

IN THE
DEATHROOMS

BASED ON A STORY BY STEPHEN KING



IN THE DEATHROOM

Stephen King

It was a deathroom. Fletcher knew it for what it was as soon as the door opened. The floor was gray industrial tile. The walls were discolored white stone, marked here and there with darker patches that might have been blood—certainly blood had been spilled in this room. The overhead lights were cupped in wire cages. Halfway across the room stood a long wooden table with three people seated behind it. Before the table was an empty chair, waiting for Fletcher. Beside the chair stood a small wheeled trolley. The object on it had been draped with a piece of cloth, as a sculptor might cover his work-in-progress between sessions.

Fletcher was half-led, half-dragged toward the chair which had been placed for him. He reeled in the guard's grip and let himself reel. If he looked more dazed than he really was, more shocked and unthinking, that was fine. He thought his chances of ever leaving this basement room in the Ministry of Information were perhaps one or two in thirty, and perhaps that was optimistic. Whatever they were, he had no intention of thinning them further by looking even halfway alert. His swelled eye, puffy nose, and broken lower lip might help in this regard; so might the crust of blood, like a dark red goatee, around his mouth. One thing Fletcher knew for sure: if he did leave, the others—the guard and the three sitting in tribunal behind the table—would be dead. He was a newspaper reporter and had never killed anything much larger than a hornet, but if he had to kill to escape this room, he would. He thought of his sister, on her retreat. He thought of his sister swimming in a river with a Spanish name. He thought of the light on the water at noon, moving river light too bright to look at. They reached the chair in front of the table. The guard pushed him into it so hard that Fletcher almost tipped himself over.

“Careful now, that's not the way, no accidents,” said one of the men behind the table. It was Escobar. He spoke to the guard in Spanish. To Escobar's left sat the other man. To Escobar's right sat a woman of about sixty. The woman and the other man were thin. Escobar was fat and as greasy as a cheap candle. He looked like a movie Mexican. You expected him to say, “Batches? Batches? We don't

need no steenkin batches.” Yet this was the Chief Minister of Information. Sometimes he gave the English-language portion of the weather on the city television station. When he did this he invariably got fan mail. In a suit he didn’t look greasy, just roly-poly. Fletcher knew all this. He had done three or four stories on Escobar. He was colorful. He was also, according to rumor, an enthusiastic torturer. A Central American Himmler, Fletcher thought, and was amazed to discover that one’s sense of humor—rudimentary, granted—could function this far into a state of terror.

“Handcuffs?” the guard asked, also in Spanish, and held up a pair of the plastic kind. Fletcher tried to keep his look of dazed incomprehension. If they cuffed him, it was over. He could forget about one chance in thirty, or one in three hundred.

Escobar turned briefly to the woman on his right. Her face was very dark, her hair black with startling white streaks. It flowed back and up from her forehead as if blown by a gale-force wind. The look of her hair reminded Fletcher of Elsa Lanchester in *Bride of Frankenstein*. He gripped this similarity with a fierceness that was close to panic, the way he gripped the thought of bright light on the river, or his sister laughing with her friends as they walked to the water. He wanted images, not ideas. Images were luxury items now. And ideas were no good in a place like this. In a place like this all you got were the wrong ideas.

The woman gave Escobar a small nod. Fletcher had seen her around the building, always garbed in shapeless dresses like the one she wore now. She had been with Escobar often enough for Fletcher to assume she was his secretary, personal assistant, perhaps even his biographer—Christ knew that men like Escobar had egos large enough to warrant such accessories. Now Fletcher wondered if he’d had it backward all along, if she was his boss.

In any case, the nod seemed to satisfy Escobar. When he turned back to Fletcher, Escobar was smiling. And when he spoke, it was in English. “Don’t be silly, put them away. Mr. Fletcher is only here to help us in a few matters. He will soon be returning to his own

country”—Escobar sighed deeply to show how deeply he regretted this. “... but in the meantime he is an honored guest.”

We don't need no steenkin handcuffs, Fletcher thought.

The woman who looked like the Bride of Frankenstein with a very deep tan leaned toward Escobar and whispered briefly behind her hand. Escobar nodded, smiling.

“Of course, Ramon, if our guest should try anything foolish or make any aggressive moves, you would have to shoot him a little.” He roared laughter—roly-poly TV laughter—and then repeated what he had said in Spanish, so that Ramon would understand as well as Fletcher. Ramon nodded seriously, replaced his handcuffs on his belt, and stepped back to the periphery of Fletcher's vision.

Escobar returned his attention to Fletcher. From one pocket of his parrot-and-foliage-studded guayabera he removed a red-and-white package: Marlboros, the preferred cigarette of third-world peoples everywhere. “Smoke, Mr. Fletcher?”

Fletcher reached toward the pack, which Escobar had placed on the edge of the table, then withdrew his hand. He had quit smoking three years ago, and supposed he might take the habit up again if he actually did get out of this—drinking high-tension liquor as well, quite likely—but at this moment he had no craving or need for a cigarette. He had wanted them to see his fingers shaking, that was all.

“Perhaps later. Right now a cigarette might—”

Might what? It didn't matter to Escobar; he just nodded understandingly and left the red-and-white pack where it was, on the edge of the table. Fletcher had a sudden, agonizing vision in which he saw himself stopping at a newsstand on Forty-third Street and buying a pack of Marlboros. A free man buying the happy poison on a New York street. He told himself that if he got out of this, he would do that. He would do it as some people went on pilgrimages to Rome or Jerusalem after their cancer was cured or their sight was restored.

“The men who did that to you”—Escobar indicated Fletcher’s face with a wave of one not-particularly-clean hand—“have been disciplined. Yet not too harshly, and I myself stop short of apology, you will notice. Those men are patriots, as are we here. As you are yourself, Mr. Fletcher, yes?”

“I suppose.” It was his job to appear ingratiating and frightened, a man who would say anything in order to get out of here. It was Escobar’s job to be soothing, to convince the man in the chair that his swelled eye, split lip, and loosened teeth meant nothing; all that was just a misunderstanding which would soon be straightened out, and when it was he would be free to go. They were still busy trying to deceive each other, even here in the deathroom.

Escobar switched his attention to Ramon the guard and spoke in rapid Spanish. Fletcher’s Spanish wasn’t good enough to pick up everything, but you couldn’t spend almost five years in this shithole capital city without picking up a fair vocabulary; Spanish wasn’t the world’s most difficult language, as both Escobar and his friend the Bride of Frankenstein undoubtedly knew.

Escobar asked if Fletcher’s things had been packed and if he had been checked out of the Hotel Magnificent: Si. Escobar wanted to know if there was a car waiting outside the Ministry of Information to take Mr. Fletcher to the airport when the interrogation was done. Si, around the corner on the Street Fifth of May.

Escobar turned back and said, “Do you understand what I ask him?” From Escobar, understand came out unnerstand, and Fletcher thought again of Escobar’s TV appearances. Low bressure? What low bressure? We don’t need no steenkin low bressure.

“I ask have you been checked out of your room—although after all this time it probably seems more like an apartment to you, yes?—and if there’s a car to take you to the airport when we finish our conversation.” Except conversation hadn’t been the word he used.

“Ye-es?” Sounding as if he could not believe his own good fortune. Or so Fletcher hoped.

“You’ll be on the first Delta flight back to Miami,” the Bride of Frankenstein said. She spoke without a trace of Spanish accent. “Your passport will be given back to you once the plane has touched down on American soil. You will not be harmed or held here, Mr. Fletcher—not if you cooperate with our inquiries—but you are being deported, let’s be clear on that. Kicked out. Given what you Americans call the bum’s rush.”

She was much smoother than Escobar. Fletcher found it amusing that he had thought her Escobar’s assistant. And you call yourself a reporter, he thought. Of course if he was just a reporter, the Times’s man in Central America, he would not be here in the basement of the Ministry of Information, where the stains on the wall looked suspiciously like blood. He had ceased being a reporter some sixteen months ago, around the time he’d first met Nunez.

“I understand,” Fletcher said.

Escobar had taken a cigarette. He lighted it with a gold-plated Zippo. There was a fake ruby in the side of the Zippo. He said, “Are you prepared to help us in our inquiries, Mr. Fletcher?”

“Do I have any choice?”

“You always have a choice,” Escobar said, “but I think you have worn out your carpet in our country, yes? Is that what you say, worn out your carpet?”

“Close enough,” Fletcher said. He thought: What you must guard against is your desire to believe them. It is natural to want to believe, and probably natural to want to tell the truth—especially after you’ve been grabbed outside your favorite cafe and briskly beaten by men who smell of refried beans—but giving them what they want won’t help you. That’s the thing to hold onto, the only idea that’s any good in a room like this. What they say means nothing. What matters is

the thing on that trolley, the thing under that piece of cloth. What matters is the guy who hasn't said anything yet. And the stains on the walls, of course.

Escobar leaned forward, looking serious.

“Do you deny that for the last fourteen months you have given certain information to a man named Tomas Herrera, who has in turn funneled it to a certain Communist insurgent named Pedro Nunez?”

“No,” Fletcher said. “I don't deny it.” To adequately keep up his side of this charade—the charade summarized by the difference between the words conversation and interrogation—he should now justify, attempt to explain. As if anyone in the history of the world had ever won a political argument in a room like this. But he didn't have it in him to do so. “Although it was a little longer than that. Almost a year and a half in all, I think.”

“Have a cigarette, Mr. Fletcher.” Escobar opened a drawer and took out a thin folder.

“Not just yet. Thank you.”

“Okay.” From Escobar it of course came out ho-kay. When he did the TV weather, the boys in the control room would sometimes superimpose a photograph of a woman in a bikini on the weather map. When he saw this, Escobar would laugh and wave his hands and pat his chest. People liked it. It was comical. It was like the sound of ho-kay. It was like the sound of steenkin batches.

Escobar opened the folder with his own cigarette planted squarely in the middle of his mouth with the smoke running up into his eyes. It was the way you saw the old men smoking on the street corners down here, the ones who still wore straw hats, sandals, and baggy white pants. Now Escobar was smiling, keeping his lips shut so his Marlboro wouldn't fall out of his mouth and onto the table but smiling just the same. He took a glossy black-and-white photograph out of

the thin folder and slid it across to Fletcher. "Here is your friend Tomas. Not too pretty, is he?"

It was a high-contrast full-face shot. It made Fletcher think of photographs by that semi-famous news photographer of the forties and fifties, the one who called himself Weegee. It was a portrait of a dead man. The eyes were open. The flashbulb had reflected in them, giving them a kind of life. There was no blood, only one mark and no blood, but still one knew at once that the man was dead. His hair was combed, one could still see the toothmarks the comb had left, and there were those little lights in his eyes, but they were reflected lights. One knew at once the man was dead.

The mark was on the left temple, a comet shape that looked like a powder burn, but there was no bullet hole, no blood, and the skull wasn't pushed out of shape. Even a low-caliber pistol like a .22, fired close enough to the skin to leave a powder burn, would have pushed the skull out of shape.

Escobar took the picture back, put it in the folder, closed the folder, and shrugged as if to say You see? You see what happens? When he shrugged, the ash fell off his cigarette onto the table. He brushed it off onto the gray lino floor with the side of one fat hand.

"We dint actually want to bother you," Escobar said. "Why would we? This a small country. We are small people in a small country. The New York Times a big paper in a big country. We have our pride, of course, but we also have our ..." Escobar tapped his temple with one finger. "You see?"

Fletcher nodded. He kept seeing Tomas. Even with the picture back in the folder he could see Tomas, the marks the comb had left in Tomas's dark hair. He had eaten food Tomas's wife had cooked, had sat on the floor and watched cartoons with Tomas's youngest child, a little girl of perhaps five. Tom and Jerry cartoons, with what little dialogue there was in Spanish.

“We don’t want to bother you,” Escobar was saying as the cigarette smoke rose and broke apart on his face and curled around his ears, “but for a long time we was watching. You dint see us—maybe because you are so big and we are just little—but we was watching. We know that you know what Tomas knows, and so we go to him. We try to get him to tell what he knows so we don’t have to bother you, but he won’t. Finally we ask Heinz here to try and make him tell. Heinz, show Mr. Fletcher how you try to make Tomas tell, when Tomas was sitting right where Mr. Fletcher was sitting now.”

“I can do that,” said Heinz. He spoke English in a nasal New York accent. He was bald, except for a fringe of hair around his ears. He wore little glasses. Escobar looked like a movie Mexican, the woman looked like Elsa Lanchester in *Bride of Frankenstein*, Heinz looked like an actor in a TV commercial, the one who explained why Excedrin was best for your headache. He walked around the table to the trolley, gave Fletcher a look both roguish and conspiratorial, and flicked away the cloth over the top.

There was a machine underneath, something with dials and lights that were now all dark. Fletcher at first thought it was a lie detector—that made a certain amount of sense—but in front of the rudimentary control panel, connected to the side of the machine by a fat black cord, was an object with a rubber grip. It looked like a stylus or some sort of fountain pen. There was no nib, though. The thing just tapered to a blunt steel point.

Below the machine was a shelf. On the shelf was a car battery marked DELCO. There were rubber cups over the battery terminals. Wires rose from the rubber cups to the back of the machine. No, not a lie detector. Except maybe to these people it was.

Heinz spoke briskly, with the pleasure of a man who likes to explain what he does. “It’s quite simple, really, a modification of the device neurologists use to administer electric shocks to people suffering unipolar neurosis. Only this administers a far more powerful jolt. The pain is really secondary, I find. Most people don’t even remember the pain. What makes them so eager to talk is an aversion to the

process. This might almost be called an atavism. Someday I hope to write a paper.”

Heinz picked up the stylus by its insulated rubber grip and held it in front of his eyes.

“This can be touched to the extremities ... the torso ... the genitals, of course ... but it can also be inserted in places where—forgive the crudity—the sun never shines. A man whose shit has been electrified never forgets it, Mr. Fletcher.”

“Did you do that to Tomas?”

“No,” Heinz said, and replaced the stylus carefully in front of the shock-generator. “He got a jolt at half-power on the hand, just to acquaint him with what he was up against, and when he still declined to discuss El Condor—”

“Never mind that,” the Bride of Frankenstein said.

“Beg pardon. When he still wouldn’t tell us what we wanted to know, I applied the wand to his temple and administered another measured jolt. Carefully measured, I assure you, half-power, not a bit more. He had a seizure and died. I believe it may have been epilepsy. Did he have a history of epilepsy, do you know, Mr. Fletcher?”

Fletcher shook his head.

“Nevertheless, I believe that’s what it was. The autopsy revealed nothing wrong with his heart.” Heinz folded his long-fingered hands in front of him and looked at Escobar.

Escobar removed his cigarette from the center of his mouth, looked at it, dropped it to the gray tile floor, stepped on it. Then he looked at Fletcher and smiled. “Very sad, of course. Now I ask you some questions, Mr. Fletcher. Many of them—I tell you this frankly—are the questions Tomas Herrera refused to answer. I hope you will not refuse, Mr. Fletcher. I like you. You sit there in dignity, do not cry or

beg or urinate the pants. I like you. I know you only do what you believe. It is patriotism. So I tell you, my friend, it's good if you answer my questions quickly and truthfully. You don't want Heinz to use his machine."

"I've said I'd help you," Fletcher said. Death was closer than the overhead lights in their cunning wire cages. Pain, unfortunately, was closer yet. And how close was Nunez, El Condor? Closer than these three guessed, but not close enough to help him. If Escobar and the Bride of Frankenstein had waited another two days, perhaps even another twenty-four hours ... but they had not, and he was here in the deathroom. Now he would see what he was made of.

"You said it and you had better mean it," the woman said, speaking very clearly. "We're not fucking around, gringo."

"I know you're not," Fletcher said in a sighing, trembling voice.

"You want that cigarette now, I think," said Escobar, and when Fletcher shook his head, Escobar took one himself, lit it, then seemed to meditate. At last he looked up. This cigarette was planted in the middle of his face like the last one. "Nunez comes soon?" he asked. "Like Zorro in that movie?"

Fletcher nodded.

"How soon?"

"I don't know." Fletcher was very aware of Heinz standing next to his infernal machine with his long-fingered hands folded in front of him, looking ready to talk about pain-relievers at the drop of a cue. He was equally aware of Ramon standing to his right, at the edge of his peripheral vision. He could not see, but guessed that Ramon's hand would be on the butt of his pistol. And here came the next question.

"When he comes, will he strike at the garrison in the hills of El Candido, the garrison at St. Therese, or will he come right into the city?"

“The garrison at St. Therese,” Fletcher said.

He will come to the city, Tomas had said while his wife and daughter now watched cartoons, sitting on the floor side by side and eating popcorn from a white bowl with a blue stripe around the rim. Fletcher remembered the blue stripe. He could see it clearly. Fletcher remembered everything. He will come at the heart. No fucking around. He will strike for the heart, like a man who would kill a vampire.

“He will not want the TV station?” Escobar asked. “Or the government radio station?”

First the radio station on Civil Hill, Tomas had said while the cartoons played. By then it was the Road Runner, always gone in a puff of dust just ahead of whatever Acme Road Runner-catching device the Coyote was using, just beep-beep and gone.

“No,” Fletcher said. “I’ve been told El Condor says ‘Let them babble.’”

“Does he have rockets? Air-to-ground rockets? Copter-killers?”

“Yes.” It was true.

“Many?”

“Not many.” This was not true. Nunez had better than sixty. There were only a dozen helicopters in the country’s whole shitpot air force—bad Russian helicopters that never flew for long.

The Bride of Frankenstein tapped Escobar on the shoulder. Escobar leaned toward her. She whispered without covering her mouth. She had no need to cover her mouth because her lips barely moved. This was a skill Fletcher associated with prisons. He had never been to prison but he had seen movies. When Escobar whispered back, he raised a fat hand to cover his own mouth.

Fletcher watched them and waited, knowing that the woman was telling Escobar he was lying. Soon Heinz would have more data for his paper, Certain Preliminary Observations on the Administration and Consequences of Electrifying the Shit of Reluctant Interrogation Subjects. Fletcher discovered that terror had created two new people inside him, at least two, sub-Fletchers with their own useless but quite powerful views on how this was going to go. One was sadly hopeful, the other just sad. The sadly hopeful one was Mr. Maybe They Will, as in maybe they really will let me go, maybe there really is a car parked on the Street Fifth of May, just around the corner, maybe they really mean to kick me out of the country, maybe I really will be landing in Miami tomorrow morning, scared but alive, with this already beginning to seem like a bad dream.

The other one, the one who was merely sad, was Mr. Even If I Do. Fletcher might be able to surprise them by making a sudden move—he had been beaten and they were arrogant, so yes, he might be able to surprise them.

But Ramon will shoot me even if I do.

And if he went for Ramon? Managed to get his gun? Unlikely but not impossible; the man was fat, fatter than Escobar by at least thirty pounds, and he wheezed when he breathed.

Escobar and Heinz will be all over me before I can shoot even if I do.

The woman too, maybe; she talked without moving her lips; she might know judo or karate or tae kwon do, as well. And if he shot them all and managed to escape this room?

There'll be more guards everywhere even if I do—they'll hear the shots and come running.

Of course rooms like this tended to be soundproofed, for obvious reasons, but even if he got up the stairs and out the door and onto the street, that was only the beginning. And Mr. Even If I Do would be running with him the whole way, for however long his run lasted.

The thing was, neither Mr. Maybe They Will or Mr. Even If I Do could help him; they were only distractions, lies his increasingly frantic mind tried to tell itself. Men like him did not talk themselves out of rooms like this. He might as well try inventing a third sub-Fletcher, Mr. Maybe I Can, and go for it. He had nothing to lose. He only had to make sure they didn't know he knew that.

Escobar and the Bride of Frankenstein drew apart. Escobar put his cigarette back in his mouth and smiled sadly at Fletcher. "Amigo, you are lying."

"No," he said. "Why would I lie? Don't you think I want to get out of here?"

"We have no idea why you would lie," said the woman with the narrow blade of a face. "We have no idea why you would choose to aid Nunez in the first place. Some have suggested American naivete, and I have no doubt that played its part, but that cannot be all. It doesn't matter. I believe a demonstration is in order. Heinz?"

Smiling, Heinz turned to his machine and flicked a switch. There was a hum, the kind that comes from an old-fashioned radio when it's warming up, and three green lights came on.

"No," Fletcher said, trying to get to his feet, thinking that he did panic very well, and why not? He was panicked, or almost panicked. Certainly the idea of Heinz touching him anywhere with that stainless steel dildo for pygmies was terrifying. But there was another part of him, very cold and calculating, that knew he would have to take at least one shock. He wasn't aware of anything so coherent as a plan, but he had to take at least one shock. Mr. Maybe I Can insisted that this was so.

Escobar nodded to Ramon.

"You can't do this, I'm an American citizen and I work for The New York Times, people know where I am."

A heavy hand pressed down on his left shoulder, pushing him back into the chair. At the same moment, the barrel of a pistol went deep into his right ear. The pain was so sudden that bright dots appeared before Fletcher's eyes, dancing frantically. He screamed, and the sound seemed muffled. Because one ear was plugged, of course—one ear was plugged.

"Hold out your hand, Mr. Fletcher," Escobar said, and he was smiling around his cigarette again.

"Right hand," Heinz said. He held the stylus by its black rubber grip like a pencil, and his machine was humming.

Fletcher gripped the arm of the chair with his right hand. He was no longer sure if he was acting or not—the line between acting and panic was gone.

"Do it," the woman said. Her hands were folded on the table; she leaned forward over them. There was a point of light in each of her pupils, turning her dark eyes into nailheads. "Do it or I can't account for the consequences."

Fletcher began to loosen his fingers on the chair arm, but before he could get the hand up, Heinz darted forward and poked the tip of the blunt stylus against the back of Fletcher's left hand. That had probably been his target all along—certainly it was closer to where Heinz stood.

There was a snapping sound, very thin, like a twig, and Fletcher's left hand closed into a fist so tight his nails cut into his palm. A kind of dancing sickness raced up from his wrist to his forearm to his flopping elbow and finally to his shoulder, the side of his neck, and to his gums. He could even feel the shock in his teeth on that side, or in the fillings. A grunt escaped him. He bit his tongue and shot sideways in the chair. The gun was gone from his ear and Ramon caught him. If he hadn't, Fletcher would have fallen on the gray tile floor.

The stylus was withdrawn. Where it had touched, between the second and third knuckles of the third finger of his left hand, there was a small hot spot. It was the only real pain, although his arm still tingled and the muscles still jumped. Yet it was horrible, being shocked like that. Fletcher felt he would seriously consider shooting his own mother to avoid another touch of the little steel dildo. An atavism, Heinz had called it. Someday he hoped to write a paper.

Heinz's face loomed down, lips pulled back and teeth revealed in an idiotic grin, eyes alight. "How do you describe it?" he cried. "Now, while the experience is still fresh, how do you describe it?"

"Like dying," Fletcher said in a voice that didn't sound like his own.

Heinz looked transported. "Yes! And you see, he has wet himself! Not much, just a little, but yes ... and Mr. Fletcher—"

"Stand aside," the Bride of Frankenstein said. "Don't be an ass. Let us take care of our business."

"And that was only one-quarter power," Heinz said in a tone of awed confidentiality, and then he stood aside and refolded his hands in front of him.

"Mr. Fletcher, you been bad," Escobar said reproachfully. He took the stub of his cigarette from his mouth, examined it, threw it on the floor.

The cigarette, Fletcher thought. The cigarette, yes. The shock had seriously insulted his arm—the muscles were still twitching and he could see blood in his cupped palm—but it seemed to have revitalized his brain, refreshed it. Of course that was what shock treatments were supposed to do.

"No ... I want to help ..."

But Escobar was shaking his head. "We know Nunez will come to the city. We know on the way he will take the radio station if he can ... and he probably can."

“For awhile,” said the Bride of Frankenstein. “Only for awhile.”

Escobar was nodding. “Only for awhile. A matter of days, perhaps hours. Is of no concern. What matters is we give you a bit of rope, see if you make a noose ... and you do.”

Fletcher sat up straight in the chair again. Ramon had retreated a step or two. Fletcher looked at the back of his left hand and saw a small smudge there, like the one on the side of Tomas’s dead face in the photograph. And there was Heinz who had killed Fletcher’s friend, standing beside his machine with his hands folded in front of him, smiling and perhaps thinking about the paper he would write, words and graphs and little pictures labeled Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 and, for all Fletcher knew, Fig. 994.

“Mr. Fletcher?”

Fletcher looked at Escobar and straightened the fingers of his left hand. The muscles of that arm were still twitching, but the twitch was subsiding. He thought that when the time came, he would be able to use the arm. And if Ramon shot him, so what? Let Heinz see if his machine could raise the dead.

“Do we have your attention, Mr. Fletcher?”

Fletcher nodded.

“Why do you want to protect this man Nunez?” Escobar asked. “Why do you want to suffer to protect this man? He takes the cocaine. If he wins his revolution he will proclaim himself President for Life and sell the cocaine to your country. He will go to mass on Sunday and fuck his coke-whores the rest of the week. In the end who wins? Maybe the Communists. Maybe United Fruit. Not the people.” Escobar spoke low. His eyes were soft. “Help us, Mr. Fletcher. Of your own free will. Don’t make us make you help us. Don’t make us pull on your string.” He looked up at Fletcher from beneath his single bushy eyebrow. He looked up with his soft cocker spaniel eyes. “You can still be on that plane to Miami. On the way you like a drink, yes?”

“Yes,” Fletcher said. “I’ll help you.”

“Ah, good.” Escobar smiled, then looked at the woman.

“Does he have rockets?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Many?”

“At least sixty.”

“Russian?”

“Some are. Others came in crates with Israeli markings, but the writing on the missiles themselves looks Japanese.”

She nodded, seeming satisfied. Escobar beamed.

“Where are they?”

“Everywhere. You can’t just swoop down and grab them. There might still be a dozen at Ortiz.” Fletcher knew that wasn’t so.

“And Nunez?” she asked. “Is El Condor at Ortiz?”

She knew better. “He’s in the jungle. Last I knew, he was in Belen Province.” This was a lie. Nunez had been in Cristobal, a suburb of the capital city, when Fletcher last saw him. He was probably still there. But if Escobar and the woman had known that, there would have been no need of this interrogation. And why would they believe Nunez would trust Fletcher with his whereabouts, anyway? In a country like this, where Escobar and Heinz and the Bride of Frankenstein were only three of your enemies, why would you trust a Yankee newspaper reporter with your address? Loco! Why was the Yankee newspaperman involved at all? But they had stopped wondering about that, at least for now.

“Who does he talk to in the city?” the woman asked. “Not who he fucks, who he talks to.”

This was the point where he had to move, if he was going to. The truth was no longer safe and they might know a lie.

“There’s a man ...” he started, then paused. “Could I have that cigarette now?”

“Mr. Fletcher! But of course!” Escobar was for a moment the concerned dinner-party host. Fletcher did not think this was playacting. Escobar picked up the red-and-white pack—the kind of pack any free man or woman could buy at any newsstand like the one Fletcher remembered on Forty-third Street—and shook out a cigarette. Fletcher took it, knowing he might be dead before it burned all the way down to the filter, no longer a part of this earth. He felt nothing, only the fading twitch of the muscles in his left arm and a funny baked taste in his fillings on that side of his mouth.

He put the cigarette between his lips. Escobar leaned further forward and snapped back the cover of his gold-plated lighter. He flicked the wheel. The lighter produced a flame. Fletcher was aware of Heinz’s infernal machine humming like an old radio, the kind with tubes in the back. He was aware of the woman he had come to think of, without a trace of humor, as the Bride of Frankenstein, looking at him the way the Coyote in the cartoons looked at the Road Runner. He was aware of his heart beating, of the remembered circular feel of the cigarette in his mouth—“a tube of singular delight,” some playwright or other had called it—and of the beat of his heart, incredibly slow. Last month he’d been called upon to make an after-luncheon speech at the Club Internacional, where all the foreign press geeks hung out, and his heart had beat faster then.

Here it was, and so what? Even the blind found their way through this; even his sister had, there by the river.

Fletcher bent to the flame. The end of the Marlboro caught fire and glowed red. Fletcher drew deep, and it was easy to start coughing;

after three years without a cigarette, it would have been harder not to cough. He sat back in the chair and added a harsh, gagging growl to the cough. He began to shake all over, throwing his elbows out, jerking his head to the left, drumming his feet. Best of all, he recalled an old childhood talent and rolled his eyes up to the whites. During none of this did he let go of the cigarette.

Fletcher had never seen an actual epileptic fit, although he vaguely remembered Patty Duke throwing one in *The Miracle Worker*. He had no way of knowing if he was doing what epileptics actually did, but he hoped that the unexpected death of Tomas Herrera would help them to overlook any false notes in his own act.

“Shit, not again!” Heinz cried in a shrill near-scream; in a movie it might have been funny.

“Grab him, Ramon!” Escobar yelled in Spanish. He tried to stand up and struck the table so hard with his meaty thighs that it rose up and thumped back down. The woman didn’t move, and Fletcher thought: She suspects. I don’t think she even knows it yet, but she’s smarter than Escobar, smarter by a mile, and she suspects.

Was this true? With his eyes rolled up he could see only a ghost of her, not enough to really know if it was or not ... but he knew. What did it matter? Things had been set in motion, and now they would play out. They would play out very fast.

“Ramon!” Escobar shouted. “Don’t let him fall on the floor, you idiot! Don’t let him swallow his t—”

Ramon bent over and grabbed Fletcher’s shaking shoulders, perhaps wanting to get Fletcher’s head back, perhaps wanting to make sure Fletcher’s tongue was still safely unswallowed (a person couldn’t swallow his own tongue, not unless it was cut off; Ramon clearly did not watch *ER*). Whatever he wanted didn’t matter. When his face was where Fletcher could get at it, Fletcher struck the burning end of the Marlboro in Ramon’s eye.

Ramon shrieked and jerked backward. His right hand rose toward his face, where the still-burning cigarette hung askew in the socket of his eye, but his left hand remained on Fletcher's shoulder. It was now tightened down to a clamp, and when he stepped back, Ramon pulled Fletcher's chair over. Fletcher spilled out of it, rolled over, and got to his feet.

Heinz was screaming something, words, maybe, but to Fletcher he sounded like a girl of about ten screaming at the sight of a singing idol—one of the Hansons, perhaps. Escobar wasn't making any noise at all and that was bad.

Fletcher didn't look back at the table. He didn't have to look to know that Escobar was coming for him. Instead he shot both hands forward, grabbed the butt of Ramon's revolver, and pulled it from its holster. Fletcher didn't think Ramon ever knew it was gone. He was screaming a flood of Spanish and pawing at his face. He struck the cigarette but instead of coming free it broke off, the burning end still stuck in his eye.

Fletcher turned. Escobar was there, already around the end of the long table, coming for him with his fat hands out. Escobar no longer looked like a fellow who sometimes did the TV weather and talked about high bressure.

"Get that Yankee son of a bitch!" the woman spat.

Fletcher kicked the overturned chair into Escobar's path and Escobar tripped on it. As he went down, Fletcher stuck the gun out, still held in both hands, and shot it into the top of Escobar's head. Escobar's hair jumped. Gouts of blood burst from his nose and mouth and from the underside of his chin, where the bullet came out. Escobar fell flat on his bleeding face. His feet drummed on the gray tile floor. The smell of shit rose from his dying body.

The woman was no longer in her chair, but she had no intention of approaching Fletcher. She ran for the door, fleet as a deer in her dark shapeless dress. Ramon, still bellowing, was between Fletcher

and the woman. And he was reaching for Fletcher, wanting to grab him by the neck, throttle him.

Fletcher shot him twice, once in the chest and once in the face. The face-shot tore off most of Ramon's nose and right cheek, but the big man in the brown uniform came on just the same, roaring, the cigarette still dangling from his eye, his big sausage fingers, a silver ring on one of them, opening and closing.

Ramon stumbled over Escobar just as Escobar had stumbled over the chair. Fletcher had a moment to think of a famous cartoon that shows fish in a line, each with his mouth open to eat the next one down in size. The Food Chain, that drawing was called.

Ramon, facedown and with two bullets in him, reached out and clamped a hand on Fletcher's ankle. Fletcher tore free, staggered, and fired a fourth shot into the ceiling when he did. Dust sifted down. There was a strong smell of gunsmoke in the room now. Fletcher looked at the door. The woman was still there, yanking at the doorknob with one hand and fumbling at the turn-lock with the other hand, but she couldn't open the door. If she'd been able to, she'd have already done it. She'd be all the way down the hall by now, and screaming bloody murder up the stairs.

"Hey," Fletcher said. He felt like an ordinary guy who goes to his Thursday-night bowling league and rolls a 300 game. "Hey, you bitch, look at me."

She turned and put her palms flat against the door, as if she were holding it up. There was still a little nailhead of light in each of her eyes. She began to tell him he mustn't hurt her. She started in Spanish, hesitated, then began to say the same thing in English. "You mustn't hurt me in any way, Mr. Fletcher, I am the only one who can guarantee your safe conduct from here, and I swear I will on my solemn oath, but you must not hurt me."

From behind them, Heinz was keening like a child in love or terror. Now that Fletcher was close to the woman—the woman standing

against the door of the deathroom with her hands pressed flat against its metal surface—he could smell some bittersweet perfume. Her eyes were shaped like almonds. Her hair streamed back above the top of her head. We're not just fucking around, she had told him, and Fletcher thought: Neither am I.

The woman saw the news of her death in his eyes and began to talk faster, pressing her butt and back and palms harder and harder against the metal door as she talked. It was as if she believed she could somehow melt herself through the door and come out whole on the other side if she just pushed hard enough. She had papers, she said, papers in his name, and she would give him these papers. She also had money, a great deal of money, also gold; there was a Swiss bank account which he could access by computer from her home. It occurred to Fletcher that in the end there might only be one way to tell the thugs from the patriots: when they saw their own death rising in your eyes like water, patriots made speeches. The thugs, on the other hand, gave you the number of their Swiss bank account and offered to put you on-line.

“Shut up,” Fletcher said. Unless this room was very well insulated indeed, a dozen ordinary troops from upstairs were probably on their way now. He had no means of standing them off, but this one was not going to get away.

She shut up, still standing against the door, pressing it with her palms. Still with the nailheads in her eyes. How old was she? Fletcher wondered. Sixty-five? And how many had she killed in this room, or rooms like it? How many had she ordered killed?

“Listen to me,” Fletcher said. “Are you listening?”

What she was undoubtedly listening for were the sounds of approaching rescue. In your dreams, Fletcher thought.

“The weatherman there said that El Condor uses cocaine, that he's a Communist butt-boy, a whore for United Fruit, who knows what else. Maybe he's some of those things, maybe none. I don't know or care.

What I know about, what I care about, was he was never in charge of the ordinaries patrolling the Caya River in the summer of 1994. Nunez was in New York then. At NYU. So he wasn't part of the bunch that found the nuns on retreat from La Caya. They put three of the nuns' heads up on sticks, there by the water's edge. The one in the middle was my sister."

Fletcher shot her twice and then Ramon's gun clicked empty. Two was enough. The woman went sliding down the door, her bright eyes never leaving Fletcher's. You were the one who was supposed to die, those eyes said. I don't understand this, you were the one who was supposed to die. Her hand clawed at her throat once, twice, then was still. Her eyes remained on his a moment longer, the bright eyes of an ancient mariner with a whale of a tale to tell, and then her head fell forward.

Fletcher turned around and began walking toward Heinz with Ramon's gun held out. As he walked he realized that his right shoe was gone. He looked at Ramon, who was still lying facedown in a spreading pool of blood. Ramon still had hold of Fletcher's loafer. He was like a dying weasel that refuses to let go of a chicken. Fletcher stopped long enough to put it on.

Heinz turned as if to run, and Fletcher wagged the gun at him. The gun was empty but Heinz didn't seem to know that. And maybe he remembered there was nowhere to run anyway, not here in the deathroom. He stopped moving and only stared at the oncoming gun and the oncoming man behind it. Heinz was crying. "One step back," Fletcher said, and, still crying, Heinz took one step back.

Fletcher stopped in front of Heinz's machine. What was the word Heinz had used? Atavism, wasn't it?

The machine on the trolley looked much too simple for a man of Heinz's intelligence—three dials, one switch marked ON and OFF (now in the OFF position), and a rheostat which had been turned so the white line on it pointed to roughly eleven o'clock. The needles on the dials all lay flat on their zeroes.

Fletcher picked up the stylus and held it out to Heinz. Heinz made a wet sound, shook his head, and took another step backward. His face would lift and pull together in a kind of grief-struck sneer, then loosen again. His forehead was wet with sweat, his cheeks with tears. This second backward step took him almost beneath one of the caged lights, and his shadow puddled around his feet.

“Take it or I’ll kill you,” Fletcher said. “And if you take another step backward I’ll kill you.” He had no time for this and it felt wrong in any case, but Fletcher could not stop himself. He kept seeing that picture of Tomas, the open eyes, the little scorched mark like a powder burn.

Sobbing, Heinz took the blunt fountain-pen-shaped object, careful to hold it only by the rubber insulated sleeve.

“Put it in your mouth,” Fletcher said. “Suck on it like it was a lollipop.”

“No!” Heinz cried in a weepy voice. He shook his head and water flew off his face. His face was still going through its contortions: cramp and release, cramp and release. There was a green bubble of snot at the entrance to one of his nostrils; it expanded and contracted with Heinz’s rapid breathing but didn’t break. Fletcher had never seen anything quite like it. “No, you can’t make me!”

But Heinz knew Fletcher could. The Bride of Frankenstein might not have believed it, and Escobar likely hadn’t had time to believe it, but Heinz knew he had no more right of refusal. He was in Tomas Herrera’s position, in Fletcher’s position. In one way that was revenge enough, but in another way it wasn’t. Knowing was an idea. Ideas were no good in here. In here seeing was believing.

“Put it in your mouth or I’ll shoot you in the head,” Fletcher said, and shoved the empty gun at Heinz’s face. Heinz recoiled with a wail of terror. And now Fletcher heard his own voice drop, become confidential, become sincere. In a way it reminded him of Escobar’s voice. We are havin an area of low bressure, he thought. We are havin the steenkin rain-showers. “I’m not going to shock you if you just do it and hurry up. But I need you to know what it feels like.”

Heinz stared at Fletcher. His eyes were blue and red-rimmed, swimming with tears. He didn't believe Fletcher, of course, what Fletcher was saying made no sense, but Heinz very clearly wanted to believe it anyway, because, sense or nonsense, Fletcher was holding out the possibility of life. He just needed to be pushed a single step further.

Fletcher smiled. "Do it for your research."

Heinz was convinced—not completely, but enough to believe Fletcher could be Mr. Maybe He Will after all. He put the steel rod into his mouth. His bulging eyes stared at Fletcher. Below them and above the jutting stylus—which looked not like a lollipop but an old-fashioned fever thermometer—that green bubble of snot swelled and retreated, swelled and retreated. Still pointing the gun at Heinz, Fletcher flicked the switch on the control panel from OFF to ON and gave the rheostat a hard turn. The white line on the knob went from eleven in the morning to five in the afternoon.

Heinz might have had time to spit the stylus out, but shock caused him to clamp his lips down on the stainless steel barrel instead. The snapping sound was louder this time, like a small branch instead of a twig. Heinz's lips pressed down even tighter. The green mucus bubble in his nostril popped. So did one of his eyes. Heinz's entire body seemed to vibrate inside his clothes. His hands were bent at the wrists, the long fingers splayed. His cheeks went from white to pale gray to a darkish purple. Smoke began to pour out of his nose. His other eye popped out on his cheek. Above the dislocated eyes there were now two raw sockets that stared at Fletcher with surprise. One of Heinz's cheeks either tore open or melted. A quantity of smoke and a strong odor of burned meat came out through the hole, and Fletcher observed small flames, orange and blue. Heinz's mouth was on fire. His tongue was burning like a rug.

Fletcher's fingers were still on the rheostat. He turned it all the way back to the left, then flicked the switch to OFF. The needles, which had swung all the way to the +50 marks on their little dials, immediately fell dead again. The moment the electricity left him,

Heinz crashed to the gray tile floor, trailing smoke from his mouth as he went. The stylus fell free, and Fletcher saw there were little pieces of Heinz's lips on it. Fletcher's gorge gave a salty, burping lurch, and he closed his throat against it. He didn't have time to vomit over what he had done to Heinz; he might consider vomiting at a later time. Still, he lingered a moment longer, leaning over to look at Heinz's smoking mouth and dislocated eyes. "How do you describe it?" he asked the corpse. "Now, while the experience is still fresh? What, nothing to say?"

Fletcher turned and hurried across the room, detouring around Ramon, who was still alive and moaning. He sounded like a man having a bad dream.

He remembered that the door was locked. Ramon had locked it; the key would be on the ring hanging at Ramon's belt. Fletcher went back to the guard, knelt beside him, and tore the ring off his belt. When he did, Ramon groped out and seized Fletcher by the ankle again. Fletcher was still holding the gun. He rapped the butt down on the top of Ramon's head. For a moment the hand on his ankle gripped even tighter, and then it let go.

Fletcher started to get up and then thought, Bullets. He must have more. The gun's empty. His next thought was that he didn't need no steenkin bullets, Ramon's gun had done all that it could for him. Shooting outside this room would bring the ordinaries like flies.

Even so, Fletcher felt along Ramon's belt, opening the little leather snap pouches until he found a speed-loader. He used it to fill up the gun. He didn't know if he could actually bring himself to shoot ordinaries who were only men like Tomas, men with families to feed, but he could shoot officers and he could save at least one bullet for himself. He would very likely not be able to get out of the building—that would be like rolling a second 300 game in a row—but he would never be brought back to this room again, and set in the chair next to Heinz's machine.

He pushed the Bride of Frankenstein away from the door with his foot. Her eyes glared dully at the ceiling. Fletcher was coming more and more to understand that he had survived and these others had not. They were cooling off. On their skin, galaxies of bacteria had already begun to die. These were bad thoughts to be having in the basement of the Ministry of Information, bad thoughts to be in the head of a man who had become—perhaps only for a little while, more likely forever—a desaparecido. Still, he couldn't help having them.

The third key opened the door. Fletcher stuck his head out into the hall—cinder-block walls, green on the bottom half and a dirty cream-white on the top half, like the walls of an old school corridor. Faded red lino on the floor. No one was in the hall. About thirty feet down to the left, a small brown dog lay asleep against the wall. His feet were twitching. Fletcher didn't know if the dog was dreaming about chasing or being chased, but he didn't think he would be asleep at all if the gunshots—or Heinz's screaming—had been very loud out here. If I ever get back, he thought, I'll write that soundproofing is the great triumph of dictatorship. I'll tell the world. Of course I probably won't get back, those stairs down to the right are probably as close to Forty-third Street as I'm ever going to get, but—

But there was Mr. Maybe I Can.

Fletcher stepped into the hall and pulled the door of the deathroom shut behind him. The little brown dog lifted its head, looked at Fletcher, puffed its lips out in a woof that was mostly a whisper, then lowered its head again and appeared to go back to sleep.

Fletcher dropped to his knees, put his hands (one still holding Ramon's gun) on the floor, bent, and kissed the lino. As he did it he thought of his sister—how she had looked going off to college eight years before her death by the river. She had been wearing a tartan skirt on the day she'd gone off to college, and the red in it hadn't been the exact same red of the faded lino, but it was close. Close enough for government work, as they said.

Fletcher got up. He started down the hall toward the stairs, the first-floor hallway, the street, the city, Highway 4, the patrols, the roadblocks, the border, the checkpoints, the water. The Chinese said a journey of a thousand miles started with a single step.

I'll see how far I get, Fletcher thought as he reached the foot of the stairs. I might just surprise myself. But he was already surprised, just to be alive. Smiling a little, holding Ramon's gun out before him, Fletcher started up the stairs.

*

A month later, a man walked up to Carlo Arcuzzi's newsstand kiosk on Forty-third Street. Carlo had a nasty moment when he was almost sure the man meant to stick a gun in his face and rob him. It was only eight o'clock and still light, lots of people about, but did any of those things stop a man who was pazzo? And this man looked plenty pazzo—so thin his white shirt and gray pants seemed to float on him, and his eyes lay at the bottom of great round sockets. He looked like a man who had just been released from a concentration camp or (by some huge mistake) a loony bin. When his hand went into his pants pocket, Carlo Arcuzzi thought, Now comes the gun.

But instead of a gun came a battered old Lord Buxton, and from the wallet came a ten-dollar bill. Then, in a perfectly sane tone of voice, the man in the white shirt and gray pants asked for a pack of Marlboros. Carlo got them, put a package of matches on top of them, and pushed them across the counter of his kiosk. While the man opened the Marlboros, Carlo made change.

"No," the man said when he saw the change. He had put one of the cigarettes in his mouth.

"No? What you mean no?"

"I mean keep the change," the man said. He offered the pack to Carlo. "Do you smoke? Have one of these, if you like."

Carlo looked mistrustfully at the man in the white shirt and gray pants. "I don't smoke. It's a bad habit."

"Very bad," the man agreed, then lit his cigarette and inhaled with apparent pleasure. He stood smoking and watching the people on the other side of the street. There were girls on the other side of the street. Men would look at girls in their summer clothes, that was human nature. Carlo didn't think this customer was crazy anymore, although he had left the change of a ten-dollar bill sitting on the narrow counter of the kiosk.

The thin man smoked the cigarette all the way down to the filter. He turned toward Carlo, staggering a little, as if he was not used to smoking and the cigarette had made him dizzy.

"A nice night," the man said.

Carlo nodded. It was. It was a nice night. "We're lucky to be alive," Carlo said.

The man nodded. "All of us. All of the time."

He walked to the curb, where there was a litter basket. He dropped the pack of cigarettes, full save one, into the litter basket. "All of us," he said. "All of the time." He walked away. Carlo watched him go and thought that maybe he was pazzo after all. Or maybe not. Crazy was a hard state to define.

*

This is a slightly Kafka-esque story about an interrogation room in the South American version of Hell. In such stories, the fellow being interrogated usually ends up spilling everything and then being killed (or losing his mind). I wanted to write one with a happier ending, however unreal that might be. And here it is.