

THE REVELATIONS OF 'BECKA PAULSON

Stephen King

What happened was simple enough — at least, at the start. What happened was that Rebecca Paulson shot herself in the head with her husband Joe's .22-caliber pistol. This occurred during her annual spring cleaning, which took place this year (as it did most years) around the middle of June. 'Becka had a way of falling behind in such things.

She was standing on a short stepladder and rummaging through the accumulated junk on the high shelf in the downstairs hall closet while the Paulson cat, a big brindle tom named Ozzie Nelson, sat in the living-room doorway, watching her. From behind Ozzie came the anxious voices of *Another World*, blaring out of the Paulsons' big old Zenith TV — which would later become something much more than a TV.

'Becka pulled stuff down and examined it, hoping for something that was still good, but not really expecting to find such a thing. There were four or five knitted winter caps, all moth-eaten and unraveling. She tossed them behind her onto the hall floor. Here was a *Reader's Digest Condensed Book* from the summer of 1954, featuring *Run Silent, Run Deep* and *Here's Goggle*. Water damage had swelled it to the size of a Manhattan telephone book. She tossed it behind her. Ah! Here was an umbrella that looked salvageable ... and a box with something in it.

It was a shoebox. Whatever was inside was heavy. When she tilted the box, it shifted. She took the lid off, also tossing this behind her (it almost hit Ozzie Nelson, who decided to split the scene). Inside the box was a gun with a long barrel and imitation wood-grip handles.

"Oh," she said. "That." She took it out of the box, not noticing that it was cocked, and turned it around to look into the small beady eye of the muzzle, believing that if there was a bullet in there she would see it.

She remembered the gun. Until five years ago, Joe had been a member of Derry Elks. Some ten years ago (or maybe it had been

fifteen), Joe had bought fifteen Elks raffle tickets while drunk. 'Becka had been so mad she had refused to let him put his manthing in her for two weeks. The first prize had been a Bombardier Skidoo, second prize an Evinrude motor. This .22 target pistol had been the third prize.

He had shot it for a while in the backyard, she remembered plinking away at cans and bottles until 'Becka complained about the noise. Then he had taken it up to the gravel pit at the dead end of their road, although she had sensed he was losing interest, even then — he'd just gone on shooting for a while to make sure she didn't think she had gotten the better of him. Then it had disappeared. She had thought he had swapped it for something — a set of snow tires, maybe, or a battery — but here it was.

She held the muzzle of the gun up to her eye, peering into the darkness, looking for the bullet. She could see nothing but darkness. Must be unloaded, then.

I'll make him get rid of it just the same, she thought, backing down the stepladder. Tonight. When he gets back from the post office. I'll stand right up to him. "Joe" I'll say, "it's no good having a gun sitting around the house even if there's no kids around and it's unloaded. You don't even use it to shoot bottles anymore." That's what I'll say.

This was a satisfying thing to think, but her undermind knew that she would of course say no such thing. In the Paulson house, it was Joe who mostly picked the roads and drove the horses. She supposed that it would be best to just dispose of it herself — put it in a plastic garbage bag under the other rickrack from the closet shelf. The gun would go to the dump with everything else the next time Vinnie Margolies stopped by to pick up their throw-out. Joe would not miss what he had already forgotten — the lid of the box had been thick with undisturbed dust. Would not miss it, that was, unless she was stupid enough to bring it to his attention.

'Becka reached the bottom of the ladder. Then she stepped backward onto the Reader's Digest Condensed Book with her left

foot. The front board of the book slid backward as the rotted binding gave way. She tottered, holding the gun with one hand and flailing with the other. Her right foot came down on the pile of knitted caps, which also slid backward. As she fell she realised that she looked more like a woman bent on suicide than on cleaning.

Well, it ain't loaded, she had time to think, but the gun was loaded, and it had been cocked; cocked for years, as if waiting for her to come along. She sat down hard in the hallway and when she did the hammer of the pistol snapped forward. There was a flat, unimportant bang not much louder than a baby firecracker in a tin cup, and a .22 Winchester short entered 'Becka Paulson's brain just above the left eye. It made a small black hole what was the faint blue of just-bloomed irises around the edges.

Her head thumped back against the wall, and a trickle of blood ran from the hole into her left eyebrow. The gun, with a tiny thread of white smoke rising from its muzzle, fell into her lap. Her hands drummed lightly up and down on the floor for a period of about five seconds, her right leg flexed, then shot straight out. Her loafer flew across the hall and hit the far wall. Her eyes remained open for the next thirty minutes, the pupils dilating and constricting, dilating and constricting.

Ozzie Nelson came to the living-room door, miaowed at her, and then began washing himself.

She was putting supper on the table that night before Joe noticed the Band-Aid over her eye. He had been home for an hour and a half, but just lately he didn't notice much at all around the house — he seemed preoccupied with something, far away from her a lot of the time. This didn't bother her as much as it might have once — at least he wasn't always after her to let him put his manthing into her ladyplace.

"What'd you do to your head?" he asked as she put a bowl of beans and a plate of red hot dogs on the table.

She touched the Band-Aid vaguely. Yes — what exactly had she done to her head? She couldn't really remember. The whole middle of the day had a funny dark place in it, like an inkstain. She remembered feeding Joe his breakfast and standing on the porch as he headed off to the post office in his Wagoneer — that much was crystal clear. She remembered doing the white load in the new Sears washer while Wheel of Fortune blared from the TV. That was also clear. Then the inkstain began. She remembered putting in the colors and starting the cold cycle. She had the faintest, vaguest recollection of putting a couple of Swanson's Hungary man frozen dinners in the oven for herself — 'Becka Paulson was a hefty eater — but after that there was nothing. Not until she had awakened sitting on the living-room couch. She had changed from slacks and her flowed smock into a dress and high heel; she had put her hair in braids. There was something heavy in her lap and on her shoulders and her forehead tickled. It was Ozzie Nelson. Ozzie was standing with his hind legs in her crotch and his forepaws on her shoulders. He was busily licking blood off her forehead and out of her eyebrow. She swatted Ozzie away from her lap and then looked at the clock. Joe would be home in an hour and she hadn't even started dinner. Then she had touched her head, which throbbed vaguely.

“Becka?”

“What?” She sat down at her place and began to spoon beans onto her plate.

“I asked you what you did to your head?”

“Bumped it,” she said although, when she went down to the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror, it hadn't looked like a bump; it had looked like a hole. “I just bumped it.”

“Oh,” he said, losing interest. He opened the new issue of Sports Illustrated which had come that day and immediately fell into a daydream. In it he was running his hands slowly over the body of Nancy Voss — an activity he had been indulging in the last six weeks or so. God bless the United States Postal Authority for

sending Nancy Voss from Falmouth to Haven, that was all he could say. Falmouth's loss was Joe Paulson's gain. He had whole days when he was quite sure he had died and gone to heaven, and his pecker hadn't been so frisky since he was nineteen and touring West Germany with the U.S. Army. It would have taken more than a Band-Aid on his wife's forehead to engage his full attention.

'Becka helped herself to three hot dogs, paused to debate a moment, and then added a fourth. She doused the dogs and the beans with ketchup and then stirred everything together. The result looked a bit like the aftermath of a bad motorcycle accident. She poured herself a glass of grape Kool-Aid from the pitcher on the table (Joe had a beer) and then touched the Band-Aid with the tips of her fingers — she had been doing that ever since she put it on. Nothing but a cool plastic strip. That was okay but she could feel the circular indentation beneath. The hole. That wasn't so okay.

"Just bumped it," she murmured again, as if saying would make it so. Joe didn't look up and 'Becka began to eat.

Hasn't hurt my appetite any, whatever it was, she thought. Not that much ever does — probably nothing ever will. When they say on the radio that all those missiles are flying and it's the end of the world. I'll probably go right on eating until one of those rockets lands on Haven.

She cut herself a piece of bread from the homemade loaf and began mopping up bean juice with it.

Seeing that that mark on her forehead had unnerved her at the time, unnerved her plenty. No sense kidding about that, just as there was no sense kidding that it was just a mark, like a bruise. And in case anyone ever wanted to know, 'Becka thought, she would tell them that looking into the mirror and seeing that you had an extra hole in your head wasn't one of life's cheeriest experiences. Your head, after all, was where your brains were. And as for what she had done next

She tried to shy away from that, but it was too late.

Too late, 'Becka, a voice tolled in her mind — it sounded like her dead father's voice.

She had stared at the hole, stared at it and stared at it, and then she had pulled open the drawer to the left of the sink and had pawed through her few meager items of makeup with hands that didn't seem to belong to her. She took out her eyebrow pencil and then looked into the mirror again.

She raised the hand holding the eyebrow pencil with the blunt end towards her, and slowly began to push it into the hole in her forehead. No, she moaned to herself, stop it, 'Becka, you don't want to do this

But apparently part of her did, because she went right on doing it. There was no pain and the eyebrow pencil was a perfect fit. She pushed it in an inch, then two, then three. She looked at herself in the mirror, a woman in a flowered dress who had a pencil sticking out of her head. She pushed it in a fourth inch.

Not much left, 'Becka, be careful, wouldn't want to lose it in there, I'd rattle when you turned over in the night, wake up Joe

She tittered hysterically.

Five inches in and the blunt end of the eyebrow pencil had finally encountered resistance. It was hard, but a gentle push also communicated a feeling of sponginess. At the same moment the whole world turned a brilliant, momentary green and an interlacing of memories jiggled through her mind — sledding at four in her older brother's snowsuit, washing high school blackboards, a '59 Impala her Uncle Bill had owned, the smell of cut hay.

She pulled the eyebrow pencil out of her head, shocked back to herself, terrified that blood would come gushing out of the hole. But no blood came, nor was there any blood on the shiny surface of the eyebrow pencil. Blood or or

But she would not think of that. She threw the pencil back into the drawer and slammed the draw shut. Her first impulse, to cover the hole, came back, stronger than ever.

She swung the mirror away from the medicine cabinet and grabbed the tin box of Band-Aids. It fell from her trembling fingers and cluttered into the basin. 'Becka had cried out at the sound and then told herself to stop it, just stop it. Cover it up, make it gone. That was the thing to do; that was the ticket. Never mind the eyebrow pencil, just forget that — she had none of the signs of brain injury she had seen on the afternoon stories and Marcus Welby, M.D., that was the important thing. She was all right. As for the eyebrow pencil, she would just forget that part.

And so she had, at least until now. She looked at her half-eaten dinner and realized with a sort of dull humor that she had been wrong about her appetite — she couldn't eat another bite.

She took her plate over to the garbage and scrapped what was left into the can, while Ozzie wound restlessly around her ankles. Joe didn't look up from his magazine. In his mind, Nancy Voss was asking him again if that tongue of his was as long as it looked.

She woke up in the middle of the night from some confusing dream in which all the clocks in the house had been talking in her father's voice. Joe lay beside her, flat on his back in his boxer shorts, snoring.

Her hand went to the Band-Aid. The hole didn't hurt, didn't exactly throb, but it itched. She rubbed at it gently, afraid of another of those dazzling green flashes. None came.

She rolled over on her side and thought: You got to go to the doctor, 'Becka. You got to get that seen to. I don't know what you did, but

No, she answered herself. No doctor. She rolled to her other side, thinking she would be awake for hours now, wondering, asking

herself frightened questions. Instead, she was asleep again in moments.

In the morning the hole under the Band-Aid hardly itched at all, and that made it easier not to think about. She made Joe his breakfast and saw him off to work. She finished washing the dishes and took out the garbage. They kept it in a little shed beside the house that Joe had built, a structure not much bigger than a doghouse. You had to lock it up or the coons came out of the woods and made a mess.

She stepped in, wrinkling her nose at the smell, and put the green bag down with the others. Vinnie would be by in Friday or Saturday and then she would give the shed a good airing. As she was backing out, she saw a bag that hadn't been tied up like the others. A curved handle, like the handle of a cane protruded from the top.

Curious, she pulled it out and saw it was an umbrella. A number of moth-eaten, unraveling hats came out with the umbrella.

A dull warning sound in her head. For a moment she could almost see through the inkstain to what was behind it, to what had happened to her

(bottom it's in the bottom something heavy something in a box what Joe don't remember won't)

yesterday. But did she want to know?

No.

She didn't.

She wanted to forget.

She backed out of the little shed and rebolted the door with hands that trembled the slightest bit.

A week later (she still changed the band-Aid each morning, but the wound was closing up — she could see the pink new tissue filling it

when she shone Joe's flashlight into it and peered into the bathroom mirror) 'Becka found out what half of have already either knew or surmised — that Joe was cheating on her. Jesus told her. In the last three days or so, Jesus had told her the most amazing, terrible, distressing things imaginable. They sickened her, they destroyed her sleep, they were destroying her sanity but were they wonderful? Weren't they just! And would she stop listening, simply tip Jesus over on His face, perhaps scream at Him to shut up? Absolutely not. For one thing, he was the Savior. For another thing, there was a grisly sort of compulsion in knowing the things Jesus told her.

Jesus was on top of the Paulsons' Zenith television and He had been in that same spot for just about twenty years. Before resting atop the Zenith, He had rested atop two RCAs (Joe Paulson had always bought American). This was a beautiful 3-D picture of Jesus that Rebecca's sister, who lived in Portsmouth, had sent her. Jesus was dressed in a simple white robe, and He was holding a Shepard's staff. Because the picture had been created ('Becka considered "made" much too mundane a word for a likeness which seemed so real you could almost stick your hand into it) before the Beatles and the changes they had wreaked on male hairstyles, His hair was not too long, and perfectly neat. The Christ on 'Becka Paulson's TV combed His hair a little bit like Elvis Presley after Elvis got out of the army. His eyes were brown and mild and kind. Behind Him, in perfect perspective, sheep as white as the linens in TV soap commercials trailed away into the distance. 'Becka and her sister Corinne and her brother Roland had grown up on a sheep farm in New Gloucester, and 'Becka knew from personal experience that sheep were never that white and uniformly woolly, like little fair weather clouds that had fallen to earth. But, she reasoned, if Jesus could turn water into wine and bring the dead back to life, there was no reason at all why He couldn't make the shit caked around a bunch of lambs' rumps disappear if He wanted to.

A couple of times Joe had tried to move that picture off the TV, and she supposed that now she new why, oh yessirree Bob, oh yes indeedy. Joe of course, had his trumped-up tales. "it doesn't seem

right to have Jesus on top of the television while we're watching Three's Company or Charlie's Angels" he'd say. "Why don't you put it up on your bureau, 'Becka? Or I'll tell you what! Why not put it up on your bureau until Sunday, and then you can bring it down and out it back on the TV while you watch Jimmy Swaggart and Rex Humbard and Jerry Falwell? I'll bet Jesus likes Jerry Falwell one hell of a lot better than he likes Charlie's Angels."

She refused.

"When it's my turn to have the Thursday-night poker game, the guys don't like it," he said another time. "No one wants to have Jesus Christ looking at them while He tries to fill a flush or draw to an inside straight."

"Maybe they feel uncomfortable because they know gambling's the Devil's work," 'Becka said.

Joe, who was a good poker player, bridled. "then it was the Devil's work that bought you your hair dryer and that garnet ring you like so well," he said. "better take 'em back for refunds and give the money to the Salvation Army. Wait, I think I got the receipts in my den."

She allowed as how Joe could turn the 3-D picture of Jesus around to face the wall on the one Thursday night a month that he had his dirty-talking, beer-swilling friends in to play poker but that was all.

And now she knew the real reason he wanted to get rid of that picture. He must have had an idea all along that that picture was a magic picture. Oh she supposed sacred was a better word, magic was for pagans — headhunters and Catholics and people like that — but the came almost to one and the same, didn't they? All along Joe must have sensed that picture was special, that it would be the means by which his sin would be found out.

Oh, she supposed she must have had some idea of what all his recent preoccupation had meant, must have known there was a reason why he was never after her at night anymore. But the truth

was, that had been a relief — sex was just as her mother had told her it would be, nasty and brutish, sometimes painful and always humiliating. Had she also smelled perfume on his collar from time to time? If so, she had ignored that, too, and she might have gone on ignoring it indefinitely if the picture of Jesus on the Sony hadn't begun to speak on July 7th. She realized now that she had ignored a third factor, as well; at about the same time the pawings had stopped the perfume smells had begun, old Charlie Estabrooke had retired and a woman named Nancy Voss had come up from the Falmouth post office to take his place. She guessed that the Voss woman (whom, 'Becka had now come to think of simply as The Hussy) was perhaps five years older than her and Joe, which would make her around fifty, but she was a trim, well-kept and handsome fifty. 'Becka herself had put on a little weight during her marriage, going from one hundred and twenty-six to a hundred and ninety-three, most of that since Byron, their only chick and child, had flown from the nest.

She could have gone on ignoring it, and perhaps what would even have been for the best. If The Hussey really enjoyed the animalism of sexual congress, with its gruntings and thrustings and that final squirt of sticky stuff that smelled faintly like codfish and looked like cheap dish detergent, then it only proved that The Hussy was little more than an animal herself — and of course it freed 'Becka of a tiresome, if ever more occasional, obligation. But when the picture of Jesus spoke up, telling her exactly what was going on, it became impossible to ignore. She knew that something would have to be done.

The picture first spoke at just past three in the afternoon on Thursday. This was eight days after shooting herself in the head and about four days after her resolution to forget it was a hole and not just a mark had begun to take effect. 'Becka was coming back into the living room from the kitchen with a little snack (half a coffeecake and a beer stein filled with Kool-Aid) to watch General Hospital. She no longer really believed that Luke would ever find Laura, but she could not quite find it in her heart to completely give up hope.

She was bending down to turn on the Zenith when Jesus said, “Becka, Joe is putting the boots to that Hussey down at the pee-oh just about every lunch hour and sometimes after punching out time in the afternoon. Once he was so randy he drove it to her while he was supposed to be helping her sort the mail. And do you know what? She never even said ‘At least wait until I get the first-class into the boxes.’ “

‘Becka screamed and spilled her Kool-Aid down the front of the TV. It was a wonder, she thought later, when she was able to think at all, that the picture tube didn’t blow. Her coffeecake went on the rug.

“And that’s not all,” Jesus told her. He walked halfway across the picture, His robe fluttering around His ankles, and sat down on a rock that jutted out of the ground. He held His staff between his knees and looked at her grimly. “There’s a lot going on in Haven. Why, you wouldn’t believe the half of it.”

‘Becka screamed again and fell on her knees. One of them landed squarely on her coffeecake and squirted raspberry filling into the face of Ozzie Nelson, who had crept into the living room to see what was going on. “My Lord! My Lord!” ‘Becka shrieked. Ozzie ran, hissing, for the kitchen, where he crawled under the stove with red goo dripping from his whiskers. He stayed under there the rest of the day.

“Well, none of the Paulsons was ever any good,” Jesus said. A sheep wandered towards Him and He whacked it away, using His staff with an absentminded impatience that reminded ‘Becka, even in her current frozen state, of her long-dead father. The sheep went, rippling slightly through the 3-D effect. It disappeared from the picture, actual seeming to curve as it went off the edge but that was just an optical illusion, she felt sure. “No good at all,” Jesus went on. “Joe’s granddad was a whoremaster of the purest sense, as you well know, ‘Becka. Spent his whole life pecker-led. And when he came up here, do you know what we said? ‘No room!’ that’s what we said.” Jesus leaned forward, still holding His staff. ““Go see Mr. Splitfoot down below,’ we said. ‘You’ll find your haven-home, all right. But you

may find you new landlord a hard taskmaster,' we said." Incredibly, Jesus winked at her and that was when 'Becka fled, shrieking, from the house.

She stopped in the backyard, panting, her hair, a mousy blond that was really not much of any color at all, hanging in her face. Her heart was beating so fast in her chest that it frightened her. No one had heard her shriekings and carryings-on, thank the Lord; she and Joe lived far out on the Nista Road, and their nearest neighbors were the Brodskys were half a mile away. If anyone had heard her, they would have thought there was a crazywoman down at Joe and 'Becka Paulson's.

Well there is a crazywoman at the Paulsons', isn't there? she thought. If you really think that picture of Jesus started to talk to you, why, you really must be crazy. Daddy'd beat you three shades of blue for thinking such a thing — one shade for lying, another shade for believing the lie, and a third for raising your voice. 'Becka, you are crazy. Pictures don't talk.

No and it didn't, another voice spoke up suddenly. That voice came out of your own head, 'Becka. I don't know how it could be how you could know such things but that's what happened. Maybe it had something to do with what happened to you last week, or maybe not, but you made that picture of Jesus talk your own self. It didn't really no more than that little rubber Topo Gigio mouse on the Ed Sullivan Show.

But somehow the idea that it might have something to do with that that

(hole)

other thing was scarier than the idea that the picture itself had spoken, because that was the sort of thing they sometimes had on Marcus Welby, like that show about the fellow who had the brain tumor and it was making him wear his wife's nylon stockings and step-ins. She refused to allow it mental houseroom. It might be a

miracle. After all, miracles happened every day. There was the Shroud of Turin, and the cures at Lourdes, and that Mexican fellow who had a picture of the Virgin Mary burned into the surface of a taco or an enchilada or something. Not to mention those children that had made the headlines of one of the tabloids — children who cried rocks. Those were all bona fide miracles (the children who wept rocks was, admittedly, a rather gritty one), as uplifting as a Jimmy Swaggart sermon. Hearing voices was only crazy.

But that's what happened. And you've been hearing voices for quite a little while now, haven't you? You've been hearing His voice. Joe's voice. And that's where it came from, not from Jesus but from Joe, from Joe's head

"No," 'Becka whimpered. "No, I ain't heard any voices in my head."

She stood by her clothesline in the hot backyard, looking blankly off toward the woods on the other side of the Nista Road, blue-gray-hazy in the heat. She wrung her hands in front of her and began to weep.

"I ain't no heard no voices in my head."

Crazy, her dead father's implacable voice replied. Crazy with the heat. You come on over here, 'Becka Bouchard, I'm gonna beat you three shades of blister-blue for that crazy talk.

"I ain't heard no voices in my head," 'Becka moaned. "That picture really did talk, I swear, I can't do ventriloquism!"

Better believe the picture. If it was the hole, it was a brain tumor, sure. If it was the picture, it was a miracle. Miracles came from God. Miracles came from Outside. A miracle could drive you crazy — and the dear God knew she felt like she was going crazy now — but it didn't mean you were crazy, or that your brains were scrambled. As for believing that you could hear other people's thoughts that was just crazy.

'Becka looked down at her legs and saw blood gushing from her left knee. She shrieked again and ran back into the house to call the doctor, MEDIX, somebody. She was in the living room again, pawing at the dial with the phone to her ear, when Jesus said:

"That's raspberry filling from your coffeecake, 'Becka. Why don't you just relax, before you have a heart attack?"

She looked at the TV, the telephone receiver falling to the table with a clunk. Jesus was still sitting on the rock outcropping. It looked as though He had crossed His legs. It was really surprising how much He looked like her own father only He didn't seem forbidding, ready to be hitting angry at a moment's notice. He was looking at her with a kind of exasperated patience.

"Try it and see if I'm not right," Jesus said.

She touched her knee gently, wincing, expecting pain. There was none. She saw the seeds in the red stuff and relaxed. She licked the raspberry filling off her fingers.

"Also," Jesus said, "you have got to get these ideas about hearing voices and going crazy out of your head. It's just Me. And I can talk to anyone I want to, any way I want to."

"Because you're the Savior," 'Becka whispered.

"That's right," Jesus said, and looked down. Below Him, a couple of animated salad bowls were dancing in appreciation of the hidden Valley Ranch Dressing which they were about to receive. "And I'd like you to please turn that crap off, if you don't mind. We don't need that thing running. Also, it makes My feet tingle."

'Becka approached the TV and turned it off.

"My Lord," she whispered.

Now it was Sunday, July 10th. Joe was lying fast asleep out in the backyard hammock with Ozzie lying limply across him ample stomach like a black and white fur stole. She stood in the living room, holding the curtain back with her left hand and looking out at Joe. Sleeping in the hammock, dreaming of The Hussy, no doubt — dreaming of throwing her down in a great big pile of catalogs from Carroll Reed and fourth-class junk mail and then — how would Joe and his piggy poker-buddies out it? — “putting the boots to her.”

She was holding the curtain with her left hand because she had a handful of square nine-volt batteries in her right. She had bought them yesterday down at the town hardware store. Now she let the curtain drop and took the batteries into the kitchen, where she was assembling a little something on the counter. Jesus had told her how to make it. She told Jesus she couldn't build things. Jesus told her not to be a cussed fool. If she could follow a recipe, she could build this little gadget. She was delighted to find that Jesus was absolutely right. It was not only easy, it was fun. A lot more fun than cooking, certainly; she had never really had the knack for that. Her cakes almost always fell and her breads almost never rose. She had begun this little thing yesterday, working with the toaster, the motor from her old Hamilton-Beach blender, and a funny board full of electronic things which had come from the back of an old radio in the shed. She thought she would be done long before Joe woke up and came in to watch the Red Sox on TV at two o'clock.

Actually, it was funny how many ideas she'd had in the last few days. Some Jesus had told her about; others just seemed to come to her at odd moments.

Her sewing machine, for instance — she'd always wanted one of those attachments that made the zigzag stitches, but Joe had told her she would have to wait until he could afford to buy her a new machine (and that would probably be along about the twelfth of Never, if she knew Joe). Just four days ago she had seen how, if she just moved the button stitcher and added a second needle where it had been at an angle of forty-five degrees to the first needle, she

could make all the zigzags she wanted. All it took was a screwdriver — even a dummy like her could use one of those — and it worked just as well as you could want. She saw that the camshaft would probably warp out of true before long because of the weight differential, but there were ways to fix that, too, when it happened.

Then there was the Electrolux. Jesus had told her about that one. Getting her ready for Joe, maybe. It had been Jesus who told her how to use Joe's little butane welding torch, and that made it easier. She had gone over to Derry and bought three of those electronic Simon games at KayBee Toys. Once she was back home she broke them open and pulled out the memory boards. Following Jesus' instructions, she connected the boards and wired Eveready dry cells to the memory circuits she had created. Jesus told her how to program the Electrolux and power it (she had in fact, already figured this out for herself, but she was much too polite to tell Him so). Now it vacuumed the kitchen, living room, and downstairs bathroom all by itself. It had a tendency to get caught under the piano bench or in the bathroom (where it just kept on butting its stupid self against the toilet until she came running to turn it around), and it scared the granola out of Ozzie, but it was still an improvement over dragging a thirty-pound vac around like a dead dog. She had much more time to catch up on the afternoon stories — and now these included true stories Jesus told her. Her new, improved Electrolux used juice awfully fast, though, and sometimes it got tangled in its own electrical cord. She thought she might just scratch the dry cells and hook up a motorcycle battery to it one day soon. There would be time — after this problem of Joe and The Hussy had been solved.

Or just last night. She had lain awake in bed long after Joe was snoring beside her, thinking about numbers. It occurred to 'Becka (who had never gotten beyond Business Math in high school) that if you gave numbers letter values, you could un-freeze them — you could turn them into something that was like Jell-O. When they — the numbers — were letters, you could pour them into any old mold you liked. Then you could turn the letters back into numbers, and that was like putting the Jell-O into the fridge so it would set, and

keep the shape of the mold when you turned it out onto a plate later on.

That way you could always figure things out, 'Becka had thought, delighted. She was unaware that her fingers had gone to the spot above her left eye and were rubbing, rubbing, rubbing. For instance, just look! You could make things fall into a line every time by saying $ax + bx + c = 0$, and that proves it. It always works. It's like Captain Marvel saying Shazam! Well, there is the zero factor; you can't let "a" be zero or that spoils it. But otherwise

She had lain awake a while longer, considering this, and then had fallen asleep, unaware that she had just reinvented the quadratic equation, and polynomials, and the concept of factoring.

Ideas. Quite a few of them just lately.

'Becka picked up Joe's little blowtorch and lit it deftly with a kitchen match. She would have laughed last month if you'd told her she would ever be working with something like this. But it was easy. Jesus had told her exactly how to solder the wires to the electronics board from the old radio. It was just like fixing up the vacuum cleaner, only this idea was even better.

Jesus had told her a lot of other things in the last three days or so. They had murdered her sleep (and what little sleep she had gotten was nightmare-driven), they had made her afraid to show her face in the village itself (I'll always know when you've done something wrong, 'Becka, her father had told her, because your face just can't keep a secret), they had made her lose her appetite. Joe, totally bound up in his work, the Red Sox, and his Hussy, noticed none of these things although he had noticed the other night as he watched television that 'Becka was gnawing her fingernails, something she had never done before — it was, in fact, one of the many things she nagged him about. But she was doing it now, all right; they were bitten right down to the quick. Joe Paulson considered this for all of twelve seconds before looking back at the Sony TV and losing himself in dreams of Nancy Voss's billowy white breasts.

Here were just a few of the afternoon stories Jesus had told her which had caused 'Becka to sleep poorly and to begin biting her fingernails at the advanced age of forty-five:

In 1973, Moss Harlingen, one of Joe's poker buddies, had murdered his father. They had been hunting deer up in Greenville and it had supposedly been one of those tragic accidents, but the shooting of Abel Harlingen had been no accident. Moss simply lay up behind a fallen tree with his rifle and waited until his father splashed towards him across a small stream about fifty yards down the hill from where Moss was. Moss shot his father carefully and deliberately through the head. Moss thought he had killed his father for money. His (Moss's) business, Big Ditch Construction, had two notes falling due with two different banks, and neither bank would extend because of the other. Moss went to Abel, but Abel refused to help, although he could afford to. So Moss shot his father and inherited a lot of money as soon as the county coroner handed down his verdict of death by misadventure. The note was paid and Moss Harlingen really believed (except perhaps in his deepest dreams) that he had committed the murder for gain. The real motive had been something else. Far in the past, when Moss was ten and his little brother Emery but seven, Abel's wife went south to Rhode Island for one whole winter. Moss's and Emery's uncle had died suddenly, and his wife needed help getting on her feet. While their mother was gone, there were several incidents of buggery in the Harlingens' Troy home. The buggery stopped when the boy's mother came back, and the incidents were never repeated. Moss had forgotten all about them. He never remembered lying awake in the dark anymore, lying awake in mortal terror and watching the doorway for the shadow of his father. He had absolutely no recollection of lying with his mouth pressed against his forearm, hot salty tears of shame and rage squeezing out of his eyes and coursing down his face to his mouth as Abel Harlingen slathered lard onto his cock and then slid it up his son's back door with a grunt and a sigh. It had all made so little impression on Moss that he could not remember biting his arm until it bled to keep from crying out, and he certainly could not remember Emery's breathless little cries from the next bed — "Please, no,

daddy, please not me tonight, please, daddy, please no.” Children, of course, forget very easily. But some subconscious memory must have lingered, because when Moss Harlingen actually pulled the trigger, as he had dreamed of doing every night for the last thirty-two years of his life, as the echoes first rolled away and then rolled back, finally disappearing into the great forested silence of the up-Maine wilderness, Moss whispered: “Not you, Em, not tonight.” That Jesus had told her this not two hours after Moss had stopped in to return a fishing rod which belonged to Joe never crossed ‘Becka’s mind.

1 Alice Kimball, who taught at the Haven Grammar School, was a lesbian. Jesus told ‘Becka this Friday, not long after the lady herself, looking large and solid and respectable in a green pant suit, had stopped by, collecting for the American Cancer Society.

2 Darla Gaines, the pretty seventeen-year-old girl who brought the Sunday paper, had half an ounce of “bitchin’ reefer” between the mattress and box spring of her bed. Jesus told ‘Becka not fifteen minutes after Darla had come by on Saturday to collect for the last five weeks (three dollars plus a fifty-cent tip ‘Becka now wished she had withheld). That she and her boyfriend smoked the reefer in Darla’s bed after doing what they called “the horizontal bop.” They did the horizontal bop and smoked reefer almost every weekday from two until three o’clock or so. Darla’s parents both worked at Splended Shoe in Derry and they didn’t get home until well past four.

3 Hank Buck, another of Joe’s poker buddies, worked at a large supermarket in Bangor and hated his boss so much that a year ago he had put half a box of Ex-Lax in the man’s chocolate shake when he, the boss, sent Hank out to McDonald’s to get his lunch one day. The boss had shit his pants promptly at quarter past three in the afternoon, as he was slicing luncheon meat in the deli of Paul’s Down-East Grocery Mart. Hank managed to hold on until punching-out time, and then he sat in his car, laughing until he almost shit his pants. “He laughed,” Jesus told ‘Becka. “He laughed. Can you believe that?”

And these things were only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. It seemed that Jesus knew something unpleasant or upsetting about everyone — everyone 'Becka herself came in contact with, anyway.

She couldn't live with such an awful outpouring.

But she didn't know if she could live without it anymore, either.

One thing was certain — she had to do something. Something.

"You are doing something," Jesus said. He spoke from behind her, from the picture on top of the TV — of course He did — and the idea that the voice was coming from inside her own head, and that it was a cold mutation of her own thoughts that was nothing but a dreadful passing illusion. "In fact, you're almost done with this part, 'Becka. Just solder that red wire to that point beside the long doohickey not that one, the one next to it that's right. Not too much solder! It's like Brylcreem, 'Becka. A little dab'll do ya."

Strange, hearing Jesus Christ talk about Brylcreem.

Joe woke up at quarter of two, tossed Ozzie off his lap, strolled to the back of his lawn, had a comfortable whizz into the poison ivy back there, then headed into the house to watch the Yankees and the Red Sox. He opened the refrigerator in the kitchen, glancing briefly at the little snips of wire on the counter and wondering just what the hell his wife had been up to. Then he dismissed it and grabbed a quart of Bud.

He padded into the living room. 'Becka was sitting in her rocking chair, pretending to read a book. Just ten minutes before Joe came in, she had finished wiring her little gadget into the Zenith console television, following Jesus' instructions to the letter.

"You got to be careful, taking the back off a television, 'Becka," Jesus had told her. "More juice back there than there is in a Bird's Eye warehouse."

“Thought you’d have this all warmed up for me,” Joe said.

“I guess you can do it,” ‘Becka said.

“Ayuh, guess I can,” Joe said, completing the last conversational exchange the two of them would ever have.

He pushed the button that made the TV come on and better than two thousand volts of electricity slammed into him. His eyes popped wide open. When the electricity hit him, his hand clenched hard enough to break the bottle in his hand and drive brown glass into his palm and fingers. Beer foamed and ran.

“EEEEEEOOOOOOOAAARRRRRRRRUMMMMMMMMM!” Joe screamed.

His face began to turn black. Blue smoke began to pour from his hair. His finger appeared nailed to the Zenith’s ON button. A picture popped up on the TV. It showed Joe and Nancy Voss screwing on the post office floor in a litter of catalogues and Congressional newsletters and sweepstakes announcements from Publishers’ Clearing House.

“No!” ‘Becka screamed, and the picture changed. Now she saw Moss Harlingen behind a fallen pine, slightly down the barrel of a .30-.30. the picture changed and she saw Darla Gaines and her boyfriend doing the horizontal bop in Darla’s upstairs bedroom while Rick Springfield stared at them from the wall.

Joe Paulson’s clothes burst into flames.

The living room was filled with the hot smell of cooking beer.

A moment later, the 3-D picture of Jesus exploded.

“No!” ‘Becka shrieked, suddenly understanding that it had been her all along, her, her, her, she had thought everything up, she had read their thoughts, somehow read their thoughts, it had been the hole in

her head and it had done something to her mind — had supered it up somehow. The picture on the TV changed again and she saw herself backing down the stepladder with the .22 pistol in her hand, pointed toward her — she looked like a woman bent on suicide rather than on cleaning.

Her husband was turning black before her very eyes.

She ran to him, seized his shredded, wet hand and was herself galvanized by electricity. She was no more able to let go than Brer Rabbit had been after he slapped the tar baby for insolence.

Jesus oh Jesus, she thought as the current slammed into her, driving her up on her toes.

And a mad, cackling voice, the voice of her father, rode in her brain: Fooled you, 'Becka! Fooled you, didn't I? Fooled you good!

The back of the television, which she had screwed back on after she had finished with her alterations (on the off-chance that Joe might look back there), exploded backward in a mighty blue flash of light. Joe and 'Becka Paulson tumbled to the carpet. Joe was already dead. And by the time the smouldering wallpaper behind the TV had ignited the, 'Becka was dead, too.