

GRAMMA

Stephen King

George's mother went to the door, hesitated there, came back, and tousled George's hair. "I don't want you to worry," she said. "You'll be all right. Gramma, too."

"Sure, I'll be okay. Tell Buddy to lay chilly."

"Pardon me?"

George smiled. "To stay cool."

"Oh. Very funny." She smiled back at him, a distracted, going-in-six-directions-at-once smile. "George, are you sure—"

"I'll be fine."

Are you sure what? Are you sure you're not scared to be alone with Gramma? Was that what she was going to ask?

If it was, the answer is no. After all, it wasn't like he was six anymore, when they had first come here to Maine to take care of Gramma, and he had cried with terror whenever Gramma held out her heavy arms toward him from her white vinyl chair that always smelled of the poached eggs she ate and the sweet bland powder George's mom rubbed into her flabby, wrinkled skin; she held out her white-elephant arms, wanting him to come to her and be hugged to that huge and heavy old white-elephant body: Buddy had gone to her, had been enfolded in Gramma's blind embrace, and Buddy had come out alive ... but Buddy was two years older.

Now Buddy had broken his leg and was at the CMG Hospital in Lewiston.

"You've got the doctor's number if something should go wrong. Which it won't. Right?"

"Sure," he said, and swallowed something dry in his throat. He smiled. Did the smile look okay? Sure. Sure it did. He wasn't scared of Gramma anymore. After all, he wasn't six anymore. Mom was

going up to the hospital to see Buddy and he was just going to stay here and lay chilly. Hang out with Gramma awhile. No problem.

Mom went to the door again, hesitated again, and came back again, smiling that distracted, going-six-ways-at-once smile. “If she wakes up and calls for her tea—”

“I know,” George said, seeing how scared and worried she was underneath that distracted smile. She was worried about Buddy, Buddy and his dumb Pony League, the coach had called and said Buddy had been hurt in a play at the plate, and the first George had known of it (he was just home from school and sitting at the table eating some cookies and having a glass of Nestle’s Quik) was when his mother gave a funny little gasp and said, Hurt? Buddy? How bad?

“I know all that stuff, Mom. I got it knocked. Negative perspiration. Go on, now.”

“You’re a good boy, George. Don’t be scared. You’re not scared of Gramma anymore, are you?”

“Huh-uh,” George said. He smiled. The smile felt pretty good; the smile of a fellow who was laying chilly with negative perspiration on his brow, the smile of a fellow who Had It Knocked, the smile of a fellow who was most definitely not six anymore. He swallowed. It was a great smile, but beyond it, down in the darkness behind his smile, was one very dry throat. It felt as if his throat was lined with mittenwool. “Tell Buddy I’m sorry he broke his leg.”

“I will,” she said, and went to the door again. Four o’clock sunshine slanted in through the window. “Thank God we took the sports insurance, Georgie. I don’t know what we’d do if we didn’t have it.”

“Tell him I hope he tagged the sucker out.”

She smiled her distracted smile, a woman of just past fifty with two late sons, one thirteen, one eleven, and no man. This time she

opened the door, and a cool whisper of October came in through the sheds.

“And remember, Dr. Arlinder—”

“Sure,” he said. “You better go or his leg’ll be fixed by the time you get there.”

“She’ll probably sleep the whole time,” Mom said. “I love you, Georgie. You’re a good son.” She closed the door on that.

George went to the window and watched her hurry to the old ‘69 Dodge that burned too much gas and oil, digging the keys from her purse. Now that she was out of the house and didn’t know George was looking at her, the distracted smile fell away and she only looked distracted—distracted and sick with worry about Buddy. George felt bad for her. He didn’t waste any similar feelings on Buddy, who liked to get him down and sit on top of him with a knee on each of George’s shoulders and tap a spoon in the middle of George’s forehead until he just about went crazy (Buddy called it the Spoon Torture of the Heathen Chinee and laughed like a madman and sometimes went on doing it until George cried), Buddy who sometimes gave him the Indian Rope Burn so hard that little drops of blood would appear on George’s forearm, sitting on top of the pores like dew on blades of grass at dawn, Buddy who had listened so sympathetically when George had one night whispered in the dark of their bedroom that he liked Heather MacArdle and who the next morning ran across the schoolyard screaming GEORGE AND HEATHER UP IN A TREE, KAY-EYE-ESS-ESS-EYE-EN-GEE! FIRSE COMES LOVE AN THEN COMES MARRITCH! HERE COMES HEATHER WITH A BABY CARRITCH! like a runaway fire engine. Broken legs did not keep older brothers like Buddy down for long, but George was rather looking forward to the quiet as long as this one did. Let’s see you give me the Spoon Torture of the Heathen Chinee with your leg in a cast, Buddy. Sure, kid—EVERY day.

The Dodge backed out of the driveway and paused while his mother looked both ways, although nothing would be coming; nothing ever

was. His mother would have a two-mile ride over washboards and ruts before she even got to tar, and it was nineteen miles to Lewiston after that.

She backed all the way out and drove away. For a moment dust hung in the bright October afternoon air, and then it began to settle.

He was alone in the house.

With Gramma.

He swallowed.

Hey! Negative perspiration! Just lay chilly, right?

“Right,” George said in a low voice, and walked across the small, sunwashed kitchen. He was a towheaded, good-looking boy with a spray of freckles across his nose and cheeks and a look of good humor in his darkish gray eyes.

Buddy’s accident had occurred while he had been playing in the Pony League championship game this October 5th. George’s Pee Wee League team, the Tigers, had been knocked out of their tournament on the first day, two Saturdays ago (What a bunch of babies! Buddy had exulted as George walked tearfully off the field. What a bunch of PUSSIES!) ... and now Buddy had broken his leg. If Mom wasn’t so worried and scared, George would have been almost happy.

There was a phone on the wall, and next to it was a note-minder board with a grease pencil hanging beside it. In the upper corner of the board was a cheerful country Gramma, her cheeks rosy, her white hair done up in a bun; a cartoon Gramma who was pointing at the board. There was a comic-strip balloon coming out of the cheerful country Gramma’s mouth and she was saying, “REMEMBER THIS, SONNY!” Written on the board in his mother’s sprawling hand was Dr. Arlinder, 681-4330. Mom hadn’t written the number there just today, because she had to go to Buddy; it had

been there almost three weeks now, because Gramma was having her “bad spells” again.

George picked up the phone and listened.

“—so I told her, I said, ‘Mabel, if he treats you like that—’ “

He put it down again. Henrietta Dodd. Henrietta was always on the phone, and if it was in the afternoon you could always hear the soap opera stories going on in the background. One night after she had a glass of wine with Gramma (since she started having the “bad spells” again, Dr. Arlinder said Gramma couldn’t have the wine with her supper, so Mom didn’t either—George was sorry, because the wine made Mom sort of giggly and she would tell stories about her girlhood), Mom had said that every time Henrietta Dodd opened her mouth, all her guts fell out. Buddy and George laughed wildly, and Mom put a hand to her mouth and said Don’t you EVER tell anyone I said that, and then she began to laugh too, all three of them sitting at the supper table laughing, and at last the racket had awakened Gramma, who slept more and more, and she began to cry Ruth! Ruth! ROO-OOTH! in that high, querulous voice of hers, and Mom had stopped laughing and went into her room.

Today Henrietta Dodd could talk all she wanted, as far as George was concerned. He just wanted to make sure the phone was working. Two weeks ago there had been a bad storm, and since then it went out sometimes.

He found himself looking at the cheery cartoon Gramma again, and wondered what it would be like to have a Gramma like that. His Gramma was huge and fat and blind; the hypertension had made her senile as well. Sometimes, when she had her “bad spells,” she would (as Mom put it) “act out the Tartar,” calling for people who weren’t there, holding conversations with total emptiness, mumbling strange words that made no sense. On one occasion when she was doing this last, Mom had turned white and had gone in and told her to shut up, shut up, shut up! George remembered that occasion very well, not only because it was the only time Mom had ever actually yelled

at Gramma, but because it was the next day that someone discovered that the Birches cemetery out on the Maple Sugar Road had been vandalized—gravestones knocked over, the old nineteenth-century gates pulled down, and one or two of the graves actually dug up—or something. Desecrated was the word Mr. Burdon, the principal, had used the next day when he convened all eight grades for Assembly and lectured the whole school on Malicious Mischief and how some things Just Weren't Funny. Going home that night, George had asked Buddy what desecrated meant, and Buddy said it meant digging up graves and pissing on the coffins, but George didn't believe that ... unless it was late. And dark.

Gramma was noisy when she had her “bad spells,” but mostly she just lay in the bed she had taken to three years before, a fat slug wearing rubber pants and diapers under her flannel nightgown, her face runneled with cracks and wrinkles, her eyes empty and Mind—faded blue irises floating atop yellowed corneas.

At first Gramma hadn't been totally blind. But she had been going blind, and she had to have a person at each elbow to help her totter from her white vinyl egg-and-baby-powder-smelling chair to her bed or the bathroom. In those days, five years ago, Gramma had weighed well over two hundred pounds.

She had held out her arms and Buddy, then eight, had gone to her. George had hung back. And cried.

But I'm not scared now, he told himself, moving across the kitchen in his Keds. Not a bit. She's just an old lady who has “bad spells” sometimes.

He filled the teakettle with water and put it on a cold burner. He got a teacup and put one of Gramma's special herb tea bags into it. In case she should wake up and want a cup. He hoped like mad that she wouldn't, because then he would have to crank up the hospital bed and sit next to her and give her the tea a sip at a time, watching the toothless mouth fold itself over the rim of the cup, and listen to the slurping sounds as she took the tea into her dank, dying guts.

Sometimes she slipped sideways on the bed and you had to pull her back over and her flesh was soft, kind of jiggly, as if it was filled with hot water, and her blind eyes would look at you ...

George licked his lips and walked toward the kitchen table again. His last cookie and half a glass of Quik still stood there, but he didn't want them anymore. He looked at his schoolbooks, covered with Castle Rock Cougars bookcovers, without enthusiasm.

He ought to go in and check on her.

He didn't want to.

He swallowed and his throat still felt as if it was lined with mittenwool.

I'm not afraid of Gramma, he thought. If she held out her arms I'd go right to her and let her hug me because she's just an old lady. She's senile and that's why she has "bad spells." That's all. Let her hug me and not cry. Just like Buddy.

He crossed the short entryway to Gramma's room, face set as if for bad medicine, lips pressed together so tightly they were white. He looked in, and there lay Gramma, her yellow-white hair spread around her in a corona, sleeping, her toothless mouth hung open, chest rising under the coverlet so slowly you almost couldn't see it, so slowly that you had to look at her for a while just to make sure she wasn't dead.

Oh God, what if she dies on me while Mom's up to the hospital?

She won't. She won't.

Yeah, but what if she does?

She won't, so stop being a pussy.

One of Gramma's yellow, melted-looking hands moved slowly on the coverlet: her long nails dragged across the sheet and made a minute

scratching sound. George drew back quickly, his heart pounding.

Cool as a moose, numbhead, see? Laying chilly.

He went back into the kitchen to see if his mother had been gone only an hour, or perhaps an hour and a half—if the latter, he could start reasonably waiting for her to come back. He looked at the clock and was astounded to see that not even twenty minutes had passed. Mom wouldn't even be into the city yet, let alone on her way back out of it! He stood still, listening to the silence. Faintly, he could hear the hum of the refrigerator and the electric clock. The snuffle of the afternoon breeze around the corners of the little house. And then—at the very edge of audibility—the faint, rasping susurrus of skin over cloth ... Gramma's wrinkled, tallowy hand moving on the coverlet.

He prayed in a single gust of mental breath:

Please God don't let her wake up until Mom comes home for Jesus' -
sake Amen.

He sat down and finished his cookie, drank his Quik. He thought of turning on the TV and watching something, but he was afraid the sound would wake up Gramma and that high, querulous, not-to-be-denied voice would begin calling Roo-OOTH! RUTH! BRING ME M'TEA! TEA! ROOO-OOOOOTH!

He slicked his dry tongue over his drier lips and told himself not to be such a pussy. She was an old lady stuck in bed, it wasn't as if she could get up and hurt him, and she was eighty-three years old, she wasn't going to die this afternoon.

George walked over and picked up the phone again.

“—that same day! And she even knew he was married! Gorry, I hate these cheap little corner-walkers that think they're so smart! So at Grange I said—”

George guessed that Henrietta was on the phone with Cora Simard. Henrietta hung on the phone most afternoons from one until six with first Ryan's Hope and then One Life to Live and then All My Children and then As the World Turns and then Search for Tomorrow and then God knew what other ones playing in the background, and Cora Simard was one of her most faithful telephone correspondents, and a lot of what they talked about was 1) who was going to be having a Tupperware party or an Amway party and what the refreshments were apt to be, 2) cheap little corner-walkers, and 3) what they had said to various people at 3-a) the Grange, 3-b) the monthly church fair, or 3-c) K of P Hall Beano.

“—that if I ever saw her up that way again, I guess I could be a good citizen and call—”

He put the phone back in its cradle. He and Buddy made fun of Cora when they went past her house just like all the other kids—she was fat and sloppy and gossipy and they would chant, Cora-Cora from Bora-Bora, ate a dog turd and wanted more-a! and Mom would have killed them both if she had known that, but now George was glad she and Henrietta Dodd were on the phone. They could talk all afternoon, for all George cared. He didn't mind Cora, anyway. Once he had fallen down in front of her house and scraped his knee—Buddy had been chasing him—and Cora had put a Band-Aid on the scrape and gave them each a cookie, talking all the time. George had felt ashamed for all the times he had said the rhyme about the dog turd and the rest of it.

George crossed to the sideboard and took down his reading book. He held it for a moment, then put it back. He had read all the stories in it already, although school had only been going a month. He read better than Buddy, although Buddy was better at sports. Won't be better for a while, he thought with momentary good cheer, not with a broken leg.

He took down his history book, sat down at the kitchen table, and began to read about how Cornwallis had surrendered up his sword at Yorktown. His thoughts wouldn't stay on it. He got up, went

through the entryway again. The yellow hand was still. Gramma slept, her face a gray, sagging circle against the pillow, a dying sun surrounded by the wild yellowish-white corona of her hair. To George she didn't look anything like people who were old and getting ready to die were supposed to look. She didn't look peaceful, like a sunset. She looked crazy, and ...

(and dangerous)

... yes, okay, and dangerous—like an ancient she-bear that might have one more good swipe left in her claws.

George remembered well enough how they had come to Castle Rock to take care of Gramma when Granpa died. Until then Mom had been working in the Stratford Laundry in Stratford, Connecticut. Granpa was three or four years younger than Gramma, a carpenter by trade, and he had worked right up until the day of his death. It had been a heart attack.

Even then Gramma had been getting senile, having her “bad spells.” She had always been a trial to her family, Gramma had. She was a volcanic woman who had taught school for fifteen years, between having babies and getting in fights with the Congregational Church she and Granpa and their nine children went to. Mom said that Granpa and Gramma quit the Congregational Church in Scarborough at the same time Gramma decided to quit teaching, but once, about a year ago, when Aunt Flo was up for a visit from her home in Salt Lake City, George and Buddy, listening at the register as Mom and her sister sat up late, talking, heard quite a different story. Granpa and Gramma had been kicked out of the church and Gramma had been fired off her job because she did something wrong. It was something about books. Why or how someone could get fired from their job and kicked out of the church just because of books, George didn't understand, and when he and Buddy crawled back into their twin beds under the eave, George asked.

There's all kinds of books, Senor El-Stupido, Buddy whispered.

Yeah, but what kind?

How should I know? Go to sleep!

Silence. George thought it through.

Buddy?

What! An irritated hiss.

Why did Mom tell us Gramma quit the church and her job?

Because it's a skeleton in the closet, that's why! Now go to sleep!

But he hadn't gone to sleep, not for a long time. His eyes kept straying to the closet door, dimly outlined in moonlight, and he kept wondering what he would do if the door swung open, revealing a skeleton inside, all grinning tombstone teeth and cistern eye sockets and parrot-cage ribs; white moonlight skating delirious and almost blue on whiter bone. Would he scream? What had Buddy meant, a skeleton in the closet? What did skeletons have to do with books? At last he had slipped into sleep without even knowing it and had dreamed he was six again, and Gramma was holding out her arms, her blind eyes searching for him; Gramma's reedy, querulous voice was saying, Where's the little one, Ruth? Why's he crying? I only want to put him in the closet ... with the skeleton.

George had puzzled over these matters long and long, and finally, about a month after Aunt Flo had departed, he went to his mother and told her he had heard her and Aunt Flo talking. He knew what a skeleton in the closet meant by then, because he had asked Mrs. Redenbacher at school. She said it meant having a scandal in the family, and a scandal was something that made people talk a lot. Like Cora Simard talks a lot? George had asked Mrs. Redenbacher, and Mrs. Redenbacher's face had worked strangely and her lips had quivered and she had said, That's not nice, George, but ... yes, something like that.

When he asked Mom, her face had gotten very still, and her hands had paused over the solitaire clockface of cards she had been laying out.

Do you think that's a good thing for you to be doing, Georgie? Do you and your brother make a habit of eavesdropping over the register?

George, then only nine, had hung his head.

We like Aunt Flo, Mom. We wanted to listen to her a little longer.

This was the truth.

Was it Buddy's idea?

It had been, but George wasn't going to tell her that. He didn't want to go walking around with his head on backwards, which might happen if Buddy found out he had tattled.

No, mine.

Mom had sat silent for a long time, and then she slowly began laying her cards out again. Maybe it's time you did know, she had said. Lying's worse than eavesdropping, I guess, and we all lie to our children about Gramma. And we lie to ourselves too, I guess. Most of the time, we do. And then she spoke with a sudden, vicious bitterness that was like acid squirting out between her front teeth—he felt that her words were so hot they would have burned his face if he hadn't recoiled. Except for me. I have to live with her, and I can no longer afford the luxury of lies.

So his Mom told him that after Granpa and Gramma had gotten married, they had had a baby that was born dead, and a year later they had another baby, and that was born dead too, and the doctor told Gramma she would never be able to carry a child to term and all she could do was keep on having babies that were dead or babies that died as soon as they sucked air. That would go on, he said, until

one of them died inside her too long before her body could shove it out and it would rot in there and kill her, too.

The doctor told her that.

Not long after, the books began.

Books about how to have babies?

But Mom didn't—or wouldn't—say what kind of books they were, or where Gramma got them, or how she knew to get them. Gramma got pregnant again, and this time the baby wasn't born dead and the baby didn't die after a breath or two; this time the baby was fine, and that was George's Uncle Larson. And after that, Gramma kept getting pregnant and having babies. Once, Mom said, Granpa had tried to make her get rid of the books to see if they could do it without them (or even if they couldn't, maybe Granpa figured they had enough yowwens by then so it wouldn't matter) and Gramma wouldn't. George asked his mother why and she said: "I think that by then having the books was as important to her as having the babies."

"I don't get it," George said.

"Well," George's mother said, "I'm not sure I do, either ... I was very small, remember. All I know for sure is that those books got a hold over her. She said there would be no more talk about it and there wasn't, either. Because Gramma wore the pants in our family."

George closed his history book with a snap. He looked at the clock and saw that it was nearly five o'clock. His stomach was grumbling softly. He realized suddenly, and with something very like horror, that if Mom wasn't home by six or so, Gramma would wake up and start hollering for her supper. Mom had forgotten to give him instructions about that, probably because she was so upset about Buddy's leg. He supposed he could make Gramma one of her special frozen dinners. They were special because Gramma was on a saltfree diet. She also had about a thousand different kinds of pills.

As for himself, he could heat up what was left of last night's macaroni and cheese. If he poured a lot of catsup on it, it would be pretty good.

He got the macaroni and cheese out of the fridge, spooned it into a pan, and put the pan on the burner next to the teakettle, which was still waiting in case Gramma woke up and wanted what she sometimes called "a cuppa cheer." George started to get himself a glass of milk, paused, and picked up the telephone again.

"—and I couldn't even believe my eyes when ... " Henrietta Dodd's voice broke off and then rose shrilly: "Who keeps listening in on this line, I'd like to know!"

George put the phone back on the hook in a hurry, his face burning.

She doesn't know it's you, stupe. There's six parties on the line!

All the same, it was wrong to eavesdrop, even if it was just to hear another voice when you were alone in the house, alone except for Gramma, the fat thing sleeping in the hospital bed in the other room; even when it seemed almost necessary to hear another human voice because your Mom was in Lewiston and it was going to be dark soon and Gramma was in the other room and Gramma looked like

(yes oh yes she did)

a she-bear that might have just one more murderous swipe left in her old clotted claws.

George went and got the milk.

Mom herself had been born in 1930, followed by Aunt Flo in 1932, and then Uncle Franklin in 1934. Uncle Franklin had died in 1948, of a burst appendix, and Mom sometimes still got teary about that, and carried his picture. She had liked Frank the best of all her brothers and sisters, and she said there was no need for him to die that way,

of peritonitis. She said that God had played dirty when He took Frank.

George looked out the window over the sink. The light was more golden now, low over the hill. The shadow of their back shed stretched all the way across the lawn. If Buddy hadn't broken his dumb leg, Mom would be here now, making chili or something (plus Gramma's saltfree dinner), and they would all be talking and laughing and maybe they'd play some gin rummy later on.

George flicked on the kitchen light, even though it really wasn't dark enough for it yet. Then he turned on LO HEAT under his macaroni. His thoughts kept returning to Gramma, sitting in her white vinyl chair like a big fat worm in a dress, her corona of hair every crazy whichway on the shoulders of her pink rayon robe, holding out her arms for him to come, him shrinking back against his Mom, bawling.

Send him to me, Ruth. I want to hug him.

He's a little frightened, Momma. He'll come in time. But his mother sounded frightened, too.

Frightened? Mom?

George stopped, thinking. Was that true? Buddy said your memory could play tricks on you. Had she really sounded frightened?

Yes. She had.

Gramma's voice rising peremptorily: Don't coddle the boy, Ruth! Send him over here; I want to give him a hug.

No. He's crying.

And as Gramma lowered her heavy arms from which the flesh hung in great, doughlike gobbets, a sly, senile smile had overspread her face and she had said: Does he really look like Franklin, Ruth? I remember you saying he favored Frank.

Slowly, George stirred the macaroni and cheese and catsup. He hadn't remembered the incident so clearly before. Maybe it was the silence that had made him remember. The silence, and being alone with Gramma.

So Gramma had her babies and taught school, and the doctors were properly dumbfounded, and Granpa carpentered and generally got more and more prosperous, finding work even in the depths of the Depression, and at last people began to talk, Mom said.

What did they say? George asked.

Nothing important, Mom said, but she suddenly swept her cards together. They said your Gramma and Granpa were too lucky for ordinary folks, that's all. And it was just after that that the books had been found. Mom wouldn't say more than that, except that the school board had found some and that a hired man had found some more. There had been a big scandal. Granpa and Gramma had moved to Buxton and that was the end of it.

The children had grown up and had children of their own, making aunts and uncles of each other; Mom had gotten married and moved to New York with Dad (who George could not even remember). Buddy had been born, and then they had moved to Stratford and in 1969 George had been born, and in 1971 Dad had been hit and killed by a car driven by the Drunk Man Who Had to Go to Jail.

When Granpa had his heart attack there had been a great many letters back and forth among the aunts and uncles. They didn't want to put the old lady in a nursing home. And she didn't want to go to a home. If Gramma didn't want to do a thing like that, it might be better to accede to her wishes. The old lady wanted to go to one of them and live out the rest of her years with that child. But they were all married, and none of them had spouses who felt like sharing their home with a senile and often unpleasant old woman. All were married, that was, except Ruth.

The letters flew back and forth, and at last George's Mom had given in. She quit her job and came to Maine to take care of the old lady. The others had chipped together to buy a small house in outer Castle View, where property values were low. Each month they would send her a check, so she could "do" for the old lady and for her boys.

What's happened is my brothers and sisters have turned me into a sharecropper, George could remember her saying once, and he didn't know for sure what that meant, but she had sounded bitter when she said it, like it was a joke that didn't come out smooth in a laugh but instead stuck in her throat like a bone. George knew (because Buddy had told him) that Mom had finally given in because everyone in the big, far-flung family had assured her that Gramma couldn't possibly last long. She had too many things wrong with her—high blood pressure, uremic poisoning, obesity, heart palpitations—to last long. It would be eight months, Aunt Flo and Aunt Stephanie and Uncle George (after whom George had been named) all said; a year at the most. But now it had been five years, and George called that lasting pretty long.

She had lasted pretty long, all right. Like a she-bear in hibernation, waiting for ... what?

(you know how to deal with her best Ruth you know how to shut her up)

George, on his way to the fridge to check the directions on one of Gramma's special saltfree dinners, stopped. Stopped cold. Where had that come from? That voice speaking inside his head?

Suddenly his belly and chest broke out in gooseflesh. He reached inside his shirt and touched one of his nipples. It was like a little pebble, and he took his finger away in a hurry.

Uncle George. His "namesake uncle," who worked for Sperry-Rand in New York. It had been his voice. He had said that when he and his family came up for Christmas two—no, three—years ago.

She's more dangerous now that she's senile.

George, be quiet. The boys are around somewhere.

George stood by the refrigerator, one hand on the cold chrome handle, thinking, remembering, looking out into the growing dark. Buddy hadn't been around that day. Buddy was already outside, because Buddy had wanted the good sled, that was why; they were going sliding on Joe Camber's hill and the other sled had a buckled runner. So Buddy was outside and here was George, hunting through the boot-and-sock box in the entryway, looking for a pair of heavy socks that matched, and was it his fault his mother and Uncle George were talking in the kitchen? George didn't think so. Was it George's fault that God hadn't struck him deaf, or, lacking the extremity of that measure, at least located the conversation elsewhere in the house? George didn't believe that, either. As his mother had pointed out on more than one occasion (usually after a glass of wine or two), God sometimes played dirty.

You know what I mean, Uncle George said.

His wife and his three girls had gone over to Gates Falls to do some last-minute Christmas shopping, and Uncle George was pretty much in the bag, just like the Drunk Man Who Had to Go to Jail. George could tell by the way his uncle slurred his words.

You remember what happened to Franklin when he crossed her.

George, be quiet, or I'll pour the rest of your beer right down the sink!

Well, she didn't really mean to do it. Her tongue just got away from her. Peritonitis—

George, shut up!

Maybe, George remembered thinking vaguely, God isn't the only one who plays dirty.

Now he broke the hold of these old memories and looked in the freezer and took out one of Gramma's dinners. Veal. With peas on the side. You had to preheat the oven and then bake it for forty minutes at 300 degrees. Easy. He was all set. The tea was ready on the stove if Gramma wanted that. He could make tea, or he could make dinner in short order if Gramma woke up and yelled for it. Tea or dinner, he was a regular two-gun Sam. Dr. Arlinder's number was on the board, in case of an emergency. Everything was cool. So what was he worried about?

He had never been left alone with Gramma, that was what he was worried, about.

Send the boy to me, Ruth. Send him over here.

No. He's crying.

She's more dangerous now ... you know what I mean.

We all lie to our children about Gramma.

Neither he nor Buddy. Neither of them had ever been left alone with Gramma. Until now.

Suddenly George's mouth went dry. He went to the sink and got a drink of water. He felt ... funny. These thoughts. These memories. Why was his brain dragging them all up now?

He felt as if someone had dumped all the pieces to a puzzle in front of him and that he couldn't quite put them together. And maybe it was good he couldn't put them together, because the finished picture might be, well, sort of boogery. It might—

From the other room, where Gramma lived all her days and nights, a choking, rattling, gargling noise suddenly arose.

A whistling gasp was sucked into George as he pulled breath. He turned toward Gramma's room and discovered his shoes were tightly

nailed to the linoleum floor. His heart was spike-iron in his chest. His eyes were wide and bulging. Go now, his brain told his feet, and his feet saluted and said Not at all, sir!

Gramma had never made a noise like that before.

Gramma had never made a noise like that before.

It arose again, a choking sound, low and then descending lower, becoming an insectile buzz before it died out altogether. George was able to move at last. He walked toward the entryway that separated the kitchen from Gramma's room. He crossed it and looked into her room, his heart slamming. Now his throat was choked with wool mittens; it would be impossible to swallow past them.

Gramma was still sleeping and it was all right, that was his first thought; it had only been some weird sound, after all; maybe she made it all the time when he and Buddy were in school. Just a snore. Gramma was fine. Sleeping.

That was his first thought. Then he noticed that the yellow hand that had been on the coverlet was now dangling limply over the side of the bed, the long nails almost but not quite touching the floor. And her mouth was open, as wrinkled and caved-in as an orifice dug into a rotten piece of fruit.

Timidly, hesitantly, George approached her.

He stood by her side for a long time, looking down at her, not daring to touch her. The imperceptible rise and fall of the coverlet appeared to have ceased.

Appeared.

That was the key word. Appeared.

But that's just because you are spooked, Georgie. You're just being *Senor El-Stupido*, like Buddy says—it's a game. Your brain's playing

tricks on your eyes, she's breathing just fine, she's—

“Gramma?” he said, and all that came out was a whisper. He cleared his throat and jumped back, frightened of the sound. But his voice was a little louder. “Gramma? You want your tea now? Gramma?”

Nothing.

The eyes were closed.

The mouth was open.

The hand hung.

Outside, the setting sun shone golden-red through the trees.

He saw her in a positive fullness then; saw her with that childish and brilliantly unhoused eye of unformed immature reflection, not here, not now, not in bed, but sitting in the white vinyl chair, holding out her arms, her face at the same time stupid and triumphant. He found himself remembering one of the “bad spells” when Gramma began to shout, as if in a foreign language—Gyaagin! Gyaagin! Hastur degryon Yos-soth-oth!—and Mom had sent them outside, had screamed “Just GO!” at Buddy when Buddy stopped at the box in the entry to hunt for his gloves, and Buddy had looked back over his shoulder, so scared he was walleyed with it because their mom never shouted, and they had both gone out and stood in the driveway, not talking, their hands stuffed in their pockets for warmth, wondering what was happening.

Later, Mom had called them in for supper as if nothing had happened.

(you know how to deal with her best Ruth you know how to shut her up)

George had not thought of that particular “bad spell” from that day to this. Except now, looking at Gramma, who was sleeping so strangely

in her crank-up hospital bed, it occurred to him with dawning horror that it was the next day they had learned that Mrs. Harham, who lived up the road and sometimes visited Gramma, had died in her sleep that night.

Gramma's "bad spells."

Spells.

Witches were supposed to be able to cast spells. That's what made them witches, wasn't it? Poisoned apples. Princes into toads. Gingerbread houses. Abracadabra. Presto-chango. Spells.

Spilled-out pieces of an unknown puzzle flying together in George's mind, as if by magic.

Magic, George thought, and groaned.

What was the picture? It was Gramma, of course, Gramma and her books, Gramma who had been driven out of town, Gramma who hadn't been able to have babies and then had been able to, Gramma who had been driven out of the church as well as out of town. The picture was Gramma, yellow and fat and wrinkled and sluglike, her toothless mouth curved into a sunken grin, her faded, blind eyes somehow sly and cunning; and on her head was a black, conical hat sprinkled with silver stars and glittering Babylonian crescents; at her feet were slinking black cats with eyes as yellow as urine, and the smells were pork and blindness, pork and burning, ancient stars and candles as dark as the earth in which coffins lay; he heard words spoken from ancient books, and each word was like a stone and each sentence like a crypt reared in some stinking boneyard and every paragraph like a nightmare caravan of the plague-dead taken to a place of burning; his eye was the eye of a child and in that moment it opened wide in startled understanding on blackness.

Gramma had been a witch, just like the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz. And now she was dead. That gargling sound, George thought

with increasing horror. That gargling, snoring sound had been a ... a ... a “death rattle.”

“Gramma?” he whispered, and crazily he thought: Dingdong, the wicked witch is dead.

No response. He held his cupped hand in front of Gramma’s mouth. There was no breeze stirring around inside Gramma. It was dead calm and slack sails and no wake widening behind the keel. Some of his fright began to recede now, and George tried to think. He remembered Uncle Fred showing him how to wet a finger and test the wind, and now he licked his entire palm and held it in front of Gramma’s mouth.

Still nothing.

He started for the phone to call Dr. Arlinder, and then stopped. Suppose he called the doctor and she really wasn’t dead at all? He’d be in dutch for sure.

Take her pulse.

He stopped in the doorway, looking doubtfully back at that dangling hand. The sleeve of Gramma’s nightie had pulled up, exposing her wrist. But that was no good. Once, after a visit to the doctor when the nurse had pressed her finger to his wrist to take his pulse, George had tried it and hadn’t been able to find anything. As far as his own unskilled fingers could tell, he was dead.

Besides, he didn’t really want to ... well ... to touch Gramma. Even if she was dead. Especially if she was dead.

George stood in the entryway, looking from Gramma’s still, bedridden form to the phone on the wall beside Dr. Arlinder’s number, and back to Gramma again. He would just have to call. He would—

—get a mirror!

Sure! When you breathed on a mirror, it got cloudy. He had seen a doctor check an unconscious person that way once in a movie. There was a bathroom connecting with Gramma's room and now George hurried in and got Gramma's vanity mirror. One side of it was regular, the other side magnified, so you could see to pluck out hairs and do stuff like that.

George took it back to Gramma's bed and held one side of the mirror until it was almost touching Gramma's open, gaping mouth. He held it there while he counted to sixty, watching Gramma the whole time. Nothing changed. He was sure she was dead even before he took the mirror away from her mouth and observed its surface, which was perfectly clear and unclouded.

Gramma was dead.

George realized with relief and some surprise that he could feel sorry for her now. Maybe she had been a witch. Maybe not. Maybe she had only thought she was a witch. However it had been, she was gone now. He realized with an adult's comprehension that questions of concrete reality became not unimportant but less vital when they were examined in the mute bland face of mortal remains. He realized this with an adult's comprehension and accepted with an adult's relief. This was a passing footprint, the shape of a shoe, in his mind. So are all the child's adult impressions; it is only in later years that the child realizes that he was being made; formed; shaped by random experiences; all that remains in the instant beyond the footprint is that bitter gunpowder smell which is the ignition of an idea beyond a child's given years.

He returned the mirror to the bathroom, then went back through her room, glancing at the body on his way by. The setting sun had painted the old dead face with barbaric, orange-red colors, and George looked away quickly.

He went through the entry and crossed the kitchen to the telephone, determined to do everything right. Already in his mind he saw a certain advantage over Buddy; whenever Buddy started to tease

him, he would simply say: I was all by myself in the house when Gramma died, and I did everything right.

Call Dr. Arlinder, that was first. Call him and say, "My Gramma just died. Can you tell me what I should do? Cover her up or something?"

No.

"I think my Gramma just died."

Yes. Yes, that was better. Nobody thought a little kid knew anything anyway, so that was better.

Or how about:

"I'm pretty sure my Gramma just died—"

Sure! That was best of all.

And tell about the mirror and the death rattle and all. And the doctor would come right away, and when he was done examining Gramma he would say, "I pronounce you dead, Gramma," and then say to George, "You laid extremely chilly in a tough situation, George. I want to congratulate you." And George would say something appropriately modest.

George looked at Dr. Arlinder's number and took a couple of slow deep breaths before grabbing the phone. His heart was beating fast, but that painful spike-iron thud was gone now. Gramma had died. The worst had happened, and somehow it wasn't as bad as waiting for her to start bellowing for Mom to bring her tea.

The phone was dead.

He listened to the blankness, his mouth still formed around the words I'm sorry, Missus Dodd, but this is George Bruckner and I have to call the doctor for my Gramma. No voices. No dial tone. Just dead blankness. Like the dead blankness in the bed in there.

Gramma is—

—is—

(oh she is)

Gramma is laying chilly.

Gooseflesh again, painful and marbling. His eyes fixed on the Pyrex teakettle on the stove, the cup on the counter with the herbal tea bag in it. No more tea for Gramma. Not ever.

(laying so chilly)

George shuddered.

He stuttered his finger up and down on the Princess phone's cutoff button, but the phone was dead. Just as dead as—

(just as chilly as)

He slammed the handset down hard and the bell tinged faintly inside and he picked it up in a hurry to see if that meant it had magically gone right again. But there was nothing, and this time he put it back slowly.

His heart was thudding harder again.

I'm alone in this house with her dead body.

He crossed the kitchen slowly, stood by the table for a minute, and then turned on the light. It was getting dark in the house. Soon the sun would be gone; night would be here.

Wait. That's all I got to do. Just wait until Mom gets back. This is better, really. If the phone went out, it's better that she just died instead of maybe having a fit or something, foaming at the mouth, maybe falling out of bed—

Ah, that was bad. He could have done very nicely without that horse-pucky.

Like being alone in the dark and thinking of dead things that were still lively—seeing shapes in the shadows on the walls and thinking of death, thinking of the dead, those things, the way they would stink and the way they would move toward you in the black: thinking this: thinking that: thinking of bugs turning in flesh: burrowing in flesh: eyes that moved in the dark. Yeah. That most of all. Thinking of eyes that moved in the dark and the creak of floorboards as something came across the room through the zebra-stripes of shadows from the light outside. Yeah.

In the dark your thoughts had a perfect circularity, and no matter what you tried to think of—flowers or Jesus or baseball or winning the gold in the 440 at the Olympics—it somehow led back to the form in the shadows with the claws and the unblinking eyes.

“Shittabrick!” he hissed, and suddenly slapped his own face. And hard. He was giving himself the whimwhams, it was time to stop it. He wasn’t six anymore. She was dead, that was all, dead. There was no more thought inside her now than there was in a marble or a floorboard or a doorknob or a radio dial or—

And a strong alien unprepared-for voice, perhaps only the unforgiving unbidden voice of simple survival, inside him cried: Shut up Georgie and get about your goddam business!

Yeah, okay. Okay, but—

He went back to the door of her bedroom to make sure.

There lay Gramma, one hand out of bed and touching the floor, her mouth hinged agape. Gramma was part of the furniture now. You could put her hand back in bed or pull her hair or pop a water glass into her mouth or put earphones on her head and play Chuck Berry into them full-tilt boogie and it would be all the same to her. Gramma

was, as Buddy sometimes said, out of it. Gramma had had the course.

A sudden low and rhythmic thudding noise began, not far to George's left, and he started, a little yipping cry escaping him. It was the storm door, which Buddy had put on just last week. Just the storm door, unlatched and thudding back and forth in the freshening breeze.

George opened the inside door, leaned out, and caught the storm door as it swung back. The wind—it wasn't a breeze but a wind—caught his hair and riffled it. He latched the door firmly and wondered where the wind had come from all of a sudden. When Mom left it had been almost dead calm. But when Mom had left it had been bright daylight and now it was dusk.

George glanced in at Gramma again and then went back and tried the phone again. Still dead. He sat down, got up, and began to walk back and forth through the kitchen, pacing, trying to think.

An hour later it was full dark.

The phone was still out. George supposed the wind, which had now risen to a near-gale, had knocked down some of the lines, probably out by the Beaver Bog, where the trees grew everywhere in a helter-skelter of deadfalls and swampwater. The phone dinged occasionally, ghostly and far, but the line remained blank. Outside the wind moaned along the eaves of the small house and George reckoned he would have a story to tell at the next Boy Scout Camporee, all right ... just sitting in the house alone with his dead Gramma and the phone out and the wind pushing rafts of clouds fast across the sky, clouds that were black on top and the color of dead tallow, the color of Gramma's claw-hands, underneath.

It was, as Buddy also sometimes said, a Classic.

He wished he was telling it now, with the actuality of the thing safely behind him. He sat at the kitchen table, his history book open in front

of him, jumping at every sound ... and now that the wind was up, there were a lot of sounds as the house creaked in all its unoiled secret forgotten joints.

She'll be home pretty quick. She'll be home and then everything will be okay. Everything

(you never covered her)

will be all r

(never covered her face)

George jerked as if someone had spoken aloud and stared wide-eyed across the kitchen at the useless telephone. You were supposed to pull the sheet up over the dead person's face. It was in all the movies.

Hell with that! I'm not going in there!

No! And no reason why he should! Mom could cover her face when she got home! Or Dr. Arlinder when he came! Or the undertaker!

Someone, anyone, but him.

No reason why he should.

It was nothing to him, and nothing to Gramma.

Buddy's voice in his head:

If you weren't scared, how come you didn't dare to cover her face?

It was nothing to me.

Fraidycat!

Nothing to Gramma, either.

CHICKENGUTS afraidycat!

Sitting at the table in front of his unread history book, considering it, George began to see that if he didn't pull the counterpane up over Gramma's face, he couldn't claim to have done everything right, and thus Buddy would have a leg (no matter how shaky) to stand on.

Now he saw himself telling the spooky story of Gramma's death at the Camporee fire before taps, just getting to the comforting conclusion where Mom's headlights swept into the driveway—the reappearance of the grown-up, both reestablishing and reconfirming the concept of Order—and suddenly, from the shadows, a dark figure arises, and a pine-knot in the fire explodes and George can see it's Buddy there in the shadows, saying: If you was so brave, chickenguts, how come you didn't dare to cover up HER FACE?

George stood up, reminding himself that Gramma was out of it, that Gramma was wasted, that Gramma was laying chilly. He could put her hand back in bed, stuff a tea bag up her nose, put on earphones playing Chuck Berry full blast, etc., etc., and none of it would put a buzz under Gramma, because that was what being dead was about, nobody could put a buzz under a dead person, a dead person was the ultimate laid-back cool, and the rest of it was just dreams, ineluctable and apocalyptic and feverish dreams about closet doors swinging open in the dead mouth of midnight, just dreams about moonlight skating a delirious blue on the bones of disinterred skeletons, just—

He whispered, "Stop it, can't you? Stop being so—"

(gross)

He steeled himself. He was going to go in there and pull the coverlet up over her face, and take away Buddy's last leg to stand on. He would administer the few simple rituals of Gramma's death perfectly. He would cover her face and then—his face lit at the symbolism of this—he would put away her unused tea bag and her unused cup. Yes.

He went in, each step a conscious act. Gramma's room was dark, her body a vague hump in the bed, and he fumbled madly for the light switch, not finding it for what seemed to be an eternity. At last it clicked up, flooding the room with low yellow light from the cut-glass fixture overhead.

Gramma lay there, hand dangling, mouth open. George regarded her, dimly aware that little pearls of sweat now clung to his forehead, and wondered if his responsibility in the matter could possibly extend to picking up that cooling hand and putting it back in bed with the rest of Gramma. He decided it did not. Her hand could have fallen out of bed any old time. That was too much. He couldn't touch her. Everything else, but not that.

Slowly, as if moving through some thick fluid instead of air, George approached Gramma. He stood over her, looking down. Gramma was yellow. Part of it was the light, filtered through the old fixture, but not all.

Breathing through his mouth, his breath rasping audibly, George grasped the coverlet and pulled it up over Gramma's face. He let go of it and it slipped just a little, revealing her hairline and the yellow creased parchment of her brow. Steeling himself, he grasped it again, keeping his hands far to one side and the other of her head so he wouldn't have to touch her, even through the cloth, and pulled it up again. This time it stayed. It was satisfactory. Some of the fear went out of George. He had buried her. Yes, that was why you covered the dead person up, and why it was right: it was like burying them. It was a statement.

He looked at the hand dangling down, unburied, and discovered now that he could touch it, he could tuck it under and bury it with the rest of Gramma.

He bent, grasped the cool hand, and lifted it.

The hand twisted in his and clutched his wrist.

George screamed. He staggered backward, screaming in the empty house, screaming against the sound of the wind reaving the eaves, screaming against the sound of the house's creaking joints. He backed away, pulling Gramma's body askew under the coverlet, and the hand thudded back down, twisting, turning, snatching at the air ... and then relaxing to limpness again.

I'm all right, it was nothing, it was nothing but a reflex.

George nodded in perfect understanding, and then he remembered again how her hand had turned, clutching his, and he shrieked. His eyes bulged in their sockets. His hair stood out, perfectly on end, in a cone. His heart was a runaway stamping-press in his chest. The world tilted crazily, came back to the level, and then just went on moving until it was tilted the other way. Every time rational thought started to come back, panic goosed him again. He whirled, wanting only to get out of the room to some other room—or even three or four miles down the road, if that was what it took—where he could get all of this under control. So he whirled and ran full tilt into the wall, missing the open doorway by a good two feet.

He rebounded and fell to the floor, his head singing with a sharp, cutting pain that sliced keenly through the panic. He touched his nose and his hand came back bloody. Fresh drops spotted his shirt. He scrambled to his feet and looked around wildly.

The hand dangled against the floor as it had before, but Gramma's body was not askew; it also was as it had been.

He had imagined the whole thing. He had come into the room, and all the rest of it had been no more than a mind-movie.

No.

But the pain had cleared his head. Dead people didn't grab your wrist. Dead was dead. When you were dead they could use you for a hat rack or stuff you in a tractor tire and roll you downhill or et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. When you were dead you might be acted upon (by, say, little boys trying to put dead dangling hands back into bed), but your days of acting upon—so to speak—were over.

Unless you're a witch. Unless you pick your time to die when no one's around but one little kid, because it's best that way, you can ... can ...

Can what?

Nothing. It was stupid. He had imagined the whole thing because he had been scared and that was all there was to it. He wiped his nose with his forearm and winced at the pain. There was a bloody smear on the skin of his inner forearm.

He wasn't going to go near her again, that was all. Reality or hallucination, he wasn't going to mess with Gramma. The bright flare of panic was gone, but he was still miserably scared, near tears, shaky at the sight of his own blood, only wanting his mother to come home and take charge.

George backed out of the room, through the entry, and into the kitchen. He drew a long, shuddery breath and let it out. He wanted a wet rag for his nose, and suddenly he felt like he was going to vomit. He went over to the sink and ran cold water. He bent and got a rag from the basin under the sink—a piece of one of Gramma's old diapers—and ran it under the cold tap, snuffling up blood as he did so. He soaked the old soft cotton diaper-square until his hand was numb, then turned off the tap and wrung it out.

He was putting it to his nose when her voice spoke from the other room.

“Come here, boy,” Gramma called in a dead buzzing voice. “Come in here—Gramma wants to hug you.”

George tried to scream and no sound came out. No sound at all. But there were sounds in the other room. Sounds that he heard when Mom was in there, giving Gramma her bedbath, lifting her bulk, dropping it, turning it, dropping it again.

Only those sounds now seemed to have a slightly different and yet utterly specific meaning—it sounded as though Gramma was trying to ... to get out of bed.

“Boy! Come in here, boy! Right NOW! Step to it!”

With horror he saw that his feet were answering that command. He told them to stop and they just went on, left foot, right foot, hay foot, straw foot, over the linoleum; his brain was a terrified prisoner inside his body—a hostage in a tower.

She IS a witch, she's a witch and she's having one of her "bad spells," oh yeah, it's a "spell" all right, and it's bad, it's REALLY bad, oh God oh Jesus help me help me help me—

George walked across the kitchen and through the entryway and into Gramma's room and yes, she hadn't just tried to get out of bed, she was out, she was sitting in the white vinyl chair where she hadn't sat for four years, since she got too heavy to walk and too senile to know where she was, anyway.

But Gramma didn't look senile now.

Her face was sagging and doughy, but the senility was gone—if it had ever really been there at all, and not just a mask she wore to lull small boys and tired husbandless women. Now Gramma's face gleamed with fell intelligence—it gleamed like an old, stinking wax candle. Her eyes drooped in her face, lackluster and dead. Her chest was not moving. Her nightie had pulled up, exposing elephantine thighs. The coverlet of her deathbed was thrown back.

Gramma held her huge arms out to him.

"I want to hug you, Georgie," that flat and buzzing deadvoice said. "Don't be a scared old crybaby. Let your Gramma hug you."

George cringed back, trying to resist that almost insurmountable pull. Outside, the wind shrieked and roared. George's face was long and twisted with the extremity of his fright; the face of a woodcut caught and shut up in an ancient book.

George began to walk toward her. He couldn't help himself. Step by dragging step toward those outstretched arms. He would show Buddy that he wasn't scared of Gramma, either. He would go to

Gramma and he hugged because he wasn't a crybaby fraidycat. He would go to Gramma now.

He was almost within the circle of her arms when the window to his left crashed inward and suddenly a wind-blown branch was in the room with them, autumn leaves still clinging to it. The river of wind flooded the room, blowing over Gramma's pictures, whipping her nightgown and her hair.

Now George could scream. He stumbled backward out of her grip and Gramma made a cheated hissing sound, her lips pulling back over smooth old gums; her thick, wrinkled hands clapped uselessly together on moving air.

George's feet tangled together and he fell down. Gramma began to rise from the white vinyl chair, a tottering pile of flesh; she began to stagger toward him. George found he couldn't get up; the strength had deserted his legs. He began to crawl backward, whimpering. Gramma came on, slowly but relentlessly, dead and yet alive, and suddenly George understood what the hug would mean; the puzzle was complete in his mind and somehow he found his feet just as Gramma's hand closed on his shirt. It ripped up the side, and for one moment he felt her cold flesh against his skin before fleeing into the kitchen again.

He would run into the night. Anything other than being hugged by the witch, his Gramma. Because when his mother came back she would find Gramma dead and George alive, oh yes ... but George would have developed a sudden taste for herbal tea.

He looked back over his shoulder and saw Gramma's grotesque, misshapen shadow rising on the wall as she came through the entryway.

And at that moment the telephone rang, shrilly and stridently.

George seized it without even thinking and screamed into it; screamed for someone to come, to please come. He screamed

these things silently; not a sound escaped his locked throat.

Gramma tottered into the kitchen in her pink nightie. Her whitish-yellow hair blew wildly around her face, and one of her horn combs hung askew against her wrinkled neck.

Gramma was grinning.

“Ruth?” It was Aunt Flo’s voice, almost lost in the whistling windtunnel of a bad long-distance connection. “Ruth, are you there?” It was Aunt Flo in Minnesota, over two thousand miles away.

“Help me!” George screamed into the phone, and what came out was a tiny, hissing whistle, as if he had blown into a harmonica full of dead reeds.

Gramma tottered across the linoleum, holding her arms out for him. Her hands snapped shut and then open and then shut again. Gramma wanted her hug; she had been waiting for that hug for five years.

“Ruth, can you hear me? It’s been storming here, it just started, and I ... I got scared. Ruth, I can’t hear you—”

“Gramma,” George moaned into the telephone. Now she was almost upon him.

“George?” Aunt Flo’s voice suddenly sharpened; became almost a shriek. “George, is that you?”

He began to back away from Gramma, and suddenly realized that he had stupidly backed away from the door and into the corner formed by the kitchen cabinets and the sink. The horror was complete. As her shadow fell over him, the paralysis broke and he screamed into the phone, screamed it over and over again: “Gramma! Gramma! Gramma!”

Gramma's cold hands touched his throat. Her muddy, ancient eyes locked on his, draining his will.

Faintly, dimly, as if across many years as well as many miles, he heard Aunt Flo say: "Tell her to lie down, George, tell her to lie down and be still. Tell her she must do it in your name and the name of her father. The name of her taken father is Hastur. His name is power in her ear, George—tell her Lie down in the Name of Hastur—tell her —"

The old, wrinkled hand tore the telephone from George's nerveless grip. There was a taut pop as the cord pulled out of the phone. George collapsed in the corner and Gramma bent down, a huge heap of flesh above him, blotting out the light.

George screamed: "Lie down! Be still! Hastur's name! Hastur! Lie down! Be still!"

Her hands closed around his neck—

"You gotta do it! Aunt Flo said you did! In my name! In your Father's name! Lie down! Be sti—"

—and squeezed.

When the lights finally splashed into the driveway an hour later, George was sitting at the table in front of his unread history book. He got up and walked to the back door and opened it. To his left, the Princess phone hung in its cradle, its useless cord looped around it.

His mother came in, a leaf clinging to the collar of her coat. "Such a wind," she said. "Was everything all—George? George, what happened?"

The blood fell from Mom's face in a single, shocked rush, turning her a horrible clown-white.

“Gramma,” he said. “Gramma died. Gramma died, Mommy.” And he began to cry.

She swept him into her arms and then staggered back against the wall, as if this act of hugging had robbed the last of her strength. “Did ... did anything happen?” she asked. “George, did anything else happen?”

“The wind knocked a tree branch through her window,” George said.

She pushed him away, looked at his shocked, slack face for a moment, and then stumbled into Gramma’s room. She was in there for perhaps four minutes. When she came back, she was holding a red tatter of cloth. It was a bit of George’s shirt.

“I took this out of her hand,” Mom whispered.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” George said. “Call Aunt Flo, if you want. I’m tired. I want to go to bed.”

She made as if to stop him, but didn’t. He went up to the room he shared with Buddy and opened the hot-air register so he could hear what his mother did next. She wasn’t going to talk to Aunt Flo, not tonight, because the telephone cord had pulled out; not tomorrow, because shortly before Mom had come home, George had spoken a short series of words, some of them bastardized Latin, some only pre-Druidic grunts, and over two thousand miles away Aunt Flo had dropped dead of a massive brain hemorrhage. It was amazing how those words came back. How everything came back.

George undressed and lay down naked on his bed. He put his hands behind his head and looked up into the darkness. Slowly, slowly, a sunken and rather horrible grin surfaced on his face.

Things were going to be different around here from now on.

Very different.

Buddy, for instance. George could hardly wait until Buddy came home from the hospital and started in with the Spoon Torture of the Heathen Chinee or an Indian Rope Burn or something like that. George supposed he would have to let Buddy get away with it—at least in the daytime, when people could see—but when night came and they were alone in this room, in the dark, with the door closed ...

George began to laugh soundlessly.

As Buddy always said, it was going to be a Classic.