LET'S TALK ABOUT FEAR

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Let’s talk, you and I. Let’s talk about fear.

The house is empty as I write this; a cold February rain is falling outside. It’s night. Sometimes when the wind blows the way it’s blowing now, we lose the power. But for now it’s on, and so let’s talk very honestly about fear. Let’s talk very rationally about moving to the rim of madness … and perhaps over the edge.

My name is Stephen King. I am a grown man with a wife and three children. I love them, and I believe that the feeling is reciprocated. My job is writing, and it’s a job I like very much. The stories—Carrie, ‘Salem’s Lot, and The Shining—have been successful enough to allow me to write full-time, which is an agreeable thing to be able to do. At this point in my life I seem to be reasonably healthy. In the last year I have been able to reduce my cigarette habit from the unfiltered brand I had smoked since I was eighteen to a low nicotine and tar brand, and I still hope to be able to quit completely. My family and I live in a pleasant house beside a relatively unpolluted lake in Maine; last fall I awoke one morning and saw a deer standing on the back lawn by the picnic table. We have a good life.

Still … let’s talk about fear. We won’t raise our voices and we won’t scream; we’ll talk rationally, you and I. We’ll talk about the way the good fabric of things sometimes has a way of unraveling with shocking suddenness.

At night, when I go to bed I still am at pains to be sure that my legs are under the blankets after the lights go out. I’m not a child anymore but … I don’t like to sleep with one leg sticking out. Because if a cool hand ever reached out from under the bed and grasped my ankle, I might scream. Yes, I might scream to wake the dead. That sort of thing doesn’t happen, of course, and we all know that. In the stories that follow you will encounter all manner of night creatures; vampires, demon lovers, a thing that lives in the closet, all sorts of other terrors. None of them are real. The thing under my bed waiting to grab my ankle isn’t real. I know that, and I also know that if I’m

careful to keep my foot under the covers, it will never be able to grab my ankle.

Sometimes I speak before groups of people who are interested in writing or in literature, and before the question-and-answer period is over, someone always rises and asks this question: Why do you choose to write about such gruesome subjects?

I usually answer this with another question: Why do you assume that I have a choice?

Writing is a catch-as-catch-can sort of occupation. All of us seem to come equipped with filters on the floors of our minds, and all the filters have differing sizes and meshes. What catches in my filter may run right through yours. What catches in yours may pass through mine, no sweat. All of us seem to have a built-in obligation to sift through the sludge that gets caught in our respective mind-filters, and what we find there usually develops into some sort of sideline. The accountant may also be a photographer. The astronomer may collect coins. The schoolteacher may do gravestone rubbings in charcoal. The sludge caught in the mind's filter, the stuff that refuses to go through, frequently becomes each person's private obsession. In civilized society we have an unspoken agreement to call our obsessions "hobbies."

Sometimes the hobby can become a full-time job. The accountant may discover that he can make enough money to support his family taking pictures; the schoolteacher may become enough of an expert on grave rubbings to go on the lecture circuit. And there are some professions which begin as hobbies and remain hobbies even after the practitioner is able to earn his living by pursuing his hobby; but because "hobby" is such a bumpy, common-sounding little word, we also have an unspoken agreement that we will call our professional hobbies "the arts."

Painting. Sculpture. Composing. Singing. Acting. The playing of a musical instrument. Writing. Enough books have been written on these seven subjects alone to sink a fleet of luxury liners. And the

only thing we seem to be able to agree upon about them is this: that those who practice these arts honestly would continue to practice them even if they were not paid for their efforts; even if their efforts were criticized or even reviled; even on pain of imprisonment or death. To me, that seems to be a pretty fair definition of obsessional behavior. It applies to the plain hobbies as well as the fancy ones we call “the arts”; gun collectors sport bumper stickers reading YOU WILL TAKE MY GUN ONLY WHEN YOU PRY MY COLD DEAD FINGERS FROM IT, and in the suburbs of Boston, housewives who discovered political activism during the busing furor often sported similar stickers reading YOU’LL TAKE ME TO PRISON BEFORE YOU TAKE MY CHILDREN OUT OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD on the back bumpers of their station wagons. Similarly, if coin collecting were outlawed tomorrow, the astronomer very likely wouldn’t turn in his steel pennies and buffalo nickels; he’d wrap them carefully in plastic, sink them to the bottom of his toilet tank, and gloat over them after midnight.

We seem to be wandering away from the subject of fear, but we really haven’t wandered very far. The sludge that catches in the mesh of my drain is often the stuff of fear. My obsession is with the macabre. I didn’t write any of the stories which follow for money, although some of them were sold to magazines before they appeared here and I never once returned a check uncashed. I may be obsessional but I’m not crazy. Yet I repeat: I didn’t write them for money; I wrote them because it occurred to me to write them. I have a marketable obsession. There are madmen and madwomen in padded cells the world over who are not so lucky.

I am not a great artist, but I have always felt impelled to write. So each day I sift the sludge anew, going through the cast-off bits and pieces of observation, of memory, of speculation, trying to make something out of the stuff that didn’t go through the filter and down the drain into the subconscious.

Louis L’Amour, the Western writer, and I might both stand at the edge of a small pond in Colorado, and we both might have an idea at

exactly the same time. We might both feel the urge to sit down and try to work it out in words. His story might be about water rights in a dry season, my story would more likely be about some dreadful, hulking thing rising out of the still waters to carry off sheep … and horses … and finally people. Louis L'Amour's "obsession" centers on the history of the American West; I tend more toward things that slither by starlight. He writes Westerns; I write fearsomes. We're both a little bit nuts.

The arts are obsessional, and obsession is dangerous. It's like a knife in the mind. In some cases—Dylan Thomas comes to mind, and Ross Lockridge and Hart Crane and Sylvia Plath—the knife can turn savagely upon the person wielding it. Art is a localized illness, usually benign—creative people tend to live a long time—sometimes terribly malignant. You use the knife carefully, because you know it doesn't care who it cuts. And if you are wise you sift the sludge carefully … because some of that stuff may not be dead.

After the why do you write that stuff question has been disposed of, the companion question comes up: Why do people read that stuff? What makes it sell? This question carries a hidden assumption with it, and the assumption is that the story about fear, the story about horror, is an unhealthy taste. People who write me often begin by saying, "I suppose you will think I'm strange, but I really liked 'Salem's Lot" or "Probably I'm morbid, but I enjoyed every page of The Shining …"

I think the key to this may lie in a line of movie criticism from Newsweek magazine. The review was of a horror film, not a very good one, and it went something like this: "… a wonderful movie for people who like to slow down and look at car accidents." It's a good snappy line, but when you stop and think about it, it applies to all horror films and stories. The Night of the Living Dead, with its gruesome scenes of human cannibalism and matricide, was certainly a film for people who like to slow down and look at car accidents; and how about that little girl puking pea soup all over the priest in The Exorcist? Bram Stoker's Dracula, often a basis of comparison

for the modern horror story (as it should be; it is the first with unabashedly psycho-Freudian overtones), features a maniac named Renfield who gobbles flies, spiders, and finally a bird. He regurgitates the bird, having eaten it feathers and all. The novel also features the impalement—the ritual penetration, one could say—of a young and lovely female vampire and the murder of a baby and the baby's mother.

The great literature of the supernatural often contains the same "let's slow down and look at the accident" syndrome: Beowulf slaughtering Grendel's mother; the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" dismembering his cataract-stricken benefactor and putting the pieces under the floorboards; the Hobbit Sam's grim battle with Shelob the spider in the final book of Tolkien's Rings trilogy.

There will be some who will object strenuously to this line of thought, saying that Henry James is not showing us a car accident in The Turn of the Screw; they will claim that Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories of the macabre, such as "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil," are also rather more tasteful than Dracula. It's a nonsensical idea. They are still showing us the car accident; the bodies have been removed but we can still see the twisted wreckage and observe the blood on the upholstery. In some ways the delicacy, the lack of melodrama, the low and studied tone of rationality that pervades a story like "The Minister's Black Veil" is even more terrible than Lovecraft's batrachian monstrosities or the auto-da-fe of Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum."

The fact is—and most of us know this in our hearts—that very few of us can forgo an uneasy peek at the wreckage bracketed by police cars and road flares on the turnpike at night. Senior citizens pick up the paper in the morning and immediately turn to the obituary column so they can see who they outlived. All of us are uneasily transfixed for a moment when we hear that a Dan Blocker has died, a Freddie Prinze, a Janis Joplin. We feel terror mixed with an odd sort of glee when we hear Paul Harvey on the radio telling us that a woman walked into a propeller blade during a rain squall at a small country

airport or that a man in a giant industrial blender was vaporized immediately when a co-worker stumbled against the controls. No need to belabor the obvious; life is full of horrors small and large, but because the small ones are the ones we can comprehend, they are the ones that smack home with all the force of mortality.

Our interest in these pocket horrors is undeniable, but so is our own revulsion. The two of them mix uneasily, and the by-product of the mix seems to be guilt … a guilt which seems not much different from the guilt that used to accompany sexual awakening.

It is not my business to tell you not to feel guilty, any more than it is my business to justify my novels or the short stories which follow. But an interesting parallel between sex and fear can be observed. As we become capable of having sexual relationships, our interest in those relationships awakens; the interest, unless perverted somehow, tends naturally toward copulation and the continuance of the species. As we become aware of our own unavoidable termination, we become aware of the fear-emotion. And I think that, as copulation tends toward self-preservation, all fear tends toward a comprehension of the final ending.

There is an old fable about seven blind men who grabbed seven different parts of an elephant. One of them thought he had a snake, one of them thought he had a giant palm leaf, one of them thought he was touching a stone pillar. When they got together, they decided they had an elephant.

Fear is the emotion that makes us blind. How many things are we afraid of? We're afraid to turn off the lights when our hands are wet. We're afraid to stick a knife into the toaster to get the stuck English muffin without unplugging it first. We're afraid of what the doctor may tell us when the physical exam is over; when the airplane suddenly takes a great unearthly lurch in midair. We're afraid that the oil may run out, that the good air will run out, the good water, the good life. When the daughter promised to be in by eleven and it's now quarter past twelve and sleet is spatting against the window like dry sand, we sit and pretend to watch Johnny Carson and look occasionally at

the mute telephone and we feel the emotion that makes us blind, the emotion that makes a stealthy ruin of the thinking process.

The infant is a fearless creature only until the first time the mother isn't there to pop the nipple into his mouth when he cries. The toddler quickly discovers the blunt and painful truths of the slamming door, the hot burner, the fever that goes with the croup or the measles. Children learn fear quickly; they pick it up off the mother or father's face when the parent comes into the bathroom and sees them with the bottle of pills or the safety razor.

Fear makes us blind, and we touch each fear with all the avid curiosity of self-interest, trying to make a whole out of a hundred parts, like the blind men with their elephant.

We sense the shape. Children grasp it easily, forget it, and relearn it as adults. The shape is there, and most of us come to realize what it is sooner or later: it is the shape of a body under a sheet. All our fears add up to one great fear, all our fears are part of that great fear —an arm, a leg, a finger, an ear. We're afraid of the body under the sheet. It's our body. And the great appeal of horror fiction through the ages is that it serves as a rehearsal for our own deaths.

The field has never been highly regarded; for a long time the only friends that Poe and Lovecraft had were the French, who have somehow come to an arrangement with both sex and death, an arrangement that Poe and Lovecraft's fellow Americans certainly had no patience with. The Americans were busy building railroads, and Poe and Lovecraft died broke. Tolkien's Middle-Earth fantasy went kicking around for twenty years before it became an aboveground success, and Kurt Vonnegut, whose books so often deal with the death-rehearsal idea, has faced a steady wind of criticism, much of it mounting to hysterical pitch.

It may be because the horror writer always brings bad news: you're going to die, he says; he's telling you to never mind Oral Roberts and his "something good is going to happen to you" because something bad is also going to happen to you, and it may be cancer

and it may be a stroke, and it may be a car accident, but it's going to happen. And he takes your hand and he enfolds it in his own, and he takes you into the room and he puts your hands on the shape under the sheet… and tells you to touch it here … here … and here …

Of course, the subjects of death and fear are not the horror writer's exclusive province. Plenty of so-called "mainstream" writers have dealt with these themes, and in a variety of different ways—from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment to Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? to Ross MacDonald's Lew Archer stories. Fear has always been big. Death has always been big. They are two of the human constants. But only the writer of horror and the supernatural gives the reader such an opportunity for total identification and catharsis. Those working in the genre with even the faintest understanding of what they are doing know that the entire field of horror and the supernatural is a kind of filter screen between the conscious and the subconscious; horror fiction is like a central subway station in the human psyche between the blue line of what we can safely internalize and the red line of what we need to get rid of in some way or another.

When you read horror, you don't really believe what you read. You don't believe in vampires, werewolves, trucks that suddenly start up and drive themselves. The horrors that we all do believe in are of the sort that Dostoyevsky and Albee and MacDonald write about: hate, alienation, growing lovelessly old, tottering out into a hostile world on the unsteady legs of adolescence. We are, in our real everyday worlds, often like the masks of Comedy and Tragedy, grinning on the outside, grimacing on the inside. There's a central switching point somewhere inside, a transformer, maybe, where the wires leading from those two masks connect. And that is the place where the horror story so often hits home.

The horror-story writer is not so different from the Welsh sin-eater, who was supposed to take upon himself the sins of the dear departed by partaking of the dear departed's food. The tale of monstrosity and terror is a basket loosely packed with phobias; when

the writer passes by, you take one of his imaginary horrors out of the basket and put one of your real ones in—at least for a time.

Back in the 1950s there was a tremendous surge of giant bug movies—Them!, The Beginning of the End, The Deadly Mantis, and so on. Almost without fail, as the movie progressed, we found out that these gigantic, ugly mutants were the results of A-bomb tests in New Mexico or on deserted Pacific atolls (and in the more recent Horror of Party Beach, which might have been subtitled Beach Blanket Armageddon; the culprit was nuclear-reactor waste). Taken together, the big-bug movies form an undeniable pattern, an uneasy gestalt of a whole country's terror of the new age that the Manhattan Project had rung in. Later in the fifties there was a cycle of "teen-age" horror movies, beginning with I Was a Teen-Age Werewolf and culminating with such epics as Teen-Agers from Outer Space and The Blob, in which a beardless Steve McQueen battled a sort of Jell-O mutant with the help of his teen-aged friends. In an age when every weekly magazine contained at least one article on the rising tide of juvenile delinquency, the teen-ager fright films expressed a whole country's uneasiness with the youth revolution even then brewing; when you saw Michael Landon turn into a werewolf in a high-school letter jacket, a connection happened between the fantasy on the screen and your own floating anxieties about the nerd in the hot rod that your daughter was dating. To the teen-agers themselves (I was one of them and speak from experience), the monsters spawned in the leased American-International studios gave them a chance to see someone even uglier than they felt themselves to be; what were a few pimples compared to the shambling thing that used to be a high-school kid in I Was a Teen-Age Frankenstein? This same cycle also expressed the teen-agers' own feeling that they were being unfairly put upon and put down by their elders, that their parents just "did not understand." The movies are formulaic (as so much of horror fiction is, written or filmed), and what the formula expresses most clearly is a whole generation's paranoia—a paranoia no doubt caused in part by all the articles their parents were reading. In the films, some terrible, warty horror is menacing Elmville. The kids know, because the flying saucer landed

near lovers' lane. In the first reel, the warty horror kills an old man in a pickup truck (the old man was unfailingly played by Elisha Cook, Jr.). In the next three reels, the kids try to convince their elders that the warty horror is indeed slinking around. "Get outta here before I lock you all up for violating the curfew!" Elmville's police chief growls just before the monster slithers down Main Street, laying waste in all directions. In the end it is the quick-thinking kids who put an end to the warty horror, and then go off to the local hangout to suck up chocolate malteds and jitterbug to some forgettable tune as the end credits run.

That's three separate opportunities for catharsis in one cycle of movies—not bad for a bunch of low-budget epics that were usually done in under ten days. It didn't happen because the writers and producers and directors of those films wanted it to happen; it happened because the horror tale lives most naturally at that connection point between the conscious and the subconscious, the place where both image and allegory occurs most naturally and with the most devastating effect. There is a direct line of evolution between I Was a Teen-Age Werewolf and Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange and between Teen-Age Monster and Brian De Palma's film Carrie.

Great horror fiction is almost always allegorical; sometimes the allegory is intended, as in Animal Farm and 1984, and sometimes it just happens—J. R. R. Tolkien swore up and down that the Dark Lord of Mordor was not Hitler in fantasy dress, but the theses and term papers to just that effect go on and on … maybe because, as Bob Dylan says, when you got a lot of knives and forks, you gotta cut something.

The works of Edward Albee, of Steinbeck, Camus, Faulkner—they deal with fear and death, sometimes with horror, but usually these mainstream writers deal with it in a more normal, real-life way. Their work is set in the frame of a rational world; they are stories that "could happen." They are on that subway line that runs through the external world. There are other writers—James Joyce, Faulkner

again, poets such as T. S. Eliot and Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton—whose work is set in the land of the symbolic unconsciousness. They are on the subway line running into the internal landscape. But the horror writer is almost always at the terminal joining the two, at least if he is on the mark. When he is at his best we often have that weird sensation of being not quite asleep or awake, when time stretches and skews, when we can hear voices but cannot make out the words or the intent, when the dream seems real and the reality dreamlike.

That is a strange and wonderful terminal. Hill House is there, in that place where the trains run both ways, with its doors that swing sensibly shut; the woman in the room with the yellow wallpaper is there, crawling along the floor with her head pressed against that faint grease mark; the barrow-wights that menaced Frodo and Sam are there; and Pickman's model; the wendigo; Norman Bates and his terrible mother. No waking or dreaming in this terminal, but only the voice of the writer, low and rational, talking about the way the good fabric of things sometimes has a way of unraveling with shocking suddenness. He's telling you that you want to see the car accident, and yes, he's right—you do. There's a dead voice on the phone … something behind the walls of the old house that sounds bigger than a rat … movement at the foot of the cellar stairs. He wants you to see all of those things, and more; he wants you to put your hands on the shape under the sheet. And you want to put your hands there. Yes.

These are some of the things I feel that the horror story does, but I am firmly convinced that it must do one more thing, this above all others: It must tell a tale that holds the reader or the listener spellbound for a little while, lost in a world that never was, never could be. It must be like the wedding guest that stoppeth one of three. All my life as a writer I have been committed to the idea that in fiction the story value holds dominance over every other facet of the writer's craft; characterization, theme, mood, none of those things is anything if the story is dull. And if the story does hold you, all else can be forgiven. My favorite line to that effect came from the pen of Edgar Rice Burroughs, no one's candidate for Great World Writer,

but a man who understood story values completely. On page one of The Land That Time Forgot, the narrator finds a manuscript in a bottle; the rest of the novel is the presentation of that manuscript. The narrator says, “Read one page, and I will be forgotten.” It’s a pledge that Burroughs makes good on—many writers with talents greater than his have not.

In fine, gentle reader, here is a truth that makes the strongest writer gnash his teeth: with the exception of three small groups of people, no one reads a writer’s preface. The exceptions are: one, the writer’s close family (usually his wife and his mother); two, the writer’s accredited representative (and the editorial people and assorted munchkins), whose chief interest is to find out if anyone has been libeled in the course of the writer’s wanderings; and three, those people who have had a hand in helping the writer on his way. These are the people who want to know whether or not the writer’s head has gotten so big that he has managed to forget that he didn’t do it by himself.

Other readers are apt to feel, with perfect justification, that the author’s preface is a gross imposition, a multi-page commercial for himself, even more offensive than the cigarette ads that have proliferated in the center section of the paperback books. Most readers come to see the show, not to watch the stage manager take bows in front of the footlights. Again, with perfect justification.

I’m leaving now. The show is going to start soon. We’re going to go into that room and touch the shape under the sheet. But before I leave, I want to take just two or three more minutes of your time to thank some people from each of the three groups above—and from a fourth. Bear with me as I say a few thank-you’s:

To my wife, Tabitha, my best and most trenchant critic. When she feels the work is good, she says so; when she feels I’ve put my foot in it, she sets me on my ass as kindly and lovingly as possible. To my kids, Naomi, Joe, and Owen, who have been very understanding about their father’s peculiar doings in the downstairs room. And to my mother, who died in 1973, and to whom this book is dedicated.

Her encouragement was steady and unwavering, she always seemed able to find forty or fifty cents for the obligatory stamped, self-addressed return envelope, and no one—including myself—was more pleased than she when I “broke through.”

In that second group, particular thanks are due my editor, William G. Thompson of Doubleday & Company, who has worked with me patiently, who has suffered my daily phone calls with constant good cheer, and who showed kindness to a young writer with no credentials some years ago, and who has stuck with that writer since then.

In the third group are the people who first bought my work: Mr. Robert A. W. Lowndes, who purchased the first two stories I ever sold; Mr. Douglas Allen and Mr. Nye Willden of the Dugent Publishing Corporation, who bought so many of the ones that followed for Cavalier and Gent, back in the scuffling days when the checks sometimes came just in time to avoid what the power companies euphemistically call “an interruption in service”; to Elaine Geiger and Herbert Schnall and Carolyn Stromberg of the New American Library; to Gerard Van der Leun of Penthouse and Harris Deinstfrey of Cosmopolitan. Thanks to all of you.

There’s one final group that I’d like to thank, and that is each and every reader who ever unlimbered his or her wallet to buy something that I wrote. In a great many ways, this is your book because it sure never would have happened without you. So thanks.

Where I am, it’s still dark and raining. We’ve got a fine night for it. There’s something I want to show you, something I want you to touch. It’s in a room not far from here—in fact, it’s almost as close as the next page.

Shall we go?

Bridgton, Maine

February 27, 1977