



THE LITTLE GREEN GOD OF AGONY

Stephen King

WAS IN AN ACCIDENT,' Newsome said.

Katherine MacDonald, sitting beside the bed and attaching one of the four TENS units to his scrawny thigh just below the basketball shorts he now always wore, did not look up. Her face was carefully blank. She was a piece of human furniture in this big house - in this big bedroom where she now spent most of her working life - and that was the way she liked it. Attracting Mr Newsome's attention was usually a bad idea, as any of his employees knew. But her thoughts ran on, just the same. *Now you tell them that you actually caused the accident. Because you think taking responsibility makes you look like a hero.*

'Actually,' Newsome said, 'I caused the accident. Not so tight, Kat, please.'

She could have pointed out, as she did at the start, that the TENS lost their efficacy if they weren't tight to the outraged nerves they were supposed to soothe, but she was a fast learner. She loosened the Velcro strap a little, thinking: *The pilot told you there were thunderstorms in the Omaha area.*

'The pilot told me there were thunderstorms in the area,' Newsome continued. The two men listened closely. Jensen had heard it all before, of course, but you always listened closely when the man doing the talking was the sixth-richest man not just in America but in the world. Three of the other five mega-rich guys were dark-complected fellows who wore robes and drove places in armoured Mercedes-Benzes.

She thought: *But I told him it was imperative that I make that meeting.*

'But I told him it was imperative that I make that meeting,' Newsome carried on.

The man sitting next to Newsome's personal assistant was the one who interested her - in an anthropological sort of way. His name was Rideout. He was tall and very thin, maybe sixty, wearing plain grey pants and a white shirt buttoned all the way to his scrawny neck, which was red with overshaving. Kat supposed he'd wanted to get a close one before meeting the sixth-richest man in the world. Beneath his chair was the only item he'd carried into this meeting, a long black lunchbox with a curved top meant to hold a Thermos. A working man's lunchbox, although what he claimed to be was a minister. So far Rideout hadn't said a word, but she didn't need her ears to know what he was. The whiff of charlatan was strong about him. In fifteen years as a nurse specialising in pain patients, she had met her share. At least this one wasn't wearing any crystals.

Now tell them about your revelation, she thought as she carried her stool around to the other side of the bed. It was on casters, but Newsome didn't like the sound when she rolled on it. She might have told another patient that carrying the stool wasn't in her contract, but when you were being paid five thousand dollars a week for what were essentially human caretaking services, you kept your smart remarks to yourself. Nor did you tell the patient that emptying and washing out bedpans wasn't in your contract. Although lately her silent compliance was wearing a little thin. She felt it happening. Like the fabric of a shirt that had been worn and washed too many times.

Newsome was speaking primarily to the fellow in the farmer-goes-to-town get-up. 'As I lay on the runway in the rain among the burning pieces of a fourteen-million-dollar aircraft, most of the clothes torn off my body - that'll happen when you hit pavement and roll fifty or sixty feet - I had a revelation.'

Actually, two of them, Kat thought as she strapped a second TENS unit on his other wasted, flabby, scarred leg.

‘Actually, two of them,’ Newsome said. ‘One was that it was very good to be alive, although I understood - even before the pain that’s been my constant companion for the last two years started to eat through the shock - that I had been badly hurt. The second was that the word *imperative* is used very loosely by most people, including my former self. There are only two imperative things. One is life itself, the other is freedom from pain. Do you agree, Reverend Rideout?’ And before Rideout could agree (for surely he would do nothing else), Newsome said in his waspy, hectoring, old man’s voice: ‘Not so goddam *tight*, Kat! How many times do I have to tell you?’

‘Sorry,’ she murmured, and loosened the strap. *Why do I even try?*

Melissa, the housekeeper, looking trim in a white blouse and high-waisted white slacks, came in with a coffee tray. Jensen accepted a cup, along with two packets of artificial sweetener. The new one, the bottom-of-the-barrel so-called reverend, only shook his head. Maybe he had some kind of holy coffee in his lunchbox Thermos. Kat didn’t get an offer. When she took coffee, she took it in the kitchen with the rest of the help. Or in the summerhouse ... only this wasn’t summer. It was November, and wind-driven rain lashed the windows.

‘Shall I turn you on, Mr Newsome, or would you prefer that I leave now?’

She didn’t want to leave. She’d heard the whole story many times before - the imperative meeting, the crash, how Andrew Newsome had been ejected from the burning plane, about the broken bones, chipped spine and dislocated neck, most of all about the twenty-four months of unrelieved suffering, which he would soon get to - and it bored her. But Rideout didn’t. Other charlatans would undoubtedly follow, now that all reputable relief resources had been exhausted, but Rideout was the first, and Kat was interested to see how the farmer-looking fellow would go about separating Andy Newsome from a large chunk of his cash. Or how he would try. Newsome hadn’t amassed his obscene piles of cash by being stupid, but of

course he wasn't the same man he had been, no matter how real his pain might be. On that subject, Kat had her own opinions, but this was the best job she'd ever had. At least in terms of money. And if Newsome wanted to continue suffering, wasn't that his choice?

'Go ahead, honey, turn me on.' He waggled his eyebrows at her. Once the lechery might have been real (Kat thought Melissa might have information on that subject), but now it was just a pair of shaggy eyebrows working on muscle memory.

Kat plugged the cords into the control unit and flicked the switch. Properly attached, the TENS units would have sent a weak electrical current into Newsome's muscles, a therapy that seemed to have some ameliorative effects... although no one could say exactly why, or if they were entirely of the placebo variety. Be that as it might, they would do nothing for Newsome tonight. Hooked up as loosely as they were, they had been reduced to the equivalent of joy-buzzers. Expensive ones.

'Shall I—?'

'Stay!' he said. 'Therapy!'

The lord wounded in battle commands, she thought, and I obey.

She bent over to pull her chest of goodies out from under the bed. It was filled with tools many of her past clients referred to as implements of torture. Jensen and Rideout paid no attention to her. They continued to look at Newsome, who might (or might not) have been granted revelations that had changed his priorities and outlook on life, but who still enjoyed holding court.

He told them about awakening in a cage of metal and mesh. There were steel gantries called fixators on both legs and one arm to immobilise joints that had been repaired with 'about a hundred' steel pins (actually seventeen; Kat had seen the X-rays). The fixators were anchored in the outraged and splintered femurs, tibiae, fibulae,

humerus, radius, ulna. His back was encased in a kind of chain-mail girdle that went from his hips to the nape of his neck. He talked about sleepless nights that seemed to go on not for hours but for years. He talked about the crushing headaches. He told them about how even wiggling his toes caused pain all the way up to his jaw, and the shrieking agony that bit into his legs when the doctors insisted that he move them, fixators and all, so he wouldn't entirely lose their function. He told them about the bedsores, and how he bit back howls of hurt and outrage when the nurses attempted to roll him on his side so the sores could be flushed out.

'There have been another dozen operations in the last two years,' he said with a kind of dark pride. Actually, Kat knew, there had been five, two of those to remove the fixators when the bones were sufficiently healed. Unless you included the minor procedure to re-set his broken fingers, that was. Then you could say there were six, but she didn't consider surgical stuff necessitating no more than local anaesthetic to be 'operations'. If that were the case she'd had a dozen herself, most of them while listening to Muzak in a dentist's chair.

Now we get to the false promises, she thought as she placed a gel pad in the crook of Newsome's right knee and laced her hands together on the hanging hot-water bottles of muscle beneath his right thigh. *That comes next.*

'The doctors promised me the pain would abate,' Newsome said. 'That in six weeks I'd only need the narcotics before and after my physical therapy sessions with the Queen of Pain here. That I'd be walking again by the summer of 2010. *Last* summer.' He paused for effect. 'Reverend Rideout, those were false promises. I have almost no flexion in my knees at all, and the pain in my hips and back is beyond description. The doctors— *Ah! Oh! Stop, Kat, stop!*'

She had raised his right leg to a ten-degree angle, perhaps a little more. Not even enough to hold the cushioning pad in place.

'Let it go down! Let it *down*, goddammit!'

Kat relaxed her hold on his knee and the leg returned to the hospital bed. Ten degrees. Possibly twelve. Whoop-de-do. Sometimes she got it all the way to fifteen - and the left leg, which was a little better, to twenty degrees of flex - before he started hollering like a kid who sees a hypodermic needle in a school nurse's hand. The doctors guilty of false promises had not been guilty of false advertising; they had told him the pain was coming. Kat had been there as a silent onlooker during several of those consultations. They had told him he would swim in pain before those crucial tendons, shortened by the accident and frozen in place by the fixators, stretched out and once again became limber. He would have plenty of pain before he was able to get the bend in his knees back to ninety degrees. Before he would be able to sit in a chair or behind the wheel of a car, that was. The same was true of his back and his neck. The road to recovery led through the Land of Pain, that was all.

These were true promises Andrew Newsome had chosen not to hear. It was his belief - never stated baldly, in words of one syllable, but undoubtedly one of the stars he steered by - that the sixth-richest man in the world should not have to visit the Land of Pain under any circumstances, only the Costa del Sol of Full Recovery. Blaming the doctors followed as day follows night. And of course he blamed fate. Things like this were not supposed to happen to guys like him.

Melissa came back with cookies on a tray. Newsome waved a hand - twisted and scarred in the accident - at her irritably. 'No one's in the mood for baked goods, 'Lissa.'

Here was another thing Kat MacDonald had discovered about the mega-rich, those dollar-babies who had amassed assets beyond ordinary comprehension: they felt very confident about speaking for everyone in the room.

Melissa gave her little Mona Lisa smile, then turned (almost pirouetted) and left the room. *Glided* from the room. She had to be at

least forty-five, but looked younger. She wasn't sexy; nothing so vulgar. Rather there was an ice-queen glamour about her that made Kat think of Ingrid Bergman. Icy or not, Kat supposed men would wonder how that chestnut hair would look freed from its clips, and lying all mussed up on a pillow. How her coral lipstick would look smeared on her teeth and up one cheek. Kat, who considered herself dumpy, told herself at least once a day that she wasn't jealous of that smooth, cool face. Or that heart-shaped bottom.

Kat returned to the other side of the bed and prepared to lift Newsome's left leg until he yelled at her again to stop, goddammit, did she want to kill him? *If you were another patient, I'd tell you the facts of life, she thought. I'd tell you to stop looking for shortcuts, because there are none. Not even for the sixth-richest man in the world. You have me - I'd help you if you'd let me - but as long as you keep looking for a way to pay yourself out of the shit, you're on your own.*

She placed the pad under his knee. Grasped the hanging bags that should have been turning back into muscle by now. Began to bend the leg. Waited for him to scream at her to stop. And she would. Because five thousand dollars a week added up to a cool quarter-mil a year. Did he know that part of what he was buying was her silence? How could he not?

Now tell them about the doctors - Geneva, London, Madrid, Mexico City, et cetera, et cetera.

'I've been to doctors all over the world,' he told them, speaking primarily to Rideout now. Rideout still hadn't said a word, just sat there with the red wattles, his overshaved neck hanging over his buttoned-to-the-neck country preacher shirt. He was wearing big yellow work boots. The heel of one almost touched his black lunchbox. 'Teleconferencing would be the easier way to go, given my condition, but of course that doesn't cut it in cases like mine. So I've gone in person, in spite of the pain it causes me. We've been everywhere, haven't we, Kat?'

'Indeed we have,' she said, very slowly continuing to bend the leg. On which he would have been walking by now, if he weren't such a child about the pain. Such a spoiled baby. On crutches, yes, but walking. And in another year, he would have been able to throw the crutches away. Only in another year he would still be here in this two-hundred-thousand-dollar state-of-the-art hospital bed. And she would still be with him. Still taking his hush-money. How much would be enough? Two million? She told herself that now, but she'd told herself half a million would be enough not so long ago, and had since moved the goalposts. Money was wretched that way.

'We've seen specialists in Mexico, Geneva, London, Rome, Paris . . . where else, Kat?'

'Vienna,' she said. 'And San Francisco, of course.'

Newsome snorted. 'Doctor there told me I was manufacturing my own pain. "To keep from doing the hard work of rehabilitation," he said. But he was a Paki. And a queer. A queer Paki, how's that for a combo?' He gave a brief bark of laughter, then peered at Rideout. 'I'm not offending you, am I, Reverend?'

Rideout rotated his head side-to-side in a negative gesture. Twice. Very slowly.

'Good, good. Stop, Kat, that's enough.'

'A little more,' she coaxed.

'Stop, I said. That's all I can take.'

She let the leg subside and began to manipulate his left arm. That he allowed. He often told people both of his arms had also been broken, but this wasn't true. The left one had only been sprained. He also told people he was lucky not to be in a wheelchair, but the all-the-bells-and-whistles hospital bed suggested strongly that this was luck

he had no intention of capitalising on in the near future. The all-the-bells-and-whistles hospital bed was his wheelchair. It rolled. He had ridden all over the world in it.

Neuropathic pain, Kat thought. It's a great mystery. Perhaps insoluble. The drugs no longer work.

'The consensus is that I'm suffering from neuropathic pain.' *And cowardice.*

'It's a great mystery.'

Also a good excuse.

'Perhaps insoluble.'

Especially when you don't try.

'The drugs no longer work and the doctors can't help me. That's why I've brought you here, Reverend Rideout. Your references in the matter of...er...healing ... are very strong.'

Rideout stood up. Kat hadn't realised how tall he was. His shadow scared up behind him on the wall even higher. Almost to the ceiling. His eyes, sunken deep in their sockets, regarded Newsome solemnly. He had charisma, of that there could be no doubt. It didn't surprise her; the charlatans of the world couldn't get along without it, but she hadn't realised how much or how strong it was until he got to his feet and towered over them. Jensen was actually craning his neck to see him. There was movement in the corner of Kat's eye. She looked and saw Melissa standing in the doorway. So now they were all here except for Tonya, the cook.

Outside, the wind rose to a shriek. The glass in the windows rattled.

'I don't heal,' Rideout said. He was from Arkansas, Kat believed - that was where Newsome's latest Gulfstream IV had picked him up,

at least - but his voice was accentless. And flat.

'No?' Newsome looked disappointed. Petulant. Maybe, Kat thought, a little scared. 'I sent a team of investigators, and they assure me that in many cases—'

'I *expel*.'

Up went the shaggy eyebrows. 'I beg your pardon?'

Rideout came to the bed and stood there with his long-fingered hands laced loosely together at the level of his flat crotch. His deep-set eyes looked sombrely down at the man in the bed. 'I exterminate the pest from the wounded body it's feeding on, just as a bug exterminator would exterminate pests - termites, for instance - feeding on a house.'

Now, Kat thought, I have heard absolutely everything. But Newsome was fascinated. *Like a kid watching a three-card monte expert on a street corner,* she thought.

'You've been possessed, sir.'

'Yes,' Newsome said. 'That's what it feels like. Especially at night. The nights are ... very long.'

'Every man or woman who suffers pain is possessed, of course, but in some unfortunate people - you are one - the problem goes deeper. The possession isn't a transient thing but a permanent condition. One that worsens. Doctors don't believe, because they are men of science. But *you* believe, don't you? Because you're the one who's suffering.'

'You bet,' Newsome breathed. Kat, sitting beside him on her stool, had to restrain herself from rolling her eyes.

'In these unfortunates, pain opens the way for a demon god. It's small, but dangerous. It feeds on a special kind of hurt produced only by certain special people.'

Genius, Kat thought, *he's going to love that.*

'Once the god finds its way in, pain becomes agony. It feeds just as termites feed on wood. And it will eat until you are all used up. Then it will cast you aside, sir, and move on.'

Kat surprised herself by saying, 'What god would that be? Certainly not the one you preach about. That one is the God of love. Or so I grew up believing.'

Jensen was frowning at her and shaking his head. He clearly expected an explosion from the boss...but a little smile had touched the corners of Newsome's lips. 'What do you say to that, Rev?'

'I say that there are many gods. The fact that our Lord, the Lord God of Hosts, rules them all - and on the Day of Judgment will *destroy* them all - does not change that. These little gods have been worshipped by people both ancient and modern. They have their powers, and our God sometimes allows those powers to be exercised.'

As a test, Kat thought.

'As a test of our strength and faith.' Then he turned to Newsome and said something that surprised her. Jensen, too; his mouth actually dropped open. 'You are a man of much strength and little faith.'

Newsome, although not used to hearing criticism, nevertheless smiled. 'I don't have much in the way of Christian faith, that's true, but I have faith in myself. I also have faith in money. How much do you want?'

Rideout returned the smile, exposing teeth that were little more than tiny eroded gravestones. If he had ever seen a dentist, it had been many moons ago. Also, he was a tobacco-chewer. Kat's father, who had died of mouth cancer, had had the same discoloured teeth.

'How much would you pay to be free of your pain, sir?'

'Ten million dollars,' Newsome replied promptly. Kat heard Melissa gasp. 'But I didn't get to where I am by being a sucker. If you do whatever it is you do - expelling, exterminating, exorcising, call it what you want - you get the money. In cash, if you don't mind spending the night. Fail, and you get nothing - except your first and only round trip on a private jet. For that there will be no charge. After all, *I* reached out to *you*.'

'No.' Rideout said it mildly, standing there beside the bed, close enough to Kat so she could smell the mothballs that had been recently keeping his dress pants (maybe his only pair, unless he had another to preach in) whole. She could also smell some strong soap.

'No?' Newsome looked frankly startled. 'You tell me no?' Then he began to smile again. This time it was the secretive and rather unpleasant smile he wore when he made his phone calls and did his deals. 'I get it. Now comes the curveball. I'm disappointed, Reverend Rideout. I really hoped you were on the level.' He turned to Kat, causing her to draw back a bit. 'You, of course, think I've lost my mind. But I haven't shared the investigators' reports with you, have I?'

'No,' she said.

'There's no curveball,' Rideout said. 'I haven't performed an expulsion in five years. Did your investigators tell you that?'

Newsome didn't reply. He was looking up at the thin, towering man with a certain unease.

Jensen said, 'Is it because you've lost your powers? If that's the case, why did you come?'

'It's God's power, sir, not mine, and I haven't lost it. But an expulsion takes great energy and great strength. Five years ago I suffered a major heart attack shortly after performing one on a young girl who had been in a terrible car accident. We were successful, she and I, but the cardiologist I consulted in Jonesboro told me that if I ever exerted myself in such a way again, I might suffer another attack. This one fatal.'

Newsome raised a gnarled hand - not without effort - to the side of his mouth and spoke to Kat and Melissa in a comic stage-whisper. 'I think he wants twenty million.'

'What I want, sir, is seven hundred and fifty thousand.'

Newsome just stared at him. It was Melissa who asked, 'Why?'

'I am pastor of a church in Titusville. The Church of Holy Faith, it's called. Only there's no church any more. We had a dry summer in my part of the world. There was a wildfire, probably started by campers. And probably drunk. That's usually the case. My church is now just a concrete footprint and a few charred beams. I and my parishioners have been worshipping in an abandoned gas station/convenience store on the Jonesboro Pike. It is not satisfactory during the winter months, and there are no homes large enough to accommodate us. We are many but poor.'

Kat listened with interest. As conman stories went, this was a good one. It had the right sympathy-hooks.

Jensen, who still had the body of a college athlete (he also served as Newsome's bodyguard) and the mind of a Harvard MBA, asked the obvious question. 'Insurance?'

Rideout once more shook his head in that deliberate way: left, right, left, right, back to centre. He still stood towering over Newsome's state-of-the-art bed like some country-ass guardian angel. 'We trust in God.'

'In this case, you might have been better off with Allstate,' Melissa said.

Newsome was smiling. Kat could tell from the stiff way he held his body that he was in serious discomfort - his pills were now half an hour overdue - but he was ignoring it because he was interested. That he *could* ignore it was something she'd known for quite a while now. He could battle the pain if he chose to. He had resources. She had thought she was merely irritated with this, but now, probably prompted by the appearance of the charlatan from Arkansas, she discovered she was actually infuriated. It was so *wasteful*.

'I have consulted with a local builder - not a member of my flock, but a man of good repute who has done repairs for me in the past and quotes a fair price - and he tells me that it will cost approximately six hundred and fifty thousand dollars to rebuild. I have taken the liberty of adding one hundred thousand dollars, just to be on the safe side.'

Uh-huh, Kat thought.

'We don't have such monetary resources, of course. But then, not even a week after speaking with Mr Kiernan, your letter came, along with the video-disc. Which I watched with great interest, by the way.'

I'll bet you did, Kat thought. *Especially the part where the doctor from San Francisco says the pain associated with his injuries can be greatly alleviated by physical therapy. Stringent physical therapy.*

It was true that nearly a dozen other doctors on the DVD had claimed themselves at a loss, but Kat believed Dr Dilawar was the only one with the guts to talk straight. She had been surprised that Newsome had allowed the disc to go out with that interview on it, but

since his accident, the sixth-richest man in the world had slipped a few cogs.

‘Will you pay me enough to rebuild my church, sir?’

Newsome studied him. Now there were small beads of sweat just below his receding hairline. Kat would give him his pills soon, whether he asked for them or not. The pain was real enough; it wasn’t as though he were faking or anything, it was just . . .

‘Would you agree not to ask for more? Gentleman’s agreement. We don’t need to sign anything.’

‘Yes.’ Rideout said it with no hesitation.

‘Although if you’re able to remove the pain - *expel* the pain -I might well make a contribution of some size. Some *considerable* size. What I believe you people call a love offering.’

‘That would be your business, sir. Shall we begin?’

‘No time like the present. Do you want everyone to leave?’

Rideout shook his head again: left to right, right to left, back to centre. ‘I will need assistance.’

Magicians always do, Kat thought. It’s part of the show.

Outside, the wind shrieked, rested, then shrieked again. The lights flickered. Behind the house, the generator (also state-of-the-art) burped to life, then stilled.

Rideout sat on the edge of the bed. ‘Mr Jensen there, I think. He looks strong and quick.’

‘He’s both,’ Newsome said. ‘Played football in college. Running back. Hasn’t lost a step since.’

'Well ... a few,' Jensen said modestly.

Rideout leaned towards Newsome. His dark, deeply socketed eyes studied the billionaire's scarred face solemnly. 'Answer a question for me, sir. What colour is your pain?'

'Green,' Newsome replied. He was looking back at the preacher with fascination. 'My pain is green.'

Rideout nodded: up, down, up, down, back to centre. Eye-contact never lost. Kat was sure he would have nodded with exactly the same look of grave confirmation if Newsome had said his pain was blue, or as purple as the fabled Purple People-Eater. She thought, with a combination of dismay and real amusement: *I could lose my temper here. I really could. It would be the most expensive tantrum of my life, but still - I could.*

'And where is it?'

'Everywhere.' It was almost a moan. Melissa took a step forward, giving Jensen a look of concern. Kat saw him shake his head a little and motion her back to the doorway.

'Yes, it likes to give that impression,' Rideout said, 'but it's not so. Close your eyes, sir, and concentrate. Look for the pain. Look past the false shouts it gives - ignore the cheap ventriloquism - and locate it. You can do this. You *must* do it, if we're to have any success.'

Newsome closed his eyes. For a space of ninety seconds there was no sound but the wind and the rain spattering against the windows like handfuls of fine gravel. Kat's watch was the old-fashioned wind-up kind, a nursing school graduation present from her father many years ago, and when the wind lulled, the room was quiet enough for her to hear its self-important ticking. And something else: at the far end of the big house, elderly Tonya Andrews singing softly as she

neatened up the kitchen at the end of another day: *Froggy went a-courtin' and he did ride, mmm-hm.*

At last Newsome said, 'It's in my chest. High in my chest. Or at the bottom of my throat, just below the windpipe.'

'Can you see it? Concentrate!'

Vertical lines appeared on Newsome's forehead. Scars from the skin that had been flayed open during the accident wavered through these grooves of concentration. 'I see it. It's pulsing in time to my heartbeat.' His lips pulled down in an expression of distaste. 'It's nasty.'

Rideout leaned closer. 'Is it a ball? It is, isn't it? A green ball.'

'Yes. Yes! A little green ball that *breathes!*'

Like the rigged-up tennis ball you undoubtedly have either up your sleeve or in that big black lunchbox of yours, Rev, she thought.

And, as if she were controlling him with her mind (instead of just deducing where this sloppy little playlet would go next), Rideout said: 'Mr Jensen, sir. There's a lunchbox under the chair I was sitting in. Get it and open it and stand next to me. You need to do no more than that for the moment. Just—'

Kat MacDonald snapped. It was a snap she actually heard in her head. It sounded like Roger Miller snapping his fingers during the intro to 'King of the Road'.

She stepped up beside Rideout and shouldered him aside. It was easy. He was taller, but she had been turning and lifting patients for nearly half her life, and she was stronger. 'Open your eyes, Andy. Open them right now. Look at me.'

Startled, Newsome did as she said. Melissa and Jensen (now with the lunchbox in his hands) looked alarmed. One of the facts of their working lives - and Kat's own, at least until now - was that you didn't command the boss. The boss commanded you. You most certainly did not startle him.

But she'd had quite enough, thank you. In another twenty minutes she might be crawling after her headlights along stormy roads to the only motel in the vicinity, a place that looked like the avatar of all roach-traps, but it didn't matter. She simply couldn't do this any longer.

'This is bullshit, Andy,' she said. Are you hearing me? Bullshit.'

'I think you better stop right there,' Newsome said, beginning to smile - he had several smiles, and this wasn't one of the good ones. 'If you want to keep your job, that is. There are plenty of other nurses in Vermont who specialise in pain therapy.'

She might have stopped there, but Rideout said, 'Let her speak, sir.' It was the gentleness in his tone that drove her over the edge.

She leaned forward, into his space, and the words spilled out in a torrent.

'For the last sixteen months - ever since your respiratory system improved enough to allow meaningful physiotherapy - I've watched you lie in this goddamned expensive bed and insult your own body. It makes me sick. Do you know how lucky you are to be alive, when everyone else on that airplane was killed? What a miracle it is that your spine wasn't severed, or your skull crushed into your brain, or your body burned - no, *baked*, baked like an apple - from head to toe? You would have lived four days, maybe even two weeks, in hellish agony. Instead you were thrown clear. You're not a vegetable. You're not a quadriplegic, although you choose to act like one. You won't do the work. You look for some easier way. You want to pay

your way out of your situation. If you died and went to Hell, the first thing you'd do is look for a tollgate.'

Jensen and Melissa were staring at her in horror. Newsome's mouth hung open. If he had ever been talked to in such a fashion, it had been long ago. Only Rideout looked at ease. *He* was the one smiling now. The way a father would smile at his wayward four-year-old. It drove her crazy.

'You could have been *walking* by now. God knows I've tried to make you understand that, and God knows I've told you - over and over - the kind of work it would take to get you up out of that bed and back on your feet. Dr Dilawar in San Francisco had the guts to tell you - he was the only one - and you rewarded him by calling him a faggot.'

~ * ~

'He *was* a faggot,' Newsome said pettishly. His scarred hands had balled themselves into fists.

'You're in pain, yes. Of course you are. It's manageable, though. I've seen it managed, not once but many times. But not by a lazy rich man who tries to substitute his sense of entitlement for the plain old hard work and tears it takes to get better. You refuse. I've seen that, too, and I know what always happens next. The quacks and confidence men come, the way leeches come when a man with a cut leg wades into a stagnant pond. Sometimes the quacks have magic creams. Sometimes they have magic pills. The healers come with trumped-up claims about God's power, the way this one has. Usually the marks get partial relief. Why wouldn't they, when half the pain is in their heads, manufactured by lazy minds that only understand it will hurt to get better?'

She raised her voice to a wavering, childlike treble and bent close to him. 'Daddy, it *hurr-rrrts!* But the relief never lasts long, because the muscles have no tone, the tendons are still slack, the bones haven't thickened enough to accommodate weight-bearing. And when you

get this guy on the phone to tell him the pain's back - if you can - do you know what he'll say? That you didn't have *faith* enough. If you used your brains on this the way you did on your manufacturing plants and various investments, you'd know there's no little living tennis-ball sitting at the base of your throat. You're too fucking old to believe in Santa Claus, Andy.'

Tonya had come into the doorway and now stood beside Melissa, staring with wide eyes and a dishwiper hanging limp in one hand.

'You're fired,' Newsome said, almost genially.

'Yes,' Kat said. 'Of course I am. Although I must say that this is the best I've felt in almost a year.'

'Don't fire her,' Rideout said. 'If you do, I'll have to take my leave.'

Newsome's eyes rolled to the Reverend. His brow was knitted in perplexity. His hands now began to knead his hips and thighs, as they always did when his pain medication was overdue.

'She needs an education, praise God's Holy Name.' Rideout leaned towards Newsome, his own hands clasped behind his back. He reminded Kat of a picture she'd seen once of Washington Irving's schoolteacher, Ichabod Crane. 'She's had her say. Shall I have mine?'

Newsome was sweating more heavily, but he was smiling again. 'Have at her, Rideout. I believe I want to hear this.'

Kat faced him. Those dark, socketed eyes were unsettling, but she met them. 'So do I.'

Hands still clasped behind his back, pink skull shining mutedly through his thin hair, long face solemn, Rideout examined her. Then he said: 'You've never suffered yourself, have you, miss?'

Kat felt an urge to flinch at that, or look away, or both. She suppressed it. 'I fell out of a tree when I was eleven and broke my arm.'

Rideout rounded his thin lips and whistled: one tuneless, almost toneless note. 'Broke an *arm* while you were *eleven*. Yes, that must have been excruciating.'

She flushed. She felt it and hated it but couldn't stop the heat. 'Belittle me all you want. I based what I said on years of experience dealing with pain patients. It is a *medical* opinion.'

Now he'll tell me he's been expelling demons, or little green gods, or whatever they are, since I was in rompers.

But he didn't.

'I'm sure,' he soothed. 'And I'm sure you're good at what you do. I'm sure you've seen your share of fakers and posers. You know their kind. And I know yours, miss, because I've seen it many times before. They're usually not as pretty as you—' Finally a trace of accent, *pretty* coming out as *purty*. '—but their condescending attitude towards pain they have never felt themselves, pain they can't even conceive of, is always the same. They work in sickrooms, they work with patients who are in varying degrees of distress, from mild pain to deepest, searing agony. And after awhile, it all starts to look either overdone or outright fake to them, isn't that so?'

'That's not true at all,' Kat said. What was happening to her voice? All at once it was small.

'No? When you bend their legs and they scream at fifteen degrees - or even at ten - don't you think, first in the back of your mind, then more and more towards the front, that they are lollygagging? Refusing to do the hard work? Perhaps even fishing for sympathy? When you enter the room and their faces go pale, don't you think, 'Oh, now I have to deal with *this* lazy thing again?' Haven't you - who

once fell from a tree and broke your *arm*, for the Lord's sake - become more and more disgusted when they beg to be put back into bed and be given more morphine or whatever?'

'That's so unfair,' Kat said ... but now her voice was little more than a whisper.

'Once upon a time, when you were new at this, you knew agony when you saw it,' Rideout said. 'Once upon a time you would have believed in what you are going to see in just a few minutes, because you knew in your heart that malignant outsider god was there. I want you to stay so I can refresh your memory . . . and the sense of compassion that's gotten lost somewhere along the way.'

'Some of my patients *are* whiners,' Kat said, and looked defiantly at Rideout. 'I suppose that sounds cruel, but sometimes the truth *is* cruel. Some *are* malingerers. If you don't know that, you're blind. Or stupid. I don't think you're either.'

He bowed as if she had paid him a compliment - which, in a way, she supposed she had. 'Of course I know. But now, in your secret heart, you believe *all* of them are malingerers. You've become inured, like a soldier who's spent too long in battle. Mr Newsome here has been infested, I tell you, *invaded*. There's a demon inside him so strong it has become a god, and I want you to see it when it comes out. It will improve matters for you considerably, I think. Certainly it will change your outlook on pain.' To Newsome: 'Can she stay, sir?'

Newsome considered. 'If you want her to.'

'And if I choose to leave?' Kat challenged him.

Rideout smiled. 'No one will hold you here, Miss Nurse. Like all of God's creatures, you have free will. I would not ask others to constrain it, or constrain it myself. But I don't believe you're a coward, merely calloused. Case-hardened.'

'You're a fraud,' Kat said. She was furious, on the verge of tears.

'No,' Rideout said, once more speaking gently. 'When we leave this room - with you or without you - Mr Newsome will be relieved of the agony that's been feeding on him. There will still be pain, but once the agony is gone, he'll be able to deal with the pain. Perhaps even with your help, miss, once you've had the necessary lesson in humility. Do you still intend to leave?'

'I'll stay,' she said, then said: 'Give me the lunchbox.'

'But—' Jensen began.

'Give it over,' Rideout said. 'Let her inspect it, by all means. But no more talk. If I am meant to do this, it's time to begin.'

Jensen gave her the long black lunchbox. Kat opened it. Where a workman's wife might have packed her husband's sandwiches and a little Tupperware container of fruit, she saw an empty glass bottle with a wide mouth. Inside the domed lid, held by a wire clamp meant to secure a Thermos, was a green aerosol can. There was nothing else. Kat turned to Rideout. He nodded. She took the aerosol out and looked at the label, nonplussed. 'Pepper spray?'

'Pepper spray,' Rideout agreed. 'I don't know if it's legal in Vermont - probably not would be my guess - but where I come from, most hardware stores stock it.' He turned to Tonya. 'You are—?'

'Tonya Marsden. I cook for Mr Newsome.'

'Very nice to make your acquaintance, ma'am. I need one more thing before we begin. Do you have a baseball bat? Or any sort of club?'

Tonya shook her head. The wind gusted again; once more the lights flickered and the generator burped in its shed behind the house.

'What about a broom?'

'Oh, yes, sir.'

'Fetch it, please.'

Tonya left. There was silence except for the wind. Kat tried to think of something to say and couldn't. Droplets of clear perspiration were trickling down Newsome's narrow cheeks, which had also been scarred in the accident. He had rolled and rolled, while the wreckage of the Gulfstream burned in the rain behind him. *I never said he wasn't in pain, she told herself. Just that he could manage it, if he'd only muster half the will he showed during the years he spent building his empire.*

But what if she was wrong?

That still doesn't mean there's some sort of living tennis ball inside him, sucking his pain the way a vampire sucks blood.

There were no vampires, and no gods of agony ... but when the wind blew hard enough to make the big house shiver in its bones, such ideas almost seemed plausible.

Tonya came back with a broom that looked like it had never swept so much as a single pile of floor-dirt into a dustpan. The bristles were bright blue nylon. The handle was painted wood, about four feet long. She held it up doubtfully. 'This what you want?'

'I think it will do,' Rideout said, although to Kat he didn't sound entirely sure. It occurred to her that Newsome might not be the only one in this room who had slipped a few cogs lately. 'I think you'd better give it to our sceptical nurse. No offence to you, Mrs Marsden, but younger folks have quicker reflexes.'

Looking not offended in the slightest - looking relieved, in fact - Tonya held out the broom. Melissa took it and handed it to Kat.

'What am I supposed to do with it?' Kat asked. 'Ride it?'

Rideout smiled, briefly showing the stained and eroded pegs of his teeth. 'You'll know when the time comes, if you've ever had a bat or raccoon in the room with you. Just remember: first the bristles. Then the stick.'

'To finish it off, I suppose. Then you put it in the specimen bottle.'

'As you say.'

'So you can put it on a shelf somewhere with the rest of your dead gods, I suppose.'

He smiled without humour. 'Hand the spray-can to Mr Jensen, please.'

Kat did so. Melissa asked, 'What do I do?'

'Watch. And pray, if you know how. On my behalf, as well as Mr Newsome's. For my heart to be strong.'

Kat, who saw a fake heart attack coming, said nothing. She simply moved away from the bed, holding the handle of the broom in both hands. Rideout sat down beside Newsome with a grimace. His knees popped like pistol-shots. 'You, Mr Jensen.'

'Yes?'

'You'll have time - it will be stunned - but be quick, just the same. As quick as you were on the football field, all right?'

'You want me to Mace it?'

Rideout once more flashed his brief smile, but now there was sweat on his brow as well as his client's. 'It's not Mace - that *is* illegal where I come from - but that's the idea, yes. Now I'd like silence, please.'

'Wait a minute.' Kat propped the broom against the bed and ran her hands first up Rideout's left arm, then his right. She felt only plain cotton cloth and the man's scrawny flesh beneath.

'Nothing up my sleeve, Miss Kat, I promise you.'

'Hurry *up*,' Newsome said. 'This is bad. It always is, but the goddam stormy weather makes it worse.'

'Hush,' Rideout said. 'All of you, hush.'

They hushed. Rideout closed his eyes. His lips moved silently. Twenty seconds ticked past on Kat's watch, then thirty. Her hands were damp with perspiration. She wiped them one at a time on her sweater, then took hold of the broom again. *We look like people gathered at a deathbed*, she thought.

Outside, the wind howled along the gutters.

Rideout said, 'For Jesus' sake I pray,' then opened his eyes and leaned close to Newsome.

'God, there is an evil outsider in this man. An outsider feeding on his flesh and bones. Help me cast it out, as Your Son cast out the demons from the possessed man of the Gadarenes. Help me speak to the little green god of agony inside Andrew Newsome in your own voice of command.'

He leaned closer. He curled the long fingers of one arthritis-swollen hand around the base of Newsome's throat, as if he intended to strangle him. He leaned closer still, and inserted the first two fingers of his other hand into the billionaire's mouth. He curled them, and pulled down the jaw.

'Come out,' he said. He had spoken of command, but his voice was soft. Silky. Almost cajoling. It made the skin on Kat's back and arms

prickle. 'Come out in the name of Jesus. Come out in the names of all the saints and martyrs. Come out in the name of God, who gave you leave to enter and now commands you to leave. Come out into the light. Leave off your meal and come out.'

There was nothing. He began again.

'Come out in the name of Jesus. Come out in the names of the saints and martyrs.' His hand flexed slightly, and Newsome's breath began to rasp. 'No, don't go deeper. You can't hide, thing of darkness. Come out into the light. Jesus commands you. The saints and martyrs command you. God commands you to leave your meal and come out.'

A cold hand gripped Kat's upper arm and she almost screamed. It was Melissa. Her eyes were huge. Her mouth hung open. In Kat's ear, the housekeeper's whisper was as harsh as bristles. '*Look.*'

A bulge like a goitre had appeared in Newsome's throat just above Rideout's loosely grasping hand. It began to move slowly mouthwards. Kat had never seen anything like it in her life.

'That's right,' Rideout almost crooned. His face was streaming with sweat; the collar of his shirt had gone limp and dark. 'Come out. Come out into the light. You've done your feeding, thing of darkness.'

The wind rose to a scream. Rain that was now half-sleet blasted the windows like shrapnel. The lights flickered and the house creaked.

'The God that let you in commands you to leave. Jesus commands you to leave. All the saints and martyrs—'

He let go of Newsome's mouth, pulling his hand back the way a man does when he's touched something hot. But Newsome's mouth stayed open. More: it began to widen, first into a gape and then into a soundless howl. His eyes rolled back in his head and his feet

began to jitter. His urine let go and the sheet over his crotch went as dark as Rideout's collar.

'Stop,' Kat said, starting forward. 'He's having a seizure. You have to st—'

Jensen yanked her back. She turned to him and saw his normally ruddy face had gone as pale as a linen napkin.

Newsome's jaw had dropped all the way to his breastbone. The lower half of his face disappeared into a mighty yawn. Kat heard temporomandibular tendons creak as knee-tendons did during strenuous physical therapy: a sound like dirty hinges. The lights in the room stuttered off, on, off, then on again.

'Come out!' Rideout shouted. 'Come out!'

In the darkness behind Newsome's teeth, a bladderlike thing rose like water in a plugged drain. It was pulsing. There was a rending, splintering crash and the window across the room shattered. Coffee cups fell to the floor and broke. Suddenly there was a branch in the room with them. The lights went out. The generator started up again. No burp this time but a steady roar. When the lights came back, Rideout was lying on the bed with Newsome, his arms flung out and his face planted on the wet patch in the sheet. Something was oozing from Newsome's gaping mouth, his teeth dragging grooves in its shapeless body, which was stippled with stubby green spikelets.

Not a tennis ball, Kat thought. More like one of those Kooshes the kids play with.

Tonya saw it and fled back down the hall with her head hunched forward, her hands locked at the nape of her neck, and her forearms over her ears.

The green thing tumbled onto Newsome's chest.

'Spray it!' Kat screamed at Jensen. *'Spray it before it can get away!'* Yes. Then they would put it in the specimen bottle and screw the lid down tight. *Very tight.*

Jensen's eyes were huge and glassy. He looked like a sleepwalker. Wind blew through the room. It swirled his hair. A picture fell from the wall. Jensen pistoned out the hand holding the can of pepper spray and triggered the plastic nub. There was a hiss, then he leaped to his feet, screaming. He tried to turn, probably to flee after Tonya, but stumbled and fell to his knees. Although Kat felt too dumbfounded to move - to even stir a hand - part of her brain must still have been working, because she knew what had happened. He had gotten the can turned around. Instead of pepper-spraying the thing that was now oozing through the unconscious Reverend Rideout's hair, Jensen had sprayed himself.

'Don't let it get me!' Jensen shrieked. He began to crawl blindly away from the bed. *'I can't see, don't let it get me!'*

The wind gusted. Dead leaves lifted from the tree-branch that had come through the window and swirled around the room. The green thing dropped from the nape of Rideout's creased and sunburned neck onto the floor. Feeling like a woman underwater, Kat swiped at it with the bristle end of the broom. She missed. The thing disappeared under the bed, not rolling but slithering.

Jensen crawled headfirst into the wall beside the doorway. *'Where am I? I can't see!'*

Newsome was sitting up, looking bewildered. 'What's going on? What happened?' He pushed Rideout's head off him. The reverend slid bonelessly from the bed to the floor.

Melissa bent over him.

'Don't do that!' Kat shouted, but it was too late.

She didn't know if the thing was truly a god or just some weird kind of leech, but it was fast. It came out from under the bed, rolled along Rideout's shoulder, onto Melissa's hand, and up her arm. Melissa tried to shake it off and couldn't. *Some kind of sticky stuff on those stubby little spikes*, the part of Kat's brain that would still work told the part - the much larger part - that still wouldn't. *Like the glue on a fly's feet*.

Melissa had seen where the thing came from and even in her panic was wise enough to cover her own mouth with both hands. The thing skittered up her neck, over her cheek, and squatted on her left eye. The wind screamed and Melissa screamed with it. It was the cry of a woman drowning in the kind of pain the charts in the hospitals can never describe. The charts go from one to ten; Melissa's agony was well over one hundred - that of someone being boiled alive. She staggered backwards, clawing at the thing on her eye. It was pulsing faster now, and Kat could hear a low, liquid sound as the thing resumed feeding. It was a *slushy* sound.

It doesn't care who it eats, she thought, just as if this made sense. Kat realised she was walking towards the screaming, flailing woman, and observed this phenomenon with interest.

'Hold still! *Melissa, HOLD STILL!*'

Melissa paid no attention. She continued to back up. She struck the thick branch now visiting the room and went sprawling. Kat went to one knee beside her and brought the broom handle smartly down on Melissa's face. Down on the thing that was feeding on Melissa's eye.

There was a splatting sound, and suddenly the thing was sliding limply down the housekeeper's cheek, leaving a wet trail of slime behind. It moved across the leaf-littered floor, intending to hide under the branch the way it had hidden under the bed. Kat sprang to her feet and stepped on it. She felt it splatter beneath her sturdy New Balance walking shoe. Green stuff shot out in both directions, as if she had stepped on a small balloon filled with snot.

Kat went down again, this time on both knees, and took Melissa in her arms. At first Melissa struggled, and Kat felt a fist graze her ear. Then Melissa subsided, breathing harshly. 'Is it gone? Kat, is it gone?'

'I feel better,' Newsome said wonderingly from behind them, in some other world.

'Yes, it's gone,' Kat said. She peered into Melissa's face. The eye the thing had landed on was bloodshot, but otherwise it looked all right. 'Can you see?'

'Yes. It's blurry, but clearing. Kat ... the pain ... it was all through me. It was like the end of the world.'

'Somebody needs to flush my eyes!' Jensen yelled. He sounded indignant.

'Flush your own eyes,' Newsome said cheerily. 'You've got two good legs, don't you? I think I might, too, once Kat throws them back into gear. Somebody check on Rideout. I think the poor sonofabitch might be dead.'

Melissa was staring up at Kat, one eye blue, the other red and leaking tears. 'The pain...Kat, you have no idea of the pain.'

'Yes,' Kat said. 'Actually, I do. Now.' She left Melissa sitting by the branch and went to Rideout. She checked for a pulse and found nothing, not even the wild waver of a heart that is still trying its best. Rideout's pain, it seemed, was over.

The generator went out.

'Fuck,' Newsome said, still sounding cheery. 'I paid seventy thousand dollars for that Jap piece of shit.'

'I need someone to flush my eyes!' Jensen bellowed. *'Kat!'*

Kat opened her mouth to reply, then didn't. In the new darkness, something had crawled onto the back of her hand.



STEPHEN KING is the world's most famous and successful horror writer. His first novel, *Carrie*, appeared in 1974, and since then he has published a phenomenal string of bestsellers, including *Salem's Lot*, *The Shining*, *The Stand*, *Dead Zone*, *Firestarter*, *Cujo*, *Pet Sematary*, *Christine*, *It*, *Misery*, *The Dark Half*, *Needful Things*, *Rose Madder*, *The Green Mile*, *Bag of Bones*, *The Colorado Kid*, *Lisey's Story*, *Duma Key* and *Under the Dome*, to name only a few.

The author's short fiction and novellas have been collected in *Night Shift*, *Different Seasons*, *Skeleton Crew*, *Four Past Midnight*, *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *Everything's Eventual*, *The Secretary of Dreams* (two volumes), *Just After Sunset: Stories* and *Stephen King Goes to the Movies*. *Full Dark, No Stars* is a recent collection of four novellas, and his latest novel is *11/22/63*, about a man who travels back in time to try to prevent the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

The winner of numerous awards, including both the Horror Writers' Association and World Fantasy Lifetime Achievement Awards, and a Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation, King lives with his wife in Bangor, Maine.

'The Little Green God of Agony' is a tribute to the classic monster and old dark house stories. This is its first publication anywhere.

'Monsters are real,' says King, 'and ghosts are real too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.'

