FAIR EXTENSION

Stephen King

Streeter only saw the sign because he had to pull over and puke. He puked a lot now, and there was very little warning—sometimes a flutter of nausea, sometimes a brassy taste in the back of his mouth, and sometimes nothing at all; just urk and out it came, howdy-do. It made driving a risky proposition, yet he also drove a lot now, partly because he wouldn't be able to by late fall and partly because he had a lot to think about. He had always done his best thinking behind the wheel.

He was out on the Harris Avenue Extension, a broad thoroughfare that ran for two miles beside the Derry County Airport and the attendant businesses: mostly motels and warehouses. The Extension was busy during the daytime, because it connected Derry's west and east sides as well as servicing the airport, but in the evening it was nearly deserted. Streeter pulled over into the bike lane, snatched one of his plastic barf-bags from the pile of them on the passenger seat, dropped his face into it, and let fly. Dinner made an encore appearance. Or would have, if he'd had his eyes open. He didn't. Once you'd seen one bellyful of puke, you'd seen them all.

When the puking phase started, there hadn't been pain. Dr. Henderson had warned him that would change, and over the last week, it had. Not agony as yet; just a quick lightning-stroke up from the gut and into the throat, like acid indigestion. It came, then faded. But it would get worse. Dr. Henderson had told him that, too.

He raised his head from the bag, opened the glove compartment, took out a wire bread-tie, and secured his dinner before the smell could permeate the car. He looked to his right and saw a providential litter basket with a cheerful lop-eared hound on the side and a stenciled message reading DERRY DAWG SEZ "PUT LITTER IN ITS PLACE!"

Streeter got out, went to the Dawg Basket, and disposed of the latest ejecta from his failing body. The summer sun was setting red over the airport's flat (and currently deserted) acreage, and the shadow tacked to his heels was long and grotesquely thin. It was as if it were

four months ahead of his body, and already fully ravaged by the cancer that would soon be eating him alive.

He turned back to his car and saw the sign across the road. At first—probably because his eyes were still watering—he thought it said HAIR EXTENSION. Then he blinked and saw it actually said FAIR EXTENSION. Below that, in smaller letters: FAIR PRICE.

Fair extension, fair price. It sounded good, and almost made sense.

There was a gravel area on the far side of the Extension, outside the Cyclone fence marking the county airport's property. Lots of people set up roadside stands there during the busy hours of the day, because it was possible for customers to pull in without getting tailgated (if you were quick and remembered to use your blinker, that was). Streeter had lived his whole life in the little Maine city of Derry, and over the years he'd seen people selling fresh fiddleheads there in the spring, fresh berries and corn on the cob in the summer, and lobsters almost year-round. In mud season, a crazy old guy known as the Snowman took over the spot, selling scavenged knickknacks that had been lost in the winter and were revealed by the melting snow. Many years ago Streeter had bought a good-looking rag dolly from this man, intending to give it to his daughter May, who had been two or three back then. He made the mistake of telling Janet that he'd gotten it from the Snowman, and she made him throw it away. "Do you think we can boil a rag doll to kill the germs?" she asked. "Sometimes I wonder how a smart man can be so stupid."

Well, cancer didn't discriminate when it came to brains. Smart or stupid, he was about ready to leave the game and take off his uniform.

There was a card table set up where the Snowman had once displayed his wares. The pudgy man sitting behind it was shaded from the red rays of the lowering sun by a large yellow umbrella that was cocked at a rakish angle.

Streeter stood in front of his car for a minute, almost got in (the pudgy man had taken no notice of him; he appeared to be watching a small portable TV), and then curiosity got the better of him. He checked for traffic, saw none—the Extension was predictably dead at this hour, all the commuters at home eating dinner and taking their noncancerous states for granted—and crossed the four empty lanes. His scrawny shadow, the Ghost of Streeter Yet to Come, trailed out behind him.

The pudgy man looked up. “Hello there,” he said. Before he turned the TV off, Streeter had time to see the guy was watching Inside Edition. “How are we tonight?”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’ve been better,” Streeter said. “Kind of late to be selling, isn’t it? Very little traffic out here after rush hour. It’s the backside of the airport, you know. Nothing but freight deliveries. Passengers go in on Witcham Street.”

“Yes,” the pudgy man said, “but unfortunately, the zoning goes against little roadside businesses like mine on the busy side of the airport.” He shook his head at the unfairness of the world. “I was going to close up and go home at seven, but I had a feeling one more prospect might come by.”

Streeter looked at the table, saw no items for sale (unless the TV was), and smiled. “I can’t really be a prospect, Mr.—?”

“George Elvid,” the pudgy man said, standing and extending an equally pudgy hand.

Streeter shook with him. “Dave Streeter. And I can’t really be a prospect, because I have no idea what you’re selling. At first I thought the sign said hair extension.”

“Do you want a hair extension?” Elvid asked, giving him a critical once-over. “I ask because yours seems to be thinning.”

“And will soon be gone,” Streeter said. “I’m on chemo.”

“Oh my. Sorry.”

“Thanks. Although what the point of chemo can be …” He shrugged. He marveled at how easy it was to say these things to a stranger. He hadn’t even told his kids, although Janet knew, of course.

“Not much chance?” Elvid asked. There was simple sympathy in his voice—no more and no less—and Streeter felt his eyes fill with tears. Crying in front of Janet embarrassed him terribly, and he’d done it only twice. Here, with this stranger, it seemed all right. Nonetheless, he took his handkerchief from his back pocket and swiped his eyes with it. A small plane was coming in for a landing. Silhouetted against the red sun, it looked like a moving crucifix.

“No chance is what I’m hearing,” Streeter said. “So I guess the chemo is just … I don’t know …”

“Knee-jerk triage?”

Streeter laughed. “That’s it exactly.”

“Maybe you ought to consider trading the chemo for extra painkillers. Or, you could do a little business with me.”

“As I started to say, I can’t really be a prospect until I know what you’re selling.”

“Oh, well, most people would call it snake-oil,” Elvid said, smiling and bouncing on the balls of his feet behind his table. Streeter noted with some fascination that, although George Elvid was pudgy, his shadow was as thin and sick-looking as Streeter’s own. He supposed everyone’s shadow started to look sick as sunset approached, especially in August, when the end of the day was long and lingering and somehow not quite pleasant.

“I don’t see the bottles,” Streeter said.

Elvid tented his fingers on the table and leaned over them, looking suddenly businesslike. “I sell extensions,” he said.

“Which makes the name of this particular road fortuitous.”

“Never thought of it that way, but I suppose you’re right. Although sometimes a cigar is just a smoke and a coincidence is just a coincidence. Everyone wants an extension, Mr. Streeter. If you were a young woman with a love of shopping, I’d offer you a credit extension. If you were a man with a small penis—genetics can be so cruel—I’d offer you a dick extension.”

Streeter was amazed and amused by the baldness of it. For the first time in a month—since the diagnosis—he forgot he was suffering from an aggressive and extremely fast-moving form of cancer. “You’re kidding.”

“Oh, I’m a great kidder, but I never joke about business. I’ve sold dozens of dick extensions in my time, and was for awhile known in Arizona as El Pene Grande. I’m being totally honest, but, fortunately for me, I neither require nor expect you to believe it. Short men frequently want a height extension. If you did want more hair, Mr. Streeter, I’d be happy to sell you a hair extension.”

“Could a man with a big nose—you know, like Jimmy Durante—get a smaller one?”

Elvid shook his head, smiling. “Now you’re the one who’s kidding. The answer is no. If you need a reduction, you have to go somewhere else. I specialize only in extensions, a very American product. I’ve sold love extensions, sometimes called potions, to the lovelorn, loan extensions to the cash-strapped—plenty of those in this economy—time extensions to those under some sort of deadline, and once an eye extension to a fellow who wanted to become an Air Force pilot and knew he couldn’t pass the vision test.”

Streeter was grinning, having fun. He would have said having fun was now out of reach, but life was full of surprises.

Elvid was also grinning, as if they were sharing an excellent joke. “And once,” he said, “I swung a reality extension for a painter—very talented man—who was slipping into paranoid schizophrenia. That was expensive.”

“How much? Dare I ask?”

“One of the fellow’s paintings, which now graces my home. You’d know the name; famous in the Italian Renaissance. You probably studied him if you took an art appreciation course in college.”

Streeter continued to grin, but he took a step back, just to be on the safe side. He had accepted the fact that he was going to die, but that didn’t mean he wanted to do so today, at the hands of a possible escapee from the Juniper Hill asylum for the criminally insane in Augusta. “So what are we saying? That you’re kind of … I don’t know … immortal?”

“Very long-lived, certainly,” Elvid said. “Which brings us to what I can do for you, I believe. You’d probably like a life extension.”

“Can’t be done, I suppose?” Streeter asked. Mentally he was calculating the distance back to his car, and how long it would take him to get there.

“Of course it can … for a price.”

Streeter, who had played his share of Scrabble in his time, had already imagined the letters of Elvid’s name on tiles and rearranged them. “Money? Or are we talking about my soul?”

Elvid flapped his hand and accompanied the gesture with a roguish roll of his eyes. “I wouldn’t, as the saying goes, know a soul if it bit me on the buttocks. No, money’s the answer, as it usually is. Fifteen percent of your income over the next fifteen years should do it. An agenting fee, you could call it.”

“That’s the length of my extension?” Streeter contemplated the idea of fifteen years with wistful greed. It seemed like a very long time, especially when he stacked it next to what actually lay ahead: six months of vomiting, increasing pain, coma, death. Plus an obituary that would undoubtedly include the phrase “after a long and courageous battle with cancer.” Yada-yada, as they said on Seinfeld.

Elvid lifted his hands to his shoulders in an expansive who-knows gesture. “Might be twenty. Can’t say for sure; this is not rocket science. But if you’re expecting immortality, fuggeddaboudit. All I sell is fair extension. Best I can do.”

“Works for me,” Streeter said. The guy had cheered him up, and if he needed a straight man, Streeter was willing to oblige. Up to a point, anyway. Still smiling, he extended his hand across the card table. “Fifteen percent, fifteen years. Although I have to tell you, fifteen percent of an assistant bank manager’s salary won’t exactly put you behind the wheel of a Rolls-Royce. A Geo, maybe, but—”

“That’s not quite all,” Elvid said.

“Of course it isn’t,” Streeter said. He sighed and withdrew his hand. “Mr. Elvid, it’s been very nice talking to you, you’ve put a shine on my evening, which I would have thought was impossible, and I hope you get help with your mental prob—”

“Hush, you stupid man,” Elvid said, and although he was still smiling, there was nothing pleasant about it now. He suddenly seemed taller —at least three inches taller—and not so pudgy.

It’s the light, Streeter thought. Sunset light is tricky. And the unpleasant smell he suddenly noticed was probably nothing but burnt aviation fuel, carried to this little graveled square outside the Cyclone fence by an errant puff of wind. It all made sense … but he hushed as instructed.

“Why does a man or woman need an extension? Have you ever asked yourself that?”

“Of course I have,” Streeter said with a touch of asperity. “I work in a bank, Mr. Elvid—Derry Savings. People ask me for loan extensions all the time.”

“Then you know that people need extensions to compensate for shortfalls—short credit, short dick, short sight, et cetera.”

“Yeah, it’s a short-ass world,” Streeter said.

“Just so. But even things not there have weight. Negative weight, which is the worst kind. Weight lifted from you must go somewhere else. It’s simple physics. Psychic physics, we could say.”

Streeter studied Elvid with fascination. That momentary impression that the man was taller (and that there were too many teeth inside his smile) had gone. This was just a short, rotund fellow who probably had a green outpatient card in his wallet—if not from Juniper Hill, then from Acadia Mental Health in Bangor. If he had a wallet. He certainly had an extremely well-developed delusional geography, and that made him a fascinating study.

“Can I cut to the chase, Mr. Streeter?”

“Please.”

“You have to transfer the weight. In words of one syllable, you have to do the dirty to someone else if the dirty is to be lifted from you.”

“I see.” And he did. Elvid was back on message, and the message was a classic.

“But it can’t be just anyone. The old anonymous sacrifice has been tried, and it doesn’t work. It has to be someone you hate. Is there someone you hate, Mr. Streeter?”

“I’m not too crazy about Kim Jong-il,” Streeter said. “And I think jail’s way too good for the evil bastards who blew up the USS Cole, but I don’t suppose they’ll ever—”

“Be serious or begone,” Elvid said, and once again he seemed taller. Streeter wondered if this could be some peculiar side-effect of the medications he was taking.

“If you mean in my personal life, I don’t hate anyone. There are people I don’t like—Mrs. Denbrough next door puts out her garbage cans without the lids, and if a wind is blowing, crap ends up all over my law—”

“If I may misquote the late Dino Martino, Mr. Streeter, everybody hates somebody sometime.”

“Will Rogers said—”

“He was a rope-twirling fabricator who wore his hat down around his eyes like a little kid playing cowboy. Besides, if you really hate nobody, we can’t do business.”

Streeter thought it over. He looked down at his shoes and spoke in a small voice he hardly recognized as his own. “I suppose I hate Tom Goodhugh.”

“Who is he in your life?”

Streeter sighed. “My best friend since grammar school.”

There was a moment of silence before Elvid began bellowing laughter. He strode around his card table, clapped Streeter on the back (with a hand that felt cold and fingers that felt long and thin rather than short and pudgy), then strode back to his folding chair. He collapsed into it, still snorting and roaring. His face was red, and the tears streaming down his face also looked red—bloody, actually—in the sunset light.

“Your best … since grammar … oh, that’s …”

Elvid could manage no more. He went into gales and howls and gut-shaking spasms, his chin (strangely sharp for such a chubby face)

nodding and dipping at the innocent (but darkening) summer sky. At last he got himself under control. Streeter thought about offering his handkerchief, and decided he didn't want it on the extension salesman's skin.

"This is excellent, Mr. Streeter," he said. "We can do business."

"Gee, that's great," Streeter said, taking another step back. "I'm enjoying my extra fifteen years already. But I'm parked in the bike lane, and that's a traffic violation. I could get a ticket."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Elvid said. "As you may have noticed, not even a single civilian car has come along since we started dickering, let alone a minion of the Derry PD. Traffic never interferes when I get down to serious dealing with a serious man or woman; I see to it."

Streeter looked around uneasily. It was true. He could hear traffic over on Witcham Street, headed for Upmile Hill, but here, Derry was utterly deserted. Of course, he reminded himself, traffic's always light over here when the working day is done.

But absent? Completely absent? You might expect that at midnight, but not at seven-thirty PM.

"Tell me why you hate your best friend," Elvid invited.

Streeter reminded himself again that this man was crazy. Anything Elvid passed on wouldn't be believed. It was a liberating idea.

"Tom was better-looking when we were kids, and he's far better-looking now. He lettered in three sports; the only one I'm even halfway good at is miniature golf."

"I don't think they have a cheerleading squad for that one," Elvid said.

Streeter smiled grimly, warming to his subject. “Tom’s plenty smart, but he lazed his way through Derry High. His college ambitions were nil. But when his grades fell enough to put his athletic eligibility at risk, he’d panic. And then who got the call?”

“You did!” Elvid cried. “Old Mr. Responsible! Tutored him, did you? Maybe wrote a few papers as well? Making sure to misspell the words Tom’s teachers got used to him misspelling?”

“Guilty as charged. In fact, when we were seniors—the year Tom got the State of Maine Sportsman award—I was really two students: Dave Streeter and Tom Goodhugh.”

“Tough.”

“Do you know what’s tougher? I had a girlfriend. Beautiful girl named Norma Witten. Dark brown hair and eyes, flawless skin, beautiful cheekbones—”

“Tits that wouldn’t quit—”

“Yes indeed. But, sex appeal aside—”

“Not that you ever did put it aside—”

“—I loved that girl. Do you know what Tom did?”

“Stole her from you!” Elvid said indignantly.

“Correct. The two of them came to me, you know. Made a clean breast of it.”

“Noble!”

“Claimed they couldn’t help it.”

“Claimed they were in love, L-U-V.”

“Yes. Force of nature. This thing is bigger than both of us. And so on.”

“Let me guess. He knocked her up.”

“Indeed he did.” Streeter was looking at his shoes again, remembering a certain skirt Norma had worn when she was a sophomore or a junior. It was cut to show just a flirt of the slip beneath. That had been almost thirty years ago, but sometimes he still summoned that image to mind when he and Janet made love. He had never made love with Norma—not the Full Monty sort, anyway; she wouldn’t allow it. Although she had been eager enough to drop her pants for Tom Goodhugh. Probably the first time he asked her.

“And left her with a bun in the oven.”

“No.” Streeter sighed. “He married her.”

“Then divorced her! Possibly after beating her silly?”

“Worse still. They’re still married. Three kids. When you see them walking in Bassey Park, they’re usually holding hands.”

“That’s about the crappiest thing I’ve ever heard. Not much could make it worse. Unless …” Elvid looked shrewdly at Streeter from beneath bushy brows. “Unless you’re the one who finds himself frozen in the iceberg of a loveless marriage.”

“Not at all,” Streeter said, surprised by the idea. “I love Janet very much, and she loves me. The way she’s stood by me during this cancer thing has been just extraordinary. If there’s such a thing as harmony in the universe, then Tom and I ended up with the right partners. Absolutely. But …”

“But?” Elvid looked at him with delighted eagerness.

Streeter became aware that his fingernails were sinking into his palms. Instead of easing up, he bore down harder. Bore down until he felt trickles of blood. “But he fucking stole her!” This had been eating him for years, and it felt good to shout the news.

“Indeed he did, and we never cease wanting what we want, whether it’s good for us or not. Wouldn’t you say so, Mr. Streeter?”

Streeter made no reply. He was breathing hard, like a man who has just dashed fifty yards or engaged in a street scuffle. Hard little balls of color had surfaced in his formerly pale cheeks.

“And is that all?” Elvid spoke in the tones of a kindly parish priest.

“No.”

“Get it all out, then. Drain that blister.”

“He’s a millionaire. He shouldn’t be, but he is. In the late eighties—not long after the flood that damn near wiped this town out—he started up a garbage company … only he called it Derry Waste Removal and Recycling. Nicer name, you know.”

“Less germy.”

“He came to me for the loan, and although the proposition looked shaky to everyone at the bank, I pushed it through. Do you know why I pushed it through, Elvid?”

“Of course! Because he’s your friend!”

“Guess again.”

“Because you thought he’d crash and burn.”

“Right. He sank all his savings into four garbage trucks, and mortgaged his house to buy a piece of land out by the Newport town line. For a landfill. The kind of thing New Jersey gangsters own to wash their dope-and-whore money and use as body-dumps. I

thought it was crazy and I couldn't wait to write the loan. He still loves me like a brother for it. Never fails to tell people how I stood up to the bank and put my job on the line. 'Dave carried me, just like in high school,' he says. Do you know what the kids in town call his landfill now?"

"Tell me!"

"Mount Trashmore! It's huge! I wouldn't be surprised if it was radioactive! It's covered with sod, but there are KEEP OUT signs all around it, and there's probably a Rat Manhattan under that nice green grass! They're probably radioactive, as well!"

He stopped, aware that he sounded ridiculous, not caring. Elvid was insane, but—surprise! Streeter had turned out to be insane, too! At least on the subject of his old friend. Plus …

In cancer veritas, Streeter thought.

"So let's recap." Elvid began ticking off the points on his fingers, which were not long at all but as short, pudgy, and inoffensive as the rest of him. "Tom Goodhugh was better-looking than you, even when you were children. He was gifted with athletic skills you could only dream of. The girl who kept her smooth white thighs closed in the backseat of your car opened them for Tom. He married her. They are still in love. Children okay, I suppose?"

"Healthy and beautiful!" Streeter spat. "One getting married, one in college, one in high school! That one's captain of the football team! Chip off the old fucking block!"

"Right. And—the cherry on the chocolate sundae—he's rich and you're knocking on through life at a salary of sixty thousand or so a year."

"I got a bonus for writing his loan," Streeter muttered. "For showing vision."

“But what you actually wanted was a promotion.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m a businessman now, but at one time I was a humble salaryman. Got fired before striking out on my own. Best thing that ever happened to me. I know how these things go. Anything else? Might as well get it all off your chest.”

“He drinks Spotted Hen Microbrew!” Streeter shouted. “Nobody in Derry drinks that pretentious shit! Just him! Just Tom Goodhugh, the Garbage King!”

“Does he have a sports car?” Elvid spoke quietly, the words lined with silk.

“No. If he did, I could at least joke with Janet about sports car menopause. He drives a goddam Range Rover.”

“I think there might be one more thing,” Elvid said. “If so, you might as well get that off your chest, too.”

“He doesn’t have cancer.” Streeter almost whispered it. “He’s fifty-one, just like me, and he’s as healthy … as a fucking … horse.”

“So are you,” Elvid said.

“What?”

“It’s done, Mr. Streeter. Or, since I’ve cured your cancer, at least temporarily, may I call you Dave?”

“You’re a very crazy man,” Streeter said, not without admiration.

“No, sir. I’m as sane as a straight line. But notice I said temporarily. We are now in the ‘try it, you’ll buy it’ stage of our relationship. It will last a week at least, maybe ten days. I urge you to visit your doctor. I think he’ll find remarkable improvement in your condition. But it won’t last. Unless …”

“Unless?”

Elvid leaned forward, smiling chummily. His teeth again seemed too many (and too big) for his inoffensive mouth. “I come out here from time to time,” he said. “Usually at this time of day.”

“Just before sunset.”

“Exactly. Most people don’t notice me—they look through me as if I wasn’t there—but you’ll be looking. Won’t you?”

“If I’m better, I certainly will,” Streeter said.

“And you’ll bring me something.”

Elvid’s smile widened, and Streeter saw a wonderful, terrible thing: the man’s teeth weren’t just too big or too many. They were sharp.

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Janet was folding clothes in the laundry room when he got back. “There you are,” she said. “I was starting to worry. Did you have a nice drive?”

“Yes,” he said. He surveyed his kitchen. It looked different. It looked like a kitchen in a dream. Then he turned on a light, and that was better. Elvid was the dream. Elvid and his promises. Just a loony on a day pass from Acadia Mental.

She came to him and kissed his cheek. She was flushed from the heat of the dryer and very pretty. She was fifty herself, but looked years younger. Streeter thought she would probably have a fine life after he died. He guessed May and Justin might have a stepdaddy in their future.

“You look good,” she said. “You’ve actually got some color.”

“Do I?”

“You do.” She gave him an encouraging smile that was troubled just beneath. “Come talk to me while I fold the rest of these things. It’s so boring.”

He followed her and stood in the door of the laundry room. He knew better than to offer help; she said he even folded dish-wipers the wrong way.

“Justin called,” she said. “He and Carl are in Venice. At a youth hostel. He said their cabdriver spoke very good English. He’s having a ball.”

“Great.”

“You were right to keep the diagnosis to yourself,” she said. “You were right and I was wrong.”

“A first in our marriage.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Jus has so looked forward to this trip. But you’ll have to fess up when he gets back. May’s coming up from Searsport for Gracie’s wedding, and that would be the right time.” Gracie was Gracie Goodhugh, Tom and Norma’s oldest child. Carl Goodhugh, Justin’s traveling companion, was the one in the middle.

“We’ll see,” Streeter said. He had one of his puke-bags in his back pocket, but he had never felt less like upchucking. Something he did feel like was eating. For the first time in days.

Nothing happened out there—you know that, right? This is just a little psychosomatic elevation. It’ll recede.

“Like my hairline,” he said.

“What, honey?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, and speaking of Gracie, Norma called. She reminded me it was their turn to have us to dinner at their place Thursday night. I said I’d ask you, but that you were awfully busy at the bank, working late hours, all this bad-mortgage stuff. I didn’t think you’d want to see them.”

Her voice was as normal and as calm as ever, but all at once she began crying big storybook tears that welled in her eyes and then went rolling down her cheeks. Love grew humdrum in the later years of a marriage, but now his swelled up as fresh as it had been in the early days, the two of them living in a crappy apartment on Kossuth Street and sometimes making love on the living-room rug. He stepped into the laundry room, took the shirt she was folding out of her hands, and hugged her. She hugged him back, fiercely.

“This is just so hard and unfair,” she said. “We’ll get through it. I don’t know how, but we will.”

“That’s right. And we’ll start by having dinner on Thursday night with Tom and Norma, just like we always do.”

She drew back, looking at him with her wet eyes. “Are you going to tell them?”

“And spoil dinner? Nope.”

“Will you even be able to eat? Without …” She put two fingers to her closed lips, puffed her cheeks, and crossed her eyes: a comic puke-pantomime that made Streeter grin.

“I don’t know about Thursday, but I could eat something now,” he said. “Would you mind if I rustled myself up a hamburger? Or I could go out to McDonald’s … maybe bring you back a chocolate shake …”

“My God,” she said, and wiped her eyes. “It’s a miracle.”

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“I wouldn’t call it a miracle, exactly,” Dr. Henderson told Streeter on Wednesday afternoon. “But …”

It was two days since Streeter had discussed matters of life and death under Mr. Elvid’s yellow umbrella, and a day before the Streeters’ weekly dinner with the Goodhughs, this time to take place at the sprawling residence Streeter sometimes thought of as The House That Trash Built. The conversation was taking place not in Dr. Henderson’s office, but in a small consultation room at Derry Home Hospital. Henderson had tried to discourage the MRI, telling Streeter that his insurance wouldn’t cover it and the results were sure to be disappointing. Streeter had insisted.

“But what, Roddy?”

“The tumors appear to have shrunk, and your lungs seem clear. I’ve never seen such a result, and neither have the two other docs I brought in to look at the images. More important—this is just between you and me—the MRI tech has never seen anything like it, and those are the guys I really trust. He thinks it’s probably a computer malfunction in the machine itself.”

“I feel good, though,” Streeter said, “which is why I asked for the test. Is that a malfunction?”

“Are you vomiting?”

“I have a couple of times,” Streeter admitted, “but I think that’s the chemo. I’m calling a halt to it, by the way.”

Roddy Henderson frowned. “That’s very unwise.”

“The unwise thing was starting it in the first place, my friend. You say, ‘Sorry, Dave, the chances of you dying before you get a chance to say Happy Valentine’s Day are in the ninetieth percentile, so we’re going to fuck up the time you have left by filling you full of poison. You might feel worse if I injected you with sludge from Tom Goodhugh’s landfill, but probably not.’ And like a fool, I said okay.”

Henderson looked offended. “Chemo is the last best hope for—”

“Don’t bullshit a bullshitter,” Streeter said with a goodnatured grin. He drew a deep breath that went all the way down to the bottom of his lungs. It felt wonderful. “When the cancer’s aggressive, chemo isn’t for the patient. It’s just an agony surcharge the patient pays so that when he’s dead, the doctors and relatives can hug each other over the coffin and say ‘We did everything we could.’”

“That’s harsh,” Henderson said. “You know you’re apt to relapse, don’t you?”

“Tell that to the tumors,” Streeter said. “The ones that are no longer there.”

Henderson looked at the images of Deepest Darkest Streeter that were still flicking past at twenty-second intervals on the conference room’s monitor and sighed. They were good pictures, even Streeter knew that, but they seemed to make his doctor unhappy.

“Relax, Roddy.” Streeter spoke gently, as he might once have spoken to May or Justin when a favorite toy got lost or broken. “Shit happens; sometimes miracles happen, too. I read it in the Reader’s Digest.”

“In my experience, one has never happened in an MRI tube.” Henderson picked up a pen and tapped it against Streeter’s file, which had fattened considerably over the last three months.

“There’s a first time for everything,” Streeter said.

*

Thursday evening in Derry; dusk of a summer night. The declining sun casting its red and dreamy rays over the three perfectly clipped, watered, and landscaped acres Tom Goodhugh had the temerity to call “the old backyard.” Streeter sat in a lawn chair on the patio,

listening to the rattle of plates and the laughter of Janet and Norma as they loaded the dishwasher.

Yard? It's not a yard, it's a Shopping Channel fan's idea of heaven.

There was even a fountain with a marble child standing in the middle of it. Somehow it was the bare-ass cherub (pissing, of course) that offended Streeter the most. He was sure it had been Norma's idea—she had gone back to college to get a liberal arts degree, and had half-assed Classical pretensions—but still, to see such a thing here in the dying glow of a perfect Maine evening and know its presence was a result of Tom's garbage monopoly …

And, speak of the devil (or the Elvid, if you like that better, Streeter thought), enter the Garbage King himself, with the necks of two sweating bottles of Spotted Hen Microbrew caught between the fingers of his left hand. Slim and erect in his open-throated Oxford shirt and faded jeans, his lean face perfectly lit by the sunset glow, Tom Goodhugh looked like a model in a magazine beer ad. Streeter could even see the copy: Live the good life, reach for a Spotted Hen.

"Thought you might like a fresh one, since your beautiful wife says she's driving."

"Thanks." Streeter took one of the bottles, tipped it to his lips, and drank. Pretentious or not, it was good.

As Goodhugh sat down, Jacob the football player came out with a plate of cheese and crackers. He was as broad-shouldered and handsome as Tom had been back in the day. Probably has cheerleaders crawling all over him, Streeter thought. Probably has to beat them off with a damn stick.

"Mom thought you might like these," Jacob said.

"Thanks, Jake. You going out?"

“Just for a little while. Throw the Frisbee with some guys down in the Barrens until it gets dark, then study.”

“Stay on this side. There’s poison ivy down there since the crap grew back.”

“Yeah, we know. Denny caught it when we were in junior high, and it was so bad his mother thought he had cancer.”

“Ouch!” Streeter said.

“Drive home carefully, son. No hot-dogging.”

“You bet.” The boy put an arm around his father and kissed his cheek with a lack of selfconsciousness that Streeter found depressing. Tom not only had his health, a still-gorgeous wife, and a ridiculous pissing cherub; he had a handsome eighteen-year-old son who still felt all right about kissing his dad goodbye before going out with his best buds.

“He’s a good boy,” Goodhugh said fondly, watching Jacob mount the stairs to the house and disappear inside. “Studies hard and makes his grades, unlike his old man. Luckily for me, I had you.”

“Lucky for both of us,” Streeter said, smiling and putting a goo of Brie on a Triscuit. He popped it into his mouth.

“Does me good to see you eating, chum,” Goodhugh said. “Me n Norma were starting to wonder if there was something wrong with you.”

“Never better,” Streeter said, and drank some more of the tasty (and no doubt expensive) beer. “I’ve been losing my hair in front, though. Jan says it makes me look thinner.”

“That’s one thing the ladies don’t have to worry about,” Goodhugh said, and stroked a hand back through his own locks, which were as full and rich as they had been at eighteen. Not a touch of gray in

them, either. Janet Streeter could still look forty on a good day, but in the red light of the declining sun, the Garbage King looked thirty-five. He didn't smoke, he didn't drink to excess, and he worked out at a health club that did business with Streeter's bank but which Streeter could not afford himself. His middle child, Carl, was currently doing the European thing with Justin Streeter, the two of them traveling on Carl Goodhugh's dime. Which was, of course, actually the Garbage King's dime.

O man who has everything, thy name is Goodhugh, Streeter thought, and smiled at his old friend.

His old friend smiled back, and touched the neck of his beer bottle to Streeter's. "Life is good, wouldn't you say?"

"Very good," Streeter agreed. "Long days and pleasant nights."

Goodhugh raised his eyebrows. "Where'd you get that?"

"Made it up, I guess," Streeter said. "But it's true, isn't it?"

"If it is, I owe a lot of my pleasant nights to you," Goodhugh said. "It has crossed my mind, old buddy, that I owe you my life." He toasted his insane backyard. "The tenderloin part of it, anyway."

"Nah, you're a self-made man."

Goodhugh lowered his voice and spoke confidentially. "Want the truth? The woman made this man. The Bible says 'Who can find a good woman? For her price is above rubies.' Something like that, anyway. And you introduced us. Don't know if you remember that."

Streeter felt a sudden and almost irresistible urge to smash his beer bottle on the patio bricks and shove the jagged and still foaming neck into his old friend's eyes. He smiled instead, sipped a little more beer, then stood up. "Think I need to pay a little visit to the facility."

“You don’t buy beer, you only rent it,” Goodhugh said, then burst out laughing. As if he had invented this himself, right on the spot.

“Truer words, et cetera,” Streeter said. “Excuse me.”

“You really are looking better,” Goodhugh called after him as Streeter mounted the steps.

“Thanks,” Streeter said. “Old buddy.”

*

He closed the bathroom door, pushed in the locking button, turned on the lights, and—for the first time in his life—swung open the medicine cabinet door in another person’s house. The first thing his eye lighted on cheered him immensely: a tube of Just For Men shampoo. There were also a few prescription bottles.

Streeter thought, People who leave their drugs in a bathroom the guests use are just asking for trouble. Not that there was anything sensational: Norma had asthma medicine; Tom was taking blood pressure medicine—Atenolol—and using some sort of skin cream.

The Atenolol bottle was half full. Streeter took one of the tablets, tucked it into the watch-pocket of his jeans, and flushed the toilet. Then he left the bathroom, feeling like a man who has just snuck across the border of a strange country.

*

The following evening was overcast, but George Elvid was still sitting beneath the yellow umbrella and once again watching Inside Edition on his portable TV. The lead story had to do with Whitney Houston, who had lost a suspicious amount of weight shortly after signing a huge new recording contract. Elvid disposed of this rumor with a twist of his pudgy fingers and regarded Streeter with a smile.

“How have you been feeling, Dave?”

“Better.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Vomiting?”

“Not today.”

“Eating?”

“Like a horse.”

“And I’ll bet you’ve had some medical tests.”

“How did you know?”

“I’d expect no less of a successful bank official. Did you bring me something?”

For a moment Streeter considered walking away. He really did. Then he reached into the pocket of the light jacket he was wearing (the evening was chilly for August, and he was still on the thin side) and brought out a tiny square of Kleenex. He hesitated, then handed it across the table to Elvid, who unwrapped it.

“Ah, Atenolol,” Elvid said. He popped the pill into his mouth and swallowed.

Streeter’s mouth opened, then closed slowly.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Elvid said. “If you had a high-stress job like mine, you’d have blood pressure problems, too. And the reflux I suffer from, oy. You don’t want to know.”

“What happens now?” Streeter asked. Even in the jacket, he felt cold.

“Now?” Elvid looked surprised. “Now you start enjoying your fifteen years of good health. Possibly twenty or even twenty-five. Who knows?”

“And happiness?”

Elvid favored him with the roguish look. It would have been amusing if not for the coldness Streeter saw just beneath. And the age. In that moment he felt certain that George Elvid had been doing business for a very long time, reflux or no reflux. “The happiness part is up to you, Dave. And your family, of course—Janet, May, and Justin.”

Had he told Elvid their names? Streeter couldn’t remember.

“Perhaps the children most of all. There’s an old saying to the effect that children are our hostages to fortune, but in fact it’s the children who take the parents hostage, that’s what I think. One of them could have a fatal or disabling accident on a deserted country road … fall prey to a debilitating disease …”

“Are you saying—”

“No, no, no! This isn’t some half-assed morality tale. I’m a businessman, not a character out of ‘The Devil and Daniel Webster.’ All I’m saying is that your happiness is in your hands and those of your nearest and dearest. And if you think I’m going to show up two decades or so down the line to collect your soul in my moldy old pocketbook, you’d better think again. The souls of humans have become poor and transparent things.”

He spoke, Streeter thought, as the fox might have done after repeated leaps had proved to it that the grapes were really and truly out of reach. But Streeter had no intention of saying such a thing. Now that the deal was done, all he wanted to do was get out of here. But still he lingered, not wanting to ask the question that was on his mind but knowing he had to. Because there was no gift-giving going on here; Streeter had been making deals in the bank for most of his

life, and he knew a horse-trade when he saw one. Or when he smelled it: a faint, unpleasant stink like burned aviation fuel.

In words of one syllable, you have to do the dirty to someone else if the dirty is to be lifted from you.

But stealing a single hypertension pill wasn't exactly doing the dirty. Was it?

Elvid, meanwhile, was yanking his big umbrella closed. And when it was furled, Streeter observed an amazing and disheartening fact: it wasn't yellow at all. It was as gray as the sky. Summer was almost over.

"Most of my clients are perfectly satisfied, perfectly happy. Is that what you want to hear?"

It was … and wasn't.

"I sense you have a more pertinent question," Elvid said. "If you want an answer, quit beating around the bush and ask it. It's going to rain, and I want to get undercover before it does. The last thing I need at my age is bronchitis."

"Where's your car?"

"Oh, was that your question?" Elvid sneered openly at him. His cheeks were lean, not in the least pudgy, and his eyes turned up at the corners, where the whites shaded to an unpleasant and—yes, it was true—cancerous black. He looked like the world's least pleasant clown, with half his makeup removed.

"Your teeth," Streeter said stupidly. "They have points."

"Your question, Mr. Streeter!"

"Is Tom Goodhugh going to get cancer?"

Elvid gaped for a moment, then started to giggle. The sound was wheezy, dusty, and unpleasant—like a dying calliope.

“No, Dave,” he said. “Tom Goodhugh isn’t going to get cancer. Not him.”

“What, then? What?”

The contempt with which Elvid surveyed him made Streeter’s bones feel weak—as if holes had been eaten in them by some painless but terribly corrosive acid. “Why would you care? You hate him, you said so yourself.”

“But—”

“Watch. Wait. Enjoy. And take this.” He handed Streeter a business card. Written on it was THE NON-SECTARIAN CHILDREN’S FUND and the address of a bank in the Cayman Islands.

“Tax haven,” Elvid said. “You’ll send my fifteen percent there. If you short me, I’ll know. And then woe is you, kiddo.”

“What if my wife finds out and asks questions?”

“Your wife has a personal checkbook. Beyond that, she never looks at a thing. She trusts you. Am I right?”

“Well …” Streeter observed with no surprise that the raindrops striking Elvid’s hands and arms smoked and sizzled. “Yes.”

“Of course I am. Our dealing is done. Get out of here and go back to your wife. I’m sure she’ll welcome you with open arms. Take her to bed. Stick your mortal penis in her and pretend she’s your best friend’s wife. You don’t deserve her, but lucky you.”

“What if I want to take it back,” Streeter whispered.

Elvid favored him with a stony smile that revealed a jutting ring of cannibal teeth. “You can’t,” he said.

That was in August of 2001, less than a month before the fall of the Towers.

*

In December (on the same day Winona Ryder was busted for shoplifting, in fact), Dr. Roderick Henderson proclaimed Dave Streeter cancer-free—and, in addition, a bona fide miracle of the modern age.

“I have no explanation for this,” Henderson said.

Streeter did, but kept his silence.

Their consultation took place in Henderson’s office. At Derry Home Hospital, in the conference room where Streeter had looked at the first pictures of his miraculously cured body, Norma Goodhugh sat in the same chair where Streeter had sat, looking at less pleasant MRI scans. She listened numbly as her doctor told her—as gently as possible—that the lump in her left breast was indeed cancer, and it had spread to her lymph nodes.

“The situation is bad, but not hopeless,” the doctor said, reaching across the table to take Norma’s cold hand. He smiled. “We’ll want to start you on chemotherapy immediately.”

*

In June of the following year, Streeter finally got his promotion. May Streeter was admitted to the Columbia School of Journalism grad school. Streeter and his wife took a long-deferred Hawaii vacation to celebrate. They made love many times. On their last day in Maui, Tom Goodhugh called. The connection was bad and he could hardly talk, but the message got through: Norma had died.

“We’ll be there for you,” Streeter promised.

When he told Janet the news, she collapsed on the hotel bed, weeping with her hands over her face. Streeter lay down beside her, held her close, and thought: Well, we were going home, anyway. And although he felt bad about Norma (and sort of bad for Tom), there was an upside: they had missed bug season, which could be a bitch in Derry.

In December, Streeter sent a check for just over fifteen thousand dollars to The Non-Sectarian Children's Fund. He took it as a deduction on his tax return.

*

In 2003, Justin Streeter made the Dean's List at Brown and—as a lark—invented a video game called Walk Fido Home. The object of the game was to get your leashed dog back from the mall while avoiding bad drivers, objects falling from tenth-story balconies, and a pack of crazed old ladies who called themselves the Canine-Killing Grannies. To Streeter it sounded like a joke (and Justin assured them it was meant as a satire), but Games, Inc. took one look and paid their handsome, good-humored son seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the rights. Plus royalties. Jus bought his parents matching Toyota Pathfinder SUVs, pink for the lady, blue for the gentleman. Janet wept and hugged him and called him a foolish, impetuous, generous, and altogether splendid boy. Streeter took him to Roxie's Tavern and bought him a Spotted Hen Microbrew.

In October, Carl Goodhugh's roommate at Emerson came back from class to find Carl facedown on the kitchen floor of their apartment with the grilled cheese sandwich he'd been making for himself still smoking in the frypan. Although only twenty-two years of age, Carl had suffered a heart attack. The doctors attending the case pinpointed a congenital heart defect—something about a thin atrial wall—that had gone undetected. Carl didn't die; his roommate got to him just in time and knew CPR. But he suffered oxygen deprivation, and the bright, handsome, physically agile young man who had not long before toured Europe with Justin Streeter became a shuffling shadow of his former self. He was not always continent, he got lost if

he wandered more than a block or two from home (he had moved back with his still-grieving father), and his speech had become a blurred blare that only Tom could understand. Goodhugh hired a companion for him. The companion administered physical therapy and saw that Carl changed his clothes. He also took Carl on biweekly “outings.” The most common “outing” was to Wishful Dishful Ice Cream, where Carl would always get a pistachio cone and smear it all over his face. Afterward the companion would clean him up, patiently, with Wet-Naps.

Janet stopped going with Streeter to dinner at Tom’s. “I can’t bear it,” she confessed. “It’s not the way Carl shuffles, or how he sometimes wets his pants—it’s the look in his eyes, as if he remembers how he was, and can’t quite remember how he got to where he is now. And … I don’t know … there’s always something hopeful in his face that makes me feel like everything in life is a joke.”

Streeter knew what she meant, and often considered the idea during his dinners with his old friend (without Norma to cook, it was now mostly takeout). He enjoyed watching Tom feed his damaged son, and he enjoyed the hopeful look on Carl’s face. The one that said, “This is all a dream I’m having, and soon I’ll wake up.” Jan was right, it was a joke, but it was sort of a good joke.

If you really thought about it.

*

In 2004, May Streeter got a job with the Boston Globe and declared herself the happiest girl in the USA. Justin Streeter created Rock the House, which would be a perennial bestseller until the advent of Guitar Hero made it obsolete. By then Jus had moved on to a music composition computer program called You Moog Me, Baby. Streeter himself was appointed manager of his bank branch, and there were rumors of a regional post in his future. He took Janet to Cancun, and they had a fabulous time. She began calling him “my nuzzle-bunny.”

Tom's accountant at Goodhugh Waste Removal embezzled two million dollars and departed for parts unknown. The subsequent accounting review revealed that the business was on very shaky ground; that bad old accountant had been nibbling away for years, it seemed.

Nibbling? Streeter thought, reading the story in The Derry News. Taking it a chomp at a time is more like it.

Tom no longer looked thirty-five; he looked sixty. And must have known it, because he stopped dying his hair. Streeter was delighted to see that it hadn't gone white underneath the artificial color; Goodhugh's hair was the dull and listless gray of Elvid's umbrella when he had furled it. The hair-color, Streeter decided, of the old men you see sitting on park benches and feeding the pigeons. Call it Just For Losers.

*

In 2005, Jacob the football player, who had gone to work in his father's dying company instead of to college (which he could have attended on a full-boat athletic scholarship), met a girl and got married. Bubbly little brunette named Cammy Dorrington. Streeter and his wife agreed it was a beautiful ceremony, even though Carl Goodhugh hooted, gurgled, and burbled all the way through it, and even though Goodhugh's oldest child—Gracie—tripped over the hem of her dress on the church steps as she was leaving, fell down, and broke her leg in two places. Until that happened, Tom Goodhugh had looked almost like his former self. Happy, in other words. Streeter did not begrudge him a little happiness. He supposed that even in hell, people got an occasional sip of water, if only so they could appreciate the full horror of unrequited thirst when it set in again.

The honeymooning couple went to Belize. I'll bet it rains the whole time, Streeter thought. It didn't, but Jacob spent most of the week in a rundown hospital, suffering from violent gastroenteritis and pooping into paper didies. He had only drunk bottled water, but then

forgot and brushed his teeth from the tap. “My own darn fault,” he said.

Over eight hundred US troops died in Iraq. Bad luck for those boys and girls.

Tom Goodhugh began to suffer from gout, developed a limp, started using a cane.

That year’s check to The Non-Sectarian Children’s Fund was of an extremely good size, but Streeter didn’t begrudge it. It was more blessed to give than to receive. All the best people said so.

*

In 2006, Tom’s daughter Gracie fell victim to pyorrhea and lost all her teeth. She also lost her sense of smell. One night shortly thereafter, at Goodhugh and Streeter’s weekly dinner (it was just the two men; Carl’s attendant had taken Carl on an “outing”), Tom Goodhugh broke down in tears. He had given up microbrews in favor of Bombay Sapphire gin, and he was very drunk. “I don’t understand what’s happened to me!” he sobbed. “I feel like … I don’t know … fucking Job!”

Streeter took him in his arms and comforted him. He told his old friend that clouds always roll in, and sooner or later they always roll out.

“Well, these clouds have been here a fuck of a long time!” Goodhugh cried, and thumped Streeter on the back with a closed fist. Streeter didn’t mind. His old friend wasn’t as strong as he used to be.

Charlie Sheen, Tori Spelling, and David Hasselhoff got divorces, but in Derry, David and Janet Streeter celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary. There was a party. Toward the end of it, Streeter escorted his wife out back. He had arranged fireworks. Everybody applauded except for Carl Goodhugh. He tried, but kept missing his

hands. Finally the former Emerson student gave up on the clapping thing and pointed at the sky, hooting.

*

In 2007, Kiefer Sutherland went to jail (not for the first time) on DUI charges, and Gracie Goodhugh Dickerson's husband was killed in a car crash. A drunk driver veered into his lane while Andy Dickerson was on his way home from work. The good news was that the drunk wasn't Kiefer Sutherland. The bad news was that Gracie Dickerson was four months pregnant and broke. Her husband had let his life insurance lapse to save on expenses. Gracie moved back in with her father and her brother Carl.

"With their luck, that baby will be born deformed," Streeter said one night as he and his wife lay in bed after making love.

"Hush!" Janet cried, shocked.

"If you say it, it won't come true," Streeter explained, and soon the two nuzzle-bunnies were asleep in each other's arms.

That year's check to the Children's Fund was for thirty thousand dollars. Streeter wrote it without a qualm.

*

Gracie's baby came at the height of a February snowstorm in 2008. The good news was that it wasn't deformed. The bad news was that it was born dead. That damned family heart defect. Gracie—toothless, husbandless, and unable to smell anything—dropped into a deep depression. Streeter thought that demonstrated her basic sanity. If she had gone around whistling "Don't Worry, Be Happy," he would have advised Tom to lock up all the sharp objects in the house.

A plane carrying two members of the rock band Blink-182 crashed. Bad news, four people died. Good news, the rockers actually

survived for a change … although one of them would die not much later.

“I have offended God,” Tom said at one of the dinners the two men now called their “bachelor nights.” Streeter had brought spaghetti from Cara Mama, and cleaned his plate. Tom Goodhugh barely touched his. In the other room, Gracie and Carl were watching American Idol, Gracie in silence, the former Emerson student hooting and gabbling. “I don’t know how, but I have.”

“Don’t say that, because it isn’t true.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do,” Streeter said emphatically. “It’s foolish talk.”

“If you say so, buddy.” Tom’s eyes filled with tears. They rolled down his cheeks. One clung to the line of his unshaven jaw, dangled there for a moment, then plinked into his uneaten spaghetti. “Thank God for Jacob. He’s all right. Working for a TV station in Boston these days, and his wife’s in accounting at Brigham and Women’s. They see May once in awhile.”

“Great news,” Streeter said heartily, hoping Jake wouldn’t somehow contaminate his daughter with his company.

“And you still come and see me. I understand why Jan doesn’t, and I don’t hold it against her, but … I look forward to these nights. They’re like a link to the old days.”

Yes, Streeter thought, the old days when you had everything and I had cancer.

“You’ll always have me,” he said, and clasped one of Goodhugh’s slightly trembling hands in both of his own. “Friends to the end.”

*

2008, what a year! Holy fuck! China hosted the Olympics! Chris Brown and Rihanna became nuzzle-bunnies! Banks collapsed! The stock market tanked! And in November, the EPA closed Mount Trashmore, Tom Goodhugh's last source of income. The government stated its intention to bring suit in matters having to do with groundwater pollution and illegal dumping of medical wastes. The Derry News hinted that there might even be criminal action.

Streeter often drove out along the Harris Avenue Extension in the evenings, looking for a certain yellow umbrella. He didn't want to dicker; he only wanted to shoot the shit. But he never saw the umbrella or its owner. He was disappointed but not surprised. Deal-makers were like sharks; they had to keep moving or they'd die.

He wrote a check and sent it to the bank in the Caymans.

*

In 2009, Chris Brown beat the hell out of his Number One Nuzzle-Bunny after the Grammy Awards, and a few weeks later, Jacob Goodhugh the ex-football player beat the hell out of his bubbly wife Cammy after Cammy found a certain lady's undergarment and half a gram of cocaine in Jacob's jacket pocket. Lying on the floor, crying, she called him a son of a bitch. Jacob responded by stabbing her in the abdomen with a meat fork. He regretted it at once and called 911, but the damage was done; he'd punctured her stomach in two places. He told the police later that he remembered none of this. He was in a blackout, he said.

His court-appointed lawyer was too dumb to get a bail reduction. Jake Goodhugh appealed to his father, who was hardly able to pay his heating bills, let alone provide high-priced Boston legal talent for his spouse-abusing son. Goodhugh turned to Streeter, who didn't let his old friend get a dozen words into his painfully rehearsed speech before saying you bet. He still remembered the way Jacob had so unselfconsciously kissed his old man's cheek. Also, paying the legal fees allowed him to question the lawyer about Jake's mental state, which wasn't good; he was racked with guilt and deeply depressed.

The lawyer told Streeter that the boy would probably get five years, hopefully with three of them suspended.

When he gets out, he can go home, Streeter thought. He can watch American Idol with Gracie and Carl, if it's still on. It probably will be.

"I've got my insurance," Tom Goodhugh said one night. He had lost a lot of weight, and his clothes bagged on him. His eyes were bleary. He had developed psoriasis, and scratched restlessly at his arms, leaving long red marks on the white skin. "I'd kill myself if I thought I could get away with making it look like an accident."

"I don't want to hear talk like that," Streeter said. "Things will turn around."

In June, Michael Jackson kicked the bucket. In August, Carl Goodhugh went and did him likewise, choking to death on a piece of apple. The companion might have performed the Heimlich maneuver and saved him, but the companion had been let go due to lack of funds sixteen months before. Gracie heard Carl gurgling but said she thought "it was just his usual bullshit." The good news was Carl also had life insurance. Just a small policy, but enough to bury him.

After the funeral (Tom Goodhugh sobbed all the way through it, holding onto his old friend for support), Streeter had a generous impulse. He found Kiefer Sutherland's studio address and sent him an AA Big Book. It would probably go right in the trash, he knew (along with the countless other Big Books fans had sent him over the years), but you never knew. Sometimes miracles happened.

*

In early September of 2009, on a hot summer evening, Streeter and Janet rode out to the road that runs along the back end of Derry's airport. No one was doing business on the graveled square outside the Cyclone fence, so he parked his fine blue Pathfinder there and put his arm around his wife, whom he loved more deeply and completely than ever. The sun was going down in a red ball.

He turned to Janet and saw that she was crying. He tilted her chin toward him and solemnly kissed the tears away. That made her smile.

“What is it, honey?”

“I was thinking about the Goodhughs. I’ve never known a family to have such a run of bad luck. Bad luck?” She laughed. “Black luck is more like it.”

“I haven’t, either,” he said, “but it happens all the time. One of the women killed in the Mumbai attacks was pregnant, did you know that? Her two-year-old lived, but the kid was beaten within an inch of his life. And—”

She put two fingers to her lips. “Hush. No more. Life’s not fair. We know that.”

“But it is!” Streeter spoke earnestly. In the sunset light his face was ruddy and healthy. “Just look at me. There was a time when you never thought I’d live to see 2009, isn’t that true?”

“Yes, but—”

“And the marriage, still as strong as an oak door. Or am I wrong?”

She shook her head. He wasn’t wrong.

“You’ve started selling freelance pieces to The Derry News, May’s going great guns with the Globe, and our son the geek is a media mogul at twenty-five.”

She began to smile again. Streeter was glad. He hated to see her blue.

“Life is fair. We all get the same nine-month shake in the box, and then the dice roll. Some people get a run of sevens. Some people, unfortunately, get snake-eyes. It’s just how the world is.”

She put her arms around him. “I love you, sweetie. You always look on the bright side.”

Streeter shrugged modestly. “The law of averages favors optimists, any banker would tell you that. Things have a way of balancing out in the end.”

Venus came into view above the airport, glimmering against the darkening blue.

“Wish!” Streeter commanded.

Janet laughed and shook her head. “What would I wish for? I have everything I want.”

“Me too,” Streeter said, and then, with his eyes fixed firmly on Venus, he wished for more.