



stephen  
**KING**

Morality

**MORALITY**

**Stephen King**

# 1

Chad knew something was up as soon as he walked in. Nora was home already. Her hours were from eleven to five, six days a week; the way it usually worked, he got home from school at four and had dinner on when she came in around six.

She was sitting on the fire escape, where he went to smoke, and she had some paperwork in her hands. He looked at the refrigerator and saw that the e-mail printout Was gone from beneath the magnet that had been holding it in place for almost four months.,

“Hey, you,” she said. “Come on out here.’ She paused. “Bring your butts, if you want.”

He was down to just a pack a week, but that didn’t make her like his habit any better. The health issue was part of it, but the expense was an even bigger part. Every cigarette was forty cents up in smoke.

He climbed out and sat down bewildered’. She had changed into jeans and one of her old blouses, so she had been home for a while. Stranger and stranger.

They looked out over their little bit of the city for a while without speaking. He kissed her and she smiled in an absent way. She had the agent’s e-mail; she also had the file folder with THE RED AND THE BLACK written on it in big capitals. His little joke, but not so funny. The file contained their financial stuff—bank and credit-card statements, utility bills, insurance premiums-and the bottom line was all red. It was an American story these days: just not enough. Two years ago they’d talked about having a kid. What they talked about now was getting out from under and maybe enough ahead to leave the city without a bunch of creditors snapping at their heels. Move north to New England. But not yet. At least here they were working.

“How was school?” she asked.

“Fine.”

Actually, the job was a plum. But after Anita Biderman got back from maternity leave, who knew? Probably not another job at P. S. 321. He was high on the list of subs, but that didn't mean anything if the regular teaching roster was all present and accounted for. Sometimes, lying in bed and waiting for sleep to overtake him, he thought of the little boy in the D. H. Lawrence story who rode his rocking horse Crying, “There must be more money!”

“You're home early,” he said. “Don't tell me Winnie died.”

She looked startled, then smiled. But they had been together for ten years, married for the last six, and Chad knew when something was wrong.

“Nora?”

“He sent me home early. To think. I've got a lot to think about. I'm ”  
She shook her head.

He took her by the shoulder and turned her to him. “You're what, Norrie? Is everything okay?”

“Go on, light up. Smoking lamp's lit.”

“Tell me what's going on.”

She had been cut from the staff of Congress Memorial Hospital two years ago during a “reorganization.” Luckily for the Chad-and-Nora Corporation, she had landed on her feet. Getting the home-nursing job had been a coup: one patient, a retired minister recovering from a stroke, thirty-six hours a week, very decent wages. She made more than he did, and by a good bit. The two incomes were almost enough to live on. At least until Anita Biderman came back.

“First, let's talk about this.” She held up the agent's e-mail. “How sure are you?”

“That I can do the work? Pretty sure. Almost positive. I mean, if I had the time. About the rest ” He shrugged. “It’s right there in black and white—no guarantees.”

With the hiring freeze currently in effect in the city’s schools, subbing was the best Chad could do. He was on every list in the system, but there was no full-time position in his immediate future. Nor would the money be much better even if such a position opened up—just more reliable. As a sub, he sometimes spent weeks on the bench.

Out of desperation and a need to fill up the empty hours when Nora was tending to the Reverend Winston, Chad had started a book he called *Living with the Animals: The Life of a Substitute Teacher in Four City Schools*. Words did not come easily to him, and on some days they did not come at all, but by the time he was called in to St. Saviour to teach second grade (Mr. Cardelli had broken a leg in a car accident), he had finished three chapters. Nora received the pages with a troubled smile. No woman wants the job of telling the man in her life that he’s been wasting his time.

He hadn’t been. The stories he told of the substitute-teaching life were sweet, funny, and often moving—much more interesting than anything she’d heard over dinner or while they were lying in bed together.

He finally found an agent who would at least look at the eighty pages he had managed to wring out of his old and limping Dell laptop. The agent’s name had a circusy feel: Edward Ringling. His response to Chad’s pages was long on praise and short on promise. “I might be able to get you a book contract based on this and an outline of the rest,” Ringling had written, “but it would be a very small contract, likely a good deal less than you currently make as a teacher. What I suggest is that you finish another seven or eight chapters, possibly even the whole book. Then I might be able to take it to auction and get you a much better deal.”

It made sense, Chad supposed, if you were overseeing the literary world from a comfy office in Manhattan. Not so much if you were

hopscotching all over the boroughs, teaching a week here and three days there, trying to keep ahead of the bills. Ringling's letter had come in May. Now it was September, and although Chad had had a relatively good few months teaching summer school (God bless the dummies, he sometimes thought), he hadn't added a single page to the manuscript. It wasn't laziness; teaching, even when it was just subbing, was like having a pair of jumper cables attached to some critical part of your brain.

"How long would it take to finish it?" Nora asked. "If you were writing full-time?"

He drew out his cigarettes and lit one. He felt a strong urge to give an optimistic answer but overcame it. Whatever was going on with her, she deserved the truth.

"Eight months at least."

"And how much money do you think it would mean if Mr. Ringling held an auction?"

On this Chad had done his homework. "I'd guess the advance could be in the neighborhood of \$100,000."

A fresh start in Vermont, that was the plan. That was what they talked about in bed. A small town, maybe up in the Northeast Kingdom. She could catch on at the local hospital or get another private; he could land a full-time teaching position. Or just maybe write another book.

"Nora, what's this about?"

"I'm afraid to tell you, but I will. Crazy or not, I will. Because the number Winnie mentioned was bigger than \$100,000. Only one thing: I'm not quitting my job. He said I could keep it no matter what we decided, and we need that job."

He reached for the aluminum ashtray he kept tucked under the windowsill and butted his cigarette in it. Then he took her hand. "Tell me."

He listened with amazement but not disbelief. He sort of wished he could disbelieve it, but he did not.

What had she actually known about Reverend George Winston? That he was a lifelong bachelor, that three years into his retirement from the Second Presbyterian Church of Park Slope (where he was still listed on the church slate as Pastor Emeritus), he had suffered a stroke. That the stroke had left him partially paralyzed on the right side and in need of home care. Not much more.

He could now walk to the bathroom (and, on good days, to his front-porch rocker) with the help of a plastic brace that kept his bad knee from buckling. And he could talk understandably again, although he still sometimes suffered from what Nora called "sleepy tongue." Nora had previous experience with stroke victims (it was what had clinched the job), and she had a great appreciation for how far he had come in a short time.

In addition to such nursely duties as giving him his pills and monitoring his blood pressure, she worked with him as a physical therapist. She was also a masseuse and occasionally—when he had letters to write—a secretary. She ran errands and sometimes read to him. And she wasn't above light housekeeping on days when Mrs. Granger did not come in. On those days, she made sandwiches or omelets for lunch, and she supposed it was over those lunches that he had drawn out the details of her own life—and had done it without Nora ever realizing what was going on.

"The one thing I remember saying," she told Chad, "and probably only because he mentioned it today, was that we weren't living in abject poverty or even in discomfort. It was the fear of those things that got us down."

Chad smiled at that.

This morning Winnie had refused both the sponge bath and the massage. Instead, he had asked her to put on his brace and help him into his study, which was a relatively long walk for him, certainly farther than the porch rocker. He made it and fell into the chair behind his desk, red-faced and panting. He drained the glass of orange juice she gave him in a single go.

“Thank you, Nora. I want to talk to you now. Very seriously.”

He must have sensed her apprehension, because he smiled and made a waving-off gesture. “It’s not about your job. You’ll have that no matter what. If you want it. If not, I’ll see that you have a reference that can’t be beat.”

“You’re making me nervous, Winnie,” she said.

“How would you like to make \$200,000?”

She gawked. All around them, high shelves of smart books frowned down. The noises from the street were muffled. They might have been in another country. A quieter country than Brooklyn.

“If you think this is about sex—it occurred to me that you might—I assure you it is not. At least I don’t think so; if one looks below the surface, and if one has read Freud, I suppose any aberrant act maybe said to have a sexual basis. I don’t know myself. I haven’t studied Freud since seminary, and even then my reading was cursory. Freud offended me. He seemed to feel that any suggestion of depth in human nature was an illusion. He seemed to be saying, What you think is a pool is a puddle. I beg to differ. Human nature has no bottom. It is as deep and mysterious as the mind of God.”

“With all respect, I’m not sure I believe in God. And I’m not sure this is a proposal I want to hear.”

“But if you don’t listen, you won’t know. And you’ll always wonder.”



She was unsure what to do or say. What she thought was, That desk he's sitting behind must have cost thousands. It was the first time she had really thought of him in connection with money.

"What I'm offering should be enough to pay off all your outstanding bills, enough to enable your husband to finish his book-enough, perhaps, to start a new life in Vermont?"

"Yes."

"Cash, Nora. No need to get the IRS involved." He had long features and white woolly hair. A sheeplike face, she had always thought before today. "Cash causes no problems if it's fed slowly into the stream of one's accounts. Also, once your husband's book is sold and you're established in New England, we need never see each other again." He paused. "Although we could. That part would be up to you. And please relax. You're sitting bolt upright."

It was the thought of \$200,000 that kept her in the room. Two hundred thousand in cash. She found she could actually see it: bills stuffed into a padded manila envelope. Or perhaps it would take two envelopes to hold that much.

"Let me talk for a bit," he said. "I haven't really done much of that, have I? Mostly I've listened. It's your turn to listen now, Nora. Will you do that?"

"I suppose." She was very curious. She supposed anybody would be. "Who do you want me to kill?"

It was a joke, but as soon as it was out of her mouth, she was afraid it might be true. Because it didn't sound like a joke. No more than the eyes in his long sheep's face looked like sheep's eyes.

Winnie laughed. Then he said, "Not murder, my dear. We won't need to go that far."

He talked then as he never had before. To anyone, probably.

“I grew up wealthy on Long Island—my father was successful in the market. He survived my mother by only five years, and when he passed on, I inherited a great deal of money, mostly in bonds and solid stocks. Over the years since, I have converted a small percentage of that to cash, a bit at a time. Not a nest egg, because I’ve never needed one, but what I’d call a wish egg. It’s in a Manhattan safe-deposit box, and it’s that cash that I’m offering you, Nora. It may actually be closer to \$240,000, but we’ll agree, shall we, not to quibble over a dollar here and a dollar there?”

“My life has been one—I say it with neither pride nor shame—of unremarkable service. I have led my church in helping the poor, both in countries far from here and in this community. The AA drop-in center up the street was my idea, and it’s helped hundreds of suffering alcoholics and addicts. I’ve comforted the sick and buried the dead. More cheerfully, I’ve presided over more than a thousand weddings, and inaugurated a scholarship fund that has sent many boys and girls to colleges they could not otherwise have afforded.

“I have only one regret: In all my years, I’ve never committed one of the sins I’ve spent a lifetime warning my various flocks about. I am not a lustful man, and since I’ve never been married, I’ve never had the opportunity to commit adultery. I’m not gluttonous by nature, and although I like nice things, I’ve never been greedy or covetous. Why would I be, when my father left me \$15 million? I’ve worked hard, keep my temper, envy no one—except perhaps Mother Teresa—and have little pride of possessions or position.

“I’m not claiming I’m without sin. Not at all. Those who can say (and I suppose there are a few) that they have never sinned in deed or word can hardly say they’ve never sinned in thought, can they? The church covers every loophole. We hold out heaven, then make people understand they have no hope of achieving it without our help. Because no one is without sin, and the wages of sin is death.

“I suppose this makes me sound like an unbeliever, but raised as I was, unbelief is as impossible for me as levitation. Yet I understand the Cozening nature of the bargain and the psychological tricks

believers use to ensure the prosperity of those beliefs. The pope's fancy hat was not conferred on him by God but by men and women paying theological blackmail money.

"I can see you fidgeting, so I'll come to the point. I want to commit a major sin before I die. A sin not of thought or word but of deed. This was on my mind—increasingly on my mind-before my stroke, but I thought it a frenzy that would pass. Now I see that it will not, because the idea has been with me more than ever during the last three years. But how great a sin can an old man stuck in a wheelchair commit, I asked myself? Then, listening to you talk about your husband's book and your financial situation, it occurred to me that I could sin by proxy. In fact, I could double my sin quotient, as it were, by making you my accessory."

She spoke from a dry mouth: "I believe in wrongdoing, Winnie, but I don't believe in sin."

He smiled, it was a benevolent smile. Also unpleasant: sheep's lips, wolf's teeth. "That's fine. But sin believes in you. And do you know what doubles sin?"

"No. I don't go to church."

"What doubles it is saying to yourself, I will do this because I know I can pray for forgiveness once it's done. To say to yourself that you can have your cake and eat it, too. I want to know what being that deep in sin is like. I don't want to wallow—I want to dive in over my head."

"And take me with you!" she said with real indignation.

"But you don't believe in sin, Nora, you just said so. From your standpoint, all I want is for you to get a little dirty. And risk arrest, I suppose, although the risk should be minor: For these things, I will pay you \$200,000."

Her face and hands felt as if she had just come in from a long walk in the cold. She would not do it, of course. What she would do was walk out of this house and get some fresh air. She wouldn't quit, or at least not immediately, because she needed the job, but she would walk out. And if he fired her for deserting her post, let him. But first, she wanted to hear the rest.

"What is it you want me to do?"

Chad had lit another cigarette. "What was it?"

She motioned with her fingers. "Give me a drag on that."

"Norrie, you haven't smoked a cigarette in five—"

"Give me a drag, I said."

He passed the cigarette to her. She dragged deep, coughed out the smoke, then told him the rest.

She lay awake late into the night, sure he was sleeping, and why not? The decision had been made. She would tell Winnie no and never mention the idea again. Decision made; sleep follows.

Still, she wasn't entirely surprised when he turned to her and said, "I can't stop thinking about it."

Nor could she. "I'd do it, you know. For us. If "

Now they were face-to-face, inches apart. Close enough to taste each other's breath. It was two o'clock in the morning: the hour of conspiracy if there ever was one, she thought.

"If what?"

"If I didn't think it would taint our lives. Some stains don't come out."

"It's a moot question, Nor. We've decided. You play Sarah Palin and tell him thanks but no thanks for that bridge to nowhere. I'll find a

way to finish the book without his psycho idea of a grant-in-aid.”

“When? On your next unpaid leave? I don’t think so.”

“It’s decided, He’s nuts. The end.” He rolled away from her. Silence descended. Upstairs, Mrs. Reston—whose picture belonged in the dictionary next to insomnia—walked back and forth. Somewhere, maybe in deepest, darkest Gowanus, a siren wailed.

Fifteen minutes went by before Chad spoke to the end table and the digital clock, which now read 2:17A. “Also, we’d have to trust him for the money, and you can’t trust a man whose one remaining ambition in life is to commit a sin.”

“But I do trust him,” she said. “It’s myself I don’t trust. Go to sleep, Chad. This subject is closed.”

“Right back atcha,” he said.

The clock read 2:26A when she said, “It could be done. I’m sure of that much. I could change my hair color. Wear a hat. Dark glasses, of course. And there would have to be an escape route.”

“Are you seriously—”

“I don’t know. I’d have to work almost three years to make \$200,000, and after the government and the banks wet their beaks, there’d be next to nothing left. We know how that works.”

She was quiet for a minute, looking at the ceiling above which Mrs. Reston trudged her slow miles.

“And what if you got hit by a car? Or I turned up with an ovarian cyst?”

“Our coverage is okay.”

“That’s what everyone says, but what everyone knows is they fuck you at the drive-through. With this, we could be sure. That’s what I

keep thinking about. Sure!”

“Two hundred thousand dollars makes my financial hopes for the book seem kind of small, though, don’t you think? Why even bother?”

“Because this would be a onetime thing. And the book would be clean.”

“Clean? You think this would make the book clean?” He rolled over and faced her. Part of him had grown hard, so perhaps part of this was about sex. Who knew about such things? Who wanted to?

“Do you think I’ll ever get another job like the one with Winnie?”

He said nothing to this, which was an answer in itself.

“And I’m not getting any younger. I’ll be thirty-six in December. You’ll take me to dinner for my birthday, and a week later

I’ll get my real present: a past-due notice for the car-loan payment.”

“Are you blaming me for—”

“No. I’m not even blaming the system. Blame is counterproductive. And I told Winnie the truth: I don’t believe in sin. But I also don’t want to go to jail.” She felt tears growing in her eyes. “I don’t want to hurt anyone, either. Especially not a—”

“You’re not going to.”

He started to turn over, but she grabbed his shoulder.

“If we did it—if I did it—we could never talk about it afterward. Not one single time.”

“No.”

She reached for him. In marriages, deals were sealed with more than a handshake. This they both knew.

The clock read 2:58A. Outside and below, a street sweeper went hushing by. He was drifting to sleep when she said, "Do you know anyone with a video camera? Because he wants—"

"Charlie Green has one."

After that, silence. Except for Mrs. Reston, still walking slowly back and forth above them. Mrs. Reston patiently walking off all those night miles. Then Nora fell asleep.

Her mother had never been a churchgoer, but Nora had attended Vacation Bible School every summer and enjoyed it. There were games and songs and flannel-board stories. She found herself remembering one of the stories the next day, in Winnie's study.

"I wouldn't have to really hurt the you know, the person to get the money?" she asked him. "I want to be very clear about that."

"No, but I expect to see blood flow. Let me be clear about that. I want you to use your fist, but a cut lip or bloody nose will be quite sufficient."

For the story, the teacher put a mountain on the flannel board. Then Jesus. Then the devil. The teacher said the devil had taken Jesus up on the mountain and showed him all the cities of the earth. You can have everything in those cities, the devil said. Every treasure. All you have to do is fall down and worship me. But Jesus was a stand-up guy. Jesus had said thanks but no thanks.

"Sin," she mused. "That's what's on your mind."

"Sin for its own sake. Deliberately planned and executed. Do you find the idea exciting?"

"No," she said, looking up at the frowning bookshelves.

Winnie let some time pass, then said, “Well?”

“If I got caught, would I still get the money?”

“If you lived up to your part of the agreement—and didn’t implicate me, of course—you certainly would. And even if you were caught, the very worst to come of it would be probation.”

“Plus court-ordered psychiatric evaluation,” she said. “Which I probably need for even considering this.”

Winnie said, “If you continue the way you are, dear, you’ll need a marriage counselor, at the very least. In my time in the ministry, I counseled many partners, and while money worries weren’t always the root cause of their problems, that’s what it was in most cases. And that’s all it was.”

“Thank you for the benefit of your experience, Winnie.”

He said nothing to this.

“You’re crazy, you know.”

He still said nothing.

She looked at the books some more. Most of them were on religion. Finally she turned her eyes back to his. “If I do this and you fuck me, I’ll make you sorry.”

He showed no discomfiture at her choice of language. “I’ll honor my commitment. You may be sure of that.”

“You speak almost perfectly now. Not even a lisp, unless you’re tired.”

He shrugged. “Being with me has trained your ear. It’s like learning to understand a new language, I suppose.”



She returned her eyes to the books. One of them was called *The Problem of Good and Evil*. Another was titled *The Basis of Morality*. It was a thick one. In the hall, an old regulator clock was ticking steadily. Finally he said it again: “Well?”

The regulator ticked. Without looking at him, she said, “If you say ‘well’ again, I’ll walk out of here.”

He didn’t say “well” or anything else. She looked down at her hands, twisting in her lap. The most appalling thing: Part of her was still curious. Not about what he wanted—that cat was out of the bag—but about what she wanted.

At last she looked up and gave her answer.

“Excellent,” he said.

With the decision made, neither Chad nor Nora wanted the actual act hanging over their heads; it cast too big a shadow. They chose Forest Park in Queens. Chad borrowed Charlie Green’s video camera and learned how to use it. They went to the park twice beforehand (on rainy days when it was mostly empty), and Chad videotaped the area they had decided on. They had a lot of sex during that period—nervous sex, fumbling sex, but usually good sex. Hot, at least. Nora found her other major appetites dwindling. In the ten days between her agreement and the morning when she executed her part of the bargain, she lost nine pounds. Chad said she was starting to look like a teenager again.

On a sunny day in early October, Chad parked their old Ford on Myrtle Avenue. Nora sat beside him, her hair dyed red and hanging to her shoulders, looking very un-Nora-like in a long skirt and an ugly brown smock top. She was wearing sunglasses and a Mets cap. She seemed calm enough, but when he reached out to touch her, she twitched away.

“Nor, c’mon—”

“Have you got cab fare?”

“Yes.”

“And a bag to put the videocam in?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then give me the car keys. I’ll see you back at the apartment.”

“Are you sure you’ll be able to drive? Because the reaction to something like this—”

“I’ll be fine. Give me the keys. Wait here fifteen minutes. If there’s something wrong if anything even feels wrong, I’ll come back. If I don’t, you go to the spot we picked out. Do you remember it?”

“Of course I remember it!”

She smiled—showed her teeth and dimples at least. “That’s the spirit,” she said, and was gone.

It was an excruciatingly long fifteen minutes, but Chad waited through every one of them. Kids wearing clamshell helmets pooted past on bikes. Women strolled in pairs, many with shopping bags. He saw an old lady laboriously crossing the avenue, and for a moment he thought it was Mrs. Reston, but when she passed by, he saw that it wasn’t. This woman was much older than Mrs. Reston.

When the fifteen minutes were almost up, it occurred to him—in a sane and rational way—that he could put a stop to this by driving away. The extra ignition key was hidden beneath the spare tire. In the park, Nora would look around and not see him. She would be the one to take the cab back to Brooklyn. And when she got there, she would thank him. She would say, You saved me from myself.

After that? Take a month off. No substitute teaching. He would turn all his resources to finishing the book. Throw his cap over the windmill.

Instead, he got out and walked to the park with Charlie Green's video camera in his hand. The paper bag that would hold it afterward was stuffed in the pocket of his windbreaker. He checked three times to make sure the camera's green power light was glowing. How terrible it would be to go through all this and discover he'd never turned on the camera. Or that he'd left the lens cap on.

Nora was sitting on a park bench. When she saw him, she brushed her hair back from the left side of her face. That was the signal: It Was on.

Behind her was a playground—swings, a push merry-go-round, teeter-totters, bouncy horses on springs, that sort of thing. At this hour, there were only a few kids playing. The moms were in a group on the far side, talking and laughing, not really paying much attention to the kids.

“Nora got up from the bench.

Two hundred thousand dollars, he thought, and raised the camera to his eye. Now that it was on, he felt calm.

## 2

Back at their building, Chad raced up the stairs. He felt sure that she wouldn't be there. He had seen her go skimming away at a full-out run, and the mothers had barely given her a look—they were converging on the child she had chosen, a boy of perhaps four—but he was still sure she wouldn't be there and that he would get a call telling him that his wife was at the police station, where she had collapsed and told everything, including his part in it. Worse, Winnie's part in it, thus ensuring that it had all been for nothing.

His hand was shaking so badly that he couldn't get the key into the slot; it went chattering madly around the key plate without even coming close. He was in the act of putting down the paper bag (now badly crumpled) with the videocam inside it so he could use his left hand to steady his right when the door opened.

Nora was now wearing cut-off jeans and a shell top, the clothes she'd had on beneath the long skirt and smock. The plan had been for her to change in the car before driving away. She said she could do it like lightning, and it seemed she'd been right.

He threw his arms around her and hugged her so tightly, he heard the thump as she came against him—not exactly a romantic embrace.

Nora bore this for a moment, then said, "Get out of the hall." And as soon as the door to the outside world was closed, she said, "Did you get it? Tell me you did. I've been here for almost half an hour going nuts."

"I was worried, too." He shoved his hair off his forehead, where the skin felt hot and feverish. "Norrie, I was scared to death."

She snatched the bag from his hands, peered inside, then glared at him. She had ditched the sunglasses and her blue eyes burned. "Tell me you got it."

“Yeah. That is, I think so. I must have. I haven’t looked yet.” The glare got hotter. “You better have. You better have. The time I haven’t been pacing around, I’ve been on the toilet. I keep having cramps-” She went to the window and looked out. He joined her, afraid she knew something he didn’t. But there were only the usual pedestrians going back and forth.

She turned to him again and this time grabbed his arms. Her palms were dead cold. “Is he all right? The kid? Did you see if he was all right?”

“He’s fine,” Chad said.

“Are you lying?” She was shouting. “You better not be!” “Fine, I said. Standing up even before the mothers got to him. Bawling his head off, but I got worse at that kid’s age when I was clopped in the back of the head by a swing. I had to go to the emergency room and have five sti—”

“I hit him much harder than I meant to. I was so afraid that if I pulled the punch if Winnie saw I pulled it he wouldn’t pay. And the adrenaline Christ! It’s a wonder I didn’t tear that poor kid’s head right off! Why did I ever do it?” But she wasn’t crying, and she didn’t look remorseful. She looked furious. “Why did you let me?”

“I never—”

“You really saw him getting up? Because I hit him much harder than I ” She wheeled away from him, went to the wall, knocked her forehead against it, then turned back. “I walked into a playground and I punched a four-year-old child square in the mouth! For money!”

He had an inspiration. “I think it’s on the tape. The kid getting up, I mean. You’ll see for yourself.”

She flew back across the room. “Put it on! I want to see!”

Chad found the cable Charlie had given him. Then, after a little fumbling, he played the tape on the TV. He had indeed recorded the kid getting to his feet again just before shutting the thing off and walking away. The kid looked bewildered, and of course he was crying, but otherwise he seemed fine. His lips were bleeding quite a lot, but his nose only a little. Chad thought he might have gotten the bloody nose when he fell down.

No worse than any minor playground accident, he thought. Thousands of them happen every day.

“See?” he asked her. “He’s fi—”

“Run it again.”

He did. And when she asked him to run it a third time, and a fourth, and a fifth, he did that, too. At some point, he became aware that she was no longer watching to see the kid get up. Neither was he. They were watching him go down. And the punch. The punch delivered by the crazy red-haired bitch in the sunglasses. The one who walked up and did her business and then took off with wings on her sneakers.

She said, “I think I knocked out one of his teeth.”

He shrugged. “Good news for the Tooth Fairy.”

After the fifth viewing, she said, “I want to get the red out of my hair. I hate it.”

“Okay—”

“But first, take me in the bedroom. Don’t talk about it, either. Just do it.”

She kept telling him to go harder, almost belting him with her upthrusting hips, as if she wanted to buck him off. But she wasn’t getting there.

“Hit me,” she said.

He slapped her. He was beyond rationality.

“You can do better than that. Fucking hit me!”

He hit her harder. Her lower lip split open. She smeared her fingers through the blood. While she was doing it she came.

“Show it to me,” Winnie said. This was the next day. They were in his study.

“Show me the money.” A famous line. She just couldn’t remember from where.

“After I see the video.”

The camera was still in the crumpled bag. She took it out, along with the cable. He had a little TV in the study, and she connected the cable to it. She pushed play, and they looked at the woman in the Mets cap sitting on the park bench. Behind her, a few children were playing. Behind them, mommies were talking mommy shit: body wraps, plays they had seen or were going to see, the new car, the next vacation. Blah-blah-blah.

The woman got up from the bench. The camera zoomed jerkily in. The picture shivered a bit, then steadied.

Nora hit the pause button. This was Chad’s idea, and she had agreed to it. She trusted Winnie, but only so far.

“The money.”

Winnie took a key from the pocket of the cardigan sweater he was wearing. He used it to open the center drawer of his desk, switching it to his left hand when the partially paralyzed right one wouldn’t do his bidding.

It wasn't an envelope after all. It was a medium-sized Federal Express box. She looked inside and saw bundled hundreds, each bundle secured with a rubber band.

He said, "It's all there, plus some extra."

"All right. Look at what you bought. All you have to do is push play. I'll be in the kitchen."

"Don't you want to watch it with me?"

"No."

"Nora? You appear to have had a small accident yourself." He tapped the corner of his mouth, the side that still turned down slightly.

Had she thought he had a sheep's face? How stupid of her. How unseeing. Nor was it a wolf's face, not really. It was somewhere in between. A dog's face maybe. The kind of dog that would bite and then run.

"I ran into a door," she said.

"I see."

"All right, I'll watch it with you," she said, and sat down. She pushed play herself.

They watched the video twice, in complete silence. The running time was about thirty seconds. That amounted to about \$6,600 a second. Nora had done the math.

After the second time, he pushed stop. She showed him how to eject the small cassette. "This is yours. The camera has to go back to the guy my husband borrowed it from."

"I understand." His eyes were bright. "I shall have Mrs. Granger buy me another camera for future viewings. Or perhaps that's an errand



you'd care to run?" "Not me. We're done."

"Ah." He didn't look surprised. "All right. But if I may make a suggestion you may want to get another job. So no one thinks it odd your bills begin getting paid off at a faster clip. It's your welfare I'm thinking of, dear."

"I'm sure." She unplugged the cable and put it back in the bag with the camera.

"And I wouldn't leave for Vermont too soon."

"I don't need your advice. I feel dirty and you're the reason why."

"But you won't get caught and no one will ever know." The right side of his mouth was drawn down, the left side lifted in what could have been a smile. The result was a serpentine below his beak of a nose. His speech was very clear that day. She would remember that and ponder it. As if what he called sin had turned out to be therapy. "And Nora is feeling dirty always a bad thing?"

She had no idea how to answer this.

"I only ask," he said, "because the second time you ran the tape, I watched you instead of it."

She picked up the bag with Charlie Green's videocam inside and walked to the door. "Have a nice life, Winnie. Make sure you get an actual therapist as well as a nurse next time. You can afford it. And take care of that tape. For both our sakes."

"You're unidentifiable on it, dear. And even if you weren't, would anyone care?" He shrugged. "It doesn't depict a rape or murder, after all."

She stood in the doorway, wanting to be gone but curious. Still curious.

"Winnie, how will you square this with your God?"

He chuckled. "If a sinner like Simon Peter could go on to found the Catholic Church, I expect I'll be fine."

"Did Simon Peter keep the videotape to watch on cold winter evenings?"

This finally silenced him, and Nora left before he could find his voice again. It was a small victory, but one she grasped eagerly.

A week later, he called the apartment and told her she was welcome to come back, at least until she and Chad left for Vermont.

"I miss you, Nora."

She said nothing.

His voice dropped. "We could watch the tape again. Wouldn't you like to do that? Wouldn't you like to see it again, at least once?"

"No," she said, and hung up. She started toward the kitchen to make tea, but then a wave of faintness came over her. She sat down in the corner of the living room and bent her head to her upraised knees. She waited for the faintness to pass. Eventually it did.

She got a job taking care of Mrs. Reston. It was only twenty hours a week, and the pay was nothing like what she had been making as Reverend Winston's employee, but money was no longer the issue, and the commute was easy: one flight of stairs. Best of all, Mrs. Reston, who suffered from diabetes and mild cardiac problems, was a featherbrained sweetie. Sometimes, however—especially during her endless monologues concerning her late husband Nora's hand itched to reach out and slap her.

Chad kept his name on the sub list but cut back on his hours. He set aside most of those newfound hours to work on Living with the Animals. The pages began to mount up.

Once or twice he asked himself if the new pages were as good—as lively—as the work he had done before that day with the video camera, and he told himself that the question had only occurred to him because some old and false notion of retribution was lodged in his mind. Like a kernel of popcorn between two back teeth.

Twelve days after the day in the park, there was a knock at the apartment door. When Nora opened it, a policeman was standing there.

“Yes?” she asked, and thought calmly: I will confess everything. And after the authorities have done to me whatever they do, I’ll go to that boy’s mother and stick out my face and say, “Hit me with your best shot, Mama. You’ll be doing us both a favor.”

He looked at his notebook. “If this is 3-C, that makes you Mrs. Callahan.”

“Yes, I’m Mrs. Callahan.”

“Ma’am, I’m here on a canvas. Because a mugger has been working the neighborhood. He hurt an elderly gentleman quite badly last night. Can I show you some pictures?”

“Of course, but I haven’t seen—”

“I’m sure.” He grinned to show her how silly it all was. She was thinking it was a very handsome grin. She Was also thinking this could be a pretext. Getting a good look at the suspect. Sizing her up.

But when she had looked at eight pictures and recognized none of the men, he nodded and put them away. “Should I check back with your husband?”

“Up to you, but he wouldn’t notice a two-headed man unless they bumped into each other on the street.” She felt giddy with relief, but part of her continued to wonder if there was some other agenda at work here. She was a mugger, after all.

“I heard that. But if you see anyone in the neighborhood who looks like any of the pictures I showed you “

“I’ll call you first ” She looked at his name tag. “Officer Abromowitz.”

He smiled. “You do that,” he said.

That night, in bed.

“Hit me!” As though it were not lovemaking but some nightmare blackjack game.

“No.”

She was on top, which made him easy to reach. The sound of her palm on the side of his face was like the report of an air gun.

Chad hit her back without thinking. She began to cry. He did her. Outside, someone’s car alarm went off.

They went to Vermont in January. They went on the train. It was lovely, like a picture postcard. They saw a house they both liked about twenty miles outside of Montpelier. It was only the third one they’d looked at.

The real estate agent’s name was Jody Enders. She was very pleasant, but she kept looking at Nora’s right eye. Finally Nora said, with an embarrassed little laugh, “I slipped on a patch of ice while I was getting into a taxi. You should have seen me last week. I looked like a spouse-abuse ad.”

“I can hardly see it,” Jody Enders said. Then, shyly: “You’re very pretty.”

Chad put his arm around Nora’s shoulders. “I think so, too.”

“What do you do for a living, Mr. Callahan?”

“I’m a writer,” he said.

They made a down payment on the house. On the loan agreement, Nora checked OWNER FINANCED. In the DETAILS box, she wrote simply: Savings.

One day in February, while they were packing for the move, Chad went into Manhattan to see a movie at the Angelika and have dinner with his agent. Officer Abromowitz had given Nora his card. She called him. He came over and they fucked in the mostly empty bedroom. It was good, but it would have been better if she could have persuaded him to hit her. She asked, but he wouldn't.

"What kind of crazy lady are you?" he asked in that voice people use when they mean I'm joking but not really.

"I don't know," Nora said. "I'm still finding out. We live and learn, Officer Abromowitz. Don't we?"

They were scheduled to make the move to Vermont on February 29. The day before—what would have been the last day of the month in an ordinary year—the telephone rang. It was Mrs. Granger, Pastor Emeritus Winston's housekeeper. As soon as Nora registered the woman's hushed tone, she knew why she had called, and her first thought was What did you do with the tape, you bastard?

"The obituary will say kidney failure," Mrs. Granger said in her hushed someone's-dead voice, "but I was in his bathroom. The medicine bottles were all out, and too many of the pills were gone. I think he committed suicide."

"Probably not," Nora said. She spoke in her calmest, surest, most nursely manner. "What's more likely is that he became confused about how many he'd taken. He may have even had another stroke. A small one."

"Do you really think so?"

"Oh, yes," Nora said, and had to restrain herself from asking if Mrs. Granger had seen a new video camera around anywhere. Hooked

up to Winnie's TV most likely. It would be insane to ask such a question. She almost did anyway.

That night, in bed. Their last Brooklyn night.

"You need to stop worrying," Chad said. "If someone finds that tape, they probably won't look at it. And if they do, the chance they'd connect it with you is so small as to be infinitesimal. Besides, the kid's probably forgotten it by now. The mother, too."

"The mother was there when a crazy lady assaulted her son and then ran away," Nora said. "She'll never forget it."

"All right," he said in an equable tone that made her want to hike her knee straight into his balls.

"Maybe I ought to go over and help Mrs. Granger neaten the place up."

He looked at her as if she were mad, then rolled away from her.

"Don't do that," she said. "C'mon, Chad."

"No," he said.

"What do you mean, no? Why?"

"Because I know what you think of."

She hit him. It was a pretty good thump on the back of the neck.

He turned over and raised a fist. "Don't do that, Nora."

"Go on," she said. "You know you want to."

He almost did. She saw the twitch. Then he lowered his hand and unrolled the fingers. "No more."

She said nothing but thought, That's what you think.

Chad finished *Living with the Animals* in July and sent the manuscript to the agent. E-mails and phone calls followed. Chad said Ringling seemed enthusiastic. If so, Nora thought he must have saved most of that enthusiasm for the phone calls. What she saw in the e-mails was cautious optimism at best.

In August, at Ringling's request, Chad did some rewriting. He was quiet about this part of the work, a sign that it wasn't going well. But he stuck to it. Nora hardly noticed. She was absorbed in her garden.

In September, Chad insisted on going to New York and pacing Ringling's office while the man made phone calls to the seven publishers to whom the manuscript had gone. Nora thought about visiting a bar in Montpelier and picking someone up—they could go to a Motel 6—but didn't. She worked in her garden instead.

It was just as well. Chad flew back that evening instead of spending the night as he had planned. He was drunk and professed to be happy. They had a handshake deal. He named a publisher she had never heard of.

"How much?"

"That doesn't really matter, babe." Doesn't come out dushn't, and he only called her babe when he was drunk. "They really love the book, and that's what matters." She realized that when Chad was drunk, he sounded quite a bit like Winnie in the first months after his stroke.

"How much?"

"Forty thousand dollars." Dollarsh.

She laughed. "I probably made that much before I got from the bench to the playground. I figured it out the first time we watched—"

She didn't see the blow coming and didn't really feel it hit. There was a big click in her head, that was all. Then she was lying on the kitchen floor, breathing through her mouth. He had broken her nose.

“You bitch!” he said, starting to cry.

Nora sat up. The kitchen seemed to make a large drunken circle around her before steadying. Blood pattered down on the linoleum. She was amazed, in pain, exhilarated, full of shame and hilarity.

“That’s right, blame me.” Her voice was foggy, hooting. “Blame me and then cry your little eyes out.”

He cocked his head as if he hadn’t heard her—or couldn’t believe what he’d heard—then made a fist and drew it back.

She raised her face, her now-crooked nose leading the way. There was a beard of blood on her chin. “Go on,” she said. “It’s the only thing you’re halfway good at.”

“How many men have you slept with since that day? Tell me!”

“Slept with none. Fucked a dozen.” A lie, actually. There had been only the cop and an electrician who’d come one day while Chad was in town. “Lay on, Macduff.”

Instead of laying on, Macduff opened his fist and let his hand drop to his side. “The book would have been all right if not for you. I’m going to leave you and write another one. A better one.”

“Pigs will whistle.”

“You wait,” he said, as tearfully childish as a little boy who has just lost in a playground scuffle. “You just wait and see.”

“You’re drunk. Go to bed.”

“You poison bitch.”

Having delivered himself of this, he shuffled off to bed, walking with his head down. He even walked like Winnie after his stroke.



Nora thought about going to Urgent Care for her nose but was too tired to think of a story that would have just the right touch of veracity. In her heart—her nursely heart—she knew there was no such story. They would see through her no matter how good her story was. ER personnel always did.

She stuffed cotton up her nose and took two Tylenol with codeine. Then she went outside and weeded her garden until it was too dark to see.

He left her and went back to New York. Sometimes he emailed her, and sometimes she emailed him back. He didn't ask for his half of the remaining money, which was good. She wouldn't have given it to him. She had worked for that money and was still working for it, feeding it into the bank little by little, paying off the house. He said in his e-mails that he was subbing again, writing on the weekends. She believed him about the subbing but not about the writing. His e-mails had a strengthless, washed-out feeling that suggested there might not be much left when it came to writing. She'd always thought he was pretty much of a one-book man, anyway.

She took care of the divorce herself. She found everything she needed on the Internet. There were papers she needed him to sign, and he signed them. They came back with no note attached.

The following summer—a good one; she was working full-time at the local hospital and her garden was an absolute riot—she was browsing in a used-book store one day and came across a volume she had seen in Winnie's study: *The Basis of Morality*. It was a pretty beat-up copy, and she was able to take it home for two dollars, plus tax.

It took her the rest of the summer and most of the fall to read it cover to cover. In the end she was disappointed. There was little or nothing in it she did not already know.