

STEPHEN KING

Apt Pupil

Now a major motion
picture from
Phoenix Pictures

Based on "Apt Pupil: A Novella" in
Different Seasons

READ BY FRANK MULLER



PENGUIN
AUDIOBOOKS



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He looked like the total all-American kid as he pedaled his twenty-six-inch Schwinn with the apehanger handlebars up the residential suburban street, and that's just what he was: Todd Bowden, thirteen years old, five-feet-eight and a healthy one hundred and forty pounds, hair the color of ripe corn, blue eyes, white even teeth, lightly tanned skin marred by not even the first shadow of adolescent acne.

He was smiling a summer vacation smile as he pedaled through the sun and shade not too far from his own house. He looked like the kind of kid who might have a paper route, and as a matter of fact, he did—he delivered the Santo Donato Clarion. He also looked like the kind of kid who might sell greeting cards for premiums, and he had done that, too. They were the kind that come with your name printed inside—JACK AND MARY BURKE, or DON AND SALLY, or THE MURCHISONS. He looked like the sort of boy who might whistle while he worked, and he often did so. He whistled quite prettily, in fact. His dad was an architectural engineer who made forty thousand dollars a year. His mom had majored in French in college and had met Todd's father when he desperately needed a tutor. She typed manuscripts in her spare time. She had kept all of Todd's old school report cards in a folder. Her favorite was his final fourth-grade card, on which Mrs. Upshaw had scratched: "Todd is an extremely apt pupil." He was, too. Straight A's and B's all the way up the line. If he'd done any better—straight A's, for example—his friends might have begun to think he was weird.

Now he brought his bike to a halt in front of 963 Claremont Street and stepped off it. The house was a small bungalow set discreetly back on its lot. It was white with green shutters and green trim. A

hedge ran around the front. The hedge was well-watered and well-clipped.

Todd brushed his blonde hair out of his eyes and walked the Schwinn up the cement path to the steps. He was still smiling, and his smile was open and expectant and beautiful. He pushed down the bike's kickstand with the toe of one Nike running-shoe and then picked the folded newspaper off the bottom step. It wasn't the Clarion; it was the L.A. Times. He put it under his arm and mounted the steps. At the top was a heavy wooden door with no window inside of a latched screen door. There was a doorbell on the right-hand door-frame, and below the bell were two small signs, each neatly screwed into the wood and covered with protective plastic so they wouldn't yellow or waterspot. German efficiency, Todd thought, and his smile widened a little. It was an adult thought, and he always mentally congratulated himself when he had one of those.

The top sign said ARTHUR DENKER.

The bottom one said NO SOLICITORS, NO PEDDLERS, NO SALESMEN.

Smiling still, Todd rang the bell.

He could barely hear its muted burring, somewhere far off inside the small house. He took his finger off the bell and cocked his head a little, listening for footsteps. There were none. He looked at his Timex watch (one of the premiums he had gotten for selling personalized greeting cards) and saw that it was twelve past ten. The guy should be up by now. Todd himself was always up by seven-thirty at the latest, even during summer vacation. The early bird catches the worm.

He listened for another thirty seconds and when the house remained silent he leaned on the bell, watching the sweep second hand on his Timex as he did so. He had been pressing the doorbell for exactly seventy-one seconds when he finally heard shuffling footsteps. Slippers, he deduced from the soft wish-wish sound. Todd was into.

deductions. His current ambition was to become a private detective when he grew up.

“All right! All right!” the man who was pretending to be Arthur Denker called querulously. “I’m coming! Let it go! I’m coming!”

Todd stopped pushing the doorbell button.

A chain and bolt rattled on the far side of the windowless inner door. Then it was pulled open.

An old man, hunched inside a bathrobe, stood looking out through the screen. A cigarette smouldered between his fingers. Todd thought the man looked like a cross between Albert Einstein and Boris Karloff. His hair was long and white but beginning to yellow in an unpleasant way that was more nicotine than ivory. His face was wrinkled and pouched and puffy with sleep, and Todd saw with some distaste that he hadn’t bothered shaving for the last couple of days. Todd’s father was fond of saying, “A shave puts a shine on the morning.” Todd’s father shaved every day, whether he had to work or not.

The eyes looking out at Todd were watchful but deeply sunken, laced with snaps of red. Todd felt an instant of deep disappointment. The guy did look a little bit like Albert Einstein, and he did look a little bit like Boris Karloff, but what he looked like more than anything else was one of the seedy old winos that hung around down by the railroad yard.

But of course, Todd reminded himself, the man had just gotten up. Todd had seen Denker many times before today (although he had been very careful to make sure that Denker hadn’t seen him, no way, Jose), and on his public occasions, Denker looked very natty, every inch an officer in retirement, you might say, even though he was seventy-six if the articles Todd had read at the library had his birth-date right. On the days when Todd had shadowed him to the Shoprite where Denker did his shopping or to one of the three movie theaters on the bus line—Denker had no car—he was always

dressed in one of three neatly kept suits, no matter how warm the weather. If the weather looked threatening he carried a furled umbrella under one arm like a swagger stick. He sometimes wore a trilby hat. And on the occasions when Denker went out, he was always neatly shaved and his white moustache (worn to conceal an imperfectly corrected harelip) was carefully trimmed.

“A boy,” he said now. His voice was thick and sleepy. Todd saw with new disappointment that his robe was faded and tacky. One rounded collar point stood up at a drunken angle to poke at his wattled neck. There was a splotch of something that might have been chili or possibly A-1 Steak Sauce on the left lapel, and he smelled of cigarettes and stale booze.

“A boy,” he repeated. “I don’t need anything, boy. Read the sign. You can read, can’t you? Of course you can. All American boys can read. Don’t be a nuisance, boy. Good day.”

The door began to close.

He might have dropped it right there, Todd thought much later on one of the nights when sleep was hard to find. His disappointment at seeing the man for the first time at close range, seeing him with his street-face put away—hanging in the closet, you might say, along with his umbrella and his trilby—might have done it. It could have ended in that moment, the tiny, unimportant snicking sound of the latch cutting off everything that happened later as neatly as a pair of shears. But, as the man himself had observed, he was an American boy, and he had been taught that persistence is a virtue.

“Don’t forget your paper, Mr. Dussander,” Todd said, holding the Times out politely.

The door stopped dead in its swing, still inches from the jamb. A tight and watchful expression flitted across Kurt Dussander’s face and was gone at once. There might have been fear in that expression. It was good, the way he had made that expression disappear, but Todd

was disappointed for the third time. He hadn't expected Dussander to be good; he had expected Dussander to be great.

Boy, Todd thought with real disgust. Boy oh boy.

He pulled the door open again. One hand, bunched with arthritis, unlatched the screen door. The hand pushed the screen door open just enough to wriggle through like a spider and close over the edge of the paper Todd was holding out. The boy saw with distaste that the old man's fingernails were long and yellow and horny. It was a hand that had spent most of its waking hours holding one cigarette after another. Todd thought smoking was a filthy dangerous habit, one he himself would never take up. It really was a wonder that Dussander had lived as long as he had.

The old man tugged. "Give me my paper."

"Sure thing, Mr. Dussander." Todd released his hold on the paper. The spider-hand yanked it inside. The screen closed.

"My name is Denker," the old man said. "Not this Doo-Zander. Apparently you cannot read. What a pity. Good day."

The door started to close again. Todd spoke rapidly into the narrowing gap. "Bergen-Belsen, January 1943 to June 1943. Auschwitz, June 1943 to June of 1944, Unterkommandant. Patin—"

The door stopped again. The old man's pouched and pallid face hung in the gap like a wrinkled, half-deflated balloon. Todd smiled.

"You left Patin just ahead of the Russians. You got to Buenos Aires. Some people say you got rich there, investing the gold you took out of Germany in the drug trade. Whatever, you were in Mexico City from 1950 to 1952. Then—"

"Boy, you are crazy like a cuckoo bird." One of the arthritic fingers twirled circles around a misshapen ear. But the toothless mouth was quivering in an infirm, panicky way.

“From 1952 until 1958, I don’t know,” Todd said, smiling more widely still. “No one does, I guess, or at least they’re not telling. But an Israeli agent spotted you in Cuba, working as the concierge in a big hotel just before Castro took over. They lost you when the rebels came into Havana. You popped up in West Berlin in 1965. They almost got you.” He pronounced the last two words as one: gotcha. At the same time he squeezed all of his fingers together into one large, wriggling fist. Dussander’s eyes dropped to those well-made and well-nourished American hands, hands that were made for building soapbox racers and Aurora models. Todd had done both. In fact, the year before, he and his dad had built a model of the Titanic. It had taken almost four months, and Todd’s father kept it in his office.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Dussander said. Without his false teeth, his words had a mushy sound Todd didn’t like. It didn’t sound... well, authentic. Colonel Klink on Hogan’s Heroes sounded more like a Nazi than Dussander did. But in his time he must have been a real whiz. In an article on the death-camps in Men’s Action, the writer had called him The Blood-Fiend of Patin. “Get out of here, boy. Before I call the police.”

“Gee, I guess you better call them, Mr. Dussander. Or Herr Dussander, if you like that better.” He continued to smile, showing perfect teeth that had been fluoridated since the beginning of his life and bathed thrice a day in Crest toothpaste for almost as long. “After 1965, no one saw you again ... until I did, two months ago, on the downtown bus.”

“You’re insane.”

“So if you want to call the police,” Todd said, smiling, “you go right ahead. I’ll wait on the stoop. But if you don’t want to call them right away, why don’t I come in? We’ll talk.”

There was a long moment while the old man looked at the smiling boy. Birds twitted in the trees. On the next block a power mower was

running, and far off, on busier streets, horns honked out their own rhythm of life and commerce.

In spite of everything, Todd felt the onset of doubt. He couldn't be wrong, could he? Was there some mistake on his part? He didn't think so, but this was no schoolroom exercise. It was real life. So he felt a surge of relief (mild relief, he assured himself later) when Dussander said: "You may come in for a moment, if you like. But only because I do not wish to make trouble for you, you understand?"

"Sure, Mr. Dussander," Todd said. He opened the screen and came into the hall. Dussander closed the door behind them, shutting off the morning.

The house smelled stale and slightly malty. It smelled the way Todd's own house smelled sometimes the morning after his folks had thrown a party and before his mother had had a chance to air it out. But this smell was worse. It was lived-in and ground-in. It was liquor, fried food, sweat, old clothes, and some stinky medicinal smell like Vick's or Mentholatum. It was dark in the hallway, and Dussander was standing too close, his head hunched into the collar of his robe like the head of a vulture waiting for some hurt animal to give up the ghost. In that instant, despite the stubble and the loosely hanging flesh, Todd could see the man who had stood inside the black SS uniform more clearly than he had ever seen him on the street. And he felt a sudden lancet of fear slide into his belly. Mild fear, he amended later.

"I should tell you that if anything happens to me—" he began, and then Dussander shuffled past him and into the living room, his slippers wish-wishing on the floor. He flapped a contemptuous hand at Todd, and Todd felt a flush of hot blood mount into his throat and cheeks.

Todd followed him, his smile wavering for the first time. He had not pictured it happening quite like this. But it would work out. Things would come into focus. Of course they would. Things always did. He began to smile again as he stepped into the living room.

It was another disappointment—and how!—but one he supposed he should have been prepared for. There was of course no oil portrait of Hitler with his forelock dangling and eyes that followed you. No medals in cases, no ceremonial sword mounted on the wall, no Luger or PPK Walther on the mantel (there was, in fact, no mantel). Of course, Todd told himself, the guy would have to be crazy to put any of those things out where people could see them. Still, it was hard to put everything you saw in the movies or on TV out of your head. It looked like the living room of any old man living alone on a slightly frayed pension. The fake fireplace was faced with fake bricks. A Westclox hung over it. There was a black and white Motorola TV on a stand; the tips of the rabbit ears had been wrapped in aluminum foil to improve reception. The floor was covered with a gray rug; its nap was balding. The magazine rack by the sofa held copies of National Geographic, Reader's Digest, and the L.A. Times. Instead of Hitler or a ceremonial sword hung on the wall, there was a framed certificate of citizenship and a picture of a woman in a funny hat. Dussander later told him that sort of hat was called a cloche, and they had been popular in the twenties and thirties.

“My wife,” Dussander said sentimentally. “She died in 1955 of a lung disease. At that time I was working at the Menschler Motor Works in Essen. I was heartbroken.”

Todd continued to smile. He crossed the room as if to get a better look at the woman in the picture. Instead of looking at the picture, he fingered the shade on a small table-lamp.

“Stop that!” Dussander barked harshly. Todd jumped back a little.

“That was good,” he said sincerely. “Really commanding. It was Use Koch who had the lampshades made out of human skin, wasn't it? And she was the one who had the trick with the little glass tubes.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Dussander said. There was a package of Kools, the kind with no filter, on top of the TV. He offered them to Todd. “Cigarette?” he asked, and grinned. His grin was hideous.

“No. They give you lung cancer. My dad used to smoke, but he gave it up. He went to Smokenders.”

“Did he.” Dussander produced a wooden match from the pocket of his robe and scratched it indifferently on the plastic case of the Motorola. Puffing, he said: “Can you give me one reason why I shouldn’t call the police and tell them of the monstrous accusations you’ve just made? One reason? Speak quickly, boy. The telephone is just down the hall. Your father would spank you, I think. You would sit for dinner on a cushion for a week or so, eh?”

“My parents don’t believe in spanking. Corporal punishment causes more problems than it cures.” Todd’s eyes suddenly gleamed. “Did you spank any of them? The women? Did you take off their clothes and—”

With a muffled exclamation, Dussander started for the phone.

Todd said coldly: “You better not do that.”

Dussander turned. In measured tones that were spoiled only slightly by the fact that his false teeth were not in, he said: “I tell you this once, boy, and once only. My name is Arthur Denker. It has never been anything else; it has not even been Americanized. I was in fact named Arthur by my father, who greatly admired the stories of Arthur Conan Doyle. It has never been Doo-Zander, or Himmler, or Father Christmas. I was a reserve lieutenant in the war. I never joined the Nazi party. In the battle of Berlin I fought for three weeks. I will admit that in the late thirties, when I was first married, I supported Hitler. He ended the depression and returned some of the pride we had lost in the aftermath of the sickening and unfair Treaty of Versailles. I suppose I supported him mostly because I got a job and there was tobacco again, and I didn’t need to hunt through the gutters when I needed to smoke. I thought, in the late thirties, that he was a great man. In his own way, perhaps he was. But at the end he was mad, directing phantom armies at the whim of an astrologer. He even gave Blondi, his dog, a death-capsule. The act of a madman; by the end they were all madmen, singing the ‘Horst Wessel Song’ as they fed

poison to their children. On May 2nd, 1945, my regiment gave up to the Americans. I remember that a private soldier named Hackermeyer gave me a chocolate bar. I wept. There was no reason to fight on; the war was over, and really had been since February. I was interned at Essen and was treated very well. We listened to the Nuremberg trials on the radio, and when Goering committed suicide, I traded fourteen American cigarettes for half a bottle of Schnaps and got drunk. When I was released, I put wheels on cars at the Essen Motor Works until 1963, when I retired. Later I emigrated to the United States. To come here was a lifelong ambition. In 1967 I became a citizen. I am an American. I vote. No Buenos Aires. No drug dealing. No Berlin. No Cuba.” He pronounced it Koo-ba. “And now, unless you leave, I make my telephone call.”

He watched Todd do nothing. Then he went down the hall and picked up the telephone. Still Todd stood in the living room, beside the table with the small lamp on it.

Dussander began to dial. Todd watched him, his heart speeding up until it was drumming in his chest. After the fourth number, Dussander turned and looked at him. His shoulders sagged. He put the phone down.

“A boy,” he breathed, “A boy.”

Todd smiled widely but rather modestly.

“How did you find out?”

“One piece of luck and a lot of hard work,” Todd said. “There’s this friend of mine, Harold Pegler his name is, only all the kids call him Foxy. He plays second base for our team. His dad’s got all these magazines out in his garage. Great big stacks of them. War magazines. They’re old. I looked for some new ones, but the guy who runs the newsstand across from the school says most of them went out of business. In most of them there’s pictures of krauts—German soldiers, I mean—and Japs torturing these women. And

articles about the concentration camps. I really groove on all that concentration camp stuff.”

“You ... groove on it.” Dussander was staring at him, one hand rubbing up and down on his cheek, producing a very small sandpapery sound.

“Groove. You know. I get off on it. I’m interested.”

He remembered that day in Foxy’s garage as clearly as anything in his life—more clearly, he suspected. He remembered in the fifth grade, before Careers Day, how Mrs. Anderson (all the kids called her Bugs because of her big front teeth) had talked to them about what she called finding YOUR GREAT INTEREST.

“It comes all at once,” Bugs Anderson had rhapsodized. “You see something for the first time, and right away you know you have found YOUR GREAT INTEREST. It’s like a key turning in a lock. Or falling in love for the first time. That’s why Careers Day is so important, children—it may be the day on which you find YOUR GREAT INTEREST.” And she had gone on to tell them about her own GREAT INTEREST, which turned out not to be teaching the fifth grade but collecting nineteenth-century postcards.

Todd had thought Mrs. Anderson was full of bullspit at the time, but that day in Foxy’s garage, he remembered what she had said and wondered if maybe she hadn’t been right after all.

The Santa Anas had been blowing that day, and to the east there were brush-fires. He remembered the smell of burning, hot and greasy. He remembered Foxy’s crewcut, and the flakes of Butch Wax clinging to the front of it. He remembered everything.

“I know there’s comics here someplace,” Foxy had said. His mother had a hangover and had kicked them out of the house for making too much noise. “Neat ones. They’re Westerns, mostly, but there’s some Turok, Son of Stone and—”

“What are those?” Todd asked, pointing at the bulging cardboard cartons under the stairs.

“Ah, they’re no good,” Foxy said. “True war stories, mostly. Boring.”

“Can I look at some?”

“Sure. I’ll find the comics.”

But by the time fat Foxy Pegler found them, Todd no longer wanted to read comics. He was lost. Utterly lost.

It’s like a key turning in a lock. Or falling in love for the first time.

It had been like that. He had known about the war, of course—not the stupid one going on now, where the Americans had gotten the shit kicked out of them by a bunch of gooks in black pajamas—but World War II. He knew that the Americans wore round helmets with net on them and the krauts wore sort of square ones. He knew that the Americans won most of the battles and that the Germans had invented rockets near the end and shot them from Germany onto London. He had even known something about the concentration camps.

The difference between all of that and what he found in the magazines under the stairs in Foxy’s garage was like the difference between being told about germs and then actually seeing them in a microscope, squirming around and alive.

Here was Ilse Koch. Here were crematoriums with their doors standing open on their soot-clotted hinges. Here were officers in SS uniforms and prisoners in striped uniforms. The smell of the old pulp magazines was like the smell of the brush-fires burning out of control on the east of Santo Donato, and he could feel the old paper crumbling against the pads of his fingers, and he turned the pages, no longer in Foxy’s garage but caught somewhere crosswise in time, trying to cope with the idea that they had really done those things, that somebody had really done those things, and that somebody had

let them do those things, and his head began to ache with a mixture of revulsion and excitement, and his eyes were hot and strained, but he read on, and from a column of print beneath a picture of tangled bodies at a place called Dachau, this figure jumped out at him:

6,000,000

And he thought: Somebody goofed there, somebody added a zero or two, that's twice as many people as there are in L.A.! But then, in another magazine (the cover of this one showed a woman chained to a wall while a guy in a Nazi uniform approached her with a poker in his hand and a grin on his face), he saw it again:

6,000,000.

His headache got worse. His mouth went dry. Dimly, from some distance, he heard Foxy saying he had to go in for supper. Todd asked Foxy if he could stay here in the garage and read while Foxy ate. Foxy gave him a look of mild puzzlement, shrugged, and said sure. And Todd read, hunched over the boxes of the old true war magazines, until his mother called and asked if he was ever going to go home.

Like a key turning in a lock.

All the magazines said it was bad, what had happened. But all the stories were continued at the back of the book, and when you turned to those pages, the words saying it was bad were surrounded by ads, and these ads sold German knives and belts and helmets as well as Magic Trusses and Guaranteed Hair Restorer. These ads sold German flags emblazoned with swastikas and Nazi Lugers and a game called Panzer Attack as well as correspondence lessons and offers to make you rich selling elevator shoes to short men. They said it was bad, but it seemed like a lot of people must not mind.

Like falling in love.

Oh yes, he remembered that day very well. He remembered everything about it—a yellowing pin-up calendar for a defunct year on the back wall, the oil-stain on the cement floor, the way the magazines had been tied together with orange twine. He

remembered how his headache had gotten a little worse each time he thought of that incredible number,

6,000,000.

He remembered thinking: I want to know about everything that happened in those places. Everything. And I want to know which is more true—the words, or the ads they put beside the words.

He remembered Bugs Anderson as he at last pushed the boxes back under the stairs and thought: She was right. I've found my GREAT INTEREST.

Dussander looked at Todd for a long time. Then he crossed the living room and sat down heavily in a rocking chair. He looked at Todd again, unable to analyze the slightly dreamy, slightly nostalgic expression on the boy's face.

"Yeah. It was the magazines that got me interested, but I figured a lot of what they said was just, you know, bullshit. So I went to the library and found out a lot more stuff. Some of it was even neater. At first the crummy librarian didn't want me to look at any of it because it was in the adult section of the library, but I told her it was for school. If it's for school they have to let you have it. She called my dad, though." Todd's eyes turned up scornfully. "Like she thought Dad didn't know what I was doing, if you can dig that."

"He did know?"

"Sure. My dad thinks kids should find out about life as soon as they can—the bad as well as the good. Then they'll be ready for it. He says life is a tiger you have to grab by the tail, and if you don't know the nature of the beast it will eat you up."

"Mmmm," Dussander said.

"My mom thinks the same way."

“Mmmmm.” Dussander looked dazed, not quite sure where he was.

“Anyhow,” Todd said, “the library stuff was real good. They must have had a hundred books with stuff in them about the Nazi concentration camps, just here in the Santo Donato library. A lot of people must like to read about that stuff. There weren’t as many pictures as in Foxy’s dad’s magazines, but the other stuff was real gooshy. Chairs with spikes sticking up through the seats. Pulling out gold teeth with pliers. Poison gas that came out of the showers.” Todd shook his head. “You guys just went overboard, you know that? You really did.”

“Gooshy,” Dussander said heavily.

“I really did do a research paper, and you know what I got on it? An A-plus. Of course I had to be careful. You have to write that stuff in a certain way. You got to be careful.”

“Do you?” Dussander asked. He took another cigarette with a hand that trembled.

“Oh yeah. All those library books, they read a certain way. Like the guys who wrote them got puking sick over what they were writing about.” Todd was frowning, wrestling with the thought, trying to bring it out. The fact that tone, as that word is applied to writing, wasn’t yet in his vocabulary, made it more difficult. “They all write like they lost a lot of sleep over it. How we’ve got to be careful so nothing like that ever happens again. I made my paper like that, and I guess the teacher gave me an A just cause I read the source material without losing my lunch.” Once more, Todd smiled winningly.

Dussander dragged heavily on his unfiltered Kool. The tip trembled slightly. As he feathered smoke out of his nostrils, he coughed an old man’s dank, hollow cough. “I can hardly believe this conversation is taking place,” he said. He leaned forward and peered closely at Todd. “Boy, do you know the word ‘existentialism’?”

Todd ignored the question. “Did you ever meet Ilse Koch?”

“Ilse Koch?” Almost inaudibly, Dussander said: “Yes, I met her.”

“Was she beautiful?” Todd asked eagerly. “I mean ...” His hands described an hourglass in the air.

“Surely you have seen her photograph?” Dussander asked. “An aficionado such as yourself?”

“What’s an af ... aff...”

“An aficionado,” Dussander said, “is one who grooves. One who... gets off on something.”

“Yeah? Cool.” Todd’s grin, puzzled and weak for a moment, shone out triumphantly again. “Sure, I’ve seen her picture. But you know how they are in those books.” He spoke as if Dussander had them all. “Black and white, fuzzy ... just snapshots. None of those guys knew they were taking pictures for, you know, history. Was she really stacked?”

“She was fat and dumpy and she had bad skin,” Dussander said shortly. He crushed his cigarette out half-smoked in a Table Talk pie-dish filled with dead butts.

“Oh. Golly.” Todd’s face fell.

“Just luck,” Dussander mused, looking at Todd. “You saw my picture in a war-adventures magazine and happened to ride next to me on the bus. Tcha!” He brought a fist down on the arm of his chair, but without much force.

“No sir, Mr. Dussander. There was more to it than that. A lot,” Todd added earnestly, leaning forward.

“Oh? Really?” The bushy eyebrows rose, signalling polite disbelief.

“Sure. I mean, the pictures of you in my scrapbook were all thirty years old, at least. I mean, it is 1974.”

“You keep a ... a scrapbook?”

“Oh, yes, sir! It’s a good one. Hundreds of pictures. I’ll show it to you sometime. You’ll go ape.”

Dussander’s face pulled into a revolted grimace, but he said nothing.

“The first couple of times I saw you, I wasn’t sure at all. And then you got on the bus one day when it was raining, and you had this shiny black slicker on—”

“That,” Dussander breathed.

“Sure. There was a picture of you in a coat like that in one of the magazines out in Foxy’s garage. Also, a photo of you in your SS greatcoat in one of the library books. And when I saw you that day, I just said to myself, ‘It’s for sure. That’s Kurt Dussander.’ So I started to shadow you—”

“You did what?”

“Shadow you. Follow you. My ambition is to be a private detective like Sam Spade in the books, or Mannix on TV. Anyway, I was super careful. I didn’t want you to get wise. Want to look at some pictures?”

Todd took a folded-over manila envelope from his back pocket. Sweat had stuck the flap down. He peeled it back carefully. His eyes were sparkling like a boy thinking about his birthday, or Christmas, or the firecrackers he will shoot off on the Fourth of July.

“You took pictures of me?”

“Oh, you bet. I got this little camera. A Kodak. It’s thin and flat and fits right into your hand. Once you get the hang of it, you can take pictures of the subject just by holding the camera in your hand and spreading your fingers enough to let the lens peek through. Then you hit the button with your thumb.” Todd laughed modestly. “I got the hang of it, but I took a lot of pictures of my fingers while I did. I

hung right in there, though. I think a person can do anything if they try hard enough, you know it? It's corny but true."

Kurt Dussander had begun to look white and ill, shrunken inside his robe. "Did you have these pictures finished by a commercial developer, boy?"

"Huh?" Todd looked shocked and startled, then contemptuous. "No! What do you think I am, stupid? My dad's got a darkroom. I've been developing my own pictures since I was nine."

Dussander said nothing, but he relaxed a little and some color came back into his face.

Todd handed him several glossy prints, the rough edges confirming that they had been home-developed. Dussander went through them, silently grim. Here he was sitting erect in a window seat of the downtown bus, with a copy of the latest James Michener, Centennial, in his hands. Here he was at the Devon Avenue bus stop, his umbrella under his arm and his head cocked back at an angle which suggested De Gaulle at his most imperial. Here he was standing on line just under the marquee of the Majestic Theater, erect and silent, conspicuous among the leaning teenagers and blank-faced housewives in curlers by his height and his bearing. Finally, here he was peering into his own mailbox.

"I was scared you might see me on that one," Todd said. "It was a calculated risk. I was right across the street. Boy oh boy, I wish I could afford a Minolta with a telephoto lens. Someday ..." Todd looked wistful.

"No doubt you had a story ready, just in case."

"I was going to ask you if you'd seen my dog. Anyway, after I developed the pix, I compared them to these."

He handed Dussander three Xeroxed photographs. He had seen them all before, many times. The first showed him in his office at the

Patin resettlement camp; it had been cropped so nothing showed but him and the Nazi flag on its stand by his desk. The second was a picture that had been taken on the day of his enlistment. The last showed him shaking hands with Heinrich Gluecks, who had been subordinate only to Himmler himself.

“I was pretty sure then, but I couldn’t see if you had the harelip because of your goshdamn moustache. But I had to be sure, so I got this.”

He handed over the last sheet from his envelope. It had been folded over many times. Dirt was grimed into the creases. The corners were lopped and milled—the way papers get when they spend a long time in the pockets of young boys who have no shortage of things to do and places to go. It was a copy of the Israeli want-sheet on Kurt Dussander. Holding it in his hands, Dussander reflected on corpses that were unquiet and refused to stay buried.

“I took your fingerprints,” Todd said, smiling. “And then I did the compares to the one on the sheet.”

Dussander gaped at him and then uttered the German word for shit. “You did not!”

“Sure I did. My mom and dad gave me a fingerprint set for Christmas last year. A real one, not just a toy. It had the powder and three brushes for three different surfaces and special paper for lifting them. My folks know I want to be a PI when I grow up. Of course, they think I’ll grow out of it.” He dismissed this idea with a disinterested lift and drop of his shoulders. “The book explained all about whorls and lands and points of similarity. They’re called compares. You need eight compares for a fingerprint to get accepted in court.

“So anyway, one day when you were at the movies, I came here and dusted your mailbox and doorknob and lifted all the prints I could. Pretty smart, huh?”

Dussander said nothing. He was clutching the arms of his chair, and his toothless, deflated mouth was trembling. Todd didn't like that. It made him look like he was on the verge of tears. That, of course, was ridiculous. The Blood-Fiend of Patin in tears? You might as well expect Chevrolet to go bankrupt or McDonald's to give up burgers and start selling caviar and truffles.

"I got two sets of prints," Todd said. "One of them didn't look anything like the ones on the wanted poster. I figured those were the postman's. The rest were yours. I found more than eight compares. I found fourteen good ones." He grinned. "And that's how I did it."

"You are a little bastard," Dussander said, and for a moment his eyes shone dangerously. Todd felt a tingling little thrill, as he had in the hall. Then Dussander slumped back again.

"Whom have you told?"

"No one."

"Not even this friend? This Cony Pegler?"

"Foxy. Foxy Pegler. Nah, he's a blabbermouth. I haven't told anybody. There's nobody I trust that much."

"What do you want? Money? There is none, I'm afraid. In South America there was, although it was nothing as romantic or dangerous as the drug trade. There is—there was—a kind of 'old boy network' in Brazil and Paraguay and Santo Domingo. Fugitives from the war. I became part of their circle and did modestly well in minerals and ores—tin, copper, bauxite, Then the changes came. Nationalism, anti-Americanism. I might have ridden out the changes, but then Wiesenthal's men caught my scent. Bad luck follows bad luck, boy, like dogs after a bitch in heat. Twice they almost had me; once I heard the Jew-bastards in the next room.

"They hanged Eichmann," he whispered. One hand went to his neck, and his eyes had become as round as the eyes of a child listening to

the darkest passage of a scary tale—“Hansel and Gretel,” perhaps, or “Bluebeard.” “He was an old man, of no danger to anyone. He was apolitical. Still, they hanged him.”

Todd nodded.

“At last, I went to the only people who could help me. They had helped others, and I could run no more.”

“You went to the Odessa?” Todd asked eagerly.

“To the Sicilians,” Dussander said dryly, and Todd’s face fell again. “It was arranged. False papers, false past. Would you care for a drink, boy?”

“Sure. You got a Coke?”

“No Coke.” He pronounced it Kok.

“Milk?”

“Milk.” Dussander went through the archway and into the kitchen. A fluorescent bar buzzed into life. “I live now on stock dividends,” his voice came back. “Stocks I picked up after the war under yet another name. Through a bank in the State of Maine, if you please. The banker who bought them for me went to jail for murdering his wife a year after I bought them... life is sometimes strange, boy, hein?”

A refrigerator door opened and closed.

“The Sicilian jackals didn’t know about those stocks,” he said. “Today the Sicilians are everywhere, but in those days, Boston was as far north as they could be found. If they had known, they would have had those as well. They would have picked me clean and sent me to America to starve on welfare and food stamps.”

Todd heard a cupboard door opened; he heard liquid poured into a glass.

“A little General Motors, a little American Telephone and Telegraph, a hundred and fifty shares of Revlon. All this banker’s choices. Dufresne, his name was—I remember, because it sounds a little like mine. It seems he was not so smart at wife-killing as he was at picking growth stocks. The crime passionel, boy. It only proves that all men are donkeys who can read.”

He came back into the room, slippers whispering. He held two green plastic glasses that looked like the premiums they sometimes gave out at gas station openings. When you filled your tank, you got a free glass. Dussander thrust a glass at Todd.

“I lived adequately on the stock portfolio this Dufresne had set up for me for the first five years I was here. But then I sold my Diamond Match stock in order to buy this house and a small cottage not far from Big Sur. Then, inflation. Recession. I sold the cottage and one by one I sold the stocks, many of them at fantastic profits. I wish to God I had bought more. But I thought I was well-protected in other directions; the stocks were, as you Americans say, a ‘flier...’ ” He made a toothless hissing sound and snapped his fingers.

Todd was bored. He had not come here to listen to Dussander whine about his money or mutter about his stocks. The thought of blackmailing Dussander had never even crossed Todd’s mind. Money? What would he do with it? He had his allowance; he had his paper route. If his monetary needs went higher than what these could provide during any given week, there was always someone who needed his lawn mowed.

Todd lifted his milk to his lips and then hesitated. His smile shone out again... an admiring smile. He extended the gas station premium glass to Dussander.

“You have some of it,” he said slyly.

Dussander stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending, and then rolled his bloodshot eyes. “Gruss Gott!” He took the glass, swallowed twice, and handed it back. “No gasping for breath. No clawing at the

t'roat. No smell of bitter almonds. It is milk, boy. Milk. From the Dairylea Farms. On the carton is a picture of a smiling cow."

Todd watched him warily for a moment, then took a small sip. Yes, it tasted like milk, sure did, but somehow he didn't feel very thirsty anymore. He put the glass down. Dussander shrugged, raised his own glass, and took a swallow. He smacked his lips over it.

"Schnaps?" Todd asked.

"Bourbon. Ancient Age. Very nice. And cheap."

Todd fiddled his fingers along the seams of his jeans.

"So," Dussander said, "if you have decided to have a 'flier' of your own, you should be aware that you have picked a worthless stock."

"Huh?"

"Blackmail," Dussander said. "Isn't that what they call it on Mannix and Hawaii Five-O and Barnaby Jones? Extortion. If that was what —"

But Todd was laughing—hearty, boyish laughter. He shook his head, tried to speak, could not, and went on laughing.

"No," Dussander said, and suddenly he looked gray and more frightened than he had since he and Todd had begun to speak. He took another large swallow of his drink, grimaced, and shuddered. "I see that is not it ... at least, not the extortion of money. But, though you laugh, I smell extortion in it somewhere. What is it? Why do you come here and disturb an old man? Perhaps, as you say, I was once a Nazi. SS, even. Now I am only old, and to have a bowel movement I have to use a suppository. So what do you want?"

Todd had sobered again. He stared at Dussander with an open and appealing frankness. "Why ... I want to hear about it. That's all. That's all I want. Really."

“Hear about it?” Dussander echoed. He looked utterly perplexed.

Todd leaned forward, tanned elbows on bluejeaned knees. “Sure. The firing squads. The gas chambers. The ovens. The guys who had to dig their own graves and then stand on the ends so they’d fall into them. The ...” His tongue came out and wetted his lips. “The examinations. The experiments. Everything. All the gooshy stuff.”

Dussander stared at him with a certain amazed detachment, the way a veterinarian might stare at a cat who was giving birth to a succession of two-headed kittens. “You are a monster,” he said softly.

Todd sniffed. “According to the books I read for my report, you’re the monster, Mr. Dussander. Not me. You sent them to the ovens, not me. Two thousand a day at Patin before you came, three thousand after, thirty-five hundred before the Russians came and made you stop. Himmler called you an efficiency expert and gave you a medal. So you call me a monster. Oh boy.”

“All of that is a filthy American lie,” Dussander said, stung. He set his glass down with a bang, slopping bourbon onto his hand and the table. “The problem was not of my making, nor was the solution. I was given orders and directives, which I followed.”

Todd’s smile widened; it was now almost a smirk.

“Oh, I know how the Americans have distorted that,” Dussander muttered. “But your own politicians make our Dr. Goebbels look like a child playing with picture books in a kindergarten. They speak of morality while they douse screaming children and old women in burning napalm. Your draft-resisters are called cowards and ‘peaceniks.’ For refusing to follow orders they are either put in jails or scourged from the country. Those who demonstrate against this country’s unfortunate Asian adventure are clubbed down in the streets. The GI soldiers who kill the innocent are decorated by Presidents, welcomed home from the bayoneting of children and the burning of hospitals with parades and bunting. They are given

dinners, Keys to the City, free tickets to pro football games.” He toasted his glass in Todd’s direction. “Only those who lose are tried as war criminals for following orders and directives.” He drank and then had a coughing fit that brought thin color to his cheeks.

Through most of this Todd fidgeted the way he did when his parents discussed whatever had been on the news that night—good old Walter Klondike, his dad called him. He didn’t care about Dussander’s politics any more than he cared about Dussander’s stocks. His idea was that people made up politics so they could do things. Like when he wanted to feel around under Sharon Ackerman’s dress last year. Sharon said it was bad for him to want to do that, even though he could tell from her tone of voice that the idea sort of excited her. So he told her he wanted to be a doctor when he grew up and then she let him. That was politics. He wanted to hear about German doctors trying to mate women with dogs, putting identical twins into refrigerators to see whether they would die at the same time or if one of them would last longer, and electroshock therapy, and operations without anesthetic, and German soldiers raping all the women they wanted. The rest was just so much tired bullspit to cover up the gooshy stuff after someone came along and put a stop to it.

“If I hadn’t followed orders, I would have been dead.” Dussander was breathing hard, his upper body rocking back and forth in the chair, making the springs squeak. A little cloud of liquor-smell hung around him. “There was always the Russian front, nicht wahr? Our leaders were madmen, granted, but does one argue with madmen... especially when the maddest of them all has the luck of Satan. He escaped a brilliant assassination attempt by inches. Those who conspired were strangled with piano-wire, strangled slowly. Their death-agonies were filmed for the edification of the elite—”

“Yeah! Neat!” Todd cried impulsively. “Did you see that movie?”

“Yes. I saw. We all saw what happened to those unwilling or unable to run before the wind and wait for the storm to end. What we did

then was the right thing. For that time and that place, it was the right thing. I would do it again. But ...”

His eyes dropped to his glass. It was empty.

“... but I don’t wish to speak of it, or even think of it. What we did was motivated only by survival, and nothing about survival is pretty. I had dreams ...” He slowly took a cigarette from the box on the TV. “Yes. For years I had them. Blackness, and sounds in the blackness. Tractor engines. Bulldozer engines. Gunbutts thudding against what might have been frozen earth, or human skulls. Whistles, sirens, pistol-shots, screams. The doors of cattle-cars rumbling open on cold winter afternoons.

“Then, in my dreams, all sounds would stop—and eyes would open in the dark, gleaming like the eyes of animals in a rainforest. For many years I lived on the edge of the jungle, and I suppose that is why it is always the jungle I smelled and felt in those dreams. When I woke from them I would be drenched with sweat, my heart thundering in my chest, my hand stuffed into my mouth to stifle the screams. And I would think: The dream is the truth. Brazil, Paraguay, Cuba... those places are the dream. In the reality I am still at Patin. The Russians are closer today than yesterday. Some of them are remembering that in 1943 they had to eat frozen German corpses to stay alive. Now they long to drink hot German blood. There were rumors, boy, that some of them did just that when they crossed into Germany: cut the t’roats of some prisoners and drank their blood out of a boot. I would wake up and think: The work must go on, if only so there is no evidence of what we did here, or so little that the world, which doesn’t want to believe it, won’t have to. I would think: The work must go on if we are to survive.”

Todd listened to this with close attention and great interest. This was pretty good, but he was sure there would be better stuff in the days ahead. All Dussander needed was a little prodding. Heck, he was lucky. Lots of men his age were senile.

Dussander dragged deeply on his cigarette. "Later, after the dreams went away, there were days when I would think I had seen someone from Patin. Never guards or fellow officers, always inmates. I remember one afternoon in West Germany, ten years ago. There was an accident on the Autobahn. Traffic was frozen in every lane. I sat in my Morris, listening to the radio, waiting for the traffic to move. I looked to my right. There was a very old Simca in the next lane, and the man behind the wheel was looking at me. He was perhaps fifty, and he looked ill. There was a scar on his cheek. His hair was white, short, cut badly. I looked away. The minutes passed and still the traffic didn't move. I began snatching glances at the man in the Simca. Every time I did, he was looking at me, his face as still as death, his eyes sunken in their sockets. I became convinced he had been at Patin. He had been there and he had recognized me."

Dussander wiped a hand across his eyes.

"It was winter. The man was wearing an overcoat. But I was convinced that if I got out of my car and went to him, made him take off his coat and push up his shirtsleeves, I would see the number on his arm.

"At last the traffic began to move again. I pulled away from the Simca. If the jam had lasted another ten minutes, I believe I would have gotten out of my car and pulled the old man out of his. I would have beaten him, number or no number. I would have beaten him for looking at me that way.

"Shortly after that, I left Germany forever."

"Lucky for you," Todd said.

Dussander shrugged. "It was the same everywhere. Havana, Mexico City, Rome. I was in Rome for three years, you know. I would see a man looking at me over his cappuccino in a cafe ... a woman in a hotel lobby who seemed more interested in me than in her magazine... a waiter in a restaurant who would keep glancing at me no matter whom he was serving. I would become convinced that

these people were studying me, and that night the dream would come—the sounds, the jungle, the eyes.

“But when I came to America I put it out of my mind. I go to movies. I eat out once a week, always at one of those fast-food places that are so clean and so well-lighted by fluorescent bars. Here at my house I do jigsaw puzzles and I read novels—most of them bad ones—and watch TV. At night I drink until I’m sleepy. The dreams don’t come anymore. When I see someone looking at me in the supermarket or the library or the tobacconist’s, I think it must be because I look like their grandfather... or an old teacher... or a neighbor in a town they left some years ago.” He shook his head at Todd. “Whatever happened at Patin, it happened to another man. Not to me.”

“Great!” Todd said. “I want to hear all about it.”

Dussander’s eyes squeezed closed, and then opened slowly. “You don’t understand. I do not wish to speak of it.”

“You will, though. If you don’t, I’ll tell everyone who you are.”

Dussander stared at him, gray-faced. “I knew,” he said, “that I would find the extortion sooner or later.”

“Today I want to hear about the gas ovens,” Todd said. “How you baked them after they were dead.” His smile beamed out, rich and radiant. “But put your teeth in before you start. You look better with your teeth in.”

Dussander did as he was told. He talked to Todd about the gas ovens until Todd had to go home for lunch. Every time he tried to slip over into generalities, Todd would frown severely and ask him specific questions to get him back on the track. Dussander drank a great deal as he talked. He didn’t smile. Todd smiled. Todd smiled enough for both of them.

2

August, 1974.

They sat on Dussander's back porch under a cloudless, smiling sky. Todd was wearing jeans, Keds, and his Little League shirt. Dussander was wearing a baggy gray shirt and shapeless khaki pants held up with suspenders—wino-pants, Todd thought with private contempt; they looked like they had come straight from a box in the back of the Salvation Army store downtown. He was really going to have to do something about the way Dussander dressed when he was at home. It spoiled some of the fun.

The two of them were eating Big Macs that Todd had brought in his bike-basket, pedaling fast so they wouldn't get cold. Todd was sipping a Coke through a plastic straw. Dussander had a glass of bourbon.

His old man's voice rose and fell, papery, hesitant, sometimes nearly inaudible. His faded blue eyes, threaded with the usual snaps of red, were never still. An observer might have thought them grandfather and grandson, the latter perhaps attending some rite of passage, a handing down.

"And that's all I remember," Dussander finished presently, and took a large bite of his sandwich. McDonald's Secret Sauce dribbled down his chin.

"You can do better than that," Todd said softly.

Dussander took a large swallow from his glass. "The uniforms were made of paper," he said finally, almost snarling.

"When one inmate died, the uniform was passed on if it could still be worn. Sometimes one paper uniform could dress as many as forty inmates. I received high marks for my frugality."

“From Gluecks?”

“From Himmler.”

“But there was a clothing factory in Patin. You told me that just last week. Why didn’t you have the uniforms made there? The inmates themselves could have made them.”

“The job of the factory in Patin was to make uniforms for German soldiers. And as for us ...” Dussander’s voice faltered for a moment, and then he forced himself to go on. “We were not in the business of rehabilitation,” he finished.

Todd smiled his broad smile.

“Enough for today? Please? My throat is sore.”

“You shouldn’t smoke so much, then,” Todd said, continuing to smile.
“Tell me some more about the uniforms.”

“Which? Inmate or SS?” Dussander’s voice was resigned.

Smiling, Todd said: “Both.”

3

September, 1974.

Todd was in the kitchen of his house, making himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. You got to the kitchen by going up half a dozen redwood steps to a raised area that gleamed with chrome and stainless steel. His mother's electric typewriter had been going steadily ever since Todd had gotten home from school. She was typing a master's thesis for a grad student. The grad student had short hair, wore thick glasses, and looked like a creature from outer space, in Todd's humble opinion. The thesis was on the effect of fruit-flies in the Salinas Valley after World War II, or some good shit like that. Now her typewriter stopped and she came out of her office.

"Todd-baby," she greeted him.

"Monica-baby," he hailed back, amiably enough.

His mother wasn't a bad-looking chick for thirty-six, Todd thought; blonde hair that was streaked ash in a couple of places, tall, shapely, now dressed in dark red shorts and a sheer blouse of a warm whiskey color—the blouse was casually knotted below her breasts, putting her flat, unlined midriff on show. A typewriter eraser was tucked into her hair, which had been pinned carelessly back with a turquoise clip.

"So how's school?" she asked him, coming up the steps into the kitchen. She brushed his lips casually with hers and then slid onto one of the stools in front of the breakfast counter.

"School's cool."

"Going to be on the honor roll again?"

"Sure." Actually, he thought his grades might slip a notch this first quarter. He had been spending a lot of time with Dussander, and

when he wasn't actually with the old kraut, he was thinking about the things Dussander had told him. Once or twice he had dreamed about the things Dussander had told him. But it was nothing he couldn't handle.

"Apt pupil," she said, ruffling his shaggy blonde hair. "How's that sandwich?"

"Good," he said.

"Would you make me one and bring it into my office?"

"Can't," he said, getting up. "I promised Mr. Denker I'd come over and read to him for an hour or so."

"Are you still on Robinson Crusoe?"

"Nope." He showed her the spine of a thick book he had bought in a junkshop for twenty cents. "Tom Jones."

"Ye gods and little fishes! It'll take you the whole school-year to get through that, Toddy-baby. Couldn't you at least find an abridged edition, like with Crusoe?"

"Probably, but he wanted to hear all of this one. He said so."

"Oh." She looked at him for a moment, then hugged him. It was rare for her to be so demonstrative, and it made Todd a little uneasy.

"You're a peach to be taking so much of your spare time to read to him. Your father and I think it's just ... just exceptional."

Todd cast his eyes down modestly.

"And to not want to tell anybody," she said. "Hiding your light under a bushel."

"Oh, the kids I hang around with—they'd probably think I was some kind of weirdo," Todd said, smiling modestly down at the floor. "All that good shit."

“Don’t say that,” she admonished absently. Then: “Do you think Mr. Denker would like to come over and have dinner with us some night?”

“Maybe,” Todd said vaguely. “Listen, I gotta put an egg in my shoe and beat it.”

“Okay. Supper at six-thirty. Don’t forget.”

“I won’t.”

“Your father’s got to work late so it’ll just be me and thee again, okay?”

“Crazy, baby.”

She watched him go with a fond smile, hoping there was nothing in Tom Jones he shouldn’t be reading; he was only thirteen. She didn’t suppose there was. He was growing up in a society where magazines like Penthouse were available to anyone with a dollar and a quarter, or to any kid who could reach up to the top shelf of the magazine rack and grab a quick peek before the clerk could shout for him to put that up and get lost. In a society that seemed to believe most of all in the creed of hump thy neighbor, she didn’t think there could be much in a book two hundred years old to screw up Todd’s head—although she supposed the old man might get off on it a little. And as Richard liked to say, for a kid the whole world’s a laboratory. You have to let them poke around in it. And if the kid in question has a healthy home life and loving parents, he’ll be all the stronger for having knocked around a few strange corners.

And there went the healthiest kid she knew, pedaling up the street on his Schwinn. We did okay by the lad, she thought, turning to make her sandwich. Damned if we didn’t do okay.

4

October, 1974.

Dussander had lost weight. They sat in the kitchen, the shopworn copy of Tom Jones between them on the oilcloth-covered table (Todd, who tried never to miss a trick, had purchased the Cliff's Notes on the book with part of his allowance and had carefully read the entire summary against the possibility that his mother or father might ask him questions about the plot). Todd was eating a Ring Ding he had bought at the market. He had bought one for Dussander, but Dussander hadn't touched it. He only looked at it morosely from time to time as he drank his bourbon. Todd hated to see anything as tasty as Ring Dings go to waste. If he didn't eat it pretty quick, Todd was going to ask him if he could have it.

"So how did the stuff get to Patin?" he asked Dussander.

"In railroad cars," Dussander said. "In railroad cars labelled MEDICAL SUPPLIES. It came in long crates that looked like coffins. Fitting, I suppose. The inmates off-loaded the crates and stacked them in the infirmary. Later, our own men stacked them in the storage sheds. They did it at night. The storage sheds were behind the showers."

"Was it always Zyklon-B?"

"No, from time to time we would be sent something else. Experimental gases. The High Command was always interested in improving efficiency. Once they sent us a gas code-named PEGASUS. A nerve-gas. Thank God they never sent it again. It—" Dussander saw Todd lean forward, saw those eyes sharpen, and he suddenly stopped and gestured casually with his gas station premium glass. "It didn't work very well," he said. "It was... quite boring."

But Todd was not fooled, not in the least. "What did it do?"

“It killed them—what did you think it did, made them walk on water? It killed them, that’s all.”

“Tell me.”

“No,” Dussander said, now unable to hide the horror he felt. He hadn’t thought of PEGASUS in ... how long? Ten years? Twenty? “I won’t tell you! I refuse!”

“Tell me,” Todd repeated, licking chocolate icing from his fingers. “Tell me or you know what.”

Yes, Dussander thought. I know what. Indeed I do, you putrid little monster.

“It made them dance,” he said reluctantly.

“Dance?”

“Like the Zyklon-B, it came in through the shower-heads. And they... they began to leap about. Some were screaming. Most of them were laughing. They began to vomit, and to ... to defecate helplessly.”

“Wow,” Todd said. “Shit themselves, huh?” He pointed at the Ring Ding on Dussander’s plate. He had finished his own.

“You going to eat that?”

Dussander didn’t reply. His eyes were hazed with memory. His face was far away and cold, like the dark side of a planet which does not rotate. Inside his mind he felt the queerest combination of revulsion and—could it be?—nostalgia?

“They began to twitch all over and to make high, strange sounds in their throats. My men... they called PEGASUS the Yodeling Gas. At last they all collapsed and just lay there on the floor in their own filth, they lay there, yes, they lay there on the concrete, screaming and yodeling, with bloody noses. But I lied, boy. The gas didn’t kill them, either because it wasn’t strong enough or because we couldn’t bring

ourselves to wait long enough. I suppose it was that. Men and women like that could not have lived long. Finally I sent in five men with rifles to end their agonies. It would have looked bad on my record if it had shown up, I've no doubt of that—it would have looked like a waste of cartridges at a time when the Fuehrer had declared every cartridge a national resource. But those five men I trusted. There were times, boy, when I thought I would never forget the sound they made. The yodeling sound. The laughing.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Todd said. He finished Dussander’s Ring Ding in two bites. Waste not, want not, Todd’s mother said on the rare occasions when Todd complained about left-overs. “That was a good story, Mr. Dussander. You always tell them good. Once I get you going.”

Todd smiled at him. And incredibly—certainly not because he wanted to—Dussander found himself smiling back.

5

November, 1974.

Dick Bowden, Todd's father, looked remarkably like a movie and TV actor named Lloyd Bochner. He—Bowden, not Bochner—was thirty-eight. He was a thin, narrow man who liked to dress in Ivy League-style shirts and solid-color suits, usually dark. When he was on a construction site, he wore khakis and a hard-hat that was a souvenir of his Peace Corps days, when he had helped to design and build two dams in Africa. When he was working in his study at home, he wore half-glasses that had a way of slipping down to the end of his nose and making him look like a college dean. He was wearing these glasses now as he tapped his son's first-quarter report card against his desk's gleaming glass top.

"One B. Four C's. One D. A D, for Christ's sake! Todd, your mother's not showing it, but she's really upset."

Todd dropped his eyes. He didn't smile. When his dad swore, that wasn't exactly the best of news.

"My God, you've never gotten a report like this. A D in Beginning Algebra? What is this?"

"I don't know, Dad." He looked humbly at his knees.

"Your mother and I think that maybe you've been spending a little too much time with Mr. Denker. Not hitting the books enough. We think you ought to cut it down to weekends, slugger. At least until we see where you're going academically ..."

Todd looked up, and for a single second Bowden thought he saw a wild, pallid anger in his son's eyes. His own eyes widened, his fingers clenched on Todd's buff-colored report card... and then it was just Todd, looking at him openly if rather unhappily. Had that anger really been there? Surely not. But the moment had unsettled him,

made it hard for him to know exactly how to proceed. Todd hadn't been mad, and Dick Bowden didn't want to make him mad. He and his son were friends, always had been friends, and Dick wanted things to stay that way. They had no secrets from each other, none at all (except for the fact that Dick Bowden was sometimes unfaithful with his secretary, but that wasn't exactly the sort of thing you told your thirteen-year-old son, was it? ... and besides, that had absolutely no bearing on his home life, his family life). That was the way it was supposed to be, the way it had to be in a cockamamie world where murderers went unpunished, high school kids skin-popped heroin, and junior high schoolers—kids Todd's age—turned up with VD.

"No, Dad, please don't do that. I mean, don't punish Mr. Denker for something that's my fault. I mean, he'd be lost without me. I'll do better. Really. That algebra... it just threw me to start with. But I went over to Ben Tremaine's, and after we studied together for a few days, I started to get it. I just ... I dunno, I sorta choked at first."

"I think you're spending too much time with him," Bowden said, but he was weakening. It was hard to refuse Todd, hard to disappoint him, and what he said about punishing the old man for Todd's falling-off... goddammit, it made sense. The old man looked forward to his visits so much.

"That Mr. Storrman, the algebra teacher, is really hard," Todd said. "Lots of kids got D's. Three or four got F's."

Bowden nodded thoughtfully.

"I won't go Wednesdays anymore. Not until I bring my grades up." He had read his father's eyes. "And instead of going out for anything at school, I'll stay after every day and study. I promise."

"You really like the old guy that much?"

"He's really neat," Todd said sincerely.

“Well ... okay. We’ll try it your way, slugger. But I want to see a big improvement in your marks come January, you understand me? I’m thinking of your future. You may think junior high’s too soon to start thinking about that, but it’s not. Not by a long chalk.” As his mother liked to say Waste not, want not, so Dick Bowden liked to say Not by a long chalk.

“I understand, Dad,” Todd said gravely. Man-to-man stuff.

“Get out of here and give those books a workout then.” He pushed his half-glasses up on his nose and clapped Todd on the shoulder.

Todd’s smile, broad and bright, broke across his face. “Right on, Dad!”

Bowden watched Todd go with a prideful smile of his own. One in a million. And that hadn’t been anger on Todd’s face. For sure. Pique, maybe... but not that high-voltage emotion he had at first thought he’d seen there. If Todd was that mad, he would have known; he could read his son like a book. It had always been that way.

Whistling, his fatherly duty discharged, Dick Bowden unrolled a blueprint and bent over it.

6

December, 1974.

The face that came in answer to Todd's insistent finger on the bell was haggard and yellowed. The hair, which had been lush in July, had now begun to recede from the bony brow; it looked lusterless and brittle. Dussander's body, thin to begin with, was now gaunt... although, Todd thought, he was nowhere near as gaunt as the inmates who had once been delivered into his hands.

Todd's left hand had been behind his back when Dussander came to the door. Now he brought it out and handed a wrapped package to Dussander. "Merry Christmas!" he yelled.

Dussander had cringed from the box; now he took it with no expression of pleasure or surprise. He handled it gingerly, as if it might contain explosive. Beyond the porch, it was raining. It had been raining off and on for almost a week, and Todd had carried the box inside his coat. It was wrapped in gay foil and ribbon.

"What is it?" Dussander asked without enthusiasm as they went to the kitchen.

"Open it and see."

Todd took a can of Coke from his jacket pocket and put it on the red and white checked oilcloth that covered the kitchen table. "Better pull down the shades," he said confidentially.

Distrust immediately leaked onto Dussander's face. "Oh? Why?"

"Well ... you can never tell who's lookin'," Todd said, smiling. "Isn't that how you got along all those years? By seeing the people who might be lookin before they saw you?"

Dussander pulled down the kitchen shades. Then he poured himself a glass of bourbon. Then he pulled the bow off the package. Todd had wrapped it the way boys so often wrap Christmas packages—boys who have more important things on their minds, things like football and street hockey and the Friday Nite Creature Feature you'll watch with a friend who's sleeping over, the two of you wrapped in a blanket and crammed together on one end of the couch, laughing. There were a lot of ragged corners, a lot of uneven seams, a lot of Scotch tape. It spoke of impatience with such a womanly thing.

Dussander was a little touched in spite of himself. And later, when the horror had receded a little, he thought: I should have known.

It was a uniform. An SS uniform. Complete with jackboots. He looked numbly from the contents of the box to its cardboard cover: PETER'S QUALITY COSTUME CLOTHIERS—AT THE SAME LOCATION SINCE 1951!

"No," he said softly. "I won't put it on. This is where it ends, boy. I'll die before I put it on."

"Remember what they did to Eichmann," Todd said solemnly. "He was an old man and he had no politics. Isn't that what you said? Besides, I saved the whole fall for it. It cost over eighty bucks, with the boots thrown in. You didn't mind wearing it in 1944, either. Not at all."

"You little bastard!" Dussander raised one fist over his head. Todd didn't flinch at all. He stood his ground, eyes shining.

"Yeah," he said softly. "Go ahead and touch me. You just touch me once."

Dussander lowered the hand. His lips were quivering. "You are a fiend from hell," he muttered.

"Put it on," Todd invited.

Dussander's hands went to the tie of his robe and paused there. His eyes, sheeplike and begging, looked into Todd's. "Please," he said. "I am an old man. No more."

Todd shook his head slowly but firmly. His eyes were still shining. He liked it when Dussander begged. The way they must have begged him once. The inmates at Patin.

Dussander let the robe fall to the floor and stood naked except for his slippers and his boxer shorts. His chest was sunken, his belly slightly bloated. His arms were scrawny old man's arms. But the uniform, Todd thought. The uniform will make a difference.

Slowly, Dussander took the tunic out of the box and began to put it on.

Ten minutes later he stood fully dressed in the SS uniform. The Cap was slightly askew, the shoulders slumped, but still the death's-head insignia stood out clearly. Dussander had a dark dignity—at least in Todd's eyes—that he had not possessed earlier. In spite of his slump, in spite of the cockeyed angle of his feet, Todd was pleased. For the first time Dussander looked to Todd as Todd believed he should look. Older, yes. Defeated, certainly. But in uniform again. Not an old man spinning away his sunset years watching Lawrence Welk on a cruddy black and white TV with tinfoil on the rabbit ears, but Kurt Dussander, The Blood-Fiend of Patin.

As for Dussander, he felt disgust, discomfort... and a mild, sneaking sense of relief. He partly despised this latter emotion, recognizing it as the truest indicator yet of the psychological domination the boy had established over him. He was the boy's prisoner, and every time he found he could live through yet another indignity, every time he felt that mild relief, the boy's power grew. And yet he was relieved. It was only cloth and buttons and snaps ... and it was a sham at that. The fly was a zipper; it should have been buttons. The marks of rank were wrong, the tailoring sloppy, the boots a cheap grade of imitation leather. It was only a trumpery uniform after all, and it wasn't exactly killing him, was it? No. It—

“Straighten your cap!” Todd said loudly.

Dussander blinked at him, startled.

“Straighten your cap, soldier!”

Dussander did so, unconsciously giving it that final small insolent twist that had been the trademark of his Oberleutnants —and, sadly wrong as it was, this was an Oberleutnant’s uniform.

“Get those feet together!”

He did so, bringing the heels together with a smart rap, doing the correct thing with hardly a thought, doing it as if the intervening years had slipped off along with his bathrobe.

“Achtung!”

He snapped to attention, and for a moment Todd was scared—really scared. He felt like the sorcerer’s apprentice, who had brought the brooms to life but who had not possessed enough wit to stop them once they got started. The old man living in genteel poverty was gone. Dussander was here.

Then his fear was replaced by a tingling sense of power.

“About face!”

Dussander pivoted neatly, the bourbon forgotten, the torment of the last four months forgotten. He heard his heels click together again as he faced the grease-splattered stove. Beyond it, he could see the dusty parade ground of the military academy where he had learned his soldier’s trade.

“About face!”

He whirled again, this time not executing the order as well, losing his balance a little. Once it would have been ten demerits and the butt of a swagger stick in his belly, sending his breath out in a hot and

agonized gust. Inwardly he smiled a little. The boy didn't know all the tricks. No indeed.

"Now march!" Todd cried. His eyes were hot, glowing.

The iron went out of Dussander's shoulders; he slumped forward again. "No," he said. "Please—"

"March! March! March, I said!"

With a strangled sound, Dussander began to goose-step across the faded linoleum of his kitchen floor. He right-faced to avoid the table, right-faced again as he approached the wall. His face was uptilted slightly, expressionless. His legs rammed out before him, then crashed down, making the cheap china rattle in the cabinet over the sink. His arms moved in short arcs.

The image of the walking brooms recurred to Todd, and his fright recurred with it. It suddenly struck him that he didn't want Dussander to be enjoying any part of this, and that perhaps—just perhaps—he had wanted to make Dussander appear ludicrous even more than he had wanted to make him appear authentic. But somehow, despite the man's age and the cheap dime-store furnishings of the kitchen, he didn't look ludicrous in the least. He looked frightening. For the first time the corpses in the ditches and the crematoriums seemed to take on their own reality for Todd. The photographs of the tangled arms and legs and torsos, fishbelly white in the cold spring rains of Germany, were not something staged like a scene in a horror film—a pile of bodies created from department-store dummies, say, to be picked up by the grips and propmen when the scene was done—but simply a real fact, stupendous and inexplicable and evil. For a moment it seemed to him that he could smell the bland and slightly smoky odor of decomposition.

Terror gathered him in.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Dussander continued to goose-step, his eyes blank and far away. His head had come up even more, pulling the scrawny chicken-tendons of his throat tight, tilting his chin at an arrogant angle. His nose, blade-thin, jutted obscenely.

Todd felt sweat in his armpits. "Halt!" he cried out.

Dussander halted, right foot forward, left coming up and then down beside the right with a single pistonlike stamp. For a moment the cold lack of expression held on his face—robotic, mindless—and then it was replaced by confusion. Confusion was followed by defeat. He slumped.

Todd let out a silent breath of relief and for a moment he was furious with himself. Who's in charge here, anyway? Then his self-confidence flooded back in. I am, that's who. And he better not forget it.

He began to smile again. "Pretty good. But with a little practice, I think you'll be a lot better."

Dussander stood mute, panting, his head hanging.

"You can take it off now," Todd added generously... and couldn't help wondering if he really wanted Dussander to put it on again. For a few seconds there—

7

January, 1975.

Todd left school by himself after the last bell, got his bike, and pedaled down to the park. He found a deserted bench, set his Schwinn up on its kickstand, and took his report card out of his hip pocket. He took a look around to see if there was anyone in the area he knew, but the only other people in sight were two high school kids making out by the pond and a pair of gross-looking winos passing a paper bag back and forth. Dirty fucking winos, he thought, but it wasn't the winos that had upset him. He opened his card.

English: C. American History: C. Earth Science: D. Your Community and You: B. Primary French: F. Beginning Algebra: F.

He stared at the grades, unbelieving. He had known it was going to be bad, but this was disaster.

Maybe that's best, an inner voice spoke up suddenly. Maybe you even did it on purpose, because a part of you wants it to end. Needs for it to end. Before something bad happens.

He shoved the thought roughly aside. Nothing bad was going to happen. Dussander was under his thumb. Totally under his thumb. The old man thought one of Todd's friends had a letter, but he didn't know which friend. If anything happened to Todd—anything—that letter would go to the police. Once he supposed Dussander might have tried it anyway. Now he was too old to run, even with a head start.

"He's under control, dammit," Todd whispered, and then pounded his thigh hard enough to make the muscle knot. Talking to yourself was bad shit—crazy people talked to themselves. He had picked up the habit over the last six weeks or so, and didn't seem able to break it. He'd caught several people looking at him strangely because of it. A couple of them had been teachers. And that asshole Bernie Everson

had come right out and asked him if he was going fruitcrackers. Todd had come very, very close to punching the little pansy in the mouth, and that sort of stuff—brawls, scuffles, punch-outs—was no good. That sort of stuff got you noticed in all the wrong ways. Talking to yourself was bad, right, okay, but—

“The dreams are bad, too,” he whispered. He didn’t catch himself that time.

Just lately the dreams had been very bad. In the dreams he was always in uniform, although the type varied. Sometimes it was a paper uniform and he was standing in line with hundreds of gaunt men; the smell of burning was in the air and he could hear the choppy roar of bulldozer engines. Then Dussander would come up the line, pointing out this one or that one. They were left. The others were marched away toward the crematoriums. Some of them kicked and struggled, but most were too undernourished, too exhausted. Then Dussander was standing in front of Todd. Their eyes met for a long, paralyzing moment, and then Dussander levelled a faded umbrella at Todd.

“Take this one to the laboratories,” Dussander said in the dream. His lip curled back to reveal his false teeth. “Take this American boy.”

In another dream he wore an SS uniform. His jackboots were shined to a mirrorlike reflecting surface: The death’s-head insignia and the lightning-bolts glittered. But he was standing in the middle of Santo Donato Boulevard and everyone was looking at him. They began to point. Some of them began to laugh. Others looked shocked, angry, or revolted. In this dream an old car came to a squalling, creaky halt and Dussander peered out at him, a Dussander who looked two hundred years old and nearly mummified, his skin a yellowed scroll.

“I know you!” the dream-Dussander proclaimed shrilly. He looked around at the spectators and then back to Todd. “You were in charge at Patin! Look, everybody! This is The Blood-Fiend of Patin! Himmler’s ‘Efficiency Expert’! I denounce you, murderer! I denounce you, butcher! I denounce you, killer of infants! I denounce you!”

In yet another dream he wore a striped convict's uniform and was being led down a stone-walled corridor by two guards who looked like his parents. Both wore conspicuous yellow armbands with the Star of David on them. Walking behind them was a minister, reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. Todd looked back over his shoulder and saw that the minister was Dussander, and he was wearing the black tunic of an SS officer.

At the end of the stone corridor, double doors opened on an octagonal room with glass walls. There was a scaffold in the center of it. Behind the glass walls stood ranks of emaciated men and women, all naked, all watching with the same dark, flat expression. On each arm was a blue number.

"It's all right," Todd whispered to himself. "It's okay, really, everything's under control."

The couple that had been making out glanced over at him. Todd stared at them fiercely, daring them to say anything. At last they looked back the other way. Had the boy been grinning ?

Todd got up, jammed his report card into his hip pocket, and mounted his bike. He pedaled down to a drugstore two blocks away. There he bought a bottle of ink eradicator and a fine-point pen that dispensed blue ink. He went back to the park (the make-out couple was gone, but the winos were still there, stinking the place up) and changed his English grade to a B, American History to A, Earth Science to B, Primary French to C, and Beginning Algebra to B. You community and You he eradicated and then simply wrote in again, so the card would have a uniform look.

Uniforms, right.

"Never mind," he whispered to himself. "That'll hold them. That'll hold them, all right."

One night late in the month, sometime after two o'clock, Kurt Dussander awoke struggling with the bedclothes, gasping and

moaning, into a darkness that seemed close and terrifying. He felt half-suffocated, paralyzed with fear. It was as if a heavy stone lay on his chest, and he wondered if he could be having a heart attack. He clawed in the darkness for the bedside lamp and almost knocked it off the nightstand turning it on.

I'm in my own room, he thought, my own bedroom, here in Santo Donato, here in California, here in America. See, the same brown drapes pulled across the same window, the same bookshelves filled with dime paperbacks from the bookshop on Soren Street, same gray rug, same blue wallpaper. No heart attack. No jungle. No eyes.

But the terror still clung to him like a stinking pelt, and his heart went on racing. The dream had come back. He had known that it would, sooner or later, if the boy kept on. The cursed boy. He thought the boy's letter of protection was only a bluff, and not a very good one at that; something he had picked up from the TV detective programs. What friend would the boy trust not to open such a momentous letter? No friend, that was who. Or so he thought. If he could be sure—His hands closed with an arthritic, painful snap and then opened slowly.

He took the packet of cigarettes from the table and lit one, scratching the wooden match on the bedpost. The clock's hands stood at 2:41. There would be no more sleep for him this night. He inhaled smoke and then coughed it out in a series of racking spasms. No more sleep unless he wanted to go downstairs and have a drink or two. Or three. And there had been altogether too much drinking over the last six weeks or so. He was no longer a young man who could toss them off one after the other, the way he had when he had been an officer on leave in Berlin in '39, when the scent of victory had been in the air and everywhere you heard the Fuehrer's voice, saw his blazing, commanding eyes—

The boy ... the cursed boy!

"Be honest," he said aloud, and the sound of his own voice in the quiet room made him jump a little. He was not in the habit of talking

to himself, but neither was it the first time he had ever done so. He remembered doing it off and on during the last few weeks at Patin, when everything had come down around their ears and in the east the sound of Russian thunder grew louder first every day and then every hour. It had been natural enough to talk to himself then. He had been under stress, and people under stress often do strange things—cup their testicles through the pockets of their pants, click their teeth together ... Wolff had been a great teeth-clicker. He grinned as he did it. Huffmann had been a finger-snapper and a thigh-patter, creating fast, intricate rhythms that he seemed utterly unaware of. He, Kurt Dussander, had sometimes talked to himself. But now—

“You are under stress again,” he said aloud. He was aware that he had spoken in German this time. He hadn’t spoken German in many years, but the language now seemed warm and comfortable. It lulled him, eased him. It was sweet and dark.

“Yes. You are under stress. Because of the boy. But be honest with yourself. It is too early in the morning to tell lies. You have not entirely regretted talking. At first you were terrified that the boy could not or would not keep his secret. He would have to tell a friend, who would tell another friend, and that friend would tell two. But if he has kept it this long, he will keep it longer. If I am taken away, he loses his ... his talking book. Is that what I am to him? I think so.”

He fell silent, but his thoughts went on. He had been lonely—no one would ever know just how lonely. There had been times when he thought almost seriously of suicide. He made a bad hermit. The voices he heard came from the radio. The only people who visited were on the other side of a dirty glass square. He was an old man, and although he was afraid of death, he was more afraid of being an old man who is alone.

His bladder sometimes tricked him. He would be halfway to the bathroom when a dark stain spread on his pants. In wet weather his joints would first throb and then begin to cry out, and there had been days when he had chewed an entire tin of Arthritis Pain Formula

between sunrise and sunset ... and still the aspirin only subdued the aches. Even such acts as taking a book from the shelf or switching the TV channel became an essay in pain. His eyes were bad; sometimes he knocked things over, barked his shins, bumped his head. He lived in fear of breaking a bone and not being able to get to the telephone, and he lived in fear of getting there and having some doctor uncover his real past as he became suspicious of Mr. Denker's nonexistent medical history.

The boy had alleviated some of those things. When the boy was here, he could call back the old days. His memory of those days was perversely clear; he spilled out a seemingly endless catalogue of names and events, even the weather of such and such a day. He remembered Private Henreid, who manned a machine-gun in the northeast tower and the wen Private Henreid had had between his eyes. Some of the men called him Three-Eyes, or Old Cyclops. He remembered Kessel, who had a picture of his girlfriend naked, lying on a sofa with her hands behind her head. Kessel charged the men to look at it. He remembered the names of the doctors and their experiments—thresholds of pain, the brainwaves of dying men and women, physiological retardation, effects of different sorts of radiation, dozens more. Hundreds more.

He supposed he talked to the boy as all old men talk, but he guessed he was luckier than most old men, who had impatience, disinterest, or outright rudeness for an audience. His audience was endlessly fascinated.

Were a few bad dreams too high a price to pay?

He crushed out his cigarette, lay looking at the ceiling for a moment, and then swung his feet out onto the floor. He and the boy were loathsome, he supposed, feeding off each other ... eating each other. If his own belly was sometimes sour with the dark but rich food they partook of in his afternoon kitchen, what was the boy's like? Did he sleep well? Perhaps not. Lately Dussander thought the boy looked rather pale, and thinner than when he had first come into Dussander's life.

He walked across the bedroom and opened the closet door. He brushed hangers to the right, reached into the shadows, and brought out the sham uniform. It hung from his hand like a vulture-skin. He touched it with his other hand. Touched it ... and then stroked it.

After a very long time he took it down and put it on, dressing slowly, not looking into the mirror until the uniform was completely buttoned and belted (and the sham fly zipped).

He looked at himself in the mirror, then, and nodded.

He went back to bed, lay down, and smoked another cigarette. When it was finished, he felt sleepy again. He turned off the bedlamp, not believing it, that it could be this easy. But he was asleep, five minutes later, and this time his sleep was dreamless.

8

February, 1975.

After dinner, Dick Bowden produced a cognac that Dussander privately thought dreadful. But of course he smiled broadly and complimented it extravagantly. Bowden's wife served the boy a chocolate malted. The boy had been unusually quiet all through the meal. Uneasy? Yes. For some reason the boy seemed very uneasy.

Dussander had charmed Dick and Monica Bowden from the moment he and the boy had arrived. The boy had told his parents that Mr. Denker's vision was much worse than it actually was (which made poor old Mr. Denker in need of a Seeing Eye Dog, Dussander thought dryly), because that explained all the reading the boy had supposedly been doing. Dussander had been very careful about that, and he thought there had been no slips.

He was dressed in his best suit, and although the evening was damp, his arthritis had been remarkably mellow—nothing but an occasional twinge. For some absurd reason the boy had wanted him to leave his umbrella home, but Dussander had insisted. All in all, he had had a pleasant and rather exciting evening. Dreadful cognac or no, he had not been out to dinner in nine years.

During the meal he had discussed the Essen Motor Works, the rebuilding of postwar Germany—Bowden had asked several intelligent questions about that, and had seemed impressed by Dussander's answers—and German writers. Monica Bowden had asked him how he had happened to come to America so late in life and Dussander, adopting the proper expression of myopic sorrow, had explained about the death of his fictitious wife. Monica Bowden was meltingly sympathetic.

And now, over the absurd cognac, Dick Bowden said: "If this is too personal, Mr. Denker, please don't answer ... but I couldn't help wondering what you did in the war."

The boy stiffened ever so slightly.

Dussander smiled and felt for his cigarettes. He could see them perfectly well, but it was important to make not the tiniest slip. Monica put them in his hand.

“Thank you, dear lady. The meal was superb. You are a fine cook. My own wife never did better.”

Monica thanked him and looked flustered. Todd gave her an irritated look.

“Not personal at all,” Dussander said, lighting his cigarette and turning to Bowden. “I was in the reserves from 1943 on, as were all able-bodied men too old to be in the active services. By then the handwriting was on the wall for the Third Reich, and for the madmen who created it. One madman in particular, of course.”

He blew out his match and looked solemn.

“There was great relief when the tide turned against Hitler. Great relief. Of course,” and here he looked at Bowden disarmingly, as man to man, “one was careful not to express such a sentiment. Not aloud.”

“I suppose not,” Dick Bowden said respectfully.

“No,” Dussander said gravely. “Not aloud. I remember one evening when four or five of us, all friends, stopped at a local Ratskeller after work for a drink—by then there was not always Schnaps. or even beer, but it so happened that night there were both. We had all known each other for upwards of twenty years. One of our number, Hans Hassler, mentioned in passing that perhaps the Fuehrer had been ill-advised to open a second front against the Russians. I said, ‘Hans, God in Heaven, watch what you say!’ Poor Hans went pale and changed the subject entirely. Yet three days later he was gone. I never saw him again, nor, as far as I know, did anyone else who was sitting at our table that night.”

“How awful!” Monica said breathlessly. “More cognac, Mr. Denker?”

“No thank you.” He smiled at her. “My wife had a saying from her mother: ‘One must never overdo the sublime.’ “

Todd’s small, troubled frown deepened slightly.

“Do you think he was sent to one of the camps?” Dick asked. “Your friend Hessler?”

“Hessler, Dussander corrected gently. He grew grave. “Many were. The camps ... they will be the shame of the German people for a thousand years to come. They are Hitler’s real legacy.”

“Oh, I think that’s too harsh,” Bowden said, lighting his pipe and puffing out a choking cloud of Cherry Blend. “According to what I’ve read, the majority of the German people had no idea of what was going on. The locals around Auschwitz thought it was a sausage plant.”

“Ugh, how terrible,” Monica said, and pulled a grimacing that’s-enough-of-that expression at her husband. Then she turned to Dussander and smiled. “I just love the smell of a pipe, Mr. Denker, don’t you?”

“Indeed I do, madam,” Dussander said. He had just gotten an almost insurmountable urge to sneeze under control.

Bowden suddenly reached across the table and clapped his son on the shoulder. Todd jumped. “You’re awfully quiet tonight, son. Feeling all right?”

Todd offered a peculiar smile that seemed divided between his father and Dussander. “I feel okay. I’ve heard most of these stories before, remember.”

“Todd!” Monica said. “That’s hardly—”

“The boy is only being honest,” Dussander said. “A privilege of boys which men often have to give up. Yes, Mr. Bowden?”

Dick laughed and nodded.

“Perhaps I could get Todd to walk back to mine house with me now,” Dussander said. “I’m sure he has his studies.”

“Todd is a very apt pupil,” Monica said, but she spoke almost automatically, looking at Todd in a puzzled sort of way. “All A’s and B’s, usually. He got a C this last quarter, but he’s promised to bring his French up to snuff on his March report. Right, Todd-baby?”

Todd offered the peculiar smile again and nodded.

“No need for you to walk,” Dick said. “I’ll be glad to run you back to your place.”

“I walk for the air and the exercise,” Dussander said. “Really, I must insist ... unless Todd prefers not to.”

“Oh, no, I’d like a walk,” Todd said, and his mother and father beamed at him.

They were almost to Dussander’s corner when Dussander broke the silence. It was drizzling, and he hoisted his umbrella over both of them. And yet still his arthritis lay quiet, dozing. It was amazing.

“You are like my arthritis,” he said.

Todd’s head came up. “Huh?”

“Neither of you have had much to say tonight. What’s got your tongue, boy? Cat or cormorant?”

“Nothing,” Todd muttered. They turned down Dussander’s street.

“Perhaps I could guess,” Dussander said, not without a touch of malice. “When you came to get me, you were afraid I might make a

slip ... 'let the cat out of the bag,' you say here. Yet you were determined to go through with the dinner because you had run out of excuses to put your parents off. Now you are disconcerted that all went well. Is that not the truth?"

"Who cares?" Todd said, and shrugged sullenly.

"Why shouldn't it go well?" Dussander demanded. "I was dissembling before you were born. You keep a secret well enough, I give you that. I give it to you most graciously. But did you see me tonight? I charmed them. Charmed them!"

Todd suddenly burst out: "You didn't have to do that!" Dussander came to a complete stop, staring at Todd.

"Not do it? Not? I thought that was what you wanted, boy! Certainly they will offer no objections if you continue to come over and 'read' to me."

"You're sure taking a lot for granted!" Todd said hotly. "Maybe I've got all I want from you. Do you think there's anybody forcing me to come over to your scuzzy house and watch you slop up booze like those old wino pusbags that hang around the old trainyards? Is that what you think?" His voice had risen and taken on a thin, wavering, hysterical note. "Because there's nobody forcing me. If I want to come, I'll come, and if I don't, I won't "

"Lower your voice. People will hear."

"Who cares?" Todd said, but he began to walk again. This time he deliberately walked outside the umbrella's span.

"No, nobody forces you to come," Dussander said. And then he took a calculated shot in the dark: "In fact, you are welcome to stay away. Believe me, boy, I have no scruples about drinking alone. None at all."

Todd looked at him scornfully. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Dussander only smiled noncommittally.

“Well, don’t count on it.” They had reached the concrete walk leading up to Dussander’s stoop. Dussander fumbled in his pocket for his latchkey. The arthritis flared a dim red in the joints of his fingers and then subsided, waiting. Now Dussander thought he understood what it was waiting for: for him to be alone again. Then it could come out.

“I’ll tell you something,” Todd said. He sounded oddly breathless. “If they knew what you were, if I ever told them, they’d spit on you and then kick you out on your skinny old ass.”

Dussander looked at Todd closely in the drizzling dark. The boy’s face was turned defiantly up to his, but the skin was pallid, the sockets under the eyes dark and slightly hollowed—the skin-tones of someone who has brooded long while others are asleep.

“I am sure they would have nothing but revulsion for me,” Dussander said, although he privately thought that the elder Bowden might stay his revulsion long enough to ask many of the questions his son had asked already. “Nothing but revulsion. But what would they feel for you, boy, when I told them you had known about me for eight months ... and said nothing?”

Todd stared at him wordlessly in the dark.

“Come and see me if you please,” Dussander said indifferently, “and stay home if you don’t. Goodnight, boy.”

He went up the walk to his front door, leaving Todd standing in the drizzle and looking after him with his mouth slightly ajar.

The next morning at breakfast, Monica said: “Your dad liked Mr. Denker a lot, Todd. He said he reminded him of your grandfather.”

Todd muttered something unintelligible around his toast. Monica looked at her son and wondered if he had been sleeping well. He

looked pale. And his grades had taken that inexplicable dip. Todd never got C's.

"You feeling okay these days, Todd?"

He looked at her blankly for a moment, and then that radiant smile spread over his face, charming her ... comforting her. There was a dab of strawberry preserves on his chin.

"Sure," he said. "Four-oh."

"Todd-baby," she said.

"Monica-baby," he responded, and they both started to laugh.

9

March, 1975.

“Kitty-kitty,” Dussander said. “Heeere, kitty-kitty. Puss-puss? Puss-puss?”

He was sitting on his back stoop, a pink plastic bowl by his right foot. The bowl was full of milk. It was one-thirty in the afternoon; the day was hazy and hot. Brush-fires far to the west tinged the air with an autumnal smell that jagged oddly against the calendar. If the boy was coming, he would be here in another hour. But the boy didn't always come now. Instead of seven days a week he came sometimes only four times, or five. An intuition had grown in him, little by little, and his intuition told him that the boy was having troubles of his own.

“Kitty-kitty,” Dussander coaxed. The stray cat was at the far end of the yard, sitting in the ragged verge of weeds by Dussander's fence. It was a tom, and every bit as ragged as the weeds it sat in. Every time he spoke, the cat's ears cocked forward. Its eyes never left the pink bowl filled with milk.

Perhaps, Dussander thought, the boy was having troubles with his studies. Or bad dreams. Or both.

That last made him smile.

“Kitty-kitty,” he called softly. The cat's ears cocked forward again. It didn't move, not yet, but it continued to study the milk.

Dussander had certainly been afflicted with problems of his own. For three weeks or so he had worn the SS uniform to bed like grotesque pajamas, and the uniform had warded off the insomnia and the bad dreams. His sleep had been—at first—as sound as a lumberjack's. Then the dreams had returned, not little by little, but all at once, and worse than ever before. Dreams of running as well as the dreams of

the eyes. Running through a wet, unseen jungle where heavy leaves and damp fronds struck his face, leaving trickles that felt like sap ... or blood. Running and running, the luminous eyes always around him, peering soullessly at him, until he broke into a clearing. In the darkness he sensed rather than saw the steep rise that began on the clearing's far side. At the top of that rise was Patin, its low cement buildings and yards surrounded by barbed wire and electrified wire, its sentry towers standing like Martian dreadnoughts straight out of War of the Worlds. And in the middle, huge stacks billowed smoke against the sky, and below these brick columns were the furnaces, stoked and ready to go, glowing in the night like the eyes of fierce demons. They had told the inhabitants of the area that the Patin inmates made clothes and candles, and of course the locals had believed that no more than the locals around Auschwitz had believed that the camp was a sausage factory. It didn't matter.

Looking back over his shoulder in the dream, he would at last see them coming out of hiding, the restless dead, the Juden, shambling toward him with blue numbers glaring from the livid flesh of their outstretched arms, their hands hooked into talons, their faces no longer expressionless but animated with hate, lively with vengeance, vivacious with murder. Toddlers ran beside their mothers and grandfathers were borne up by their middle-aged children. And the dominant expression on all their faces was desperation.

Desperation? Yes. Because in the dreams he knew (and so did they) that if he could climb the hill, he would be safe. Down here in these wet and swampy lowlands, in this jungle where the night-flowering plants extruded blood instead of sap, he was a hunted animal ... prey. But up there, he was in command. If this was a jungle, then the camp at the top of the hill was a zoo, all the wild animals safely in cages, he the head keeper whose job it was to decide which would be fed, which would live, which would be handed over to the vivisectionists, which would be taken to the knacker's in the remover's van.

He would begin to run up the hill, running in all the slowness of nightmare. He would feel the first skeletal hands close about his neck, feel their cold and stinking breath, smell their decay, hear their birdlike cries of triumph as they pulled him down with salvation not only in sight but almost at hand—

“Kitty-kitty,” Dussander called. “Milk. Nice milk.”

The cat came at last. It crossed half of the back yard and then sat again, but lightly, its tail twitching with worry. It didn’t trust him; no. But Dussander knew the cat could smell the milk and so he was sanguine. Sooner or later it would come.

At Patin there had never been a contraband problem. Some of the prisoners came in with their valuables poked far up their asses in small chamois bags (and how often their valuables turned out not to be valuable at all—photographs, locks of hair, fake jewelry), often pushed up with sticks until they were past the point where even the long fingers of the trusty they had called Stinky-Thumbs could reach. One woman, he remembered, had had a small diamond, flawed, it turned out, really not valuable at all—but it had been in her family for six generations, passed from mother to eldest daughter (or so she said, but of course she was a Jew and all of them lied). She swallowed it before entering Patin. When it came out in her waste, she swallowed it again. She kept doing this, although eventually the diamond began to cut her insides and she bled.

There had been other ruses, although most only involved petty items such as a hoard of tobacco or a hair-ribbon or two. It didn’t matter. In the room Dussander used for prisoner interrogations there was a hot plate and a homely kitchen table covered with a red checked cloth much like the one in his own kitchen. There was always a pot of lamb stew bubbling mellowly away on that hotplate. When contraband was suspected (and when was it not?) a member of the suspected clique would be brought to that room. Dussander would stand them by the hotplate, where the rich fumes from the stew wafted. Gently, he would ask them Who. Who is hiding gold? Who is hiding jewelry? Who has tobacco? Who gave the Givenet woman the

pill for her baby? Who? The stew was never specifically promised; but always the aroma eventually loosened their tongues. Of course, a truncheon would have done the same, or a gun-barrel jammed into their filthy crotches, but the stew was ... was elegant. Yes.

“Kitty-kitty,” Dussander called. The cat’s ears cocked forward. It half-rose, then half-remembered some long-ago kick, or perhaps a match that had burned its whiskers, and it settled back on its haunches. But soon it would move.

He had found a way of propitiating his nightmare. It was, in a way, no more than wearing the SS uniform ... but raised to a greater power. Dussander was pleased with himself, only sorry that he had never thought of it before. He supposed he had the boy to thank for this new method of quieting himself, for showing him that the key to the past’s terrors was not in rejection but in contemplation and even something like a friend’s embrace. It was true that before the boy’s unexpected arrival last summer he hadn’t had any bad dreams for a long time, but he believed now that he had come to a coward’s terms with his past. He had been forced to give up a part of himself. Now he had reclaimed it.

“Kitty-kitty,” called Dussander, and a smile broke on his face, a kindly smile, a reassuring smile, the smile of all old men who have somehow come through the cruel courses of life to a safe place, still relatively intact, and with at least some wisdom.

The tom rose from its haunches, hesitated only a moment longer, and then trotted across the remainder of the back yard with lithe grace. It mounted the steps, gave Dussander a final mistrustful look, laying back its chewed and scabby ears; then it began to drink the milk.

“Nice milk,” Dussander said, pulling on the Playtex rubber gloves that had lain in his lap all the while. “Nice milk for a nice kitty.” He had bought these gloves in the supermarket. He had stood in the express lane, and older women had looked at him approvingly, even speculatively. The gloves were advertised on TV. They had cuffs.

They were so flexible you could pick up a dime while you were wearing them.

He stroked the cat's back with one green finger and talked to it soothingly. Its back began to arch with the rhythm of his strokes.

Just before the bowl was empty, he seized the cat.

It came electrically alive in his clenching hands, twisting and jerking, clawing at the rubber. Its body lashed limberly back and forth, and Dussander had no doubt that if its teeth or claws got into him, it would come off the winner. It was an old campaigner. It takes one to know one, Dussander thought, grinning.

Holding the cat prudently away from his body, the painful grin stamped on his face, Dussander pushed the back door open with his foot and went into the kitchen. The cat yowled and twisted and ripped at the rubber gloves. Its feral, triangular head flashed down and fastened on one green thumb.

"Nasty kitty," Dussander said reproachfully.

The oven door stood open. Dussander threw the cat inside. Its claws made a ripping, prickly sound as they disengaged from the gloves. Dussander slammed the oven door shut with one knee, provoking a painful twinge from his arthritis. Yet he continued to grin. Breathing hard, nearly panting, he propped himself against the stove for a moment, his head hanging down. It was a gas stove. He rarely used it for anything fancier than TV dinners and killing stray cats.

Faintly, rising up through the gas burners, he could hear the cat scratching and yowling to be let out.

Dussander twisted the oven dial over to 500deg. There was an audible pop! as the oven pilot-light lit two double rows of hissing gas. The cat stopped yowling and began to scream. It sounded ... yes ... almost like a young boy. A young boy in terrible pain. The thought made Dussander smile even more broadly. His heart thundered in

his chest. The cat scratched and whirled madly in the oven, still screaming. Soon, a hot, furry, burning smell began to seep out of the oven and into the room.

He scraped the remains of the cat out of the oven half an hour later, using a barbecue fork he had acquired for two dollars and ninety-eight cents at the Grant's in the shopping center a mile away.

The cat's roasted carcass went into an empty flour sack. He took the sack down cellar. The cellar floor had never been cemented. Shortly, Dussander came back up. He sprayed the kitchen with Glade until it reeked of artificial pine scent. He opened all the windows. He washed the barbecue fork and hung it up on the pegboard. Then he sat down to wait and see if the boy would come. He smiled and smiled.

Todd did come, about five minutes after Dussander had given up on him for the afternoon. He was wearing a warm-up jacket with his school colors on it; he was also wearing a San Diego Padres baseball cap. He carried his schoolbooks under his arm.

"Yucka-ducka," he said, coming into the kitchen and wrinkling his nose. "What's that smell? It's awful."

"I tried the oven," Dussander said, lighting a cigarette. "I'm afraid I burned my supper. I had to throw it out."

One day later that month the boy came much earlier than usual, long before school usually let out. Dussander was sitting in the kitchen, drinking Ancient Age bourbon from a chipped and discolored cup that had the words HERE'S YER CAWFEE MAW, HAW! HAW! HAW! written around the rim. He had his rocker out in the kitchen now and he was just drinking and rocking, rocking and drinking, bumping his slippers on the faded linoleum. He was pleasantly high. There had been no more bad dreams at all until just last night. Not since the tomcat with the chewed ears. Last night's had been particularly horrible, though. That could not be denied. They had dragged him down after he had gotten halfway up the hill, and they had begun to

do unspeakable things to him before he was able to wake himself up. Yet, after his initial thrashing return to the world of real things, he had been confident. He could end the dreams whenever he wished. Perhaps a cat would not be enough this time. But there was always the dog pound. Yes. Always the pound.

Todd came abruptly into the kitchen, his face pale and shiny and strained. He had lost weight, all right, Dussander thought. And there was a queer white look in his eyes that Dussander did not like at all.

“You’re going to help me,” Todd said suddenly and defiantly.

“Really?” Dussander said mildly, but sudden apprehension leaped inside of him. He didn’t let his face change as Todd slammed his books down on the table with a sudden, vicious overhand stroke. One of them spun-skated across the oilcloth and landed in a tent on the floor by Dussander’s foot.

“Yes, you’re fucking-A right!” Todd said shrilly. “You better believe it! Because this is your fault! All your fault!” Hectic spots of red mounted into his cheeks. “But you’re going to have to help me get out of it, because I’ve got the goods on you! I’ve got you right where I want you!”

“I’ll help you in any way I can,” Dussander said quietly. He saw that he had folded his hands neatly in front of himself without even thinking about it—just as he had once done. He leaned forward in the rocker until his chin was directly over his folded hands—as he had once done. His face was calm and friendly and enquiring; none of his growing apprehension showed. Sitting just so, he could almost imagine a pot of lamb stew simmering on the stove behind him. “Tell me what the trouble is.”

“This is the fucking trouble,” Todd said viciously, and threw a folder at Dussander. It bounced off his chest and landed in his lap, and he was momentarily surprised by the heat of the anger which leaped up in him; the urge to rise and backhand the boy smartly. Instead, he kept the mild expression on his face. It was the boy’s school-card, he

saw, although the school seemed to be at ridiculous pains to hide the fact. Instead of a school-card, or a Grade Report, it was called a "Quarterly Progress Report." He grunted at that, and opened the card.

A typed half-sheet of paper fell out. Dussander put it aside for later examination and turned his attention to the boy's grades first.

"You seem to have fallen on the rocks, my boy," Dussander said, not without some pleasure. The boy had passed only English and American History. Every other grade was an F.

"It's not my fault," Todd hissed venomously. "It's your fault. All those stories. I have nightmares about them, do you know that? I sit down and open my books and I start thinking about whatever you told me that day and the next thing I know, my mother's telling me it's time to go to bed. Well, that's not my fault! It isn't! You hear me? It isn't!"

"I hear you very well," Dussander said, and read the typed note that had been tucked into Todd's card.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Bowden,

This note is to suggest that we have a group conference concerning Todd's second-and third-quarter grades. In light of Todd's previous good work in this school, his current grades suggest a specific problem which may be affecting his academic performance in a deleterious way. Such a problem can often be solved by a frank and open discussion.

I should point out that although Todd has passed the half-year, his final grades may be failing in some cases unless his work improves radically in the fourth quarter. Failing grades would entail summer school to avoid being kept back and causing a major scheduling problem.

I must also note that Todd is in the college division, and that his work so far this year is far below college acceptance levels. It is also

below the level of academic ability assumed by the SAT tests.

Please be assured that I am ready to work out a mutually convenient time for us to meet. In a case such as this, earlier is usually better.

Sincerely yours, Edward French

“Who is this Edward French?” Dussander asked, slipping the note back inside the card (part of him still marvelled at the American love of jargon; such a rolling missive to inform the parents that their son was flunking out!) and then refolding his hands. His premonition of disaster was stronger than ever, but he refused to give in to it. A year before, he would have done; a year ago he had been ready for disaster. Now he was not, but it seemed that the cursed boy had brought it to him anyway. “Is he your headmaster?”

“Rubber Ed? Hell, no. He’s the guidance counsellor.”

“Guidance counsellor? What is that?”

“You can figure it out,” Todd said. He was nearly hysterical. “You read the goddam note!” He walked rapidly around the room, shooting sharp, quick glances at Dussander. “Well, I’m not going to let any of this shit go down. I’m just not. I’m not going to any summer school. My dad and mom are going to Hawaii this summer and I’m going with them.” He pointed at the card on the table. “Do you know what my dad will do if he sees that?”

Dussander shook his head.

“He’ll get everything out of me. Everything. He’ll know it was you. It couldn’t be anything else, because nothing else has changed. He’ll poke and pry and he’ll get it all out of me. And then ... then I’ll ... I’ll be in dutch.”

He stared at Dussander resentfully.

“They’ll watch me. Hell, they might make me see a doctor, I don’t know. How should I know? But I’m not getting in dutch. And I’m not going to any fucking summer school.”

“Or to the reformatory,” Dussander said. He said it very quietly.

Todd stopped circling the room. His face became very still. His cheeks and forehead, already pale, became even whiter. He stared at Dussander, and had to try twice before he could speak. “What? What did you just say?”

“My dear boy,” Dussander said, assuming an air of great patience, “for the last five minutes I have listened to you pule and whine, and what all your puling and whining comes down to is this. You are in trouble. You might be found out. You might find yourself in adverse circumstances.” Seeing that he had the boy’s complete attention—at last—Dussander sipped reflectively from his cup.

“My boy,” he went on, “that is a very dangerous attitude for you to have. And dangerous for me. The potential harm is much greater for me. You worry about your school-card. Pah! This for your school-card.”

He flicked it off the table and onto the floor with one yellow finger.

“I am worried about my life!”

Todd did not reply; he simply went on looking at Dussander with that white-eyed, slightly crazed stare.

“The Israelis will not scruple at the fact that I am seventy-six. The death-penalty is still very much in favor over there, you know, especially when the man in the dock is a Nazi war criminal associated with the camps.”

“You’re a U.S. citizen,” Todd said. “America wouldn’t let them take you. I read up on that. I—”

“You read, but you don’t listen! I am not a U.S. citizen! My papers came from la cosa nostra. I would be deported, and Mossad agents would be waiting for me wherever I deplaned.”

“I wish they would hang you,” Todd muttered, curling his hands into fists and staring down at them. “I was crazy to get mixed up with you in the first place.”

“No doubt,” Dussander said, and smiled thinly. “But you are mixed up with me. We must live in the present, boy, not in the past of ‘I-should-have-nevers.’ You must realize that your fate and my own are now inextricably entwined. If you ‘blow the horn on me,’ as your saying goes, do you think I will hesitate to blow the horn on you? Seven hundred thousand died at Patin. To the world at large I am a criminal, a monster, even the butcher your scandal-rags would have me. You are an accessory to all of that, my boy. You have criminal knowledge of an illegal alien, but you have not reported it. And if I am caught, I will tell the world all about you. When the reporters put their microphones in my face, it will be your name I’ll repeat over and over again. ‘Todd Bowden, yes, that is his name ... how long? Almost a year. He wanted to know everything ... all the gooshy parts. That’s how he put it, yes: “All the gooshy parts.” ‘ “

Todd’s breath had stopped. His skin appeared transparent. Dussander smiled at him. He sipped bourbon.

“I think they will put you in jail. They may call it a reformatory, or a correctional facility—there may be a fancy name for it, like this ‘Quarterly Progress Report’ “—his lip curled—“but no matter what they call it, there will be bars on the windows.”

Todd wet his lips. “I’d call you a liar. I’d tell them I just found out. They’d believe me, not you. You just better remember that.”

Dussander’s thin smile remained. “I thought you told me your father would get it all out of you.”

Todd spoke slowly, as a person speaks when realization and verbalization occur simultaneously. "Maybe not. Maybe not this time. This isn't just breaking a window with a rock."

Dussander winced inwardly. He suspected that the boy's judgment was right—with so much at stake, he might indeed be able to convince his father. After all, when faced with such an unpleasant truth, what parent would not want to be convinced ?

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. But how are you going to explain all those books you had to read to me because poor Mr. Denker is half-blind? My eyes are not what they were, but I can still read fine print with my spectacles. I can prove it."

"I'd say you fooled me!"

"Will you? And what reason will you be able to give for my fooling?"

"For ... for friendship. Because you were lonely."

That, Dussander reflected, was just close enough to the truth to be believable. And once, in the beginning, the boy might have been able to bring it off. But now he was ragged; now he was coming apart in strings like a coat that has reached the end of its useful service. If a child shot off his cap pistol across the street, this boy would jump into the air and scream like a girl.

"Your school-card will also support my side of it," Dussander said. "It was not Robinson Crusoe that caused your grades to fall down so badly, my boy, was it?"

"Shut up, why don't you? Just shut up about it!"

"No," Dussander said. "I won't shut up about it." He lit a cigarette, scratching the wooden match alight on the gas oven door. "Not until I make you see the simple truth. We are in this together, sink or swim." He looked at Todd through the raftering smoke, not smiling, his old, lined face reptilian. "I will drag you down, boy. I promise you

that. If anything comes out, everything will come out. That is my promise to you.”

Todd stared at him sullenly and didn't reply.

“Now,” Dussander said briskly, with the air of a man who has put a necessary unpleasantness behind him, “the question is, what are we going to do about this situation? Have you any ideas?”

“This will fix the report card,” Todd said, and took a new bottle of ink eradicator from his jacket pocket. “About that fucking letter, I don't know.”

Dussander looked at the ink eradicator approvingly. He had falsified a few reports of his own in his time. When the quotas had gone up to the point of fantasy ... and far, far beyond. And ... more like the situation they were now in—there had been the matter of the invoices ... those which enumerated the spoils of war. Each week he would check the boxes of valuables, all of them to be sent back to Berlin in special train-cars that were like big safes on wheels. On the side of each box was a manila envelope, and inside the envelope there had been a verified invoice of that box's contents. So many rings, necklaces, chokers, so many grams of gold. Dussander, however, had had his own box of valuables—not very valuable valuables, but not insignificant, either. Jades. Tourmalines. Opals. A few flawed pearls. Industrial diamonds. And when he saw an item invoiced for Berlin that caught his eye or seemed a good investment, he would remove it, replace it with an item from his own box, and use ink eradicator on the invoice, changing their item for his. He had developed into a fairly expert forger ... a talent that had come in handy more than once after the war was over.

“Good,” he told Todd. “As for this other matter ...” Dussander began to rock again, sipping from his cup. Todd pulled a chair up to the table and began to go to work on his report card, which he had picked up from the floor without a word. Dussander's outward calm had had its effect on him and now he worked silently, his head bent studiously over the card, like any American boy who has set out to

do the best by God job he can, whether that job be planting corn, pitching a no-hitter in the Little League World Series, or forging grades on his report card.

Dussander looked at the nape of his neck, lightly tanned and cleanly exposed between the fall of his hair and the round neck of his tee-shirt. His eyes drifted from there to the top counter drawer where he kept the butcher knives. One quick thrust—he knew where to put it—and the boy's spinal cord would be severed. His lips would be sealed forever. Dussander smiled regretfully. There would be questions asked if the boy disappeared. Too many of them. Some directed at him. Even if there was no letter with a friend, close scrutiny was something he could not afford. Too bad.

"This man French," he said, tapping the letter. "Does he know your parents in a social way?"

"Him?" Todd edged the word with contempt. "My mom and dad don't go anywhere that he could even get in."

"Has he ever met them in his professional capacity? Has he ever had conferences with them before?"

"No. I've always been near the top of my classes. Until now."

"So what does he know about them?" Dussander said, looking dreamily into his cup, which was now nearly empty. "Oh, he knows about you. He no doubt has all the records on you that he can use. Back to the fights you had in the kindergarten play yard. But what does he know about them?"

Todd put his pen and the small bottle of ink eradicator away. "Well, he knows their names. Of course. And their ages. He knows we're all Methodists. You don't have to fill that line out, but my folks always do. We don't go much, but he'd know that's what we are. He must know what my dad does for a living; that's on the forms, too. All that stuff they have to fill out every year. And I'm pretty sure that's all."

“Would he know if your parents were having troubles at home?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dussander tossed off the last of the bourbon in his cup. “Squabbles. Fights. Your father sleeping on the couch. Your mother drinking too much.” His eyes gleamed. “A divorce brewing.”

Indignantly, Todd said: “There’s nothing like that going on! No way!”

“I never said there was. But just think, boy. Suppose that things at your house were ‘going to hell in a streetcar,’ as the saying is.”

Todd only looked at him, frowning.

“You would be worried about them,” Dussander said.

“Very worried. You would lose your appetite. You would sleep poorly. Saddest of all, your schoolwork would suffer. True? Very sad for the children, when there are troubles in the home.”

Understanding dawned in the boy’s eyes—understanding and something like dumb gratitude. Dussander was gratified.

“Yes, it is an unhappy situation when a family totters on the edge of destruction,” Dussander said grandly, pouring more bourbon. He was getting quite drunk. “The daytime television dramas, they make this absolutely clear. There is acrimony. Backbiting and lies. Most of all, there is pain. Pain, my boy. You have no idea of the hell your parents are going through. They are so swallowed up by their own troubles that they have little time for the problems of their own son. His problems seem minor compared to theirs, hein? Someday, when the scars have begun to heal, they will no doubt take a fuller interest in him once again. But now the only concession they can make is to send the boy’s kindly grandfather to Mr. French.”

Todd’s eyes had been gradually brightening to a glow that was nearly fervid. “Might work,” he was muttering. “Might, yeah, might

work, might—” He broke off suddenly. His eyes darkened again. “No, it won’t. You don’t look like me, not even a little bit. Rubber Ed will never believe it.”

“Himmel! Gott im Himmel!” Dussander cried, getting to his feet, crossing the kitchen (a bit unsteadily), opening the cellar door, and pulling out a fresh bottle of Ancient Age. He spun off the cap and poured liberally. “For a smart boy, you are such a Dummkopf. When do grandfathers ever look like their grandsons? Huh? I got white hair. Do you have white hair?”

Approaching the table again, he reached out with surprising quickness, snatched an abundant handful of Todd’s blonde hair, and pulled briskly.

“Cut it out!” Todd snapped, but he smiled a little.

“Besides,” Dussander said, settling back into his rocker,

“you have yellow hair and blue eyes. My eyes are blue, and before my hair turned white, it was yellow. You can tell me your whole family history. Your aunts and uncles. The people your father works with. Your mother’s little hobbies. I will remember. I will study and remember. Two days later it will all be forgotten again—these days my memory is like a cloth bag filled with water—but I will remember for long enough.” He smiled grimly. “In my time I have stayed ahead of Wiesenthal and pulled the wool over the eyes of Himmler himself. If I cannot fool one American public school teacher, I will pull my winding-shroud around me and crawl down into my grave.”

“Maybe,” Todd said slowly, and Dussander could see he had already accepted it. His eyes were luminous with relief.

“No—surely!” Dussander cried.

He began to cackle with laughter, the rocking chair squeaking back and forth. Todd looked at him, puzzled and a little frightened, but after a bit he began to laugh, too. In Dussander’s kitchen they

laughed and laughed, Dussander by the open window where the warm California breeze wafted in, and Todd rocked back on the rear legs of his kitchen chair, so that its back rested against the oven door, the white enamel of which was crisscrossed by the dark, charred-looking streaks made by Dussander's wooden matches as he struck them alight.

Rubber Ed French (his nickname, Todd had explained to Dussander, referred to the rubbers he always wore over his sneakers during wet weather) was a slight man who made an affectation of always wearing Keds to school. It was a touch of informality which he thought would endear him to the one hundred and six children between the ages of twelve and fourteen who made up his counselling load. He had five pairs of Keds, ranging in color from Fast Track Blue to Screaming Yellow Zonkers, totally unaware that behind his back he was known not only as Rubber Ed but as Sneaker Pete and The Ked Man, as in The Ked Man Cometh. He had been known as Pucker in college, and he would have been most humiliated of all to learn that even that shameful fact had somehow gotten out.

He rarely wore ties, preferring turtleneck sweaters. He had been wearing these ever since the mid-sixties, when David McCallum had popularized them in The Man from U.N.C.L.E. In his college days his classmates had been known to spy him crossing the quad and remark, "Here comes Pucker in his U.N.C.L.E. sweater." He had majored in Educational Psychology, and he privately considered himself to be the only good guidance counsellor he had ever met. He had real rapport with his kids. He could get right down to it with them; he could rap with them and be silently sympathetic if they had to do some shouting and kick out the jams. He could get into their hangups because he understood what a bummer it was to be thirteen when someone was doing a number on your head and you couldn't get your shit together.

The thing was, he had a damned hard time remembering what it had been like to be thirteen himself. He supposed that was the ultimate

price you had to pay for growing up in the fifties. That, and travelling into the brave new world of the sixties nicknamed Pucker.

Now, as Todd Bowden's grandfather came into his office, closing the pebbled-glass door firmly behind him, Rubber Ed stood up respectfully but was careful not to come around his desk to greet the old man. He was aware of his sneakers. Sometimes the old-timers didn't understand that the sneakers were a psychological aid with kids who had teacher hangups—which was to say that some of the older folks couldn't get behind a guidance counsellor in Keds.

This is one fine-looking dude, Rubber Ed thought. His white hair was carefully brushed back. His three-piece suit was spotlessly clean. His dove-gray tie was impeccably knotted. In his left hand he held a furled black umbrella (outside, a light drizzle had been falling since the weekend) in a manner that was almost military. A few years ago Rubber Ed and his wife had gone on a Dorothy Sayers jag, reading everything by that estimable lady that they could lay their hands upon. It occurred to him now that this was her brainchild, Lord Peter Wimsey, to the life. It was Wimsey at seventy-five, years after both Bunter and Harriet Vane had passed on to their rewards. He made a mental note to tell Sondra about this when he got home.

"Mr. Bowden," he said respectfully, and offered his hand.

"A pleasure," Bowden said, and shook it. Rubber Ed was careful not to put on the firm and uncompromising pressure he applied to the hands of the fathers he saw; it was obvious from the gingerly way the old boy offered it that he had arthritis.

"A pleasure, Mr. French," Bowden repeated, and took a seat, carefully pulling up the knees of his trousers. He propped the umbrella between his feet and leaned on it, looking like an elderly, extremely urbane vulture that had come in to roost in Rubber Ed French's office. He had the slightest touch of an accent, Rubber Ed thought, but it wasn't the clipped intonation of the British upper class, as Wimsey's would have been; it was broader, more European.

Anyway, the resemblance to Todd was quite striking. Especially through the nose and eyes.

“I’m glad you could come,” Rubber Ed told him, resuming his own seat, “although in these cases the student’s mother or father—”

This was the opening gambit, of course. Almost ten years of experience in the counselling business had convinced him that when an aunt or an uncle or a grandparent showed up for a conference, it usually meant trouble at home—the sort of trouble that invariably turned out to be the root of the problem. To Rubber Ed, this came as a relief. Domestic problems were bad, but for a boy of Todd’s intelligence, a heavy drug trip would have been much, much worse.

“Yes, of course,” Bowden said, managing to look both sorrowful and angry at the same time. “My son and his wife asked me if I could come and talk this sorry business over with you, Mr. French. Todd is a good boy, believe me. This trouble with his school marks is only temporary.”

“Well, we all hope so, don’t we, Mr. Bowden? Smoke if you like. It’s supposed to be off-limits on school property, but I’ll never tell.”

“Thank you.”

Mr. Bowden took a half-crushed package of Camel cigarettes from his inner pocket, put one of the last two zigzagging smokes in his mouth, found a Diamond Blue-Tip match, scratched it on the heel of one black shoe, and lit up. He coughed an old man’s dank cough over the first drag, shook the match out, and put the blackened stump into the ashtray Rubber Ed had produced. Rubber Ed watched this ritual, which seemed almost as formal as the old man’s shoes, with frank fascination.

“Where to begin,” Bowden said, his distressed face looking at Rubber Ed through a swirling raft of cigarette smoke.

“Well,” Rubber Ed said kindly, “the very fact that you’re here instead of Todd’s parents tells me something, you know.”

“Yes, I suppose it does. Very well.” He folded his hands. The Camel protruded from between the second and third fingers of his right. He straightened his back and lifted his chin. There was something almost Prussian in his mental coming to terms, Rubber Ed thought, something that made him think of all those war movies he’d seen as a kid.

“My son and my daughter-in-law are having troubles in their home,” Bowden said, biting off each word precisely. “Rather bad troubles, I should think.” His eyes, old but amazingly bright, watched as Rubber Ed opened the folder centered in front of him on the desk blotter. There were sheets of paper inside, but not many.

“And you feel that these troubles are affecting Todd’s academic performance?”

Bowden leaned forward perhaps six inches. His blue eyes never left Rubber Ed’s brown ones. There was a heavily charged pause, and then Bowden said: “The mother drinks.”

He resumed his former ramrod-straight position.

“Oh,” Rubber Ed said.

“Yes,” Bowden replied, nodding grimly. “The boy has told me that he has come home on two occasions and has found her sprawled out on the kitchen table. He knows how my son feels about her drinking problem, and so the boy has put dinner in the oven himself on these occasions, and has gotten her to drink enough black coffee so she will at least be awake when Richard comes home.”

“That’s bad,” Rubber Ed said, although he had heard worse—mothers with heroin habits, fathers who had abruptly taken it into their heads to start banging their daughters ... or their sons. “Has

Mrs. Bowden thought about getting professional help for her problem?”

“The boy has tried to persuade her that would be the best course. She is much ashamed, I think. If she was given a little time ...” He made a gesture with his cigarette that left a dissolving smoke-ring in the air. “You understand?”

“Yes, of course.” Rubber Ed nodded, privately admiring the gesture that had produced the smoke-ring. “Your son ... Todd’s father ...”

“He is not without blame,” Bowden said harshly. “The hours he works, the meals he has missed, the nights when he must leave suddenly ... I tell you, Mr. French, he is more married to his job than he is to Monica. I was raised to believe that a man’s family came before everything. Was it not the same for you?”

“It sure was,” Rubber Ed responded heartily. His father had been a night watchman for a large Los Angeles department store and he had really only seen his pop on weekends and vacations.

“That is another side of the problem,” Bowden said.

Rubber Ed nodded and thought for a moment. “What about your other son, Mr. Bowden? Uh ...” He looked down at the folder. “Harold. Todd’s uncle.”

“Harry and Deborah are in Minnesota now,” Bowden said, quite truthfully. “He has a position there at the University medical school. It would be quite difficult for him to leave, and very unfair to ask him.” His face took on a righteous cast. “Harry and his wife are quite happily married.”

“I see.” Rubber Ed looked at the file again for a moment and then closed it. “Mr. Bowden, I appreciate your frankness. I’ll be just as frank with you.”

“Thank you,” Bowden said stiffly.

“We can’t do as much for our students in the counselling area as we would like. There are six counsellors here, and we’re each carrying a load of over a hundred students. My newest colleague, Hepburn, has a hundred and fifteen. At this age, in our society, all children need help.”

“Of course.” Bowden mashed his cigarette brutally into the ashtray and folded his hands once more.

“Sometimes bad problems get by us. Home environment and drugs are the two most common. At least Todd isn’t mixed up with speed or mescaline or PCP.”

“God forbid.”

“Sometimes,” Rubber Ed went on, “there’s simply nothing we can do. It’s depressing, but it’s a fact of life. Usually the ones that are first to get spit out of the machine we’re running here are the class troublemakers, the sullen, uncommunicative kids, the ones who refuse to even try. They are simply warm bodies waiting for the system to buck them up through the grades or waiting to get old enough so they can quit without their parents’ permission and join the Army or get a job at the Speedy-Boy Carwash or marry their boyfriends. You understand? I’m being blunt. Our system is, as they say, not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“I appreciate your frankness.”

“But it hurts when you see the machine starting to mash up someone like Todd. He ran out a ninety-two average for last year’s work, and that puts him in the ninety-fifth percentile. His English averages are even better. He shows a flair for writing, and that’s something special in a generation of kids that think culture begins in front of the TV and ends in the neighborhood movie theater. I was talking to the woman who had Todd in Comp last year. She said Todd passed in the finest term-paper she’d seen in twenty years of teaching. It was on the German death-camps during World War Two. She gave him the only A-plus she’s ever given a composition student.”

“I have read it,” Bowden said. “It is very fine.”

“He has also demonstrated above-average ability in the life sciences and social sciences, and while he’s not going to be one of the great math whizzes of the century, all the notes I have indicate that he’s given it the good old college try ... until this year. Until this year. That’s the whole story, in a nut-shell.”

“Yes.”

“I hate like hell to see Todd go down the tubes this way, Mr. Bowden. And summer school ... well, I said I’d be frank. Summer school often does a boy like Todd more harm than good. Your usual junior high school summer session is a zoo. All the monkeys and the laughing hyenas are in attendance, plus a full complement of dodo birds. Bad company for a boy like Todd.”

“Certainly.”

“So let’s get to the bottom line, shall we? I suggest a series of appointments for Mr. and Mrs. Bowden at the Counselling Center downtown. Everything in confidence, of course. The man in charge down there, Harry Ackerman, is a good friend of mine. And I don’t think Todd should go to them with the idea; I think you should.” Rubber Ed smiled widely. “Maybe we can get everybody back on track by June. It’s not impossible.”

But Bowden looked positively alarmed by this idea.

“I believe they might resent the boy if I took that proposal to them now,” he said. “Things are very delicate. They could go either way. The boy has promised me he will work harder in his studies. He is very alarmed at this drop in his marks.” He smiled thinly, a smile Ed French could not quite interpret. “More alarmed than you know.”

“But—”

“And they would resent me,” Bowden pressed on quickly. “God knows they would. Monica already regards me as something of a meddler. I try not to be, but you see the situation. I feel that things are best left alone ... for now.”

“I’ve had a great deal of experience in these matters,” Rubber Ed told Bowden. He folded his hands on Todd’s file and looked at the old man earnestly. “I really think counselling is in order here. You’ll understand that my interest in the marital problems your son and daughter-in-law are having begins and ends with the effect they’re having on Todd ... and right now, they’re having quite an effect.”

“Let me make a counter-proposal,” Bowden said. “You have, I believe, a system of warning parents of poor grades?”

“Yes,” Rubber Ed agreed cautiously. “Interpretation of Progress cards—IOP cards. The kids, of course, call them Flunk Cards. They only get them if their grade in a given course falls below seventy-eight. In other words, we give out IOP cards to kids who are pulling a D or an F in a given course.”

“Very good,” Bowden said. “Then what I suggest is this: if the boy gets one of those cards ... even one”—he held up one gnarled finger—“I will approach my son and his wife about your counselling. I will go further.” He pronounced it furdah. “If the boy receives one of your Flunk Cards in April—”

“We give them out in May, actually.”

“Yes? If he receives one then, I guarantee that they will accept the counselling proposal. They are worried about their son, Mr. French. But now they are so wrapped up in their own problem that ...” He shrugged.

“I understand.”

“So let us give them that long to solve their own problems. Pulling one’s self up by one’s own shoelaces ... that is the American way, is

it not?"

"Yes, I guess it is," Rubber Ed told him after a moment's thought ... and after a quick glance at the clock, which told him he had another appointment in five minutes. "I'll accept that."

He stood, and Bowden stood with him. They shook hands again, Rubber Ed being carefully mindful of the old party's arthritis.

"But in all fairness, I ought to tell you that very few students can pull out of an eighteen-week tailspin in just four weeks of classes. There's a huge amount of ground to be made up—a huge amount. I suspect you'll have to come through on your guarantee, Mr. Bowden."

Bowden offered his thin, disconcerting smile again. "Do you?" was all he said.

Something had troubled Rubber Ed through the entire interview, and he put his finger on it during lunch in the cafeteria, more than an hour after "Lord Peter" had left, umbrella once again neatly tucked under his arm.

He and Todd's grandfather had talked for fifteen minutes at least, probably closer to twenty, and Ed didn't think the old man had once referred to his grandson by name.

Todd pedaled breathlessly up Dussander's walk and parked his bike on its kickstand. School had let out only fifteen minutes before. He took the front steps at one jump, used his doorkey, and hurried down the hall to the sunlit kitchen. His face was a mixture of hopeful sunshine and gloomy clouds. He stood in the kitchen doorway for a moment, his stomach and his vocal cords knotted, watching Dussander as he rocked with his cupful of bourbon in his lap. He was still dressed in his best, although he had pulled his tie down two inches and loosened the top button of his shirt. He looked at Todd expressionlessly, his lizardlike eyes at half-mast.

“Well?” Todd finally managed.

Dussander left him hanging a moment longer, a moment that seemed at least ten years long to Todd. Then, deliberately, Dussander set his cup on the table next to his bottle of Ancient Age and said:

“The fool believed everything.”

Todd let out his pent-up breath in a whooping gust of relief.

Before he could draw another breath in, Dussander added: “He wanted your poor, troubled parents to attend counselling sessions downtown with a friend of his. He was really quite insistent.”

“Jesus! Did you ... what did you ... how did you handle it?”

“I thought quickly,” Dussander replied. “Like the little girl in the Saki story, invention on short notice is one of my strong points. I promised him your parents would go in for such counselling if you received even one Flunk Card when they are given in May.”

The blood fell out of Todd’s face.

“You did what?” he nearly screamed. “I’ve already flunked two algebra quizzes and a history test since the marking period started!” He advanced into the room, his pale face now growing shiny with breaking sweat. “There was a French quiz this afternoon and I flunked that, too ... I know I did. All I could think about was that goddamned Rubber Ed and whether or not you were taking care of him. You took care of him, all right,” he finished bitterly. “Not get one Flunk Card? I’ll probably get five or six.”

“It was the best I could do without arousing suspicions,” Dussander said. “This French, fool that he is, is only doing his job. Now you will do yours.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Todd’s face was ugly and thunderous, his voice truculent.

“You will work. In the next four weeks you will work harder than you have ever worked in your life. Furthermore, on Monday you will go to each of your instructors and apologize to them for your poor showing thus far. You will—”

“It’s impossible,” Todd said. “You don’t get it, man. It’s impossible. I’m at least five weeks behind in science and history. In algebra it’s more like ten.”

“Nevertheless,” Dussander said. He poured more bourbon.

“You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?” Todd shouted at him. “Well, I don’t take orders from you. The days when you gave orders are long over. Do you get it?” He lowered his voice abruptly. “The most lethal thing you’ve got around the house these days is a Shell No-Pest Strip. You’re nothing but a broken-down old man who farts rotten eggs if he eats a taco. I bet you even pee in your bed.”

“Listen to me, snotnose,” Dussander said quietly.

Todd’s head jerked angrily around at that.

“Before today,” Dussander said carefully, “it was possible, just barely possible, that you could have denounced me and come out clean yourself. I don’t believe you would have been up to the job with your nerves in their present state, but never mind that. It would have been technically possible. But now things have changed. Today I impersonated your grandfather, one Victor Bowden. No one can have the slightest doubt that I did it with ... how is the word? ... your connivance. If it comes out now, boy, you will look blacker than ever. And you will have no defense. I took care of that today.”

“I wish—”

“You wish! You wish!” Dussander roared. “Never mind your wishes, your wishes make me sick, your wishes are no more than little piles of dogshit in the gutter! All I want from you is to know if you understand the situation we are in!”

“I understand it,” Todd muttered. His fists had been tightly clenched while Dussander shouted at him—he was not used to being shouted at. Now he opened his hands and dully observed that he had dug bleeding half-moons into his palms. The cuts would have been worse, he supposed, but in the last four months or so he had taken up biting his nails.

“Good. Then you will make your sweet apologies, and you will study. In your free time at school you will study. During your lunch hours you will study. After school you will come here and study, and on your weekends you will come here and do more of the same.”

“Not here,” Todd said quickly. “At home.”

“No. At home you will dawdle and daydream as you have all along. If you are here I can stand over you if I have to and watch you. I can protect my own interests in this matter. I can quiz you. I can listen to your lessons.”

“If I don’t want to come here, you can’t make me.” Dussander drank. “That is true. Things will then go on as they have. You will fail. This guidance person, French, will expect me to make good on my promise. When I don’t, he will call your parents. They will find out that kindly Mr. Denker impersonated your grandfather at your request. They will find out about the altered grades. They—”

“Oh, shut up. I’ll come.”

“You’re already here. Begin with algebra.”

“No way! It’s Friday afternoon!”

“You study every afternoon now,” Dussander said softly. “Begin with algebra.”

Todd stared at him—only for a moment before dropping his eyes and fumbling his algebra text out of his bookbag—and Dussander saw murder in the boy’s eyes. Not figurative murder; literal murder. It had been years since he had seen that dark, burning, speculative glance, but one never forgot it. He supposed he would have seen it in his own eyes if there had been a mirror at hand on the day he had looked at the white and defenseless nape of the boy’s neck.

I must protect myself, he thought with some amazement. One underestimates at one’s own risk.

He drank his bourbon and rocked and watched the boy study.

It was nearly five o’clock when Todd biked home. He felt washed out, hot-eyed, drained, impotently angry. Every time his eyes had wandered from the printed page—from the maddening, incomprehensible, fucking stupid world of sets, subsets, ordered pairs, and Cartesian co-ordinates-Dussander’s sharp old man’s voice had spoken. Otherwise he had remained completely silent ... except for the maddening bump of his slippers on the floor and the squeak of the rocker. He sat there like a vulture waiting for its prey to expire. Why had he ever gotten into this? How had he gotten into it? This was a mess, a terrible mess. He had picked up some ground this afternoon—some of the set theory that had stumped him so badly just before the Christmas break had fallen into place with an almost audible click—but it was impossible to think he could pick up enough to scrape through next week’s algebra test with even a D.

It was four weeks until the end of the world.

On the corner he saw a bluejay lying on the sidewalk, its beak slowly opening and closing. It was trying vainly to get onto its birdy-feet and hop away. One of its wings had been crushed, and Todd supposed a passing car had hit it and flipped it up onto the sidewalk like a tiddlywink. One of its beady eyes stared up at him.

Todd looked at it for a long time, holding the grips of his bike's apehanger handlebars lightly. Some of the warmth had gone out of the day and the air felt almost chilly. He supposed his friends had spent the afternoon goofing off down at the Babe Ruth diamond on Walnut Street, maybe playing a little scrub, more likely playing pepper or three-flies-six-grounders or roly-bat. It was the time of year when you started working your way up to baseball. There was some talk about getting up their own sandlot team this year to compete in the informal city league; there were dads enough willing to shlepp them around to games. Todd, of course, would pitch. He had been a Little League pitching star until he had grown out of the Senior Little League division last year. Would have pitched.

So what? He'd just have to tell them no. He'd just have to tell them: Guys, I got mixed up with this war criminal. I got him right by the balls, and then—ha-ha, this'll killya, guys—then I found out he was holding my balls as tight as I was holding his. I started having funny dreams and the cold sweats. My grades went to hell and I changed them on my report card so my folks wouldn't find out and now I've got to hit the books really hard for the first time in my life. I'm not afraid of getting grounded, though. I'm afraid of going to the reformatory. And that's why I can't play any sandlot with you guys this year. You see how it is, guys.

A thin smile, much like Dussander's and not at all like his former broad grin, touched his lips. There was no sunshine in it; it was a shady smile. There was no fun in it; no confidence. It merely said: You see how it is, guys.

He rolled his bike forward over the jay with exquisite slowness, hearing the newspaper crackle of its feathers and the crunch of its small hollow bones as they fractured inside it. He reversed, rolling over it again. It was still twitching. He rolled over it again, a single bloody feather stuck to his front tire, revolving up and down, up and down. By then the bird had stopped moving, the bird had kicked the bucket, the bird had punched out, the bird had gone to that great aviary in the sky, but Todd kept going forwards and backwards

across its mashed body just the same. He did it for almost five minutes, and that thin smile never left his face. You see how it is, guys.

10

April, 1975.

The old man stood halfway down the compound's aisle, smiling broadly, as Dave Klingerman walked up to meet him. The frenzied barking that filled the air didn't seem to bother him in the slightest, or the smells of fur and urine, or the hundred different strays yapping and howling in their cages, dashing back and forth, leaping against the mesh. Klingerman pegged the old guy as a dog-lover right off the bat. His smile was sweet and pleasant. He offered Dave a swollen, arthritis-bunched hand carefully, and Klingerman shook it in the same spirit.

"Hello, sir!" he said, speaking up. "Noisy as hell, isn't it?"

"I don't mind," the old man said. "Not at all. My name is Arthur Denker."

"Klingerman. Dave Klingerman."

"I am pleased to meet you, sir. I read in the paper—I could not believe it—that you give dogs away here. Perhaps I misunderstood. In fact I think I must have misunderstood."

"No, we give em away, all right," Dave said. "If we can't, we have to destroy em. Sixty days, that's what the State gives us. Shame. Come on in the office here. Quieter. Smells better, too."

In the office, Dave heard a story that was familiar (but nonetheless affecting): Arthur Denker was in his seventies. He had come to California when his wife died. He was not rich, but he tended what he did have with great care. He was lonely. His only friend was the boy who sometimes came to his house and read to him. In Germany he had owned a beautiful Saint Bernard. Now, in Santo Donato, he had a house with a good-sized back yard. The yard was fenced. And he had read in the paper ... would it be possible that he could ...

“Well, we don’t have any Bernards,” Dave said. “They go fast because they’re so good with kids—”

“Oh, I understand. I didn’t mean that—”

“—but I do have a half-grown shepherd pup. How would that be?”

Mr. Denker’s eyes grew bright, as if he might be on the verge of tears. “Perfect,” he said. “That would be perfect.”

“The dog itself is free, but there are a few other charges. Distemper and rabies shots. A city dog license. All of it goes about twenty-five bucks for most people, but the State pays half if you’re over sixty-five-part of the California Golden Ager program.”

“Golden Ager ... is that what I am?” Mr. Denker said, and laughed. For just a moment—it was silly—Dave felt a kind of chill.

“Uh ... I guess so, sir.”

“It is very reasonable.”

“Sure, we think so. The same dog would cost you a hundred and twenty-five dollars in a pet shop. But people go to those places instead of here. They are paying for a set of papers, of course, not the dog.” Dave shook his head. “If they only understood how many fine animals are abandoned every year.”

“And if you can’t find a suitable home for them within sixty days, they are destroyed?”

“We put them to sleep, yes.”

“Put them to ... ? I’m sorry, my English—”

“It’s a city ordinance,” Dave said. “Can’t have dog-packs running the streets.”

“You shoot them.”

“No, we give them gas. It’s very humane. They don’t feel a thing.”

“No,” Mr. Denker said. “I am sure they don’t.”

Todd’s seat in Beginning Algebra was four desks down in the second row. He sat there, trying to keep his face expressionless, as Mr. Storrman passed back the exams. But his ragged fingernails were digging into his palms again, and his entire body seemed to be running with a slow and caustic sweat.

Don’t get your hopes up. Don’t be such a goddam chump. There’s no way you could have passed. You know you didn’t pass.

Nevertheless, he could not completely squash the foolish hope. It had been the first algebra exam in weeks that looked as if it had been written in something other than Greek. He was sure that in his nervousness (nervousness? no, call it what it had really been: outright terror) he had not done that well, but maybe ... well, if it had been anyone else but Storrman, who had a Yale padlock for a heart ...

STOP IT! he commanded himself, and for a moment, a coldly horrible moment, he was positive he had screamed those two words aloud in the classroom. You flunked, you know you did, not a thing in the world is going to change it.

Storrman handed him his paper expressionlessly and moved on. Todd laid it face down on his initial-scarred desk. For a moment he didn’t think he possessed sufficient will to even turn it over and know. At last he flipped it with such convulsive suddenness that the exam sheet tore. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as he stared at it. His heart seemed to stop for a moment.

The number 83 was written in a circle at the top of the sheet. Below it was a letter-grade: C+. Below the letter-grade was a brief notation: Good improvement! I think I’m twice as relieved as you should be. Check errors carefully At least three of them are arithmetical rather than conceptual.

His heartbeat began again, at triple-time. Relief washed over him, but it was not cool—it was hot and complicated and strange. He closed his eyes, not hearing the class as it buzzed over the exam and began the pre-ordained fight for an extra point here or there. Todd saw redness behind his eyes. It pulsed like flowing blood with the rhythm of his heartbeat. In that instant he hated Dussander more than he ever had before. His hands snapped shut into fists and he only wished, wished, wished, that Dussander's scrawny chicken neck could have been between them.

Dick and Monica Bowden had twin beds, separated by a nightstand with a pretty imitation Tiffany lamp standing on it. Their room was done in genuine redwood, and the walls were comfortably lined with books. Across the room, nestled between two ivory bookends (bull elephants on their hind legs) was a round Sony TV. Dick was watching Johnny Carson with the earplug in while Monica read the new Michael Crichton that had come from the book club that day.

“Dick?” She put a bookmark (THIS IS WHERE I FELL ASLEEP, it said) into the Crichton and closed it.

On the TV, Buddy Hackett had just broken everyone up. Dick smiled.

“Dick?” she said more loudly.

He pulled the earplug out. “What?”

“Do you think Todd's all right?”

He looked at her for a moment, frowning, then shook his head a little. “Je ne comprends pas, cherie.” His limping French was a joke between them. His father had sent him an extra two hundred dollars to hire a tutor when he was flunking French. He had gotten Monica Darrow, picking her name at random from the cards tacked up on the Union bulletin board. By Christmas she had been wearing his pin ... and he had managed a C in French.

“Well ... he's lost weight.”

“He looks a little scrawny, sure,” Dick said. He put the TV earplug in his lap, where it emitted tiny squawking sounds.

“He’s growing up, Monica.”

“So soon?” she asked uneasily.

He laughed. “So soon. I shot up seven inches as a teenager—from a five-foot-six shrimp at twelve to the beautiful six-foot-one mass of muscle you see before you today. My mother said that when I was fourteen you could hear me growing in the night “

“Good thing not all of you grew that much.”

“It’s all in how you use it.”

“Want to use it tonight?”

“The wench grows bold,” Dick Bowden said, and threw the earplug across the room.

After, as he was drifting off to sleep:

“Dick, he’s having bad dreams, too.”

“Nightmares?” he muttered.

“Nightmares. I’ve heard him moaning in his sleep two or three times when I’ve gone down to use the bathroom in the night. I didn’t want to wake him up. It’s silly, but my grandmother used to say you could drive a person insane if you woke them up in the middle of a bad dream.”

“She was the Polack, wasn’t she?”

“The Polack, yeah, the Polack. Nice talk!”

“You know what I mean. Why don’t you just use the upstairs john?”
He had put it in himself two years ago.

“You know the flush always wakes you up,” she said.

“So don’t flush it.”

“Dick, that’s nasty.”

He sighed.

“Sometimes when I go in, he’s sweating. And the sheets are damp.”

He grinned in the dark. “I bet.”

“What’s that ... oh.” She slapped him lightly. “That’s nasty, too. Besides, he’s only thirteen.”

“Fourteen next month. He’s not too young. A little precocious, maybe, but not too young.”

“How old were you?”

“Fourteen or fifteen. I don’t remember exactly. But I remember I woke up thinking I’d died and gone to heaven.”

“But you were older than Todd is now.”

“All that stuff’s happening younger. It must be the milk ... or the fluoride. Do you know they have sanitary napkin dispensers in all the girls’ rooms of the school we built in Jackson Park last year? And that’s a grammar school. Now your average sixth-grader is only eleven. How old were you when you started?”

“I don’t remember,” she said. “All I know is Todd’s dreams don’t sound like ... like he died and went to heaven.”

“Have you asked him about them?”

“Once. About six weeks ago. You were off playing golf with that horrible Ernie Jacobs.”

“That horrible Ernie Jacobs is going to make me a full partner by 1977, if he doesn’t screw himself to death with that high-yellow secretary of his before then. Besides, he always pays the greens fees. What did Todd say?”

“That he didn’t remember. But a sort of ... shadow crossed his face. I think he did remember.”

“Monica, I don’t remember everything from my dear dead youth, but one thing I do remember is that wet dreams are not always pleasant. In fact, they can be downright unpleasant.”

“How can that be?”

“Guilt. All kinds of guilt. Some of it maybe all the way from babyhood, when it was made very clear to him that wetting the bed was wrong. Then there’s the sex thing. Who knows what brings a wet dream on? Copping a feel on the bus? Looking up a girl’s skirt in study hall? I don’t know. The only one I can really remember was going off the high board at the YMCA pool on co-ed day and losing my trunks when I hit the water.”

“You got off on that?” she asked, giggling a little.

“Yeah. So if the kid doesn’t want to talk to you about his John Thomas problems, don’t force him.”

“We did our damn best to raise him without all those needless guilts.”

“You can’t escape them. He brings them home from school like the colds he used to pick up in the first grade. From his friends, or the way his teachers mince around certain subjects. He probably got it from my dad, too. ‘Don’t touch it in the night, Todd, or your hands’ll grow hair and you’ll go blind and you’ll start to lose your memory, and after awhile your thing will turn black and rot off. So be careful, Todd.’ “

“Dick Bowden! Your dad would never—”

“He wouldn’t. Hell, he did. Just like your Polack grandmother told you that waking somebody up in the middle of a nightmare might drive them nuts. He also told me to always wipe off the ring of a public toilet before I sat on it so I wouldn’t get ‘other people’s germs.’ I guess that was his way of saying syphilis. I bet your grandmother laid that one on you, too.”

“No, my mother,” she said absently. “And she told me to always flush. Which is why I go downstairs.”

“It still wakes me up,” Dick mumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

This time he had actually drifted halfway over the threshold of sleep when she spoke his name again.

“What?” he asked, a little impatiently.

“You don’t suppose ... oh, never mind. Go back to sleep.”

“No, go on, finish. I’m awake again. I don’t suppose what?”

“That old man. Mr. Denker. You don’t think Todd’s seeing too much of him, do you? Maybe he’s ... oh, I don’t know ... filling Todd up with a lot of stories.”

“The real heavy horrors,” Dick said. “The day the Essen Motor Works dropped below quota.” He snickered.

“It was just an idea,” she said, a little stiffly. The covers rustled as she turned over on her side. “Sorry I bothered you.”

He put a hand on her bare shoulder. “I’ll tell you something, babe,” he said, and stopped for a moment, thinking carefully, choosing his words. “I’ve been worried about Todd, too, sometimes. Not the same things you’ve been worried about, but worried is worried, right?”

She turned back to him. "About what?"

"Well, I grew up a lot different than he's growing up. My dad had the store. Vic the Grocer, everyone called him. He had a book where he kept the names of the people who owed him, and how much they owed. You know what he called it?"

"No." Dick rarely talked about his boyhood; she had always thought it was because he hadn't enjoyed it. She listened carefully now.

"He called it the Left Hand Book. He said the right hand was business, but the right hand should never know what the left hand was doing. He said if the right hand did know, it would probably grab a meat-cleaver and chop the left hand right off."

"You never told me that."

"Well, I didn't like the old man very much when we first got married, and the truth is I still spend a lot of time not liking him. I couldn't understand why I had to wear pants from the Goodwill box while Mrs. Mazursky could get a ham on credit with that same old story about how her husband was going back to work next week. The only work that fucking wino Bill Mazursky ever had was holding onto a twelve-cent bottle of musky so it wouldn't fly away.

"All I ever wanted in those days was to get out of the neighborhood and away from my old man's life. So I made grades and played sports I didn't really like and got a scholarship at UCLA. And I made damn sure I stayed in the top ten per cent of my classes because the only Left Hand Book the colleges kept in those days was for the GIs that fought the war. My dad sent me money for my textbooks, but the only other money I ever took from him was the time I wrote home in a panic because I was flunking funnybook French. I met you. And I found out later from Mr. Halleck down the block that my dad put a lien on his car to scare up that two hundred bucks.

"And now I've got you, and we've got Todd. I've always thought he was a damned fine boy, and I've tried to make sure he's always had

everything he ever needed ... anything that would help him grow into a fine man. I used to laugh at that old wheeze about a man wanting his son to be better than he was, but as I get older it seems less funny and more true. I never want Todd to have to wear pants from a Goodwill box because some wino's wife got a ham on credit. You understand?"

"Yes, of course I do," she said quietly.

"Then, about ten years ago, just before my old man finally got tired of fighting off the urban renewal guys and retired, he had a minor stroke. He was in the hospital for ten days. And the people from the neighborhood, the guineas and the krauts, even some of the jigs that started to move in around 1955 or so ... they paid his bill. Every fucking cent. I couldn't believe it. They kept the store open, too. Fiona Castellano got four or five of her friends who were out of work to come in on shifts. When my old man got back, the books balanced out to the cent."

"Wow," she said, very softly.

"You know what he said to me? My old man? That he'd always been afraid of getting old—of being scared and hurting and all by himself. Of having to go into the hospital and not being able to make ends meet anymore. Of dying. He said that after the stroke he wasn't scared anymore. He said he thought he could die well. 'You mean die happy, Pap?' I asked him. 'No,' he said. 'I don't think anyone dies happy, Dickie.' He always called me Dickie, still does, and that's another thing I guess I'll never be able to like. He said he didn't think anyone died happy, but you could die well. That impressed me."

He was silent for a long, thoughtful time.

"The last five or six years I've been able to get some perspective on my old man. Maybe because he's down there in San Remo and out of my hair. I started thinking that maybe the Left Hand Book wasn't such a bad idea. That was when I started to worry about Todd. I kept wanting to tell him about how there was maybe something more to

life than me being able to take all of you to Hawaii for a month or being able to buy Todd pants that don't smell like the mothballs they used to put in the Goodwill box. I could never figure out how to tell him those things. But I think maybe he knows. And it takes a load off my mind."

"Reading to Mr. Denker, you mean?"

"Yes. He's not getting anything for that. Denker can't pay him. Here's this old guy, thousands of miles from any friends or relatives that might still be living, here's this guy that's everything my father was afraid of. And there's Todd."

"I never thought of it just like that."

"Have you noticed the way Todd gets when you talk to him about that old man?"

"He gets very quiet."

"Sure. He gets tongue-tied and embarrassed, like he was doing something nasty. Just like my pop used to when someone tried to thank him for laying some credit on them. We're Todd's right hand, that's all. You and me and all the rest—the house, the ski-trips to Tahoe, the Thunderbird in the garage, his color TV. All his right hand. And he doesn't want us to see what his left hand is up to."

"You don't think he's seeing too much of Denker, then?"

"Honey, look at his grades! If they were falling off, I'd be the first one to say Hey, enough is enough, already, don't go overboard. His grades are the first place trouble would show up. And how have they been?"

"As good as ever, after that first slip."

"So what are we talking about? Listen, I've got a conference at nine, babe. If I don't get some sleep, I'm going to be sloppy."

“Sure, go to sleep,” she said indulgently, and as he turned over, she kissed him lightly on one shoulderblade. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” he said comfortably, and closed his eyes.
“Everything’s fine, Monica. You worry too much.”

“I know I do. Goodnight.”

They slept.

“Stop looking out the window,” Dussander said. “There is nothing out there to interest you.”

Todd looked at him sullenly. His history text was open on the table, showing a color plate of Teddy Roosevelt cresting San Juan Hill. Helpless Cubans were falling away from the hooves of Teddy’s horse. Teddy was grinning a wide American grin, the grin of a man who knew that God was in His heaven and everything was bully. Todd Bowden was not grinning.

“You like being a slave-driver, don’t you?” he asked.

“I like being a free man,” Dussander said. “Study.”

“Suck my cock.”

“As a boy,” Dussander said, “I would have had my mouth washed out with lye soap for saying such a thing.”

“Times change.”

“Do they?” Dussander sipped his bourbon. “Study.” Todd stared at Dussander. “You’re nothing but a goddamned rummy. You know that?”

“Study.”

“Shut up!” Todd slammed his book shut. It made a riflecrack sound in Dussander’s kitchen. “I can never catch up, anyway. Not in time for

the test. There's fifty pages of this shit left, all the way up to World War One. I'll make a crib in Study Hall Two tomorrow."

Harshly, Dussander said: "You will do no such thing!"

"Why not? Who's going to stop me? You?"

"Boy, you are still having a hard time comprehending the stakes we play for. Do you think I enjoy keeping your snivelling brat nose in your books?" His voice rose, whipsawing, demanding, commanding. "Do you think I enjoy listening to your tantrums, your kindergarten swears? 'Suck my cock,' " Dussander mimicked savagely in a high, falsetto voice that made Todd flush darkly. " 'Suck my cock, so what, who cares, I'll do it tomorrow, suck my cock!'"

"Well, you like it!" Todd shouted back. "Yeah, you like it! The only time you don't feel like a zombie is when you're on my back! So give me a fucking break!"

"If you are caught with one of these cribbing papers, what do you think will happen? Who will be told first?"

Todd looked at his hands with their ragged, bitten fingernails and said nothing.

"Who?"

"Jesus, you know. Rubber Ed. Then my folks, I guess."

Dussander nodded. "Me, I guess that too. Study. Put your cribbing paper in your head, where it belongs."

"I hate you," Todd said dully. "I really do." But he opened his book again and Teddy Roosevelt grinned up at him, Teddy galloping into the twentieth century with his saber in his hand, Cubans falling back in disarray before him—possibly before the force of his fierce American grin.

Dussander began to rock again. He held his teacup of bourbon in his hands. "That's a good boy," he said, almost tenderly.

Todd had his first wet dream on the last night of April, and he awoke to the sound of rain whispering secretly through the leaves and branches of the tree outside his window.

In the dream, he had been in one of the Patin laboratories. He was standing at the end of a long, low table. A lush young girl of amazing beauty had been secured to this table with clamps. Dussander was assisting him. Dussander wore a white butcher's apron and nothing else. When he pivoted to turn on the monitoring equipment, Todd could see Dussander's scrawny buttocks grinding at each other like misshapen white stones.

He handed something to Todd, something he recognized immediately, although he had never actually seen one. It was a dildo. The tip of it was polished metal, winking in the light of the overhead fluorescents like heartless chrome. The dildo was hollow. Snaking out of it was a black electrical cord that ended in a red rubber bulb.

"Go ahead," Dussander said. "The Fuehrer says it's all right. He says it's your reward for studying."

Todd looked down at himself and saw that he was naked. His small penis was fully erect, jutting plumply up at an angle from the thin peachdown of his pubic hair. He slipped the dildo on. The fit was tight but there was some sort of lubricant in there. The friction was pleasant. No; it was more than pleasant. It was delightful.

He looked down at the girl and felt a strange shift in his thoughts ... as if they had slipped into a perfect groove. Suddenly all things seemed right. Doors had been opened. He would go through them. He took the red rubber bulb in his left hand, put his knees on the table, and paused for just a moment, gauging the angle while his Norseman's prick made its own angle up and out from his slight boy's body.

Dimly, far off, he could hear Dussander reciting: “Test run eighty-four. Electricity, sexual stimulus, metabolism. Based on the Thyssen theories of negative reinforcement. Subject is a young Jewish girl, approximately sixteen years of age, no scars, no identifying marks, no known disabilities—”

She cried out when the tip of the dildo touched her. Todd found the cry pleasant, as he did her fruitless struggles to free herself, or, lacking that, to at least bring her legs together.

This is what they can't show in those magazines about the war, he thought, but it's there, just the same.

He thrust forward suddenly, parting her with no grace. She shrieked like a fireball.

After her initial thrashings and efforts to expel him, she lay perfectly still, enduring. The lubricated interior of the dildo pulled and slid against Todd's engorgement. Delightful. Heavenly. His ringers toyed with the rubber bulb in his left hand.

Far away, Dussander recited pulse, blood pressure, respiration, alpha waves, beta waves, stroke count.

As the climax began to build inside him, Todd became perfectly still and squeezed the bulb. Her eyes, which had been closed, flew open, bulging. Her tongue fluttered in the pink cavity of her mouth. Her arms and legs thrummed. But the real action was in her torso, rising and falling, vibrating, every muscle

(oh every muscle every muscle moves tightens closes every) every muscle and the sensation at climax was

(ecstasy)

oh it was, it was

(the end of the world thundering outside)

He woke to that sound and the sound of rain. He was huddled on his side in a dark ball, his heart beating at a sprinter's pace. His lower belly was covered with a warm, sticky liquid. There was an instant of panicky horror when he feared he might be bleeding to death ... and then he realized what it really was, and he felt a fainting, nauseated revulsion. Semen. Come. Jizz. Jungle-juice. Words from fences and locker rooms and the walls of gas station bathrooms. There was nothing here he wanted.

His hands balled helplessly into fists. His dream-climax recurred to him, pallid now, senseless, frightening. But nerve-endings still tingled, retreating slowly from their spike-point. That final scene, fading now, was disgusting and yet somehow compulsive, like an unsuspecting bite into a piece of tropical fruit which, you realized (a second too late), had only tasted so amazingly sweet because it was rotten.

It came to him then. What he would have to do.

There was only one way he could get himself back again. He would have to kill Dussander. It was the only way. Games were done; storytime was over. This was survival.

"Kill him and it's all over," he whispered in the darkness, with the rain in the tree outside and semen drying on his belly. Whispering it made it seem real-Dussander always kept three or four fifths of Ancient Age on a shelf over the steep cellar stairs. He would go to the door, open it (half-crooked already, more often than not), and go down two steps. Then he would lean out, put one hand on the shelf, and grip the fresh bottle by the neck with his other hand. The cellar floor was not paved, but the dirt was hard-packed and Dussander, with a machinelike efficiency that Todd now thought of as Prussian rather than German, oiled it once every two months to keep bugs from breeding in the dirt. Cement or no cement, old bones break easily. And old men have accidents. The post-mortem would show that "Mr. Denker" had had a skinful of booze when he "fell."

What happened, Todd?

He didn't answer the door so I used the key he gave me. Sometimeshe falls asleep. I went into the kitchen and saw the cellar door was open. I went down the stairs and he ... he...

Then, of course, tears.

It would work.

He would have himself back again.

For a long time Todd lay awake in the dark, listening to the thunder retreat westward, out over the Pacific, listening to the secret sound of the rain. He thought he would stay awake the rest of the night, going over it and over it. But he fell asleep only moments later and slept dreamlessly with one fist curled under his chin. He woke on the first of May fully rested for the first time in months.

11

May, 1975.

For Todd, that Friday was the longest of his life. He sat in class after class, hearing nothing, waiting only for the last five minutes, when the instructor would take out his or her small pile of Flunk Cards and distribute them. Each time an instructor approached Todd's desk with that pile of cards, he grew cold. Each time he or she passed him without stopping, he felt waves of dizziness and semi-hysteria.

Algebra was the worst. Storrman approached... hesitated ... and just as Todd became convinced he was going to pass on, he laid a Flunk Card face down on Todd's desk. Todd looked at it coldly, with no feelings at all. Now that it had happened, he was only cold. Well, that's it, he thought. Point, game, set, and match. Unless Dussander can think of something else. And I have my doubts.

Without much interest, he turned the Flunk Card over to see by how much he had missed his C. It must have been close, but trust old Stony Storrman not to give anyone a break. He saw that the grade-spaces were utterly blank—both the letter-grade space and the numerical-grade space. Written in the COMMENTS section was this message: I'm sure glad I don't have to give you one of these for REAL! Chas. Storrman.

The dizziness came again, more savagely this time, roaring through his head, making it feel like a balloon filled with helium. He gripped the sides of his desk as hard as he could, holding one thought with total obsessive tightness: You will not faint, not faint, not faint. Little by little the waves of dizziness passed, and then he had to control an urge to run up the aisle after Storrman, turn him around, and poke his eyes out with the freshly sharpened pencil he held in his hand. And through it all his face remained carefully blank. The only sign that anything at all was going on inside was a mild tic in one eyelid.

School let out for the week fifteen minutes later. Todd walked slowly around the building to the bike-racks, his head down, his hands shoved into his pockets, his books tucked into the crook of his right arm, oblivious of the running, shouting students. He tossed the books into his bike-basket, unlocked the Schwinn, and pedaled away. Toward Dussander's house.

Today, he thought. Today is your day, old man.

"And so," Dussander said, pouring bourbon into his cup as Todd entered the kitchen, "the accused returns from the dock. How said they, prisoner?" He was wearing his bathrobe and a pair of hairy wool socks that climbed halfway up his shins. Socks like that, Todd thought, would be easy to slip in. He glanced at the bottle of Ancient Age Dussanger was currently working. It was down to the last three fingers.

"No D's, no F's, no Flunk Cards," Todd said. "I'll still have to change some of my grades in June, but maybe just the averages. I'll be getting all A's and B's this quarter if I keep up my work."

"Oh, you'll keep it up, all right," Dussander said. "We will see to it." He drank and then tipped more bourbon into his cup. "This calls for a celebration." His speech was slightly blurred—hardly enough to be noticeable, but Todd knew the old fuck was as drunk as he ever got. Yes, today. It would have to be today.

But he was cool.

"Celebrate pigshit," he told Dussander.

"I'm afraid the delivery boy hasn't arrived with the beluga and the truffles yet," Dussander said, ignoring him. "Help is so unreliable these days. What about a few Ritz crackers and some Velveeta while we wait?"

"Okay," Todd said. "What the hell."

Dussander stood up (one knee banged the table, making him wince) and crossed to the refrigerator. He got out the cheese, took a knife from the drawer and a plate from the cupboard, and a box of Ritz crackers from the breadbox.

“All carefully injected with prussic acid,” he told Todd as he set the cheese and crackers down on the table. He grinned, and Todd saw that he had left out his false teeth again today. Nevertheless, Todd smiled back.

“So quiet today!” Dussander exclaimed. “I would have expected you to turn handsprings all the way up the hall.” He emptied the last of the bourbon into his cup, sipped, smacked his lips.

“I guess I’m still numb,” Todd said. He bit into a cracker. He had stopped refusing Dussander’s food a long time ago. Dussander thought there was a letter with one of Todd’s friends—there was not, of course; he had friends, but none he trusted that much. He supposed Dussander had guessed that long ago, but he knew Dussander didn’t quite dare put his guess to such an extreme test as murder.

“What shall we talk about today?” Dussander enquired, tossing off the last shot. “I give you the day off from studying, how’s that? Uh? Uh?” When he drank, his accent became thicker. It was an accent Todd had come to hate. Now he felt okay about the accent; he felt okay about everything. He felt very cool all over. He looked at his hands, the hands which would give the push, and they looked just as they always did. They were not trembling; they were cool.

“I don’t care,” he said. “Anything you want.”

“Shall I tell you about the special soap we made? Our experiments with enforced homosexuality? Or perhaps you would like to hear how I escaped Berlin after I had been foolish enough to go back. That was a close one, I can tell you.” He pantomimed shaving one stubby cheek and laughed.

“Anything,” Todd said. “Really.” He watched Dussander examine the empty bottle and then get up with it in one hand. Dussander took it to the wastebasket and dropped it in.

“No, none of those, I think,” Dussander said. “You don’t seem to be in the mood.” He stood reflectively by the wastebasket for a moment and then crossed the kitchen to the cellar door. His wool socks whispered on the hilly linoleum. “I think today I will instead tell you the story of an old man who was afraid.”

Dussander opened the cellar door. His back was now to the table. Todd stood up quietly.

“He was afraid,” Dussander went on, “of a certain young boy who was, in a queer way, his friend. A smart boy. His mother called this boy ‘apt pupil,’ and the old man had already discovered he was an apt pupil... although perhaps not in the way his mother thought.”

Dussander fumbled with the old-fashioned electrical switch on the wall, trying to turn it with his bunched and clumsy fingers. Todd walked—almost glided—across the linoleum, not stepping on any of the places where it squeaked or creaked. He knew this kitchen as well as his own, now. Maybe better.

“At first, the boy was not the old man’s friend,” Dussander said. He managed to turn the switch at last. He descended the first step with a veteran drunk’s care. “At first the old man disliked the boy a great deal. Then he grew to ... to enjoy his company, although there was still a strong element of dislike there.” He was looking at the shelf now but still holding the railing. Todd, cool—no, now he was cold—stepped behind him and calculated the chances of one strong push dislodging Dussander’s hold on the railing. He decided to wait until Dussander leaned forward.

“Part of the old man’s enjoyment came from a feeling of equality,” Dussander went on thoughtfully. “You see, the boy and the old man had each other in mutual deathgrips. Each knew something the other wanted kept secret. And then... ah, then it became apparent to the

old man that things were changing. Yes. He was losing his hold—some of it or all of it, depending on how desperate the boy might be, and how clever. It occurred to this old man on one long and sleepless night that it might be well for him to acquire a new hold on the boy. For his own safety.”

Now Dussander let go of the railing and leaned out over the steep cellar stairs, but Todd remained perfectly still. The bone-deep cold was melting out of him, being replaced by a rosy flush of anger and confusion. As Dussander grasped his fresh bottle, Todd thought viciously that the old man had the stinkiest cellar in town, oil or no oil. It smelled as if something had died down there.

“So the old man got out of his bed right then. What is sleep to an old man? Very little. And he sat at his small desk, thinking about how cleverly he had enmeshed the boy in the very crimes the boy was holding over his own head. He sat thinking about how hard the boy had worked, how very hard, to bring his school marks back up. And how, when they were back up, he would have no further need for the old man alive. And if the old man were dead, the boy could be free.”

He turned around now, holding the fresh bottle of Ancient Age by the neck.

“I heard you, you know,” he said, almost gently. “From the moment you pushed your chair back and stood up. You are not as quiet as you imagine, boy. At least not yet.”

Todd said nothing.

“So!” Dussander exclaimed, stepping back into the kitchen and closing the cellar door firmly behind him. “The old man wrote everything down, nicht wahr? From first word to last he wrote it down. When he was finally finished it was almost dawn and his hand was singing from the arthritis—the verdammt arthritis—but he felt good for the first times in weeks. He felt safe. He got back into his bed and slept until mid-afternoon. In fact, if he had slept any longer, he would have missed his favorite—General Hospital.”

He had regained his rocker now. He sat down, produced a worn jackknife with a yellow ivory handle, and began to cut painstakingly around the seal covering the top of the bourbon bottle.

“On the following day the old man dressed in his best suit and went down to the bank where he kept his little checking and savings accounts. He spoke to one of the bank officers, who was able to answer all the old man’s questions most satisfactorily. He rented a safety deposit box. The bank officer explained to the old man that he would have a key and the bank would have a key. To open the box, both keys would be needed. No one but the old man could use the old man’s key without a signed, notarized letter of permission from the old man himself. With one exception.”

Dussander smiled toothlessly into Todd Bowden’s white, set face.

“That exception is made in the event of the box-holder’s death,” he said. Still looking at Todd, still smiling, Dussander put his jackknife back into the pocket of his robe, unscrewed the cap of the bourbon bottle, and poured a fresh jolt into his cup.

“What happens then?” Todd asked hoarsely.

“Then the box is opened in the presence of a bank official and a representative of the Internal Revenue Service. The contents of the box are inventoried. In this case they will find only a twelve-page document. Non-taxable... but highly interesting.”

The fingers of Todd’s hands crept toward each other and locked tightly. “You can’t do that,” he said in a stunned and unbelieving voice. It was the voice of a person who observes another person walking on the ceiling. “You can’t... can’t do that.”

“My boy,” Dussander said kindly, “I have.”

“But ... I ... you ...” His voice suddenly rose to an agonized howl. “You’re old! Don’t you know that you’re old? You could die! You could die anytime!”

Dussander got up. He went to one of the kitchen cabinets and took down a small glass. This glass had once held jelly. Cartoon characters danced around the rim. Todd recognized them all—Fred and Wilma Flintstone, Barney and Betty Rubble, Pebbles and Bamm-Bamm. He had grown up with them. He watched as Dussander wiped this jelly-glass almost ceremonially with a dishtowel. He watched as Dussander set it in front of him. He watched as Dussander poured a finger of bourbon into it.

“What’s that for?” Todd muttered. “I don’t drink. Drinking’s for cheap stewbums like you.”

“Lift your glass, boy. It is a special occasion. Today you drink.”

Todd looked at him for a long moment, then picked up the glass. Dussander clicked his cheap ceramic cup smartly against it.

“I make a toast, boy—long life! Long life to both of us! Prosit!” He tossed his bourbon off at a gulp and then began to laugh. He rocked back and forth, stockinged feet hitting the linoleum, laughing, and Todd thought he had never looked so much like a vulture, a vulture in a bathrobe, a noisome beast of carrion.

“I hate you,” he whispered, and then Dussander began to choke on his own laughter. His face turned a dull brick color; it sounded as if he were coughing, laughing, and strangling, all at the same time. Todd, scared, got up quickly and clapped him on the back until the coughing fit had passed.

“Danke schon,” he said. “Drink your drink. It will do you good.”

Todd drank it. It tasted like very bad cold-medicine and lit a fire in his gut.

“I can’t believe you drink this shit all day,” he said, putting the glass back on the table and shuddering. “You ought to quit it. Quit drinking and smoking.”

“Your concern for my health is touching,” Dussander said. He produced a crumpled pack of cigarettes from the same bathrobe pocket into which the jackknife had disappeared.

“And I am equally solicitous of your own welfare, boy. Almost every day I read in the paper where a cyclist has been killed at a busy intersection. You should give it up. You should walk. Or ride the bus, like me.”

“Why don’t you go fuck yourself?” Todd burst out.

“My boy,” Dussander said, pouring more bourbon and beginning to laugh again, “we are fucking each other—didn’t you know that?”

One day about a week later, Todd was sitting on a disused mail platform down in the old trainyard. He chucked cinders out across the rusty, weed-infested tracks one at a time.

Why shouldn’t I kill him anyway?

Because he was a logical boy, the logical answer came first. No reason at all. Sooner or later Dussander was going to die, and given Dussander’s habits, it would probably be sooner. Whether he killed the old man or whether Dussander died of a heart attack in his bathtub, it was all going to come out. At least he could have the pleasure of wringing the old vulture’s neck.

Sooner or later—that phrase defied logic.

Maybe it’ll be later, Todd thought. Cigarettes or not, booze or not, he’s a tough old bastard. He’s lasted this long, so ... so maybe it’ll be later.

From beneath him came a fuzzy snort.

Todd jumped to his feet, dropping a handful of cinders he had been holding. That snorting sound came again.

He paused, on the verge of running, but the snort didn't recur. Nine hundred yards away, an eight-lane freeway swept across the horizon above this weed-and junk-strewn cul-desac with its deserted buildings, rusty Cyclone fences, and splintery, warped platforms. The cars up on the freeway glistened in the sun like exotic hard-shelled beetles. Eight lanes of traffic up there, nothing down here but Todd, a few birds ... and whatever had snorted.

Cautiously, he bent down with his hands on his knees and peered under the mail platform. There was a wino lying up in there among the yellow weeds and empty cans and dusty old bottles. It was impossible to tell his age; Todd put him at somewhere between thirty and four hundred. He was wearing a strappy tee-shirt that was caked with dried vomit, green pants that were far too big for him, and gray leather workshoes cracked in a hundred places. The cracks gaped like agonized mouths. Todd thought he smelled like Dussander's cellar.

The wino's red-laced eyes opened slowly and stared at Todd with a bleary lack of wonder. As they did, Todd thought of the Swiss Army knife in his pocket, the Angler model. He had purchased it at a sporting goods store in Redondo Beach almost a year ago. He could hear the clerk that had waited on him in his mind: You couldn't pick a better knife than that one, son—a knife like that could save your life someday. We sell fifteen hundred Swiss knives every damn year.

Fifteen hundred a year.

He put his hand in his pocket and gripped the knife. In his mind's eye he saw Dussander's jackknife working slowly around the neck of the bourbon bottle, slitting the seal. A moment later he became aware that he had an erection.

Cold terror stole into him.

The wino swiped a hand over his cracked lips and then licked them with a tongue which nicotine had turned a permanent dismal yellow. "Got a dime, kid?"

Todd looked at him expressionlessly.

“Gotta get to L.A. Need another dime for the bus. I got a pointment, me. Got a job offertunity. Nice kid like you must have a dime. Maybe you got a quarter.”

Yessir, you could clean out a damn bluegill with a knife like that... hell, you could clean out a damn marlin with it if you had to. We sell fifteen hundred of those a year. Every sporting goods store and Army-Navy Surplus in America sells them, and if you decided to use this one to clean out some dirty, shitty old wino, nobody could trace it back to you, absolutely NOBODY.

The wino's voice dropped; it became a confidential, tenebrous whisper. “For a buck I'd do you a blowjob, you never had a better. You'd come your brains out, kid, you'd—”

Todd pulled his hand out of his pocket. He wasn't sure what was in it until he opened it. Two quarters. Two nickles. A dime. Some pennies. He threw them at the wino and fled.

12

June, 1975.

Todd Bowden, now fourteen, came biking up Dussander's walk and parked his bike on the kickstand. The L.A. Times was on the bottom step; he picked it up. He looked at the bell, below which the neat legends ARTHURDENKER and NO SOLICITORS, NO PEDDLERS, NO SALESMEN still kept their places. He didn't bother with the bell now, of course; he had his key.

Somewhere close by was the popping, burping sound of a Lawn-Boy. He looked at Dussander's grass and saw it could use a cutting; he would have to tell the old man to find a boy with a mower. Dussander forgot little things like that more often now. Maybe it was senility; maybe it was just the pickling influence of Ancient Age on his brains. That was an adult thought for a boy of fourteen to have, but such thoughts no longer struck Todd as singular. He had many adult thoughts these days. Most of them were not so great.

He let himself in.

He had his usual instant of cold terror as he entered the kitchen and saw Dussander slumped slightly sideways in his rocker, the cup on the table, a half-empty bottle of bourbon beside it. A cigarette had burned its entire length down to lacy gray ash in a mayonnaise cover where several other butts had been mashed out. Dussander's mouth hung open. His face was yellow. His big hands dangled limply over the rocker's arms. He didn't seem to be breathing.

"Dussander," he said, a little too harshly. "Rise and shine, Dussander."

He felt a wave of relief as the old man twitched, blinked, and finally sat up.

"Is it you? And so early?"

“They let us out early on the last day of school,” Todd said. He pointed to the remains of the cigarette in the mayonnaise cover. “Someday you’ll burn down the house doing that.”

“Maybe,” Dussander said indifferently. He fumbled out his cigarettes, shot one from the pack (it almost rolled off the edge of the table before Dussander was able to catch it), and at last got it going. A protracted fit of coughing followed, and Todd winced in disgust. When the old man really got going, Todd half-expected him to start spitting out grayish-black chunks of lung-tissue onto the table... and he’d probably grin as he did it.

At last the coughing eased enough for Dussander to say, “What have you got there?”

“Report card.”

Dussander took it, opened it, and held it away from him at arm’s length so he could read it. “English ... A. American History... A. Earth Science... B-plus. Your Community and You... A. Primary French... B-minus. Beginning Algebra... B.” He put it down. “Very good. What is the slang? We have saved your bacon, boy. Will you have to change any of these averages in the last column?”

“French and algebra, but no more than eight or nine points in all. I don’t think any of this is ever going to come out. And I guess I owe that to you. I’m not proud of it, but it’s the truth. So, thanks.”

“What a touching speech,” Dussander said, and began to cough again.

“I guess I won’t be seeing you around too much from now on,” Todd said, and Dussander abruptly stopped coughing.

“No?” he said, politely enough.

“No,” Todd said. “We’re going to Hawaii for a month starting on June twenty-fifth. In September I’ll be going to school across town. It’s this

bussing thing.”

“Oh yes, the Schwarzen,” Dussander said, idly watching a fly as it trundled across the red and white check of the oilcloth. “For twenty years this country has worried and whined about the Schwarzen. But we know the solution ... don’t we, boy?” He smiled toothlessly at Todd and Todd looked down, feeling the old sickening lift and drop in his stomach. Terror, hate, and a desire to do something so awful it could only be fully contemplated in his dreams.

“Look, I plan to go to college, in case you didn’t know,” Todd said. “I know that’s a long time off, but I think about it. I even know what I want to major in. History.”

“Admirable. He who will not learn from the past is—”

“Oh, shut up,” Todd said.

Dussander did so, amiably enough. He knew the boy wasn’t done... not yet. He sat with his hands folded, watching him.

“I could get my letter back from my friend,” Todd suddenly blurted. “You know that? I could let you read it, and then you could watch me burn it. If—”

“—if I would remove a certain document from my safety deposit box.”

“Well ... yeah.”

Dussander uttered a long, windy, rueful sigh. “My boy,” he said. “Still you do not understand the situation. You never have, right from the beginning. Partly because you are only a boy, but not entirely... even in the beginning, you were a very old boy. No, the real villain was and is your absurd American self-confidence that never allowed you to consider the possible consequences of what you were doing ... which does not allow it even now.”

Todd began to speak and Dussander raised his hand adamantly, suddenly the world's oldest traffic cop.

"No, don't contradict me. It's true. Go on if you like. Leave the house, get out of here, never come back. Can I stop you? No. Of course I can't. Enjoy yourself in Hawaii while I sit in this hot, grease-smelling kitchen and wait to see if the Schwarzen in Watts will decide to start killing policemen and burning their shitty tenements again this year. I can't stop you any more than I can stop getting older a day at a time."

He looked at Todd fixedly, so fixedly that Todd looked away.

"Down deep inside, I don't like you. Nothing could make me like you. You forced yourself on me. You are an unbidden guest in my house. You have made me open crypts perhaps better left shut, because I have discovered that some of the corpses were buried alive, and that a few of those still have some wind left in them.

"You yourself have become enmeshed, but do I pity you because of that? Gott im Himmel! You have made your bed; should I pity you if you sleep badly in it? No ... I don't pity you, and I don't like you, but I have come to respect you a little bit. So don't try my patience by asking me to explain this twice. We could obtain our documents and destroy them here in my kitchen. And still it would not be over. We would, in fact, be no better off than we are at this minute."

"I don't understand you."

"No, because you have never studied the consequences of what you have set in motion. But attend me, boy. If we burned our letters here, in this jar cover, how would I know you hadn't made a copy? Or two? Or three? Down at the library they have a Xerox machine, for a nickle anyone can make a photocopy. For a dollar, you could post a copy of my death-warrant on every streetcorner for twenty blocks. Two miles of death-warrants, boy! Think of it! Can you tell me how I would know you hadn't done such a thing?"

“I ... well, I ... I ...” Todd realized he was floundering and forced himself to shut his mouth. All of a sudden his skin felt too warm, and for no reason at all he found himself remembering something that had happened when he was seven or eight. He and a friend of his had been crawling through a culvert which ran beneath the old Freight Bypass Road just out of town. The friend, skinnier than Todd, had had no problem ... but Todd had gotten stuck. He had become suddenly aware of the feet of rock and earth over his head, all that dark weight, and when an L.A.-bound semi passed above, shaking the earth and making the corrugated pipe vibrate with a low, tuneless, and somehow sinister note, he had begun to cry and to struggle witlessly, throwing himself forward, pistoning with his legs, yelling for help. At last he had gotten moving again, and when he finally struggled out of the pipe, he had fainted.

Dussander had just outlined a piece of duplicity so fundamental that it had never even crossed his mind. He could feel his skin getting hotter, and he thought: I won't cry.

“And how would you know I hadn't made two copies for my safety deposit box ... that I had burned one and left the other there?”

Trapped. I'm trapped just like in the pipe that time and who are you going to yell for now?

His heart speeded up in his chest. He felt sweat break on the backs of his hands and the nape of his neck. He remembered how it had been in that pipe, the smell of old water, the feel of the cool, ribbed metal, the way everything shook when the truck passed overhead. He remembered how hot and desperate the tears had been.

“Even if there were some impartial third party we could go to, always there would be doubts. The problem is insoluble, boy. Believe it.”

Trapped. Trapped in the pipe. No way out of this one.

He felt the world go gray. Won't cry. Won't faint. He forced himself to come back.

Dussander took a deep drink from his cup and looked at Todd over the rim.

“Now I tell you two more things. First, that if your part in this matter came out, your punishment would be quite small. It is even possible—no, more than that, likely—that it would never come out in the papers at all. I frightened you with reform school once, when I was badly afraid you might crack and tell everything. But do I believe that? No—I used it the way a father will use the ‘boogerman’ to frighten a child into coming home before dark. I don’t believe that they would send you there, not in this country where they spank killers on the wrist and send them out onto the streets to kill again after two years of watching color TV in a penitentiary.

“But it might well ruin your life all the same. There are records ... and people talk. Always, they talk. Such a juicy scandal is not allowed to wither; it is bottled, like wine. And, of course, as the years pass, your culpability will grow with you. Your silence will grow more damning. If the truth came out today, people would say, ‘But he is just a child!’ ... not knowing, as I do, what an old child you are. But what would they say, boy, if the truth about me, coupled with the fact that you knew about me as early as 1974 but kept silent, came out while you are in high school? That would be bad. For it to come out while you are in college would be disaster. As a young man just starting out in business... Armageddon. You understand this first thing?”

Todd was silent, but Dussander seemed satisfied. He nodded.

Still nodding, he said: “Second, I don’t believe you have a letter.”

Todd strove to keep a poker face, but he was terribly afraid his eyes had widened in shock. Dussander was studying him avidly, and Todd was suddenly, nakedly aware that this old man had interrogated hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. He was an expert. Todd felt that his skull had turned to window-glass and all things were flashing inside in large letters.

“I asked myself whom you would trust so much. Who are your friends... whom do you run with? Whom does this boy, this self-sufficient, coldly controlled little boy, go to with his loyalty? The answer is, nobody.”

Dussander’s eyes gleamed yellowly.

“Many times I have studied you and calculated the odds. I know you, and I know much of your character—no, not all, because one human being can never know everything that is in another human being’s heart—but I know so little about what you do and whom you see outside of this house. So I think, ‘Dussander, there is a chance that you are wrong. After all these years, do you want to be captured and maybe killed because you misjudged a boy?’ Maybe when I was younger I would have taken the chance—the odds are good odds, and the chance is a small chance. It is very strange to me, you know—the older one becomes, the less one has to lose in matters of life and death... and yet, one becomes more and more conservative.”

He looked hard into Todd’s face.

“I have one more thing to say, and then you can go when you want. What I have to say is that, while I doubt the existence of your letter, never doubt the existence of mine. The document I have described to you exists. If I die today ... tomorrow... everything will come out. Everything.”

“Then there’s nothing for me,” Todd said. He uttered a dazed little laugh. “Don’t you see that?”

“But there is. Years will go by. As they pass, your hold on me will become worth less and less, because no matter how important my life and liberty remain to me, the Americans and—yes, even the Israelis—will have less and less interest in taking them away.”

“Yeah? Then why don’t they let that guy Hess go?”

“If the Americans had sole custody of him—the Americans who let killers out with a spank on the wrist—they would have let him go,” Dussander said. “Are the Americans going to allow the Israelis to extradite an eighty-year-old man so they can hang him as they hanged Eichmann? I think not. Not in a country where they put photographs of firemen rescuing kittens from trees on the front pages of city newspapers.

“No, your hold over me will weaken even as mine over you grows stronger. No situation is static. And there will come a time—if I live long enough—when I will decide what you know no longer matters. Then I will destroy the document.”

“But so many things could happen to you in between! Accidents, sickness, disease—”

Dussander shrugged. “There will be water if God wills it, and we will find it if God wills it, and we will drink it if God wills it.’ What happens is not up to us.”

Todd looked at the old man for a long time—for a very long time. There were flaws in Dussander’s arguments—there had to be. A way out, an escape hatch either for both of them or for Todd alone. A way to cry it off—times, guys, I hurt my foot, allee-allee-in-free. A black knowledge of the years ahead trembled somewhere behind his eyes; he could feel it there, waiting to be born as conscious thought. Everywhere he went, everything he did—

He thought of a cartoon character with an anvil suspended over its head. By the time he graduated from high school, Dussander would be eighty-one, and that would not be the end; by the time he collected his B.A., Dussander would be eighty-five and he would still feel that he wasn’t old enough, he would finish his master’s thesis and graduate school the year Dussander turned eighty-seven ... and Dussander still might not feel safe.

“No,” Todd said thickly. “What you’re saying ... I can’t face that.”

“My boy,” Dussander said gently, and Todd heard for the first time and with dawning horror the slight accent the old man had put on the first word. “My boy ... you must.”

Todd stared at him, his tongue swelling and thickening in his mouth until it seemed it must fill his throat and choke him. Then he wheeled and blundered out of the house.

Dussander watched all of this with no expression at all, and when the door had slammed shut and the boy's running footsteps stopped, meaning that he had mounted his bike, he lit a cigarette. There was, of course, no safe deposit box, no document. But the boy believed those things existed; he had believed utterly. He was safe. It was ended.

But it was not ended.

That night they both dreamed of murder, and both of them awoke in mingled terror and exhilaration.

Todd awoke with the now familiar stickiness of his lower belly. Dussander, too old for such things, put on the SS uniform and then lay down again, waiting for his racing heart to slow. The uniform was cheaply made and already beginning to fray.

In Dussander's dream he had finally reached the camp at the top of the hill. The wide gate slid open for him and then rumbled shut on its steel track once he was inside. Both the gate and the fence surrounding the camp were electrified. His scrawny, naked pursuers threw themselves against the fence in wave after wave; Dussander had laughed at them and he had strutted back and forth, his chest thrown out, his cap cocked at exactly the right angle. The high, winey smell of burning flesh filled the black air, and he had awakened in southern California thinking of jack-o'-lanterns and the night when vampires seek the blue flame.

Two days before the Bowdens were scheduled to fly to Hawaii, Todd went back to the abandoned trainyard where folks had once boarded

trains for San Francisco, Seattle, and Las Vegas; where other, older folks had once boarded the trolley for Los Angeles.

It was nearly dusk when he got there. On the curve of freeway nine hundred yards away, most of the cars were now showing their parking lights. Although it was warm, Todd was wearing a light jacket. Tucked into his belt under it was a butcher knife wrapped in an old hand-towel. He had purchased the knife in a discount department store, one of the big ones surrounded by acres of parking lot.

He looked under the platform where the wino had been the month before. His mind turned and turned, but it turned on nothing; everything inside him at that moment was shades of black on black.

What he found was the same wino or possibly another; they all looked pretty much the same.

“Hey!” Todd said. “Hey! You want some money?”

The wino turned over, blinking. He saw Todd’s wide, sunny grin and began to grin back. A moment later the butcher knife descended, all whicker-snicker and chrome-white, slicker-slicing through the stubbly right cheek. Blood sprayed. Todd could see the blade in the wino’s opening mouth... and then its tip caught for a moment in the left corner of the wino’s lips, pulling his mouth into an insanely cockeyed grin. Then it was the knife that was making the grin; he was carving the wino like a Halloween pumpkin.

He stabbed the wino thirty-seven times. He kept count. Thirty-seven, counting the first strike, which went through the wino’s cheek and then turned his tentative smile into a great grisly grin. The wino stopped trying to scream after the fourth stroke. He stopped trying to scramble away from Todd after the sixth. Todd then crawled all the way under the platform and finished the job.

On his way home he threw the knife into the river. His pants were bloodstained. He tossed them into the washing machine and set it to

wash cold. There were still faint stains on the pants when they came out, but they didn't concern Todd. They would fade in time. He found the next day that he could barely lift his right arm to the level of his shoulder. He told his father he must have strained it throwing pepper with some of the guys in the park.

"It'll get better in Hawaii," Dick Bowden said, ruffling Todd's hair, and it did; by the time they came home, it was as good as new.

13

It was July again.

Dussander, carefully dressed in one of his three suits (not his best), was standing at the bus stop and waiting for the last local of the day to take him home. It was 10:45 P.M. He had been to a film, a light and frothy comedy that he had enjoyed a great deal. He had been in a fine mood ever since the morning mail. There had been a postcard from the boy, a glossy color photo of Waikiki Beach with bone-white highrise hotels standing in the background. There was a brief message on the reverse.

Dear Mr. Denker,

Boy this sure is some place. I've been swimming every day. My dad caught a big fish and my mom is catching up on her reading (joke). Tomorrow we're going to a volcano. I'll try not to fall in! Hope you're okay.

Stay healthy, Todd

He was still smiling faintly at the significance of that last when a hand touched his elbow.

"Mister?"

"Yes?"

He turned, on his guard—even in Santo Donato, muggers were not unknown—and then winced at the aroma. It seemed to be a combination of beer, halitosis, dried sweat, and possibly Musterole. It was a bum in baggy pants. He—it—wore a flannel shirt and very old loafers that were currently being held together with dirty bands of adhesive tape. The face looming above this motley costume looked like the death of God.

“You got an extra dime, mister? I gotta get to L.A., me. Got a job offertunity. I need just a dime more for the express bus. I wudn’t ask if it wadn’t a big chance for me.”

Dussander had begun to frown, but now his smile reasserted itself.

“Is it really a bus ride you wish?”

The wino smiled sickly, not understanding.

“Suppose you ride the bus home with me,” Dussander proposed. “I can offer you a drink, a meal, a bath, and a bed. All I ask in return is a little conversation. I am an old man. I live alone. Company is sometimes very welcome.”

The drunk’s smile abruptly grew more healthy as the situation clarified itself. Here was a well-to-do old faggot with a taste for slumming.

“All by yourself! Bitch, innit?”

Dussander answered the broad, insinuating grin with a polite smile. “I only ask that you sit away from me on the bus. You smell rather strongly.”

“Maybe you don’t want me stinking up your place, then,” the drunk said with sudden, tipsy dignity.

“Come, the bus will be here in a minute. Get off one stop after I do and then walk back two blocks. I’ll wait for you on the corner. In the morning I will see what I can spare. Perhaps two dollars.”

“Maybe even five,” the drunk said brightly. His dignity, tipsy or otherwise, had been forgotten.

“Perhaps, perhaps,” Dussander said impatiently. He could now hear the low diesel drone of the approaching bus. He pressed a quarter, the correct bus fare, into the bum’s grimy hand and strolled a few paces away without looking back.

The bum stood undecided as the headlights of the local swept over the rise. He was still standing and frowning down at the quarter when the old faggot got on the bus without looking back. The bum began to walk away and then—at the last second—he reversed direction and boarded the bus just before the doors folded closed. He put the quarter into the fare-box with the expression of a man putting a hundred dollars down on a long shot. He passed Dussander without doing more than glancing at him and sat at the back of the bus. He dozed off a little, and when he woke up, the rich old faggot was gone. He got off at the next stop, not knowing if it was the right one or not, and not really caring.

He walked back two blocks and saw a dim shape under the streetlight. It was the old faggot, all right. The faggot was watching him approach, and he was standing as if at attention.

For just a moment the bum felt a chill of apprehension, an urge to just turn away and forget the whole thing.

Then the old man was gripping him by the arm ... and his grip was surprisingly firm.

“Good,” the old man said. “I’m very glad you came. My house is down here. It’s not far.”

“Maybe even ten,” the bum said, allowing himself to be led.

“Maybe even ten,” the old faggot agreed, and then laughed. “Who knows?”

14

The Bi-Centennial year arrived.

Todd came by to see Dussander half a dozen times between his return from Hawaii in the summer of 1975 and the trip he and his parents took to Rome just as all the drum-thumping, flag-waving, and Tall Ships-watching was approaching its climax.

These visits to Dussander were low-key and in no way unpleasant ; the two of them found they could pass the time civilly enough. They spoke more in silences than they did in words, and their actual conversations would have put an FBI agent to sleep. Todd told the old man that he had been seeing a girl named Angela Farrow off and on. He wasn't nuts about her, but she was the daughter of one of his mother's friends. The old man told Todd he had taken up braiding rugs because he had read such an activity was good for arthritis. He showed Todd several samples of his work, and Todd dutifully admired them.

The boy had grown quite a bit, had he not? (Well, two inches.) Had Dussander given up smoking? (No, but he had been forced to cut down; they made him cough too much now.) How had his schoolwork been? (Challenging but exciting ; he had made all A's and B's, had gone to the state finals with his Science Fair project on solar power, and was now thinking of majoring in anthropology instead of history when he got to college.) Who was mowing Dussander's lawn this year? (Randy Chambers from just down the street—a good boy, but rather fat and slow.)

During that year Dussander had put an end to three winos in his kitchen. He had been approached at the downtown bus stop some twenty times, had made the drink-dinner-bath-and-bed offer seven times. He had been turned down twice, and on two other occasions the winos had simply walked off with the quarters Dussander gave them for the fare-box. After some thought, he had worked out a way

around this; he simply bought a book of coupons. They were two dollars and fifty cents, good for fifteen rides, and non-negotiable at the local liquor stores.

On very warm days just lately, Dussander had noticed an unpleasant smell drifting up from his cellar. He kept his doors and windows firmly shut on these days.

Todd Bowden had found a wino sleeping it off in an abandoned drainage culvert behind a vacant lot on Cienaga Way—this had been in December, during the Christmas vacation. He had stood there for some time, hands stuffed into his pockets, looking at the wino and trembling. He had returned to the lot six times over a period of five weeks, always wearing his light jacket, zipped halfway up to conceal the Craftsman hammer tucked into his belt. At last he had come upon the wino again—that one or some other, and who really gave a fuck—on the first day of March. He had begun with the hammer end of the tool, and then at some point (he didn't really remember when; everything had been swimming in a red haze) he had switched to the claw end, obliterating the wino's face.

For Kurt Dussander, the winos were a half-cynical propitiation of gods he had finally recognized ... or re-recognized. And the winos were fun. They made him feel alive. He was beginning to feel that the years he had spent in Santo Donate—the years before the boy had turned up on his door-step with his big blue eyes and his wide American grin—had been years spent being old before his time. He had been just past his mid-sixties when he came here. And he felt much younger than that now.

The idea of propitiating gods would have startled Todd at first—but it might have gained eventual acceptance. After stabbing the wino under the train platform, he had expected his nightmares to intensify—to perhaps even drive him crazy. He had expected waves of paralyzing guilt that might well end with a blurted confession or the taking of his own life.

Instead of any of those things, he had gone to Hawaii with his parents and enjoyed the best vacation of his life.

He had begun high school last September feeling oddly new and refreshed, as if a different person had jumped into his Todd Bowden skin. Things that had made no particular impression on him since earliest childhood—the sunlight just after dawn, the look of the ocean off the Fish Pier, the sight of people hurrying on a downtown street at just that moment of dusk when the streetlights come on—these things now imprinted themselves on his mind again in a series of bright cameos, in images so clear they seemed electroplated. He tasted life on his tongue like a draught of wine straight from the bottle.

After he had seen the stewbum in the culvert, but before he killed him, the nightmares had begun again.

The most common one involved the wino he had stabbed to death in the abandoned trainyard. Home from school, he burst into the house, a cheery Hi, Monica-baby! on his lips. It died there as he saw the dead wino in the raised breakfast nook. He was sitting slumped over their butcher-block table in his puke-smelling shirt and pants. Blood had streaked across the bright tiled floor; it was drying on the stainless steel counters. There were bloody handprints on the natural pine cupboards.

Clipped to the note-board by the fridge was a message from his mother: Todd—Goneto the store. Back by 3:30. The hands of the stylish sunburst clock over the Jenn-Air range stood at 3:20 and the drunk was sprawled dead up there in the nook like some horrid oozing relic from the subcellar of a junkshop and there was blood everywhere, and Todd began trying to clean it up, wiping every exposed surface, all the time screaming at the dead wino that he had to go, had to leave him alone, and the wino just lolled there and stayed dead, grinning up at the ceiling, and freshets of blood kept pouring from the stab-wounds in his dirty skin. Todd grabbed the O Cedar mop from the closet and began to slide it madly back and forth across the floor, aware that he was not really getting the blood

up, only diluting it, spreading it around, but unable to stop. And just as he heard his mother's Town and Country wagon turn into the driveway, he realized the wino was Dussander. He woke from these dreams sweating and gasping, clutching double handfuls of the bedclothes.

But after he finally found the wino in the culvert again—that wino or some other—and used the hammer on him, these dreams went away. He supposed he might have to kill again, and maybe more than once. It was too bad, but of course their time of usefulness as human creatures was over. Except their usefulness to Todd, of course. And Todd, like everyone else he knew, was only tailoring his lifestyle to fit his own particular needs as he grew older. Really, he was no different than anybody. You had to make your own way in the world; if you were going to get along, you had to do it by yourself.

15

In the fall of his junior year, Todd played varsity tailback for the Santo Donato Cougars and was named All-Conference. And in the second quarter of that year, the quarter which ended in late January of 1977, he won the American Legion Patriotic Essay Contest. This contest was open to all city high school students who were taking American history courses. Todd's piece was called "An American's Responsibility." During the baseball season that year he was the school's star pitcher, winning four and losing none. His batting average was .361. At the awards assembly in June he was named Athlete of the Year and given a plaque by Coach Haines (Coach Haines, who had once taken him aside and told him to keep practicing his curve "because none of these niggers can hit a curveball, Bowden, not one of them"). Monica Bowden burst into tears when Todd called her from school and told her he was going to get the award. Dick Bowden strutted around his office for two weeks following the ceremony, trying not to boast. That summer they rented a cabin in Big Sur and stayed there for two weeks and Todd snorkled his brains out. During that same year Todd killed four derelicts. He stabbed two of them and bludgeoned two of them. He had taken to wearing two pairs of pants on what he now acknowledged to be hunting expeditions. Sometimes he rode the city busses, looking for likely spots. The best two, he found, were the Santo Donato Mission for the Indigent on Douglas Street, and around the corner from the Salvation Army on Euclid. He would walk slowly through both of these neighborhoods, waiting to be panhandled. When a wino approached him, Todd would tell him that he, Todd, wanted a bottle of whiskey, and if the wino would buy it, Todd would share the bottle. He knew a place, he said, where they could go. It was a different place every time, of course. He resisted a strong urge to go back either to the trainyard or to the culvert behind the vacant lot on Cienaga Way. Revisiting the scene of a previous crime would have been unwise.

During the same year Dussander smoked sparingly, drank Ancient Age bourbon, and watched TV. Todd came by once in awhile, but their conversations became increasingly arid. They were growing apart. Dussander celebrated his seventy-ninth birthday that year, which was also the year Todd turned sixteen. Dussander remarked that sixteen was the best year of a young man's life, forty-one the best year of a middle-aged man's, and seventy-nine the best of an old man's. Todd nodded politely. Dussander had been quite drunk, and cackled in a way that made Todd distinctly uneasy.

Dussander had dispatched two winos during Todd's academic year of 1976-77. The second had been livelier than he looked; even after Dussander had gotten the man soddenly drunk he had tottered around the kitchen with the haft of a steak-knife jutting from the base of his neck, gushing blood down the front of his shirt and onto the floor. The wino had re-discovered the front hall after two staggering circuits of the kitchen and had almost escaped the house.

Dussander had stood in the kitchen, eyes wide with shocked unbelief, watching the wino grunt and puff his way toward the door, rebounding from one side of the hall to the other and knocking cheap Currier & Ives reproductions to the floor. His paralysis had not broken until the wino was actually groping for the doorknob. Then Dussander had bolted across the room, jerked open the utility drawer, and pulled out his meat-fork. He ran down the hall with the meat-fork held out in front of him and drove it into the wino's back.

Dussander had stood over him, panting, his old heart racing in a frightening way ... racing like that of a heart-attack victim on that Saturday night TV program he enjoyed, Emergency ! But at last it had slowed back into a normal rhythm and he knew he was going to be all right.

There had been a great deal of blood to clean up.

That had been four months ago, and since then he had not made his offer at the downtown bus stop. He was frightened of the way he had almost bungled the last one... but when he remembered the way he

had handled things at the last moment, pride rose in his heart. In the end the wino had never made it out the door, and that was the important thing.

16

In the fall of 1977, during the first quarter of his senior year, Todd joined the Rifle Club. By June of 1978 he had qualified as a marksman. He made All-Conference in football again, won five and lost one during the baseball season (the loss coming as the result of two errors and one unearned run), and made the third highest Merit Scholarship score in the school's history. He applied to Berkeley and was promptly accepted. By April he knew he would either be valedictorian or salutatorian on graduation night. He very badly wanted to be valedictorian.

During the latter half of his senior year, an odd impulse came on him—one which was as frightening to Todd as it was irrational. He seemed to be clearly and firmly in control of it, and that at least was comforting, but that such a thought should have occurred at all was scary. He had made an arrangement with life. He had worked things out. His life was much like his mother's bright and sunshiny kitchen, where all the surfaces were dressed in chrome, Formica, or stainless steel—a place where everything worked when you pressed the buttons. There were deep and dark cupboards in this kitchen, of course, but many things could be stored in them and their doors still be closed.

This new impulse reminded him of the dream in which he had come home to discover the dead and bleeding wino in his mother's clean, well-lighted place. It was as if, in the bright and careful arrangement he had made, in that a-place-for-everything-and-everything-in-its-place kitchen of his mind, a dark and bloody intruder now lurched and shambled, looking for a place to die conspicuously ...

A quarter of a mile from the Bowden house was the freeway, running eight lanes wide. A steep and brushy bank led down to it. There was plenty of good cover on the bank. His father had given him a Winchester .30-.30 for Christmas, and it had a removable telescopic

sight. During rush hour, when all eight lanes were jammed, he could pick a spot on that bank and ... why, he could easily...

Do what?

Commit suicide?

Destroy everything he had worked for these last four years? Say what?

No sir, no ma'am, no way.

It is, as they say, to laugh.

Sure it was ... but the impulse remained.

One Saturday a few weeks before his high school graduation, Todd cased the .30-.30 after carefully emptying the magazine. He put the rifle in the back seat of his father's new toy—a used Porsche. He drove to the spot where the brushy slope dropped steeply down to the freeway. His mother and father had taken the station wagon and had driven to L.A. for the weekend. Dick, now a full partner, would be holding discussions with the Hyatt people about a new Reno hotel.

Todd's heart bumped in his chest and his mouth was full of sour, electric spit as he worked his way down the grade with the cased rifle in his arms. He came to a fallen tree and sat cross-legged behind it. He uncased the rifle and laid it on the dead tree's smooth trunk. A branch jutting off at an angle made a nice rest for the barrel. He snugged the buttplate into the hollow of his right shoulder and peered into the telescopic sight.

Stupid! his mind screamed at him. Boy, this is really stupid! If someone sees you, it's not going to matter if the gun's loaded or not! You'll get in plenty of trouble, maybe even end up with some Chippie shooting at you!

It was mid-morning and the Saturday traffic was light. He settled the crosshairs on a woman behind the wheel of a blue Toyota. The woman's window was half-open and the round collar of her sleeveless blouse was fluttering. Todd centered the crosshairs on her temple and dry-fired. It was bad for the firing-pin, but what the fuck.

"Pow," he whispered as the Toyota disappeared beneath the underpass half a mile up from the slope where Todd sat. He swallowed around a lump that tasted like a stuck-together mass of pennies.

Here came a man behind the wheel of a Subaru Brat pickup truck. This man had a scuzzy-looking gray beard and was wearing a San Diego Padres baseball hat.

"You're ... you're a dirty rat... the dirty rat that shot my bruddah," Todd whispered, giggling a little, and dry-fired the .30-.30 again.

He shot at five others, the impotent snap of the hammer spoiling the illusion at the end of each "kill." Then he cased the rifle again. He carried it back up the slope, bending low to keep from being seen. He put it into the back of the Porsche. There was a dry hot pounding in his temples. He drove home. Went up to his room. Masturbated.

17

The stewbum was wearing a ragged, unravelling reindeer sweater that looked so startling it almost seemed surreal here in southern California. He also wore seaman's issue bluejeans which were out at the knees, showing white, hairy flesh and a number of peeling scabs. He raised the jelly-glass—Fred and Wilma, Barney and Betty dancing around the rim in what might have been some grotesque fertility rite—and tossed off the knock of Ancient Age at a gulp. He smacked his lips for the last time in this world.

“Mister, that hits the old spot. I don't mind saying so.”

“I always enjoy a drink in the evening,” Dussander agreed from behind him, and then rammed the butcher knife into the stewbum's neck. There was the sound of ripping gristle, a sound like a drumstick being torn enthusiastically from a freshly roasted chicken. The jelly-glass fell from the stewbum's hand and onto the table. It rolled toward the edge, its movement enhancing the illusion that the cartoon characters on it were dancing.

The stewbum threw his head back and tried to scream. Nothing came out but a hideous whistling sound. His eyes widened, widened ... and then his head thumped soggly onto the red and white oilcloth check that covered Dussander's kitchen table. The stewbum's upper plate slithered halfway out of his mouth like a semi-detachable grin.

Dussander yanked the knife free—he had to use both hands to do it—and crossed to the kitchen sink. It was filled with hot water, Lemon Fresh Joy, and dirty supper dishes. The knife disappeared into a billow of citrus-smelling suds like a very small fighter plane diving into a cloud.

He crossed to the table again and paused there, resting one hand on the dead stewbum's shoulder while a spasm of coughing rattled through him. He took his handkerchief from his back pocket and spat yellowish-brown phlegm into it. He had been smoking too much

lately. He always did when he was making up his mind to do another one. But this one had gone smoothly; really very smoothly. He had been afraid after the mess he had made with the last one that he might be tempting fate sorely to try it again.

Now, if he hurried, he would still be able to watch the second half of Lawrence Welk.

He hustled across the kitchen, opened the cellar door, and turned on the light switch. He went back to the sink and got the package of green plastic garbage bags from the cupboard beneath. He shook one out as he walked back to the slumped wino. Blood had run across the oilcloth in all directions. It had puddled in the wino's lap and on the hilly, faded linoleum. It would be on the chair, too, but all of those things would clean up.

Dussander grabbed the stewbum by the hair and yanked his head up. It came with boneless ease, and a moment later the wino was lolling backwards, like a man about to get a pre-haircut shampoo. Dussander pulled the garbage bag down over the wino's head, over his shoulders, and down his arms to the elbows. That was as far as it would go. He unbuckled his late guest's belt and pulled it free of the fraying belt-loops. He wrapped the belt around the garbage bag two or three inches above the elbows and buckled it tight. Plastic rustled. Dussander began to hum under his breath.

The wino's feet were clad in scuffed and dirty Hush Puppies. They made a limp V on the floor as Dussander seized the belt and dragged the corpse toward the cellar door. Something white tumbled out of the plastic bag and clicked on the floor. It was the stewbum's upper plate, Dussander saw. He picked it up and stuffed it into one of the wino's front pockets.

He laid the wino down in the cellar doorway with his head now lolling backward onto the second stair-level. Dussander climbed around the body and gave it three healthy kicks. The body moved slightly on the first two, and the third sent it slithering bonelessly down the stairs. Halfway down, the feet flew up over the head and the body executed

an acrobatic roll. It belly-whopped onto the packed dirt of the cellar floor with a solid thud. One Hush Puppy flew off, and Dussander made a mental note to pick it up.

He went down the stairs, skirted the body, and approached his toolbench. To the left of the bench a spade, a rake, and a hoe leaned against the wall in a neat rank. Dussander selected the spade. A little exercise was good for an old man. A little exercise could make you feel young.

The smell down here was not good, but it didn't bother him much. He limed the place once a month (once every three days after he had "done" one of his winos) and he had gotten a fan which he ran upstairs to keep the smell from permeating the house on very warm still days. Josef Kramer, he remembered, had been fond of saying that the dead speak, but we hear them with our noses.

Dussander picked a spot in the cellar's north corner and went to work. The dimensions of the grave were two and a half feet by six feet. He had gotten to a depth of two feet, half deep enough, when the first paralyzing pain struck him in the chest like a shotgun blast. He straightened up, eyes flaring wide. Then the pain rolled down his arm ... unbelievable pain, as if an invisible hand had seized all the blood-vessels in there and was now pulling them. He watched the spade tumble sideways and felt his knees buckle. For one horrible moment he felt sure that he was going to fall into the grave himself.

Somehow he staggered backwards three paces and sat down on his workbench with a plop. There was an expression of stupid surprise on his face—he could feel it—and he thought he must look like one of those silent movie comedians after he'd been hit by the swinging door or stepped in the cow patty. He put his head down between his knees and gasped.

Fifteen minutes crawled by. The pain had begun to abate somewhat, but he did not believe he would be able to stand. For the first time he understood all the truths of old age which he had been spared until now. He was terrified almost to the point of whimpering. Death had

brushed by him in this dank, smelly cellar; it had touched Dussander with the hem of its robe. It might be back for him yet. But he would not die down here; not if he could help it.

He got up, hands still crossed on his chest, as if to hold the fragile machinery together. He staggered across the open space between the workbench and the stairs. His left foot tripped over the dead wino's outstretched leg and he went to his knees with a small cry. There was a sullen flare of pain in his chest. He looked up the stairs—the steep, steep stairs. Twelve of them. The square of light at the top was mockingly distant.

“Ein, ” Kurt Dussander said, and pulled himself grimly up onto the first stair-level. “Zwei, Drei, Vier.”

It took him twenty minutes to reach the linoleum floor of the kitchen. Twice, on the stairs, the pain had threatened to come back, and both times Dussander had waited with his eyes closed to see what would happen, perfectly aware that if it came back as strongly as it had come upon him down there, he would probably die. Both times the pain had faded away again.

He crawled across the kitchen floor to the table, avoiding the pools and streaks of blood, which were now congealing. He got the bottle of Ancient Age, took a swallow, and closed his eyes. Something that had been cinched tight in his chest seemed to loosen a little. The pain faded a bit more. After another five minutes he began to work his way slowly down the hall. His telephone sat on a small table halfway down.

It was quarter past nine when the phone rang in the Bowden house. Todd was sitting cross-legged on the couch, going over his notes for the trig final. Trig was a bitch for him, as all maths were and probably always would be. His father was seated across the room, going through the checkbook stubs with a portable calculator on his lap and a mildly disbelieving expression on his face. Monica, closest to the phone, was watching the James Bond movie Todd had taped off HBO two evenings before.

“Hello?” She listened. A faint frown touched her face and she held the handset out to Todd. “It’s Mr. Denker. He sounds excited about something. Or upset.”

Todd’s heart leaped into his throat, but his expression hardly changed. “Really?” He went to the phone and took it from her. “Hi, Mr. Denker.”

Dussander’s voice was hoarse and short. “Come over right away, boy. I’ve had a heart attack. Quite a bad one, I think.”

“Gee,” Todd said, trying to collect his flying thoughts, to see around the fear that now bulked huge in his own mind.

“That’s interesting, all right, but it’s pretty late and I was studying—”

“I understand that you cannot talk,” Dussander said in that harsh, almost barking voice. “But you can listen. I cannot call an ambulance or dial two-two-two, boy ... at least not yet. There is a mess here. I need help... and that means you need help.”

“Well ... if you put it that way ...” Todd’s heartbeat had reached a hundred and twenty beats a minute, but his face was calm, almost serene. Hadn’t he known all along that a night like this would come? Yes, of course he had.

“Tell your parents I’ve had a letter,” Dussander said. “An important letter. You understand?”

“Yeah, okay,” Todd said.

“Now we see, boy. We see what you are made of.”

“Sure,” Todd said. He suddenly became aware that his mother was watching him instead of the movie, and he forced a stiff grin onto his face. “Bye.”

Dussander was saying something else now, but Todd hung up on it.

“I’m going over to Mr. Denker’s for awhile,” he said, speaking to both of them but looking at his mother—that faint expression of concern was still on her face. “Can I pick up anything for either of you at the store?”

“Pipe cleaners for me and a small package of fiscal responsibility for your mother,” Dick said.

“Very funny,” Monica said. “Todd, is Mr. Denker—”

“What in the name of God did you get at Fielding’s?” Dick interrupted.

“That knick-knack shelf in the closet. I told you that. There’s nothing wrong with Mr. Denker, is there, Todd? He sounded a little strange.”

“There really are such things as knick-knack shelves? I thought those crazy women who write British mysteries made them up so there would always be a place where the killer could find a blunt instrument.”

“Dick, can I get a word in edgeways?”

“Sure. Be my guest. But for the closet?”

“He’s okay, I guess,” Todd said. He put on his letter jacket and zipped it up. “But he was excited. He got a letter from a nephew of his in Hamburg or Dusseldorf or someplace. He hasn’t heard from any of his people in years, and now he’s got this letter and his eyes aren’t good enough for him to read it.”

“Well isn’t that a bitch,” Dick said. “Go on, Todd. Get over there and ease the man’s mind.”

“I thought he had someone to read to him,” Monica said. “A new boy.”

“He does,” Todd said, suddenly hating his mother, hating the half-informed intuition he saw swimming in her eyes.

“Maybe he wasn’t home, or maybe he couldn’t come over this late.”

“Oh. Well ... go on, then. But be careful.”

“I will. You don’t need anything at the store?”

“No. How’s your studying for that calculus final going?”

“It’s trig,” Todd said. “Okay, I guess. I was just getting ready to call it a night.” This was a rather large lie.

“You want to take the Porsche?” Dick asked.

“No, I’ll ride my bike.” He wanted the extra five minutes to collect his thoughts and get his emotions under control—to try, at least. And in his present state, he would probably drive the Porsche into a telephone pole.

“Strap your reflector-patch on your knee,” Monica said, “and tell Mr. Denker hello for us.”

“Okay.”

That doubt was still in his mother’s eyes but it was less evident now. He blew her a kiss and then went out to the garage where his bike—a racing-style Italian bike rather than a Schwinn now—was parked. His heart was still racing in his chest, and he felt a mad urge to take the .30-.30 back into the house and shoot both of his parents and then go down to the slope overlooking the freeway. No more worrying about Dussander. No more bad dreams, no more winos. He would shoot and shoot and shoot, only saving one bullet back for the end.

Then reason came back to him and he rode away toward Dussander’s, his reflector-patch revolving up and down just above his knee, his long blonde hair streaming back from his brow.

“Holy Christ!” Todd nearly screamed.

He was standing in the kitchen door. Dussander was slumped on his elbows, his china cup between them. Large drops of sweat stood out on his forehead. But it was not Dussander Todd was looking at. It was the blood. There seemed to be blood everywhere—it was puddled on the table, on the empty kitchen chair, on the floor.

“Where are you bleeding?” Todd shouted, at last getting his frozen feet to move again—it seemed to him that he had been standing in the doorway for at least a thousand years. This is the end, he was thinking, this is the absolute end of everything. The balloon is going up high, baby, all the way to the sky, baby, and it’s toot-toot-tootsie, goodbye. All the same, he was careful not to step in any of the blood. “I thought you said you had a fucking heart attack!”

“It’s not my blood,” Dussander muttered.

“What?” Todd stopped. “What did you say?”

“Go downstairs. You will see what has to be done.”

“What the hell is this?” Todd asked. A sudden terrible idea had come into his head.

“Don’t waste our time, boy. I think you will not be too surprised at what you find downstairs. I think you have had experience in such matters as the one in my cellar. First-hand experience.”

Todd looked at him, unbelieving, for another moment, and then he plunged down the cellar stairs two by two. His first look in the feeble yellow glow of the basement’s only light made him think that Dussander had pushed a bag of garbage down here. Then he saw the protruding legs, and the dirty hands held down at the sides by the cinched belt.

“Holy Christ,” he repeated, but this time the words had no force at all—they emerged in a slight, skeletal whisper.

He pressed the back of his right hand against lips that were as dry as sandpaper. He closed his eyes for a moment... and when he opened them again, he felt in control of himself at last.

Todd started moving.

He saw the spade-handle protruding from a shallow hole in the far corner and understood at once what Dussander had been doing when his ticker had seized up. A moment later he became fully aware of the cellar's fetid aroma—a smell like rotting tomatoes. He had smelled it before, but upstairs it was much fainter—and, of course, he hadn't been here very often over the past couple of years. Now he understood exactly what that smell meant and for several moments he had to struggle with his gorge. A series of choked gagging sounds, muffled by the hand he had clapped over his mouth and nose, came from him.

Little by little he got control of himself again.

He seized the wino's legs and dragged him across to the edge of the hole. He dropped them, skidded sweat from his forehead with the heel of his left hand, and stood absolutely still for a moment, thinking harder than he ever had in his life.

Then he seized the spade and began to deepen the hole. When it was five feet deep, he got out and shoved the derelict's body in with his foot. Todd stood at the edge of the grave, looking down. Tattered bluejeans. Filthy, scab-encrusted hands. It was a stewbum, all right. The irony was almost funny. So funny a person could scream with laughter.

He ran back upstairs.

"How are you?" he asked Dussander.

"I'll be all right. Have you taken care of it?"

"I'm doing it, okay?"

“Be quick. There’s still up here.”

“I’d like to find some pigs and feed you to them,” Todd said, and went back down cellar before Dussander could reply.

He had almost completely covered the wino when he began to think there was something wrong. He stared into the grave, grasping the spade’s handle with one hand. The wino’s legs stuck partway out of the mound of dirt, as did the tips of his feet—one old shoe, possibly a Hush Puppy, and one filthy athletic sock that might actually have been white around the time that Taft was President.

One Hush Puppy? One?

Todd half-ran back around the furnace to the foot of the stairs. He glanced around wildly. A headache was beginning to thud against his temples, dull drillbits trying to work their way out. He spotted the old shoe five feet away, overturned in the shadow of some abandoned shelving. Todd grabbed it, ran back to the grave with it, and threw it in. Then he started to shovel again. He covered the shoe, the legs, everything.

When all the dirt was back in the hole, he slammed the spade down repeatedly to tamp it. Then he grabbed the rake and ran it back and forth, trying to disguise the fact the earth here had been recently turned. Not much use; without good camouflage, a hole that has been recently dug and then filled in always looks like a hole that has been recently dug and then filled in. Still, no one would have any occasion to come down here, would they? He and Dussander would damn well have to hope not.

Todd ran back upstairs. He was starting to pant.

Dussander’s elbows had spread wide and his head had sagged down to the table. His eyes were closed, the lids a shiny purple—the color of asters.

“Dussander!” Todd shouted. There was a hot, juicy taste in his mouth—the taste of fear mixed with adrenaline and pulsing hot blood.

“Don’t you dare die on me, you old fuck!”

“Keep your voice down,” Dussander said without opening his eyes.

“You’ll have everyone on the block over here.”

“Where’s your cleaner? Lestoil ... Top Job ... something like that. And rags. I need rags.”

“All that is under the sink.”

A lot of the blood had now dried on. Dussander raised his head and watched as Todd crawled across the floor, scrubbing first at the puddle on the linoleum and then at the drips that had straggled down the legs of the chair the wino had been sitting in. The boy was biting compulsively at his lips, champing at them, almost, like a horse at a bit. At last the job was finished. The astringent smell of cleaner filled the room.

“There is a box of old rags under the stairs,” Dussander said. “Put those bloody ones on the bottom. Don’t forget to wash your hands.”

“I don’t need your advice. You got me into this.”

“Did I? I must say you took hold well.” For a moment the old mockery was in Dussander’s voice, and then a bitter grimace pulled his face into a new shape. “Hurry.”

Todd took care of the rags, then hurried up the cellar stairs for the last time. He looked nervously down the stairs for a moment, then snapped off the light and closed the door. He went to the sink, rolled up his sleeves, and washed in the hottest water he could stand. He plunged his hands into the suds ... and came up holding the butcher knife Dussander had used.

“I’d like to cut your throat with this,” Todd said grimly.

“Yes, and then feed me to the pigs. I have no doubt of it.”

Todd rinsed the knife, dried it, and put it away. He did the rest of the dishes quickly, let the water out, and rinsed the sink. He looked at the clock as he dried his hands and saw it was twenty minutes after ten.

He went to the phone in the hallway, picked up the receiver, and looked at it thoughtfully. The idea that he had forgotten something—something as potentially damning as the wino’s shoe—nagged unpleasantly at his mind. What? He didn’t know. If not for the headache, he might be able to get it. The triple-damned headache. It wasn’t like him to forget things, and it was scary.

He dialed 222 and after a single ring, a voice answered:

“This is Santo Donato MED-Q. Do you have a medical problem?”

“My name is Todd Bowden. I’m at 963 Claremont Street. I need an ambulance.”

“What’s the problem, son?”

“It’s my friend, Mr. D—” He bit down on his lip so hard that it squirted blood, and for a moment he was lost, drowning in the pulses of pain from his head. Dussander. He had almost given this anonymous MED-Q voice Dussander’s real name.

“Calm down, son,” the voice said. “Take it slow and you’ll be fine.”

“My friend Mr. Denker,” Todd said. “I think he’s had a heart attack.”

“His symptoms?”

Todd began to give them, but the voice had heard enough as soon as Todd described the chest pain that had migrated to the left arm. He told Todd the ambulance would arrive in ten to twenty minutes, depending on the traffic. Todd hung up and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes.

“Did you get it?” Dussander called weakly.

“Yes!” Todd screamed. “Yes, I got it! Yes goddammit yes! Yes yes yes! Just shut up!”

He pressed his hands even harder against his eyes, creating first senseless starflashes of light and then a bright field of red. Get hold of yourself, Todd-baby. Get down, get funky, get cool. Dig it.

He opened his eyes and picked up the telephone again. Now the hard part. Now it was time to call home.

“Hello?” Monica’s soft, cultured voice in his ear. For a moment—just a moment—he saw himself slamming the muzzle of the .30-.30 into her nose and pulling the trigger into the first flow of blood.

“It’s Todd, Mommy. Let me talk to Dad, quick.”

He didn’t call her mommy anymore. He knew she would get that signal quicker than anything else, and she did. “What’s the matter? Is something wrong, Todd?”

“Just let me talk to him!”

“But what—”

The phone rattled and clunked. He heard his mother saying something to his father. Todd got ready.

“It’s Mr. Denker, Daddy. He ... it’s a heart attack, I think. I’m pretty sure it is.”

“Jesus!” His father’s voice lagged away for a moment and Todd heard him repeating the information to his wife. Then he was back. “He’s still alive? As far as you can tell?”

“He’s alive. Conscious.”

“All right, thank God for that. Call an ambulance.”

“I just did.”

“Two-two-two?”

“Yes.”

“Good boy. How bad is he, can you tell?”

“I don’t know, Dad. They said the ambulance would be here soon, but... I’m sorta scared. Can you come over and wait with me?”

“You bet. Give me four minutes.”

Todd could hear his mother saying something else as his father hung up, breaking the connection. Todd replaced the receiver on his end.

Four minutes.

Four minutes to do anything that had been left undone. Four minutes to remember whatever it was that had been forgotten. Or had he forgotten anything? Maybe it was just nerves. God, he wished he hadn’t had to call his father. But it was the natural thing to do, wasn’t it? Sure. Was there some natural thing that he hadn’t done? Something—?

“Oh, you shit-for-brains!” he suddenly moaned, and bolted back into the kitchen. Dussander’s head lay on the table, his eyes half-open, sluggish.

“Dussander!” Todd cried. He shook Dussander roughly, and the old man groaned. “Wake up! Wake up, you stinking old bastard!”

“What? Is it the ambulance?”

“The letter! My father is coming over, he’ll be here in no time. Where’s the fucking letter?”

“What ... what letter?”

“You told me to tell them you got an important letter. I said ...” His heart sank. “I said it came from overseas ... from Germany. Christ!” Todd ran his hands through his hair.

“A letter.” Dussander raised his head with slow difficulty. His seamed cheeks were an unhealthy yellowish-white, his lips blue. “From Willi, I think. Willi Frankel. Dear ... dear Willi.”

Todd looked at his watch and saw that already two minutes had passed since he had hung up the phone. His father would not, could not make it from their house to Dussander’s in four minutes, but he could do it damn fast in the Porsche. Fast, that was it. Everything was moving too fast. And there was still something wrong here; he felt it. But there was no time to stop and hunt around for the loophole.

“Yes, okay, I was reading it to you, and you got excited and had this heart attack. Good. Where is it?”

Dussander looked at him blankly.

“The letter! Where is it?”

“What letter?” Dussander asked vacantly, and Todd’s hands itched to throttle the drunken old monster.

“The one I was reading to you! The one from Willi What’s-his-face! Where is it?”

They both looked at the table, as if expecting to see the letter materialize there.

“Upstairs,” Dussander said finally. “Look in my dresser. The third drawer. There is a small wooden box in the bottom of that drawer. You will have to break it open. I lost the key a long time ago. There are some very old letters from a friend of mine. None signed. None dated. All in German. A page or two will serve for window-fittings, as you would say. If you hurry—”

“Are you crazy?” Todd raged. “I don’t understand German! How could I read you a letter written in German, you numb fuck?”

“Why would Willi write me in English?” Dussander countered wearily. “If you read me the letter in German, I would understand it even if you did not. Of course your pronunciation would be butchery, but still, I could—”

Dussander was right—right again, and Todd didn’t wait to hear more. Even after a heart attack the old man was a step ahead. Todd raced down the hall to the stairs, pausing just long enough by the front door to make sure his father’s Porsche wasn’t pulling up even now. It wasn’t, but Todd’s watch told him just how tight things were getting; it had been five minutes now.

He took the stairs two at a time and burst into Dussander’s bedroom. He had never been up here before, hadn’t even been curious, and for a moment he only looked wildly around at the unfamiliar territory. Then he saw the dresser, a cheap item done in the style his father called Discount Store Modern. He fell on his knees in front of it and yanked at the third drawer. It came halfway out, then jiggled sideways in its slot and stuck firmly.

“Goddam you,” he whispered at it. His face was dead pale except for the spots of dark, bloody color flaring at each cheek and his blue eyes, which looked as dark as Atlantic storm-clouds. “Goddam you fucking thing come out!”

He yanked so hard that the entire dresser tottered forward and almost fell on him before deciding to settle back. The drawer shot all the way out and landed in Todd’s lap. Dussander’s socks and underwear and handkerchiefs spilled out all around him. He pawed through the stuff that was still in the drawer and came out with a wooden box about nine inches long and three inches deep. He tried to pull up the lid. Nothing happened. It was locked, just as Dussander had said. Nothing was free tonight.

He stuffed the spilled clothes back into the drawer and then rammed the drawer back into its oblong slot. It stuck again. Todd worked to free it, wiggling it back and forth, sweat running freely down his face. At last he was able to slam it shut. He got up with the box. How much time had passed now?

Dussander's bed was the type with posts at the foot and Todd brought the lock side of the box down on one of these posts as hard as he could, grinning at the shock of pain that vibrated in his hands and travelled all the way up to his elbows. He looked at the lock. The lock looked a bit dented, but it was intact. He brought it down on the post again, even harder this time, heedless of the pain. This time a chunk of wood flew off the bedpost, but the lock still didn't give. Todd uttered a little shriek of laughter and took the box to the other end of the bed. He raised it high over his head this time and brought it down with all his strength. This time the lock splintered.

As he flipped the lid up, headlights splashed across Dussander's window.

He pawed wildly through the box. Postcards. A locket. A much-folded picture of a woman wearing frilly black garters and nothing else. An old billfold. Several sets of ID. An empty leather passport folder. At the bottom, letters.

The lights grew brighter, and now he heard the distinctive beat of the Porsche's engine. It grew louder... and then cut off.

Todd grabbed three sheets of airmail-type stationery, closely written in German on both sides of each sheet, and ran out of the room again. He had almost gotten to the stairs when he realized he had left the forced box lying on Dussander's bed. He ran back, grabbed it, and opened the third dresser drawer.

It stuck again, this time with a firm shriek of wood against wood.

Out front, he heard the ratchet of the Porsche's emergency brake, the opening of the driver's side door, the slam shut.

Faintly, Todd could hear himself moaning. He put the box in the askew drawer, stood up, and lashed out at it with his foot. The drawer closed neatly. He stood blinking at it for a moment and then fled back down the hall. He raced down the stairs. Halfway down them, he heard the rapid rattle of his father's shoes on Dussander's walk. Todd vaulted over the bannister, landed lightly, and ran into the kitchen, the airmail pages fluttering from his hand.

A hammering on the door. "Todd? Todd, it's me!"

And he could hear an ambulance siren in the distance as well. Dussander had drifted away into semi-consciousness again.

"Coming, Dad!" Todd shouted.

He put the airmail pages on the table, fanning them a little as if they had been dropped in a hurry, and then he went back down the hall and let his father in.

"Where is he?" Dick Bowden asked, shouldering past Todd.

"In the kitchen."

"You did everything just right, Todd," his father said, and hugged him in a rough, embarrassed way.

"I just hope I remembered everything," Todd said modestly, and then followed his father down the hall and into the kitchen.

In the rush to get Dussander out of the house, the letter was almost completely ignored. Todd's father picked it up briefly, then put it down when the medics came in with the stretcher. Todd and his father followed the ambulance, and his explanation of what had happened was accepted without question by the doctor attending Dussander's case. "Mr. Denker" was, after all, eighty years old, and his habits were not the best. The doctor also offered Todd a brusque commendation for his quick thinking and action. Todd thanked him wanly and then asked his father if they could go home.

As they rode back, Dick told him again how proud of him he was. Todd barely heard him. He was thinking about his .30-.30 again.

That was the same day Morris Heisel broke his back.

Morris had never intended to break his back; all he had intended to do was nail up the corner of the rain-gutter on the west side of his house. Breaking his back was the furthest thing from his mind, he had had enough grief in his life without that, thank you very much. His first wife had died at the age of twenty-five, and both of their daughters were also dead. His brother was dead, killed in a tragic car accident not far from Disneyland in 1971. Morris himself was nearing sixty, and had a case of arthritis that was worsening early and fast. He also had warts on both hands, warts that seemed to grow back as fast as the doctor could burn them off. He was also prone to migraine headaches, and in the last couple of years, that potzer Rogan next door had taken to calling him "Morris the Cat." Morris had wondered aloud to Lydia, his second wife, how Rogan would like it if Morris took up calling him "Rogan the hemorrhoid."

"Quit it, Morris," Lydia said on these occasions. "You can't take a joke, you never could take a joke, sometimes I wonder how I could marry a man with absolutely no sense of humor. We go to Las Vegas," Lydia had said, addressing the empty kitchen as if an invisible horde of spectators which only she could see were standing there, "we see Buddy Hackett, and Morris doesn't laugh once."

Besides arthritis, warts, and migraines, Morris also had Lydia, who, God love her, had developed into something of a nag over the last five years or so ... ever since her hysterectomy. So he had plenty of sorrows and plenty of problems without adding a broken back.

"Morris!" Lydia cried, coming to the back door and wiping suds from her hands with a dishtowel. "Morris, you come down off that ladder right now!"

"What?" He twisted his head so he could see her. He was almost at the top of his aluminum stepladder. There was a bright yellow sticker

on this step which said: DANGER! BALANCE MAY SHIFT WITHOUT WARNING ABOVE THIS STEP! Morris was wearing his carpenter's apron with the wide pockets, one of the pockets filled with nails and the other filled with heavy-duty staples. The ground under the stepladder's feet was slightly uneven and the ladder rocked a little when he moved. His neck ached with the unlovely prelude to one of his migraines. He was out of temper. "What?"

"Come down from there, I said, before you break your back."

"I'm almost finished."

"You're rocking on that ladder like you were on a boat, Morris. Come down."

"I'll come down when I'm done!" he said angrily. "Leave me alone!"

"You'll break your back," she reiterated dolefully, and went into the house again.

Ten minutes later, as he was hammering the last nail into the rain-gutter, tipped back nearly to the point of overbalancing, he heard a feline yowl followed by fierce barking.

"What in God's name—?"

He looked around and the stepladder rocked alarmingly. At that same moment, their cat—it was named Lover Boy, not Morris—tore around the corner of the garage, its fur bushed out into hackles and its green eyes flaring. The Rogans' collie pup was in hot pursuit, its tongue hanging out and its leash dragging behind it.

Lover Boy, apparently not superstitious; ran under the stepladder. The collie pup followed.

"Look out, look out, you dumb mutt!" Morris shouted.

The ladder rocked. The pup bunted it with the side of its body. The ladder tipped over and Morris tipped with it, uttering a howl of

dismay. Nails and staples flew out of his carpenter's apron. He landed half on and half off the concrete driveway, and a gigantic agony flared in his back. He did not so much hear his spine snap as feel it happen. Then the world grayed out for awhile.

When things swam back into focus, he was still lying half on and half off the driveway in a litter of nails and staples. Lydia was kneeling over him, weeping. Rogan from next door was there, too, his face as white as a shroud.

"I told you!" Lydia babbled. "I told you to come down off that ladder! Now look! Now look at this!"

Morris found he had absolutely no desire to look. A suffocating, throbbing band of pain had cinched itself around his middle like a belt, and that was bad, but there was something much worse: he could feel nothing below that belt of pain—nothing at all.

"Wail later," he said huskily. "Call the doctor now."

"I'll do it," Rogan said, and ran back to his own house.

"Lydia," Morris said. He wet his lips.

"What? What, Morris?" She bent over him and a tear splashed on his cheek. It was touching, he supposed, but it had made him flinch, and the flinch had made the pain worse.

"Lydia, I also have one of my migraines."

"Oh, poor darling! Poor Morrish But I told you—"

"I've got the headache because that potzer Rogan's dog barked all night and kept me awake. Today the dog chases my cat and knocks over my ladder and I think my back is broken."

Lydia shrieked. The sound made Morris's head vibrate.

"Lydia," he said, and wet his lips again.

“What, darling?”

“I have suspected something for many years. Now I am sure.”

“My poor Morris! What?”

“There is no God,” Morris said, and fainted.

They took him to Santo Donato and his doctor told him, at about the same time that he would have ordinarily been sitting down to one of Lydia’s wretched suppers, that he would never walk again. By then they had put him in a bodycast. Blood and urine samples had been taken. Dr. Kemmelman had peered into his eyes and tapped his knees with a little rubber hammer—but no reflexive twitch of the leg answered the taps. And at every turn there was Lydia, the tears streaming from her eyes, as she used up one handkerchief after another. Lydia, a woman who would have been at home married to Job, went everywhere well-supplied with little lace snotrags, just in case reason for an extended crying spell should occur. She had called her mother, and her mother would be here soon (“That’s nice, Lydia”—although if there was anyone on earth Morris honestly loathed, it was Lydia’s mother). She had called the rabbi, he would be here soon, too (“That’s nice, Lydia”—although he hadn’t set foot inside the synagogue in five years and wasn’t sure what the rabbi’s name was). She had called his boss, and while he wouldn’t be here soon, he sent his greatest sympathies and condolences (“That’s nice, Lydia”—although if there was anyone in a class with Lydia’s mother, it was that cigar-chewing putz Frank Haskell). At last they gave Morris a Valium and took Lydia away. Shortly afterward, Morris just drifted away—no worries, no migraines, no nothing. If they kept giving him little blue pills like that, went his last thought, he would go on up that stepladder and break his back again.

When he woke up—or regained consciousness, that was more like it—dawn was just breaking and the hospital was as quiet as Morris supposed it ever got. He felt very calm... almost serene. He had no pain; his body felt swaddled and weightless. His bed had been surrounded by some sort of contraption like a squirrel cage—a thing

of stainless steel bars, guy wires, and pulleys. His legs were being held up by cables attached to this gadget. His back seemed to be bowed by something beneath, but it was hard to tell—he had only the angle of his vision to judge by.

Others have it worse, he thought. All over the world, others have it worse. In Israel, the Palestinians kill busloads of farmers who were committing the political crime of going into town to see a movie. The Israelis cope with this injustice by dropping bombs on the Palestinians and killing children along with whatever terrorists may be there. Others have it worse than me ... which is not to say this is good, don't get that idea, but others have it worse.

He lifted one hand with some effort—there was pain somewhere in his body, but it was very faint—and made a weak fist in front of his eyes. There. Nothing wrong with his hands. Nothing wrong with his arms, either. So he couldn't feel anything below the waist, so what? There were people all over the world paralyzed from the neck down. There were people with leprosy. There were people dying of syphilis. Somewhere in the world right now, there might be people walking down the jetway and onto a plane that was going to crash. No, this wasn't good, but there were worse things in the world.

And there had been, once upon a time, much worse things in the world.

He raised his left arm. It seemed to float, disembodied, before his eyes—a scrawny old man's arm with the muscles deteriorating. He was in a hospital johnny but it had short sleeves and he could still read the numbers on the forearm, tattooed there in faded blue ink. P499965214. Worse things, yes, worse things than falling off a suburban stepladder and breaking your back and being taken to a clean and sterile metropolitan hospital and being given a Valium that was guaranteed to bubble your troubles away.

There were the showers, they were worse. His first wife, Ruth, had died in one of their filthy showers. There were the trenches that became graves—he could close his eyes and still see the men lined

up along the open maw of the trenches, could still hear the volley of rifle-fire, could still remember the way they flopped backwards into the earth like badly made puppets. There were the crematoriums, they were worse, too, the crematoriums that filled the air with the steady sweet smell of Jews burning like torches no one could see. The horror-struck faces of old friends and relatives... faces that melted away like guttering candles, faces that seemed to melt away before your very eyes—thin, thinner, thinnest. Then one day they were gone. Where? Where does a torch-flame go when the cold wind has blown it out? Heaven. Hell? Lights in the darkness, candles in the wind. When Job finally broke down and questioned, God asked him: Where were you when I made the world? If Morris Heisel had been Job, he would have responded: Where were You when my Ruth was dying, You potzer, You? Watching the Yankees and the Senators? If You can't pay attention to Your business better than this, get out of my face.

Yes, there were worse things than breaking your back, he had no doubt of it. But what sort of God would have allowed him to break his back and become paralyzed for life after watching his wife die, and his daughters, and his friends?

No God at all, that was Who.

A tear trickled from the corner of his eye and ran slowly down the side of his head to his ear. Outside the hospital room, a bell rang softly. A nurse squeaked by on white crepe-soled shoes. His door was ajar, and on the far wall of the corridor outside he could read the letters NSIVE CA and guessed that the whole sign must read INTENSIVE CARE.

There was movement in the room—a rustle of bedclothes.

Moving very carefully, Morris turned his head to the right, away from the door. He saw a night-table next to him with a pitcher of water on it. There were two call-buttons on the table. Beyond it was another bed, and in the bed was a man who looked even older and sicker than Morris felt. He was not hooked into a giant exercise-wheel for

gerbils like Morris was, but an IV feed stood beside his bed and some sort of monitoring console stood at its foot. The man's skin was sunken and yellow. Lines around his mouth and eyes had driven deep. His hair was yellowish-white, dry and lifeless. His thin eyelids had a bruised and shiny look, and in his big nose Morris saw the burst capillaries of the lifelong drinker.

Morris looked away ... and then looked back. As the dawnlight grew stronger and the hospital began to wake up, he began to have the strangest feeling that he knew his roommate. Could that be? The man looked to be somewhere between seventy-five and eighty, and Morris didn't believe he knew anyone quite that old—except for Lydia's mother, a horror Morris sometimes believed to be older than the Sphinx, whom the woman closely resembled.

Maybe the guy was someone he had known in the past, maybe even before he, Morris, came to America. Maybe. Maybe not. And why all of a sudden did it seem to matter? For that matter, why had all his memories of the camp, of Patin, come flooding back tonight, when he always tried to—and most times succeeded in—keeping those things buried?

He broke out in a sudden rash of gooseflesh, as if he had stepped into some mental haunted house where old bodies were unquiet and old ghosts walked. Could that be, even here and now in this clean hospital, thirty years after those dark times had ended?

He looked away from the old man in the other bed, and soon he had begun to feel sleepy again.

It's a trick of your mind that this other man seems familiar. Only your mind, amusing you in the best way it can, amusing you the way it used to try to amuse you in—

But he would not think of that. He would not allow himself to think of that.

Drifting into sleep, he thought of a boast he had made to Ruth (but never to Lydia; it didn't pay to boast to Lydia; she was not like Ruth, who would always smile sweetly at his harmless puffing and crowing): I never forget a face. Here was his chance to find out if that was still so. If he had really known the man in the other bed at some time or other, perhaps he could remember when... and where.

Very close to sleep, drifting back and forth across its threshold, Morris thought: Perhaps I knew him in the camp.

That would be ironic indeed—what they called a “jest of God.”

What God? Morris Heisel asked himself again, and slept.

19

Todd graduated salutatorian of his class, just possibly because of his poor grade on the trig final he had been studying for the night Dussander had his heart attack. It dragged his final grade in the course down to 89, one point below an A-minus average.

A week after graduation, the Bowdens went to visit Mr. Denker at Santo Donato General. Todd fidgeted through fifteen minutes of banalities and thank-yous and how-do-you-feels and was grateful for the break when the man in the other bed asked him if he could come over for a minute.

“You’ll pardon me,” the other man said apologetically. He was in a huge bodycast and was for some reason attached to an overhead system of pulleys and wires. “My name is Morris Heisel. I broke my back.”

“That’s too bad,” Todd said gravely.

“Oy, too bad, he says! This boy has the gift of understatement!”

Todd started to apologize, but Heisel raised his hand, smiling a little. His face was pale and tired, the face of any old man in the hospital facing a life full of sweeping changes just ahead—and surely few of them for the better. In that way, Todd thought, he and Dussander were alike.

“No need,” Morris said. “No need to answer a rude comment. You are a stranger. Does a stranger need to be inflicted with my problems?”

“No man is an island, entire of itself—’ ” Todd began, and Morris laughed.

“Donne, he quotes at me! A smart kid! Your friend there, is he very bad off?”

“Well, the doctors say he’s doing fine, considering his age. He’s eighty.”

“That old!” Morris exclaimed. “He doesn’t talk to me much, you know. But from what he does say, I’d guess he’s naturalized. Like me. I’m Polish, you know. Originally, I mean. From Radom.”

“Oh?” Todd said politely.

“Yes. You know what they call an orange manhole cover in Radom?”

“No,” Todd said, smiling.

“Howard Johnson’s,” Morris said, and laughed. Todd laughed, too. Dussander glanced over at them, startled by the sound and frowning a little. Then Monica said something and he looked back at her again.

“Is your friend naturalized?”

“Oh, yes,” Todd said. “He’s from Germany. Essen. Do you know that town?”

“No,” Morris said, “but I was only in Germany once. I wonder if he was in the war.”

“I really couldn’t say.” Todd’s eyes had gone distant.

“No? Well, it doesn’t matter. That was a long time ago, the war. In another three years there will be people in this country constitutionally eligible to become President—President!—who weren’t even born until after the war was over. To them it must seem there is no difference between the Miracle of Dunkirk and Hannibal taking his elephants over the Alps”

“Were you in the war?” Todd asked.

“I suppose I was, in a manner of speaking. You’re a good boy to visit such an old man ... two old men, counting me.”

Todd smiled modestly.

“I’m tired now,” Morris said. “Perhaps I’ll sleep.”

“I hope you’ll feel better very soon,” Todd said.

Morris nodded, smiled, and closed his eyes. Todd went back to Dussander’s bed, where his parents were just getting ready to leave—his dad kept glancing at his watch and exclaiming with bluff heartiness at how late it was getting.

Two days later, Todd came back to the hospital alone. This time, Morris Heisel, immured in his bodycast, was deeply asleep in the other bed.

“You did well,” Dussander said quietly. “Did you go back to the house later?”

“Yes. I burned the damned letter. I don’t think anyone was too interested in that letter, and I was afraid ... I don’t know.” He shrugged, unable to tell Dussander he’d been almost superstitiously afraid about the letter—afraid that maybe someone would wander into the house who could read German, someone who would notice references in the letter that were ten, perhaps twenty years out of date.

“Next time you come, smuggle me in something to drink,” Dussander said. “I find I don’t miss the cigarettes, but—”

“I won’t be back again,” Todd said flatly. “Not ever. It’s the end. We’re quits.”

“Quits.” Dussander folded his hands on his chest and smiled. It was not a gentle smile ... but it was perhaps as close as Dussander could come to such a thing. “I thought that was in the cards. They are going to let me out of this graveyard next week ... or so they promise. The doctor says I may have a few years left in my skin yet. I ask him how many, and he just laughs. I suspect that means no

more than three, and probably no more than two. Still, I may give him a surprise.”

Todd said nothing.

“But between you and me, boy, I have almost given up my hopes of seeing the century turn.”

“I want to ask you about something,” Todd said, looking at Dussander steadily. “That’s why I came in today. I want to ask you about something you said once.”

Todd glanced over his shoulder at the man in the other bed and then drew his chair closer to Dussander’s bed. He could smell Dussander’s smell, as dry as the Egyptian room in the museum.

“So ask.”

“That wino. You said something about me having experience. First-hand experience. What was that supposed to mean?”

Dussander’s smile widened a bit. “I read the newspapers, boy. Old men always read the newspapers, but not in the same way younger people do. Buzzards are known to gather at the ends of certain airport runways in South America when the crosswinds are treacherous, did you know that? That is how an old man reads the newspaper. A month ago there was a story in the Sunday paper. Not a front-page story, no one cares enough about bums and alcoholics to put them on the front page, but it was the lead story in the feature section. is SOMEONE STALKING SANTO DONATO’S DOWN-AND-OUT?—that’s what it was called. Crude. Yellow journalism. You Americans are famous for it.”

Todd’s hands were clenched into fists, hiding the butchered nails. He never read the Sunday papers, he had better things to do with his time. He had of course checked the papers every day for at least a week following each of his little adventures, and none of his stewbums had ever gotten beyond page three. The idea that

someone had been making connections behind his back infuriated him.

“The story mentioned several murders, extremely brutal murders. Stabbings, bludgeonings. ‘Subhuman brutality’ was how the writer put it, but you know reporters. The writer of this lamentable piece admitted that there is a high death-rate among these unfortunates, and that Santo Donato has had more than its share of the indigent over the years. In any given year, not all of these men die naturally, or of their own bad habits. There are frequent murders. But in most cases the murderer is usually one of the deceased degenerate’s compatriots, the motive no more than an argument over a penny-ante card-game or a bottle of muscatel. The killer is usually happy to confess. He is filled with remorse.

“But these recent killings have not been solved. Even more ominous, to this yellow journalist’s mind—or whatever passes for his mind—is the high disappearance rate over the last few years. Of course, he admits again, these men are not much more than modern-day hoboes. They come and go. But some of these left without picking up welfare checks or day-labor checks from Spell O’ Work, which only pays on Fridays. Could some of these have been victims of this yellow journalist’s Wino Killer, he asks? Victims who haven’t been found? Pah!”

Dussander waved his hand in the air as if to dismiss such arrant irresponsibility.

“Only titillation, of course. Give people a comfortable little scare on Sunday morning. He calls up old bogies, threadbare but still useful—the Cleveland Torso Murderer, Zodiac, the mysterious Mr. X who killed the Black Dahlia, Springheel Jack. Such drivel. But it makes me think. What does an old man have to do but think when old friends don’t come to visit anymore?”

Todd shrugged.

“I thought: ‘If I wished to help this odious yellow-dog journalist, which I certainly do not, I could explain some of the disappearances. Not the corpses found stabbed or bludgeoned, not them, God rest their besotted souls, but some of the disappearances. Because at least some of the buns who disappeared are in my cellar.’ “

“How many down there?” Todd asked in a low voice.

“Six,” Dussander said calmly. “Counting the one you helped me dispose of, six.”

“You’re really nutso,” Todd said. The skin below his eyes had gone white and shiny. “At some point you just blew all your fucking wheels.”

” ‘Blew my wheels.’ What a charming idiom! Perhaps you’re right! But then I said to myself: ‘This newspaper jackal would love to pin the murders and the disappearances on the same somebody—his hypothetical Wino Killer. But I think maybe that’s not what happened at all.’”

“Then I say to myself: ‘Do I know anybody who might be doing such things? Somebody who has been under as much strain as I have during the last few years? Someone who has also been listening to old ghosts rattle their chains?’ And the answer is yes. I know you, boy.”

“I’ve never killed anyone.”

The image that came was not of the winos; they weren’t people, not really people at all. The image that came was of himself crouched behind the dead tree, peering through the telescopic sight of his .30-.30, the crosshairs fixed on the temple of the man with the scuzzy beard, the man driving the Brat pickup.

“Perhaps not,” Dussander agreed, amicably enough. “Yet you took hold so well that night. Your surprise was mostly anger at having

been put in such a dangerous position by an old man's infirmity, I think. Am I wrong?"

"No, you're not wrong," Todd said. "I was pissed off at you and I still am. I covered it up for you because you've got something in a safety deposit box that could destroy my life."

"No. I do not."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"It was as much a bluff as your 'letter left with a friend.' You never wrote such a letter, there never was such a friend, and I have never written a single word about our ... association, shall I call it? Now I lay my cards on the table. You saved my life. Never mind that you acted only to protect yourself; that does not change how speedily and efficiently you acted. I cannot hurt you, boy. I tell you that freely. I have looked death in the face and it frightens me, but not as badly as I thought it would. There is no document. It is as you say: we are quits."

Todd smiled: a weird upward corkscrewing of the lips. A strange, sardonic light danced and fluttered in his eyes.

"Herr Dussander," he said, "if only I could believe that."

In the evening Todd walked down to the slope overlooking the freeway, climbed down to the dead tree, and sat on it. It was just past twilight. The evening was warm. Car headlights cut through the dusk in long yellow daisy chains.

There is no document.

He hadn't realized how completely irretrievable the entire situation was until the discussion that had followed. Dussander suggested Todd search the house for a safety deposit key, and when he didn't find one, that would prove there was no safety deposit box and hence no document. But a key could be hidden anywhere—it could

be put in a Crisco can and then buried, it could be put in a Sucrets tin and slid behind a board that had been loosened and then replaced; he might even have ridden the bus to San Diego and put it behind one of the rocks in the decorative stone wall which surrounded the bears' environmental area. For that matter, Todd went on, Dussander could even have thrown the key away. Why not? He had only needed it once, to put his written documents in. If he died, someone else would take it out.

Dussander nodded reluctantly at this, but after a moment's thought he made another suggestion. When he got well enough to go home, he would have the boy call every single bank in Santo Donato. He would tell each bank official he was calling for his grandfather. Poor grandfather, he would say, had grown lamentably senile over the last two years, and now he had misplaced the key to his safety deposit box. Even worse, he could no longer remember which bank the box was in. Could they just check their files for an Arthur Denker, no middle initial? And when Todd drew a blank at every bank in town—

Todd was already shaking his head again. First, a story like that was almost guaranteed to raise suspicions. It was too pat. They would probably suspect a con-game and get in touch with the police. Even if every one of them bought the story, it would do no good. If none of the almost nine dozen banks in Santo Donato had a box in the Denker name, it didn't mean that Dussander hadn't rented one in San Diego, L.A., or any town in between.

At last Dussander gave up.

“You have all the answers, boy. All, at least, but one. What would I stand to gain by lying to you? I invented this story to protect myself from you—that is a motive. Now I am trying to uninvent it. What possible gain do you see in that?”

Dussander got laboriously up on one elbow.

“For that matter, why would I need a document at all, at this point? I could destroy your life from this hospital bed, if that was what I

wanted. I could open my mouth to the first passing doctor, they are all Jews, they would all know who I am, or at least who I was. But why would I do this? You are a fine student. You have a fine career ahead of you ... unless you get careless with those winos of yours.”

Todd’s face froze. “I told you—”

“I know. You never heard of them, you never touched so much as a hair on their scaly, tick-ridden heads, all right, good, fine. I say no more about it. Only tell me, boy: why should I lie about this? We are quits, you say. But I tell you we can only be quits if we can trust each other.”

Now, sitting behind the dead tree on the slope which ran down to the freeway, looking at all the anonymous headlights disappearing endlessly like slow tracer bullets, he knew well enough what he was afraid of.

Dussander talking about trust. That made him afraid.

The idea that Dussander might be tending a small but perfect flame of hatred deep in his heart, that made him afraid, too.

A hatred of Todd Bowden, who was young, clean-featured, unwrinkled; Todd Bowden, who was an apt pupil with a whole bright life stretching ahead of him.

But what he feared most was Dussander’s refusal to use his name.

Todd. What was so hard about that, even for an old kraut whose teeth were mostly false? Todd. One syllable. Easy to say. Put your tongue against the roof of your mouth, drop your teeth a little, replace your tongue, and it was out. Yet Dussander had always called him “boy.” Only that. Contemptuous. Anonymous. Yes, that was it, anonymous. As anonymous as a concentration camp serial number.

Perhaps Dussander was telling the truth. No, not just perhaps; probably. But there were those fears ... the worst of them being Dussander's refusal to use his name.

And at the root of it all was his own inability to make a hard and final decision. At the root of it all was a rueful truth: even after four years of visiting Dussander, he still didn't know what went on in the old man's head. Perhaps he wasn't such an apt pupil after all.

Cars and cars and cars. His fingers itched to hold his rifle. How many could he get? Three? Six? An even baker's dozen? And how many miles to Babylon?

He stirred restlessly, uneasily.

Only Dussander's death would tell the final truth, he supposed. Sometime during the next five years, maybe even sooner. Three to five ... it sounded like a prison sentence. Todd Bowden, this court hereby sentences you to three to five for associating with a known war criminal. Three to five at bad dreams and cold sweats.

Sooner or later Dussander would simply drop dead. Then the waiting would begin. The knot in the stomach every time the phone or the doorbell rang.

He wasn't sure he could stand that.

His fingers itched to hold the gun and Todd curled them into fists and drove both fists into his crotch. Sick pain swallowed his belly and he lay for some time afterwards in a writhing ball on the ground, his lips pulled back in a silent shriek. The pain was dreadful, but it blotted out the endless parade of thoughts.

At least for a while.

20

For Morris Heisel, that Sunday was a day of miracles.

The Atlanta Braves, his favorite baseball team, swept a double-header from the high and mighty Cincinnati Reds by scores of 7-1 and 8-0. Lydia, who boasted smugly of always taking care of herself and whose favorite saying was “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” slipped on her friend Janet’s wet kitchen floor and sprained her hip. She was at home in bed. It wasn’t serious, not at all, and thank God (what God) for that, but it meant she wouldn’t be able to visit him for at least two days, maybe as long as four.

Four days without Lydia! Four days that he wouldn’t have to hear about how she had warned him that the stepladder was wobbly and how he was up too high on it in the bargain. Four days when he wouldn’t have to listen to her tell him how she’d always said the Rogans’ pup was going to cause them grief, always chasing Lover Boy that way. Four days without Lydia asking him if he wasn’t glad now that she had kept after him about sending in that insurance application, for if she had not, they would surely be on their way to the poorhouse now. Four days without having Lydia tell him that many people lived perfectly normal lives—almost, anyway—paralyzed from the waist down; why, every museum and gallery in the city had wheelchair ramps as well as stairs, and there were even special busses. After the observation, Lydia would smile bravely and then inevitably burst into tears.

Morris drifted off into a contented late afternoon nap.

When he woke up it was half-past five in the afternoon. His roommate was asleep. He still hadn’t placed Denker, but all the same he felt sure that he had known the man at some time or other. He had begun to ask Denker about himself once or twice, but then something kept him from making more than the most banal conversation with the man—the weather, the last earthquake, the

next earthquake, and yeah, the Guide says Myron Floren is going to come back for a special guest appearance this weekend on the Welk show.

Morris told himself he was holding back because it gave him a mental game to play, and when you were in a bodycast from your shoulders to your hips, mental games can come in handy. If you had a little mental contest going on, you didn't have to spend quite so much time wondering how it was going to be, pissing through a catheter for the rest of your life.

If he came right out and asked Denker, the mental game would probably come to a swift and unsatisfying conclusion. They would narrow their pasts down to some common experience—a train trip, a boat ride, possibly even the camp. Denker might have been in Patin; there had been plenty of German Jews there.

On the other hand, one of the nurses had told him Denker would probably be going home in a week or two. If Morris couldn't figure it out by then, he would mentally declare the game lost and ask the man straight out: Say, I've had the feeling I know you—

But there was more to it than just that, he admitted to himself. There was something in his feelings, a nasty sort of undertow, that made him think of that story "The Monkey's Paw," where every wish had been granted as the result of some evil turn of fate. The old couple who came into possession of the paw wished for a hundred dollars and received it as a gift of condolence when their only son was killed in a nasty mill accident. Then the mother had wished for the son to return to them. They had heard footsteps dragging up their walk shortly afterward; then pounding on the door. The mother, mad with joy, had gone rushing down the stairs to let in her only child. The father, mad with fear, scrabbled through the darkness for the dried paw, found it at last, and wished his son dead again. The mother threw the door open a moment. later and found nothing on the stoop but an eddy of night wind.

In some way Morris felt that perhaps he did know where he and Denker had been acquainted, but that his knowledge was like the son of the old couple in the story—returned from the grave, but not as he was in his mother’s memory; returned, instead, horribly crushed and mangled from his fall into the gnashing, whirling machinery. He felt that his knowledge of Denker might be a subconscious thing, pounding on the door between that area of his mind and that of rational understanding and recognition, demanding admittance ... and that another part of him was searching frantically for the monkey’s paw, or its psychological equivalent; for the talisman that would wish away the knowledge forever.

Now he looked at Denker, frowning.

Denker, Denker, Where have I known you, Denker? Was it Patin? Is that why I don’t want to know? But surely, two survivors of a common horror do not have to be afraid of each other. Unless, of course ...

He frowned. He felt very close to it, suddenly, but his feet were tingling, breaking his concentration, annoying him. They were tingling in just the way a limb tingles when you’ve slept on it and it’s returning to normal circulation. If it wasn’t for the damned bodycast, he could sit up and rub his feet until that tingle went away. He could —

Morris’s eyes widened.

For a long time he lay perfectly still, Lydia forgotten, Denker forgotten, Patin forgotten, everything forgotten except that tingly feeling in his feet. Yes, both feet, but it was stronger in the right one. When you felt that tingle, you said My foot went to sleep.

But what you really meant, of course, was My foot is waking up.

Morris fumbled for a call-button. He pressed it again and again until the nurse came.

The nurse tried to dismiss it—she had had hopeful patients before. His doctor wasn't in the building, and the nurse didn't want to call him at home. Dr. Kimmelman had a vast reputation for evil temper ... especially when he was called at home. Morris wouldn't let her dismiss it. He was a mild man, but now he was prepared to make more than a fuss; he was prepared to make an uproar if that's what it took. The Braves had taken two. Lydia had sprained her hip. But good things came in threes, everyone knew that.

At last the nurse came back with an intern, a young man named Dr. Timpnell whose hair looked as if it had been cut by a Lawn Boy with very dull blades. Dr. Timpnell pulled a Swiss Army knife from the pocket of his white pants, folded out the Phillips screwdriver attachment, and ran it from the toes of Morris's right foot down to the heel. The foot did not curl, but his toes twitched—it was an obvious twitch, too definite to miss. Morris burst into tears.

Timpnell, looking rather dazed, sat beside him on the bed and patted his hand.

“This sort of thing happens from time to time,” he said (possibly from his wealth of practical experience, which stretched back perhaps as far as six months). “No doctor predicts it, but it does happen. And apparently it's happened to you.”

Morris nodded through his tears.

“Obviously, you're not totally paralyzed.” Timpnell was still patting his hand. “But I wouldn't try to predict if your recovery will be slight, partial, or total. I doubt if Dr. Kimmelman will, either. I suspect you'll have to undergo a lot of physical therapy, and not all of it will be pleasant. But it will be more pleasant than ... you know.”

“Yes,” Morris said through his tears. “I know. Thank God!” He remembered telling Lydia there was no God and felt his face fill up with hot blood.

“I’ll see that Dr. Kemmelman is informed,” Timpnell said, giving Morris’s hand a final pat and rising.

“Could you call my wife?” Morris asked. Because, doom-crying and hand-wringing aside, he felt something for her. Maybe it was even love, an emotion which seemed to have little to do with sometimes feeling like you could wring a person’s neck.

“Yes, I’ll see that it’s done. Nurse, would you—?”

“Of course, doctor,” the nurse said, and Timpnell could barely stifle his grin.

“Thank you,” Morris said, wiping his eyes with a Kleenex from the box on the nightstand. “Thank you very much.”

Timpnell went out. At some point during the discussion, Mr. Denker had awakened. Morris considered apologizing for all the noise, or perhaps for his tears, and then decided no apology was necessary.

“You are to be congratulated, I take it,” Mr. Denker said. “We’ll see,” Morris said, but like Timpnell, he was barely able to stifle his grin. “We’ll see.”

“Things have a way of working out,” Denker replied vaguely, and then turned on the TV with the remote control device. It was now quarter to six, and they watched the last of Hee Haw. It was followed by the evening news. Unemployment was worse. Inflation was not so bad. Billy Carter was thinking about going into the beer business. A new Gallup poll showed that, if the election were to be held right then, there were four Republican candidates who could beat Billy’s brother Jimmy. And there had been racial incidents following the murder of a black child in Miami. “A night of violence,” the newscaster called it. Closer to home, an unidentified man had been found in an orchard near Highway 46, stabbed and bludgeoned.

Lydia called just before six-thirty. Dr. Kemmelman had called her and, based on the young intern’s report, he had been cautiously

optimistic. Lydia was cautiously joyous. She vowed to come in the following day even if it killed her. Morris told her he loved her. Tonight he loved everyone—Lydia, Dr. Timpnell with his Lawn Boy haircut, Mr. Denker, even the young girl who brought in the supper trays as Morris hung up.

Supper was hamburgers, mashed potatoes, a carrots-and-peas combination, and small dishes of ice cream for dessert. The candy striper who served it was Felice, a shy blonde girl of perhaps twenty. She had her own good news—her boyfriend had landed a job as a computer programmer with IBM and had formally asked her to marry him.

Mr. Denker, who exuded a certain courtly charm that all the young ladies responded to, expressed great pleasure. “Really, how wonderful. You must sit down and tell us all about it. Tell us everything. Omit nothing.”

Felice blushed and smiled and said she couldn’t do that. “We’ve still got the rest of the B Wing to do and C Wing after that. And look, here it is six-thirty!”

“Then tomorrow night, for sure. We insist ... don’t we, Mr. Heisel?”

“Yes, indeed,” Morris murmured, but his mind was a million miles away.

(you must sit down and tell us all about it)

Words spoken in that exact-same bantering tone. He had heard them before; of that there could be no doubt. But had Denker been the one to speak them? Had he?

(tell us everything)

The voice of an urbane man. A cultured man. But there was a threat in the voice. A steel hand in a velvet glove. Yes.

Where?

(tell us everything. omit nothing.)

(? PATIN ?)

Morris Heisel looked at his supper. Mr. Denker had already fallen to with a will. The encounter with Felice had left him in the best of spirits—the way he had been after the young boy with the blonde hair came to visit him.

“A nice girl,” Denker said, his words muffled by a mouthful of carrots and peas.

“Oh yes—

(you must sit down)

“—Felice, you mean. She’s

(and tell us all about it.)

“very sweet.”

(tell us everything. omit nothing.)

He looked down at his own supper, suddenly remembering how it got to be in the camps after awhile. At first you would have killed for a scrap of meat, no matter how maggoty or green with decay. But after awhile, that crazy hunger went away and your belly lay inside your middle like a small gray rock. You felt you would never be hungry again.

Until someone showed you food.

(“tell us everything, my friend. omit nothing. you must sit down and tell us AAALLLLL about it.”)

The main course on Morris's plastic hospital tray was hamburger. Why should it suddenly make him think of lamb? Not mutton, not chops—mutton was often stringy, chops often tough, and a person whose teeth had rotted out like old stumps would perhaps not be overly tempted by mutton or a chop. No, what he thought of now was a savory lamb stew, gravy-rich and full of vegetables. Soft tasty vegetables. Why think of lamp stew? Why, unless—

The door banged open. It was Lydia, her face rosy with smiles. An aluminum crutch was propped in her armpit and she was walking like Marshal Dillon's friend Chester. "Morris!" she trilled. Trailing her and looking just as tremulously happy was Emma Rogan from next door.

Mr. Denker, startled, dropped his fork. He cursed softly under his breath and picked it up off the floor with a wince.

"It's so WONDERFUL!" Lydia was almost baying with excitement. "I called Emma and asked her if we could come tonight instead of tomorrow, I had the crutch already, and I said, 'Em,' I said, 'if I can't bear this agony for Morris, what kind of wife am I to him?' Those were my very words, weren't they, Emma?"

Emma Rogan, perhaps remembering that her collie pup had caused at least some of the problem, nodded eagerly.

"So I called the hospital," Lydia said, shrugging her coat off and settling in for a good long visit, "and they said it was past visiting hours but in my case they would make an exception, except we couldn't stay too long because we might bother Mr. Denker. We aren't bothering you, are we, Mr. Denker?"

"No, dear lady," Mr. Denker said resignedly.

"Sit down, Emma, take Mr. Denker's chair, he's not using it. Here, Morris, stop with the ice cream, you're slobbering it all over yourself, just like a baby. Never mind, we'll have you up and around in no time. I'll feed it to you. Goo-goo, ga-ga. Open wide ... over the teeth, over the gums ... look out, stomach, here it comes! ... No, don't say

a word, Mommy knows best. Would you look at him, Emma, he hardly has any hair left and I don't wonder, thinking he might never walk again. It's God's mercy. I told him that stepladder was wobbly. I said, 'Morris,' I said, 'come down off there before—' "

She fed him ice cream and chattered for the next hour and by the time she left, hobbling ostentatiously on the crutch while Emma held her other arm, thoughts of lamb stew and voices echoing up through the years were the last things in Morris Heisel's mind. He was exhausted. To say it had been a busy day was putting it mildly. Morris fell deeply asleep.

He awoke sometime between 3:00 and 4:00 A.M. with a scream locked behind his lips.

Now he knew. He knew exactly where and exactly when he had been acquainted with the man in the other bed. Except his name had not been Denker then. Oh no, not at all.

He had awakened from the most terrible nightmare of his whole life. Someone had given him and Lydia a monkey's paw, and they had wished for money. Then, somehow, a Western Union boy in a Hitler Youth uniform had been in the room with them. He handed Morris a telegram which read:

REGRET TO INFORM YOU BOTH DAUGHTERS DEAD STOP
PATIN CONCENTRATION CAMP STOP GREATEST REGRETS AT
THIS FINAL SOLUTION STOP COMMANDANT'S LETTER
FOLLOWS STOP WILL TELL YOU EVERYTHING AND OMIT
NOTHING STOP PLEASE ACCEPT OUR CHECK FOR 100
REICHMARKS ON DEPOSIT YOUR BANK TOMORROW STOP
SIGNED ADOLF HITLER CHANCELLOR.

A great wail from Lydia, and although she had never even seen Morris's daughters, she held the monkey's paw high and wished for them to be returned to life. The room went dark. And suddenly, from outside, came the sound of dragging, lurching footfalls.

Morris was down on his hands and knees in a darkness that suddenly stank of smoke and gas and death. He was searching for the paw. One wish left. If he could find the paw he could wish this dreadful dream away. He would spare himself the sight of his daughters, thin as scarecrows, their eyes deep wounded holes, their numbers burning on the scant flesh of their arms.

Hammering on the door.

In the nightmare, his search for the paw became ever more frenzied, but it bore no fruit. It seemed to go on for years. And then, behind him, the door crashed open. No, he thought. I won't look. I'll close my eyes. Rip them from my head if I have to, but I won't look.

But he did look. He had to look. In the dream it was as if huge hands had grasped his head and wrenched it around.

It was not his daughters standing in the doorway; it was Denker. A much younger Denker, a Denker who wore a Nazi SS uniform, the cap with its death's-head insignia cocked rakishly to one side. His buttons gleamed heartlessly, his boots were polished to a killing gloss.

Clasped in his arms was a huge and slowly bubbling pot of lamb stew.

And the dream-Denker, smiling his dark, suave smile, said: You must sit down and tell us all about it—as one friend to another, hein? We have heard that gold has been hidden. That tobacco has been hoarded. That it was not food-poisoning with Schneibel at all but powdered glass in his supper two nights ago. You must not insult our intelligence by pretending you know nothing. You knew EVERYTHING. So tell it all. Omit nothing.

And in the dark, smelling the maddening aroma of the stew, he told them everything. His stomach, which had been a small gray rock, was now a ravening tiger. Words spilled helplessly from his lips.

They spewed from him in the senseless sermon of a lunatic, truth and falsehood all mixed together.

Brodin has his mother's wedding ring taped below his scrotum!

("you must sit down")

Laslo and Herman Dorksy have talked about rushing guard tower number three!

("and tell us everything!")

Rachel Tannenbaum's husband has tobacco, he gave the guard who comes on after Zeickert, the one they call Booger-Eater because he is always picking his nose and then putting his fingers in his mouth. Tannenbaum, some of it to Booger-Eater so he wouldn't take his wife's pearl earrings!

("oh that makes no sense no sense at all you've mixed up two different stories I think but that's all right quite all right we'd rather have you mix up two stories than omit one completely you must omit NOTHING!")

There is a man who has been calling out his dead son's name in order to get double rations!

("tell us his name")

I don't know it but I can point him out to you please yes I can show him to you I will I will I will I

("tell us everything you know")

will I will I will I will I will I will I will I

Until he swam up into consciousness with a scream in his throat like fire.

Trembling uncontrollably, he looked at the sleeping form in the other bed. He found himself staring particularly at the wrinkled, caved-in mouth. Old tiger with no teeth. Ancient and vicious rogue elephant with one tusk gone and the other rotted loose in its socket. Senile monster.

“Oh my God,” Morris Heisel whispered. His voice was high and faint, inaudible to anyone but himself. Tears trickled down his cheeks toward his ears. “Oh dear God, the man who murdered my wife and my daughters is sleeping in the same room with me, my God, oh dear dear God, he is here with me now in this room.”

The tears began to flow faster now—tears of rage and horror, hot, scalding.

He trembled and waited for morning, and morning did not come for an age.

21

The next day, Monday, Todd was up at six o'clock in the morning and poking listlessly at a scrambled egg he had fixed for himself when his father came down still dressed in his monogrammed bathrobe and slippers.

"Mumph," he said to Todd, going past him to the refrigerator for orange juice.

Todd grunted back without looking up from his book, one of the 87th Squad mysteries. He had been lucky enough to land a summer job with a landscaping outfit that operated out of Pasadena. That would have been much too far to commute ordinarily, even if one of his parents had been willing to loan him a car for the summer (neither was), but his father was working on-site not far from there, and he was able to drop Todd off at a bus stop on his way and pick him up at the same place on his way back. Todd was less than wild about the arrangement; he didn't like riding home from work with his father and absolutely detested riding to work with him in the morning. It was in the mornings that he felt the most naked, when the wall between what he was and what he might be seemed the thinnest. It was worse after a night of bad dreams, but even if no dreams had come in the night, it was bad. One morning he realized with a fright so suddenly it was almost terror that he had been seriously considering reaching across his father's briefcase, grabbing the wheel of the Porsche, and sending them corkscrewing into the two express lanes, cutting a swath of destruction through the morning commuters.

"You want another egg, Todd-O?"

"No thanks, Dad." Dick Bowden ate them fried. How could anyone stand to eat a fried egg? On the grill of the Jenn-Air for two minutes, then over easy. What you got on your plate at the end looked like a giant dead eye with a cataract over it, an eye that would bleed orange when you poked it with your fork.

He pushed his scrambled egg away. He had barely touched it.

Outside, the morning paper slapped the step.

His father finished cooking, turned off the grill, and came to the table. "Not hungry this morning, Todd-O?"

You call me that one more time and I'm going to stick my knife right up your fucking nose ... Dad-O.

"Not much appetite, I guess."

Dick grinned affectionately at his son; there was still a tiny dab of shaving cream on the boy's right ear. "Betty Trask stole your appetite. That's my guess."

"Yeah, maybe that's it." He offered a wan smile that vanished as soon as his father went down the stairs from the breakfast nook to get the paper. Would it wake you up if I told you what a cunt she is, Dad-O? How about if I said, "Oh, by the way, did you know your good friend Ray Trask's daughter is one of the biggest sluts in Santo Donato? She'd kiss her own twat if she was double-jointed, Dad-O. That's how much she thinks of it. Just a stinking little slut. Two lines of coke and she's yours for the night. And if you don't happen to have any coke, she's still yours for the night. She'd fuck a dog if she couldn't get a man." Think that'd wake you up, Dad-O? Get you a flying start on the day?

He pushed the thoughts back away viciously, knowing they wouldn't stay gone.

His father came back with the paper. Todd glimpsed the headline: SPACE SHUTTLE WON'T FLY, EXPERT SAYS.

Dick sat down. "Betty's a fine-looking girl," he said. "She reminds me of your mother when I first met her."

"Is that so?"

“Pretty ... young ... fresh ...” Dick Bowden’s eyes had gone vague. Now they came back, focusing almost anxiously on his son. “Not that your mother isn’t still a fine-looking woman. But at that age a girl has a certain ... glow, I guess you’d say. It’s there for awhile, and then it’s gone.” He shrugged and opened the paper. “C’est la vie, I guess.”

She’s a bitch in heat. Maybe that’s what makes her glow.

“You’re treating her right, aren’t you, Todd-O?” His father was making his usual rapid trip through the paper toward the sports pages. “Not getting too fresh?”

“Everything’s cool, Dad.”

(if he doesn’t stop pretty soon I’ll I’ll do something. scream. throw his coffee in his face. something.)

“Ray thinks you’re a fine boy,” Dick said absently. He had at last reached the sports. He became absorbed. There was blessed silence at the breakfast table.

Betty Trask had been all over him the very first time they went out. He had taken her to the local lovers’ lane after the movie because he knew it would be expected of them; they could swap spits for half an hour or so and have all the right things to tell their respective friends the next day. She could roll her eyes and tell how she had fought off his advances—boys were so tiresome, really, and she never fucked on the first date, she wasn’t that kind of girl. Her friends would agree and then all of them would troop into the girls’ room and do whatever it was they did in there—put on fresh makeup, smoke Tampax, whatever.

And for a guy ... well, you had to make out. You had to get at least to second base and try for third. Because there were reputations and reputations. Todd couldn’t have cared less about having a stud reputation; he only wanted a reputation for being normal. And if you didn’t at least try, word got around. People started to wonder if you were all right.

So he took them up on Jane's Hill, kissed them, felt their tits, went a little further than that if they would allow it. And that was it. The girl would stop him, he would put up a little good-natured argument, and then take her home. No worries about what might be said in the girls' room the next day. No worries that anyone was going to think Todd Bowden was anything but normal. Except—

Except Betty Trask was the kind of girl who fucked on the first date. On every date. And in between dates.

The first time had been a month or so before the goddam Nazi's heart attack, and Todd thought he had done pretty well for a virgin ... perhaps for the same reason a young pitcher will do well if he's tapped to throw the biggest game of the year with no forewarning. There had been no time to worry, to get all strung up about it.

Always before, Todd had been able to sense when a girl had made up her mind that on the next date she would just allow herself to be carried away. He was aware that he was personable and that both his looks and his prospects were good. The kind of boy their cunt mothers regarded as "a good catch." And when he sensed that physical capitulation about to happen, he would start dating some other girl. And whatever it said about his personality, Todd was able to admit to himself that if he ever started dating a truly frigid girl, he would probably be happy to date her for years to come. Maybe even marry her.

But the first time with Betty had gone fairly well—she was no virgin, even if he was. She had to help him get his cock into her, but she seemed to take that as a matter of course. And halfway through the act itself she had gurgled up from the blanket they were lying on: "I just love to fuck!" It was the tone of voice another girl might have used to express her love for strawberry whirl ice cream.

Later encounters—there had been five of them (five and a half, he supposed, if you wanted to count last night)—hadn't been so good. They had, in fact, gotten worse at what seemed an exponential rate ... although he didn't believe even now that Betty had been aware of

that (at least not until last night). In fact, quite the opposite. Betty apparently believed she had found the battering-ram of her dreams.

Todd hadn't felt any of the things he was supposed to feel at a time like that. Kissing her lips was like kissing warm but uncooked liver. Having her tongue in his mouth only made him wonder what kind of germs she was carrying, and sometimes he thought he could smell her fillings—an unpleasant metallic odor, like chrome. Her breasts were bags of meat. No more.

Todd had done it twice more with her before Dussander's heart attack. Each time he had more trouble getting erect. In both cases he had finally succeeded by using a fantasy. She was stripped naked in front of all their friends. Crying. Todd was forcing her to walk up and down before them while he cried out: Show your tits! Let them see your snatch, you cheap slut! Spread your cheeks! That's right, bend over and SPREAD them!

Betty's appreciation was not at all surprising. He was a good lover, not in spite of his problems but because of them. Getting hard was only the first step. Once you achieved erection, you had to have an orgasm. The fourth time they had done it—this was three days after Dussander's heart attack—he had pounded away at her for over ten minutes. Betty Trask thought she had died and gone to heaven; she had three orgasms and was trying for a fourth when Todd recalled an old fantasy ... what was, in fact, the First Fantasy. The girl on the table, clamped and helpless. The huge dildo. The rubber squeeze-bulb. Only now, desperate and sweaty and almost insane with his desire to come and get this horror over with, the face of the girl on the table became Betty's face. That brought on a joyless, rubbery spasm that he supposed was, technically, at least, an orgasm. A moment later Betty was whispering in his ear, her breath warm and redolent of Juicy Fruit gum: "Lover, you do me any old time. Just call me."

Todd had nearly groaned aloud.

The nub of his dilemma was this: Wouldn't his reputation suffer if he broke off with a girl who obviously wanted to put out for him? Wouldn't people wonder why? Part of him said they would not. He remembered walking down the hall behind two senior boys during his freshman year and hearing one of them tell the other he had broken off with his girlfriend. The other wanted to know why. "Fucked 'er out," the first said, and both of them bellowed goatish laughter.

If someone asks me why I dropped her, I'll just say I fucked her out. But what if she says we only did it five times? Is that enough? What? ... How much? ... How many? ... Who'll talk? ... What'll they say?

So his mind ran on, as restless as a hungry rat in an insoluble maze. He was vaguely aware that he was turning a minor problem into a big problem, and that this very inability to solve the problem had something to say about how shaky he had gotten. But knowing it brought him no fresh ability to change his behavior, and he sank into a black depression.

College. College was the answer. College offered an excuse to break with Betty that no one could question. But September seemed so far away.

The fifth time it had taken him almost twenty minutes to get hard, but Betty had proclaimed the experience well worth the wait. And then, last night, he hadn't been able to perform at all.

"What are you, anyway?" Betty had asked petulantly. After twenty minutes of manipulating his lax penis, she was dishevelled and out of patience. "Are you one of those AC/DC guys?"

He very nearly strangled her on the spot. And if he'd had his .30-.30

"Well, I'll be a son of a gun! Congratulations, son!"

"Huh?" He looked up and out of his black study.

“You made the Southern Cal High School All-Stars!” His father was grinning with pride and pleasure.

“Is that so?” For a moment he hardly knew what his father was talking about; he had to grope for the meaning of the words. “Say, yeah, Coach Haines mentioned something to me about that at the end of the year. Said he was putting me and Billy DeLyons up. I never expected anything to happen.”

“Well Jesus, you don’t seem very excited about it!”

“I’m still trying

(who gives a ripe fuck?)

to get used to the idea.” With a huge effort, he managed a grin. “Can I see the article?”

His father handed the paper across the table to Todd and got to his feet. “I’m going to wake Monica up. She’s got to see this before we leave.”

No, God—I can’t face both of them this morning.

“Aw, don’t do that. You know she won’t be able to get back to sleep if you wake her up. We’ll leave it for her on the table.”

“Yes, I suppose we could do that. You’re a damned thoughtful boy, Todd.” He clapped Todd on the back, and Todd squeezed his eyes closed. At the same time he shrugged his shoulders in an aw-shucks gesture that made his father laugh. Todd opened his eyes again and looked at the paper.

4 BOYS NAMED TO SOUTHERN CAL ALL-STARS, the headline read. Beneath were pictures of them in their uniforms—the catcher and left-fielder from Fairview High, the harp south-paw from Mountford, and Todd to the far right, grinning openly out at the world from beneath the bill of his baseball cap. He read the story and saw

that Billy DeLyons had made the second squad. That, at least, was something to feel happy about. DeLyons could claim he was a Methodist until his tongue fell out, if it made him feel good, but he wasn't fooling Todd. He knew perfectly well what Billy DeLyons was. Maybe he ought to introduce him to Betty Trask, she was another sheeny. He had wondered about that for a long time, and last night he had decided for sure. The Trasks were passing for white. One look at her nose and that olive complexion—her old man's was even worse—and you knew. That was probably why he hadn't been able to get it up. It was simple: his cock had known the difference before his brain. Who did they think they were kidding, calling themselves Trask?

“Congratulations again, son.”

He looked up and first saw his father's hand stuck out, then his father's foolishly grinning face.

Your buddy Trask is a yid! he heard himself yelling into his father's face. That's why I was impotent with his slut of a daughter last night! That's the reason! Then, on the heels of that, the cold voice that sometimes came at moments like this rose up from deep inside him, shutting off the rising flood of irrationality, as if

(GET HOLD OF YOURSELF RIGHT NOW)

behind steel gates.

He took his father's hand and shook it. Smiled guilelessly into his father's proud face. Said: “Jeez, thanks, Dad.”

They left that page of the newspaper folded back and a note for Monica, which Dick insisted Todd write and sign Your All-Star Son, Todd.

22

Ed French, aka “Pucker” French, aka Sneaker Pete and The Ked Man, also aka Rubber Ed French, was in the small and lovely seaside town of San Remo for a guidance counsellors’ convention. It was a waste of time if ever there had been one—all guidance counsellors could ever agree on was not to agree on anything—and he grew bored with the papers, seminars, and discussion periods after a single day. Halfway through the second day, he discovered he was also bored with San Remo, and that of the adjectives small, lovely, and seaside, the key adjective was probably small. Gorgeous views and redwood trees aside, San Remo didn’t have a movie theater or a bowling alley, and Ed hadn’t wanted to go in the place’s only bar—it had a dirt parking lot filled with pickup trucks, and most of the pickups had Reagan stickers on their rusty bumpers and tailgates. He wasn’t afraid of being picked on, but he hadn’t wanted to spend an evening looking at men in cowboy hats and listening to Loretta Lynn on the jukebox.

So here he was on the third day of a convention which stretched out over an incredible four days; here he was in room 217 of the Holiday Inn, his wife and daughter at home, the TV broken, an unpleasant smell hanging around in the bathroom. There was a swimming pool, but his eczema was so bad this summer that he wouldn’t have been caught dead in a bathing suit. From the shins down he looked like a leper. He had an hour before the next workshop (Helping the Vocally Challenged Child—what they meant was doing something for kids who stuttered or who had cleft palates, but we wouldn’t want to come right out and say that, Christ no, someone might lower our salaries), he had eaten lunch at San Remo’s only restaurant, he didn’t feel like a nap, and the TV’s one station was showing a re-run of Bewitched.

So he sat down with the telephone book and began to flip through it aimlessly, hardly aware of what he was doing, wondering distantly if he knew anyone crazy enough about either small, lovely, or seaside to live in San Remo. He supposed this was what all the bored people

in all the Holiday Inns all over the world ended up doing—looking for a forgotten friend or relative to call up on the phone. It was that, Bewitched, or the Gideon Bible. And if you did happen to get hold of somebody, what the hell did you say? “Frank! How the hell are you? And by the way, which was it—small, lovely, or seaside?” Sure. Right. Give that man a cigar and set him on fire.

Yet, as he lay on the bed flipping through the thin San Remo white pages and half-scanning the columns, it seemed to him that he did know somebody in San Remo. A book salesman? One of Sondra’s nieces or nephews, of which there were marching battalions? A poker buddy from college? The relative of a student? That seemed to ring a bell, but he couldn’t fine it down any more tightly.

He kept thumbing, and found he was sleepy after all. He had almost dozed off when it came to him and he sat up, wide-awake again.

Lord Peter!

They were re-running those Wimsey stories on PBS just lately—Clouds of Witness, Murder Must Advertise, The Nine Tailors. He and Sondra were hooked. A man named Ian Carmichael played Wimsey, and Sondra was nuts for him. So nuts, in fact, that Ed, who didn’t think Carmichael looked like Lord Peter at all, actually became quite irritated.

“Sandy, the shape of his face is all wrong. And he’s wearing false teeth, for heaven’s sake!”

“Poo,” Sondra had replied airily from the couch where she was curled up. “You’re just jealous. He’s so handsome.”

“Daddy’s jealous, Daddy’s jealous,” little Norma sang, prancing around the living room in her duck pajamas.

“You should have been in bed an hour ago,” Ed told her, gazing at his daughter with a jaundiced eye. “And if I keep noticing you’re here, I’ll probably remember that you aren’t there.”

Little Norma was momentarily abashed. Ed turned back to Sondra.

“I remember back three or four years ago. I had a kid named Todd Bowden, and his grandfather came in for a conference. Now that guy looked like Wimsey. A very old Wimsey, but the shape of his face was right, and—”

“Wim-zee, Wim-zee, Dim-zee, Jim-zee,” little Norma sang. “Wim-zee, Bim-zee, doodle-oodle-ooo-doo-”

“Shh, both of you,” Sondra said. “I think he’s the most beautiful man.” Irritating woman!

But hadn’t Todd Bowden’s grandfather retired to San Remo? Sure. It had been on the forms. Todd had been one of the brightest boys in that year’s class. Then, all at once, his grades had gone to hell. The old man had come in, told a familiar tale of marital difficulties, and had persuaded Ed to let the situation alone for awhile and see if things didn’t straighten themselves out. Ed’s view was that the old *laissez-faire* bit didn’t work—if you told a teenage kid to root, hog, or die, he or she usually died. But the old man had been almost eerily persuasive (it was the resemblance to Wimsey, perhaps), and Ed had agreed to give Todd to the end of the next Flunk Card period. And damned if Todd hadn’t pulled through. The old man must have gone right through the whole family and really kicked some ass, Ed thought. He looked like the type who not only could do it, but who might derive a certain dour pleasure from it. Then, just two days ago, he had seen Todd’s picture in the paper—he had made the Southern Cal All-Stars in baseball. No mean feat when you consider that about five hundred boys were nominated each spring. He supposed he might never have come up with the grandfather’s name if he hadn’t seen the picture.

He flicked through the white pages more purposefully now, ran his finger down a column of fine type, and there it was. BOWDEN, VICTOR s. 403 Ridge Lane. Ed dialed the number and it rang several times at the other end. He was just about to hang up when an old man answered. “Hello?”

“Hello, Mr. Bowden. Ed French. From Santo Donato Junior High.”

“Yes?” Politeness, but no more. Certainly no recognition. Well, the old guy was three years further along (weren’t they all!) and things undoubtedly slipped his mind from time to time.

“Do you remember me, sir?”

“Should I?” Bowden’s voice was cautious, and Ed smiled. The old man forgot things, but he didn’t want anybody to know if he could help it. His own old man had been that way when his hearing started to go.

“I was your grandson Todd’s guidance counsellor at S.D.J.H.S. I called to congratulate you. He sure tore up the pea-patch when he got to high school, didn’t he? And now he’s All-Conference to top it off. Wow!”

“Todd!” the old man said, his voice brightening immediately. “Yes, he certainly did a fine job, didn’t he? Second in his class! And the girl who was ahead of him took the business courses.” A sniff of disdain in the old man’s voice. “My son called and offered to take me to Todd’s commencement, but I’m in a wheelchair now. I broke my hip last January. I didn’t want to go in a wheelchair. But I have his graduation picture right in the hall, you bet! Todd’s made his parents very proud. And me, of course.”

“Yes, I guess we got him over the hump,” Ed said. He was smiling as he said it, but his smile was a trifle puzzled—somehow Todd’s grandfather didn’t sound the same. But it had been a long time ago, of course.

“Hump? What hump?”

“The little talk we had. When Todd was having problems with his course-work. Back in ninth.”

“I’m not following you,” the old man said slowly. “I would never presume to speak for Richard’s son. It would cause trouble ... ho-ho, you don’t know how much trouble it would cause. You’ve made a mistake, young fellow.”

“But—”

“Some sort of mistake. Got me confused with another student and another grandfather, I imagine.”

Ed was moderately thunderstruck. For one of the few times in his life, he could not think of a single thing to say. If there was confusion, it sure wasn’t on his part.

“Well,” Bowden said doubtfully, “it was nice of you to call, Mr.—”

Ed found his tongue. “I’m right here in town, Mr. Bowden. It’s a convention. Guidance counsellors. I’ll be done around ten tomorrow morning, after the final paper is read. Could I come around to ...” He consulted the phone book again. “... to Ridge Lane and see you for a few minutes?”

“What in the world for?”

“Just curiosity, I guess. It’s all water over the dam now. But about three years ago, Todd got himself into a real crack with his grades. They were so bad I had to send a letter home with his report card requesting a conference with a parent, or, ideally, with both of his parents. What I got was his grandfather, a very pleasant man named Victor Bowden.”

“But I’ve already told you—”

“Yes. I know. Just the same, I talked to somebody claiming to be Todd’s grandfather. It doesn’t matter much now, I suppose, but seeing is believing. I’d only take a few minutes of your time. It’s all I can take, because I’m expected home by suppertime.”

“Time is all I have,” Bowden said, a bit ruefully. “I’ll be here all day. You’re welcome to stop in.”

Ed thanked him, said goodbye, and hung up. He sat on the end of the bed, staring thoughtfully at the telephone. After awhile he got up and took a pack of Phillies Cheroots from the sport coat hanging on the back of the desk chair. He ought to go; there was a workshop, and if he wasn’t there, he would be missed. He lit his Cheroot with a Holiday Inn match and dropped the burnt stub into a Holiday Inn ashtray. He went to the Holiday Inn window and looked blankly out into the Holiday Inn courtyard.

It doesn’t matter much now, he had told Bowden, but it mattered to him. He wasn’t used to being sold a bill of goods by one of his kids, and this unexpected news upset him. Technically he supposed it could still turn out to be a case of an old man’s senility, but Victor Bowden hadn’t sounded as if he was drooling in his beard yet. And, damn it, he didn’t sound the same.

Had Todd Bowden jobbed him?

He decided it could have been done. Theoretically, at least. Especially by a bright boy like Todd. He could have jobbed everyone, not just Ed French. He could have forged his mother or father’s name to the Flunk Cards he had been issued during his bad patch. Lots of kids discovered a latent forging ability when they got Flunk Cards. He could have used ink eradicator on his second-and third-quarter reports, changing the grades up for his parents and then back down again so that his home-room teacher wouldn’t notice anything weird if he or she glanced at his card. The double application of eradicator would be visible to someone who was really looking, but home-room teachers carried an average of sixty students each. They were lucky if they could get the entire roll called before the first bell, let alone spot-checking returned cards for tampering.

As for Todd’s final class standing, it would have dipped perhaps no more than three points overall—two bad marking periods out of a

total of twelve. His other grades had been lopsidedly good enough to make up most of the difference. And how many parents drop by the school to look at the student records kept by the California Department of Education? Especially the parents of a bright student like Todd Bowden?

Frown lines appeared on Ed French's normally smooth forehead.

It doesn't matter much now. That was nothing but the truth. Todd's high school work had been exemplary; there was no way in the world you could fake a 94 percent. The boy was going on to Berkeley, the newspaper article had said, and Ed supposed his folks were damned proud—as they had every right to be. More and more it seemed to Ed that there was a vicious downside of American life, a greased skid of opportunism, cut comers, easy drugs, easy sex, a morality that grew cloudier each year. When your kid got through in standout style, parents had a right to be proud.

It doesn't matter much now—but who was his frigging grandfather?

That kept sticking into him. Who, indeed? Had Todd Bowden gone to the local branch of the Screen Actors' Guild and hung a notice on the bulletin board? YOUNG MAN IN GRADES TROUBLE NEEDS OLDER MAN, PREF. 70-80 YRS., TO GIVE BOFFO PERFORMANCE AS GRANDFATHER, WILL PAY UNION SCALE? Uh-uh. No way, Jose. And just what sort of adult would have fallen in with such a crazy conspiracy, and for what reason?

Ed French, aka Pucker, aka Rubber Ed, just didn't know. And because it didn't really matter, he stubbed out his Cheroot and went to his workshop. But his attention kept wandering.

The next day he drove out to Ridge Lane and had a long talk with Victor Bowden. They discussed grapes; they discussed the retail grocery business and how the big chain stores were pushing the little guys out; they discussed the political climate in southern California. Mr. Bowden offered Ed a glass of wine. Ed accepted with pleasure. He felt that he needed a glass of wine, even if it was only ten-forty in

the morning. Victor Bowden looked as much like Peter Wimsey as a machine-gun looks like a shillelagh. Victor Bowden had no trace of the faint accent Ed remembered, and he was quite fat. The man who had purported to be Todd's grandfather had been whip-thin.

Before leaving, Ed told him: "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention any of this to Mr. or Mrs. Bowden. There may be a perfectly reasonable explanation for all of it ... and even if there isn't, it's all in the past."

"Sometimes," Bowden said, holding his glass of wine up to the sun and admiring its rich dark color, "the past don't rest so easy. Why else do people study history?"

Ed smiled uneasily and said nothing.

"But don't you worry. I never meddle in Richard's affairs. And Todd is a good boy. Salutatorian of his class ... he must be a good boy. Am I right?"

"As rain," Ed French said heartily, and then asked for another glass of wine.

23

Dussander's sleep was uneasy; he lay in a trench of bad dreams.

They were breaking down the fence. Thousands, perhaps millions of them. They ran out of the jungle and threw themselves against the electrified barbed wire and now it was beginning to lean ominously inward. Some of the strands had given way and now coiled uneasily on the packed earth of the parade ground, squirting blue sparks. And still there was no end to them, no end. The Fuehrer was as mad as Rommel had claimed if he thought now—if he had ever thought—there could be a final solution to this problem. There were billions of them; they filled the universe; and they were all after him.

“Old man. Wake up, old man. Dussander. Wake up, old man, wake up.”

At first he thought this was the voice of the dream.

Spoken in German; it had to be part of the dream. That was why the voice was so terrifying, of course. If he awoke he would escape it, so he swam upward ...

The man was sitting by his bed on a chair that had been turned around backwards—a real man. “Wake up, old man,” this visitor was saying. He was young—no more than thirty. His eyes were dark and studious behind plain steel-framed glasses. His brown hair was longish, collar-length, and for a confused moment Dussander thought it was the boy in a disguise. But this was not the boy, wearing a rather old-fashioned blue suit much too hot for the California climate. There was a small silver pin on the lapel of the suit. Silver, the metal you used to kill vampires and werewolves. It was a Jewish star.

“Are you speaking to me?” Dussander asked in German.

“Who else? Your roommate is gone.”

“Heisel? Yes. He went home yesterday.”

“Are you awake now?”

“Of course. But you’ve apparently mistaken me for someone else. My name is Arthur Denker. Perhaps you have the wrong room.”

“My name is Weiskopf. And yours is Kurt Dussander.” Dussander wanted to lick his lips but didn’t. Just possibly this was still all part of the dream—a new phase, no more. Bring me a wino and a steak-knife, Mr. Jewish Star in the Lapel, and I’ll blow you away like smoke.

“I know no Dussander,” he told the young man. “I don’t understand you. Shall I ring for the nurse?”

“You understand,” Weiskopf said. He shifted position slightly and brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. The prosiness of this gesture dispelled Dussander’s last hope.

“Heisel,” Weiskopf said, and pointed at the empty bed.

“Heisel, Dussander, Weiskopf—none of these names mean anything to me.”

“Heisel fell off a ladder while he was nailing a new gutter onto the side of his house,” Weiskopf said. “He broke his back. He may never walk again. Unfortunate. But that was not the only tragedy of his life. He was an inmate of Patin, where he lost his wife and daughters. Patin, which you commanded.”

“I think you are insane,” Dussander said. “My name is Arthur Denker. I came to this country when my wife died. Before that was—”

“Spare me your tale,” Weiskopf said, raising a hand. “He had not forgotten your face. This face.”

Weiskopf flicked a photograph into Dussander’s face like a magician doing a trick. It was one of those the boy had shown him years ago.

A young Dussander in a jauntily cocked SS cap, seated behind his desk.

Dussander spoke slowly, in English now, enunciating carefully.

“During the war I was a factory machinist. My job was to oversee the manufacture of drive-columns and power-trains for armored cars and trucks. Later I helped to build Tiger tanks. My reserve unit was called up during the battle of Berlin and I fought honorably, if briefly. After the war I worked in Essen, at the Menschler Motor Works until—”

“—until it became necessary for you to run away to South America. With your gold that had been melted down from Jewish teeth and your silver melted down from Jewish jewelry and your numbered Swiss bank account. Mr. Heisel went home a happy man, you know. Oh, he had a bad moment when he woke up in the dark and realized with whom he was sharing a room. But he feels better now. He feels that God allowed him the sublime privilege of breaking his back so that he could be instrumental in the capture of one of the greatest butchers of human beings ever to live.”

Dussander spoke slowly, enunciating carefully.

“During the war I was a factory machinist—”

“Oh, why not drop it? Your papers will not stand up to a serious examination. I know it and you know it. You are found out “

“My job was to oversee the manufacture of—”

“Of corpses! One way or another, you will be in Tel Aviv before the new year. The authorities are cooperating with us this time, Dussander. The Americans want to make us happy, and you are one of the things that will make us happy.”

“—the manufacture of drive-columns and power-trains for armored cars and trucks. Later I helped to build Tiger tanks.”

“Why be tiresome? Why drag it out?”

“My reserve unit was called up—”

“Very well then. You’ll see me again. Soon.”

Weiskopf rose. He left the room. For a moment his shadow bobbed on the wall and then that was gone, too. Dussander closed his eyes. He wondered if Weiskopf could be telling the truth about American cooperation. Three years ago, when oil was tight in America, he wouldn’t have believed it. But the current upheaval in Iran might well harden American support for Israel. It was possible. And what did it matter? One way or the other, legal or illegal, Weiskopf and his colleagues would have him. On the subject of Nazis they were intransigent, and on the subject of the camps they were lunatics.

He was trembling all over. But he knew what he must do now.

24

The school records for the pupils who had passed through Santo Donato Junior High were kept in an old, rambling warehouse on the north side. It was not far from the abandoned trainyard. It was dark and echoing and it smelled of wax and polish and 999 Industrial Cleaner—it was also the school department's custodial warehouse.

Ed French got there around four in the afternoon with Norma in tow. A janitor let them in, told Ed what he wanted was on the fourth floor, and showed them to a creeping, clanking elevator that frightened Norma into an uncharacteristic silence.

She regained herself on the fourth floor, prancing and capering up and down the dim aisles of stacked boxes and files while Ed searched for and eventually found the files containing report cards from 1975. He pulled the second box and began to leaf through the B's. BORK. BOSTWICK. BOSWELL. BOWDEN, TODD. He pulled the card, shook his head impatiently over it in the dim light, and took it across to one of the high, dusty windows.

“Don't run around in here, honey,” he called over his shoulder.

“Why, Daddy?”

“Because the trolls will get you,” he said, and held Todd's card up to the light.

He saw it at once. This report card, in those files for three years now, had been carefully, almost professionally, doctored.

“Jesus Christ,” Ed French muttered.

“Trolls, trolls, trolls!” Norma sang gleefully, as she continued to dance up and down the aisles.

25

Dussander walked carefully down the hospital corridor. He was still a bit unsteady on his legs. He was wearing his blue bathrobe over his white hospital johnny. It was night now, just after eight o'clock, and the nurses were changing shifts. The next half hour would be confused—he had observed that all the shift changes were confused. It was a time for exchanging notes, gossip, and drinking coffee at the nurses' station, which was just around the corner from the drinking fountain.

What he wanted was just across from the drinking fountain. He was not noticed in the wide hallway, which at this hour reminded him of a long and echoing train station minutes before a passenger train departs. The walking wounded paraded slowly up and down, some dressed in robes as he was, others holding the backs of their johnnies together. Disconnected music came from half a dozen different transistor radios in half a dozen different rooms. Visitors came and went. A man laughed in one room and another man seemed to be weeping across the hall. A doctor walked by with his nose in a paperback novel.

Dussander went to the fountain, got a drink, wiped his mouth with his cupped hand, and looked at the closed door across the hall. This door was always locked—at least, that was the theory. In practice he had observed that it was sometimes both unlocked and unattended. Most often during the chaotic half hour when the shifts were changing and the nurses were gathered around the corner. Dussander had observed all of this with the trained and wary eye of a man who has been on the jump for a long, long time. He only wished he could observe the unmarked door for another week or so, looking for dangerous breaks in the pattern—he would only have the one chance. But he didn't have another week. His status as Werewolf in Residence might not become known for another two or three days, but it might happen tomorrow. He did not dare wait. When it came out, he would be watched constantly.

He took another small drink, wiped his mouth again, and looked both ways. Then, casually, with no effort at concealment, he stepped across the hall, turned the knob, and walked into the drug closet. If the woman in charge had happened to already be behind her desk, he was only nearsighted Mr. Denker. So sorry, dear lady, I thought it was the W.C. Stupid of me.

But the drug closet was empty.

He ran his eye over the top shelf at his left. Nothing but eyedrops and eardrops. Second shelf: laxatives, suppositories. On the third shelf he saw both Seconal and Veronal. He slipped a bottle of Seconals into the pocket of his robe. Then he went back to the door and stepped out without looking around, a puzzled smile on his face—that certainly wasn't the W.C., was it? There it was, right next to the drinking fountain. Stupid me!

He crossed to the door labelled MEN, went inside, and washed his hands. Then he went back down the hall to the semi-private room that was now completely private since the departure of the illustrious Mr. Heisel. On the table between the beds was a glass and a plastic pitcher filled with water. Pity there was no bourbon; really, it was a shame. But the pills would float him off just as nicely no matter how they were washed down.

“Morris Heisel, salud,” he said with a faint smile, and poured himself a glass of water. After all those years of jumping at shadows, of seeing faces that looked familiar on park benches or in restaurants or bus terminals, he had finally been recognized and turned in by a man he wouldn't have known from Adam. It was almost funny. He had barely spared Heisel two glances, Heisel and his broken back from God. On second thought, it wasn't almost funny; it was very funny.

He put three pills in his mouth, swallowed them with water, took three more, then three more. In the room across the hall he could see two old men hunched over a night-table, playing a grumpy game of cribbage. One of them had a hernia. Dussander knew. What was

the other? Gallstones? Kidney stones? Tumor? Prostate? The horrors of old age. They were legion.

He refilled his water glass but didn't take any more pills right away. Too many could defeat his purpose. He might throw them up and they would pump the residue out of his stomach, saving him for whatever indignities the Americans and the Israelis could devise. He had no intention of trying to take his life stupidly, like a Hausfrau on a crying jag. When he began to get drowsy, he would take a few more. That would be fine.

The quavering voice of one of the cribbage players came to him, thin and triumphant: "A double run of three for eight ... fifteens for twelve ... and the right jack for thirteen. How do you like those apples?"

"Don't worry," the old man with the hernia said confidently. "I got first count. I'll peg out"

Peg out, Dussander thought, sleepy now. An apt enough phrase—but the Americans had a turn of idiom. I don't give a tin shit, get hip or get out, stick it where the sun don't shine, money talks, nobody walks. Wonderful idiom.

They thought they had him, but he was going to peg out before their very eyes.

He found himself wishing, of all absurd things, that he could leave a note for the boy. Wishing he could tell him to be very careful. To listen to an old man who had finally overstepped himself. He wished he could tell the boy that in the end he, Dussander, had come to respect him, even if he could never like him, and that talking to him had been better than listening to the run of his own thoughts. But any note, no matter how innocent, might cast suspicion on the boy, and Dussander did not want that. Oh, he would have a bad month or two, waiting for some government agent to show up and question him about a certain document that had been found in a safety deposit box rented to Kurt Dussander, aka Arthur Denker ... but after a time, the boy would come to believe he had been telling the truth. There

was no need for the boy to be touched by any of this, as long as he kept his head.

Dussander reached out with a hand that seemed to stretch for miles, got the glass of water, and took another three pills. He put the glass back, closed his eyes, and settled deeper into his soft, soft pillow. He had never felt so much like sleeping, and his sleep would be long. It would be restful.

Unless there were dreams.

The thought shocked him. Dreams? Please God, no. Not those dreams. Not for eternity, not with all possibility of awakening gone. Not—

In sudden terror, he tried to struggle awake. It seemed that hands were reaching eagerly up out of the bed to grab him, hands with hungry fingers.

(!NO!)

His thoughts broke up in a steepening spiral of darkness, and he rode down that spiral as if down a greased slide, down and down, to whatever dreams there are.

His overdose was discovered at 1:35 A.M., and he was pronounced dead fifteen minutes later. The nurse on duty was young and had been susceptible to elderly Mr. Denker's slightly ironic courtliness. She burst into tears. She was a Catholic, and she could not understand why such a sweet old man, who had been getting better, would want to do such a thing and damn his immortal soul to hell.

26

On Saturday morning in the Bowden household, nobody got up until at least nine. This morning at nine-thirty Todd and his father were reading at the table and Monica, who was a slow waker, served them scrambled eggs, juice, and coffee without speaking, still half in her dreams.

Todd was reading a paperback science fiction novel and Dick was absorbed in Architectural Digest when the paper slapped against the door.

“Want me to get it, Dad?”

“I will.”

Dick brought it in, started to sip his coffee, and then choked on it as he got a look at the front page.

“Dick, what’s wrong?” Monica asked, hurrying toward him.

Dick coughed out coffee that had gone down the wrong pipe, and while Todd looked at him over the top of the paperback in mild wonder, Monica started to pound him on the back. On the third stroke, her eyes fell to the paper’s headline and she stopped in mid-stroke, as if playing statues. Her eyes widened until it seemed they might actually fall out onto the table.

“Holy God up in heaven!” Dick Bowden managed in a choked voice.

“Isn’t that ... I can’t believe ...” Monica began, and then stopped. She looked at Todd. “Oh, honey—”

His father was looking at him, too.

Alarmed now, Todd came around the table. “What’s the matter?”

“Mr. Denker,” Dick said—it was all he could manage.

Todd read the headline and understood everything. In dark letters it read: FUGITIVE NAZI COMMITS SUICIDE IN SANTO DONATO HOSPITAL. Below were two photos, side by side. Todd had seen both of them before. One showed Arthur Denker, six years younger and spryer. Todd knew it had been taken by a hippie street photographer, and that the old man had bought it only to make sure it didn't fall into the wrong hands by chance. The other photo showed an SS officer named Kurt Dussander behind his desk at Patin, his cap cocked to one side.

If they had the photograph the hippie had taken, they had been in his house.

Todd skimmed the article, his mind whizzing frantically. No mention of the winos. But the bodies would be found, and when they were, it would be a worldwide story. PATIN COMMANDANT NEVER LOST HIS TOUCH. HORROR IN NAZI'S BASEMENT. HE NEVER STOPPED KILLING.

Todd Bowden swayed on his feet.

Far away, echoing, he heard his mother cry sharply: “Catch him, Dick! He's fainting!”

The word

(faintingfaintingfainting)

repeated itself over and over. He dimly felt his father's arms grab him, and then for a little while Todd felt nothing, heard nothing at all.

Ed French was eating a danish when he unfolded the paper. He coughed, made a strange gagging sound, and spat dismembered pastry all over the table.

“Eddie!” Sondra French said with some alarm. “Are you okay?”

“Daddy’s chokun, Daddy’s chokun,” little Norma proclaimed with nervous good humor, and then happily joined her mother in slamming Ed on the back. Ed barely felt the blows. He was still goggling down at the newspaper.

“What’s wrong, Eddie?” Sondra asked again.

“Him! Him!” Ed shouted, stabbing his finger down at the paper so hard that his fingernail tore all the way through the A section.

“That man! Lord Peter!”

“What in God’s name are you t—”

“That’s Todd Bowden’s grandfather!”

“What? That war criminal? Eddie, that’s crazy!”

“But it’s him,” Ed almost moaned. “Jesus Christ Almighty, that’s him!”

Sondra French looked at the picture long and fixedly.

“He doesn’t look like Peter Wimsey at all,” she said finally.

28

Todd, pale as window-glass, sat on a couch between his mother and father.

Opposite them was a graying, polite police detective named Richler. Todd's father had offered to call the police, but Todd had done it himself, his voice cracking through the registers as it had done when he was fourteen.

He finished his recital. It hadn't taken long. He spoke with a mechanical colorlessness that scared the hell out of Monica. He was seventeen, true enough, but he was still a boy in so many ways. This was going to scar him forever.

"I read him ... oh, I don't know. Tom Jones. The Mill on the Floss. That was a boring one. I didn't think we'd ever get through it. Some stories by Hawthorne—I remember he especially liked 'The Great Stone Face' and 'Young Goodman Brown.' We started The Pickwick Papers, but he didn't like it. He said Dickens could only be funny when he was being serious, and Pickwick was only kittenish. That was his word, kittenish. We got along the best with Tom Jones. We both liked that one."

"And that was three years ago," Richler said.

"Yes. I kept stopping in to see him when I got the chance, but in high school we were bussed across town ... and some of the kids got up a scratch ballteam ... there was more homework ... you know ... things just came up."

"You had less time."

"Less time, that's right. The work in high school was a lot harder ... making the grades to get into college."

“But Todd is a very apt pupil,” Monica said almost automatically. “He graduated salutatorian. We were so proud.”

“I’ll bet you were,” Richler said with a warm smile. “I’ve got two boys in Fairview, down in the Valley, and they’re just about able to keep their sports eligibility.” He turned back to Todd. “You didn’t read him any more books after you started high school?”

“No. Once in awhile I’d read him the paper. I’d come over and he’d ask me what the headlines were. He was interested in Watergate when that was going on. And he always wanted to know about the stock market, and the print on that page used to drive him batshit—sorry. Mom.”

She patted his hand.

“I don’t know why he was interested in the stocks, but he was.”

“He had a few stocks,” Richler said. “That’s how he was getting by. He also had five different sets of ID salted around that house. He was a cagey one, all right.”

“I suppose he kept the stocks in a safe deposit box somewhere,” Todd remarked.

“Pardon me?” Richler raised his eyebrows.

“His stocks,” Todd said. His father, who had also looked puzzled, now nodded at Richler.

“His stock certificates, the few that were left, were in a footlocker under his bed,” Richler said, “along with that photo of him as Denker. Did he have a safety deposit box, son? Did he ever say he did?”

Todd thought, and then shook his head. “I just thought that was where you kept your stocks. I don’t know. This ... this whole thing has just ... you know ... it blows my wheels.” He shook his head in a dazed way that was perfectly real. He really was dazed. Yet, little by

little, he felt his instinct of self-preservation surfacing. He felt a growing alertness, and the first stirrings of confidence. If Dussander had really taken a safety deposit box in which to store his insurance document, wouldn't he have transferred his remaining stock certificates there? And that photograph?

"We're working with the Israelis on this," Richler said. "In a very unofficial way. I'd be grateful if you didn't mention that if you decide to see any press people. They're real professionals. There's a man named Weiskopf who'd like to talk to you tomorrow, Todd. If that's okay by you and your folks."

"I guess so," Todd said, but he felt a touch of atavistic dread at the thought of being sniffed over by the same hounds that had chased Dussander for the last half of his life. Dussander had had a healthy respect for them, and Todd knew he would do well to keep that in mind.

"Mr. and Mrs. Bowden? Do you have any objections to Todd seeing Mr. Weiskopf?"

"Not if Todd doesn't," Dick Bowden said. "I'd like to be present, though. I've read about these Mossad characters—"

"Weiskopf isn't Mossad. He's what the Israelis call a special operative. In fact, he teaches Yiddish literature and English grammar. Also, he's written two novels." Richler smiled.

Dick raised a hand, dismissing it. "Whatever he is, I'm not going to let him badger Todd. From what I've read, these fellows can be a little too professional. Maybe he's okay. But I want you and this Weiskopf to remember that Todd tried to help that old man. He was flying under false colors, but Todd didn't know that."

"That's okay, Dad," Todd said with a wan smile.

"I just want you to help us all that you can," Richler said. "I appreciate your concern, Mr. Bowden. I think you're going to find that

Weiskopf is a pleasant, low-pressure kind of guy. I've finished my own questions, but I'll break a little ground by telling you what the Israelis are most interested in. Todd was with Dussander when he had the heart attack that landed him in the hospital—"

"He asked me to come over and read him a letter," Todd said.

"We know." Richler leaned forward, elbows on his knees, tie swinging out to form a plumb-line to the floor. "The Israelis want to know about that letter. Dussander was a big fish, but he wasn't the last one in the lake—or so Sam Weiskopf says, and I believe him. They think Dussander might have known about a lot of other fish. Most of those still alive are probably in South America, but there may be others in a dozen countries ... including the United States. Did you know they collared a man who had been an Unterkommandant at Buchenwald in the lobby of a Tel Aviv hotel?"

"Really!" Monica said, her eyes widening.

"Really." Richler nodded. "Two years ago. The point is just that the Israelis think the letter Dussander wanted Todd to read might have been from one of those other fish. Maybe they're right, maybe they're wrong. Either way, they want to know."

Todd, who had gone back to Dussander's house and burned the letter, said: "I'd help you—or this Weiskopf—if I could, Lieutenant Richler, but the letter was in German. It was really tough to read. I felt like a fool. Mr. Denker ... Dussander ... kept getting more excited and asking me to spell the words he couldn't understand because of my, you know, pronunciation. But I guess he was following all right. I remember once he laughed and said, 'Yes, yes, that is what you'd do, isn't it?' Then he said something in German. This was about two or three minutes before he had the heart attack. Something about Dummkopf. That means stupid in German, I think."

He was looking at Richler uncertainly, inwardly quite pleased with this lie.

Richler was nodding. "Yes, we understand that the letter was in German. The admitting doctor heard the story from you and corroborated it. But the letter itself, Todd ... do you remember what happened to it?"

Here it is, Todd thought. The crunch.

"I guess it was still on the table when the ambulance came. When we all left. I couldn't testify to it in court, but—"

"I think there was a letter on the table," Dick said. "I picked something up and glanced at it. Airmail stationery, I think, but I didn't notice it was written in German."

"Then it should still be there," Richler said. "That's what we can't figure out."

"It's not?" Dick said. "I mean, it wasn't?"

"It wasn't, and it isn't."

"Maybe somebody broke in," Monica suggested.

"There would have been no need to break in," Richler said.

"In the confusion of getting him out, the house was never locked. Dussander himself never thought to ask someone to lock up, apparently. His latchkey was still in the pocket of his pants when he died. His house was unlocked from the time the MED-Q attendants wheeled him out until we sealed it this morning at two-thirty A.M."

"Well, there you are," Dick said.

"No," Todd said. "I see what's bugging Lieutenant Richler." Oh yes, he saw it very well. You'd have to be blind to miss it. "Why would a burglar steal nothing but a letter? Especially one written in German? It doesn't listen. Mr. Denker didn't have much to steal, but a guy who broke in could find something better than that."

“You got it, all right,” Richler said. “Not bad.”

“Todd used to want to be a detective when he grew up,” Monica said, and ruffled Todd’s hair a bit. Since he had gotten big he seemed to object to that, but right now he didn’t seem to mind. God, she hated to see him looking so pale. “I guess he’s changed his mind to history these days.”

“History is a good field,” Richler said. “You can be an investigative historian. Have you ever read Josephine Tey?”

“No, sir.”

“Doesn’t matter. I just wish my boys had some ambition greater than seeing the Angels win the pennant this year.”

Todd offered a wan smile and said nothing.

Richler turned serious again. “Anyway, I’ll tell you the theory we’re going on. We figure that someone, probably right here in Santo Donato, knew who and what Dussander was.”

“Really?” Dick said.

“Oh yes. Someone who knew the truth. Maybe another fugitive Nazi. I know that sounds like Robert Ludlum stuff, but who would have thought there was even one fugitive Nazi in a quiet little suburb like this? And when Dussander was taken to the hospital, we think that Mr. X scooted over to the house and got that incriminating letter. And that by now it’s so many decomposing ashes floating around in the sewer system.”

“That doesn’t make much sense either,” Todd said.

“Why not, Todd?”

“Well, if Mr. Denk ... if Dussander had an old buddy from the camps, or just an old Nazi buddy, why did he bother to have me come over and read him that letter? I mean, if you could have heard him

correcting me, and stuff ... at least this old Nazi buddy you're talking about would know how to speak German."

"A good point. Except maybe this other fellow is in a wheelchair, or blind. For all we know, it might be Bormann himself and he doesn't even dare go out and show his face."

"Guys that are blind or in wheelchairs aren't that good at scooting out to get letters," Todd said.

Richler looked admiring again. "True. But a blind man could steal a letter even if he couldn't read it, though. Or hire it done."

Todd thought this over, and nodded—but he shrugged at the same time to show how farfetched he thought the idea. Richler had progressed far beyond Robert Ludlum and into the land of Sax Rohmer. But how farfetched the idea was or wasn't didn't matter one fucking little bit, did it? No. What mattered was that Richler was still sniffing around ... and that sheeny, Weiskopf, was also sniffing around. The letter, the goddam letter! Dussander's stupid goddam idea! And suddenly he was thinking of his .30-.30, cased and resting on its shelf in the cool, dark garage. He pulled his mind away from it quickly. The palms of his hands had gone damp.

"Did Dussander have any friends that you knew of?" Richler was asking.

"Friends? No. There used to be a cleaning lady, but she moved away and he didn't bother to get another one. In the summer he hired a kid to mow his lawn, but I don't think he'd gotten one this year. The grass is pretty long, isn't it?"

"Yes. We've knocked on a lot of doors, and it doesn't seem as if he'd hired anyone. Did he get phone calls?"

"Sure," Todd said off-handedly ... here was a gleam of light, a possible escape-hatch that was relatively safe. Dussander's phone had actually rung only half a dozen times or so in all the time Todd

had known him—salesmen, a polling organization asking about breakfast foods, the rest wrong numbers. He only had the phone in case he got sick ... as he finally had, might his soul rot in hell. “He used to get a call or two every week.”

“Did he speak German on those occasions?” Richler asked quickly. He seemed excited.

“No,” Todd said, suddenly cautious. He didn’t like Richler’s excitement—there was something wrong about it, something dangerous. He felt sure of it, and suddenly Todd had to work furiously to keep himself from breaking out in a sweat. “He didn’t talk much at all. I remember that a couple of times he said things like. ‘The boy who reads to me is here right now. I’ll call you back.’ “

“I’ll bet that’s it!” Richler said, whacking his palms on his thighs. “I’d bet two weeks’ pay that was the guy!” He closed his notebook with a snap (so far as Todd could see he had done nothing but doodle in it) and stood up. “I want to thank all three of you for your time. You in particular, Todd. I know all of this has been a hell of a shock to you, but it will be over soon. We’re going to turn the house upside down this afternoon—cellar to attic and then back down to the cellar again. We’re bringing in all the special teams. We may find some trace of Dussander’s phonemate yet “

“I hope so,” Todd said.

Richler shook hands all around and left. Dick asked Todd if he felt like going out back and hitting the badminton birdie around until lunch. Todd said he didn’t feel much like badminton or lunch, and went upstairs with his head down and his shoulders slumped. His parents exchanged sympathetic, troubled glances. Todd lay down on his bed, stared at the ceiling, and thought about his .30-.30. He could see it very clearly in his mind’s eye. He thought about shoving the blued steel barrel right up Betty Trask’s slimy Jewish cooze—just what she needed, a prick that never went soft. How do you like it, Betty? he heard himself asking her. You just tell me if you get enough, okay? He imagined her screams. And at last a terrible flat

smile came to his face. Sure, just tell me, you bitch ... okay? Okay? Okay? ...

“So what do you think?” Weiskopf asked Richler when Richler picked him up at a luncheonette three blocks from the Bowden home.

“Oh, I think the kid was in on it somehow,” Richler said. “Somehpw, some way, to some degree. But is he cool? If you poured hot water into his mouth I think he’d spit out ice-cubes. I tripped him up a couple of times, but I’ve got nothing I could use in court. And if I’d gone much further, some smart lawyer might be able to get him off on entrapment a year or two down the road even if something does pull together. I mean, the courts are still going to look at him as a juvenile—the kid’s only seventeen. In some ways, I’d guess he hasn’t really been a juvenile since he was maybe eight. He’s creepy, man.” Richler stuck a cigarette in his mouth and laughed—the laugh had a shaky sound. “I mean, really fuckin creepy.”

“What slips did he make?”

“The phone calls. That’s the main thing. When I slipped him the idea, I could see his eyes light up like a pinball machine.” Richler turned left and wheeled the nondescript Chevy Nova down the freeway entrance ramp. Two hundred yards to their right was the slope and the dead tree where Todd had dry-fired his rifle at the freeway traffic one Saturday morning not long ago.

“He’s saying to himself, ‘This cop is off the wall if he thinks Dussander had a Nazi friend here in town, but if he does think that, it takes me off ground-zero.’ So he says yeah, Dussander got one or two calls a week. Very mysterious. ‘I can’t talk now, Z-five, call later’—that type of thing. But Dussander’s been getting a special ‘quiet phone’ rate for the last seven years. Almost no activity at all, and no long distance. He wasn’t getting a call or two a week.”

“What else?”

“He immediately jumped to the conclusion that the letter was gone and nothing else. He knew that was the only thing missing because he was the one who went back and took it “

Richler jammed his cigarette out in the ashtray.

“We think the letter was just a prop. We think that Dussander had the heart attack while he was trying to bury that body ... the freshest body. There was dirt on his shoes and his cuffs, and so that’s a pretty fair assumption. That means he called the kid after he had the heart attack, not before. He crawls upstairs and phones the kid. The kid flips out—as much as he ever flips out, anyway—and cooks up the letter story on the spur of the moment. It’s not great, but not that bad, either ... considering the circumstances. He goes over there and cleans up Dussander’s mess for him. Now the kid is in fucking overdrive. MED-Q’s coming, his father is coming, and he needs that letter for stage-dressing. He goes upstairs and breaks open that box —”

“You’ve got confirmation on that?” Weiskopf asked, lighting a cigarette of his own. It was an unfiltered Player, and to Richler it smelled like horseshit. No wonder the British Empire fell, he thought, if they started smoking cigarettes like that.

“Yes, we’ve got confirmation right up the ying-yang,” Richler said. “There are fingerprints on the box which match those in his school records. But his fingerprints are on almost everything in the goddam house!”

“Still, if you confront him with all of that, you can rattle him,” Weiskopf said.

“Oh, listen, hey, you don’t know this kid. When I said he was cool, I meant it. He’d say Dussander asked him to fetch the box once or twice so he could put something in it or take something out of it.”

“His fingerprints are on the shovel.”

“He’d say he used it to plant a rose-bush in the back yard.” Richler took out his cigarettes but the pack was empty. Weiskopf offered him a Player. Richler took one puff and began coughing. “They taste as bad as they smell,” he choked.

“Like those hamburgers we had for lunch yesterday,” Weiskopf said, smiling. “Those Mac-Burgers.”

“Big Macs,” Richler said, and laughed. “Okay. So cross-cultural pollination doesn’t always work.” His smile faded. “He looks so clean-cut, you know?”

“Yes.”

“This is no j.d. from Vasco with hair down to his asshole and chains on his motorcycle boots.”

“No.” Weiskopf stared at the traffic all around them and was very glad he wasn’t driving. “He’s just a boy. A white boy from a good home. And I find it difficult to believe that—”

“I thought you had them ready to handle rifles and grenades by the time they were eighteen. In Israel.”

“Yes. But he was fourteen when all of this started. Why would a fourteen-year-old boy mix himself up with such a man as Dussander? I have tried and tried to understand that and still I can’t.”

“I’d settle for how,” Richter said, and flicked the cigarette out the window. It was giving him a headache.

“Perhaps, if it did happen, it was just luck. A coincidence. Serendipity. I think there is black serendipity as well as white.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Richler said gloomily. “All I know is the kid is creepier than a bug under a rock.”

“What I’m saying is simple. Any other boy would have been more than happy to tell his parents, or the police. To say, ‘I have

recognized a wanted man. He is living at this address. Yes, I am sure.' And then let the authorities take over. Or do you feel I am wrong?"

"No, I wouldn't say so. The kid would be in the limelight for a few days. Most kids would dig that. Picture in the paper, an interview on the evening news, probably a school assembly award for good citizenship." Richler laughed. "Hell, the kid would probably get a shot on Real People."

"What's that?"

"Never mind," Richler said. He had to raise his voice slightly because ten-wheelers were passing the Nova on either side. Weiskopf looked nervously from one to the other. "You don't want to know. But you're right about most kids. Most kids."

"But not this kid," Weiskopf said. "This boy, probably by dumb luck alone, penetrates Dussander's cover. Yet instead of going to his parents or the authorities ... he goes to Dussander. Why? You say you don't care, but I think you do. I think it haunts you just as it does me."

"Not blackmail," Richler said. "That's for sure. That kid's got everything a kid could want. There was a dune-buggy in the garage, not to mention an elephant gun on the wall. And even if he wanted to squeeze Dussander just for the thrill of it, Dussander was practically unsqueezable. Except for those few stocks, he didn't have a pot to piss in."

"How sure are you that the boy doesn't know you've found the bodies?"

"I'm sure. Maybe I'll go back this afternoon and hit him with that. Right now it looks like our best shot." Richler struck the steering wheel lightly. "If all of this had come out even one day sooner, I think I would have tried for a search warrant."

“The clothes the boy was wearing that night?”

“Yeah. If we could have found soil samples on his clothes that matched the dirt in Dussander’s cellar, I almost think we could break him. But the clothes he was wearing that night have probably been washed six times since then.”

“What about the other dead winos? The ones your police department has been finding around the city?”

“Those belong to Dan Bozeman. I don’t think there’s any connection anyhow. Dussander just wasn’t that strong ... and more to the point, he had such a neat little racket already worked out. Promise them a drink and a meal, take them home on the city bus—the fucking city bus!—and waste them right in his kitchen.”

Weiskopf said quietly: “It wasn’t Dussander I was thinking of.”

“What do you mean by th—” Richler began, and then his mouth snapped suddenly closed. There was a long, unbelieving moment of silence, broken only by the drone of the traffic all around them. Then Richler said softly: “Hey. Hey, come on now. Give me a fucking br—”

“As an agent of my government, I am only interested in Bowden because of what, if anything, he may know about Dussander’s remaining contacts with the Nazi underground. But as a human being, I am becoming more and more interested in the boy himself. I’d like to know what makes him tick. I want to know why. And as I try to answer that question to my own satisfaction, I find that more and more I am asking myself What else.”

“But—”

“Do you suppose, I ask myself, that the very atrocities in which Dussander took part formed the basis of some attraction between them? That’s an unholy idea, I tell myself. The things that happened in those camps still have power enough to make the stomach flutter with nausea. I feel that way myself, although the only close relative I

ever had in the camps was my grandfather, and he died when I was three. But maybe there is something about what the Germans did that exercises a deadly fascination over us—something that opens the catacombs of the imagination. Maybe part of our dread and horror comes from a secret knowledge that under the right—or wrong—set of circumstances, we ourselves would be willing to build such places and staff them. Black serendipity. Maybe we know that under the right set of circumstances the things that live in the catacombs would be glad to crawl out. And what do you think they would look like? Like mad Fuehrers with forelocks and shoe-polish moustaches, heil-ing all over the place? Like red devils, or demons, or the dragon that floats on its stinking reptile wings?”

“I don’t know,” Richler said.

“I think most of them would look like ordinary accountants,” Weiskopf said: “Little mind-men with graphs and flow-charts and electronic calculators, all ready to start maximizing the kill ratios so that next time they could perhaps kill twenty or thirty millions instead of only six. And some of them might look like Todd Bowden.”

“You’re damn near as creepy as he is,” Richler said.

Weiskopf nodded. “It’s a creepy subject. Finding those dead men and animals in Dussander’s cellar ... that was creepy, nu? Have you ever thought that maybe this boy began with a simple interest in the camps? An interest not much different from the interests of boys who collect coins or stamps or who like to read about Wild West desperados? And that he went to Dussander to get his information straight from the horse’s head?”

“Mouth,” Richler said automatically. “Man, at this point I could believe anything.”

“Maybe,” Weiskopf muttered. It was almost lost in the roar of another ten-wheeler passing them. BUDWEISER was printed on the side in letters six feet tall. What an amazing country, Weiskopf thought, and lit a fresh cigarette. They don’t understand how we can live

surrounded by half-mad Arabs, but if I lived here for two years I would have a nervous breakdown. “Maybe. And maybe it isn’t possible to stand close to murder piled on murder and not be touched by it.”

The short guy who entered the squadroom brought stench after him like a wake. He smelled like rotten bananas and Wildroot Cream Oil and cockroach shit and the inside of a city garbage truck at the end of a busy morning. He was dressed in a pair of ageing herringbone pants, a ripped gray institutional shirt, and a faded blue warmup jacket from which most of the zipper hung loose like a string of pygmy teeth. The uppers of his shoes were bound to the lowers with Krazy Glue. A pestiferous hat sat on his head.

“Oh Christ, get out of here!” the duty sergeant cried. “You’re not under arrest, Hap! I swear to God! I swear it on my mother’s name! Get out of here! I want to breathe again.”

“I want to talk to Lieutenant Bozeman.”

“He died, Hap. It happened yesterday. We’ll all really fucked up over it. So get out and let us mourn in peace.”

“I want to talk to Lieutenant Bozeman!” Hap said more loudly. His breath drifted fragrantly from his mouth: a juicy, fermenting mixture of pizza, Hall’s Mentho-lyptus lozenges, and sweet red wine.

“He had to go to Siam on a case, Hap. So why don’t you just get out of here? Go someplace and eat a lightbulb.”

“I want to talk to Lieutenant Bozeman and I ain’t leaving until I do!”

The duty sergeant fled the room. He returned about five minutes later with Bozeman, a thin, slightly stooped man of fifty.

“Take him into your office, okay, Dan?” the duty sergeant begged. “Won’t that be all right?”

“Come on, Hap,” Bozeman said, and a minute later they were in the three-sided stall that was Bozeman’s office. Bozeman prudently

opened his only window and turned on his fan before sitting down.
“Do something for you, Hap?”

“You still on those murders, Lieutenant Bozeman?”

“The derelicts? Yeah, I guess that’s still mine.”

“Well, I know who greased ‘em.”

“Is that so, Hap?” Bozeman asked. He was busy lighting his pipe. He rarely smoked the pipe, but neither the fan nor the open window was quite enough to overwhelm Hap’s smell. Soon, Bozeman thought, the paint would begin to blister and peel. He sighed.

“You remember I told you Poley was talkin to a guy just a day before they found him all cut up in that pipe? You member me tellin you that, Lieutenant Bozeman?”

“I remember.” Several of the winos who hung around the Salvation Army and the soup kitchen a few blocks away had told a similar story about two of the murdered derelicts, Charles “Sonny” Brackett and Peter “Poley” Smith. They had seen a guy hanging around, a young guy, talking to Sonny and Poley. Nobody knew for sure if Poley had gone off with the guy, but Hap and two others claimed to have seen Poley Smith walk off with him. They had the idea that the “guy” was underage and willing to spring for a bottle of musky in exchange for some juice. Several other winos claimed to have seen a “guy” like that around. The description of this “guy” was superb, bound to stand up in court, coming as it did from such unimpeachable sources. Young, blond, and white. What else did you need to make a bust?

“Well, last night I was in the park,” Hap said, “and I just happened to have this old bunch of newspapers—”

“There’s a law against vagrancy in this city, Hap.”

“I was just collectin em up,” Hap said righteously. “It’s so awful the way people litter. I was doon a public surface, Lieutenant. A friggin

public surface. Some of those papers was a week old.”

“Yes, Hap,” Bozeman said. He remembered—vaguely—being quite hungry and looking forward keenly to his lunch. That time seemed long ago now.

“Well, when I woke up, one of those papers had blew onto my face and I was lookin right at the guy. Gave me a hell of a jump, I can tell you. Look. This is the guy. This guy right here.”

Hap pulled a crumpled, yellowed, water-spotted sheet of newspaper from his warmup jacket and unfolded it. Bozeman leaned forward, now moderately interested. Hap put the paper on his desk so he could read the headline: 4 BOYS NAMED TO SOUTHERN CAL ALL-STARS. Below the head were four photos.

“Which one, Hap?”

Hap put a grimy finger on the picture to the far right. “Him. It says his name is Todd Bowden.”

Bozeman looked from the picture to Hap, wondering how many of Hap’s brain-cells were still unfried and in some kind of working order after twenty years of being sauteed in a bubbling sauce of cheap wine seasoned with an occasional shot of sterno.

“How can you be sure, Hap? He’s wearing a baseball cap in the picture. I can’t tell if he’s got blonde hair or not.”

“The grin,” Hap said. “It’s the way he’s grinnin. He was grinnin at Poley in just that same ain’t-life-grand way when they walked off together. I couldn’t mistake that grin in a million years. That’s him, that’s the guy.”

Bozeman barely heard the last; he was thinking, and thinking hard. Todd Bowden. There was something very familiar about that name. Something that bothered him even worse than the thought that a local high school hero might be going around and offing winos. He

thought he had heard that name just this morning in conversation. He frowned, trying to remember where.

Hap was gone and Dan Bozeman was still trying to figure it out when Richler and Weiskopf came in ... and it was the sound of their voices as they got coffee in the squadroom that finally brought it home to him.

“Holy God,” said Lieutenant Bozeman, and got up in a hurry.

Both of his parents had offered to cancel their afternoon plans—Monica at the market and Dick golfing with some business people—and stay home with him, but Todd told them he would rather be alone. He thought he would clean his rifle and just sort of think the whole thing over. Try to get it straight in his mind.

“Todd,” Dick said, and suddenly found he had nothing much to say. He supposed if he had been his own father, he would have at this point advised prayer. But the generations had turned, and the Bowdens weren’t much into that these days. “Sometimes these things happen,” he finished lamely, because Todd was still looking at him. “Try not to brood about it.”

“It’ll be all right,” Todd said.

After they were gone, he took some rags and a bottle of Alpaca gun oil out onto the bench beside the roses. He went back into the garage and got the .30-.30. He took it to the bench and broke it down, the dusty-sweet smell of the flowers lingering pleasantly in his nose. He cleaned the gun thoroughly, humming a tune as he did it, sometimes whistling a snatch between his teeth. Then he put the gun together again. He could have done it just as easily in the dark. His mind wandered free. When it came back some five minutes later, he observed that he had loaded the gun. The idea of target-shooting didn’t much appeal, not today, but he had still loaded it. He told himself he didn’t know why.

Sure you do, Todd-baby. The time, so to speak, has come.

And that was when the shiny yellow Saab turned into the driveway. The man who got out was vaguely familiar to Todd, but it wasn't until he slammed the car door and started to walk toward him that Todd saw the sneakers—tow-topped Keds, light blue. Talk about Blasts from the Past; here, walking up the Bowden driveway, was Rubber Ed French, The Ked Man.

“Hi, Todd. Long time no see.”

Todd leaned the rifle against the side of the bench and offered his wide and winsome grin. “Hi, Mr. French. What are you doing out here on the wild side of town?”

“Are your folks home?”

“Gee, no. Did you want them for something?”

“No,” Ed French said after a long, thoughtful pause. “No, I guess not. I guess maybe it would be better if just you and

I talked. For starters, anyway. You may be able to offer a perfectly reasonable explanation for all this. Although God knows I doubt it.”

He reached into his hip pocket and brought out a newsclipping. Todd knew what it was even before Rubber Ed passed it to him, and for the second time that day he was looking at the side-by-side pictures of Dussander. The one the street photographer had taken had been circled in black ink. The meaning was clear enough to Todd; French had recognized Todd's “grandfather.” And now he wanted to tell everyone in the world all about it. He wanted to midwife the good news. Good old Rubber Ed, with his jive talk and his motherfucking sneakers.

The police would be very interested—but, of course, they already were. He knew that now. The sinking feeling had begun about thirty minutes after Richler left. It was as if he had been riding high in a balloon filled with happy-gas. Then a cold steel arrow had ripped through the balloon's fabric, and now it was sinking steadily.

The phone calls, that was the biggie. Richler had trotted that out just as slick as warm owlshit. Sure, he had said, practically breaking his neck to rush into the trap. He gets one or two calls a week. Let them go ranting all over southern California looking for geriatric ex-Nazis. Fine. Except maybe they had gotten a different story from Ma Bell. Todd didn't know if the phone company could tell how much your phone got used ... but there had been a look in Richler's eyes ...

Then there was the letter. He had inadvertently told Richler that the house hadn't been burgled, and Richler had no doubt gone away thinking that the only way Todd could have known that was if he had been back ... as he had been, not just once but three times, first to get the letter and twice more looking for anything incriminating. There had been nothing; even the SS uniform was gone, disposed of by Dussander sometime during the last four years.

And then there were the bodies. Richler had never mentioned the bodies.

At first Todd had thought that was good. Let them hunt a little longer while he got his own head—not to mention his story—straight. No fear about the dirt that had gotten on his clothes burying the body; they had all been cleaned later that same night. He ran them through the washer-dryer himself, perfectly aware that Dussander might die and then everything might come out. You can't be too careful, boy, as Dussander himself would have said.

Then, little by little, he had realized it was not good. The weather had been warm, and the warm weather always made the cellar smell worse; on his last trip to Dussander's house it had been a rank presence. Surely the police would have been interested in that smell, and would have tracked it to its source. So why had Richler withheld the information? Was he saving it for later? Saving it for a nasty little surprise? And if Richler was into planning nasty little surprises, it could only mean that he suspected.

Todd looked up from the clipping and saw that Rubber Ed had half-turned away from him. He was looking into the street, although not

much was happening out there. Richler could suspect, but suspicion was the best he could do.

Unless there was some sort of concrete evidence binding Todd to the old man.

Exactly the sort of evidence Rubber Ed French could give. Ridiculous man in a pair of ridiculous sneakers. Such a ridiculous man hardly deserved to live. Todd touched the barrel of the .30-.30.

Yes, Rubber Ed was a link they didn't have. They could never prove that Todd had been an accessory to one of Dussander's murders. But with Rubber Ed's testimony they could prove conspiracy. And would even that end it? Oh, no. They would get his high school graduation picture next and start showing it to the stewbums down in the Mission district. A long shot, but one Richler could ill afford not to play. If we can't pin one bunch of winos on him, maybe we can get him for the other bunch.

What next? Court next.

His father would get him a wonderful bunch of lawyers, of course. And the lawyers would get him off, of course. Too much circumstantial evidence. He would make too favorable an impression on the jury. But by then his life would be ruined anyway, just as Dussander had said it would be. It would be all dragged through the newspapers, dug up and brought into the light like the half-decayed bodies in Dussander's cellar.

"The man in that picture is the man who came to my office when you were in the ninth grade," Ed told him abruptly, turning to Todd again. "He purported to be your grandfather. Now it turns out he was a wanted war criminal."

"Yes," Todd said. His face had gone oddly blank. It was the face of a department-store dummy. All the healthiness, life, and vivacity had drained from it. What was left was frightening in its vacuous emptiness.

“How did it happen?” Ed asked, and perhaps he intended his question as a thundering accusation, but it came out sounding plaintive and lost and somehow cheated. “How did this happen, Todd?”

“Oh, one thing just followed another,” Todd said, and picked up the .30-.30. “That’s really how it happened. One thing just ... followed another.” He pushed the safety catch to the off position with his thumb and pointed the rifle at Rubber Ed. “As stupid as it sounds, that’s just what happened. That’s all there was to it.”

“Todd,” Ed said, his eyes widening. He took a step backwards. “Todd, you don’t want to ... please, Todd. We can talk this over. We can disc—”

“You and the fucking kraut can discuss it down in hell,” Todd said, and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot rolled away in the hot and windless quiet of the afternoon. Ed French was flung back against his Saab. His hand groped behind him and tore off a windshield wiper. He stared at it foolishly as blood spread on his blue turtleneck, and then he dropped it and looked at Todd.

“Norma,” he whispered.

“Okay,” Todd said. “Whatever you say, champ.” He shot Rubber Ed again and roughly half of his head disappeared in a spray of blood and bone.

Ed turned drunkenly and began to grope toward the driver’s-side door, speaking his daughter’s name over and over again in a choked and failing voice. Todd shot him again, aiming for the base of the spine, and Ed fell down. His feet drummed briefly on the gravel and then were still.

Sure did die hard for a guidance counsellor, Todd thought, and brief laughter escaped him. At the same moment a burst of pain as sharp

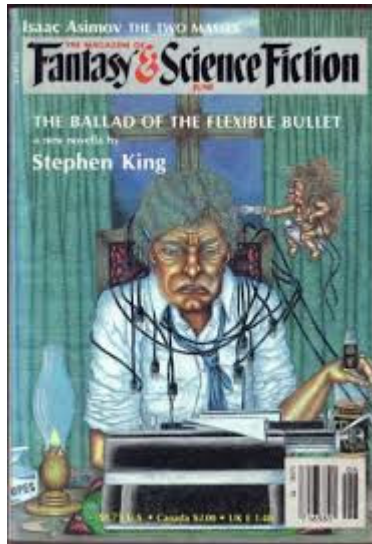
as an icepick drove into his brain and he closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he felt better than he had in months—maybe better than he had felt in years. Everything was fine. Everything was together. The blankness left his face and a kind of wild beauty filled it.

He went back into the garage and got all the shells he had, better than four hundred rounds. He put them in his old knapsack and shouldered it. When he came back out into the sunshine he was smiling excitedly, his eyes dancing—it was the way boys smile on their birthdays, on Christmas, on the Fourth of July. It was a smile that betokened skyrockets, treehouses, secret signs and secret meeting-places, the aftermath of the triumphal big game when the players are carried out of the stadium and into town on the shoulders of the exultant fans. The ecstatic smile of tow-headed boys going off to war in coal-scuttle helmets.

“I’m king of the world!” he shouted mightily at the high blue sky, and raised the rifle two-handed over his head for a moment. Then, switching it to his right hand, he started toward that place above the freeway where the land fell away and where the dead tree would give him shelter.

It was five hours later and almost dark before they took him down.



THE BALLAD OF THE FLEXIBLE BULLET

Stephen King

The barbecue was over. It had been a good one; drinks, charcoaled T-bones, rare, a green salad and Meg's special dressing. They had started at five. Now it was eight-thirty and almost dusk—the time when a big party is just starting to get rowdy. But they weren't a big party. There were just the five of them: the agent and his wife, the celebrated young writer and his wife, and the magazine editor, who was in his early sixties and looked older. The editor stuck to Fresca. The agent had told the young writer before the editor arrived that there had once been a drinking problem there. It was gone now, and so was the editor's wife ... which was why they were five instead of six.

Instead of getting rowdy, an introspective mood fell over them as it started to get dark in the young writer's backyard, which fronted the lake. The young writer's first novel had been well reviewed and had sold a lot of copies. He was a lucky young man, and to his credit he knew it.

The conversation had turned with playful gruesomeness from the young writer's early success to other writers who had made their marks early and had then committed suicide. Ross Lockridge was touched upon, and Tom Hagen. The agent's wife mentioned Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and the young writer said that he didn't think Plath qualified as a successful writer. She had not committed suicide because of success, he said; she had gained success because she had committed suicide. The agent smiled.

"Please, couldn't we talk about something else?" the young writer's wife asked, a little nervously.

Ignoring her, the agent said, "And madness. There have been those who have gone mad because of success." The agent had the mild but nonetheless rolling tones of an actor offstage.

The writer's wife was about to protest again—she knew that her husband not only liked to talk about these things so he could joke about them, and he wanted to joke about them because he thought

about them too much—when the magazine editor spoke up. What he said was so odd she forgot to protest.

“Madness is a flexible bullet.”

The agent’s wife looked startled. The young writer leaned forward quizzically. He said, “That sounds familiar—”

“Sure,” the editor said. “That phrase, the image, ‘flexible bullet,’ is Marianne Moore’s. She used it to describe some car or other. I’ve always thought it described the condition of madness very well. Madness is a kind of mental suicide. Don’t the doctors say now that the only way to truly measure death is by the death of the mind? Madness is a kind of flexible bullet to the brain.”

The young writer’s wife hopped up. “Anybody want another drink?” She had no takers.

“Well, I do, if we’re going to talk about this,” she said, and went off to make herself one.

The editor said: “I had a story submitted to me once, when I was working over at Logan’s. Of course it’s gone the way of Collier’s and The Saturday Evening Post now, but we outlasted both of them.” He said this with a trace of pride. “We published thirty-six short stories a year, or more, and every year four or five of them would be in somebody’s collection of the year’s best. And people read them. Anyway, the name of this story was ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,’ and it was written by a man named Reg Thorpe. A young man about this young man’s age, and about as successful. “

“He wrote Underworld Figures, didn’t he?” the agent’s wife asked.

“Yes. Amazing track record for a first novel. Great reviews, lovely sales in hardcover and paperback, Literary Guild, everything. Even the movie was pretty good, although not as good as the book. Nowhere near.”

“I loved that book,” the author’s wife said, lured back into the conversation against her better judgment. She had the surprised, pleased look of someone who has just recalled something which has been out of mind for too long. “Has he written anything since then? I read *Underworld Figures* back in college and that was ... well, too long ago to think about.”

“You haven’t aged a day since then,” the agent’s wife said warmly, although privately she thought the young writer’s wife was wearing a too-small halter and a too-tight pair of shorts.

“No, he hasn’t written anything since then,” the editor said. “Except for this one short story I was telling you about. He killed himself. Went crazy and killed himself.”

“Oh,” the young writer’s wife said limply. Back to that.

“Was the short story published?” the young writer asked.

“No, but not because the author went crazy and killed himself. It never got into print because the editor went crazy and almost killed himself.”

The agent suddenly got up to freshen his own drink, which hardly need freshening. He knew that the editor had had a nervous breakdown in the summer of 1969, not long before Logan’s had drowned in a sea of red ink.

“I was the editor,” the editor informed the rest of them. “In a sense we went crazy together, Reg Thorpe and I, even though I was in New York, he was out in Omaha, and we never even met. His book had been out about six months and he had moved out there ‘to get his head together,’ as the phrase was then. And I happen to know this side of the story because I see his wife occasionally when she’s in New York. She paints, and quite well. She’s a lucky girl. He almost took her with him.”

The agent came back and sat down. "I'm starting to remember some of this now," he said. "It wasn't just his wife, was it? He shot a couple of other people, one of them a kid."

"That's right," the editor said. "It was the kid that finally set him off."

"The kid set him off?" the agent's wife asked. "What do you mean?"

But the editor's face said he would not be drawn; he would talk, but not be questioned.

"I know my side of the story because I lived it," the magazine editor said. "I'm lucky, too. Damned lucky. It's an interesting thing about those who try to kill themselves by pointing a gun at their heads and pulling the trigger. You'd think it would be the foolproof method, better than pills or slashing the wrists, but it isn't. When you shoot yourself in the head, you just can't tell what's going to happen. The slug may ricochet off the skull and kill someone else. It may follow the skull's curve all the way around and come out on the other side. It may lodge in the brain and blind you and leave you alive. One man may shoot himself in the forehead with a .38 and wake up in the hospital. Another may shoot himself in the forehead with a .22 and wake up in hell ... if there is such a place. I tend to believe it's here on earth, possibly in New Jersey."

The writer's wife laughed rather shrilly.

"The only foolproof suicide method is to step off a very high building, and that's a way out that only the extraordinarily dedicated ever take. So damned messy, isn't it?"

"But my point is simply this: When you shoot yourself with a flexible bullet, you really don't know what the outcome is going to be. In my case, I went off a bridge and woke up on a trash-littered embankment with a trucker whapping me on the back and pumping my arms up and down like he had only twenty-four hours to get in shape and he had mistaken me for a rowing machine. For Reg, the

bullet was lethal. He ... But I'm telling you a story I have no idea if you want to hear."

He looked around at them questioningly in the gathering gloom. The agent and the agent's wife glanced at each other uncertainly, and the writer's wife was about to say she thought they'd had enough gloomy talk when her husband said, "I'd like to hear it. If you don't mind telling it for personal reasons, I mean."

"I never have told it," the editor said, "but not for personal reasons. Perhaps I never had the correct listeners."

"Then tell away," the writer said.

"Paul—" His wife put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't you think—"

"Not now, Meg."

The editor said:

"The story came in over the transom, and at that time Logan's no longer read unsolicited scripts. When they came in, a girl would just put them into return envelopes with a note that said 'Due to increasing costs and the increasing inability of the editorial staff to cope with a steadily increasing number of submissions, Logan's no longer reads unsolicited manuscripts. We wish you the best of luck in placing your work elsewhere.' Isn't that a lovely bunch of gobbledegook? It's not easy to use the word 'increasing' three times in one sentence, but they did it."

"And if there was no return postage, the story went into the wastebasket," the writer said. "Right?"

"Oh, absolutely. No pity in the naked city."

An odd expression of unease flitted across the writer's face. It was the expression of a man who is in a tiger pit where dozens of better men have been clawed to pieces. So far this man hasn't seen a

single tiger. But he has a feeling that they are there, and that their claws are still sharp.

“Anyway,” the editor said, taking out his cigarette case, “this story came in, and the girl in the mailroom took it out, paper-clipped the form rejection to the first page, and was getting ready to put it in the return envelope when she glanced at the author’s name. Well, she had read *Underworld Figures*. That fall, everybody had read it, or was reading it, or was on the library waiting list, or checking the drugstore racks for the paperback. “

The writer’s wife, who had seen the momentary unease on her husband’s face, took his hand. He smiled at her. The editor snapped a gold Ronson to his cigarette, and in the growing dark they could all see how haggard his face was—the loose, crocodile-skinned pouches under the eyes, the runneled cheeks, the old man’s jut of chin emerging out of that late-middle-aged face like the prow of a ship. That ship, the writer thought, is called old age. No one particularly wants to cruise on it, but the staterooms are full. The gangholds too, for that matter.

The lighter winked out, and the editor puffed his cigarette meditatively.

“The girl in the mailroom who read that story and passed it on instead of sending it back is now a full editor at G. P. Putnam’s Sons. Her name doesn’t matter; what matters is that on the great graph of life, this girl’s vector crossed Reg Thorpe’s in the mailroom of Logan’s magazine. Hers was going up and his was going down. She sent the story to her boss and her boss sent it to me. I read it and loved it. It was really too long, but I could see where he could pare five hundred words off it with no sweat. And that would be plenty.”

“What was it about?” the writer asked.

“You shouldn’t even have to ask,” the editor said. “It fits so beautifully into the total context.”

“About going crazy?”

“Yes, indeed. What’s the first thing they teach you in your first college creative-writing course? Write about what you know. Reg Thorpe knew about going crazy, because he was engaged in going there. The story probably appealed to me because I was also going there. Now you could say—if you were an editor—that the one thing the American reading public doesn’t need foisted on them is another story about Going Mad Stylishly in America, subtopic A, Nobody Talks to Each Other Anymore. A popular theme in twentieth-century literature. All the greats have taken a hack at it and all the hacks have taken an ax to it. But this story was funny. I mean, it was really hilarious.

“I hadn’t read anything like it before and I haven’t since. The closest would be some of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s stories ... and Gatsby. The fellow in Thorpe’s story was going crazy, but he was doing it in a very funny way. You kept grinning, and there were a couple of places in this story—the place where the hero dumps the lime Jell-O on the fat girl’s head is the best—where you laugh right out loud. But they’re jittery laughs, you know. You laugh and then you want to look over your shoulder to see what heard you. The opposing lines of tension in that story were really extraordinary. The more you laughed, the more nervous you got. And the more nervous you got, the more you laughed ... right up to the point where the hero goes home from the party given in his honor and kills his wife and baby daughter.”

“What’s the plot?” the agent asked.

“No,” the editor said, “that doesn’t matter. It was just a story about a young man gradually losing his struggle to cope with success. It’s better left vague. A detailed plot synopsis would only be boring. They always are.

“Anyway, I wrote him a letter. It said this: ‘Dear Reg Thorpe, I’ve just read “The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet” and I think it’s great. I’d like to publish it in Logan’s early next year, if that fits. Does \$800 sound okay? Payment on acceptance. More or less.’ New paragraph.”

The editor indented the evening air with his cigarette.

” ‘The story runs a little long, and I’d like you to shorten it by about five hundred words, if you could. I would settle for a two-hundred-word cut, if it comes to that. We can always drop a cartoon.’

Paragraph. ‘Call, if you want.’ My signature. And off the letter went, to Omaha.”

“And you remember it, word for word like that?” the writer’s wife asked.

“I kept all the correspondence in a special file,” the editor said. “His letters, carbons of mine back. There was quite a stack of it by the end, including three or four pieces of correspondence from Jane Thorpe, his wife. I’ve read the file over quite often. No good, of course. Trying to understand the flexible bullet is like trying to understand how a Mobius strip can have only one side. That’s just the way things are in this best-of-all-possible worlds. Yes, I know it all word for word, or almost. Some people have the Declaration of Independence by heart.”

“Bet he called you the next day,” the agent said, grinning. “Collect. “

“No, he didn’t call. Shortly after Underworld Figures, Thorpe stopped using the telephone altogether. His wife told me that. When they moved to Omaha from New York, they didn’t even have a phone put in the new house. He had decided, you see, that the telephone system didn’t really run on electricity but on radium. He thought it was one of the two or three best-kept secrets in the history of the modern world. He claimed—to his wife—that all the radium was responsible for the growing cancer rate, not cigarettes or automobile emissions or industrial pollution. Each telephone had a small radium crystal in the handset, and every time you used the phone, you shot your head full of radiation.”

“Yuh, he was crazy,” the writer said, and they all laughed.

“He wrote instead,” the editor said, flicking his cigarette in the direction of the lake. “His letter said this: ‘Dear Henry Wilson (or just Henry, if I may), Your letter was both exciting and gratifying. My wife was, if anything, more pleased than I. The money is fine ... although in all honesty I must say that the idea of being published in Logan’s at all seems like more than adequate compensation (but I’ll take it, I’ll take it). I’ve looked over your cuts, and they seem fine. I think they’ll improve the story as well as clear space for those cartoons. All best wishes, Reg Thorpe.’”

“Under his signature was a funny little drawing ... more like a doodle. An eye in a pyramid, like the one on the back of the dollar bill. But instead of Novus Ordo Seclorum on the banner beneath, there were these words: Fornit Some Fornus.”

“Either Latin or Groucho Marx,” the agent’s wife said.

“Just part of Reg Thorpe’s growing eccentricity,” the editor said. “His wife told me that Reg had come to believe in ‘little people,’ sort of like elves or fairies. The Fornits. They were luck-elves, and he thought one of them lived in his typewriter. “

“Oh my Lord,” the writer’s wife said.

“According to Thorpe, each Fornit has a small device, like a flitgun, full of ... good-luck dust, I guess you’d call it. And the good-luck dust —”

“—is called fornus,” the writer finished. He was grinning broadly.

“Yes. And his wife thought it quite funny, too. At first. In fact, she thought at first—Thorpe had conceived the Fornits two years before, while he was drafting Underworld Figures—that it was just Reg, having her on. And maybe at first he was. It seems to have progressed from a whimsey to a superstition to an outright belief. It was ... a flexible fantasy. But hard in the end. Very hard.”

They were all silent. The grins had faded.

“The Fornits had their funny side,” the editor said. “Thorpe’s typewriter started going to the shop a lot near the end of their stay in New York, and it was even a more frequent thing when they moved to Omaha. He had a loaner while it was being fixed for the first time out there. The dealership manager called a few days after Reg got his own machine back to tell him he was going to send a bill for cleaning the loaner as well as Thorpe’s own machine.”

“What was the trouble?” the agent’s wife asked.

“I think I know,” the writer’s wife said.

“It was full of food,” the editor said. “Tiny bits of cake and cookies. There was peanut butter smeared on the platens of the keys themselves. Reg was feeding the Fornit in his typewriter. He also ‘fed’ the loaner, on the off chance that the Fornit had made the switch.”

“Boy,” the writer said.

“I knew none of these things then, you understand. For the nonce, I wrote back to him and told him how pleased I was. My secretary typed the letter and brought it in for my signature, and then she had to go out for something. I signed it and she wasn’t back. And then—for no real reason at all—I put the same doodle below my name. Pyramid. Eye. And ‘Fomit Some Fornus.’ Crazy. The secretary saw it and asked me if I wanted it sent out that way. I shrugged and told her to go ahead.

“Two days later Jane Thorpe called me. She told me that my letter had excited Reg a great deal. Reg thought he had found a kindred soul ... someone else who knew about the Fornits. You see what a crazy situation it was getting to be? As far as I knew at that point, a Fornit could have been anything from a lefthanded monkey wrench to a Polish steak knife. Ditto fornus. I explained to Jane that I had merely copied Reg’s own design. She wanted to know why. I slipped the question, although the answer would have been because I was very drunk when I signed the letter.”

He paused, and an uncomfortable silence fell on the back lawn area. People looked at the sky, the lake, the trees, although they were no more interesting now than they had been a minute or two before.

“I had been drinking all my adult life, and it’s impossible for me to say when it began to get out of control. In the professional sense I was on top of the bottle until nearly the very end. I would begin drinking at lunch and come back to the office el blotto. I functioned perfectly well there, however. It was the drinks after work—first on the train, then at home—that pushed me over the functional point.

“My wife and I had been having problems that were unrelated to the drinking, but the drinking made the other problems worse. For a long time she had been preparing to leave, and a week before the Reg Thorpe story came in, she did it.

“I was trying to deal with that when the Thorpe story came in. I was drinking too much. And to top it all off, I was having—well, I guess now it’s fashionable to call it a mid-life crisis. All I knew at the time was that I was as depressed about my professional life as I was about my personal one. I was coming to grips—or trying to—with a growing feeling that editing mass-market stories that would end up being read by nervous dental patients, housewives at lunchtime, and an occasional bored college student was not exactly a noble occupation. I was coming to grips—again, trying to, all of us at Logan’s were at that time—with the idea that in another six months, or ten, or fourteen, there might not be any Logan’s.

“Into this dull autumnal landscape of middle-aged angst comes a very good story by a very good writer, a funny, energetic look at the mechanics of going crazy. It was like a bright ray of sun. I know it sounds strange to say that about a story that ends with the protagonist killing his wife and infant child, but you ask any editor what real joy is, and he’ll tell you it’s the great story or novel you didn’t expect, landing on your desk like a big Christmas present. Look, you all know that Shirley Jackson story, ‘The Lottery.’ It ends on one of the most downbeat notes you can imagine. I mean, they take a nice lady out and stone her to death. Her son and daughter

participate in her murder, for Christ's sake. But it was a great piece of storytelling ... and I bet the editor at the New Yorker who read the story first went home that night whistling.

“What I'm trying to say is the Thorpe story was the best thing in my life right then. The one good thing. And from what his wife told me on the phone that day, my acceptance of that story was the one good thing that had happened to him lately. The author-editor relationship is always mutual parasitism, but in the case of Reg and me, that parasitism was heightened to an unnatural degree.”

“Let's go back to Jane Thorpe,” the writer's wife said.

“Yes, I did sort of leave her on a side-track, didn't I? She was angry about the Fornit business. At first. I told her I had simply doodled that eye-and-pyramid symbol under my signature, with no knowledge of what it might be, and apologized for whatever I'd done.

“She got over her anger and spilled everything to me. She'd been getting more and more anxious, and she had no one at all to talk to. Her folks were dead, and all her friends were back in New York. Reg wouldn't allow anyone at all in the house. They were tax people, he said, or FBI, or CIA. Not long after they moved to Omaha, a little girl came to the door selling Girl Scout cookies. Reg yelled at her, told her to get the hell out, he knew why she was there, and so on. Jane tried to reason with him. She pointed out that the girl had only been ten years old. Reg told her that the tax people had no souls, no consciences. And besides, he said, the little girl might have been an android. Androids wouldn't be subject to the child-labor laws. He wouldn't put it past the tax people to send an android Girl Scout full of radium crystals to find out if he was keeping any secrets ... and to shoot him full of cancer rays in the meantime.”

“Good Lord,” the agent's wife said.

“She'd been waiting for a friendly voice and mine was the first. I got the Girl Scout story, I found out about the care and feeding of Fornits, about fornus, about how Reg refused to use a telephone.

She was talking to me from a pay booth in a drugstore five blocks over. She told me that she was afraid it wasn't really tax men or FBI or CIA Reg was worried about. She thought he was really afraid that They—some hulking, anonymous group that hated Reg, was jealous of Reg, would stop at nothing to get Reg—had found out about his Fornit and wanted to kill it. If the Fornit was dead, there would be no more novels, no more short stories, nothing. You see? The essence of insanity. They were out to get him. In the end, not even the IRS, which had given him the very devil of a time over the income Underworld Figures generated, would serve as the boogeyman. In the end it was just They. The perfect paranoid fantasy. They wanted to kill his Fornit."

"My God, what did you say to her?" the agent asked.

"I tried to reassure her," the editor said. "There I was, freshly returned from a five-martini lunch, talking to this terrified woman who was standing in a drugstore phone booth in Omaha, trying to tell her it was all right, not to worry that her husband believed that the phones were full of radium crystals, that a bunch of anonymous people were sending android Girl Scouts to get the goods on him, not to worry that her husband had disconnected his talent from his mentality to such a degree that he could believe there was an elf living in his typewriter.

"I don't believe I was very convincing.

"She asked me—no, begged me—to work with Reg on his story, to see that it got published. She did everything but come out and say that 'The Flexible Bullet' was Reg's last contact to what we laughingly call reality.

"I asked her what I should do if Reg mentioned Fornits again. 'Humor him,' she said. Her exact words—humor him. And then she hung up.

"There was a letter in the mail from Reg the next day—five pages, typed, single-spaced. The first paragraph was about the story. The second draft was getting on well, he said. He thought he would be

able to shave seven hundred words from the original ten thousand five hundred, bringing the final down to a tight nine thousand eight.

“The rest of the letter was about Fornits and fornus. His own observations, and questions ... dozens of questions.”

“Observations?” The writer leaned forward. “He was actually seeing them, then?”

“No,” the editor said. “Not seeing them in an actual sense, but in another way ... I suppose he was. You know, astronomers knew Pluto was there long before they had a telescope powerful enough to see it. They knew all about it by studying the planet Neptune’s orbit. Reg was observing the Fornits in that way. They liked to eat at night, he said, had I noticed that? He fed them at all hours of the day, but he noticed that most of it disappeared after eight P.M.”

“Hallucination?” the writer asked.

“No,” the editor said. “His wife simply cleared as much of the food out of the typewriter as she could when Reg went out for his evening walk. And he went out every evening at nine o’clock.”

“I’d say she had quite a nerve getting after you,” the agent grunted. He shifted his large bulk in the lawn chair. “She was feeding the man’s fantasy herself.”

“You don’t understand why she called and why she was so upset,” the editor said quietly. He looked at the writer’s wife. “But I’ll bet you do, Meg.”

“Maybe,” she said, and gave her husband an uncomfortable sideways look. “She wasn’t mad because you were feeding his fantasy. She was afraid you might upset it.”

“Bravo.” The editor lit a fresh cigarette. “And she removed the food for the same reason. If the food continued to accumulate in the typewriter, Reg would make the logical assumption, proceeding

directly from his own decidedly illogical premise. Namely, that his Fornit had either died or left. Hence, no more fornus. Hence, no more writing. Hence ...”

The editor let the word drift away on cigarette smoke and then resumed:

“He thought that Fornits were probably nocturnal. They didn’t like loud noises—he had noticed that he hadn’t been able to write on mornings after noisy parties—they hated the TV, they hated free electricity, they hated radium. Reg had sold their TV to Goodwill for twenty dollars, he said, and his wristwatch with the radium dial was long gone. Then the questions. How did I know about Fornits? Was it possible that I had one in residence? If so, what did I think about this, this, and that? I don’t need to be more specific, I think. If you’ve ever gotten a dog of a particular breed and can recollect the questions you asked about its care and feeding, you’ll know most of the questions Reg asked me. One little doodle below my signature was all it took to open Pandora’s box.”

“What did you write back?” the agent asked.

The editor said slowly, “That’s where the trouble really began. For both of us. Jane had said, ‘Humor him,’ so that’s what I did. Unfortunately, I rather overdid it. I answered his letter at home, and I was very drunk. The apartment seemed much too empty. It had a stale smell—cigarette smoke, not enough airing. Things were going to seed with Sandra gone. The dropcloth on the couch all wrinkled. Dirty dishes in the sink, that sort of thing. The middle-aged man unprepared for domesticity.

“I sat there with a sheet of my personal stationery rolled into the typewriter and I thought: I need a Fornit. In fact, I need a dozen of them to dust this damn lonely house with fornus from end to end. In that instant I was drunk enough to envy Reg Thorpe his delusion.

“I said I had a Fornit, of course. I told Reg that mine was remarkably similar to his in its characteristics. Nocturnal. Hated loud noises, but

seemed to enjoy Bach and Brahms ... I often did my best work after an evening of listening to them, I said. I had found my Fornit had a decided taste for Kirschner's bologna ... had Reg ever tried it? I simply left little scraps of it near the Scripto I always carried—my editorial blue pencil, if you like—and it was almost always gone in the morning. Unless, as Reg said, it had been noisy the night before. I told him I was glad to know about radium, even though I didn't have a glow-in-the-dark wristwatch. I told him my Fornit had been with me since college. I got so carried away with my own invention that I wrote nearly six pages. At the end I added a paragraph about the story, a very perfunctory thing, and signed it." "And below your signature—?" the agent's wife asked.

"Sure. Fornit Some Fornus." He paused. "You can't see it in the dark, but I'm blushing. I was so goddammed drunk, so goddammed smug ... I might have had second thoughts in the cold light of dawn, but by then it was too late."

"You'd mailed it the night before?" the writer murmured.

"So I did. And then, for a week and a half, I held my breath and waited. One day the manuscript came in, addressed to me, no covering letter. The cuts were as we had discussed them, and I thought that the story was letter-perfect, but the manuscript was ... well, I put it in my briefcase, took it home, and retyped it myself. It was covered with weird yellow stains. I thought ..."

"Urine?" the agent's wife asked.

"Yes, that's what I thought. But it wasn't. And when I got home, there was a letter in my mailbox from Reg. Ten pages this time. In the course of the letter the yellow stains were accounted for. He hadn't been able to find Kirschner's bologna, so had tried Jordan's.

"He said they loved it. Especially with mustard.

"I had been quite sober that day. But his letter combined with those pitiful mustard stains ground right into the pages of his manuscript

sent me directly to the liquor cabinet. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars. Go directly to drunk. “

“What else did the letter say?” the agent’s wife asked. She had grown more and more fascinated with the tale, and was now leaning over her not inconsiderable belly in a posture that reminded the writer’s wife of Snoopy standing on his doghouse and pretending to be a vulture.

“Only two lines about the story this time. All credit thrown to the Fornit ... and to me. The bologna had really been a fantastic idea. Rackne loved it, and as a consequence—”

“Rackne?” the author asked.

“That was the Fornit’s name,” the editor said. “Rackne. As a consequence of the bologna, Rackne had really gotten behind in the rewrite. The rest of the letter was a paranoid chant. You have never seen such stuff in your life.”

“Reg and Rackne ... a marriage made in heaven,” the writer’s wife said, and giggled nervously.

“Oh, not at all,” the editor said. “Theirs was a working relationship. And Rackne was male.”

“Well, tell us about the letter.”

“That’s one I don’t have by heart. It’s just as well for you that I don’t. Even abnormality grows tiresome after a while. The mailman was CIA. The paperboy was FBI; Reg had seen a silenced revolver in his sack of papers. The people next door were spies of some sort; they had surveillance equipment in their van. He no longer dared to go down to the corner store for supplies because the proprietor was an android. He had suspected it before, he said, but now he was sure. He had seen the wires crisscrossing under the man’s scalp, where he was beginning to go bald. And the radium count in his house was way up; at night he could see a dull, greenish glow in the rooms.

“His letter finished this way: ‘I hope you’ll write back and apprise me of your own situation (and that of your Fornit) as regards enemies, Henry. I believe that reaching you has been an occurrence that transcends coincidence. I would call it a life-ring from (God? Providence? Fate? supply your own term) at the last possible instant.

” ‘It is not possible for a man to stand alone for long against a thousand enemies. And to discover, at last, that one is not alone ... is it too much to say that the commonality of our experience stands between myself and total destruction? Perhaps not. I must know: are the enemies after your Fornit as they are after Rackne? If so, how are you coping? If not, do you have any idea why not? I repeat, I must know.’

“The letter was signed with the Fornit Some Fornus doodle beneath, and then a P.S. Just one sentence. But lethal. The P.S. said: ‘Sometimes I wonder about my wife.’

“I read the letter through three times. In the process, I killed an entire bottle of Black Velvet. I began to consider options on how to answer his letter. It was a cry for help from a drowning man, that was pretty obvious. The story had held him together for a while, but now the story was done. Now he was depending on me to hold him together. Which was perfectly reasonable, since I’d brought the whole thing on myself.

“I walked up and down the house, through all the empty rooms. And I started to unplug things. I was very drunk, remember, and heavy drinking opens unexpected avenues of suggestibility. Which is why editors and lawyers are willing to spring for three drinks before talking contract at lunch.”

The agent brayed laughter, but the mood remained tight and tense and uncomfortable.

“And please keep in mind that Reg Thorpe was one hell of a writer. He was absolutely convinced of the things he was saying. FBI. CIA.

IRS. They. The enemies. Some writers possess a very rare gift for cooling their prose the more passionately they feel their subject. Steinbeck had it, so did Hemingway, and Reg Thorpe had that same talent. When you entered his world, everything began to seem very logical. You began to think it very likely, once you accepted the basic Fornit premise, that the paperboy did have a silenced .38 in his bag of papers. That the college kids next door with the van might indeed be KGB agents with death-capsules in wax molars, on a do-or-die mission to kill or capture Rackne.

“Of course, I didn’t accept the basic premise. But it seemed so hard to think. And I unplugged things. First the color TV, because everybody knows that they really do give off radiation. At Logan’s we had published an article by a perfectly reputable scientist suggesting that the radiation given off by the household color television was interrupting human brainwaves just enough to alter them minutely but permanently. This scientist suggested that it might be the reason for declining college-board scores, literacy tests, and grammar-school development of arithmetical skills. After all, who sits closer to the TV than a little kid?

“So I unplugged the TV, and it really did seem to clarify my thoughts. In fact, it made it so much better that I unplugged the radio, the toaster, the washing machine, the dryer. Then I remembered the microwave oven, and I unplugged that. I felt a real sense of relief when that fucking thing’s teeth were pulled. It was one of the early ones, about the size of a house, and it probably really was dangerous. Shielding on them’s better these days.

“It occurred to me just how many things we have in any ordinary middle-class house that plug into the wall. An image occurred to me of this nasty electrical octopus, its tentacles consisting of electrical cables, all snaking into the walls, all connected with wires outside, and all the wires leading to power stations run by the government.

“There was a curious doubling in my mind as I did those things,” the editor went on, after pausing for a sip of his Fresca. “Essentially, I was responding to a superstitious impulse. There are plenty of

people who won't walk under ladders or open an umbrella in the house. There are basketball players who cross themselves before taking foul shots and baseball players who change their socks when they're in a slump. I think it's the rational mind playing a bad stereo accompaniment with the irrational subconscious. Forced to define 'irrational subconscious,' I would say that it is a small padded room inside all of us, where the only furnishing is a small card table, and the only thing on the card table is a revolver loaded with flexible bullets.

“When you change course on the sidewalk to avoid the ladder or step out of your apartment into the rain with your furled umbrella, part of your integrated self peels off and steps into that room and picks the gun up off the table. You may be aware of two conflicting thoughts: Walking under a ladder is harmless, and Not walking under a ladder is also harmless. But as soon as the ladder is behind you—or as soon as the umbrella is open—you're back together again.”

The writer said, “That's very interesting. Take it a step further for me, if you don't mind. When does that irrational part actually stop fooling with the gun and put it up to its temple?”

The editor said, “When the person in question starts writing letters to the op-ed page of the paper demanding that all the ladders be taken down because walking under them is dangerous. “

There was a laugh.

“Having taken it that far, I suppose we ought to finish. The irrational self has actually fired the flexible bullet into the brain when the person begins tearing around town, knocking ladders over and maybe injuring the people that were working on them. It is not certifiable behavior to walk around ladders rather than under them. It is not certifiable behavior to write letters to the paper saying that New York City went broke because of all the people callously walking under workmen's ladders. But it is certifiable to start knocking over ladders.”

“Because it’s overt,” the writer muttered.

The agent said, “You know, you’ve got something there, Henry. I’ve got this thing about not lighting three cigarettes on a match. I don’t know how I got it, but I did. Then I read somewhere that it came from the trench warfare in World War I. It seems that the German sharpshooters would wait for the Tommies to start lighting each other’s cigarettes. On the first light, you got the range. On the second one, you got the windage. And on the third one, you blew the guy’s head off. But knowing all that didn’t make any difference. I still can’t light three on a match. One part of me says it doesn’t matter if I light a dozen cigarettes on one match. But the other part—this very ominous voice, like an interior Boris Karloff—says ‘Ohhhh, if you dooo ...’ “

“But all madness isn’t superstitious, is it?” the writer’s wife asked timidly.

“Isn’t it?” the editor replied. “Jeanne d’Arc heard voices from heaven. Some people think they are possessed by demons. Others see gremlins ... or devils ... or Fornits. The terms we use for madness suggest superstition in some form or other. Mania ... abnormality ... irrationality ... lunacy ... insanity. For the mad person, reality has skewed. The whole person begins to reintegrate in that small room where the pistol is.

“But the rational part of me was still very much there. Bloody, bruised, indignant, and rather frightened, but still on the job. Saying: ‘Oh, that’s all right. Tomorrow when you sober up, you can plug everything back in, thank God. Play your games if you have to. But no more than this. No further than this.’

“That rational voice was right to be frightened. There’s something in us that is very much attracted to madness. Everyone who looks off the edge of a tall building has felt at least a faint, morbid urge to jump. And anyone who has ever put a loaded pistol up to his head ...

“

“Ugh, don’t,” the writer’s wife said. “Please.”

“All right,” the editor said. “My point is just this: even the most well-adjusted person is holding on to his or her sanity by a greased rope. I really believe that. The rationality circuits are shoddily built into the human animal.

“With the plugs pulled, I went into my study, wrote Reg Thorpe a letter, put it in an envelope, stamped it, took it out and mailed it. I don’t actually remember doing any of these things. I was too drunk. But I deduce that I did them because when I got up the next morning, the carbon was still by my typewriter, along with the stamps and the box of envelopes. The letter was about what you’d expect from a drunk. What it boiled down to was this: the enemies were drawn by electricity as well as by the Fornits themselves. Get rid of the electricity and you got rid of the enemies. At the bottom I had written, ‘The electricity is fucking up your thinking about these things, Reg. Interference with brainwaves. Does your wife have a blender?’ “

“In effect, you had started writing letters to the paper,” the writer said.

“Yes. I wrote that letter on a Friday night. On Saturday morning I got up around eleven, hung over and only blurrily aware of what sort of mischief I’d been up to the night before. Great pangs of shame as I plugged everything back in. Greater pangs of shame—and fear—when I saw what I’d written to Reg. I looked all over the house for the original to that letter, hoping like hell I hadn’t mailed it. But I had. And the way I got through that day was by making a resolution to take my lumps like a man and go on the wagon. Sure I was.

“The following Wednesday there was a letter from Reg. One page, handwritten. Fornit Some Fornus doodles all over it. In the center, just this: ‘You were right. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Reg. You were right. Everything is fine now. Reg. Thanks a lot. Reg. Fornit is fine. Reg. Thanks. Reg.’ “

“Oh, my,” the writer’s wife said.

“Bet his wife was mad,” the agent’s wife said.

“But she wasn’t. Because it worked.”

“Worked?” the agent said.

“He got my letter in the Monday-morning post. Monday afternoon he went down to the local power-company office and told them to cut his power off. Jane Thorpe, of course, was hysterical. Her range ran on electricity, she did indeed have a blender, a sewing machine, a washer-dryer combination ... well, you understand. On Monday evening I’m sure she was ready to have my head on a plate.

“But it was Reg’s behavior that made her decide I was a miracle worker instead of a lunatic. He sat her down in the living room and talked to her quite rationally. He said that he knew he’d been acting in a peculiar fashion. He knew that she’d been worried. He told her that he felt much better with the power off, and that he would be glad to help her through any inconvenience that it caused. And then he suggested that they go next door and say hello.”

“Not to the KGB agents with the radium in their van?” the writer asked.

“Yes, to them. Jane was totally floored. She agreed to go over with him but she told me that she was girding herself up for a really nasty scene. Accusations, threats, hysteria. She had begun to consider leaving Reg if he wouldn’t get help for his problem. She told me that Wednesday morning on the phone that she had made herself a promise: the power was the next-to-the-last straw. One more thing, and she was going to leave for New York. She was becoming afraid, you see. The thing had worsened by such degrees as to be nearly imperceptible, and she loved him, but even for her it had gotten as far as it could go. She had decided that if Reg said one strange word to the students next door, she was going to break up housekeeping. I found out much later that she had already asked some very circumspect questions about the procedure in Nebraska to effect an involuntary committal.”

“The poor woman,” the writer’s wife murmured.

“But the evening was a smashing success,” the editor said. “Reg was at his most charming ... and according to Jane, that was very charming indeed. She hadn’t seen him so much on in three years. The sullenness, the secretiveness, they were gone. The nervous tics. The involuntary jump and look over his shoulder whenever a door opened. He had a beer and talked about all the topics that were current back in those dim dead days: the war, the possibilities of a volunteer army, the riots in the cities, the pot laws.

“The fact that he had written Underworld Figures came up, and they were ... ‘author-struck’ was the way Jane put it. Three of the four had read it, and you can bet the odd one wasn’t going to linger any on his way to the library.”

The writer laughed and nodded. He knew about that bit.

“So,” the editor said, “we leave Reg Thorpe and his wife for just a little while, without electrical power but happier than they’ve been in a good long time—”

“Good thing he didn’t have an IBM typewriter,” the agent said.

“—and return to Ye Editor. Two weeks have gone by. Summer is ending. Ye Editor has, of course, fallen off the wagon any number of times, but has managed on the whole to remain pretty respectable. The days have gone their appointed rounds. At Cape Kennedy, they are getting ready to put a man on the moon. The new issue of Logan’s, with John Lindsay on the cover, is out on the stands, and selling miserably, as usual. I had put in a purchase order for a short story called ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,’ by Reg Thorpe, first serial rights, proposed publication January 1970, proposed purchase price \$800, which was standard then for a Logan’s lead story.

“I got a buzz from my superior, Jim Dohegan. Could I come up and see him? I trotted into his office at ten in the morning, looking and

feeling my very best. It didn't occur to me until later that Janey Morrison, his secretary, looked like a wake in progress.

"I sat down and asked Jim what I could do for him, or vice versa. I won't say the Reg Thorpe name hadn't entered my mind; having the story was a tremendous coup for Logan's, and I suspected a few congratulations were in order. So you can imagine how dumbfounded I was when he slid two purchase orders across the desk at me. The Thorpe story, and a John Updike novella we had scheduled as the February fiction lead. RETURN stamped across both.

"I looked at the revoked purchase orders. I looked at Jimmy. I couldn't make any of it out. I really couldn't get my brains to work over what it meant. There was a block in there. I looked around and I saw his hot plate. Janey brought it in for him every morning when she came to work and plugged it in so he could have fresh coffee when he wanted it. That had been the drill at Logan's for three years or more. And that morning all I could think of was, if that thing was unplugged, I could think. I know if that thing was unplugged, I could put this together.

"I said, 'What is this, Jim?'

" 'I'm sorry as hell to have to be the one to tell you this, Henry,' he said. 'Logan's isn't going to be publishing any more fiction as of January 1970.' "

The editor paused to get a cigarette, but his pack was empty. "Does anyone have a cigarette?"

The writer's wife gave him a Salem.

"Thank you, Meg."

He lit it, shook out the match, and dragged deep. The coal glowed mellowly in the dark.

“Well,” he said, “I’m sure Jim thought I was crazy. I said, ‘Do you mind?’ and leaned over and pulled the plug on his hot plate.

“His mouth dropped open and he said, ‘What the hell, Henry?’

” ‘It’s hard for me to think with things like that going,’ I said. ‘Interference.’ And it really seemed to be true, because with the plug pulled, I was able to see the situation a great deal more clearly. ‘Does this mean I’m pinked?’ I asked him.

” ‘ don’t know,’ he said. ‘That’s up to Sam and the board. I just don’t know, Henry.’

“There were a lot of things I could have said. I guess what Jimmy was expecting was a passionate plea for my job. You know that saying, ‘He had his ass out to the wind’? ... I maintain that you don’t understand the meaning of that phrase until you’re the head of a suddenly nonexistent department.

“But I didn’t plead my cause or the cause of fiction at Logan’s. I pleaded for Reg Thorpe’s story. First I said that we could move it up over the deadline—put it in the December issue.

“Jimmy said, ‘Come on, Henry, the December ish is locked up. You know that. And we’re talking ten thousand words here.’

” ‘Nine-thousand-eight,’ I said.

” ‘And a full-page illo,’ he said. ‘Forget it.’

” ‘Well, we’ll scrap the art,’ I said. ‘Listen, Jimmy, it’s a great story, maybe the best fiction we’ve had in the last five years.’

“Jimmy said, ‘I read it, Henry. I know it’s a great story. But we just can’t do it. Not in December. It’s Christmas, for God’s sake, and you want to put a story about a guy who kills his wife and kid under the Christmas trees of America? You must be—’ He stopped right there,

but I saw him glance over at his hot plate. He might as well have said it out loud, you know?”

The writer nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving the dark shadow that was the editor’s face.

“I started to get a headache. A very small headache at first. It was getting hard to think again. I remembered that Janey Morrison had an electric pencil sharpener on her desk. There were all those fluorescents in Jim’s office. The heaters. The vending machines in the concession down the hall. When you stopped to think of it, the whole fucking building ran on electricity; it was a wonder that anyone could get anything done. That was when the idea began to creep in, I think. The idea that Logan’s was going broke because no one could think straight. And the reason no one could think straight was because we were all cooped up in this highrise building that ran on electricity. Our brainwaves were completely messed up. I remember thinking that if you could have gotten a doctor in there with one of those EEG machines, they’d get some awfully weird graphs. Full of those big, spiky alpha waves that characterize malignant tumors in the forebrain.

“Just thinking about those things made my headache worse. But I gave it one more try. I asked him if he would at least ask Sam Vadar, the editor-in-chief, to let the story stand in the January issue. As Logan’s fiction valedictory, if necessary. The final Logan’s short story.

“Jimmy was fiddling with a pencil and nodding. He said, ‘I’ll bring it up, but you know it’s not going to fly. We’ve got a story by a one-shot novelist and we’ve got a story by John Updike that’s just as good ... maybe better ... and—’

” ‘The Updike story is not better!’ I said.

” ‘Well, Jesus, Henry, you don’t have to shout—’

” ‘I am not shouting!’ I shouted.

“He looked at me for a long time. My headache was quite bad by then. I could hear the fluorescents buzzing away. They sounded like a bunch of flies caught in a bottle. It was a really hateful sound. And I thought I could hear Janey running her electric pencil sharpener. They’re doing it on purpose, I thought. They want to mess me up. They know I can’t think of the right things to say while those things are running, so ... so ...

“Jim was saying something about bringing it up at the next editorial meeting, suggesting that instead of an arbitrary cutoff date they publish all the stories which I had verbally contracted for ... although ...

“I got up, went across the room, and shut off the lights.

” ‘What did you do that for?’ Jimmy asked.

” ‘You know why I did it,’ I said. ‘You ought to get out of here, Jimmy, before there’s nothing left of you.’

“He got up and came over to me. ‘I think you ought to take the rest of the day off, Henry,’ he said. ‘Go home. Rest. I know you’ve been under a strain lately. I want you to know I’ll do the best I can on this. I feel as strongly as you do ... well, almost as strongly. But you ought to just go home and put your feet up and watch some TV.’

” ‘TV,’ I said, and laughed. It was the funniest thing I’d ever heard. ‘Jimmy,’ I said. ‘You tell Sam Vadar something else for me.’

” ‘What’s that, Henry?’

” ‘Tell him he needs a Fornit. This whole outfit. One Fornit? A dozen of them.’

” ‘A Fornit,’ he said, nodding. ‘Okay, Henry. I’ll be sure to tell him that.’

“My headache was very bad. I could hardly even see. Somewhere in the back of my mind I was already wondering how I was going to tell Reg and wondering how Reg was going to take it.

” ‘I’ll put in the purchase order myself, if I can find out who to send it to,’ I said. ‘Reg might have some ideas. A dozen Fornits. Get them to dust this place with fornus from end to end. Shut off the fucking power, all of it.’ I was walking around his office and Jimmy was staring at me with his mouth open. ‘Shut off all the power, Jimmy, you tell them that. Tell Sam that. No one can think with all that electrical interference, am I right?’

” ‘You’re right, Henry, one hundred percent. You just go on home and get some rest, okay? Take a nap or something.’

” ‘And Fornits. They don’t like all that interference. Radium, electricity, it’s all the same thing. Feed them bologna. Cake. Peanut butter. Can we get requisitions for that stuff?’ My headache was this black ball of pain behind my eyes. I was seeing two of Jimmy, two of everything. All of a sudden I needed a drink. If there was no fornus, and the rational side of my mind assured me there was not, then a drink was the only thing in the world that would get me right.

” ‘Sure, we can get the requisitions,’ he said.

” ‘You don’t believe any of this, do you, Jimmy?’ I asked.

” ‘Sure I do. It’s okay. You just want to go home and rest a little while.’

” ‘You don’t believe it now,’ I said, ‘but maybe you will when this rag goes into bankruptcy. How in the name of God can you believe you’re making rational decisions when you’re sitting less than fifteen yards from a bunch of Coke machines and candy machines and sandwich machines?’ Then I really had a terrible thought. ‘And a microwave oven!’ I screamed at him. ‘They got a microwave oven to heat the sandwiches up in!’

“He started to say something, but I didn’t pay any attention. I ran out. Thinking of that microwave oven explained everything. I had to get away from it. That was what made the headache so bad. I remember seeing Janey and Kate Younger from the ad department and Mert Strong from publicity in the outer office, all of them staring at me. They must have heard me shouting.

“My office was on the floor just below. I took the stairs. I went into my office, turned off all the lights, and got my briefcase. I took the elevator down to the lobby, but I put my briefcase between my feet and poked my fingers in my ears. I also remember the other three or four people in the elevator looking at me rather strangely.” The editor uttered a dry chuckle. “They were scared. So to speak. Cooped up in a little moving box with an obvious madman, you would have been scared, too.”

“Oh, surely, that’s a little strong,” the agent’s wife said.

“Not at all. Madness has to start somewhere. If this story’s about anything—if events in one’s own life can ever be said to be about anything—then this is a story about the genesis of insanity. Madness has to start somewhere, and it has to go somewhere. Like a road. Or a bullet from the barrel of a gun. I was still miles behind Reg Thorpe, but I was over the line. You bet.

“I had to go somewhere, so I went to Four Fathers, a bar on Forty-ninth. I remember picking that bar specifically because there was no juke and no color TV and not many lights. I remember ordering the first drink. After that I don’t remember anything until I woke up the next day in my bed at home. There was puke on the floor and a very large cigarette burn in the sheet over me. In my stupor I had apparently escaped dying in one of two extremely nasty ways—choking or burning. Not that I probably would have felt either.”

“Jesus,” the agent said, almost respectfully.

“It was a blackout,” the editor said. “The first real bona fide blackout of my life—but they’re always a sign of the end, and you never have

very many. One way or the other, you never have very many. But any alcoholic will tell you that a blackout isn't the same as passing out. It would save a lot of trouble if it was. No, when an alky blacks out, he keeps doing things. An alky in a blackout is a busy little devil. Sort of like a malign Fornit. He'll call up his ex-wife and abuse her over the phone, or drive his car the wrong way on the turnpike and wipe out a carload of kids. He'll quit his job, rob a market, give away his wedding ring. Busy little devils.

"What I had done, apparently, was to come home and write a letter. Only this one wasn't to Reg. It was to me. And I didn't write it—at least, according to the letter I didn't."

"Who did?" the writer's wife asked.

"Bellis."

"Who's Bellis?"

"His Fornit," the writer said almost absently. His eyes were shadowy and faraway.

"Yes, that's right," the editor said, not looking a bit surprised. He made the letter in the sweet night air for them again, indenting at the proper points with his finger.

" 'Hello from Bellis. I am sorry for your problems, my friend, but would like to point out at the start that you are not the only one with problems. This is no easy job for me. I can dust your damned machine with fornus from now unto forever, but moving the KEYS is supposed to be your job. That's what God made big people FOR. So I sympathize, but that's all of the sympathy you get.

" 'I understand your worry about Reg Thorpe. I worry not about Thorpe but my brother, Rackne. Thorpe worries about what will happen to him if Rackne leaves, but only because he is selfish. The curse of serving writers is that they are all selfish. He worries not about what will happen to Rackne if THORPE leaves. Or goes el

bonzo seco. Those things have apparently never crossed his oh-so-sensitive mind. But, luckily for us, all our unfortunate problems have the same short-term solution, and so I strain my arms and my tiny body to give it to you, my drunken friend. YOU may wonder about long-term solutions; I assure you there are none. All wounds are mortal. Take what's given. You sometimes get a little slack in the rope but the rope always has an end. So what. Bless the slack and don't waste breath cursing the drop. A grateful heart knows that in the end we all swing.

" 'You must pay him for the story yourself. But not with a personal check. Thorpe's mental problems are severe and perhaps dangerous but this in no way indicates stupidity.' "

The editor stopped here and spelled: S-t-u-p-i-d-d-i-t-y. Then he went on. " 'If you give him a personal check he'll crack wise in about nine seconds.

" 'Withdraw eight hundred and some few-odd dollars from your personal account and have your bank open a new account for you in the name Arvin Publishing, Inc. Make sure they understand you want checks that look businesslike—nothing with cute dogs or canyon vistas on them. Find a friend, someone you can trust, and list him as co-drawer. When the checks arrive, make one for eight hundred dollars and have the co-drawer sign the check. Send the check to Reg Thorpe. That will cover your ass for the time being.

" 'Over and out.' It was signed 'Bellis.' Not in holograph. In type."

"Whew," the writer said again.

"When I got up the first thing I noticed was the typewriter. It looked like somebody had made it up as a ghost-typewriter in a cheap movie. The day before it was an old black office Underwood. When I got up—with a head that felt about the size of North Dakota—it was a sort of gray. The last few sentences of the letter were clumped up and faded. I took one look and figured my faithful old Underwood was probably finished. I took a taste and went out into the kitchen.

There was an open bag of confectioner's sugar on the counter with a scoop in it. There was confectioner's sugar everywhere between the kitchen and the little den where I did my work in those days."

"Feeding your Fornit," the writer said. "Bellis had a sweet tooth. You thought so, anyway."

"Yes. But even as sick and hung over as I was, I knew perfectly well who the Fornit was."

He ticked off the points on his fingers.

"First, Bellis was my mother's maiden name.

"Second, that phrase *el bonzo seco*. It was a private phrase my brother and I used to use to mean crazy. Back when we were kids.

"Third, and in a way most damning, was that spelling of the word 'stupidity.' It's one of those words I habitually misspell. I had an almost screamingly literate writer once who used to spell 'refrigerator' with a d—'refridgerator'—no matter how many times the copy editors blooped it. And for this guy, who had a doctoral degree from Princeton, 'ugly' was always going to be 'ughly.' "

The writer's wife uttered a sudden laugh—it was both embarrassed and cheerful. "I do that."

"All I'm saying is that a man's misspellings—or a woman's—are his literary fingerprints. Ask any copy editor who has done the same writer a few times.

"No, Bellis was me and I was Bellis. Yet the advice was damned good advice. In fact, I thought it was great advice. But here's something else—the subconscious leaves its fingerprints, but there's a stranger down there, too. A hell of a weird guy who knows a hell of a lot. I'd never seen that phrase 'co-drawer' in my life, to the best of my knowledge ... but there it was, and it was a good one, and I found out some time later that banks actually use it.

“I picked up the phone to call a friend of mine, and this bolt of pain— incredible!—went through my head. I thought of Reg Thorpe and his radium and put the phone down in a hurry. I went to see the friend in person after I’d taken a shower and gotten a shave and had checked myself about nine times in the mirror to make sure my appearance approximated how a rational human being is supposed to look. Even so, he asked me a lot of questions and looked me over pretty closely. So I guess there must have been a few signs that a shower, a shave, and a good dose of Listerine couldn’t hide. He wasn’t in the biz, and that was a help. News has a way of traveling, you know. In the biz. So to speak. Also, if he’d been in the biz, he would have known Arvin Publishing, Inc., was responsible for Logan’s and would have wondered just what sort of scam I was trying to pull. But he wasn’t, he didn’t, and I was able to tell him it was a self-publishing venture I was interested in since Logan’s had apparently decided to eighty-six the fiction department.”

“Did he ask you why you were calling it Arvin Publishing?” the writer asked.

“Yes.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him,” the editor said, smiling a wintry smile, “that Arvin was my mother’s maiden name.”

There was a little pause, and then the editor resumed; he spoke almost uninterrupted to the end.

“So I began waiting for the printed checks, of which I wanted exactly one. I exercised to pass the time. You know—pick up the glass, flex the elbow, empty the glass, flex the elbow again. Until all that exercise wears you out and you just sort of fall forward with your head on the table. Other things happened, but those were the ones that really occupied my mind—the waiting and the flexing. As I remember. I have to reiterate that, because I was drunk a lot of the

time, and for every single thing I remember, there are probably fifty or sixty I don't.

“I quit my job—that caused a sigh of relief all around, I'm sure. From them because they didn't have to perform the existential task of firing me for craziness from a department that was no longer in existence, me because I didn't think I could ever face that building again—the elevator, the fluorescents, the phones, the thought of all that waiting electricity.

“I wrote Reg Thorpe and his wife a couple of letters each during that three-week period. I remember doing hers, but not his—like the letter from Bellis, I wrote those letters in blackout periods. But I hewed to my old work habits when I was blotto, just as I hewed to my old misspellings. I never failed to use a carbon ... and when I came to the next morning, the carbons were lying around. It was like reading letters from a stranger.

“Not that the letters were crazy. Not at all. The one where I finished up with the P.S. about the blender was a lot worse. These letters seemed ... almost reasonable.”

He stopped and shook his head, slowly and wearily.

“Poor Jane Thorpe. Not that things appeared to be all that bad at their end. It must have seemed to her that her husband's editor was doing a very skillful—and humane—job of humoring him out of his deepening depression. The question of whether or not it's a good idea to humor a person who has been entertaining all sorts of paranoid fantasies—fantasies which almost led in one case to an actual assault on a little girl—probably occurred to her; if so, she chose to ignore the negative aspects, because she was humoring him, too. Nor have I ever blamed her for it—he wasn't just a meal ticket, some nag that was to be worked and humored, humored and worked until he was ready for the knacker's shop; she loved the guy. In her own special way, Jane Thorpe was a great lady. And after living with Reg from the Early Times to the High Times and finally to the Crazy Times, I think she would have agreed with Bellis about

blessing the slack and not wasting your breath cursing the drop. Of course, the more slack you get, the harder you snap when you finally fetch up at the end ... but even that quick snap can be a blessing, I reckon—who wants to strangle?

“I had return letters from both of them in that short period—remarkably sunny letters ... although there was a strange, almost final quality to that sunlight. It seemed as if ... well, never mind the cheap philosophy. If I can think of what I mean, I’ll say it. Let it go for now.

“He was playing hearts with the kids next door every night, and by the time the leaves started to fall, they thought Reg Thorpe was just about God come down to earth. When they weren’t playing cards or tossing a Frisbee they were talking literature, with Reg gently rallying them through their paces. He’d gotten a puppy from the local animal shelter and walked it every morning and night, meeting other people on the block the way you do when you walk your mutt. People who’d decided the Thorpes were really very peculiar people now began to change their minds. When Jane suggested that, without electrical appliances, she could really use a little house help, Reg agreed at once. She was flabbergasted by his cheery acceptance of the idea. It wasn’t a question of money—after Underworld Figures they were rolling in dough—it was a question, Jane figured, of they. They were everywhere, that was Reg’s scripture, and what better agent for them than a cleaning woman that went everywhere in your house, looked under beds and in closets and probably in desk drawers as well, if they weren’t locked and then nailed shut for good measure.

“But he told her to go right ahead, told her he felt like an insensitive clod not to’ve thought of it earlier, even though—she made a point of telling me this—he was doing most of the heavy chores, such as the hand-washing, himself. He only made one small request: that the woman not be allowed to come into his study.

“Best of all, most encouraging of all from Jane’s standpoint, was the fact that Reg had gone back to work, this time on a new novel. She had read the first three chapters and thought they were marvelous.

All of this, she said, had begun when I had accepted 'The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet' for Logan's—the period before that had been dead low ebb. And she blessed me for it.

"I am sure she really meant that last, but her blessing seemed to have no great warmth, and the sunniness of her letter was marred somehow—here we are, back to that. The sunshine in her letter was like sunshine on a day when you see those mackerel-scale clouds that mean it's going to rain like hell soon.

"All this good news—hearts and dog and cleaning woman and new novel—and yet she was too intelligent to really believe he was getting well again ... or so I believed, even in my own fog. Reg had been exhibiting symptoms of psychosis. Psychosis is like lung cancer in one way—neither one of them clears up on its own, although both cancer patients and lunatics may have their good days.

"May I borrow another cigarette, dear?"

The writer's wife gave him one.

"After all," he resumed, bringing out the Ronson, "the signs of his *idée fixe* were all around her. No phone; no electricity. He'd put Reynolds Wrap over all of the switchplates. He was putting food in his typewriter as regularly as he put it into the new puppy's dish. The students next door thought he was a great guy, but the students next door didn't see Reg putting on rubber gloves to pick up the newspaper off the front stoop in the morning because of his radiation fears. They didn't hear him moaning in his sleep, or have to soothe him when he woke up screaming with dreadful nightmares he couldn't remember.

"You, my dear"—he turned toward the writer's wife—"have been wondering why she stuck with him. Although you haven't said as much, it's been on your mind. Am I right?"

She nodded.

“Yes. And I’m not going to offer a long motivational thesis—the convenient thing about stories that are true is that you only need to say this is what happened and let people worry for themselves about the why. Generally, nobody ever knows why things happen anyway ... particularly the ones who say they do.

“But in terms of Jane Thorpe’s own selective perception, things had gotten one hell of a lot better. She interviewed a middle-aged black woman about the cleaning job, and brought herself to speak as frankly as she could about her husband’s idiosyncrasies. The woman, Gertrude Rulin by name, laughed and said she’d done for people who were a whole lot stranger. Jane spent the first week of the Rulin woman’s employ pretty much the way she’d spent that first visit with the young people next door—waiting for some crazy outburst. But Reg charmed her as completely as he’d charmed the kids, talking to her about her church work, her husband, and her youngest son, Jimmy, who, according to Gertrude, made Dennis the Menace look like the biggest bore in the first grade. She’d had eleven children in all, but there was a nine-year gap between Jimmy and his next oldest sib. He made things hard on her.

“Reg seemed to be getting well ... at least, if you looked at things a certain way he did. But he was just as crazy as ever, of course, and so was I. Madness may well be a sort of flexible bullet, but any ballistics expert worth his salt will tell you no two bullets are exactly the same. Reg’s one letter to me talked a little bit about his new novel, and then passed directly to Fornits. Fornits in general, Rackne in particular. He speculated on whether they actually wanted to kill Fornits, or—he thought this more likely—capture them alive and study them. He closed by saying, ‘Both my appetite and my outlook on life have improved immeasurably since we began our correspondence, Henry. Appreciate it all. Affectionately yours, Reg.’ And a P.S. below inquiring casually if an illustrator had been assigned to do his story. That caused a guilty pang or two and a quick trip to the liquor cabinet on my part.

“Reg was into Fornits; I was into wires.

“My answering letter mentioned Fornits only in passing—by then I really was humoring the man, at least on that subject; an elf with my mother’s maiden name and my own bad spelling habits didn’t interest me a whole hell of a lot.

“What had come to interest me more and more was the subject of electricity, and microwaves, and RF waves, and RF interference from small appliances, and low-level radiation, and Christ knows what else. I went to the library and took out books on the subject; I bought books on the subject. There was a lot of scary stuff in them ... and of course that was just the sort of stuff I was looking for.

“I had my phone taken out and my electricity turned off. It helped for a while, but one night when I was staggering in the door drunk with a bottle of Black Velvet in my hand and another one in my topcoat pocket, I saw this little red eye peeping down at me from the ceiling. God, for a minute I thought I was going to have a heart attack. It looked like a bug up there at first ... a great big dark bug with one glowing eye.

“I had a Coleman gas lantern and I lit it. Saw what it was at once. Only instead of relieving me, it made me feel worse. As soon as I got a good look at it, it seemed I could feel large, clear bursts of pain going through my head—like radio waves. For a moment it was as if my eyes had rotated in their sockets and I could look into my own brain and see cells in there smoking, going black, dying. It was a smoke detector—a gadget which was even newer than microwave ovens back in 1969.

“I bolted out of the apartment and went downstairs—I was on the fifth floor but by then I was always taking the stairs—and hammered on the super’s door. I told him I wanted that thing out of there, wanted it out of there right away, wanted it out of there tonight, wanted it out of there within the hour. He looked at me as though I had gone completely—you should pardon the expression—bonzo seco, and I can understand that now. That smoke detector was supposed to make me feel good, it was supposed to make me safe. Now, of

course, they're the law, but back then it was a Great Leap Forward, paid for by the building tenants' association.

“He removed it—it didn't take long—but the look in his eyes was not lost upon me, and I could, in some limited way, understand his feelings. I needed a shave, I stank of whiskey, my hair was sticking up all over my head, my topcoat was dirty. He would know I no longer went to work; that I'd had my television taken away; that my phone and electrical service had been voluntarily interrupted. He thought I was crazy.

“I may have been crazy but—like Reg—I was not stupid. I turned on the charm. Editors have got to have a certain amount, you know. And I greased the skids with a ten-dollar bill. Finally I was able to smooth things over, but I knew from the way people were looking at me in the next couple of weeks—my last two weeks in the building, as things turned out—that the story had traveled. The fact that no members of the tenants' association approached me to make wounded noises about my ingratitude was particularly telling. I suppose they thought I might take after them with a steak knife.

“All of that was very secondary in my thoughts that evening, however. I sat in the glow of the Coleman lantern, the only light in the three rooms except for all the electricity in Manhattan that came through the windows. I sat with a bottle in one hand, a cigarette in the other, looking at the plate in the ceiling where the smoke detector with its single red eye—an eye which was so unobtrusive in the daytime that I had never even noticed it—had been. I thought of the undeniable fact that, although I'd had all the electricity turned off in my place, there had been that one live item ... and where there was one, there might be more.

“Even if there wasn't, the whole building was rotten with wires—it was filled with wires the way a man dying of cancer is filled with evil cells and rotting organs. Closing my eyes I could see all those wires in the darkness of their conduits, glowing with a sort of green nether light. And beyond them, the entire city. One wire, almost harmless in itself, running to a switchplate ... the wire behind the switchplate a

little thicker, leading down through a conduit to the basement where it joined a still thicker wire ... that one leading down under the street to a whole bundle of wires, only those wires so thick that they were really cables.

“When I got Jane Thorpe’s letter mentioning the tinfoil, part of my mind recognized that she saw it as a sign of Reg’s craziness, and that part knew I would have to respond as if my whole mind thought she was right. The other part of my mind—by far the largest part now—thought: ‘What a marvelous idea!’ and I covered my own switchplates in identical fashion the very next day. I was the man, remember, that was supposed to be helping Reg Thorpe. In a desperate sort of way it’s actually quite funny.

“I determined that night to leave Manhattan. There was an old family place in the Adirondacks I could go to, and that sounded fine to me. The one thing keeping me in the city was Reg Thorpe’s story. If ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet’ was Reg’s life-ring in a sea of madness, it was mine, too—I wanted to place it in a good magazine. With that done, I could get the hell out.

“So that’s where the not-so-famous Wilson-Thorpe correspondence stood just before the shit hit the fan. We were like a couple of dying drug addicts comparing the relative merits of heroin and ‘ludes. Reg had Fornits in his typewriter, I had Fornits in the walls, and both of us had Fornits in our heads.

“And there was they. Don’t forget they. I hadn’t been flogging the story around for long before deciding they included every magazine fiction editor in New York—not that there were many by the fall of 1969. If you’d grouped them together, you could have killed the whole bunch of them with one shotgun shell, and before long I started to feel that was a damned good idea.

“It took about five years before I could see it from their perspective. I’d upset the super, and he was just a guy who saw me when the heat was screwed up and when it was time for his Christmas tip. These other guys ... well, the irony was just that a lot of them really

were my friends. Jared Baker was the assistant fiction editor at Esquire in those days, and Jared and I were in the same rifle company during World War II, for instance. These guys weren't just uneasy after sampling the new improved Henry Wilson. They were appalled. If I'd just sent the story around with a pleasant covering letter explaining the situation—my version of it, anyway—I probably would have sold the Thorpe story almost right away. But oh no, that wasn't good enough. Not for this story. I was going to see that this story got the personal treatment. So I went from door to door with it, a stinking, grizzled ex-editor with shaking hands and red eyes and a big old bruise on his left cheekbone from where he ran into the bathroom door on the way to the can in the dark two nights before. I might as well have been wearing a sign reading BELLEVUE-BOUND.

“Nor did I want to talk to these guys in their offices. In fact, I could not. The time had long since passed when I could get into an elevator and ride it up forty floors. So I met them like pushers meet junkies—in parks, on steps, or in the case of Jared Baker, in a Burger Heaven on Forty-ninth Street. Jared at least would have been delighted to buy me a decent meal, but the time had passed, you understand, when any self-respecting maitre d' would have let me in a restaurant where they serve business people.”

The agent winced.

“I got perfunctory promises to read the story, followed by concerned questions about how I was, how much I was drinking. I remember—hazily—trying to tell a couple of them about how electricity and radiation leaks were fucking up everyone's thinking, and when Andy Rivers, who edited fiction for American Crossings, suggested I ought to get some help, I told him he was the one who ought to get some help.

” ‘You see those people out there on the street?’ I said. We were standing in Washington Square Park. ‘Half of them, maybe even three-quarters of them, have got brain tumors. I wouldn't sell you

Thorpe's story on a bet, Andy. Hell, you couldn't understand it in this city. Your brain's in the electric chair and you don't even know it.'

"I had a copy of the story in my hand, rolled up like a newspaper. I whacked him on the nose with it, the way you'd whack a dog for piddling in the corner. Then I walked off. I remember him yelling for me to come back, something about having a cup of coffee and talking it over some more, and then I passed a discount record store with loudspeakers blasting heavy metal onto the sidewalk and banks of snowy-cold fluorescent lights inside, and I lost his voice in a kind of deep buzzing sound inside my head. I remember thinking two things—I had to get out of the city soon, very soon, or I would be nursing a brain tumor of my own, and I had to get a drink right away.

"That night when I got back to my apartment I found a note under the door. It said 'We want you out of here, you crazy-bird.' I threw it away without so much as a second thought. We veteran crazy-birds have more important things to worry about than anonymous notes from fellow tenants.

"I was thinking over what I'd said to Andy Rivers about Reg's story. The more I thought about it—and the more drinks I had—the more sense it made. 'Flexible Bullet' was funny, and on the surface it was easy to follow ... but below that surface level it was surprisingly complex. Did I really think another editor in the city could grasp the story on all levels? Maybe once, but did I still think so now that my eyes had been opened? Did I really think there was room for appreciation and understanding in a place that was wired up like a terrorist's bomb? God, loose volts were leaking out everywhere.

"I read the paper while there was still enough daylight to do so, trying to forget the whole wretched business for a while, and there on page one of the Times there was a story about how radioactive material from nuclear-power plants kept disappearing—the article went on to theorize that enough of that stuff in the right hands could quite easily be used to make a very dirty nuclear weapon.

“I sat there at the kitchen table as the sun went down, and in my mind’s eye I could see them panning for plutonium dust like 1849 miners panning for gold. Only they didn’t want to blow up the city with it, oh no. They just wanted to sprinkle it around and fuck up everyone’s minds. They were the bad Fornits, and all that radioactive dust was bad-luck fornus. The worst bad-luck fornus of all time.

“I decided I didn’t want to sell Reg’s story after all—at least, not in New York. I’d get out of the city just as soon as the checks I’d ordered arrived. When I was upstate, I could start sending it around to the out-of-town literary magazines. Sewanee Review would be a good place to start, I reckoned, or maybe Iowa Review. I could explain to Reg later. Reg would understand. That seemed to solve the whole problem, so I took a drink to celebrate. And then the drink took a drink. And then the drink took the man. So to speak. I blacked out. I only had one more blackout left in me, as it happened.

“The next day my Arvin Company checks came. I typed one of them up and went to see my friend, the ‘co-drawer.’ There was another one of those tiresome cross-examinations, but this time I kept my temper. I wanted that signature. Finally, I got it. I went to a business supply store and had them make up an Arvin Company letter-stamp while I waited. I stamped a return address on a business envelope, typed Reg’s address (the confectioner’s sugar was out of my machine but the keys still had a tendency to stick), and added a brief personal note, saying that no check to an author had ever given me more personal pleasure ... and that was true. Still is. It was almost an hour before I could bring myself to mail it—I just couldn’t get over how official it looked. You never would have known that a smelly drunk who hadn’t changed his underwear in about ten days had put that one together. “

He paused, crushed out his cigarette, looked at his watch. Then, oddly like a conductor announcing a train’s arrival in some city of importance, he said, “We have reached the inexplicable.

“This is the point in my story which most interested the two psychiatrists and various mental caseworkers with whom I was

associated over the next thirty months of my life. It was the only part of it they really wanted me to recant, as a sign that I was getting well again. As one of them put it, 'This is the only part of your story which cannot be explicated as faulty induction ... once, that is, your sense of logic has been mended.' Finally I did recant, because I knew—even if they didn't—that I was getting well, and I was damned anxious to get out of the sanitarium. I thought if I didn't get out fairly soon, I'd go crazy all over again. So I recanted—Galileo did, too, when they held his feet to the fire—but I have never recanted in my own mind. I don't say that what I'm about to tell you really happened; I only say I still believe it happened. That's a small qualification, but to me it's crucial.

“So, my friends, the inexplicable:

“I spent the next two days preparing to move upstate. The idea of driving the car didn't disturb me at all, by the way. I had read as a kid that the inside of a car is one of the safest places to be during an electrical storm, because the rubber tires serve as near-perfect insulators. I was actually looking forward to getting in my old Chevrolet, cranking up all the windows, and driving out of the city, which I had begun to see as a sink of lightning. Nevertheless, part of my preparations included removing the bulb in the dome light, taping over the socket, and turning the headlight knob all the way to the left to kill the dashlights.

“When I came in on the last night I meant to spend in the apartment, the place was empty except for the kitchen table, the bed, and my typewriter in the den. The typewriter was sitting on the floor. I had no intention of taking it with me—it had too many bad associations, and besides, the keys were going to stick forever. Let the next tenant have it, I thought—it, and Bellis, too.

“It was just sunset, and the place was a funny color. I was pretty drunk, and I had another bottle in my topcoat pocket against the watches of the night. I started across the den, meaning to go into the bedroom, I suppose. There I would sit on the bed and think about

wires and electricity and free radiation and drink until I was drunk enough to go to sleep.

“What I called the den was really the living room. I made it my workplace because it had the nicest light in the whole apartment—a big westward-facing window that looked all the way to the horizon. That’s something close to the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes in a fifth-floor Manhattan apartment, but the line of sight was there. I didn’t question it; I just enjoyed it. That room was filled with a clear, lovely light even on rainy days.

“But the quality of the light that evening was eerie. The sunset had filled the room with a red glow. Furnace light. Empty, the room seemed too big. My heels made flat echoes on the hardwood floor.

“The typewriter sat in the middle of the floor, and I was just going around it when I saw there was a ragged scrap of paper stuck under the roller—that gave me a start, because I knew there had been no paper in the machine when I went out for the last time to get the fresh bottle.

“I looked around, wondering if there was someone—some intruder—in the place with me. Except it wasn’t really intruders, or burglars, or junkies, I was thinking of ... it was ghosts.

“I saw a ragged blank place on the wall to the left of the bedroom door. I at least understood where the paper in the typewriter had come from. Someone had simply torn off a ragged piece of the old wallpaper.

“I was still looking at this when I heard a single small clear noise—clack!—from behind me. I jumped and whirled around with my heart knocking in my throat. I was terrified, but I knew what that sound was just the same—there was no question at all. You work with words all your life and you know the sound of a typewriter platen hitting paper, even in a deserted room at dusk, where there is no one to strike the key.”

They looked at him in the dark, their faces blurred white circles, saying nothing, slightly huddled together now. The writer's wife was holding one of the writer's hands tightly in both of her own.

"I felt ... outside myself. Unreal. Perhaps this is always the way one feels when one arrives at the point of the inexplicable. I walked slowly over to the typewriter. My heart was pounding madly up there in my throat, but I felt mentally calm ... icy, even.

"Clack! Another platen popped up. I saw it this time—the key was in the third row from the top, on the left.

"I got down on my knees very slowly, and then all the muscles in my legs seemed to go slack and I half-swooned the rest of the way down until I was sitting there in front of the typewriter with my dirty London Fog topcoat spread around me like the skirt of a girl who has made her very deepest curtsy. The typewriter clacked twice more, fast, paused, then clacked again. Each clack made the same kind of flat echo my footfalls had made on the floor.

"The wallpaper had been rolled into the machine so that the side with the dried glue on it was facing out. The letters were ripply and bumpy, but I could read them: rackn, it said. Then it clacked again and the word was rackne.

"Then—" He cleared his throat and grinned a little. "Even all these years later this is hard to tell ... to just say right out. Okay. The simple fact, with no icing on it, is this. I saw a hand come out of the typewriter. An incredibly tiny hand. It came out from between the keys B and N in the bottom row, curled itself into a fist, and hammered down on the space bar. The machine jumped a space—very fast, like a hiccough—and the hand drew back down inside."

The agent's wife giggled shrilly.

"Can it, Marsha," the agent said softly, and she did.

“The clacks began to come a little faster,” the editor went on, “and after a while I fancied I could hear the creature that was shoving the key arms up gasping, the way anyone will gasp when he is working hard, coming closer and closer to his physical limit. After a while the machine was hardly printing at all, and most of the keys were filled with that old gluey stuff, but I could read the impressions. It got out rackne is d and then the y key stuck to the glue. I looked at it for a moment and then I reached out one finger and freed it. I don’t know if it—Bellis—could have freed it himself. I think not. But I didn’t want to see it ... him ... try. Just the fist was enough to have me tottering on the brink. If I saw the elf entire, so to speak, I think I really would have gone crazy. And there was no question of getting up to run. All the strength had gone out of my legs.

“Clack-clack-clack, those tiny grunts and sobs of effort, and after every word that pallid ink-and dirt-streaked fist would come out between the B and the N and hammer down on the space bar. I don’t know exactly how long it went on. Seven minutes, maybe. Maybe ten. Or maybe forever.

“Finally the clacks stopped, and I realized I couldn’t hear him breathing anymore. Maybe he fainted ... maybe he just gave up and went away ... or maybe he died. Had a heart attack or something. All I really know for sure is that the message was not finished. It read, completely in lowercase: rackne is dying its the little boy jimmy thorpe doesn’t know tell thorpe rackne is dying the little boy jimmy is killing rackne bel ... and that was all.

“I found the strength to get to my feet then, and I left the room. I walked in great big tippy-toe steps, as if I thought it had gone to sleep and if I made any of those flat echoey noises on the bare wood it would wake up and the typing would start again ... and I thought if it did, the first clack would start me screaming. And then I would just go on until my heart or my head burst.

“My Chevy was in the parking lot down the street, all gassed and loaded and ready to go. I got in behind the wheel and remembered

the bottle in my topcoat pocket. My hands were shaking so badly that I dropped it, but it landed on the seat and didn't break.

"I remembered the blackouts, and, my friends, right then a blackout was exactly what I wanted, and exactly what I got. I remember taking the first drink from the neck of the bottle, and the second. I remember turning the key over to accessory and getting Frank Sinatra on the radio singing 'That Old Black Magic,' which seemed fitting enough. Under the circumstances. So to speak. I remember singing along, and having a few more drinks. I was in the back row of the lot, and I could see the traffic light on the corner going through its paces. I kept thinking of those flat clacking sounds in the empty room, and the fading red light in the den. I kept thinking of those puffing sounds, as if some body-building elf had hung fishing sinkers on the ends of a Q-Tip and was doing bench presses inside my old typewriter. I kept seeing the pebbly surface on the back side of that torn scrap of wallpaper. My mind kept wanting to examine what must have gone on before I came back to the apartment ... kept wanting to see it—him—Bellis—jumping up, grabbing the loose edge of the wallpaper by the door to the bedroom because it was the only thing left in the room approximating paper—hanging on—finally tearing it loose and carrying it back to the typewriter on its—on his—head like the leaf of a nipa palm. I kept trying to imagine how he—it—could ever have run it into the typewriter. And none of that was blacking out so I kept drinking and Frank Sinatra stopped and there was an ad for Crazy Eddie's and then Sarah Vaughan came on singing 'I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter' and that was something else I could relate to since I'd done just that recently or at least I'd thought I had up until tonight when something happened to give me cause to rethink my position on that matter so to speak and I sang along with good old Sarah Soul and right about then I must have achieved escape velocity because in the middle of the second chorus with no lag at all I was puking my guts out while somebody first thumped my back with his palms and then lifted my elbows behind me and put them down and then thumped my back with his palms again. That was the trucker. Every time he thumped I'd feel a great clot of liquid rise up in my throat and get ready to go back

down except then. he'd lift my elbows and every time he lifted my elbows I'd puke again, and most of it wasn't even Black Velvet but river water. When I was able to lift my head enough to look around it was six o'clock in the evening three days later and I was lying on the bank of the Jackson River in western Pennsylvania, about sixty miles north of Pittsburgh. My Chevy was sticking out of the river, rear end up. I could still read the McCarthy sticker on the bumper.

"Is there another Fresca, love? My throat's dry as hell."

The writer's wife fetched him one silently, and when she handed it to him she impulsively bent and kissed his wrinkled, alligator-hide cheek. He smiled, and his eyes sparkled in the dim light. She was, however, a good and kindly woman, and the sparkle did not in any way fool her. It was never merriness which made eyes sparkle that way.

"Thank you, Meg."

He drank deeply, coughed, waved away the offer of a cigarette.

"I've had enough of those for the evening. I'm going to quit them entirely. In my next incarnation. So to speak.

"The rest of my own tale really needs no telling. It would have against it the only sin that any tale can ever really be guilty of—it's predictable. They fished something like forty bottles of Black Velvet out of my car, a good many of them empty. I was babbling about elves, and electricity, and Fornits, and plutonium miners, and fornus, and I seemed utterly insane to them, and that of course is exactly what I was.

"Now here's what happened in Omaha while I was driving around—according to the gas credit slips in the Chevy's glove compartment—five northeastern states. All of this, you understand, was information I obtained from Jane Thorpe over a long and painful period of correspondence, which culminated in a face-to-face meeting in New Haven, where she now lives, shortly after I was dismissed from the

sanitarium as a reward for finally recanting. At the end of that meeting we wept in each other's arms, and that was when I began to believe that there could be a real life for me—perhaps even happiness—again.

“That day, around three o'clock in the afternoon, there was a knock at the door of the Thorpe home. It was a telegraph boy. The telegram was from me—the last item of our unfortunate correspondence. It read: REG HAVE-RELIABLE INFORMATION THAT RACKNE IS DYING IT'S THE LITTLE BOY ACCORDING TO BELLIS BELLIS SAYS THE BOY'S NAME IS JIMMY FORNIT SOME FORNUS HENRY.

“In case that marvelous Howard Baker question of What did he know and when did he know it? has gone through your mind, I can tell you that I knew Jane had hired a cleaning woman; I didn't know—except through Bellis—that she had a li'l-devil son named Jimmy. I suppose you'll have to take my word for that, although in all fairness I have to add that the shrinks who worked on my case over the next two and a half years never did.

“When the telegram came, Jane was at the grocery store. She found it, after Reg was dead, in one of his back pockets. The time of transmission and delivery were both noted on it, along with the added line No telephone/Deliver original. Jane said that although the telegram was only a day old, it had been so much handled that it looked as if he'd had it for a month.

“In a way, that telegram, those twenty-six words, was the real flexible bullet, and I fired it directly into Reg Thorpe's brain all the way from Paterson, New Jersey, and I was so fucking drunk I don't even remember doing it.

“During the last two weeks of his life, Reg had fallen into a pattern that seemed normality itself. He got up at six, made breakfast for himself and his wife, then wrote for an hour. Around eight o'clock he would lock his study and take the dog for a long, leisurely walk around the neighborhood. He was very forthcoming on these walks,

stopping to chat with anyone who wanted to chat with him, tying the pooch outside a nearby cafe to have a midmorning cup of coffee, then rambling on again. He rarely got back to the house before noon. On many days it was twelve-thirty or one o'clock. Part of this was an effort to escape the garrulous Gertrude Rulin, Jane believed, because his pattern hadn't really begun to solidify until a couple of days after she started working for them.

"He would eat a light lunch, lie down for an hour or so, then get up and write for two or three hours. In the evenings he would sometimes go next door to visit with the young people, either with Jane or alone; sometimes he and Jane took in a movie, or just sat in the living room and read. They turned in early, Reg usually a while before Jane. She wrote there was very little sex, and what there was of it was unsuccessful for both of them. 'But sex isn't as important for most women,' she said, 'and Reg was working full-out again, and that was a reasonable substitute for him. I would say that, under the circumstances, those last two weeks were the happiest in the last five years.' I damn near cried when I read that.

"I didn't know anything about Jimmy, but Reg did. Reg knew everything except for the most important fact—that Jimmy had started coming to work with his mother.

"How furious he must have been when he got my telegram and began to realize! Here they were, after all. And apparently his own wife was one of them, because she was in the house when Gertrude and Jimmy were there, and she had never said a thing to Reg about Jimmy. What was it he had written to me in that earlier letter? 'Sometimes I wonder about my wife.'

"When she arrived home on that day the telegram came, she found Reg gone. There was a note on the kitchen table which said, 'Love—I've gone down to the bookstore. Back by suppertime.' This seemed perfectly fine to Jane ... but if Jane had known about my telegram, the very normality of that note would have scared the hell out of her, I think. She would have understood that Reg believed she had changed sides.

“Reg didn’t go near any bookstore. He went to Littlejohn’s Gun Emporium downtown. He bought a .45 automatic and two thousand rounds of ammunition. He would have bought an AK-70 if Littlejohn’s had been allowed to sell them. He meant to protect his Fornit, you see. From Jimmy, from Gertrude, from Jane. From them.

“Everything went according to established routine the next morning. She remembered thinking he was wearing an awfully heavy sweater for such a warm fall day, but that was all. The sweater, of course, was because of the gun. He went out to walk the dog with the .45 stuffed into the waistband of his chinos.

“Except the restaurant where he usually got his morning coffee was as far as he went, and he went directly there, with no lingering or conversation along the way. He took the pup around to the loading area, tied its leash to a railing, and then went back toward his house by way of backyards.

“He knew the schedule of the young people next door very well; knew they would all be out. He knew where they kept their spare key. He let himself in, went upstairs, and watched his own house.

“At eight-forty he saw Gertrude Rulin arrive. And Gertrude wasn’t alone. There was indeed a small boy with her. Jimmy Rulin’s boisterous first-grade behavior convinced the teacher and the school guidance counselor almost at once that everyone (except maybe Jimmy’s mother, who could have used a rest from Jimmy) would be better off if he waited another year. Jimmy was stuck with repeating kindergarten, and he had afternoon sessions for the first half of the year. The two day-care centers in her area were full, and she couldn’t change to afternoons for the Thorpes because she had another cleaning job on the other side of town from two to four.

“The upshot of everything was Jane’s reluctant agreement that Gertrude could bring Jimmy with her until she was able to make other arrangements. Or until Reg found out, as he was sure to do.

“She thought Reg might not mind—he had been so sweetly reasonable about everything lately. On the other hand, he might have a fit. If that happened, other arrangements would have to be made. Gertrude said she understood. And for heaven’s sake, Jane added, the boy was not to touch any of Reg’s things. Gertrude said for sure not; the mister’s study door was locked and would stay locked.

“Thorpe must have crossed between the two yards like a sniper crossing no-man’s-land. He saw Gertrude and Jane washing bed linen in the kitchen. He didn’t see the boy. He moved along the side of the house. No one in the dining room. No one in the bedroom. And then, in the study, where Reg had morbidly expected to see him, there Jimmy was. The kid’s face was hot with excitement, and Reg surely must have believed that here was a bona fide agent of they at last.

“The boy was holding some sort of death-ray in his hand, it was pointed at the desk ... and from inside his typewriter, Reg could hear Rackne screaming.

“You may think I’m attributing subjective data to a man who’s now dead—or, to be more blunt, making stuff up. But I’m not. In the kitchen, both Jane and Gertrude heard the distinctive warbling sound of Jimmy’s plastic space blaster ... he’d been shooting it around the house ever since he started coming with his mother, and Jane hoped daily that its batteries would go dead. There was no mistaking the sound. No mistaking the place it was coming from, either—Reg’s study.

“The kid really was Dennis the Menace material, you know—if there was a room in the house where he wasn’t supposed to go, that was the one place he had to go, or die of curiosity. It didn’t take him long to discover that Jane kept a key to Reg’s study on the dining-room mantel, either. Had he been in there before? I think so. Jane said she remembered giving the boy an orange three or four days before, and later, when she was clearing out the house, she found orange

peels under the little studio sofa in that room. Reg didn't eat oranges—claimed he was allergic to them.

“Jane dropped the sheet she was washing back into the sink and rushed into the bedroom. She heard the loud wah-wah-wah of the space blaster, and she heard Jimmy, yelling: ‘I’ll getcha! You can’t run! I can seeya through the GLASS!’ And ... she said ... she said that she heard something screaming. A high, despairing sound, she said, so full of pain it was almost insupportable.

” ‘When I heard that,’ she said, ‘I knew that I would have to leave Reg no matter what happened, because all the old wives’ tales were true ... madness was catching. Because it was Rackne I was hearing; somehow that rotten little kid was shooting Rackne, killing it with a two-dollar space-gun from Kresge’s.

” ‘The study door was standing open, the key in it. Later on that day I saw one of the dining-room chairs standing by the mantel, with Jimmy’s sneaker prints all over the seat. He was bent over Reg’s typewriter table. He—Reg—had an old office model with glass inserts in the sides. Jimmy had the muzzle of his blaster pressed against one of those and was shooting it into the typewriter. Wah-wah-wah-wah, and purple pulses of light shooting out of the typewriter, and suddenly I could understand everything Reg had ever said about electricity, because although that thing ran on nothing more than harmless old C or D cells, it really did feel as if there were waves of poison coming out of that gun and rolling through my head and frying my brains.

” ‘ “I seeya in there!” Jimmy was screaming, and his face was filled with a small boy’s glee—it was both beautiful and somehow gruesome. “You can’t run away from Captain Future! You’re dead, alien!” And that screaming ... getting weaker ... smaller ...

” ‘ “Jimmy, you stop it!” I yelled.

” ‘He jumped. I’d startled him. He turned around ... looked at me ... stuck out his tongue ... and then pushed the blaster against the

glass panel and started shooting again. Wah-wah-wah, and that rotten purple light.

” ‘Gertrude was coming down the hall, yelling for him to stop, to get out of there, that he was going to get the whipping of his life ... and then the front door burst open and Reg came up the hall, bellowing. I got one good look at him and understood that he was insane. The gun was in his hand.

” ‘ “Don’t you shoot my baby!” Gertrude screamed when she saw him, and reached out to grapple with him. Reg simply clubbed her aside.

” ‘Jimmy didn’t even seem to realize any of this was going on—he just went on shooting the space blaster into the typewriter. I could see that purple light pulsing in the blackness between the keys, and it looked like one of those electrical arcs they tell you not to look at without a pair of special goggles because otherwise it might boil your retinas and make you blind.

” ‘Reg came in, shoving past me, knocking me over.

” ‘ “RACKNE!” he screamed. “YOU’RE KILLING RACKNE!”

” ‘And even as Reg was rushing across the room, apparently planning to kill that child,’ Jane told me, ‘I had time to wonder just how many times he had been in that room, shooting that gun into the typewriter when his mother and I were maybe upstairs changing beds or in the backyard hanging clothes where we couldn’t hear the wah-wah-wah ... where we couldn’t hear that thing ... the Fornit ... inside, screaming.

” ‘Jimmy didn’t stop even when Reg came bursting in—just kept shooting into the typewriter as if he knew it was his last chance, and since then I have wondered if perhaps Reg wasn’t right about them, too—only maybe they just sort of float around, and every now and then they dive into a person’s head like someone doing a double-gainer into a swimming pool and they get that somebody to do the

dirty work and then check out again, and the guy they were in says, “Huh? Me? Did what?”

” ‘And in the second before Reg got there, the screaming from inside the typewriter turned into a brief, drilling shriek—and I saw blood splatter all over the inside of that glass insert, as if whatever was in there had finally just exploded, the way they say a live animal will explode if you put it in a microwave oven. I know how crazy it sounds, but I saw that blood—it hit the glass in a blot and then started to run.

” ‘ “Got it,” Jimmy said, highly satisfied. “Got—”

” ‘Then Reg threw him all the way across the room. He hit the wall. The gun was jarred out of his hand, hit the floor, and broke. It was nothing but plastic and Eveready batteries, of course.

” ‘Reg looked into the typewriter, and he screamed. Not a scream of pain or fury, although there was fury in it—mostly it was a scream of grief. He turned toward the boy then. Jimmy had fallen to the floor and whatever he had been—if he ever was anything more than just a mischievous little boy—now he was just a six-year-old in terror. Reg pointed the gun at him, and that’s all I remember.’ “

The editor finished his soda and put the can carefully aside.

“Gertrude Rulin and Jimmy Rulin remember enough to make up for the lack,” he said. “Jane called out, ‘Reg, NO!’ and when he looked around at her, she got to her feet and grappled with him. He shot her, shattering her left elbow, but she didn’t let go. As she continued to grapple with him, Gertrude called to her son, and Jimmy ran to her.

“Reg pushed Jane away and shot her again. This bullet tore along the left side of her skull. Even an eighth of an inch to the right and he would have killed her. There is little doubt of that, and none at all that, if not for Jane Thorpe’s intervention, he would have surely killed Jimmy Rulin and quite possibly the boy’s mother as well.

“He did shoot the boy—as Jimmy ran into his mother’s arms just outside the door. The bullet entered Jimmy’s left buttock on a downward course. It exited from his upper-left thigh, missing the bone, and passed through Gertrude Rulin’s shin. There was a lot of blood, but no major damage done to either.

“Gertrude slammed the study door and carried her screaming, bleeding son down the hallway and out the front door.”

The editor paused again, thoughtfully.

“Jane was either unconscious by that time or she has deliberately chosen to forget what happened next. Reg sat down in his office chair and put the muzzle of the .45 against the center of his forehead. He pulled the trigger. The bullet did not pass through his brain and leave him a living vegetable, nor did it travel in a semicircle around his skull and exit harmlessly on the far side. The fantasy was flexible, but the final bullet was as hard as it could be. He fell forward across the typewriter, dead.

“When the police broke in, they found him that way; Jane was sitting in a far corner, semiconscious.

“The typewriter was covered with blood, presumably filled with blood as well; head wounds are very, very messy.

“All of the blood was Type O.

“Reg Thorpe’s type.

“And that, ladies and gentlemen, is my story; I can tell no more.” Indeed, the editor’s voice had been reduced to little more than a husky whisper.

There was none of the usual post-party chatter, or even the awkwardly bright conversation people sometimes use to cover a cocktail-party indiscretion of some moment, or to at least disguise

the fact that things had at some point become much more serious than a dinner-party situation usually warranted.

But as the writer saw the editor to his car, he was unable to forbear one final question. “The story,” he said. “What happened to the story?”

“You mean Reg’s—”

” ‘The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,’ that’s right. The story that caused it all. That was the real flexible bullet—for you, if not for him. What in the hell happened to this story that was so goddam great?”

The editor opened the door of his car; it was a small blue Chevette with a sticker on the back bumper which read FRIENDS DON’T LET FRIENDS DRIVE DRUNK. “No, it was never published. If Reg had a carbon copy, he destroyed it following my receipt and acceptance of the tale—considering his paranoid feelings about them, that would have been very much in character.

“I had his original plus three photocopies with me when I went into the Jackson River. All four in a cardboard carton. If I’d put that carton in the trunk, I would have the story now, because the rear end of my car never went under—even if it had, the pages could have been dried out. But I wanted it close to me, so I put it in the front, on the driver’s side. The windows were open when I went into the water. The pages ... I assume they just floated away and were carried out to sea. I’d rather believe that than believe they rotted along with the rest of the trash at the bottom of that river, or were eaten by catfish, or something even less aesthetically pleasing. To believe they were carried out to sea is more romantic, and slightly more unlikely, but in matters of what I choose to believe, I find I can still be flexible.

“So to speak.”

The editor got into his small car and drove away. The writer stood and watched until the taillights had winked out, and then turned around. Meg was there, standing at the head of their walk in the

darkness, smiling a little tentatively at him. Her arms were crossed tightly across her bosom, although the night was warm.

“We’re the last two,” she said. “Want to go in?”

“Sure.”

Halfway up the walk she stopped and said: “There are no Fornits in your typewriter, are there, Paul?”

And the writer, who had sometimes—often—wondered exactly where the words did come from, said bravely: “Absolutely not.”

They went inside arm in arm and closed the door against the night.

A LIFETIME TV EVENT



**BIG
DRIVER**

STEPHEN KING

WITH BONUS STORY "FAIR EXTENSION"

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FAIR EXTENSION

*For Tabby
Still.*

BIG DRIVER

Tess accepted twelve compensated speaking engagements a year, if she could get them. At twelve hundred dollars each, that came to over fourteen thousand dollars. It was her retirement fund. She was still happy enough with the Willow Grove Knitting Society after twelve books, but didn't kid herself that she could go on writing them until she was in her seventies. If she did, what would she find at the bottom of the barrel? *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes to Terre Haute?* *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Visits the International Space Station?* No. Not even if the ladies' book societies who were her mainstay read them (and they probably would). No.

So she was a good little squirrel, living well on the money her books brought in . . . but putting away acorns for the winter. Each year for the last ten she had put between twelve and sixteen thousand dollars into her money market fund. The total wasn't as high as she might have wished, thanks to the gyrations of the stock market, but she told herself that if she kept on plugging, she'd probably be all right; she was the little engine that could. And she did at least three events each year gratis to salve her conscience. That often annoying organ should not have troubled her about taking honest money for honest work but sometimes it did. Probably because running her gums and signing her name didn't fit the concept of work as she had been raised to understand it.

Other than an honorarium of at least twelve hundred dollars, she had one other requirement: that she be able to drive to the location of her lecture, with not more than one overnight stop on the way to or from. This meant she rarely went farther south than Richmond or farther west than Cleveland. One night in a motel was tiring but acceptable; two made her useless for a week. And Fritz, her cat, hated keeping house by himself. This he made clear when she came home, twining between her feet on the stairs and often making promiscuous use of his claws when he sat in her lap. And although

Patsy McClain from next door was very good about feeding him, he rarely ate much until Tess came home.

It wasn't that she was afraid of flying, or hesitant about billing the organizations that engaged her for travel expenses just as she billed them for her motel rooms (always nice, never elegant). She just hated it: the crowding, the indignity of the full-body scans, the way the airlines now had their hands out for what used to be free, the delays . . . and the inescapable fact that you were not in charge. That was the worst. Once you went through the interminable security checkpoints and were allowed to board, you had put your most valuable possession—your life—into the hands of strangers.

Of course that was also true on the turnpikes and interstates she almost always used when she traveled, a drunk could lose control, jump the median strip, and end your life in a head-on collision (*they* would live; the drunks, it seemed, always did), but at least when she was behind the wheel of her car, she had the *illusion* of control. And she liked to drive. It was soothing. She had some of her best ideas when she was on cruise control with the radio off.

"I bet you were a long-haul trucker in your last incarnation," Patsy McClain told her once.

Tess didn't believe in past lifetimes, or future ones for that matter—in metaphysical terms, she thought what you saw was pretty much what you got—but she liked the idea of a life where she was not a small woman with an elfin face, a shy smile, and a job writing cozy mysteries, but a big guy with a big hat shading his sunburned brow and grizzled cheeks, letting a bulldog hood ornament lead him along the million roads that crisscrossed the country. No need to carefully match her clothes before public appearances in that life; faded jeans and boots with side-buckles would do. She liked to write, and she didn't mind public speaking, but what she really liked to do was drive. After her Chicopee appearance, this struck her as funny . . . but not funny in a way that made you laugh. No, not that kind of funny at all.

The invitation from Books & Brown Baggers filled her requirements perfectly. Chicopee was hardly more than sixty miles from Stoke Village, the engagement was to be a daytime affair, and the Three Bs were offering an honorarium of not twelve but fifteen hundred dollars. Plus expenses, of course, but those would be minimal—not even a stay at a Courtyard Suites or a Hampton Inn. The query letter came from one Ramona Norville, who explained that, although she was the head librarian at the Chicopee Public Library, she was writing in her capacity as President of Books & Brown Baggers, which put on a noon lecture each month. People were encouraged to bring their lunches, and the events were very popular. Janet Evanovich had been scheduled for October 12th, but had been forced to cancel because of a family matter—a wedding or a funeral, Ramona Norville wasn't sure which.

“I know this is short notice,” Ms. Norville said in her slightly wheedling final paragraph, “but Wikipedia says you live in neighboring Connecticut, and our readers here in Chicopee are *such* fans of the Knitting Society gals. You would have our undying gratitude as well as the above-mentioned honorarium.”

Tess doubted that the gratitude would last much longer than a day or two, and she already had a speaking engagement lined up for October (Literary Cavalcade Week in the Hamptons), but I-84 would take her to I-90, and from 90, Chicopee was a straight shot. Easy in, easy out; Fritzzy would hardly know she was gone.

Ramona Norville had of course included her email address, and Tess wrote her immediately, accepting the date and the honorarium amount. She also specified—as was her wont—that she would sign autographs for no more than an hour. “I have a cat who bullies me if I'm not home to feed him his supper personally,” she wrote. She asked for any further details, although she already knew most of what would be expected of her; she had been doing similar events since she was thirty. Still, organizational types like Ramona Norville

expected to be asked, and if you didn't, they got nervous and started to wonder if that day's hired writer was going to show up braless and tipsy.

It crossed Tess's mind to suggest that perhaps two thousand dollars would be more appropriate for what was, in effect, a triage mission, but she dismissed the idea. It would be taking advantage. Also, she doubted if all the Knitting Society books put together (there were an even dozen) had sold as many copies as any one of Stephanie Plum's adventures. Like it or not—and in truth, Tess didn't mind much one way or the other—she was Ramona Norville's Plan B. A surcharge would be close to blackmail. Fifteen hundred was more than fair. Of course when she was lying in a culvert, coughing out blood from her swollen mouth and nose, it didn't seem fair at all. But would two thousand have been any fairer? Or two million?

Whether or not you could put a price tag on pain, rape, and terror was a question the Knitting Society ladies had never taken up. The crimes they solved were really not much more than the *ideas* of crimes. But when Tess was forced to consider it, she thought the answer was no. It seemed to her that only one thing could possibly constitute payback for such a crime. Both Tom and Fritzy agreed.

Ramona Norville turned out to be a broad-shouldered, heavy-breasted, jovial woman of sixty or so with flushed cheeks, a Marine haircut, and a take-no-prisoners handshake. She was waiting for Tess outside the library, in the middle of the parking space reserved for Today's Author of Note. Instead of wishing Tess a very good morning (it was quarter to eleven), or complimenting her on her earrings (diamond drops, an extravagance reserved for her few dinners out and engagements like this), she asked a man's question: had Tess come by the 84?

When Tess said she had, Ms. Norville widened her eyes and blew out her cheeks. "Glad you got here safe. 84's the worst highway in America, in my humble opinion. Also the long way around. We can improve the situation going back, if the Internet's right and you live in Stoke Village."

Tess agreed that she did, although she wasn't sure she liked strangers—even a pleasant librarian—knowing where she went to lay down her weary head. But it did no good to complain; everything was on the Internet these days.

"I can save you ten miles," Ms. Norville said as they mounted the library steps. "Have you got a GPS? That makes things easier than directions written on the back of an envelope. Wonderful gadgets."

Tess, who had indeed added a GPS to her Expedition's dashboard array (it was called a Tomtom and plugged into the cigarette lighter), said that ten miles off her return journey would be very nice.

"Better a straight shot through Robin Hood's barn than all the way around it," Ms. Norville said, and clapped Tess lightly on the back. "Am I right or am I right?"

"Absolutely," Tess agreed, and her fate was decided as simply as that. She had always been a sucker for a shortcut.

Les affaires du livre usually had four well-defined acts, and Tess's appearance at the monthly convocation of Books & Brown Baggers could have been a template for the general case. The only diversion from the norm was Ramona Norville's introduction, which was succinct to the point of terseness. She carried no disheartening pile of file cards to the podium, felt no need to rehash Tess's Nebraska farmgirl childhood, and did not bother producing bouquets of critical praise for the Willow Grove Knitting Society books. (This was good, because they were rarely reviewed, and when they were, the name of Miss Marple was usually invoked, not always in a good way.) Ms. Norville simply said that the books were hugely popular (a forgivable overstatement), and that the author had been extremely generous in donating her time on short notice (although, at fifteen hundred dollars, it was hardly a donation). Then she yielded the podium, to the enthusiastic applause of the four hundred or so in the library's small but adequate auditorium. Most were ladies of the sort who do not attend public occasions without first donning hats.

But the introduction was more of an *entr'acte*. Act One was the eleven o'clock reception, where the higher rollers got to meet Tess in person over cheese, crackers, and cups of lousy coffee (evening events featured plastic glasses of lousy wine). Some asked for autographs; many more requested pictures, which they usually took with their cell phones. She was asked where she got her ideas and made the usual polite and humorous noises in response. Half a dozen people asked her how you got an agent, the glint in their eyes suggesting they had paid the extra twenty dollars just to ask this question. Tess said you kept writing letters until one of the hungrier ones agreed to look at your stuff. It wasn't the whole truth—when it came to agents, there *was* no whole truth—but it was close.

Act Two was the speech itself, which lasted about forty-five minutes. This consisted chiefly of anecdotes (none too personal) and a description of how she worked out her stories (back to front). It was

important to insert at least three mentions of the current book's title, which that fall happened to be *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes Spelunking* (she explained what that was for those who didn't already know).

Act Three was Question Time, during which she was asked where she got her ideas (humorous, vague response), if she drew her characters from real life ("my aunts"), and how one got an agent to look at one's work. Today she was also asked where she got her scrunchie (JCPenney, an answer which brought inexplicable applause).

The last act was Autograph Time, during which she dutifully fulfilled requests to inscribe happy birthday wishes, happy anniversary wishes, *To Janet, a fan of all my books*, and *To Leah—Hope to see you at Lake Toxaway again this summer!* (a slightly odd request, since Tess had never been there, but presumably the autograph-seeker had).

When all the books had been signed and the last few lingerers had been satisfied with more cellphone pictures, Ramona Norville escorted Tess into her office for a cup of real coffee. Ms. Norville took hers black, which didn't surprise Tess at all. Her hostess was a black-coffee type of chick if one had ever strode the surface of the earth (probably in Doc Martens on her day off). The only surprising thing in the office was the framed signed picture on the wall. The face was familiar, and after a moment, Tess was able to retrieve the name from the junkheap of memory that is every writer's most valuable asset.

"Richard Widmark?"

Ms. Norville laughed in an embarrassed but pleased sort of way. "My favorite actor. Had sort of a crush on him when I was a girl, if you want the whole truth. I got him to sign that for me ten years before he died. He was very old, even then, but it's a real signature, not a stamp. This is yours." For one crazed moment, Tess thought Ms. Norville meant the signed photo. Then she saw the envelope in those blunt fingers. The kind of envelope with a window, so you could peek at the check inside.

"Thank you," Tess said, taking it.

"No thanks necessary. You earned every penny."

Tess did not demur.

“Now. About that shortcut.”

Tess leaned forward attentively. In one of the Knitting Society books, Doreen Marquis had said, *The two best things in life are warm croissants and a quick way home*. This was a case of the writer using her own dearly held beliefs to enliven her fiction.

“Can you program intersections in your GPS?”

“Yes, Tom’s very canny.”

Ms. Norville smiled. “Input Stagg Road and US 47, then. Stagg Road is very little used in this modern age—almost forgotten since that damn 84—but it’s scenic. You’ll ramble along it for, oh, sixteen miles or so. Patched asphalt, but not too bumpy, or wasn’t the last time I took it, and that was in the spring, when the worst bumps show up. At least that’s my experience.”

“Mine, too,” Tess said.

“When you get to 47, you’ll see a sign pointing you to I-84, but you’ll only need to take the turnpike for twelve miles or so, that’s the beauty part. And you’ll save tons of time and aggravation.”

“That’s also the beauty part,” Tess said, and they laughed together, two women of the same mind watched over by a smiling Richard Widmark. The abandoned store with the ticking sign was then still ninety minutes away, tucked snugly into the future like a snake in its hole. And the culvert, of course.

Tess not only had a GPS; she had spent extra for a customized one. She liked toys. After she had input the intersection (Ramona Norville leaned in the window as she did it, watching with manly interest), the gadget thought for a moment or two, then said, "Tess, I am calculating your route."

"Whoa-ho, how about that!" Norville said, and laughed the way that people do at some amiable peculiarity.

Tess smiled, although she privately thought programming your GPS to call you by name was no more peculiar than keeping a fan foto of a dead actor on your office wall. "Thank you for everything, Ramona. It was all very professional."

"We do our best at Three Bs. Now off you go. With my thanks."

"Off I go," Tess agreed. "And you're very welcome. I enjoyed it." This was true; she usually did enjoy such occasions, in an all-right-let's-get-this-taken-care-of fashion. And her retirement fund would certainly enjoy the unexpected infusion of cash.

"Have a safe trip home," Norville said, and Tess gave her a thumbs-up.

When she pulled away, the GPS said, "Hello, Tess. I see we're taking a trip."

"Yes indeed," she said. "And a good day for it, wouldn't you say?"

Unlike the computers in science fiction movies, Tom was poorly equipped for light conversation, although Tess sometimes helped him. He told her to make a right turn four hundred yards ahead, then take her first left. The map on the Tomtom's screen displayed green arrows and street names, sucking the information down from some whirling metal ball of technology high above.

She was soon on the outskirts of Chicopee, but Tom sent her past the turn for I-84 without comment and into countryside that was flaming with October color and smoky with the scent of burning leaves. After ten miles or so on something called Old County Road,

and just as she was wondering if her GPS had made a mistake (as if), Tom spoke up again.

“In one mile, right turn.”

Sure enough, she soon saw a green Stagg Road sign so pocked with shotgun pellets it was almost unreadable. But of course, Tom didn't need signs; in the words of the sociologists (Tess had been a major before discovering her talent for writing about old lady detectives), he was other-directed.

You'll ramble along for sixteen miles or so, Ramona Norville had said, but Tess rambled for only a dozen. She came around a curve, spied an old dilapidated building ahead on her left (the faded sign over the pumpless service island still read ESSO), and then saw—too late—several large, splintered pieces of wood scattered across the road. There were rusty nails jutting from many of them. She jounced across the pothole that had probably dislodged them from some country bumpkin's carelessly packed load, then veered for the soft shoulder in an effort to get around the litter, knowing she probably wasn't going to make it; why else would she hear herself saying *Oh-oh*?

There was a *clack-thump-thud* beneath her as chunks of wood flew up against the undercarriage, and then her trusty Expedition began pogoing up and down and pulling to the left, like a horse that's gone lame. She wrestled it into the weedy yard of the deserted store, wanting to get it off the road so someone who happened to come tearing around that last curve wouldn't rear-end her. She hadn't seen much traffic on Stagg Road, but there'd been some, including a couple of large trucks.

“Goddam you, Ramona,” she said. She knew it wasn't really the librarian's fault; the head (and probably only member) of The Richard Widmark Fan Appreciation Society, Chicopee Branch, had only been trying to be helpful, but Tess didn't know the name of the dummocks who had dropped his nail-studded shit on the road and then gone gaily on his way, so Ramona had to do.

“Would you like me to recalculate your route, Tess?” Tom asked, making her jump.

She turned the GPS off, then killed the engine, as well. She wasn't going anywhere for awhile. It was very quiet out here. She

heard birdsong, a metallic ticking sound like an old wind-up clock, and nothing else. The good news was that the Expedition seemed to be leaning to the left front instead of just leaning. Perhaps it was only the one tire. She wouldn't need a tow, if that was the case; just a little help from Triple-A.

When she got out and looked at the left front tire, she saw a splintered piece of wood impaled on it by a large, rusty spike. Tess uttered a one-syllable expletive that had never crossed the lips of a Knitting Society member, and got her cell phone out of the little storage compartment between the bucket seats. She would now be lucky to get home before dark, and Fritzzy would have to be content with his bowl of dry food in the pantry. So much for Ramona Norville's shortcut . . . although to be fair, Tess supposed the same thing could have happened to her on the interstate; certainly she had avoided her share of potentially car-crippling crap on many thruways, not just I-84.

The conventions of horror tales and mysteries—even mysteries of the bloodless, one-corpse variety enjoyed by her fans—were surprisingly similar, and as she flipped open her phone she thought, *In a story, it wouldn't work*. This was a case of life imitating art, because when she powered up her Nokia, the words NO SERVICE appeared in the window. Of course. Being able to use her phone would be too simple.

She heard an indifferently muffled engine approaching, turned, and saw an old white van come around the curve that had done her in. On the side was a cartoon skeleton pounding a drum kit that appeared to be made out of cupcakes. Written in drippy horror-movie script above this apparition (*much* more peculiar than a fan foto of Richard Widmark on a librarian's office wall) were the words ZOMBIE BAKERS. For a moment Tess was too bemused to wave, and when she did, the driver of the Zombie Bakers truck was busy trying to avoid the mess on the road and didn't notice her.

He was quicker to the shoulder than Tess had been, but the van had a higher center of gravity than the Expedition, and for a moment she was sure it was going to roll and land on its side in the ditch. It stayed up—barely—and regained the road beyond the spilled

chunks of wood. The van disappeared around the next curve, leaving behind a blue cloud of exhaust and a smell of hot oil.

“Damn you, Zombie Bakers!” Tess yelled, then began to laugh. Sometimes it was all you could do.

She clipped her phone to the waistband of her dress slacks, went out to the road, and began picking up the mess herself. She did it slowly and carefully, because up close it became obvious that all the pieces of wood (which were painted white and looked as if they had been stripped away by someone in the throes of a home renovation project) had nails in them. Big ugly ones. She worked slowly because she didn't want to cut herself, but she also hoped to be out here, observably doing A Good Work of Christian Charity, when the next car came along. But by the time she'd finished picking up everything but a few harmless splinters and casting the big pieces into the ditch below the shoulder of the road, no other cars had come along. Perhaps, she thought, the Zombie Bakers had eaten everyone in this immediate vicinity and were now hurrying back to their kitchen to put the leftovers into the always-popular People Pies.

She walked back to the defunct store's weedy parking lot and looked moodily at her leaning car. Thirty thousand dollars' worth of rolling iron, four-wheel drive, independent disc brakes, Tom the Talking Tomtom . . . and all it took to leave you stranded was a piece of wood with a nail in it.

But of course they all had nails, she thought. *In a mystery—or a horror movie—that wouldn't constitute carelessness; that would constitute a plan. A trap, in fact.*

“Too much imagination, Tessa Jean,” she said, quoting her mother . . . and that was ironic, of course, since it was her imagination that had ended up providing her with her daily bread. Not to mention the Daytona Beach home where her mother had spent the last six years of her life.

In the big silence she again became aware of that tinny ticking sound. The abandoned store was of a kind you didn't see much in the twenty-first century: it had a porch. The lefthand corner had collapsed and the railing was broken in a couple of places, but yes, it was an actual porch, charming even in its dilapidation. Maybe *because* of its dilapidation. Tess supposed general store porches

had become obsolete because they encouraged you to sit a spell and chat about baseball or the weather instead of just paying up and hustling your credit cards on down the road to some other place where you could swipe them at the checkout. A tin sign hung askew from the porch roof. It was more faded than the Esso sign. She took a few steps closer, raising a hand to her forehead to shade her eyes. YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU. Which was a slogan for what, exactly?

She had almost plucked the answer from her mental junkheap when her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of an engine. As she turned toward it, sure that the Zombie Bakers had come back after all, the sound of the motor was joined by the scream of ancient brakes. It wasn't the white van but an old Ford F-150 pickup with a bad blue paintjob and Bondo around the headlights. A man in bib overalls and a gimme cap sat behind the wheel. He was looking at the litter of wood scraps in the ditch.

"Hello?" Tess called. "Pardon me, sir?"

He turned his head, saw her standing in the overgrown parking lot, flicked a hand in salute, pulled in beside her Expedition, and turned off his engine. Given the sound of it, Tess thought that an act tantamount to mercy killing.

"Hey, there," he said. "Did you pick that happy crappy up off the road?"

"Yes, all but the piece that got my left front tire. And—" *And my phone doesn't work out here*, she almost added, then didn't. She was a woman in her late thirties who went one-twenty soaking wet, and this was a strange man. A big one. "—and here I am," she finished, a bit lamely.

"I'll change it forya if you got a spare," he said, working his way out of his truck. "Do you?"

For a moment she couldn't reply. The guy wasn't big, she'd been wrong about that. The guy was a giant. He had to go six-six, but head-to-foot was only part of it. He was deep in the belly, thick in the thighs, and as wide as a doorway. She knew it was impolite to stare (another of the world's facts learned at her mother's knee), but it was hard not to. Ramona Norville had been a healthy chunk of woman, but standing next to this guy, she would have looked like a ballerina.

“I know, I know,” he said, sounding amused. “You didn’t think you were going to meet the Jolly Green Giant out here in the williwags, didja?” Only he wasn’t green; he was tanned a deep brown. His eyes were also brown. Even his cap was brown, although faded almost white in several places, as if it had been splattered with bleach at some point in its long life.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just that I was thinking you don’t ride in that truck of yours, you wear it.”

He put his hands on his hips and guffawed at the sky. “Never heard it put like that before, but you’re sort of right. When I win the lottery, I’m going to buy myself a Hummer.”

“Well, I can’t buy you one of those, but if you change my tire, I’d be happy to pay you fifty dollars.”

“You kiddin? I’ll do it for free. You saved me a mess of my own when you picked up that scrapwood.”

“Someone went past in a funny truck with a skeleton on the side, but he missed it.”

The big guy had been heading for Tess’s flat front tire, but now he turned back to her, frowning. “Someone went by and didn’t offer to help you out?”

“I don’t think he saw me.”

“Didn’t stop to pick up that mess for the next fellow, either, did he?”

“No. He didn’t.”

“Just went on his way?”

“Yes.” There was something about these questions she didn’t quite like. Then the big guy smiled and Tess told herself she was being silly.

“Spare under the cargo compartment floor, I suppose?”

“Yes. That is, I think so. All you have to do is—”

“Pull up on the handle, yep, yep. Been there, done that.”

As he ambled around to the back of her Expedition with his hands tucked deep into the pockets of his overalls, Tess saw that the door of his truck hadn’t shut all the way and the dome light was on. Thinking that the F-150’s battery might be as battered as the truck it was powering, she opened the door (the hinge screamed almost as loudly as the brakes) and then slammed it closed. As she did, she

looked through the cab's back window and into the pickup's bed. There were several pieces of wood scattered across the ribbed and rusty metal. They were painted white and had nails sticking out of them.

For a moment, Tess felt as if she were having an out-of-body experience. The ticking sign, YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU, now sounded not like an old-fashioned alarm clock but a ticking bomb.

She tried to tell herself the scraps of wood meant nothing, stuff like that only meant something in the kind of books she didn't write and the kind of movies she rarely watched: the nasty, bloody kind. It didn't work. Which left her with two choices. She could either go on trying to pretend because to do otherwise was terrifying, or she could take off running for the woods on the other side of the road.

Before she could decide, she smelled the whopping aroma of mansweat. She turned and he was there, towering over her with his hands in the side pockets of his overalls. "Instead of changing your tire," he said pleasantly, "how about I fuck you? How would that be?"

Then Tess ran, but only in her mind. What she did in the real world was to stand pressed against his truck, looking up at him, a man so tall he blocked out the sun and put her in his shadow. She was thinking that not two hours ago four hundred people—mostly ladies in hats—had been applauding her in a small but entirely adequate auditorium. And somewhere south of here, Fritzzy was waiting for her. It dawned on her—laboriously, like lifting something heavy—that she might never see her cat again.

"Please don't kill me," some woman said in a very small and very humble voice.

"You bitch," he said. He spoke in the tone of a man reflecting on the weather. The sign went on ticking against the eave of the porch. "You whiny whore bitch. Gosh sakes."

His right hand came out of his pocket. It was a very big hand. On the pinky finger was a ring with a red stone in it. It looked like a ruby, but it was too big to be a ruby. Tess thought it was probably just glass. The sign ticked. YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU. Then the hand turned into a fist and came speeding toward her, growing until everything else was blotted out.

There was a muffled metallic bang from somewhere. She thought it was her head colliding with the side of the pickup truck's cab. Tess thought: *Zombie Bakers*. Then for a little while it was dark.

She came to in a large shadowy room that smelled of damp wood, ancient coffee, and prehistoric pickles. An old paddle fan hung crookedly from the ceiling just above her. It looked like the broken merry-go-round in that Hitchcock movie, *Strangers on a Train*. She was on the floor, naked from the waist down, and he was raping her. The rape seemed secondary to the weight: he was also crushing her. She could barely draw a breath. It had to be a dream. But her nose was swollen, a lump that felt the size of a small mountain had grown at the base of her skull, and splinters were digging into her buttocks. You didn't notice those sorts of details in dreams. And you didn't feel actual pain in dreams; you always woke up before the real pain started. This was happening. He was raping her. He had taken her inside the old store and he was raping her while golden dust motes twirled lazily in the slanting afternoon sun. Somewhere people were listening to music and buying products online and taking naps and talking on phones, but in here a woman was being raped and she was that woman. He had taken her underpants; she could see them frothing from the pocket in the bib of his overalls. That made her think of *Deliverance*, which she had watched at a college film retrospective, back in the days when she had been slightly more adventurous in her moviegoing. *Get them panties down*, one of the hillbillies had said before commencing to rape the fat townie. It was funny what crossed your mind when you were lying under three hundred pounds of country meat with a rapist's cock creaking back and forth inside you like an unoiled hinge.

"Please," she said. "Oh please, no more."

"Lots more," he said, and here came that fist again, filling her field of vision. The side of her face went hot, there was a click in the middle of her head, and she blacked out.

The next time she came to, he was dancing around her in his overalls, tossing his hands from side to side and singing “Brown Sugar” in a squalling, atonal voice. The sun was going down, and the abandoned store’s two west-facing windows—the glass dusty but miraculously unbroken by vandals—were filled with fire. His shadow danced behind him, capering down the board floor and up the wall, which was marked with light squares where advertising signs had once hung. The sound of his cludding workboots was apocalyptic.

She could see her dress slacks crumpled under the counter where the cash register must once have stood (probably next to a jar of boiled eggs and another of pickled pigs’ feet). She could smell mold. And oh God she hurt. Her face, her chest, most of all down below, where she felt torn open.

Pretend you’re dead. It’s your only chance.

She closed her eyes. The singing stopped and she smelled approaching mansweat. Sharper now.

Because he’s been exercising, she thought. She forgot about playing dead and tried to scream. Before she could, his huge hands gripped her throat and began to choke. She thought: *It’s over. I’m over.* They were calm thoughts, full of relief. At least there would be no more pain, no more waking to watch the monster-man dance in the burning sunset light.

She passed out.

When Tess swam back to consciousness the third time, the world had turned black and silver and she was floating.

This is what it's like to be dead.

Then she registered hands beneath her—big hands, *his* hands—and the barbwire circlet of pain around her throat. He hadn't choked her quite enough to kill her, but she was wearing the shape of his hands like a necklace, palms in front, fingers on the sides and the nape of her neck.

It was night. The moon was up. A full moon. He was carrying her across the parking lot of the deserted store. He was carrying her past his truck. She didn't see her Expedition. Her Expedition was gone.

Wherefore art thou, Tom?

He stopped at the edge of the road. She could smell his sweat and feel the rise and fall of his chest. She could feel the night air, cool on her bare legs. She could hear the sign ticking behind her, YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU.

Does he think I'm dead? He can't think I'm dead. I'm still bleeding.

Or was she? It was hard to tell for sure. She lay limp in his arms, feeling like a girl in a horror movie, the one who's carried away by Jason or Michael or Freddy or whatever his name was after all the other ones are slaughtered. Carried to some slumpy deep-woods lair where she would be chained to a hook in the ceiling. In those movies there were always chains and hooks in the ceiling.

He got moving again. She could hear his work-shoes on the patched tar of Stagg Road: *clud-clump-clud*. Then, on the far side, scraping noises and clattering sounds. He was kicking away the chunks of wood she had so carefully cleaned up and thrown down here in the ditch. She could no longer hear the ticking sign, but she could hear running water. Not much, not a gush, only a trickle. He knelt down. A soft grunt escaped him.

Now he'll kill me for sure. And at least I won't have to listen to any more of his awful singing. It's the beauty part, Ramona Norville would say.

"Hey girl," he said in a kindly voice.

She didn't reply, but she could see him bending over her, looking into her half-lidded eyes. She took great care to keep them still. If he saw them move, even a little . . . or a gleam of tears . . .

"Hey." He popped the flat of his hand against her cheek. She let her head roll to the side.

"Hey!" This time he outright slapped her, but on the other cheek. Tess let her head roll back the other way.

He pinched her nipple, but he hadn't bothered to take off her blouse and bra and it didn't hurt too badly. She lay limp.

"I'm sorry I called you a bitch," he said, still using the kindly voice. "You was a good fuck. And I like em a little older."

Tess realized he really *might* think she was dead. It was amazing, but could be true. And all at once she wanted very badly to live.

He picked her up again. The mansweat smell was suddenly overwhelming. Beard bristles tickled the side of her face, and it was all she could do not to twitch away from them. He kissed the corner of her mouth.

"Sorry I was a little rough."

Then he was moving her again. The sound of the running water got louder. The moonlight was blotted out. There was a smell—no, a stench—of rotting leaves. He put her down in four or five inches of water. It was very cold, and she almost cried out. He pushed on her feet and she let her knees go up. *Boneless*, she thought. *Have to stay boneless*. They didn't go far before bumping against a corrugated metal surface.

"Fuck," he said, speaking in a reflective tone. Then he shoved her.

Tess remained limp even when something—a branch—scrawled a line of hurt down the center of her back. Her knees bumped along the corrugations above her. Her buttocks pushed a spongy mass, and the smell of rotting vegetable matter intensified. It was as thick as meat. She felt a terrible urge to cough the smell away. She could feel a mat of wet leaves gathering in the small of her back, like a throw-pillow soaked with water.

If he figures it out now, I'll fight him. I'll kick him and kick him and kick him—

But nothing happened. For a long time she was afraid to open her eyes any wider or move them in the slightest. She imagined him crouching there, looking into the pipe where he'd stashed her, head to one side, tilting a question, waiting for just such a move. How could he not know she was alive? Surely he'd felt the thump of her heart. And what good would kicking be against the giant from the pickup? He'd grab her bare feet in one hand, haul her out, and recommence choking her. Only this time he wouldn't stop.

She lay in the rotting leaves and sluggish water, looking up at nothing from her half-lidded eyes, concentrating on playing dead. She passed into a gray fugue that was not quite unconsciousness, and there she stayed for a length of time that felt long but probably wasn't. When she heard a motor—his truck, surely his truck—Tess thought: *I'm imagining that sound. Or dreaming it. He's still here.*

But the irregular thump of the motor first swelled, then faded off down Stagg Road.

It's a trick.

That was almost certainly hysteria. Even if it wasn't, she couldn't stay here all night. And when she raised her head (wincing at the stab of pain in her abused throat) and looked toward the mouth of the pipe, she saw only an unimpeded silver circle of moonlight. Tess started wriggling toward it, then stopped.

It's a trick. I don't care what you heard, he's still here.

This time the idea was more powerful. Seeing nothing at the mouth of the culvert *made* it more powerful. In a suspense novel, this would be the moment of false relaxation before the big climax. Or in a scary movie. The white hand emerging from the lake in *Deliverance*. Alan Arkin springing out at Audrey Hepburn in *Wait Until Dark*. She didn't like scary books and movies, but being raped and almost murdered seemed to have unlocked a whole vault of scary-movie memories, all the same. As if they were just there, in the air.

He *could* be waiting. If, for instance, he'd had an accomplice drive his truck away. He could be squatting on his hunkers beyond the mouth of the pipe in that patient way country men had.

“Get those panties down,” she whispered, then covered her mouth. What if he heard her?

Five minutes passed. It might have been five. The water was cold and she began to shiver. Soon her teeth would begin to chatter. If he was out there, he would hear.

He drove away. You heard him.

Maybe. Maybe not.

And maybe she didn't need to leave the pipe the way she'd gone in. It was a culvert, it would go all the way under the road, and since she could feel water running under her, it wasn't blocked. She could crawl the length of it and look out into the deserted store's parking lot. Make sure his old truck was gone. She still wouldn't be safe if there was an accomplice, but Tess felt sure, deep down where her rational mind had gone to hide, that there was no accomplice. An accomplice would have insisted on taking his turn at her. Besides, giants worked alone.

And if he is gone? What then?

She didn't know. She couldn't imagine her life after her afternoon in the deserted store and her evening in the pipe with rotting leaves smooshed up into the hollow of her back, but maybe she didn't have to. Maybe she could concentrate on getting home to Fritzzy and feeding him a packet of Fancy Feast. She could see the Fancy Feast box very clearly. It was sitting on a shelf in her peaceful pantry.

She turned over on her belly and started to get up on her elbows, meaning to crawl the length of the pipe. Then she saw what was sharing the culvert with her. One of the corpses was not much more than a skeleton (stretching out bony hands as if in supplication), but there was still enough hair left on its head to make Tess all but certain it was the corpse of a woman. The other might have been a badly defaced department store mannequin, except for the bulging eyes and protruding tongue. This body was fresher, but the animals had been at it and even in the dark Tess could see the grin of the dead woman's teeth.

A beetle came lumbering out of the mannequin's hair and trundled down the bridge of her nose.

Screaming hoarsely, Tess backed out of the culvert and bolted to her feet, her clothes soaked to her body from the waist up. She was

naked from the waist down. And although she did not pass out (at least she didn't think she did), for a little while her consciousness was a queerly broken thing. Looking back on it, she would think of the next hour as a darkened stage lit by occasional spotlights. Every now and then a battered woman with a broken nose and blood on her thighs would walk into one of these spotlights. Then she would disappear back into darkness again.

She was in the store, in the big empty central room that had once been divided into aisles, with a frozen food case (maybe) at the back, and a beer cooler (for sure) running the length of the far wall. She was in the smell of departed coffee and pickles. He had either forgotten her dress slacks or meant to come back for them later—perhaps when he picked up the nail-studded scrapwood. She was fishing them out from under the counter. Beneath them were her shoes and her phone—smashed. Yes, at some point he would be back. Her scrunchie was gone. She remembered (vaguely, the way one remembers certain things from one's earliest childhood) some woman asking earlier today where she'd gotten it, and the inexplicable applause when she'd said JCPenney. She thought of the giant singing "Brown Sugar"—that squalling monotonous childish voice—and she went away again.

She was walking behind the store in the moonlight. She had a carpet remnant wrapped around her shivering shoulders, but couldn't remember where she had gotten it. It was filthy but it was warm, and she pulled it tighter. It came to her that she was actually *circling* the store, and this might be her second, third, or even fourth go-round. It came to her that she was looking for her Expedition, but each time she didn't find it behind the store, she forgot that she had looked and went around again. She forgot because she had been thumped on the head and raped and choked and was in shock. It came to her that her brain might be bleeding—how could you know, unless you woke up with the angels and they told you? The afternoon's light breeze had gotten a little stronger, and the ticking of the tin sign was a little louder. YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU.

"7Up," she said. Her voice was hoarse but serviceable. "That's what it is. You like it and it likes you." She heard herself raising her own voice in song. She had a good singing voice, and being choked had given it a surprisingly pleasant rasp. It was like listening to Bonnie Tyler sing out here in the moonlight. "7Up tastes good . . . like a cigarette should!" It came to her that that wasn't right, and even if it was, she should be singing something better than fucked-up advertising jingles while she had that pleasing rasp in her voice; if you were going to be raped and left for dead in a pipe with two rotting corpses, something good should come out of it.

I'll sing Bonnie Tyler's hit record. I'll sing "It's a Heartache." I'm sure I know the words, I'm sure they're in the junkheap every writer has in the back of her . . .

But then she went away again.

She was sitting on a rock and crying her eyes out. The filthy carpet-remnant was still around her shoulders. Her crotch ached and burned. The sour taste in her mouth suggested to her that she had vomited at some point between walking around the store and sitting on this rock, but she couldn't remember doing it. What she remembered—

I was raped, I was raped, I was raped!

"You're not the first and you won't be the last," she said, but this tough-love sentiment, coming out as it did in a series of choked sobs, was not very helpful.

He tried to kill me, he almost did kill me!

Yes, yes. And at this moment his failure did not seem like much consolation. She looked to her left and saw the store fifty or sixty yards down the road.

He killed others! They're in the pipe! Bugs are crawling on them and they don't care!

"Yes, yes," she said in her raspy Bonnie Tyler voice, then went away again.

She was walking down the center of Stagg Road and singing “It’s a Heartache” when she heard an approaching motor from behind her. She whirled around, almost falling, and saw headlights brightening the top of a hill she must have just come over. It was him. The giant. He had come back, had investigated the culvert after finding her clothes gone, and seen she was no longer in it. He was looking for her.

Tess bolted down into the ditch, stumbled to one knee, lost hold of her makeshift shawl, got up, and blundered into the bushes. A branch drew blood from her cheek. She heard a woman sobbing with fear. She dropped down on her hands and knees with her hair hanging in her eyes. The road brightened as the headlights cleared the hill. She saw the dropped piece of carpeting very clearly, and knew the giant would see it too. He would stop and get out. She would try to run but he would catch her. She would scream, but no one would hear her. In stories like this, they never did. He would kill her, but first he would rape her some more.

The car—it *was* a car, not a pickup truck—went by without slowing. From inside came the sound of Bachman-Turner Overdrive, turned up loud: “B-B-B-Baby, you just ain’t seen n-n-nuthin yet.” She watched the taillights wink out of sight. She felt herself getting ready to go away again and slapped her cheeks with both hands.

“*No!*” she growled in her Bonnie Tyler voice. “*No!*”

She came back a little. She felt a strong urge to stay crouched in the bushes, but that was no good. It wasn’t just a long time until daylight, it was probably still a long time until midnight. The moon was low in the sky. She couldn’t stay here, and she couldn’t just keep . . . blinking out. She had to think.

Tess picked the piece of carpeting out of the ditch, started to wrap it around her shoulders again, then touched her ears, knowing what she’d find. The diamond drop earrings, one of her few real extravagances, were gone. She burst into tears again, but this crying

fit was shorter, and when it ended she felt more like herself. More *in* herself, a resident of her head and body instead of a specter floating around it.

Think, Tessa Jean!

All right, she would try. But she would walk while she did it. And no more singing. The sound of her changed voice was creepy. It was as if by raping her, the giant had created a new woman. She didn't *want* to be a new woman. She had liked the old one.

Walking. Walking in the moonlight with her shadow walking on the road beside her. What road? Stagg Road. According to Tom, she had been a little less than four miles from the intersection of Stagg Road and US 47 when she'd run into the giant's trap. That wasn't so bad; she walked at least three miles a day to keep in shape, treadmilling on days when it rained or snowed. Of course this was her first walk as the New Tess, she of the aching, bleeding snatch and the raspy voice. But there was an upside: she was warming up, her top half was drying out, and she was in flat shoes. She had almost worn her three-quarter heels, and that would have made this evening stroll very unpleasant, indeed. Not that it would have been fun under any circumstances, no no n—

Think!

But before she could start doing that, the road brightened ahead of her. Tess darted into the underbrush again, this time managing to hold onto the carpet remnant. It was another car, thank God, not his truck, and it didn't slow.

It could still be him. Maybe he switched to a car. He could have driven back to his house, his lair, and switched to a car. Thinking, she'll see it's a car and come out of wherever she's hiding. She'll wave me down and then I'll have her.

Yes, yes. That was what would happen in a horror movie, wasn't it? *Screaming Victims 4* or *Stagg Road Horror 2*, or—

She was trying to go away again, so she slapped her cheeks some more. Once she was home, once Fritzzy was fed and she was in her own bed (with all the doors locked and all the lights on), she could go away all she wanted. But not now. No no no. Now she had to keep walking, and hiding when cars came. If she could do those two things, she'd eventually reach US 47, and there might be a

store. A *real* store, one with a pay phone, if she was lucky . . . and she deserved some good luck. She didn't have her purse, her purse was still in her Expedition (wherever *that* was), but she knew her AT&T calling-card number by heart; it was her home phone number plus 9712. Easy-as-can-beezy.

Here was a sign at the side of the road. Tess read it easily enough in the moonlight:

YOU ARE NOW ENTERING
COLEWICH TOWNSHIP
WELCOME, FRIEND!

"You like Colewich, it likes you," she whispered.

She knew the town, which the locals pronounced "Collitch." It was actually a small city, one of many in New England that had been prosperous back in the textile-mill days and continued to struggle along somehow in the new free-trade era, when America's pants and jackets were made in Asia or Central America, probably by children who couldn't read or write. She was on the outskirts, but surely she could walk to a phone.

Then what?

Then she would . . . would . . .

"Call a limousine," she said. The idea burst on her like a sunrise. Yes, that was exactly what she'd do. If this was Colewich, then her own Connecticut town was thirty miles away, maybe less. The limo service she used when she wanted to go to Bradley International or into Hartford or New York (Tess did not do city driving if she could help it) was based in the neighboring town of Woodfield. Royal Limousine boasted round-the-clock service. Even better, they would have her credit card on file.

Tess felt better and began to walk a little faster. Then headlights brightened the road and she once more hurried into the bushes and crouched down, as terrified as any hunted thing: doe fox rabbit. This vehicle was a truck, and she began to tremble. She went on trembling even when she saw it was a little white Toyota, nothing at all like the giant's old Ford. When it was gone, she tried to force herself to walk back to the road, but at first she couldn't. She was

crying again, the tears warm on her chilly face. She felt herself getting ready to step out of the spotlight of awareness once more. She couldn't let that happen. If she allowed herself to go into that waking blackness too many times, she might eventually lose her way back.

She made herself think of thanking the limo driver and adding a tip to the credit card form before making her way slowly up the flower-lined walk to her front door. Tilting up her mailbox and taking the extra key from the hook behind it. Listening to Fritzzy meow anxiously.

The thought of Fritzzy turned the trick. She worked her way out of the bushes and resumed walking, ready to dart back into cover the second she saw more headlights. The very second. Because he was out there somewhere. She realized that from now on he would always be out there. Unless the police caught him, that was, and put him in jail. But for that to occur she would have to report what had happened, and the moment this idea came into her mind, she saw a glaring black *New York Post*-style headline:

“WILLOW GROVE” SCRIBE RAPED AFTER LECTURE

Tabloids like the *Post* would undoubtedly run a picture of her from ten years ago, when her first Knitting Society book had been published. Back then she'd been in her late twenties, with long dark blond hair cascading down her back and good legs she liked to showcase in short skirts. Plus—in the evening—the kind of high-heeled slingbacks some men (the giant for one, almost certainly) referred to as fuckme shoes. They wouldn't mention that she was now ten years older, twenty pounds heavier, and had been dressed in sensible—almost dowdy—business attire when she was assaulted; those details didn't fit the kind of story the tabloids liked to tell. The copy would be respectful enough (if panting a trifle between the lines), but the picture of her old self would tell the real story, one that probably pre-dated the invention of the wheel: *She asked for it . . . and she got it.*

Was that realistic, or only her shame and badly battered sense of self-worth imagining the worst-case scenario? The part of her that might want to go on hiding in the bushes even if she managed to get off this awful road and out of this awful state of Massachusetts and back to her safe little house in Stoke Village? She didn't know, and guessed that the true answer lay somewhere in between. One thing she *did* know was that she would get the sort of nationwide coverage every writer would like when she publishes a book and no writer wants when she has been raped and robbed and left for dead. She could visualize someone raising a hand during Question Time and asking, "Did you in any way encourage him?"

That was ridiculous, and even in her current state Tess knew it . . . but she also knew that if this came out, someone *would* raise his or her hand to ask, "Are you going to write about this?"

And what would she say? What *could* she say?

Nothing, Tess thought. *I would run off the stage with my hands over my ears.*

But no.

No no no.

The truth was she wouldn't be there in the first place. How could she ever do another reading, lecture, or autographing, knowing that *he* might turn up, smiling at her from the back row? Smiling from beneath that weird brown cap with the bleach spots on it? Maybe with her earrings in his pocket. Fondling them.

The thought of telling the police made her skin burn, and she could feel her face literally wincing in shame, even out here, alone in the dark. Maybe she wasn't Sue Grafton or Janet Evanovich, but neither was she, strictly speaking, a private person. She would even be on CNN for a day or two. The world would know a crazy, grinning giant had shot his load inside of the Willow Grove Scribe. Even the fact that he had taken her underwear as a souvenir might come out. CNN wouldn't report that part, but *The National Enquirer* or *Inside View* would have no such compunctions.

Sources inside the investigation say they found a pair of the Scribe's panties in the accused rapist's drawer: blue Victoria's Secret hip-huggers, trimmed with lace.

"I can't tell," she said. "I won't tell."

But there were others before you, there could be others after y—

She pushed this thought away. She was too tired to consider what might or might not be her moral responsibility. She'd work on that part later, if God meant to grant her a later . . . and it seemed He might. But not on this deserted road where any set of approaching lights might have her rapist behind it.

Hers. He was hers now.

A mile or so after passing the Colewich sign, Tess began to hear a low, rhythmic thudding that seemed to come up from the road through her feet. Her first thought was of H. G. Wells's mutant Morlocks, tending their machinery deep in the bowels of the earth, but another five minutes clarified the sound. It was coming through the air, not from the ground, and it was one she knew: the heartbeat of a bass guitar. The rest of the band coalesced around it as she walked. She began to see light on the horizon, not headlights but the white of arc sodiums and the red gleam of neon. The band was playing "Mustang Sally," and she could hear laughter. It was drunken and beautiful, punctuated by happy party-down whoops. The sound made her feel like crying some more.

The roadhouse, a big old honkytonk barn with a huge dirt parking lot that looked full to capacity, was called The Stagger Inn. She stood at the edge of the glare cast by the parking lot lights, frowning. Why so many cars? Then she remembered it was Friday night. Apparently The Stagger Inn was the place to go on Friday nights if you were from Colewich or any of the surrounding towns. They would have a phone, but there were too many people. They would see her bruised face and leaning nose. They would want to know what had happened to her, and she was in no shape to make up a story. At least not yet. Even a pay phone outside was no good, because she could see people out there, too. Lots of them. Of course. These days you had to go outside if you wanted to smoke a cigarette. Also . . .

He could be there. Hadn't he been capering around her at one point, singing a Rolling Stones song in his awful tuneless voice? Tess supposed she might have dreamed that part—or hallucinated it—but she didn't think so. Wasn't it possible that after hiding her car, he'd come right here to The Stagger Inn, pipes all cleaned and ready to party the night away?

The band launched into a perfectly adequate cover of an old Cramps song: "Can Your Pussy Do the Dog." *No*, Tess thought, *but today a dog certainly did my pussy*. The Old Tess would not have approved of such a joke, but the New Tess thought it was pretty goddam funny. She barked a hoarse laugh and got walking again, moving to the other side of the road, where the lights from the road-house parking lot did not quite reach.

As she passed the far side of the building, she saw an old white van backed up to the loading dock. There were no arc sodiums on this side of The Stagger Inn, but the moonlight was enough to show her the skeleton pounding its cupcake drums. No wonder the van hadn't stopped to pick up the nail-studded road litter. The Zombie Bakers had been late for the load-in, and that wasn't good, because on Friday nights, The Stagger Inn was hopping with the bopping, rolling with the strolling, and reeling with the feeling.

"Can your pussy do the dog?" Tess asked, and pulled the filthy carpet remnant a little tighter around her neck. It was no mink stole, but on a cool October night, it was better than nothing.

When Tess got to the intersection of Stagg Road and Route 47, she saw something beautiful: a Gas & Dash with two pay telephones on the cinder-block wall between the restrooms.

She used the Women's first, and had to put a hand over her mouth to stifle a cry when her urine started to flow; it was as if someone had lit a book of matches in there. When she got up from the toilet, fresh tears were rolling down her cheeks. The water in the bowl was a pastel pink. She blotted herself—very gently—with a pad of toilet paper, then flushed. She would have taken another wad to fold into the crotch of her underwear, but of course she couldn't do that. The giant had taken her underpants as a souvenir.

"You bastard," she said.

She paused with her hand on the doorknob, looking at the bruised, wide-eyed woman in the water-spotted metal mirror over the washbasin. Then she went out.

She discovered that using a pay telephone in this modern age had grown strangely difficult, even if you had your calling-card number memorized. The first phone she tried worked only one-way: she could hear the directory assistance operator, but the directory assistance operator couldn't hear her, and broke such connection as there was. The other phone was tilted askew on the cinder-block wall—not encouraging—but it worked. There was a steady annoying underwhine, but at least she and the operator could communicate. Only Tess had no pen or pencil. There were several writing implements in her purse, but of course her purse was gone.

“Can't you just connect me?” she asked the operator.

“No, ma'am, you have to dial it yourself in order to utilize your credit card.” The operator spoke in the voice of someone explaining the obvious to a stupid child. This didn't make Tess angry; she *felt* like a stupid child. Then she saw how dirty the cinder-block wall was. She told the operator to give her the number, and when it came, she wrote it in the dust with her finger.

Before she could start dialing, a truck pulled into the parking lot. Her heart launched itself into her throat with dizzying, acrobatic ease, and when two laughing boys in high school jackets got out and whipped into the store, she was glad it was up there. It blocked the scream that surely would have come out otherwise.

She felt the world trying to go away and leaned her head against the wall for a moment, gasping for breath. She closed her eyes. She saw the giant towering over her, hands in the pockets of his biballs, and opened her eyes again. She dialed the number written in dust on the wall.

She braced herself for an answering machine, or for a bored dispatcher telling her that they had no cars, of course they didn't, it was Friday night, were you born stupid, lady, or did you just grow that way? But the phone was answered on the second ring by a businesslike woman who identified herself as Andrea. She listened

to Tess, and said they would send a car right out, her driver would be Manuel. Yes, she knew exactly where Tess was calling from, because they ran cars out to The Stagger Inn all the time.

“Okay, but I’m not there,” Tess said. “I’m at the intersection about half a mile down from th—”

“Yes, ma’am, I have that,” Andrea said. “The Gas & Dash. Sometimes we go there, too. People often walk down and call if they’ve had a little too much to drink. It’ll probably be forty-five minutes, maybe even an hour.”

“That’s fine,” Tess said. The tears were falling again. Tears of gratitude this time, although she told herself not to relax, because in stories like this the heroine’s hopes so often turned out to be false. “That’s absolutely fine. I’ll be around the corner by the pay telephones. And I’ll be watching.”

Now she’ll ask me if I had a little too much to drink. Because I probably sound that way.

But Andrea only wanted to know if she would be paying with cash or credit.

“American Express. I should be in your computer.”

“Yes, ma’am, you are. Thank you for calling Royal Limousine, where every customer is treated like royalty.” Andrea clicked off before Tess could say she was very welcome.

She started to hang up the phone, and then a man—*him, it’s him*—ran around the corner of the store and right at her. This time there was no chance of screaming; she was paralyzed with terror.

It was one of the teenage boys. He went past without looking at her and hooked a left into the Men’s. The door slammed. A moment later she heard the enthusiastic, horselike sound of a young man voiding an awesomely healthy bladder.

Tess went down the side of the building and around back. There she stood beside a reeking Dumpster (*no, she thought, I’m not standing, I’m lurking*), waiting for the young man to finish and be gone. When he was, she walked back to the pay phones to watch the road. In spite of all the places where she hurt, her belly was rumbling with hunger. She had missed her dinner, had been too busy being raped and almost killed to eat. She would have been glad to have any of the snacks they sold in places like this—even some of

those little nasty peanut butter crackers, so weirdly yellow, would have been a treat—but she had no money. Even if she had, she wouldn't have gone in there. She knew what kind of lights they had in roadside convenience stores like Gas & Dash, those bright and heartless fluorescents that made even healthy people look like they were suffering from pancreatic cancer. The clerk behind the counter would look at her bruised cheeks and forehead, her broken nose and her swollen lips, and he or she might not say anything, but Tess would see the widening of the eyes. And maybe a quickly suppressed twitch of the lips. Because, face it, people could think a beat-up woman was funny. Especially on a Friday night. *Who tuned up on you, lady, and what did you do to deserve it? Wouldn't you come across after some guy spent his overtime on you?*

That reminded her of an old joke she'd heard somewhere: *Why are there three hundred thousand battered women each year in America? Because they won't . . . fuckin . . . listen.*

"Never mind," she whispered. "I'll have something to eat when I get home. Tuna salad, maybe."

It sounded good, but part of her was convinced that her days of eating tuna salad—or nasty yellow convenience-store peanut butter crackers, for that matter—were all over. The idea of a limo pulling up and driving her out of this nightmare was an insane mirage.

From somewhere to her left, Tess could hear cars rushing by on I-84—the road she would have taken if she hadn't been so pleased to be offered a shorter way home. Over there on the turnpike, people who had never been raped or stuffed in pipes were going places. Tess thought the sound of their blithe travel was the loneliest she'd ever heard.

The limo came. It was a Lincoln Town Car. The man behind the wheel got out and looked around. Tess observed him closely from the corner of the store. He was wearing a dark suit. He was a small, bespectacled fellow who didn't look like a rapist . . . but of course not all giants were rapists and not all rapists were giants. She had to trust him, though. If she were to get home and feed Fritzy, there was no other option. So she dropped her filthy makeshift stole beside the pay phone that actually worked and walked slowly and steadily toward the car. The light shining through the store windows seemed blindingly bright after the shadows at the side of the building, and she knew what her face looked like.

He'll ask what happened to me and then he'll ask if I want to go to the hospital.

But Manuel (who might have seen worse, it wasn't impossible) only held the door for her and said, "Welcome to Royal Limousine, ma'am." He had a soft Hispanic accent to go with his olive skin and dark eyes.

"Where I'm treated like royalty," Tess said. She tried to smile. It hurt her swollen lips.

"Yes, ma'am." Nothing else. God bless Manuel, who might have seen worse—perhaps back where he'd come from, perhaps in the back of this very car. Who knew what secrets limo drivers kept? It was a question that might have a good book hidden in it. Not the kind she wrote, of course . . . only who knew what kind of books she might write after this? Or if she would write any more at all? Tonight's adventure might have turned that solitary joy out of her for awhile. Maybe even forever. It was impossible to tell.

She got into the back of the car, moving like an old woman with advanced osteoporosis. When she was seated and he had closed the door, she wrapped her fingers around the handle and watched closely, wanting to make sure it was Manuel who got in behind the wheel and not the giant in the bib overalls. In *Stagg Road Horror 2* it

would have been the giant: one more turn of the screw before the credits. *Have some irony, it's good for your blood.*

But it was Manuel who got in. Of course it was. She relaxed.

"The address I have is 19 Primrose Lane, in Stoke Village. Is that correct?"

For a moment she couldn't remember; she had punched her calling-card number into the pay phone without a pause, but she was blanking on her own address.

Relax, she told herself. It's over. This isn't a horror movie, it's your life. You've had a terrible experience, but it's over. So relax.

"Yes, Manuel, that's right."

"Will you want to be making any stops, or are we going right to your home?" It was the closest he came to mentioning what the lights of the Gas & Dash must have shown him when she walked to the Town Car.

It was only luck that she was still taking her oral contraceptive pills—luck and perhaps optimism, she hadn't had so much as a one-night stand for three years, unless you counted tonight—but luck had been in short supply today, and she was grateful for this short stroke of it. She was sure Manuel could find an all-night pharmacy somewhere along the way, limo drivers seem to know all that stuff, but she didn't think she would have been able to walk into a drugstore and ask for the morning-after pill. Her face would have made it all too obvious why she needed one. And of course there was the money problem.

"No other stops, just take me home, please."

Soon they were on I-84, which was busy with Friday-night traffic. Stagg Road and the deserted store were behind her. What was ahead of her was her own house, with a security system and a lock for every door. And that was good.

It all went exactly as she had visualized: the arrival, the tip added to the credit card slip, the walk up the flower-lined path (she asked Manuel to stay, illuminating her with his headlights, until she was inside), the sound of Fritzy meowing as she tilted the mailbox and fished the emergency key off its hook. Then she was inside and Fritzy was twining anxiously around her feet, wanting to be picked up and stroked, wanting to be fed. Tess did those things, but first she locked the front door behind her, then set the burglar alarm for the first time in months. When she saw **ARMED** flash in the little green window above the keypad, she at last began to feel something like her true self. She looked at the kitchen clock and was astounded to see it was only quarter past eleven.

While Fritzy was eating his Fancy Feast, she checked the doors to the backyard and the side patio, making sure they were both locked. Then the windows. The alarm's command-box was supposed to tell you if something was open, but she didn't trust it. When she was positive everything was secure, she went to the front-hall closet and took down a box that had been on the top shelf so long there was a scrim of dust on the top.

Five years ago there had been a rash of burglaries and home invasions in northern Connecticut and southern Massachusetts. The bad boys were mostly drug addicts hooked on eighties, which was what its many New England fans called OxyContin. Residents were warned to be particularly careful and "take reasonable precautions." Tess had no strong feelings about handguns pro or con, nor had she felt especially worried about strange men breaking in at night (not then), but a gun seemed to come under the heading of reasonable precautions, and she had been meaning to educate herself about pistols for the next Willow Grove book, anyway. The burglary scare had seemed like the perfect opportunity.

She went to the Hartford gun store that rated best on the Internet, and the clerk had recommended a Smith & Wesson .38 model he

called a Lemon Squeezer. She bought it mostly because she liked that name. He also told her about a good shooting range on the outskirts of Stoke Village. Tess had dutifully taken her gun there once the forty-eight-hour waiting period was up and she was actually able to obtain it. She had fired off four hundred rounds or so over the course of a week, enjoying the thrill of banging away at first but quickly becoming bored. The gun had been in the closet ever since, stored in its box along with fifty rounds of ammunition and her carry permit.

She loaded it, feeling better—*safer*—with each filled chamber. She put it on the kitchen counter, then checked the answering machine. There was one message. It was from Patsy McClain next door. “I didn’t see any lights this evening, so I guess you decided to stay over in Chicopee. Or maybe you went to Boston? Anyway, I used the key behind the mailbox and fed Fritzzy. Oh, and I put your mail on the hall table. All adverts, sorry. Call me tomorrow before I go to work, if you’re back. Just want to know you got in safe.”

“Hey, Fritz,” Tess said, bending over to stroke him. “I guess you got double rations tonight. Pretty clever of y—”

Wings of grayness came over her vision, and if she hadn’t caught hold of the kitchen table, she would have gone sprawling full length on the linoleum. She uttered a cry of surprise that sounded faint and faraway. Fritzzy twitched his ears back, gave her a narrow, assessing look, seemed to decide she wasn’t going to fall over (at least not on him), and went back to his second supper.

Tess straightened up slowly, holding onto the table for safety’s sake, and opened the fridge. There was no tuna salad, but there was cottage cheese with strawberry jam. She ate it eagerly, scraping the plastic container with her spoon to get every last curd. It was cool and smooth on her hurt throat. She wasn’t sure she could have eaten flesh, anyway. Not even tuna out of a can.

She drank apple juice straight from the bottle, belched, then trudged to the downstairs bathroom. She took the gun along, curling her fingers outside the trigger guard, as she had been taught.

There was an oval magnifying mirror standing on the shelf above the washbasin, a Christmas gift from her brother in New Mexico. Written in gold-gilt script above it were the words PRETTY ME. The

Old Tess had used it for tweezing her eyebrows and doing quick fixes to her makeup. The new one used it to examine her eyes. They were bloodshot, of course, but the pupils looked the same size. She turned off the bathroom light, counted to twenty, then turned it back on and watched her pupils contract. That looked okay, too. So, probably no skull fracture. Maybe a concussion, a *light* concussion, but—

As if I'd know. I've got a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Connecticut and an advanced degree in old lady detectives who spend at least a quarter of each book exchanging recipes I crib from the Internet and then change just enough so I won't get sued for plagiarism. I could go into a coma or die of a brain hemorrhage in the night. Patsy would find me the next time she came in to feed the cat. You need to see a doctor, Tessa Jean. And you know it.

What she knew was that if she went to her doctor, her misfortune really could become public property. Doctors guaranteed confidentiality, it was a part of their oath, and a woman who made her living as a lawyer or a cleaning woman or a Realtor could probably count on getting it. Tess might get it herself, it was certainly possible. Probable, even. On the other hand, look what had happened to Farrah Fawcett: tabloid-fodder when some hospital employee blabbed. Tess herself had heard rumors about the psychiatric misadventures of a male novelist who had been a chart staple for years with his tales of lusty derring-do. Her own agent had passed the juiciest of these rumors on to Tess over lunch not two months ago . . . and Tess had listened.

I did more than listen, she thought as she looked at her magnified, beaten self. I passed that puppy on just as soon as I could.

Even if the doctor and his staff kept mum about the lady mystery writer who had been beaten, raped, and robbed on her way home from a public appearance, what about the other patients who might see her in the waiting room? To some of them she wouldn't be just another woman with a bruised face that practically screamed beating; she would be Stoke Village's resident novelist, you know the one, they made a TV movie about her old lady detectives a year or two ago, it was on Lifetime Channel, and my God, you should have *seen* her.

Her nose wasn't broken, after all. It was hard to believe anything could hurt that badly and *not* be broken, but it wasn't. Swollen (of course, poor thing), and it hurt, but she could breathe through it and she had some Vicodin upstairs that would manage the pain tonight. But she had a couple of blooming shiners, a bruised and swollen cheek, and a ring of bruises around her throat. That was the worst, the sort of necklace people got in only one way. There were also assorted bumps, bruises, and scratches on her back, legs, and tushie. But clothes and hose would hide the worst of those.

Great. I'm a poet and I don't know it.

"The throat . . . I could wear a turtleneck . . ."

Absolutely. October was turtleneck weather. As for Patsy, she could say she'd fallen downstairs and hit her face in the night. Say that—

"That I thought I heard a noise and Fritzzy got between my feet when I went downstairs to check."

Fritzzy heard his name and meowed from the bathroom door.

"Say I hit my stupid face on the newel post at the bottom. I could even . . ."

Even put a little mark on the post, of course she could. Possibly with the meat-tenderizing hammer she had in one of her kitchen drawers. Nothing gaudy, just a tap or two to chip the paint. Such a story wouldn't fool a doctor (or a sharp old lady detective like Doreen Marquis, doyenne of the Knitting Society), but it would fool sweet Patsy McC, whose husband had surely never raised a hand to her a single time in the twenty years they'd been together.

"It's not that I have anything to be ashamed about," she whispered at the woman in the mirror. The New Woman with the crooked nose and the puffy lips. "It's not that." True, but public exposure would *make* her ashamed. She would be naked. A naked victim.

But what about the women, Tessa Jean? The women in the pipe?

She would have to think about them, but not tonight. Tonight she was tired, in pain, and harrowed to the bottom of her soul.

Deep inside her (in her harrowed soul) she felt a glowing ember of fury at the man responsible for this. The man who had put her in this position. She looked at the pistol lying beside the basin, and knew that if he were here, she would use it on him without a moment's

hesitation. Knowing that made her feel confused about herself. It also made her feel a little stronger.

She chipped at the newel post with the meat-tenderizing hammer, by then so tired she felt like a dream in some other woman's head. She examined the mark, decided it looked too deliberate, and gave several more light taps around the edges of the blow. When she thought it looked like something she might have done with the side of her face—where the worst bruise was—she went slowly up the stairs and down the hall, holding her gun in one hand.

For a moment she hesitated outside her bedroom door, which was standing ajar. What if *he* was in there? If he had her purse, he had her address. The burglar alarm had not been set until she got back (so sloppy). He could have parked his old F-150 around the corner. He could have forced the kitchen door lock. It probably wouldn't have taken much more than a chisel.

If he was here, I'd smell him. That mansweat. And I'd shoot him. No "Lie down on the floor," no "Keep your hands up while I dial 911," no horror-movie bullshit. I'd just shoot him. But you know what I'd say first?

"You like it, it likes you," she said in her low rasp of a voice. Yes. That was it exactly. He wouldn't understand, but *she* would.

She discovered she sort of *wanted* him in her room. That probably meant the New Woman was more than a little crazy, but so what? If it all came out then, it would be worth it. Shooting him would make public humiliation bearable. And look at the bright side! It would probably help sales!

I'd like to see the terror in his eyes when he realized I really meant to do it. That might make at least some of this right.

It seemed to take her groping hand an age to find the bedroom light-switch, and of course she kept expecting her fingers to be grabbed while she fumbled. She took off her clothes slowly, uttering one watery, miserable sob when she unzipped her pants and saw dried blood in her pubic hair.

She ran the shower as hot as she could stand it, washing the places that could bear to be washed, letting the water rinse the rest. The clean hot water. She wanted his smell off her, and the mildewy smell of the carpet remnant, too. Afterward, she sat on the toilet. This time peeing hurt less, but the bolt of pain that went through her head when she tried—very tentatively—to straighten her leaning nose made her cry out. Well, so what? Nell Gwyn, the famous Elizabethan actress, had had a bent nose. Tess was sure she had read that somewhere.

She put on flannel pajamas and shuffled to bed, where she lay with all the lights on and the Lemon Squeezer .38 on the night table, thinking she would never sleep, that her inflamed imagination would turn every sound from the street into the approach of the giant. But then Fritzy jumped up on the bed, curled himself beside her, and began to purr. That was better.

I'm home, she thought. I'm home, I'm home, I'm home.

When she woke up, the inarguably sane light of six AM was streaming through the windows. There were things that needed to be done and decisions that needed to be made, but for the moment it was enough to be alive and in her own bed instead of stuffed into a culvert.

This time peeing felt almost normal, and there was no blood. She got into the shower again, once more running the water as hot as she could stand it, closing her eyes and letting it beat on her throbbing face. When she'd had all of that she could take, she worked shampoo into her hair, doing it slowly and methodically, using her fingers to massage her scalp, skipping the painful spot where he must have hit her. At first the deep scratch on her back stung, but that passed and she felt a kind of bliss. She hardly thought of the shower scene in *Psycho* at all.

The shower was always where she had done her best thinking, a womblike environment, and if she had ever needed to think both hard and well, it was now.

I don't want to see Dr. Hedstrom, and I don't need to see Dr. Hedstrom. That decision's been made, although later—a couple of weeks from now, maybe, when my face looks more or less normal again—I'll have to get checked out for STDs . . .

“Don't forget the AIDS test,” she said, and the thought made her grimace hard enough to hurt her mouth. It was a scary thought. Nevertheless, the test would have to be taken. For her own peace of mind. And none of that addressed what she now recognized as this morning's central issue. What she did or didn't do about her own violation was her own business, but that was not true of the women in the pipe. They had lost far more than she. And what about the next woman the giant attacked? That there would be another she had no doubt. Maybe not for a month or a year, but there would be. As she turned off the shower Tess realized (again) that it might even be her, if he went back to check the culvert and found her gone. And

her clothes gone from the store, of course. If he'd looked through her purse, and surely he had, then he *did* have her address.

"Also my diamond earrings," she said. "Fucking pervert sonofabitch stole my earrings."

Even if he steered clear of the store and the culvert for awhile, those women belonged to her now. They were her responsibility, and she couldn't shirk it just because her picture might appear on the cover of *Inside View*.

In the calm morning light of a suburban Connecticut morning, the answer was ridiculously simple: an anonymous call to the police. The fact that a professional novelist with ten years' experience hadn't thought of it right away almost deserved a yellow penalty card. She would give them the location—the deserted YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU store on Stagg Road—and she would describe the giant. How hard could it be to locate a man like that? Or a blue Ford F-150 pickup with Bondo around the headlights?

Easy-as-can-beezy.

But while she was drying her hair, her eyes fell on her Lemon Squeezer .38 and she thought, *Too easy-as-can-beezy. Because . . .*

"What's in it for me?" she asked Fritzzy, who was sitting in the doorway and looking at her with his luminous green eyes. "Just what's in that for me?"

Standing in the kitchen an hour and a half later. Her cereal bowl soaking in the sink. Her second cup of coffee growing cold on the counter. Talking on the phone.

“Oh my God!” Patsy exclaimed. “I’m coming right over!”

“No, no, I’m fine, Pats. And you’ll be late for work.”

“Saturday mornings are strictly optional, and you should go to the doctor! What if you’re concussed, or something?”

“I’m not concussed, just colorful. And I’d be ashamed to go to the doctor, because I was three drinks over the limit. At least three. The only sensible thing I did all night was call a limo to bring me home.”

“You’re sure your nose isn’t broken?”

“Positive.” Well . . . *almost* positive.

“Is Fritzzy all right?”

Tess burst into perfectly genuine laughter. “I go downstairs half-shot in the middle of the night because the smoke detector’s beeping, trip over the cat and almost kill myself, and your sympathies are with the cat. Nice.”

“Honey, no—”

“I’m just teasing,” Tess said. “Go on to work and stop worrying. I just didn’t want you to scream when you saw me. I’ve got a couple of absolutely beautiful shiners. If I had an ex-husband, you’d probably think he’d paid me a visit.”

“Nobody would dare to put a hand on you,” Patsy said. “You’re feisty, girl.”

“That’s right,” Tess said. “I take no shit.”

“You sound hoarse.”

“On top of everything else, I’m getting a cold.”

“Well . . . if you need something tonight . . . chicken soup . . . a couple of old Percocets . . . a Johnny Depp DVD . . .”

“I’ll call if I do. Now go on. Fashion-conscious women seeking the elusive size six Ann Taylor are depending on you.”

“Piss off, woman,” Patsy said, and hung up, laughing.

Tess took her coffee to the kitchen table. The gun was sitting on it, next to the sugar bowl: not quite a Dalí image, but damn close. Then the image doubled as she burst into tears. It was the memory of her own cheery voice that did it. The sound of the lie she would now live until it felt like the truth. “You bastard!” she shouted. “You fuck-bastard! *I hate you!*”

She had showered twice in less than seven hours and still felt dirty. She had douched, but she thought she could still feel him in there, his . . .

“His cockslime.”

She bolted to her feet, from the corner of her eye glimpsed her alarmed cat racing down the front hall, and arrived at the sink just in time to avoid making a mess on the floor. Her coffee and Cheerios came up in a single hard contraction. When she was sure she was done, she collected her pistol and went upstairs to take another shower.

When she was done and wrapped in a comforting terry-cloth robe, she lay down on her bed to think about where she should go to make her anonymous call. Someplace big and busy would be best. Someplace with a parking lot so she could hang up and then scat. Stoke Village Mall sounded right. There was also the question of which authorities to call. Colewich, or would that be too Deputy Dawg? Maybe the State Police would be better. And she should write down what she meant to say . . . the call would go quicker . . . she'd be less likely to forget anyth . . .

Tess drifted off, lying on her bed in a bar of sunlight.

The telephone was ringing far away, in some adjacent universe. Then it stopped and Tess heard her own voice, the pleasantly impersonal recording that started *You have reached . . .* This was followed by someone leaving a message. A woman. By the time Tess struggled back to wakefulness, the caller had clicked off.

She looked at the clock on the night table and saw it was quarter to ten. She'd slept another two hours. For a moment she was alarmed: maybe she'd suffered a concussion or a fracture after all. Then she relaxed. She'd had a lot of exercise the previous night. Much of it had been extremely unpleasant, but exercise was exercise. Falling asleep again was natural. She might even take another nap this afternoon (another shower for sure), but she had an errand to run first. A responsibility to fulfill.

She put on a long tweed skirt and a turtleneck that was actually too big for her; it lapped the underside of her chin. That was fine with Tess. She had applied concealer to the bruise on her cheek. It didn't cover it completely, nor would even her biggest pair of sunglasses completely obscure her black eyes (the swollen lips were a lost cause), but the makeup helped, just the same. The very act of applying it made her feel more anchored in her life. More in charge.

Downstairs, she pushed the Play button on her answering machine, thinking the call had probably been from Ramona Norville, doing the obligatory day-after follow-up: we had fun, hope you had fun, the feedback was great, please come again (not bloody likely), blah-blah-blah. But it wasn't Ramona. The message was from a woman who identified herself as Betsy Neal. She said she was calling from The Stagger Inn.

"As part of our effort to discourage drinking and driving, our policy is to courtesy-call people who leave their cars in our lot after closing," Betsy Neal said. "Your Ford Expedition, Connecticut license plate 775 NSD, will be available for pickup until five PM this evening. After five it will be towed to Excellent Auto Repair, 1500 John Higgins

Road, North Colewich, at your expense. Please note that we don't have your keys, ma'am. You must have taken them with you." Betsy Neal paused. "We have other property of yours, so please come to the office. Remember that I'll need to see some ID. Thank you and have a nice day."

Tess sat down on her sofa and laughed. Before listening to the Neal woman's canned speech, she had been planning to drive her Expedition to the mall. She didn't have her purse, she didn't have her key-ring, she didn't have her damn *car*, but she had still planned to just walk out to the driveway, climb in, and—

She sat back against the cushion, whooping and pounding a fist on her thigh. Fritzzy was under the easy chair on the other side of the room, looking at her as if she were mad. *We're all mad here, so have another cup of tea*, she thought, and laughed harder than ever.

When she finally stopped (only it felt more like running down), she played the message again. This time what she focused on was the Neal woman saying they had other property of hers. Her purse? Perhaps even her diamond earrings? But that would be too good to be true. Wouldn't it?

Arriving at The Stagger Inn in a black car from Royal Limo might be a little too memorable, so she called Stoke Village Taxi. The dispatcher said they'd be glad to run her out to what he called "The Stagger" for a flat fifty-dollar fee. "Sorry to charge you so much," he said, "but the driver's got to come back empty."

"How do you know that?" Tess asked, bemused.

"Left your car, right? Happens all the time, specially on weekends. Although we also get calls after karaoke nights. Your cab'll be there in fifteen minutes or less."

Tess ate a Pop-Tart (swallowing hurt, but she had lost her first try at breakfast and was hungry), then stood at the living-room window, watching for the taxi and bouncing her spare Expedition key on her palm. She decided on a change of plan. Never mind Stoke Village Mall; once she'd collected her car (and whatever other property Betsy Neal was holding), she would drive the half a mile or so to the Gas & Dash and call the police from there.

It seemed only fitting.

When her cab turned onto Stagg Road, Tess's pulse began to rise. By the time they reached The Stagger Inn, it was flying along at what felt like a hundred and thirty beats a minute. The cabbie must have seen something in his rearview mirror . . . or maybe it was just the visible signs of the beating that prompted his question.

"Everything okay, ma'am?"

"Peachy," she said. "It's just that I didn't plan on coming back here this morning."

"Few do," the cabbie said. He was sucking on a toothpick, which made a slow and philosophical journey from one side of his mouth to the other. "They got your keys, I suppose? Left em with the bartender?"

"Oh, no trouble there," she said brightly. "But they're holding other property for me—the lady who called wouldn't say what, and I can't for the life of me think what it could be." *Good God, I sound like one of my old lady detectives.*

The cabbie rolled his toothpick back to its starting point. It was his only reply.

"I'll pay you an extra ten dollars to wait until I come out," Tess said, nodding at the roadhouse. "I want to make sure my car starts."

"No problem-o," the cabbie said.

And if I scream because he's in there, waiting for me, come on the run, okay?

But she wouldn't have said that even if she could have done so without sounding absolutely bonkers. The cabdriver was fat, fifty, and wheezy. He'd be no match for the giant if this was a setup . . . which in a horror movie, it would be.

Lured back, Tess thought dismally. *Lured back by a phone call from the giant's girlfriend, who's just as crazy as he is.*

Foolish, paranoid idea, but the walk to The Stagger Inn's door seemed long, and the hard-packed dirt made her walking shoes seem very loud: *clump-clud-clump*. The parking lot that had been a

sea of cars last night was now deserted save for four automotive islands, one of which was her Expedition. It was at the very back of the lot—sure, he would not have wanted to be observed putting it there—and she could see the left front tire. It was a plain old blackwall that didn't match the other three, but otherwise it looked fine. He had changed her tire. Of course he had. How else could he have moved it away from his . . . his . . .

His recreational facility. His kill-zone. He drove it down here, parked, walked back to the deserted store, and then off he went in his old F-150. Good thing I didn't come to sooner; he'd have found me wandering around in a daze and I wouldn't be here now.

She looked back over her shoulder. In one of the movies she now could not stop thinking about, she surely would have seen the cab speeding away (*leaving me to my fate*), but it was still right there. She lifted a hand to the driver, and he lifted his in return. She was fine. Her car was here and the giant wasn't. The giant was at his house (his *lair*), quite possibly still sleeping off the previous evening's exertions.

The sign on the door said WE ARE CLOSED. Tess knocked and got no response. She tried the knob and when it turned, sinister movie plots returned to her mind. The really stupid plots where the knob always turns and the heroine calls out (in a tremulous voice), "Is anybody there?" Everyone knows she's crazy to go in, but she does anyway.

Tess looked back at the cab again, saw it was still right there, reminded herself that she was carrying a loaded gun in her spare purse, and went in anyway.

She entered a foyer that ran the length of the building on the parking lot side. The walls were decorated with publicity stills: bands in leather, bands in jeans, an all-girl band in miniskirts. An auxiliary bar stretched out beyond the coat racks; no stools, just a rail where you could have a drink while you waited for someone or because the bar inside was too packed. A single red sign glowed above the ranked bottles: BUDWEISER.

You like Bud, Bud likes you, Tess thought.

She took off her dark glasses so she could walk without stumbling into something and crossed the foyer to peep into the main room. It was vast and redolent of beer. There was a disco ball, now dark and still. The wooden floor reminded her of the roller-skating rink where she and her girlfriends had all but lived during the summer between eighth grade and high school. The instruments were still up on the bandstand, suggesting that The Zombie Bakers would be back tonight for another heaping bowl of rock n roll.

"Hello?" Her voice echoed.

"I'm right here," a voice replied softly from behind her.

If it had been a man's voice, Tess would have shrieked. She managed to avoid that, but she still whirled around so quickly that she stumbled a little. The woman standing in the coat alcove—a skinny breath of a thing, no more than five feet three—blinked in surprise and took a step back. "Whoa, easy."

"You startled me," Tess said.

"I see I did." The woman's tiny, perfect oval of a face was surrounded by a cloud of teased black hair. A pencil peeked from it. She had piquant blue eyes that didn't quite match. *A Picasso girl*, Tess thought. "I was in the office. Are you the Expedition lady or the Honda lady?"

"Expedition."

"Have ID?"

"Yes, two pieces, but only one with my picture on it. My passport. The other stuff was in my purse. My other purse. I thought that was what you might have."

"No, sorry. Maybe you stashed it under the seat, or something? We only look in the glove compartments, and of course we can't even do that if the car is locked. Yours wasn't, and your phone number was on the insurance card. But probably you know that. Maybe you'll find your purse at home." Neal's voice suggested that this wasn't likely. "One photo ID will be okay if it looks like you, I guess."

Neal led Tess to a door at the back of the coat area, then down a narrow curving corridor that skirted the main room. There were more band photos on the walls. At one point they passed through a fume of chlorine that stung Tess's eyes and tender throat.

"If you think the johns smell now, you should be here when the joint is going full tilt," Neal said, then added, "Oh, I forgot—you were."

Tess made no comment.

At the end of the hallway was a door marked OFFICE STAFF ONLY. The room beyond was large, pleasant, and filled with morning sunshine. A framed picture of Barack Obama hung on the wall, above a bumper sticker bearing the YES WE CAN slogan. Tess couldn't see her cab—the building was in the way—but she could see its shadow.

That's good. Stay right there and get your ten bucks. And if I don't come out, don't come in. Just call the police.

Neal went to the desk in the corner and sat down. "Let's see your ID."

Tess opened her purse, fumbled past the .38, and brought out her passport and her Authors Guild card. Neal gave the passport photo only a cursory glance, but when she saw the Guild card, her eyes widened. "You're the Willow Grove lady!"

Tess smiled gamely. It hurt her lips. "Guilty as charged." Her voice sounded foggy, as though she were getting over a bad cold.

"My gran loves those books!"

"Many grans do," Tess said. "When the affection finally filters down to the next generation—the one not currently living on fixed incomes—I'm going to buy myself a château in France."

Sometimes this earned her a smile. Not from Ms. Neal, however. "I hope that didn't happen here." She wasn't more specific and didn't have to be. Tess knew what she was talking about, and Betsy Neal knew she knew.

Tess thought of revisiting the story she'd already told Patsy—the beeping smoke detector alarm, the cat under her feet, the collision with the newel post—and didn't bother. This woman had a look of daytime efficiency about her and probably visited The Stagger Inn as infrequently as possible during its hours of operation, but she was clearly under no illusions about what sometimes happened here when the hour grew late and the guests grew drunk. She was, after all, the one who came in early on Saturday mornings to make the courtesy calls. She had probably heard her share of morning-after stories featuring midnight stumbles, slips in the shower, etc., etc.

"Not here," Tess said. "Don't worry."

"Not even in the parking lot? If you ran into trouble there, I'll have to have Mr. Rumble talk with the security staff. Mr. Rumble's the

boss, and security's supposed to check the video monitors regularly on busy nights."

"It happened after I left."

I really do have to make the report anonymously now, if I mean to report it at all. Because I'm lying, and she'll remember.

If she meant to report it at all? Of course she did. Right?

"I'm very sorry." Neal paused, seeming to debate with herself. Then she said, "I don't mean to offend you, but you probably don't have any business in a place like this to begin with. It didn't turn out so well for you, and if it got into the papers . . . well, my gran would be very disappointed."

Tess agreed. And because she could embellish convincingly (it was the talent that paid the bills, after all), she did. "A bad boyfriend is sharper than a serpent's tooth. I think the Bible says that. Or maybe it's Dr. Phil. In any case, I've broken up with him."

"A lot of women say that, then weaken. And a guy who does it once—"

"Will do it again. Yes, I know, I was very foolish. If you don't have my purse, what property of mine *do* you have?"

Ms. Neal turned in her swivel chair (the sun licked across her face, momentarily highlighting those unusual blue eyes), opened one of her file cabinets, and brought out Tom the Tomtom. Tess was delighted to see her old traveling buddy. It didn't make things all better, but it was a step in the right direction.

"We're not supposed to remove anything from patrons' cars, just get the address and the phone number if we can, then lock it up, but I didn't like to leave this. Thieves don't mind breaking a window to get a particularly tasty item, and it was sitting right there on your dashboard."

"Thank you." Tess felt tears springing into her eyes behind her dark glasses and willed them back. "That was very thoughtful."

Betsy Neal smiled, which transformed her stern Ms. Taking Care of Business face to radiant in an instant. "Very welcome. And when that boyfriend of yours comes crawling back, asking for a second chance, think of my gran and all your other loyal readers and tell him no way Jose." She considered. "But do it with the chain on your door. Because a bad boyfriend really *is* sharper than a serpent's tooth."

“That’s good advice. Listen, I have to go. I told the cab to wait while I made sure I was really going to get my car.”

And that might have been all—it really might have been—but then Neal asked, with becoming diffidence, if Tess would mind signing an autograph for her grandmother. Tess told her of course not, and in spite of all that had happened, watched with real amusement as Neal found a piece of business stationery and used a ruler to tear off the Stagger Inn logo at the top before handing it across the desk.

“Make it ‘To Mary, a true fan.’ Can you do that?”

Tess could. And as she was adding the date, a fresh confabulation came to mind. “A man helped me when my boyfriend and I were . . . you know, tussling. If not for him, I might have been hurt a lot worse.” *Yes! Raped, even!* “I’d like to thank him, but I don’t know his name.”

“I doubt if I could do you much good there. I’m just the office help.”

“But you’re local, right?”

“Yes . . .”

“I met him at the little store down the road.”

“The Gas & Dash?”

“I think that’s the name. It’s where my boyfriend and I had our argument. It was about the car. I didn’t want to drive and I wouldn’t let him. We were arguing about it all the time we walked down the road . . . staggered down the road . . . staggered down Stagg Road . . .”

Neal smiled as people do when they’ve heard a joke many times before.

“Anyway, this guy came along in an old blue pickup truck with that plastic stuff for rust around the headlights—”

“Bondo?”

“I think that’s what it’s called.” Knowing damn well that was what it was called. Her father had supported the company almost single-handed. “Anyway, I remember thinking when he got out that he wasn’t really riding in that truck, he was wearing it.”

When she handed the signed sheet of paper back across the desk, she saw that Betsy Neal was now actually grinning. “Oh my God, I might actually know who he was.”

“Really?”

“Was he big or was he *real* big?”

“Real big,” Tess said. She felt a peculiar watchful happiness that seemed located not in her head but in the center of her chest. It was the way she felt when the strings of some outlandish plot actually started to come together, pulling tight like the top of a nicely crafted tote-bag. She always felt both surprised and not surprised when this happened. There was no satisfaction like it.

“Did you happen to notice if he was wearing a ring on his little finger? Red stone?”

“Yes! Like a ruby! Only too big to be real. And a brown hat—”

Neal was nodding. “With white splatters on it. He’s been wearing the damn thing for ten years. That’s Big Driver you’re talking about. I don’t know where he lives, but he’s local, either Colewich or Nestor Falls. I see him around—supermarket, hardware store, Walmart, places like that. And once you see him, you don’t forget him. His real name is Al Something-Polish. You know, one of those hard-to-pronounce names. Strelkowicz, Stancowitz, something like that. I bet I could find him in the phone book, because he and his brother own a trucking company. Hawkline, I think it’s called. Or maybe Eagle Line. Something with a bird in it, anyway. Want me to look him up?”

“No, thanks,” Tess said pleasantly. “You’ve been helpful enough, and my cabdriver’s waiting.”

“Okay. Just do yourself a favor and stay away from that boyfriend of yours. And stay away from The Stagger. Of course, if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll have to find you and kill you.”

“Fair enough,” Tess said, smiling. “I’d deserve it.” At the doorway, she turned back. “A favor?”

“If I can.”

“If you happen to see Al Something-Polish around town, don’t mention that you talked to me.” She smiled more widely. It hurt her lips, but she did it. “I want to surprise him. Give him a little gift, or something.”

“Not a problem.”

Tess lingered a bit longer. “I love your eyes.”

Neal shrugged and smiled. “Thanks. They don’t quite match, do they? It used to make me self-conscious, but now . . .”

“Now it works for you,” Tess said. “You grew into them.”

“I guess I did. I even picked up some work modeling in my twenties. But sometimes, you know what? It’s better to grow out of things. Like a taste for bad-tempered men.”

To that there seemed to be nothing to say.

She made sure her Expedition would start, then tipped the cabdriver twenty instead of ten. He thanked her with feeling, then drove away toward the I-84. Tess followed, but not until she'd plugged Tom back into the cigarette lighter receptacle and powered him up.

"Hello, Tess," Tom said. "I see we're taking a trip."

"Just home, Tommy-boy," she said, and pulled out of the parking lot, very aware she was riding on a tire that had been mounted by the man who had almost killed her. Al Something-Polish. A truck-driving son of a gun. "One stop on the way."

"I don't know what you're thinking, Tess, but you should be careful."

If she had been home instead of in her car, Fritzzy would have been the one to say this, and Tess would have been equally unsurprised. She had been making up voices and conversations since childhood, although at the age of eight or nine, she'd quit doing it around other people, unless it was for comic effect.

"I don't know what I'm thinking, either," she said, but this was not quite true.

Up ahead was the US 47 intersection, and the Gas & Dash. She signaled, turned in, and parked with the Expedition's nose centered between the two pay phones on the side of the building. She saw the number for Royal Limousine on the dusty cinder block between them. The numbers were crooked, straggling, written by a finger that hadn't been able to stay steady. A chill shivered its way up her back, and she wrapped her arms around herself, hugging hard. Then she got out and went to the pay phone that still worked.

The instruction card had been defaced, maybe by a drunk with a car key, but she could still read the salient information: no charge for 911 calls, just lift the handset and punch in the numbers. Easy-as-can-beezy.

She punched 9, hesitated, punched 1, then hesitated again. She visualized a piñata, and a woman poised to hit it with a stick. Soon

everything inside would come tumbling out. Her friends and associates would know she had been raped. Patsy McClain would know the story about stumbling over Fritzzy in the dark was a shame-driven lie . . . and that Tess hadn't trusted her enough to tell the truth. But really, those weren't the main things. She supposed she could stand up to a little public scrutiny, especially if it kept the man Betsy Neal had called Big Driver from raping and killing another woman. Tess realized that she might even be perceived as a heroine, a thing that had been impossible to even consider last night, when urinating hurt enough to make her cry and her mind kept returning to the image of her stolen panties in the center pocket of the giant's bib overalls.

Only . . .

"What's in it for me?" she asked again. She spoke very quietly, while looking at the telephone number she'd written in the dust. "What's in that for me?"

And thought: *I have a gun and I know how to use it.*

She hung up the phone and went back to her car. She looked at Tom's screen, which was showing the intersection of Stagg Road and Route 47. "I need to think about this some more," she said.

"What's to think about?" Tom asked. "If you were to kill him and then get caught, you'd go to jail. Raped or not."

"That's what I need to think about," she said, and turned onto US 47, which would take her to I-84.

Traffic on the big highway was Saturday-morning light, and being behind the wheel of her Expedition was good. Soothing. Normal. Tom was quiet until she passed the sign reading EXIT 9 STOKE VILLAGE 2 MILES. Then he said, "Are you sure it was an accident?"

"What?" Tess jumped, startled. She had heard Tom's words coming out of her mouth, spoken in the deeper voice she always used for the make-believe half of her make-believe conversations (it was a voice very little like Tom the Tomtom's actual robo-voice), but it didn't feel like her *thought*. "Are you saying the bastard raped me by *accident*?"

"No," Tom replied. "I'm saying that if it had been up to you, you would have gone back the way you came. *This* way. I-84. But

somebody had a better idea, didn't they? Somebody knew a shortcut."

"Yes," she agreed. "Ramona Norville did." She considered it, then shook her head. "That's pretty far-fetched, my friend."

To this Tom made no reply.

Leaving the Gas & Dash, she had planned to go online and see if she could locate a trucking company, maybe a small independent, that operated out of Colewich or one of the surrounding towns. A company with a bird name, probably hawk or eagle. It was what the Willow Grove ladies would have done; they loved their computers and were always texting each other like teenagers. Other considerations aside, it would be interesting to see if her version of amateur sleuthing worked in real life.

Driving up the I-84 exit ramp a mile and a half from her house, she decided that she would do a little research on Ramona Norville first. Who knew, she might discover that, besides presiding over Books & Brown Baggers, Ramona was president of the Chicopee Rape Prevention Society. It was even plausible. Tess's hostess had pretty clearly been not just a lesbian but a *dyke* lesbian, and women of that persuasion were often not fond of men who were *non-rapists*.

"Many arsonists belong to their local volunteer fire departments," Tom observed as she turned onto her street.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Tess asked.

"That you shouldn't eliminate anyone based on their public affiliations. The Knitting Society ladies would never do that. But by all means check her out online." Tom spoke in a be-my-guest tone that Tess hadn't quite expected. It was mildly irritating.

"How kind of you to give me permission, Thomas," she said.

But when she was in her office with her computer booted up, she only stared at the Apple welcome screen for the first five minutes, wondering if she was really thinking of finding the giant and using her gun, or if that was just the sort of fantasy to which liars-for-profit such as herself were prone. A revenge fantasy, in this case. She avoided those kinds of movies, too, but she knew they were out there; you couldn't avoid the vibe of your culture unless you were a total recluse, and Tess wasn't. In the revenge movies, admirably muscular fellows like Charles Bronson and Sylvester Stallone didn't bother with the police, they got the baddies on their own. Frontier justice. Do you feel lucky, punk. She believed that even Jodie Foster, one of Yale's more famous graduates, had made a movie of this type. Tess couldn't quite remember the title. *The Courageous Woman*, maybe? It was something like that, anyway.

Her computer flipped to the word-of-the-day screen-saver. Today's word was *cormorant*, which just happened to be a bird.

"When you send your goodies by Cormorant Trucking, you'll think you're flying," Tess said in her deep pretending-to-be-Tom voice. Then she tapped a key and the screen-saver disappeared. She went online, but not to one of the search engines, at least not to begin with. First she went to YouTube and typed in RICHARD WIDMARK, with no idea at all why she was doing it. No conscious one, anyway.

Maybe I want to find out if the guy's really worthy of fanship, she thought. *Ramona certainly thinks so.*

There were lots of clips. The top-rated one was a six-minute compilation titled **HE'S BAD, HE'S REALLY BAD**. Several hundred thousand people had viewed it. There were scenes from three movies, but the one that transfixed her was the first. It was black-and-white, it looked on the cheap side . . . but it was definitely one of *those* movies. Even the title told you so: *Kiss of Death*.

Tess watched the entire video, then returned to the *Kiss of Death* segment twice. Widmark played a giggling hood menacing an old

lady in a wheelchair. He wanted information: "Where's that squealin' son of yours?" And when the old lady wouldn't tell him: "You know what I do to squealers? I let em have it in the belly, so they can roll around for a long time, thinkin' it over."

He didn't shoot the old lady in the belly, though. He tied her into her wheelchair with a lamp cord and pushed her down the stairs.

Tess exited YouTube, Binged Richard Widmark, and found what she expected, given the power of that brief clip. Although he had played in many subsequent movies, more and more often as the hero, he was best known for *Kiss of Death*, and the giggling, psychotic Tommy Udo.

"Big deal," Tess said. "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

"Meaning what?" Fritzy asked from the windowsill where he was sunning himself.

"Meaning Ramona probably fell in love with him after seeing him play a heroic sheriff or a courageous battleship commander, or something like that."

"She must have," Fritzy agreed, "because if you're right about her sexual orientation, she probably doesn't idolize men who murder old ladies in wheelchairs."

Of course that was true. Good thinking, Fritzy.

The cat regarded Tess with a skeptical eye and said, "But maybe you're not right about that."

"Even if I'm not," Tess said, "*nobody* roots for psycho bad guys."

She recognized this for the stupidity it was as soon as it was out of her mouth. If people didn't root for psychos, they wouldn't still be making movies about the nut in the hockey mask and the burn victim with scissors for fingers. But Fritzy did her the courtesy of not laughing.

"You better not," Tess said. "If you're tempted, remember who fills your food dish."

She googled *Ramona Norville*, got forty-four thousand hits, added *Chicopee*, and got a more manageable twelve hundred (although even most of those, she knew, would be coincidental dreck). The first relevant one was from the *Chicopee Weekly Reminder*, and concerned Tess herself: LIBRARIAN RAMONA NORVILLE ANNOUNCES "WILLOW GROVE FRIDAY."

“There I am, the starring attraction,” Tess murmured. “Hooray for Tessa Jean. Now let’s see my supporting actress.” But when she pulled up the clipping, the only photo Tess saw was her own. It was the bare-shoulders publicity shot her part-time assistant routinely sent out. She wrinkled her nose and went back to Google, not sure why she wanted to look at Ramona again, only knowing that she did. When she finally found a photo of the librarian, she saw what her subconscious might already have suspected, at least judging by Tom’s comments on the ride back to her house.

It was in a story from the August 3 issue of the *Weekly Reminder*. BROWN BAGGERS ANNOUNCE SPEAKING SCHEDULE FOR FALL, the headline read. Below it, Ramona Norville stood on the library steps, smiling and squinting into the sun. A bad photograph, taken by a part-timer without much talent, and a bad (but probably typical) choice of clothes on Norville’s part. The man-tailored blazer made her look as wide in the chest as a pro football tackle. Her shoes were ugly brown flatboats. A pair of too-tight gray slacks showcased what Tess and her friends back in middle school had called “thunder thighs.”

“Holy fucking shit, Fritzzy,” she said. Her voice was watery with dismay. “Look at this.” Fritzzy didn’t come over to look and didn’t reply—how could he, when she was too upset to make his voice?

Make sure of what you’re seeing, she told herself. You’ve had a terrible shock, Tessa Jean, maybe the biggest shock a woman can have, short of a mortal diagnosis in a doctor’s office. So make sure.

She closed her eyes and summoned the image of the man from the old Ford pickup truck with the Bondo around the headlights. He had seemed so friendly at first. *Didn’t think you were going to meet the Jolly Green Giant out here in the williwags, didja?*

Only he *hadn’t* been green, he’d been a tanned hulk of a man who didn’t ride in his pickup but wore it.

Ramona Norville, not a Big Driver but certainly a Big Librarian, was too old to be his sister. And if she was a lesbian now, she hadn’t always been one, because the resemblance was unmistakable.

Unless I’m badly mistaken, I’m looking at a picture of my rapist’s mother.

She went to the kitchen and had a drink of water, but water wasn't getting it. An old half-filled bottle of tequila had been brooding in a back corner of a kitchen cabinet for donkey's years. She took it out, considered a glass, then nipped directly from the bottle. It stung her mouth and throat, but had a positive effect otherwise. She helped herself to more—a sip rather than a nip—and then put the bottle back. She had no intention of getting drunk. If she had ever needed her wits about her, she needed them about her today.

Rage—the biggest, truest rage of her adult life—had invaded her like a fever, but it wasn't like any fever she had known previously. It circulated like weird serum, cold on the right side of her body, then hot on the left, where her heart was. It seemed to come nowhere near her head, which remained clear. Clearer since she'd had the tequila, actually.

She paced a series of rapid circles around the kitchen, head down, one hand massaging the ring of bruises around her throat. It did not occur to her that she was circling her kitchen as she had circled the deserted store after crawling out of the pipe Big Driver had meant for her tomb. Did she really think Ramona Norville had sent her, Tess, to her psychotic son like some kind of sacrifice? Was that likely? It was not. Could she even be sure that the two of them were mother and son, based on one bad photograph and her own memory?

But my memory's good. Especially my memory for faces.

Well, so she thought, but probably everyone did. Right?

Yes, and the whole idea's crazy. You have to admit it is.

She did admit it, but she had seen crazier things on true-crime programs (which she *did* watch). The ladies with the apartment house in San Francisco who had spent years killing their elderly tenants for their Social Security checks and burying them in the backyard. The airline pilot who murdered his wife, then froze the body so he could run her through the woodchipper behind the

garage. The man who had doused his own children with gasoline and cooked them like Cornish game hens to make sure his wife never got the custody the courts had awarded her. A woman sending victims to her own son was shocking and unlikely . . . but not impossible. When it came to the dark fuckery of the human heart, there seemed to be no limit.

“Oh boy,” she heard herself saying in a voice that combined dismay and anger. “Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy.”

Find out. Find out for sure. If you can.

She went back to her trusty computer. Her hands were trembling badly, and it took her three tries to enter COLEWICH TRUCKING FIRMS in the search field at the top of the Google page. Finally she got it right, hit enter, and there it was, at the top of the list: RED HAWK TRUCKING. The entry took her to the Red Hawk website, which featured a badly animated big rig with what she assumed was a red hawk on the side and a bizarre smiley-head man behind the wheel. The truck crossed the screen from right to left, flipped and came back left to right, then flipped again. An endless crisscross journey. The company’s motto flashed red, white, and blue above the animated truck: THE SMILES COME WITH THE SERVICE!

For those wishing to journey beyond the welcome screen, there were four or five choices, including phone numbers, rates, and testimonials from satisfied customers. Tess skipped these and clicked on the last one, which read CHECK OUT THE NEWEST ADDITION TO OUR FLEET! And when the picture came up, the final piece fell into place.

It was a much better photograph than the one of Ramona Norville standing on the library steps. In it, Tess’s rapist was sitting behind the wheel of a shiny cab-over Pete with RED HAWK TRUCKING COLEWICH, MASSACHUSETTS written on the door in fancy script. He wasn’t wearing his bleach-splattered brown cap, and the bristly blond crewcut revealed by its absence made him look even more like his mother, almost eerily so. His cheerful, you-can-trust-me grin was the one Tess had seen yesterday afternoon. The one he’d still been wearing when he said *Instead of changing your tire, how about I fuck you? How would that be?*

Looking at the photo made the weird rageserum cycle faster through her system. There was a pounding in her temples that wasn't exactly a headache; in fact, it was almost pleasant.

He was wearing the red glass ring.

The caption below the picture read: "Al Strehlke, President of Red Hawk Trucking, seen here behind the wheel of the company's newest acquisition, a 2008 Peterbilt 389. This horse of a hauler is now available to our customers, who are THE FINEST IN ALL THE LAND. Say! Doesn't Al look like a Proud Papa?"

She heard him calling her a bitch, a whiny whore bitch, and clenched her hands into fists. She felt her fingernails sinking into her palms and clenched them even tighter, relishing the pain.

Proud Papa. That was what her eyes kept returning to. *Proud Papa.* The rage moved faster and faster, circling through her body the way she had circled her kitchen. The way she had circled the store last night, moving in and out of consciousness like an actress through a series of spotlights.

You're going to pay, Al. And never mind the cops, I'm the one coming to collect.

And then there was Ramona Norville. The proud papa's proud mama. Although Tess was still not sure of her. Partly it was not wanting to believe that a woman could allow something so horrible to happen to another woman, but she could also see an innocent explanation. Chicopee wasn't that far from Colewich, and Ramona would have used the Stagg Road shortcut all the time when she went there.

"To visit her son," Tess said, nodding. "To visit the proud papa with the new cab-over Pete. For all I know, she might be the one who took the picture of him behind the wheel." And why wouldn't she recommend her favorite route to that day's speaker?

But why didn't she say, "I go that way all the time to visit my son"? Wouldn't that be natural?

"Maybe she doesn't talk to strangers about the Strehlke phase of her life," Tess said. "The phase before she discovered short hair and comfortable shoes." It was possible, but there was the scatter of nail-studded boards to think about. The trap. Norville had sent her that way, and the trap had been set ahead of time. Because she had

called him? Called him and said *I'm sending you a juicy one, don't miss out?*

It still doesn't mean she was involved . . . or not knowingly involved. The proud papa could keep track of her guest speakers, how hard would that be?

"Not hard at all," Fritzzy said after leaping up on her filing cabinet. He began to lick one of his paws.

"And if he saw a photo of one he liked . . . a reasonably attractive one . . . I suppose he'd know his mother would send her back by . . ." She stopped. "No, that doesn't scan. Without some input from Ma, how would he know I wasn't driving to my home in Boston? Or flying back to my home in New York City?"

"You googled *him*," Fritzzy said. "Maybe he googled *you*. Just like she did. Everything's on the Internet these days; you said so yourself."

That hung together, if only by a thread.

She thought there was one way to find out for sure, and that was to pay Ms. Norville a surprise visit. Look in her eyes when she saw Tess. If there was nothing in them but surprise and curiosity at the Return of the Willow Grove Scribe . . . to Ramona's home rather than her library . . . that would be one thing. But if there was fear in them as well, the kind that might be prompted by the thought *why are you here instead of in a rusty culvert on the Stagg Road . . . well . . .*

"That would be different, Fritzzy. Wouldn't it?"

Fritzzy looked at her with his cunning green eyes, still licking his paw. It looked harmless, that paw, but there were claws hidden inside it. Tess had seen them, and on occasion felt them.

She found out where I lived; let's see if I can return the favor.

Tess went back to her computer, this time searching for a Books & Brown Baggers website. She was quite sure she'd find one—everybody had websites these days, there were prisoners doing life for murder who had websites—and she did. The Brown Baggers posted newsy notes about their members, book reviews, and informal summaries—not quite minutes—of their meetings. Tess chose the latter and began scrolling. It did not take her long to discover that the June 10 meeting had been held at Ramona Norville's home in Brewster. Tess had never been to this town, but

knew where it was, had passed a green turnpike sign pointing to it while on her way to yesterday's gig. It was only two or three exits south of Chicopee.

Next she went to the Brewster Township tax records and scrolled down until she found Ramona's name. She had paid \$913.06 in property taxes the year before; said property at 75 Lacemaker Lane.

"Found you, dear," Tess murmured.

"You need to think about how you're going to handle this," Fritzzy said. "And about how far you're willing to go."

"If I'm right," Tess said, "maybe quite far."

She started to turn off her computer, then thought of one more thing worth checking out, although she knew it might come to nothing. She went to the *Weekly Reminder's* home page and clicked on OBITUARIES. There was a place to enter the name you were interested in, and Tess typed STREHLKE. There was a single hit, for a man named Roscoe Strehlke. According to the 1999 obit, he had died suddenly in his home, at the age of forty-eight. Survived by his wife, Ramona, and two sons: Alvin (23) and Lester (17). For a mystery writer, even of the bloodless sort known as "cozies," *died suddenly* was a red flag. She searched the *Reminder's* general database and found nothing more.

She sat still for a moment, drumming her fingers restlessly against the arms of her chair as she did when she was working and found herself stuck for a word, a phrase, or a way of describing something. Then she looked for a list of newspapers in western and southern Massachusetts, and found the Springfield *Republican*. When she typed the name of Ramona Norville's husband, the headline that came up was stark and to the point: CHICOPEE BUSINESSMAN COMMITS SUICIDE.

Strehlke had been discovered in his garage, hanging from a rafter. There was no note and Ramona wasn't quoted, but a neighbor said that Mr. Strehlke had been distraught over "some trouble his older boy had been in."

"What kind of trouble was Al in that got you so upset?" Tess asked the computer screen. "Was it something to do with a girl? Assault, maybe? Sexual battery? Was he working up to bigger things, even

then? If that's why you hung yourself, you were one chickenshit daddy."

"Maybe Roscoe had help," Fritzzy said. "From Ramona. Big strong woman, you know. You *ought* to know; you saw her."

Again, that didn't sound like the voice she made when she was essentially talking to herself. She looked at Fritzzy, startled. Fritzzy looked back: green eyes asking *who, me?*

What Tess wanted to do was drive directly to Lacemaker Lane with her gun in her purse. What she *ought* to do was stop playing detective and call the police. Let them handle it. It was what the Old Tess would have done, but she was no longer that woman. That woman now seemed to her like a distant relative, the kind you sent a card to at Christmas and forgot for the rest of the year.

Because she couldn't decide—and because she hurt all over—she went upstairs and back to bed. She slept for four hours and got up almost too stiff to walk. She took two extra-strength Tylenol, waited until they improved matters, then drove down to Blockbuster video. She carried the Lemon Squeezer in her purse. She thought she would always carry it now while she was riding alone.

She got to Blockbuster just before closing and asked for a Jodie Foster movie called *The Courageous Woman*. The clerk (who had green hair, a safety pin in one ear, and looked all of eighteen years old) smiled indulgently and told her the film was actually called *The Brave One*. Mr. Retro Punk told her that for an extra fifty cents, she could get a bag of microwave popcorn to go with. Tess almost said no, then reconsidered. "Why the fuck not?" she asked Mr. Retro Punk. "You only live once, right?"

He gave her a startled, reconsidering look, then smiled and agreed that it was a case of one life to a customer.

At home, she popped the corn, inserted the DVD, and plopped onto the couch with a pillow at the small of her back to cushion the scrape there. Fritzzy joined her and they watched Jodie Foster go after the men (the *punks*, as in *do you feel lucky, punk*) who had killed her boyfriend. Foster got assorted other punks along the way, and used a pistol to do it. *The Brave One* was very much *that* kind of a movie, but Tess enjoyed it just the same. She thought it made perfect sense. She also thought that she had been missing

something all these years: the low but authentic catharsis movies like *The Brave One* offered. When it was over, she turned to Fritzzy and said, "I wish Richard Widmark had met Jodie Foster instead of the old lady in the wheelchair, don't you?"

Fritzzy agreed one thousand percent.

Lying in bed that night with an October wind getting up to dickens around the house and Fritzzy beside her, curled up nose to tail, Tess made an agreement with herself: if she woke up tomorrow feeling as she did now, she would go to see Ramona Norville, and perhaps after Ramona—depending on how things turned out on Lacemaker Lane—she would pay a visit to Alvin “Big Driver” Strehlke. More likely she’d wake up with some semblance of sanity restored and call the police. No anonymous call, either; she’d face the music and dance. Proving actual rape forty hours and God knew how many showers after the fact might be difficult, but the signs of sexual battery were written all over her body.

And the women in the pipe: she was their advocate, like it or not.

Tomorrow all these revenge ideas will seem silly to me. Like the kind of delusions people have when they’re sick with a high fever.

But when she woke up on Sunday, she was still in full New Tess mode. She looked at the gun on the night table and thought, *I want to use it. I want to take care of this myself, and given what I’ve been through, I deserve to take care of it myself.*

“But I need to make sure, and I don’t want to get caught,” she said to Fritzzy, who was now on his feet and stretching, getting ready for another exhausting day of lying around and snacking from his bowl.

Tess showered, dressed, then took a yellow legal pad out to the sunporch. She stared at her back lawn for almost fifteen minutes, occasionally sipping at a cooling cup of tea. Finally she wrote DON’T GET CAUGHT at the top of the first sheet. She considered this soberly, and then began making notes. As with each day’s work when she was writing a book, she started slowly, but picked up speed.

By ten o'clock she was ravenous. She cooked herself a huge brunch and ate every bite. Then she took her movie back to Blockbuster and asked if they had *Kiss of Death*. They didn't, but after ten minutes of browsing, she settled on a substitute called *Last House on the Left*. She took it home and watched closely. In the movie, men raped a young girl and left her for dead. It was so much like what had happened to her that Tess burst into tears, crying so loudly that Fritzzy ran from the room. But she stuck with it and was rewarded with a happy ending: the parents of the young girl murdered the rapists.

She returned the disc to its case, which she left on the table in the hall. She would return it tomorrow, if she were still alive tomorrow. She planned to be, but nothing was certain; there were many strange twists and devious turns as one hopped down the overgrown bunny-trail of life. Tess had found this out for herself.

With time to kill—the daylight hours seemed to move so slowly—she went back online, searching for information about the trouble Al Strehlke had been in before his father committed suicide. She found nothing. Possibly the neighbor was full of shit (neighbors so often were), but Tess could think of another scenario: the trouble might have occurred while Strehlke was still a minor. In cases like that, names weren't released to the press and the court records (assuming the case had even gone to court) were sealed.

"But maybe he got worse," she told Fritzzy.

"Those guys often do get worse," Fritzzy agreed. (This was rare; Tom was usually the agreeable one. Fritzzy's role tended to be devil's advocate.)

"Then, a few years later, something else happened. Something worse. Say Mom helped him to cover it up—"

"Don't forget the younger brother," Fritzzy said. "Lester. He might have been in on it, too."

“Don’t confuse me with too many characters, Fritz. All I know is that Al Fucking Big Driver raped me, and his mother may have been an accessory. That’s enough for me.”

“Maybe Ramona’s his aunt,” Fritzzy speculated.

“Oh, shut up,” Tess said, and Fritzzy did.

She lay down at four o'clock, not expecting to sleep a wink, but her healing body had its own priorities. She went under almost instantly, and when she woke to the insistent *dah-dah-dah* of her bedside clock, she was glad she had set the alarm. Outside, a gusty October breeze was combing leaves from the trees and sending them across her backyard in colorful skitters. The light had gone that strange and depthless gold which seems the exclusive property of late-fall afternoons in New England.

Her nose was better—the pain there down to a dull throb—but her throat was still sore and she hobbled rather than walked to the bathroom. She got into the shower and stayed in the stall until the bathroom was as foggy as an English moor in a Sherlock Holmes story. The shower helped. A couple of Tylenol from the medicine cabinet would help even more.

She dried her hair, then swiped a clear place on the mirror. The woman in the glass looked back from eyes haunted by rage and sanity. The glass didn't stay clear for long, but it was long enough for Tess to realize that she really meant to do this, no matter the consequences.

She dressed in a black turtleneck sweater and black cargo pants with big flap pockets. She tied her hair up in a bun and then yanked on a big black gimme cap. The bun made the cap bulge a little behind, but at least no potential witness would be able to say, *I didn't get a good look at her face, but she had long blond hair. It was tied back in one of those scrunchie things. You know, the kind you can buy at JCPenney.*

She went down to the basement where her kayak had been stored since Labor Day and took the reel of yellow boat-line from the shelf above it. She used the hedge clippers to cut off four feet, wound it around her forearm, then slipped the coil into one of her big pants pockets. Upstairs again in the kitchen, she tucked her Swiss Army knife into the same pocket—the left. The right pocket was for

the Lemon Squeezer .38 . . . and one other item, which she took from the drawer next to the stove. Then she spooned out double rations for Fritzzy, but before she let him start eating, she hugged him and kissed the top of his head. The old cat flattened his ears (more in surprise than distaste, probably; she wasn't ordinarily a kissy mistress) and hurried to his dish as soon as she put him down.

"Make that last," Tess told him. "Patsy will check on you eventually if I don't come back, but it could be a couple of days." She smiled a little and added, "I love you, you scruffy old thing."

"Right, right," Fritzzy said, then got busy eating.

Tess checked her DON'T GET CAUGHT memo one more time, mentally inventorying her supplies as she did so and going over the steps she intended to take once she got to Lacemaker Lane. She thought the most important thing to keep in mind was that things wouldn't go as she hoped they would. When it came to things like this, there were always jokers in the deck. Ramona might not be at home. Or she might be home but with her rapist-murderer son, the two of them cozied up in the living room and watching something uplifting from Blockbuster. *Saw*, maybe. The younger brother—no doubt known in Colewich as Little Driver—might be there, as well. For all Tess knew, Ramona might be hosting a Tupperware party or a reading circle tonight. The important thing was not to get flummoxed by unexpected developments. If she couldn't improvise, Tess thought it very likely that she really was leaving her house in Stoke Village for the last time.

She burned the DON'T GET CAUGHT memo in the fireplace, stirred the ashes apart with the poker, then put on her leather jacket and a pair of thin leather gloves. The jacket had a deep pocket in the lining. Tess slipped one of her butcher knives into it, just for good luck, then told herself not to forget it was there. The last thing she needed this weekend was an accidental mastectomy.

Just before stepping out the door, she set the burglar alarm.

The wind surrounded her immediately, flapping the collar of her jacket and the legs of her cargo pants. Leaves swirled in mini-cyclones. In the not-quite-dark sky above her tasteful little piece of Connecticut suburbia, clouds scudded across the face of a three-quarter moon. Tess thought it was a fine night for a horror movie.

She got into her Expedition and closed the door. A leaf spun down on the windshield, then dashed away. “I’ve lost my mind,” she said matter-of-factly. “It fell out and died in that culvert, or when I was walking around the store. It’s the only explanation for this.”

She started the engine. Tom the Tomtom lit up and said, “Hello, Tess. I see we’re taking a trip.”

“That’s right, my friend.” Tess leaned forward and programmed 75 Lacemaker Lane into Tom’s tidy little mechanical head.

She had checked out Ramona's neighborhood on Google Earth, and it looked the same when she got there. So far, so good. Brewster was a small New England town, Lacemaker Lane was on the outskirts, and the houses were far apart. Tess cruised past number 75 at a sedately suburban twenty miles an hour, determining that the lights were on and only a single car—a late-model Subaru that almost screamed librarian—was in the driveway. There was no sign of a cab-over Pete or any other big rig. No old Bondo-patched pickup, either.

The street ended in a turnaround. Tess took it, came back, and turned into Norville's driveway without giving herself a chance to hesitate. She killed the lights and the motor, then took a long, deep breath.

"Come back safe, Tess," Tom said from his place on the dashboard. "Come back safe and I'll take you to your next stop."

"I'll do my best." She grabbed her yellow legal pad (there was now nothing written on it) and got out of her car. She held the pad to the front of her jacket as she walked to Ramona Norville's door. Her moonshadow—perhaps all that was left of the Old Tess—walked beside her.

Norville's front door had beveled glass strips on either side. They were thick and warped the view, but Tess could make out nice wallpaper and a hallway floored with polished wood. There was an end table with a couple of magazines on it. Or maybe they were catalogues. There was a big room at the end of the hall. The sound of a TV came from there. She heard singing, so Ramona probably wasn't watching *Saw*. In fact—if Tess was right and the song was "Climb Ev'ry Mountain"—Ramona was watching *The Sound of Music*.

Tess rang the doorbell. From inside came a run of chimes that sounded like the opening notes of "Dixie"—a strange choice for New England, but then, if Tess was right about her, Ramona Norville was a strange woman.

Tess heard the clump of big feet and made a half-turn, so the light from the beveled glass would catch only a bit of her face. She lowered her blank pad from her chest and made writing motions with one gloved hand. She let her shoulders slump a little. She was a woman taking some kind of survey. It was Sunday evening, she was tired, all she wanted was to discover the name of this woman's favorite toothpaste (or maybe if she had Prince Albert in a can) and then go home.

Don't worry, Ramona, you can open the door, anybody can see that I'm harmless, the kind of woman who wouldn't say boo to a goose.

From the corner of her eye she glimpsed a distorted fish-face swim into view behind the beveled glass. There was a pause that seemed to last a very long time, then Ramona Norville opened the door. "Yes? Can I help y—"

Tess turned back. The light from the open door fell on her face. And the shock she saw on Norville's face, the utter drop-jaw shock, told her everything she needed to know.

"You? What are *you* doing h—"

Tess pulled the Lemon Squeezer .38 from her right front pocket. On the drive from Stoke Village she had imagined it getting stuck in there—had imagined it with nightmarish clarity—but it came out smoothly.

“Move back from the door. If you try to shut it, I’ll shoot you.”

“You won’t,” Norville said. She didn’t move back, but she didn’t shut the door, either. “Are you crazy?”

“Get inside.”

Norville was wearing a big blue housecoat, and when Tess saw the front of it rise precipitously, she raised the gun. “If you even start to yell, I’ll shoot. You better believe me, bitch, because I’m not even close to kidding.”

Norville’s large bosom deflated. Her lips were drawn back from her teeth and her eyes were shifting from side to side in their sockets. She didn’t look like a librarian now, and she didn’t look jovial and welcoming. To Tess she looked like a rat caught outside its hole.

“If you fire that gun, the whole neighborhood will hear.”

Tess doubted that, but didn’t argue. “It won’t matter to you, because you’ll be dead. Get inside. If you behave yourself and answer my questions, you might still be alive tomorrow morning.”

Norville backed up, and Tess came in through the open door with the gun held stiffly out in front of her. As soon as she closed the door—she did it with her foot—Norville stopped moving. She was standing by the little table with the catalogues on it.

“No grabbing, no throwing,” Tess said, and saw by the twitch of the other woman’s mouth that grabbing and throwing had indeed been in Ramona’s mind. “I can read you like a book. Why else would I be here? Keep backing up. All the way down to the living room. I just love the Trapp Family when they’re really rocking.”

“You’re crazy,” Ramona said, but she began to back up again. She was wearing shoes. Even in her housecoat she was wearing big ugly shoes. Men’s laceups. “I have no idea what you’re doing here, but—”

“Don’t bullshit me, Mommy. Don’t you *dare*. It was all on your face when you opened the door. Every bit of it. You thought I was dead, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“It’s just us girls, so why not fess up?”

They were in the living room now. There were sentimental paintings on the walls—clowns, waifs with big eyes—and lots of shelves and tables cluttered with knickknacks: snowglobes, troll babies, Hummel figures, Care Bears, a ceramic candy house à la Hansel and Gretel. Although Norville was a librarian, there were no books in evidence. Facing the TV was a La-Z-Boy with a hassock in front of it. There was a TV tray beside the chair. On it was a bag of Cheez Doodles, a large bottle of Diet Coke, the remote control, and a *TV Guide*. On top of the television was a framed photograph of Ramona and another woman with their arms around each other and their cheeks pressed together. It looked as if it had been taken at an amusement park or a county fair. In front of the photo was a glass candy dish that gleamed with sparkle-points of light beneath the overhead fixture.

“How long have you been doing it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“How long have you been pimping for your homicidal rapist of a son?”

Norville’s eyes flickered, but again she denied it . . . which presented Tess with a problem. When she had come here, killing Ramona Norville had seemed not just an option but the most likely outcome. Tess had been almost positive she could do it, and that the boat-rope in the left front pocket of her cargo pants would go unused. Now, however, she discovered she couldn’t go ahead unless the woman admitted her complicity. Because what had been written on her face when she’d seen Tess standing at her door, bruised but otherwise very much alive, wasn’t enough.

Not quite enough.

“When did it start? How old was he? Fifteen? Did he claim he was ‘just foolin around’? That’s what a lot of them claim when they first start.”

“I have no idea what you mean. You come to the library and put on a perfectly acceptable presentation—lackluster, obviously you were only there for the money, but at least it filled the open date on our calendar—and the next thing I know you’re on my doorstep, pointing a gun and making all sorts of wild—”

“It’s no good, Ramona. I saw his picture on the Red Hawk website. Ring and all. He raped me and tried to kill me. He thought he *did* kill me. *And you sent me to him.*”

Norville’s mouth dropped open in a gruesome combination of shock, dismay, and guilt. “*That’s not true! You stupid cunt, you don’t know what you’re talking about!*” She started forward.

Tess raised the gun. “Nuh-uh, don’t do that. No.”

Norville stopped, but Tess didn’t think she would stay stopped for long. She was nerving herself up for either fight or flight. And because she had to know Tess would follow her if she tried to run deeper into the house, it would probably be fight.

The Trapp Family was singing again. Given the situation Tess was in—that she had put herself in—all that happy choral crap was maddening. Keeping the Lemon Squeezer trained on Norville with her right hand, Tess picked up the remote with her left and muted the TV. She started to put the remote down again, then froze. There were two things on top of the TV, but at first she had only registered the picture of Ramona and her girlfriend; the candy dish had just earned a glance.

Now she saw that the sparkles she had assumed were coming from the cut-glass sides of the dish weren’t coming from the sides at all. They were coming from something inside. Her earrings were in the dish. Her diamond earrings.

Norville grabbed the Hansel and Gretel candy house from its shelf and threw it. She threw it hard. Tess ducked and the candy house went an inch over her head, shattering on the wall behind her. She stepped backward, tripped over the hassock, and went sprawling. The gun flew from her hand.

They both went for it, Norville dropping to her knees and slamming her shoulder against Tess’s arm and shoulder like a football tackle intent on sacking the quarterback. She grabbed the gun, at first juggling it and then securing her grip. Tess reached inside her jacket and closed her hand around the handle of the butcher knife that was her backup, aware that she was going to be too late. Norville was too big . . . and too maternal. Yes, that was it. She had protected that rogue son of hers for years, and was intent

on protecting him now. Tess should have shot her in the hall, the moment the door was shut behind her.

But I couldn't, she thought, and even at this moment, knowing it was the truth brought some comfort. She got up on her knees, hand still inside the jacket, facing Ramona Norville.

"You're a shitty writer and you were a shitty guest speaker," Norville said. She was smiling, speaking faster and faster. Her voice had a nasal auctioneer's lilt. "You phoned in your talk the same way you phone in your stupid books. You were perfect for him and he was going to do someone, I know the signs. I sent you that way and it worked out right and I'm glad he fucked you. I don't know what you thought you were going to do, coming here, but this is what you get."

She pulled the trigger and there was nothing but a dry click. Tess had taken lessons when she bought the gun, and the most important had been not to put a bullet in the chamber that would first fall under the hammer. Just in case the trigger was pulled by accident.

An expression of almost comical surprise came over Norville's face. It made her young again. She looked down at the gun, and when she did, Tess drew the knife from the inside pocket of the jacket, stumbled forward, and jammed it up to the hilt in Norville's belly.

The woman made a glassy "OOO-OOOO" sound that tried to be a scream and failed. Tess's pistol dropped and Ramona staggered back against the wall, looking down at the handle of the knife. One flailing arm struck a rank of Hummel figures. They tumbled from the shelf and shattered on the floor. She made that "OOO-OOOO" sound again. The front of the housecoat was still unstained, but blood began to patter from beneath its hem, onto Ramona Norville's manshoes. She put her hands on the haft of the knife, tried to tug it free, and made the "OOO-OOOO" for the third time.

She looked up at Tess, unbelieving. Tess looked back. She was remembering something that had happened on her tenth birthday. Her father had given her a slingshot, and she had gone out looking for things to shoot with it. At some point, five or six blocks from her house, she had seen a raggedy-eared stray dog rooting in a garbage can. She had put a small rock in her slingshot and fired at it, only meaning to scare the dog away (or so she told herself), but hitting it

in the rump instead. The dog had made a miserable *ike-ike-ike* sound and run away, but before it did, it gave Tess a look of reproach she had never forgotten. She would have given anything to take that casual shot back, and she had never fired her slingshot at another living thing. She understood that killing was a part of life—she felt no compunction about swatting mosquitoes, put down traps when she saw mouse-droppings in the cellar, and had eaten her fair share of Mickey D’s Quarter Pounders—but then she had believed she would never again be able to hurt something that way without feeling remorse or regret. She suffered neither in the living room of the house on Lacemaker Lane. Perhaps because, in the end, it had been self-defense. Or perhaps that wasn’t it at all.

“Ramona,” she said, “I’m feeling a certain kinship to Richard Widmark right now. This is what we do to squealers, honey.”

Norville was standing in a puddle of her own blood and her housecoat was at last blooming with blood-poppies. Her face was pale. Her dark eyes were huge and glittery with shock. Her tongue came out and swiped slowly across her lower lip.

“Now you can roll around for a long time, thinkin’ it over—how would that be?”

Norville began to slide. Her manshoes made squittering sounds in the blood. She groped for one of the other shelves and pulled it off the wall. A platoon of Care Bears tilted forward and committed suicide.

Although she still felt no regret or remorse, Tess found that, in spite of her big talk, she had very little inner Tommy Udo; she had no urge to watch or prolong Norville’s suffering. She bent and picked up the .38. From the right front pocket of her cargo pants she removed the item she had taken from the kitchen drawer beside her stove. It was a quilted oven glove. It would silence a single pistol shot quite effectively, as long as the caliber wasn’t too big. She had learned this while writing *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes on a Mystery Cruise*.

“You don’t understand.” Norville’s voice was a harsh whisper. “You can’t do this. It’s a mistake. Take me . . . hospital.”

“The mistake was yours.” Tess pulled the oven glove over the pistol, which was in her right hand. “It was not having your son

castrated as soon as you found out what he was.” She put the oven glove against Ramona Norville’s temple, turned her head slightly to one side, and pulled the trigger. There was a low, emphatic *pluh* sound, like a big man clearing his throat.

That was all.

She hadn't googled Al Strehlke's home address; she had been expecting to get that from Norville. But, as she had already reminded herself, things like this never went according to plan. What she had to do now was keep her wits about her and carry the job through to the end.

Norville's home office was upstairs, in what had probably been meant as a spare bedroom. There were more Care Bears and Hummels here. There were also half a dozen framed pictures, but none of her sons, her main squeeze, or the late great Roscoe Strehlke; these were autographed photos of writers who had spoken to the Brown Baggers. The room reminded Tess of the Stagger Inn's foyer, with its band photos.

She didn't ask for an autograph on my photo, Tess thought. Of course not, why would she want to be reminded of a shitty writer like me? I was basically just a talking head to fill a hole in her schedule. Not to mention meat for her son's meatgrinder. How lucky for them that I came along at the right time.

On Norville's desk, below a bulletin board buried in circulars and library correspondence, was a desktop Mac very much like Tess's. The screen was dark, but the glowing light on the CPU told her it was only sleeping. She pushed one of the keys with a gloved fingertip. The screen refreshed and she was looking at Norville's electronic desktop. No need for those pesky passwords, how nice.

Tess clicked the address book icon, scrolled down to the R's, and found Red Hawk Trucking. The address was 7 Transport Plaza, Township Road, Colewich. She scrolled further, to the S's, and found both her overgrown acquaintance from Friday night and her acquaintance's brother, Lester. Big Driver and Little Driver. They both lived on Township Road, near the company they must have inherited from their father: Alvin at number 23, Lester at number 101.

If there was a third brother, she thought, they'd be The Three Little Truckers. One in a house of straw, one in a house of sticks, one in a

house of bricks. Alas, there are only two.

Downstairs again, she plucked her earrings from the glass dish and put them in her coat pocket. She looked at the dead woman sitting against the wall as she did it. There was no pity in the glance, only the sort of parting acknowledgment anyone may give to a piece of hard work that has now been finished. There was no need to worry about trace evidence; Tess was confident she had left none, not so much as a single strand of hair. The ovenglove—now with a hole blown in it—was back in her pocket. The knife was a common item sold in department stores all over America. For all she knew (or cared), it matched Ramona's own set. So far she was clean, but the hard part might still be ahead. She left the house, got in her car, and drove away. Fifteen minutes later she pulled into the lot of a deserted strip mall long enough to program 23 Township Road, Colewich, into her GPS.

With Tom's guidance, Tess found herself near her destination not long after nine o'clock. The three-quarter moon was still low in the sky. The wind was blowing harder than ever.

Township Road branched off US 47, but at least seven miles from The Stagger Inn and even farther from Colewich's downtown. Transport Plaza was at the intersection of the two roads. According to the signage, three trucking firms and a moving company were based here. The buildings that housed them had an ugly prefab look. The smallest belonged to Red Hawk Trucking. All were dark on this Sunday night. Beyond them were acres of parking lot surrounded by Cyclone fence and lit with high-intensity arc lights. The depot lot was full of parked cabs and freight haulers. At least one of the cab-overs had RED HAWK TRUCKING on the side, but Tess didn't think it was the one pictured on the website, the one with the Proud Papa behind the wheel.

There was a truck stop adjacent to the depot area. The pumps—over a dozen—were lit by the same high-intensity arcs. Bright white fluorescents spilled out from the right side of the main building; the left side was dark. There was another building, this one U-shaped, to the rear. A scattering of cars and trucks was parked there. The sign out by the road was a huge digital job, loaded with bright red information.

RICHIE'S TOWNSHIP ROAD TRUCK STOP
"YOU DRIVE 'EM, WE FILL 'EM"
REG \$2.99 GAL
DIESEL \$2.69 GAL
NEWEST LOTTERY TIX ALWAYS AVAILABLE
RESTAURANT CLOSED SUN. NITE
SORRY NO SHOWERS SUN. NITE
STORE & MOTEL "ALWAYS OPEN"
RVS "ALWAYS WELCOME"

And at the bottom, badly spelled but fervent:

SUPPORT OUR TROOPS!
WIN IN AFGANDISTAN!

With truckers coming and going, fueling up both their rigs and themselves (even with its lights off, Tess could tell that, when open, the restaurant was of the sort where chicken-fried steak, meatloaf, and Mom's Bread Pudding would always be on the menu), the place would probably be a beehive of activity during the week, but on Sunday night it was a graveyard because there was nothing out here, not even a roadhouse like The Stagger.

There was only a single vehicle parked at the pumps, facing out toward the road with a pump nozzle stuck in its gas hatch. It was an old Ford F-150 pickup with Bondo around the headlights. It was impossible to read the color in the harsh lighting, but Tess didn't have to. She had seen that truck close up, and knew the color. The cab was empty.

"You don't seem surprised, Tess," Tom said as she slowed to a stop on the shoulder of the road and squinted at the store. She could make out a couple of people in there in spite of the glare from the harsh outside lighting, and she could see that one of them was big. *Was he big or real big?* Betsy Neal had asked.

"I'm not surprised at all," she said. "He lives out here. Where else would he go to gas up?"

"Maybe he's getting ready to take a trip."

"This late on Sunday night? I don't think so. I think he was at home, watching *The Sound of Music*. I think he drank up all of his beer and came down here for more. He decided to top off his tank while he was at it."

"You could be wrong, though. Hadn't you better pull in behind the store and follow him when he leaves?"

But Tess didn't want to do that. The front of the truck-stop store was all glass. He might look out and see her when she drove in. Even if the bright lighting above the pump islands made it hard for him to see her face, he might recognize the vehicle. There were lots of Ford SUVs on the road, but after Friday night, Al Strehlike had to

be particularly sensitized to black Ford Expeditions. And there was her license plate—surely he would have noticed her Connecticut license plate on Friday, when he pulled up beside her in the gone-to-weeds parking lot of the deserted store.

There was something else. Something even more important. She got rolling again, putting Richie's Township Road Truck Stop in the rearview.

"I don't want to be behind him," she said. "I want to be ahead of him. I want to be waiting for him."

"What if he's married, Tess?" Tom asked. "What if he's got a wife waiting for him?"

The idea startled her for a moment. Then she smiled, and not just because the only ring he'd been wearing was the one too big to be a ruby. "Guys like him don't have wives," she said. "Not ones that stick around, anyway. There was only one woman in Al's life, and she's dead."

Unlike Lacemaker Lane, there was nothing suburban about Township Road; it was as country as Travis Tritt. The houses were glimmering islands of electric light beneath the glow of the rising moon.

“Tess, you are approaching your destination,” Tom said in his non-imaginary voice.

She breasted a rise, and there on her left was a mailbox marked STREHLKE and 23. The driveway was long, rising on a curve, paved with asphalt, smooth as black ice. Tess turned in without hesitation, but apprehension dropped over her as soon as Township Road was behind her. She had to fight to keep from jamming on the brakes and backing out again. Because if she kept going, she had no choice. She'd be like a bug in a bottle. And even if he *wasn't* married, what if someone else was up there at the house? Brother Les, for instance? What if Big Driver had been at Tommy's buying beer and snacks not for one but for two?

Tess killed her headlights and drove on by moonlight.

In her keyed-up state, the driveway seemed to go on forever, but it could have been no more than an eighth of a mile before she saw the lights of Strehlke's house. It was at the top of the hill, a tidy-looking place that was bigger than a cottage but smaller than a farmhouse. Not a house of bricks, but not a humble house of straw, either. In the story of the three little pigs and the big bad wolf, Tess reckoned this would have been the house of sticks.

Parked on the left side of the house was a long trailer-box with RED HAWK TRUCKING on the side. Parked at the end of the driveway, in front of the garage, was the cab-over Pete from the website. It looked haunted in the moonlight. Tess slowed as she approached it, and then she was flooded with a white glare that dazzled her eyes and lit the lawn and the driveway. It was a motion-activated pole light, and if Strehlke came back while it was on, he

would be able to see its glow at the foot of his driveway. Maybe even while he was still approaching on Township Road.

She jammed on the brakes, feeling as she had when, as a teenager, she'd dreamed of finding herself in school with no clothes on. She heard a woman groaning. She supposed it was her, but it didn't sound or feel like her.

"This isn't good, Tess."

"Shut up, Tom."

"He could come back any minute, and you don't know how long the timer on that thing is. You had trouble with the mother. He's *much* bigger than her."

"I said shut *up!*"

She tried to think, but that blaring light made it hard. Shadows from the parked cab-over and the long-box to her left seemed to reach for her with sharp black fingers—boogeyman fingers. Goddam pole light! Of *course* a man like him would have a pole light! She ought to go right now, just turn around on his lawn and drive back down to the road as fast as she could, but she would meet him if she did. She knew it. And with the element of surprise gone, she would die.

Think, Tessa Jean, think!

And oh God, just to make things a little worse, a dog started barking. There was a dog in the house. She imagined a pit bull with a headful of jutting teeth.

"If you're going to stay, you need to get out of sight," Tom said . . . and no, that didn't sound like her voice. Or not *exactly* like her voice. Perhaps it was the one that belonged to her deepest self, the survivor. And the killer—her, too. How many unsuspected selves could a person have, hiding deep inside? She was beginning to think the number might be infinite.

She glanced into her rearview mirror, chewing at her still-swollen lower lip. No approaching headlights yet. But would she even be able to tell, given the combined brilliance of the moon and that Christing pole light?

"It's on a timer," Tom said, "but I'd do something before it goes out, Tess. If you move the car after it does, you'll only trip it again."

She threw the Expedition into four-wheel, started to swing around the cab-over, then stopped. There was high grass on that side. In the pitiless glare of the pole light, he couldn't help but see the tracks she would leave. Even if the Christing light went out, it would come back on again when he drove up and then he would see them.

Inside, the dog continued to weigh in: *Yark! Yark! YarkYarkYark!*

"Drive across the lawn and put it behind the long-box," Tom said.

"The tracks, though! The *tracks!*"

"You have to hide it somewhere," Tom returned. He spoke apologetically but firmly. "At least the grass is mown on that side. Most people are pretty unobservant, you know. Doreen Marquis says that all the time."

"Strehlke's not a Knitting Society lady, he's a fucking lunatic."

But because there was really no choice—not now that she was up here—Tess drove onto the lawn and toward the parked silver long-box through a glare that seemed as bright as a summer noonday. She did it with her bottom slightly raised off the seat, as if by doing that she could somehow magically render the tracks of the Expedition's passage less visible.

"Even if the motion light is still on when he comes back, he may not be suspicious," Tom said. "I'll bet deer trip it all the time. He might even have a light like that to scare them out of his vegetable garden."

This made sense (and it sounded like her special Tom-voice again), but it did not comfort her much.

Yark! Yark! YarkYark! Whatever it was, it sounded like it was shitting nickels in there.

The ground behind the silver box was bumpy and bald—other freight-boxes had no doubt been parked on it from time to time—but solid enough. She drove the Expedition as deep into the long-box's shadow as she could, then killed the engine. She was sweating heavily, producing a rank aroma no deodorant would be able to defeat.

She got out, and the motion light went out when she slammed the door. For one superstitious moment Tess thought she had done it herself, then realized the scary fucking thing had just timed out. She leaned over the warm hood of the Expedition, pulling in deep breaths

and letting them out like a runner in the last quarter-mile of a marathon. It might come in handy to know how long it had been on, but that was a question she couldn't answer. She'd been too scared. It had seemed like hours.

When she had herself under control again, she took inventory, forcing herself to move slowly and methodically. Pistol and oven glove. Both present and accounted for. She didn't think the oven glove would muffle another shot, not with a hole in it; she'd have to count on the isolation of the little hilltop house. It was okay that she'd left the knife in Ramona's belly; if she were reduced to trying to take out Big Driver with a butcher knife, she'd be in serious trouble.

And there are only four shots left in the gun, you better not forget that and just start spraying him. Why didn't you bring any more bullets, Tessa Jean? You thought you were planning, but I don't think you did a very good job.

"Shut up," she whispered. "Tom or Fritzzy or whoever you are, just shut up."

The scolding voice ceased, and when it did, Tess realized the real world had also gone silent. The dog had ceased its mad barking when the pole light went off. Now the only sound was the wind and the only light was the moon.

With that terrible glare gone, the long-box provided excellent cover, but she couldn't stay there. Not if she meant to do what she had come here to do. Tess scurried around the back of the house, terrified of tripping another motion light, but feeling she had no choice. There was no light to trip, but the moon went behind a cloud and she stumbled over the cellar bulkhead, almost hitting her head on a wheel barrow when she went to her knees. For a moment as she lay there, she wondered again what she had turned into. She was a member of the Authors Guild who had shot a woman in the head not long ago. After stabbing her in the stomach. *I've gone entirely off the reservation.* Then she thought of him calling her a bitch, a whiny whore bitch, and quit caring about whether she was on or off the reservation. It was a stupid saying, anyway. And racist in the bargain.

Strehlke *did* have a garden behind his house, but it was small and apparently not worth protecting from the depredations of the deer with a motion light. There was nothing left in it anyway except for a few pumpkins, most now rotting on the vine. She stepped over the rows, rounded the far corner of the house, and there was the cab-over. The moon had come out again and turned its chrome to the liquid silver of sword blades in fantasy novels.

Tess came up behind it, walked along the left side, and knelt by the chin-high (to her, at least) front wheel. She took the Lemon Squeezer out of her pocket. He couldn't drive into his garage because the cab-over was in the way. Even if it hadn't been, the garage was probably full of bachelor rickrack: tools, fishing gear, camping gear, truck parts, cases of discount soda.

That's just guessing. It's dangerous to guess. Doreen would scold you for it.

Of course she would, no one knew the Knitting Society ladies better than Tess did, but those dessert-loving babies rarely took

chances. When you did take them, you were forced to make a certain number of guesses.

Tess looked at her watch and was astounded to see it was only twenty-five to ten. It seemed that she had fed Fritz double rations and left the house four years ago. Maybe five. She thought she heard an approaching engine, then decided she didn't. She wished the wind wasn't blowing so hard, but wish in one hand and shit in the other, see which one fills up first. It was a saying no Knitting Society lady had ever voiced—Doreen Marquis and her friends were more into things like *soonest begun, soonest done*—but it was a true saying, just the same.

Maybe he really *was* going on a trip, Sunday night or not. Maybe she was still going to be here when the sun came up, chilled to her already aching bones by the constant wind combing this lonely hilltop where she was crazy to be.

No, he's the crazy one. Remember how he danced? His shadow dancing on the wall behind him? Remember how he sang? His squalling voice? You wait for him, Tessa Jean. You wait until hell freezes over. You've come too far to turn back.

She was afraid of that, actually.

It can't be a decorous drawing-room murder. You understand that, don't you?

She did. This particular killing—if she was able to bring it off—would be more *Death Wish* than *The Willow Grove Knitting Society Goes Backstage*. He would pull in, hopefully right up to the cab-over she was hiding behind. He would douse the lights of the pickup, and before his eyes could adjust—

It wasn't the wind this time. She recognized the badly tuned thump of the engine even before the headlights splashed up the curve of the drive. Tess got on one knee and yanked the brim of her cap down so the wind wouldn't blow it off. She would have to approach, and that meant her timing would have to be exquisite. If she tried to shoot him from ambush, she would quite likely miss, even at close range; the gun instructor had told her she could only count on the Lemon Squeezer at ten feet or less. He had recommended she buy a more reliable handgun, but she never had. And getting close enough to make sure of killing him wasn't all. She

had to make sure it was Strehlke in the truck, and not the brother or some friend.

I have no plan.

But it was too late to plan, because it was the truck and when the pole light came on, she saw the brown cap with the bleach-splatters on it. She also saw him wince against the glare, as she had, and knew he was momentarily blinded. It was now or not at all.

I am the Courageous Woman.

With no plan, without even thinking, she walked around the back of the cab-over, not running but taking big, calm strides. The wind gusted around her, flapping her cargo pants. She opened the passenger door and saw the ring with the red stone on his hand. He was grabbing a paper bag with the shape of a square box inside it. Beer, probably a twelve-pack. He turned toward her and something terrible happened: she divided in two. The Courageous Woman saw the animal that had raped her, choked her, and put her in a pipe with two other rotting bodies. Tess saw the slightly broader face and lines around the mouth and eyes that hadn't been there on Friday afternoon. But even as she was registering these things, the Lemon Squeezer barked twice in her hand. The first bullet punctured Strehlke's throat, just below the chin. The second opened a black hole above his bushy right eyebrow and shattered the driver's side window. He fell backward against the door, the hand that had been grasping the top of the paper bag dropping away. He gave a monstrous whole-body twitch, and the hand with the ring on it thudded against the middle of the steering wheel, honking the horn. Inside the house, the dog began to bark again.

"No, it's him!" She stood at the open door with the gun in her hand, staring in. "*It's got to be him!*"

She rushed around the front of the pickup, lost her balance, went to one knee, got up, and yanked open the driver's side door. Strehlke fell out and hit his dead head on the smooth asphalt of his driveway. His hat fell off. His right eye, pulled out of true by the bullet that had entered his head just above it, stared up at the moon. The left one stared at Tess. And it wasn't the face that finally convinced her—the face with lines on it she was seeing for the very first time,

the face pitted with old acne scars that hadn't been there on Friday afternoon.

Was he big or real big? Betsy Neal had asked.

Real big, Tess had replied, and he had been . . . but not as big as this man. Her rapist had been six-six, she had thought when he got out of the truck (*this* truck, she was in no doubt about that). Deep in the belly, thick in the thighs, and as wide as a doorway. But this man had to be at least six-*nine*. She had come hunting a giant and killed a leviathan.

"Oh my God," Tess said, and the wind whipped her words away. "Oh my dear God, what have I done?"

"You killed me, Tess," the man on the ground said . . . and that certainly made sense, given the hole in his head and the one in his throat. "You went and killed Big Driver, just like you meant to."

The strength left her muscles. She went to her knees beside him. Overhead, the moon beamed down from the roaring sky.

"The ring," she whispered. "The hat. The *truck*."

"He wears the ring and the hat when he goes hunting," Big Driver said. "And he drives the pickup. When he goes hunting, I'm on the road in a Red Hawk cab-over and if anyone sees him—especially if he's sitting down—they think they're seeing me."

"Why would he do that?" Tess asked the dead man. "You're his *brother*."

"Because he's crazy," Big Driver said patiently.

"And because it worked before," Doreen Marquis said. "When they were younger and Lester got in trouble with the police. The question is whether Roscoe Strehlke committed suicide because of that first trouble, or because Ramona made big brother Al take the blame for it. Or maybe Roscoe was going to tell and Ramona killed him. Made it look like suicide. Which way was it, Al?"

But on this subject Al was quiet. Dead quiet, in fact.

"I'll tell you how I think it was," Doreen said in the moonlight. "I think Ramona knew that if your little brother wound up in an interrogation room with an even half-smart policeman, he might confess to something a lot worse than touching a girl on the schoolbus or peeking into cars on the local lovers' lane or whatever ten-cent crime it was he'd been accused of. I think she talked *you*

into taking the blame, and she talked her husband into dummifying up. Or browbeat him into it, that's more like it. And either because the police never asked the girl to make a positive identification or because she wouldn't press charges, they got away with it."

Al said nothing.

Tess thought, *I'm kneeling here talking in imaginary voices. I've lost my mind.*

Yet part of her knew she was trying to *keep* her mind. The only way to do it was to understand, and she thought the story she was telling in Doreen's voice was either true or close to true. It was based on guesswork and slopped-on deduction, but it made sense. It fit in with what Ramona had said in her last moments.

You stupid cunt, you don't know what you're talking about.

And: You don't understand. It's a mistake.

It was a mistake, all right. Everything she'd done tonight had been a mistake.

No, not everything. She was in on it. She knew.

"Did you know?" Tess asked the man she had killed. She reached out to grab Strehlke's arm, then drew away. It would be still warm under his sleeve. Still thinking it was alive. "*Did you?*"

He didn't answer.

"Let me try," Doreen said. And in her kindest, you-can-tell-me-everything old lady voice, the one that always worked in the books, she asked: "How *much* did you know, Mr. Driver?"

"I sometimes suspected," he said. "Mostly I didn't think about it. I had a business to run."

"Did you ever ask your mother?"

"I might have," he said, and Tess thought his strangely cocked right eye evasive. But in that wild moonlight, who could tell about such things? Who could tell for sure?

"When girls disappeared? Is that when you asked?"

To this Big Driver made no reply, perhaps because Doreen had begun to sound like Fritzy. And like Tom the Tomtom, of course.

"But there was never any proof, was there?" This time it was Tess herself. She wasn't sure he would answer her voice, but he did.

"No. No proof."

"And you didn't *want* proof, did you?"

No answer this time, so Tess got up and walked unsteadily to the bleach-spattered brown hat, which had blown across the driveway and onto the lawn. Just as she picked it up, the pole light went off again. Inside, the dog stopped barking. This made her think of Sherlock Holmes, and standing there in the windy moonlight, Tess heard herself voicing the saddest chuckle to ever come from a human throat. She took off her hat, stuffed it into her jacket pocket, and put his on in its place. It was too big for her, so she took it off again long enough to adjust the strap in back. She returned to the man she had killed, the one she judged perhaps not quite innocent . . . but surely too innocent to deserve the punishment the Courageous Woman had meted out.

She tapped the brim of the brown hat and asked, "Is this the one you wear when you go on the road?" Knowing it wasn't.

Strehlke didn't answer, but Doreen Marquis, doyenne of the Knitting Society, did. "Of course not. When you're driving for Red Hawk, you wear a Red Hawk cap, don't you, dear?"

"Yes," Strehlke said.

"And you don't wear your ring, either, do you?"

"No. Too gaudy for customers. Not businesslike. And what if someone at one of those skanky truck-stops—someone too drunk or stoned to know better—saw it and thought it was real? No one would risk mugging me, I'm too big and strong for that—at least I was until tonight—but someone might shoot me. And I don't deserve to be shot. Not for a fake ring, and not for the terrible things my brother might have done."

"And you and your brother never drive for the company at the same time, do you, dear?"

"No. When he's out on the road, I mind the office. When I'm out on the road, he . . . well. I guess you know what he does when I'm out on the road."

"You should have *told!*" Tess screamed down at him. "Even if you only suspected, you should have *told!*"

"He was scared," Doreen said in her kindly voice. "Weren't you, dear?"

"Yes," Al said. "I was scared."

“Of your brother?” Tess asked, either unbelieving or not wanting to believe. “Scared of your *kid brother*?”

“Not him,” Al Strehlke said. “Her.”

When Tess got back in her car and started the motor, Tom said: "There was no way you could know, Tess. And it all happened so fast."

That was true, but it ignored the central looming fact: by going after her rapist like a vigilante in a movie, she had sent herself to hell.

She raised the gun to her temple, then lowered it again. She couldn't, not now. She still had an obligation to the women in the pipe, and any other women who might join them if Lester Strehlke escaped. And after what she had just done, it was more important than ever that he not escape.

She had one more stop to make. But not in her Expedition.

The driveway at 101 Township Road wasn't long, and it wasn't paved. It was just a pair of ruts with bushes growing close enough to scrape the sides of the blue F-150 pickup truck as she drove it up to the little house. Nothing neat about this one; this one was a huddled old creep-manse that could have been straight out of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. How life did imitate art, sometimes. And the cruder the art, the closer the imitation.

Tess made no attempt at stealth—why bother to kill the headlights when Lester Strehlke would know the sound of his brother's truck almost as well as the sound of his brother's voice?

She was still wearing the bleach-splattered brown cap Big Driver wore when he wasn't on the road, the lucky cap that turned out to be unlucky in the end. The ring with the fake ruby stone was far too big for any of her fingers, so she had put it into the left front pocket of her cargo pants. Little Driver had dressed and driven as his big brother when he went out hunting, and while he might never have time enough (or brains enough) to appreciate the irony of his last victim coming to him with the same accessories, Tess did.

She parked by the back door, turned off the engine, and got out. She carried the gun in one hand. The door was unlocked. She stepped into a shed that smelled of beer and spoiled food. A single sixty-watt bulb hung from the ceiling on a length of dirty cord. Straight ahead were four overflowing plastic garbage cans, the thirty-two-gallon kind you could buy at Walmart. Behind them, stacked against the shed wall, were what looked like five years' worth of *Uncle Henry's* swap guide. To the left was another door, up a single step. It would lead to the kitchen. It had an old-fashioned latch rather than a knob. The door squalled on unoiled hinges when she depressed the latch and pushed it open. An hour ago, such a squall would have terrified her into immobility. Now it didn't bother her in the slightest. She had work to do. That was all it came down to, and it was a relief to be free of all that emotional baggage. She stepped

into the smell of whatever greasy meat Little Driver had fried for his supper. She could hear a TV laugh-track. Some sitcom. *Seinfeld*, she thought.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Lester Strehlke called from the vicinity of the laugh-track. “I ain’t got but a beer and a half left, if that’s what you came for. I’m gonna drink up and then go to bed.” She followed the sound of his voice. “If you’d a called, I coulda saved you the tr—”

She came into the room. He saw her. Tess hadn’t speculated on what his reaction might be to the reappearance of his last victim, carrying a gun and wearing the hat Lester himself wore when his urges came over him. Even if she had, she could never have predicted the extremity of the one she saw. His mouth dropped open, and then his entire face froze. The can of beer he was holding dropped from his hand and fell into his lap, spraying foam onto his only article of clothing, a pair of yellowing Jockey shorts.

He’s seeing a ghost, she thought as she walked toward him, raising the gun. *Good.*

There was time to see that, although the living room was a bachelor mess and there were no snowglobes or cutie-poo figurines, the TV-watching setup was the same as the one at his mother’s house on Lacemaker Lane: the La-Z-Boy, the TV tray (here holding a final unopened can of Pabst Blue Ribbon and a bag of Doritos instead of Diet Coke and Cheez Doodles), the same *TV Guide*, the one with Simon Cowell on it.

“You’re dead,” he whispered.

“No,” Tess replied. She put the barrel of the Lemon Squeezer against the side of his head. He made one feeble effort to grab her wrist, but it was far too little and much too late. “That’s you.”

She pulled the trigger. Blood came out of his ear and his head snapped briskly to the side. He looked like a man trying to free up a kink in his neck. On the TV, George Costanza said, “I was in the pool, I was in the pool.” The audience laughed.

It was almost midnight, and the wind was blowing harder than ever. When it gusted, Lester Strehlke's whole house shook, and each time Tess thought of the little pig who had built his house out of sticks.

The little piggy who had lived in this one would never have to worry about his shitty house blowing away, because he was dead in his La-Z-Boy. *And he wasn't a little piggy, anyway*, Tess thought. *He was a big bad wolf.*

She was sitting in the kitchen, writing on the pages of a grimy Blue Horse tablet she had found in Strehlke's upstairs bedroom. There were four rooms on the second floor, but the bedroom was the only one not stuffed with junk, everything from iron bedsteads to an Evinrude boat-motor that looked as if it might have been dropped from the top of a five-story building. Because it would take weeks or months to go through those caches of the useless, the worthless, and the pointless, Tess turned all her attention on Strehlke's bedroom and searched it carefully. The Blue Horse tablet was a bonus. She had found what she was looking for in an old travel-tote pushed to the very back of the closet shelf, where it had been camouflaged—not very successfully—with old issues of *National Geographic*. In it was a tangle of women's underwear. Her own panties were on top. Tess put them in her pocket and, packrat-like, replaced them with the coil of yellow boat-line. Nobody would be surprised to find rope in a rapist-killer's suitcase of trophy lingerie. Besides, she would not be needing it.

"Tonto," said the Lone Ranger, "our work here is done."

What she wrote, as *Seinfeld* gave way to *Frasier* and *Frasier* gave way to the local news (one Chicopee resident had won the lottery and another had suffered a broken back after falling from a scaffolding, so *that* balanced out), was a confession in the form of a letter. As she reached page five, the TV news gave way to an apparently endless commercial for Almighty Cleanse. Danny Vierra was saying, "Some Americans have a bowel movement only once

every two or three *days*, and because this has gone on for years, *they believe it's normal!* Any doctor worth his salt will tell you *it's not!*"

The letter was headed *TO THE PROPER AUTHORITIES*, and the first four pages consisted of a single paragraph. In her head it sounded like a scream. Her hand was tired, and the ballpoint pen she'd found in a kitchen drawer (RED HAWK TRUCKING printed in fading gilt on the barrel) was showing signs of drying up, but she was, thank God, almost done. While Little Driver went on not watching TV from where he sat in his La-Z-Boy, she at last started a new paragraph at the top of page five.

I will not make excuses for what I have done. Nor can I say that I did it while of unsound mind. I was furious and I made a mistake. It's that simple. Under other circumstances—those less terrible, I mean—I might say, "It was a natural mistake, the two of them look almost enough alike to be twins." But these are not other circumstances.

I have thought of atonement as I sat here, writing these pages and listening to his television and to the wind—not because I hope for forgiveness, but because it seems wrong to do wrong without at least trying to balance it out with something right. (Here Tess thought of how the lottery winner and the man with the broken back evened out, but the concept would be difficult to express when she was so tired, and she wasn't sure it was germane, anyway.) I thought of going to Africa and working with AIDS victims. I thought about going down to New Orleans and volunteering at a homeless shelter or a food bank. I thought about going to the Gulf to clean oil off birds. I thought of donating the million dollars or so I have put away for my retirement to some group that works to end violence against women. There must be such a society in Connecticut, perhaps even several of them.

But then I thought of Doreen Marquis, from the Knitting Society, and what she says once in every book . . .

What Doreen said at least once in every book was *murderers always overlook the obvious. You may depend on it, dears.* And

even as Tess wrote about atonement, she realized it would be impossible. Because Doreen was absolutely right.

Tess had worn a cap so that she wouldn't leave hair that could be analyzed for DNA. She had worn gloves which she had never taken off, even while driving Alvin Strehlke's pickup. It was not too late to burn this confession in Lester's kitchen woodstove, drive to Brother Alvin's considerably nicer house (house of bricks instead of house of sticks), get into her Expedition, and head back to Connecticut. She could go home, where Fritzzy was waiting. At first glance she looked clear, and it might take the police a few days to get to her, but get to her they would. Because while she had been concentrating on the forensic molehills, she had overlooked the obvious mountain, exactly like the killers in the Knitting Society books.

The obvious mountain had a name: Betsy Neal. A pretty woman with an oval face, mismatched Picasso eyes, and a cloud of dark hair. She had recognized Tess, had even gotten her autograph, but that wasn't the clincher. The clincher was going to be the bruises on her face (*I hope that didn't happen here*, Neal had said), and the fact that Tess had asked about Alvin Strehlke, describing his truck and recognizing the ring when Neal mentioned it. *Like a ruby*, Tess had agreed.

Neal would see the story on TV or read it in the newspaper—with three dead from the same family, how could she avoid it?—and she would go to the police. The police would come to Tess. They would check the Connecticut gun-registration records as a matter of course and discover that Tess owned a .38 Smith & Wesson revolver known as a Lemon Squeezer. They would ask her to produce it so they could test-fire it and do comparisons to the bullets found in the three victims. And what was she going to say? Was she going to look at them from her blackened eyes and say (in a voice still hoarse from the choking Lester Strehlke had given her) that she lost it? Would she continue to stick to that story even after the dead women were found in the culvert pipe?

Tess picked up her borrowed pen and began writing again.

. . . what she says once in every book: murderers always overlook the obvious. Doreen also once took a leaf from

Dorothy Sayers's book and left a murderer with a loaded gun, telling him to take the honorable way out. I have a gun. My brother Mike is my only surviving close relative. He lives in Taos, New Mexico. I suppose he may inherit my estate. It depends on the legal ramifications of my crimes. If he does, I hope the authorities who find this letter will show it to him, and convey my wish that he donate the bulk to some charitable organization that works with women who have been sexually abused.

I am sorry about Big Driver—Alvin Strehlke. He was not the man who raped me, and Doreen is sure he didn't rape and kill those other women, either.

Doreen? No, *her*. Doreen wasn't real. But Tess was too tired to go back and change it. And what the hell—she was near the end, anyway.

For Ramona and that piece of garbage in the other room, I make no apologies. They are better off dead.

So, of course, am I.

She paused long enough to look back over the pages and see if there was anything she had forgotten. There didn't appear to be, so she signed her name—her final autograph. The pen ran dry on the last letter and she put it aside.

"Got anything to say, Lester?" she asked.

Only the wind replied, gusting hard enough to make the little house groan in its joints and puff drafts of cold air.

She went back into the living room. She put the hat on his head and the ring on his finger. That was the way she wanted them to find him. There was a framed photo on the TV. In it, Lester and his mother stood with their arms around each other. They were smiling. Just a boy and his mum. She looked at it for awhile, then left.

She felt that she should go back to the deserted store where it had happened and finish her business there. She could sit for awhile in the weedy lot, listen to the wind ticking the old sign (YOU LIKE IT IT LIKES YOU), thinking about whatever people think about in the final moments of a life. In her case that would probably be Fritz. She guessed Patsy would take him, and that would be fine. Cats were survivors. They didn't much care who fed them, as long as the bowl was full.

It wouldn't take long to get to the store at this hour, but it still seemed too far. She was very tired. She decided she would get into Al Strehlke's old truck and do it there. But she didn't want to splatter her painfully written confession with her blood, that seemed very wrong considering all the bloodshed detailed within it, and so—

She took the pages from the Blue Horse tablet into the living room, where the TV played on (a young man who looked like a criminal was now selling a robot floorwasher), and dropped them in Strehlke's lap. "Hold that for me, Les," she said.

"No problem," he replied. She noted that a portion of his diseased brains was now drying on his bony naked shoulder. That was all right.

Tess went out into the windy dark and slowly climbed behind the wheel of the pickup truck. The scream of the hinge when the driver's door swung shut was oddly familiar. But no, not so odd; hadn't she heard it at the store? Yes. She had been trying to do him a favor, because he was going to do her one—he was going to change her tire so she could go home and feed her cat. "I didn't want his battery to run down," she said, and laughed.

She put the short barrel of the .38 against her temple, then reconsidered. A shot like that wasn't always effective. She wanted her money to help women who had been hurt, not to pay for her care as she lay unconscious year after year in some home for human vegetables.

The mouth, that was better. Surer.

The barrel was oily against her tongue, and she could feel the small nub of the sight digging into the roof of her mouth.

I've had a good life—pretty good, anyway—and although I made a terrible mistake at the end of it, maybe that won't be held against me if there's something after this.

Ah, but the night wind was very sweet. So were the fragile fragrances it carried through the half-open driver's side window. It was a shame to leave, but what choice? It was time to go.

Tess closed her eyes, tightened her finger on the trigger, and that was when Tom spoke up. It was strange that he could do that, because Tom was in her Expedition, and the Expedition was at the other brother's house, almost a mile down the road from here. Also, the voice she heard was nothing like the one she usually manufactured for Tom. Nor did it sound like her own. It was a cold voice. And she—she had a gun in her mouth. She couldn't talk at all.

"She was never a very good detective, was she?"

She took it out. "Who? Doreen?"

In spite of everything, she was shocked.

"Who else, Tessa Jean? And why *would* she be a good one? She came from the old you. Didn't she?"

Tess supposed that was true.

"Doreen believes Big Driver didn't rape and kill those other women. Isn't that what you wrote?"

"*Me*," Tess said. "*I'm* sure. I was just tired, that's all. And shocked, I suppose."

"Also guilty."

"Yes. Also guilty."

"Do guilty people make good deductions, do you think?"

No. Perhaps they didn't.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"That you only solved part of the mystery. Before you could solve all of it—you, not some cliché-ridden old lady detective—something admittedly unfortunate happened."

"Unfortunate? Is that what you call it?" From a great distance, Tess heard herself laugh. Somewhere the wind was making a loose

gutter click against an eave. It sounded like the 7Up sign at the deserted store.

“Before you *shoot* yourself,” the new, strange Tom said (he was sounding more female all the time), “why don’t you *think* for yourself? But not here.”

“Where, then?”

Tom didn’t answer this question, and didn’t have to. What he said was, “And take that fucking confession with you.”

Tess got out of the truck and went back inside Lester Strehlke’s house. She stood in the dead man’s kitchen, thinking. She did it aloud, in Tom’s voice (which sounded more like her own all the time). Doreen seemed to have taken a hike.

“Al’s housekey will be on the ring with his ignition key,” Tom said, “but there’s the dog. You don’t want to forget the dog.”

No, that would be bad. Tess went to Lester’s refrigerator. After a little rummaging, she found a package of hamburger at the back of the bottom shelf. She used an issue of *Uncle Henry’s* to double-wrap it, then went back into the living room. She plucked the confession from Strehlke’s lap, doing it gingerly, very aware that the part of him that had hurt her—the part that had gotten three people killed tonight—lay just beneath the pages. “I’m taking your ground chuck, but don’t hold it against me. I’m doing you a favor. It smells spunky-going-on-rotten.”

“A thief as well as a murderer,” Little Driver said in his droning deadvoice. “Isn’t that nice.”

“Shut up, Les,” she said, and left.

Before you shoot yourself, why don't you think for yourself?

As she drove the old pickup back down the windy road to Alvin Strehlke's house, she tried to do that. She was starting to think Tom, even when he wasn't in the vehicle with her, was a better detective than Doreen Marquis on her best day.

"I'll keep it short," Tom said. "If you don't think Al Strehlke was part of it—and I mean a *big* part—you're crazy."

"Of course I'm crazy," she replied. "Why else would I be trying to convince myself that I didn't shoot the wrong man when I know I *did*?"

"That's guilt talking, not logic," Tom replied. He sounded maddeningly smug. "He was no innocent little lamb, not even a half-black sheep. Wake up, Tessa Jean. They weren't just brothers, they were partners."

"*Business* partners."

"Brothers are never just business partners. It's always more complicated than that. Especially when you've got a woman like Ramona for a mother."

Tess turned up Al Strehlke's smoothly paved driveway. She supposed Tom could be right about that. She knew one thing: Doreen and her Knitting Society friends had never met a woman like Ramona Norville.

The pole light went on. The dog started up: *yark-yark, yarkyarkyark*. Tess waited for the light to go out and the dog to quiet down.

"There's no way I'll ever know for sure, Tom."

"You can't be certain of that unless you look."

"Even if he knew, *he wasn't the one who raped me.*"

Tom was silent for a moment. She thought he'd given up. Then he said, "When a person does a bad thing and another person knows but doesn't stop it, they're equally guilty."

"In the eyes of the law?"

“Also in the eyes of *me*. Say it was just Lester who did the hunting, the raping, and the killing. I don’t think so, but say it was. If big brother knew and said nothing, that makes him worth killing. In fact, I’d say bullets were too good for him. Impaling on a hot poker would be closer to justice.”

Tess shook her head wearily and touched the gun on the seat. One bullet left. If she had to use it on the dog (and really, what was one more killing among friends), she would have to hunt for another gun, unless she meant to try and hang herself, or something. But guys like the Strehlkes usually had firearms. That was the beauty part, as Ramona would have said.

“If he knew, yes. But an if that big didn’t deserve a bullet in the head. The mother, yes—on that score, the earrings were all the proof I needed. But there’s no proof here.”

“Really?” Tom’s voice was so low Tess could barely hear it. “Go see.”

The dog didn't bark when she clumped up the steps, but she could picture it standing just inside the door with its head down and its teeth bared.

"Goober?" What the hell, it was as good a name for a country dog as any. "My name's Tess. I have some hamburger for you. I also have a gun with one bullet in it. I'm going to open the door now. If I were you, I'd choose the meat. Okay? Is it a deal?"

Still no barking. Maybe it took the pole light to set him off. Or a juicy female burglar. Tess tried one key, then another. No good. Those two were probably for the trucking office. The third one turned in the lock, and she opened the door before she could lose her courage. She had been visualizing a bulldog or a Rottweiler or a pit bull with red eyes and slavering jaws. What she saw was a Jack Russell terrier who was looking at her hopefully and thumping its tail.

Tess put the gun in her jacket pocket and stroked the dog's head. "Good God," she said. "To think I was *terrified* of you."

"No need to be," Goober said. "Say, where's Al?"

"Don't ask," she said. "Want some hamburger? I warn you, it may have gone off."

"Give it to me, baby," Goober said.

Tess fed him a chunk of the hamburger, then came in, closed the door, and turned on the lights. Why not? It was only her and Goober, after all.

Alvin Strehlke had kept a neater house than his younger brother. The floors and walls were clean, there were no stacks of *Uncle Henry's Swap Guide*, and she actually saw a few books on the shelves. There were also several clusters of Hummel figures, and a large framed photo of Momzilla on the wall. Tess found that a touch suggestive, but it was hardly proof positive. Of anything. *If there was a photo of Richard Widmark in his famous Tommy Udo role, that might be different.*

"What are you smiling about?" Goober asked. "Want to share?"

“Actually, no,” Tess said. “Where should we start?”

“I don’t know,” Goober said. “I’m just the dog. How about some more of that tasty cow?”

Tess fed him some more meat. Goober got up on his hind legs and turned around twice. Tess wondered if she were going insane.

“Tom? Anything to say?”

“You found your underpants at the other brother’s house, right?”

“Yes, and I took them. They’re torn . . . and I’d never want to wear them again even if they weren’t . . . but they’re *mine*.”

“And what else did you find besides a bunch of undies?”

“What do you mean, what else?”

But Tom didn’t need to tell her that. It wasn’t a question of what she had found; it was a question of what she hadn’t: no purse and no keys. Lester Strehlke had probably thrown the keys into the woods. It was what Tess herself would have done in his place. The bag was a different matter. It had been a Kate Spade, very pricey, and inside was a sewn-in strip of silk with her name on it. If the bag—and the stuff in the bag—wasn’t at Lester’s house, and if he didn’t throw it into the woods with her keys, where is it?

“I vote for here,” Tom said. “Let’s look around.”

“Meat!” Goober cried, and did another pirouette.

Where should she start?

“Come on,” Tom said. “Men keep most of their secrets in one of two places: the study or the bedroom. Doreen might not know that, but you do. And this house doesn’t have a study.”

She went into Al Strehlke’s bedroom (trailed by Goober), where she found an extra-long double bed made up in no-nonsense military style. Tess looked under it. Nada. She started to turn toward the closet, paused, then pivoted back to the bed. She lifted the mattress. Looked. After five seconds—maybe ten—she uttered a single word in a dry flat voice.

“Jackpot.”

Lying on the box spring were three ladies’ handbags. The one in the middle was a cream-colored clutch that Tess would have recognized anywhere. She flipped it open. There was nothing inside but some Kleenex and an eyebrow pencil with a cunning little lash-comb hidden in the top half. She looked for the silk strip with her name on it, but it was gone. It had been removed carefully, but she saw one tiny cut in the fine Italian leather where the stitches had been unpicked.

“Yours?” Tom asked.

“You know it is.”

“What about the eyebrow pencil?”

“They sell those things by the thousands in drugstores all over Amer—”

“Is it yours?”

“Yes. It is.”

“Are you convinced yet?”

“I . . .” Tess swallowed. She was feeling something, but she wasn’t sure what it was. Relief? Horror? “I guess I am. But *why?* Why *both* of them?”

Tom didn’t say. He didn’t need to. Doreen might not know (or want to admit it if she did, because the old ladies who followed her

adventures didn't like the ooky stuff), but Tess supposed she did. Because Mommy fucked both of them up. That's what a psychiatrist would say. Lester was the rapist; Al was the fetishist who participated vicariously. Maybe he even helped with one or both of the women in the pipe. She'd never know for sure.

"It would probably take until dawn to search the whole house," Tom said, "but you can search the rest of this room, Tessa Jean. He probably destroyed everything from the purse—cut up the credit cards and tossed them in the Colewich River, would be my guess—but you have to make sure, because anything with your name on it would lead the police right to your door. Start with the closet."

Tess didn't find her credit cards or anything else belonging to her in the closet, but she did find something. It was on the top shelf. She got off the chair she'd been standing on and studied it with growing dismay: a stuffed duck that might have been some child's favorite toy. One of its eyes was missing and its synthetic fur was matted. That fur was actually gone in places, as if the duck had been petted half to death.

On the faded yellow beak was a dark maroon splash.

"Is that what I think it is?" Tom asked.

"Oh Tom, I think so."

"The bodies you saw in the culvert . . . could one of them have been a child's body?"

No, neither of them had been that small. But maybe the culvert running beneath Stagg Road hadn't been the Strehlke brothers' only body dump.

"Put it back on the shelf. Leave it for the police to find. You need to make sure he doesn't have a computer with stuff on it about you. Then you need to get the hell out of here."

Something cold and wet nuzzled Tess's hand. She almost screamed. It was Goober, looking up at her with bright eyes.

"More meat!" Goober said, and Tess gave him some.

"If Al Strehlke has a computer," Tess said, "you can be sure it's password-protected. And his probably won't be open for me to poke around in."

"Then take it and throw it in the goddam river when you go home. Let it sleep with the fishes."

But there was no computer.

At the door, Tess fed Goober the rest of the hamburger. He would probably puke it all up on the rug, but that wasn't going to bother Big Driver.

Tom said, "Are you satisfied, Tessa Jean? Are you satisfied you didn't kill an innocent man?"

She supposed she must be, because suicide no longer seemed like an option. "What about Betsy Neal, Tom? What about her?"

Tom didn't answer . . . and once again didn't need to. Because, after all, he was she.

Wasn't she?

Tess wasn't entirely sure about that. And did it matter, as long as she knew what to do next? As for tomorrow, it was another day. Scarlett O'Hara had been right about that much.

What mattered most was that the police had to know about the bodies in the culvert. If only because somewhere there were friends and relatives who were still wondering. Also because . . .

"Because the stuffed duck says there might be more."

That was her own voice.

And that was all right.

At seven-thirty the next morning, after less than three hours of broken, nightmare-haunted sleep, Tess booted up her office computer. But not to write. Writing was the farthest thing from her mind.

Was Betsy Neal single? Tess thought so. She had seen no wedding ring that day in Neal's office, and while she might have missed that, there had been no family pictures, either. The only picture she could remember seeing was a framed photo of Barack Obama . . . and *he* was already married. So yes—Betsy Neal was probably divorced or single. And probably unlisted. In which case, a computer search would do her no good at all. Tess supposed she could go to The Stagger Inn and find her there . . . but she didn't *want* to go back to The Stagger. Ever again.

"Why are you buying trouble?" Fritzzy said from the windowsill. "At least check the telephone listings for Colewich. And what's that I smell on you? Is that *dog*?"

"Yes. That's Goober."

"Traitor," Fritzzy said contemptuously.

Her search turned up an even dozen Neals. One was an E Neal. E for Elizabeth? There was one way to find out.

With no hesitation—that would have almost certainly have caused her to lose her courage—Tess punched in the number. She was sweating, and her heart was beating rapidly.

The phone rang once. Twice.

It's probably not her. It could be an Edith Neal. An Edwina Neal. Even an Elvira Neal.

Three times.

If it is Betsy Neal's phone, she's probably not even there. She's probably on vacation in the Catskills—

Four times.

—or shackled up with one of the Zombie Bakers, how about that? The lead guitarist. They probably sing "Can Your Pussy Do the Dog"

together in the shower after they—

The phone was picked up, and Tess recognized the voice in her ear at once.

“Hello, you’ve reached Betsy, but I can’t come to the phone right now. There’s a beep coming, and you know what to do when you hear it. Have a nice day.”

I had a bad day, thanks, and last night was ever so much w—

The beep came, and Tess heard herself talking before she was even aware she meant to. “Hello, Ms. Neal, this is Tessa Jean calling—the Willow Grove Lady? We met at The Stagger Inn. You gave me back my Tomtom and I signed an autograph for your gran. You saw how marked up I was and I told you some lies. It wasn’t a boyfriend, Ms. Neal.” Tess began to speak faster, afraid that the message tape would run out before she finished . . . and she discovered she badly wanted to finish. “I was raped and that was bad, but then I tried to make it right and . . . I . . . I have to talk to you about it because—”

There was a click on the line and then Betsy Neal herself was in Tess’s ear. “Start again,” she said, “but go slow. I just woke up and I’m still half asleep.”

They met for lunch on the Colewich town common. They sat on a bench near the bandstand. Tess didn't think she was hungry, but Betsy Neal forced a sandwich on her, and Tess found herself eating it in large bites that made her think of Goober snarfing up Lester Strehlke's hamburger.

"Start at the beginning," Betsy said. She was calm, Tess thought—almost preternaturally so. "Start from the beginning and tell me everything."

Tess began with the invitation from Books & Brown Baggers. Betsy Neal said little, only occasionally adding an "Uh-huh" or "Okay" to let Tess know she was still following the story. Telling it was thirsty work. Luckily, Betsy had also brought two cans of Dr. Brown's cream soda. Tess took one and drank it greedily.

When she finished, it was past one in the afternoon. The few people who had come to the common to eat their lunches were gone. There were two women walking babies in strollers, but they were a good distance away.

"Let me get this straight," Betsy Neal said. "You were going to kill yourself, and then some phantom voice told you to go back to Alvin Strehlke's house, instead."

"Yes," Tess replied. "Where I found my purse. And the duck with the blood on it."

"Your panties you found in the younger brother's house."

"Little Driver's, yes. They're in my Expedition. And the purse. Do you want to see them?"

"No. What about the gun?"

"That's in the car, too. With one bullet left in it." She looked at Neal curiously, thinking: *The girl with the Picasso eyes*. "Aren't you afraid of me? You're the one loose end. The only one I can think of, anyway."

"We're in a public park, Tess. Also, I've got quite the confession on my answering machine at home."

Tess blinked. Something else she hadn't thought of.

"Even if you somehow managed to kill me without those two young mothers over there noticing—"

"I'm not up for killing anyone else. Here or anywhere."

"Good to know. Because even if you took care of me and my answering machine tape, sooner or later someone would find the cabdriver who brought you out to The Stagger on Saturday morning. And when the police got to you, they'd find you wearing a load of incriminating bruises."

"Yes," Tess said, touching the worst of them. "That's true. So what now?"

"For one thing, I think you'd be wise to stay out of sight as much as you can until your pretty face looks pretty again."

"I think I'm covered there," Tess said, and told Betsy the tale she had confabulated for Patsy McClain's benefit.

"That's pretty good."

"Ms. Neal . . . Betsy . . . do you believe me?"

"Oh yes," she said, almost absently. "Now listen. Are you listening?"

Tess nodded.

"We're a couple of women having a little picnic in the park, and that's fine. But after today, we're not going to see each other again. Right?"

"If you say so," Tess said. Her brain felt the way her jaw did after the dentist gave her a healthy shot of novocaine.

"I do. And you need to have another story made up and ready, just in case the cops talk to either the limo driver who took you home—"

"Manuel. His name was Manuel."

"—or the taxi driver who took you out to The Stagger on Saturday morning. I don't think anybody will make the connection between you and the Strehlkes as long as none of your ID shows up, but when the story breaks, this is going to be big news and we can't assume the investigation won't touch you." She leaned forward and tapped Tess once above the left breast. "I'm counting on you to make sure that it never touches *me*. Because I don't deserve that."

No. She absolutely didn't.

“What story could you tell the cops, hon? Something good without me in it. Come on, you’re the writer.”

Tess thought for a full minute. Betsy let her.

“I’d say Ramona Norville told me about the Stagg Road shortcut after my appearance—which is true—and that I saw The Stagger Inn when I drove by. I’d say I stopped for dinner a few miles down the road, then decided to go back and have a few drinks. Listen to the band.”

“That’s good. They’re called—”

“I know what they’re called,” Tess said. Maybe the novocaine was wearing off. “I’d say I met some guys, drank a bunch, and decided I was too blitzed to drive. You’re not in this story, because you don’t work nights. I could also say—”

“Never mind, that’s enough. You’re pretty good at this stuff once you get cooking. Just don’t embellish too much.”

“I won’t,” Tess said. “And this is one story I might not ever have to tell. Once they have the Strehlkes and the Strehlkes’ victims, they’ll be looking for a killer a lot different than a little book-writing lady like me.”

Betsy Neal smiled. “Little book-writing lady, my ass. You’re one bad bitch.” Then she saw the look of startled alarm on Tess’s face. “What? What *now*?”

“They *will* be able to tie the women in the pipe to the Strehlkes, won’t they? At least to Lester?”

“Did he put on a rubber before he raped you?”

“No. God, no. His stuff was still on my thighs when I got home. And inside me.” She shuddered.

“Then he’ll have gone in bareback with the others. Plenty of evidence. They’ll put it together. As long as those bad boys really got rid of your ID, you should be home and dry. And there’s no sense worrying about what you can’t control, is there?”

“No.”

“As for you . . . not planning on going home and cutting your wrists in the bathtub, are you? Or using that last bullet?”

“No.” Tess thought of how sweet the night air had smelled as she sat in the truck with the short barrel of the Lemon Squeezer in her mouth. “No, I’m good.”

“Then it’s time for you to leave. I’ll sit here a little longer.”

Tess started to get off the bench, then sat down again. “There’s something I need to know. You’re making yourself an accessory after the fact. Why would you do that for a woman you don’t even know? A woman you only met once?”

“Would you believe because my gran loves your books and would be very disappointed if you went to jail for a triple murder?”

“Not a bit,” Tess said.

Betsy said nothing for a moment. She picked up her can of Dr. Brown’s, then put it back down again. “Lots of women get raped, wouldn’t you say? I mean, you’re not unique in that respect, are you?”

No, Tess knew she was not unique in that respect, but knowing it did not make the pain and shame any less. Nor would it help with her nerves while she waited for the results of the AIDS test she’d soon be taking.

Betsy smiled. There was nothing pleasant about it. Or pretty. “Women all over the world are being raped as we speak. Girls, too. Some who undoubtedly have favorite stuffed toys. Some are killed, and some survive. Of the survivors, how many do you think report what happened to them?”

Tess shook her head.

“I don’t know, either,” Betsy said, “but I know what the National Crime Victimization Survey says, because I googled it. Sixty per cent of rapes go unreported, according to them. Three in every five. I think that might be low, but who can say for sure? Outside of math classes, it’s hard to prove a negative. Impossible, really.”

“Who raped you?” Tess asked.

“My stepfather. I was twelve. He held a butter knife to my face while he did it. I kept still—I was scared—but the knife slipped when he came. Probably not on purpose, but who can say?”

Betsy pulled down the lower lid of her left eye with her left hand. The right she cupped beneath it, and the glass eye rolled neatly into that palm. The empty socket was mildly red and uptilted, seeming to stare out at the world with surprise.

“The pain was . . . well, there’s no way to describe pain like that, not really. It seemed like the end of the world to me. There was

blood, too. Lots. My mother took me to the doctor. She said I was to tell him I was running in my stocking feet and slipped on the kitchen linoleum because she'd just waxed it. That I pitched forward and put out my eye on the corner of the kitchen counter. She said the doctor would want to speak to me alone, and she was depending on me. 'I know he did a terrible thing to you,' she said, 'but if people find out, they'll blame me. Please, baby, do this one thing for me and I'll make sure nothing bad ever happens to you again.' So that's what I did."

"And did it happen again?"

"Three or four more times. And I always kept still, because I only had one eye left to donate to the cause. Listen, are we done here or not?"

Tess moved to embrace her, but Betsy cringed back—*like a vampire who sees a crucifix*, Tess thought.

"Don't do that," Betsy said.

"But—"

"I know, I know, mucho thanks, solidarity, sisterhood forever, blah-blah-blah. I don't like to be hugged, that's all. Are we done here, or not?"

"We're done."

"Then go. And I'd throw that gun of yours in the river on your way back home. Did you burn the confession?"

"Yes. You bet."

Betsy nodded. "And I'll erase the message you left on my answering machine."

Tess walked away. She looked back once. Betsy Neal was still sitting on the bench. She had put her eye back in.

In her Expedition, Tess realized it might be an extremely good idea to delete her last few journeys from her GPS. She pushed the power button, and the screen brightened. Tom said: "Hello, Tess. I see we're taking a trip."

Tess finished making her deletions, then turned the GPS unit off again. No trip, not really; she was only going home. And she thought she could find the way by herself.

FAIR EXTENSION

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

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

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

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

Streeter got out, went to the Dawg Basket, and disposed of the latest ejecta from his failing body. The summer sun was setting red over the airport's flat (and currently deserted) acreage, and the shadow tacked to his heels was long and grotesquely thin. It was as if it were four months ahead of his body, and already fully ravaged by the cancer that would soon be eating him alive.

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

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

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

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

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

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

His scrawny shadow, the Ghost of Streeter Yet to Come, trailed out behind him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And will soon be gone," Streeter said. "I'm on chemo."

"Oh my. Sorry."

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

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

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

“Knee-jerk triage?”

Streeter laughed. “That’s it exactly.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How much? Dare I ask?”

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

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

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

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

“Of course it can . . . for a price.”

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

Elvid flapped his hand and accompanied the gesture with a roguish roll of his eyes. “I wouldn’t, as the saying goes, know a soul if it bit me on the buttocks. No, money’s the answer, as it usually is.

Fifteen percent of your income over the next fifteen years should do it. An agenting fee, you could call it.”

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

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

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

“That’s not quite all,” Elvid said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Please.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Will Rogers said—”

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

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

“Who is he in your life?”

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

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

“*Your best . . . since grammar . . . oh, that’s . . .*”

Elvid could manage no more. He went into gales and howls and gut-shaking spasms, his chin (strangely sharp for such a chubby face) nodding and dipping at the innocent (but darkening) summer sky. At last he got himself under control. Streeter thought about offering his handkerchief, and decided he didn’t want it on the extension salesman’s skin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Tough.”

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

“Tits that wouldn't quit—”

“Yes indeed. But, sex appeal aside—”

“Not that you ever *did* put it aside—”

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

“Stole her from you!” Elvid said indignantly.

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

“Noble!”

“Claimed they couldn't help it.”

“Claimed they were in *love*, L-U-V.”

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

“Let me guess. He knocked her up.”

“Indeed he did.” Streeter was looking at his shoes again, remembering a certain skirt Norma had worn when she was a

sophomore or a junior. It was cut to show just a flirt of the slip beneath. That had been almost thirty years ago, but sometimes he still summoned that image to mind when he and Janet made love. He had never made love with Norma—not the Full Monty sort, anyway; she wouldn't allow it. Although she had been eager enough to drop her pants for Tom Goodhugh. *Probably the first time he asked her.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No.”

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

“He's a millionaire. He shouldn't be, but he is. In the late eighties—not long after the flood that damn near wiped this town out—he

started up a garbage company . . . only he called it Derry Waste Removal and Recycling. Nicer name, you know.”

“Less germy.”

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

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

“Guess again.”

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

“Right. He sank all his savings into four garbage trucks, and mortgaged his house to buy a piece of land out by the Newport town line. For a landfill. The kind of thing New Jersey gangsters own to wash their dope-and-whore money and use as body-dumps. I thought it was crazy and I couldn’t wait to write the loan. He still loves me like a brother for it. Never fails to tell people how I stood up to the bank and put my job on the line. ‘Dave carried me, just like in high school,’ he says. Do you know what the kids in town call his landfill now?”

“Tell me!”

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

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

In cancer veritas, Streeter thought.

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

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

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

“I got a bonus for writing his loan,” Streeter muttered. “For showing *vision*.”

“But what you actually wanted was a promotion.”

“How do you know that?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So are you,” Elvid said.

“*What?*”

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

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

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

“Unless?”

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

“Just before sunset.”

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

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

“And you’ll bring me something.”

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

“Do I?”

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

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

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

“Great.”

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

“A first in our marriage.”

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

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

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

“Like my hairline,” he said.

“What, honey?”

“Nothing.”

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

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

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

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

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

“And spoil dinner? Nope.”

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

“But what, Roddy?”

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

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

“Are you vomiting?”

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

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

“The unwise thing was starting it in the first place, my friend. You say, ‘Sorry, Dave, the chances of you dying before you get a chance to say Happy Valentine’s Day are in the ninetieth percentile, so we’re going to fuck up the time you have left by filling you full of poison.

You might feel worse if I injected you with sludge from Tom Goodhugh's landfill, but probably not.' And like a fool, I said okay."

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

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

"That's harsh," Henderson said. "You know you're apt to relapse, don't you?"

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

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

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

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

"There's a first time for everything," Streeter said.

* * *

Thursday evening in Derry; dusk of a summer night. The declining sun casting its red and dreamy rays over the three perfectly clipped, watered, and landscaped acres Tom Goodhugh had the temerity to call "the old backyard." Streeter sat in a lawn chair on the patio, listening to the rattle of plates and the laughter of Janet and Norma as they loaded the dishwasher.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks, Jake. You going out?"

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

"Stay on this side. There's poison ivy down there since the crap grew back."

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

"Ouch!" Streeter said.

"Drive home carefully, son. No hot-dogging."

"You bet." The boy put an arm around his father and kissed his cheek with a lack of self-consciousness that Streeter found depressing. Tom not only had his health, a still-gorgeous wife, and a ridiculous pissing cherub; he had a handsome eighteen-year-old son

who still felt all right about kissing his dad goodbye before going out with his best buds.

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

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

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

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

“That’s one thing the ladies don’t have to worry about,” Goodhugh said, and stroked a hand back through his own locks, which were as full and rich as they had been at eighteen. Not a touch of gray in them, either. Janet Streeter could still look forty on a good day, but in the red light of the declining sun, the Garbage King looked thirty-five. He didn’t smoke, he didn’t drink to excess, and he worked out at a health club that did business with Streeter’s bank but which Streeter could not afford himself. His middle child, Carl, was currently doing the European thing with Justin Streeter, the two of them traveling on Carl Goodhugh’s dime. Which was, of course, actually the Garbage King’s dime.

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

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

“Very good,” Streeter agreed. “Long days and pleasant nights.”

Goodhugh raised his eyebrows. “Where’d you get that?”

“Made it up, I guess,” Streeter said. “But it’s true, isn’t it?”

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

“Nah, you’re a self-made man.”

Goodhugh lowered his voice and spoke confidentially. “Want the truth? The woman made this man. The Bible says ‘Who can find a

good woman? For her price is above rubies.' Something like that, anyway. And you introduced us. Don't know if you remember that."

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

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

"Truer words, et cetera," Streeter said. "Excuse me."

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

"Thanks," Streeter said. "Old buddy."

* * *

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

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

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

* * *

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

“How have you been feeling, Dave?”

“Better.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Vomiting?”

“Not today.”

“Eating?”

“Like a horse.”

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

“How did you know?”

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

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

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

Streeter’s mouth opened, then closed slowly.

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

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

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

“And happiness?”

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

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

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

“Are you saying—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was . . . and wasn’t.

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

“Where’s your car?”

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

“Your teeth,” Streeter said stupidly. “They have *points*.”

“*Your question, Mr. Streeter!*”

“Is Tom Goodhugh going to get cancer?”

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

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

“What, then? What?”

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

“But—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

Streeter did, but kept his silence.

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

In October, Carl Goodhugh's roommate at Emerson came back from class to find Carl facedown on the kitchen floor of their apartment with the grilled cheese sandwich he'd been making for himself still smoking in the frypan. Although only twenty-two years of age, Carl had suffered a heart attack. The doctors attending the case pinpointed a congenital heart defect—something about a thin atrial wall—that had gone undetected. Carl didn't die; his roommate got to him just in time and knew CPR. But he suffered oxygen deprivation, and the bright, handsome, physically agile young man who had not long before toured Europe with Justin Streeter became a shuffling shadow of his former self. He was not always continent, he got lost if he wandered more than a block or two from home (he had moved back with his still-grieving father), and his speech had become a blurred blare that only Tom could understand. Goodhugh hired a companion for him. The companion administered physical therapy and saw that Carl changed his clothes. He also took Carl on biweekly "outings." The most common "outing" was to Wishful Dishful Ice Cream, where Carl would always get a pistachio cone

and smear it all over his face. Afterward the companion would clean him up, patiently, with Wet-Naps.

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

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

If you really thought about it.

* * *

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

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

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

Tom no longer looked thirty-five; he looked sixty. And must have known it, because he stopped dying his hair. Streeter was delighted to see that it hadn't gone white underneath the artificial color;

Goodhugh's hair was the dull and listless gray of Elvid's umbrella when he had furled it. The hair-color, Streeter decided, of the old men you see sitting on park benches and feeding the pigeons. Call it Just For Losers.

* * *

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

The honeymooning couple went to Belize. *I'll bet it rains the whole time*, Streeter thought. It didn't, but Jacob spent most of the week in a rundown hospital, suffering from violent gastroenteritis and pooping into paper didies. He had only drunk bottled water, but then forgot and brushed his teeth from the tap. "My own darn fault," he said.

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

Charlie Sheen, Tori Spelling, and David Hasselhoff got divorces, but in Derry, David and Janet Streeter celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary. There was a party. Toward the end of it, Streeter escorted his wife out back. He had arranged fireworks. Everybody applauded except for Carl Goodhugh. He tried, but kept missing his hands. Finally the former Emerson student gave up on the clapping thing and pointed at the sky, hooting.

* * *

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

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

"Hush!" Janet cried, shocked.

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

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

* * *

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

A plane carrying two members of the rock band Blink-182 crashed. Bad news, four people died. Good news, the rockers actually survived for a change . . . although one of them would die not much later.

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

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

“You don’t know that.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

"What is it, honey?"

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

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

She put two fingers to her lips. "Hush. No more. Life's not fair. We know that."

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

"Yes, but—"

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

She shook her head. He wasn't wrong.

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

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

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

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

Streeter shrugged modestly. "The law of averages favors optimists, any banker would tell you that. Things have a way of

balancing out in the end.”

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

“Wish!” Streeter commanded.

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

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



STEPHEN KING is the author of more than fifty worldwide bestsellers. He was the recipient of the 2003 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters and the 2007 Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.



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Previously published in 2010 in a collection of novellas title *Full Dark, No Stars*

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First Scribner ebook edition September 2014

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AFTERWORD

The stories in this book are harsh. You may have found them hard to read in places. If so, be assured that I found them equally hard to write in places. When people ask me about my work, I have developed a habit of skirting the subject with jokes and humorous personal anecdotes (which you can't quite trust; never trust anything a fiction writer says about himself). It's a form of deflection, and a little more diplomatic than the way my Yankee forebears might have answered such questions: *It's none of your business, chummy*. But beneath the jokes, I take what I do very seriously, and have since I wrote my first novel, *The Long Walk*, at the age of eighteen.

I have little patience with writers who *don't* take the job seriously, and none at all with those who see the art of story-fiction as essentially worn out. It's not worn out, and it's not a literary game. It's one of the vital ways in which we try to make sense of our lives, and the often terrible world we see around us. It's the way we answer the question, *How can such things be?* Stories suggest that sometimes—not always, but sometimes—there's a *reason*.

From the start—even before a young man I can now hardly comprehend started writing *The Long Walk* in his college dormitory room—I felt that the best fiction was both propulsive and assaultive. It gets in your face. Sometimes it shouts in your face. I have no quarrel with literary fiction, which usually concerns itself with extraordinary people in ordinary situations, but as both a reader and a writer, I'm much more interested by ordinary people in extraordinary situations. I want to provoke an emotional, even visceral, reaction in my readers. Making them think *as they read* is not my deal. I put that in italics, because if the tale is good enough and the characters vivid enough, thinking will supplant emotion when the tale has been told and the book set aside (sometimes with relief). I can remember reading George Orwell's *1984* at the age of thirteen or so with growing dismay, anger, and outrage, charging through the

pages and gobbling up the story as fast as I could, and what's wrong with that? Especially since I continue to think about it to this day when some politician (I'm thinking of Sarah Palin and her scurrilous "death-panel" remarks) has some success in convincing the public that white is really black, or vice-versa.

Here's something else I believe: if you're going into a very dark place—like Wilf James's Nebraska farmhouse in "1922"—then you should take a bright light, and shine it on everything. If you don't want to see, why in God's name would you dare the dark at all? The great naturalist writer Frank Norris has always been one of my literary idols, and I've kept what he said on this subject in mind for over forty years: "I never truckled; I never took off my hat to Fashion and held it out for pennies. By God, I told them the truth."

But Steve, you say, you've made a great many pennies during your career, and as for truth . . . that's variable, isn't it? Yes, I've made a good amount of money writing my stories, but the money was a side effect, never the goal. Writing fiction for money is a mug's game. And sure, truth is in the eye of the beholder. But when it comes to fiction, the writer's only responsibility is to look for the truth inside his own heart. It won't always be the reader's truth, or the critic's truth, but as long as it's the *writer's* truth—as long as he or she doesn't truckle, or hold out his or her hat to Fashion—all is well. For writers who knowingly lie, for those who substitute unbelievable human behavior for the way people really act, I have nothing but contempt. Bad writing is more than a matter of shit syntax and faulty observation; bad writing usually arises from a stubborn refusal to tell stories about what people actually do—to face the fact, let us say, that murderers sometimes help old ladies cross the street.

I have tried my best in *Full Dark, No Stars* to record what people might do, and how they might behave, under certain dire circumstances. The people in these stories are not without hope, but they acknowledge that even our fondest hopes (and our fondest wishes for our fellowmen and the society in which we live) may sometimes be vain. Often, even. But I think they also say that nobility most fully resides not in success but in trying to do the right thing . . . and that when we fail to do that, or willfully turn away from the challenge, hell follows.

“1922” was inspired by a nonfiction book called *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973), written by Michael Lesy and featuring photographs taken in the small city of Black River Falls, Wisconsin. I was impressed by the rural isolation of these photographs, and the harshness and deprivation in the faces of many of the subjects. I wanted to get that feeling in my story.

In 2007, while traveling on Interstate 84 to an autographing in western Massachusetts, I stopped at a rest area for a typical Steve King Health Meal: a soda and a candybar. When I came out of the refreshment shack, I saw a woman with a flat tire talking earnestly to a long-haul trucker parked in the next slot. He smiled at her and got out of his rig.

“Need any help?” I asked.

“No, no, I got this,” the trucker said.

The lady got her tire changed, I’m sure. I got a Three Musketeers and the story idea that eventually became “Big Driver.”

In Bangor, where I live, a thoroughfare called the Hammond Street Extension skirts the airport. I walk three or four miles a day, and if I’m in town, I often go out that way. There’s a gravel patch beside the airport fence about halfway along the Extension, and there any number of roadside vendors have set up shop over the years. My favorite is known locally as Golf Ball Guy, and he always appears in the spring. Golf Ball Guy goes up to the Bangor Municipal Golf Course when the weather turns warm, and scavenges up hundreds of used golf balls that have been abandoned under the snow. He throws away the really bad ones and sells the rest at the little spot out on the Extension (the windshield of his car is lined with golf balls—a nice touch). One day when I spied him, the idea for “Fair Extension” came into my mind. Of course I set it in Derry, home of the late and unlamented clown Pennywise, because Derry is just Bangor masquerading under a different name.

The last story in this book came to my mind after reading an article about Dennis Rader, the infamous BTK (bind, torture, and kill) murderer who took the lives of ten people—mostly women, but two of his victims were children—over a period of roughly sixteen years. In many cases, he mailed pieces of his victims’ identification to the police. Paula Rader was married to this monster for thirty-four years,

and many in the Wichita area, where Rader claimed his victims, refuse to believe that she could live with him and not know what he was doing. I did believe—I *do* believe—and I wrote this story to explore what might happen in such a case if the wife suddenly found out about her husband's awful hobby. I also wrote it to explore the idea that it's impossible to fully know anyone, even those we love the most.

All right, I think we've been down here in the dark long enough. There's a whole other world upstairs. Take my hand, Constant Reader, and I'll be happy to lead you back into the sunshine. I'm happy to go there, because I believe most people are essentially good. I know that I am.

It's *you* I'm not entirely sure of.

Bangor, Maine
December 23, 2009

GALLERY BOOKS PRESENTS

“UNDER THE WEATHER”

A NEW STORY FROM
STEPHEN KING...

I've been having this bad dream for a week now, but it must be one of the lucid ones, because I'm always able to back out before it turns into a nightmare. Only this time it seems to have followed me, because Ellen and I aren't alone. There's something under the bed. I can hear it chewing.

You know how it is when you're really scared, right? Your heart seems to stop, your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth, your skin goes cold and goose bumps rise up all over your body. Instead of meshing, the cogs in your head just spin and the whole engine heats up. I almost scream, I really do. I think, *It's the thing I don't want to look at. It's the thing in the window seat.*

Then I see the fan overhead, the blades turning at their slowest speed. I see a crack of early morning light running down the middle of the pulled drapes. I see the graying milkweed fluff of Ellen's hair on the other side of the bed. I'm here on the Upper East Side, fifth floor, and everything's okay. The dream was just a dream. As for what's under the bed—

I toss back the covers and slide out onto my knees, like a man who means to pray. But instead of that, I lift the flounce and peer under the bed. I only see a dark shape at first. Then the shape's head turns and two eyes gleam at me. It's Lady. She's not supposed to be under there, and I guess she knows it (hard to tell what a dog knows and what it doesn't), but I must have left the door open when I came to bed. Or maybe it didn't quite latch and she pushed it open with her snout. She must have brought one of her toys with her from the basket in the hall. At least it wasn't the blue bone or the red rat. Those have squeakers in them, and would have wakened Ellen for sure. And Ellen needs her rest. She's been under the weather.

"Lady," I whisper. "Lady, come out of there."

She only looks at me. She's getting on in years and not so steady on her pins as she used to be, but—as the saying goes—she ain't stupid. She's under Ellen's side, where I can't reach her. If I raise my voice she'll have to come, but she knows (I'm pretty sure she knows) that I won't do that, because if I raise my voice, that will wake Ellen.

As if to prove this, Lady turns away from me and the chewing recommences.

Well, I can handle that. I've been living with Lady for eleven years, nearly half my married life. There are three things that get her on her feet. One is the rattle of her leash and a call of "Elevator!" One is the thump of her food dish on the floor. The third—

I get up and walk down the short hall to the kitchen. From the cupboard I take the bag of Snackin' Slices, making sure to rattle it. I don't have to wait long for the muted clitter of cockerclaws. Five seconds and she's right there. She doesn't even bother to bring her toy.

I show her one of the little carrot shapes, then toss it into the living room. A little mean, maybe, and I know she didn't mean to scare the life out of me, but she did. Besides, the fat old thing can use the exercise. She chases her treat. I linger long enough to start the coffeemaker, then go back into the bedroom. I'm careful to pull the door all the way shut.

Ellen's still sleeping, and getting up early has one benefit: no need for the alarm. I turn it off. Let her sleep a little later. It's a bronchial infection. I was scared for a while there, but now she's on the mend.

I go into the bathroom and officially christen the day by brushing my teeth (I've read that in the morning a person's mouth is as germicidally dead as it ever gets, but the habits we learn as children are hard to break). I turn on the shower, get it good and hot, and step in.

The shower's where I do my best thinking, and this morning I think about the dream. Five nights in a row I've had it. (But who's counting.) Nothing really awful happens, but in a way that's the worst part. Because in the dream I know—absolutely *know*—that something awful *will* happen. If I let it.

I'm in an airplane, in business class. I'm in an aisle seat, which is where I prefer to be, so I don't have to squeeze past anybody if I have to go to the toilet. My tray table is down. On it is a bag of peanuts and an orange drink that looks like a vodka sunrise, a drink I've never ordered in real life. The ride is smooth. If there are clouds, we're above them. The cabin is filled with sunlight. Someone is sitting in the window seat, and I know if I look at him (or her, or possibly *it*), I'll see something that will turn my bad dream into a nightmare. If I look into the face of my seatmate, I may lose my mind.

It could crack open like an egg and all the darkness there is might pour out.

I give my soapy hair a quick rinse, step out, dry off. My clothes are folded on a chair in the bedroom. I take them and my shoes into the kitchen, which is now filling with the smell of coffee. Nice. Lady's curled up by the stove, looking at me reproachfully.

"Don't go giving me the stinkeye," I tell her, and nod toward the closed bedroom door. "You know the rules."

She puts her snout down on the floor between her paws.

* * *

I choose cranberry juice while I wait for the coffee. There's OJ, which is my usual morning drink, but I don't want it. Too much like the drink in the dream, I suppose. I have my coffee in the living room with CNN on mute, just reading the crawl at the bottom, which is all a person really needs. Then I turn it off and have a bowl of All-Bran. Quarter to eight. I decide that if the weather's nice when I walk Lady, I'll skip the cab and walk to work.

The weather's nice all right, spring edging into summer and a shine on everything. Carlo, the doorman, is under the awning, talking on his cell phone. "Yuh," he says. "Yuh, I finally got hold of her. She says go ahead, no problem as long as I'm there. She don't trust nobody, and I don't blame her. She got a lot of nice things up there. You come when? Three? You can't make it earlier?" He tips me a wave with one white-gloved hand as I walk Lady down to the corner.

We've got this down to a science, Lady and I. She does it at pretty much the same place every day, and I'm fast with the poop bag. When I come back, Carlo stoops to give her a pat. Lady waves her tail back and forth most fetchingly, but no treat is forthcoming from Carlo. He knows she's on a diet. Or supposed to be.

"I finally got hold of Mrs. Warshawski," Carlo tells me. Mrs. Warshawski is in 5-C, but only technically. She's been gone for a couple of months now. "She was in Vienna."

"Vienna, is that so," I say.

"She told me to go ahead with the exterminators. She was horrified when I told her. You're the only one on four, five, or six who

hasn't complained. The rest of them . . ." He shakes his head and makes a *whoo* sound.

"I grew up in a Connecticut mill town. It pretty well wrecked my sinuses. I can smell coffee, and Ellie's perfume if she puts it on thick, but that's about all."

"In this case, that's probably a blessing. How *is* Mrs. Nathan? Still under the weather?"

"It'll be a few more days before she's ready to go back to work, but she's a hell of a lot better. She gave me a scare for a while."

"Me, too. She was going out one day—in the rain, naturally—"

"That's El," I say. "Nothing stops her. If she feels like she has to go somewhere, she goes."

"—and I thought to myself, 'That's a real graveyard cough.'" He raises one of his gloved hands in a *stop* gesture. "Not that I really thought—"

"It was on the way to being a hospital cough, anyway. But I finally got her to see the doctor, and now . . . road to recovery."

"Good. Good." Then, returning to what's really on his mind: "Mrs. Warshawski was pretty grossed out when I told her. I said we'd probably just find some spoiled food in the fridge, but I know it's worse than that. So does anybody else on those floors with an intact smeller." He gives a grim little nod. "They're going to find a dead rat in there, you mark my words. Food stinks, but not like that. Only dead things stink like that. It's a rat, all right, maybe a couple of them. She probably put down poison and doesn't want to admit it." He bends down to give Lady another pat. "*You* smell it, don't you, girl? You bet you do."

* * *

There's a litter of purple notes around the coffee-maker. I take the purple pad they came from to the kitchen table and write another.

Ellen: Lady all walked. Coffee ready. If you feel well enough to go out to the park, go! Just not too far. Don't want you to overdo now that you're finally on the mend. Carlo told me again that he "smells a rat." I guess so does everyone else in the neighborhood of 5-C. Lucky for us that you're plugged up and I'm "olfac'trilly challenged."

Haha! If you hear people in Mrs. W's, it's the exterminators. Carlo will be with them, so don't worry. I'm going to walk to work. Need to think summore about the latest male wonder drug. Wish they'd consulted us before they hung that name on it. Remember, DON'T OVERDO. Love you—love you.

I jot half a dozen X's just to underline the point, and sign it with a B in a heart. Then I add it to the other notes around the coffeemaker. I refill Lady's water dish before I leave.

It's twenty blocks or so, and I don't think about the latest male wonder drug. I think about the exterminators, who will be coming at three. Earlier, if they can make it.

* * *

The walk might have been a mistake. The dreams have interrupted my sleep cycle, I guess, and I almost fall asleep during the morning meeting in the conference room. But I come around in a hurry when Pete Wendell shows a mock-up poster for the new Petrov Vodka campaign. I've seen it already, on his office computer while he was fooling with it last week, and looking at it again I know where at least one element of my dream came from.

"Petrov Vodka," Aura McLean says. Her admirable breasts rise and fall in a theatrical sigh. "If that's an example of the new Russian capitalism, it's dead on arrival." The heartiest laughter at this comes from the younger men, who'd like to see Aura's long blond hair spread on a pillow next to them. "No offense to you intended, Pete, it's a great leader."

"None taken," Pete says with a game smile. "We do what we can."

The poster shows a couple toasting each other on a balcony while the sun sinks over a harbor filled with expensive pleasure boats. The cutline beneath reads SUNSET. THE PERFECT TIME FOR A VODKA SUNRISE.

There's some discussion about the placement of the Petrov bottle—right? left? center? below?—and Frank Bernstein suggests that actually adding the recipe might prolong the page view, especially in mags like *Playboy* and *Esquire*. I tune out, thinking about the drink sitting on the tray in my airplane dream, until I realize George

Slattery is calling on me. I'm able to replay the question, and that's a good thing. You don't ask George to chew his cabbage twice.

"I'm actually in the same boat as Pete," I say. "The client picked the name, I'm just doing what I can."

There's some good-natured laughter. There have been many jokes about Vonnell Pharmaceutical's newest drug product.

"I may have something to show you by Monday," I tell them. I'm not looking at George, but he knows where I'm aiming. "By the middle of next week for sure. I want to give Billy a chance to see what he can do." Billy Ederle is our newest hire, and doing his break-in time as my assistant. He doesn't get an invite to the morning meetings yet, but I like him. Everybody at Andrews-Slattery likes him. He's bright, he's eager, and I bet he'll start shaving in a year or two.

George considers this. "I was really hoping to see a treatment today. Even rough copy."

Silence. People study their nails. It's as close to a public rebuke as George gets, and maybe I deserve it. This hasn't been my best week, and laying it off on the kid doesn't look so good. It doesn't feel so good, either.

"Okay," George says at last, and you can feel the relief in the room. It's like a light cool breath of breeze, there and then gone. No one wants to witness a conference room caning on a sunny Friday morning, and I sure don't want to get one. Not with all the other stuff on my mind.

George smells a rat, I think.

"How's Ellen doing?" he asks.

"Better," I tell him. "Thanks for asking."

There are a few more presentations. Then it's over. Thank God.

* * *

I'm almost dozing when Billy Ederle comes into my office twenty minutes later. Check that: I *am* dozing. I sit up fast, hoping the kid just thinks he caught me deep in thought. He's probably too excited to have noticed either way. In one hand he's holding a piece of

poster board. I think he'd look right at home in Podunk High School, putting up a big notice about the Friday night dance.

"How was the meeting?" he asks.

"It was okay."

"Did they bring us up?"

"You know they did. What have you got for me, Billy?"

He takes a deep breath and turns his poster board around so I can see it. On the left is a prescription bottle of Viagra, either actual size or close enough not to matter. On the right—the power side of the ad, as anyone in advertising will tell you—is a prescription bottle of our stuff, but much bigger. Beneath is the cutline: PO-10S, TEN TIMES MORE EFFECTIVE THAN VIAGRA!

As Billy looks at me looking at it, his hopeful smile starts to fade. "You don't like it."

"It's not a question of like or don't like. In this business it never is. It's a question of what works and what doesn't. This doesn't."

Now he's looking sulky. If George Slattery saw that look, he'd take the kid to the woodshed. I won't, although it might feel that way to him because it's my job to teach him. In spite of everything else on my mind, I'll try to do that. Because I love this business. It gets very little respect, but I love it anyway. Also, I can hear Ellen say, you don't let go. Once you get your teeth in something, they stay there. Determination like that can be a little scary.

"Sit down, Billy."

He sits.

"And wipe that pout off your puss, okay? You look like a kid who just dropped his binky in the toilet."

He does his best. Which I like about him. Kid's a trier, and if he's going to work in the Andrews-Slattery shop, he'd better be.

"Good news is I'm not taking it away from you, mostly because it's not your fault Vonnell Pharmaceutical saddled us with a name that sounds like a multivitamin. But we're going to make a silk purse out of this sow's ear. In advertising, that's the main job seven times out of every ten. Maybe eight. So pay attention."

He gets a little grin. "Should I take notes?"

"Don't be a smart-ass. First, when you're shouting a drug, you *never* show a prescription bottle. The logo, sure. The pill itself,

sometimes. It depends. You know why Pfizer shows the Viagra pill? Because it's blue. Consumers like blue. The shape helps, too. Consumers have a very positive response to the shape of the Viagra tab. But people *never like to see the prescription bottle their stuff comes in*. Prescription bottles make them think of sickness. Got that?"

"So maybe a little Viagra pill and a big Po-10s pill? Instead of the bottles?" He raises his hands, framing an invisible cutline. "'Po-10s, ten times bigger, ten times better.' Get it?"

"Yes, Billy, I get it. The FDA will get it, too, and they won't like it. In fact, they could make us take ads with a cutline like that out of circulation, which would cost a bundle. Not to mention a very good client."

"*Why?*" It's almost a bleat.

"Because it *isn't* ten times bigger, and it isn't ten times better. Viagra, Cialis, Levitra, Po-10s, they all have about the same penis-elevation formula. Do your research, kiddo. And a little refresher course in advertising law wouldn't hurt. Want to say Blowhard's Bran Muffins are ten times tastier than Bigmouth's Bran Muffins? Have at it, taste is a subjective judgment. What gets your prick hard, though, and for how long . . ."

"Okay," he says in a small voice.

"Here's the other half. 'Ten times more' anything is—speaking in erectile dysfunction terms—pretty limp. It went out of vogue around the same time as Two Cs in a K."

He looks blank.

"Two cunts in a kitchen. It's how advertising guys used to refer to their TV ads on the soaps back in the fifties."

"You're joking!"

"Afraid not. Now here's something I've been playing with." I jot on a pad, and for a moment I think of all those notes scattered around the coffeemaker back in good old 5-B—why are they still there?

"Can't you just tell me?" the kid asks from a thousand miles away.

"No, because advertising isn't an oral medium," I say. "Never trust an ad that's spoken out loud. Write it down and show it to someone. Show it to your best friend. Or your . . . you know, your wife."

"Are you okay, Brad?"

“Fine. Why?”

“I don’t know, you just looked funny for a minute.”

“Just as long as I don’t look funny when I present on Monday. Now—what does this say to you?” I turn the pad around and show him what I’ve printed there: PO-10S . . . FOR MEN WHO WANT TO DO IT THE HARD WAY.

“It’s like a dirty joke!” he objects.

“You’ve got a point, but I’ve printed it in block caps. Imagine it in a soft italic type, almost a girly type. Maybe even in parentheses.” I add them, although they don’t work with the caps. But they will. It’s a thing I just know, because I can see it. “Now, playing off that, think of a photo showing a big, burly guy. In low-slung jeans that show the top of his underwear. And a sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off, let’s say. See him with some grease and dirt on his guns.”

“Guns?”

“Biceps. And he’s standing beside a muscle car with the hood up. Now, is it still a dirty joke?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“Neither do I, not for sure, but my gut tells me it’ll pull the plow. But not quite as is. The cutline still doesn’t work, you’re right about that, and it’s got to, because it’ll be the basis of the TV and ’Net ads. So play with it. Make it work. Just remember the key word . . .”

Suddenly, just like that, I know where the rest of that damn dream came from.

“Brad?”

“The key word is *hard*,” I say. “Because a man . . . when something’s not working—his prick, his plan, his *life*—he *takes* it hard. He doesn’t want to give up. He remembers how it was, and he wants it that way again.”

Yes, I think. Yes he does.

Billy smirks. “I wouldn’t know.”

I manage a smile. It feels god-awful heavy, as if there are weights hanging from the corners of my mouth. All at once it’s like being in the bad dream again. Because there’s something close to me I don’t want to look at. Only this isn’t a lucid dream I can back out of. This is lucid reality.

* * *

After Billy leaves, I go down to the can. It's ten o'clock, and most of the guys in the shop have off-loaded their morning coffee and are taking on more in our little caff, so I have it to myself. I drop my pants so if someone wanders in and happens to look under the door he won't think I'm weird, but the only business I've come in here to do is thinking. Or remembering.

Four years after coming on board at Andrews-Slattery, the Fasprin Pain Reliever account landed on my desk. I've had some special ones over the years, some breakouts, and that was the first. It happened fast. I opened the sample box, took out the bottle, and the basis of the campaign—what admen sometimes call the heartwood—came to me in an instant. I ditzed around a little, of course—you don't want to make it look *too* easy—then did some comps. Ellen helped. This was just after we found out she couldn't conceive. It was something to do with a drug she'd been given when she had rheumatic fever as a kid. She was pretty depressed. Helping with the Fasprin comps took her mind off it, and she really threw herself into the thing.

Al Andrews was still running things back then, and he was the one I took the comps to. I remember sitting in front of his desk in the sweat-seat with my heart in my mouth as he shuffled slowly through the comps we'd worked up. When he finally put them down and raised his shaggy old head to look at me, the pause seemed to go on for at least an hour. Then he said, "These are good, Bradley. More than good, terrific. We'll meet with the client tomorrow afternoon. You do the prez."

I did the prez, and when the Dugan Drug VP saw the picture of the young working woman with the bottle of Fasprin poking out of her rolled-up sleeve, he flipped for it. The campaign brought Fasprin right up there with the big boys—Bayer, Anacin, Bufferin—and by the end of the year we were handling the whole Dugan account. Billing? Seven figures. Not a low seven, either.

I used the bonus to take Ellen to Nassau for ten days. We left from Kennedy, on a morning that was pelting down rain, and I still remember how she laughed and said, "Kiss me, beautiful," when the

plane broke through the clouds and the cabin filled with sunlight. I did kiss her, and the couple on the other side of the aisle—we were flying in business class—applauded.

That was the best. The worst came half an hour later, when I turned to her and for a moment thought she was dead. It was the way she was sleeping, with her head cocked over on her shoulder and her mouth open and her hair kind of sticking to the window. She was young, we both were, but the idea of sudden death had a hideous possibility in Ellen's case.

"They used to call your condition 'barren,' Mrs. Franklin," the doctor said when he gave us the bad news, "but in your case, the condition could more accurately be called a blessing. Pregnancy puts a strain on the heart, and thanks to a disease that was badly treated when you were a child, yours isn't strong. If you did happen to conceive, you'd be in bed for the last four months of the pregnancy, and even then the outcome would be dicey."

She wasn't pregnant when we left on that trip, but she'd been excited about it for the last two weeks. The climb up to cruising altitude had been plenty rough . . . and she didn't look like she was breathing.

Then she opened her eyes. I settled back into my aisle seat, letting out a long and shaky breath.

She looked at me, puzzled. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. The way you were sleeping, that's all."

She wiped at her chin. "Oh God, did I drool?"

"No." I laughed. "But for a minute there you looked . . . well, dead."

She laughed, too. "And if I was, you'd ship the body back to New York, I suppose, and take up with some Bahama mama."

"No," I said. "I'd take you, anyway."

"What?"

"Because I wouldn't accept it. No way would I."

"You'd have to after a few days. I'd get all smelly."

She was smiling. She thought it was still a game, because she hadn't really understood what the doctor was telling her that day. She hadn't—as the saying goes—taken it to heart. And she didn't know how she'd looked, with the sun shining on her winter-pale cheeks and smudged eyelids and slack mouth. But I'd seen, and I'd

taken it to heart. She was my heart, and I guard what's in my heart. Nobody takes it away from me.

"You wouldn't," I said. "I'd keep you alive."

"Really? How? Necromancy?"

"By refusing to give up. And by using an adman's most valuable asset."

"Which is what, Mr. Fasprin?"

"Imagination. Now can we talk about something more pleasant?"

* * *

The call I've been expecting comes around three-thirty. It's not Carlo. It's Berk Ostrow, the building super. He wants to know what time I'm going to be home, because the rat everybody's been smelling isn't in 5-C, it's in our place next door. Ostrow says the exterminators have to leave by four to get to another job, but that isn't the important thing. What's important is what's wrong in there, and by the way, Carlo says no one's seen your wife in over a week. Just you and the dog.

I explain about my deficient sense of smell, and Ellen's bronchitis. In her current condition, I say, she wouldn't know the drapes were on fire until the smoke detector went off. I'm sure Lady smells it, I tell him, but to a dog, the stench of a decaying rat probably smells like Chanel No. 5.

"I get all that, Mr. Franklin, but I still need to get in there to see what's what. And the exterminators will have to be called back. I think you're probably going to be on the hook for their bill, which is apt to be quite high. I could let myself in with the passkey, but I'd really be more comfortable if you were—"

"Yes, I'd be more comfortable, too. Not to mention my wife."

"I tried calling her, but she didn't answer the phone." I can hear the suspicion creeping back into his voice. I've explained everything, advertising men are good at that, but the convincing effect only lasts for sixty seconds or so.

"She's probably got it on mute. Plus, the medication the doctor gave her makes her sleep quite heavily."

“What time will you be home, Mr. Franklin? I can stay until seven; after that there’s only Alfredo.” The disparaging note in his voice suggests I’d be better off dealing with a no-English wetback.

Never, I think. I’ll never be home. In fact, I was never there in the first place. Ellen and I enjoyed the Bahamas so much we moved to Cable Beach, and I took a job with a little firm in Nassau. I shouted Cruise Ship Specials, Stereo Blowout Sales, and supermarket openings. All this New York stuff has just been a lucid dream, one I can back out of at any time.

“Mr. Franklin? Are you there?”

“Sure. Just thinking.” What I’m thinking is that if I leave right now, and take a taxi, I can be there in twenty minutes. “I’ve got one meeting I absolutely can’t miss, but why don’t you meet me in the apartment around six?”

“How about in the lobby, Mr. Franklin? We can go up together.”

I think of asking him how he believes I’d get rid of my murdered wife’s body at rush hour—because that *is* what he’s thinking. Maybe it’s not at the very front of his mind, but it’s not all the way in back, either. Does he think I’d use the service elevator? Or maybe dump her down the incinerator chute?

“The lobby is absolutely okey-fine,” I say. “Six. Quarter of, if I can possibly make it.”

I hang up and head for the elevators. I have to pass the caff to get there. Billy Ederle’s leaning in the doorway, drinking a Nozzy. It’s a remarkably lousy soda, but it’s all we vend. The company’s a client.

“Where are you off to?”

“Home. Ellen called. She’s not feeling well.”

“Don’t you want your briefcase?”

“No.” I don’t expect to be needing my briefcase for a while. In fact, I may never need it again.

“I’m working on the new Po-10s direction. I think it’s going to be a winner.”

“I’m sure,” I say, and I am. Billy Ederle will soon be movin’ on up, and good for him. “I’ve got to get a wiggle on.”

“Sure, I understand.” He’s twenty-four and understands nothing. “Give her my best.”

* * *

We take on half a dozen interns a year at Andrews-Slattery; it's how Billy Ederle got started. Most are terrific, and at first Fred Willits seemed terrific, too. I took him under my wing, and so it became my responsibility to fire him—I guess you'd say that, although interns are never actually "hired" in the first place—when it turned out he was a klepto who had decided our supply room was his private game preserve. God knows how much stuff he lifted before Maria Ellington caught him loading reams of paper into his suitcase-sized briefcase one afternoon. Turned out he was a bit of a psycho, too. He went nuclear when I told him he was through. Pete Wendell called security while the kid was yelling at me in the lobby and had him removed forcibly.

Apparently old Freddy had a lot more to say, because he started hanging around my building and haranguing me when I came home. He kept his distance, though, and the cops claimed he was just exercising his right to free speech. But it wasn't his mouth I was afraid of. I kept thinking he might have lifted a box cutter or an X-ACTO knife as well as printer cartridges and about fifty reams of copier paper. That was when I got Alfredo to give me a key to the service entrance, and I started going in that way. All that was in the fall of the year, September or October. Young Mr. Willits gave up and took his issues elsewhere when the weather turned cold, but Alfredo never asked for the return of the key, and I never gave it back. I guess we both forgot.

That's why, instead of giving the taxi driver my address, I get him to let me out on the next block. I pay him, adding a generous tip—hey, it's only money—and then walk down the service alley. I have a bad moment when the key doesn't work, but when I jiggle it a little, it turns. The service elevator has brown quilted movers' pads hanging from the walls. Previews of the padded cell they'll put me in, I think, but of course that's just melodrama. I'll probably have to take a leave of absence from the shop, and what I've done is a lease breaker for sure, but—

What *have* I done, exactly?

For that matter, what have I been doing for the last week?

“Keeping her alive,” I say as the elevator stops at the fifth floor. “Because I couldn’t bear for her to be dead.”

She *isn’t* dead, I tell myself, just under the weather. It sucks as a cutline, but for the last week it has served me very well, and in the advertising biz the short term is what counts.

I let myself in. The air is still and warm, but I don’t smell anything. So I tell myself, and in the advertising biz imagination is *also* what counts.

“Honey, I’m home,” I call. “Are you awake? Feeling any better?”

I guess I forgot to close the bedroom door before I left this morning, because Lady slinks out. She’s licking her chops. She gives me a guilty glance, then waddles into the living room with her tail tucked way down low. She doesn’t look back.

“Honey? EI?”

I go into the bedroom. There’s still nothing to be seen of her but the milkweed fluff of her hair and the shape of her body under the quilt. The quilt is slightly rumped, so I know she’s been up—if only to have some coffee—and then gone back to bed again. It was last Friday when I came home and she wasn’t breathing and since then she’s been sleeping a lot.

I go around to her side and see her hand hanging down. There’s not much left of it but bones and hanging strips of flesh. I gaze at this and think there’s two ways of seeing it. Look at it one way, and I’ll probably have to have my dog—Ellen’s dog, really, Lady always loved Ellen best—euthanized. Look at it another way and you could say Lady got worried and was trying to wake her up. Come on, Ellie, I want to go to the park. Come on, Ellie, let’s play with my toys.

I tuck the reduced hand under the sheets. That way it won’t get cold. Then I wave away some flies. I can’t remember ever seeing flies in our apartment before. They probably smelled that dead rat Carlo was talking about.

“You know Billy Ederle?” I say. “I gave him a slant on that damn Po-10s account, and I think he’s going to run with it.”

Nothing from Ellen.

“You can’t be dead,” I say. “That’s unacceptable.”

Nothing from Ellen.

“Do you want coffee?” I glance at my watch. “Something to eat? We’ve got chicken soup. Just the kind that comes in the pouches, but it’s not bad when it’s hot. What do you say, EI?”

She says nothing.

“All right,” I say. “That’s all right. Remember when we went to the Bahamas, hon? When we went snorkeling and you had to quit because you were crying? And when I asked why, you said, ‘Because it’s all so beautiful.’”

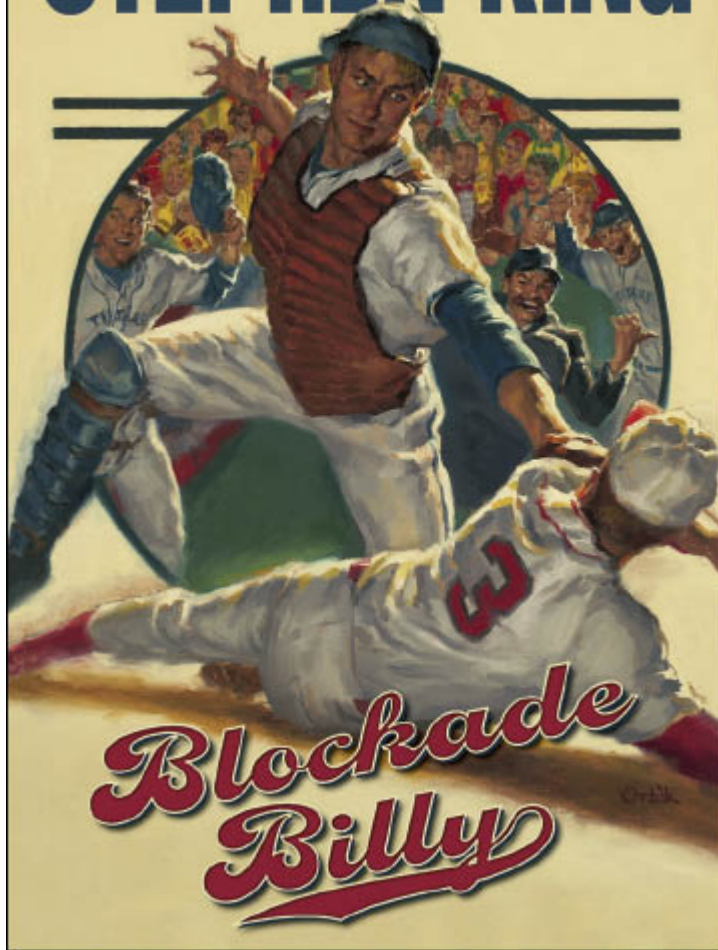
Now *I’m* the one who’s crying.

“Are you sure you don’t want to get up and walk around a little? I’ll open the windows and let in some fresh air.”

Nothing from Ellen.

I sigh. I stroke that fluff of hair. “All right,” I say, “why don’t you just sleep for a little while longer? I’ll sit here beside you.”

STEPHEN KING



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a cognizant original v5 release november 13 2010

Storyville LLC
c/o Darhansoff, Verrill, Feldman
236 West 26th Street, Suite 802
New York, NY 10001
<http://www.dvfliterary.com>

eISBN: 978-0-615-36598-5

A hardcover first edition of *Blockade Billy* has been published by
Cemetery Dance Publications
<http://www.cemeterydance.com>

Blockade Billy

STEPHEN KING

STORYVILLE

❖ 2010 ❖

This is for every guy (and gal) who ever put on the gear.

William Blakely?

Oh my God, you mean Blockade Billy. Nobody's asked me about him in years. Of course, no one asks me much of anything in here, except if I'd like to sign up for Polka Night at the K of P Hall downtown or something called Virtual Bowling. That's right here in the Common Room. My advice to you, Mr. King—you didn't ask for it, but I'll give it to you—is don't get old, and if you do, don't let your relatives put you in a zombie hotel like this one.

It's a funny thing, getting old. When you're young, people always want to listen to your stories, especially if you were in pro baseball. But when you're young, you don't have time to tell them. Now I've got all the time in the world, and it seems like nobody cares about those old days. But I still like to think about them. So sure, I'll tell you about Billy Blakely. Awful story, of course, but those are the ones that last the longest.

Baseball was different in those days. You have to remember that Blockade Billy played for the Titans only ten years after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier, and the Titans are long gone. I don't suppose New Jersey will ever have another Major League team, not with two powerhouse franchises just across the river in New York. But it was a big deal then—we were a big deal—and we played our games in a different world.

The rules were the same. Those don't change. And the little rituals were pretty similar, too. Oh, nobody would have been allowed to wear their cap cocked to the side, or curve the brim, and your hair had to be neat and short (the way these chuckleheads wear it now, my God), but some players still crossed themselves before they stepped into the box, or drew in the dirt with the heads of their bats

before taking up the stance, or jumped over the baseline when they were running out to take their positions. Nobody wanted to step on the baseline, it was considered the worst luck to do that.

The game was *local*, okay? TV had started to come in, but only on the weekends. We had a good market, because the games were on WNJ, and everyone in New York could watch. Some of those broadcasts were pretty comical. Compared to the way they do today's games, it was all amateur night in Dixie. Radio was better, more professional, but of course that was local, too. No satellite broadcasts, because there were no satellites! The Russians sent the first one up during the Yanks-Braves World Series that year. As I remember, it happened on an off-day, but I could be wrong about that. What I remember is that the Titans were out of it early that year. We contended for awhile, partly thanks to Blockade Billy, but you know how *that* turned out. It's why you came, right?

But here's what I'm getting at: because the game was smaller on the national stage, the players weren't such a big deal. I'm not saying there weren't stars—guys like Aaron, Burdette, Williams, Kaline, and of course The Mick—but most weren't as well-known coast to coast as players like Alex Rodriguez and Barry Bonds (a couple of bushers, if you ask me). And most of the other guys? I can tell you in two words: working stiffs. The average salary back then was fifteen grand, less than a first-year high school teacher makes today.

Working stiffs, get it? Just like George Will said in that book of his. Only he talked about that like it was a good thing. I'm not so sure it was, if you were a thirty-year-old shortstop with a wife and three kids and maybe another seven years to go before retirement. Ten, if you

were lucky and didn't get hurt. Carl Furillo ended up installing elevators in the World Trade Center and moonlighting as a night watchman, did you know that? You did? Do you think that guy Will knew it, or just forgot to mention it?

The deal was this: if you had the skills and could do the job even with a hangover, you got to play. If you couldn't, you got tossed on the scrapheap. It was that simple. And as brutal. Which brings me to our catching situation that spring.

We were in good shape during camp, which for the Titans was in Sarasota. Our starting catcher was Johnny Goodkind. Maybe you don't remember him. If you do, it's probably because of the way he ended up. He had four good years, batted over .300, put the gear on almost every game. Knew how to handle the pitchers, didn't take any guff. The kids didn't dare shake him off. He hit damn near .350 that spring, with maybe a dozen ding-dongs, one as deep and far as any I ever saw at Ed Smith Stadium, where the ball didn't carry well. Put out the windshield in some reporter's Chevrolet—ha!

But he was also a big drinker, and two days before the team was supposed to head north and open at home, he ran over a woman on Pineapple Street and killed her just as dead as a dormouse. Or doornail. Whatever the saying is. Then the damn fool tried to run. But there was a County Sheriff's cruiser parked on the corner of Orange, and the deputies inside saw the whole thing. Wasn't much doubt about Johnny's state, either. When they pulled him out of his car, he smelled like a brewery and could hardly stand. One of the deputies bent down to put the cuffs on him, and Johnny threw up on the back of the guy's head. Johnny Goodkind's career in baseball was over before the puke dried. Even the Babe couldn't have stayed in the

game after running over a housewife out doing her morning shop-around.

His backup was a guy named Frank Faraday. Not bad behind the plate, but a banjo hitter at best. Went about one-fifty. No bulk, which put him at risk. The game was played hard in those days, Mr. King, with plenty of fuck-you.

But Faraday was what we had. I remember DiPunno saying he wouldn't last long, but not even Jersey Joe had an idea how short a time it was going to be.

Faraday was behind the plate when we played our last exhibition game that year. Against the Reds, it was. There was a squeeze play put on. Don Hoak at the plate. Some big hulk—I think it was Ted Kluszewski—on third. Hoak punches the ball right at Jerry Rugg, who was pitching for us that day. Big Klew breaks for the plate, all two hundred and seventy Polack pounds of him. And there's Faraday, just about as skinny as a Flav'r Straw, standing with one foot on the old dishola. You knew it was going to end bad. Rugg throws to Faraday. Faraday turns to put the tag on. I couldn't look.

Faraday hung onto the ball and got the out, I'll give him that, only it was a spring training out, as important in the great scheme of things as a low fart in a high wind. And that was the end of *his* baseball career. One broken arm, one broken leg, a concussion—that was the score. I don't know what became of him. Wound up washing windshields for tips at an Esso station in Tucumcari, for all I know. He wouldn't be the only one.

But here's the point: we lost both our catchers in the space of forty-eight hours and had to go north with nobody to put behind the plate except for Ganzie Burgess, who converted from catcher to

pitcher in the early fifties. He was thirty-nine years old that season and only good for middle relief, but he was a knuckleballer, and as crafty as Satan, so no way was Joe DiPunno going to risk those old bones behind the plate. He said he'd put *me* back there first. I knew he was joking—I was just an old third-base coach with so many groin-pulls my balls were practically banging on my knees—but the idea still made me shiver.

What Joe did was call the front office in Newark and say, "I need a guy who can catch Hank Masters's fastball and Danny Doo's curve without falling on his keister. I don't care if he plays for Testicle Tire in Tremont, just make sure he's got a mitt and have him at the Swamp in time for the National Anthem. Then get to work finding me a real catcher. If you want to have any chance at all of contending this season, that is." Then he hung up and lit what was probably his eightieth cigarette of the day.

Oh for the life of a manager, huh? One catcher facing manslaughter charges; another in the hospital, wrapped in so many bandages he looked like Boris Karloff in *The Mummy*; a pitching staff either not old enough to shave or about ready for the Sociable Security; God knows who about to put on the gear and squat behind the plate on Opening Day.

We flew north that year instead of riding the rails, but it still felt like a train wreck. Meanwhile, Kerwin McCaslin, who was the Titans' GM, got on the phone and found us a catcher to start the season with: William Blakely, soon to be known as Blockade Billy. I can't remember now if he came from Double or Triple A, but you could look it up on your computer, I guess, because I *do* know the name of the team he came from: the Davenport Cornhuskers. A few players

came up from there during my seven years with the Titans, and the regulars would always ask how things were down there playing for the Cornholers. Or sometimes they'd call them the Cocksuckers. Baseball humor is not what you'd call sophisticated.

We opened against the Red Sox that year. Middle of April. Baseball started later back then, and played a saner schedule. I got to the park early that day—before God got out of bed, actually—and there was a young man sitting on the bumper of an old Ford truck in the players' lot. Iowa license plate dangling on chickenwire from the back bumper. Nick the guard let him in when the kid showed him his letter from the front office and his driver's license.

"You must be Bill Blakely," I said, shaking his hand. "Good to know you."

"Good to know you too," he said. "I brought my gear, but it's pretty beat-up."

"Oh, I think we can take care of you there, partner," I said, letting go of his hand. He had a Band-Aid wrapped around his second finger, just below the middle knuckle. "Cut yourself shaving?" I asked, pointing to it.

"Yup, cut myself shaving," he says. I couldn't tell if that was his way of showing he got my little joke, or if he was so worried about fucking up he thought he ought to agree with everything anyone said, at least to begin with. Later on I realized it was neither of those things; he just had a habit of echoing back what you said to him. I got used to it, even sort of got to like it.

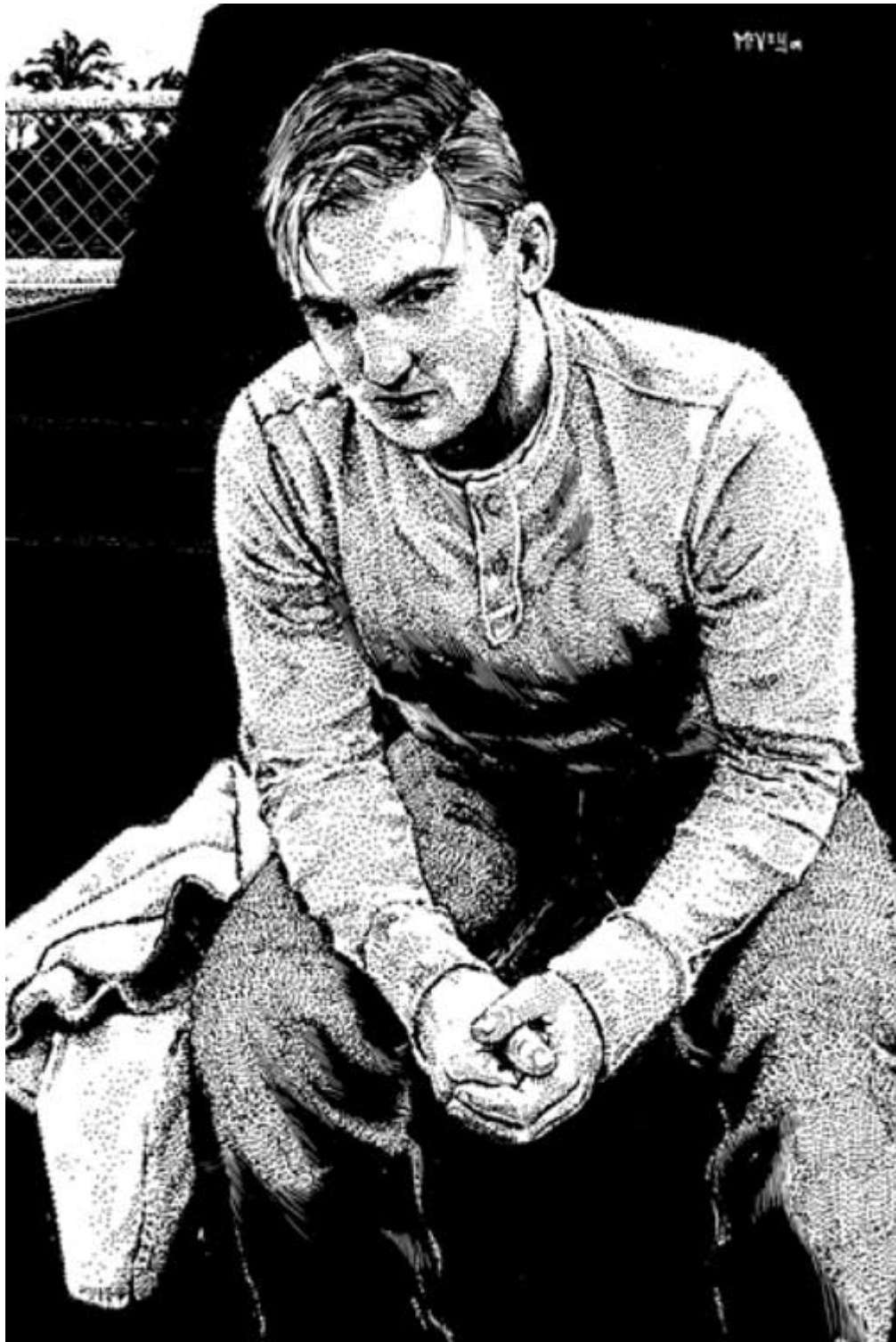
"Are you the manager?" he asked. "Mr. DiPunno?"

"No," I said, "I'm George Grantham. Granny to you. I coach third base. I'm also the equipment manager." Which was the truth; I did

both jobs. Told you the game was smaller then. "I'll get you fixed up, don't worry. All new gear."

"All new gear," says he. "Except for the glove. I have to have Billy's old glove, you know. Billy Junior and me's been the miles."

"Well, that's fine with me." And we went on in to what the sports writers used to call Old Swampy in those days.



I hesitated over giving him 19, because it was poor old Faraday's number, but the uniform fit him without looking like pajamas, so I did. While he was dressing, I said: "Ain't you tired? You must have driven almost nonstop. Didn't they send you some cash to take a plane?"

"I ain't tired," he said. "They might have sent me some cash to take a plane, but I didn't see it. Could we go look at the field?"

I said we could, and led him down the runway and up through the dugout. He walked down to home plate outside the foul line in Faraday's uniform, the blue 19 gleaming in the morning sun (it wasn't but eight o'clock, the groundskeepers just starting what would be a long day's work).

I wish I could tell you how it felt to see him taking that walk, Mr. King, but words are your thing, not mine. All I know is that back-to he looked more like Faraday than ever. He was ten years younger, of course...but age doesn't show much from the back, except sometimes in a man's walk. Plus he was slim like Faraday, and slim's the way you want your shortstop and second baseman to look, not your catcher. Catchers should be built like fireplugs, the way Johnny Goodkind was. This one looked like a bunch of broken ribs waiting to happen.

He had a firmer build than Frank Faraday, though; broader butt and thicker thighs. He was skinny from the waist up, but looking at him ass-end-going-away, I remember thinking he looked like what he probably was: an Iowa plowboy on vacation in scenic Newark.

He went to the plate and turned around to look out to dead center. He had dark hair and a lock of it had fallen on his forehead. He brushed it away and just stood there taking it all in—the silent, empty stands where over fifty thousand people would be sitting that

afternoon, the bunting already hung on the railings and fluttering in the little morning breeze, the foul poles painted fresh Jersey Blue, the groundskeepers just starting to water. It was an awesome sight, I always thought, and I could imagine what was going through the kid's mind, him that had probably been home milking the cows just a week ago and waiting for the Cornholers to start playing in mid-May.

I thought, *Poor kid's finally getting the picture. When he looks over here, I'll see the panic in his eyes. I may have to tie him down in the locker room to keep him from jumping in that old truck of his and hightailing it back to God's country.*

But when he looked at me, there was no panic in his eyes. No fear. Not even nervousness, which I would have said every player feels on Opening Day. No, he looked perfectly cool standing there behind the plate in his Levi's and light poplin jacket.

"Yuh," he says, like a man confirming something he was pretty sure of in the first place. "Billy can hit here."

"Good for him," I tells him. It's all I can think of to say.

"Good," he says back. Then—I swear—he says, "Do you think those guys need help with them hoses?"

I laughed. There was something strange about him, something off, something that made folks nervous...but that something made people take to him, too. Kinda sweet. Something that made you want to like him in spite of feeling he wasn't exactly right in the top story. Joe felt it right away. Some of the players did, too, but that didn't stop them from liking him. I don't know, it was like when you talked to him what came back was the sound of your own voice. Like an echo in a cave.

“Billy,” I said, “groundskeeping ain’t your job. Bill’s job is to put on the gear and catch Danny Dusen this afternoon.”

“Danny Doo,” he said.

“That’s right. Twenty and six last year, should have won the Cy Young, didn’t. He’s still got a red ass over that. And remember this: if he shakes you off, don’t you dare flash the same sign again. Not unless you want your pecker and asshole to change places after the game, that is. Danny Doo is four games from two hundred wins, and he’s going to be mean as hell until he gets there.”

“Until he gets there.” Nodding his head.

“That’s right.”

“If he shakes me off, flash something different.”

“Yes.”

“Does he have a changeup?”

“Do you have two legs? The Doo’s won a hundred and ninety-six games. You don’t do that without a changeup.”

“Not without a changeup,” he says. “Okay.”

“And don’t get hurt out there. Until the front office can make a deal, you’re what we got.”

“I’m it,” he says. “Gotcha.”

“I hope so.”

Other players were coming in by then, and I had about a thousand things to do. Later on I saw the kid in Jersey Joe’s office, signing whatever needed to be signed with Kerwin McCaslin hanging over him like a vulture over roadkill, pointing out all the right places. Poor kid, probably six hours’ worth of sleep in the last sixty, and he was in there signing five years of his life away. Later I saw him with Dusen, going over the Boston lineup. The Doo was doing all the talking, and

the kid was doing all the listening. Didn't even ask a question, so far as I saw, which was good. If the kid had opened his head, Danny probably would have bit it off.

About an hour before the game, I went in to Joe's office to look at the lineup card. He had the kid batting eighth, which was no shock. Over our heads the murmuring had started and you could hear the rumble of feet on the boards. Opening Day crowds always pile in early. Listening to it started the butterflies in my gut, like always, and I could see Jersey Joe felt the same. His ashtray was already overflowing.

"He's not big like I hoped he'd be," he said, tapping Blakely's name on the lineup card. "God help us if he gets cleaned out."

"McCaslin hasn't found anyone else?"

"Maybe. He talked to Hubie Rattner's wife, but Hubie's on a fishing trip somewhere in Rectal Temperature, Michigan. Out of touch until next week."

"Cap—Hubie Rattner's forty-three if he's a day."

"Beggars can't be choosers. And be straight with me—how long do you think that kid's gonna last in the bigs?"

"Oh, he's probably just a cup of coffee," I says, "but he's got something Faraday didn't."

"And what might that be?"

"Dunno. But if you'd seen him standing behind the plate and looking out into center, you might feel better about him. It was like he was thinking 'This ain't the big deal I thought it would be.'"

"He'll find out how big a deal it is the first time Ike Delock throws one at his nose," Joe said, and lit a cigarette. He took a drag and started hacking. "I got to quit these Luckies. Not a cough in a

carload, my ass. I'll bet you twenty goddam bucks that kid lets Danny Doo's first curve go right through his wickets. Then Danny'll be all upset—you know how he gets when someone fucks up his train ride—and Boston'll be off to the races.”

“Ain't you just the cheeriest Cheerio,” I says.

He stuck out his hand. “Bet.”

And because I knew he was trying to take the curse off it, I shook his hand. That was twenty I won, because the legend of Blockade Billy started that very day.

You couldn't say he called a good game, because he didn't call it. The Doo did that. But the first pitch—to Frank Malzone—was a curve, and the kid caught it just fine. Not only that, though. It was a cunt's hair outside and I never saw a catcher pull one back so fast, not even Yogi. Ump called strike one and it was us off to the races, at least until Williams hit a solo shot in the fifth. We got that back in the sixth, when Ben Vincent put one out. Then in the seventh, we've got a runner on second—I think it was Barbarino—with two outs and the new kid at the plate. It was his third at bat. First time he struck out looking, the second time swinging. Delock fooled him bad that time, made him look silly, and he heard the only boos he ever got while he was wearing a Titans uniform.

He steps in, and I looked over at Joe. Seen him sitting way down by the lineup card, just looking at the floor and shaking his head. Even if the kid worked a walk, The Doo was up next, and The Doo couldn't hit a slowpitch softball with a tennis racket. As a hitter that guy was fucking terrible.

I won't drag out the suspense; this ain't no kids' sports novel. Although whoever said life sometimes imitates art was right, and it

did that day. Count went to three and two. Then Delock threw the sinker that fooled the kid so bad the first time and damn if the kid didn't suck for it again. Except Ike Delock turned out to be the sucker that time. Kid golfed it right off his shoetops the way Ellie Howard used to do and shot it into the gap. I waved the runner in and we had the lead back, two to one.

Everybody in the joint was on their feet, screaming their throats out, but the kid didn't even seem to hear it. Just stood there on second, dusting off the seat of his pants. He didn't stay there long, because The Doo went down on three pitches, then threw his bat like he always did when he got struck out.

So maybe it's a sports novel after all, like the kind you probably read in junior high school study hall. Top of the ninth and The Doo's looking at the top of the lineup. Strikes out Malzone, and a quarter of the crowd's on their feet. Strikes out Klaus, and half the crowd's on their feet. Then comes Williams—old Teddy Ballgame. The Doo gets him on the hip, oh and two, then weakens and walks him. The kid starts out to the mound and Doo waves him back—just squat and do your job, sonny. So sonny does. What else is he gonna do? The guy on the mound is one of the best pitchers in baseball and the guy behind the plate was maybe playing a little pickup ball behind the barn that spring to keep in shape after the day's cowtits was all pulled.

First pitch, goddam! Williams takes off for second. The ball was in the dirt, hard to handle, but the kid still made one fuck of a good throw. Almost got Teddy, but as you know, almost only counts in horseshoes. Now everybody's on their feet, screaming. The Doo does some shouting at the kid—like it was the kid's fault instead of

just a bullshit pitch—and while Doo's telling the kid he's a lousy choker, Williams calls time. Hurt his knee a little sliding into the bag, which shouldn't have surprised anyone; he could hit like nobody's business, but he was a leadfoot on the bases. Why he stole a bag that day is anybody's guess. It sure wasn't no hit-and-run, not with two outs and the game on the line.

So Billy Anderson comes in to run for Teddy...who probably would have been royally roasted by the manager if he'd been anyone but Teddy. And Dick Gernert steps in, .425 slugging percentage or something like it. The crowd's going apeshit, the flag's blowing out, the frank wrappers are swirling around, women are goddam crying, men are yelling for Jersey Joe to yank The Doo and put in Stew Rankin—he was what people would call the closer today, although back then he was just known as a short-relief specialist.

But Joe crossed his fingers and stuck with Dusen.

The count goes three and two, right? Anderson off with the pitch, right? Because he can run like the wind and the guy behind the plate's a first-game rook. Gernert, that mighty man, gets just under a curve and beeps it—not bleeps it but *beeps* it—behind the pitcher's mound, just out of The Doo's reach. He's on it like a cat, though. Anderson's around third and The Doo throws home from his knees. That thing was a fucking *bullet*.

I know what you're thinking I'm thinking, Mr. King, but you're dead wrong. It never crossed my mind that our new rookie catcher was going to get busted up like Faraday and have a nice one-game career in the bigs. For one thing, Billy Anderson was no moose like Big Klew; more of a ballet dancer. For another...well...the kid was better than Faraday. I think I knew that the first time I saw him, sitting

on the bumper of his beshitted old truck with his wore-out gear stored in the back.

Dusen's throw was low but on the money. The kid took it between his legs, then pivoted around, and I seen he was holding out *just the mitt*. I just had time to think of what a rookie mistake that was, how he forgot that old saying *two hands for beginners*, how Anderson was going to knock the ball loose and we'd have to try to win the game in the bottom of the ninth. But then the kid lowered his left shoulder like a football lineman. I never paid attention to his free hand, because I was staring at that outstretched catcher's mitt, just like everyone else in Old Swampy that day. So I didn't exactly see what happened, and neither did anybody else.

What I saw was this: the kid whapped the glove on Anderson's chest while he was still three full steps from the dish. Then Anderson hit the kid's lowered shoulder. He went up and over and landed behind the lefthand batter's box. The umpire lifted his fist in the *out* sign. Then Anderson started to yell and grab his ankle. I could hear it from the far end of the dugout, so you know it must have been good yelling, because those Opening Day fans were roaring like a force-ten gale. I could see that Anderson's left pants cuff was turning red, and blood was oozing out between his fingers.

Can I have a drink of water? Just pour some out of that plastic pitcher, would you? Plastic pitchers is all they give us for our rooms, you know; no glass pitchers allowed in the zombie hotel.

Ah, that's good. Been a long time since I talked so much, and I got a lot more to say. You bored yet? No? Good. Me neither. Having the time of my life, awful story or not.

Anderson didn't play again until '58, and '58 was his last year—Boston gave him his unconditional release halfway through the season, and he couldn't catch on with anyone else. Because his speed was gone, and speed was really all he had to sell. The docs said he'd be good as new, the Achilles tendon was only nicked, not cut all the way through, but it was also stretched, and I imagine that's what finished him. Baseball's a tender game, you know; people don't realize. And it isn't only catchers who get hurt in collisions at the plate.

After the game, Danny Doo grabs the kid in the shower and yells: "I'm gonna buy you a drink tonight, rook! In fact, I'm gonna buy you *ten!*" And then he gives his highest praise: "*You hung the fuck in there!*"

"Ten drinks, because I hung the fuck in there," the kid says, and The Doo laughs and claps him on the back like it's the funniest thing he ever heard.



But then Pinky Higgins comes storming in. He was managing the Red Sox that year, which was a thankless job; things only got worse for Pinky and the Sox as the summer of '57 crawled along. He was mad as hell, chewing a wad of tobacco so hard and fast the juice squirted from both sides of his mouth and ran down his chin. He said the kid had deliberately cut Anderson's ankle when they collided at the plate. Said Blakely must have done it with his fingernails, and the kid should be put out of the game for it. This was pretty rich, coming from a man whose motto was, "Spikes high and let em die!"

I was sitting in Joe's office drinking a beer, so the two of us listened to Pinky's rant together. I thought the guy was nuts, and I could see from Joe's face that I wasn't alone.

Joe waited until Pinky ran down, then said: "I wasn't watching Anderson's foot. I was watching to see if Blakely made the tag and held onto the ball. Which he did."

"Get him in here," Pinky fumes. "I want to say it to his face."

"Be reasonable, Pink," Joe says. "Would I be in your office doing a tantrum if it had been Blakely all cut up?"

"It wasn't spikes!" Pinky yells. "Spikes are a part of the game! Scratching someone up like a...a girl at a *kickball match*...that *ain't*! And Anderson's in the game seven years! He's got a family to support!"

"So you're saying what? My catcher ripped your pinch-runner's ankle open while he was tagging him out—and tossing him over his goddam shoulder, don't forget—and he did it with his *nails*?"

"That's what Anderson says," Pinky tells him. "Anderson says he felt it."

“Maybe Blakely stretched Anderson’s foot with his nails, too. Is that it?”

“No,” Pinky admits. His face was all red by then, and not just from being mad. He knew how it sounded. “He says that happened when he came down.”

“Begging the court’s pardon,” I says, “but *fingernails*? This is a load of crap.”

“I want to see the kid’s hands,” Pinky says. “You show me or I’ll lodge a goddam protest.”

I thought Joe would tell Pinky to shit in his hat, but he didn’t. He turned to me. “Tell the kid to come in here. Tell him he’s gonna show Mr. Higgins his nails, just like he did to his first-grade teacher after the Pledge of Allegiance.”

I got the kid. He came willingly enough, although he was just wearing a towel, and didn’t hold back showing his nails. They were short, clean, not broken, not even bent. There were no blood-blisters, either, like there might be if you really set them in someone and raked with them. One little thing I did happen to notice, although I didn’t think anything of it at the time: the Band-Aid was gone from his second finger, and I didn’t see any sign of a healing cut where it had been, just clean skin, pink from the shower.

“Satisfied?” Joe asked Pinky. “Or would you like to check his ears for potato-dirt while you’re at it?”

“Fuck you,” Pinky says. He got up, stamped over to the door, spat his cud into the wastepaper basket there—*splut!*—and then he turns back. “My boy says *your* boy cut him. Says he felt it. And my boy don’t lie.”

“Your boy tried to be a hero with the game on the line instead of stopping at third and giving Piersall a chance. He’d tell you the moon was made of his father’s come-stained skivvies if it’d get him off the hook for that. You know what happened and so do I. Anderson got tangled in his own spikes and did it to himself when he went whoopsy-daisy. Now get out of here.”

“There’ll be a payback for this, DiPunno.”

“Yeah? Well it’s the same gametime tomorrow. Get here early.”

Pinky left, already tearing off a fresh piece of chew. Joe drummed his fingers beside his ashtray, then asked the kid: “Now that it’s just us chickens, did you do anything to Anderson? Tell me the truth.”

“No.” Not a bit of hesitation. “I didn’t do anything to Anderson. That’s the truth.”

“Okay,” Joe said, and stood up. “Always nice to shoot the shit after a game, but I think I’ll go on home and have a drink. Then I might fuck my wife on the sofa. Winning on Opening Day always makes my pecker stand up.” Then he said, “Kid, you played the game the way it’s supposed to be played. Good for you.”

He left. The kid cinched his towel around his waist and started back to the locker room. I said, “I see that shaving cut’s all better.”

He stopped dead in the doorway, and although his back was to me, I knew he’d done something out there. The truth was in the way he was standing. I don’t know how to explain it better, but...I knew.

“What?” Like he didn’t get me, you know.

“The shaving cut on your finger.”

“Oh, *that* shaving cut. Yuh, all better.”

And out he sails...although, rube that he was, he probably didn’t have a clue *where* he was going. Luckily for him, Kerwin McCaslin

had got him a place to stay in the better part of Newark. Hard to believe as it might be, Newark had a better part back then.

Okay, second game of the season. Dandy Dave Sisler on the mound for Boston, and our new catcher is hardly settled into the batter's box before Sisler chucks a fastball at his head. Would have knocked his fucking eyes out if it had connected, but he snaps his head back—didn't duck or nothing—and then just cocks his bat again, looking at Sisler as if to say, *Go on, mac, do it again if you want.*

The crowd's screaming like mad and chanting *RUN IM! RUN IM! RUN IM!* The ump didn't run Sisler, but he got warned and a cheer went up. I looked over and saw Pinky in the Boston dugout, walking back and forth with his arms folded so tight he looked like he was trying to keep from exploding.

Sisler walks twice around the mound, soaking up the fan-love—boy oh boy, they wanted him drawn and quartered—and then he went to the rosin bag, and then he shook off two or three signs. Taking his time, you know, letting it sink in. The kid all the time just standing there with his bat cocked, comfortable as old Tillie. So Dandy Dave throws a get-me-over fastball right down Broadway and the kid loses it in the left field bleachers. Tidings was on base and we're up two to nothing. I bet the people over in New York heard the noise from Swampy when the kid hit that home run.

I thought he'd be grinning when he came around third, but he looked just as serious as a judge. Under his breath he's muttering, "Got it done, Billy, showed that busher and got it done."

The Doo was the first one to grab him in the dugout and danced him right into the bat-rack. Helped him pick up the spilled lumber,

too, which was nothing like Danny Dusen, who usually thought he was above such things.

After beating Boston twice and pissing off Pinky Higgins, we went down to Washington and won three straight. The kid hit safe in all three, including his second home run, but Griffith Stadium was a depressing place to play, brother; you could have gunned down a running rat in the box seats behind home plate and not had to worry about hitting any fans. Goddam Senators finished over forty games back that year. Forty! Jesus fucking wept.

The kid was behind the plate for The Doo's second start down there and damn near caught a no-hitter in his fifth game wearing a big league uniform. Pete Runnels spoiled it in the ninth—hit a double with one out. After that, the kid went out to the mound, and that time Danny didn't wave him back. They discussed it a little bit, and then The Doo gave an intentional pass to the next batter, Lou Berberet (see how it all comes back?). That brought up Bob Usher, and he hit into a double play just as sweet as you could ever want: ballgame.

That night The Doo and the kid went out to celebrate Dusen's one hundred and ninety-eighth win. When I saw our newest chick the next day, he was very badly hungover, but he bore that as calmly as he bore having Dave Sisler chuck at his head. I was starting to think we had a real big leaguer on our hands, and wouldn't be needing Hubie Rattner after all. Or anybody else.

"You and Danny are getting pretty tight, I guess," I says.

"Tight," he agrees, rubbing his temples. "Me and The Doo are tight. He says Billy's his good luck charm."

"Does he, now?"

“Yuh. He says if we stick together, he’ll win twenty-five and they’ll have to give him the Cy Young.”

“That right?”

“Yessir, that’s right. Granny?”

“What?”

He was giving me that wide blue stare of his: twenty-twenty vision that saw everything and understood practically nothing. By then I knew he could hardly read, and the only movie he’d ever seen was *Bambi*. He said he went with the other kids from Ottershow or Outershow—whatever—and I assumed it was his school. I was both right and wrong about that, but it ain’t really the point. The point is that he knew how to play baseball—instinctively, I’d say—but otherwise he was a blackboard with nothing written on it.

“What’s a Cy Young?”

That’s how he was, you see.

We went over to Baltimore for three before going back home. Typical spring baseball in that town, which isn’t quite south or north; cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey the first day, hotter than hell the second, a fine drizzle like liquid ice the third. Didn’t matter to the kid; he hit in all three games, making it eight straight. Also, he stopped another runner at the plate. We lost the game, but it was a hell of a stop. Gus Triandos was the victim, I think. He ran headfirst into the kid’s knees and just lay there stunned, three feet from home. The kid put the tag on the back of his neck just as gentle as Mommy patting oil on Baby Dear’s sunburn.

There was a picture of that put-out in the Newark *Evening News*, with a caption reading *Blockade Billy Blakely Saves Another Run*. It was a good nickname and caught on with the fans. They weren’t as

demonstrative in those days—nobody would have come to Yankee Stadium in '57 wearing a chef's hat to support Gary Sheffield, I don't think—but when we played our first game back at Old Swampy, some of the fans came in carrying orange road-signs reading DETOUR and ROAD CLOSED.

The signs might have been a one-day thing if two Indians hadn't got thrown out at the plate in our first game back. That was a game Danny Dusen pitched, incidentally. Both of those put-outs were the result of great throws rather than great blocks, but the rook got the credit, anyway, and I'd say he deserved it. The guys were starting to trust him, see? And they wanted to watch him do it. Baseball players are fans, too, and when someone's on a roll, even the most hard-hearted try to help.

Dusen got his hundred and ninety-ninth that day. Oh, and the kid went three for four, including a home run, so it shouldn't surprise you that even more people showed up with those signs for our second game against Cleveland.

By the third one, some enterprising fellow was selling them out on Titan Esplanade, big orange cardboard diamonds with black letters: ROAD CLOSED BY ORDER OF BLOCKADE BILLY. Some of the fans'd hold em up when Blockade Billy was at bat, and they'd all hold them up when the other team had a runner on third. By the time the Yankees came to town—this was going on to the end of April—the whole stadium would flush orange when the Bombers had a runner on third, which they did often in that series.

Because the Yankees kicked the living shit out of us and took over first place. It was no fault of the kid's; he hit in every game and tagged out Bill Skowron between home and third when the lug got

caught in a rundown. Skowron was a moose the size of Big Klew, and he tried to flatten the kid, but it was Skowron who went on his ass, the kid straddling him with a knee on either side. The photo of that one in the paper made it look like the end of a Big Time Wrestling match with Pretty Tony Baba for once finishing off Gorgeous George instead of the other way around. The crowd outdid themselves waving those ROAD CLOSED signs around. It didn't seem to matter that the Titans had lost; the fans went home happy because they'd seen our skinny catcher knock Mighty Moose Skowron on his ass.

I seen the kid afterward, sitting naked on the bench outside the showers. He had a big bruise coming on the side of his chest, but he didn't seem to mind it at all. He was no crybaby. The sonofabitch was too dumb to feel pain, some people said later; too dumb and crazy. But I've known plenty of dumb players in my time, and being dumb never stopped them from bitching over their booboos.

"How about all those signs, kid?" I asked, thinking I would cheer him up if he needed cheering.

"What signs?" he says, and I could see by the puzzled look on his face that he wasn't joking a bit. That was Blockade Billy for you. He would have stood in front of a semi if the guy behind the wheel was driving down the third base line and trying to score on him, but otherwise he didn't have a fucking clue.



We played a two-game series with Detroit before hitting the road again, and lost both. Danny Doo was on the mound for the second one, and he couldn't blame the kid for the way it went; he was gone before the third inning was over. Sat in the dugout whining about the cold weather (it wasn't cold), the way Harrington misplayed a fly ball out in right (Harrington would have needed rockets on his heels to get to that one before it dropped), and the bad calls he got from that sonofabitch Wenders behind the plate. On that last one he might have had a point. Hi Wenders didn't like The Doo, never had, ran him in two ballgames the year before. But I didn't see any bad calls that day, and I was standing less than ninety feet away.

The kid hit safe in both games, including a home run and a triple. Nor did Dusen hold the hot bat against him, which would have been his ordinary behavior; he was one of those guys who wanted fellows to understand there was one big star on the Titans, and it wasn't them. But he liked the kid; really seemed to think the kid was his lucky charm. And the kid liked him. They went bar-hopping after the game, had about a thousand drinks and visited a whorehouse to celebrate The Doo's first loss of the season, and showed up the next day for the trip to KC pale and shaky.

"The kid got laid last night," Doo confided in me as we rode out to the airport in the team bus. "I think it was his first time. That's the good news. The bad news is that I don't think he remembers it."

We had a bumpy plane-ride; most of them were back then. Lousy prop-driven buckets, it's a wonder we didn't all get killed like Buddy Holly and the Big Fucking Bopper. The kid spent most of the trip throwing up in the can at the back of the plane, while right outside the door a bunch of guys sat playing acey-deucey and tossing him

the usual funny stuff: *Get any onya? Want a fork and knife to cut that up a little?* Then the next day the sonofabitch goes five-for-five at Municipal Stadium, including a pair of jacks.

There was also another Blockade Billy play; by then he could have taken out a patent. This time the victim was Clete Boyer. Again it was Blockade Billy down with the left shoulder, and up and over Mr. Boyer went, landing flat on his back in the left batter's box. There were some differences, though. The rook used both hands on the tag, and there was no bloody foot or strained Achilles tendon. Boyer just got up and walked back to the dugout, dusting his ass and shaking his head like he didn't quite know where he was. Oh, and we lost the game in spite of the kid's five hits. Eleven to ten was the final score, or something like that. Ganzie Burgess's knuckleball wasn't dancing that day; the Athletics feasted on it.

We won the next game, lost a squeaker on getaway day. The kid hit in both games, which made it sixteen straight. Plus nine putouts at the plate. Nine in sixteen games! That might be a record. If it was in the books, that is. If any of that month's records were in the books.

We went to Chicago for three, and the kid hit in those games, too, making it nineteen straight. But damn if we didn't lose all three. Jersey Joe looked at me after the last of those games and said, "I don't buy that lucky charm stuff. I think Blakely *sucks* luck."

"That ain't fair and you know it," I said. "We were going good at the start, and now we're in a bad patch. It'll even out."

"Maybe," he says. "Is Dusen still trying to teach the kid how to drink?"

"Yeah. They headed off to The Loop with some other guys."

“But they’ll come back together,” Joe says. “I don’t get it. By now Dusen should hate that kid. Doo’s been here five years and I know his MO.”

I did, too. When The Doo lost, he had to lay the blame on somebody else, like that bum Johnny Harrington or that busher bluesuit Hi Wenders. The kid’s turn in the barrel was overdue, but Danny was still clapping him on the back and promising him he’d be Rookie of the Goddam Year. Not that The Doo could blame the kid for that day’s loss. In the fifth inning of his latest masterpiece, Danny had hucked one to the backstop in the fifth: high, wide, and handsome. That scored one. So then he gets mad, loses his control, and walks the next two. Then Nellie Fox doubled down the line. After that The Doo got it back together, but by then it was too late; he was on the hook and stayed there.

We got a little well in Detroit, took two out of three. The kid hit in all three games and made another one of those amazing home-plate stands. Then we flew home. By then the kid from the Davenport Cornholers was the hottest goddam thing in the American League. There was talk of him doing a Gillette ad.

“That’s an ad I’d like to see,” Si Barbarino said. “I’m a fan of comedy.”

“Then you must love looking at yourself in the mirror,” Critter Hayward said.

“You’re a card,” Si says. “What I mean is the kid ain’t got no whiskers.”

There never was an ad, of course. Blockade Billy’s career as a baseball player was almost over. We just didn’t know it.

We had three scheduled at home with the White Sox, but the first one was a washout. The Doo's old pal Hi Wenders was the umpire crew chief, and he gave me the news himself. I'd got to The Swamp early because the trunks with our road uniforms in them got sent to Idlewild by mistake and I wanted to make sure they'd been trucked over. We wouldn't need them for a week, but I was never easy in my mind until such things were taken care of.

Wenders was sitting on a little stool outside the umpire's room, reading a paperback with a blond in step-ins on the cover.

"That your wife, Hi?" I asks.

"My girlfriend," he says. "Go on home, Grannie. Weather forecast says that by three it's gonna be coming down in buckets. I'm just waiting for DiPunno and Lopez to get here so I can call the game."

"Okay," I says. "Thanks." I started away and he called after me.

"Grannie, is that wonder-kid of yours all right in the head? Because he talks to himself behind the plate. Whispers. Never fucking shuts up."

"He's no Quiz Kid, but he's not crazy, if that's what you mean," I said. I was wrong about that, but who knew? "What kind of stuff does he say?"

"I couldn't hear much the one time I was behind him—the second game against Boston—but I know he talks about himself. In that whatdoyoucallit, third person. He says stuff like 'I can do it, Billy.' And one time, when he dropped a foul tip that woulda been strike three, he goes, 'I'm sorry, Billy.'"

"Well, so what? Til I was five, I had an invisible friend named Sheriff Pete. Me and Sheriff Pete shot up a lot of mining towns together."

“Yeah, but Blakely ain’t five anymore. Unless he’s five up here.” Wenders taps the side of his thick skull.

“He’s apt to have a five as the first number in his batting average before long,” I says. “That’s all I care about. Plus he’s a hell of a stopper. You have to admit that.”

“I do,” Wenders says. “That little cock-knocker has no fear. Another sign that he’s not all there in the head.”

I wasn’t going to listen to an umpire run down one of my players any more than that, so I changed the subject and asked him—joking but not joking—if he was going to call the game tomorrow fair and square, even though his favorite Doo-Bug was throwing.

“I always call it fair and square,” he says. “Dusen’s a conceited glory-hog who’s got his spot all picked out in Cooperstown, he’ll do a hundred things wrong and never take the blame once, and he’s an argumentative sonofabitch who knows better than to start in with me, because I won’t stand for it. That said, I’ll call it straight-up, just like I always do. I can’t believe you’d ask.”

And I can’t believe you’d sit there scratching your ass and calling our catcher next door to a congenital idiot, I thought, but you did.

I took my wife out to dinner that night, and we had a very nice time. Danced to Lester Lannon’s band, as I recall. Got a little romantic in the taxi afterward. Slept well. I didn’t sleep well for quite some time afterward; lots of bad dreams.

Danny Dusen took the ball in what was supposed to be the afternoon half of a twi-nighter, but the world as it applied to the Titans had already gone to hell; we just didn’t know it. No one did except for Joe DiPunno. By the time night fell, we knew we were fucked for the season, because our first twenty-two games were

almost surely going to be erased from the record books, along with any official acknowledgement of Blockade Billy Blakely.

I got in late because of traffic, but figured it didn't matter because the uniform snafu was sorted out. Most of the guys were already there, dressing or playing poker or just sitting around shooting the shit. Dusen and the kid were over in the corner by the cigarette machine, sitting in a couple of folding chairs, the kid with his uniform pants on, Dusen still wearing nothing but his jock—not a pretty sight. I went over to get a pack of Winstons and listened in. Danny was doing most of the talking.

“That fucking Wenders hates my ass,” he says.

“He hates your ass,” the kid says, then adds: “That fucker.”

“You bet he is. You think he wants to be the one behind the plate when I get my two hundredth?”

“No?” the kid says.

“You bet he don't! But I'm going to win today just to spite him. And you're gonna help me, Bill. Right?”

“Right. Sure. Bill's gonna help.”

“He'll squeeze like a motherfucker.”

“Will he? Will he squeeze like a motherf—”

“I just said he will. So you pull everything back.”

“I'll pull everything back.”

“You're my good luck charm, Billy-boy.”

And the kid, grinning: “I'm your good luck charm.”

“Yeah. Now listen...”

It was funny and creepy at the same time. The Doo was *intense*—leaning forward, eyes flashing while he talked. Everything Wenders had said about him was true, but he left one thing out: The Doo was

a competitor. He wanted to win the way Bob Gibson did. Like Gibby, he'd do anything he could get away with to make that happen. And the kid was eating it up with a spoon.

I almost said something, because I wanted to break up that connection. Talking about it to you, I think maybe my subconscious mind had already put a lot of it together. Maybe that's bullshit, but I don't think so.

In any case, I left them alone, just got my butts and walked away. Hell, if I'd opened my bazoo, Dusen would have told me to put a sock in it, anyway. He didn't like to be interrupted when he was holding court, and while I might not have given much of a shit about that on any other day, you tend to leave a guy alone when it's his turn to toe the rubber in front of the forty thousand people who are paying his salary. Especially when he's up for the big two-double-zero.

I went over to Joe's office to get the lineup card, but the office door was shut and the blinds were down, an almost unheard-of thing on a game day. The slats weren't closed, so I peeked through. Joe had the phone to his ear and one hand over his eyes. I knocked on the glass. He started so hard he almost fell out of his chair, then looked around. And I saw he was crying. I never saw him cry in my life, not before or after, but he was crying that day. His face was pale and his hair was wild—what little hair he had.

He waved me away, then went back to talking on the phone. I started across the locker room to the coaches' office, which was really the equipment room. Halfway there I stopped. The big pitcher-catcher conference had broken up, and the kid was pulling on his

uniform shirt, the one with the big blue 19. And I saw the Band-Aid was back on the second finger of his right hand.

I walked over and put a hand on his shoulder. He smiled at me. The kid had a real sweet smile when he used it. "Hi, Granny," he says. But his smile began to fade when he saw I wasn't smiling back.

"You all ready to play?" I asked.

"Sure."

"Good. But I want to tell you something first. The Doo's a hell of a pitcher, but as a human being he ain't ever going to get past Double A. He'd walk on his grandmother's broken back to get a win, and you matter a hell of a lot less to him than his grandmother."

"I'm his good luck charm!" he says indignantly...but underneath the indignation, he looked ready to cry.

"Maybe so," I said, "but that's not what I'm talking about. There's such a thing as getting too pumped up for a game. A little is good, but too much and a fellow's apt to bust wide open."



“I don’t get you.”

“If you popped and went flat like a bad tire, The Doo wouldn’t give much of a shit. He’d just find himself a brand new lucky charm.”

“You shouldn’t talk like that! Him and me’s friends!”

“I’m your friend, too. More important, I’m one of the coaches on this team. I’m responsible for your welfare, and I’ll talk any goddam way I want, especially to a rook. And you’ll listen. Are you listening?”

“I’m listening.”

I’m sure he was, but he wasn’t looking; he’d cast his eyes down and sullen red roses were blooming on those smooth little-boy cheeks of his.

“I don’t know what kind of a rig you’ve got under that Band-Aid, and I don’t want to know. All I know is I saw it in the first game you played for us, and somebody got hurt. I haven’t seen it since, and I don’t want to see it today. Because if you got caught, it’d be you caught. Not The Doo.”

“I just cut myself,” he says, all sullen.

“Right. Shaving. But I don’t want to see it on your finger when you go out there. I’m looking after your own best interests.”

Would I have said that if I hadn’t seen Joe so upset he was crying? I like to think so. I like to think I was also looking after the best interests of the game, which I loved then and now. Virtual Bowling can’t hold a candle, believe me.

I walked away before he could say anything else. And I didn’t look back. Partly because I didn’t want to see what was under the Band-Aid, mostly because Joe was standing in his office door, beckoning to me. I won’t swear there was more gray in his hair, but I won’t swear there wasn’t.

I came into the office and closed the door. An awful idea occurred to me. It made a kind of sense, given the look on his face. “Jesus, Joe, is it your wife? Or the kids? Did something happen to one of the kids?”

He started, like I’d just woken him out of a dream. “Jessie and the kids are fine. But George...oh *God*. I can’t believe it. This is such a mess.” And he put the heels of his palms against his eyes. A sound came out of him, but it wasn’t a sob. It was a laugh. The most terrible fucked-up laugh I ever heard.

“What is it? Who called you?”

“I have to think,” he says—but not to me. It was himself he was talking to. “I have to decide how I’m going to...” He took his hands off his eyes, and he seemed a little more like himself. “You’re managing today, Grannie.”

“*Me?* I can’t manage! The Doo’d blow his stack! He’s going for his two hundredth again, and—”

“None of that matters, don’t you see? Not now.”

“What—”

“Just shut up and make out a lineup card. As for that kid...” He thought, then shook his head. “Hell, let him play, why not? Shit, bat him fifth. I was gonna move him up, anyway.”

“Of course he’s gonna play,” I said. “Who else’d catch Danny?”

“Oh, fuck Danny Dusen!” he says.

“Cap—Joey—tell me what happened.”

“No,” he says. “I got to think about it first. What I’m going to say to the guys. And the reporters!” He slapped his brow as if this part of it had just occurred to him. “*Those* overbred assholes! Shit!” Then, talking to himself again: “But let the guys have this game. They

deserve that much. Maybe the kid, too. Hell, maybe he'll bat for the cycle!" He laughed some more, then went upside his own head to make himself stop.

"I don't understand."

"You will. Go on, get out of here. Make any old lineup you want. Pull the names out of a hat, why don't you? It doesn't matter. Only make sure you tell the umpire crew chief you're running the show. I guess that'd be Wenders."

I walked down the hall to the umpire's room like a man in a dream and told Wenders that I'd be making out the lineup and managing the game from the third base box. He asked me what was wrong with Joe, and I said Joe was sick.

That was the first game I managed until I got the Athletics in '63, and it was a short one, because as you probably know if you've done your research, Hi Wenders ran me in the sixth. I don't remember much about it, anyway. I had so much on my mind that I felt like a man in a dream. But I did have sense enough to do one thing, and that was to check the kid's right hand before he ran out on the field. There was no Band-Aid on the second finger, and no cut, either. I didn't even feel relieved. I just kept seeing Joe DiPunno's red eyes and haggard mouth.

That was Danny Doo's last good game ever, and he never did get his two hundred. He tried to come back in '58, but it was no good. He claimed the double vision was gone and maybe it was true, but he couldn't hardly get the pill over the plate anymore. No spot in Cooperstown for Danny. Joe was right: that kid did suck luck.

But that afternoon Doo was the best I ever saw him, his fastball hopping, his curve snapping like a whip. For the first four innings

they couldn't touch him at all. Just wave the stick and take a seat, fellows. He struck out six and the rest were infield ground-outs. Only trouble was, Kinder was almost as good. We'd gotten one lousy hit, a two-out double by Harrington in the bottom of the third.

Now it's the top of the fifth. The first batter goes down easy. Then Walt Dropo comes up, hits one deep into the left field corner, and takes off like a bat out of hell. The crowd saw Harry Keene still chasing the ball while Dropo's legging for second, and they understood it could be an inside-the-park job. The chanting started. Only a few voices at first, then more and more. Getting deeper and louder. It put a chill up me from the crack of my ass to the nape of my neck.

"Bloh-KADE! Bloh-KADE! Bloh-KADE!"

Like that. The orange signs started going up. People were on their feet and holding them over their heads. Not waving them like usual, just holding them up. I have never seen anything like it.

"Bloh-KADE! Bloh-KADE! Bloh-KADE!"

At first I thought there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell; by then Dropo's steaming for third with all the stops pulled out. But Keene pounced on the ball and made a perfect throw to Barbarino at short. The rook, meanwhile, is standing on the third-base side of home plate with his glove held out, making a target, and Si hit the goddam pocket.

The crowd's chanting. Dropo's sliding, spikes up. The kid don't mind; he goes on his knees and dives over em. Hi Wenders was where he was supposed to be—that time, at least—leaning over the play. A cloud of dust goes up...and out of it comes Wenders's upraised thumb. *"Yerrrr...OUT!"* Mr. King, the fans went nuts. Walt

Dropo did, too. He was up and dancing around like a coked-up kid at a record hop. He couldn't believe it.

The kid was scraped halfway up his left forearm, not bad, just bloodsweat, but enough for old Bony Dadier—he was our trainer—to come out and slap a Band-Aid on it. So the kid got his Band-Aid after all, only this one was legit. The fans stayed on their feet during the whole medical consultation, waving their ROAD CLOSED signs and chanting “*Bloh-KADE! Bloh-KADE!*” like they wouldn't ever get enough of it.

The kid didn't seem to notice. He was in another world. He was the whole time he was with the Titans, now that I think of it. He just put on his mask, went back behind the plate, and squatted down. Business as usual. Bubba Phillips came up, lined out to Lathrop at first, and that was the fifth.

When the kid came up in the bottom of the inning and struck out on three pitches, the crowd still gave him a standing O. That time he noticed, and tipped his cap when he went back to the dugout. Only time he ever did it. Not because he was snotty but because...well, I already said it. That other world thing.

Okay, top of the sixth. Over fifty years later and I still get a red ass when I think of it. Kinder's up first and loops out to third, just like a pitcher should. Then comes Luis Aparicio, Little Louie. The Doo winds and fires. Aparicio fouls it off high and lazy behind home plate, on the third base side of the screen. The kid throws away his mask and sprints after it, head back and glove out. Wenders trailed him, but not close like he should have done. He didn't think the kid had a chance. It was lousy goddam umping.

The kid's off the grass and on the track, by the low wall between the field and the box seats. Neck craned. Looking up. Two dozen people in those first- and second-row box seats also looking up, most of them waving their hands in the air. This is one thing I don't understand about fans and never will. It's a fucking *baseball*, for the love of God! An item that sold for seventy-five cents back then. Everybody knew it. But when fans see one in reach at the ballpark, they turn into fucking Danny Doo in order to get their hands on it. Never mind standing back and letting the man trying to catch it—their man, and in a tight ballgame—do his job.

I saw it all. Saw it clear. That mile-high popup came down on our side of the wall. The kid was going to catch it. Then some long-armed bozo in one of those Titans jerseys they sold on the Esplanade reached over and ticked it so the ball bounced off the edge of the kid's glove and fell to the ground.



I was so sure Wenders would call Aparicio out—it was clear interference—that at first I couldn't believe what I was seeing when he gestured for the kid to go back behind the plate and for Aparicio to resume the box. When I got it, I ran out, waving my arms. The crowd started cheering me and booing Wenders, which is no way to win friends and influence people when you're arguing a call, but I was too goddam mad to care. I wouldn't have stopped if Mahatma Gandhi had walked out on the field butt-naked and urging us to make peace.

"Interference!" I yelled. *"Clear as day, clear as the nose on your face!"*

"It was in the stands, and that makes it anyone's ball," Wenders says. "Go on back to your little nest and let's get this show on the road."

The kid didn't care; he was talking to his pal The Doo. That was all right. I didn't care that he didn't care. All I wanted at that moment was to tear Hi Wenders a fresh new asshole. I'm not ordinarily an argumentative man—all the years I managed the A's, I only got thrown out of games twice—but that day I would have made Billy Martin look like a peacenik.

"You didn't see it, Hi! You were trailing too far back! You didn't see shit!"

"I wasn't trailing and I saw it all. Now get back, Granny. I ain't kidding."

"If you didn't see that long-armed sonofabitch—" (Here a lady in the second row put her hands over her little boy's ears and pursed up her mouth at me in an oh-you-nasty-man look.) *"—that long-*

armed sonofabitch reach out and tick that ball, you were goddam trailing! Jesus Christ!"

The man in the jersey starts shaking his head—who, me? not me!—but he’s also wearing a big embarrassed suckass grin. Wenders saw it, knew what it meant, then looked away. “That’s it,” he says to me. And in the reasonable voice that means you’re one smart crack from drinking a Rhinegold in the locker room. “You’ve had your say. Now you can either go back to the dugout or you can listen to the rest of the game on the radio. Take your pick.”

I went back to the dugout. Aparicio stood back in with a big shit-eating grin on his face. He knew, sure he did. And made the most of it. The guy never hit many home runs, but when The Doo sent in a changeup that didn’t change, Louie cranked it high, wide, and handsome to the deepest part of the park. Nosy Norton was playing center, and he never even turned around.

Aparicio circled the bases, serene as the *Queen Mary* coming into dock, while the crowd screamed at him, denigrated his relatives, and hurled hate down on Hi Wenders’s head. Wenders heard none of it, which is the chief umpirely skill. He just got a fresh ball out of his coat pocket and inspected it for dings and doinks. Watching him do that, I lost it entirely. I rushed out to home plate and started shaking both fists in his face.

“That’s your run, you fucking busher!” I screamed. *“Too fucking lazy to chase after a foul ball, and now you’ve got an RBI for yourself! Jam it up your ass! Maybe you’ll find your glasses!”*

The crowd loved it. Hi Wenders, not so much. He pointed at me, threw his thumb back over his shoulder, and walked away. The crowd started booing and shaking their ROAD CLOSED signs; some

threw bottles, cups, and half-eaten franks onto the field. It was a circus.

“Don’t you walk away from me, you fatass blind lazy sonofabitching bastard!” I screamed, and chased after him. Someone from our dugout grabbed me before I could grab Wenders, which I meant to do. I had lost touch with reality.

The crowd was chanting *“KILL THE UMP! KILL THE UMP! KILL THE UMP!”* I’ll never forget that, because it was the same way they’d been chanting *“Bloh-KADE! Bloh-KADE!”*

“If your mother was here, she’d be throwing shit at you, too, you bat-blind busher!” I screamed, and then they hauled me into the dugout. Ganzie Burgess, our knuckleballer, managed the last three innings of that horror-show. He also pitched the last two. You might find that in the record-books, too. If there were any records of that lost spring.

The last thing I saw on the field was Danny Dusen and Blockade Billy standing on the grass between the plate and the mound. The kid had his mask tucked under his arm. The Doo was whispering in his ear. The kid was listening—he always listened when The Doo talked—but he was looking at the crowd, forty thousand fans on their feet, men, women, and children, yelling *KILL THE UMP, KILL THE UMP, KILL THE UMP.*

There was a bucket of balls halfway down the hall between the dugout and the locker room. I kicked it and sent balls rolling every whichway. If I’d stepped on one of them and fallen on my ass, it would have been the perfect end to a perfect fucking afternoon at the ballpark.

Joe was in the locker room, sitting on a bench outside the showers. By then he looked seventy instead of just fifty. There were three other guys in there with him. Two were uniformed cops. The third one was in a suit, but you only had to take one look at his hard roast beef of a face to know he was a cop, too.

“Game over early?” this one asked me. He was sitting on a folding chair with his big old cop thighs spread and straining his seersucker pants. The bluesuits were on one of the benches in front of the lockers.

“It is for me,” I said. I was still so mad I didn’t even care about the cops. To Joe I said, “Fucking Wenders ran me. I’m sorry, Cap, but it was a clear case of interference and that lazy sonofabitch—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Joe said. “The game isn’t going to count. I don’t think any of our games are going to count. Kerwin’ll appeal to the Commissioner, of course, but—”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Joe sighed. Then he looked at the guy in the suit. “You tell him, Detective Lombardazzi,” he said. “I can’t bear to.”

“Does he need to know?” Lombardazzi asked. He’s looking at me like I’m some kind of bug he’s never seen before. It was a look I didn’t need on top of everything else, but I kept my mouth shut. Because I knew three cops, one of them a detective, don’t show up in the locker room of a Major League baseball team if it isn’t goddam serious.

“If you want him to hold the other guys long enough for you to get the Blakely kid out of here, I think he does need to,” Joe says.

From above us there came a cry from the fans, followed by a groan, followed by a cheer. None of us paid any attention to what

turned out to be the end of Danny Dusen's baseball career. The cry was when he got hit in the forehead by a Larry Doby line drive. The groan was when he fell on the pitcher's mound like a tagged prizefighter. And the cheer was when he picked himself up and gestured that he was okay. Which he was not, but he pitched the rest of the sixth, and the seventh, too. Didn't give up a run, either. Ganzie made him come out before the eighth when he saw The Doo wasn't walking straight. Danny all the time claiming he was perfectly okay, that the big purple goose-egg raising up over his left eyebrow wasn't nothing, he'd had lots worse, and the kid saying the same: it ain't nothing, it ain't nothing. Little Sir Echo. Us down in the clubhouse didn't know any of that, no more than Dusen knew he might've been tagged worse in his career, but it was the first time part of his brain had sprung a leak.

"His name isn't Blakely," Lombardazzi says. "It's Eugene Katsanis."

"Katz-*whatsis*? Where's Blakely, then?"

"William Blakely's dead. Has been for a month. His parents, too."

I gaped at him. "What are you talking about?"

So he told me the stuff I'm sure you already know, Mr. King, but maybe I can fill in a few blanks. The Blakelys lived in Clarence, Iowa, a wide patch of not much an hour's drive from Davenport. Made it convenient for Ma and Pa, because they could go to most of their son's minor league games. Blakely had a successful farm; an eight hundred acre job. One of their hired men wasn't much more than a boy. His name was Gene Katsanis, an orphan who'd grown up in The Ottershaw Christian Home for Boys. He was no farmer, and not quite right in the head, but he was a hell of a baseball player.

Katsanis and Blakely played against each other on a couple of church teams, and together on the local Babe Ruth team, which won the state tournament all three years the two of them played together, and once went as far as the national semis. Blakely went to high school and starred on that team, too, but Katsanis wasn't school material. Slopping-the-hogs material and ballplaying material is what he was, although he was never supposed to be as good as Billy Blakely. Nobody so much as considered such a thing. Until it happened, that is.

Blakely's father hired him because the kid worked cheap, sure, but mostly because he had enough natural talent to keep Billy sharp. For twenty-five dollars a week, the kid got a fielder and a batting-practice pitcher. The old man got a cow-milker and a shit-shoveler. Not a bad deal, at least for them.

Whatever you've found in your research probably favors the Blakely family, am I right? Because they had been around those parts for four generations, because they were rich farmers, and because Katsanis wasn't nothing but a state kid who started life in a liquor carton on a church step and had several screws loose upstairs. And why was that? Because he was born dumb or because he got the crap beaten out of him three and four times a week in that home before he got old enough and big enough to defend himself? I know a lot of the beatings came because he had a habit of talking to himself—that came out in the newspapers later on.

Katsanis and Billy practiced just as hard once Billy got into the Titans' farm-system—during the off-season, you know, probably throwing and hitting in the barn once the snow got too deep outside—but Katsanis got kicked off the local town team, and wasn't

allowed to go to the Cornholers' workouts during Billy's second season with them. During his first one, Katsanis had been allowed to participate in some of the workouts, even in some intersquad games, if they were a man shy. It was all pretty informal and loosey-goosey back then, not like now when the insurance companies shit a brick if a major leaguer so much as grabs a bat without wearing a helmet.

What I think happened—feel free to correct me if you know better—is that the kid, whatever other problems he might have had, continued to grow and mature as a ballplayer. Blakely didn't. You see that all the time. Two kids who both look like Babe Fuckin' Ruth in high school. Same height, same weight, same speed, same twenty-twenty peepers. But one of them is able to play at the next level... and the next...and the next...while the other one starts to fall behind. This much I did hear later: Billy Blakely didn't start out as a catcher. He got switched from center field when the kid who was catching broke his arm. And that kind of switch isn't a real good sign. It's like the coach is sending a message: "You'll do...but only until someone better shows up."

I think Blakely got jealous, I think his old man got jealous, and I think maybe Mom did, too. Maybe especially Mom, because sports moms can be the worst. I think maybe they pulled a few strings to keep Katsanis from playing locally, and from showing up for the Davenport Cocksuckers' workouts. They could have done it, because they were a wealthy, long-established Iowa family and Gene Katsanis was a nobody who grew up in an orphan home. A *Christian* orphan home that was probably hell on earth.

I think maybe Billy got ragging on the kid once too often and once too hard. Or it could've been the dad or the mom. Maybe it was over

the way he milked the cows, or maybe he didn't shovel the shit just right that one time, but I'll bet the bottom line was baseball and plain old jealousy. The green-eyed monster. For all I know, the Cornholers' manager told Blakely he might be sent down to Single A in Clearwater, and getting sent down a rung when you're only twenty—when you're supposed to be going *up* the ladder—is a damned good sign that your career in organized baseball is going to be a short one.

But however it was—and *whoever*—it was a bad mistake. The kid could be sweet when he was treated right, we all knew that, but he wasn't right in the head. And he could be dangerous. I knew that even before the cops showed up, because of what happened in the very first game of the season: Billy Anderson.

"The County Sheriff found all three Blakelys in the barn," Lombardazzi said. "Katsanis slashed their throats. Sheriff said it looked like a razor blade."

I just gaped at him.

"What must have happened is this," Joe said in a heavy voice. "Kerwin McCaslin called around for a backup catcher when our guys got hurt down in Florida, and the manager of the Cornhuskers said he had a boy who might fill the bill for three or four weeks, assuming we didn't need him to hit for average. Because, he said, this kid wouldn't do that."

"But he did," I says.

"Because he wasn't Blakely," Lombardazzi says. "By then Blakely and his parents must already have been dead a couple of days, at least. The Katsanis kid was keeping house all by himself. And not all his screws were loose. He was smart enough to answer the phone

when it rang. He took the call from the manager and said sure, Billy'd be glad to go to New Jersey. And before he left—as Billy—he called around to the neighbors and the feed store downtown. Told em the Blakelys had been called away on a family emergency and he was taking care of things. Pretty smart for a loony, wouldn't you say?"

"He's not a loony," I told him.

"Well, he cut the throats of the people who took him in and gave him a job, and he killed all the cows so the neighbors wouldn't hear them bawling to be milked at night, but have it your way. I know the DA's going to agree with you, because he wants to see Katsanis get the rope. That's how they do it in Iowa, you know."

I turned to Joe. "How could a thing like this happen?"

"Because he was good," Joe said. "And because he wanted to play ball."

The kid had Billy Blakely's ID, and this was back in the days when picture IDs were unheard of. The two kids matched up pretty well: blue eyes, dark hair, six feet tall. But mostly, yeah—it happened because the kid was good. And wanted to play ball.

"Good enough to get almost a month in the pros," Lombardazzi said, and over our heads a cheer went up. Billy Blockade had just gotten his last big-league hit: a homer. "Then, day before yesterday, the LP gas man went out to the Blakely farm. Others folks had been there before, but they read the note Katsanis left on the door and went away. Not the gas man. He filled the tanks behind the barn, and the barn was where the bodies were—cows and Blakelys both. The weather had finally turned warm, and he smelled em. Which is pretty much the way our story ends. Now, your manager here wants him arrested with as little fuss as possible, and with as little danger to the

other players on your team as possible. That's fine with me. So your job—”

“Your job is to hold the rest of the guys in the dugout,” Jersey Joe says. “Send Blakely...Katsanis...down here on his own. He'll be gone when the rest of the guys get to the locker room. Then we'll try to sort this clusterfuck out.”

“What the hell do I tell them?”

“Team meeting. Free ice cream. I don't care. You just hold them for five minutes.”

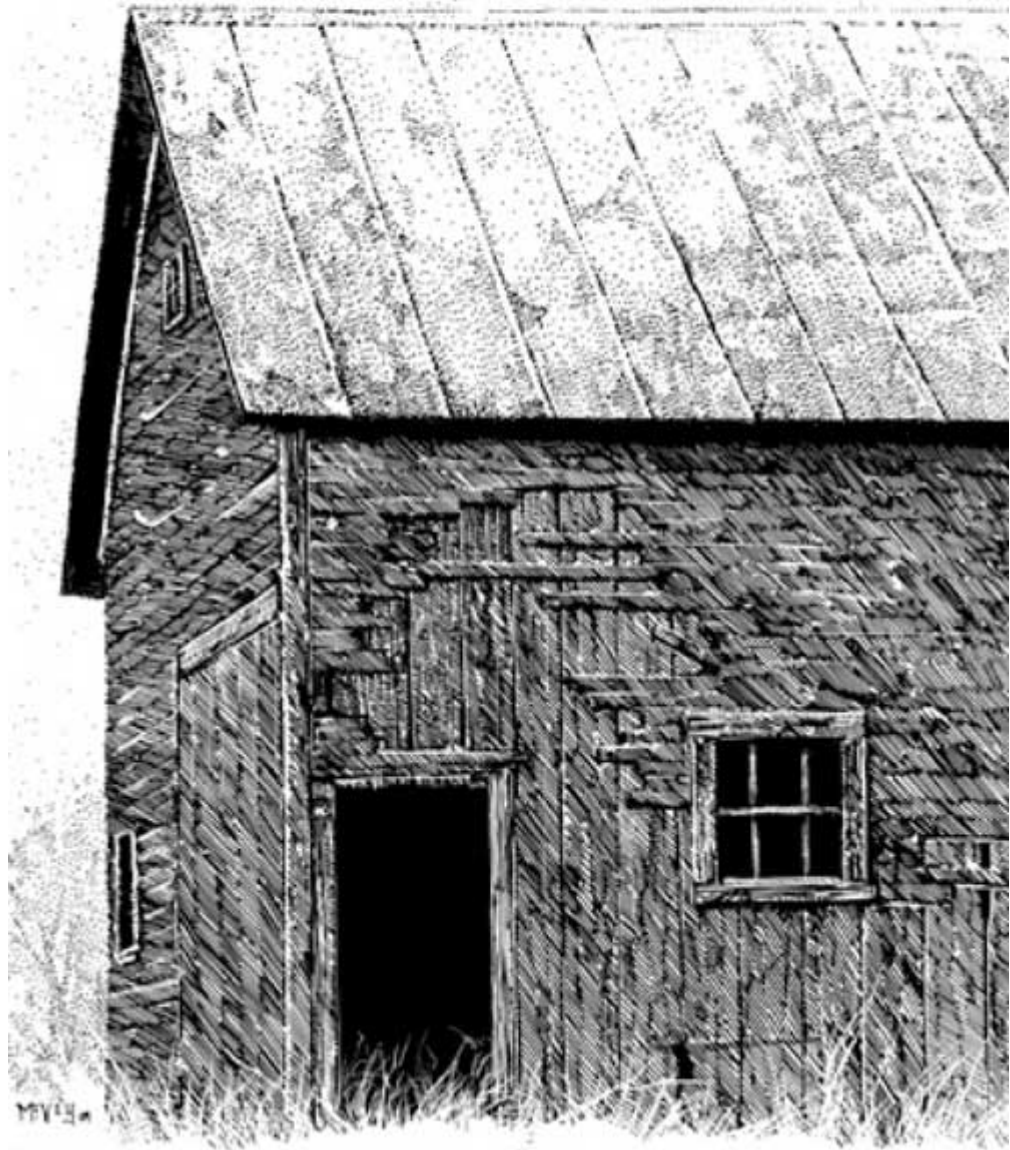
I says to Lombardazzi, “No one tipped? No one? You mean no one heard the radio broadcasts and tried calling Pop Blakely to say how great it was that his kid was tearing up the bigs?”

“I imagine one or two might have tried,” Lombardazzi said. “Folks from Iowa *do* come to the big city from time to time, I'm told, and I imagine a few people visiting New York listen to the Titans or read about em in the paper—”

“I prefer the Yankees,” one of the bluesuits chimes in.

“If I want your opinion, I'll rattle the bars in your cage,” Lombardazzi said. “Until then, shut up and die right.”

I looked at Joe, feeling sick. Getting a bad call and getting run off the field during my first managerial stint now seemed like the very least of my problems.



“Get him in here alone,” Joe said. “I don’t care how. The guys shouldn’t have to see this.” He thought it over and added: “And the kid shouldn’t have to see them seeing it. No matter what he did.”

If it matters—and I know it don’t—we lost that game two to one. All three runs were solo shots. Minnie Minoso hit the game-winner off of Ganzie in the top of the ninth. The kid made the final out. He whiffed in his first at-bat as a Titan; he whiffed in his last one. Baseball is also a game of balance.

But none of our guys cared about the game. When I got up there, they were gathered around The Doo, who was sitting on the bench and telling them he was fine, goddammit, just a little dizzy. But he didn’t look fine, and our old excuse for a doc looked pretty grave. He wanted Danny down at Newark General for X-rays.

“Fuck that,” Doo says, “I just need a couple of minutes. I’m all right, I tell you. Jesus, Bones, cut me a break.”

“Blakely,” I said. “Go on down to the locker room. Mr. DiPunno wants to see you.”

“Coach DiPunno wants to see me? In the locker room? Why?”

“Something about the Rookie of the Month award,” I said. It just popped into my head from nowhere. There was no such thing back then, but the kid didn’t know that.

The kid looks at Danny Doo, and the Doo flaps his hand at him. “Go on, get out of here, kid. You played a good game. Not your fault. You’re still lucky, and fuck anyone who says different.” Then he says: “All of you get out of here. Gimme some breathing-room.”

“Hold off on that,” I says. “Joe wants to see him alone. Give him a little one-to-one congratulations, I guess. Kid, don’t wait around. Just —” *Just scat* was how I meant to finish, but I didn’t have to. Blakely

or Katsanis, he was already gone. And you know what happened after that.

If the kid had gone straight down the hall to the umpire's room, he would have gotten collared, because the locker room was on the way. Instead, he cut through our box-room, where luggage was stored and where we also had a couple of massage tables and a whirlpool bath. We'll never know for sure why he did that, but I think the kid knew something was wrong. Crazy or not, he must have known the roof was going to fall in on him eventually. In any case, he came out on the far side of the locker room, walked down to the ump's room, and knocked on the door. By then the rig he probably learned how to make in The Ottershaw Christian Home was back on his second finger. One of the older boys probably showed him how, that's what I think. *Kid, if you want to stop getting beaten up all the time, make yourself one of these.*

He never put it back in his locker after all, you see; just tucked it into his pocket. And he didn't bother with the Band-Aid after the game, which tells me he knew he didn't have anything to hide anymore.

He raps on the umpire's door and says, "Urgent telegram for Mr. Hi Wenders." Crazy but not stupid, you see? I don't know what would have happened if one of the other umps on the crew had opened up, but it was Wenders himself, and I'm betting his life was over even before he realized it wasn't a Western Union delivery-boy standing there.

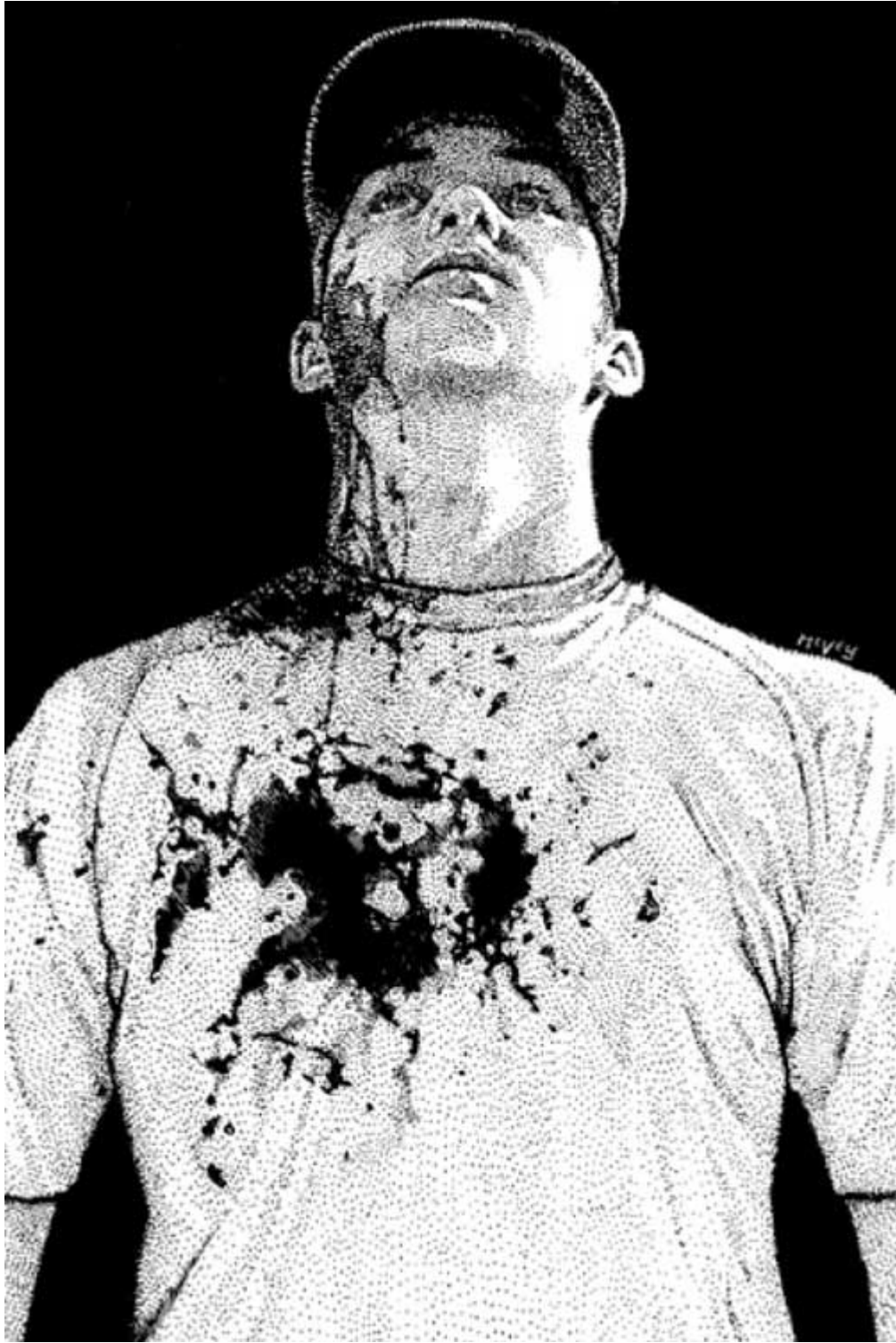
It was a razor blade, see? Or a piece of one, anyway. When it wasn't needed, it stayed inside a little tin band like a kid's pretend finger-ring. Only when he balled his right fist and pushed on the band

with the ball of his thumb, that little sliver of a blade popped up on a spring. Wenders opened the door and Katsanis swept it across his neck and cut his throat with it. When I saw the puddle of blood after he was taken away in handcuffs—oh my God, such a pool of it there was—all I could think of was those forty thousand people screaming *KILL THE UMP* the same way they'd been screaming *Bloh-KADE*. No one really means it, but the kid didn't know that, either. Especially not after the Doo poured a lot of poison in his ears about how Wenders was out to get both of them.

When the cops ran out of the locker room, Billy Blockade was just standing there with blood all down the front of his white home uniform and Wenders laying at his feet. Nor did he try to fight or slash when the bluesuits grabbed him. No, he just stood there whispering to himself. "I got him, Doo. I got him, Billy. He won't make no more bad calls now. I got him for all of us."

That's where the story ends, Mr. King—the part of it I know, at least. As far as the Titans go, you could look it up, as ol' Casey used to say: all those games canceled out, and all the doubleheaders we played to make them up. How we ended up with old Hubie Rattner behind the plate after all, and how he batted .185—well below what they now call the Mendoza Line. How Danny Dusen was diagnosed with something called "an intercranial bleed" and had to sit out the rest of the season. How he tried to come back in 1958—that was sad. Five outings. In three of them he couldn't get the ball over the plate. In the other two...do you remember the last Red Sox–Yankees playoff game in 2004? How Kevin Brown started for the Yankees, and the Sox scored six goddam runs off him in the first two innings? That's how Danny Doo pitched in '58 when he actually managed to

get the ball over the dish. He had *nothing*. And still, after all that, we managed to finish ahead of the Senators and the Athletics. Only Jersey Joe DiPunno had a heart attack during the World Series that year. Might have been the same day the Russians put the Sputnik up. They took him out of County Stadium on a stretcher. He lived another five years, but he was a shadow of his former self and of course he never managed again.



He said the kid sucked luck, and he was more right than he knew. Mr. King, that kid was a *black hole* for luck.

For himself, as well. I'm sure you know how his story ended—how he was taken to Essex County Jail and held there for extradition. How he swallowed a bar of soap and choked to death on it. I can't think of a worse way to go. That was a nightmare season, no doubt, and still, telling you about it brought back some good memories. Mostly, I think, of how Old Swampy would flush orange when all those fans raised their signs: ROAD CLOSED BY ORDER OF BLOCKADE BILLY. Yep, I bet the fellow who thought those up made a goddam mint. But you know, the people who bought them got fair value. When they stood up with them held over their heads, they were part of something bigger than themselves. That can be a bad thing—just think of all the people who turned out to see Hitler at his rallies—but this was a good thing. *Baseball* is a good thing. Always was, always will be.

Bloh-KADE, bloh-KADE, bloh-KADE.

Still gives me a chill to think of it. Still echoes in my head. That kid was the real thing, crazy or not, luck-sucker or not.

Mr. King, I think I'm all talked out. Do you have enough? Good. I'm glad. You come back anytime you want, but not on Wednesday afternoon; that's when they have their goddam Virtual Bowling, and you can't hear yourself think. Come on Saturday, why don't you? There's a bunch of us always watches the Game of the Week. We're allowed a couple of beers, and we root like mad bastards. It ain't like the old days, but it ain't bad.



ROAD CLOSED
BY ORDER OF
BLOCKADE
BILLY

About the Author

Stephen King has written more than forty novels and two hundred short stories. He is the recipient of the 2003 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters and he also received the O. Henry Award for his story "The Man in the Black Suit." He has written about baseball before. "Head Down," an essay about Little League ball first published in *The New Yorker*, can be found in his collection *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* along with "Brooklyn Summer," a poem celebrating Ebbets Field while the Dodgers still considered it home. He and Stewart O'Nan co-authored *Faithful*, an account of the 2004 season and the first World Series Championship enjoyed by the Boston Red Sox and their diehard fans. He took less pleasure in reporting the 2009 Yankees victory over the Phillies for *McSweeney's*. Among his most recent worldwide bestsellers are the novels *Under the Dome*, *Duma Key*, *Cell*, and *Lisey's Story*. In November 2010 Scribner will publish *Full Dark, No Stars*.

a cognizant original v5 release november 13 2010

STEPHEN
KING



THE BODY

PENGUIN READERS

THE BODY
Stephen King

1

The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of, because words diminish them - words shrink things that seemed limitless when they were in your head to no more than living size when they're brought out. But it's more than that, isn't it? The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried, like landmarks to a treasure your enemies would love to steal away. And you may make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you've said at all, or why you thought it was so important that you almost cried while you were saying it. That's the worst, I think. When the secret stays locked within not for want of a teller but for want of an understanding ear.

I was twelve going on thirteen when I first saw a dead human being. It happened in 1960, a long time ago ... although sometimes it doesn't seem that long to me. Especially on the nights I wake up from those dreams where the hall fell into his open eyes.

2

We had a treehouse in a big elm which overhung a vacant lot in Castle Rock. There's a moving company on that lot today, and the elm is gone. Progress. It was a sort of social club, although it had no name. There were five, maybe six steady guys and some other wet ends who just hung around. We'd let them come up when there was a card game and we needed some fresh blood. The game was usually blackjack and we played for pennies, nickel limit. But you got double money on blackjack and five-card-under ... triple money on six-card-under, although Teddy was the only guy crazy enough to go for that.

The sides of the treehouse were planks scavenged from the shitpile behind Makey Lumber & Building Supply on Carbine Road - they were splintery and full of knotholes we plugged with either toilet paper or paper towels. The roof was a corrugated tin sheet we hawked from the dump, looking over our shoulders all the time we were hustling it out of there, because the dump custodian's dog was supposed to be a real kid-eating monster. We found a screen door out there on the same day. It was flyproof but really rusty -I mean, that rust was extreme. No matter what time of day you looked out that screen door, it looked like sunset. Besides playing cards, the club was a good place to go and smoke cigarettes and look at girly books. There were half a dozen battered tin ashtrays that said CAMELS on the bottom, a lot of centrefolds tacked to the splintery walls, twenty or thirty dog-eared packs of Bike cards (Teddy got them from his uncle, who ran the Castle Rock Stationery Shoppe - when Teddy's unc asked him one day what kind of cards we played, Teddy said we had cribbage tournaments and Teddy's unc thought that was just fine), a set of plastic poker chips, and a pile of ancient Master Detective murder magazines to leaf through if there was nothing else shaking. We also built a 12" x 10" secret compartment under the floor to hide most of this stuff in on the rare occasions when some kid's father decided it was time to do the We're Really Good Pals routine. When it rained, being in the club was like being inside a Jamaican steel drum ... but that summer there had been no rain.

It had been the driest and hottest since 1907 - or so the newspapers said, and on that Friday preceding the Labour Day weekend and the start of another school year, even the goldenrod in the fields and the ditches beside the backroads looked parched and poorly. Nobody's garden had done doodly-squat that year, and the big displays of canning stuff in the Castle Rock Red & White were still there, gathering

dust. No one had anything to put up that summer, except maybe dandelion wine.

Teddy and Chris and I were up in the club on that Friday morning, glooming to each other about school being so near and playing cards and swapping the same old travelling salesman jokes and Frenchman jokes. How do you know when a Frenchman's been in your back yard? Well, your garbage cans are empty and your dog is pregnant. Teddy would try to look offended, but he was the first one to bring in a joke as soon as he heard it, only switching Frenchman to Polack.

The elm gave good shade, but we already had our shirts off so we wouldn't sweat them up too bad. We were playing three-penny-scat, the dullest card game ever invented, but it was too hot to think about anything more complicated. We'd had a pretty fair scratch ballteam until the middle of August and then a lot of kids just drifted away. Too hot I was down to my ride and building spades. I'd started with thirteen, gotten an eight to make twenty-one, and nothing had happened since then. Chris knocked. I took my last draw and got nothing helpful.

Twenty-nine,' Chris said, laying down diamonds.

Twenty-two,' Teddy said, looking disgusted.

'Piss up a rope,' I said, and tossed my cards onto the table face-down.

'Gordie's out, ole Gordie just bit the bag and stepped out the door,' Teddy bugled, and then gave out with his patented Teddy Duchamp laugh - Eeee-eee-eee, like a rusty nail being slowly hauled out of a rotten board. Well, he was weird; we all knew it. Close to being thirteen like the rest of us, the thick glasses and the hearing aid he wore

sometimes made him look like an old man. Kids were always trying to cadge smokes off him on the street, but the bulge in his shirt was just his hearing aid battery.

In spite of the glasses and the flesh-coloured button always screwed into his ear, Teddy couldn't see very well and often misunderstood the things people said to him. In baseball you had to have him play the fences, way beyond Chris in left field and Billy Greer in right. You just hoped no one would hit one that far because Teddy would go grimly after it, see it or not. Every now and then he got bonked a good one, and once he went out cold when he ran full tilt boogie into the fence by the treehouse. He lay there on his back with his eyes showing whites for almost five minutes, and I got scared. Then he woke up and walked around with a bloody nose and a huge purple lump rising on his forehead, trying to claim that the ball was foul.

His eyesight was just naturally bad, but there was nothing natural about what had happened to his ears. Back in those days, when it was cool to get your hair cut so that your ears stuck out like a couple of jug-handles, Teddy had Castle Rock's first Beatle haircut - four years before anyone in America had even heard of the Beatles. He kept his ears covered because they looked like two lumps of warm wax.

One day when he was eight, Teddy's father got pissed at him for breaking a plate. His mother was working at the shoe factory in South Paris when it happened and by the time she found out about it, everything had happened.

Teddy's dad took Teddy over to the big woodstove at the back of the kitchen and shoved the side of Teddy's head down against one of the cast-iron burner plates. He held it down there for about ten seconds. Then he yanked Teddy up by the hair and did the other side. Then he called the

Central Maine General Emergency Unit and told them to come get his boy. Then he hung up the phone, went into the closet, got his four-ten, and sat down to watch the daytime stories on TV with the shotgun laid across his knees. When Mrs Burroughs from next door came over to ask if Teddy was all right - she'd heard the screaming - Teddy's dad pointed the shotgun at her. Mrs Burroughs went out of the Duchamp house at roughly the speed of light, locked herself into her own house, and called the police. When the ambulance came, Mr Duchamp let the orderlies in and then went out on the back porch to stand guard while they wheeled Teddy to the old portholed Buick ambulance on a stretcher.

Teddy's dad explained to the orderlies that while the fucking brass hats said the area was clear, there were still Kraut snipers everywhere. One of the orderlies asked Teddy's Dad if he thought he could hold on. Teddy's dad smiled Frigidaire dealership, if that's what it took. The orderly saluted, and Teddy's dad snapped it right back at him. A few minutes after the ambulance left, the state police arrived and relieved Norman Duchamp of duty.

He'd been doing odd things like shooting cats and lighting fires in mailboxes for over a year, and after the atrocity he had visited upon his son, they had a quick hearing and sent him to Togus, which is a special sort of V.A. hospital. Togus is where you have to go if you're a section eight. Teddy's dad had stormed the beach at Normandy, and that's just the way Teddy always put it. Teddy was proud of his old man in spite of what his old man had done to him, and Teddy went with his mom to visit him every week.

He was the dumbest guy we hung around with, I guess, and he was crazy. He'd take the craziest chances you can imagine, and get away with them. His big thing was what

he called Truck Dodging. He'd run out in front of them on 196 and sometimes they'd miss him by bare inches. God knew how many heart attacks he'd caused, and he'd be laughing while the windblast from the passing truck rippled his clothes. It scared us because his vision was so lousy. Coke-bottle glasses or not. It seemed like only a matter of time before he misjudged one of those trucks. And you had to be careful what you dared him, because Teddy would do anything on a dare.

'Gordie's out, eeeeeee-eee-eee!'

'Screw,' I said, and picked up a Master Detective to read while they played it out. I turned to 'He Stomped the Pretty Co-Ed to Death in a Stalled Elevator' and got right into it.

Teddy picked up the cards, gave them one brief look, and said: 'I knock.'

'You four-eyed pile of shit!' Chris cried.

'The pile of shit has a thousand eyes,' Teddy said seriously, and both Chris and I cracked up. Teddy stared at us with a slight frown, as if wondering what had gotten us laughing. That was another thing about the cat - he was always coming out with weird stuff like "The pile of shit has a thousand eyes', and you could never be sure if he meant it to be funny or if it just happened that way. He'd look at the people who were laughing with that slight frown on his face, as if to say O Lord what is it this time?

Teddy had a natural thirty - jack, queen, and king of clubs. Chris had only sixteen and went down to his ride.

Teddy was shuffling the cards in his clumsy way and I was just getting to the gooshy part of the murder story, where this deranged sailor from New Orleans was doing the Bristol

Stomp all over this college girl from Bryn Mawr because he couldn't stand being in closed-in spaces, when we heard someone coming fast up the ladder nailed to the side of the elm. A fist rapped on the underside of the trapdoor.

'Who goes?' Chris yelled.

'Vern!' He sounded excited and out of breath.

I went to the trapdoor and pulled the bolt. The trapdoor banged up and Vern Tessio, one of the other regulars, pulled himself into the clubhouse. He was sweating buckets and his hair, which he usually kept combed in a perfect imitation of his rock and roll idol, Bobby Rydell, was plastered to his bullet head in chunks and strings.

'Wow, man,' he panted. 'Wait'll you hear this.'

'Hear what?' I asked.

'Lemme get my breath. I ran all the way from my house.'

'/ ran all the way home,' Teddy wavered in a dreadful Little Anthony falsetto, 'just to say I'm soh-ree Tuck your hand, man,' Vern said.

'Drop dead in a shed, Fred,' Teddy returned smartly.

'You ran all the way from your place?' Chris asked unbelievably. 'Man, you're crazy.' Vern's house was two miles down Grand Street. 'It must be ninety out there.'

'This is worth it,' Vern said. 'Holy Jeezum. You won't believe this. Sincerely.' He slapped his sweaty forehead to show us how sincere he was.

'Okay, what?' Chris asked.

'Can you guys camp out tonight?' Vern was looking at us earnestly, excitedly. His eyes looked like raisins pushed into dark circles of sweat 'I mean, if you tell your folks we're gonna tent out in my back field?'

'Yeah, I guess so,' Chris said, picking up his new hand and y'know.'

'You got to, man,' Vern said. 'Sincerely. You won't believe this. Can you, Gordie?'

'Probably.'

I was able to do most stuff like that - in fact, I'd been like the Invisible Boy that whole summer. In April my older brother, Dennis, had been killed in a Jeep accident. That was at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he was in basic. He and another guy were on their way to the PX and an army truck hit them broadside. Dennis was killed instantly and his passenger had been in a coma ever since. Dennis would have been twenty later that week. I'd already picked out a birthday card for him at Dahlie's over in Castle Green.

I cried when I heard, and I cried more at the funeral, and I couldn't believe that Dennis was gone, that anyone that used to knuckle my head or scare me with a rubber spider until I cried or give me a kiss when I fell down and scraped both knees bloody and whisper in my ear, 'Now stop cryin', ya baby!' - that a person who had touched me could be dead. It hurt me and it scared me that he could be dead ... but it seemed to have taken all the heart out of my parents. For me, Dennis was hardly more than an acquaintance. He was eight years older than me if you can dig it, and he had his own friends and classmates. We ate at the same table for a lot of years, and sometimes he was my friend and sometimes my tormentor, but mostly he was, you know,

just a guy. When he died he'd been gone for a year except for a couple of furloughs. We didn't even look alike. It took me a long time after that summer to realize that most of the tears I cried were for my mom and dad. Fat lot of good it did them, or me.

'So what are you pissing and moaning about, Vern-O?' Teddy asked.

'I knock,' Chris said.

'What?' Teddy screamed, immediately forgetting all about Vern. 'You friggin' liar! You ain't got to pat hand. I didn't deal you no pat hand.'

Chris smirked. 'Make your draw, shitheap.'

Teddy reached for the top card of the pile of Bikes. Chris reached for the Winstons on the ledge behind him. I bent over to pick up my detective magazine.

Vern Tessio said: 'You guys want to go see a dead body?'

Everybody stopped.

3

We'd all heard about it on the radio, of course. The radio, a Philco with a cracked case which had also been scavenged from the dump, played all the time. We kept it tuned to WLAM in Lewiston, which churned out the super-hits and the boss oldies: 'What in the World's Come Over You' by Jack Scott and 'This Time' by Troy Shondell and 'King Creole' by Elvis and 'Only the Lonely' by Roy Orbison. When the news came on we usually switched some mental dial over to Mute. The news was a lot of happy horseshit about Kennedy and Nixon and Quemoy and Matsu and the missile

gap and what a shit that Castro was turning out to be after all. But we had all listened to the Ray Brower story a little more closely, because he was a kid our age.

He was from Chamberlain, a town forty miles or so east of Castle Rock. Three days before Vern came busting into the clubhouse after a two-mile run up Grand Street, Ray Brower had gone out with one of his mother's pots to pick blueberries. When dark came and he still wasn't back, the Browsers called the county sheriff and a search started - first just around the kid's house and then spreading to the surrounding towns of Motton and Durham and Pownal. Everybody got into the act - cops, deputies, game wardens, volunteers. But three days later the kid was still missing. You could tell, hearing about it on the radio, that they were never going to find that poor sucker alive; eventually the search would just peter away into nothing. He might have gotten smothered in a gravel pit slide or drowned in a brook, and ten years from now some hunter would find his bones. They were already dragging the ponds in Chamberlain, and the Motton Reservoir.

Nothing like that could happen in south-western Maine today; most of the area has become suburbanized, and the bedroom communities surrounding Portland and Lewiston have spread out like the tentacles of a giant squid. The woods are still there, and they get heavier as you work your way west towards the White Mountains, but these days if you can keep your head long enough to walk five miles in one consistent direction, you're certain to cross two-lane blacktop. But in 1960 the whole area between Chamberlain and Castle Rock was undeveloped, and there were places that hadn't even been logged since before World War II. In those days it was still possible to walk into the woods and lose your direction there and die there.

Vern Tessio had been under his porch that morning, digging.

We all understood that right away, but maybe I should take just a minute to explain it to you. Teddy Duchamp was only about half-bright, but Vern Tessio would never be spending any of his spare time on Quiz Kids either. Still, his brother Billy was even dumber, as you will see. But first I have to tell you why Vern was digging under the porch.

Four years ago, when he was eight, Vern buried a quart jar of pennies under the long Tessio front porch. Vern called the dark space under the porch his 'cave'. He was playing a pirate sort of game, and the pennies were buried treasure - only if you were playing pirate with Vern, you couldn't call it buried treasure, you had to call it 'booty'. So he buried the jar of pennies deep, filled in the hole, and covered the fresh dirt with some of the old leaves that had drifted under there over the years. He drew a treasure map which he put up in his room with the rest of his junk. He forgot all about it for a month or so. Then, being low on cash for a movie or something, he remembered the pennies and went to get his map. But his mom had been in to clean two or three times since then, and had collected all the old homework papers and candy wrappers and comic magazines and joke books. She burned them in the stove to start the cook-fire one morning, and Vern's treasure map went right up the kitchen chimney.

Or so he figured it.

He tried to find the spot from memory and dug there. No luck. To the right and the left of that spot. Still no luck. He gave up for the day but had tried off and on ever since.

Four years, man. Four years. Isn't that a pisser? You didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

It had gotten to be sort of an obsession with him. The Tessio front porch ran the length of the house, probably forty feet long and seven feet wide. He had dug through damn near every inch of that area two, maybe three times and no pennies. The number of pennies began to grow in his mind. When it first happened he told Chris and me that there had been maybe three dollars' worth. A year later he was up to five and just lately it was running around ten, more or less, depending on how broke he was.

Every so often we tried to tell him what was so clear to us - that Billy had known about the jar and dug it up himself. Vern refused to believe it, although he hated Billy like the Arabs hate the Jews and probably would have cheerfully voted the death penalty on his brother for shoplifting, if the opportunity had ever presented itself. He also refused to ask Billy point blank. Probably he was afraid Billy would laugh and say Course I got them, you stupid pussy, and there was twenty bucks' worth of pennies in that jar and I spent every fuckin' cent of it. Instead, Vern went out and dug for the pennies whenever the spirit moved him (and whenever Billy wasn't around). He always crawled out from under the porch with his jeans dirty and his hair leafy and his hands empty. We ragged him about it something wicked, and his nickname was Penny - Penny Tessio. I think he came up to the club with his news as quick as he did not just to get it out but to show us that some good had finally come of his penny-hunt He had been up that morning before anybody, ate his cornflakes, and was out in the driveway shooting baskets through the old hoop nailed up on the garage, nothing much to do. no one to play Ghost with or anything, and he decided to have another dig for his pennies. He was under the porch when the screen door

slammed up above. He froze, not making a sound. If it was his dad, he would crawl out; if it was Billy, he'd stay put until Billy and his jd friend Charlie Hogan had taken off.

Two pairs of footsteps crossed the porch, and then Charlie Hogan himself said in a trembling, cry-baby voice: 'Jesus Christ, Billy, what are we gonna do?'

Vern said that just hearing Charlie Hogan talk like that - Charlie, who was one of the toughest kids in town - made him prick up his ears. Charlie, after all, hung out with Ace Merrill and Eyeball Chambers, and if you hung out with cats like that, you had to be tough.

'Nuthin',' Billy said. "That's all we're gonna do. Nuthin'.'

'We gotta do somethin'? Charlie said, and they sat down on the porch close to where Vern was hunkered down. 'Didn't you see him?'

Vern took a chance and crept a little closer to the steps, practically slaving. At that point he thought that maybe Billy and Charlie had been really drunked up and had run somebody down. Vern was careful not to crackle any of the old leaves as he moved. If the two of them found out he was under the porch and had overheard them, you could have put what was left of him in a Ken-L-Ration dogfood can.

'It's nuthin' to us,' Billy Tessio said. "The kid's dead so it's nuthin' to him, neither. Who gives a fuck if they ever find him? I don't.'

'It was that kid they been talkin' about on the radio,' Charlie said. 'It was, sure as shit Brocker, Brower, Flowers, whatever his name is. Fuckin' train must have hit him.'

'Yeah,' Billy said. Sound of a scratched match. Vern saw it flicked into the gravel driveway and then smelled cigarette smoke. 'It sure did. And you puked.'

No words, but Vern sensed emotional waves of shame radiating off Charlie Hogan.

'Well, the girls didn't see it,' Billy said after a while. 'Lucky break.' From the sound, he clapped Charlie on the back to buck him up. "They'd blab it from here to Portland. We tore out of there fast, though. You think they knew there was something wrong?'

'No,' Charlie said, 'Marie don't like to go down that Back Harlow Road past the cemetery, anyway. She's afraid of ghosts.' Then again in that scared cry-baby voice: 'Jesus, I wish we'd never boosted no car last night! Just gone to the show like we was gonna!'

Charlie and Billy went with a couple of scags named Marie Daughtery and Beverly Thomas; you never saw such gross-looking broads outside of a carnival show - pimples, moustaches, the whole works. Sometimes the four of them -or maybe six or eight if Fuzzy Brackowicz or Ace Merrill were along with their girls - would boost a car from a Lewiston parking lot and go joyriding out into the country with two or three bottles of Wild Irish Rose wine and a six-pack of ginger ale. They'd take the girls parking somewhere in Castle View or Harlow or Shiloh, drink Purple Jesuses, and make out. Then they'd dump the car somewhere near home. Cheap thrills in the monkeyhouse, as Chris sometimes said. They'd never been caught at it, but Vern kept hoping. He really dug the idea of visiting Billy on Sundays at the reformatory.

'If we told the cops, they'd want to know how we got way the hell out in Harlow,' Billy said. 'We ain't got no car, neither of us. It's better if we just keep our mouths shut. Then they can't touch us.'

'We could make a nonnamus call,' Charlie said.

'They trace those fuckin* calls,' Billy said ominously. 'I seen it on Highway Patrol. And Dragnet.'

'Yeah, right,' Charlie said miserably. 'Jesus. I wish Ace'd been with us. We could have told the cops we was in his car.'

'Well, he wasn't'

'Yeah,' Charlie said. He sighed. 'I guess you're right' A cigarette butt flicked into the driveway. 'We hadda walk up and take a piss by the tracks, didn't we? Couldn't walk the other way, could we? And I got puke on my new Keds.' His voice sank a little. 'Fuckin' kid was laid right out, you know it? Didja see that sonofawhore, Billy?'

'I seen him,' Billy said, and a second cigarette butt joined the first in the driveway. 'Let's go see if Ace is up. I want some juice.'

'We gonna tell him?'

'Charlie, we ain't gonna tell nobody. Nobody never. You dig me?'

'I dig you,' Charlie said. 'Chrise-Jesus, I wish we never boosted that fuckin' Dodge.'

'Aw, shut the fuck up and come on.'

Two pairs of legs clad in tight, wash-faded pegged jeans, two pairs of feet in black engineer boots with side-buckles, came down the steps. Vern froze on his hands and knees ('My balls crawled up so high I thought they was trine to get back home,' he told us), sure his brother would sense him beneath the porch and drag him out and kill him - he and Charlie Hogan would kick the few brains the good Lord had seen fit to give him right out his jug ears and then stomp him with their engineer boots. But they just kept going and when Vern was sure they were really gone, he had crawled out from under the porch and run here.

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'You're really lucky,' I said. They would have killed you.'

Teddy said, 'I know the Back Harlow Road. It comes to a dead end by the river. We used to fish for cossies out there.'

Chris nodded. 'There used to be a bridge, but there was a flood. A long time ago. Now there's just the train-tracks.'

'Could a kid really have gotten all the way from Chamberlain to Harlow?' I asked Chris. That's twenty or thirty miles.'

'I think so. He probably happened on the train tracks and followed them the whole way. Maybe he thought they'd take him out, or maybe he thought he could flag down a train if he had to. But that's just a freight run now - GS&WM up to Derry and Brownsville - and not many of those anymore. He'd had to've walked all the way to Castle Rock to get out. After dark a train must have finally come along ... and el smacko.'

Chris drove his right fist down against his left palm, making a flat noise. Teddy, a veteran of many close calls dodging

the pulp-trucks on 196, looked vaguely pleased. I felt a little sick, imagining the kid so far away from home, scared to death but doggedly following the GS&WM tracks, probably walking on the ties because of the night-noises from the overhanging trees and bushes ... maybe even from the culverts underneath the railroad bed. And here comes the train, and maybe the big headlight on the front hypnotised him until it was too late to jump. Or maybe he was just lying there on the tracks in a hunger-faint when the train came along. Either way, any way, Chris had the straight of it: el smacko had been the final result. The kid was dead.

'So anyway, you want to go see it?' Vern asked. He was squirming around like he had to go to the bathroom he was so excited.

We all looked at him for a long second, no one saying anything. Then Chris tossed his cards down and said, 'Sure! And I bet you anything we get our pictures in the paper!'

'Huh?' Vern said.

'Yeah?' Teddy said, and grinned his crazy truck-dodging grin.

'Look,' Chris said, leaning across the ratty card-table. 'We can find the body and report it! Well be on the news!'

'I dunno,' Vern said, obviously taken aback. 'Billy will know where I found out. He'll beat the living shit outta me.'

'No he won't,' I said, 'because it'll be us guys that find that kid, not Billy and Charlie Hogan in a boosted car. Then they won't have to worry about it anymore. They'll probably pin a medal on you, Penny.'

'Yeah?' Vern grinned, showing his bad teeth. It was a dazed sort of grin, as if the thought of Billy being pleased with anything he did had acted on him like a hard shot to the chin. 'Yeah, you think so?'

Teddy was grinning, too. Then he frowned and said, 'Oh-oh.'

'What?' Vern asked. He was squirming again, afraid that some really basic objection to the idea had just cropped up in Teddy's mind ... or what passed for Teddy's mind.

'Our folks,' Teddy said. 'If we find that kid's body over in South Harlow tomorrow, they're gonna know we didn't spend the night campin* out in Vern's back field.'

'Yeah,' Chris said. They'll know we went lookin' for that kid.'

'No they won't,' I said. I felt funny - both excited and scared because I knew we could do it and get away with it. The mixture of emotions made me feel heatsick and headachey. I picked up the Bikes to have something to do with my hands and started box-shuffling them. That and how to play cribbage was about all I got for older brother stuff from Dennis. The other kids envied that shuffle, and I guess everyone I knew had asked me to show them how it went... everyone except Chris. I guess only Chris knew that showing someone would be like giving away a piece of Dennis, and I just didn't have so much of him that I could afford to pass pieces around.

I said: 'We'll just tell 'em we got bored tenting in Vern's field because we've done it so many times before. So we decided to hike up the tracks and have a campout in the woods. I bet we don't even get hided for it because everybody'll be so excited about what we found.'

'My dad'll hide me anyway,' Chris said. 'He's on a really mean streak this time.' He shook his head sullenly. To hell, it's worth a hiding.'

'Okay,' Teddy said, getting up. He was still grinning like crazy, ready to break into his high-pitched, cackling laugh at any second. 'Let's all get together at Vern's house after lunch. What can we tell 'em about supper?'

Chris said, 'You and me and Gordie can say we're eating at Vern's.'

'And I'll tell my mom I'm eating over at Chris's,' Vern said.

That would work unless there was some emergency we couldn't control or unless any of the parents got together. And neither Vern's folks or Chris's had a phone. Back then there were a lot of families which still considered a telephone a luxury, especially families of the shirttail variety. And none of us came from the upper crust.

My dad was retired. Vern's dad worked in the mill and was still driving a 1952 DeSoto. Teddy's mom had a house on Danberry Street and she took in a boarder whenever she could get one. She didn't have one that summer; the FURNISHED ROOM TO LET sign had been up in the parlour window since June. And Chris's dad was always on a 'mean streak', more or less; he was a drunk who got welfare off and on - mostly on - and spent most of his time hanging out in Sukey's Tavern with Junior Merrill, Ace Merrill's old man, and a couple of other local rumpots.

Chris didn't talk much about his dad, but we all knew he hated him like poison. Chris was marked up every two weeks or so, bruises on his cheeks and neck or one eye swelled up and as colourful as a sunset, and once he came into school with a big clumsy bandage on the back of his

head. Other times he never got to school at all. His mom would call him in sick because he was too lamed up to come in. Chris was smart, really smart, but he played truant a lot, and Mr Halliburton, the town truant officer, was always showing up at Chris's house, driving his old black Chevrolet with the NO RIDERS sticker in the corner of the windshield. If Chris was being truant and Bertie (as we called him - always behind his back, of course) caught him, he would haul him back to school and see that Chris got detention for a week. But if Bertie found out that Chris was home because his father had beaten the shit out of him, Bertie just went away and didn't say boo to a cuckoo-bird. It never occurred to me to question this set of priorities until about twenty years later.

The year before, Chris had been suspended from school for two weeks. A bunch of milk-money disappeared when it was Chris's turn to be room-monitor and collect it, and because he was a Chambers from those no-account Chamberses, he had to take a walk even though he always swore he never hawked that money. That was the time Mr Chambers put Chris in the hospital for an overnight stay, when his dad heard Chris was suspended, he broke Chris's nose and his right wrist. Chris came from a bad family, all right, and everybody thought he would turn out bad ... including Chris. His brothers had lived up to the town's expectations admirably. Dave, the eldest, ran away from home when he was seventeen, joined the Navy, and ended up doing a long stretch in Portsmouth for rape and criminal assault. The next-eldest, Richard (his right eye was all funny and jittery, which was why everybody called him Eyeball), had dropped out of high school in the tenth grade, and chummed around with Charlie and Billy Tessio and their jd buddies.

'I think all that'll work,' I told Chris. 'What about John and Marty?' John and Marty DeSpain were two other members

of our regular gang.

'They're still away,' Chris said. 'They won't be back until Monday.'

'Oh. That's too bad.'

'So are we set?' Vern asked, still squirming. He didn't want the conversation sidetracked even for a minute.

'I guess we are,' Chris said. 'Who wants to play some more scat?'

No one did. We were too excited to play cards. We climbed down from the treehouse, climbed the fence into the vacant lot, and played three-flies-six-grounders for a while with Vein's old friction-taped baseball, but that was no fun, either. All we could think about was that kid Brower, hit by a train, and how we were going to see him, or what was left of him. Around ten o'clock we all drifted away home to fix it with our parents.

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I got to my house at quarter to eleven, after stopping at the drugstore to check out the paperbacks. I did that every couple of days to see if there were any new John D MacDonalds. I had a quarter and I figured if there was, I'd take it along. But there were only the old ones, and I'd read most of those half a dozen times.

When I got home the car was gone and I remembered that my mom and some of her hen-party friends had gone to Boston to see a concert. A great old concert-goer, my mother. And why not? Her only kid was dead and she had to do something to take her mind off it. I guess that sounds

pretty bitter. And I guess if you'd been there, you'd understand why I felt that way.

Dad was out back, passing a fine spray from the hose over his ruined garden. If you couldn't tell it was a lost cause from his glum face, you sure could by looking at the garden itself. The soil was light, powdery grey. Everything in it was dead except for the corn, which had never grown so much as a single edible ear. Dad said he'd never known how to water a garden; it had to be mother nature or nobody. He'd water too long in one spot and drown the plants. In the next row, plants were dying of thirst. He could never hit a happy medium. But he didn't talk about it often. He'd lost a son in April and a garden in August. And if he didn't want to talk about either one, I guess that was his privilege. It just bugged me that he'd given up talking about everything else, too. That was taking democracy too fucking far.

'Hi, daddy,' I said, standing beside him. I offered him the Rollos I'd bought at the drugstore. 'Want one?'

'Hello, Gordon. No thanks.' He kept flicking the fine spray over the hopeless grey earth.

'Be okay if I camp out in Vern Tessio's back field tonight with some of the guys?' 'What guys?'

'Vern. Teddy Duchamp. Maybe Chris.' I expected him to start right in on Chris - how Chris was bad company, a rotten apple from the bottom of the barrel, a thief, and an apprentice juvenile delinquent. But he just sighed and said, 'I suppose it's okay.' 'Great! Thanks!'

I turned to go into the house and check out what was on the boob tube when he stopped me with: Those are the only people you want to be with, aren't they, Gordon?'

I looked back at him, braced for an argument, but there was no argument in him that morning. It would have been better if there had been, I think. His shoulders were slumped. His face, pointed towards the dead garden and not towards me, sagged. There was a certain unnatural sparkle in his eyes that might have been tears.

'Aw, dad, they're okay -'

'Of course they are. A thief and two feebs. Fine company for my son.'

'Vern Tessio isn't feeble,' I said. Teddy was a harder case to argue.

Twelve years old and still in the fifth grade,' my dad said. 'And that time he slept over. When the Sunday paper came the next morning, he took an hour and a half to read the funnypages.'

That made me mad, because I didn't think he was being fair. He was judging Vern the way he judged all my friends, from having seen them off and on, mostly going in and out of the house. He was wrong about them. And when he called Chris a thief I always saw red, because he didn't know anything about Chris. I wanted to tell him that, but if I pissed him off he'd keep me home. And he wasn't really mad anyway, not like he got at the supper-table sometimes, ranting so loud that nobody wanted to eat. Now he just looked sad and tired out and used. He was sixty three years old, old enough to be my grandfather.

My mom was fifty-five - no spring chicken, either. When she and dad got married they tried to start a family right away and my mom got pregnant and had a miscarriage. She miscarried two more and the doctor told her she'd never be able to carry a baby to term. I got all of this stuff, chapter

and verse, whenever one of them was lecturing me, you understand. They wanted me to think I was a special delivery from God and I wasn't appreciating my great good fortune in being conceived when my mother was forty-two and starting to grey. I wasn't appreciating my great good fortune and I wasn't appreciating her tremendous pain and sacrifices, either.

Five years after the doctor said mom would never have a baby she got pregnant with Dennis. She carried him for eight months and then he just sort of fell out, all eight pounds of him - my father used to say that if she had carried Dennis to term, the kid would have weighed fifteen pounds. The doctor said, Well, sometimes nature fools us, but he'll be the only one you'll ever have. Thank God for him and be content. Ten years later she got pregnant with me. She not only carried me to term, the doctor had to use forceps to yank me out. Did you ever hear of such a fucked-up family? I came into the world the child of two Geritol-chuggers, not to go on and on about it, and my only brother was playing league baseball in the big kids' park before I even got out of diapers.

In the case of my mom and dad, one gift from God had been enough. I won't say they treated me badly, and they sure never beat me, but I was a hell of a big surprise and I guess when you get into your forties you're not as partial to surprises as you were in your twenties. After I was born, Mom got that operation her hen-party friends referred to as 'the Band-Aid'. I guess she wanted to make a hundred per cent sure that there wouldn't be any more gifts from God. When I got to college I found out I'd beaten long odds just by not being born retarded ... although I think my dad had his doubts when he saw my friend Vern taking ten minutes to puzzle out the dialogue in Beetle Bailey.

This business about being ignored: I could never really pin it down until I did a book report in high school on this novel called Invisible Man. When I agreed to do the book for Miss Hardy I thought it was going to be the science fiction story about the guy in bandages and Foster Grants - Claude Rains played him in the movies. When I found out this was a different story I tried to give the book back but Miss Hardy wouldn't let me off the hook. I ended up being real glad. This Invisible Man is about a Negro. Nobody ever notices him at all unless he fucks up. People look right through him. When he talks, nobody answers. He's like a black ghost. Once I got into it, I ate that book up like it was a John D MacDonald, because that cat Ralph Ellison was writing about me. At the supper table it was Denny how many did you strike out and Denny who asked you to the Sadie Hopkins dance and Denny I want to talk to you man to man about that car we were looking at. I'd say, 'Pass the butter', and Dad would say, Denny, are you sure the army is what you want? I'd say, 'Pass the butter someone, okay?' and Mom would ask Denny if he wanted her to pick him up one of the Pendleton shirts on sale downtown, and I'd end up getting the butter myself. One night when I was nine, just to see what would happen, I said, 'Please pass those goddam spuds.' And my Mom said, Denny, Auntie Grace called today and she asked after you and Gordon.

The night Dennis graduated with honours from Castle Rock High School I played sick and stayed home. I got Stevie Darabont's oldest brother Royce to buy me a bottle of Wild Irish Rose and I drank half of it and puked in my bed in the middle of the night.

In a family situation like that, you're supposed to either hate the older brother or idolize him hopelessly - at least that's what they teach you in college psychology. Bullshit, right? But so far as I can tell, I didn't feel either way about

Dennis. We rarely argued and never had a fist-fight. That would have been ridiculous. Can you see a fourteen-year-old boy finding something to beat up his four-year-old brother about? And our folks were always a little too impressed with him to burden him with the care of his kid brother, so he never resented me the way some older kids come to resent their sibs. When Denny took me with him somewhere, it was of his own free will, and those were some of the happiest times I can remember.

'Hey Lachance, who the fuck is that?'

'My kid brother and you better watch your mouth, Davis. He'll beat the crap out of you. Gordie's tough.'

They gather around me for a moment, huge, impossibly tall, just a moment of interest like a patch of sun. They are so big, they are so old.

'Hey kid! This wet end really your big brother?'

I nod shyly.

'He's a real asshole, ain't he, kid?'

I nod again and everybody, Dennis included, roars with laughter. Then Dennis claps his hands together twice, briskly, and says: 'Come on, we gonna have a practice or stand around here like a bunch of pussies?'

They run to their positions, already peppering the ball around the infield.

'Go sit over there on the bench, Gordie. Be quiet. Don't bother anybody.'

I go sit over there on the bench. I am good. I feel impossibly small under the sweet summer clouds. I watch my brother pitch. I don't bother anybody.

But there weren't many times like that. Sometimes he read me bedtime stories that were better than mom's; mom's stories were about the Gingerbread Man and the Three Little Pigs, okay stuff, but Dennis's were about stuff like Bluebeard and Jack the Ripper. He also had a version of Billy Goat's Gruff where the troll under the bridge ended up the winner. And, as I have already said, he taught me the game of cribbage and how to do a box-shuffle. Not that much, but hey! in this world you take what you can get, am I right?

As I grew older, my feelings of love for Dennis were replaced with an almost clinical awe, the kind of awe so-so Christians feel for God, I guess. And when he died, I was mildly shocked and mildly sad, the way I imagine those same so-so Christians must have felt when Time magazine said God was dead. Let me put it this way: I was as sad for Denny's dying as I was when I heard on the radio that Dan Blocker had died. I'd seen them both about as frequently, and Denny never ever got any re-runs.

He was buried in a closed coffin with the American flag on top (they took the flag off the box before they finally stuck it in the ground and folded it - the flag, not the box - into a cocked hat and gave it to my mom). My parents just fell to pieces. Six months hadn't been long enough to put them back together again; I didn't know if they'd ever be whole again. Mr and Mrs Dumpty. Denny's room was in suspended animation just one door down from my room, suspended animation or maybe in a time-warp. The ivy-league college pennants were still on the walls, and the senior pictures of the girls he had dated were still tucked into the mirror

where he had stood for what seemed like hours at a stretch, combing his hair back into a ducktail like Elvis's. The stack of Trues and Sports Illustrateds remained on his desk, their dates looking more and more antique as time passed. It's the kind of thing you see in sticky-sentimental movies. But it wasn't sentimental to me; it was terrible. I didn't go into Dennis's room unless I had to because I kept expecting that he would be behind the door, or under the bed, or in the closet. Mostly it was the closet that preyed on my mind, and if my mother sent me in to get Denny's postcard album or his shoebox of photographs so she could look at them, I would imagine that door swinging slowly open while I stood rooted to the spot with horror. I would imagine him pallid and bloody in the darkness, the side of his head walloped in, a grey-veined cake of blood and brains drying on his shirt. I would imagine his arms coming up, his bloody hands hooking into claws, and he would be croaking: It should have been you, Gordon. It should have been you.

7

Stud City, by Gordon Lachance. Originally published in Greenspun Quarterly, issue 45, Fall, 1970. Used by permission of the author.

March.

Chico stands at the window, arms crossed, elbows on the ledge that divides upper and lower panes, naked, looking out, breath fogging the glass. A draught against his belly. Bottom right pane is gone. Blocked by a piece of cardboard.

'Chico.'

He doesn't turn. She doesn't speak again. He can see a ghost of her in the glass, in his bed, sitting, blankets pulled

up in apparent defiance of gravity. Her eye makeup has smeared into deep hollows under her eyes.

Chico shifts his gaze beyond her ghost, out beyond the house. Raining. Patches of snow sloughed away to reveal the bald ground underneath. He sees last year's dead grass, a plastic toy - Billy's - a rusty rake. His brother Johnny's Dodge is up on blocks, the deflated wheels sticking out like stumps. He remembers times he and Johnny worked on it, listening to the superhits and boss oldies from WLAM in Lewiston pour out of Johnny's old transistor radio - a couple of times Johnny would give him a beer. She gonna run fast, Chico, Johnny would say. She gonna eat up everything on this road from Gates Falls to Castle Rock. Wait till we get that Hearst shifter in her!

But that had been then, and this was now.

Beyond Johnny's Dodge was the highway. Route 14, goes to Portland and New Hampshire south, all the way to Canada north, if you turned left on US 1 at Thomaston.

'Stud city,' Chico says to the glass. He smokes his cigarette.

'What?'

'Nothing, babe.'

'Chico?' Her voice is puzzled. He will have to change the sheets before Dad gets back. She bled.

'What?'

'I love you, Chico.'

'That's right.'

Dirty March. You're some old whore, Chico thinks. Dirty, staggering old baggy-tits March with rain in her face.

'This room used to be Johnny's,' he says suddenly.

'Who?'

'My brother.'

'Oh. Where is he?'

'In the Army,' Chico says, but Johnny isn't in the Army. He had been working the summer before at Oxford Plains Speedway and a car went out of control and skidded across the infield towards the pit area, where Johnny had been changing the back tyres on a Chevy charger-class stocker. Some guys shouted at him to look out, but Johnny never heard them. One of the guys who shouted was Johnny's brother Chico.

'Aren't you cold?' she asks.

'No. Well, my feet. A little.'

And he thinks suddenly: Well, my God. Nothing happened to Johnny that isn't going to happen to you too, sooner or later. He sees it again, though: the skidding, skating Ford Mustang, the knobs of his brother's spine picked out in a series of dimpled shadows against the white of his Haines T-shirt; he had been hunkered down, pulling one of the Chevy's back tyres. There had been time to see rubber flaying off the tyres of the runaway Mustang, to see its hanging muffler scraping up sparks from the infield. It had struck Johnny even as Johnny tried to get to his feet. Then the yellow shout of flame.

Well, Chico thinks, // could have been slow, and he thinks of his grandfather. Hospital smells. Pretty young nurses bearing bedpans. A last papery breath. Were there any good ways?

He shivers and wonders about God. He touches the small silver St Christopher's medal that hangs on a chain around his neck. He is not a Catholic and he's surely not a Mexican: his real name is Edward May and his friends all call him Chico because his hair is black and he greases it back with Brylcreem and he wears boots with pointed toes and Cuban heels. Not Catholic, but he wears this medallion. Maybe if Johnny had been wearing one, the runaway Mustang would have missed him. You never knew.

He smokes and stares out the window and behind him the girl gets out of bed and comes to him quickly, almost mincing, maybe afraid he will turn around and look at her. She puts a warm hand on his back. Her breasts push against his side. Her belly touches his buttock.

'Oh. It is cold.'

'It's this place.'

'Do you love me, Chico?'

'You bet!' he says offhandedly, and then, more seriously:
'You were cherry.'

'What does that-'

'You were a virgin.'

The hand reaches higher. One finger traces the skin on the nape of his neck. 'I said, didn't I?'

'Was it hard? Did it hurt?'

She laughs. 'No. But I was scared.'

They watch the rain. A new Oldsmobile goes by on 14, spraying up water.

'Stud City,' Chico says.

'What?'

'That guy. He's going Stud City. In his new stud car.'

She kisses the place her finger has been touching gently and he brushes at her as if she were a fly.

'What's the matter?'

He turns to her. Her eyes flick down to his penis and then up again hastily. Her arms twitch to cover herself, and then she remembers that they never do stuff like that in the movies and she drops them to her sides again. Her hair is black and her skin is winter white, the colour of cream. He breasts are firm, her belly perhaps a little too soft. One flaw to remind, Chico thinks, that this isn't the movies.

'Jane?'

'What?' He can feel himself getting ready. Not beginning, but getting ready.

'It's all right,' he said. 'We're friends.' He eyes her deliberately, letting himself reach at her in all sorts of ways. When he looks at her face again, it is flushed. 'Do you mind me looking at you?'

'I...no.No,Chico.'

She steps back, closes her eyes, sits on the bed, and leans back, legs spread. He sees all of her. The muscles, the little muscles on the inside of her thighs ... they're jumping, uncontrolled, and this suddenly excites him more than the taut cones of her breasts or the mild pink pearl of her cunt. Excitement trembles in him, some stupid Bozo on a spring. Love may be as divine as the poets say, he thinks, but sex is Bozo the clown bouncing around on a spring. How could a woman look at an erect penis without going off into mad gales of laughter?

The rain beats against the roof, against the window, against the sodden cardboard patch blocking the glassless lower pane. He presses his hand against his chest, looking for a moment like a stage Roman about to orate. His hand is cold. He drops it to his side.

'Open your eyes. We're friends, I said.'

Obediently, she opens them. She looks at him. Her eyes appear violet now. The rainwater running down the window makes rippling patterns on her face, her neck, her breasts. Stretched across the bed, her belly has been pulled tight. She is perfect in her moment.

'Oh,' she says. 'Oh Chico, it feels so funny,' A shiver goes through her. She has curled her toes involuntarily. He can see the insteps of her feet. Her insteps are pink. 'Chico. Chico.'

He steps towards her. His body is shivering and her eyes widen. She says something, one word, but he can't tell what it is. This isn't the time to ask. He half-kneels before her for just a second, looking at the floor with frowning concentration, touching her legs just above the knees. He

measures the tide within himself. Its pull is thoughtless, fantastic. He pauses a little longer.

The only sound is the tinny tick of the alarm clock on the bedtable, standing brassy-legged atop a pile of Spiderman comic books. Her breathing flutters faster and faster. His muscles slide smoothly as he dives upward and forward. They begin. It's better this time. Outside, the rain goes on washing away the snow.

A half-hour later Chico shakes her out of a light doze. 'We gotta move,' he says. 'Dad and Virginia will be home pretty quick.'

She looks at her wristwatch and sits up. This time she makes no attempt to shield herself. Her whole tone - her body English - has changed. She has not matured (although she probably believes she has) nor learned anything more complex than tying a shoe, but her tone has changed just the same. He nods and she smiles tentatively at him. He reaches for the cigarettes on the bedtable. As she draws on her panties, he thinks of a line from an old novelty song: Keep playin' till I shoot through, Blue ... play your didgeridoo. 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down', by Rolf Harris. He grins. That was a song Johnny used to sing. It ended, So we tanned his hide when he died, Clyde, and that's it hanging on the shed.

She hooks her bra and begins buttoning her blouse. 'What are you smiling about, Chico?'

'Nothing,' he says.

'Zip me up?'

He goes to her, still naked, and zips her up. He kisses her cheek. 'Go on in the bathroom and do your face if you

want,' he says. 'Just don't take too long, okay?'

She goes up the hall gracefully, and Chico watches her, smoking. She is a tall girl - taller than he - and she has to duck her head a little going through the bathroom door. Chico finds his underpants under the bed. He puts them in the dirty clothes bag hanging just inside the closet door, and gets another pair from the bureau. He puts them on, and then, while walking back to the bed, he slips and almost falls in a patch of wetness the square of cardboard has let in.

'Goddam,' he whispers resentfully.

He looks around at the room, which had been Johnny's until Johnny died (why did I tell her he was in the Army, for Christ's sake! he wonders ... a little uneasily). Fibreboard walls, so thin he can hear Dad and Virginia going at it at night, that don't quite make it all the way to the ceiling. The floor has a slightly crazy hipshot angle so that the room's door will only stay open if you block it open - if you forget, it swings stealthily closed as soon as your back is turned. On the far wall is a movie poster from Easy Rider - Two Men Went Looking for America and Couldn't Find it Anywhere. The room had more life when Johnny lived here. Chico doesn't know how or why, only that it's true. And he knows something else, as well. He knows that sometimes the room spooks him at night. Sometimes he thinks that the closet door will swing open and Johnny will be standing there, his body charred and twisted and blackened, his teeth yellow dentures poking out of wax that has partially melted and re-hardened; and Johnny will be whispering: Get out of my room, Chico. And if you lay a hand on my Dodge, I'll fuckin' kill you. Got it?

Got it, bro, Chico thinks.

For a moment he stands still, looking at the rumpled sheet spotted with the girl's blood, and then he spreads the blankets up in one quick gesture. Here. Right here. How do you like that, Virginia? How does that grab your snatch? He puts on his pants, his engineer boots, finds a sweater.

He's dry-combing his hair in front of the mirror when she comes out of the John. She looks classy. Her too-soft stomach doesn't show in the jumper. She looks at the bed, does a couple of things to it, and it comes out looking made instead of just spread up.

'Good,' Chico says.

She laughs a little self-consciously and pushes a lock of hair behind her ear. It is an evocative, poignant gesture.

'Let's go,' he says.

They go out through the hall and the living room. Jane pauses in front of the tinted studio photograph on top of the TV. It shows his father and Virginia, a high-school-age Johnny, a grammar-school-age Chico, and an infant Billy -in the picture, Johnny is holding Billy. All of them have fixed, stoned grins ... all except Virginia, whose face is its sleepy, indecipherable self. That picture, Chico remembers, was taken less than a month after his Dad married the bitch.

That your mother and father?'

'It's my father,' Chico said. 'She's my step-mother, Virginia. Come on.'

'Is she still that pretty?' Jane asks, picking up her coat and handing Chico his windbreaker.

'I guess my old man thinks so,' Chico says.

They step out into the shed. It's a damp and draughty place - the wind hoots through the cracks in its slapstick walls. There is a pile of old bald tyres, Johnny's old bike that Chico inherited when he was ten and which he promptly wrecked, a pile of detective magazines, returnable Pepsi bottles, a greasy monolithic engine block, an orange crate full of paperback books, an old paint-by-the-numbers of a horse standing on dusty green grass.

Chico helps her pick her way outside. The rain is falling with disheartening steadiness. Chico's old sedan stands in a driveway puddle, looking downhearted. Even up on blocks and with a red piece of plastic covering the place where the windshield should go, Johnny's Dodge has more class. Chico's car is a Buick. The paint is dull and flowered with spots of rust. The front seat upholstery has been covered with a brown Army Blanket. A large button pinned to the sun visor on the passenger side says: I WANT IT EVERY DAY. There is a rusty starter assembly on the back seat; if it ever stops raining he will clean it, he thinks, and maybe put it into the Dodge. Or maybe not. The Buick smells musty and his own starter grinds a long time before the Buick starts up.

'Is it your battery?' she asks.

'Just the goddam rain, I guess.' He backs out onto the road, flicking on the windshield wipers and pausing for a moment to look at the house. It is a completely unappetizing aqua colour. The shed sticks off from it at a ragtag, double-jointed angle, tarpaper and peeled -looking shingles.

The radio comes on with a blare and Chico shuts it off at once. There is the beginning of a Sunday afternoon headache behind his forehead. They ride past the Grange hall and the Volunteer Fire Department and Brownie's Store.

Sally Morrison's T-Bird is parked by Brownie's hi-test pump, and Chico raises a hand to her as he turns off onto the old Lewiston road.

'Who's that?'

'Sally Morrison.'

'Pretty lady.' Very neutral.

He feels for his cigarettes. 'She's been married twice and divorced twice. Now she's the town pump, if you believe half the talk that goes on in this shitass little town.'

'She looks young.'

'She is.'

'Have you ever -'

He slides his hand up her leg and smiles. 'No,' he says. 'My brother, maybe, but not me. I like Sally, though. She's got her alimony and her big white Bird, and she doesn't care what people say about her.'

It starts to seem like a long drive. The Androscoggin, off to the right, is slaty and sullen. The ice is all out of it now. Jane has grown quiet and thoughtful. The only sound is the steady snap of the windshield wipers. When the car rolls through the dips in the road there is groundfog, waiting for evening when it will creep out of these pockets and take over the whole River Road.

They cross into Auburn and Chico drives the cutoff and swings onto Minot Avenue. The four lanes are nearly deserted, and all the suburban homes look packaged. They

see one little boy in a yellow plastic raincoat walking up the sidewalk, carefully stepping in all the puddles.

'Go, man,' Chico says softly.

'What?' Jane asks.

'Nothing, babe. Go back to sleep.'

She laughs a little doubtfully.

Chico turns up Keston Street and into the driveway of one of the packaged houses. He doesn't turn off the ignition.

'Come in and I'll give you cookies,' she says.

He shakes his head. 'I have to get back.'

'I know.' She puts her arms around him and kisses him.
'Thank you for the most wonderful time of my life.'

He smiles suddenly. His face shines. It is nearly magical. 'I'll see you Monday, Janey-Jane. Still friends, right?'

'You know we are,' she says, and kisses him again ... but when he cups a breast through her jumper, she pulls away.
'Don't. My father might see.'

He lets her go, only a little of the smile left. She gets out of the car quickly and runs through the rain to the back door. A second later she's gone. Chico pauses for a moment to light a cigarette and then he backs out of the driveway. The Buick stalls and the starter seems to grind forever before the engine manages to catch. It is a long ride home.

When he gets there, Dad's station wagon is parked in the driveway. He pulls in beside it and lets the engine die. For a

moment he sits inside silently, listening to the rain. It is like being inside a steel drum.

Inside, Billy is watching Carl Stormer and his Country Buckaroos on the TV set. When Chico comes in, Billy jumps up, excited. 'Eddie, hey Eddie, you know what Uncle Pete said? He said him and a whole mess of other guys sank a Kraut sub in the war! Will you take me to the show next Saturday?'

'I don't know,' Chico says, grinning. 'Maybe if you kiss my shoes every night before supper all week.' He pulls Billy's hair. Billy hollers and laughs and kicks him in the shins.

'Cut it out, now,' Sam May says, coming into the room. 'Cut it out you two. You know how your mother feels about the roughhousing.' He has pulled his tie down and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. He's got a couple -three red hotdogs on a plate. The hotdogs are wrapped in white bread, and Sam May has put the old mustard right to them. 'Where you been, Eddie?'

'At Jane's.'

The toilet flushes in the bathroom. Virginia. Chico wonders briefly if Jane has left any hairs in the sink, or a lipstick, or a bobby pin.

'You should have come with us to see your Uncle Pete and Aunt Ann,' his father says. He eats a frank in three quick bites. 'You're getting to be like a stranger around here, Eddie. I don't like that. Not while we provide the bed and board.'

'Some bed,' Chico says. 'Some board.'

Sam looks up quickly, hurt at first, then angry. When he speaks, Chico sees that his teeth are yellow with French's mustard. He feels vaguely nauseated. 'Your lip. Your goddam lip. You aren't too big yet, snotnose.'

Chico shrugs, peels a slice of Wonder Bread off the loaf standing on the TV tray by his father's chair, and spreads it with ketchup. 'In three months I'm going to be gone anyway.'

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'I'm gonna fix up Johnny's car and go out to California. Look for work.'

'Oh yeah. Right.' He is a big man, big in a shambling way, but Chico thinks now that he got smaller after he married Virginia, and smaller again after Johnny died. And in his mind he hears himself saying to Jane: My brother, maybe. Not me. And on the heels of that: Play your didgeridoo, Blue. 'You ain't never going to get that car as far as Castle Rock, let alone Canada.'

'You don't think so? Just watch my fucking dust.'

For a moment his father only looks at him and then he throws the frank he has been holding. It hits Chico in the chest, spraying mustard on his sweater and on the chair.

'Say that word again and I'll break your nose for you, smartass.'

Chico picks up the frank and looks at it. Cheap red frank, smeared with French's mustard. Spread a little sunshine. He throws it back at his father. Sam gets up, his face the colour of an old brick, the vein in the middle of his forehead pulsing. His thigh connects with the TV tray and it

overturms. Billy stands in the kitchen doorway watching them. He's gotten himself a plate of franks and beans and the plate has tipped and bean-juice runs onto the floor. Billy's eyes are wide, his mouth trembling. On the TV, Carl Stormer and his Country Buckaroos are tearing through Long Black Veil at a breakneck pace.

'You raise them up best you can and they spit on you,' his father says thickly. 'Ayuh. That's how it goes. He gropes blindly on the seat of his chair and comes up with the half-eaten hotdog. He holds it in his fist like a severed phallus. Incredibly, he begins to eat it... at the same time, Chico sees that he has begun to cry. 'Ayuh, they spit on you, that's just how it goes.'

'Well, why in the hell did you have to marry her?' he bursts out, and then has to bite down on the rest of it: If you hadn't married her, Johnny would still be alive.

That's none of your goddam business!' Sam May roars through his tears. "That's my business!"

'Oh?' Chico shouts back. 'Is that so? I only have to live with her! Me and Billy, we have to live with her! Watch her grind you down! And you don't even know -'

'What?' his father says, and his voice is suddenly low and ominous. The chunk of hotdog left in his closed fist is like a bloody chunk of bone. 'What don't I know?'

'You don't know shit from Shinola,' he says, appalled at what has almost come out of his mouth.

'You want to stop it now,' his father says. 'Or I'll beat the hell out of you, Chico.' He only calls him this when he is very angry indeed.

Chico turns and sees that Virginia is standing at the other side of the room, adjusting her skirt minutely, looking at him with her large, calm, brown eyes. Her eyes are beautiful; the rest of her is not so beautiful, so self-renewing, but those eyes will carry her for years yet, Chico thinks, and he feels the sick hate come back -So we tanned his hide when he died, Clyde, and that's it hanging on the shed.

'She's got you pussywhipped and you don't have the guts to do anything about it!'

All of this shouting has finally become too much for Billy -he gives a great wail of terror, drops his plate of franks and beans, and covers his face with his hands. Bean-juice splatters his Sunday shoes and sprays across the rug.

Sam takes a single step forward and then stops when Chico makes a curt beckoning gesture, as if to say: Yeah, come on, let's get down to it, what took you sofuckin long? They stand like statues until Virginia speaks - her voice is low, as calm as her brown eyes.

'Have you had a girl in your room, Ed? You know how your father and I fee! about that.' Almost as an afterthought: 'She left a handkerchief.'

He stares at her, savagely unable to express the way he feels, the way she is dirty, the way she shoots unerringly at the back, the way she clips in behind you and cuts at your hamstrings.

You could hurt me if you wanted to, the calm brown eyes say. / know you know what was going on before he died. But that's the only way you can hurt me, isn't it, Chico? And only then if your father believed you. And if he believed you, it would kill him.

His father lunges at the new gambit like a bear. 'Have you been screwing in my house, you little bastard?'

'Watch your language, please, Sam,' Virginia says calmly.

'Is that why you didn't want to come with us? So you could scr - so you could -'

'Say it!' Chico weeps. 'Don't let her do it to you! Say it! Say what you mean!'

'Get out,' he says dully. 'Don't you come back until you can apologize to your mother and me.'

'Don't you dare!' he cries. 'Don't you dare call that bitch my mother! I'll kill you!'

'Stop it, Eddie!' Billy screams. The words are muffled, blurred, through his hands, which still cover his face. 'Stop yelling at daddy! Stop it, please!'

Virginia doesn't move from the doorway. Her calm eyes remain on Chico.

Sam blunders back a step and the back of his knees strike the edge of his easy-chair. He sits down in it heavily and averts his face against a hairy forearm. 'I can't even look at you when you got words like that in your mouth, Eddie. You are making me feel so bad.'

'She makes you feel bad! Why won't you admit it?'

He does not reply. Still not looking at Chico, he fumbles another frank wrapped in bread from the plate on the TV tray. He fumbles for the mustard. Billy goes on crying. Carl Stormer and his Country Buckaroos are singing a truck-

driving song. 'My rig is old, but that don't mean she's slow,' Carl tells all his western Maine viewers.

'The boy doesn't know what he's saying, Sam,' Virginia says gently. 'It's hard, at his age. It's hard to grow up.'

She's whipped him. That's the end, all right.

He turns and heads for the door which leads first into the shed and then outdoors. As he opens it he looks back at Virginia, and she gazes at him tranquilly when he speaks her name.

'What is it, Ed?'

"The sheets are bloody.' He pauses. 'I broke her in.'

He thinks something has stirred in her eyes, but that is probably only his wish. 'Please go now, Ed. You're scaring BUly.'

He leaves. The Buick doesn't want to start and he has almost resigned himself to walking in the rain when the engine finally catches. He lights a cigarette and backs out onto 14, slamming the clutch back in and racing the mill when it starts to jerk and splutter. The generator light blinks balefully at him twice, and then the car settles into a rugged die. At last he is on his way, creeping up the road towards Gates Falls.

He spares Johnny's Dodge one last look.

Johnny could have had steady work at Gates Mills & Weaving, but only on the night shift. Nightwork didn't bother him, he had told Chico, and the pay was better than at the Plains, but their father worked days, and working nights at the mill would have meant Johnny would have

been home with her, home alone or with Chico in the next room ... and the walls were thin. / can't stop and she won't let me try, Johnny said. Yeah, I know what it would do to him. But she's ... she Just won't stop and it's like I can't stop ... she's always at me, you know what I mean, you've seen her, Billy's too young to understand, but you've seen her...

Yes. He had seen her. And Johnny had gone to work at the Plains, telling their father it was because he could get parts for the Dodge on the cheap. And that's how it happened that he had been changing a tyre when the Mustang came skidding and skating across the infield with its muffler dragging up sparks; that was how his stepmother had killed his brother, so just keep playing until I shoot through, Blue, 'cause we goin Stud City right here in this shitheap Buick, and he remembers how the rubber smelled, and how the knobs of Johnny's spine cast small crescent shadows on the bright white of his tee-shirt, he remembers seeing Johnny get halfway up from the squat he had been working in when the Mustang hit him, squashing him between it and the Chevy, and there had been a hollow bang as the Chevy came down off its jacks, and then the bright yellow flare of flame, the rich smell of gasolineChico strikes the brakes with both feet, bringing the sedan to a crunching, juddering halt on the sodden shoulder. He leans widely across the seat, throws open the passenger door, and sprays yellow puke onto the mud and snow. The sight of it makes him puke again, and the thought of it makes him dry-heave one more time. The car almost stalls, but he catches it in time. The generator light winks out reluctantly when he guns the engine. He sits, letting the shakes work their way out of him. A car goes by fast, a new Ford, white, throwing up great dirty fans of water and slush.

'Stud City,' Chico says. 'In his new stud car. Funky.'

He tastes puke on his lips and in his throat and coating his sinuses. He doesn't want a cigarette. Danny Carter will let him sleep over. Tomorrow will be time enough for further decisions. He pulls back into Route 14 and gets rolling.

8

Pretty fucking melodramatic, right?

The world has seen one or two better stories, I know that - one or two hundred thousand better ones, more like it. It ought to have THIS IS A PRODUCE OF AN UNDERGRADUATE CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP stamped on every page ... because that's just what it was, at least up to a certain point. It seems both painfully derivative and painfully sophomoric to me now; style by Hemingway (except we've got the whole thing in the present tense for some reason - how too fucking trendy), theme by Faulkner. Could anything be more serious! More lit'ry?

But even its pretensions can't hide the fact that it's an extremely sexual story written by an extremely inexperienced young man (at the time I wrote Stud City, I had been to bed with two girls and had ejaculated prematurely all over one of them - not much like Chico in the foregoing tale, I guess). Its attitude towards women goes beyond hostility and to a point which verges on actual ugliness - two of the women in Stud City are sluts, and the third is a simple receptacle who says things like 'I love you, Chico,* and 'Come in, I'll give you cookies.' Chico, on the other hand, is a macho cigarette-smoking working-class hero who could have stepped whole and breathing from the grooves of a Bruce Springsteen record - although Springsteen was yet to be heard from when I published the story in the college literary magazine (where it ran between a poem called Images of Me and an essay on student

parietals written entirely in the lower case). It is the work of a young man every bit as insecure as he was inexperienced.

And yet it was the first story I ever wrote that felt like my story - the first one that really felt whole, after five years of trying. The first one that might still be able to stand up, even with its props taken away. Ugly but alive. Even now when I read it, stifling a smile at its pseudo-toughness and its pretensions, I can see the true face of Gordon Lachance lurking just behind the lines of print, a Gordon Lachance younger than the one living and writing now, one certainly more idealistic than the best-selling novelist who is more apt to have his paperback contracts reviewed than his books, but not so young as the one who went with his friends that day to see the body of a dead kid named Ray Brewer. A Gordon Lachance halfway along in the process of losing the shine.

No, it's not a very good story - its author was too busy listening to other voices to listen as closely as he should have to the one coming from inside. But it was the first time I had ever really used the places I knew and the things I felt in a piece of fiction, and there was a kind of dreadful exhilaration in seeing things that had bothered me for years come out in a new form, a form over which I had imposed control. It had been years since that childhood idea of Denny being in the closet of his spookily preserved room had occurred to me; I would have honestly believed I had forgotten it Yet there it is in Stud City, only slightly changed... but controlled.

I've resisted the urge to change it a lot more, to rewrite it, to juice it up - and that urge was fairly strong, because I find the story quite embarrassing now. But there are still things in it I like, things that would be cheapened by changes made by this later Lachance, who has the first

threads of grey in his hair. Things, like that image of the shadows on Johnny's white tee-shirt or that of the rain-ripples on Jane's naked body, that seem better than they have any right to be.

Also, it was the first story I never showed to my mother and father. There was too much Denny in it. Too much Castle Rock. And most of all, too much 1960. You always know the truth, because when you cut yourself or someone else with it, you bleed.

9

My room was on the second floor, and it must have been at least ninety degrees up there. It would be a hundred and ten by afternoon, even with all the windows open. I was really glad I wasn't sleeping there that night, and the thought of where we were going made me excited all over again. I made two blankets into a bedroll and tied it with my old belt. I collected all my money, which was sixty-eight cents. Then I was ready to go.

I went down the back stairs to avoid meeting my Dad in front of the house, but I hadn't needed to worry; he was still out in the garden with the hose, making useless rainbows in the air and looking through them.

I walked down Summer Street and cut through a vacant lot to Carbine - where the offices of the Castle Call stand today. I was headed up Carbine towards the clubhouse when a car pulled over to the kerb and Chris got out. He had his old Boy Scout pack in one hand and two blankets rolled up and tied with clothesrope in the other.

Thanks, mister,' he said, and trotted over to join me as the car pulled away. His Boy Scout canteen was slung around

his neck and under one arm so that it finally ended up banging on his hip. His eyes were sparkling.

'Gordie! You wanna see something?'

'Sure, I guess so. What?'

'Come on down here first.' He pointed at the narrow space between the Blue Point Diner and the Castle Rock Drug Store.

'What is it, Chris?'

'Come on, I said!'

He ran down the alley and after a brief moment (that's all it took me to cast aside my better judgment) I ran after him. The two buildings were set slightly towards each other rather than running parallel, and so the alley narrowed as it went back. We waded through trashy drifts of old newspapers and stepped over cruel, sparkly nests of broken beer and soda bottles. Chris cut behind the Blue Point and put his bedroll down. There were eight or nine garbage cans lined up here and the stench was incredible.

'Phew! Christ Come on, gimme a break!'

'Gimme your arm,' Chris said, by rote.

'No, sincerely, I'm gonna throw u -'

The words broke off in my mouth and I forgot all about the smelly garbage cans. Chris had unslung his pack and opened it and reached inside. Now he was holding out a huge pistol with dark wood grips.

'You wanna be the Lone Ranger or the Cisco Kid?' Chris asked, grinning.

'Walking, talking Jesus! Where'd you get that?'

'Hawked it out of my dad's bureau. It's a .45.'

'Yeah, I can see that,' I said, although it could have been a .38 or a .357 for all I knew - in spite of all the John D MacDonalds and Ed McBains I'd read, the only pistol I'd ever seen up close was the one Constable Bannerman carried ... and although all the kids asked him to take it out of its holster, Banner never would. 'Man, your dad's gonna hide you when he finds out. You said he was on a mean streak anyway.'

His eyes just went on dancing. 'That's it, man. He ain't gonna find out nothing. Him and these other rummies are all laid up down in Harrison with six or eight bottles of wine. They won't be back for a week. Fucking rummies.' His lips curled. He was the only guy in our gang who would never take a drink, even to show he had, you know, big balls. He said he wasn't going to grow up to be a fucking tosspot like his old man. And he told me once privately - this was after the DeSpain twins showed up with a six-pack they'd hawked from their old man and everybody teased Chris because he wouldn't take a beer or even a swallow - that he was scared to drink. He said his father never got his nose all the way out of the bottle anymore, that his older brother had been drunk out of his tits when he raped that girl, and that Eyeball was always guzzling purple Jesuses with Ace Merrill and Charlie Hogan and Billy Tessio. What, he asked me, did I think his chances of letting go of the bottle would be once he picked it up? Maybe you think that's funny, a twelve-year-old worrying that he might be an incipient alcoholic,

but it wasn't funny to Chris. Not at all. He'd thought about the possibility a lot. He'd had occasion to.

'You got shells for it?'

'Nine of them - all that was left in the box. He'll think he used 'em himself, shooting at cans while he was drunk.'

'Is it loaded?'

'No! Chrissake, what do you think I am?'

I finally took the gun. I liked the heavy way it sat there in my hand. I could see myself as Steve Carella of the 87th precinct, going after that guy The Heckler or maybe covering Myer Myer or Kling while they broke into a desperate junkie's sleazy apartment. I sighted on one of the smelly trashcans and squeezed the trigger.

KA-BLAM!

The gun bucked in my hand. Fire licked from the end. It felt as if my wrist had just been broken. My heart vaulted nimbly into the back of my mouth and crouched there, trembling. A big hole appeared in the corrugated metal surface of the trash can - it was the work of an evil conjuror.

'Jesus!' I screamed.

Chris was cackling wildly - in real amusement or hysterical terror I couldn't tell. 'You did it, you did it! Gordie did it!' He bugled. 'Hey, Gordon Lachance is shooting up Castle Rock?'

'Shut up! Let's get out of here?' I screamed, and grabbed him by the shirt.

As we ran, the back door of the Blue Point jerked open and Francine Tupper stepped out in her white rayon waitress's uniform. 'Who did that? Who's letting off cherry-bombs back here?'

We ran like hell, cutting behind the drug store and the hardware store and the Emporium Galorium, which sold antiques and junk and dime books. We climbed a fence, spiking our palms with splinters, and finally came out on Curran Street. I threw the .45 at Chris as we ran; he was killing himself laughing but caught it and somehow managed to stuff it back into his knapsack and close one of the snaps. Once around the corner of Curran and back on Carbine Street, we slowed to a walk so we wouldn't look suspicious, running in the heat. Chris was still giggling.

'Man, you shoulda seen your face. Oh man, that was priceless. That was really fine. My fucking-A," He shook his head and slapped his leg and howled.

'You knew it was loaded, didn't you? You wet! I'm gonna be in trouble. That Tupper babe saw me.'

'Shit, she thought it was a firecracker. Besides, ole Thunderjugs Tupper can't see past the end of her own nose, you know that Thinks wearing glasses would spoil her pretty face.' He put one palm against the small of his back and bumped his hips and got laughing again.

'Well, I don't care. That was a mean trick, Chris. Really.'

'Come on, Gordie.' He put a hand on my shoulder. 'I didn't know it was loaded, honest to God, I swear on my mother's name. I just took it out of my dad's bureau. He always unloads it He must have been really drunk when he put it away the last time.'

'You really didn't load it?'

'No sir.'

'You swear it on your mother's name even if she goes to hell for you telling a lie?'

'I swear.' He crossed himself and spat, his face as open and repentant as any choirboy's. But when we turned into the vacant lot where our treehouse was and we saw Vern and Teddy sitting on their bedrolls waiting for us, he started to laugh again. He told them the whole story and after everybody had had their yucks, Teddy asked him what Chris thought they needed a pistol for.

'Nothin',' Chris said. 'Except we might see a bear. Something like that. Besides, it's spooky sleeping out at night in the woods.'

Everybody nodded at that. Chris was the biggest toughest guy in our gang, and he could always get away with saying things like that. Teddy, on the other hand, would have gotten his ass ragged off if he even hinted he was afraid of the dark.

'Did you set your tent up in the field?' Teddy asked Vern.

'Yeah. And I put two turned-on flashlights in it so it'll look like we're there after dark.'

'Hot shit!' I said, and clapped Vern on the back. For him, that was real thinking. He grinned and blushed.

'So let's go,' Teddy said. 'Come on, it's almost twelve already!'

Chris got up and we gathered around him.

'We'll walk across Beeman's field and behind that furniture place by Sonny's Texaco,' he said. 'Then we'll get on the railroad tracks down by the dump and just walk across the trestle into Harlow.'

'How far do you think it's gonna be?' Teddy asked.

Chris shrugged. 'Harlow's big. We're gonna be walking at least twenty miles. That sound right to you, Gordie?'

'Yeah. It might even be thirty.'

'Even if it's thirty we ought to be there by tomorrow afternoon, if no one goes pussy.'

'No pussies here,' Teddy said at once.

We all looked at each other for a second.

'Miaoww,' Vern said, and we all laughed.

'Come on, you guys,' Chris said, and shouldered his pack. We walked out of the vacant lot together, Chris slightly in the lead.

10

By the time we got across Beeman's field and had struggled up the cindery embankment to the Great Southern and Western Maine tracks, we had all taken our shirts off and tied them around our waists. We were sweating like pigs. At the top of the embankment we looked down the tracks, towards where we'd have to go.

I'll never forget that moment, no matter how old I get. I was the only one with a watch - a cheap Timex I'd gotten as a premium for selling Cloverine Brand Salve the year

before. Its hands stood at straight up noon, and the sun beat down on the dry, shadeless vista before us with savage heat. You could feel it working to get in under your skull and fry your brains.

Behind us was Castle Rock spread out on the long hill that was known as Castle View, surrounding its green and shady common. Further down Castle River you could see the stacks of the woollen mill spewing smoke into a sky the colour of gunmetal and spewing waste into the water. The Jolly Furniture Barn was on our left And straight ahead of us the railroad tracks, bright and heliographing in the sun. They paralleled the Castle River, which was on our left. To our right was a lot of overgrown scrubland (there's a motorcycle track there today - they have scrambles every Sunday afternoon at two p.m.). An old abandoned water tower stood on the horizon, rusty and somehow scary.

We stood there for that one noontime moment and then Chris said impatiently, 'Come on, let's get going.'

We walked beside the tracks in the cinders, kicking up little puffs of blackish dust at every step. Our socks and sneakers were soon gritty with it. Vern started singing 'Roll Me Over in the Clover' but soon quit it, which was a break for our ears. Only Teddy and Chris had brought canteens, and we were ail hitting them pretty hard.

'We could fill all the canteens again at the dump faucet,' I said. 'My dad told me that's a safe well. It's a hundred and ninety feet deep.'

'Okay,' Chris said, being the tough platoon leader. 'That'll be a good place to take five, anyway.'

'What about food?' Teddy asked suddenly. 'I bet nobody thought to bring something to eat I know I didn't'

Chris stopped. 'Shit! I didn't, either. Gordie?'

I shook my head, wondering how I could have been so dumb.

'Vern?'

'Zip,' Vern said. 'Sorry.'

'Well, let's see how much money we got,' I said. I untied my shirt, spread it on the cinders, and dropped my own sixty-eight cents onto it. The coins glittered feverishly in the sunlight. Chris had a tattered dollar and two pennies. Teddy had two quarters and two nickels. Vern had exactly seven cents.

'Two-thirty-seven,' I said. 'Not bad. There's a store at the end of that little road that goes to the dump. Somebody!! have to walk down there and get some hamburger and some tonics while the others rest.'

'Who?' Vern asked.

'We'll match for it when we get to the dump. Come on.'

I slid all the money into my pants pocket and was just tying my shirt around my waist again when Chris hollered: 'Train!'

I put my hand out on one of the rails to feel it, even though I could already hear it. The rail was thrumming crazily; for a moment it was like holding the train in my hand.

'Paratroops over the side!' Vern bawled, and leapt halfway down the embankment in one crazy, clownish stride. Vern was nuts for playing paratroops anyplace the ground was soft - a gravel pit, a haymow, an embankment like this one. Chris jumped after him. The train was really loud now,

probably headed straight up our side of the river towards Lewiston. Instead of jumping, Teddy turned in the direction of which it was coming. His thick glasses glittered in the sun. His long hair flopped untidily over his brow in sweat-soaked stringers.

'Go on, Teddy,' I said.

'No, huh-uh, I'm gonna dodge it' He looked at me, his magnified eyes frantic with excitement. 'A train-dodge, dig it? What's trucks after a fuckin' train-dodge?'

'You're crazy, man. You want to get killed?'

'Just like the beaches at Normandy!' Teddy yelled, and strode out into the middle of the tracks. He stood on one of the cross-ties, lightly balanced.

I stood stunned for a moment, unable to believe stupidity of such width and breadth. Then I grabbed him, dragged him fighting and protesting to the embankment, and pushed him over. I jumped after him and Teddy caught me a good one in the guts while I was still in the air. The wind whooshed out of me, but I was still able to hit him in the sternum with my knee and knock him flat on his back before he could get all the way up. I landed, gasping and sprawling, and Teddy grabbed me around the neck. We went rolling all the way to the bottom of the embankment, hitting and clawing at each other while Chris and Vern stared at us, stupidly surprised.

'You little son of a bitch!' Teddy was screaming at me. 'You fucker! Don't you throw your weight around on me! I'll kill you, you dipshit!'

I was getting my breath back now, and I made it to my feet. I backed away as Teddy advanced, holding my open hands up to slap away his punches, half laughing and half

scared. Teddy was no one to fool around with when he went into one of his screaming fits. He'd take on a big kid in that state, and after the big kid broke both of his arms, he'd bite.

'Teddy, you can dodge anything you want after we see what we're going to see but' whack on the shoulder as one wildly-swinging fist got past me 'until then no one's supposed to see us, you' whack on the side of the face, and then we might have had a real fight if Chris and Vern 'stupid wet end!' hadn't grabbed us and kept us apart. Above us, the train roared by in a thunder of diesel exhaust and the great heavy clacking of boxcar wheels. A few cinders bounced down the embankment and the argument was over ... at least until we could hear ourselves talk again.

It was only a short freight, and when the caboose had trailed by, Teddy said: 'I'm gonna kill him. At least give him a fat lip.' He struggled against Chris, but Chris only grabbed him tighter.

'Calm down, Teddy,' Chris said quietly, and he kept saying it until Teddy stopped struggling and just stood there, his glasses hanging askew and his hearing-aid cord dangling limply against his chest on its way down to the battery, which he had shoved into the pocket of his jeans.

When he was completely still, Chris turned to me and said: 'What the hell are you fighting with him about, Gordon?'

'He wanted to dodge the train. I figured the engineer would see him and report it They might send a cop out.'

'Ahhh, he'd be too busy makin' chocolate in his drawers,' Teddy said, but he didn't seem angry anymore. The storm had passed.

'Gordie was just trying to do the right thing,' Vern said.
'Come on, peace.'

'Peace, you guys,' Chris agreed.

'Yeah, okay,' I said, and held out my hand, palm up. 'Peace, Teddy?'

'I coulda dodged it,' he said to me. 'You know that, Gordie?'

'Yeah,' I said, although the thought turned me cold inside. 'I know it.'

'Okay. Peace, then.'

'Skin it, man,' Chris ordered, and let go of Teddy.

Teddy slapped his hand down on mine hard enough to sting and then turned it over. I slapped his.

'Fucking pussy Lachance,' Teddy said.

'Meeiowww,' I said.

'Come on, you guys,' Vern said. 'Let's go, okay?'

'Go anywhere you want, but don't go here,' Chris said solemnly, and Vern drew back as if to hit him.

11

We got to the dump around one-thirty, and Vern led the way down the embankment with a Paratroops over the side! We went to the bottom in big jumps and leaped over the brackish trickle of water oozing listlessly out of the culvert which poked out of the cinders. Beyond this small boggy area was the sandy, trash-littered verge of the dump.

There was a six-foot security fence surrounding it. Every twenty feet weather-faded signs were posted. They said:

CASTLE ROCK DUMP

HOURS 4-8 PM

CLOSED MONDAYS

TRESPASSING STRICTLY FORBIDDEN

We climbed to the top of the fence, swung over, and jumped down. Teddy and Vern led the way towards the well, which you tapped with an old-fashioned pump - the kind from which you had to call the water with elbow-grease. There was a Crisco can filled with water next to the pump handle, and the great sin was to forget to leave it filled for the next guy to come along. The iron handle stuck off at an angle, looking like a one-winged bird that was trying to fly. It had once been green, but almost all of the paint had been rubbed off by the thousands of hands that had worked that handle since 1940.

The dump is one of my strongest memories of Castle Rock. It always reminds me of the surrealist painters when I think of it - those fellows who were always painting pictures of clockfaces lying limply in the crotches of trees or Victorian living rooms standing in the middle of the Sahara or steam engines coming out of fireplaces. To my child's eye, nothing in the Castle Rock Dump looked as if it really belonged there.

We had entered from the back. If you came from the front, a wide dirt road came in through the gate, broadened out into a semicircular area that had been bulldozed as flat as a dirt landing-strip, and then ended abruptly at the edge of the dumping-pit. The pump (Teddy and Vern were currently

standing there and squabbling about who was going to prime it) was at the back of this great pit. It was maybe eighty feet deep and filled with all the American things that get empty, wear out, or just don't work anymore. There was so much stuff that my eyes hurt just looking at it - or maybe it was your brain that actually hurt, because it could never quite decide what your eye should stop on. Then your eye would stop, or be stopped, by something that seemed as out of place as those limp clock-faces or the living room in the desert. A brass bedstead leaning drunkenly in the sun. A little girl's dolly looking amazedly between her thighs as she gave birth to stuffing. An overturned Studebaker automobile with its chrome bullet nose glittering in the sun like some Buck Rogers missile. One of those giant water bottles they have in office buildings, transformed by the summer sun into a hot, blazing sapphire.

There was plenty of wildlife there, too, although it wasn't the kind you see in the Walt Disney nature films or at those tame zoos where you can pet the animals. Plump rats, woodchucks grown sleek and lumbering on such rich chow as rotting hamburger and maggoty vegetables, seagulls by the thousands, and stalking among the gulls like thoughtful, introspective ministers, an occasional huge crow. It was also the place where the town's stray dogs came for a meal when they couldn't find any trashcans to knock over or any deer to run. They were a miserable, ugly-tempered, mongrel lot; slat-sided and grinning bitterly, they would attack each other over a flyblown piece of bologna or a pile of chicken guts fuming in the sun.

But these dogs never attacked Milo Pressman, the dump-keeper, because Milo was never without Chopper at his heel. Chopper was - at least until Camber's dog Cujo went rabid twenty years later - the most feared and least seen dog in Castle Rock. He was the meanest dog for forty miles around

(or so we heard), and ugly enough to stop a striking clock. The kids whispered legends about Chopper's meanness. Some said he was half German Shepherd, some said he was mostly Boxer, and a kid from Castle View with the unfortunate name of Harry Horr claimed that Chopper was a Doberman Pinscher whose vocal cords had been surgically removed so you couldn't hear him when he was on the attack. There were other kids who claimed Chopper was a maniacal Irish Wolfhound and Milo Pressman fed him a special mixture of Gaines Meal and chicken blood. These same kids claimed that Milo didn't dare take Chopper out of his shack unless the dog was hooded like a hunting falcon.

The most common story was that Pressman had trained Chopper not just to sic but to sic specific parts of the human anatomy. Thus an unfortunate kid who had illegally scaled the dump fence to pick for illicit treasures might hear Milo Pressman cry: 'Chopper! Sic! Hand!' And Chopper would grab that hand and hold on, ripping skin and tendons, powdering bones between his slavering jaws, until Milo told him to quit. It was rumoured that Chopper could take an ear, an eye, a foot, or a leg ... and that a second offender who was surprised by Milo and the ever-loyal Chopper would hear the dread cry: 'Chopper! Sic! Pecker!' And that kid would be a soprano for the rest of his life. Milo himself was more commonly seen and thus more commonly regarded. He was just a half-bright working joe who supplemented his small town salary by fixing things people threw away and selling them around town.

There was no sign of either Milo or Chopper today.

Chris and I watched Vern prime the pump while Teddy worked the handle frantically. At last he was rewarded with a flood of clear water. A moment later both of them had

their heads under the trough, Teddy still pumping away a mile a minute.

Teddy's crazy,' I said softly.

'Oh yeah,' Chris said matter-of-factly. 'He won't live to be twice the age he is now, I bet His dad burnin' his ears like that That's what did it He's crazy to dodge trucks the way he does. He can't see worth a shit, glasses or no glasses.'

'You remember that time in the tree?'

'Yeah.'

The year before, Teddy and Chris had been climbing the big pine tree behind my house. They were almost to the top and Chris said they couldn't go any further because all of the branches up there were rotten. Teddy got that crazy stubborn look on his face and said fuck that, he had pine tar all over his hands and he was gonna go up until he could touch the top. Nothing Chris said could talk him out of it. So up he went, and he actually made it - he only weighed seventy-five pounds or so, remember. He stood there, clutching the top of the pine in one tar-gummy hand, shouting that he was king of the world or some stupid thing like that, and then there was a sickening, rotted crack as the branch he was standing on gave way and he plummeted. What happened next was one of those things that makes you sure there must be a God. Chris reached out, purely on reflex, and what he caught was a fistful of Teddy Duchamp's hair. And although his wrist swelled up fat and he was unable to use his right hand very well for almost two weeks, Chris held him until Teddy, screaming and cursing, got his foot on a live branch thick enough to support his weight. Except for Chris's blind grab, he would have turned and crashed and smashed all the way to the

foot of the tree, a hundred and twenty feet below. When they got down, Chris was grey-faced and almost puking with the fear reaction. And Teddy wanted to fight him for pulling his hair. They would have gone at it, too, if I hadn't been there to make peace.

'I dream about that every now and then,' Chris said, and looked at me with strangely defenceless eyes. 'Except in this dream I have, I always miss him. I just get a couple of hairs and Teddy screams and down he goes. Weird, huh?'

'Weird,' I agreed, and for just one moment we looked in each other's eyes and saw some of the true things that made us friends. Then we looked away again and watched Teddy and Vern throwing water at each other, screaming and laughing and calling each other pussies.

'Yeah, but you didn't miss him,' I said. 'Chris Chambers never misses, am I right?'

'Not even when the ladies leave the seat down,' he said. He winked at me, formed an O with his thumb and forefinger, and spat a neat white bullet through it 'Eat me raw, Chambers,' I said.

Through a Flavour Straw,' he said, and we grinned at each other.

Vern yelled: 'Come on and get your water before it runs back down the piper 'Race you,' Chris said.

'In this heat? You're off your gourd.'

'Come on,' he said, still grinning. 'On my go.'

'Okay.'

'Go!'

We raced, our sneakers digging up the hard, sunbaked dirt, our torsos leaning out ahead of our flying bluejeaned legs, our - sts doubled. It was a dead heat, with both Vern on Chris's .. .de and Teddy on mine holding up their middle fingers at the same moment. We collapsed laughing in the still, smoky odour of the place, and Chris tossed Vern his canteen. When i was full, Chris and I went to the pump and first Chris pumped for me and then I pumped for him, the shockingly cold water sluicing off the soot and the heat all in a flash, sending our suddenly freezing scalps four months ahead into January. Then I refilled the lard can and we all walked over to sit down in the shade of the dump's only tree, a stunted ash forty feet from Milo Pressman's tarpaper shack. The tree was hunched slightly to the west, as if what it really wanted to do was pick up its roots the way an old lady would pick up her skirts and just get the hell out of the dump.

"The most!" Chris said, laughing, tossing his tangled hair back from his brow.

'A blast,' I said, nodding, still laughing myself.

"This is really a good time,' Vern said simply, and he didn't just mean being off-limits inside the dump, or fudging our folks, or going on a hike up the railroad tracks into Harlow; he meant those things but it seems to me now that there was more, and that we all knew it. Everything was there and around us. We knew exactly who we were and exactly where we were going. It was grand.

We sat under the tree for a while, shooting the shit like we always did - who had the best ballteam (still the Yankees with Mantle and Maris, of course), what was the best car

('55 Thunderbird, with Teddy holding out stubbornly for the '58 Corvette), who was the toughest guy in Castle Rock who wasn't in our gang (we all agreed it was Jamie Gallant, who gave Mrs Ewing the finger and then sauntered out of her class with his hands in his pockets while she shouted at him), the best TV show (either The Untouchables or Peter Gunn - both Robert Stack as Eliot Ness and Craig Stevens as Gunn were cool), all that stuff.

It was Teddy who first noticed that the shade of the ash tree was getting longer and asked me what time it was. I looked at my watch and was surprised to see it was quarter past two.

'Hey, man,' Vern said. 'Somebody's got to go for provisions. Dump opens at four. I don't want to still be here when Milo and Chopper make the scene.'

Even Teddy agreed. He wasn't afraid of Milo, who had a pot belly and was at least forty, but every kid in Castle Rock squeezed his balls between his legs when Chopper's name was mentioned.

'Okay,' I said. 'Odd man goes?'

That's you, Gordie,' Chris said, smiling. 'Odd as a cod.'

'So's your mother,' I said, and gave them each a coin. 'Flip.'

Four coins glittered up into the sun. Four hands snatched them from the air. Four flat smacks on four grimy wrists. We uncovered. Two heads and two tails. We flipped again and this time all four of us had tails.

'Oh Jesus, that's a goocher,' Vern said, not telling us anything we didn't know. Four heads, or a moon, was

supposed to be extraordinarily good luck. Four tails was a goocher, and that meant very bad luck.

'Fuck that shit,' Chris said. 'It doesn't mean anything. Go again.'

'No, man,' Vern said earnestly. 'A goocher, that's really bad. You remember when Clint Bracken and those guys got wiped out on Sirois Hill in Durham? Billy tole me they was flippin' for beers and they came up a goocher just before they got into the car. And bang! they all get fuckin' totalled. I don't like that. Sincerely.'

'Nobody believes that crap about moons and goochers,' Teddy said impatiently. 'It's baby stuff, Vern. You gonna flip or not?'

Vern flipped, but with obvious reluctance. This time he, Chris and Teddy all had tails. I was showing Thomas Jefferson on a nickle. And I was suddenly scared. It was as if a shadow had crossed some inner sun. They still had a goocher, the three of them, as if dumb fate had pointed at them a second time. Abruptly I thought of Chris saying: / just get a couple of hairs and Teddy screams and down he goes. Weird, huh?

Three tails, one head.

Then Teddy was laughing his crazy, cackling laugh and pointing at me and the feeling was gone.

'I heard that only fairies laugh like that,' I said, and gave him the finger.

'Eeee-eeee-eeee, Gordie,' Teddy laughed. 'Go get the : rovisions, you fuckin' morphadite.'

I wasn't really sorry to be going. I was rested up and didn't mind going down the road to the Florida Market.

'Don't call me any of your mother's pet names,' I said to Teddy.

'Eeee-eee-eeee, what a fuckin' wet you are, Lachance.'

'Go on, Gordie,' Chris said. 'We'll wait over by the tracks.'

'You guys better not go without me,' I said.

Vern laughed. 'Coin' without you'd be like goin' with Schlitz instead of Budweiser's, Gordie.'

'Ah, shut up.'

They chanted together: 'I don't shut up, I grow up. And when I look at you I throw up.'

'Then your mother goes around the corner and licks it up,' I said, and hauled ass out of there, giving them the finger over my shoulder as I went. I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, did you?

12

Different strokes for different folks, they say now, and that's cool. So if I say summer to you, you get one set of private, personal images that are all the way different from mine. That's cool. But for me, summer is always going to mean running down the road to the Florida Market with change jingling in my pockets, the temperature in the gay nineties, my feet dressed in Keds. The word conjures an image of the GS&WM railroad tracks running into a perspective-point in the distance, burnished so white under the sun that when

you closed your eyes you could still see them there in the dark, only blue instead of white.

But there was more to that summer than our trip across the river to look for Ray Brower, although that looms the largest. Sounds of The Fleetwoods singing 'Come Softly Darling' and Robin Luke singing 'Susie Darlin' and Little Anthony popping the vocal on 'I Ran All the Way Home'. Were they all hits in that summer of 1960? Yes and no. Mostly yes. In the long purple evenings when rock and roll from WLAM blurred into night baseball from WCCU, time shifted. I think it was all 1960 and that the summer went on for a space of years, held magically intact in a web of sounds: the sweet hum of crickets, the machine-gun roar of playing-cards riffing against the spokes of some kid's bicycle as he pedalled home for a late supper of cold cuts and iced tea, the flat Texas voice of Buddy Knox singing 'Come along and be my party doll, and I'll make love to you, to you,' and the baseball announcer's voice mingling with the song and with the smell of freshly cut grass: 'Count's three and two now. Whitey Ford leans over ... shakes off the sign ... now he's got it ... Ford pauses ... pitches ... and there it goes! Williams got all of that one! Kiss it goodbye! RED SOX LEAD, THREE TO ONE!' Was Ted Williams still playing for the Red Sox in 1960? Absolutely not. But he was. I remember that he was very clearly. Baseball had become important to me in the last couple of years, ever since I'd had to face the knowledge that baseball players were as much flesh and blood as I was. The knowledge came when Roy Campanella's car overturned and the papers screamed mortal news from the front pages: his career was done, he was going to sit in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. How that came back to me, with that same sickening mortal thud, when I sat down to this typewriter one morning two years ago, turned on the

radio, and heard that Thurman Munson had died while trying to land his airplane.

There were movies to go see at the Gem, which has long since been torn down; science fiction movies like Gog with Richard Egan and westerns with Audie Murphy (Teddy saw every movie Audie Murphy made at least three times; he believed Murphy was almost a god) and war movies with John Wayne. There were games and endless bolted meals, lawns to mow, places to run to, walls to pitch pennies against, people to clap you on the back. And now I sit here trying to look through an IBM keyboard and see that time, trying to recall the best and worst of that green and brown summer, and I can almost feel the skinny, scabbed boy still buried in this advancing body and hear those sounds. But the apotheosis of the memory and the time is Gordon Lachance running down the road to the Florida Market with change in his pockets and sweat running down his back.

I asked for three pounds of hamburger and got some hamburger rolls, four bottles of Coke and a two-cent churchkey to open them with. The owner, a man named George Dusset, got the meat and then leaned by his cash register, one hammy hand planted on the counter by the big bottle of hardcooked eggs, a toothpick in his mouth, his huge beer belly rounding his white T-shirt like a sail filled with a good wind. He stood right there as I shopped, making sure I didn't try to hawk anything. He didn't say a word until he was weighing up the hamburger.

'I know you. You're Denny Lachance's brother. Ain't you?' The toothpick journeyed from one corner of his mouth to the other, as if on ball bearings. He reached behind the cash register, picked up a bottle of S'OK cream soda, and chugged it.

'Yes, sir. But Denny, he -'

'Yeah, I know. That's a sad thing, kid. The Bible says: "In the midst of life, we are in death." Did you know that... Yuh. I lost a brother in Korea. You look just like Denny, people ever tell you that? Yuh. Spitting image.'

'Yes, sir, sometimes,' I said glumly.

'I remember the year he was All Conference. Halfback, he played. Yuh. Could he run? Father God and Sonny Jesus! You're probably too young to remember.' He was looking over my head, out through the screen door and into the blasting heat, as if he were having a beautiful vision of my brother.

'I remember. Uh, Mr Dusset?'

'What, kid?' His eyes were still misty with memory; the toothpick trembled a little between his lips.

'Your thumb is on that scales.'

'What?' He looked down, astounded, to where the ball of his thumb was pressed firmly on the white enamel. If I hadn't moved away from him a little bit when he started talking about Dennis, the ground meat would have hidden it. 'Why, so it is. Yuh. I guess I just got thinkin' about your brother, God love him.' George Dusset signed a cross on himself. When he took his thumb off the scales, the needle sprang back six ounces. He patted a little more meat on top and then did the package up with white butcher's paper.

'Okay,' he said past the toothpick. 'Let's see what we got here. Three pounds of hamburg, that's a dollar forty-four. Hamburg rolls, that's twenty-seven. Four tonics, forty cents.'

One churchkey, two pence. Come to ...' He added it up on the bag he was going to put the stuff in. 'Two-twenty-nine.'

'Thirteen,' I said.

He looked up at me very slowly, frowning. 'Huh?'

'Two-thirteen. You added it wrong.'

'Kid, are you-'

'You added it wrong,' I said. 'First you put your thumb on the scales and then you overcharged on the groceries, Mr Dusset I was gonna throw some Hostess Twinkies on top of that order but now I guess I won't.' I spanged two dollars and thirteen cents down on the Schlitz placemat in front of him.

He looked at the money, then at me. The frown was now tremendous, the lines on his face as deep as fissures. 'What are you, kid?' He said in a low voice that was ominously confidential. 'Are you some kind of smartass?'

'No, sir,' I said. 'But you ain't gonna jap me and get away with it What would your mother say if she knew you was japping little kids?'

He thrust our stuff into the paper bag with quick stiff movements, making the Coke bottles clink together. He thrust the bag at me roughly, not caring if I dropped it and broke the tonics or not. His swarthy face was flushed and dull, the frown now frozen in place. 'Okay, kid. Here you go. Now what you do is you get the Christ out of my store. I see you in here again and I going to throw you out, me. Yuh. Smartass little sonofawhore.'

'I won't come in again,' I said, walking over to the screen door and pushing it open. The hot afternoon buzzed somnolently along its appointed course outside, sounding green and brown and full of silent light. 'Neither will none of my friends. I guess I got fifty or so.'

'Your brother wasn't no smartass!' George Dusset yelled.

'Fuck you!' yelled, and ran like hell down the road.

I heard the screen door bang open like a gunshot and his bull roar came after me: 'If you ever come in here again I'll fat your lip for you, you little punk. I ran until I was over the first hill, scared and laughing to myself, my heart beating out a triphammer pulse in my chest. Then I slowed to a fast walk, looking back over my shoulder every now and then to make sure he wasn't going to take after me in his car, or anything.

He didn't, and pretty soon I got to the dump gate. I put the bag inside my shirt, climbed the gate, and monkeyed down the other side. I was halfway across the dump area when I saw something I didn't like - Milo Pressman's portholed '56 Buick was parked behind his tarpaper shack. If Milo saw me, I was going to be in a world of hurt. As yet there was no sign of either him or the infamous Chopper, but all at once the chain-link fence at the back of the dump seemed very far away. I found myself wishing I'd gone around the outside, but I was now too far into the dump to want to turn around and go back. If Milo saw me climbing the dump fence, I'd probably be in dutch when I got home, but that didn't scare me as much as Milo yelling for Chopper to sic would.

Scary violin music started to play in my head. I kept putting one foot in front of the other, trying to look casual, trying to

look as if I belonged here with a paper grocery sack poking out of my shirt, heading for the fence between the dump and the railroad tracks.

I was about fifty feet from the fence and just beginning to think that everything was going to be all right after all when I heard Milo shout. 'Hey! Hey, you! Kid! Get away from that fence! Get outta here!'

The smart thing to have done would have been to just agree with the guy and go around, but then I was so keyed up that instead of doing the smart thing I just broke for the fence with a wild yell, my sneakers kicking up dust. Vern, Teddy, and Chris came out of the underbrush on the other side of the fence and stared anxiously through the chain-link.

'You come back here!' Milo bawled. 'Come back here or I'll sic my dawg on you, goddammitr I did not exactly find that to be the voice of sanity and conciliation, and I ran even faster for the fence, my arms pumping, the brown grocery bag crackling against my skin. Teddy started to laugh his idiotic chortling laugh, eee-eee-eeee into the air like some reed instrument being played by a lunatic.

'Go, Gordie! Go!' Vern screamed.

And Milo yelled: 'Sic 'im, Chopper! Go get 'im, boy!'

I threw the bag over the fence and Vern elbowed Teddy out of the way to catch it Behind me I could hear Chopper coming, shaking the earth, blurting fire out of one distended nostril and ice out of the other, dripping sulphur from his champing jaws. I threw myself halfway up the fence with one leap, screaming. I made it to the top in no more than three seconds and simply leaped -I never thought about it, never even looked down to see what I might land on. What

I almost landed on was Teddy, who was doubled over and laughing like crazy. His glasses had fallen off and tears were streaming out of his eyes. I missed him by inches and hit the clay-gravel embankment just to his left. At the same instant, Chopper hit the chain-link fence behind me and let out a howl of mingled pain and disappointment. I turned around, holding one skinned knee, and got my first look at the famous Chopper - and my first lesson in the vast differences between myth and reality.

Instead of some huge hellhound with red, savage eyes and teeth jutting out of his mouth like straight-pipes from a hotrod, I was looking at a medium-sized mongrel dog that was a perfectly common black and white. He was yapping and jumping fruitlessly, going up on his back legs to paw the fence.

Teddy was now strutting up and down in front of the fence, twiddling his glasses in one hand, and inciting Chopper to even greater rage.

'Kiss my ass, Choppie!' Teddy invited, spittle flying from his lips. 'Kiss my ass! Bite shit!'

He bumped his fanny against the chain-link fence and Chopper did his level best to take Teddy up on his invitation. He got nothing for his pains but a good healthy nose-bump.

He began to bark crazily, foam flying from his snout. Teddy kept bumping his rump against the fence and Chopper kept lunging at it, always missing, doing nothing but racking out his nose, which was now bleeding. Teddy kept exhorting him, calling him by the somehow grisly diminutive 'Choppie', and Chris and Vern were lying weakly on the

embankment, laughing so hard that they could now do little more than wheeze.

And here came Milo Pressman, dressed in sweat-stained fatigues and a New York Giants baseball cap, his mouth drawn down in distracted anger.

'Here, here!' He was yelling. 'You boys stop a-teasing that dawg! You hear me? Stop it right now!'

'Bite it, Choppie!' Teddy yelled, strutting up and down on our side of the fence like a mad Prussian reviewing his troops. 'Come on and sic me! Sic me!'

Chopper went nuts. I mean it sincerely. He ran around in a big circle, yelping and barking and foaming, rear feet spewing up tough little dry clods. He went around about three times, getting his courage up, I guess, and then he launched himself straight at the security fence. He must have been going thirty miles an hour when he hit it, I kid you not - his doggy lips were stretched back from his teeth and his ears were flying in the slipstream. The whole fence made a low, musical sound as the chain-link was not just driven back against the posts but sort of stretched back. It was like a zither note -yimmmmmmm. A strangled yawp came out of Chopper's mouth, both eyes came up blank, and he did a totally amazing reverse snap-roll, landing on his back with a solid thump that sent dust puffing up around him. He just lay there for a moment and then he crawled off with his tongue hanging crookedly from the left side of his mouth.

At this, Milo himself went almost berserk with rage. His complexion darkened to a scary plum colour - even his scalp was purple under the short hedgehog bristles of his flattop haircut. Sitting stunned in the dirt, both knees of my jeans torn out, my heart still thudding from the nearness of

my escape, I thought that Milo looked like a human version of Chopper.

'I know you!' Milo raved. 'You're Teddy Duchamp! I know all of you! Sonny, I'll beat your ass, teasing my dawg like that!'

'Like to see you try!' Teddy raved right back. 'Let's see you climb over this fence and get me, fatass!'

'WHAT? WHAT DID YOU CALL ME?'

'FAT-ASS!' Teddy screamed happily. 'LARD-BUCKET! TUBBAGUTS! COME ON! COME ON!' He was jumping up and down, fists clenched, sweat flying from his hair. 'TEACH YOU TO SIC YOUR STUPID DOG ON PEOPLE! COME ON! LIKE TO SEE YOU TRY!'

'You little tin-weasel pecker wood loony's son! I'll see your - other gets an invitation to go down and talk to the judge in court about what you done to my dawg!'

'What did you call me?' Teddy asked hoarsely. He had stopped jumping up and down. His eyes had gone huge and glassy, and his skin was the colour of lead.

Milo had called Teddy a lot of things, but he was able to go oack and get the one that had struck home with no trouble at all - since then I have noticed again and again what a genius people have for that... for finding the LOONY button down -.side and not just pressing it but hammering on the fucker.

'Your dad was a loony,' he said, grinning. 'Loony up in Togus, that's what Crazier'n a shithouse rat. Crazier'n a buck with tickwood fever. Nuttier'n a long-tailed cat in a room fulla rockin' chairs. Loony. No wonder you're actin' the way you are, with a loony for a f-'

'YOUR MOTHER BLOWS DEAD RATS!' Teddy screamed. 'AND IF YOU CALL MY DAD A LOONY AGAIN, I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU, YOU COCKSUCKER!'

'Loony,' Milo said smugly. He'd found the button, all right. Loony's kid, loony's kid, your father's got toys in the attic, kid, tough break.'

Vern and Chris had been getting over their laughing fit, perhaps getting ready to appreciate the seriousness of the situation and call Teddy off, but when Teddy told Milo that his mother blew dead rats, they went back into hysterics again, lying there on the bank, rolling from side to side, their feet kicking, holding their bellies. 'No more,' Chris said weakly. 'No more, please, no more, I swear to God I'm gonna bust!'

Chopper was walking around in a large, dazed figure-eight behind Milo. He looked like the losing fighter about ten seconds after the ref has ended the match and awarded the winner a TKO. Meanwhile, Teddy and Milo continued their discussion of Teddy's father, standing nose to nose, with the wire fence Milo was too old and too fat to climb between them.

'Don't you say nothing else about my dad! My dad stormed the beaches at Normandy, you fucking wet end!'

'Yeah, well, where is he now, you ugly little four-eyed turd? He's up to Togus, ain't he? He's up to Togus because HE WENT FUCKING SECTION EIGHT!'

'Okay, that's it,' Teddy said. 'That's it, that's the end, I'm gonna kill you.' He threw himself at the fence and started up.

'You come on and try it, you slimy little bastard.' Milo stood back, grinning and waiting.

'No!' I shouted. I got to my feet, grabbed Teddy by the loose seat of his jeans, and pulled him off the fence. We both staggered back and fell over, him on top. He squashed my balls pretty good and I groaned. Nothing hurts like having your balls squashed, you know it? But I kept my arms locked around Teddy's middle.

'Lemme up!' Teddy sobbed, writhing in my arms. 'Lemme up, Gordie! Nobody ranks out my old man. LEMME UP GODDAMMIT LEMME UP!'

'That's just what he wants!' I shouted in his ear. 'He wants to get you over there and beat the piss out of you and then take you to the cops!'

'Huh?' Teddy craned around to look at me, his face dazed.

'Never mind your smartmouth, kid,' Milo said, advancing to the fence again with his hands curled into ham-sized fists. 'Let 'im fight his own battles.'

'Sure,' I said. 'You only outweigh him by five hundred pounds.'

'I know you, too,' Milo said ominously. 'Your name's Lachance.' He pointed to where Vern and Chris were finally picking themselves up, still breathing fast from laughing so hard. 'And those guys are Chris Chambers and one of those stupid Tessio kids. All your fathers are going to get calls from me, except for the loony up to Togus. You'll go to the 'formatory, every one of you. Juvenile delinquents!'

He stood flat on his feet, big freckled hands held out like a guy who wanted to play One Potato Two Potato, breathing

hard, eyes narrow, waiting for us to cry or say we were sorry or maybe give him Teddy so he could feed Teddy to Chopper.

Chris made an O out of his thumb and index finger and spat neatly through it.

Vern hummed and looked to the sky.

Teddy said: 'Come on, Gordie. Let's get away from this asshole before I puke.'

'Oh, you're gonna get it, you foulmouthed little whoremaster. Wait'll I get you to the constable.'

'We heard what you said about his father,' I told him. 'We're all witnesses. And you sicced that dog on me. That's against the law.'

Milo looked a trifle uneasy. 'You was trespassin'.'

"The hell I was. The dump's public property.'

'You climbed the fence?'

'Sure I did, after you sicced your dog on me,' I said, hoping that Milo wouldn't recall that I'd also climbed the gate to get in.' What'd you think I was gonna do? Stand there and et 'im rip me to pieces? Come on, you guys. Let's go. It stinks around here.'

"Formatory,' Milo promised hoarsely, his voice shaking. 'Formatory for you wise guys.'

'Can't wait to tell the cops how you called a war vet a fuckin' loony,' Chris called back over his shoulder as we moved away. 'What did you do in the war, Mr Pressman?'

'NONE OF YOUR DAMN BUSINESSr Milo shrieked. YOU HURT MY DA WG!'

'Put it on your t.s. slip and send it to the chaplain,' Vern - uttered, and then we were climbing the railroad embankment again.

'Come back here!' Milo shouted, but his voice was fainter now and he seemed to be losing interest.

Teddy shot him the finger as we walked away. I looked back over my shoulder when we got to the top of the embankment. Milo was standing there behind the security fence, a big man in a baseball cap with his dog sitting beside him. His fingers were hooked through the small chain-link diamonds as he shouted at us, and all at once I felt sorry for him - he looked like the biggest third-grader in the world, locked inside the playground by mistake, yelling for someone to let him out. He kept yelling for a while and then he either gave up or we got out of range. No more was seen or heard of Milo Pressman and Chopper that day.

13

There was some discussion - in righteous tones that were actually kind of forced-sounding - about how we had shown that creepy Milo Pressman we weren't just another bunch of pussies. I told how the guy at the Florida Market had tried to jap us, and then we fell into a gloomy silence, thinking it over. For my part, I was thinking that maybe there was something to that stupid goocher business after all. Things couldn't have turned out much worse - in fact, I thought, it might be better to just keep going and spare my folks the pain of having one son in the Castle View Cemetery and one in South Windham Boys' Correctional. I had no doubt that Milo would go to the cops as soon as the importance of the

dump having been closed at the time of the incident filtered into his thick skull. When that happened, he would realize that I really had been trespassing, public property or not. Probably that gave him every right in the world to sic his stupid dog on me. And while Chopper wasn't the hellhound he was cracked up to be, he sure would have ripped the sitdown out of my jeans if I hadn't won the race to the fence. All of it put a big dark crimp in the day. And there was another gloomy idea rolling around inside my head - the idea that this was no lark after all, and maybe we deserved our bad luck. Maybe it was even God warning us to go home. What were we doing, anyway, going to look at some kid that had gotten himself all mashed up by a freight train?

But we were doing it, and none of us wanted to stop.

We had almost reached the trestle which carried the tracks across the river when Teddy burst into tears. It was as if a great inner tidal wave had broken through a carefully constructed set of mental dykes. No bullshit - it was that sudden and that fierce. The sobs doubled him over like punches and he sort of collapsed into a heap, his hands going from his stomach to the mutilated gobs of flesh that were the remains of his ears. He went on crying in hard, violent bursts. None of us knew what the fuck to do. It wasn't crying like when you got hit by a line drive while you were playing shortstop or smashed on the head playing tackle football on the common or when you fell off your bike. There was nothing physically wrong with him. We walked away a little and watched him, our hands in our pockets.

'Hey, man ...' Vern said in a very thin voice. Chris and I looked at Vern hopefully. 'Hey, man' was always a good start. But Vern couldn't follow it up.

Teddy leaned forward onto the crossties and put a hand over his eyes. Now he looked like he was doing the Allah bit - 'Salami, salami, baloney,' as Popeye says. Except it wasn't funny.

At last, when the force of his crying had trailed off a little, it was Chris who went to him. He was the toughest guy in our gang (maybe even tougher than Jamie Gallant, I thought privately), but he was also the guy who made the best peace. He had a way about it I'd seen him sit down on the kerb next to a little kid with a scraped knee, a kid he didn't even fucking know, and get him talking about something - the Shrine

Circus that was coming to town or Huckleberry Hound on TV - until the kid forgot he was supposed to be hurt Chris was good at it. He was tough enough to be good at it.

'Listen, Teddy, what do you care what a fat old pile of shit like him said about your father? Huh? I mean, sincerely! That don't change nothing, does it? What a fat old pile of shit like him says? Huh? Huh? Does it?'

Teddy shook his head violently. It changed nothing. But to hear it spoken of in bright daylight, something must have gone over and over in his mind while he was lying awake in bed and looking at the moon offcentre in one windowpane, something he must have thought about in his slow and broken way until it seemed almost holy, trying to make sense out of it, and then to have it brought home to him that everybody else had merely dismissed his dad as a loony ... that had rocked him. But it changed nothing. Nothing.

'He still stormed the beaches at Normandy, right?' Chris said. He picked up one of Teddy's sweaty, grimy hands and patted it.

Teddy nodded fiercely, crying. Snot was running out of his nose.

'Do you think that pile of shit was at Normandy?'

Teddy shook his head violently. 'Nuh-Nuh-No?'

'Do you think that guy knows you?'

'Nuh-No!No,b-b-but-'

'Or your father? He one of your father's buddies?'

'NO!' Angry, horrified. The thought. Teddy's chest heaved and more sobs came out of it. He had pushed his hair away from his ears and I could see the round brown plastic button of the hearing aid set in the middle of the right one. The shape of the hearing aid made more sense than the shape of his ear, if you get what I mean.

Chris said calmly: Talk is cheap.'

Teddy nodded, still not looking up.

'And whatever's between you and your old man, talk can't change that.'

Teddy's head shook without definition, unsure if this was true. Someone had redefined his pain, and redefined it in shockingly common terms. That would (loony) have to be examined (fucking section eight) later. In depth. On long sleepless nights.

Chris rocked him. 'He was rankin' you, man,' he said in soothing cadences that were almost a lullabye. 'He was just tryin' to rank you over that friggin' fence, you know it? No strain, man. No fuckin' strain. He don't know nothing about your old man. He don't know nothin' but stuff he heard from those rumdums down at the Mellow Tiger. He's just dogshit, man. Right, Teddy? Huh? Right?'

Teddy's crying was down to sniffles. He wiped his eyes, saving two sooty rings around them, and sat up.

'I'm okay,' he said, and the sound of his own voice seemed to convince him. 'Yeah, I'm okay.' He stood up and put his glasses back on - dressing his naked face, it seemed to me. He laughed thinly and swiped his bare arm across the snot on his upper lip. 'Fuckin' crybaby, right?'

'No, man,' Vern said uncomfortably. 'If anyone was rankin' out my dad -'

'Then you got to kill 'em!' Teddy said briskly, almost arrogantly. 'Kill their asses. Right, Chris?'

'Right,' Chris said amiably, and clapped Teddy on the back.

'Right, Gordie?'

'Absolutely,' I said, wondering how Teddy could care so much for his dad when his dad had practically killed him, and how I couldn't seem to give much of a shit one way or the other about my own dad, when so far as I could remember, he had never laid a hand on me since I was three and got some bleach from under the sink and started to eat it.

We walked another two hundred yards down the tracks and Teddy said in a quieter voice: 'Hey, if I spoiled your good

time, I'm sorry. I guess that was pretty stupid shit back there at that fence.'

'I ain't sure I want it to be no good time,' Vern said suddenly.

Chris looked at him. 'You sayin' you want to go back, man?'

'No, huh-uh!' Vern's face knotted in thought. 'But goin' to see a dead kid ... it shouldn't be a party, maybe. I mean, if you can dig it. I mean ...' He looked at us rather wildly. 'I mean, I could be a little scared. If you get me.'

Nobody said anything and Vern plunged on:

'I mean, sometimes I get nightmares. Like ... aw, you guys remember the time Danny Naughton left that pile of old funnybooks, the ones with the vampires and people getting cut up and all that shit? Jeezum-crow, I'd wake up in the middle of the night dreamin' about some guy hangin' in a house with his face all green or somethin', you know, like that, and it seems like there's somethin' under the bed and if I dangled a hand over the side, that thing might, you know, grab me...'

We all began to nod. We knew about the night-sweats. I would have laughed then, though, if you had told me that one day not too many years from then I'd parley a simple case of the night-sweats into about a million dollars.

'And I don't dare say anything because my friggin' brother ... well, you know Billy ... he'd broadcast it...' He shrugged miserably. 'So I'm ascaresed to look at that kid 'cause if he's, you know, if he's really bad...'

I swallowed and glanced at Chris. He was looking gravely at Vern and nodding for him to go on.

'If he's really bad,' Vern resumed, 'I'll have nightmares about him and wake up thinkin' it's him under my bed, all cut up in a pool of blood like he just came out of one of those Saladmaster gadgets they show on TV, just eyeballs and hair, but movin' somehow, if you can dig that, movin' somehow, you know, and gettin' ready to grab -'

'Jesus Christ,' Teddy said thickly. 'What a fuckin' bedtime story.'

'Well I can't help it,' Vern said, his voice defensive. 'But I feel like we hafta see him, even if there are bad dreams. You know? Like we hafta. But ... but maybe it shouldn't be no good time.'

'Yeah,' Chris said softly. 'Maybe it shouldn't.'

Vern said pleadingly: 'You won't tell none of the other guys, will you? I don't mean about the nightmares, everybody has those - I mean about wakin' up and thinkin' there might be somethin' under the bed. I'm too fuckin' old for the boogeyman.'

We all said we wouldn't tell, and a glum silence fell over us again. It was only quarter to three, but it felt much later. It was too hot and too much had happened. We weren't even over into Harlow yet. We were going to have to pick them up and lay them down if we were going to make some real miles before dark.

We passed the railroad junction and a signal on a tall, rusty pole and all of us paused to chuck cinders at the steel flag on top, but nobody hit it. And around three-thirty we came to the Castle River and the GS&WM trestle which crossed it.

The river was better than a hundred yards across at that point in 1960; I've been back to look at it since then, and found it had narrowed up quite a bit during the years between. They're always fooling with the river, trying to make it work better for the mills, and they've put in so many dams that it's pretty well tamed. But in those days there were only three dams on the whole length of the river as it ran across all of New Hampshire and half of Maine. The Castle was still pretty free back then, and every third spring it would overflow its banks and cover Route 136 in either Harlow or Danvers Junction or both.

Now, at the end of the driest summer western Maine had seen since the depression, it was still broad. From where we stood on the Castle Rock side, the bulking forest on the Harlow side looked like a different country altogether. The pines and spruces over there were bluish in the heat-haze of the afternoon. The rails went across the water fifty feet up, supported by an underpinning of tarred wooden support posts and crisscrossing beams. The water was so shallow you could look down and see the tops of the cement plugs which had been planted ten feet deep in the riverbed to hold up the trestle.

The trestle itself was pretty chintzy - the rails ran over a long, narrow wooden platform of six-by-fours. There was a four-inch gap between each pair of these beams where you could look all the way down into the water. On the sides, there was no more than eighteen inches between the rail and the edge of the trestle. If a train came it was maybe enough room to avoid getting plastered ... but the wind generated by a highballing freight would surely sweep you off to fall to a certain death against the rocks just below the surface of the shallow running water.

Looking at the trestle, we all felt fear start to crawl around in our bellies ... and mixing uneasily with the fear was the excitement of a boss dare, a really big one, something you could brag on for weeks after you got home ... jf you got home. That queer light was creeping back into Teddy's eyes and I thought he wasn't seeing the GS&WM train trestle at all but a long sandy beach, a thousand LSTs aground in the foaming waves, ten thousand GIs charging up the sand, combat boots digging. They were leaping rolls of barbed wire! Tossing grenades at pillboxes! Overrunning machine-gun nests!

We were standing beside the tracks where the cinders sloped away towards the river's cut - the place where the embankment stopped and the trestle began. Looking down, I could see where the slope started to get steep. The cinders gave way to straggly, tough-looking bushes and slabs of grey rock. Further down there were a few stunted firs with exposed roots writhing their way out of fissures in the plates of rock; they seemed to be looking down at their own miserable reflections in the running water.

At this point, the Castle River actually looked fairly clean; at Castle Rock it was just entering Maine's textile-mill belt. But there were no fish jumping out there, although the river was clear enough to see the bottom - you had to go another ten miles upstream and towards New Hampshire before you could see any fish in the Castle. There were no fish, and along the edges of the river you could see dirty collars of foam around some of the rocks - the foam was the colour of old ivory. The river's smell was not particularly pleasant, either; it smelled like a laundry hamper full of mildewy towels. Dragonflies stitched at the surface of the water and laid their eggs with impunity. There were no trout to eat them. Hell, there weren't even any shiners.

'Man,' Chris said softly.

'Come on,' Teddy said in that brisk, arrogant way. 'Let's go.' He was already edging his way out, walking on the six-by-fours between the shining rails.

'Say,' Vern said uneasily, 'any of you guys know when the next train's due?'

We all shrugged.

I said: There's the Route 136 bridge...'

'Hey, come on, gimme a break!' Teddy cried. 'That means walkin' five miles down the river on this side and then five miles back up on the other side ... it'll take us until dark! If we use the trestle, we can get to the same place in ten minutes?'

'But if a train comes, there's nowhere to go,' Vern said. He wasn't looking at Teddy. He was looking down at the fast, bland river.

'Fuck there isn't!' Teddy said indignantly. He swung over the edge and held one of the wooden supports between the rails. He hadn't gone out very far - his sneakers were almost touching the ground - but he thought of doing that same thing above the middle of the river with a fifty-foot drop beneath and a train bellowing by just over my head, a train that would probably be dropping some nice hot sparks into my hair and down the back of my neck ... none of that actually made me feel like Queen for a Day.

'See how easy it is?' Teddy said. He dropped to the embankment, dusted his hands, and climbed back up beside us.

'You tellin' me you're gonna hang on that way if it's a two hundred car freight?' Chris asked. 'Just sorta hang there by your hands for five or ten minutes?'

'You chicken?' Teddy shouted.

'No, just askin' what you'd do,' Chris said, grinning. 'Peace, man.'

'Go around if you want to!' Teddy brayed. 'Who gives a fuck? I'll wait for you! I'll take a nap!'

'One train already went by,' I said reluctantly. 'And there probably isn't any more than one, two trains a day that go through Harlow. Look at this.' I kicked the weeds growing up through the railroad ties with one sneaker. There were no weeds growing between the tracks which ran between Castle Rock and Lewiston.

'There. See?' Teddy was triumphant.

'But still, there's a chance,' I added.

'Yeah,' Chris said. He was looking only at me, his eyes sparkling. 'Dare you, Lachance.'

'Dares go first.'

'Okay,' Chris said. He widened his gaze to take in Teddy and Vern. 'Any pussies here?'

'NO?' Teddy shouted.

Vern cleared his throat, croaked, cleared it again, and said 'no' in a very small voice. He smiled a weak, sick smile.

'Okay,' Chris said ... but we hesitated for a moment, even Teddy, looking warily up and down the tracks. I knelt down

and took one of the steel rails firmly in my hand, never minding that it was almost hot enough to blister the skin. The rail was mute.

'Okay,' I said, and as I said it some guy pole-vaulted in my stomach. He dug his pole all the way into my balls, it felt like, and ended up sitting astride my heart.

We went out onto the trestle single-file: Chris first, then Teddy, then Vern, and me playing tail-end Charlie because I was the one who said dares go first. We walked on the platform crossties between the rails, and you had to look at your feet whether you were scared of heights or not. A misstep and you would go down to your crotch, probably with a broken ankle to pay.

The embankment dropped away beneath me, and every step further out seemed to seal our decision more firmly ... and to make it feel more suicidally stupid. I stopped to look up when I saw the rocks giving way to water far beneath me. Chris and Teddy were a long way ahead, almost out over the middle, and Vern was tottering slowly along behind them, peering studiously down at his feet. He looked like an old lady trying out stilts with his head poked downward, his back hunched, his arms held out for balance. I looked back over my shoulder. Too far, man, I had to keep going now, and not only because a train might come. If I went back, I'd be a pussy for life.

So I got walking again. After looking down at that endless series of crossties for a while, with a glimpse of running water between each pair, I started to feel dizzy and disoriented. Each time I brought my foot down, part of my brain assured me it was going to plunge through into space, even though I could see it was not.

I became acutely aware of all the noises inside me and outside me, like some crazy orchestra tuning up to play. The steady thump of my heart, the bloodbeat in my ears like a drum being played with brushes, the creak of sinews like the strings of a violin that has been tuned radically upward, the steady hiss of the river, the hot hum of a locust digging into tight bark, the monotonous cry of a chickadee, and somewhere, far away, a barking dog. Chopper, maybe. The mildewy smell of the Castle River was strong in my nose. The long muscles in my thighs were trembling. I kept thinking how much safer it would be (probably faster, as well) if I just got down on my hands and knees and scuttered along that way. But I wouldn't do that - none of us would. If the Saturday matinee movies down to the Gem had taught us anything, it was that Only Losers Crawl. It was one of the central tenets of the Gospel According to Hollywood. Good guys walk firmly upright, and if your sinews are creaking like overtuned violin strings because of the adrenalin rush going on in your body, and if the long muscles in your thighs are trembling for the same reason, why, so be it.

I had to stop in the middle of the trestle and look up at the sky for a while. That dizzy feeling had been getting worse. I saw phantom crossties - they seemed to float right in front of my nose. Then they faded out and I began to feel okay again. I looked ahead and saw I had almost caught up with Vern, who was slowpoking along worse than ever. Chris and Teddy were almost all the way across.

And although I've since written seven books about people who can do such exotic things as read minds and precognit the future, that was when I had my first and last psychic flash. I'm sure that's what it was; how else to explain it? I squatted and made a fist around the rail on my left. It

thrummed in my hand. It was thrumming so hard that it was like gripping a bundle of deadly metallic snakes.

You've heard it said 'His bowels turned to water'? I know what that phrase means - exactly what it means. It may be the most accurate cliché ever coined. I've been scared since, badly scared, but I've never been as scared as I was in that moment, holding that hot live rail. It seemed that for a moment all my works below throat level just went limp and lay there in an internal faint. A thin stream of urine ran listlessly down the inside of one thigh. My mouth opened. I didn't open it, it opened by itself, the jaw dropping like a trapdoor from which the hinge pins had suddenly been moved. My tongue was plastered suffocatingly against the roof of my mouth. All my muscles were locked. That was the worst. My works were limp but my muscles were in a kind of dreadful lockbolt and I couldn't move at all. It was only for a moment, but in the subjective timestream, it seemed forever.

All sensory input became intensified, as if some powersurge had occurred in the electrical flow of my brain, cranking everything up from a hundred and ten volts to two-hundred. I could hear a plane passing in the sky somewhere near and had time to wish I was on it, just sitting in a window seat with a Coke in my hand and gazing idly down at the shining line of a river whose name I did not know. I could see every little splinter and gouge in the tarred crosstie I was squatting on. And out of the corner of my eye I could see the rail itself with my hand still clutched around it, glittering insanely. The vibration from that rail sank so deeply into my hand that when I took it away it still vibrated, the nerve-endings kicking each other over again and again, tingling the way a hand or a foot tingles when it has been asleep and is starting to wake up. I could taste my saliva, suddenly all electric and sour and thickened to curds along my gums.

And worst, somehow most horrible of all, I couldn't hear the train yet, could not know if it was rushing at me from ahead or behind, or how close it was. It was invisible. It was unannounced, except for that shaking rail in my hand. There was only that to advertise its imminent arrival. An image of Ray Brower, dreadfully mangled and thrown into a ditch somewhere like a ripped-open laundry bag, reeled before my eyes. We would join him, or at least Vern and I would, or at least I would. We had invited ourselves to our own funerals.

The last thought broke the paralysis and I shot to my feet. I probably would have looked like a jack-in-the-box to anyone watching, but to myself I felt like a boy in underwater slow motion, shooting up not through five feet of air but rather up through five hundred feet of water, moving slowly, moving with a dreadful languidness as the water parted grudgingly.

But at last I did break the surface.

I screamed: 'TRAIN!'

The last of the paralysis fell from me and I began to run.

Vern's head jerked back over his shoulder. The surprise that distorted his face was almost comically exaggerated, written as large as the letters in a Dick and Jane primer. He saw me break into my clumsy, shambling run, dancing from one horribly high crosstie to the next, and knew I wasn't joking. He began to run himself.

Far ahead, I could see Chris stepping off the ties and onto the solid safe embankment and I hated him with a sudden bright green hate as juicy and as bitter as the sap in an April leaf. He was safe. That fucker was safe. I watched him drop to his knees and grab a rail..

My left foot almost slipped into the yaw beneath me. I flailed with my arms, my eyes as hot as ball bearings in some runaway piece of machinery, got my balance, and ran on. Now I was right behind Vern. We were past the halfway point and for the first time I heard the train. It was coming from behind us, coming from the Castle Rock side of the river. It was a low rumbling noise that began to rise slightly and sort itself into the diesel thrum of the engine and the higher, more sinister sound of big grooved wheels turning heavily on the rails.

'Awwwwwwww, shit!' Vern screamed.

'Run, you pussy!' I yelled, and thumped him on the back.

'I can't! I'll fall!'

'Runfaster!' ia wwwwwwwwwww-SHIT!'

But he ran faster, a shambling scarecrow with a bare, sunburnt back, the collar of his shirt swinging and dangling below his butt. I could see the sweat standing out on his peeling shoulderblades, standing out in perfect little beads. I could see the fine down on the nape of his neck. His muscles clenched and loosened, clenched and loosened, clenched and loosened. His spine stood out in a series of knobs, each knob casting its own crescent-shaped shadow - I could see that these knobs grew closer together as they approached his neck. He was still holding his bedroll and I was still holding mine. Vern's feet thudded on the crossties. He almost missed one, lunged forward with his arms out, and I whacked him on the back again to keep him going.

'Gordeeee I can't AWWWWWWWWWWW-SHE-EEEEYIT-'

'RUN FASTER, DICKFACE!' I bellowed and was I enjoying this!

Yeah - in some peculiar, self-destructive way that I have experienced since only when completely and utterly drunk, I was. I was driving Vern Tessio like a drover getting a particularly fine cow to market. And maybe he was enjoying his own fear in that same way, bawling like that self-same cow, hollering and sweating, his ribcage rising and falling like the bellows of a blacksmith on a speed-trip, clumsily keeping his footing, lurching ahead.

The train was very loud now, its engine deepening to a steady rumble. Its whistle sounded as it crossed the junction point where we had paused to chuck cinders at the rail-flag. I had finally gotten my hellhound, like it or not. I kept waiting for the trestle to start shaking under my feet. When that happened, it would be right behind us.

'GO FASTER, VERN! FAAASTER!'

'Oh Gawd Gordie oh Gawd Gordie oh Gawd AWWWWWWW-SHEEEEEEEYIT!'

The freight's electric horn suddenly spanked the air into a hundred pieces with one long loud blast, making everything you ever saw in a movie or a comic book or one of your own daydreams fly apart, letting you know what both the heroes and the cowards really heard when death flew at them:

WHHHHHHHONNNNNNK!

WHHHHHHHHHONNNNNNNNK!

And then Chris was below us and to the right, and Teddy was behind him, his glasses flashing back arcs of sunlight, and they were both mouthing a single word and the word was jump! but the train had sucked all the blood out of the word, leaving only its shape in their mouths. The trestle began to shake as the train charged across it. We jumped.

Vern landed full-length in the dust and the cinders and I landed right beside him, almost on top of him. I never did see that train, nor do I know if its engineer saw us - when I mentioned the possibility that he hadn't seen us to Chris a couple of years later, he said: 'They don't blow the electric horn like that just for chucks, Gordie.' But he could have; he could have been blowing it just for the hell of it. I suppose. Right then, such fine points didn't much matter. I clapped my hands over my ears and dug my face into the hot dirt as the freight went by, metal squalling against metal, the air buffeting us. I had no urge to look at it. It was a long freight bu; I never looked at all. Before it had passed completely, I felt a warm hand on my neck and knew it was Chris's.

When it was gone - when I was sure it was gone -I raised my head like a soldier coming out of his foxhole at the end of a day-long artillery barrage. Vern was still plastered into the dirt, shivering. Chris was sitting cross-legged between us, one hand on Vern's sweaty neck, the other still on mine.

When Vern finally sat up, shaking all over and licking his lips compulsively, Chris said, 'What you guys think if we drink those Cokes? Could anybody use one besides me?'

We all thought we could use one.

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About a quarter of a mile along on the Harlow side, the GS&WM tracks plunged directly into the woods. The heavily wooded land sloped down to a marshy area. It was full of mosquitoes almost as big as fighter-planes, but it was cool... blessedly cool.

We sat down in the shade to drink our Cokes. Vern and I threw our shirts over our shoulders to keep the bugs off, but Chris and Teddy just sat naked to the waist, looking as cool and collected as two Eskimos in an icehouse. We hadn't been there five minutes when Vern had to go off into the bushes and take a squat, which led to a good deal of joking and elbowing when he got back.

'Train scare you much, Vern?'

'No,' Vern said. 'I was gonna squat when we got across, anyway. I hadda take a squat, you know?'

'Verrrrrrrn!' Chris and Teddy chorused.

'Come on, you guys, I did. Sincerely.'

'Then you won't mind if we examine the seat of your Jockeys for Hershey-squirts, willya?' Teddy asked, and Vern laughed, finally understanding that he was getting ribbed.

'Go screw.'

Chris turned to me. 'That train scare you, Gordie?'

'Nope,' I said, and sipped my Coke.

'Not much, you sucker.' He punched my arm.

'Sincerely! I wasn't scared at all.'

'Yeah? You wasn't scared?' Teddy was looking me over carefully.

'No. I was fuckm' petrified.'

This slew all of them, even Vern, and we laughed long and hard. Then we just laid back, not goofing anymore, just drinking our Cokes and being quiet. My body felt warm, exercised, at peace with itself. Nothing in it was working crossgrain to anything else. I was alive and glad to be. Everything seemed to stand out with a special dearness, and although I never could have said that out loud I didn't think it mattered - maybe that sense of dearness was something I wanted just for myself.

I think I began to understand a little bit that day what makes men become daredevils. I paid twenty dollars to watch Evel Knievel attempt his jump over the Snake River Canyon a couple of years ago and my wife was horrified. She told me that if I'd been born a Roman I would have been right there in the Coliseum, munching grapes and watching as the lions disembowelled the Christians. She was wrong, although it was hard for me to explain why

(and, really, I think she thought I was just jiving her). I didn't cough up that twenty to watch the man die on coast-to-coast closed-circuit TV, although I was quite sure that was exactly what was going to happen. I went because of the shadows that are always somewhere behind our eyes, because of what Bruce Springsteen calls the darkness on the edge of town in one of his songs, and at one time or another I think everyone wants to dare that darkness in spite of the jalopy bodies that some . oker of a God gave us human beings. No ... not in spite of our jalopy bodies but because of them.

'Hey, tell that story,' Chris said suddenly, sitting up.

'What story?' I asked, although I guess I knew.

I always felt uncomfortable when the talk turned to my stories, although all of them seemed to like them - wanting to tell stories, even wanting to write them down ... that was just peculiar enough to be boss, like wanting to grow up to be a sewer inspector or a Grand Prix mechanic. Richie Jenner, a kid who hung around with us until his family moved to Nebraska in 1959, was the first one to find out that I wanted to be a writer when I grew up, that I wanted to do that for my full-time job. We were up in my room, just fooling around, and he found a bunch of handwritten pages under the comic books in a carton in my closet. What's this! Richie asks. Nothin', I say, and try to grab them back. Richie held the pages up out of reach ... I must admit that I didn't try very hard to get them back. I wanted him to read them and at the same time I didn't - an uneasy mix of pride and shyness that has never changed in me very much when someone asks to look. The act of writing itself is done in secret, like masturbation - oh, I have one friend who has done things like write stories in the display windows of bookshops and department stores, but this is a man who is

nearly crazy with courage, the kind of man you'd like to have with you if you just happened to fall down with a heart attack in a city where no one knew you. For me, it always wants to be sex and always falls short - it's always that adolescent handjob in 'the bathroom with the door locked.

Richie sat right there on the end of my bed for most of the afternoon reading his way through the stuff I had been doing, most of it influenced by the same sort of comic books as the ones that had given Vern nightmares. And when he was done, Richie looked at me in a strange new way that made me feel very peculiar, as if he had been forced to reappraise my whole personality. He said, You're pretty good at this. Why don't you show these to Chris? I said no, I wanted it to be a secret, and Richie said: Why... It ain't pussy. You ain't no queer. I mean, it ain't poetry.

Still, I made him promise not to tell anybody about my stories and of course he did and it turned out most of them liked to read the stuff I wrote, which was mostly about getting buried alive or some crook coming back from the dead and slaughtering the jury that had condemned him in Twelve Interesting Ways or a maniac that went crazy and chopped a lot of people into veal cutlets before the hero, Curt Cannon, 'cut the subhuman, screeching madman to pieces with round after round from his smoking .45 automatic.'

In my stories, they were always rounds. Never bullets.

For a change of pace, there were the Le Dio stories. Le Dio was a town in France, and during 1942, a grim squad of tired American dog-faces were trying to re-take it from the Nazis (this was two years before I discovered that the Allies didn't land in France until 1944). They went on trying to re-take it, fighting their way from street to street, through

about forty stories which I wrote between the ages of nine and fourteen. Teddy was absolutely made for the Le Dio stories, and I think I wrote the last dozen or so just for him -by then I was heartily sick of Le Dio and writing things like Mon Dieu and Cherchez le Bochel and Fermez la portel In Le Dio, French peasants were always hissing to GI dogfaces to Fermez la portel But Teddy would hunch over the pages, his eyes big, his brow beaded with sweat, his face twisting. There were times when I could almost hear air-cooled Brownings and whistling 88s going off in his skull. The way he clamoured for more Le Dio stories was both pleasing and frightening.

Nowadays writing is my work and the pleasure has diminished a little, and more and more often that guilty, masturbatory pleasure has become associated in my head with the coldly clinical images of artificial insemination: I come according to the rules and regs laid down in my publishing contract. And although no one is ever going to call me the Thomas Wolfe of my generation, I rarely feel like a cheat: I get it off as hard as I can every fucking time. Doing less would, in an odd way, be like going faggot - or what that meant to us back then. What scares me is how often it hurts these days. Back then I was sometimes disgusted by how damned good it felt to write. These days I sometimes look at this typewriter and wonder when it's going to run out of good words. I don't want that to happen. I guess I can bear the pain as long as I don't run out of good words, you know?

'What's this story?' Vern asked uneasily. 'It ain't a horror story, is it, Gordie? I don't think I want to hear no horror stories. I'm not up for that, man.'

'No, it ain't a horror,' Chris said. 'It's really funny. Gross, but funny. Go on, Gordie. Hammer that fucker to us.'

'Is it about Le Dio?' Teddy asked.

'No, it ain't about Le Dio, you fuckin' psycho,' Chris said, and rabbit-punched him. 'It's about this pie-eatin* contest.'

'Hey, I didn't even write it down yet,' I said.

'Yeah, but tell it'

'You guys want to hear it?'

'Sure,' Teddy said. 'Boss.'

'Well, it's about this made-up town, Gretna, I call it. Gretna, Maine.'

'Gretna?' Vern said, grinning. 'What kind of name is that? There ain't no Gretna in Maine.'

'Shut up, fool,' Chris said. 'He just toldja it was made-up, didn't he?'

'Yeah, but Gretna, that sounds pretty stupid -'

'Lots of real towns sound stupid,' Chris said. 'I mean, what about Alfred, Maine? Or Saco, Maine? Or Jerusalem's Lot? Or Castle-fuckin'-Rock? There ain't no castle here. Most town names are stupid. You just don't think so because you're used to 'em. Right, Gordie?'

'Sure,' I said, but privately I thought Vern was right- Gretna was a pretty stupid name for a town. I just hadn't been able to think of another one. 'So anyway, they're having their annual Pioneer Days, just like in Castle Rock -'

'Yeah, Pioneer Days, that's a fuckin' blast,' Vern said earnestly. 'I put my whole family in that jail on wheels they have, even fuckin' Billy. It was only for half an hour and it

cost me my whole allowance but it was worth it just to know where that sonofawhore was -'

'Will you shut up and let him tell it?' Teddy hollered.

Vern blinked. 'Sure. Yeah. Okay.'

'Go on, Gordie,' Chris said.

'It's not really much -'

'Naw, we don't expect much from a wet end like you,' Teddy said, 'but tell it anyway.'

I cleared my throat. 'So anyway. It's Pioneer Days, and on the last night they have these three big events. There's an egg-roll for the little kids and a sack-race for kids that are like eight or nine, and then there's the pie-eating contest. And the main guy of the story is this fat kid nobody likes named Davie Hogan.'

'Like Charlie Hogan's brother if he had one,' Vern said, and then shrank back as Chris rabbit-punched him again.

'This kid, he's our age, but he's fat. He weighs like one-eighty and he's always gettin' beat up and ranked out. And all the kids, instead of calling him Davie, they call him Lard Ass Hogan and rank him out whenever they get the chance.'

They nodded respectfully, showing the proper sympathy for Lard Ass, although if such a guy ever showed up in Castle Rock, we all would have been out teasing him and ranking him to the dogs and back.

'So he decided to take revenge because he's, like, fed up, you know? He's only in the pie-eating contest, but that's

like the final event during Pioneer Days and everyone really digs it. The prize is five bucks -'

'So he wins it and gives the finger to everybody!' Teddy said. 'Boss!'

'No, it's better than that,' Chris said. 'Just shut up and listen.'

'Lard Ass figures to himself, five bucks, what's that? If anybody remembers anything at all in two weeks, it'll just be that fuckin' pig Hogan out-ate everybody, well, it figures, let's go over his house and rank the shit out of him, only now we'll call him Pie Ass instead of Lard Ass.'

They nodded some more, agreeing that Davie Hogan was a thinking cat. I began to warm to my own story.

'But everybody expects him to enter the contest, you know. Even his mom and dad. Hey, they practically got that five bucks spent for him already.'

'Yeah, right,' Chris said.

'So he's thinkin' about it and hating the whole thing, because being fat isn't really his fault. See, he'd got these weird fuckin' glands, somethin', and -'

'My cousin's like that!' Vern said excitedly. 'Sincerely! She weighs close to three hundred pounds! Supposed to be her Hyboid Gland or something like that. I dunno about her Hyboid Gland, but what a fuckin' blimp, no shit, she looks like a fuckin' Thanksgiving turkey, and this one time -'

'Will you shut the fuck up, Vern?' Chris cried violently. 'For the last time! Honest to God!' He had finished his Coke and

now he turned the hourglass-shaped green bottle upside down and brandished it over Vent's head.

'Yeah, right, I'm sorry. Go on, Gordie. It's a swell story.'

I smiled. I didn't really mind Vern's interruptions, but of course I couldn't tell Chris that; he was the self-appointed Guardian of Art 'So he's turnin' it over in his mind, you know, the whole week before the contest At school kids keep comin' up to him and sayin' Hey Lard Ass, how many pies ya gonna eat? Ya gonna eat ten? Twenty? Fuckin' eighty! And Lard Ass, he says, How should I know. I don't even know what kind they are. And see, there's quite a bit of interest in the contest because the champ is this grownup whose name is, uh, Bill Traynor, I guess. And this guy Traynor, he ain't even fat In fact, he's a real stringbean. But he can eat pies like a whiz, and the year before he ate six pies in five minutes.'

'Whole pies?' Teddy asked, awe-struck.

'Right you are. And Lard Ass, he's the youngest guy to ever be in the contest'

'Go, Lard Ass!' Teddy cried excitedly. 'Scoff up those fuckin' pies!'

'Tell 'em about the other guys in it,' Chris said.

'Okay. Besides Lard Ass Hogan and Bill Traynor, there was Calvin Spier, the fattest guy in town - he ran the jewellery store -'

'Gretna Jewels,' Vern said, and snickered. Chris gave him a black look.

'And then there's this guy who's a disc jockey at a radio station up in Lewiston, he ain't exactly fat but he's sorta chubby, you know. And the last guy was Hubert Gretna the Third, who was the principal of Lard Ass Hogan's school.'

'He was eatin' against his own principal!' Teddy asked.

Chris clutched his knees and rocked back and forth joyfully. 'Ain't that great! Go on, Gordie!'

I had them now. They were all leaning forward. I felt an intoxicating sense of power. I tossed my empty Coke bottle into the woods and scrunched around a little bit to get comfortable. I remember hearing the chickadee again, off in the woods, farther away now, lifting its monotonous, endless call into the sky: dee-dee-dee dee ...

'So he gets this idea,' I said. The greatest revenge idea a kid ever had. The big night comes - the end of Pioneer Days. The pie-eating contest comes just before the fireworks. The Main Street of Gretna has been closed off so people can walk around in it, and there's this big platform set up right in the street. There's bunting hanging down and a big crowd in front. There's also a photographer from the paper, to get a picture of the winner with blueberries all over his face, because it turned out to be blueberry pies that year. Also, I almost forgot to tell you this, they had to eat the pies with their hands tied behind their backs. So, dig it, they come up onto the platform...'

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From *The Revenge of Lard Ass Hogan*, by Gordon Lachance, originally published in *Cavalier* magazine, March, 1975. Used by permission.

They came up onto the platform one by one and stood behind a long trestle table covered with a linen cloth. The table was stacked high with pies and stood at the edge of the platform. Above it were looped necklaces of bare 100-watt bulbs, moths and night-fliers banging softly against them and haloing them. Above the platform, bathed in spotlights, was a long sign which read: THE GREAT GREYNA PIE-EAT OF 1960! To either side of this sign hung battered loudspeakers, supplied by Chuck Day of the Great Day Appliance Shop. Bill Travis, the reigning champion, was Chuck's cousin.

As each contestant came up, his hands bound behind him and his shirtfront open, like Sidney Carton on his way to the guillotine, Mayor Charbonneau would announce his name over Chuck's PA system and tie a large white bib around his neck. Calvin Spier received token applause only; in spite of his belly, which was the size of a twenty-gallon waterbarrel, he was considered an underdog second only to the Hogan kid (most considered Lard Ass a comer, but too young and inexperienced to do much this year).

After Spier, Bob Cormier was introduced. Cormier was a disc jockey who did a popular afternoon programme at WLAM in Lewiston. He got a bigger hand, accompanied by a few screams from the teenaged girls in the audience. The girls thought he was 'cute'. John Wiggins, principal of Greyna Elementary School, followed Cormier. He received a hearty cheer from the older section of the audience - and a few scattered boos from fractious members of his student body. Wiggins managed to beam paternally and frown sternly down on the audience at the same time.

Next, Mayor Charbonneau introduced Lard Ass.

'A new participant in the annual Great Gretna Pie-Eat, but one we expect great things from in the future ... young master David Hogan! Lard Ass got a big round of applause as Mayor Charbonneau tied on his bib, and as it was dying away, a rehearsed Greek chorus just beyond the reach of the 100-watt bulbs cried out in wicked unison: "Go-get-'em-Lard Ass?"

There were muffled shrieks of laughter, running footsteps, a few shadows that no one could (or would) identify, some nervous laughter, some judicial frowns (the largest from Hizzoner Charbonneau, the most visible figure of authority). Lard Ass himself appeared to not even notice. The small smile greasing his thick lips and creasing his thick chops did not change as the Mayor, still frowning largely, tied his bib around his neck and told him not to pay any attention to fools in the audience (as if the Mayor had even the faintest inkling of what monstrous fools Lard Ass Hogan had suffered and would continue to suffer as he rumbled through life like a Nazi Tiger Tank). The Mayor's breath was warm and smelled of beer.

The last contestant to mount the bunting-decorated stage drew the loudest and most sustained applause; this was the legendary Bill Travis, six feet five inches tall, gangling, voracious. Travis was a mechanic at the local Amoco station down by the railyard, a likeable fellow if there ever was one.; It was common knowledge around town that there was more involved in the Great Gretna Pie-Eat than a mere five dollars - at least, for Bill Travis there was. There were two reasons for this. First, people always came by the station to congratulate Bill after he won the contest, and most everyone who came to congratulate stayed to get his gas-tank filled. And the two garage-bays were sometimes booked up for a solid month after the contest. Folks would come in to get a muffler replaced or their wheel-bearings

greased, and would sit in the theatre chairs ranged along one wall (Jerry Mating, who owned the Amoco, had salvaged them from the old Gem Theatre when it was torn down in 1957), drinking Cokes and Moxies from out of the machine and gassing with Bill about the contest as he changed sparkplugs or rolled around on a crawlie-wheelie under someone's International Harvester pickup, looking for holes in the exhaust system. Bill always seemed willing to talk, which was one of the reasons he was so well-liked in Gretna.

There was some dispute around town as to whether Jerry Maling gave Bill a flat bonus for the extra business his yearly feat (or yearly eat, if you prefer) brought in, or if he got an out-and-out raise. Whatever way it was, there could be no doubt that Travis did much better than most small-town wrench jokeys. He had a nice-looking two-storey ranch out on the Sabbatus Road, and certain snide people referred to it as 'the house that pies built'. That was probably an exaggeration, but Bill had it coming another way ... which brings us to the second reason there was more in it for Travis than just five dollars.

The pie-eat was a hot wagering event in Gretna. Perhaps most people only came to laugh, but a goodly minority also came to lay their money down. Contestants were observed and discussed by these betters as ardently as thoroughbreds are observed and discussed by racing touts. The wagerers accosted contestants' friends, relatives, even mere acquaintances. They pried out any and all details concerning the contestants' eating habits. There was always a lot of discussion about that year's official pie - apple was considered a 'heavy' pie, apricot a 'light' one (although a contestant had to resign himself to a day or two of the trots after downing three or four apricot pies). That year's official pie, blueberry, was considered a happy medium. Better, of

course, were particularly interested in their man's stomach for blueberry dishes. How did he do on blueberry buckle? Did he favour blueberry jam over strawberry preserve? Had he been known to sprinkle blueberries on his breakfast cereal, or was he strictly a bananas-and-cream sort of fellow?

There were other questions of some moment. Was he a fast eater who slowed down or a slow eater who started to speed up as things got serious or just a good steady all-around trencher-man? How many hot dogs could he put away while watching a Babe Ruth League game down at the St Dom's baseball field? Was he much of a beer-drinker, and, if so, how many bottles did he usually put away in the course of an evening? Was he a belcher? It was believed that a good belcher was a bit tougher to beat over the long haul.

All of this and other information was sifted, the odds laid, the bets made. How much money actually changed hands during the week or so following pie-night I have no way of knowing, but if you held a gun to my head and forced me to guess, I'd put it at close to a thousand dollars - that probably sounds like a pretty paltry figure, but it was a lot of money to be passing around in such a small town fifteen years ago.

And because the contest was honest and a strict time-limit of ten minutes was observed, no one objected to a competitor betting on himself, and Bill Travis did so every year. Talk was, as he nodded, smiling, to his audience on that summer night in 1960, that he had bet a substantial amount on himself again, and that the best he had been able to do this year was one-for-five odds. If you're not the betting type, let me explain it this way: he'd have to put two hundred and fifty dollars at risk to win fifty. Not a good

deal at all, but it was the price of success - and as he stood there, soaking up the applause and smiling easy, he didn't look too worried about it.

'And the defending champion,' Mayor Charbonneau trumpeted, 'Gretna's own Bill Travis!'

'Hoo, Bill!'

'How many you goin' through tonight, Bill?'

'You goin' for ten, Billy-boy?'

'I got a two-spot on you, Bill! Don't let me down, boy!'

'Save me one of those pies, Trav!'

Nodding and smiling with all proper modesty, Bill Travis allowed the Mayor to tie his bib around his neck. Then he sat down at the far right end of the table, near the place where Mayor Charbonneau would stand during the contest. From right to left, then, the eaters were Bill Travis, David 'Lard Ass' Hogan, Bob Cormier, principal John Wiggins, and Calvin Spier holding down the stool on the far left.

Mayor Charbonneau introduced Sylvia Dodge, who was even more of a contest figure than Bill Travis himself. She had been President of the Gretna Ladies' Auxiliary for years beyond telling (since the First Manassas, according to some town wits), and it was she who oversaw the baking of each year's pies, strictly subjecting each to her own rigorous quality control, which included a weigh-in ceremony on Mr Bancichek's butcher's scales down at the Freedom Market - this to make sure that each pie weighed within an ounce of the others.

Sylvia smiled regally down at the crowd, her blue hair twinkling under the hot glow of the light-bulbs. She made a short speech about how glad she was that so much of the town had turned out to celebrate their hardy pioneer forebears, the people who made this country great, for it was great, not only on the grassroots level where Mayor Charbonneau would be leading the local Republicans to the hallowed seats of town government again in November, but on the national level where the team of Nixon and Lodge would take the torch of freedom from Our Great and Beloved General and hold it high for Calvin Spier's belly rumbled noisily - Goinnnngg! There was laughter and even some applause. Sylvia Dodge, who knew perfectly well that Calvin was both a Democrat and a Catholic (either would have been forgivable alone, but the two combined, never), managed to blush, smile, and look furious all at the same time. She cleared her throat and wound up with a ringing exhortation to every boy and girl in the audience, telling them to always hold the red, white, and blue high, both in their hands and in their hearts, and to remember that smoking was a dirty, evil habit which made you cough. The boys and girls in the audience, most of whom would be wearing peace medallions and smoking not Camels but marijuana in another eight years, shuffled their feet and waited for the action to begin.

'Less talk, more eatin'!' someone in the back row called, and there was another burst of applause - it was heartier this time.

Mayor Charbonneau handed Sylvia a stopwatch and a silver police whistle, which she would blow at the end of the ten minutes of all-out pie-eating. Mayor Charbonneau would then step forward and hold up the hand of the winner.

'Are you ready??' Hizzoner's voice rolled triumphantly through the Great Day PA and off down Main Street.

The five pie-eaters declared they were ready.

'Are you SET??' Hizzoner enquired further.

The eaters growled that they were indeed set. Downstreet, a boy set off a rattling skein of firecrackers.

Mayor Charbonneau raised one pudgy hand and then dropped it 'GO!!!'

Five heads dropped into five pie-plates. The sound was like five large feet stamping firmly into mud. Wet chomping noises rose on the mild night air and then were blotted out as the betters and partisans in the crowd began to cheer on their favourites. And no more than the first pie had been demolished before most people realised that a possible upset was in the making.

Lard Ass Hogan, a seven-to-one underdog because of his age and inexperience, was eating like a boy possessed. His jaws machine-gunned up crust (the contest rules required that only the top crust of the pie be eaten, not the bottom), and when that had disappeared, a huge sucking sound issued from between his lips. It was like the sound of an industrial vacuum cleaner going to work. Moments later his whole head disappeared into the pie-plate. He raised it fifteen seconds later to indicate he was done. His cheeks and forehead were smeared with blueberry juice, and he looked like an extra in a minstrel show. He was done - done before the legendary Bill Travis had finished hay of his first pie.

Startled applause went up as the Major examined Lard Ass's pie-plate and pronounced it clean enough. He whipped a

second pie into place before the pace-maker. Lard Ass had gobbled a regulation-size pie in just forty-two seconds. It was a contest record.

He went at the second pie even more furiously yet, his head bobbing and smooching in the soft blueberry filling, and Bill Travis threw him a worried glance as he called for his second blueberry pie. As he told friends later, he felt he was in a real contest for the first time since 1957, when George Gamache gobbled three pies in four minutes and then fainted dead away. He had to wonder, he said, if he was up against a boy or a demon. He thought of the money he had riding on this and redoubled his efforts.

But if Travis had redoubled, Lard Ass had trebled. Blueberries flew from his second pie-dish, staining the tablecloth around him like a Jackson Pollock painting. There were blueberries in his hair, blueberries in his bib, blueberries standing out on his forehead as if, in an agony of concentration, he had actually begun to sweat blueberries.

'Doner he cried, lifting his head from his second pie dish before Bill Travis had even consumed the crust on his new pie.

'Better slow down, boy,' Hizzoner murmured. Charbonneau himself had ten dollars riding on Bill Travis. 'You got to pace yourself if you want to hold out.'

It was as if Lard Ass hadn't heard. He tore into his third pie with lunatic speed, jaws moving with lightning rapidity. And then -

But I must interrupt for a moment to tell you that there was an empty bottle in the medicine cabinet at Lard Ass Hogan's house. Earlier, that bottle had been three-quarters full of

pearl-yellow castor oil, perhaps the most noxious fluid ' .hat the good Lord, in His infinite wisdom, ever allowed upon or beneath the face of the earth. Lard Ass had emptied that bottle himself, drinking every last drop and then licking the rim, his mouth twisting, his belly gagging sourly, his brain filled with thoughts of sweet revenge.

And as he rapidly worked his way through his third pie (Calvin Spier, dead last as predicted, had not yet finished his first), Lard Ass began to deliberately torture himself with grisly fantasies. He was not eatin' pies at all; he was eating cowflops. He was eating great big gobs of greasy grimy gopher-guts. He was eating diced-up woodchuck intestines with blueberry sauce poured over them. Rancid blueberry sauce.

He finished his third pie and called for his fourth, now one full pie ahead of the legendary Bill Travis. The fickle crowd, sensing a new and unexpected champ in the making, began to cheer him on lustily.

But Lard Ass had no hope or intention of winning. He could not have continued at the pace he was currently setting if his own mother's life had been the prize. And besides, winning for him was losing; revenge was the only blue ribbon he sought. His belly groaning with castor oil, his throat opening and closing sickly, he finished his fourth pie and called for his fifth, the Ultimate Pie - Blueberries Become Electra, so to speak. He dropped his head into the dish, breaking the crust, and snuffled blueberries up his nose. Blueberries went down his shirt. The contents of his stomach seemed to suddenly gain weight. He chewed up pastry crust and swallowed it. He inhaled blueberries.

And suddenly the moment of revenge was at hand. His stomach, loaded beyond endurance, revolted. It clenched

like a strong hand encased in a slick rubber glove. His throat opened.

Lard Ass raised his head.

He grinned at Bill Travis with blue teeth.

Puke rumbled up his throat like a six-ton Peterbilt shooting through a tunnel.

It roared out of his mouth in a huge blue-and-yellow glurt, warm and gaily steaming. It covered Bill Travis, who only had time to utter one nonsense syllable - 'Googr was what it sounded like. Women in the audience screamed. Calvin Spier, who had watched this unannounced event with a numb and surprised expression on his face, leaned conversationally over the table as if to explain to the gaping audience just what was happening, and puked on the head of Marguerite Charbonneau, the Mayor's wife. She screamed and backed away, pawing futilely at her hair, which was now covered with a mixture of crushed berries, baked beans, and partially digested frankfurters (the latter two had been Cal Spier's dinner). She turned to her good friend Maria Lavin and threw up on the front of Maria's buckskin jacket.

In rapid succession, like a replay of the firecrackers:.

Bill Travis blew a great - and seemingly supercharged -jet of vomit out over the first two rows of spectators, his stunned face proclaiming to one and all, Man, I just can't believe I'm doing this; Chuck Day, who had received a generous portion of Bill Travis's surprise gift, threw up on his Hush Puppies and then blinked at them wonderingly, knowing full well that stuff would never come off suede; John Wiggins, principal of Gretna Elementary, opened his blue-lined mouth and said reprovingly: 'Really, this has ... YURRRK!' As befitted a man of his breeding and position, he did it in his

own pie-plate; Hizzonner Charbonneau, who found himself suddenly presiding over what must have seemed more like a stomach-flu hospital ward than a pie-eating contest, opened his mouth to call the whole thing off and upchucked all over the microphone.

'Jesus save us?' moaned Sylvia Dodge, and then her outraged supper - fried clams, cole slaw, butter-and-sugar corn (two ears' worth), and a generous helping of Muriel Harrington's Bosco chocolate cake - bolted out the emergency exit and landed with a large wet splash on the back of the Mayor's Robert Hall suitcoat.

Lard Ass Hogan, now at the absolute apogee of his young life, beamed happily out over the audience. Puke was everywhere. People staggered around in drunken circles, holding their throats and making weak cawing noises. Somebody's pet Pekinese ran past the stage, yapping crazily, and a man wearing jeans and a Western-style silk shirt threw up on it, nearly drowning it. Mrs Brockway, the Methodist minister's wife, made a long, basso belching noise which was followed by a gusher of degenerated roast beef and mashed potatoes and apple cobbler. The cobbler looked as if it might have been quite good when it first went down. Jerry Maling, who had come to see his pet mechanic walk away with all the marbles again, decided to get the righteous fuck out of this madhouse. He got about fifteen yards before tripping over a kid's little red wagon and realizing he had landed in a puddle of warm bile, Jerry tossed his cookies in his own lap and told folks later he only thanked Providence he had been wearing his coveralls. And Miss Norman, who taught Latin and English Fundamentals at the Gretna Consolidated High School, vomited into her own purse in an agony of propriety.

Lard Ass Hogan watched it all, his large face calm and beaming, his stomach suddenly sweet and steady with a warm balm it might never know again - that balm was a feeling of utter and complete satisfaction. He stood up, took the slightly tacky microphone from the trembling hand of Mayor Charbonneau, and said ...

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"I declare this contest a draw." Then he puts the mike down, walks off the back of the platform, and goes straight home. His mother's there, on account of she couldn't get a babysitter for Lard Ass's little sister, who was only two. And as soon as he comes in, all covered with puke and pie drool, still wearin' his bib, she says, "Davie, did you win?" But he doesn't say a fuckin' word, you know. Just goes upstairs to his room, locks the door, and lays down on his bed.'

I downed the last swallow in Chris's Coke and tossed it into the woods.

'Yeah, that's cool, then what happened?' Teddy asked eagerly.

'I don't know.'

'What do you mean, you don't know?' Teddy asked.

'It means it's the end. When you don't know what happens next, that's the end.'

'Whaaaat? Vern cried. There was an upset, suspicious look on his face, like he thought maybe he'd just gotten rooked playing penny-up Bingo at the Topsham Fair. 'What's all this happy crappy? How'd it come out'

'You have to use your imagination,' Chris said patiently.

'No, I ain't!' Vern said angrily. 'He's supposed to use his imagination! He made up the fuckin' story!'

'Yeah, what happened to the cat?' Teddy persisted. 'Come on, Gordie, tell us.'

'I think his dad was at the Pie-Eat and when he came home he beat the living crap out of Lard Ass.'

'Yeah, right,' Chris said. 'I bet that's just what happened.'

'And,' I said, 'the kids went right on calling him Lard Ass. Except that maybe some of them started calling him Puke-Yer-Guts, too.'

'That ending sucks,' Teddy said sadly.

That's why I didn't want to tell it.'

'You could have made it so he shot his father and ran away and joined the Texas Rangers,' Teddy said. 'How about that?'

Chris and I exchanged a glance. Chris raised one shoulder in a barely perceptible shrug.

'I guess so,' I said.

'Hey, you got any new Le Dio stories, Gordie?'

'Not just now. Maybe I'll think of some.' I didn't want to upset Teddy, but I wasn't very interested in checking out what was happening in Le Dio, either. 'Sorry you didn't go for this one better.'

'Nah, it was good,' Teddy said. 'Right up to the end, it was good. All that pukin' was really cool.'

'Yeah, that was cool, really gross,' Vern agreed. 'But Teddy's right about the ending. It was sort of a gyp.'

'Yeah,' I said, and sighed.

Chris stood up. 'Let's do some walking,' he said. It was still bright daylight, the sky a hot, steely blue, but our shadows had begun to trail out long. I remember that as a kid, September days always seemed to end much too soon, catching me by surprise - it was as if something inside my heart expected it to always be June, with daylight lingering in the sky until almost nine-thirty. 'What time is it, Gordie?'

I looked at my watch and was astonished to see it was after five.

'Yeah, let's go,' Teddy said. 'But let's make camp before dark so we can see to get wood and stuff. I'm gettin' hungry, too.'

'Six-thirty,' Chris promised. 'Okay with you guys?'

It was. We started to walk again, using the cinders beside the tracks now. Soon the river was so far behind us we couldn't even hear its sound. Mosquitoes hummed and I slapped one off my neck. Vern and Teddy were walking up ahead, working out some sort of complicated comic book trade. Chris was beside me, hands in his pockets, shirt slapping against his knees and thighs like an apron.

'I got some Winstons,' he said. 'Hawked 'em off my old man's dresser. One apiece. For after supper.'

'Yeah? That's boss.'

'That's when a cigarette tastes best,' Chris said. 'After supper.'

'Right.'

We walked in silence for a while.

'That's a really fine story,' Chris said suddenly. "They're just a little too dumb to understand.'

'No, it's not that hot. It's a mumbler.'

'That's what you always say. Don't give me that bullshit you don't believe. Are you gonna write it down? The story?'

'Probably. But not for a while. I can't write 'em down right after I tell 'em. It'll keep.'

'What Vern said? About the ending being a gyp?'

'Yeah?'

Chris laughed. 'Life's a gyp, you know it? I mean, look at us.'

'Nah, we have a great time.'

'Sure,' Chris said. 'All the fuckin' time, you wet.'

I laughed. Chris did, too.

They come outta you just like bubbles out of soda-pop,' he said after a while.

'What does?' But I thought I knew what he meant.

'The stories. That really bugs me, man. It's like you could tell a million stories and still only get the ones on top. You'll be a great writer someday, Gordie.'

'No, I don't think so.'

'Yeah, you will. Maybe you'll even write about us guys if you ever get hard up for material.'

'Have to be pretty fuckin' hard up.' I gave him the elbow.

There was another period of silence and then he asked suddenly: 'You ready for school?'

I shrugged. Who ever was? You got a little excited thinking about going back, seeing your friends; you were curious about your new teachers and what they would be like - pretty young things just out of teachers' college that you could rag or some old topkick that had been there since the Alamo, In a funny way you could even get excited about the long droning classes, because as the summer vacation neared its end you sometimes got bored enough to believe you could learn something. But summer boredom was nothing like the school boredom that always set in by the end of the second week, and by the beginning of the third week you got down to the real business: Could you hit Stinky Fiske in the back of the head with your art-gum while the teacher was putting The Principal Exports of South America on the board? How many good loud squeaks could you get off on the varnished surface of your desk if your hands were real sweaty? Who could cut the loudest farts in the locker room while changing up for phys ed? How many girls could you get to play Who Goosed the Moose during lunch hour? Higher learning, baby.

'Junior High,' Chris said. 'And you know what, Gordie? By next June, we'll all be quits.'

'What are you talking about? Why would that happen?'

'It's not gonna be like grammar school, that's why. You'll be in the college course. Me and Teddy and Vern, we'll all be in the shop courses, playing pocket-pool with the rest of the

retards, making ashtrays and birdhouses. Vern might even have to go into Remedial. You'll meet a lot of new guys. Smart guys. That's just the way it works, Gordie. That's how they got it set up.'

'Meet a lot of pussies is what you mean,' I said.

He gripped my arm. 'No, man. Don't say that. Don't even think that. They'll get your stories. Not like Vern and Teddy.'

'Fuck the stories. I'm not going in with a lot of pussies. No sir.'

'If you don't, then you're an asshole.'

'What's asshole about wanting to be with your friends?'

He looked at me thoughtfully, as if deciding whether or not to tell me something. We had slowed down; Vern and Teddy had pulled almost half a mile ahead. The sun, lower now, came at us through the overlacing trees in broken, dusty shafts, turning everything gold - but it was a tawdry gold, dimestore gold, if you can dig that. The tracks stretched ahead of us in the gloom that was just starting to gather - they seemed almost to twinkle. Star-pricks of light stood out on them here and there, as if some nutty rich guy masquerading as a common labourer had decided to embed a diamond in the steel every sixty yards or so. It was still hot. The sweat rolled off us, slicking our bodies.

'It's asshole if your friends can drag you down,' Chris said finally. 'I know about you and your folks. They don't give a shit about you. Your big brother was the one they cared about. Like my dad, when Frank got thrown into the stockade in Portsmouth. That was when he started always bein' mad at us other kids and hitting us all the time. Your dad doesn't beat on you, but maybe that's even worse. He's

got you asleep. You could tell him you were enrolling in the fuckin' shop division and you know what he'd do? He'd turn to the next page in his paper and say, Well, that's nice, Gordon, go ask your mother what's for dinner. And don't try to tell me different I've met him.'

I didn't try to tell him different. It's scary to find out that someone else, even a friend, knows just how things are with you.

'You're just a kid, Gordie -'

'Gee, thanks, Dad.'

'I wish to fuck I was your father!' he said angrily. 'You wouldn't go around talking about taking those stupid shop courses if I was! It's like God gave you something, all those stories you can make up, and He said, This is what we got for you, kid. Try not to lose it. But kids lose everything unless somebody looks out for them and if your folks are too fucked up to do it then maybe I ought to.'

His face looked like he was expecting me to take a swing at him; it was set and unhappy in the green-gold late afternoon light. He had broken the cardinal rule for kids in those days. You could say anything about another kid, you could rank him to the dogs and back, but you didn't say a bad word ever about his mom and dad. That was the Fabled Automatic, the same way not inviting your Catholic friends home to dinner on Friday unless you'd checked first to make sure you weren't having meat was the Fabled Automatic. If a kid ranked out your Mom and Dad, you had to feed him a knuckle sandwich.

"Those stories you tell, they're no good to anybody but you, Gordie. If you go along with us just because you don't want the gang to break up, you'll wind up just another grunt,

making Cs to get on the teams. You'll get to High and take the same fuckin' shop courses and throw erasers and pull your meat along with the rest of the grunts. Get detentions. Fuckin' suspensions. And after a while all you'll care about is gettin' a car so you can take some skag to the hops or down to the fuckin' Twin Bridges Tavern. Then you'll knock her up and spend the rest of your life in the mill or some fuckin' shoeshop in Auburn or maybe even up to Hillcrest pluckin' chickens. And that pie story will never get written down. N'othin'll get written down. 'Cause you'll just be another wiseguy with shit for brains.'

Chris Chambers was twelve when he said all that to me. But while he was saying it his face crumpled and folded into something older, oldest, ageless. He spoke tonelessly, colourlessly, but nevertheless, what he said struck terror into my bowels. It was as if he had lived that whole life already, -nat life where they tell you to step right up and spin the Wheel of Fortune, and it spins so pretty and the guy steps on i pedal and it comes up double zeros, house number, r/erybody loses. They give you a free pass and then turn on ae rain machine, pretty funny, huh, a joke even Vern Tessio could appreciate.

He grabbed my naked arm and his fingers closed tight. They dug grooves in my flesh. They ground at the bones. His ryes were hooded and dead - so dead, man, that he might - ave just fallen out of his own coffin.

'I know what people think of my family in this town. I mow what they think of me and what they expect. Nobody even asked me if I took the milk-money that time. I just got a three-day vacation.'

'Did you take it?' I asked. I had never asked him before, and if you had told me I ever would, I would have called

you crazy. The words came out in a little dry bullet.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Yeah, I took it.' He was silent for a moment, looking ahead at Teddy and Vern. 'You knew I took it, Teddy knew, everybody knew. Even Vern knew, I think.'

I started to deny it, and then closed my mouth. He was right. No matter what I might have said to my mother and father about how a person was supposed to be innocent until proved guilty, I had known.

'Then maybe I was sorry and tried to give it back,' Chris said.

I stared at him, my eyes widening. 'You tried to give it back!'

'Maybe, I said. Just maybe. And maybe I took it to old lady Simons and told her, and maybe the money was all there and I got a three-day vacation anyway, because the money never showed up. And maybe the next week old lady Simons had this brand-new skirt on when she came to school.'

I stared at Chris, speechless with horror. He smiled at me, but it was a crimped, terrible smile that never touched his eyes.

'Just maybe,' he said, but I remembered the new skirt - a light brown paisley, sort of full. I remembered thinking that it made old lady Simons look younger, almost pretty.

'Chris, how much was that milk-money?'

'Almost seven bucks.'

'Christ,' I whispered.

'So I just say that / stole the milk-money but then old lady Simons stole it from me. Just suppose. Then suppose I told that story. Me, Chris Chambers. Kid brother of Frank Chambers and Eyeball Chambers. You think anybody would have believed it?'

'No way,' I whispered. 'Jesus, Chris!'

He smiled his wintry, awful smile. 'And do you think that bitch would have dared try something like that if it had been one of those dootchbags from up on The View that had taken the money?'

'No,' I said.

'Yeah. If it had been one of them, Simons would have said 'kay, 'kay, we'll forget it this time, but we're gonna spank your wrist real hard and if you ever do it again we'll have to spank both wrists. But me ... well, maybe she had her eye or that skirt for a long time. Anyway, she saw her chance and she took it. I was the stupid one for even trying to give that -money back. But I never thought ... I never thought that a teacher ... oh who gives a fuck, anyway? Why am I even -talkin' about it?'

He swiped an arm angrily across his eyes and I realized he was almost crying.

'Chris,' I said, 'why don't you go into the college courses? You're smart enough.'

They decide all of that in the office. And in their smart little conferences. The teachers, they sit around in this big circle-jerk and all they say is Yeah, Yeah, Right, Right All. they give a fuck about is whether you behaved yourself in grammar school and what the town thinks of your family. All they're deciding is whether or not you'll contaminate all

those precious college-course dootchbags. But maybe I'll try to work -myself up. I don't know if I could do it, but I might try. Because I want to get out of Castle Rock and go to college and never see my old man or any of my brothers again. I -want to go someplace where nobody knows me and I don't have any black marks against me before I start. But I don't

know if I can do it.'

'Why not?'

'People. People drag you down.'

'Who?' I asked, thinking he must mean the teachers, or adult monsters like Miss Simons, who had wanted a new skirt, or maybe his brother Eyeball who hung around with Ace and Billy and Charlie and the rest, or maybe his own Mom and Dad.

But he said: 'Your friends drag you down, Gordie. Don't you know that?' He pointed at Vern and Teddy, who were standing and waiting for us to catch up. They were laughing about something; in fact, Vern was just about busting a gut. Your friends do. They're like drowning guys that are holding on to your legs. You can't save them. You can only drown with them.'

'Come on, you fuckin' slowpokes!' Vern shouted, still laughing.

'Yeah, comin'!' Chris called, and before I could say anything else, he began to run. I ran, too, but he caught up to them

before I could catch up to him.

18

We went another mile and then decided to camp for the night. There was still some daylight left, but nobody really wanted to use it. We were pooped from the scene at the dump and from our scare on the train trestle, but it was more than that We were in Harlow now, in the woods. Somewhere up ahead was a dead kid, probably mangled and covered with flies. Maggots, too, by this time. Nobody wanted to get too close to him with the night coming on. I had read somewhere - in an Algernon Blackwood story, I think - that a guy's ghost hangs out around his dead body until that body is given a decent Christian burial, and there was no way I wanted to wake up in the night and confront the glowing, disembodied ghost of Ray Brower, moaning and gibbering and floating among the dark and rustling pines. By stopping here we figured there had to be at least ten miles between us and him, and of course all four of us knew there were no such things as ghosts, but ten miles seemed just about far enough in case what everybody knew was wrong.

Vern, Chris, and Teddy gathered wood and got a modest little campfire going on a bed of cinders. Chris scraped a bare patch all around the fire - the woods were powder-dry, and he didn't want to take any chances. While they were doing that I sharpened some sticks and made what my brother Denny used to call 'Pioneer Drumsticks' - lumps of hamburger pushed into the ends of green branches. The three of them laughed and bickered over their woodcraft (which was almost nil; there was a Castle Rock Boy Scout troop, but most of the kids who hung around our vacant lot considered it to be an organization made up mostly of pussies), arguing about whether it was better to cook over

flames or over coals (a moot point; we were too hungry to wait for coals), whether dried moss would work as kindling, what they would do if they used up all the matches before they got the fire to stay lit. Teddy claimed he could make a fire by rubbing two sticks together. Chris claimed he was so full of shit he squeaked. They didn't have to try; Vern got the small pile of twigs and dry moss to catch from the second match. The day was perfectly still and there was no wind to puff out the light. We all took turns feeding the thin flames until they began to grow stouter on wrist-thick chunks of wood fetched from an old deadfall some thirty yards into the forest. When the flames began to die back a little bit, I stuck the sticks holding the Pioneer Drumsticks firmly into the ground at an angle over the fire. We sat around watching them as they shimmered and dripped and finally began to brown. Our stomachs made pre-dinner conversation.

Unable to wait until they were really cooked, we each took one of them, stuck it in a roll, and yanked the hot stick out of the centre. They were charred outside, raw inside, and totally delicious. We wolfed them down and wiped the grease from our mouths with our bare arms. Chris opened his pack and took out a tin Band-Aids box (the pistol was way at the bottom of his pack, and because he hadn't told Vern and Teddy, I guessed it was to be our secret). He opened it and gave each of us a battered Winston. We lit them with flaming twigs from the fire and then leaned back, men of the world, watching the cigarette smoke drift away into the soft twilight. None of us inhaled because we might cough and that would mean a day or two of ragging from the others. And it was pleasant enough just to drag and blow, hawking into the fire to hear the sizzle (that was the summer I learned how you can pick out someone who is just learning to smoke: if you're new at it you spit a lot).

We were feeling good. We smoked the Winstons down to the filters, then tossed them into the fire.

'Nothin' like a smoke after a meal,' Teddy said.

Tucking-A,' Vern agreed.

Crickets had started to hum in the green gloom. I looked up at the lane of sky visible through the railroad cut and saw that the blue was now bruising towards purple. Seeing that outrider of twilight made me feel sad and calm at the same time, brave but not really brave, comfortably lonely.

We tramped down a flat place in the underbrush beside the embankment and laid out our bedrolls. Then, for an hour or so, we fed the fire and talked, the kind of talk you can never quite remember once you get past fifteen and discover girls. We talked about who was the best dragger in Castle Rock, if Boston could maybe stay out of the cellar this year, and about the summer just past. Teddy told about the time he had been at White's Beach in Brunswick and some kid had hit his head while diving off the float and almost drowned. We discussed at some length the relative merits of the teachers we had had. We agreed that Mr Brooks was the biggest pussy in Castle Rock Elementary - he would just about cry if you sassed him back. On the other hand, there was Mrs Cote (pronounced Cody) - she was just about the meanest bitch God had ever set down on the earth. Vern said he'd heard she hit a kid so hard two years ago that the kid almost went blind. I looked at Chris, wondering if he would say anything about Miss Simons, but he didn't say anything at all, and he didn't see me looking at him - he was looking at Vern and nodding soberly at Vern's story.

We didn't talk about Ray Brower as the dark drew down, but I was thinking about him. There's something horrible and fascinating about the way dark comes to the woods, its coming unsoftened by headlights or streetlights or houselights or neon. It comes with no mothers' voices, calling for their kids to leave off and come on in now, to herald it. If you're used to the town, the coming of the dark in the woods seems more like a natural disaster than a natural phenomenon; it rises like the Castle River rises in the spring.

And as I thought about the body of Ray Brower in this light - or lack of it - what I felt was not queasiness or fear that he would suddenly appear before us, a green and gibbering banshee whose purpose was to drive us back the way we had come before we could disturb his - its - peace, but a sudden and unexpected wash of pity that he should be so alone and so defenceless in the dark that was now coming over our side of the earth. If something wanted to eat or him, it would. His mother wasn't here to stop that from happening, and neither was his father, nor Jesus Christ in the company of all the saints. He was dead and he was all alone, flung off the railroad tracks and into the ditch, and I realized that if I didn't stop thinking about it I was going to cry.

So I told a Le Dio story, made up on the spot and not very good, and when it ended as most of my Le Dio stories did, with one lone American dogface coughing out a dying declaration of patriotism and love for the girl back home into the sad and wise face of the platoon sergeant, it was not the white, scared face of some pfc from Castle Rock or White River Junction I saw in my mind's eye but the face of a much younger boy, already dead, his eyes closed, his features troubled, a rill of blood running from the left corner of his mouth to his jawline. And in back of him, instead of

the shattered shops and churches of my Le Dio dreamscape, I saw only dark forest and the cindered railway bed bulking against the starry sky like a prehistoric burial mound.

19

I came awake in the middle of the night, disorientated, wondering why it was so chilly in my bedroom and who had left the windows open. Denny, maybe. I had been dreaming of Denny, something about body-surfing at Harrison State Park. But it had been four years ago that we had done that.

This wasn't my room: this was someplace else. Somebody was holding me in a mighty bearhug. Somebody else was pressed against my back, and a shadowy third was crouched beside me, head cocked in a listening attitude.

'What the fuck?' I asked in honest puzzlement.

A long drawn-out groan in answer. It sounded like Vern.

That brought things into focus, and I remembered where I was ... but what was everybody doing awake in the middle of the night? Or had I only been asleep for seconds? No, that couldn't be, because a thin sliver of moon was floating dead centre in an inky sky.

'Don't let it get me,' Vern gibbered. 'I swear I'll be a good boy, I won't do nothin' bad, I'll put the ring up before I take a piss, I'll ... I'll ...' With some astonishment I realized that I was listening to a prayer - or at least the Vern Tessio equivalent of a prayer.

I sat bolt upright, scared. 'Chris?'

'Shut up, Vern,' Chris said. He was the one crouching and listening. 'It's nothing.'

'Oh yes it is,' Teddy said ominously. 'It's something.'

'What is?' I asked. I was still sleepy and disorientated, unstrung from my place in space and time. It scared me that I had come in late on whatever had developed - too late to defend myself properly, maybe.

Then, as if to answer my question, a long and hollow scream rose languidly from the woods - it was the sort of scream you might expect from a woman dying in extreme agony and extreme fear.

'Oh-dear-to-Jesus!' Vern whimpered, his voice high and filled with tears. He reapplied the bearhug that had wakened me, making it hard for me to breathe and adding to my own terror. I threw him loose with an effort but he scrambled right back beside me like a puppy which can't think of anyplace else to go.

'It's that Brower kid,' Teddy whispered hoarsely. 'His ghost's out walkin' in the woods.'

'Oh God!' Vern screamed, apparently not crazy about that idea at all. 'I promise I won't hawk no more dirty books out of Dahlie's Market! I promise I won't give my carrots to the dog no more I ... I ... I...!' He floundered there, wanting to bribe God with everything but unable to think of anything really good in the extremity of his fear. I won't smoke no more unfiltered cigarettes! I won't say no bad swears! I won't put my Bazooka in the qfferin 'plate! I won't -'

'Shut up, Vern,' Chris said, and beneath his usual authoritative toughness I could hear the hollow boom of awe. I wondered if his arms and back and belly were as stiff

with gooseflesh as my own were, and if the hair on the nape of his neck was trying to stand up in hackles, as mine was.

Vern's voice dropped to a whisper as he continued to expand the reforms he planned to institute if God would only let him live through this night.

'It's a bird, isn't it?' I asked Chris.

'No. At least, I don't think so. I think it's a wildcat My dad says they scream Moody murder when they're getting ready to mate. Sounds like a woman, doesn't it?'

'Yeah,' I said. My voice hitched in the middle of the word and two ice-cubes broke off in the gap.

'But no woman could scream that loud,' Chris said ... and then added helplessly: 'Could she, Gordie?'

'It's his ghost,' Teddy whispered again. His eyeglasses reflected the moonlight in weak, somehow dreamy smears. I'm gonna go look for it'

I don't think he was serious, but we took no chances. When he started to get up, Chris and I hauled him back down. Perhaps we were too rough with him, but our muscles had been turned to cables with fear.

'Let me up, fuckheads!' Teddy hissed, struggling. 'If I say I wanna go look for it, then I'm gonna go look for it! I wanna see it! I wanna see the ghost! I wanna see it -'

The wild, sobbing cry rose into the night again, cutting the air like a knife with a crystal blade, freezing us with our hands on Teddy - if he'd been a flag, we would have looked like that picture of the Marines claiming Iwo Jima. The

scream climbed with a crazy ease through octave after octave, finally reaching a glassy, freezing edge. It hung there for a moment and then whirled back down again, disappearing into an impossible bass register that buzzed like a monstrous honeybee. This was followed by a burst of what sounded like mad laughter ... and then there was silence again.

'Jesus H Baldheaded Christ,' Teddy whispered, and he talked no more of going into the woods to see what was making that screaming noise. All four of us huddled up together and I thought of running. I doubt if I was the only one. If we had been tenting in Vern's field - where our folks thought we were - we probably would have run. But Castle Rock was too far, and the thought of trying to run across that trestle in the dark made my blood freeze. Running deeper into Harlow and closer to the corpse of Ray Brower was equally unthinkable. We were stuck. If there was a ha'ant out there in the woods - what my dad called a Goosalum - and it wanted us, it would probably get us.

Chris proposed we keep a guard and everyone was agreeable to that. We flipped for watches and Vern got the first one. I got the last. Vern sat up cross-legged by the husk of the campfire while the rest of us lay down again. We huddled together like sheep.

I was positive that sleep would be impossible, but I did sleep - a light, uneasy sleep that skimmed through unconsciousness like a sub with its periscope up. My half-sleeping dreams were populated with wild cries that might have been real or might have only been products of my imagination. I saw - or thought I saw - something white and shapeless steal through the trees like a grotesquely ambulatory bedsheet.

At last I slipped into something I knew was a dream. Chris and I were swimming at White's Beach, a gravel-pit in Brunswick that had been turned into a miniature lake when the gravel-diggers struck water. It was where Teddy had seen the kid hit his head and almost drown.

In my dream we were out over our heads, stroking lazily along, with a hot July sun blazing down. From behind us, on the float, came cries and shouts and yells of laughter as kids climbed and dived or climbed and were pushed. I could hear the empty kerosene drums that held the float up clanging and booming together - a sound not unlike that of churchbells, which are so solemn and emptily profound. On the sand-and-gravel beach, oiled bodies lay face down on blankets, little kids with buckets squatted on the verge of the water or sat happily flipping muck into their hair with plastic shovels, and teenagers clustered in grinning groups, watching the young girls promenade endlessly back and forth in pairs and trios, never alone, the secret places of their bodies wrapped in Jantzen tank suits. People walked up the hot sand on the balls of their feet, wincing, to the snackbar. They came back with chips, Devil Dogs, Red Ball Popsicles.

Mrs Cote drifted past us on an inflatable rubber raft. She was lying on her back, dressed in her typical September-to-June school uniform: a grey two-piece suit with a thick sweater instead of a blouse under the jacket, a flower pinned over one almost nonexistent breast, thick support hose the colour of Canada Mints on her legs. Her black old lady's high-heeled shoes were trailing in the water, making small Vs. Her hair was blue-rinsed, like my mother's, and done up in those tight, medicinal-smelling clockspring curls. Her glasses flashed brutally in the sun.

'Watch your steps, boys,' she said. 'Watch your steps or I'll hit you hard enough to strike you blind. I can do that; I have been given that power by the school board. Now, Mr Chambers, "Mending Wall", if you please. By rote.'

'I tried to give the money back,' Chris said. 'Old lady Simons said okay, but she took it! Do you hear me? She took it! Now what are you going to do about it? Are you going to whack her blind?'

' "Mending Wall," Mr Chambers, if you please. By rote.' Chris threw me a despairing glance, as if to say Didn't I tell you it would be this way?, and then began to tread water. He began.' "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that sends the frozen groundswell under it -" And then his head went under, his reciting mouth filling with water. He popped back up, crying: 'Help me, Gordie! Help me!' Then he was dragged under again. Looking into the clear water I could see two bloated, naked corpses holding his ankles. One was Vern and the other was Teddy, and their open eyes were as blank and pupilless as the eyes of Greek statues. Their small pre-pubescent penises floated limply up from their distended bellies like albino strands of kelp. Chris's head broke water again. He held one hand up limply to me and voiced a screaming, womanish cry that rose and rose, ululating in the hot sunny summer air. I looked wildly towards the beach but nobody had heard. The lifeguard, his bronzed, athletic body lolling attractively on the seat at the top of his whitewashed cruciform wooden tower, just went on smiling down at a girl in a red bathing suit. Chris's scream turned into a bubbling waterchoked gurgle as the corpses pulled him under again. And as they dragged him down to black water I could see his rippling, distorted eyes turned up to me in pleading agony; I could see his white starfish hands held helplessly up to the sun-burnished roof of the water. But instead of diving down and trying to save

him, I stroked madly for the shore, or at least to a place where the water would not be over my head. Before I could get there - before I could even get close - I felt a soft, rotted, implacable hand wrap itself around my calf and begin to pull. A scream built up in my chest ... but before I could utter it, the dream washed away into a grainy facsimile of reality. It was Teddy with his hand on my leg. He was shaking me awake. It was my watch.

Still half in the dreams, almost talking in my sleep, I asked him thickly: 'You alive, Teddy?'

'No. I'm dead and you're a black nigger,' he said crossly. It dispelled the last of the dream. I sat up by the campfire and Teddy lay down.

20

I

The others slept heavily through the rest of the night I was in and out, dozing, waking, dozing again. The night was far from silent; I heard the triumphant screech-squawk of a pouncing owl, the tiny cry of some small animal perhaps about to be eaten, a larger something blundering wildly through the undergrowth. Under all of this, a steady tone, were the crickets. There were no more screams. I dozed and woke, woke and dozed, and I suppose if I had been discovered standing such a slipshod watch in Le Dio, I probably would have been court-martialed and shot.

I snapped more solidly out of my last doze and became aware that something was different. It took a moment or two to figure it out: although the moon was down, I could see my hands resting on my jeans. My watch said quarter to five. It was dawn.

I stood, hearing my spine crackle, walked two dozen feet away from the lumped-together bodies of my friends, and pissed into a clump of sumac. I was starting to shake the night-willies; I could feel them sliding away. It was a fine feeling.

I scrambled up the cinders to the railroad tracks and sat on one of the rails, idly chucking cinders between my feet, in no hurry to wake the others. At that precise moment the new day felt too good to share.

Morning came on apace. The noise of the crickets began to drop, and the shadows under the trees and bushes evaporated like puddles after a shower. The air had that peculiar lack of taste that presages the latest hot day in a famous series of hot days. Birds that had maybe cowered all night just as we had done now began to twitter self-importantly. A wren landed on top of the deadfall from which we had taken our firewood, preened itself, and then flew off.

I don't know how long I sat there on that rail, watching the purple steal out of the sky as noiselessly as it had stolen in the evening before. Long enough for my butt to start complaining, anyway. I was about to get up when I looked to my right and saw a deer standing in the railroad bed not ten yards from me.

My heart went up into my throat so high that I think I could have put my hand in my mouth and touched it. My stomach and genitals filled with a hot, dry excitement. I didn't move. I couldn't have moved if I wanted to. Her eyes weren't brown but a dark, dusty black - the kind of velvet you see backgrounding jewellery displays. Her small ears were scuffed suede. She looked serenely at me, head slightly lowered in what I took for curiosity, seeing a kid with his

hair in a sleep-scarecrow of whirls and many-tined cowlicks, wearing jeans with cuffs and a brown khaki shirt with the elbows mended and the collar turned up in the hoody tradition of the day. What I was seeing was some sort of gift, something given with a carelessness that was appalling.

We looked at each other for a long time ... I think it was a long time. Then she turned and walked off to the other side of the tracks, white bobtail flipping insouciantly. She found grass and began to crop. I couldn't believe it. She had begun a) crop. She didn't look back at me and didn't need to; I was frozen solid.

Then the rail started to thrum under my ass and bare seconds later the doe's head came up, cocked back towards Castle Rock. She stood there, her branch-black nose working on the air, coaxing it a little. Then she was gone in three gangling leaps, vanishing into the woods with no sound but one rotted branch, which broke with a sound like a track ref s starter-gun.

I sat there, looking mesmerized at the spot where she had been, until the actual sound of the freight came up through the stillness. Then I skidded back down the bank to where the others were sleeping.

The freight's slow, loud passage woke them up, yawning and scratching. There was some funny, nervous talk about 'the case of the screaming ghost', as Chris called it, but not as much as you might imagine. In daylight it seemed more foolish than interesting - almost embarrassing. Best forgotten.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell them about the deer, but I ended up not doing it. That was one thing I kept to

myself. I've never spoken or written of it until just now, today. And I have to tell you that it seems a lesser thing written down, damn near inconsequential. But for me it was the best part of that trip, the cleanest part, and it was a moment I found myself returning to, almost helplessly, when there was trouble in my life - my first day in the bush in Viet Nam, and this fellow walked into the clearing where we were with his hand over his nose and when he took his hand away there was no nose there because it had been shot off; the time the doctor told us our youngest son might be hydrocephalic (he turned out just to have an oversized head, thank God); the long, crazy weeks before my mother died. I would find my thoughts turning back to that morning, the scuffed suede of her ears, the white flash of her tail. But five hundred million Red Chinese don't give a shit, right? The most important things are the hardest to say, because words diminish them. It's hard to make strangers care about the good things in your life.

21

The tracks now bent south-west and ran through tangles of second-growth fir and heavy underbrush. We got a breakfast of late blackberries from some of these bushes, but berries never fill you up; your stomach just gives them a thirty-minute option and then begins growling again. We went back to the tracks - it was about eight o'clock by then - and took five. Our mouths were a dark purple and our naked torsos were scratched from the blackberry brambles. Vern wished glumly aloud for a couple of fried eggs with bacon on the side.

That was the last day of the heat, and I think it was the worst of all. The early scud of clouds melted away and by nine o'clock the sky was a pale steel colour that made you feel hotter just looking at it. The sweat rolled and ran from

our chests and backs, leaving clean streaks through the accumulated soot and grime. Mosquitoes and blackflies whirled and dipped around our heads in aggravating clouds. Knowing that we had eight, maybe ten miles to go didn't make us feel any better. Yet the fascination of the thing drew us on and kept us walking faster than we had any business doing, in that heat. We were all crazy to see that kid's body -I can't put it any more simply or honestly than that Whether it was harmless or whether it turned out to have the power to murder sleep with a hundred mangled dreams, we wanted to see it. I think that we had come to believe we deserved to see it.

It was about nine-thirty when Teddy and Chris spotted water up ahead - they shouted to Vern and me. We ran over to where they were standing. Chris was laughing, delighted. 'Look there! Beavers did that!' He pointed.

It was the work of beavers, all right. A large-bore culvert ran under the railroad embankment a little way ahead, and the beavers had sealed the right end with one of their neat and industrious little dams - sticks and branches cemented together with leaves, twigs, and dried mud. Beavers are busy little fuckers, all right Behind the dam was a clear and shining pool of water, brilliantly mirroring the sunlight Beaver houses humped up and out of the water in several places - they looked like wooden igloos. A small creek trickled into the far end of the pool, and the trees which bordered it were gnawed a clean bone-white to a height of almost three feet in places.

'Railroad'll clean this shit out pretty soon,' Chris said.

'Why?' Vern asked.

"They can't have a pool here,' Chris said, 'it'd undercut their previous railroad line. That's why they put that culvert in there to start with. They'll shoot them some beavers and scare off the rest and then knock out their dam. Then this'll go back to being a bog, like it probably was before.'

'I think that eats the meat,' Teddy said.

Chris shrugged. 'Who cares about beavers? Not the Great Western and Southern Maine, that's for sure.'

'You think it's deep enough to swim in?' Vern asked, looking hungrily at the water.

'One way to find out,' Teddy said.

'Who goes first?' I asked.

'Me!' Chris said. He went running down the bank, kicking off his sneakers and untying his shirt from around his waist with a jerk. He pushed his pants and undershorts down with a single shove of his thumbs. He balanced, first on one leg and then on the other, to get his socks. Then he made a shallow dive. He came up shaking his head to get his wet hair out of his eyes. 'It's fuckin' great!' he shouted.

'How deep?' Teddy called back. He had never learned to swim.

Chris stood up in the water and his shoulders broke the surface. I saw something on one of them - a blackish-greyish something. I decided it was a piece of mud and dismissed it. If I had looked more closely I could have saved myself a lot of nightmares later on. 'Come on in, you chickens!'

He turned and thrashed off across the pool in a clumsy breast-stroke, turned over, and thrashed back. By then we were all getting undressed. Vern was in next, then me.

Hitting the water was fantastic - clean and cool. I swam across to Chris, loving the silky feel of having nothing on but water. I stood up and we grinned into each other's faces.

'Boss!' We said it at exactly the same instant.

'Fuckin' jerkoff,' he said, splashed water in my face, and swam off the other way.

We goofed off in the water for almost half an hour before we realized that the pond was full of bloodsuckers. We dived, swam under water, ducked each other. We never knew a thing. Then Vern swam into the shallower part, went under, and stood on his hands. When his legs broke water in a shaky but triumphant V, I saw that they were covered with blackish-grey lumps, just like the one I had seen on Chris's

shoulder. They were slugs - big ones.

Chris's mouth dropped open, and I felt all the blood in my body go as cold as dry ice. Teddy screamed, his face going Dale. Then all three of us were thrashing for the bank, going just as fast as we could. I know more about freshwater slugs now than I did then, but the fact that they are mostly harmless has done nothing to allay the almost insane horror of them I've had ever since that day in the beaver-pool. They carry a local anaesthetic and an anticoagulant in their alien saliva, which means that the host never feels a thing when they attach themselves. If you don't happen to see them they'll go on feeding until their swelled, loathsome bodies fall off you, sated, or until they actually burst.

We pulled ourselves up on the bank and Teddy went into a hysterical paroxysm as he looked down at himself. He was screaming as he picked the leeches off his naked body.

Vern broke the water and looked at us, puzzled. 'What the hell's wrong with hi -'

'Leeches!' Teddy screamed, pulling two of them off his trembling thighs and throwing them just as far as he could. Dirty motherfuckin' bloodsuckers? His voice broke shrilly on the last word.

'OhGodOhGodOhGod!' Vern cried. He paddled across the pool and stumbled out.

I was still cold; the heat of the day had been suspended. I kept telling myself to catch hold. Not to get screaming. Not to be a pussy. I picked half a dozen off my arms and several more off my chest.

Chris turned his back to me. 'Gordie? Are there any more? Take 'em off if there are, please, Gordie!' There were more, five or six, running down his back like grotesque black buttons. I pulled their soft, boneless bodies off him.

I brushed even more off my legs, then got Chris to do my back.

I was starting to relax a little ... and that was when I looked down at myself and saw the granddaddy of them all clinging to my testicles, its body swelled to four times its normal size. Its blackish-grey skin had gone a bruised purplish-red. That was when I began to lose control. Not outside, at least not in any big way, but inside, where it counts.

I brushed its slick, glutinous body with the back of my hand. It held on. I tried to do it again and couldn't bring

myself to actually touch it I turned to Chris, tried to speak, couldn't I pointed instead. His cheeks, already ashy, went whiter still.

'I can't get it off,' I said through numb lips. 'You ... can you...'

But he backed away, shaking his head, his mouth twisted 'I can't, Gordie,' he said, unable to take his eyes away. 'I'm sorry but I can't No. Oh. No.' He turned away, bowed with one hand pressed to his midsection like the butler in a musical comedy, and was sick in a stand of juniper bushes.

You got to hold onto yourself, I thought, looking at the leech that hung off me like a crazy beard. Its body was still visibly swelling. You got to hold onto yourself and get him. Be tough. It's the last one. The. Last. One.

I reached down again and picked it off and it burst between my fingers. My own blood ran across my palm and inner wrist in a warm flood. I began to cry.

Still crying, I walked back to my clothes and put them on. I wanted to stop crying, but I just didn't seem able to turn off the waterworks. Then the shakes set in, making it worse. Vern ran up to me, still naked.

'They off, Gordie? They off me? They off me?'

He twirled in front of me like an insane dancer on carnival stage.

They.off? Huh? Huh? They off me, Gordie?'

His eyes kept going past me, as wide and white as the eyes of a plaster horse on a merry-go-round.

I nodded that they were and just kept on crying. It seemed that crying was going to be my new career. I tucked my shirt in and then buttoned it all the way to the neck. I put on my socks and my sneakers. Little by little the tears began to slow down. Finally there was nothing left but a few hitches and moans, and then they stopped, too.

Chris walked over to me, wiping his mouth with a handful of elm leaves. His eyes were wide and mute and apologetic.

When we were all dressed we just stood there looking at each other for a moment, and then we began to climb the railroad embankment. I looked back once at the burst leech lying on top of the tramped-down bushes where we had danced and screamed and groaned them off. It looked deflated ... but still ominous.

Fourteen years later I sold my first novel and made my first trip to New York. 'It's going to be a three-day celebration,' my new editor told me over the phone. 'People slinging bullshit will be summarily shot' But of course it was three days of unmitigated bullshit. I went away thinking the publishing house believed me to be the reincarnation of Thomas Wolfe; they saw me off with perhaps other things in mind - paperback sales in the millions, for instance.

While I was there I wanted to do all the standard out-of-towner things - see a stage show at Radio City Music Hall, go to the top of the Empire State Building (fuck the World Trade Center; the building King Kong climbed in 1933 is always gonna be the tallest one in the world for me), visit Times Square by night. Keith, my editor, seemed more than pleased to show his city off. The last touristy thing we did was to take a ride on the Staten Island Ferry, and while leaning on the rail I happened to look down and see scores of used condoms floating on the mild swells. And I had a

moment of almost total recall - or perhaps it was an actual incidence of time-travel. Either way, for one second I was Literally in the past, pausing halfway up that embankment and looking back at the burst leech: dead, deflated ... but still ominous.

Keith must have seen something in my face because he said: 'Not very pretty, are they?'

I only shook my head, wanting to tell him not to apologize, wanting to tell him that you didn't have to come to the Apple and ride the ferry to see used rubbers, wanting to say: The only reason anyone writes stories is so they can understand the past and get ready for some future mortality; that's why all the verbs in stories have -ed endings, Keith my good man, even the ones that sell millions of paperbacks. The only two useful artforms are religion and stories.

I was pretty drunk that night, as you may have guessed.

What I did tell him was: 'I was thinking of something else, that's all.' The most important things are the hardest things to say.

22

We walked further down the tracks - I don't know just how far - and I was starting to think: Well, okay, I'm going to be able to handle it, it's all over anyway, just a bunch of leeches, what the fuck; I was still thinking it when waves of whiteness suddenly began to come over my sight and I fell down.

I must have fallen hard, but landing on the crossties was like plunging into a warm and puffy feather bed. Someone turned me over. The touch of hands was faint and

unimportant. Their faces were disembodied balloons looking down at me from miles up. They looked the way the ref's face must look to a fighter who has been punched silly and is currently taking a ten-second rest on the canvas. Their words came in gentle oscillations, fading in and out '...him?'

'...be all...'

'... if you think the sun ...'

'Gordie, are you ...'

Then I must have said something that didn't make much sense because they began to look really worried.

'We better take him back, man,' Teddy said, and then the whiteness came over everything again.

When it cleared, I seemed to be all right Chris was squatting next to me, saying: 'Can you hear me, Gordie? You there, man?'

'Yes,' I said, and sat up. A swarm of black dots exploded in front of my eyes, and then went away. I waited to see if they'd come back, and when they didn't, I stood up.

'You scared the cheesly old shit outta me, Gordie,' he said. 'You want a drink of water?'

'Yeah.'

He gave me his canteen, half-full of water, and I let three warm gulps roll down my throat 'Why'd you faint, Gordie?' Vern asked anxiously.

'Made a bad mistake and looked at your face,' I said.

'Eeee-eee-eeee!' Teddy cackled. 'Fuckin' Gordie! You wet!'

'You really okay?' Vern persisted.

'Yeah. Sure. It was ... bad there for a minute. Thinking about those suckers.'

They nodded soberly. We took five in the shade and then went on walking, me and Vern on one side of the tracks again, Chris and Teddy on the other. We figured we must be getting close.

23

We weren't as close as we thought, and if we'd had the brains to spend two minutes looking at a roadmap, we would have seen why. We knew that Ray Brewer's corpse had to be near the Back Harlow Road, which dead-ends on the bank of the Royal River. Another trestle carries the GS&WM tracks across the Royal. So this is the way we figured: Once we got close to the Royal, we'd be getting close to the Back Harlow Road, where Billy and Charlie had been parked when they saw the boy. And since the Royal was only ten miles from the Castle River, we figured we had it made in the shade.

But that was ten miles as the crow flies, and the tracks didn't move on a straight line between the Castle and the Royal. Instead, they made a very shallow loop to avoid a hilly, crumbling region called The Bluffs. Anyway, we could have seen that loop quite clearly if we had looked on a map, and figured out that instead of ten miles, we had about sixteen to walk.

Chris began to suspect the truth when noon had come and gone and the Royal still wasn't in sight. We stopped while he climbed a high pine tree and took a look around. He came down and gave us a simple enough report: it was going to be at least four in the afternoon before we got to

the Royal, and we would only make it by then if we humped right along.

'Ah, shit!' Teddy cried. 'So what're we gonna do now?'

We looked into each other's tired, sweaty faces. We were hungry and out of temper. The big adventure had turned into a long slog - dirty and sometimes scary. We would have been missed back home by now, too, and if Milo Pressman hadn't already called the cops on us, the engineer of the train crossing the trestle might have done it. We had been planning to hitchhike back to Castle Rock, but four o'clock was just three hours from dark, and nobody gives four kids on a back country road a lift after dark.

I tried to summon up the cool image of my deer, cropping at green morning grass, but even that seemed dusty and no good, no better than a stuffed trophy over the mantle in some guy's hunting lodge, the eyes sprayed to give them that phony lifelike shine.

Finally Chris said: 'It's still closer going ahead. Let's go.'

He turned and started to walk along the tracks in his dusty sneakers, head down, his shadow only a puddle at his feet. After a minute or so the rest of us followed him, strung out in Indian file.

24

In the years between then and the writing of this memoir, I've thought remarkably little about those two days in September, at least consciously. The associations the memories bring to the surface are as unpleasant as week-old rivercorpses brought to the surface by cannonfire. As a result, I never really questioned our decision to walk down the tracks. Put another way, I've wondered sometimes

about what we had decided to do but never about how we did it.

But now a much simpler scenario comes to mind. I'm confident that if the idea had come up it would have been shot down - walking down the tracks would have seemed neater, bossier, as we said then. But if the idea had come up and hadn't been shot down in flames, none of the things which occurred later would have happened. Maybe Chris and Teddy and Vern would even be alive today. No, they didn't die in the woods or on the railroad tracks; nobody dies in this story except some bloodsuckers and Ray Brower, and if you want to be completely fair about it, he was dead before it even started. But it is true that, of the four of us who flipped coins to see who would go down to the Florida Market to get supplies, only the one who actually went is still alive. The Ancient Mariner at thirty-four, with you, Gentle Reader, in the role of wedding guest (at this point shouldn't you flip to the jacket photo to see if my eye holdeth you in its spell?)... If you sense a certain flipness on my part, you're right - but maybe I have cause. At an age when all four of us would be considered too young and immature to be President, three of us are dead. And if small events really do echo up larger and larger through time, yes, maybe if we had done the simple thing and simply hitched into Harlow, they would still be alive today.

We could have hooked a ride all the way up Route 7 to the Shiloh Church, which stood at the intersection of the highway and the Back Harlow Road (at least until 1967, when it was levelled by a fire attributed to a tramp's smouldering cigarette butt). With reasonable luck we could: have been beating the bushes in the area where Billy and Charlie parked with their skag girlfriends before sundown of the previous day.

But the idea wouldn't have lived. It wouldn't have been shot down with tightly buttressed arguments and debating society rhetoric, but with grunts and scowls and farts and raised middle fingers. The verbal part of the discussion would have been carried forward with such trenchant and sparkling contributions as 'Fuck no', 'That sucks', and that old reliable standby, 'Did your mother ever have any kids that lived?'

Unspoken - maybe it was too fundamental to be spoken - was the idea that this was a big thing. It wasn't screwing around with firecrackers or trying to look through the knothole in the back of the girls' privy at Harrison State Park. This was something on a par with getting laid for the first time, or going into the Army, or buying your first bottle of legal liquor - just bopping into that state store, if you can dig it, selecting a bottle of good Scotch, showing the clerk your draft card and drivers' licence, then walking out with a grin on your face and that brown bag in your hand, member of a club with just a few more rights and privileges than our old treehouse with the tin roof.

There's a high ritual to all fundamental events, the rites of passage, the magic corridor where the change happens. Buying the condoms. Standing before the minister. Raising your hand and taking the oath. Or, if you please, walking down the railroad tracks to meet a fellow your own age halfway, the same as I'd walk halfway up Grand Street to meet Chris if he was coming over to my house, or the way Teddy would walk halfway down Gates Street to meet me if I was going to his. It seemed right to do it this way, because the rite of passage is a magic corridor and so we always provide an aisle - it's what you walk down when you get married, what they carry you down when you get buried. Our corridor was those twin rails, and we walked between them, just bopping along towards whatever this

was supposed to mean. You don't hitchhike your way to a thing like that, maybe.

And maybe we thought it was also right that it should have turned out to be harder than we had expected. Events surrounding our hike had turned it into what we had suspected it was all along: serious business.

What we didn't know as we walked around The Bluffs was that Billy Tessio, Charlie Hogan, Jack Mudgett, Norman 'Fuzzy' Brackowicz, Vince Desjardins, Chris's older brother Eyeball, and Ace Merrill himself were all on their way to take a look at the body themselves - in a weird kind of way, Ray Brower had become famous, and our secret had turned into a regular roadshow. They were piling into Ace's chopped and channelled '52 Ford and Vince's pink '54 Studebaker even as we started on the last leg of our trip.

Billy and Charlie had managed to keep their enormous secret for just about twenty-four hours. Then Charlie spilled it to Ace while they were shooting pool, and Billy had spilled it to Jack Mudgett while they were fishing for steelies from the Boom Road bridge. Both Ace and Jack had sworn solemnly on their mothers' names to keep the secret, and that was how everybody in their gang knew about it by noon. Guess you could tell what those assholes thought about their mothers.

They all congregated down at the pool hall, and Fuzzy Brackowicz advanced a theory (which you have heard before, Gentle Reader) that they could all become heroes - not to mention instant radio and TV personalities - by 'discovering' the body. All they had to do, Fuzzy maintained, was to take two cars with a lot of fishing gear in the trunks. After they found the body, their story would be a hundred

per cent. We was just plannin' to take a few pickerel out of the Royal River, officer. Heh-heh-heh. Look what we found.

They were burning up the road from Castle Rock to the Back Harlow area just as we started to finally get close.

25

Clouds began to build in the sky around two o'clock, but at first none of us took them seriously. It hadn't rained since the early days of July, so why should it rain now? But they kept building to the south of us, up and up and up, thunderheads in great pillars as purple as bruises, and they began to move slowly our way. I looked at them closely, checking for that membrane beneath that means it's already raining twenty miles away, or fifty. But there was no rain yet. The clouds were still just building.

Vern got a blister on his heel and we stopped and rested while he packed the back of his left sneaker with moss stripped from the bark of an old oak tree.

'Is it gonna rain, Gordie?' Teddy asked.

'I think so.'

'Pisser!' he said, and sighed. 'The pisser good end to a pisser good day.'

I laughed and he tipped me a wink.

We started to walk again, a little more slowly now out of respect for Vern's hurt foot. And in the hour between two and three, the quality of the day's light began to change, and we knew for sure that rain was coming. It was just as hot as ever, and even more humid, but we knew. And the birds did. They seemed to appear from nowhere and swoop

across the sky, chattering and crying shrilly to each other. And the light. From a steady, beating brightness it seemed to evolve into something filtered, almost pearly. Our shadows, which had begun to grow long again, also grew fuzzy and ill-defined. The sun had begun to sail in and out through the thickening decks of clouds, and the southern sky had gone a copper shade. We watched the thunderheads lumber closer, fascinated by their size and their mute threat. Every now and then it seemed that a giant flashbulb had gone off inside one of them, turning their purplish, bruised colour momentarily to a light grey. I saw a jagged fork of lightning lick down from the underside of the closest. It was bright enough to print a blue tattoo on my retinas. It was followed by a long, shaking blast of thunder.

We did a little bitching about how we were going to get caught out in the rain, but only because it was the expected thing - of course we were all looking forward to it. It would be cold and refreshing ... and leech-free.

At a little past three-thirty, we saw running water through a break in the trees.

"That's it!" Chris yelled jubilantly. "That's the Royal!"

We began to walk faster, taking our second wind. The storm was getting close now. The air began to stir, and it seemed that the temperature dropped ten degrees in a space of seconds. I looked down and saw that my shadow had disappeared entirely.

We were walking in pairs again, each two watching a side of the railroad embankment. My mouth was dry, throbbing with a sickish tension. The sun sailed behind another cloudbank and this time it didn't come back out. For a

moment the bank's edges were embroidered with gold, like a cloud hi an Old Testament Bible illustration, and then the wine-coloured, dragging belly of the thunderhead blotted out all traces of the sun. The day became gloomy - the clouds were rapidly eating up the last of the blue. We could smell the river so clearly that we might have been horses - or perhaps it was the smell of rain impending in the air as well. There was an ocean above us, held in by a thin sac that might rupture and let down a flood at any second.

I kept trying to look into the underbrush, but my eyes were continually drawn back to that turbulent, racing sky; in its deepening colours you could read whatever doom you liked: water, fire, wind, hail. The cool breeze became more insistent, hissing in the firs. A sudden impossible bolt of lightning flashed down, seemingly from directly overhead, making me cry out and clap my hands to my eyes. God had taken my picture, a little kid with his shirt tied around his waist, duckbumps on his bare chest and cinders on his cheeks. I heard the rending fall of some big tree not sixty yards away. The crack of thunder which followed made me cringe. I wanted to be at home reading a good book in a safe place ... like down in the potato cellar.

'Jeezis!' Vern screamed in a high, fainting voice. 'Oh my Jeezis Chrise, lookit that!'

I looked in the direction Vern was pointing and saw a blue-white fireball bowling its way up the lefthand rail of the GS&WM tracks, crackling and hissing for all the world like a scalded cat. It hurried past us as we turned to watch it go, dumbfounded, aware for the first time that such things could exist. Twenty feet beyond us it made a sudden -pop!! - and just disappeared, leaving a greasy smell of ozone behind.

'What am I doin' here, anyway?' Teddy muttered.

'What a pisser!' Chris exclaimed happily, his face upturned. This is gonna be a pisser like you wouldn't believe. But I was with Teddy. Looking up at that sky gave me a dismaying sense of vertigo. It was more like looking into some deeply mysterious marbled gorge. Another lightning-bolt crashed down, making us duck. This time the ozone smell was hotter, more urgent. The following clap of thunder came with no perceptible pause at all.

My ears were still ringing from it when Vern began to screech triumphantly: 'THERE! THERE HE IS! RIGHT THERE! I SEE HIM?'

I can see Vern right this minute, if I want to - all I have to do is sit back for a minute and close my eyes. He's standing there on the lefthand rail like an explorer on the prow of his ship, one hand shielding his eyes from the silver stroke of lightning that has just come down, the other extended and pointing.

We ran up beside him and looked. I was thinking to myself: Vern's imagination just ran away with him, that's all. The suckers, the heat, now this storm ... his eyes are dealing wild cards, that's all. But that wasn't what it was, although there was a split second when I wanted it to be. In that split second I knew I never wanted to see a corpse, not even a runover woodchuck.

In the place where we were standing, early spring rains had washed part of the embankment away, leaving a gravelly, uncertain four-foot drop-off. The railroad maintenance crews either not yet gotten around to it in their yellow diesel-operated repair carts, or it had happened so recently it hadn't yet been reported. At the bottom of this washout

was a marshy, mucky tangle of undergrowth that smelled bad. And sticking out of a wild clingspring of blackberry brambles was a single pale white hand.

Did any of us breathe? I didn't.

The breeze was now a wind - harsh and jerky, coming at us from no particular direction, jumping and whirling, slapping at our sweaty skins and open pores. I hardly noticed. I think part of my mind was waiting for Teddy to cry out Paratroops over the side!, and I thought if he did that I might just go crazy. It would have been better to see the whole body, ail at once, but instead there was only that limp outstretched hand, horribly white, the fingers limply splayed, like the hand of a drowned boy. It told us the truth of the whole matter. It explained every graveyard in the world. The image of that hand came back to me every time I heard or read of an atrocity. Somewhere, attached to that hand, was the rest of Ray Brower.

Lightning flickered and stroked. Thunder ripped in behind each stroke as if a drag race had started over our heads.

'Sheeeee ...' Chris said, the sound not quite a cuss word, not quite the country version of shit as it is pronounced around a slender stem of timothy grass when the baler breaks down - instead it was a long, tuneless syllable without meaning; a sigh that had just happened to pass through the vocal cords.

Vern was licking his lips in a compulsive sort of way, as if he had tasted some obscure new delicacy, a Howard Johnson's 29th Flavour, Tibetan Sausage Rolls, Interstellar Escargot, something so weird that it excited and revolted him at the same time.

Teddy only stood and looked. The wind whipped his greasy, clotted hair first away from his ears and then back over them. His face was a total blank. I could tell you I saw something there, and perhaps I did, in hindsight ... but not then.

There were black ants trundling back and forth across the hand.

A great whispering noise began to rise in the woods on either side of the tracks, as if the forest had just noticed we were there and was commenting on it. The rain had started.

Dime-sized drops fell on my head and arms. They struck the embankment, turning the fill dark for a moment - and then the colour changed back again as the greedy dry ground sucked the moisture up.

Those big drops fell for maybe five seconds and then they stopped. I looked at Chris and he blinked back at me.

Then the storm came all at once, as if a shower chain had been pulled in the sky. The whispering sound changed to loud contention. It was as if we were being rebuked for our discovery, and it was frightening. Nobody tells you about the pathetic fallacy until you're in college ... and even then I noticed that nobody but the total dorks completely believed it was a fallacy.

Chris jumped over the side of the washout, his hair already soaked and clinging to his head. I followed. Vern and Teddy came close behind, but Chris and I were first to reach the body of Ray Brower. He was face down. Chris looked into my eyes, his face set and stern - an adult's face. I nodded slightly, as if he had spoken aloud.

I think he was down here and relatively intact instead of up there between the rails and completely mangled because he was trying to get out of the way when the train hit him, knocking him head over heels. He had landed with his head pointed towards the tracks, arms over his head like a diver about to execute. He had landed in this boggy cup of land that was becoming a small swamp. His hair was a dark reddish colour. The moisture in the air had made it curt slightly at the ends. There was blood in it, but not a great deal, not a gross-out amount. The ants were grosser. He was wearing a solid colour dark green tee-shirt and bluejeans. His feet were bare, and a few feet behind him, caught in that blackberry brambles, I saw a pair of filthy low-topped Keds. For a moment I was puzzled - why was he here and his tennies there... Then I realized, and the realization was like a dirty punch below the belt. My wife, my kids, my friends - they all think that having an imagination like mine must be quite nice; aside from making all this dough, I can have a little mind-movie whenever things get dull. Mostly they're right But every now and then it turns around and bites the shit out of you with these long teeth, teeth that have been filed to points like the teeth of a cannibal. You see things you'd just as soon not see, things that keep you awake until first light. I saw one of those things now, saw it with absolute clarity and certainty. He had been knocked spang out of his Keds. The train had knocked him out of his Keds just as it had knocked the life out of his body.

That finally rammed it all the way home for me. The kid was dead. The kid wasn't sick, the kid wasn't sleeping. The kid wasn't going to get up in the morning anymore or get the runs from eating too many apples or catch poison ivy or wear out the eraser on the end of his Ticonderoga No 2 during a hard math test The kid was dead; stone dead. The kid was never going to go out bottling with his friends in the

spring, gunnysack over his shoulder to pick up the returnables the retreating snow uncovered The kid wasn't going to wake up at two o'clock a.m. on the morning of 1 November this year, run to the bathroom, and vomit up a big glurt of cheap Halloween candy. The kid wasn't going to pull a single girl's braid in home room. The kid wasn't going to give a bloody nose, or get one. The kid was can't, don't, won't, never, shouldn't, wouldn't, couldn't. He was the side of the battery where the terminal says NEG. The fuse you have to put a penny in. The wastebasket by the teacher's desk, which always smells of wood-shavings from the sharpener and dead orange-peels from lunch. The haunted house outside of town where the windows are crashed out, the NO TRESPASSING signs whipped away across the fields, the attic full of bats, the cellar full of worms. The kid was dead, mister, ma'am, young sir, little miss. I could go on all day and never get it right about the distance between his bare feet on the ground and his dirty Keds hanging in the bushes. It was thirty-plus inches, it was a googol of light-years. The kid was disconnected from his Keds beyond all hope of reconciliation. He was dead.

We turned him face up into the pouring rain, the lightning, the steady crack of thunder.

There were ants and bugs all over his face and neck. They ran briskly in and out of the round collar of his tee-shirt. His eyes were open, but terrifyingly out of sync - one was rolled back so far that we could see only a tiny arc of pupil; the other stared straight up into the storm. There was a dried froth of blood above his mouth and on his chin - from a bloody nose, I thought - and the right side of his face was lacerated and darkly bruised. Still, I thought, he didn't really look bad. I had once walked into a door my brother Dennis was shoving open, came off with bruises even worse

than this kid's, plus the bloody nose, and still had two helpings of everything for supper after it happened.

Teddy and Vern stood behind us and if there had been any sight at all left in that one upward-staring eye, I suppose we would have looked to Ray Brower like pallbearers in a horror movie.

A beetle came out of his mouth, trekked across his fuzzless cheek, stepped onto a nettle, and was gone.

'D'joo see that?' Teddy asked in a high, strange, fainting voice. 'I bet he's fuckin' fulla bugs! I bet his brains're' Shut up, Teddy,' Chris said, and Teddy did, looking relieved.

Lightning forked blue across the sky, making the boy's single eye light up. You could almost believe he was glad to be found, and found by boys his own age. His torso had swelled up and there was a faint gassy odour about him, like the smell of old farts.

I turned away, sure I was going to be sick, but my stomach was dry, hard, steady. I suddenly rammed two fingers down my throat, trying to make myself heave, needing to do it, as if I could sick it up and get rid of it. But my stomach only hitched a little and then was steady again.

The roaring downpour and the accompanying thunder had completely covered the sound of cars approaching along the Back Harlow Road, which lay bare yards beyond this boggy tangle. It likewise covered the crackle-crunch of the underbrush as they blundered through it from the dead end where they had parked.

And the first we knew of them was Ace Merrill's voice raised above the tumult of the storm, saying: 'Well what the fuck do you know about this?'

We all jumped like we had been goosed and Vern cried out - he admitted later that he thought, for just a second, that the voice had come from the dead boy.

On the far side of the boggy patch, where the woods took up again, masking the butt end of the road, Ace Merrill and Eyeball Chambers stood together, half-obscured by a pouring grey curtain of rain. They were both wearing red nylon high school jackets, the kind you can buy in the office if you're a regular student, the same kind they give away free to varsity sports players. Their da haircuts had been plastered back against their skulls and a mixture of rainwater and Vitalis ran down their cheeks like ersatz tears.

'Sumbitch!' Eyeball said. That's my little brother!'

Chris was staring at Eyeball with his mouth open. His shirt, wet, limp and dark, was still tied around his skinny middle. His pack, stained a darker green by the rain, was hanging against his naked shoulderblades.

'You get away, Rich,' he said in a trembling voice. 'We found him. We got dibs.'

'Fuck your dibs. We're gonna report 'im.'

'No you're not,' I said. I was suddenly furious with them, turning up this way at the last minute. If we'd thought about it, we'd have known something just like this was going to happen ... but this was one time, somehow, that the older, bigger kids weren't going to steal it - to take something they wanted as if by divine right, as if their easy way was the right way, the only way. They had come in cars

-I think that was what made me angriest They had come in cars. "There's four of us, Eyeball. You just try.'

'Oh, we'll try, don't worry,' Eyeball said, and the trees shook behind him and Ace, Charlie Hogan and Vern's brother Billy stepped through them, cursing and wiping water out of their eyes. I felt a lead ball drop into my belly. It grew bigger as Jack Mudgett and Fuzzy Brackowicz stepped out behind Charlie and Billy.

'Here we all are,' Ace said, grinning. 'So you just -'

"VERN!!" Billy Tessio cried in a terrible, accusing, my-justice-cometh-and-that-right-early voice. He made a pair of dripping fists. 'You little sonofawhore! You was under the porch! Cock-knocker!'

Vern flinched.

Charlie Hogan waxed positively lyrical: 'You little keyhole-peeping cunt-licking bungwipe! I ought to beat the living shit out of you!'

'Yeah? Well, try it!' Teddy brayed suddenly. His eyes were crazily alight behind his rainspotted glasses. 'Come on, fightcha for 'im! Come on! Come on, big men!'

Billy and Charlie didn't need a second invitation. They started forward together and Vern flinched again - no doubt visualizing the ghosts of Beatings Past and Beatings Yet To Come. He flinched ... but hung tough. He was with his friends, and we had been through a lot, and we hadn't got here in a couple of cars.

But Ace held Billy and Charlie back, simply by touching each of them on the shoulder.

'Now listen, you guys,' Ace said. He spoke patiently, just as if we weren't all standing in a roaring rainstorm. 'There's more of us than there are of you. We're bigger. We'll give you one chance to just blow away. I don't give a fuck where. Just make like a tree and leave.'

Chris's brother giggled and Fuzzy clapped Ace on the back in appreciation of his great wit. The Sid Caesar of the jd set.

"Cause we're takin' him.' Ace smiled gently, and you could imagine him smiling that same gentle smile just before breaking his cue over the head of some uneducated punk who had made the terrible mistake of lipping off while Ace was lining up a shot. 'If you go, well take him. If you stay, well beat the piss outta you and still take him. Besides,' he added, trying to gild the thuggery with a little righteousness, 'Charlie and Billy found him, so it's their dibs anyway.'

'They was chicken!' Teddy shot back. 'Vern told us about it! They was fuckin' chicken right outta their fuckin' minds!' He screwed his face up into a terrified, snivelling parody of Charlie Hogan.' "I wish we never boosted that car! I wish we never went on no Back Harlow Road to whack off a piece! Oh Billee, what are we gonna do? Oh Billee, I think I just made a pile in my Fruit of the Looms! Oh Billee -"

That's it,' Charlie said, starting forward again. His face was knotted with rage and sullen embarrassment. 'Kid, whatever your name is, get ready to reach down your fuckin' throat the next time you need to pick your nose.'

I looked wildly down at Ray Brower. He stared calmly up into the rain with his one eye, below us but above it all. The thunder was still booming steadily, but the rain had begun to slack off.

'What do you say, Gordie?' Ace asked. He was holding Charlie lightly by the arm, the way an accomplished trainer would restrain a vicious dog. 'You must have at least some of your brother's sense. Tell these guys to back off. I'll let Charlie beat up the four eyes el punko a little bit and then we all go about our business. What do you say?'

He was wrong to mention Denny. I had wanted to reason with him, to point out what Ace knew perfectly well, that we had every right to take Billy and Charlie's dibs since Vern had heard them giving said dibs away. I wanted to tell him how Vern and I had almost gotten run down by a freight train on the trestle which spans the Castle River. About Milo Pressman and his fearless - if stupid - sidekick, Chopper the Wonder-Dog. About the bloodsuckers, too. I guess all I really wanted to tell him was come on, Ace, fair is fair. You know that. But he had to bring Denny into it, and what I heard coming out of my mouth instead of sweet reason was my own death warrant: 'Suck my fat one, you cheap dime-store hood.'

Ace's mouth formed a perfect O of surprise - the expression was so unexpectedly prissy that under other circumstances it would have been a laft riot, so to speak. All of the others - on both sides of the bog - stared at me. dumbfounded.

Then Teddy screamed gleefully: "That's telling 'im, Gordie! Oh boy! Too cool!"

I stood numbly, unable to believe it. It was like some crazed understudy had shot onstage at the critical moment and declaimed lines that weren't even in the play. Telling a guy to suck was as bad as you could get without resorting to his mother. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Chris had unshouldered his knapsack and was digging into it frantically, but I didn't get it - not then, anyway.

'Okay,' Ace said softly. 'Let's take 'em. Don't hurt nobody but the Lachance kid. I'm gonna break both his fuckin' arms.'

I went dead cold. I didn't piss myself the way I had on the railroad trestle, but it must have been because I had nothing inside to let out. He meant it, you see; the years between then and now have changed my mind about a lot of things, but not about that. When Ace said he was going to break both of my arms, he absolutely meant it.

They started to walk towards us through the slackening rain. Jackie Mudgett took a DeMano switchknife out of his pocket and hit the chrome. Six inches of steel flicked out, dove-grey in the afternoon half-light. Vern and Teddy dropped suddenly into fighting crouches on either side of me. Teddy did so eagerly, Vern with a desperate, cornered grimace on his face.

The big kids advanced in a line, their feet splashing through the bog, which was now one big sludgy puddle because of the storm. The body of Ray Brower lay at our feet like a waterlogged barrel. I got ready to fight... and that was when Chris fired the pistol he had hawked out of his old man's dresser.

KA-BLAMI God, what a wonderful sound that was! Charlie Hogar jumped right up into the air. Ace Merrill, who had been staring straight at me, now jerked around and looked at Chris. His mouth made that O again. Eyeball looked absolutely astounded.

'Hey, Chris, that's Daddy's,' he said. 'You're gonna get the tar whaled out of you -'

"That's nothing to what you'll get,' Chris said. His face was horribly pale, and all the life in him seemed to have been

sucked upward, into his eyes. They blazed out of his face. 'Gordie was right, you're nothing but a bunch of cheap hoods. Vern and Billy didn't want their fuckin' dibs and you all know it. We wouldn't have walked way to fuck out here if they said they did. They just went someplace and puked the story up and let Ace Merrill do their thinkin' for them.' His voice rose to a scream. 'But you ain't gonna get him, do you hear me?

'Now listen,' Ace said. 'You better put that down before you take your foot off with it. You ain't got the sack to shoot a woodchuck.' He began to walk forward again, smiling his gentle smile as he came. 'You're just a sawed-off pint-sized pissy-assed little runt and I'm gonna make you eat that fuckin' gun.'

'Ace, if you don't stand still I'm going to shoot you. I swear to God.'

'You'll go to jayyy-ail' Ace crooned, not even hesitating. He was still smiling. The others watched him with horrified fascination ... much the same way as Teddy and Vern and I were looking at Chris. Ace Merrill was the hardest case for miles around and I didn't think Chris could bluff him down. And what did that leave? Ace didn't think a twelve-year-old punk would actually shoot him. I thought he was wrong; I thought Chris would shoot Ace before he let Ace take his father's pistol away from him. In those few seconds I was sure there was going to be bad trouble, the worst I'd ever known. Killing trouble, maybe. And all of it over who got dibs on a dead body.

Chris said softly, with great regret: 'Where do you want it, Ace? Arm or leg? I can't pick. You pick for me.'

And Ace stopped.

His face sagged, and I saw sudden terror on it. It was Chris's tone rather than his actual words, I think; the real regret that things were going to go from bad to worse. If it was a bluff, it's still the best I've ever seen. The other big kids were totally convinced; their faces were squinched up as if someone had just touched a match to a cherry bomb with a short fuse.

Ace slowly got control of himself. The muscles in his face tightened again, his lips pressed together, and he looked at Chris the way you'd look at a man who has made a serious business proposition - to merge with your company, or handle your line of credit, or shoot your balls off. It was a waiting, almost curious expression, one that made you know that the terror was either gone or tightly lidded. Ace had recomputed the odds on not getting shot and had decided that they weren't as much in his favour as he had thought. But he was still dangerous - maybe more than before. Since then I've thought it was the rawest piece of brinkmanship I've ever seen. Neither of them was bluffing; they both meant business.

'All right,' Ace said softly, speaking to Chris. 'But I know how you're going to come out of this, motherfuck.'

'No you don't,' Chris said.

'You little prick!' Eyeball said loudly. 'You're gonna wind up in traction for this!'

'Bite my bag,' Chris told him.

With an inarticulate sound of rage Eyeball started forward and Chris put a bullet into the water about ten feet in front of him. It kicked up a splash. Eyeball jumped back, cursing.

'Okay, now what?' Ace asked.

'Now you guys get into your cars and bomb on back to Castle Rock. After that I don't care. But you ain't getting him.' He touched Ray Brower lightly, almost reverently, with the toe of one sopping sneaker. 'You dig me?'

'But we'll get you,' Ace said. He was starting to smile again. 'Don't you know that?'

'Well get you hard,' Ace said, smiling. 'Well hurt you. I can't believe you don't know that We'll put you all in the fuckin' hospital with fuckin' ruptures. Sincerely.'

'Oh, why don't you go home and fuck your mother some more? I hear she loves the way you do it'

Ace's smile froze. 'I'll kill you for that. Nobody ranks my mother.'

'I heard your mother fucks for bucks,' Chris informed him, and as Ace began to pale, as his complexion began to approach Chris's own ghastly whiteness, he added: 'In fact, I heard she throws blowjobs for jukebox nickels. I heard -'

Then the storm came back, viciously, all at once. Only this time it was hail instead of rain. Instead of whispering or talking, the woods now seemed alive with hokey B-movie jungle drums - it was the sound of big ice hailstones bonking off tree trunks. Stinging pebbles began to hit my shoulders - it felt as if some sentient, malevolent force was throwing them. Worse than that, they began to strike Ray Brower's upturned face with an awful splatting sound that reminded us of him again, of his terrible and unending patience.

Vern caved in first, with a wailing scream. He fled up the embankment in huge, gangling strides. Teddy held out a minute longer, then ran after Vern, his hands held up over his head. On their side, Vince Desjardins floundered back under some nearby trees and Fuzzy Brackowicz joined him. But the others stood pat, and Ace began to grin again.

'Stick with me, Gordie," Chris said in a low, shaky voice. 'Stick with me, man.'

'I'm right here.'

'Go on, now,' Chris said to Ace, and he was able, by some magic, to get the shakiness out of his voice. He sounded as if he was instructing a stupid infant.

'Well get you,' Ace said. 'We're not going to forget it, if that's what you're thinking. This is big time, baby.'

"That's fine. You just go on and do your getting another day.'

'Well fuckin' ambush you, Chambers. We'll -'

'Get out? Chris screamed, and levelled the gun. Ace stepped back.

He looked at Chris a moment longer, nodded, then turned around. 'Come on,' he said to the others. He looked back over his shoulder at Chris and me once more. 'Be seeing you.'

They went back into the screen of trees between the bog and the road. Chris and I stood perfectly still in spite of the hail that was wetting us, reddening our skins, and piling up all around us like summer snow. We stood and listened and

above the crazy calypso sound of the hail hitting the tree trunks we heard two cars start up.

'Stay right here,' Chris told me, and he started across the bog.

'Chris!' I said, panicky.

'I got to. Stay here.'

It seemed he was gone a very long time. I became convinced that either Ace or Eyeball had lurked behind and grabbed him. I stood my ground with nobody but Ray Brower for company and waited for somebody - anybody - to come back. After a while, Chris did.

'We did it,' he said. 'They're gone.'

'You sure?'

'Yeah. Both cars.' He held his hands up over his head, locked together with the gun between them, and shook the double fist in a wry championship gesture. Then he dropped them and smiled at me. I think it was the saddest, scariest smile I ever saw.' "Suck my fat one" - whoever told you you had a fat one, Lachance?'

'Biggest one in four counties,' I said. I was shaking all over.

We looked at each other warmly for a second, and then, maybe embarrassed by what we were seeing, looked down together. A nasty thrill of fear shot through me, and the sudden splash/splash as Chris shifted his feet let me know that he had seen, too. Ray Brewer's eyes had gone wide and white, starey and pupilless, like the eyes that look out at you from Grecian statuary. It only took a second to understand what had happened, but understanding didn't

lessen the horror. His eyes had filled up with round white hailstones. Now they were melting and the water ran down his cheeks as if he were weeping for his own grotesque position - a tatty prize to be fought over by two bunches of stupid hick kids. His clothes were also white with hail. He seemed to be lying in his own shroud.

'Oh, Gordie, hey,' Chris said shakily. 'Say-hey, man. What a creepshow for him.'

'I don't think he knows -'

'Maybe that was his ghost we heard. Maybe he knew this was gonna happen. What a fuckin' creepshow, I'm sincere.'

Branches crackled behind us. I whirled, sure they had flanked us, but Chris went back to contemplating the body after one short, almost casual glance. It was Vern and Teddy, their jeans soaked black and plastered to their legs, both of them grinning like dogs that have been sucking eggs.

'What are we gonna do, man?' Chris asked, and I felt a weird chill steal through me. Maybe he was talking to me, maybe he was ... but he was still looking down at the body.

'We're gonna take him back, ain't we?' Teddy asked, puzzled. 'We're gonna be heroes. Ain't that right?' He looked from Chris to me and back to Chris again.

Chris looked up as if startled out of a dream. His lip curled. He took big steps towards Teddy, planted both hands on Teddy's chest, and pushed him roughly backwards. Teddy stumbled, pinwheeled his arms for balance, then sat down with a soggy splash. He blinked up at Chris like a surprised muskrat. Vern was looking warily at Chris, as if he feared madness. Perhaps that wasn't far from the mark.

'You keep your trap shut,' Chris said to Teddy. 'Paratroops over the side my ass. You lousy rubber chicken.'

'It was the hail!' Teddy cried out, angry and ashamed. 'It wasn't those guys, Chris! I'm ascares of storms! I can't help it! I would have taken all of 'em on at once, I swear on my mother's name! But I'm ascares of storms! Shit! I can't help it!' He began to cry again, sitting there in the water.

'What about you?' Chris asked, turning to Vern. 'Are you ascares of storms too?'

Vern shook his head vacuously, still astounded by Chris's rage. 'Hey, man, I thought we was all runnin'.'

'You must be a mind-reader then, because you ran first'

Vern swallowed twice and said nothing.

Chris stared at him, his eyes sullen and wild. Then he turned to me. 'Going to build him a litter, Gordie.'

'If you say so, Chris.'

'Sure! Like in Scouts.' His voice had begun to climb into strange, reedy levels. 'Just like in the fuckin' Scouts. A litter -poles and shuts. Like in the handbook. Right, Gordie?'

'Yeah. If you want But what if those guys -'

'Fuck those guys!' he screamed. 'You're all a bunch of chickens! Fuck off, creeps?'

'Chris, they could call the sheriff. To get back at us.'

"He's ours and we're gonna take him OUT!"

Those guys would say anything to get us in dutch,' I told him. My words sounded thin, stupid, sick with the flu. 'Say anything and then lie each other up. You know how people can get other people in trouble telling lies, man. Like with the milk-mo-'

'I DONT CARE!" he screamed, and lunged at me with his fists up. But one of his feet struck Ray Brower's ribcage with a soggy thump, making the body rock. He tripped and fell full-length and I waited for him to get up and maybe punch me in the mouth but instead he lay where he had fallen, head pointing towards the embankment, arms stretched out over his head like a diver about to execute, in the exact posture Ray Brower had been in when we found him. I looked wildly at Chris's feet to make sure his sneakers were still on. Then he began to cry and scream, his body bucking in the muddy-water, splashing it around, fists drumming up and down in it head twisting from side to side. Teddy and Vem were staring at him, agog, because nobody had ever seen Chris Chambers cry. After a moment or two I walked back to the embankment, climbed it, and sat down on one of the rails. Chris and Vern followed me. And we sat there in the rain, not talking, looking like those three Monkeys of Virtue they sell in dime stores and those sleazy gift-shops that always look like they are tottering on the edge of bankruptcy.

28

It was twenty minutes before Chris climbed the embankment to sit down beside us. The clouds had begun to break. Spears of sun came down through the rips. The bushes seemed to have gone three shades darker green in the last forty-five minutes. He was mud all the way up one side and down the other. His hair was standing up in muddy

spikes. The only clean parts of him were the whitewashed circles around his eyes.

'You're right, Gordie,' he said. 'Nobody gets last dibs. Goocher all around, huh?'

I nodded. Five minutes passed. No one said anything. And I happened to have a thought ... just in case they did call Bannerman. I went back down the embankment and over to where Chris had been standing. I got down on my knees and began to comb carefully through the water and marshgrass with my fingers.

'What you doing?' Teddy asked, joining me.

'It's to your left, I think,' Chris said, and pointed.

I looked there and after a minute or two I found both shell casings. They winked in the fresh sunlight. I gave them to Chris. He nodded and stuffed them into a pocket of his jeans.

'Now we go,' Chris said.

'Hey, come on!' Teddy yelled, in real agony. 'I wanna take 'im!'

'Listen, dummy,' Chris said, 'if we take him back we could all wind up in the reformatory. It's like Gordie says. Those guys could make up any story they wanted to. What if they said we killed him, huh? How would you like that?'

'I don't give a damn,' Teddy said sulkily. Then he looked at us with absurd hope. 'Besides, we might only get a couple of months or so. As excessories. I mean, we're only twelve fuckin' years old, they ain't gonna put us in Shawshank.'

Chris said softly: 'You can't get in the army if you got a record, Teddy.'

I was pretty sure that was nothing but a bald-faced lie -but somehow this didn't seem the time to say so. Teddy just looked at Chris for a long time, his mouth trembling. Finally he managed to squeak out: 'No shit?'

'Ask Gordie.'

He looked at me hopefully.

'He's right,' I said, feeling like a great big turd. 'He's right, Teddy. First thing they do when you volunteer is to check your name through R&I.'

'Holy God?'

'We're gonna shag ass back to the trestle,' Chris said. 'Then we'll get off the tracks and come into Castle Rock from the other direction. If people ask where we were, we'll say we went campin' up on Brickyard Hill and got lost.'

'Milo Pressman knows better,' I said. 'That creep at the Florida Market does, too.'

'Well, we'll say Milo scared us and that's when we decided to go up on the Brickyard.'

I nodded. That might work. If Vern and Teddy could remember to stick to it 'What about if our folks get together?' Vern asked.

'You worry about it if you want,' Chris said. 'My dad'll still be juiced up.'

'Come on, then,' Vern said, eyeing the screen of trees between us and the Back Harlow Road. He looked like he expected Bannerman, along with a brace of bloodhounds, to come crashing through at any moment 'Let's get while the gettin's good.'

We were all on our feet now, ready to go. The birds were singing like crazy, pleased with the rain and the shine and the worms and just about everything in the world, I guess. We all turned around, as if pulled on strings, and looked back at Ray Brower.

He was lying there, alone again. His arms had flopped out when we turned him over and now he was sort of spreadeagled, as if to welcome the sunshine. For a moment it seemed all right a more natural deathscene than any ever constructed for a viewing-room audience by a mortician. Then you saw the bruise, the caked blood on the chin and under the nose, and the way the corpse was beginning to bloat. You saw that the bluebottles had come out with the sun and that they were circling the body, buzzing indolently. You remembered that gassy smell, sickish but dry, like farts in a closed room. He was a boy our age, he was dead, and I rejected the idea that anything about it could be natural; I pushed it away with horror.

'Okay,' Chris said, and he meant to be brisk but his voice came out of his throat like a handful of dry bristles from an old whiskbroom. 'Double time.'

We started to almost-trot back the way we had come. We didn't talk. I don't know about the others, but I was too busy thinking to talk. There were things that bothered me about the body of Ray Brower - they bothered me then and they bother me now.

A bad bruise on the side of his face, a scalp laceration, a bloody nose. No more - at least, no more visible. People walk away from bar-fights in worse condition and go right on drinking. Yet the train must have hit him; why else would his sneakers be off his feet that way? And how come the engineer hadn't seen him? Could it be that the train had hit him hard enough to toss him but not to kill him? I thought that, under just the right combination of circumstances, that could have happened. Had the train hit him a hefty, teeth-rattling sideswipe as he tried to get out of the way? Hit him and knocked him in a flying, backwards somersault over that eaved-in banking? Had he perhaps lain awake and trembling in the dark for hours, not just lost now but disorientated as well, cut off from the world? Maybe he had died of fear. A bird with crushed tailfeathers once died in my cupped hands in just that way. Its body trembled and vibrated lightly, its beak opened and closed, its dark, bright eyes stared up at me. Then the vibration quit, the beak froze half-open, and the black eyes became lacklustre and uncaring. It could have been that way with Ray Brower. He could have died because he was simply too frightened to go on living.

But there was another thing, and that bothered me most of all, I think. He had started off to go berrying. I seemed to remember the news reports saying he'd been carrying a tin pail. When we got back I went to the library and looked it up in the newspapers just to be sure, and I was right He'd been berrying, and he'd had a pail. But we hadn't found it We found him, and we found his sneakers. He must have thrown it away somewhere between Chamberlain and the boggy patch of ground in Harlow where he died. He perhaps clutched it even tighter at first, as though it linked him to home and safety. But as his fear grew, and with it that sense of being utterly alone, with no chance of rescue except for whatever he could do by himself, as the real cold

terror set it, he maybe threw it away into the woods on one side of the tracks or the other, hardly even noticing it was gone.

I've thought of going back and looking for it - how does that strike you for morbid? I've thought of driving to the end of the Back Harlow Road in my almost new Ford van and getting out of it some bright summer morning, all by myself, my wife and children far off in another world where, if you turn a switch, lights come on in the dark. I've thought about how it would be. Pulling my pack out of the back and resting it on the customized van's rear bumper while I carefully remove my shirt and tie it around my waist. Rubbing my chest and shoulders with Muskol insect repellent and then crashing through the woods to where that boggy place was, the place where we found him. Would the grass grow up yellow there, in the shape of his body? Of course not, there would be no sign, but still you wonder, and you realize what a thin film there is between your rational man costume - the writer with leather elbow-patches on his corduroy jacket -and the capering, Gorgon myths of childhood. Then climbing the embankment, now overgrown with weeds, and walking slowly beside the rusted tracks and rotted ties towards Chamberlain.

Stupid fantasy. An expedition looking for a fourteen-year-old blueberry pail, which was probably cast deep into the woods or ploughed under by a bulldozer readying a half-acre plot for a tract house or so deeply overgrown by weeds and brambles it had become invisible. But I feel sure it is still there, somewhere along the old discontinued GS&WM line, and at times the urge to go and look is almost a frenzy. It usually comes early in the morning, when my wife is showering and the kids are watching Batman and Scooby-Doo on channel 38 out of Boston, and I am feeling the most like the pre-adolescent Gordon Lachance that once strode

the earth, walking and talking and occasionally crawling on his belly like a reptile. That boy was me, I think. And the thought which follows, chilling me like a dash of cold water, is: Which boy do you mean?

Sipping a cup of tea, looking at sun slanting through the kitchen windows, hearing the TV from one end of the house and the shower from the other, feeling the pulse behind my eyes that means I got through one beer too many the night before, I feel sure I could find it. I would see clear metal winking through rust, the bright summer sun reflecting it back to my eyes. I would go down the side of the embankment, push aside the grasses that had grown up and twined toughly around its handle, and then I would ... what? Why, simply pull it out of time. I would turn it over and over in my hands, wondering at the feel of it, marvelling at the knowledge that the last person to touch it had been long years in his grave. Suppose there was a note in it? Help me, I'm lost. Of course there wouldn't be - boys don't go out to pick blueberries with paper and pencil - but just suppose. I imagine the awe I'd feel would be as dark as an eclipse. Still, it's mostly just the idea of holding that pail in my two hands, I guess - as much a symbol of my living as his dying, proof that I really do know which boy it was - which boy of the five of us. Holding it. Reading every year in its cake of rust and the fading of its bright shine. Feeling it, trying to understand the suns that shone on it the rains that fell on it, and the snows that covered it And to wonder where I was when each thing happened to it in its lonely place, where I was, what I was doing, who I was loving, how I was getting along, where I was. I'd hold it, read it, feel it... and look at my own face in whatever reflection might be left. Can you dig it?

We got back to Castle Rock a little past five o'clock on Sunday morning, the day before Labour Day. We had walked all night Nobody complained, although we all had blisters and were all ravenously hungry. My head was throbbing with a killer headache, and my legs felt twisted and burning with fatigue. Twice we had to scramble down the embankment to get out of the way of freights. One of them was going our way, but moving far too fast to hop. It was seeping daylight when we got to the trestle spanning the Castle again. Chris looked at it, looked at the river, looked back at us.

'Fuck it I'm walkin' across. If I get hit by a train I won't have to watch out for fuckin' Ace Merrill'

We all walked across it - plodded might be the better verb. No train came. When we got to the dump we climbed the fence (no Milo and no Chopper, not this early, and not on a Sunday morning) and went directly to the pump. Vert primed it and we all took turns sticking our heads under the icy flow, slapping the water over our bodies, drinking until we could hold no more. Then we had to put our shirts on again because the morning seemed chilly. We walked - limped -back into town and stood for a moment on the sidewalk in front of the vacant lot We looked at our treehouse so we wouldn't have to look at each other.

'Well,' Teddy said at last, 'seeya in school on Wednesday. I think I'm gonna sleep until then.'

'Me too,' Vern said. I'm too pooped to pop.'

Chris whistled tunelessly through his teeth and said nothing.

'Hey, man,' Teddy said awkwardly. 'No hard feelin's, okay?'

'No,' Chris said, and suddenly his sombre, tired face broke into a sweet and sunny grin. 'We did it, didn't we? We did the bastard.'

'Yeah,' Vern said. 'Your fuckin' A. Now Billy's gonna do me:

'So what?' Chris said. 'Richie's gonna tool up on me and Ace is probably gonna tool up on Gordie and somebody else'll tool up on Teddy. But we did it'

That's right,' Vern said. But he still sounded unhappy.

Chris looked at me. 'We did it, didn't we?' he asked softly. It was worth it, wasn't it?'

'Sure it was,' I said.

'Fuck this,' Teddy said in his dry I'm-losing-interest way. You guys sound like fuckin' Meet the Press. Gimme some skin, man. I'm gonna toot home and see if Mom's got me on the Ten Most Wanted list.'

We all laughed, Teddy gave us his surprised Oh-Lord-what-now look, and we gave him skin. Then he and Vern started off in their direction and I should have gone in mine .. but I hesitated for a second.

'Walk with you,' Chris offered.

'Sure, okay.'

We walked a block or so without talking. Castle Rock was awesomely quiet in the day's first light, and I felt an almost holy tiredness-is-slipping-away sort of feeling. We were awake and the whole world was asleep and I almost expected to turn the corner and see my deer standing at

the far end of Carbine Street, where the GS&WM tracks pass through the mill's loading yard.

Finally Chris spoke. They'll tell," he said.

'You bet they will. But not today or tomorrow, if that's what you're worried about. It'll be a long time before they tell, I think. Years, maybe.'

He looked at me, surprised.

'They're scared, Chris. Teddy especially, that they won't take him in the army. But Vern's scared, too. They'll lose some sleep over it, and there's gonna be times this fail when it's right on the tips of their tongues to tell somebody, but I don't think they will. And then ... you know what? It sounds fucking crazy, but ... I think they'll almost forget it ever happened.'

He was nodding slowly. 'I didn't think of it just like that.

You see through people, Gordie.'

'Man, I wish I did.'

'You do, though.'

We walked another block in silence.

'I'm never gonna get out of this town,' Chris said, and sighed. 'When you come back from college on summer vacation, you'll be able to look me and Vern and Teddy up down at Sukey's after the seven-to-three shift's over. If you want to. Except you'll probably never want to.' He laughed a creepy laugh.

'Quit jerking yourself off,' I said, trying to sound tougher than I felt - I was thinking about being out there in the woods, about Chris saying: And maybe I took it to old lady Simons and told her, and maybe I got a three-day vacation anyway, because the money never showed up ... and maybe the next week old lady Simons had this brand-new skirt on when she came to school... The look. The look in his eyes.

'No jerk-off, daddy-O,' Chris said.

I rubbed my first finger against my thumb. 'This is the world's smallest violin playing "My Heart Pumps Purple Piss for You".'

'He was ours,' Chris said, his eyes dark in the morning light.

We had reached the corner of my street and we stoppec there. It was quarter past six. Back towards town we could see the Sunday Telegram truck pulling up in front of Teddy's uncle's stationery shop. A man in bluejeans and a tee-shirt threw off a bundle of papers. They bounced upside down on the sidewalk, showing the colour funnies (always Dick Tracey and Blondie on the first page). Then the truck drove on, its driver intent on delivering the outside world to the rest of the whistlestops up the line - Otisfield, Norway-South Paris, Waterford, Stoneham. I wanted to say something more to Chris and didn't know how to.

'Gimme some skin, man,' he said, sounding tired.

'Chris-'

'Skin.'

I gave him some skin. 'I'll see you.'

He grinned - that same sweet, sunny grin. 'Not if I see you first, fuckface.'

He walked off, still laughing, moving easily and gracefully, as though he didn't hurt like me and have blisters like me and like he wasn't lumped and bumped with mosquito and chigger and blackfly bites like me. As if he didn't have a care in the world, as if he was going to some real boss place instead of just home to a three-room house (shack would have been closer to the truth) with no indoor plumbing and broken windows covered with plastic and a brother who was probably laying for him in the front yard. Even if I'd known the right thing to say, I probably couldn't have said it. Speech destroys the functions of love, I think - that's a hell of a thing for a writer to say, I guess, but I believe it to be true. If you speak to tell a deer you mean it no harm, it glides away with a single flip of its tail. The word is the harm. Love isn't what these asshole poets like McKuen want you to think it is. Love has teeth; they bite; the wounds never close. No word, no combination of words, can close those lovebites. It's the other way around, that's the joke. If those wounds dry up, the words die with them. Take it from me. I've made my life from die words, and I know that is so.

30

The back door was locked so I fished the spare key out from under the mat and let myself in. The kitchen was empty, silent, suicidally clean. I could hear the hum the fluorescent bars over the sink made when I turned on the switch. It had been literally years since I had been up before my mother; I couldn't even remember the last time such a thing had happened.

I took off my shirt and put it in the plastic clothes basket behind the washing machine. I got a clean rag from under the sink and sponged off with it - face, neck, pits, belly. Then unzipped my pants and scrubbed my crotch - my testicles in particular - until my skin began to hurt. It seemed I couldn't get clean enough down there, although the red weal left by the bloodsucker was rapidly fading. I still have a tiny crescent-shaped scar there. My wife once asked about it and I told her a lie before I was even aware I meant to do so.

When I was done with the rag, I threw it away. It was filthy.

I got out a dozen eggs and scrambled six of them together. When they were semi-solid in the pan, I added a side dish of crushed pineapple and half a quart of milk. I was just sitting down to eat when my mother came in, her grey hair tied in a knot behind her head. She was wearing a faded pink bathrobe and smoking a Camel.

'Gordon, where have you been?'

'Camping,' I said, and began to eat 'We started off in Vern's field and then went up the Brickyard Hill. Vern's mom said she would call you. Didn't she?'

'She probably talked to your father,' she said, and glided past me to the sink. She looked like a pink ghost. The fluorescent bars were less than kind to her face; they made her complexion look almost yellow. She sighed ... almost sobbed. 'I miss Dennis most in the mornings,' she said. 'I always look in his room and it's always empty, Gordon. Always.'

'Yeah, that's a bitch,' I said.

'He always slept with his window open and the blankets ...
Gordon? Did you say something?'

'Nothing important, Mom.'

'... and the blankets pulled up to his chin,' she finished. Then she just stared out the window, her back to me. I went on eating. I was trembling all over.

31

The story never did get out. Oh, I don't mean that Ray Brower's body was never found; it was. But neither our gang nor their gang got the credit. In the end, Ace must have decided that an anonymous phonecall was the safest course, because that's how the location of the corpse was reported. What I mean was that none of our parents ever found out what we'd been up to that Labour Day weekend.

Chris's dad was still drinking, just as Chris had said he would be. His mom had gone off to Lewiston to stay with her sister, the way she almost always did when Mr Chambers was on a bender. She went and left Eyeball in charge of the younger kids. Eyeball had fulfilled his responsibility by going off with Ace and his jd buddies, leaving nine-year-old Sheldon, five-year-old Emery, and two-year-old Deborah to sink or swim on their own.

Teddy's mom got worried the second night and called Vern's mom. Vern's mom, who was also never going to do the gameshow circuit, said we were still out in Vern's tent. She knew because she could look right out the kitchen window and see a light on in there. Teddy's mom said she sure hoped no one was smoking cigarettes in there and Vern's mom said it looked like a flashlight to her, and besides, she was sure that none of Vern's or Billy's friends smoked.

My dad asked me some vague questions, looked mildly troubled at my evasive answers, said we'd go fishing together sometime, and that was the end of it. If the parents had fotten together in the week or two afterwards, everything would have fallen down ... but they never did.

Milo Pressman never spoke up, either. My guess is that he thought twice about it being our word against his, and how we would all swear that he sicced Chopper on me.

So the story never came out - but that wasn't the end of it.

32

One day near the end of the month, while I was walking some from school, a black 1952 Ford cut into the kerb in front of me. There was no mistaking that car. Gangster whitewalls and spinner hubcaps, highrise chrome bumpers . and lucite deathknob with a rose embedded in it clamped to the steering wheel. Painted on the back deck was a deuce and a one-eyed jack. Beneath them, in Roman Gothic script, were the words WILD CARD.

The doors flew open; Ace Merrill and Fuzzy Brackowicz stepped out 'Cheap hood, right?' Ace said, smiling his gentle smile 'My mother loves the way I do it to her, right?'

'We're gonna rack you, baby,' Fuzzy said.

I dropped my schoolbooks on the sidewalk and ran. I was busting my buns but they caught me before I even made the end of the block. Ace hit me with a flying tackle and I went full-length on the paving. My chin hit the cement and I didn't see stars; I saw whole constellations, whole nebulae. I was already crying when they picked me up, not so much from my elbows and knees, both pairs scraped and

bleeding, or even from fear - it was vast, impotent rage that made me cry. Chris was right He had been ours.

I twisted and turned and almost squiggled free. Then Fuzzy hoicked his knee into my crotch. The pain was amazing, incredible, nonpareil; it widened the horizons of pain from plain old wide screen to Vista Vision. I began to scream. Screaming seemed to be my best chance.

Ace punched me twice in the face, long and looping haymaker blows. The first one closed my left eye; it would be four days before I was really able to see out of that eye again The second broke my nose with a crunch that sounded the way crispy cereal sounds inside your head when you chew. Then old Mrs Chalmers came out on her porch with her cane clutched in one arthritis-twisted hand and a Herbert Tareyton jutting from one corner of her mouth. She began to bellow at them:

'Hi! Hi there, you boys! You stop that! Let 'im alone! Let 'im up! Bullies! Bullies! Two on one! Police! Poleeeeece!'

'Don't let me see you around, dipshit,' Ace said, smiling, and they let go of me and backed off. I sat up and then leaned over, cupping my wounded balls, sickly sure I was going to throw up and then die. I was still crying, too. But when Fuzzy started to walk around me, the sight of his pegged jeans-leg snugged down over the top of his motorcycle boot brought all the fury back. I grabbed him and bit his calf through his jeans. I bit him just as hard as I could. Fuzzy began to do a little screaming of his own. He also began hopping around on one leg, and, incredibly, he was calling me a dirty fighter. I was watching him hop around and that was when Ace stamped down on my left hand, breaking the first two fingers. I heard them break. They didn't sound like crispy cereal. They sounded like

pretzels. Then Ace and Fuzzy were going back to Ace's '52, Ace sauntering with his hands in his back pockets, Fuzzy hopping on one leg and throwing curses back over his shoulder at me. I curled up on the sidewalk, crying. Aunt Evvie Chalmers came down her walk, thudding her cane angrily as she came. She asked me if I needed the doctor. I sat up and managed to stop most of the crying. I told her I didn't.

'Bullshit,' she bellowed - Aunt Evvie was deaf and bellowed everything. 'I saw where that bully got you. Boy, your sweetmeats are going to swell up to the size of Mason jars.'

She took me into her house, gave me a wet rag for my nose - it had begun to resemble a summer squash by then - and gave me a big cup of medicinal-tasting coffee that was somehow calming. She kept bellowing at me that she should call the doctor and I kept telling her not to. Finally she gave up and I walked home. Very slowly, I walked home. My balls weren't the size of Mason jars yet, but they were on their way.

My mom and dad got a look at me and wiggled right out - I was sort of surprised that they noticed anything at all, to tell the truth. Who were the boys? Could I pick them out of a line-up? That from my father, who never missed Naked City and The Untouchables. I said I didn't think I could pick the boys out of a line-up. I said I was tired. Actually I think I was in shock - in shock and more than a little drunk from Aunt Evvie's coffee, which must have been at least sixty per cent VSOP brandy. I said I thought they were from some other town, or from 'up the city' - a phrase everyone understood to mean Lewiston-Auburn.

They took me to Dr Clarkson in the station wagon - Dr Clarkson, who is still alive today, was even then old enough

to have quite possibly been on armchair-to-armchair terms with God. He set my nose and my fingers and gave my mother a prescription for painkiller. Then he got them out of the examining room on some pretext or other and came over to me, shuffling, head forward, like Boris Karloff approaching Igor.

'Who did it, Gordon?'

'I don't know, Dr Cla-'

'You're lying.'

'No, sir. Huh-uh.'

His sallow cheeks began to glow with colour. 'Why should you protect the cretins who did this? Do you think they win respect you? They will laugh and call you stupid-fool! "Oh," they'll say, "there goes the stupid fool we beat up for kicks the other day. Ha-ha! Hoo-hoo! Har-de-har-har-har!"'

'I didn't know them. Really.'

I could see his hands itching to shake me, but of course he couldn't do that. So he sent me out to my parents, shaking his white head and muttering about juvenile delinquents. He would no doubt tell his old friend God all about it that night over their cigars and sherry.

I didn't care if Ace and Fuzzy and the rest of those assholes respected me or thought I was stupid or never thought about me at all. But there was Chris to think of. His brother Eyeball had broken his arm in two places and had left his face looking like a Canadian sunrise. They had to set the elbow-break with a steel pin. Mrs McGinn from down the road saw Chris staggering along the soft shoulder, bleeding from both ears and reading a Richie Rich comic book. She

took him to the CMG Emergency Room where Chris told the doctor he had fallen down the cellar stairs in the dark.

'Right,' the doctor said, every bit as disgusted with Chris as Dr Clarkson had been with me, and then he went to call Sheriff Bannerman.

While he did that from his office, Chris went slowly down the hall, holding the temporary sling against his chest so the arm wouldn't swing and grate the broken bones together, and used a nickel in the pay phone to call home - he told me later it was the first collect call he had ever made and he was scared to death that Mrs McGinn wouldn't accept the charges-but she did.

'Chris, are you all right?' she asked.

'Yes, thank you,' Chris said.

'I'm sorry I couldn't stay with you, Chris, but I had pies in the-'

'That's all right, Missus McGinn,' Chris said. 'Can you see the Buick in our dooryard?' The Buick was the car Chris's mother drove. It was ten years old and when the engine got hot it smelted like frying Hush Puppies.

'It's there,' she said cautiously. Best not to mix in too much with the Chamberses. Poor white trash; shanty Irish.

'Would you go over and tell Mamma to go downstairs and take the lightbulb out of the socket in the cellar?'

'Chris, I really, my pies -'

'Tell her,' Chris said implacably, 'to do it right away. Unless she maybe wants my brother to go to jail.'

Vern and Teddy took their lumps, too, although not as bad as either Chris or I. Billy was laying for Vern when Vern got home. He took after him with a stovelength and hit him hard enough to knock him unconscious after only four or five good licks. Vern was no more than stunned, but Billy got scared he might have killed him and stopped. Three of them caught Teddy walking home from the vacant lot one afternoon. They punched him out and broke his glasses. He fought them, but they wouldn't fight him when they realized he was groping after them like a blindman in the dark.

We hung out together at school looking like the remains of a Korean assault force. Nobody knew exactly what had happened, but everybody understood that we'd had a pretty serious run-in with the big kids and comported ourselves like men. A few stories went around. All of them were wildly wrong.

When the casts came off and the bruises healed, Vern and Teddy just drifted away. They had discovered a whole new group of contemporaries that they could lord it over. Most of them were real wets - scabby, scrubby little fifth-grade assholes - but Vern and Teddy kept bringing them to the treehouse, ordering them around, strutting like Nazi generals. Chris and I began to drop by there less and less frequently, and after a while the place was theirs by default. I remember going up one time in the spring of 1961 and noticing that the place smelled like a shootoff in a haymow. I never went there again that I can recall. Teddy and Vern slowly became just two more faces in the halls or in 3:30 detention. We nodded and said hi. That was all. It happens. Friends come in and out of your life like busboys in a restaurant, did you ever notice that? But when I think of that dream, the corpses under the water pulling implacably at my legs, it seems right that it should be that way. Some

people drown, that's all. It's not fair, but it happens. Some people drown.

33

Vern Tessio was killed in a housefire that swept a Lewiston apartment building in 1966 - in Brooklyn and the Bronx, they call that sort of apartment building a slum tenement, I believe. The Fire Department said it started around two in the morning, and the entire building was nothing but cinders in the cellar-hole by dawn. There had been a large drunken party; Vern was there. Someone fell asleep in one of the bedrooms with a live cigarette going. Vern himself, maybe, drifting off, dreaming of his pennies. They identified him and the four others who died by their teeth.

Teddy went in a squalid car crash. There used to be a saying when I was growing up: 'If you go out alone you're a hero. Take somebody else with you and you're dogpiss.' Teddy, who had wanted nothing but the service since the time he was old enough to want anything, was turned down by the Air Force and classified 4-F by the draft. Anyone who had seen his glasses and his hearing aid knew it was going to happen - anyone but Teddy. In his junior year at high school he got a three-day vacation from school for calling the guidance counsellor a lying sack of shit. The g.o. had observed Teddy coming in every so often - like every day - and checking over his career-board for new service literature. He told Teddy that maybe he should think about another career, and that was when Teddy blew his stack.

He was held back a year for repeated absences, tardies, and the attendant flunked courses ... but he did graduate. He had an ancient Chevrolet Bel Aire, and he used to hang around the places where Ace and Fuzzy and the rest had hung around before him: the pool hall, the dance hall,

Sukey's Tavern, which is closed now, and the Mellow Tiger, which isn't. He eventually got a job with the Castle Rock Public Works Department, filling up holes with hotpatch.

The crash happened over in Harlow. Teddy's Bel Aire was full of his friends (two of them had been part of that group he and Vern took to bossing around way back in 1960), and they were all passing around a couple of joints and a couple of bottles of Popov. They hit a utility pole and sheared it off and the Chevrolet rolled six times. One girl came out technically still alive. She lay for six months in what the nurses and orderlies at Central Maine General call the C&T Ward - Cabbages and Turnips. Then some merciful phantom pulled the plug on her respirator. Teddy Duchamp was posthumously awarded the Dogpiss of the Year Award.

Chris enrolled in the college courses in his second year of junior high - he and I both knew that if he waited any longer it would be too late; he would never catch up. Everyone jawed at him about it: his parents, who thought he was putting on airs, his friends, most of whom dismissed him as a pussy, the guidance counsellor, who didn't believe he could do the work, and most of all the teachers, who didn't approve of this duck-tailed, leather-jacketed, engineer-booted apparition who had materialized without warning in their classrooms. You could see that the sight of those boots and that many-zippered jacket offended them in connection with such high-minded subjects as algebra, Latin, and earth science; such attire was meant for the shop courses only. Chris sat among the well-dressed, vivacious boys and girls from the middle-class families in Castle View and Brickyard Hill like some silent, brooding Grendel that might turn on them at any moment, produce a horrible roaring like the sound of dual glasspack mufflers, and gobble them up, penny loafers, Peter Pan collars, button-down paisley shirts and all.

He almost quit a dozen times that year. His father in particular hounded him, accusing Chris of thinking he was better than his old man, accusing Chris of wanting 'to go up there to the college so you can turn me into a bankrupt.' He once broke a Rhinegold bottle over the back of Chris's head and Chris wound up in the CMC Emergency Room again, where it took four stitches to close his scalp. His old friends, most of whom were now majoring in Smoking Area, catcalled him on the streets. The guidance counsellor huckstered him to take at least some shop courses so he wouldn't flunk the whole slate. Worst of all, of course, was just this: he'd been fucking off for the entire first seven years of his public education, and now the bill had come due with a vengeance.

We studied together almost every night, sometimes for as long as six hours at a stretch. I always came away from those sessions exhausted, and sometimes I came away frightened as well - frightened by his incredulous rage at just how murderously high that bill was. Before he could even begin to understand Introductory Algebra, he had to relearn the fractions that he and Teddy and Vern had played pocket pool through in the fifth grade. Before he could even begin to understand Pater noster qui est in caelis, he had to be told what nouns and prepositions and objects were. On the inside of his English grammar, neatly lettered, were the words FUCK GERUNDS. His compositional ideas were good and not badly organized, but his grammar was bad and he approached the whole business of punctuation as if with a shotgun. He wore out his copy of Warriner's and bought another in a Portland bookstore - it was the first hardcover book he actually owned, and it became a queer sort of Bible to him.

But by our junior year in high school, he had been accepted. Neither of us made top honours, but I came out

seventh and Chris stood nineteenth. We were both accepted at the University of Maine, but I went to the Orono campus while Chris enrolled at the Portland campus. Pre-law, can you believe that? More Latin.

We both dated through high school, but no girl ever came between us. Does that sound like we went faggot? It would have to most of our old friends, Vern and Teddy included. But it was only survival. We were clinging to each other in deep water. I've explained about Chris, I think; my reasons for clinging to him were less definable. His desire to get away from Castle Rock and out of the mill's shadow seemed to me to be my best part, and I could not just leave him to sink or swim on his own. If he had drowned, that part of me would have drowned with him, I think.

Near the end of the spring semester in 1968, the year when we all grew our hair long and cut classes to go to teach-ins about the war in Viet Nam, Chris went into a Chicken Delight to get a three-piece Snack Bucket Just ahead of him, two men started arguing about which one had been first in line. One of them pulled a knife. Chris, who had always been the best of us at making peace, stepped between them and was stabbed in the throat The man with the knife had spent time in four different institutions; he had been released from Shawshank Penitentiary only the week before. Chris died almost instantly.

I was out of school when I read about it in the paper -Chris had been finishing his second year of graduate studies. Me, I had been married a year and a half and was teaching high school English. My wife was pregnant and I was trying to write a book. When I read the news item - STUDENT FATALLY STABBED IN PORTLAND RESTAURANT -I told my wife I was going out for a milkshake. I drove out of town, parked, and cried for him. Cried for damn near half an hour,

I guess. I couldn't have done that in front of my wife, much as I love her. It would have been pussy.

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'I'm a writer now, like I said. A lot of the critics think what I write is shit. A lot of the time I think they are right... but it still freaks me out to put those words, 'Freelance Writer', down in the Occupation blank of the forms you have to fill out at credit desks and in doctors' offices. My story sounds so much like a fairytale that it's fucking absurd.

I sold the book and it was made into a movie and the movie got good reviews and it was a smash hit besides. This all had happened by the time I was twenty-six. The second book was made into a movie as well, as was the third. I told you - it's fucking absurd. Meantime, my wife doesn't seem to mind having me around the house and we have three kids now. They all seem perfect to me, and most of the time I'm happy.

But the writing isn't so easy or as much fun as it used to be. The phone rings a lot. Sometimes I get headaches, bad ones, and then I have to go into a dim room and lie down until they go away. The doctor says they aren't true migraines; he called them 'stressaches' and told me to slow down. I worry about myself sometimes. What a stupid habit that is ... and yet I can't quite seem to stop it. And I wonder if there is really any point in what I'm doing, or what I'm supposed to make of a world where a man can get sick playing 'let's pretend!.

But it's funny how I saw Ace Merrill again. My friends are dead but Ace is alive. I saw him pulling out of the mil parking lot just after the three o'clock whistle the last time I took my kids down home to see my dad.

The '52 Ford had become a '77 Ford station wagon. A faded bumper-sticker said REAGAN/BUSH 1980. His hair was mowed into a crewcut and he'd gotten fat. The sharp, handsome features I remembered were now buried in an avalanche of flesh. I had left the kids with dad long enough to go downtown and get the paper. I was standing on the corner of Main and Carbine and he glanced at me as I waited to cross. There was no sign of recognition on the face of this thirty-two-year-old man who had broken my nose in another dimension of time.

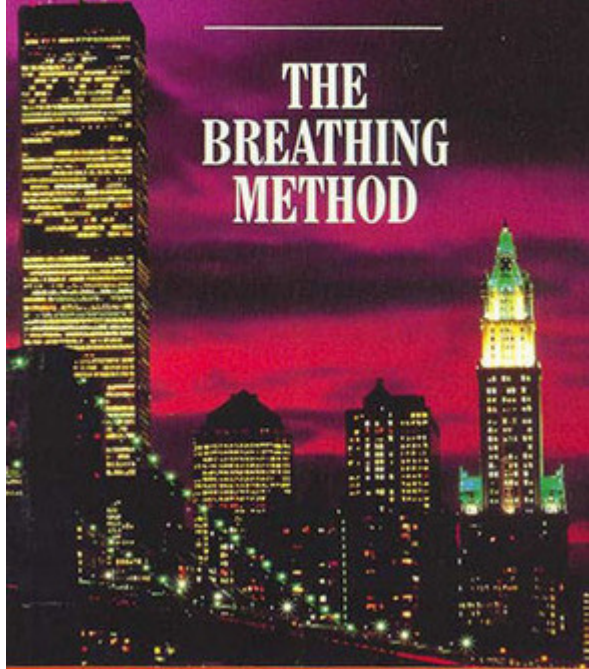
I watched him wheel the Ford wagon into the dirt parking lot beside the Mellow Tiger, get out, hitch at his pants, and walk inside. I could imagine the brief wedge of country-western as he opened the door, the brief sour whiff of Knick and Gansett on draught, the welcoming shouts of the other regulars as he closed the door and placed his large ass on the same stool which had probably held him up for at least three hours every day of his life - except Sundays - since he was twenty-one.

I thought: So that's what Ace is now.

I looked to the left, and beyond the mill I could see the Castle River, not so wide now but a little cleaner, still flowing under the bridge between Castle Rock and Harlow. The trestle upstream is gone now, but the river is still around. So am I.

STEPHEN 
KING

THE
BREATHING
METHOD



PENGUIN READERS

THE BREATHING METHOD

Stephen King

1: The Club

I dressed a bit more speedily than normal on that snowy, windy, bitter night - I admit it. It was 23 December, 197-, and I suspect that there were other members of the club who did the same. Taxis are notoriously hard to come by in New York on stormy nights, so I called for a radio-cab. I did this at five-thirty for an eight o'clock pick-up - my wife raised an eyebrow but said nothing. I was under the awning of the apartment building on East 58th Street, where Ellen and I had lived since 1946, by quarter to eight, and when the taxi was five minutes late, I found myself pacing up and down impatiently.

The taxi arrived at 8:10 and I got in, too glad to be out of the wind to be as angry with the driver as he probably deserved. That wind, part of a cold front* that had swept down from Canada the day before, meant business. It whistled and whined around the cab's window, occasionally drowning out the salsa on the driver's radio and rocking the big Checker on its springs. Many of the stores were open but the sidewalks were nearly bare of last-minute shoppers. Those that were abroad looked uncomfortable or actually pained.

It had been flurrying off and on all day, and now the snow began again, coming first in thin membranes, then twisting into cyclone shapes ahead of us in the street. Coming home that night, I would think of the combination of snow, a taxi, and New York City with considerably greater unease ... but I did not of course know that then.

At the corner of 3rd and Fortieth, a large tinsel Christmas bell went floating through the intersection like a spirit 'Bad night,' the cabbie said. "They'll have an extra two dozen in

the morgue tomorrow. Wino Popsicles. Plus a few bag-lady Popsicles.'

'I suppose.'

The cabbie ruminated. 'Well, good riddance,' he said finally. 'Less welfare, right?'

'Your Christmas spirit,' I said, 'is stunning in its width and depth.'

The cabbie ruminated. 'You one of those bleeding-heart liberals?' he asked finally.

'I refuse to answer on the grounds that my answer might tend to incriminate me,' I said. The cabbie gave a why-do-I-always-get-the-wisenheimers snort... but he shut up.

He let me out at 2nd and Thirty-Fifth, and I walked halfway down the block to the club, bent over against the whistling wind, holding my hat on my head with one gloved hand. In almost no time at all the life-force seemed to have been driven deep into my body, a flickering blue flame about the size of the pilot-light in a gas oven. At seventy-three, a man feels the cold quicker and deeper. That man should be home in front of a fireplace ... or at least in front of an electric heater. At seventy-three, hot blood isn't even really a memory; it's more of an academic concept.

The latest flurry was letting up, but snow as dry as sand still beat into my face. I was glad to see that the steps leading up to the door of 249 had been sanded - that was Stevens's work, of course - Stevens knew the base alchemy of old age well enough: not lead into gold but bones into glass. When I think about such things, I believe that God probably thinks t great deal like Groucho Marx.

Then Stevens was there, holding the door open, and a moment later I was inside. Down the mahogany-panelled hallway, through double doors standing three-quarters of the way open on their recessed tracks, into the library cum reading-room cum bar. It was a dark room in which occasional pools of light gleamed - reading-lamps. A richer, more textured light glowed across the oak parquet floor, and I could hear the steady snap of birch logs in the huge fireplace. The heat radiated all the way across the room - surely there is no welcome for a man or a woman that can equal a fire on the hearth. A paper rustled - dry, slightly impatient. That would be Johanssen, with his Wall Street Journal. After ten years, it was possible to recognize his presence simply by the way he read his stocks. Amusing ... and in a quiet way, amazing.

Stevens helped me off with my overcoat, murmuring that it was a dirty night; WCBS was now forecasting heavy snow before morning.

I agreed that it was indeed a dirty night and looked back into that big, high-ceilinged room again. A dirty night, a roaring fire ... and a ghost story. Did I say that at seventy-Jiree hot blood is a thing of the past? Perhaps so. But I felt something warm in my chest at the thought ... something that hadn't been caused by the fire of Stevens's reliable, dignified welcome.

I think it was because it was McCarron's turn to tell the :tale.

I had been coming to the brownstone which stands at 249 East 35th Street for ten years - coming at intervals that were almost - but not quite - regular. In my own mind I think of it is a 'gentleman's club', that amusing pre-Gloria

Steinem antiquity. But even now I am not sure that's what it really is, or how it came to be in the first place.

On the night Emlyn McCarron told his story - the story of the Breathing Method - there were perhaps thirteen clubmembers in all, although only six of us had come out on that howling, bitter night. I can remember years when there might have been as few as eight full-time members, and others when there were at least twenty, and perhaps more.

I suppose Stevens might know how it all came to be - one thing I am sure of is that Stevens has been there from the first, no matter how long that may be ... and I believe Stevens to be older than he looks. Much, much older. He has a faint Brooklyn accent, but in spite of that he is as brutally correct and as cuttngly punctilious as a third-generation English butler. His reserve is part of his often maddening charm, and Stevens's small smile is a locked and latched door. I have never seen any club records - if he keeps them. I have never gotten a receipt of dues - there are no dues. I have never been called by the club secretary - there is no secretary, and at 249 East 35th, there are no phones. There is no box of white marbles and black balls. And the club - if it is a club - has never had a name.

I first came to the club (as I must continue to call it) as the guest of George Waterhouse. Waterhouse headed the law firm for which I had worked since 1951. My progress upward in the firm - one of New York's three biggest - had been steady but extremely slow; I was a slogger, a mule for work, something of a centrepuncher ... but I had no real flair or genius. I had seen men who had begun at the same time I had, promoted in giant steps while I only continued to pace -and I saw it with no real surprise.

Waterhouse and I had exchanged pleasantries, attended the obligatory dinner put on by the firm each October, and had little more congress until the fall of 196-, when he dropped by my office one day in early November.

This in itself was unusual enough, and it had me thinking black thoughts (dismissal) that were counterbalanced by giddy ones (an unexpected promotion). It was a puzzling visit. Waterhouse leaned in the doorway, his Phi Beta Kappa key gleaming mellowly on his vest, and talked in amiable generalities - none of what he said seemed to have any real substance or importance. I kept expecting him to finish the pleasantries and get down to cases: 'Now about this Casey brief,' or 'We've been asked to research the Mayor's appointment of Salkowitz to -' But it seemed there were no cases. He glanced at his watch, said he had enjoyed our talk and that he had to be going.

I was still blinking, bewildered, when he turned back and said casually: There's a place where I go most Thursday nights - a sort of club. Old duffers, mostly, but some of them are good company. They keep a really excellent cellar, if you've a palate. Every now and then someone tells a good story, as well. Why not come down some night, David? As my guest.'

I stammered some reply - even now I'm not sure what it was. I was bewildered by the offer. It had a spur-of-the-moment sound, but there was nothing spur-of-the-moment about his eyes, blue Anglo-Saxon ice under the bushy white whorls of his eyebrows. And if I don't remember exactly how I replied, it was because I felt suddenly sure that this offer -vague and puzzling as it was - had been exactly the specific I had kept expecting him to get down to.

Ellen's reaction that evening was one of amused exasperation. I had been with Waterhouse, Garden, Lawton, Frasier, and Effingham for something like twenty years, and it was clear enough that I could not expect to rise much above the mid-level position I now held; it was her idea that this was the firm's cost-efficient substitute for a gold watch.

'Old men telling war stories and playing poker,' she said. 'A night of that and you're supposed to be happy in the Research Library until they pension you off, I suppose ... oh, I put two Becks' on ice for you.' And she kissed me warmly. I suppose she had seen something on my face - God knows she's good at reading me after all the years we've spent together.

Nothing happened over a course of weeks. When my mind turned to Waterhouse's odd offer - certainly odd coming from a man with whom I met less than a dozen times a year, and who I only saw socially at perhaps three parties a year, including the company party in October - I supposed that I had been mistaken about the expression in his eyes, that he really had made the offer casually, and had forgotten it. Or regretted it - ouch! And then he approached me one late afternoon, a man of nearly seventy who was still broad-shouldered and athletic looking. I was shrugging on my topcoat with my briefcase between my feet. He said: 'If you'd still like to have a drink at the club, why not come tonight?'

'Well,..I...'

'Good.' He slapped a slip of paper into my hand. 'Here's the address.'

He was waiting for me at the foot of the steps that evening, and Stevens held the door for us. The wine was as excellent

as Waterhouse had promised. He made no attempt whatsoever to 'introduce me around' - I took that for snobbery but later recanted the idea - but two or three of them introduced themselves to me. One of those who did so was Emlyn McCarron, even then in his early seventies. He held out his hand and I clasped it briefly. His skin was dry, leathery, tough; almost turtlelike. He asked me if I played bridge. I said I did not.

'God damned good thing,' he said 'That god damned game has done more in this century to kill intelligent after-dinner conversation than anything else I can think of.' And with that pronouncement he walked away into the murk of the library, where shelves of books went up apparently to infinity.

I looked around for Waterhouse, but he had disappeared. Feeling a little uncomfortable and a lot out of place, I wandered over to the fireplace. It was, as I believe I have already mentioned, a huge thing - it seemed particularly huge in New York, where apartment-dwellers such as myself have trouble imagining such a benevolence big enough to do anything more than pop corn or toast bread. The fireplace at 249 East 35th was big enough to broil an ox whole. There was no mantle; instead a brawny stone arch curved over it. This arch was broken in the centre by a keystone which jutted out slightly. It was just on the level of my eyes, and although the light was dim, I could read the legend engraved on that stone with no trouble: IT IS THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.

'Here you go, David,' Waterhouse said from my elbow, and I jumped. He hadn't deserted me after all; had only trudged off into some uncharted locale to bring back drinks.

'Bombay martini's yours, isn't it?'

'Yes. Thank you. Mr Waterhouse -'

'George,' he said. 'Here it's just George.'

'George, then,' I said, although it seemed slightly mad to be using his first name. 'What is all of-'

'Cheers,' he said.

We drank. The martini was perfect. I said so instead of finishing my question.

'Stevens tends the bar. He makes fine drinks. He likes to say it's a small but vital skill.'

The martini took the edge off my feelings of disorientation and awkwardness (the edge, but the feelings themselves remained - I had spent nearly half an hour gazing into my closet and wondering what to wear; I had finally settled on dark brown slacks and a rough tweed jacket that almost matched them, hoping I would not be wandering into a group of men either turned out in tuxedos or wearing bluejeans and L.L. Bean's lumberjack shirts ... it seemed that I hadn't gone too far wrong on the matter of dress, anyway). A new place and a new situation makes one crucially aware of every social act, no matter how small, and at that moment, drink in hand and the obligatory small toast made, I wanted very much to be sure that I hadn't overlooked any of the amenities.

'Is there a guest book I ought to sign?' I asked. 'Something like that?'

He looked mildly surprised. 'We don't have anything like that,' he said. 'At least, I don't think we do.' He glanced around the dim, quiet room. Johanssen rattled his Wall Street Journal, I saw Stevens pass in a doorway at the far

end of the room, ghostly in his white messjacket. George put his drink on an endtable and tossed a fresh log onto the fire. Sparks corkscrewed up the black throat of the chimney.

'What does that mean?' I asked, pointing to the inscription on the keystone. 'Any idea?'

Waterhouse read it carefully, as if for the first time. IT IS THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.

'I suppose I have an idea,' he said. 'You may, too, if you should come back. Yes, I should say you may have an idea or two. In time. Enjoy yourself, David.'

He walked away. And, although it may seem odd, having been left to sink or swim in such an unfamiliar situation, I did enjoy myself. For one thing, I have always loved books, and there was a trove of interesting ones to examine here. I walked slowly along the shelves, examining the spines as best I could in the faint light, pulling one out now and then, and pausing once to look out a narrow window at the 2nd Avenue intersection up the street. I stood there and watched through the frost-rimmed glass as the traffic light at the intersection cycled from red to green to amber and back to red again, and quite suddenly I felt the queerest - and yet very welcome - sense of peace come to me. It did not flood in; instead it seemed to almost steal in. Oh yes, I can hear you saying, that makes great sense; watching a stop-and-go light gives everyone a sense of peace.

All right; it made no sense. I grant you that. But the feeling was there, just the same. It made me think for the first time in 17 years of the winter nights in the Wisconsin farmhouse where I grew up: lying in bed in a draughty upstairs room and marking the contrast between the whistle of the January wind outside, drifting snow as dry as sand

along miles of snow-fence, and the warmth my body created under the two quilts.

There were some law books, but they were pretty damn strange: *Twenty Cases of Dismemberment and Their Outcomes under British Law* is one title I remember. *Pet Cases* was another. I opened that one and sure enough, it was a scholarly legal tome dealing with the law's treatment (American law, this time) of cases which bore in some important respect upon pets - everything from housecats that had inherited great sums of money to an ocelot that had broken its chain and seriously injured a postman.

There was a set of Dickens, a set of Defoe, a nearly endless set of Trollope; and there was also a set of novels - eleven of them - by a man named Edward Gray Seville. They were bound in handsome green leather, and the name of the firm gold-stamped on the spine was Stedham & Son. I had never heard of Seville nor of his publishers. The copyright date of the first Seville - *These Were Our Brothers* - was 1911. The date of the last, *Breakers*, was 1935.

Two shelves down from the set of Seville novels was a large folio volume which contained careful step by step plans for Erector Set enthusiasts. Next to it was another folio volume which featured famous scenes from famous movies. Each of these pictures filled one whole page, and opposite each, filling the facing pages, were free-verse poems either about the scenes with which they were paired or inspired by them. Not a very remarkable concept, but the poets who were represented were remarkable - Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Louis Zukofsky, and Erica Jong, to mention just a few. Halfway through the book I found a poem by Archibald MacLeish set next to that famous photograph of Marilyn Monroe standing

on the subway grating and trying to hold her skirt down. The poem was titled 'The Toll' and it began:

The shape of the skirt is -we would say- the shape of a bell
The legs are the clapper And some such more. Not a terrible poem, but certainly not MacLeish's best or anywhere near the top drawer. I felt I could hold such an opinion because I had read a good deal of Archibald MacLeish over the years. I could not, however, recall this poem about Marilyn Monroe (which it is; the poem announces it even when divorced from the picture - at the end MacLeish writes: My legs clap my name:/Marilyn, ma belle). I have looked for it since then and haven't been able to find it;.. which means nothing, of course. Poems are not like novels or legal opinions; they are more like blown leaves and any omnibus volume titled The Complete So-and-So must certainly be a lie. Poems have a way of getting lost under sofas - it is one of their charms, and one of the reasons they endure. But -

At some point Stevens came by with a second martini (by then I had settled into a chair of my own with a volume of Ezra Pound). It was as perfect as the first. As I sipped it I saw two of those present, George Gregson and Harry Stein (Harry was six years dead on the night Emlyn McCarron told us the story of the Breathing Method), leave the room by a peculiar door less than three feet high. It was an Alice Down the Rabbit-Hole door if ever there was one. They left it open, and shortly after their odd exit from the library I heard the muted click of billiard balls.

Stevens passed by and asked if I would like another martini. I declined with real regret He nodded. 'Very goodt sir.' His face never changed, and yet I had an obscure feeling that I had somehow pleased him.

Laughter startled me from my book sometime later. Someone had thrown a packet of chemical powder into the fire and turned the flames momentarily parti-coloured. I thought of my boyhood again ... but not in any wistful, sloppily romantic-nostalgic way. I feel a great need to emphasize that, God knows why. I thought of times when I had done just such a thing as a kid, but the memory was a strong one, pleasant, untinged with regret.

I saw that most of the others had drawn chairs up around the hearth in a semi-circle. Stevens had produced a heaping, smoking platter of marvellous hot sausages. Harry Stein returned through the down-the-rabbit-hole door, introducing himself hurriedly but pleasantly to me. Gregson remained in the billiard room, practising shots, by the sound.

After a moment's hesitation I joined the others. A story was told - not a pleasant one. It was Norman Stett who told it, and while it is not my purpose to recount it here, perhaps you'll understand what I mean about its quality if I tell you that it was about a man who drowned in a telephone booth.

When Stett - who is also dead now - finished, someone said, 'You should have saved it for Christmas, Norman.' There was laughter, which I of course did not understand. At least, not then.

Waterhouse himself spoke up then, and such a Waterhouse I never would have dreamed of in a thousand years of dreaming. A graduate of Yale, a Phi Beta Kappa, silver-haired, three-piece-suited head of a law firm so large it was more enterprise than company - this Waterhouse told a story that had to do with a teacher who had gotten stuck in a privy. The privy stood behind the one-room schoolhouse in which she had taught, and the day she got her caboose

jammed into one of the privy's two holes also happened to be the day the privy was scheduled to be taken away as Anniston County's contribution to the Life As It Was in New England exhibition being held at the Prudential Center in Boston. The teacher hadn't made a sound during all the time it took to load the privy onto the back of a flatbed truck and to spike it down; she was struck dumb with embarrassment and horror, Waterhouse said. And then the privy door blew off into the passing lane of Route 128 in Somerville during rush hour. But draw a curtain over that, and over any other stories which might have followed it; they are not my stories tonight. At some point Stevens produced a bottle of brandy that was more than just good; it was damned near exquisite. It was passed around and Johanssen raised a toast - the toast, one might almost say: The tale, not he who tells it.

We drank to that.

Not long after, men began slipping away. It wasn't late; not yet midnight, anyway; but I've noticed that when your fifties give way to your sixties, late begins coming earlier and earlier. I saw Waterhouse slipping his arms into the overcoat Stevens was holding open for him, and decided that must be my cue. I thought it strange that Waterhouse would slip away without so much as a word to me (which certainly seemed to be what he was doing; if I had come back from shelving the Pound book forty seconds later, he would have been gone), but no stranger than most of the other things that had gone on that evening.

I stepped out just behind him, and Waterhouse glanced around, as if surprised to see me ... and almost as if he had been startled out of a light doze. 'Share a taxi?' he asked, as though we had just met by chance on this deserted, windy street. 'Thank you,' I said. I meant thanks for a great

deal more than his offer to share a cab, and I believe that was unmistakable in my tone, but he nodded as if that was all I had meant. A taxi with its for-hire light lit was cruising slowly down the street - fellows like George Waterhouse seem to luck onto cabs even on those miserably cold or snowy New York nights when you would swear there isn't a cab to be had on the entire island of Manhattan - and he flagged it.

Inside, safely warm, the taxi-meter charting our journey in measured clicks, I told him how much I had enjoyed his story. I couldn't remember laughing so hard or so spontaneously since I was eighteen, I told him, which was not flattery but only the simple truth.

'Oh? How kind of you to say.' His voice was chillingly polite. I subsided, feeling a dull flush in my cheeks. One does not always need to hear a slam to know that the door has been closed.

When the taxi drew up to the kerb in front of my building, I thanked him again, and this time he showed a trifle more warmth. 'It was good of you to come on such short notice, he said. 'Come again, if you like. Don't wait for an invitation: we don't stand much on ceremony at two-four-nine. Thursdays are best for stories, but the club is there every night'

Am I then to assume membership?

The question was on my lips. I meant to ask it; it seemed necessary to ask it. I was only mulling it over, listening to it in my head (in my tiresome lawyer's way) to hear if I had got the phrasing right - perhaps that was a little too blunt - when Waterhouse told the cabbie to drive on. The next moment the taxi was rolling on towards Madison. I stood

there on the sidewalk for a moment, the hem of my topcoat whipping around my shins, thinking: He knew I was going to ask that question - he knew it, and he purposely had the driver go on before I could. Then I told myself that was utterly absurd -paranoid, even. And it was. But it was also true. I could scoff all I liked; none of the scoffing changed that essential certainty.

I walked slowly to the door of my building and went inside.

Ellen was sixty per cent asleep when I sat down on the bed to take off my shoes. She rolled over and made a fuzzy interrogative sound deep in her throat. I told her to go back to sleep.

She made the muzzy sound again. This time approximated English: 'Howwuzzit?'

For a moment I hesitated, my shirt half-unbuttoned. And I thought with one moment's utter clarity: If I tell her, I will never see the other side of that door again.

'It was all right,' I said. 'Old men telling war stories.'

'I told you so.'

'But it wasn't bad. I might go back again. It might do me some good with the firm.'

' "The firm", ' she mocked lightly. 'What an old buzzard you are, my love.'

'It takes one to know one,' I said, but she had already fallen asleep again. I undressed, showered, towelled, put on my pyjamas ... and then, instead of going to bed as I should have done (it was edging past one by that time), I put on my robe and had another bottle of Beck's. I sat at the

kitchen table, drinking it slowly, looking out the window and up the cold canyon of Madison Avenue, thinking. My head was a trifle buzzy from my evening's intake of alcohol - for me an unexpectedly large intake. But the feeling was not at all unpleasant, and I had no sense of an impending hangover.

The thought which had come to me when Ellen asked me about my evening was as ridiculous as the one I'd entertained about George Waterhouse as the cab drew away from me -what in God's name could be wrong with telling my wife about a perfectly harmless evening at my boss's stuffy men's club ... and even if something were wrong with telling her, who would know that I had? No, it was every bit as ridiculous and paranoid as those earlier musings ... and, my heart told me, every bit as true.

I met George Waterhouse the next day in the hallway between Accounts and the Reading Library. Met him... Passed him would be more accurate. He nodded my way and went on without speaking ... as he had done for years.

My stomach muscles ached all day long. That was the only thing that completely convinced me the evening had been real.

Three weeks passed. Four ... five. No second invitation came from Waterhouse. Somehow I just hadn't been right; hadn't fitted. Or so I told myself. It was a depressing, disappointing thought. I supposed it would begin to fade and lose its sting, as all disappointments eventually do. But I thought of that evening at the oddest moments - the isolated pools of library lamplight, so still and tranquil and somehow civilized; Waterhouse's absurd and hilarious tale of the schoolteacher stuck in the privy; the rich smell of leather in the narrow stacks. Most of all I thought of

standing by that narrow window and watching the frost crystals change from green to amber to red. I thought of that sense of peace I had felt.

During that same five-week period I went to the library and checked out four volumes of Archibald MacLeish's poetry (I had three others myself, and had already checked through them); one of these volumes purported to be The Complete Poems of. I reacquainted myself with some old favourites, including my favourite MacLeish poem, 'Epistle to Be Left in Earth.' But I found no poem called 'The Toll' in any of the volumes.

On that same trip to the New York Public Library, I checked the card catalogue for works of fiction by a man named Edward Gray Seville. A mystery novel by a woman named Ruth Seville was the closest I came.

Come again, if you like; don't wait for an invitation ...

I was waiting for an invitation anyway, of course; my mother taught me donkey's years ago not to automatically believe people who tell you glibly to 'drop by anytime' or that 'the door is always open'. I didn't feel I needed an engraved card delivered to my apartment door by a footman in livery bearing a gilt plate, I don't mean that, but I did want something, even if it was only a casual remark: 'Coming by some night, David? Hope we didn't bore you.' That kind of thing.

But when even that didn't come, I began to think more seriously about going back anyway - after all, sometimes people really did want you to drop in anytime; I supposed that, at some places, the door always was open; and that mothers weren't always right.

... don't wait for an invitation ...

Anyway, that's how it happened that, on 10 December of that year, I found myself putting on my rough tweed coat and dark brown pants again and looking for my darkish red tie. I was rather more aware of my heartbeat than usual that night, I remember.

'George Waterhouse finally broke down and asked you back?' Ellen asked. 'Back into the sty with the rest of the male chauvinist oinkers?'

'That's right,' I said, thinking it must be the first time in at least a dozen years that I had told her a lie ... and then I remembered that, after the first meeting, I had answered her questions about what it had been like with a lie. Old men telling war stories, I had said.

'Well, maybe there really will be a promotion in it,' she said ... though without much hope. To her credit, she said it without much bitterness, either.

'Stranger things have happened,' I said, and kissed her goodbye.

'Oink-oink,' she said as I went out the door.

The taxi ride that night seemed very long. It was cold, still, and starry. The cab was a Checker and I felt somehow very small in it, like a child seeing the city for the first time. It was excitement I was feeling as the cab pulled up in front of the brownstone - something as simple and yet complete as that. But such simple excitement seems to be one of life's qualities that slips away almost unnoticed, and its rediscovery as one grows older is always something of a surprise, like finding a black hair or two in one's comb years after one had last found such a thing.

I paid the driver, got out, and walked towards the four steps leading to the door. As I mounted them, my excitement curdled into plain apprehension (a feeling the old are much more familiar with). What exactly was I doing here?

The door was of thick panelled oak, and to my eye it looked as stout as the door of a castle keep. There was no doorbell that I could see, no knocker, no closed circuit TV camera mounted unobtrusively hi the shadow of a deep eave, and, of course, no Waterhouse waiting to take me in. I stopped at the foot of the steps and looked around. Thirty-Fifth Street suddenly seemed darker, colder, more threatening. The brownstones all looked somehow secret, as if hiding mysteries best not investigated. Their windows looked like eyes.

Somewhere, behind one of those windows, there may be a man or woman contemplating murder, I thought. A shudder worked up my spine. Contemplating it ...or doing it.

Then, suddenly, the door was open and Stevens was there.

I felt an intense surge of relief. I am not an overly imaginative man, I think - at least not under ordinary circumstances - but this last thought had had all the eerie clarity of prophecy. I might have babbled aloud if I hadn't glanced at Stevens's eyes first His eyes did not know me. His eyes did not know me at all.

Then there was another instance of that eerie, prophetic clarity; I saw the rest of my evening in perfect detail. Three hours in a quiet bar. Three martinis (perhaps four) to dull the embarrassment of having been fool enough to go where I wasn't wanted. The humiliation my mother's advice had been intended to avoid - that which comes with knowing one has overstepped.

I saw myself going home a little tipsy, but not in a good way. I saw myself merely sitting through the cab ride rather than experiencing it through that childlike lens of excitement and anticipation. I heard myself saying to Ellen, It wears thin after a while ... Waterhouse told the same story about winning a consignment of T-bone steaks for the 3rd Battalion in a poker game ... and they play Hearts for a dollar a point, can you believe it? ... go back? ... / suppose I might, but I doubt it. And that would be the end of it. Except, I suppose, for my own humiliation.

I saw all of this in the nothing of Stevens's eyes. Then the eyes warmed. He smiled slightly and said: 'Mr Adley! Come in. I'll take your coat.'

I mounted the steps and Stevens closed the door firmly behind me. How different a door can feel when you are on the warm side of it! He took my coat and was gone with it. I stood in the hall for a moment, looking at my own reflection in the pier glass, a man of sixty-three whose face was rapidly becoming too gaunt to look middle-aged. And yet the reflection pleased me.

I slipped into the library.

Johanssen was there, reading his Wall Street Journal. In another island of light, Emlyn McCarron sat over a chessboard opposite Peter Andrews. McCarron was and is a cadaverous man, possessed of a narrow, bladelike nose; Andrews was huge, slope-shouldered, and choleric. A vast ginger-coloured beard sprayed over his vest. Face to face over the inlaid board with its carved pieces of ivory and ebony, they looked like Indian totems: eagle and bear.

Waterhouse was there, frowning over that day's Times. He glanced up, nodded at me without surprise, and

disappeared into the paper again.

Stevens brought me a Bombay martini, unasked.

I took it into the stacks and found that puzzling, enticing set of green volumes again. I began reading the works of Edward Gray Seville that night. I started at the beginning, with *These Were Our Brothers*. Since then I have read them all, and believe them to be eleven of the finest novels of our century.

Near the end of the evening there was a story -just one - and Stevens brought brandy around. When the tale was told, people began to rise, preparing to leave. Stevens spoke from the double doorway which communicated with the hallway. His voice was low and pleasant, but carrying:

'Who will bring us a tale for Christmas, then?'

People stopped what they were doing and glanced around. There was some low, goodnatured talk and a burst of laughter.

Stevens, smiling but serious, clapped his hands together twice, like a grammar school teacher calling an unruly class to order. 'Come, gentlemen - who'll bring the tale?'

Peter Andrews, he of the sloped shoulders and gingery beard, cleared his throat. 'I have something I've been thinking about I don't know if it's quite right; that is, if it's -'

'That will be fine,' Stevens interrupted, and there was more laughter. Andrews had his back slapped good naturedly. Cold draughts swirled up the hallway as men slipped out.

Then Stevens was there, as if by benign magic, holding my coat for me. 'Good evening, Mr Adley. Always a pleasure.'

'Do you really meet on Christmas night?' I asked, buttoning my coat I was a little disappointed that I was going to miss Andrews's story, but we had made firm plans to drive to Schenectady and keep the holiday with Ellen's sister.

Stevens managed to look both shocked and amused at the same time. 'In no case,' he said. 'Christmas is a night a man should spend with his family. That night, if no other. Don't you agree, sir?'

'I certainly do.'

'We always meet on the Thursday before Christmas. In fact, that is the one night of the year when we're assured a large turnout.'

He hadn't used the word members, I noticed - just happenstance or neat avoidance?

'Many tales have been spun out in the main room, Mr Adley, tales of every sort, from the comic to the tragic to the ironic to the sentimental. But on the Thursday before Christmas, it's always a tale of the uncanny. It's always been that way, at least as far back as I can remember.'

That at least explained the comment I had heard on my first visit, the one to the effect that Norman Stett should have saved his story for Christmas. Other questions hovered on my lips, but I saw a reflected caution in Stevens's eyes. Do you catch my drift? It was not a warning that he would not answer my questions; it was, rather, a warning that I should not even ask them.

'Was there something else, Mr Adley?'

We were alone in the hall now. All the others had left And suddenly the hallway seemed darker, Stevens's long face

paler, his lips redder. A knot exploded in the fireplace and a red glow washed momentarily across the polished parquet floor. I thought I heard, from somewhere in those as-yet-unexplored rooms beyond, a kind of slithery bump. I did not like the sound. Not at all.

'No,' I said in a voice that was not quite steady. 'I think not.'

'Goodnight, then,' Stevens said, and I crossed the threshold. I heard the heavy door close behind me. I heard the lock turn. And then I was walking towards the lights of 2nd Avenue, not looking back over my shoulder, somehow afraid to look back, as if I might see some frightful fiend matching me stride for stride, or glimpse some secret better kept than known. I reached the corner, saw an empty cab, and flagged it.

'More war stories?' Ellen asked me that night. She was in bed with Philip Marlowe, the only lover she has ever taken.

"There was a war story or two,' I said, hanging up my overcoat. 'Mostly I sat and read a book.'

'When you weren't oinking.'

'Yes, that's right. When I wasn't oinking.'

'Listen to this: "The first time I ever laid eyes on Terry Lennox he was drunk in a Rolls-Royce Stiver Wraith outside the terrace of the Dancers,'" Ellen read.' "He had a young-looking face but his hair was bone white. You could tell by his eyes that he was plastered to the hairline, but otherwise he looked like any other nice young guy in a dinner jacket who had been spending too much money in a place that exists for that purpose and for no other." Nice, huh? It's -'

'The Long Goodbye' I said, taking off my shoes. 'You read me that same passage once every three years. It's part of your life-cycle.'

She wrinkled her nose at me. 'Oink-oink.'

"Thank you,' I said.

She went back to her book. I went out into the kitchen to get a bottle of Beck's. When I came back, she had laid The Long Goodbye open on the counterpane and was looking at me closely. 'David, are you going to join this club?'

'I suppose I might... if I'm asked.' I felt uncomfortable. I had perhaps told her another lie. If there was such a thing as membership at 249 East 35th, I already was a member.

'I'm glad,' she said. 'You've needed something for a long time now. I don't think you even know it, but you have. I've got the Relief Committee and the Commission on Women's Rights and the Theatre Society. But you've needed something. Some people to grow old with, I think.'

I went to the bed and sat beside her and picked up The Long Goodbye. It was a bright, new-minted paperback. I could remember buying the original hardback edition as a birthday present for Ellen. In 1953. 'Are we old?' I asked her.

'I suspect we are,' she said, and smiled brilliantly at me.

I put the book down and touched her breast. 'Too old for this?'

She turned the covers back with ladylike decorum ... and then, giggling, kicked them onto the floor with her feet. 'Beat me, daddy,' Ellen said, 'eight to the bar.'

'Oink, oink,' I said, and then we were both laughing.

The Thursday before Christmas came. That evening was much the same as the others, with two notable exceptions. There were more people there, perhaps as many as eighteen. And there was a sharp, indefinable sense of excitement in the air. Johansson took only a cursory glance at his Journal and then joined McCarron, Hugh Beagleman, and myself. We sat near the windows, talking of this and that, and finally fell into a passionate - and often hilarious - discussion of pre-war automobiles.

There was, now that I think of it, a third difference as well - Stevens had concocted a delicious egnog punch. It was smooth, but it was also hot with rum and spices. It was served from an incredible Waterford bowl that looked like an ice-sculpture, and the animated hum of the conversation grew ever higher as the level of the punch grew lower.

I looked over in the corner by the tiny door leading to the billiard room and was astounded to see Waterhouse and Norman Stett flipping baseball cards into what looked like a genuine beaver tophat. They were laughing uproariously.

Groups formed and re-formed. The hour grew late ... and then, at the time when people usually began slipping out through the front door, I saw Peter Andrews seated in front of the fire with an unmarked packet, about the size of a seed envelope, in one hand. He tossed it into the flames without opening it, and a moment later the fire began to dance with every colour of the spectrum - and some, I would have sworn, from outside it - before turning yellow again. Chairs were dragged around. Over Andrews's shoulder I could see the keystone with its etched homily: IT IS THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.

Stevens passed unobtrusively among us, taking punch glasses and replacing them with snifters of brandy. There were murmurs of 'Merry Christmas' and 'Top of the season, Stevens,' and for the first time I saw money change hands - a ten dollar bill was unobtrusively tendered here, a bill that looked like a fifty there, one which I clearly saw was a hundred from another chair.

"Thank you, Mr McCarron ... Mr Johansson ... Mr Beagleman ..." A quiet, well-bred murmur.

I have lived in New York long enough to know that the Christmas season is a carnival of tips; something for the butcher, the baker, the candlesdck-maker - not to mention the doorman, the super, and the cleaning lady who comes in Tuesdays and Fridays. I've never met anyone of my own class who regarded this as anything but a necessary nuisance ... but I felt none of that grudging spirit on that night. The money was given willingly, even eagerly ... and suddenly, for no reason (it was the way thoughts often seemed to come when one was at 249), I thought of the boy calling up to Scrooge on the still, cold air of a London Christmas morning: 'Wot? The goose that's as big as me?' And Scrooge, nearly crazed with joy, giggling 'A goodboy! An excellent boy!'

I found my own wallet. In the back of this, behind the pictures of Ellen I keep, there has always been a fifty dollar bill which I keep for emergencies. When Stevens gave me my brandy, I slipped it into his hand with never a qualm ... although I was not a rich man.

'Happy Christmas, Stevens,' I said.

Thank you, sir. And the same to you.'

He finished passing out the brandies and collecting his honorariums and retired. I glanced around once, at the midpoint of Peter Andrews's story, and saw him standing by the double doors, a dim manlike shadow, still and silent.

'I'm a lawyer now, as most of you know,' Andrews said after sipping at his glass, clearing his throat, and then sipping again. 'I've had offices on Park Avenue for the last twenty-two years. But before that, I was a legal assistant in a firm of lawyers which did business in Washington, DC. One night in July I was required to stay late in order to finish indexing case citations in a brief which hasn't anything at all to do with this story. But then a man came in - a man who was at that time one of the most widely known Senators on the Hill, a man who later almost became President His shirt was matted with blood and his eyes were bulging from their sockets.

' "I've got to talk to Joe," he said. Joe, you understand, was Joseph Woods, the head of my firm, one of the most influential private-sector lawyers in Washington, and this Senator's close personal friend.

"He went home hours ago," I said. I was terribly frightened, I can tell you - he looked like a man who had just walked away from a dreadful car accident, or perhaps from a knife-fight And somehow seeing his face which I had seen in newspaper photos and on Meet the Press - seeing it streaked with gore, one cheek twitching spasmodically below one wild eye ... all of that made my fright worse. "I can call him if you -" I was already fumbling with the phone, mad with eagerness to turn this unexpected responsibility over to someone else. Looking behind him, I could see the caked and bloody footprints he had left on the carpet ' "I've got to talk to Joe right now," he reiterated as if he hadn't heard me.' "There's something in the trunk of my car ...

something I found out at the Virginia place. I've shot it and stabbed it and I can't kill it It's not human, and I can't kill it"

'He began to giggle ... and then to laugh ... and finally to scream. And he was still screaming when I finally got Mr Woods on the phone and told him to come, for God's sake, to come as fast as he could ...'

It is not my purpose to tell Peter Andrews's story, either. As a matter of fact, I am not sure I would dare to tell it Suffice it to say that it was a tale so gruesome that I dreamed of it for weeks afterwards, and Ellen once looked at me over the breakfast table and asked me why I had suddenly cried out 'His head! His head is still speaking in the earth!' in the middle of the night 'I suppose it was a dream,' I said. 'One of those you can't remember afterwards.'

But my eyes dropped immediately to my coffee cup, and I think that Ellen knew the lie that time.

One day in August of the following year, I was buzzed as I worked in the Readers' Library. It was George Waterhouse. He asked me if I could step up to his office. When I got there I saw that Robert Garden was also there, and Henry Effingham. For one moment I was positive I was about to be accused of some really dreadful act of stupidity or malfeasance.

Then Garden stepped around to me and said: 'George believes the time has come to make you a junior partner, David. The rest of us agree.'

'It's going to be a little bit like being the world's oldest JayCee,' Effingham said with a grin, 'but it's the channel you have to go through, David. With any luck, we can make you a full partner by Christmas.'

There were no bad dreams that night. Ellen and I went out to dinner, drank too much, went on to a jazz place where we hadn't been in nearly six years, and listened to that amazing blue-eyed black man, Dexter Gordon, blow his horn until almost two in the morning. We woke up the next morning with fluttery stomachs and achey heads, both of us still unable to completely believe what had happened. One of them was that my salary had just climbed by eight thousand dollars a year long after our expectations of such a staggering income jump had fallen by the wayside.

The firm sent me to Copenhagen for six weeks that fall, and I returned to discover that John Hanrahan, one of the regular attendees at 249, had died of cancer. A collection was taken up for his wife, who had been left in unpleasant circumstances. I was pressed into service to total the amount - which was given entirely in cash - and convert it to a cashier's check. It came to almost ten thousand dollars. I turned the check over to Stevens and I suppose he mailed it.

It just so happened that Arlene Hanrahan was a member of Ellen's Theatre Society, and Ellen told me some time later that Arlene had received an anonymous check for ten thousand four hundred dollars. Written on the check stub was the brief and unilluminating message 'Friends of your late husband John'.

'Isn't that the most amazing thing you ever heard in your life?' Ellen asked me.

'No,' I said, 'but it's right up there in the top ten. Are there any more strawberries, Ellen?'

The years went by. I discovered a warren of rooms upstairs at 249 - a writing room, a bedroom where guests

sometimes stayed overnight (although after that slithery bump I had heard - or imagined I had heard - I believe I personally would rather have registered at a good hotel), a small but well-equipped gymnasium, and a sauna bath. There was also a long, narrow room which ran the length of the building and contained two bowling alleys.

In those same years I re-read the novels of Edward Gray Seville, and discovered an absolutely stunning poet - the equal of Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens, perhaps - named Norbert Rosen. According to the back flap on one of the three volumes of his work in the stacks, he had been born in 1924 and killed at Anzio. All three volumes of his work had been published by Stedham & Son, New York and Boston.

I remember going back to the New York Public Library on a bright spring afternoon during one of those years (of which year I am no longer sure) and requesting twenty years' worth of Literary Market Place. The LMP is an annual publication the size of a large city's Yellow Pages, and the reference room librarian was quite put out with me, I'm afraid. But I persisted, and went through each volume carefully. And although LMP is supposed to list every publisher, great and small, in the United States (in addition to agents, editors, and book club staffs), I found no listing for Stedham & Son. A year later - or perhaps it was two years later - I fell into conversation with an antiquarian book dealer and asked him about the imprint. He said he had never heard of it.

I thought of asking Stevens - saw that warning light in his eyes - and dropped the question unasked.

And, over those years, there were stories. Tales, to use Stevens's word. Funny tales, tales of love found and love

lost, tales of unease. Yes, and even a few war stories, although none of the sort Ellen had likely been thinking of when she made the suggestion.

I remember Gerard Tozeman's story the most clearly - the tale of an American base of operations which took a direct hit from German artillery four months before the end of World War I, killing everyone present except for Tozeman himself.

Lathrop Carruthers, the American general who everyone had by then decided must be utterly insane (he had been responsible for better than eighteen thousand casualties by then - lives and limbs spent as casually as you or I might spend a quarter in a jukebox), was standing at a map of the front lines when the shell struck. He had been explaining yet another mad flanking operation at that moment - an operation which would have succeeded only on the level of all the others Carruthers had hatched: it would be wonderfully successful at making new widows.

And when the dust cleared, Gerard Tozeman, dazed and deaf, bleeding from his nose, his ears, and the corners of both eyes, his testicles already swelling from the force of the concussion, had come upon Carruthers's body while looking for a way out of the abattoir that had been the staff HQ only minutes before. He looked at the general's body ... and then began to scream and laugh. The sounds went unheard by his own shellshocked ears, but they served to notify the medicos that someone was still alive in that strew of matchwood.

Carruthers had not been mutilated by the blast... at least, Tozeman said, it hadn't been what the soldiers of that long-ago war had come to think of as mutilation - men whose arms had been blown off, men with no feet, no eyes; men

whose lungs had been shrivelled by gas. No, he said, it was nothing like that The man's mother would have known him at once. But the map...

... the map before which Carruthers had been standing with his butcher's pointer when the shell struck ...

It had somehow been driven into his face. Tozeman had found himself staring into a hideous, tattooed deathmask. Here was the stony shore of Brittany on the bony ridge of Lathrop Carruthers's brow. Here was the Rhine flowing like a blue scar down his left cheek. Here were some of the finest wine-growing provinces in the world bumped and ridged over his chin. Here was the Saar drawn around his throat like a hangman's noose ... and printed across one bulging eyeball was the word VERSAILLES.

That was our Christmas story in the year 197-.

I remember many others, but they do not belong here. Properly speaking, Tozeman's doesn't, either ... but it was the first 'Christmas tale' I heard at 249, and I could not resist telling it And then, on the Thursday after Thanksgiving of this year, when Stevens clapped his hands together for attention and asked who would favour us with a Christmas tale, Emlyn McCarron growled: 'I suppose I've got something that bears telling. Tell it now or tell it never; God'll shut me up for good soon enough.'

In the years I had been coming to 249, I had never heard McCarron tell a story. And perhaps that's why I called the taxi so early, and why, when Stevens passed out eggnog to the six of us who had ventured out on that bellowing, frigid night, I felt so keenly excited. Nor was I the only one; I saw that same excitement on a good many other faces.

McCarron, old and dry and leathery, sat in the huge chair by the fire with the packet of powder in his gnarled hands. He tossed it in, and we watched the flames shift colours madly before returning to yellow again, Stevens passed among us with brandy, and we passed him his Christmas honorariums. Once, during that yearly ceremony, I heard the clink of change passing from the hand of the giver to the hand of the receiver; on another occasion, I had seen a one thousand dollar bill for a moment in the firelight. On both occasions the murmur of Stevens's voice had been exactly the same: low, considerate, and entirely correct. Ten years, more or less, had passed since I had first come to 249 with George Waterhouse, and while much had changed in the world outside, nothing had changed in here, and Stevens seemed not to have aged a month, or even a single day.

He moved back into the shadows, and for a moment there was a silence so perfect that we could hear the faint whistle of boiling sap escaping from the burning logs on the hearth. Emlyn McCarron was looking into the fire and we all followed his gaze. The flames seemed particularly wild that night. I felt almost hypnotized by the sight of the fire - as, I suppose, the cavemen who binned us were once hypnotized by it as the wind walked and talked outside their cold northern caves.

At last, still looking into the fire, bent slightly forward so that his forearms rested on his thighs and his clasped hands hung in a knot between his knees, McCarron began to speak.

2: The Breathing Method

I am nearly eighty now, which means that I was born with the century. All my life I have been associated with a building which stands almost directly across from Madison Square Garden; this building, which looks like a great grey prison -something out of A Tale of Two Cities - is actually a hospital, as most of you know. It is Harriet White Memorial Hospital. The Harriet White after whom it was named was my father's first wife, and she got her practical experience in nursing when there were still actual sheep grazing on the Sheep's Meadow in Central Park. A statue of the lady herself (who would have been my stepmother, had she still been alive when I was born) stands on a pedestal in a pavillion before the building, and if any of you have seen it, you may have wondered how a woman with such a stern and uncompromising face could have found such a gentle occupation. The motto chiselled into the statue's base, once you get rid of the Latin folderol, is even less comforting: There is no comfort without pain; thus we define salvation through suffering. Cato, if you please ... or if you don't please!

I was born inside that grey stone building on 20 March, 1900. I returned there as an intern in the year 1926. Twenty-six is old to be just starting out in the world of medicine, but I had done a more practical internship in France, at the end of World War I, trying to pack ruptured guts back into stomachs that had been blown wide open and dealing on the black market for morphine which was often tinctured and sometimes dangerous.

As with the generation of physicians following World War II, we were a bedrock-practical lot of sawbones, and the records of the major medical schools show a remarkably

small number of washouts in the years 1919 to 1928. We were older, more experienced, steadier. Were we also wiser? I don't know ... but we were certainly more cynical. There was none of this nonsense you read about in the popular medical novels, stuff about fainting or vomiting at one's first autopsy. Not after Belleau Wood, where mamma rats sometimes raised whole litters of ratlings in the gas-exploded intestines of the soldiers left to rot in no-man's land. We had gotten all our puking and passing out behind us.

The Harriet White Memorial Hospital also figured largely in something that happened to me nine years after I had interned there - and this is the story I want to tell you gentlemen tonight. It is not a tale to be told at Christmas, you would say (although its final scene was played out on Christmas Eve), and yet, while it is certainly horrible, it also seems to express to me all the amazing power of our cursed, doomed species. In it I see the wonder of our will... and also its horrible, tenebrous power.

Birth itself, gentlemen, is a horrid thing to many; it is the fashion now that fathers should be present at the birth of their children, and while this fashion has served to indict many men with a guilt which I feel they may not deserve (it is a guilt which some women use knowingly and with an almost prescient cruelty), it seems by and large to be a healthful, salubrious thing. Yet I have seen men leave the delivery room white and tottering and I have seen them swoon like girls, overcome by the cries and the blood. I remember one father who held up just fine ... only to begin screaming hysterically as his perfectly healthy son pushed its way into the world. The infant's eyes were open, it gave the impression of looking around ... and then its eyes settled on the father.

Birth is wonderful, gentlemen, but I have never found it beautiful - not by any stretch of the imagination. I believe it is too brutal to be beautiful. A woman's womb is like an engine. With conception, that engine is turned on. At first it barely idles ... but as the creative cycle nears the climax of birth, that engine revs up and up and up. Its idling whisper becomes a steady running hum, and then a rumble, and finally a bellowing, frightening roar. Once that silent engine has been turned on, every mother-to-be understands that her life is in check. Either she will bring the baby forth and the engine will shut down again, or that engine will pound louder and harder and faster until it explodes, killing her in blood and pain.

This is a story of birth, gentlemen, on the eve of that birth we have celebrated for almost two thousand years.

I began practising medicine in 1929 - a bad year to begin anything. My grandfather was able to loan me a small sum of money, so I was luckier than many of my colleagues, but I still had to survive over the next four years mostly on my wits.

By 1935, things had improved a bit. I had developed a bedrock of steady patients and was getting quite a few outpatient referrals from White Memorial. In April of that year I saw a new patient, a young woman whom I will call Sandra Stansfield - that name is close enough to what her name really was. This was a young woman, white, who stated her age to be twenty-eight. After examining her, I guessed her true age to be between three and five years younger than that. She was blonde, slender, and tall for that time - about five feet eight inches. She was quite beautiful, but in an austere way that was almost forbidding. Her features were clear and regular, her eyes intelligent ... and her mouth every bit as determined as the stone mouth of

Harriet White on the statue in the pavilion across from Madison Square Garden. The name she put on her form was not Sandra Stansfield but Jane Smith. My examination subsequently showed her to be about two months gone in pregnancy. She wore no wedding ring.

After the preliminary exam - but before the results of the pregnancy test were in, my nurse, Ella Davidson, said: "That girl yesterday? Jane Smith? If that isn't an assumed name, I never heard one."

I agreed. Still, I rather admired her. She had not engaged in the usual shilly-shallying, toe-scuffing, blushing, tearful behaviour. She had been straightforward and businesslike. Even her alias had seemed more a matter of business than of shame. There had been no attempt to provide verisimilitude by creating a 'Betty Rucklehouse' or whomping up a 'Ternina DeVille'. You require a name for your form, she seemed to be saying, because that is the law. So here is a name; but rather than trusting to the professional ethics of a man I don't know, I'll trust in myself. If you don't mind, Ella sniffed and passed a few remarks - 'modern girls' and 'bold as brass' - but she was a good woman, and I don't think she said those things except for the sake of form. She knew as well as I did that, whatever my new patient might be, she was no little trollop with hard eyes and round heels. No; 'Jane Smith' was merely an extremely serious, extremely determined young woman - if either of those things can be described by such a milquetoast adverb as 'merely'. It was an unpleasant situation (it used to be called 'getting in a scrape', as you gentlemen may remember; nowadays it seems that many young women use a scrape to get out of the scrape), and she meant to go through it with whatever grace and dignity she could manage.

A week after her initial appointment, she came in again. That was a peach of a day - one of the first real days of spring. The air was mild, the sky a soft, milky shade of blue, and there was a smell on the breeze - a warm, indefinable smell that seems to be nature's signal that she is entering her own birth cycle again. The sort of day when you wish you were miles from any responsibility, sitting opposite a lovely woman of your own - at Coney Island, maybe, or on the Palisades across the Hudson with a picnic hamper on a checkered cloth and the lady in question wearing a great white cartwheel hat and a sleeveless gown as pretty as the day.

'Jane Smith's' dress had sleeves, but it was still almost as pretty as the day; a smart white linen with brown edging. She wore brown pumps, white gloves, and a cloche hat that was slightly out of fashion - it was the first sign I saw that she was a far from rich woman.

'You're pregnant,' I said. 'I don't believe you doubted it much, did you?'

If there are to be tears, I thought, they will come now.

'No,' she said with perfect composure. There was no more a sign of tears in her eyes than there were rainclouds on the horizon that day. 'I'm very regular as a rule.'

There was a pause between us.

'When may I expect to deliver?' she asked then, with an almost soundless sigh. It was the sound a man or woman might make before bending over to pick up a heavy load.

'It will be a Christmas baby,' I said. '10 December is the date I'll give you, but it could be two weeks on either side of that'

'All right.' She hesitated briefly, and then plunged ahead. 'Will you attend me? Even though I'm not married?'

'Yes,' I said. 'On one condition.'

She frowned, and in that moment her face was more like the face of Harriet White, my father's first wife, than ever. One would not think that the frown of a woman perhaps only twenty-three could be particularly formidable, but this one was. She was ready to leave, and the fact that she would have to go through this entire embarrassing process again with another doctor was not going to deter her.

'And what might that be?' she asked with perfect, colourless courtesy.

Now it was I who felt an urge to drop my eyes from her steady hazel ones, but I held her gaze. 'I insist upon knowing your real name. We can continue to do business on a cash basis if that is how you prefer it, and I can continue to have Mrs Davidson issue you receipts in the name of Jane Smith. But if we are going to travel through the next seven months or so together, I would like to be able to address you by the name to which you answer in all the rest of your life.'

I finished this absurdly stiff little speech and watched her think it through. I was somehow quite sure she was going to stand up, thank me for my time, and leave forever. I was going to feel disappointed if that happened. I liked her. Even more, I liked the straightforward way she was handling a problem which would have reduced ninety women out of a hundred to inept and undignified liars, terrified by the living clock within and so deeply ashamed of their situation that to make any reasonable plan for coping with it became impossible.

I suppose many young people today would find such a state of mind ludicrous, ugly, even hard to believe. People have become so eager to demonstrate their broad-mindedness that a pregnant woman who has no wedding ring is apt to be treated with twice the solicitude of one who does. You gentlemen will well remember when rectitude and hypocrisy were combined to make a situation that was viciously difficult for a woman who had gotten herself 'in a scrape'. In those days, a married pregnant woman was a radiant woman, sure of her position and proud of fulfilling what she considered to be the function God put her on earth for. An unmarried pregnant woman was a trollop in the eyes of the world and apt to be a trollop in her own eyes as well. They were, to use Ella Davidson's word, 'easy', and in that world and that time, easiness was not quickly forgiven. Such women crept away to have their babies in other towns or cities. Some took pills or jumped from buildings. Others went to butcher abortionists with dirty hands or tried to do the job themselves; in my time as a physician I have seen four women die of blood-loss before my eyes as the result of punctured wombs - in one case the puncturing was done by the jagged neck of a Dr Pepper bottle that had been tied to the handle of a whisk-broom. It is hard to believe now that such things happened, but they did, gentlemen. They did. It was, quite simply, the worst situation a healthy young woman could find herself in.

'All right' she said at last. 'That's fair enough. My name is Sandra Stansfield.' And she held her hand out. Rather amazed, I took it and shook it. I'm rather glad Ella Davidson didn't see me do that. She would have made no comment, but the coffee would have been bitter for the next week.

She smiled - at my own expression of bemusement, I imagine - and looked at me frankly. 'I hope we can be

friends, Dr McCarron. I need a friend just now. I'm quite frightened.'

'I can understand that, and I'll try to be your friend if I can, Miss Stansfield. Is there anything I can do for you now?'

She opened her handbag and took out a dime-store pad and a pen. She opened the pad, poised the pen, and looked up at me. For one horrified instant I believed she was going to ask me for the name and address of an abortionist Then she said: 'I'd like to know the best things to eat. For the baby, I mean.'

I laughed out loud. She looked at me with some amazement.

'Forgive me - it's just that you seem so businesslike.'

'I suppose,' she said. 'This baby is part of my business now, isn't it, Dr McCarron?'

'Yes. Of course it is. And I have a folder which I give to all my pregnant patients. It deals with diet and weight and drinking and smoking and lots of other things. Please don't laugh when you look at it You'll hurt my feelings if you do, because I wrote it myself.'

And so I had - although it was really more of a pamphlet than a folder, and in time became my book, A Practical Guide to Pregnancy and Delivery. I was quite interested in obstetrics and gynaecology in those days - still am - although it was not a thing to specialize in back then unless you had plenty of uptown connections. Even if you did, it might take ten or fifteen years to establish a strong practice. Having hung out my shingle at a rather too-ripe age as a result of the war, I didn't feel I had the time to spare. I contented myself with the knowledge that I would

see a great many happy expectant mothers and deliver a great many babies in the course of my general practice. And so I did; at last count I had delivered well over two thousand babies -enough to fill two hundred classrooms.

I kept up with the literature on having babies more smartly than I did on that applying to any other area of general practice. And because my opinions were strong, enthusiastic ones, I wrote my own pamphlet rather than just passing along the stale chestnuts so often foisted on young mothers then. I won't run through the whole catalogue of these chestnuts - we'd be here all night - but I'll mention a couple.

Expectant mothers were urged to stay off their feet as much as possible, and on no account were they to walk any sustained distance lest a miscarriage or 'birth damage' result. Now giving birth is an extremely strenuous piece of work, and such advice is like telling a football player to prepare for the big game by sitting around as much as possible so he won't tire himself out! Another sterling piece of advice, given by a good many doctors, was that moderately overweight mothers-to-be take up smoking ... smoking! The rationale was perfectly expressed by an advertising slogan of the day: 'Have a Lucky instead of a sweet.' People who have the idea that when we entered the twentieth century we also entered an age of medical light and reason have no idea of how utterly crazy medicine could sometimes be. Perhaps it's just as well; their hair would turn white.

I gave Miss Stansfield my folder and she looked through it with complete attention for perhaps five minutes. I asked her permission to smoke my pipe and she gave it absently, without looking up. When she did look up at last, there was

a small smile on her lips. 'Are you a radical, Dr McCarron?' she asked.

'Why do you say that? Because I advise that the expectant mother should walk her round of errands instead of riding in a smoky, jolting subway car?'

' "Pre-natal vitamins," whatever they are ... swimming recommended ... and breathing exercises! What breathing exercises?'

'That comes later on, and no - I'm not a radical. Far from it What I am is five minutes overdue on my next patient.'

'Oh! I'm sorry.' She got to her feet quickly, tucking the thick folder into her purse.

'No need.'

She shrugged into her light coat, looking at me with those direct hazel eyes as she did so. 'No,' she said. 'Not a radical at all. I suspect you're actually quite ... comfortable? Is that the word I want?'

'I hope it will serve,' I said. 'It's a word I like. If you speak to Mrs Davidson, shell give you an appointment schedule. I'll want to see you again early next month.'

'Your Mrs Davidson doesn't approve of me.'

'Oh, I'm sure that's not true at all.' But I've never been a particularly good liar, and the warmth between us suddenly slipped away. I did not accompany her to the door of my consulting room. 'Miss Stansfield?'

She turned towards me, coolly enquiring.

'Do you intend to keep the baby?'

She considered me briefly and then smiled - a secret smile which I am convinced only pregnant women know. 'Oh yes,' she said, and let herself out.

By the end of that day I had treated identical twins for identical cases of poison ivy, lanced a boil, removed a hook of metal from a sheet-welder's eye, and had referred one of my oldest patients to White Memorial for what was surely cancer. I had forgotten all about Sandra Stansfield by then. Ella Davidson recalled her to my mind by saying:

'Perhaps she's not a chippie after all.'

I looked up from my last patient's folder. I had been looking at it, feeling that useless disgust most doctors feel when they know they have been rendered completely helpless, and thinking I ought to have a rubber stamp made up for such files - only instead of saying ACCOUNT RECEIVABLE or PAID IN FULL or PATIENT MOVED, it would simply say DEATH-WARRANT. Perhaps with a skull and crossbones above, like those on bottles of poison.

'Pardon me?'

'Your Miss Jane Smith. She did a most peculiar thing after her appointment this morning.' The set of Mrs Davidson's head and mouth made it clear that this was the sort of peculiar thing of which she approved.

'And what was that?'

'When I gave her her appointment card, she asked me to tot up her expenses. All of her expenses. Delivery and hospital stay included.'

That was a peculiar thing, all right. This was 1935, remember, and Miss Stansfield gave every impression of being a woman on her own. Was she well off, even comfortably off? I didn't think so. Her dress, shoes, and gloves had all been smart, but she had worn no jewellery - not even costume jewellery. And then there was her hat, that decidedly out-of-date cloche.

'Did you do it?' I asked.

Mrs Davidson looked at me as though I might have lost my senses. 'Did I? Of course I did! And she paid the entire amount. In cash.'

The last, which apparently had surprised Mrs Davidson the most (in an extremely pleasant way, of course), surprised me not at all. One thing which the Jane Smiths of the world can't do is write cheques.

Took a bank-book out of her purse, opened it, and counted the money right out onto my desk,' Mrs Davidson was continuing. Then she put her receipt in where the cash had been, put the bank-book into her purse again, and said good day. Not half bad, when you think of the way we've had to chase some of these so-called "respectable" people to make them pay their bills!'

I felt chagrined for some reason. I was not happy with the Stansfield woman for having done such a thing, with Mrs Davidson for being so pleased and complacent with the arrangement, and with myself, for some reason I couldn't define then and can't now. Something about it made me feel small.

'But she couldn't very well pay for a hospital stay now, could she?' I asked - it was a ridiculously small thing to seize on, but it was all I could find at that moment on which

to express my pique and half-amused frustration. 'After all, none of us know how long shell have to remain there. Or are you reading the crystal now, Ella?'

'I told her that very thing, and she asked what the average stay was following an uncomplicated birth. I told her three days. Wasn't that right, Dr McCarron?'

I had to admit it was.

'She said that she would pay for three days, then, and if it was longer, she would pay the difference, and if-'

'- if it was shorter, we could issue her a refund,' I finished wearily. I thought: Damn the woman, anyway! - and then I laughed. She had guts. One couldn't deny that All kinds of guts.

Mrs Davidson allowed herself a smile ... and if I am ever tempted, now that I am in my dotage, to believe I know all there is to know about one of my fellow creatures, I try to remember that smile. Before that day I would have staked my iife that I would never see Mrs Davidson, one of the most 'proper' women I have ever known, smile fondly as she thought about a girl who was pregnant out of wedlock.

'Guts? I don't know, Doctor. But she knows her own mind, that one. She certainly does.'

A month passed, and Miss Stansfield showed up promptly for her appointment, simply appearing out of that wide, amazing flow of humanity that was New York then and is New York now. She wore a fresh-looking blue dress to which she managed to communicate a feeling of originality, of one-of-a-kind-ness, despite the fact that it had been quite obviously picked from a rack of dozens just like it. Her

pumps did not match it; they were the same brown ones in which I had seen her last time.

I checked her over carefully and found her normal in every way. I told her so and she was pleased. 'I found the pre-natal vitamins, Dr McCarron.'

'Did you? That's good.'

Her eyes sparkled impishly. "The druggist advised me against them.'

'God save me from pestle-pounders,' I said, and she giggled against the heel of her palm - it was a childlike gesture, winning in its unselfconsciousness. 'I never met a druggist that wasn't a frustrated doctor. And a Republican. Pre-natal vitamins are new, so they're regarded with suspicion. Did you take his advice?'

'No, I took yours. You're my doctor.'

Thank you.'

'Not at all.' She looked at me straightforwardly, not giggling now. 'Dr McCarron, when will I begin to show?'

'Not until August, I should guess. September, if you choose garments which are ... uh, voluminous.'

Thank you.' She picked up her purse but did not rise immediately to go. I thought that she wanted to talk ... and didn't know where or how to begin.

'You're a working woman, I take it?'

She nodded. 'Yes. I work.'

'Might I ask where? If you'd rather I didn't -'

She laughed - a brittle, humourless laugh, as different from that giggle as day is from dark. 'In a department store. Where else does an unmarried woman work in the city? I sell perfume to fat ladies who rinse their hair and then have it done up in tiny finger-waves.'

'How long will you continue?'

'Until my delicate condition is noticed. I suppose then I'll be asked to leave, lest I upset any of the fat ladies. The shock of being waited on by a pregnant woman with no wedding-band might cause their hair to straighten.'

Quite suddenly her eyes were bright with tears. Her lips began to tremble, and I groped for a handkerchief. But the tears didn't fall - not so much as a single one. Her eyes brimmed for a moment and then she blinked them back. Her lips tightened ... and then smoothed out. She simply decided she was not going to lose control of her emotions ... and she did not. It was a remarkable thing to watch.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'You've been very kind to me. I won't repay your kindness with what would be a very common story.'

She rose to go, and I rose with her.

'I'm not a bad listener,' I said, 'and I have some time. My next patient cancelled.'

'No,' she said. 'Thank you, but no.'

'All right,' I said. 'But there's something else.'

'Yes?'

'It's not my policy to make my patients - any of my patients - pay for services in advance of those services being rendered. I hope if you ... that is, if you feel you'd like to ... or have to ...' I fumbled my way into silence.

I've been in New York four years, Dr McCarron, and I'm thrifty by nature. After August - or September - I'll have to live on what's in my savings account until I can go back to work again. It's not a great amount and sometimes, during the nights, mostly, I become frightened.'

She looked at me steadily with those wonderful hazel eyes.

'It seemed better to me - safer - to pay for the baby first. Ahead of everything. Because that is where the baby is in my thoughts, and because, later on, the temptation to spend that money might become very great'

'All right,' I said. 'But please remember that I see it as having been paid before accounts. If you need it, say so.'

'And bring out the dragon in Mrs Davidson again?' The impish light was back in her eyes. 'I don't think so. And now, Doctor-'

'You intend to work as long as possible? Absolutely as long as possible?'

'Yes. I have to. Why?'

'I think I'm going to frighten you a little before you go,' I said.

Her eyes widened slightly. 'Don't do that,' she said. 'I'm frightened enough already.'

'Which is exactly why I'm going to do it Sit down again, Miss Stansfield.' And when she only stood there, I added: 'Please.'

She sat. Reluctantly.

'You're in a unique and unenviable position,' I told her, leaning back against the examination table. 'You are dealing with the situation with remarkable grace.'

She began to speak, and I held up my hand to silence her.

'That's good. I salute you for it But I would hate to see you hurt your baby in any way out of concern for your own financial security. I had a patient who, in spite of my strenuous advice to the contrary, continued packing herself into a girdle month after month, strapping it tighter and tighter as her pregnancy progressed. She was a vain, stupid, tiresome woman, and I don't believe she really wanted the baby anyway. I don't subscribe to many of these theories of the subconscious which everyone seems to discuss over the Man-Jong boards these days, but if I did, I would say that she - or some part of her - was trying to kill the baby.'

'And did she?' Her face was very still.

'No, not at all. But the baby was born retarded. It's very possible that the baby would have been born retarded anyway, and I'm not saying otherwise - we know next to nothing about what causes such things. But she may have caused it.'

'I take your point,' she said in a low voice. 'You don't want me to ... to pack myself in so I can work another month or six weeks. I'll admit the thought had crossed my mind. So ... thank you for the fright.'

This time I walked her to the door. I would have liked to ask her just how much - or how little - she had left in that savings book, and just how close to the edge she was. It was a question she would not answer; I knew that well enough. So I merely bade her goodbye and made a joke about her vitamins. She left I found myself thinking about her at odd moments over the next month, and Johanssen interrupted McCarron's story at this point. They were old friends, and I suppose that gave him the right to ask the question that had surely crossed all our minds.

'Did you love her, Emlyn? Is that what all this is about, this stuff about her eyes and smile and how you "thought of her at odd moments"?'

I thought that McCarron might be annoyed at this interruption, but he was not. 'You have a right to ask the question,' he said, and paused, looking into the fire. It seemed that he might almost have fallen into a doze. Then a dry knot of wood exploded, sending sparks up the chimney in a swirl, and McCarron looked around, first at Johanssen and then at the rest of us.

'No. I didn't love her. The things I've said about her sound like the things a man who is falling in love would notice - her eyes, her dresses, her laugh.' He lit his pipe with a special boltlike pipe-lighter that he carried, drawing the flame until there was a bed of coals there. Then he snapped the bolt shut, dropped it into the pocket of his jacket, and blew out a plume of smoke that shifted slowly around his head in an aromatic membrane.

'I admired her. That was the long and short of it. And my admiration grew with each of her visits. I suppose some of you sense this as a story of love crossed by circumstance. Nothing could be further from the truth. Her story came out

a bit at a time over the next half-year or so, and when you gentlemen hear it, I think you'll agree that it was every bit as common as she herself said it was. She had been drawn to the city like a thousand other girls; she had come from a small town..

... in Iowa or Nebraska. Or possibly it was Minnesota - I don't really remember anymore. She had done a lot of high school dramatics and community theatre in her small town - good reviews in the local weekly written by a drama critic with an English degree from Cow and Sileage Junior College - and she came to New York to try a career in acting.

She was practical even about that - as practical as an impractical ambition will allow one to be, anyway. She came to New York, she told me, because she didn't believe the unstated thesis of the movie magazines - that any girl who came to Hollywood could become a star, that she might be sipping a soda in Schwab's Drug Store one day and playing opposite Gable or MacMurray the next. She came to New York, she said, because she thought it might be easier to get her foot in the door there ... and, I think, because the legitimate theatre interested her more than the talkies.

She got a job selling perfume in one of the big department stores and enrolled in acting classes. She was smart and terribly determined, this girl - her will was pure steel, through and through - but she was as human as anyone else. She was lonely, too. Lonely in a way that perhaps only single girls fresh from small midwestern towns know. Homesickness is not always a vague, nostalgic, almost beautiful emotion, although that is somehow the way we always seem to picture it in our mind. It can be a terribly keen blade, not just a sickness in metaphor but in fact as well. It can change the way one looks at the world; the faces one sees in the street look not just indifferent but ugly

... perhaps even malignant. Homesickness is a real sickness - the ache of the uprooted plant.

Miss Stansfield, admirable as she may have been, determined as she may have been, was not immune to it. And the rest follows so naturally it needs no telling. There was a young man in her acting classes. The two of them went out several times. She did not love him, but she needed a friend. By the time she discovered he was not that and never would be, there had been two incidents. Sexual incidents. She discovered she was pregnant. She told the young man, who told her he would stand by her and 'do the decent thing'. A week later he was gone from his lodgings, leaving no forwarding address. That was when she came to me.

During her fourth month, I introduced Miss Stansfield to the Breathing Method - what is today called the Lamaze Method. In those days, you understand, Monsieur Lamaze was yet to be heard from.

'In those days' - the phrase has cropped up again and again, I notice. I apologize for it but am unable to help it - so much of what I have told you and will tell you happened as it did because it happened 'in those days'.

So ... 'in those days', over forty-five years ago, a visit to the delivery rooms in any large American hospital would have sounded to you like a visit to a madhouse. Women weeping wildly, women screaming that they wished they were dead, women screaming that they could not bear such agony, women screaming for Christ to forgive them their sins, women screaming out strings of curses and gutter-words their husbands and fathers never would have believed they knew. All of this was quite the accepted thing, in spite of the fact that most of the world's women give birth in almost

complete silence, aside from the grunting sounds of strain that we would associate with any piece of hard physical labour.

Doctors were responsible for some of this hysteria, I'm sorry to say. The stories the pregnant woman heard from friends and relatives who had already been through the birthing process also contributed to it. Believe me: if you are told that some experience is going to hurt, it will hurt. Most pain is in the mind, and when a woman absorbs the idea that the act of giving birth is excruciatingly painful - when she gets this information from her mother, her sisters, her married friends, and her physician - that woman has been mentally prepared to feel great agony.

Even after only six years' practice, I had become used to seeing women who were trying to cope with a twofold problem: not just the fact that they were pregnant and must plan for the new arrival, but also the fact - what most of them saw as a fact, anyway - that they had entered the valley of the shadow of death. Many were actually trying to put their affairs in coherent order so that if they should die, their husbands would be able to carry on without them.

This is neither the time nor place for a lesson on obstetrics, but you should know that for a long time before 'those days', the act of giving birth was extremely dangerous in the Western countries. A revolution in medical procedure, beginning around 1900, had made the process much safer, but an absurdly small number of doctors bothered to tell their expectant mothers that. God knows why. But in light of this, is it any wonder that most delivery rooms sounded like Ward Nine in Bellevue? Here are these poor women, their time come round at last, experiencing a process which has, because of the almost Victorian decorum of the times, been described to them only in the vaguest of terms; here

are these women experiencing that engine of birth finally running at full power. They were seized with an awe and wonder which they immediately interpreted as insupportable pain, and most of them felt that they would very shortly die a dog's death.

In the course of my reading on the subject of pregnancy, I discovered the principle of the silent birth and the idea of the Breathing Method. Screaming wastes energy which would be better used to expel the baby, it causes the women to hyperventilate, and hyperventilation puts the body on an emergency basis - adrenals running full blast, respiration and pulse-rate up - that is really unnecessary. The Breathing Method was supposed to help the mother focus her attention on the job at hand and to cope with pain by utilizing the body's own resources.

It was used widely at that time in India and Africa; in America, the Shoshone, Kiowa, and Micmac Indians all used it; the Eskimos have always used it; but, as you may guess, most Western doctors had little interest in it. One of my colleagues - an intelligent man - returned the typescript of my pregnancy pamphlet to me in the fall of 1931 with a red line drawn through the entire section on the Breathing Method. In the margin he had scribbled that if he wanted to know about 'nigger superstitions', he would stop by a newsstand and buy an issue of *Weird Tales*!

Well, I didn't cut the section from the pamphlet as he had suggested, but I had mixed results with the method - that was the best one could say. There were women who used it with great success. There were others who seemed to grasp the idea perfectly in principle but who lost their discipline completely as soon as their contractions became deep and heavy. In most of those cases I found that the entire idea had been subverted and undermined by well-meaning

friends and relatives who had never heard of such a thing and thus could not believe it would actually work.

The method was based on the idea that, while no two labours are ever the same in their specifics, all are pretty much alike in general. There are four stages: contractive labour, mid-labour, birth, and the expulsion of the afterbirth. Contractions are a complete hardening of the abdominal and pelvic-area muscles, and the expectant mother often finds them beginning in the sixth month. Many women pregnant for the first time expect something rather nasty, like bowel cramps, but I'm told it's much cleaner - a strongly physical sensation, which may deepen into a pain like a charley horse. A woman employing the Breathing Method began to breathe in a series of short, measured inhales and exhales when she felt a contraction coming on. Each breath was expelled in a puff, as if one were blowing a trumpet Dizzy Gillespie fashion.

During mid-labour, when more painful contractions begin coming every fifteen minutes or so, the woman switched to long inhales followed by long exhales - it's the way a marathon runner breathes when he's starting his final kick. The harder the contraction, the longer the inhale-exhale. In my pamphlet, I called this stage 'riding the waves'.

The final stage we need concern ourselves with here I called 'locomotive', and Lamaze instructors today frequently call it the 'choo-choo' stage of breathing. Final labour is accompanied by pains which are most frequently described as deep and glassy. They are accompanied by an irresistible urge on the mother's part to push ... to expel the baby. This is the point, gentlemen, at which that wonderful, frightening engine reaches its absolute crescendo. The cervix is fully dilated. The baby has begun its short journey down the birth canal, and if you were to look directly between the

mother's legs, you would be apt to see the baby's fontanelle pulsing only inches from the open air. The mother using the Breathing Method now begins to take and let out short, sharp breaths between her lips, not filling her lungs, not hyperventilating, but almost panting in a perfectly controlled fashion. It really is the sound children make when they are imitating a steam-driven locomotive.

All of this has a salutary effect on the body - the mother's oxygen is kept high without putting her systems on an emergency basis, and she herself remains aware and alert, able to ask and answer questions, able to take instructions. But of course the mental results of the Breathing Method were even more important. The mother felt she was actively participating in the birth of her child - that she was in some part guiding the process. She felt on top of the experience ... and on top of the pain.

You can understand that the whole process was utterly dependent on the patient's state of mind. The Breathing Method was uniquely vulnerable, uniquely delicate, and if I had a good many failures, I'd explain them this way - what a patient can be convinced of by her doctor she may be unconvinced of by relatives who raise their hands in horror when told of such a heathenish practice.

From this aspect, at least, Miss Stansfield was the ideal patient. She had neither friends nor relatives to talk her out of her belief in the Breathing Method (although, in all fairness, I must add that I doubt anyone ever talked her out of anything once she had made up her mind on the subject) once she came to believe in it. And she did come to believe in it. 'It's a little like self-hypnosis, isn't it?' she asked me the first time we really discussed it. I agreed, delighted. 'Exactly! But you mustn't let that make you think it's a trick, or that it will let you down when the going gets tough.'

'I don't think that at all. I'm very grateful to you. I'll practise assiduously, Dr McCarron.' She was the sort of woman the Breathing Method was invented for, and when she told me she would practise, she spoke nothing but the truth. I have never seen anyone embrace an idea with such enthusiasm ... but, of course, the Breathing Method was uniquely suited to her temperament. There are docile men and women in this world by the millions, and some of them are damn fine people. But there are others whose hands ache to hold the throttles of their own lives, and Miss Stansfield was one of those.

When I say she embraced the Breathing Method totally, I mean it ... and I think the story of her final day at the department store where she sold perfumes and cosmetics proves the point. The end of her gainful employment finally came late in August. Miss Stansfield was a slim young woman in fine physical condition, and this was, of course, her first child. Any doctor will tell you that such a woman is apt not to 'show' for five, perhaps even six months ... and then, one day and all at once, everything will show.

She came in for her monthly checkup on the first of September, laughed ruefully, and told me she had discovered the Breathing Method had another use.

'What's that?' I asked her.

'It's even better than counting to ten when you're mad as hell at someone,' she said. Those hazel eyes were dancing. 'Although people look at you as if you might be a lunatic when you start puffing and blowing.'

She told me the tale readily enough. She had gone to work as usual on the previous Monday, and all I can think is that the curiously abrupt transition from a slim young woman to

an obviously pregnant young woman - and the transition really can be almost as sudden as day to dark in the tropics - had happened over the weekend. Or maybe her supervisor finally decided that her suspicions were no longer just suspicions.

'I'll want to see you in the office on your break,' this woman, a Mrs Kelly, said coldly. She had previously been quite friendly to Miss Stansfield. She had shown her pictures of her two children, both in high school, and they had exchanged recipes at one point. Mrs Kelly was always asking her if she had met 'a nice boy' yet that kindness and friendliness was gone now. And when she stepped into Mrs Kelly's office on her break, Miss Stansfield told me, she knew what to expect.

'You're in trouble,' this previously kind woman said curtly.

'Yes,' Miss Stansfield said. 'It's called that by some people.'

Mrs Kelly's cheeks had gone the colour of old brick. 'Don't you be smart with me, young woman,' she said. 'From the looks of your belly, you've been too smart by half already.'

I could see the two of them in my mind's eye as she told me the story - Miss Stansfield, her direct hazel eyes fixed on Mrs Kelly, perfectly composed, refusing to drop her eyes, or weep, or exhibit shame in any other way. I believe she had a much more practical conception of the trouble she was in than her supervisor did, with her two almost grown children and her respectable husband, who owned his own barber-shop and voted Republican.

'I must say you show remarkably little shame at the way you've deceived me!' Mrs Kelly burst out bitterly.

'I have never deceived you. No mention of my pregnancy has been made until today.' She looked at Mrs Kelly almost curiously. 'How can you say I have deceived you?'

'I took you home!' Mrs Kelly cried. 'I had you to dinner... with my sons.' She looked at Miss Stansfield with utter loathing.

This is when Miss Stansfield began to grow angry. Angrier, she told me, than she had ever been in her life. She had not been unaware of the sort of reaction she could expect when the secret came out, but as any one of you gentlemen will attest, the difference between academic theory and practical application can sometimes be shockingly huge.

Clutching her hands firmly together in her lap, Miss Stansfield said: 'If you are suggesting I made or ever would make any attempt to seduce your sons, that's the dirtiest, filthiest thing I've ever heard in my life.'

Mrs Kelly's head rocked back as if she had been slapped. That bricky colour drained from her cheeks, leaving only two small spots of hectic colour. The two women looked grimly at each other across a desk littered with perfume samples in a room that smelled vaguely of flowers. It was a moment, Miss Stansfield said, that seemed much longer than it actually could have been.

Then Mrs Kelly yanked open one of her drawers and brought out a buff-coloured cheque. A bright pink severance slip was attached to it. Showing her teeth, actually seeming to bite off each word, she said, 'With hundreds of decent girls looking for work in this city, I hardly think we need a strumpet such as yourself in our employ, dear.'

She told me it was that final, contemptuous 'dear' that brought all her anger to a sudden head. A moment later Mrs

Kelly's jaw dropped and her eyes widened as Miss Stansfield, her hands locked together as tightly as links in a steel chain, so tightly she left bruises on herself (they were fading but still perfectly visible when I saw her on 1 September), began to 'locomotive' between her clenched teeth.

It wasn't a funny story, perhaps, but I burst out laughing at the image and Miss Stansfield joined me. Mrs Davidson looked in - to make sure we hadn't gotten into the nitrous oxide, perhaps - and then left again.

'It was all I could think to do,' Miss Stansfield said, still laughing and wiping her streaming eyes with her handkerchief. 'Because at that moment, I saw myself reaching out and simply sweeping those sample bottles of perfume - every one of them - off her desk and onto the floor, which was uncarpeted concrete. I didn't just think it, I saw it! I saw them crashing to the floor and filling the room with such a God-awful mixed stench that the fumigators would have to come.'

'I was going to do it; nothing was going to stop me doing it. Then I began to Breathe, and everything was all right. I was able to take the cheque, and the pink slip, and get up, and get out. I wasn't able to thank her, of course - I was still being a locomotive''

We laughed again, and then she sobered.

'It's all passed off now, and I am even able to feel a little sorry for her - or does that sound like a terribly stiff-necked thing to say?'

'Not at all. I think it's an admirable way to be able to feel.'

'May I show you something I bought with my severance pay, Dr McCarron?'

'Yes, if you like.'

She opened her purse and took out a small flat box. 'I bought it at a pawnshop,' she said. 'For two dollars. And it's the only time during this whole nightmare that I've felt ashamed and dirty. Isn't that strange?'

She opened the box and laid it on my desk so I could look inside. I wasn't surprised at what I saw. It was a plain gold wedding ring.

'I'll do what's necessary,' she said. 'I am staying in what Mrs Kelly would undoubtedly call "a respectable boarding house". My landlady has been kind and friendly ... but Mrs Kelly was kind and friendly, too. I think she may ask me to leave at any time now, and I suspect that if I say anything about the rent-balance due me, or the damage deposit I paid when I moved in, she'll laugh in my face.'

'My dear young woman, that would be quite illegal. There are courts and lawyers to help you answer such -'

The courts are men's clubs,' she said steadily, 'and not apt to go out of their way to befriend a woman in my position. Perhaps I could get my money back, perhaps not. Either way, the expense and the trouble and the ... the unpleasantness ... hardly seem worth the forty-seven dollars or so. I had no business mentioning it to you in the first place. It hasn't happened yet, and maybe it won't. But in any case, I intend to be practical from now on.'

She raised her head, and her eyes flashed at mine.

'I've got my eye on a place down in the Village - just in case. It's on the third floor, but it's clean, and it's five dollars a month cheaper than where I'm staying now.' She picked the ring out of the box. 'I wore this when the landlady showed me the room.'

She put it on the third finger of her left hand with a small moue of disgust of which I believe she was unaware. There. Now I'm Mrs Stansfield. My husband was a truck-driver who was killed on the Pittsburgh-New York run. Very sad. But I am no longer a little roundheels strumpet, and my child is no longer a bastard.'

She looked up at me, and the tears were in her eyes again. As I watched, one of them overspilled and rolled down her cheek.

'Please,' I said, distressed, and reached across the desk to take her hand. It was very, very cold. 'Don't, my dear.'

She turned her hand - it was the left - over in my hand and looked at the ring. She smiled, and that smile was as bitter as gall and vinegar, gentlemen. Another tear fell - just that one.

'When I hear cynics say that the days of magic and miracles are all behind us, Dr McCarron, I'll know they're deluded, won't I? When you can buy a ring in a pawnshop for a dollar and a half and that ring will instantly erase both bastardy and licentiousness, what else would you call that but magic? Cheap magic.'

'Miss Stansfield ... Sandra, if I may ... if you need help, if there's anything I can do -'

She drew her hand away from me - if I had taken her right hand instead of her left, perhaps she would not have done.

I did not love her, I've told you, but in that moment I could have loved her; I was on the verge of falling in love with her. Perhaps, if I'd taken her right hand instead of the one with that lying ring on it, and if she had allowed me to hold her hand only a little longer, until my own warmed it, perhaps then I should have.

'You're a good, kind man, and you've done a great deal for me and my baby ... and your Breathing Method is a much better kind of magic than this awful ring. After all, it kept me from being jailed on charges of wilful destruction, didn't it?'

She left soon after that, and I went to the window to watch her move off down the street towards Madison Avenue. God, I admired her just then: She looked so slight, so young, and so obviously pregnant - but there was still nothing timid or tentative about her. She did not scutter up the street; she walked as if she had every right to her place on the sidewalk.

She left my view and I turned back to my desk. As I did so, the framed photograph which hung on the wall next to my diploma caught my eye, and a terrible shudder worked through me. My skin - all of it, even the skin on my forehead and the backs of my hands - crawled up into cold knots of gooseflesh. The most suffocating fear of my entire life fell on me like a horrible shroud, and I found myself gasping for breath. It was a precognitive interlude, gentlemen. I do not take part in arguments about whether or not such things can occur; I know they can, because it has happened to me. Just that once, on that hot early September afternoon. I pray to God I never have another.

The photograph had been taken by my mother on the day I finished medical school. It showed me standing in front of

White Memorial, hands behind my back, grinning like a kid who's just gotten a full-day pass to the rides at Palisades Park. To my left the statue of Harriet White can be seen, and although the photograph cuts her off at about mid-shin, the pedestal and that queerly heartless inscription - There is no comfort without pain; thus we define salvation through suffering - could be clearly seen. It was at the foot of the statue of my grandfather's first wife, directly below that inscription, that Sandra Stansfield died not quite four months later in a senseless accident that occurred just as she arrived at the hospital to deliver her child.

She exhibited some anxiety that fall that I would not be there to attend her during her labour - that I would be away for the Christmas holidays or not on call. She was partly afraid that she would be delivered by some doctor who would ignore her wish to use the Breathing Method and who would instead give her gas or a spinal block.

I assured her as best I could. I had no reason to leave the city, no family to visit over the holidays. My mother had died two years before, and there was no one else except a maiden aunt in California ... and the train didn't agree with me, I told Miss Stansfield.

'Are you ever lonely?' she asked.

'Sometimes. Usually I keep too busy. Now, take this.' I jotted my home telephone number on a card and gave it to her. 'If you get the answering service when your labour begins, call me here.'

'Oh, no, I couldn't-'

'Do you want to use the Breathing Method, or do you want to get some sawbones who'll think you're mad and give you a capful of ether as soon as you start to "locomotive"?'

She smiled a little. 'All right. I'm convinced.'

But as the autumn progressed and the butchers on 3rd Avenue began advertising the per-pound price of their 'young and succulent Toms', it became clear that her mind was still not at rest. She had indeed been asked to leave the place where she had been living when I first met her, and had moved to the Village. But that, at least, had turned out quite well for her. She had even found work of a sort. A blind woman with a fairly comfortable income had hired her to come in twice a week, do some light housework, and then to read to her from the works of Jean Stratton-Porter and Pearl Buck. She had taken on that blooming, rosy look that most healthy women come to have during the final trimester of their pregnancies. But there was a shadow on her face. I would speak to her and she would be slow to answer ... and once, when she didn't answer at all, I looked up from the notes I was making and saw her looking at the framed photograph next to my diploma with a strange, dreamy expression in her eyes. I felt a recurrence of that chill... and her response, which had nothing to do with my question, hardly made me feel easier.

'I have a feeling, Dr McCarron, sometimes quite a strong feeling, that I am doomed.'

Silly, melodramatic word! And yet, gentlemen, the response that rose to my own lips was this: Yes; I feel that, too. I bit it off, of course; a doctor who would say such a thing should immediately put his instruments and medical books up for sale and investigate his future in the plumbing or carpentry business.

I told her that she was not the first pregnant woman to have such feelings, and would not be the last. I told her that the feeling was indeed so common that doctors knew it

by the tongue-in-cheek name of The Valley of the Shadow Syndrome. I've already mentioned it tonight, I believe.

Miss Stansfield nodded with perfect seriousness, and I remember how young she looked that day, and how large her belly seemed. 'I know about that,' she said. 'I've felt it. But it's quite separate from this other feeling. This other feeling is like ... like something looming up. I can't describe it any better than that. It's silly, but I can't shake it.'

'You must try,' I said. 'It isn't good for the -'

But she had drifted away from me. She was looking at the photograph again.

'Who is that?'

'Emlyn McCarron,' I said, trying to make a joke. It sounded extraordinarily feeble. 'Back before the Civil War, when he was quite young.'

'No, I recognized you, of course,' she said. 'The woman. Who is the woman?'

'Her name is Harriet White,' I said, and thought: And hers will be the first face you see when you arrive to deliver your child. The chill came back - that dreadful drifting formless chill. Her stone face.

'And what does it say there at the base of the statue?' she asked, her eyes still dreamy, almost trancelike.

'I don't know,' I lied. 'My conversational Latin is not that good.'

That night I had the worst dream of my entire life - I woke up from it in utter terror, and if I had been married, I

suppose I would have frightened my poor wife to death.

In the dream I opened the door to my consulting room and found Sandra Stansfield in there. She was wearing the brown pumps, the smart white linen dress with the brown edging, and the slightly out-of-date cloche hat. But the hat was between her breasts, because she was carrying her head in her arms. The white linen was stained and streaked with gore. Blood jetted from her neck and splattered the ceiling.

And then her eyes fluttered open - those wonderful hazel eyes - and they fixed on mine.

'Doomed,' the speaking head told me. 'Doomed. I'm doomed. There's no salvation without suffering. It's cheap magic, but it's all we have.'

That's when I woke up screaming:

Her due date of 10 December came and went. I examined her on 17 December and suggested that, while the baby would almost certainly be born in 1935, I no longer expected the child to put in his or her appearance until after Christmas. Miss Stansfield accepted this with good grace. She seemed to have thrown off the shadow that had hung over her that fall. Mrs Gibbs, the blind woman who had hired her to read aloud and do light housework, was impressed with her - impressed enough to tell her friends about the brave young widow who, in spite of her recent bereavement and delicate condition, was facing her own future with such determined good cheer. Several of the blind woman's friends had expressed an interest in employing her following the birth of her child.

'I'll take them up on it, too,' she told me. 'For the baby. But only until I'm on my feet again, and able to find something

steady. Sometimes I think the worst part of this -of everything that's happened - is that it's changed the way I look at people. Sometimes I think to myself, "How can you sleep at night, knowing that you've deceived that dear old thing?" and then I think, "If she knew, she'd show you the door, just like all the others." Either way, it's a lie, and I feel the weight of it on my heart sometimes.'

Before she left that day, she took a small, gaily wrapped package from her purse and slid it shyly across the desk to me. 'Merry Christmas, Dr McCarron.'

'You shouldn't have,' I said, sliding open a drawer and taking out a package of my own. 'But since I did, too -'

She looked at me for a moment, surprised ... and then we laughed together. She had gotten me a silver tie-clasp with the medical symbol on it. I had gotten her an album in which to keep photographs of her baby. I still have the tie-clasp. What happened to the album, I cannot say.

I saw her to the door, and as we reached it, she turned to me, put her hands on my shoulders, stood on tiptoe, and kissed me on the mouth. Her lips were cool and firm. It was not a passionate kiss, gentlemen, but neither was it the sort of kiss you might expect from a sister or an aunt.

'Thank you again, Dr McCarron,' she said a little breathlessly. The colour was high in her cheeks and her hazel eyes glowed lustroously. 'Thank you for so much.'

I laughed - a little uneasily. 'You speak as if we'll never meet again, Sandra.' It was, I believe, the second and last time I ever used her Christian name.

'Oh, we'll meet again,' she said. 'I don't doubt it a bit.'

And she was right - although neither of us could have foreseen the dreadful circumstances of that last meeting.

Sandra Stansfield's labour began on Christmas Eve, at just past six p.m. By that time, the snow which had fallen all that day had changed to sleet. And by the time Miss Stansfield entered mid-labour, not quite two hours later, the city streets were a dangerous glaze of ice.

Mrs Gibbs, the blind woman, had a large and spacious first-floor apartment, and at 6:30 p.m. Miss Stansfield worked her way carefully downstairs, knocked at her door, was admitted, and asked if she might use the telephone to call a cab.

'Is it the baby, dear?' Mrs Gibbs asked, fluttering already.

'Yes. The labour's only begun, but I can't chance the weather. It will take a cab a long time.'

She made that call and then called me. At that time, 6:40, the pains were coming at intervals of about twenty-five minutes. She repeated to me that she had begun everything early because of the foul weather. 'I'd rather not have my child in the back of a Yellow,' she said. She sounded extraordinarily calm.

The cab was late and Miss Stansfield's labour was progressing more rapidly than I would have predicted - but as I have said, no two labours are alike in their specifics. The driver, seeing that his fare was about to have a baby, helped her down the slick steps, constantly adjuring her to 'be careful, lady'. Miss Stansfield only nodded, preoccupied with her deep inhale-exhales as a fresh contraction seized her. Sleet ticked off streetlights and the roofs of cars; it melted in large, magnifying drops on the taxi's yellow dome-light. Miss Gibbs told me later that the young cab

driver was more nervous than her 'poor, dear Sandra', and that was probably a contributing cause to the accident.

Another was almost certainly the Breathing Method itself.

The driver threaded his hack through the slippery streets, working his way slowly past the fender-benders and inching through the clogged intersections, slowly closing on the hospital. He was not seriously injured in the accident, and I talked to him in the hospital. He said the sound of the steady deep breathing coming from the back seat made him nervous; he kept looking in the rear view mirror to see if she was 'dine or sumpin'. He said he would have felt less nervous if she had let out a few healthy bellows, the way a woman in labour was supposed to do. He asked her once or twice if she was feeling all right and she only nodded, continuing to 'ride the waves' in deep inhales and exhales.

Two or three blocks from the hospital, she must have felt the onset of labour's final stage. An hour had passed since she had entered the cab - the traffic was that snarled - but this was still an extraordinarily fast labour for a woman having her first baby. The driver noticed the change in the way she was breathing. 'She started pantin' like a dog on a hot day, Doc,' he told me. She had begun to 'locomotive'.

At almost the same time the cabbie saw a hole open up in the crawling cross-traffic and shot through it. The way to White Memorial was now open. It was less than three blocks ahead. 'I could see the statue of that broad,' he said. Eager to be rid of his panting, pregnant passenger, he stepped down on the gas again and the cab leaped forward, wheels spinning over the ice with little or no traction.

I had walked to the hospital, and my arrival coincided with the cab's arrival only because I had underestimated just

how bad driving conditions had become. I believed I would find her upstairs, a legally admitted patient with all her papers signed, her prep completed, working her way steadily through her mid-labour. I was mounting the steps when I saw the sudden sharp convergence of two sets of headlights reflected from the patch of ice where the janitors hadn't yet spread cinders. I turned just in time to see it happen.

An ambulance was nosing its way out of the Emergency Wing rampway as Miss Stansfield's cab came across the Square and towards the hospital. The cab was simply going too fast to stop. The cabbie panicked and stamped down on the brake-pedal rather than pumping it. The cab slid, then began to turn broadside. The pulsing dome-light of the ambulance threw moving stripes and blotches of blood-coloured light over the scene, and, freakishly, one of these illuminated the face of Sandra Stansfield. For that one moment it was the face in my dream, the same bloody, open-eyed face that I had seen on her severed head.

I cried out her name, took two steps down, slipped, and fell sprawling. I cracked my elbow a paralyzing blow but somehow managed to hold on to my black bag. I saw the rest of what happened from where I lay, head ringing, elbow smarting.

The ambulance braked, and it also began to fishtail. Its rear end struck the base of the statue. The loading doors flew open. A stretcher, mercifully empty, shot out like a tongue and then crashed upside down in the street with its wheels spinning. A young woman on the sidewalk screamed as the two vehicles approached each other and tried to run. Her feet went out from under her after two strides and she fell on her stomach. Her purse flew out of her hand and shot

down the icy sidewalk like a weight in a pinball bowling game.

The cab swung all the way around, now travelling backwards, and I could see the cabbie clearly. He was spinning his wheel madly, like a kid in a Dodgem Car. The ambulance rebounded from Mrs White's statue at an angle ... and smashed broadside into the cab. The taxi spun around once in a tight circle and was slammed against the base of the statue with fearful force. Its yellow light, the letters ON RADIO CALL still flashing, exploded like a bomb. The left side of the cab crumpled like tissue-paper. A moment later I saw that it was not just the left side; the cab had struck an angle of the pedestal hard enough to tear it in two. Glass sprayed onto the slick ice like diamonds. And my patient was thrown through the rear right-side window of the dismembered cab like a rag-doll.

I was on my feet again without even knowing it. I raced down the icy steps, slipped again, caught at the railing, and kept on. I was only aware of Miss Stansfield lying in the uncertain shadow cast by that hideous statue of Harriet White, some twenty feet from where the ambulance had come to rest on its side, flasher still strobing the night with red. There was something terribly wrong with that figure, but I honestly don't believe I knew what it was until my foot struck something with a heavy enough thud to almost send me sprawling again. The thing I'd kicked skittered away - like the young woman's purse, it slid rather than rolled. It skittered away and it was only the fall of hair - bloodstreaked but still recognizably blonde, speckled with bits of glass - that made me realize what it was. She had been decapitated in the accident. What I had kicked into the frozen gutter was her head.

Moving in total numb shock, now I reached her body and turned it over. I think I tried to scream as soon as I had done it, as soon as I saw. If I did, no sound came out; I could not make a sound. The woman was still breathing, you see, gentlemen. Her chest was heaving up and down in quick, light, shallow breaths. Ice pattered down on her open coat and her blood-drenched dress. And I could hear a high, thin whistling noise. It waxed and waned like a teakettle which can't quite reach the boil. It was air being pulled into her severed windpipe and then exhaled again; the little screams of air through the crude reed of the vocal chords which no longer had a mouth to shape their sounds.

I wanted to run but I had no strength; I fell on my knees beside her on the ice, one hand cupped to my mouth. A moment later I was aware of fresh blood seeping through the lower part of her dress - and of movement there. I became suddenly, frenziedly convinced that there was still a chance to save the baby.

'Cheap magic!' I roared into the sleet, and I believe that as I yanked her dress up to her waist I began laughing. I believe I was mad. Her body was warm. I remember that. I remember the way it heaved with her breathing. One of the ambulance attendants came up, weaving like a drunk, one hand clapped to the side of his head. Blood trickled through his fingers.

'Cheap magic!' I screamed again, still laughing, still groping. My hands had found her fully dilated.

The attendant stared down at Sandra Stansfield's headless body with wide eyes. I don't know if he realized the corpse was still somehow breathing or not. Perhaps he thought it was merely a thing of the nerves - a kind of final reflex action. If he did think such a thing, he could not have been

driving an ambulance long. Chickens may walk around for a while with their heads cut off, but people only twitch once or twice... if that 'Stop staring at her and get me a blanket,' I snapped at him.

He wandered away, but not back towards the ambulance. He was pointed more or less towards Times Square. He simply walked off into the sleety night. I have no idea what became of him. I turned back to the dead woman who was somehow not dead, hesitated a moment, and then stripped off my overcoat. Then I lifted her hips so I could get it under her. Still I heard that whistle of breath as her headless body did 'locomotive' breathing. I sometimes hear it still, gentlemen. In my dreams.

Please understand that all of this had happened in an extremely short time - it seemed longer to me, but only because my perceptions had been heightened to a feverish pitch. People were only beginning to run out of the hospital to see what had happened, and behind me a woman shrieked as she saw the severed head lying by the edge of the street.

I yanked open my black bag, thanking God I hadn't lost it in my fall, and pulled out a short scalpel. I opened it, cut through her underwear, and pulled it off. Now the ambulance driver approached - he came to within fifteen feet of us and then stopped dead. I glanced over at him, still wanting that blanket. I wasn't going to get it from him, I saw; he was staring down at the breathing body, his eyes widening until it seemed they must slip from their orbits and simply dangle from their optic nerves like grotesque seeing yo-yos. Then he dropped to his knees and raised his clasped hands. He meant to pray, I am quite sure of that. The attendant might not have known he was seeing an

impossibility, but this fellow did. The next moment he had fainted dead away.

I had packed forceps in my bag that night; I don't know why. I hadn't used such things in three years, not since I had seen a doctor I will not name punch through a newborn's temple and into the child's brain with one of those infernal gadgets. The child died instantly. The corpse was 'lost' and what went on the death certificate was stillborn. But, for whatever reason, I had them.

Miss Stansfield's body tightened down, her belly clenching, turning from flesh to stone. And the baby crowned. I saw the crown for just a moment, bloody and membranous and pulsing. Pulsing. It was alive, at least then. Definitely alive.

Stone became flesh again. The crown slipped back out of sight. And a voice behind me said: 'What can I do, Doctor?'

It was a middle-aged nurse, the sort of woman who is so often the backbone of our profession. Her face was as pale as milk, and while there was terror and a kind of superstitious awe on her face as she looked down at that weirdly breathing body, there was none of that dazed shock which would have made her difficult and dangerous to work with.

'You can get me a blanket, stat,' I said curtly. 'We've still got a chance, I think.' Behind her I saw perhaps two dozen people from the hospital standing on the steps, not wanting to come any closer. How much or how little did they see? I have no way of knowing for sure. All I know is that I was avoided for days afterwards (and forever by some of them), and no one, including this nurse, ever spoke to me of it. She now turned and started back towards the hospital.

'Nurse!' I called. 'No time for that. Get one from the ambulance. This baby is coming now.'

She changed course, slipping and sliding through the slush in her white crepe-soled shoes. I turned back to Miss Stansfield.

Rather than slowing down, the locomotive breathing had actually begun to speed up ... and then her body turned hard again, locked and straining. The baby crowned again. I waited for it to slip back but it did not; it simply kept coming. There was no need for the forceps after all. The baby all but flew into my hands. I saw the sleet ticking off its naked, bloody body - for it was a boy, his sex unmistakable. I saw steam rising from it as the black, icy night snatched away the last of its mother's heat. Its blood-grimed fists waved feebly; it uttered a thin, wailing cry.

'Nurse!' I bawled, 'move your ass, you bitch!' It was perhaps inexcusable language, but for a moment I felt I was back in France, that in a few moments the shells would begin to whistle overhead with a sound like that remorselessly ticking sleet; the machine-guns would begin their hellish stutter; the Germans would begin to materialize out of the murk, running and slipping and cursing and dying in the mud and smoke. Cheap magic, I thought, seeing the bodies twist and turn and fall. But you're right, Sandra, it's all we have. It was the closest I have ever come to losing my mind, gentlemen.

'NURSE, FOR GOD'S SAKE!'

The baby wailed again - such a tiny, lost sound! - and then it wailed no more. The steam rising from its skin had thinned to ribbons. I put my mouth against its face, smelling blood and the bland, damp aroma of placenta. I

breathed into its mouth and heard the jerky sussurrus of its breathing resume. Then the nurse was there, the blanket in her arms. I held out my hand for it.

She started to give it to me, and then held it back. 'Doctor, what... what if it's a monster? Some kind of monster?'

'Give me that blanket,' I said. 'Give it to me now, Sarge, before I kick your fucking asshole right up your fucking shoulderblades.'

'Yes, doctor,' she said with perfect calmness (we must bless the women, gentlemen, who so often understand simply by not trying to), and gave me the blanket I wrapped the child and gave it to her.

'If you drop him, Sarge, you'll be eating those stripes.'

'Yes, doctor.'

'It's cheap fucking magic, Sarge, but it's all God left us with.'

'Yes, doctor.'

I watched her half-walk, half-run back to the hospital with the child and watched the crowd on the steps part for her. Then I rose to my feet and backed away from the body. Its breathing, like the baby's, hitched and caught... stopped ... hitched again ... stopped ...

I began to back away from it. My foot struck something. I turned. It was her head. And obeying some directive from outside of me, I dropped to one knee and turned the head over. The eyes were open - those direct hazel eyes that had always been full of such life and such determination. They

were full of determination still. Gentlemen, she was seeing me.

Her teeth were clenched, her lips slightly parted. I heard the breath slipping rapidly back and forth between those lips and through those teeth as she "locomotived". Her eyes moved; they rolled slightly to the left in their sockets so as to see me better. Her lips parted. They mouthed four words: Thank you, Doctor McCarron. And I heard them, gentlemen, but not from her mouth. They came from twenty feet away. From her vocal cords. And because her tongue and lips and teeth, all of which we use to shape our words, were here, they came out only in unformed modulations of sound. But there were seven of them, seven distinct sounds, just as there are seven syllables in that phrase, Thank you, Doctor McCarron.

'You're welcome, Miss Stansfield,' I said. 'It's a boy.' Her lips moved again, and from behind me, thin, ghostly, came the sound hoyyyyyy Her eyes lost their focus and their determination. They seemed now to look at something beyond me, perhaps in that black, sleety sky. Then they closed. She began to locomotive again ... and then she simply stopped. Whatever had happened was now over. The nurse had seen some of it, the ambulance driver had perhaps seen some of it before he fainted. But it was over now, over for sure. There was only the remains of an ugly accident out here ... and a new baby in there.

I looked up at the statue of Harriet White and there she still stood, looking stonily away towards the Garden across the way, as if nothing of any particular note had happened, as if such determination in a world as hard and as senseless as this one meant nothing ... or worse still, that it was perhaps the only thing which meant anything, the only thing that made any difference at all.

As I recall, I knelt there in the slush before her severed head and began to weep. As I recall, I was still weeping when an intern and two nurses helped me to my feet and inside.

McCarron's pipe had gone out He relit it with his bolt-lighter while we sat in perfect, breathless silence. Outside, the wind howled and moaned. He snapped his lighter closed and looked up. He seemed mildly surprised to find us still there.

'That's all,' he said. That's the end! What are you waiting for? Chariots of fire?' He snorted, then seemed to debate for a moment 'I paid her burial expenses out of my own pocket She had no one else, you see.' He smiled a little. 'Well ... there was Ella Davidson, my nurse. She insisted on chipping in twenty-five dollars, which she could ill afford. But when Davidson insisted on a thing-' He shrugged, and then laughed a little.

'You're quite sure it wasn't a reflex?' I heard myself demanding suddenly. 'Are you quite sure -'

'Quite sure,' McCarron said imperturbably. 'The first contraction, perhaps. But the completion of her labour was not a matter of seconds but of minutes. And I sometimes think she might have held on even longer, if it had been necessary. Thank God it was not.'

'What about the baby?' Johanssen asked.

McCarron puffed at his pipe. 'Adopted,' he said. 'And you'll understand that, even in those days, adoption records were kept as secret as possible.'

'Yes, but what about the baby?' Johanssen asked again, and McCarron laughed in a cross way.

'You never let go of a thing, do you?' he asked Johanssen.

Johanssen shook his head. 'Some people have learned it to their sorrow. What about the baby?'

'Well, if you've come with me this far perhaps you'll also understand that I had a certain vested interest in knowing how it all came out for that child. Or I felt that I did. There was a young man and his wife - their name was not Harrison, but that is close enough. They lived in Maine. They could have no children of their own. They adopted the child and named him ... well, John's good enough, isn't it? John will do you fellows, won't it?'

He puffed at his pipe but it had gone out again. I was faintly aware of Stevens hovering behind me, and knew that somewhere our coats would be at the ready. Soon we would slip back into them ... and back into our lives. As McCarron had said, the tales were done for another year.

The child I delivered that night is now head of the English Department at one of the two or three most respected private colleges in the country,' McCarron said. 'He's not forty-five yet. A young man. It's early for him, but the day may well come when he will be President of that school. I shouldn't doubt it a bit. He is handsome, intelligent, and charming.

'Once, on a pretext, I was able to dine with him in the private faculty club. We were four that evening. I said little and so was able to watch him. He has his mother's determination, gentlemen...

'... and his mother's hazel eyes.'

3: The Club

Stevens saw us out as he always did, holding coats, wishing men the happiest of happy Christmases, thanking them for their generosity. I contrived to be the last, and Stevens looked at me with no surprise when I said:

'I have a question I'd like to ask, if you don't mind.'

He smiled a little. 'I suppose you should,' he said, 'Christmas is a fine time for questions.'

Somewhere down the hallway to our left - a hall I had never been down - a grandfather clock ticked sonorously, the sound of the age passing away. I could smell old leather and oiled wood and, much more faintly than either of these, the smell of Stevens's aftershave.

'But I should warn you,' Stevens added as the wind rose in a gust outside, 'it's better not to ask too much. Not if you want to keep coming here.'

'People have been closed out for asking too much?' Closed out was not really the phrase I wanted, but it was as close as I could come.

'No,' Stevens said, his voice as low and polite as ever. They simply choose to stay away.'

I returned his gaze, feeling a chill prickle its way up my back - it was as if a large, cold, invisible hand had been laid on my spine. I found myself remembering that strangely liquid thump I had heard upstairs one night and wondered (as I had more than once before) exactly how many rooms there really were here.

'If you still have a question, Mr Adley, perhaps you'd better ask it. The evening's almost over -'

'And you have a long train-ride ahead of you?' I asked, but Stevens only looked at me impassively. 'All right,' I said. There are books in this library that I can't find anywhere else - not in the New York Public Library, not in the catalogues of any of the antiquarian book-dealers I've checked with, and certainly not in Books in Print. The billiard table in the Small Room is a Nord. I'd never heard of such a brand, and so I called the International Trademark Commission. They have two Nordes - one makes crosscountry skis and the other makes wooden kitchen accessories. There's a Seafront jukebox in the Long Room. The ITC has a Seeburg listed, but no Seafront.'

'What is your question, Mr Adley?'

His voice was as mild as ever, but there was something terrible in his eyes suddenly ... no; if I am to be truthful, it was not just in his eyes; the terror I felt had infused the atmosphere all around me. The steady tock-tock from down the lefthand hall was no longer the pendulum of a grandfather clock; it was the tapping foot of the executioner as he watches the condemned led to the scaffold. The smells of oil and leather turned bitter and menacing, and when the wind rose in another wild whoop, I felt momentarily sure that the front door would blow open, revealing not 35th Street but an insane Clark Ashton Smith landscape where the bitter shapes of twisted trees stood silhouetted on a sterile horizon below . which double suns were setting in a gruesome red glare.

Oh, he knew what I had meant to ask; I saw it in his grey eyes.

Where do all these things come from? I had meant to ask. Oh, I know well enough where you come from, Stevens; that accent isn't Dimension X, it's pure Brooklyn. But where do you go? What has put that timeless look in your eyes and stamped it on your face? And, Stevens - where are we RIGHT THIS SECOND?

But he was waiting for my question.

I opened my mouth. And the question that came out was: 'Are there many more rooms upstairs?'

'Oh, yes, sir,' he said, his eyes never leaving mine. 'A great many. A man could become lost In fact, men have become lost Sometimes it seems to me that they go on for miles. Rooms and corridors.'

'And entrances and exits?'

His eyebrows went up slightly. 'Oh yes. Entrances and exits.' He waited, but I had asked enough, I thought - I had come to the very edge of something that would, perhaps, drive me mad.

"Thank you, Stevens.'

'Of course, sir.' He held out my coat and I slipped into it.

There will be more tales?'

'Here, sir, there are always more tales.'

That evening was some time ago, and my memory has not improved between then and now (when a man reaches my age, the opposite is much more likely to be true), but I remember with perfect clarity the stab of fear that went through me when Stevens swung the oaken door wide - the

cold certainty that I would see that alien landscape, cracked and hellish in the bloody light of those double suns, which might set and bring on an unspeakable darkness of an hour's duration, or ten hours, or ten thousand years. I cannot explain it, but I tell you that world exists - I am as sure of that as Emlyn McCarron was sure that the severed head of Sandra Stansfield went on breathing. I thought for that one timeless second that the door would open and Stevens would thrust me out into that world and I would then hear that door slam shut behind me ... forever.

Instead, I saw 35th Street and a radio-cab standing at the curb, exhaling plumes of exhaust. I felt an utter, almost debilitating relief.

'Yes, always more tales,' Stevens repeated. 'Goodnight, sir.'

Always more tales.

Indeed there have been. And, one day soon, perhaps I'll tell you another.

AFTERWORD

Although 'Where do you get your ideas?' has always been the question I'm most frequently asked (it's number one with a bullet, you might say), the runner-up is undoubtedly this one: 'Is horror all you write?' When I say it isn't, it's hard to tell if the questioner seems relieved or disappointed.

Just before the publication of *Carrie*, my first novel, I got a letter from my editor, Bill Thompson, suggesting it was time to start thinking about what we were going to do for an encore (it may strike you as a bit strange, this thinking about the next book before the first was even out, but because the pre-publication schedule for a novel is almost as long as the post-production schedule on a film, we had

been living with Carrie for a long time at that point - nearly a year). I promptly sent Bill the manuscripts of two novels, one called Blaze and one called Second Coming. The former had been written immediately after Carrie, during the six-month period when the first draft of Carrie was sitting in a desk drawer, mellowing; the latter was written during the year or so when Carrie inched, tortoiselike, closer and closer to publication.

Blaze was a melodrama about a huge, almost retarded criminal who kidnaps a baby, planning to ransom it back to the child's rich parents ... and then falls in love with the child instead. Second Coming was a melodrama about vampires taking over a small town in Maine. Both were literary imitations of a sort, Second Coming of Dracula, Blaze of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

I think Bill must have been flabbergasted when these two manuscripts arrived in a single big package (some of the pages of Blaze had been typed on the reverse sides of milk-bills, and the Second Coming manuscript reeked of beer because someone had spilled a pitcher of Black Label on it during a New Year's Eve party three months before) - like a woman who wishes for a bouquet of flowers and discovers her husband has gone out and bought her a hothouse. The two manuscripts together totalled about five hundred and fifty single-spaced pages.

He read them both over the next couple of weeks - scratch an editor and find a saint - and I went down to New York from Maine to celebrate the publication of Carrie (April, 1974, friends and neighbours - Lennon was alive, Nixon was still hanging in there as President, and this kid had yet to see the first grey hair in his beard) and to talk about which of the two books should be next ... or if neither of them should be next.

I was in the city for a couple of days, and we talked around the question three or four times. The final decision was made on a street-corner - Park Avenue and 44th Street, in fact. Bill and I were standing there waiting for the light, watching the cabs roll into that funky tunnel or whatever it is - the one that seems to burrow straight through the Pan Am Building. And Bill said, 'I think it should be Second Coming.'

Well, that was the one I liked better myself- but there was something so oddly reluctant in his voice that I looked at him sharply and asked him what the matter was. 'It's just that if you do a book about vampires as the follow-up to a book about a girl who can move things by mind-power, you're going to get typed,' he said.

'Typed?' I asked, honestly bewildered. I could see no similarities to speak of between vampires and telekinesis. 'As what?'

'As a horror-writer,' he said, more reluctantly still.

'Oh,' I said, vastly relieved. 'Is that all!'

'Give it a few years,' he said, 'and see if you still think it's "all".'

'Bill,' I said, amused, 'no one can make a living writing just horror stories in America. Lovecraft starved in Providence. Bloch gave it up for suspense novels and Unknown-type spoofs. The Exorcist was a one-shot. You'll see.'

The light changed. Bill clapped me on the shoulder. 'I think you're going to be very successful,' he said, 'but I don't think you know shit from Shinola.'

He was closer to the truth than I was. It turned out that it was possible to make a living writing horror stories in America. *Second Coming*, eventually retitled *'Salem's Lot*, did very well. By the time it was published, I was living in Colorado with my family and writing a novel about a haunted hotel. On a trip into New York, I sat up with Bill half the night in a bar called Jasper's of the Rock-Ola; you had to kind of lift him up to see what the selections were, and told him the plot. By the end, his elbows were planted on either side of his bourbon and his head was in his hands, like a man with a monster migraine.

'You don't like it,' I said.

'I like it a lot,' he said hollowly.

"Then what's wrong?"

'First the telekinetic girl, then the vampires, now the haunted hotel and the telepathic kid. You're gonna get typed.'

This time I thought about it a little more seriously - and then I thought about all the people who had been typed as horror writers, and who had given me such great pleasure over the years - Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Belknap Long, Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson, and Shirley Jackson (yes, even she was typed as a spook writer). And I decided there in Jasper's with the cat asleep on the juke and my editor sitting beside me with his head in his hands, that I could be in worse company. I could, for example, be an 'important' writer like Joseph Heller and publish a novel every seven years or so, or a 'brilliant' writer like John Gardner and write obscure books for bright academics who eat macrobiotic foods and drive old Saabs

with faded but still legible GENE MCCARTHY FOR PRESIDENT stickers on the rear bumpers.

'That's okay, Bill,' I said, 'I'll be a horror writer if that's what people want That's just fine.'

We never had the discussion again. Bill's still editing and I'm still writing horror stories, and neither of us is in analysis. It's a good deal.

So I got typed and I don't much mind - after all, I write true to type ... at least, most of the time. But is horror all I write? If you've read the foregoing stories, you know it's not ... but elements of horror can be found in all of the tales, not just in The Breathing Method - that business with the slugs in The Body is pretty gruesome, as is much of the dream imagery in Apt Pupil. Sooner or later, my mind always seems to turn back in that direction, God knows why.

Each one of these longish stories was written immediately after completing a novel - it's as if I've always finished the big job with just enough gas left in the tank to blow off one good-sized novella. The Body, the oldest story here, was written direct after Salem's Lot; Apt Pupil was written in a two-week period following the completion of The Shining (and following Apt Pupil I wrote nothing for three months -I was pooped); Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption was written after finishing The Dead Zone; and The Breathing Method, the most recently written of these stories, immediately following Firestarter*

None of them have been published previous to this book; none has even been submitted for publication. Why? Because each of them comes out to 25,000 to 35,000 words - not exactly, maybe, but that's close enough to be in the

ballpark. I've got to tell you: 25,000 to 35,000 words are numbers apt to make even the most stout-hearted writer of fiction shake and shiver in his boots. There is no hard-and-fast definition of what either a novel or a short story is - at least not in terms of word-count - nor should there be. But when a writer approaches the 20,000-word mark, he knows he is edging out of the country of the short story. Likewise, when he passes the 40,000-word mark, he is edging into the country of the novel. The borders of the country between these two more orderly regions are ill-defined, but at some point the writer wakes up with alarm and realizes that he's come or is coming to a really terrible place, an anarchy-ridden literary banana republic called the 'novella' (or, rather too cutesy for my taste, the 'novelette').

Now, artistically speaking, there's nothing at all wrong with the novella. Of course, there's nothing wrong with circus * Something else about them, which I just realized: each one was written in a different house - three of those in Maine and one in Boulder, Colorado. freaks, either, except that you rarely see them outside of the circus. The point is that there are great novellas, but they traditionally only sell to the 'genre markets' (that's the polite term; the impolite but more accurate one is 'ghetto markets'). You can sell a good mystery novella to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine or Mike Shayne's Mystery Magazine, a good science fiction novella to Amazing or Analog, maybe even to Omni or The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. Ironically, there are also markets for good horror novellas: the aforementioned F&SF is one; The Twilight Zone is another and there are various anthologies of original creepy fiction, such as the Shadows series published by Doubleday and edited by Charles L. Grant.

But for novellas which can, on measure, only be described with the word 'mainstream' (a word almost as depressing as

'genre')... boy, as far as marketability goes, you in a heap o' trouble. You look at your 25,000-to-35,000-word manuscript dismally, twist the cap off a beer, and in your head you seem to hear a heavily accented and rather greasy voice saying: 'BueSos dias, senior! How was your flight on Revolution Airways? You like to eeet pretty-good fine I theenk, si? Welcome to Novella, senior! You going to like heet here preety-good-fine, I theenk! Have a cheap cigar! Have some feelthy peectures! Put your feet up, senior, I theenk your story is going to be here a long, long time ... quepasal Ah-ha-hah-hah-hah!' Depressing.

Once upon a time (he mourned) there really was a market for such tales - there were magical magazines such as The Saturday Evening Post, Collier's, and The American Mercury. Fiction - fiction both short and long - was a staple of these and others. And, if the story was too long for a single issue, it was serialized in three parts, or five, or nine. The poisonous idea of 'condensing' or 'excerpting' novels was as yet unknown (both Playboy and Cosmopolitan have honed this particular obscenity to a noxious science: you can now read an entire novel in twenty minutes!), the tale was given the space it demanded, and I doubt if I'm the only one who can remember waiting for the mailman all day long because the new Post was due and a new short story by Ray Bradbury had been promised, or perhaps because the final episode of the latest Clarence Buddington Kelland serial was due.

(My anxiety made me a particularly easy mark. When the postman finally did show up, walking briskly with his leather bag over his shoulder, dressed in his summer-issue shorts and wearing his summer-issue sun helmet, I'd meet him at the end of the walk, dancing from one foot to the other as if I badly needed to go to the bathroom; my heart in my throat. Grinning rather cruelly, he'd hand me an electric bill.

Nothing but that. Heart plummets into my shoes. Finally he relents and gives me the Post after all: grinning Eisenhower on the cover, painted by Norman Rockwell; an article on Sophia Loren by Pete Martin; 'I Say He's a Wonderful Guy', by Pat Nixon, concerning - yeah, you guessed it - her husband Richard; and, of course, stories. Long ones, short ones, and the last chapter of the Kelland serial. Praise God!)

And this didn't happen just once in a while; this happened every fucking week! The day that the Post came, I guess I was the happiest kid on the whole eastern seaboard.

There are still magazines that publish long fiction -Atlantic Monthly and The New Yorker are two which have been particularly sympathetic to the publication problems of a writer who has delivered (we won't say 'gotten'; that's too close to 'misbegotten') a 30,000-word novella. But neither of these magazines has been particularly receptive to my stuff, which is fairly plain, not very literary, and sometimes (although it hurts like hell to admit it) downright clumsy.

To some degree or other, I would guess that those very qualities - unadmirable though they may be - have been responsible for the success of my novels. Most of them have been plain fiction for plain folks, the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and a large fries from McDonald's. I am able to recognize elegant prose and to respond to it, but have found it difficult or impossible to write it myself (most of my idols as a maturing writer were muscular novelists with prose styles which ranged from the horrible to the nonexistent: cats like Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris). Subtract elegance from the novelist's craft and one finds himself left with only one strong leg to stand on, and that leg is good weight. As a result, I've tried as hard as I can, always, to give good weight. Put another way, if you find out you can't run like a thoroughbred, you can still pull your

brains out (A voice rises from the balcony: 'What brains, King?' Ha-ha, very funny, fella, you can leave now).

The result of all this is that, when it came to the novellas you've just read, I found myself in a puzzling position. I had gotten to a place with my novels where people were saying King could publish his laundry list if he wanted to (and there are critics who claim that's exactly what I've been doing for the last eight years or so), but I couldn't publish these tales because they were too long to be short and too short to be really long. If you see what I mean.

'Si, senior, I see! Take off your shoes! Have some cheap rum! Soon thee Medicare Revolucion Steel Band iss gonna come along and play some bad calypso! You like eet preety-good-fine, I theenk! And you got time, senior! You got time because I theenk your story ees gonna -'

- be here a long time, yeah, yeah, great, why don't you go somewhere and overthrow a puppet imperialist democracy?

So I finally decided to see if Viking, my hardcover publisher, and New American Library, my paperback publisher, would want to do-a book with stories in it about an off-beat prison-break, an old man and a young boy locked up in a gruesome relationship based on mutual parasitism, a quartet of country boys on a journey of discovery, and an off-the-wall horror story about a young woman determined to give birth to her child no matter what (or maybe the story is actually about that odd Club that isn't a Club). The publishers said okay. And that is how I managed to break these four long stories out of the banana republic of the novella.

I hope you liked them preety-good-fine, muchachos and muchachas.

Oh, one thing about type-casting before I call it a day.

Was talking to my editor - not Bill Thompson, this is my new editor, real nice guy named Alan Williams, smart, witty, able, but usually on jury duty somewhere deep in the bowels of New Jersey - about a year ago.

'Loved Ciyo,' Alan says (the editorial work on that novel, a real shaggy-dog story, had just been completed). 'Have you thought about what you're going to do next?'

Deja' vu sets in. I have had this conversation before.

'Well, yeah,' I say. 'I have given it some thought -'

'Lay it on me.'

'What would you think about a book of four novellas? Most or all of them just sort of ordinary stories? What would you think about that?'

'Novellas,' Alan says. He is being a good sport, but his voice says some of the joy may have just gone out of his day; his voice says he feels he has just won two tickets to some dubious little banana republic on Revolucion Airways. 'Long stories, you mean.'

'Yeah, that's right,' I say. 'And we'll call the book something like "Different Seasons", just so people will get the idea that it's not about vampires or haunted hotels or anything like that.'

'Is the next one going to be about vampires?' Alan asks hopefully.

'No, I don't think so. What do you think, Alan?'

'A haunted hotel, maybe?'

'No, I did that one, already. Different Seasons, Alan. It's got a nice ring to it, don't you think?'

'It's got a great ring, Steve,' Alan says, and sighs. It is the sigh of a good sport who has just taken his seat in third class on Revolucion Airways' newest plane - a Lockheed Tri-Star - and has seen the first cockroach trundling busily over the top of the seat ahead of him.

'I hoped you'd like it,' I say.

'I don't suppose,' Alan says, 'we could have a horror story in it? Just one? A sort of... similar season?'

I smile a little - just a little - thinking of Sandra Stansfield and Dr McCarron's Breathing Method. 'I can probably whomp something up.'

'Great! And about the new novel -'

'How about a haunted car?' I say.

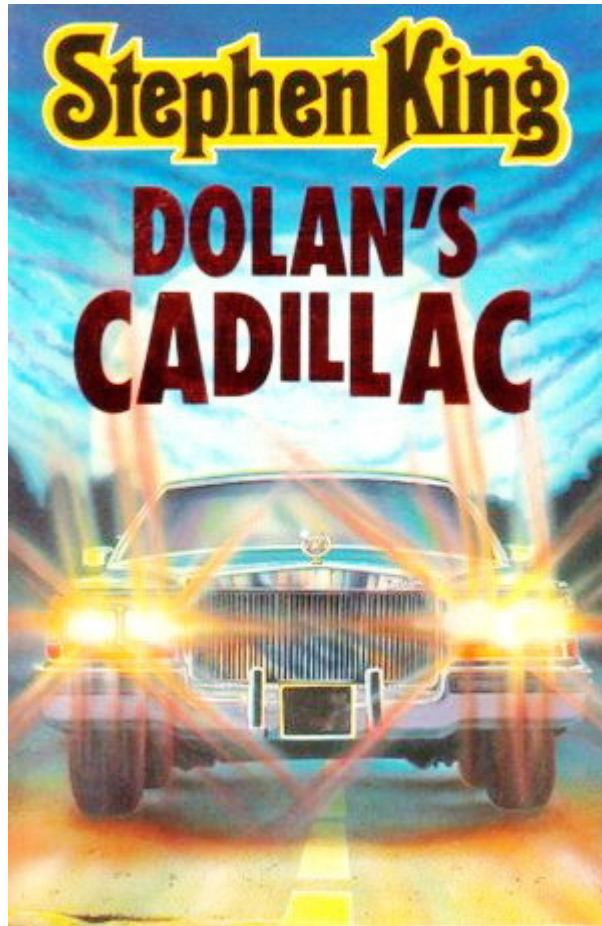
'My man? Alan cries. I have the feeling that I'm sending him back to his editorial meeting - or possibly to jury duty in East Rahway - a happy man. I'm happy, too - I love my haunted car, and I think it's going to make a lot of people nervous about crossing busy streets after dark.

But I've been in love with each of these stories, too, and part of me always will be in love with them, I guess. I hope that you liked them, Reader; that they did for you what any good story should do - make you forget the real stuff weighing on your mind for a little while and take you away to a place you've never been. It's the most amiable sort of magic I know.

Okay. Gotta split. Until we see each other again, keep your head together, read some good books, be useful, and don't take any shit from anybody.

Love and good wishes, Stephen King January 4th, 1982

Bangor, Maine



DOLAN'S CADILLAC

Stephen King

Stephen King

Revenge is a dish best eaten cold.

—Spanish proverb

I waited and watched for seven years. I saw him come and go—Dolan. I watched him stroll into fancy restaurants dressed in a tuxedo, always with a different woman on his arm, always with his pair of bodyguards bookending him. I watched his hair go from iron-gray to a fashionable silver while my own simply receded until I was bald. I watched him leave Las Vegas on his regular pilgrimages to the West Coast; I watched him return. On two or three occasions I watched from a side road as his Sedan DeVille, the same color as his hair, swept by on Route 71 toward Los Angeles. And on a few occasions I watched him leave his place in the Hollywood Hills in the same gray Cadillac to return to Las Vegas—not often, though. I am a schoolteacher. Schoolteachers and high-priced hoodlums do not have the same freedom of movement; it's just an economic fact of life.

He did not know I was watching him—I never came close enough for him to know that. I was careful.

He killed my wife or had her killed; it comes to the same, either way. Do you want details? You won't get them from me. If you want them, look them up in the back issues of the papers. Her name was Elizabeth. She taught in the same school where I taught and where I teach still. She taught first-graders. They loved her, and I think that some of them may not have forgotten their love still, although they would be teenagers now. I loved her and love her still, certainly. She was not beautiful but she was pretty. She was quiet, but she could laugh. I dream of her. Of her hazel eyes. There has never been another woman for me. Nor ever will be.

He slipped—Dolan. That's all you have to know. And Elizabeth was there, at the wrong place and the wrong time, to see the slip. She

went to the police, and the police sent her to the FBI, and she was questioned, and she said yes, she would testify. They promised to protect her, but they either slipped or they underestimated Dolan. Maybe it was both. Whatever it was, she got into her car one night and the dynamite wired to the ignition made me a widower. He made me a widower—Dolan.

With no witness to testify, he was let free.

He went back to his world, I to mine. The penthouse apartment in Vegas for him, the empty tract home for me. The succession of beautiful women in furs and sequined evening dresses for him, the silence for me. The gray Cadillacs, four of them over the years, for him, and the aging Buick Riviera for me. His hair went silver while mine just went.

But I watched.

I was careful—oh, yes! Very careful. I knew what he was, what he could do. I knew he would step on me like a bug if he saw or sensed what I meant for him. So I was careful.

During my summer vacation three years ago I followed him (at a prudent distance) to Los Angeles, where he went frequently. He stayed in his fine house and threw parties (I watched the comings and goings from a safe shadow at the end of the block, fading back when the police cars made their frequent patrols), and I stayed in a cheap hotel where people played their radios too loud and neon light from the topless bar across the street shone in the window. I fell asleep on those nights and dreamed of Elizabeth's hazel eyes, dreamed that none of it had ever happened, and woke up sometimes with tears drying on my face.

I came close to losing hope.

He was well guarded, you see; so well guarded. He went nowhere without those two heavily armed gorillas with him, and the Cadillac

itself was armor plated. The big radial tires it rolled on were of the self-sealing type favored by dictators in small, uneasy countries.

Then, that last time, I saw how it could be done—but I did not see it until after I'd had a very bad scare.

I followed him back to Las Vegas, always keeping at least a mile between us, sometimes two, sometimes three. As we crossed the desert heading east his car was at times no more than a sunflash on the horizon and I thought about Elizabeth, how the sun looked on her hair.

I was far behind on this occasion. It was the middle of the week, and traffic on U.S. 71 was very light. When traffic is light, tailing becomes dangerous—even a grammar-school teacher knows that. I passed an orange sign which read DETOUR 5 MILES and dropped back even farther. Desert detours slow traffic to a crawl, and I didn't want to chance coming up behind the gray Cadillac as the driver babied it over some rutted secondary road.

DETOUR 3 MILES, the next sign read, and below that: BLASTING AREA AHEAD * TURN OFF 2-WAY RADIO.

I began to muse on some movie I had seen years before. In this film a band of armed robbers had tricked an armored car into the desert by putting up false detour signs. Once the driver fell for the trick and turned off onto a deserted dirt road (there are thousands of them in the desert, sheep roads and ranch roads and old government roads that go nowhere), the thieves had removed the signs, assuring isolation, and then had simply laid siege to the armored car until the guards came out.

They killed the guards.

I remembered that.

They killed the guards.

I reached the detour and turned onto it. The road was as bad as I had imagined—packed dirt, two lanes wide, filled with potholes that made my old Buick jounce and groan. The Buick needed new shock absorbers, but shocks are an expense a schoolteacher sometimes has to put off, even when he is a widower with no children and no hobbies except his dream of revenge.

As the Buick bounced and wallowed along, an idea occurred to me. Instead of following Dolan's Cadillac the next time it left Vegas for L.A. or L.A. for Vegas, I would pass it—get ahead of it. I would create a false detour like the one in the movie, luring it out into the wastes that exist, silent and rimmed by mountains, west of Las Vegas. Then I would remove the signs, as the thieves had done in the movie—

I snapped back to reality suddenly. Dolan's Cadillac was ahead of me, directly ahead of me, pulled off to one side of the dusty track. One of the tires, self-sealing or not, was flat. No—not just flat. It was exploded, half off the rim. The culprit had probably been a sharp wedge of rock stuck in the hardpan like a miniature tank-trap. One of the two bodyguards was working a jack under the front end. The second—an ogre with a pig-face streaming sweat under his brush cut—stood protectively beside Dolan himself. Even in the desert, you see, they took no chances.

Dolan stood to one side, slim in an open-throated shirt and dark slacks, his silver hair blowing around his head in the desert breeze. He was smoking a cigarette and watching the men as if he were somewhere else, a restaurant or a ballroom or a drawing room perhaps.

His eyes met mine through the windshield of my car and then slid off with no recognition at all, although he had seen me once, seven years ago (when I had hair!), at a preliminary hearing, sitting beside my wife.

My terror at having caught up with the Cadillac was replaced with an utter fury.

I thought of leaning over and unrolling the passenger window and shrieking: How dare you forget me? How dare you dismiss me? Oh, but that would have been the act of a lunatic. It was good that he had forgotten me, it was fine that he had dismissed me. Better to be a mouse behind the wainscoting, nibbling at the wires. Better to be a spider, high up under the eaves, spinning its web.

The man sweating the jack flagged me, but Dolan wasn't the only one capable of dismissal. I looked indifferently beyond the arm-waver, wishing him a heart attack or a stroke or, best of all, both at the same time. I drove on—but my head pulsed and throbbed, and for a few moments the mountains on the horizon seemed to double and even treble.

If I'd had a gun! I thought. If only I'd had a gun! I could have ended his rotten, miserable life right then if I'd only had a gun!

Miles later some sort of reason reasserted itself. If I'd had a gun, the only thing I could have been sure of was getting myself killed. If I'd had a gun I could have pulled over when the man using the bumper-jack beckoned me, and gotten out, and begun spraying bullets wildly around the deserted landscape. I might have wounded someone. Then I would have been killed and buried in a shallow grave, and Dolan would have gone on escorting the beautiful women and making pilgrimages between Las Vegas and Los Angeles in his silver Cadillac while the desert animals unearthed my remains and fought over my bones under the cold moon. For Elizabeth there would have been no revenge—none at all.

The men who travelled with him were trained to kill. I was trained to teach third-graders.

This was not a movie, I reminded myself as I returned to the highway and passed an orange END CONSTRUCTION * THE STATE OF NEVADA THANKS YOU! sign. And if I ever made the mistake of confusing reality with a movie, of thinking that a balding third-grade teacher with myopia could ever be Dirty Harry anywhere outside of his own daydreams, there would never be any revenge, ever.

But could there be revenge, ever? Could there be?

My idea of creating a fake detour was as romantic and unrealistic as the idea of jumping out of my old Buick and spraying the three of them with bullets—me, who had not fired a gun since the age of sixteen and who had never fired a handgun.

Such a thing would not be possible without a band of conspirators—even the movie I had seen, romantic as it had been, had made that clear. There had been eight or nine of them in two separate groups, staying in touch with each other by walkie-talkie. There had even been a man in a small plane cruising above the highway to make sure the armored car was relatively isolated as it approached the right spot on the highway.

A plot no doubt dreamed up by some overweight screenwriter sitting by his swimming pool with a pina colada by one hand and a fresh supply of Pentel pens and an Edgar Wallace plot-wheel by the other. And even that fellow had needed a small army to fulfill his idea. I was only one man.

It wouldn't work. It was just a momentary false gleam, like the others I'd had over the years—the idea that maybe I could put some sort of poison gas in Dolan's air-conditioning system, or plant a bomb in his Los Angeles house, or perhaps obtain some really deadly weapon—a bazooka, let us say—and turn his damned silver Cadillac into a fireball as it raced east toward Vegas or west toward L.A. along 71.

Best to dismiss it.

But it wouldn't go.

Cut him out, the voice inside that spoke for Elizabeth kept whispering. Cut him out the way an experienced sheep-dog cuts a ewe out of the flock when his master points. Detour him out into the emptiness and kill him. Kill them all.

Wouldn't work. If I allowed no other truth, I would at least have to allow that a man who had stayed alive as long as Dolan must have a carefully honed sense of survival—honed to the point of paranoia, perhaps. He and his men would see through the detour trick in a minute.

They turned down this one today, the voice that spoke for Elizabeth responded. They never even hesitated. They went just like Mary's little lamb.

But I knew—yes, somehow I did!—that men like Dolan, men who are really more like wolves than men, develop a sort of sixth sense when it comes to danger. I could steal genuine detour signs from some road department shed and set them up in all the right places; I could even add fluorescent orange road cones and a few of those smudge-pots. I could do all that and Dolan would still smell the nervous sweat of my hands on the stage dressing. Right through his bullet-proof windows he would smell it. He would close his eyes and hear Elizabeth's name far back in the snake-pit that passed for his mind.

The voice that spoke for Elizabeth fell silent, and I thought it had finally given up for the day. And then, with Vegas actually in sight—blue and misty and wavering on the far rim of the desert—it spoke up again.

Then don't try to fool him with a fake detour, it whispered. Fool him with a real one.

I swerved the Buick over to the shoulder and shuddered to a stop with both feet on the brake-pedal. I stared into my own wide, startled eyes in the rear-view mirror.

Inside, the voice that spoke for Elizabeth began to laugh. It was wild, mad laughter, but after a few moments I began to laugh along with it.

*

The other teachers laughed at me when I joined the Ninth Street Health Club. One of them wanted to know if someone had kicked sand in my face. I laughed along with them. People don't get suspicious of a man like me as long as he keeps laughing along with them. And why shouldn't I laugh? My wife had been dead seven years, hadn't she? Why, she was no more than dust and hair and a few bones in her coffin! So why shouldn't I laugh? It's only when a man like me stops laughing that people wonder if something is wrong.

I laughed along with them even though my muscles ached all that fall and winter. I laughed even though I was constantly hungry—no more second helpings, no more late-night snacks, no more beer, no more before-dinner gin and tonic. But lots of red meat and greens, greens, greens.

I bought myself a Nautilus machine for Christmas.

No—that's not quite right. Elizabeth bought me a Nautilus machine for Christmas.

I saw Dolan less frequently; I was too busy working out, losing my pot belly, building up my arms and chest and legs. But there were times when it seemed I could not go on with it, that recapturing anything like real physical fitness was going to be impossible, that I could not live without second helpings and pieces of coffee cake and the occasional dollop of sweet cream in my coffee. When those times came I would park across from one of his favorite restaurants or perhaps go into one of the clubs he favored and wait for him to show up, stepping from the fog-gray Cadillac with an arrogant, icy blonde or a laughing redhead on his arm—or one on each. There he would be, the man who had killed my Elizabeth, there he would be, resplendent in a formal shirt from Bijan's, his gold Rolex winking in the nightclub lights. When I was tired and discouraged I went to Dolan as a man with a raging thirst might seek out an oasis in the desert. I drank his poisoned water and was refreshed.

In February I began to run every day, and then the other teachers laughed at my bald head, which peeled and pinked and then peeled and pinked again, no matter how much sunblock I smeared on it. I laughed right along with them, as if I had not twice nearly fainted and spent long, shuddering minutes with cramps stabbing the muscles of my legs at the end of my runs.

When summer came, I applied for a job with the Nevada Highway Department. The municipal employment office stamped a tentative approval on my form and sent me along to a district foreman named Harvey Blocker. Blocker was a tall man, burned almost black by the Nevada sun. He wore jeans, dusty workboots, and a blue tee-shirt with cut-off sleeves. BAD ATTITUDE, the shirt proclaimed. His muscles were big rolling slabs under his skin. He looked at my application. Then he looked at me and laughed. The application looked very puny rolled up in one of his huge fists.

“You got to be kidding, my friend. I mean, you have got to be. We talkin desert sun and desert heat here—none of that yuppie tanning-salon shit. What are you in real life, bubba? An accountant?”

“A teacher,” I said. “Third grade.”

“Oh, honey,” he said, and laughed again. “Get out of my face, okay?”

I had a pocket watch—handed down from my great-grandfather, who worked on the last stretch of the great transcontinental railroad. He was there, according to family legend, when they hammered home the golden spike. I took the watch out and dangled it in Blocker’s face on its chain.

“See this?” I said. “Worth six, maybe seven hundred dollars.”

“This a bribe?” Blocker laughed again. A great old laugh was he. “Man, I’ve heard of people making deals with the devil, but you’re the first one I ever met who wanted to bribe himself into hell.” Now he looked at me with something like compassion. “You may think you understand what you’re tryin to get yourself into, but I’m here to tell

you you don't have the slightest idea. In July I've seen it go a hundred and seventeen degrees out there west of Indian Springs. It makes strong men cry. And you ain't strong, bubba. I don't have to see you with your shirt off to know you ain't got nothin on your rack but a few yuppie health-club muscles, and they won't cut it out in the Big Empty."

I said, "The day you decide I can't cut it, I'll walk off the job. You keep the watch. No argument."

"You're a fucking liar."

I looked at him. He looked back for some time.

"You're not a fucking liar." He said this in tones of amazement.

"No."

"You'd give the watch to Tinker to hold?" He cocked his thumb at a humongous black man in a tie-dyed shirt who was sitting nearby in the cab of a bulldozer, eating a fruit-pie from McDonald's and listening.

"Is he trustworthy?"

"You're damned tooting."

"Then he can hold it until you tell me to take a hike or until I have to go back to school in September."

"And what do I put up?"

I pointed to the employment application in his fist. "Sign that," I said. "That's what you put up."

"You're crazy."

I thought of Dolan and of Elizabeth and said nothing.

“You’d start on shit-work,” Blocker warned. “Shovelling hot-patch out of the back of a truck and into potholes. Not because I want your damned watch—although I’ll be more than happy to take it—but because that’s where everyone starts.”

“All right.”

“As long as you understand, bubba.”

“I do.”

“No,” Blocker said, “you don’t. But you will.”

And he was right.

*

I remember next to nothing about the first couple of weeks—just shovelling hot-top and tamping it down and walking along behind the truck with my head down until the truck stopped at the next pothole. Sometimes we worked on the Strip and I’d hear the sound of jackpot bells ringing in the casinos. Sometimes I think the bells were just ringing in my head. I’d look up and I’d see Harvey Blocker looking at me with that odd look of compassion, his face shimmering in the heat baking off the road. And sometimes I’d look over at Tinker, sitting under the canvas parasol which covered the cab of his ‘dozer, and Tinker would hold up my great-granddad’s watch and swing it on the chain so it kicked off sunflashes.

The big struggle was not to faint, to hold onto consciousness no matter what. All through June I held on, and the first week of July, and then Blocker sat down next to me one lunch hour while I was eating a sandwich with one shaking hand. I shook sometimes until ten at night. It was the heat. It was either shake or faint, and when I thought of Dolan I somehow managed to keep shaking.

“You still ain’t strong, bubba,” he said.

“No,” I said. “But like the man said, you should have seen the materials I had to start with.”

“I keep expecting to look around and see you passed out in the middle of the roadbed and you keep not doing it. But you gonna.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. If you stay behind the truck with a shovel, you gonna.”

“No.”

“Hottest part of the summer still coming on, bubba. Tink calls it cookie-sheet weather.”

“I’ll be fine.”

He pulled something out of his pocket. It was my great-granddad’s watch. He tossed it in my lap. “Take this fucking thing,” he said, disgusted. “I don’t want it.”

“You made a deal with me.”

“I’m calling it off.”

“If you fire me, I’ll take you to arbitration,” I said. “You signed my form. You—”

“I ain’t firing you,” he said, and looked away. “I’m going to have Tink teach you how to run a front-end loader.”

I looked at him for a long time, not knowing what to say. My third-grade classroom, so cool and pleasant, had never seemed so far away ... and still I didn’t have the slightest idea of how a man like Blocker thought, or what he meant when he said the things he said. I knew that he admired me and held me in contempt at the same time, but I had no idea why he felt either way. And you don’t need to care, darling, Elizabeth spoke up suddenly inside my mind. Dolan is your business. Remember Dolan.

“Why do you want to do that?” I asked at last.

He looked back at me then, and I saw he was both furious and amused. But the fury was the emotion on top, I think. “What is it with you, bubba? What do you think I am?”

“I don’t—”

“You think I want to kill you for your fucking watch? That what you think?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, you are. Sorriest little motherfucker I ever saw.”

I put my great-granddad’s watch away.

“You ain’t never gonna be strong, bubba. Some people and plants take hold in the sun. Some wither up and die. You dyin. You know you are, and still you won’t move into the shade. Why? Why you pulling this crap on your system?”

“I’ve got my reasons.”

“Yeah, I bet you do. And God help anyone who gets in your way.”

He got up and walked off.

Tinker came over, grinning.

“You think you can learn to run a front-end loader?”

“I think so,” I said.

“I think so, too,” he said. “Ole Blockhead there likes you—he just don’t know how to say so.”

“I noticed.”

Tink laughed. “Tough little motherfucker, ain’t you?”

“I hope so,” I said.

I spent the rest of the summer driving a front-end loader, and when I went back to school that fall, almost as black as Tink himself, the other teachers stopped laughing at me. Sometimes they looked at me out of the corners of their eyes after I passed, but they had stopped laughing.

I’ve got my reasons. That’s what I told him. And I did. I did not spend that season in hell just on a whim. I had to get in shape, you see. Preparing to dig a grave for a man or a woman may not require such drastic measures, but it was not just a man or woman I had in mind.

It was that damned Cadillac I meant to bury.

*

By April of the following year I was on the State Highway Commission’s mailing list. Every month I received a bulletin called Nevada Road Signs. I skimmed most of the material, which concerned itself with pending highway-improvement bills, road equipment that had been bought and sold, State Legislature action on such subjects as sand dune control and new anti-erosion techniques. What I was interested in was always on the last page or two of the bulletin. This section, simply titled The Calendar, listed the dates and sites of roadwork in each coming month. I was especially interested in sites and dates followed by a simple four-letter abbreviation: RPAV. This stood for repaving, and my experience on Harvey Blocker’s crew had showed me that these were the operations which most frequently called for detours. But not always—no indeed. Closing a section of road is a step the Highway Commission never takes unless there is no other choice. But sooner or later, I thought, those four letters might spell the end for Dolan. Just four letters, but there were times when I saw them in my dreams: RPAV.

Not that it would be easy, or perhaps even soon—I knew I might have to wait for years, and that someone else might get Dolan in the meantime. He was an evil man, and evil men live dangerous lives. Four loosely related vectors would have to come together, like a rare conjunction of the planets: travel for Dolan, vacation time for me, a national holiday, and a three-day weekend.

Years, maybe. Or maybe never. But I felt a kind of serenity—a surety that it would happen, and that when it did I would be prepared. And eventually it did happen. Not that summer, not that fall, and not the following spring. But in June of last year, I opened Nevada Road Signs and saw this in The Calendar:

JULY 1-JULY 22 (TENT.):

U.S. 71 MI 440-472 (WESTBND) RPAV

Hands shaking, I paged through my desk calendar to July and saw that July 4th fell on a Monday.

So here were three of the four vectors, for surely there would be a detour somewhere in the middle of such an extensive repaving job.

But Dolan... what about Dolan? What about the fourth vector?

Three times before I could remember him going to L.A. during the week of the Fourth of July—a week which is one of the few slow ones in Las Vegas. I could remember three other times when he had gone somewhere else—once to New York, once to Miami, once all the way to London—and a fourth time when he had simply stayed put in Vegas.

If he went ...

Was there a way I could find out?

I thought on this long and hard, but two visions kept intruding. In the first I saw Dolan's Cadillac speeding west toward L.A. along U.S. 71

at dusk, casting a long shadow behind it. I saw it passing DETOUR AHEAD signs, the last of them warning CB owners to turn off their sets. I saw the Cadillac passing abandoned road equipment—bulldozers, graders, front-end loaders. Abandoned not just because it was after knocking-off time but because it was a weekend, a three-day weekend.

In the second vision everything was the same except the detour signs were gone.

They were gone because I had taken them down.

It was on the last day of school when I suddenly realized how I might be able to find out. I had been nearly drowsing, my mind a million miles away from both school and Dolan, when I suddenly sat bolt-upright, knocking a vase on the side of my desk (it contained some pretty desert flowers my students had brought me as an end-of-school present) to the floor, where it shattered. Several of my students, who had also been drowsing, also sat bolt-upright, and perhaps something on my face frightened one of them, because a little boy named Timothy Urich burst into tears and I had to soothe him.

Sheets, I thought, comforting Timmy. Sheets and pillowcases and bedding and silverware; the rugs; the grounds. Everything has to look just so. He'll want everything just so.

Of course. Having things just so was as much a part of Dolan as his Cadillac.

I began to smile, and Timmy Urich smiled back, but it wasn't Timmy I was smiling at.

I was smiling at Elizabeth.

*

School finished on June 10th that year. Twelve days later I flew to Los Angeles. I rented a car and checked into the same cheap hotel I had used on other occasions. On each of the next three days I drove into the Hollywood Hills and mounted a watch on Dolan's house. It could not be a constant watch; that would have been noticed. The rich hire people to notice interlopers, because all too often they turn out to be dangerous.

Like me.

At first there was nothing. The house was not boarded up, the lawn was not overgrown—heaven forbid!—the water in the pool was doubtless clean and chlorinated. But there was a look of emptiness and disuse all the same—shades pulled against the summer sun, no cars in the central turnaround, no one to use the pool that a young man with a ponytail cleaned every other morning.

I became convinced it was a bust. Yet I stayed, wishing and hoping for the final vector.

On the 29th of June, when I had almost consigned myself to another year of watching and waiting and exercising and driving a front-end loader in the summer for Harvey Blocker (if he would have me again, that was) a blue car marked LOS ANGELES SECURITY SERVICES pulled up at the gate of Dolan's house. A man in a uniform got out and used a key to open the gate. He drove his car in and around the corner. A few moments later he came back on foot, closed the gate, and relocked it.

This was at least a break in the routine. I felt a dim flicker of hope.

I drove off, managed to make myself stay away for nearly two hours, and then drove back, parking at the head of the block instead of the foot this time. Fifteen minutes later a blue van pulled up in front of Dolan's house. Written on the side were the words BIG JOE'S CLEANING SERVICE. My heart leaped up in my chest. I was watching in the rear-view mirror, and I remember how my hands clamped down on the steering wheel of the rental car.

Four women got out of the van, two white, one black, one Chicana. They were dressed in white, like waitresses, but they were not waitresses, of course; they were cleaning women.

The security guard answered when one of them buzzed at the gate, and unlocked it. The five of them talked and laughed together. The security guard attempted to goose one of the women and she slapped his hand aside, still laughing.

One of the women went back to the van and drove it into the turnaround. The others walked up, talking among themselves as the guard closed the gate and locked it again.

Sweat was pouring down my face; it felt like grease. My heart was triphammering.

They were out of my field of vision in the rear-view mirror. I took a chance and looked around.

I saw the back doors of the van swing open.

One of them carried a neat stack of sheets; another had towels; another had a pair of vacuum cleaners.

They trooped up to the door and the guard let them inside.

I drove away, shaking so badly I could hardly steer the car.

They were opening the house. He was coming.

*

Dolan did not trade in his Cadillac every year, or even every two—the gray Sedan DeVille he was driving as that June neared its end was three years old. I knew its dimensions exactly. I had written the GM company for them, pretending to be a research writer. They had sent me an operator's manual and spec sheet for that year's model. They even returned the stamped, self-addressed envelope I had

enclosed. Big companies apparently maintain their courtesy even when they're running in the red.

I had then taken three figures—the Cadillac's width at its widest point, height at its tallest, and length at its longest—to a friend of mine who teaches mathematics at Las Vegas High School. I have told you, I think, that I had prepared for this, and not all my preparation was physical. Most assuredly not.

I presented my problem as a purely hypothetical one. I was trying to write a science fiction story, I said, and I wanted to have my figures exactly right. I even made up a few plausible plot fragments—my own inventiveness rather astonished me.

My friend wanted to know how fast this alien scout vehicle of mine would be going. It was a question I had not expected, and I asked him if it mattered.

"Of course it matters," he said. "It matters a lot. If you want the scout vehicle in your story to fall directly into your trap, the trap has to be exactly the right size. Now this figure you've given me is seventeen feet by five feet."

I opened my mouth to say that wasn't exactly right, but he was already holding up his hand.

"Just an approximation," he said. "Makes it easier to figure the arc."

"The what?"

"The arc of descent," he repeated, and I cooled off. That was a phrase with which a man bent on revenge could fall in love. It had a dark, smoothly portentous sound. The arc of descent.

I'd taken it for granted that if I dug the grave so that the Cadillac could fit, it would fit. It took this friend of mine to make me see that before it could serve its purpose as a grave, it had to work as a trap.

The shape itself was important, he said. The sort of slit-trench I had been envisioning might not work—in fact, the odds of its not working were greater than the odds that it would. “If the vehicle doesn’t hit the start of the trench dead-on,” he said, “it may not go all the way in at all. It would just slide along on an angle for awhile and when it stopped all the aliens would climb out the passenger door and zap your heroes.” The answer, he said, was to widen the entrance end, giving the whole excavation a funnel-shape.

Then there was this problem of speed.

If Dolan’s Cadillac was going too fast and the hole was too short, it would fly across, sinking a bit as it went, and either the frame or the tires would strike the lip of the hole on the far side. It would flip over on its roof—but without falling in the hole at all. On the other hand, if the Cadillac was going too slowly and the hole was too long, it might land at the bottom on its nose instead of its wheels, and that would never do. You couldn’t bury a Cadillac with the last two feet of its trunk and its rear bumper sticking out of the ground any more than you could bury a man with his legs sticking up.

“So how fast will your scout vehicle be going?”

I calculated quickly. On the open highway, Dolan’s driver kept it pegged between sixty and sixty-five. He would probably be driving a little slower than that where I planned to make my try. I could take away the detour signs, but I couldn’t hide the road machinery or erase all the signs of construction.

“About twenty rull,” I said.

He smiled. “Translation, please?”

“Say fifty earth-miles an hour.”

“Ah-hah.” He set to work at once with his slip-stick while I sat beside him, bright-eyed and smiling, thinking about that wonderful phrase: arc of descent.

He looked up almost at once. “You know,” he said, “you might want to think about changing the dimensions of the vehicle, buddy.”

“Oh? Why do you say that?”

“Seventeen by five is pretty big for a scout vehicle.” He laughed. “That’s damn near the size of a Lincoln Mark IV.”

I laughed, too. We laughed together.

*

After I saw the women going into the house with the sheets and towels, I flew back to Las Vegas.

I unlocked my house, went into the living room, and picked up the telephone. My hand trembled a little. For nine years I had waited and watched like a spider in the eaves or a mouse behind a baseboard. I had tried never to give Dolan the slightest clue that Elizabeth’s husband was still interested in him—the totally empty look he had given me that day as I passed his disabled Cadillac on the way back to Vegas, furious as it had made me at the time, was my just reward.

But now I would have to take a risk. I would have to take it because I could not be in two places at the same time and it was imperative that I know if Dolan was coming, and when to make the detour temporarily disappear.

I had figured out a plan coming home on the plane. I thought it would work. I would make it work.

I dialed Los Angeles directory assistance and asked for the number of Big Joe’s Cleaning Service. I got it and dialed it.

“This is Bill at Rennie’s Catering,” I said. “We got a party Saturday night at 1121 Aster Drive in Hollywood Hills. I wanted to know if one of your girls would check for Mr. Dolan’s big punch-bowl in the cabinet over the stove. Could you do that for me?”

I was asked to hold on. I did, somehow, although with the passing of each endless second I became more and more sure that he had smelled a rat and was calling the phone company on one line while I held on the other.

At last—at long, long last—he came back on. He sounded upset, but that was all right. That was just how I wanted him to sound.

“Saturday night?”

“Yes, that’s right. But I don’t have a punch-bowl as big as they’re going to want unless I call across town, and my impression was that he already has one. I’d just like to be sure.”

“Look, mister, my call-sheet says Mr. Dolan ain’t expected in until three P.M. Sunday afternoon. I’ll be glad to have one of my girls check out your punch-bowl, but I want to straighten this other business out first. Mr. Dolan is not a man to fuck around with, if you’ll pardon my French—”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” I said.

“—and if he’s going to show up a day early, I got to send some more girls out there right away.”

“Let me double-check,” I said. The third-grade reading textbook I use, *Roads to Everywhere*, was on the table beside me. I picked it up and riffled some of the pages close to the phone.

“Oh, boy,” I said. “It’s my mistake. He’s having people in Sunday night. I’m really sorry. You going to hit me?”

“Nah. Listen, let me put you on hold again—I’ll get one of the girls and have her check on the—”

“No need, if it’s Sunday,” I said. “My big punch-bowl’s coming back from a wedding reception in Glendale Sunday morning.”

“Okay. Take it easy.” Comfortable. Unsuspicious. The voice of a man who wasn’t going to think twice.

I hoped.

I hung up and sat still, working it out in my head as carefully as I could. To get to L.A. by three, he would be leaving Vegas about ten o’clock Sunday morning. And he would arrive in the vicinity of the detour between eleven-fifteen and eleven-thirty, when traffic was apt to be almost non-existent anyway.

I decided it was time to stop dreaming and start acting.

I looked through the want ads, made some telephone calls, and then went out to look at five used vehicles that were within my financial reach. I settled for a battered Ford van that had rolled off the assembly line the same year Elizabeth was killed. I paid cash. I was left with only two hundred and fifty-seven dollars in my savings account, but this did not disturb me in the slightest. On my way home I stopped at a rental place the size of a discount department store and rented a portable air compressor, using my MasterCard as collateral.

Late Friday afternoon I loaded the van: picks, shovels, compressor, a hand-dolly, a toolbox, binoculars, and a borrowed Highway Department jackhammer with an assortment of arrowhead-shaped attachments made for slicing through asphalt. A large square piece of sand-colored canvas, plus a long roll of canvas—this latter had been a special project of mine last summer—and twenty-one thin wooden struts, each five feet long. Last but not least, a big industrial stapler.

On the edge of the desert I stopped at a shopping center and stole a pair of license plates and put them on my van.

Seventy-six miles west of Vegas, I saw the first orange sign: CONSTRUCTION AHEAD * PASS AT YOUR OWN RISK. Then, a mile or so beyond that, I saw the sign I had been waiting for since...

well, ever since Elizabeth died, I suppose, although I hadn't always known it.

DETOUR AHEAD 6 MILES

Dusk was deepening toward dark as I arrived and surveyed the situation. It could have been better if I'd planned it, but not much.

The detour was a right turn between two rises. It looked like an old fence-line road which the Highway Department had smoothed and widened to temporarily accommodate the heavier traffic flow. It was marked by a flashing arrow powered by a buzzing battery in a padlocked steel box.

Just beyond the detour, as the highway rose toward the crest of that second rise, the road was blocked off by a double line of road cones. Beyond them (if one was so extraordinarily stupid as to have, first, missed the flashing arrow and, second, run over the road cones without realizing it—I suppose some drivers were) was an orange sign almost as big as a billboard, reading ROAD CLOSED * USE DETOUR.

Yet the reason for the detour was not visible from here, and that was good. I didn't want Dolan to have the slightest chance of smelling the trap before he fell into it.

Moving quickly—I didn't want to be seen at this—I got out of the van and quickly stacked up some dozen of the road cones, creating a lane wide enough for the van. I dragged the ROAD CLOSED sign to the right, then ran back to the van, got in, and drove through the gap.

Now I could hear an approaching motor.

I grabbed the cones again, replacing them as fast as I could. Two of them spilled out of my hands and rolled down into the gully. I chased after them, panting. I tripped over a rock in the dark, fell sprawling, and got up quickly with dust on my face and blood dripping from one palm. The car was closer now; soon it would appear over the last

rise before the detour-junction and in the glow thrown by his high beams the driver would see a man in jeans and a tee-shirt trying to replace road cones while his van stood idling where no vehicle that didn't belong to the Nevada State Highway Department was supposed to be. I got the last cone in place and ran back to the sign. I tugged too hard. It swayed and almost fell over.

As the approaching car's headlights began to brighten on the rise to the east, I suddenly became convinced it was a Nevada State Trooper.

The sign was back where it had been—and if it wasn't, it was close enough. I sprinted for the van, got in, and drove over the next rise. Just as I cleared it, I saw headlights splash over the rise behind me.

Had he seen me in the dark, with my own lights out?

I didn't think so.

I sat back against the seat, eyes closed, waiting for my heart to slow down. At last, as the sound of the car bouncing and bucketing its way down the detour faded out, it did.

I was here—safe behind the detour.

It was time to get to work.

*

Beyond the rise, the road descended to a long, straight flat. Two-thirds of the way along this straight stretch the road simply ceased to exist—it was replaced by piles of dirt and a long, wide stretch of crushed gravel.

Would they see that and stop? Turn around? Or would they keep on going, confident that there must be an approved way through since they had not seen any detour signs?

Too late to worry about it now.

I picked a spot about twenty yards into the flat, but still a quarter of a mile short of the place where the road dissolved. I pulled over to the side of the road, worked my way into the back of the van, and opened the back doors. I slid out a couple of boards and muscled the equipment. Then I rested and looked up at the cold desert stars.

“Here we go, Elizabeth,” I whispered to them.

It seemed I felt a cold hand stroke the back of my neck.

*

The compressor made a racket and the jackhammer was even worse, but there was no help for it—the best I could hope for was to be done with the first stage of the work before midnight. If it went on much longer than that I was going to be in trouble anyway, because I had only a limited quantity of gasoline for the compressor.

Never mind. Don't think of who might be listening and wondering what fool would be running a jackhammer in the middle of the night; think about Dolan. Think about the gray Sedan DeVille.

Think about the arc of descent.

I marked off the dimensions of the grave first, using white chalk, the tape measure from my toolbox, and the figures my mathematician friend had worked out. When I was done, a rough rectangle not quite five feet wide by forty-two feet long glimmered in the dark. At the nearer end it flared wide. In the gloom that flare did not look so much like a funnel as it had on the graph paper where my mathematician friend first sketched it. In the gloom it looked like a gaping mouth at the end of a long, straight windpipe. All the better to eat you with, my dear, I thought, and smiled in the dark.

I drew twenty more lines across the box, making stripes two feet wide. Last, I drew a single vertical line down the middle, creating a grid of forty-two near-squares, two feet by two and a half. The forty-third segment was the shovel-shaped flare at the end.

Then I rolled up my sleeves, pull-started the compressor, and went back to square one.

The work went faster than I had any right to hope, but not as fast as I had dared to dream—does it ever? It would have been better if I could have used the heavy equipment, but that would come later. The first thing was to carve up the squares of paving. I was not done by midnight and not by three in the morning, when the compressor ran out of gas. I had anticipated this might happen, and was equipped with a siphon for the van's gas tank. I got as far as unscrewing the gas-cap, but when the smell of the gasoline hit me, I simply screwed the cap back on and lay down flat in the back of the van.

No more, not tonight I couldn't. In spite of the work-gloves I had worn, my hands were covered with big blisters, many of them now weeping. My whole body seemed to vibrate from the steady, punishing beat of the jackhammer, and my arms felt like tuning forks gone mad. My head ached. My teeth ached. My back tormented me; my spine felt as if it had been filled with ground glass.

I had cut my way through twenty-eight squares.

Twenty-eight.

Fourteen to go.

And that was only the start.

Never, I thought. It's impossible. Can't be done.

That cold hand again.

Yes, my darling. Yes.

The ringing in my ears was subsiding a little now; every once in awhile I could hear an approaching engine ... and then it would subside to a drone on the right as it turned onto the detour and

started around the loop the Highway Department had created to bypass the construction.

Tomorrow was Saturday... sorry, today. Today was Saturday. Dolan was coming on Sunday. No time.

Yes, my darling.

The blast had torn her to pieces.

My darling had been torn to pieces for telling the truth to the police about what she had seen, for refusing to be intimidated, for being brave, and Dolan was still driving around in his Cadillac and drinking twenty-year-old Scotch while his Rolex glimmered on his wrist.

I'll try, I thought, and then I fell into a dreamless sleep that was like death.

*

I woke up with the sun, already hot at eight o'clock, shining in my face. I sat up and screamed, my throbbing hands flying to the small of my back. Work? Cut up another fourteen chunks of asphalt? I couldn't even walk.

But I could walk, and I did.

Moving like a very old man on his way to a shuffleboard game, I worked my way to the glove compartment and opened it. I had put a bottle of Empirin there in case of such a morning after.

Had I thought I was in shape? Had I really?

Well! That was quite funny, wasn't it?

I took four of the Empirin with water, waited fifteen minutes for them to dissolve in my stomach, and then wolfed a breakfast of dried fruit and cold Pop-Tarts.

I looked over to where the compressor and the jackhammer waited. The yellow skin of the compressor already seemed to sizzle in the morning sunshine. Leading up to it on either side of my incision were the neatly cut squares of asphalt.

I didn't want to go over there and pick up that jackhammer. I thought of Harvey Blocker saying, You ain't never gonna be strong, bubba. Some people and plants take hold in the sun. Some wither up and die ... Why you pulling this crap on your system?

"She was in pieces," I croaked. "I loved her and she was in pieces."

As a cheer it was never going to replace "Go, Bears!" or "Hook em, horns!" but it got me moving. I siphoned gas from the van's tank, gagging at the taste and the stink, holding onto my breakfast only by a grim act of will. I wondered briefly what I was going to do if the road-crew had drained the diesel from their machines before going home for the long weekend, and quickly shoved the thought out of my mind. It made no sense to worry over things I couldn't control. More and more I felt like a man who has jumped out of the bay of a B-52 with a parasol in his hand instead of a parachute on his back.

I carried the gasoline can over to the compressor and poured it into the tank. I had to use my left hand to curl the fingers of my right around the handle of the compressor's starter-cord. When I pulled, more blisters broke, and as the compressor started up, I saw thick pus dripping out of my fist.

Never make it.

Please, darling.

I walked over to the jackhammer and started in again.

The first hour was the worst, and then the steady pounding of the jackhammer combined with the Empirin seemed to numb everything—my back, my hands, my head. I finished cutting out the last block

of asphalt by eleven. It was time to see how much I remembered of what Tinker had told me about jump-starting road equipment.

I went staggering and flapping back to my van and drove a mile and a half down the road to where the road construction was going on. I saw my machine almost at once: a big Case-Jordan bucket-loader with a grapple-and-pincers attachment on the back. \$135,000 worth of rolling stock. I had driven a Caterpillar for Blocker, but this one would be pretty much the same.

I hoped.

I climbed up into the cab and looked at the diagram printed on the head of the stick-shift. It looked just the same as the one on my Cat. I ran the pattern once or twice. There was some resistance at first because some grit had found its way into the gearbox—the guy who drove this baby hadn't put down his sand-flaps and his foreman hadn't checked him. Blocker would have checked. And docked the driver five bucks, long weekend or not.

His eyes. His half-admiring, half-contemptuous eyes. What would he think of an errand like this?

Never mind. This was no time to be thinking of Harvey Blocker; this was a time to be thinking of Elizabeth. And Dolan.

There was a piece of burlap on the steel floor of the cab. I lifted it, looking for the key. There was no key there, of course.

Tink's voice in my mind: Shit, a kid could jump-start one of these babies, whitebread. Ain't nothin' to it. At least a car's got a ignition lock on it—new ones do, anyway. Look here. No, not where the key goes, you ain't got no key, why you want to look where the key goes? Look under here. See these wires hangin' down?

I looked now and saw the wires hanging down, looking just as they had when Tinker pointed them out to me: red, blue, yellow, and

green. I pared the insulation from an inch of each and then took a twist of copper wire from my back pocket.

Okay, whitebread, lissen up 'cause we maybe goan give Q and A later, you dig me? You gonna wire the red and the green. You won't forget that, 'cause it's like Christmas. That takes care of your ignition.

I used my wire to hold the bare places on the red and green wires of the Case-Jordan's ignition together. The desert wind hooted, thin, like the sound of someone blowing over the top of a soda bottle. Sweat ran down my neck and into my shirt, where it caught and tickled.

Now you just got the blue and the yellow. You ain't gonna wire em; you just gonna touch em together and you gonna make sho you ain't touchin no bare wire wither own self when you do it neither, 'less you wanna make some hot electrified water in your Jockeys, m'man. The blue and the yellow the ones turn the starter. Off you go. When you feel like you had enough of a joyride, you just pull the red and green wires apart. Like turnin off the key you don't have.

I touched the blue and yellow wires together. A big yellow spark jumped up and I recoiled, striking the back of my head on one of the metal posts at the rear of the cab. Then I leaned forward and touched them together again. The motor turned over, coughed, and the bucket-loader took a sudden spasmodic lurch forward. I was thrown into the rudimentary dashboard, the left side of my face striking the steering bar. I had forgotten to put the damned transmission in neutral and had almost lost an eye as a result. I could almost hear Tink laughing.

I fixed that and then tried the wires again. The motor turned over and turned over. It coughed once, puffing a dirty brown smoke signal into the air to be torn away by the ceaseless wind, and then the motor just went on cranking. I kept trying to tell myself the machine was just in rough shape—a man who'd go off without putting the sand-flaps down, after all, was apt to forget anything—but I became more and more sure that they had drained the diesel, just as I had feared.

And then, just as I was about to give up and look for something I could use to dipstick the loader's fuel tank (all the better to read the bad news with, my dear), the motor bellowed into life.

I let the wires go—the bare patch on the blue one was smoking—and goosed the throttle. When it was running smoothly, I geared it into first, swung it around, and started back toward the long brown rectangle cut neatly into the westbound lane of the highway.

*

The rest of the day was a long bright hell of roaring engine and blazing sun. The driver of the Case-Jordan had forgotten to mount his sand-flaps, but he had remembered to take his sun umbrella. Well, the old gods laugh sometimes, I guess. No reason why. They just do. And I guess the old gods have a twisted sense of humor.

It was almost two o'clock before I got all of the asphalt chunks down into the ditch, because I had never achieved any real degree of delicacy with the pincers. And with the spade-shaped piece at the end, I had to cut it in two and then drag each of the chunks down into the ditch by hand. I was afraid that if I used the pincers I would break them.

When all the asphalt pieces were down in the ditch, I drove the bucket-loader back down to the road equipment. I was getting low on fuel; it was time to siphon. I stopped at the van, got the hose ... and found myself staring, hypnotized, at the big jerrican of water. I tossed the siphon away for the time being and crawled into the back of the van. I poured water over my face and neck and chest and screamed with pleasure. I knew that if I drank I would vomit, but I had to drink. So I did and I vomited, not getting up to do it but only turning my head to one side and then crab-crawling as far away from the mess as I could.

Then I slept again and when I woke up it was nearly dusk and somewhere a wolf was howling at a new moon rising in the purple sky.

*

In the dying light the cut I had made really did look like a grave—the grave of some mythical ogre. Goliath, maybe.

Never, I told the long hole in the asphalt.

Please, Elizabeth whispered back. Please ... for me.

I got four more Empirin out of the glove compartment and swallowed them down. “For you,” I said.

*

I parked the Case-Jordan with its fuel tank close to the tank of a bulldozer, and used a crowbar to pry off the caps on both. A ‘dozer-jockey on a state crew might get away with forgetting to drop the sand-flaps on his vehicle, but with forgetting to lock the fuel-cap, in these days of \$1.05 diesel? Never.

I got the fuel running from the ‘dozer into my loader and waited, trying not to think, watching the moon rise higher and higher in the sky. After awhile I drove back to the cut in the asphalt and started to dig.

Running a bucket-loader by moonlight was a lot easier than running a jackhammer under the broiling desert sun, but it was still slow work because I was determined that the floor of my excavation should have exactly the right slant. As a consequence, I frequently consulted the carpenter’s level I’d brought with me. That meant stopping the loader, getting down, measuring, and climbing up into the peak-seat again. No problem ordinarily, but by midnight my body had stiffened up and every movement sent a shriek of pain through my bones and muscles. My back was the worst; I began to fear I had done something fairly unpleasant to it.

But that—like everything else—was something I would have to worry about later.

If a hole five feet deep as well as forty-two feet long and five feet wide had been required, it really would have been impossible, of course, bucket-loader or not—I might just as well have planned to send him into outer space, or drop the Taj Mahal on him. The total yield on such dimensions is over a thousand cubic feet of earth.

“You’ve got to create a funnel shape that will suck your bad aliens in,” my mathematician friend had said, “and then you’ve got to create an inclined plane that pretty much mimes the arc of descent.”

He drew one on another sheet of graph paper.

“That means that your intergalactic rebels or whatever they are only need to remove half as much earth as the figures initially show. In this case—” He scribbled on a work sheet, and beamed. “Five hundred and twenty-five cubic feet. Chicken-feed. One man could do it.”

I had believed so, too, once upon a time, but I had not reckoned on the heat ... the blisters ... the exhaustion ... the steady pain in my back.

Stop for a minute, but not too long. Measure the slant of the trench.

It’s not as bad as you thought, is it, darling? At least it’s roadbed and not desert hardpan—

I moved more slowly along the length of the grave as the hole got deeper. My hands were bleeding now as I worked the controls. Ram the drop-lever all the way forward until the bucket lay on the ground. Pull back on the drop-lever and shove the one that extended the armature with a high hydraulic whine. Watch as the bright oiled metal slid out of the dirty orange casing, pushing the bucket into the dirt. Every now and then a spark would flash as the bucket slid over a piece of flint. Now raise the bucket ... swivel it, a dark oblong shape against the stars (and try to ignore the steady throbbing pain in your neck the way you’re trying to ignore the even deeper throb of pain in

your back) ... and dump it down in the ditch, covering the chunks of asphalt already there.

Never mind, darling—you can bandage your hands when it's done. When he's done.

“She was in pieces,” I croaked, and jockeyed the bucket back into place so I could take another two hundred pounds of dirt and gravel out of Dolan's grave.

How the time flies when you are having a good time.

*

Moments after I had noticed the first faint streaks of light in the east I got down to take another measurement of the floor's incline with the carpenter's level. I was actually getting near the end; I thought I might just make it. I knelt, and as I did I felt something in my back let go. It went with a dull little snap.

I uttered a guttural cry and collapsed on my side on the narrow, slanted floor of the excavation, lips pulled back from my teeth, hands pressing into the small of my back.

Little by little the very worst of the pain passed and I was able to get to my feet.

All right, I thought. That's it. It's over. It was a good try, but it's over.

Please, darling, Elizabeth whispered back—impossible as it would have been to believe once upon a time, that whispering voice had begun to take on unpleasant undertones in my mind; there was a sense of monstrous implacability about it. Please don't give up. Please go on.

Go on digging? I don't even know if I can walk!

But there's so little left to do! the voice wailed—it was no longer just the voice that spoke for Elizabeth, if it had ever been; it was

Elizabeth. So little left, darling!

I looked at my excavation in the growing light and nodded slowly. She was right. The bucket-loader was only five feet from the end; seven at most. But it was the deepest five or seven, of course; the five or seven with the most dirt in it.

You can do it, darling—I know you can. Softly cajoling.

But it was not really her voice that persuaded me to go on. What really turned the trick was an image of Dolan lying asleep in his penthouse while I stood here in this hole beside a stinking, rumbling bucket-loader, covered with dirt, my hands in flaps and ruins. Dolan sleeping in silk pajama bottoms with one of his blondes asleep beside him, wearing only the top.

Downstairs, in the glassed-in executive section of the parking garage, the Cadillac, already loaded with luggage, would be gassed and ready to go.

“All right, then,” I said. I climbed slowly back into the bucket-loader’s seat and revved the engine.

*

I kept on until nine o’clock and then I quit—there were other things to do, and I was running out of time. My angled hole was forty feet long. It would have to be enough.

I drove the bucket-loader back to its original spot and parked it. I would need it again, and that would mean siphoning more gas, but there was no time for that now. I wanted more Empirin, but there weren’t many left in the bottle and I would need them all later today ... and tomorrow. Oh, yes, tomorrow—Monday, the glorious Fourth.

Instead of Empirin I took a fifteen-minute rest. I could ill-afford the time, but I forced myself to take it just the same. I lay on my back in the van, my muscles jumping and twitching, imagining Dolan.

He would be packing a few last-minute items in a Travel-All now—some papers to look over, a toilet kit, maybe a paperback book or a deck of cards.

Suppose he flies this time? a malicious voice deep inside me whispered, and I couldn't help it—a moan escaped me. He had never flown to L.A. before—always it had been the Cadillac. I had an idea he didn't like to fly. Sometimes he did, though—he had flown all the way to London once—and the thought lingered, itching and throbbing like a scaly patch of skin.

*

It was nine-thirty when I took out the roll of canvas and the big industrial stapler and the wooden struts. The day was overcast and a little cooler—God sometimes grants a favor. Up until then I'd forgotten my bald head in consideration of larger agonies, but now, when I touched it with my fingers, I drew them away with a little hiss of pain. I looked at it in the outside passenger mirror and saw that it was a deep, angry red—almost a plum color.

Back in Vegas Dolan would be making last-minute phone calls. His driver would be bringing the Cadillac around front. There were only about seventy-five miles between me and it, and soon the Cadillac would start to close that distance at sixty miles an hour. I had no time to stand around bemoaning my sunburned pate.

I love your sunburned pate, dear, Elizabeth said beside me.

“Thank you, Beth,” I said, and began taking the struts over to the hole.

*

The work was now light compared to the digging I'd done earlier, and the almost unbearable agony in my back subsided to a steady dull throb.

But what about later? that insinuating voice asked. What about that, hmhhh?

Later would have to take care of itself, that was all. It was beginning to look as if the trap was going to be ready, and that was the important thing.

The struts spanned the hole with just enough extra length to allow me to seat them tightly in the sides of the asphalt which formed the top layer of my excavation. This was a job that would have been tougher at night, when the asphalt was hard, but now, at mid-morning, the stuff was sludgy-pliable, and it was like sticking pencils in wads of cooling taffy.

When I had all the struts in, the hole had taken on the look of my original chalk diagram, minus the line down the middle. I positioned the heavy roll of canvas next to the shallow end of the hole and removed the hanks of rope that had tied it shut.

Then I unrolled forty-two feet of Route 71.

Close up, the illusion was not perfect—as stage make-up and set-decoration is never perfect from the first three rows. But from even a few yards away, it was virtually undetectable. It was a dark-gray strip which matched the actual surface of Route 71 exactly. On the far left of the canvas strip (as you faced west) was a broken yellow passing line.

I settled the long strip of canvas over the wooden understructure, then went slowly along the length of it, stapling the canvas to the struts. My hands didn't want to do the work but I coaxed them.

With the canvas secured, I returned to the van, slid behind the wheel (sitting down caused another brief but agonizing muscle spasm), and drove back to the top of the rise. I sat there for a full minute, looking down at my lumpy, wounded hands as they lay in my lap. Then I got out and looked back down Route 71, almost casually. I didn't want to focus on any one thing, you see; I wanted the whole picture—a

gestalt, if you will. I wanted, as much as possible, to see the scene as Dolan and his men were going to see it when they came over the rise. I wanted to get an idea of how right—or how wrong—it was going to feel to them.

What I saw looked better than I could have hoped.

The road machinery at the far end of the straight stretch justified the piles of dirt that had come from my excavation. The asphalt chunks in the ditch were mostly buried. Some still showed—the wind was picking up, and it had blown the dirt around—but that looked like the remnants of an old paving job. The compressor I'd brought in the back of the van looked like Highway Department equipment.

And from here the illusion of the canvas strip was perfect—Route 71 appeared to be utterly untouched down there.

Traffic had been heavy Friday and fairly heavy on Saturday—the drone of motors heading into the detour loop had been almost constant. This morning, however, there was hardly any traffic at all; most people had gotten to wherever they intended to spend the Fourth, or were taking the Interstate forty miles south to get there. That was fine with me.

I parked the van just out of sight over the brow of the rise and lay on my belly until ten-forty-five. Then, after a big milk-truck had gone lumbering slowly up the detour, I backed the van down, opened the rear doors, and threw all the road cones inside.

The flashing arrow was a tougher proposition—at first I couldn't see how I was going to unhook it from the locked battery box without electrocuting myself. Then I saw the plug. It had been mostly hidden by a hard rubber O-ring on the side of the sign-case ... a little insurance policy against vandals and practical jokers who might find pulling the plug on such a highway sign an amusing prank, I supposed.

I found a hammer and chisel in my toolbox, and four hard blows were sufficient to split the O-ring. I yanked it off with a pair of pliers and pulled the cable free. The arrow stopped flashing and went dark. I pushed the battery box into the ditch and buried it. It was strange to stand there and hear it humming down there in the sand. But it made me think of Dolan, and that made me laugh.

I didn't think Dolan would hum.

He might scream, but I didn't think he would hum.

Four bolts held the arrow in a low steel cradle. I loosened them as fast as I could, ears cocked for another motor. It was time for one—but not time for Dolan yet, surely.

That got the interior pessimist going again.

What if he flew?

He doesn't like to fly.

What if he's driving but going another way? Going by the Interstate, for instance? Today everyone else is ...

He always goes by 71.

Yes, but what if—

"Shut up," I hissed. "Shut up, damn you, just shut the fuck up!"

Easy, darling—easy! Everything will be all right.

I got the arrow into the back of the van. It crashed against the sidewall and some of the bulbs broke. More of them broke when I tossed the cradle in after it.

With that done, I drove back up the rise, pausing at the top to look behind me. I had taken away the arrow and the cones; all that

remained now was that big orange warning: ROAD CLOSED * USE
DETOUR

There was a car coming. It occurred to me that if Dolan was early, it had all been for nothing—the goon driving would simply turn down the detour, leaving me to go mad out here in the desert.

It was a Chevrolet.

My heart slowed down and I let out a long, shuddering breath. But there was no more time for nerves.

I drove back to where I had parked to look at my camouflage job and parked there again. I reached under the jumble of stuff in the back of the van and got the jack. Grimly ignoring my screaming back, I jacked up the rear end of the van, loosened the lug-nuts on the back tire they would see when

(if)

they came, and tossed it into the back of the van. More glass broke, and I would just have to hope there had been no damage done to the tire. I didn't have a spare.

I went back to the front of the van, got my old binoculars, and then headed back toward the detour. I passed it and got to the top of the next rise as fast as I could—a shambling trot was really all I could manage by this time.

Once at the top, I trained my binoculars east.

I had a three-mile field of vision, and could see snatches of the road for two miles east of that. Six vehicles were currently on the way, strung out like random beads on a long string. The first was a foreign car, Datsun or Subaru, I thought, less than a mile away. Beyond that was a pick-up, and beyond the pick-up was what looked like a Mustang. The others were just desert-light flashing on chrome and glass.

When the first car neared—it was a Subaru—I stood up and stuck my thumb out. I didn't expect a ride looking the way I did, and I wasn't disappointed. The expensively coiffed woman behind the wheel took one horrified glance and her face snapped shut like a fist. Then she was gone, down the hill and onto the detour.

“Get a bath, buddy!” the driver of the pick-up yelled at me half a minute later.

The Mustang actually turned out to be an Escort. It was followed by a Plymouth, the Plymouth by a Winnebago that sounded as if it were full of kids having a pillow-fight.

No sign of Dolan.

I looked at my watch. 11:25 A.M. If he was going to show up, it ought to be very soon. This was prime time.

The hands on my watch moved slowly around to 11:40 and there was still no sign of him. Only a late-model Ford and a hearse as black as a raincloud.

He's not coming. He went by the Interstate. Or he flew.

No. He'll come.

He won't, though. You were afraid he'd smell you, and he did. That's why he changed his pattern.

There was another twinkle of light on chrome in the distance. This car was a big one. Big enough to be a Cadillac.

I lay on my belly, elbows propped in the grit of the shoulder, binoculars to my eyes. The car disappeared behind a rise ... reemerged... slipped around a curve... and then came out again.

It was a Cadillac, all right, but it wasn't gray—it was a deep mint green.

What followed was the most agonizing thirty seconds of my life; thirty seconds that seemed to last for thirty years. Part of me decided on the spot, completely and irrevocably, that Dolan had traded in his old Cadillac for a new one. Certainly he had done this before, and although he had never traded for a green one before, there was certainly no law against it.

The other half argued vehemently that Cadillacs were almost a dime a dozen on the highways and byways between Vegas and L.A., and the odds against the green Caddy's being Dolan's Cadillac were a hundred to one.

Sweat ran into my eyes, blurring them, and I put the binoculars down. They weren't going to help me solve this one, anyhow. By the time I was able to see the passengers, it would be too late.

It's almost too late now! Go down there and dump the detour sign! You're going to miss him!

Let me tell you what you're going to catch in your trap if you hide that sign now: two rich old people going to L.A. to see their children and take their grandkids to Disneyland.

Do it! It's him! It's the only chance you're going to have!

That's right. The only chance. So don't blow it by catching the wrong people.

It's Dolan!

It's not!

"Stop it," I moaned, holding my head. "Stop it, stop it."

I could hear the motor now.

Dolan.

The old people.

The lady.

The tiger.

Dolan.

The old—

“Elizabeth, help me!” I groaned.

Darling, that man has never owned a green Cadillac in his life. He never would. Of course it’s not him.

The pain in my head cleared away. I was able to get to my feet and get my thumb out.

It wasn’t the old people, and it wasn’t Dolan, either. It was what looked like twelve Vegas chorines crowded in with one old boy who was wearing the biggest cowboy hat and the darkest Foster Grants I’d ever seen. One of the chorines mooned me as the green Cadillac went fishtailing onto the detour.

Slowly, feeling entirely washed out, I raised the binoculars again.

And saw him coming.

There was no mistaking that Cadillac as it came around the curve at the far end of my uninterrupted view of the road—it was as gray as the sky overhead, but it stood out with startling clarity against the dull brown rises of land to the east.

It was him—Dolan. My long moments of doubt and indecision seemed both remote and foolish in an instant. It was Dolan, and I didn’t have to see that gray Cadillac to know it.

I didn’t know if he could smell me, but I could smell him.

*

Knowing he was on the way made it easier to pick up my aching legs and run.

I got back to the big DETOUR sign and shoved it facedown into the ditch. I shook a sand-colored piece of canvas over it, then pawed loose sand over its support posts. The overall effect wasn't as good as the fake strip of road, but I thought it would serve.

Now I ran up the second rise to where I had left the van, which was just another part of the picture now—a vehicle temporarily abandoned by the owner, who had gone off somewhere to either get a new tire or have an old one fixed.

I got into the cab and stretched out across the seat, my heart thumping.

Again, time seemed to stretch out. I lay there listening for the engine and the sound didn't come and didn't come and didn't come.

They turned off. He caught wind of you at the last moment anyway... or something looked hinky, either to him or to one of his men ... and they turned off.

I lay on the seat, my back throbbing in long, slow waves, my eyes squinched tightly shut as if that would somehow help me hear better.

Was that an engine?

No—just the wind, now blowing hard enough to drive an occasional sheet of sand against the side of the van.

Not coming. Turned off or turned back.

Just the wind.

Turned off or turned b—

No, it was not just the wind. It was a motor, the sound of it was swelling, and a few seconds later a vehicle—one single vehicle—

rushed past me.

I sat up and grabbed the wheel—I had to grab something—and stared out through the windshield, my eyes bulging, my tongue caught between my teeth.

The gray Cadillac floated down the hill toward the flat stretch, doing fifty or maybe a little more. The brake lights never went on. Not even at the end. They never saw it; never had so much as the slightest idea.

What happened was this: all at once the Cadillac seemed to be driving through the road instead of on it. This illusion was so persuasive that I felt a moment of confused vertigo even though I had created the illusion myself. Dolan's Cadillac was hubcap-deep in Route 71, and then it was up to the door-panels. A bizarre thought occurred to me: if the GM company made luxury submarines, this is what they would look like going down.

I could hear thin snapping sounds as the struts supporting the canvas broke under the car. I could hear the sound of canvas rippling and ripping.

All of it happened in only three seconds, but they are three seconds I will remember my whole life.

I had an impression of the Cadillac now running with only its roof and the top two or three inches of the polarized windows visible, and then there was a big toneless thud and the sound of breaking glass and crimping metal. A large puff of dust rose in the air and the wind pulled it apart.

I wanted to go down there—wanted to go down right away—but first I had to put the detour to rights. I didn't want us to be interrupted.

I got out of the van, went around to the back, and pulled the tire back out. I put it on the wheel and tightened the six lug-nuts as fast as I could, using only my fingers. I could do a more thorough job later; in

the meantime I only needed to back the van down to the place where the detour diverged from Highway 71.

I jacked the bumper down and hurried back to the cab of the van at a limping run. I paused there for a moment, listening, head cocked.

I could hear the wind.

And from the long, rectangular hole in the road, the sound of someone shouting ... or maybe screaming.

Grinning, I got back in the van.

*

I backed rapidly down the road, the van swinging drunkenly back and forth. I got out, opened the back doors, and put out the traffic cones again. I kept my ear cocked for approaching traffic, but the wind had gotten too strong to make that very worthwhile. By the time I heard an approaching vehicle, it would be practically on top of me.

I started down into the ditch, tripped, landed on my prat, and slid to the bottom. I pushed away the sand-colored piece of canvas and dragged the big detour sign up to the top. I set it up again, then went back to the van and slammed the rear doors closed. I had no intention of trying to set the arrow sign up again.

I drove back over the next rise, stopped in my old place just out of sight of the detour, got out, and tightened the lug-nuts on the van's back wheel, using the tire-iron this time. The shouting had stopped, but there was no longer any question about the screaming; it was much louder.

I took my time tightening the nuts. I wasn't worried that they were going to get out and either attack me or run away into the desert, because they couldn't get out. The trap had worked perfectly. The Cadillac was now sitting squarely on its wheels at the far end of the excavation, with less than four inches of clearance on either side.

The three men inside couldn't open their doors wide enough to do more than stick out a foot, if that. They couldn't open their windows because they were power-drive and the battery would be so much squashed plastic and metal and acid somewhere in the wreck of the engine.

The driver and the man in the shotgun seat might also be squashed in the wreckage, but this did not concern me; I knew that someone was still alive in there, just as I knew that Dolan always rode in back and wore his seatbelt as good citizens are supposed to do.

The lug-nuts tightened to my satisfaction, I drove the van down to the wide, shallow end of the trap and got out.

Most of the struts were completely gone, but I could see the splintered butt ends of a few, still sticking out of the tar. The canvas "road" lay at the bottom of the cut, crumpled and ripped and twisted. It looked like a shed snakeskin.

I walked up to the deep end and here was Dolan's Cadillac.

The front end was utterly trashed. The hood had accordioned upward in a jagged fan shape. The engine compartment was a jumble of metal and rubber and hoses, all of it covered with sand and dirt that had avalanched down in the wake of the impact. There was a hissing sound and I could hear fluids running and dripping down there someplace. The chilly alcohol aroma of antifreeze was pungent in the air.

I had been worried about the windshield. There was always a chance that it could have broken inward, allowing Dolan space enough to wriggle up and out. But I hadn't been too worried; I told you that Dolan's cars were built to the sorts of specifications required by tinpot dictators and despotic military leaders. The glass was not supposed to break, and it had not.

The Caddy's rear window was even tougher because its area was smaller. Dolan couldn't break it—not in the time I was going to give

him, certainly—and he would not dare try to shoot it out. Shooting at bullet-proof glass from close up is another form of Russian Roulette. The slug would leave only a small white fleck on the glass and then ricochet back into the car.

I'm sure he could have found an out, given world enough and time, but I was here now, and I would give him neither.

I kicked a shower of dirt across the Cadillac's roof.

The response was immediate.

“We need some help, please.

We're stuck in here.”

Dolan's voice. He sounded unhurt and eerily calm. But I sensed the fear underneath, held rigidly in check, and I came as close to feeling sorry for him right then as it was possible for me to come. I could imagine him sitting in the back seat of his telescoped Cadillac, one of his men injured and moaning, probably pinned by the engine block, the other either dead or unconscious.

I imagined it and felt a jittery moment of what I can only term sympathetic claustrophobia. Push the window-buttons—nothing. Try the doors, even though you can see they're going to clunk to a full stop long before you could squeeze through.

Then I stopped trying to imagine, because he was the one who had bought this, wasn't he? Yes. He had bought his own ticket and paid a full fare.

“Who's there?”

“Me,” I said, “but I'm not the help you're looking for, Dolan.”

I kicked another fan of grit and pebbles across the gray Cadillac's roof. The screamer started doing his thing again as the second bunch of pebbles rattled across the roof.

“My legs! Jim, my legs!”

Dolan’s voice was suddenly wary. The man outside, the man on top, knew his name. Which meant this was an extremely dangerous situation.

“Jimmy, I can see the bones in my legs!”

“Shut up,” Dolan said coldly. It was eerie to hear their voices drifting up like that. I suppose I could have climbed down onto the Cadillac’s back deck and looked in the rear window, but I would not have seen much, even with my face pressed right against it. The glass was polarized, as I may already have told you.

I didn’t want to see him, anyway. I knew what he looked like. What would I want to see him for? To find out if he was wearing his Rolex and his designer jeans?

“Who are you, buddy?” he asked.

“I’m nobody,” I said. “Just a nobody who had a good reason to put you where you are right now.”

And with an eerie, frightening suddenness, Dolan said: “Is your name Robinson?”

I felt as if someone had punched me in the stomach. He had made the connection that fast, winnowing through all the half-remembered names and faces and coming up with exactly the right one. Had I thought him an animal, with the instincts of an animal? I hadn’t known the half of it, and it was really just as well I had not, or I never would have had the guts to do what I had done.

I said, “My name doesn’t matter. But you know what happens now, don’t you?”

The screamer began again—great bubbling, liquid bellows.

“Get me outta here, Jimmy! Get me outta here! For the luvva Jaysus! My legs’re broke!”

“Shut up,” Dolan said. And then, to me: “I can’t hear you, man, the way he’s screaming.”

I got down on my hands and knees and leaned over. “I said you know what h—”

I suddenly had an image of the wolf dressed up as Gramma telling Red Riding Hood, All the better to hear you with, my dear... come a little closer. I recoiled, and just in time. The revolver went off four times. The shots were loud where I was; they must have been deafening in the car. Four black eyes opened in the roof of Dolan’s Cadillac, and I felt something split the air an inch from my forehead.

“Did I get you, cocksucker?” Dolan asked.

“No,” I said.

The screamer had become the weeper. He was in the front seat. I saw his hands, as pale as the hands of a drowned man, slapping weakly at the windshield, and the slumped body next to him. Jimmy had to get him out, he was bleeding, the pain was bad, the pain was turrible, the pain was more than he could take, for the luvva Jaysus he was sorry, heartily sorry for his sins, but this was more than—

There was another pair of loud reports. The man in the front seat stopped screaming. The hands dropped away from the windshield.

“There,” Dolan said in a voice that was almost reflective. “He ain’t hurting anymore and we can hear what we say to each other.”

I said nothing. I felt suddenly dazed and unreal. He had killed a man just now. Killed him. The feeling that I had underestimated him in spite of all my precautions and was lucky to be alive recurred.

“I want to make you a proposal,” Dolan said.

I continued to hold my peace—

“My friend?”

—and to hold it some more.

“Hey! You!” His voice trembled minutely. “If you’re still up there, talk to me! What can that hurt?”

“I’m here,” I said. “I was just thinking you fired six times. I was thinking you may wish you’d saved one for yourself before long. But maybe there’s eight in the clip, or you have reloads.”

Now it was his turn to fall silent. Then:

“What are you planning?”

“I think you’ve already guessed,” I said. “I have spent the last thirty-six hours digging the world’s longest grave, and now I’m going to bury you in your fucking Cadillac.”

The fear in his voice was still reined in. I wanted that rein to snap.

“You want to hear my proposition first?”

“I’ll listen. In a few seconds. First I have to get something.”

I walked back to the van and got my shovel.

*

When I got back he was saying “Robinson? Robinson? Robinson?” like a man speaking into a dead phone.

“I’m here,” I said. “You talk. I’ll listen. And when you’re finished I may make a counter-proposal.”

When he spoke, he sounded more cheerful. If I was talking counter-proposals, I was talking deal. And if I was talking deal, he was

already halfway to being out.

“I’m offering you a million dollars to let me out of here. But, just as important—”

I tossed a shovelful of gritty till down on the rear deck of the Cadillac. Pebbles bounced and rattled off the small rear window. Dirt sifted into the line of the trunk-lid.

“What are you doing?” His voice was sharp with alarm.

“Idle hands do the devil’s work,” I said. “I thought I’d keep mine busy while I listened.”

I dug into the dirt again and threw in another shovelful.

Now Dolan spoke faster, his voice more urgent.

“A million dollars and my personal guarantee that no one will ever touch you ... not me, not my men, not anyone else’s men.”

My hands didn’t hurt anymore. It was amazing. I shoveled steadily, and in no more than five minutes, the Cadillac’s rear deck was drifted deep in dirt. Putting it in, even by hand, was certainly easier than taking it out.

I paused, leaning on the shovel for a moment.

“Keep talking.”

“Look, this is crazy,” he said, and now I could hear bright splinters of panic in his voice. “I mean it’s just crazy.”

“You got that right,” I said, and shoveled in more dirt.

*

He held on longer than I thought any man could, talking, reasoning, cajoling—yet becoming more and more disjointed as the sand and

dirt piled up over the rear window, repeating himself, backtracking, beginning to stutter. At one point the passenger door opened as far as it could and banged into the sidewall of the excavation. I saw a hand with black hair on the knuckles and a big ruby ring on the second finger. I sent down a quick four shovelfuls of loose earth into the opening. He screamed curses and yanked the door shut again.

He broke not long after. It was the sound of the dirt coming down that finally got to him, I think. Sure it was. The sound would have been very loud inside the Cadillac. The dirt and stones rattling onto the roof and falling past the window. He must have finally realized he was sitting in an upholstered eight-cylinder fuel-injected coffin.

“Get me out!” he shrieked. “Please! I can’t stand it! Get me out!”

“You ready for that counter-proposal?” I asked.

“Yes! Yes! Christ! Yes! Yes! Yes!”

“Scream. That’s the counter-proposal. That’s what I want. Scream for me. If you scream loud enough, I’ll let you out.”

He screamed piercingly.

“That was good!” I said, and I meant it. “But it was nowhere near good enough.”

I began to dig again, throwing fan after fan of dirt over the roof of the Cadillac. Disintegrating clods ran down the windshield and filled the windshield-wiper slot.

He screamed again, even louder, and I wondered if it was possible for a man to scream loud enough to rupture his own larynx.

“Not bad!” I said, redoubling my efforts. I was smiling in spite of my throbbing back. “You might get there, Dolan—you really might.”

“Five million.” It was the last coherent thing he said.

“I think not,” I replied, leaning on the shovel and wiping sweat off my forehead with the heel of one grimy hand. The dirt covered the roof of the car almost from side to side now. It looked like a starburst ... or a large brown hand clasping Dolan’s Cadillac. “But if you can make a sound come out of your mouth which is as loud, let us say, as eight sticks of dynamite taped to the ignition switch of a 1968 Chevrolet, then I will get you out, and you may count on it.”

So he screamed, and I shoveled dirt down on the Cadillac. For some time he did indeed scream very loudly, although I judged he never screamed louder than two sticks of dynamite taped to the ignition switch of a 1968 Chevrolet. Three, at most. And by the time the last of the Cadillac’s brightwork was covered and I rested to look down at the dirt-shrouded hump in the hole, he was producing no more than a series of hoarse and broken grunts.

I looked at my watch. It was just past one o’clock. My hands were bleeding again, and the handle of the shovel was slippery. A sheaf of gritty sand flew into my face and I recoiled from it. A high wind in the desert makes a peculiarly unpleasant sound—a long, steady drone that simply goes on and on. It is like the voice of an idiot ghost.

I leaned over the hole. “Dolan?”

No answer.

“Scream, Dolan.”

No answer at first—then a series of harsh barks.

Satisfactory!

*

I went back to the van, started it up, and drove the mile and a half back down to the road construction. On the way I tuned to WKXR, Las Vegas, the only station the van’s radio would pull in. Barry Manilow told me he wrote the songs that make the whole world sing,

a statement I greeted with some skepticism, and then the weather report came on. High winds were forecast; a travellers' advisory had been posted on the main roads between Vegas and the California line. There were apt to be visibility problems because of sheeting sand, the disc jockey said, but the thing to really watch out for was wind-shear. I knew what he was talking about, because I could feel it whipsawing the van.

Here was my Case-Jordan bucket-loader; already I thought of it as mine. I got in, humming the Barry Manilow tune, and touched the blue and yellow wires together again. The loader started up smoothly. This time I'd remembered to take it out of gear. Not bad, white boy, I could hear Tink saying in my head. You learnin.

Yes I was. Learning all the time.

I sat for a minute, watching membranes of sand skirl across the desert, listening to the bucket-loader's engine rumble and wondering what Dolan was up to. This was, after all, his Big Chance. Try to break the rear window, or crawl over into the front seat and try to break the windshield. I had put a couple of feet of sand and dirt over each, but it was still possible. It depended on how crazy he was by now, and that wasn't a thing I could know, so it really didn't bear thinking about. Other things did.

I geared the bucket-loader and drove back up the highway to the trench. When I got there I trotted anxiously over and looked down, half-expecting to see a man-sized gopher hole at the front or rear of the Cadillac-mound where Dolan had broken some glass and crawled out.

My spadework had not been disturbed.

"Dolan," I said, cheerfully enough, I thought.

There was no answer.

"Dolan!"

No answer.

He's killed himself, I thought, and felt a sick-bitter disappointment. Killed himself somehow or died of fright.

"Dolan?"

Laughter drifted up from the mound; bright, irrepressible, totally genuine laughter. I felt my flesh lift itself into large hard lumps. It was the laughter of a man whose mind has broken.

He laughed and he laughed in his hoarse voice. Then he screamed; then he laughed again. Finally he did both together.

For awhile I laughed with him, or screamed, or whatever, and the wind laughed and screamed at both of us.

Then I went back to the Case-Jordan, lowered the blade, and began to cover him up for real.

*

In four minutes even the shape of the Cadillac was gone. There was just a hole filled with dirt.

I thought I could hear something, but with the sound of the wind and the steady grumble of the loader's engine, it was hard to tell. I got down on my knees; then I lay down full-length with my head hanging into what remained of the hole.

Far down, underneath all that dirt, Dolan was still laughing. They were sounds like something you might read in a comic book: Hee-hee-hee, aaah-hah-hah-hah. There might have been some words, too. It was hard to tell. I smiled and nodded, though.

"Scream," I whispered. "Scream, if you want." But that faint sound of laughter just went on, seeping up from the dirt like a poisonous vapor.

A sudden dark terror seized me—Dolan was behind me! Yes, somehow Dolan had gotten behind me! And before I could turn around he would tumble me into the hole and—

I jumped up and whirled around, my mangled hands making rough approximations of fists.

Wind-driven sand smacked me.

There was nothing else.

I wiped my face with my dirty bandanna and got back into the cab of the bucket-loader and went back to work.

The cut was filled in again long before dark. There was even dirt left over, in spite of what the wind had whipped away, because of the area displaced by the Cadillac. It went quickly... so quickly.

The tone of my thoughts was weary, confused, and half-delirious as I piloted the loader back down the road, driving it directly over the spot where Dolan was buried.

I parked it in its original place, removed my shirt, and rubbed all of the metal in the cab with it in an effort to remove fingerprints. I don't know exactly why I did that, even to this day, since I must have left them in a hundred other places around the site. Then, in the deep brownish-gray gloom of that stormy dusk, I went back to the van.

I opened one of the rear doors, observed Dolan crouched inside, and staggered back, screaming, one hand thrown up to shield my face. It seemed to me that my heart must explode in my chest.

Nothing—no one—came out of the van. The door swung and banged in the wind like the last shutter on a haunted house. At last I crept back, heart pounding, and peered inside. There was nothing but the jumble of stuff I had left in there—the road-arrow with the broken bulbs, the jack, my toolbox.

“You have got to get hold of yourself,” I said softly. “Get hold of yourself.”

I waited for Elizabeth to say, You’ll be all right, darling ... something like that ... but there was only the wind.

I got back into the van, started it, and drove halfway back to the excavation. That was as far as I could make myself go. Although I knew it was utterly foolish, I became more and more convinced that Dolan was lurking in the van. My eyes kept going to the rear-view mirror, trying to pick his shadow out of the others.

The wind was stronger than ever, rocking the van on its springs. The dust it pulled up from the desert and drove before it looked like smoke in the headlights.

At last I pulled over to the side of the road, got out, and locked all the doors. I knew I was crazy to even try sleeping outside in this, but I couldn’t sleep in there. I just couldn’t. So I crawled under the van with my sleeping bag.

I was asleep five seconds after I zipped myself into it.

*

When I woke up from a nightmare I could not remember—except there had been hands in it, clutching at my throat—I found that I had been buried alive. There was sand up my nose, sand in my ears. It was down my throat, choking me.

I screamed and struggled upward, at first convinced that the confining sleeping bag was earth. Then I banged my head on the van’s undercarriage and saw flakes of rust silting down.

I rolled out from under into a dawn the color of smutty pewter. My sleeping bag blew away like a tumbleweed the moment my weight was off it. I gave a surprised yell and chased twenty feet after it before realizing it would be the world’s worst mistake. Visibility was

down to no more than twenty yards, and maybe less. The road was totally gone in places. I looked back at the van and it looked washed-out, barely there, a sepia photograph of a ghost-town relic.

I staggered back to it, found my keys, and got inside. I was still spitting sand and coughing dryly. I got the motor going and drove slowly back the way I had come. There was no need to wait for a weather report; the weather was all the jock could talk about this morning. The worst desert windstorm in Nevada history. All roads closed. Stay home unless you absolutely have to go out, and then stay home anyway.

The glorious Fourth.

Stay in. You're crazy if you go out there. You'll go sandblind.

That I would chance. This was a golden opportunity to cover it up forever—never in my wildest imaginings had I suspected I might get such a chance, but it was here, and I was taking it.

I had brought three or four extra blankets. I tore a long, wide strip from one of them and tied it around my head. Looking like some sort of crazed Bedouin, I stepped out.

*

I spent all morning carrying chunks of asphalt up from the ditch and placing them back into the trench, trying to be as neat as a mason laying a wall ... or bricking up a niche. The actual fetching and carrying was not terribly difficult, although I had to unearth most of the asphalt blocks like an archaeologist hunting for artifacts, and every twenty minutes or so I had to repair to the van to get out of the blowing sand and rest my stinging eyes.

I worked slowly west from what had been the shallow end of the excavation, and by quarter past noon—I had started at six—I had reached the final seventeen feet or so. By then the wind had begun to die and I could see occasional ragged patches of blue above me.

I fetched and placed, fetched and placed. Now I was over the spot where I calculated Dolan must be. Was he dead yet? How many cubic feet of air could a Cadillac hold? How soon would that space become unable to support human life, assuming that neither of Dolan's two companions was still breathing?

I knelt by the bare earth. The wind had eroded the impressions of the Case-Jordan's treads but not quite erased them; somewhere beneath those faint indentations was a man wearing a Rolex.

"Dolan," I said chummily, "I've changed my mind and decided to let you out."

Nothing. No sound at all. Dead for sure this time.

I went back and got another square of asphalt. I placed it, and as I started to rise, I heard faint, cackling laughter seeping up through the earth.

I sank back into a crouch with my head forward—if I'd still had hair, it would have been hanging in my face—and remained in that position for some time, listening as he laughed. The sound was faint and without timbre.

When it stopped, I went back and got another asphalt square. There was a piece of the broken yellow line on this one. It looked like a hyphen. I knelt with it.

"For the love of God!" he shrieked. "For the love of God, Robinson!"

"Yes," I said, smiling. "For the love of God."

I put the chunk of asphalt in neatly next to its neighbor, and although I listened, I heard him no more.

*

I got back to my place in Vegas that night at eleven o'clock. I slept for sixteen hours, got up, walked toward the kitchen to make coffee,

and then collapsed, writhing, on the hall floor as a monstrous back spasm racked me. I scrabbled at the small of my back with one hand while I chewed on the other to stifle the screams.

After awhile I crawled into the bathroom—I tried standing once, but this resulted in another thunderbolt—and used the washstand to pull myself up enough so I could get the second bottle of Empirin in the medicine cabinet.

I chewed three and drew a bath. I lay on the floor while I waited for the tub to fill. When it was, I wriggled out of my pajamas and managed to get into the tub. I lay there for five hours, dozing most of the time. When I got out, I could walk.

A little.

I went to a chiropractor. He told me I had three slipped discs and had suffered a serious lower spinal dislocation. He wanted to know if I had decided to sub for the circus strongman.

I told him I did it digging in my garden.

He told me I was going to Kansas City.

I went.

They operated.

When the anesthesiologist put the rubber cup over my face, I heard Dolan laughing from the hissing blackness inside and knew I was going to die.

*

The recovery room was a watery tiled green.

“Am I alive?” I croaked.

A nurse laughed. “Oh, yes.” His hand touched my brow—my brow that went all the way around my head. “What a sunburn you have! My God! Did that hurt, or are you still too doped up?”

“Still too doped up,” I said. “Did I talk while I was under?”

“Yes,” he said.

I was cold all over. Cold to the bones of me.

“What did I say?”

“You said, ‘It’s dark in here. Let me out!’” And he laughed again.

“Oh,” I said.

*

They never found him—Dolan.

It was the storm. That flukey storm. I’m pretty sure I know what happened, although I think you’ll understand when I tell you I never checked too closely.

RPAV—remember that? They were repaving. The storm almost buried the section of 71 which the detour had closed. When they went back to work, they didn’t bother to remove the new dunes all at once but only as they went along—why do otherwise? There was no traffic to worry about. So they plowed sand and routed up old paving at the same time. And if the ‘dozer operator happened to notice that the sand-crusting asphalt in one section—a section about forty feet long—was breaking in front of his blade in neat, almost geometric pieces, he never said anything. Maybe he was stoned. Or maybe he was just dreaming of stepping out with his baby that evening.

Then came the dumpsters with their fresh loads of gravel, followed by the spreaders and rollers. After them the big tankers would arrive, the ones with the wide sprayer attachments on the backs and their smell of hot tar, so like melting shoe-leather. And when the fresh

asphalt had dried, along would come the lining machine, the driver under his big canvas parasol looking back frequently to make sure the broken yellow line was perfectly straight, unaware that he was passing over a fog-gray Cadillac with three people inside, unaware that down in the darkness there was a ruby ring and a gold Rolex that might still be marking off the hours.

One of those heavy vehicles would almost surely have collapsed an ordinary Cadillac; there would have been a lurch, a crunch, and then a bunch of men digging to see what—or who—they had found. But it really was more tank than car, and Dolan's very carefulness has so far kept anyone from finding him.

Sooner or later the Cadillac will collapse of course, probably under the weight of a passing semi, and the next vehicle along will see a big broken dent in the westbound lane, and the Highway Department will be notified, and there will be another RPAV. But if there aren't Highway Department workers right there to see what happens, to observe that the heavy weight of a passing truck has caused some hollow object under the road to collapse, I think they will assume the "marsh-hole" (that is what they call them) has been caused by either frost, or a collapsed salt-dome, or possibly a desert temblor. They will repair it and life will go on.

*

He was reported missing—Dolan.

A few tears were shed.

A columnist in the Las Vegas Sun suggested that he might be playing dominos or shooting pool somewhere with Jimmy Hoffa.

Perhaps that is not so far from the truth.

*

I'm fine.

My back is pretty much okay again. I'm under strict orders not to lift anything which weighs over thirty pounds without help, but I've got a good bunch of third-graders this year, and all the help I could want.

I've driven back and forth over that stretch of road several times in my new Acura automobile. Once I even stopped, got out, and (after checking in both directions to make sure the road was deserted) took a piss on what I was pretty sure was the spot. But I couldn't produce much of a flow, even though my kidneys felt full, and when I drove on I kept checking the rear-view mirror: I had this funny idea, you see, that he was going to rise up from the back seat, his skin charred to a cinnamon color and stretched over his skull like the skin of a mummy, his hair full of sand, his eyes and his Rolex watch glittering.

That was the last time I was on 71, actually. Now I take the Interstate when I need to head west.

And Elizabeth? Like Dolan, she has fallen silent. I find that is a relief.

s t e p h e n
KING

**EVERYTHING'S
EVENTUAL**

'One of the great storytellers of our time'

Guardian

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

Stephen King

One day, out of nowhere, I had a clear image of a young man pouring change into a sewer grating outside of the small suburban house in which he lived. I had nothing else, but the image was so clear—and so disturbingly odd—that I had to write a story about it. It came out smoothly and without a single hesitation, supporting my idea that stories are artifacts: not really made things which we create (and can take credit for), but preexisting objects which we dig up.

I

I've got a good job now, and no reason to feel glum. No more hanging out with the gumbyheads at the Supr Savr, policing up the Kart Korral and getting bothered by assholes like Skipper. Skipper's munching the old dirt sandwich these days, but one thing I have learned in my nineteen years on this Planet Earth is don't relax, there are Skippers everywhere.

Ditto no more pulling pizza patrol on rainy nights, driving my old Ford with the bad muffler, freezing my ass off with the driver's-side window down and a little Italian flag sticking out on a wire. Like somebody in Harkerville was going to salute. Pizza Roma. Quarter tips from people who don't even see you, because most of their mind's still on the TV football game. Driving for Pizza Roma was the lowest point, I think. Since then I've even had a ride in a private jet, so how could things be bad?

"This is what comes of leaving school without a diploma," Ma would say during my Delivery Dan stint. And, "You've got this to look forward to for the rest of your life." Good old Ma. On and on, until I actually thought about writing her one of those special letters. As I say, that was the low point. You know what Mr. Sharpton told me that night in his car? "It's not just a job, Dink, it's a goddam adventure." And he was right. Whatever he might have been wrong about, he was right about that.

I suppose you're wondering about the salary of this famous job. Well, I got to tell you, there's not much money in it. Might as well get that right up front. But a job isn't just about money, or getting ahead. That's what Mr. Sharpton told me. Mr. Sharpton said that a real job is about the fringe benefits. He said that's where the power is.

Mr. Sharpton. I only saw him that once, sitting behind the wheel of his big old Mercedes-Benz, but sometimes once is enough.

Take that any way you want. Any old way at all.

II

I've got a house, okay? My very own house. That's fringe benefit number one. I call Ma sometimes, ask how her bad leg is, shoot the shit, but I've never invited her over here, although Harkerville is only seventy or so miles away and I know she's practically busting a gut with curiosity. I don't even have to go see her unless I want to. Mostly I don't want to. If you knew my mother, you wouldn't want to, either. Sit there in that living room with her while she talks about all her relatives and whines about her puffy leg. Also I never noticed how much the house smelled of catshit until I got out of it. I'm never going to have a pet. Pets bite the big one.

Mostly I just stay here. It's only got one bedroom, but it's still an excellent house. Eventual, as Pug used to say. He was the one guy at the Supr Savr I liked. When he wanted to say something was really good, Pug'd never say it was awesome, like most people do; he'd say it was eventual. How funny is that? The old Pugmeister. I wonder how he's doing. Okay, I suppose. But I can't call him and make sure. I can call my Ma, and I have an emergency number if anything ever goes wrong or if I think somebody's getting nosy about what's not their business, but I can't buzz any of my old friends (as if any of them besides Pug gave Shit One about Dinky Earnshaw). Mr. Sharpton's rules.

But never mind that. Let's go back to my house here in Columbia City. How many nineteen-year-old high-school dropouts do you know who have their own houses? Plus a new car? Only a Honda, true, but the first three numbers on the odometer are still zeroes, and that's the important part. It has a CD/tape-player, and I don't slide in behind the wheel wondering if the goddam thing'll start, like I always did with the Ford, which Skipper used to make fun of. The Assholemobile, he called it. Why are there so many Skippers in the world? That's what I really wonder about.

I do get some money, by the way. More than enough to meet my needs. Check this out. I watch *As the World Turns* every day while I'm eating my lunch, and on Thursdays, about halfway through the show, I hear the clack of the mail-slot. I don't do anything then, I'm not supposed to. Like Mr. Sharpton said, "Them's the rules, Dink."

I just watch the rest of my show. The exciting stuff on the soaps always happens around the weekends—murders on Fridays, fucking on Mondays—but I watch right to the end every day, just the same. I'm especially careful to stay in the living room until the end on Thursdays. On Thursdays I don't even go out to the kitchen for another glass of milk. When *World* is over, I turn off the TV for awhile—Oprah Winfrey comes on next, I hate her show, all that sitting-around-talking shit is for the Mas of the world—and go out to the front hall.

Lying on the floor under the mail-slot, there's always a plain white envelope, sealed. Nothing written on the front. Inside there'll be either fourteen five-dollar bills or seven ten-dollar bills. That's my money for the week. Here's what I do with it. I go to the movies twice, always in the afternoon, when it's just \$4.50. That's \$9. On Saturday I fill up my Honda with gas, and that's usually about \$7. I don't drive much. I'm not invested in it, as Pug would say. So now we're up to \$16. I'll eat out maybe four times at Mickey D's, either at breakfast (Egg McMuffin, coffee, two hash browns) or at dinner (Quarter Pounder with Cheese, never mind that McSpecial shit, what dimbulb thought those sandwiches up). Once a week I put on chinos and a button-up shirt and see how the other half lives—have a fancy meal at a place like Adam's Ribs or the Chuck Wagon. All of that goes me about \$25 and now we're up to \$41. Then I might go by News Plus and buy a stroke book or two, nothing really kinky, just your usual like *Variations* or *Penthouse*. I have tried writing these mags down on *DINKY'S DAYBOARD*, but with no success. I can buy them myself, and they don't disappear on cleaning day or anything, but they don't show up, if you see what I'm getting at, like most other stuff does. I guess Mr. Sharpton's cleaners don't like to buy dirty stuff (pun). Also, I can't get to any of the sex stuff on the Internet. I have

tried, but it's blocked out, somehow. Usually things like that are easy to deal with—you go under or around the roadblocks if you can't hack straight through—but this is different.

Not to belabor the point, but I can't dial 900 numbers on the phone, either. The auto-dialer works, of course, and if I want to call somebody just at random, anywhere in the world, and shoot the shit with them for awhile, that's okay. That works. But the 900 numbers don't. You just get a busy. Probably just as well. In my experience, thinking about sex is like scratching poison ivy. You only spread it around. Besides, sex is no big deal, at least for me. It's there, but it isn't eventual. Still, considering what I'm doing, that little prudery streak is sort of weird. Almost funny ... except I seem to have lost my sense of humor on the subject. A few others, as well.

Oh well, back to the budget.

If I get a Variations, that's four bucks and we're up to \$45. Some of the money that's left I might use to buy a CD, although I don't have to, or a candy-bar or two (I know I shouldn't, because my complexion still blows dead rats, although I'm almost not a teenager anymore). I think of calling out for a pizza or for Chinese sometimes, but it's against TransCorp's rules. Also, I would feel weird doing it, like a member of the oppressing class. I have delivered pizza, remember. I know what a sucky job it is. Still, if I could order in, the pizza guy wouldn't leave this house with a quarter tip. I'd lay five on him, watch his eyes light up.

But you're starting to see what I mean about not needing a lot of cash money, aren't you? When Thursday morning rolls around again, I usually have at least eight bucks left, and sometimes it's more like twenty. What I do with the coins is drop them down the storm-drain in front of my house. I am aware that this would freak the neighbors out if they saw me doing it (I'm a high-school dropout, but I didn't leave because I was stupid, thank you very much), so I take out the blue plastic recycling basket with the newspapers in it (and sometimes with a Penthouse or Variations buried halfway down the stack, I don't keep that shit around for long, who would), and while

I'm putting it down on the curb, I open the hand with the change in it, and through the grate in the gutter it goes. Tinkle-tinkle-tinkle-splash. Like a magician's trick. Now you see it, now you don't. Someday that drain will get clogged up, they'll send a guy down there and he'll think he won the fucking lottery, unless there's a flood or something that pushes all the change down to the waste treatment plant, or wherever it goes. By then I'll be gone. I'm not going to spend my life in Columbia City, I can tell you that. I'm leaving, and soon. One way or the other.

The currency is easier. I just poke it down the garbage disposal in the kitchen. Another magic trick, presto-change-o, money into lettuce. You probably think that's very weird, running money through the sink-pig. I did, too, at first. But you get used to just about anything after you do it awhile, and besides, there's always another seventy falling through the letter-slot. The rule is simple: no squirrelling it away. End the week broke. Besides, it's not millions we're talking about, only eight or ten bucks a week. Chump-change, really.

III

DINKY'S DAYBOARD. That's another fringe benefit. I write down whatever I want during the week, and I get everything I ask for (except sex-mags, as I told you). Maybe I'll get bored with that eventually, but right now it's like having Santa Claus all year round. Mostly what I write down is groceries, like anyone does on their kitchen chalkboard, but by no means is groceries all.

I might, for instance, write down "New Bruce Willis Video" or "New Weezer CD" or something like that. A funny thing about that Weezer CD, since we're on the subject. I happened to go into Toones Xpress one Friday after my movie was over (I always go to the show on Friday afternoons, even if there's nothing I really want to see, because that's when the cleaners come), just killing time inside because it was rainy and that squashed going to the park, and while I was looking at the new releases, this kid asks a clerk about the new Weezer CD. The clerk tells him it won't be in for another ten days or so, but I'd had it since the Friday before.

Fringe benefits, like I say.

If I write down "sport shirt" on the DAYBOARD, there it is when I get back to the house on Friday night, always in one of the nice earth-tone colors I like. If I write down "new jeans" or "chinos," I get those. All stuff from The Gap, which is where I'd go myself, if I had to do stuff like that. If I want a certain kind of after-shave lotion or cologne, I write the name on DINKY'S DAYBOARD and it's on the bathroom counter when I get home. I don't date, but I'm a fool for cologne. Go figure.

Here's something you'll laugh at, I bet. Once I wrote down "Rembrandt Painting" on the DAYBOARD. Then I spent the afternoon at the movies and walking in the park, watching people making out and dogs catching Frisbees, thinking how eventual it would be if the cleaners actually brought me my own fucking

Rembrandt. Think of it, a genuine Old Master on the wall of a house in the Sunset Knoll section of Columbia City. How eventual would that be?

And it happened, in a manner of speaking. My Rembrandt was hung on the living room wall when I got home, over the sofa where the velvet clowns used to be. My heart was beating about two hundred a minute as I walked across the room toward it. When I got closer, I saw it was just a copy ... you know, a reproduction. I was disappointed, but not very. I mean, it was a Rembrandt. Just not an original Rembrandt.

Another time, I wrote "Autographed Photo of Nicole Kidman" on the DAYBOARD. I think she's the best-looking actress alive, she just gets me on so much. And when I got home that day, there was a publicity still of her on the fridge, held there by a couple of those little vegetable magnets. She was on her Moulin Rouge swing. And that time it was the real deal. I know because of the way it was signed: "To Dinky Earnshaw, with love & kisses from Nicole."

Oh, baby. Oh, honey.

Tell you something, my friend—if I worked hard and really wanted it, there might be a real Rembrandt on my wall someday. Sure. In a job like this, there is nowhere to go but up. In a way, that's the scary part.

IV

I never have to make grocery lists. The cleaners know what I like—Stouffer’s frozen dinners, especially that boil-in-the-bag stuff they call creamed chipped beef and Ma had always called shit on a shingle, frozen strawberries, whole milk, pre-formed hamburger patties that you just have to slap in a hot frying pan (I hate playing with raw meat), Dole puddings, the ones that come in plastic cups (bad for my complexion but I love em), ordinary food like that. If I want something special, I write it down on DINKY’S DAYBOARD.

Once I asked for a homemade apple pie, specifically not from the supermarket, and when I came back that night around the time it was getting dark, my pie was in the fridge with the rest of the week’s groceries. Only it wasn’t wrapped up, it was just sitting there on a blue plate. That’s how I knew it was homemade. I was a little hesitant about eating it at first, not knowing where it came from and all, and then I decided I was being stupid. A person doesn’t really know where supermarket food comes from, not really. I mean, we assume it’s okay because it’s wrapped up or in a can or “double-sealed for your protection,” but anyone could have been handling it with dirty fingers before it was double-sealed, or sneezing great big whoops of booger-breath on it, or even wiping their asses with it. I don’t mean to gross you out, but it’s true, isn’t it? The world is full of strangers, and a lot of them are “up to no good.” I have had personal experience of this, believe me.

Anyway, I tried the pie and it was delicious. I ate half of it Friday night and the rest on Saturday morning, while I was running the numbers in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Most of Saturday night I spent on the toilet, shitting my guts out from all those apples, I guess, but I didn’t care. The pie was worth it. “Like mother used to make” is what people say, but it can’t be my mother they say it about. My Ma couldn’t fry Spam.

V

I never have to write down underwear on the DAYBOARD. Every five weeks or so the old drawers disappear and there are brand-new Hanes Jockey-shorts in my bureau, four three-packs still in their plastic bags. Double-sealed for my protection, ha-ha. Toilet-paper, laundry soap, dishwasher soap, I never have to write any of that shit down. It just appears.

Very eventual, don't you think?

VI

I have never seen the cleaners, any more than I have ever seen the guy (or maybe it's a gal) who delivers my seventy bucks every Thursday during *As the World Turns*. I never want to see them, either. I don't need to, for one thing. For another, yes, okay, I'm afraid of them. Just like I was afraid of Mr. Sharpton in his big gray Mercedes on the night I went out to meet him. So sue me.

I don't eat lunch in my house on Fridays. I watch *As the World Turns*, then jump in my car and drive into town. I get a burger at Mickey D's, then go to a movie, then to the park if the weather is good. I like the park. It's a good place to think, and these days I've got an awful lot to think about.

If the weather is bad, I go to the mall. Now that the days are beginning to shorten, I'm thinking about taking up bowling again. It'd be something to do on Friday afternoons, at least. I used to go now and then with Pug.

I sort of miss Pug. I wish I could call him, just shoot the shit, tell him some of the stuff that's been going on. Like about that guy Neff, for instance.

Oh, well, spit in the ocean and see if it comes back.

While I'm away, the cleaners are doing my house from wall to wall and top to bottom—wash the dishes (although I'm pretty good about that myself), wash the floors, wash the dirty clothes, change the sheets, put out fresh towels, restock the fridge, get any of the incidentals that are written on the DAYBOARD. It's like living in a hotel with the world's most efficient (not to mention eventual) maid service.

The one place they don't mess around with much is the study off the dining room. I keep that room fairly dark, the shades always pulled, and they have never raised them to let in so much as a crack of

daylight, like they do in the rest of the house. It never smells of Lemon Pledge in there, either, although every other room just about reeks of it on Friday nights. Sometimes it's so bad I have these sneezing fits. It's not an allergy; more like a nasal protest-demonstration.

Someone vacuums the floor in there, and they empty the waste-paper basket, but no one has ever moved any of the papers that I keep on the desk, no matter how cluttered-up and junky-looking they are. Once I put a little piece of tape over where the drawer above the knee-hole opens, but it was still there, unbroken, when I got back home that night. I don't keep anything top secret in that drawer, you understand; I just wanted to know.

Also, if the computer and modem are on when I leave, they're still on when I come back, the VDT showing one of the screen-saver programs (usually the one of the people doing stuff behind their blinds in this high-rise building, because that's my favorite). If my stuff was off when I left, it's off when I come back. They don't mess around in Dinky's study.

Maybe the cleaners are a little afraid of me, too.

VII

I got the call that changed my life just when I thought the combination of Ma and delivering for Pizza Roma was going to drive me crazy. I know how melodramatic that sounds, but in this case, it's true. The call came on my night off. Ma was out with her girlfriends, playing Bingo at the Reservation, all of them smoking up a storm and no doubt laughing every time the caller pulled B-12 out of the hopper and said, "All right, ladies, it's time to take your vitamins." Me, I was watching a Clint Eastwood movie on TNT and wishing I was anywhere else on Planet Earth. Saskatchewan, even.

The phone rings, and I think, oh good, it's Pug, gotta be, and so when I pick it up I say in my smoothest voice, "You have reached the Church of Any Eventuality, Harkerville branch, Reverend Dink speaking."

"Hello, Mr. Earnshaw," a voice says back. It was one I'd never heard before, but it didn't seem the least put-out or puzzled by my bullshit. I was mortified enough for both of us, though. Have you ever noticed that when you do something like that on the phone—try to be cool right from the pickup—it's never the person you expected on the other end? Once I heard about this girl who picked up the phone and said "Hi, it's Helen, and I want you to fuck me raw" because she was sure it was her boyfriend, only it turned out to be her father. That story is probably made up, like the one about the alligators in the New York sewers (or the letters in Penthouse), but you get the point.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I say, too flustered to wonder how the owner of this strange voice knows that Reverend Dink is also Mr. Earnshaw, actual name Richard Ellery Earnshaw. "I thought you were someone else."

"I am someone else," the voice says, and although I didn't laugh then, I did later on. Mr. Sharpton was someone else, all right. Seriously, eventually someone else.

“Can I help you?” I asked. “If you wanted my mother, I’ll have to take a message, because she’s—”

“—out playing Bingo, I know. In any case, I want you, Mr. Earnshaw. I want to offer you a job.”

For a moment I was too surprised to say anything. Then it hit me—some sort of phone-scam. “I got a job,” I go. “Sorry.”

“Delivering pizza?” he says, sounding amused. “Well, I suppose. If you call that a job.”

“Who are you, mister?” I ask.

“My name is Sharpton. And now let me ‘cut through the bullshit,’ as you might say, Mr. Earnshaw. Dink? May I call you Dink?”

“Sure,” I said. “Can I call you Sharpie?”

“Call me whatever you want, just listen.”

“I’m listening.” I was, too. Why not? The movie on the tube was Coogan’s Bluff, not one of Clint’s better efforts.

“I want to make you the best job-offer you’ve ever had, and the best one you probably ever will have. It’s not just a job, Dink, it’s an adventure.”

“Gee, where have I heard that before?” I had a bowl of popcorn in my lap, and I tossed a handful into my mouth. This was turning into fun, sort of.

“Others promise; I deliver. But this is a discussion we must have face-to-face. Will you meet me?”

“Are you a queer?” I asked.

“No.” There was a touch of amusement in his voice. Just enough so that it was hard to disbelieve. And I was already in the hole, so to

speak, from the smartass way I'd answered the phone. "My sexual orientation doesn't come into this."

"Why're you yanking my chain, then? I don't know anybody who'd call me at nine-thirty in the fucking night and offer me a job."

"Do me a favor. Put the phone down and go look in your front hall."

Crazier and crazier. But what did I have to lose? I did what he said, and found an envelope lying there. Someone had poked it through the mail-slot while I was watching Clint Eastwood chase Don Stroud through Central Park. The first envelope of many, although of course I didn't know that then. I tore it open, and seven ten-dollar bills fell out into my hand. Also a note.

This can be the beginning of a great career!

I went back into the living room, still looking at the money. Know how weirded-out I was? I almost sat on my bowl of popcorn. I saw it at the last second, set it aside, and plopped back on the couch. I picked up the phone, really sort of expecting Sharpton to be gone, but when I said hello, he answered.

"What's this all about?" I asked him. "What's the seventy bucks for? I'm keeping it, but not because I think I owe you anything. I didn't fucking ask for anything."

"The money is absolutely yours," Sharpton says, "with not a string in the world attached. But I'll let you in on a secret, Dink—a job isn't just about money. A real job is about the fringe benefits. That's where the power is."

"If you say so."

"I absolutely do. And all I ask is that you meet me and hear a little more. I'll make you an offer that will change your life, if you take it. That will open the door to a new life, in fact. Once I've made that

offer, you can ask all the questions you like. Although I must be honest and say you probably won't get all the answers you'd like."

"And if I just decide to walk away?"

"I'll shake your hand, clap you on the back, and wish you good luck."

"When did you want to meet?" Part of me—most of me—still thought all this was a joke, but there was a minority opinion forming by then. There was the money, for one thing; two weeks' worth of tips driving for Pizza Roma, and that's if business was good. But mostly it was the way Sharpton talked. He sounded like he'd been to school ... and I don't mean at Sheep's Rectum State College over in Van Drusen, either. And really, what harm could there be? Since Skipper's accident, there was no one on Planet Earth who wanted to take after me in a way that was dangerous or painful. Well, Ma, I suppose, but her only weapon was her mouth ... and she wasn't into elaborate practical jokes. Also, I couldn't see her parting with seventy dollars. Not when there was still a Bingo game in the vicinity.

"Tonight," he said. "Right now, in fact."

"All right, why not? Come on over. I guess if you can drop an envelope full of tens through the mail-slot, you don't need me to give you the address."

"Not at your house. I'll meet you in the Supr Savr parking lot."

My stomach dropped like an elevator with the cables cut, and the conversation stopped being the least bit funny. Maybe this was some kind of setup—something with cops in it, even. I told myself no one could know about Skipper, least of all the cops, but Jesus. There was the letter; Skipper could have left the letter lying around anywhere. Nothing in it anyone could make out (except for his sister's name, but there are millions of Debbies in the world), no more than anyone could've made out the stuff I wrote on the sidewalk outside Mrs. Bukowski's yard ... or so I would have said before the goddam phone rang. But who could be absolutely sure?

And you know what they say about a guilty conscience. I didn't exactly feel guilty about Skipper, not then, but still ...

"The Supr Savr's kind of a weird place for a job interview, don't you think? Especially when it's been closed since eight o'clock."

"That's what makes it good, Dink. Privacy in a public place. I'll park right by the Kart Korral. You'll know the car—it's a big gray Mercedes."

"I'll know it because it'll be the only one there," I said, but he was already gone.

I hung up and put the money in my pocket, almost without realizing I was doing it. I was sweating lightly all over my body. The voice on the phone wanted to meet me by the Kart Korral, where Skipper had so often teased me. Where he had once mashed my fingers between a couple of shopping carts, laughing when I screamed. That hurts the worst, getting your fingers mashed. Two of the nails had turned black and fallen off. That was when I'd made up my mind to try the letter. And the results had been unbelievable. Still, if Skipper Brannigan had a ghost, the Kart Korral was likely where it would hang out, looking for fresh victims to torture. The voice on the phone couldn't have picked that place by accident. I tried to tell myself that was bullshit, that coincidences happened all the time, but I just didn't believe it. Mr. Sharpton knew about Skipper. Somehow he knew.

I was afraid to meet him, but I didn't see what choice I had. If nothing else, I ought to find out how much he knew. And who he might tell.

I got up, put on my coat (it was early spring then, and cold at night—it seems to me that it's always cold at night in western Pennsylvania), started out the door, then went back and left a note for Ma. "Went out to see a couple of guys," I wrote. "Will be back by midnight." I intended to be back well before midnight, but that note seemed like a good idea. I wouldn't let myself think too closely about why it seemed like a good idea, not then, but I can own up to it now:

if something happened to me, something bad, I wanted to make sure
Ma would call the police.

VIII

There are two kinds of scared—at least that's my theory. There's TV-scared, and there's real-scared. I think we go through most of our lives only getting TV-scared. Like when we're waiting for our blood-tests to come back from the doctor or when we're walking home from the library in the dark and thinking about bad guys in the bushes. We don't get real-scared about shit like that, because we know in our heart of hearts that the blood-tests will come back clean and there won't be any bad guys in the bushes. Why? Because stuff like that only happens to the people on TV.

When I saw that big gray Mercedes, the only car in about an acre of empty parking lot, I got real-scared for the first time since the thing in the box-room with Skipper Brannigan. That time was the closest we ever came to really getting into it.

Mr. Sharpton's ride was sitting under the light of the lot's yellow mercury-vapor lamps, a big old Krautmobil, at least a 450 and probably a 500, the kind of car that costs a hundred and twenty grand these days. Sitting there next to the Kart Korral (now almost empty for the night, all the carts except for one poor old three-wheeled cripple safely locked up inside) with its parking lights on and white exhaust drifting up into the air. Engine rumbling like a sleepy cat.

I drove toward it, my heart pumping slow but hard and a taste like pennies in my throat. I wanted to just mat the accelerator of my Ford (which in those days always smelled like a pepperoni pizza) and get the hell out of there, but I couldn't get rid of the idea that the guy knew about Skipper. I could tell myself there was nothing to know, that Charles "Skipper" Brannigan had either had an accident or committed suicide, the cops weren't sure which (they couldn't have known him very well; if they had, they would have thrown the idea of suicide right out the window—guys like Skipper don't off themselves, not at the age of twenty-three they don't), but that didn't stop the

voice from yammering away that I was in trouble, someone had figured it out, someone had gotten hold of the letter and figured it out.

That voice didn't have logic on its side, but it didn't need to. It had good lungs and just outscreamed logic. I parked beside the idling Mercedes and rolled my window down. At the same time, the driver's-side window of the Mercedes rolled down. We looked at each other, me and Mr. Sharpton, like a couple of old friends meeting at the Hi-Hat Drive-In.

I don't remember much about him now. That's weird, considering all the time I've spent thinking about him since, but it's the truth. Only that he was thin, and that he was wearing a suit. A good one, I think, although judging stuff like that's not my strong point. Still, the suit eased me a little. I guess that, unconsciously, I had this idea that a suit means business, and jeans and a tee-shirt means fuckery.

"Hello, Dink," he says. "I'm Mr. Sharpton. Come on in here and sit down."

"Why don't we just stay the way we are?" I asked. "We can talk to each other through these windows. People do it all the time."

He only looked at me and said nothing. After a few seconds of that, I turned off the Ford and got out. I don't know exactly why, but I did. I was more scared than ever, I can tell you that. Real-scared. Real as real as real. Maybe that was why he could get me to do what he wanted.

I stood between Mr. Sharpton's car and mine for a minute, looking at the Kart Korral and thinking about Skipper. He was tall, with this wavy blond hair he combed straight back from his forehead. He had pimples, and these red lips, like a girl wearing lipstick. "Hey Dinky, let's see your dinky," he'd say. Or "Hey Dinky, you want to suck my dinky?" You know, witty shit like that. Sometimes, when we were rounding up the carts, he'd chase me with one, nipping at my heels with it and going "Rmmmm! Rmmmmmm! Rmmmmmm!" like a fucking

race-car. A couple of times he knocked me over. At dinner-break, if I had my food on my lap, he'd bump into me good and hard, see if he could knock something onto the floor. You know the kind of stuff I'm talking about, I'm sure. It was like he'd never gotten over those ideas of what's funny to bored kids sitting in the back row of study hall.

I had a ponytail at work, you had to wear your hair in a ponytail if you had it long, supermarket rules, and sometimes Skipper would come up behind me, grab the rubber band I used, and yank it out. Sometimes it would snarl in my hair and pull it. Sometimes it would break and snap against my neck. It got so I'd stick two or three extra rubber bands in my pants pocket before I left for work. I'd try not to think about why I was doing it, what I was putting up with. If I did, I'd probably start hating myself.

Once I turned around on my heels when he did that, and he must have seen something on my face, because his teasing smile went away and another one came up where it had been. The teasing smile didn't show his teeth, but the new one did. Out in the box-room, this was, where the north wall is always cold because it backs up against the meat-locker. He raised his hands and made them into fists. The other guys sat around with their lunches, looking at us, and I knew none of them would help. Not even Pug, who stands about five-feet-four anyway and weighs about a hundred and ten pounds. Skipper would have eaten him like candy, and Pug knew it.

"Come on, assface," Skipper said, smiling that smile. The broken rubber band he'd stripped out of my hair was dangling between two of his knuckles, hanging down like a little red lizard's tongue. "Come on, you want to fight me? Come on, sure. I'll fight you."

What I wanted was to ask why it had to be me he settled on, why it was me who somehow rubbed his fur wrong, why it had to be any guy. But he wouldn't have had an answer. Guys like Skipper never do. They just want to knock your teeth out. So instead, I just sat back down and picked up my sandwich again. If I tried to fight Skipper, he'd likely put me in the hospital. I started to eat, although I wasn't hungry anymore. He looked at me a second or two longer, and I

thought he might go after me, anyway, but then he unrolled his fists. The broken rubber band dropped onto the floor beside a smashed lettuce-crate. "You waste," Skipper said. "You fucking longhair hippie waste." Then he walked away. It was only a few days later that he mashed my fingers between two of the carts in the Korral, and a few days after that Skipper was lying on satin in the Methodist Church with the organ playing. He brought it on himself, though. At least that's what I thought then.

"A little trip down Memory Lane?" Mr. Sharpton asked, and that jerked me back to the present. I was standing between his car and mine, standing by the Kart Korral where Skipper would never mash anyone else's fingers.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"And it doesn't matter. Hop in here, Dink, and let's have a little talk."

I opened the door of the Mercedes and got in. Man, that smell. It's leather, but not just leather. You know how, in Monopoly, there's a Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card? When you're rich enough to afford a car that smells like Mr. Sharpton's gray Mercedes, you must have a Get-Out-of-Everything-Free card.

I took a deep breath, held it, then let it out and said, "This is eventual."

Mr. Sharpton laughed, his clean-shaven cheeks gleaming in the dashboard lights. He didn't ask what I meant; he knew. "Everything's eventual, Dink," he said. "Or can be, for the right person."

"You think so?"

"Know so." Not a shred of doubt in his voice.

"I like your tie," I said. I said it just to be saying something, but it was true, too. The tie wasn't what I'd call eventual, but it was good. You know those ties that are printed all over with skulls or dinosaurs or

little golf-clubs, stuff like that? Mr. Sharpton's was printed all over with swords, a firm hand holding each one up.

He laughed and ran a hand down it, kind of stroking it. "It's my lucky tie," he said. "When I put it on, I feel like King Arthur." The smile died off his face, little by little, and I realized he wasn't joking. "King Arthur, out gathering the best men there ever were. Knights to sit with him at the Round Table and remake the world."

That gave me a chill, but I tried not to show it. "What do you want with me, Art? Help you hunt for the Holy Grail, or whatever they call it?"

"A tie doesn't make a man a king," he said. "I know that, in case you were wondering."

I shifted, feeling a little uncomfortable. "Hey, I wasn't trying to put you down—"

"It doesn't matter, Dink. Really. The answer to your question is I'm two parts headhunter, two parts talent scout, and four parts walking, talking destiny. Cigarette?"

"I don't smoke."

"That's good, you'll live longer. Cigarettes are killers. Why else would people call them coffin-nails?"

"You got me," I said.

"I hope so," Mr. Sharpton said, lighting up. "I most sincerely hope so. You're top-shelf goods, Dink. I doubt if you believe that, but it's true."

"What's this offer you were talking about?"

"Tell me what happened to Skipper Brannigan."

Kabam, my worst fear come true. He couldn't know, nobody could, but somehow he did. I only sat there feeling numb, my head

pounding, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth like it was glued there.

“Come on, tell me.” His voice seemed to be coming in from far away, like on a shortwave radio late at night.

I got my tongue back where it belonged. It took an effort, but I managed. “I didn’t do anything.” My own voice seemed to be coming through on that same shitty shortwave band. “Skipper had an accident, that’s all. He was driving home and he went off the road. His car rolled over and went into Lockerby Stream. They found water in his lungs, so I guess he drowned, at least technically, but it was in the paper that he probably would have died, anyway. Most of his head got torn off in the rollover, or that’s what people say. And some people say it wasn’t an accident, that he killed himself, but I don’t buy that. Skipper was ... he was getting too much fun out of life to kill himself.”

“Yes. You were part of his fun, weren’t you?”

I didn’t say anything, but my lips were trembling and there were tears in my eyes.

Mr. Sharpton reached over and put his hand on my arm. It was the kind of thing you’d expect to get from an old guy like him, sitting with him in his big German car in a deserted parking lot, but I knew when he touched me that it wasn’t like that, he wasn’t hitting on me. It was good to be touched the way he touched me. Until then, I didn’t know how sad I was. Sometimes you don’t, because it’s just, I don’t know, all around. I put my head down. I didn’t start bawling or anything, but the tears went running down my cheeks. The swords on his tie doubled, then tripled—three for one, such a deal.

“If you’re worried that I’m a cop, you can quit. And I gave you money—that screws up any sort of prosecution that might come out of this. But even if that wasn’t the case, no one would believe what really happened to young Mr. Brannigan, anyway. Not even if you confessed on nationwide TV. Would they?”

“No,” I whispered. Then, louder: “I put up with a lot. Finally I couldn’t put up with any more. He made me, he brought it on himself.”

“Tell me what happened,” Mr. Sharpton said.

“I wrote him a letter,” I said. “A special letter.”

“Yes, very special indeed. And what did you put in it so it could only work on him?”

I knew what he meant, but there was more to it than that. When you personalized the letters, you increased their power. You made them lethal, not just dangerous.

“His sister’s name,” I said. I think that was when I gave up completely. “His sister, Debbie.”

IX

I've always had something, some kind of deal, and I sort of knew it, but not how to use it or what its name was or what it meant. And I sort of knew I had to keep quiet about it, because other people didn't have it. I thought they might put me in the circus if they found out. Or in jail.

I remember once—vaguely, I might have been three or four, it's one of my first memories—standing by this dirty window and looking out at the yard. There was a wood-chopping block and a mailbox with a red flag, so it must have been while we were at Aunt Mabel's, out in the country. That was where we lived after my father ran off. Ma got a job in the Harkerville Fancy Bakery and we moved back to town later on, when I was five or so. We were living in town when I started school, I know that. Because of Mrs. Bukowski's dog, having to walk past that fucking canine cannibal five days a week. I'll never forget that dog. It was a boxer with a white ear. Talk about Memory Lane.

Anyway, I was looking out and there were these flies buzzing around at the top of the window, you know how they do. I didn't like the sound, but I couldn't reach high enough, even with a rolled-up magazine, to swat them or make them go away. So instead of that, I made these two triangles on the windowpane, drawing in the dirt with the tip of my finger, and I made this other shape, a special circle-shape, to hold the triangles together. And as soon as I did that, as soon as I closed the circle, the flies—there were four or five of them—dropped dead on the windowsill. Big as jellybeans, they were—the black jellybeans that taste like licorice. I picked one up and looked at it, but it wasn't very interesting, so I dropped it on the floor and went on looking out the window.

Stuff like that would happen from time to time, but never on purpose, never because I made it happen. The first time I remember doing something absolutely on purpose—before Skipper, I mean—was when I used my whatever-it-was on Mrs. Bukowski's dog. Mrs.

Bukowski lived on the corner of our street, when we rented on Dugway Avenue. Her dog was mean and dangerous, every kid on the West Side was afraid of that white-eared fuck. She kept it tied in her side yard—hell, staked out in her side yard is more like it—and it barked at everyone who went by. Not harmless yapping, like some dogs do, but the kind that says If I could get you in here with me or get out there with you, I'd tear your balls off, Brewster. Once the dog did get loose, and it bit the paperboy. Anyone else's dog probably would have sniffed gas for that, but Mrs. Bukowski's son was the police chief, and he fixed it up, somehow.

I hated that dog the way I hated Skipper. In a way, I suppose, it was Skipper. I had to go by Mrs. Bukowski's on my way to school unless I wanted to detour all the way around the block and get called a sissy-boy, and I was terrified of the way that mutt would run to the end of its rope, barking so hard that foam would fly off its teeth and muzzle. Sometimes it hit the end of the rope so hard it'd go right off its feet, boi-yoi-yoinng, which might have looked funny to some people but never looked funny to me; I was just scared the rope (not a chain, but a plain old piece of rope) would break one day, and the dog would jump over the low picket fence between Mrs. Bukowski's yard and Dugway Avenue, and it would rip my throat out.

Then one day I woke up with an idea. I mean it was right there. I woke up with it the way some days I'd wake up with a great big throbbing boner. It was a Saturday, bright and early, and I didn't have to go anywhere near Mrs. Bukowski's if I didn't want to, but that day I did want to. I got out of bed and threw on my clothes just as fast as I could. I did everything fast because I didn't want to lose that idea. I would, too—I'd lose it the way you eventually lose the dreams you wake up with (or the boners you wake up with, if you want to be crude)—but right then I had the whole thing in my mind just as clear as a bell: words with triangles around them and curlicues over them, special circles to hold the whole shebang together ... two or three of those, overlapping for extra strength.

I just about flew through the living room (Ma was still sleeping, I could hear her snoring, and her pink bakery uniform was hung over the shower rod in the bathroom) and went into the kitchen. Ma had a little blackboard by the phone for numbers and reminders to herself—MA'S DAYBOARD instead of DINKY'S DAYBOARD, I guess you'd say—and I stopped just long enough to gleep the piece of pink chalk hanging on a string beside it. I put it in my pocket and went out the door. I remember what a beautiful morning that was, cool but not cold, the sky so blue it looked like someone had run it through the Happy Wheels Carwash, no one moving around much yet, most folks sleeping in a little, like everyone likes to do on Saturdays, if they can.

Mrs. Bukowski's dog wasn't sleeping in. Fuck, no. That dog was a firm believer in rooty-tooty, do your duty. It saw me coming through the picket-fence and went charging to the end of its rope as hard as ever, maybe even harder, as if some part of its dim little doggy brain knew it was Saturday and I had no business being there. It hit the end of the rope, boi-yoi-yoinng, and went right over backward. It was up again in a second, though, standing at the end of its rope and barking in its choky I'm-strangling-but-I-don't-care way. I suppose Mrs. Bukowski was used to that sound, maybe even liked it, but I've wondered since how the neighbors stood it.

I paid no attention that day. I was too excited to be scared. I fished the chalk out of my pocket and dropped down on one knee. For one second I thought the whole works had gone out of my head, and that was bad. I felt despair and sadness trying to fill me up and I thought, No, don't let it, don't let it, Dinky, fight it. Write anything, even if it's only FUCK MRS. BUKOWSKI'S DOG.

But I didn't write that. I drew this shape, I think it was a sankofite, instead. Some weird shape, but the right shape, because it unlocked everything else. My head flooded with stuff. It was wonderful, but at the same time it was really scary because there was so fucking much of it. For the next five minutes or so I knelt there on the sidewalk, sweating like a pig and writing like a mad fiend. I wrote

words I'd never heard and drew shapes I'd never seen—shapes nobody had ever seen: not just sankofites but japps and fouders and mirks. I wrote and drew until I was pink dust halfway to my right elbow and Ma's piece of chalk was nothing but a little pebble between my thumb and finger. Mrs. Bukowski's dog didn't die like the flies, it barked at me the whole time, and it probably drew back and ran out the length of its rope leash another time or two, but I didn't notice. I was in this total frenzy. I could never describe it to you in a million years, but I bet it's how great musicians like Mozart and Eric Clapton feel when they're writing their music, or how painters feel when they're getting their best work on canvas. If someone had come along, I would have ignored him. Shit, if Mrs. Bukowski's dog had finally broken its rope, jumped the fence, and clamped down on my ass, I probably would have ignored that.

It was eventual, man. It was so fucking eventual I can't even tell you.

No one did come, although a few cars went by and maybe the people in them wondered what that kid was doing, what he was drawing on the sidewalk, and Mrs. Bukowski's dog went on barking. At the end, I realized I had to make it stronger, and the way to do that was to make it just for the dog. I didn't know its name, so I printed BOXER with the last of the chalk, drew a circle around it, then made an arrow at the bottom of the circle, pointing to the rest. I felt dizzy and my head was throbbing, the way it does when you've just finished taking a super-hard test, or if you spend too long watching TV. I felt like I was going to be sick ... but I still also felt totally eventual.

I looked at the dog—it was still just as lively as ever, barking and kind of prancing on its back legs when it ran out of slack—but that didn't bother me. I went back home feeling easy in my mind. I knew Mrs. Bukowski's dog was toast. The same way, I bet, that a good painter knows when he's painted a good picture, or a good writer knows when he's written a good story. When it's right, I think you just know. It sits there in your head and hums.

Three days later the dog was eating the old dirt sandwich. I got the story from the best possible source when it comes to mean asshole dogs: the neighborhood mailman. Mr. Shermerhorn, his name was. Mr. Shermerhorn said Mrs. Bukowski's boxer for some reason started running around the tree he was tied to, and when he got to the end of his rope (ha-ha, end of his rope), he couldn't get back. Mrs. Bukowski was out shopping somewhere, so she was no help. When she got home, she found her dog lying at the base of the tree in her side yard, choked to death.

The writing on the sidewalk stayed there for about a week; then it rained hard and afterward there was just a pink blur. But until it rained, it stayed pretty sharp. And while it was sharp, no one walked on it. I saw this for myself. People—kids walking to school, ladies walking downtown, Mr. Shermerhorn, the mailman—would just kind of veer around it. They didn't even seem to know they were doing it. And nobody ever talked about it, either, like "What's up with this weird shit on the sidewalk?" or "What do you suppose you call something that looks like that?" (A foudler, dimbulb.) It was as if they didn't even see it was there. Except part of them must have. Why else would they have walked around it?

X

I didn't tell Mr. Sharpton all that, but I told him what he wanted to know about Skipper. I had decided I could trust him. Maybe that secret part of me knew I could trust him, but I don't think so. I think it was just the way he put his hand on my arm, like your Dad would. Not that I have a Dad, but I can imagine.

Plus, it was like he said—even if he was a cop and arrested me, what judge and jury would believe Skipper Brannigan had driven his car off the road because of a letter I sent him? Especially one full of nonsense words and symbols made up by a pizza delivery-boy who had flunked high school geometry. Twice.

When I was done, there was silence between us for a long time. At last Mr. Sharpton said, "He deserved it. You know that, don't you?"

And for some reason that did it. The dam burst and I cried like a baby. I must have cried for fifteen minutes or more. Mr. Sharpton put his arm around me and pulled me against his chest and I watered the lapel of his suit. If someone had driven by and seen us that way, they would have thought we were a couple of queers for sure, but nobody did. There was just him and me under the yellow mercury-vapor lamps, there by the Kart Korral. Yippy-ti-yi-yo, get along little shopping cart, Pug used to sing, for yew know Supr Savr will be yer new home. We'd laugh till we cried.

At last I was able to turn off the waterworks. Mr. Sharpton handed me a hanky and I wiped my eyes with it. "How did you know?" I asked. My voice sounded all deep and weird, like a foghorn.

"Once you were spotted, all it took was a little rudimentary detective work."

"Yeah, but how was I spotted?"

“We have certain people—a dozen or so in all—who look for fellows and gals like you,” he said. “They can actually see fellows and gals like you, Dink, the way certain satellites in space can see nuclear piles and power-plants. You folks show up yellow. Like matchflames is how this one spotter described it to me.” He shook his head and gave a wry little smile. “I’d like to see something like that just once in my life. Or be able to do what you do. Of course, I’d also like to be given a day—just one would be fine—when I could paint like Picasso or write like Faulkner.”

I gaped at him. “Is that true? There are people who can see—”

“Yes. They’re our bloodhounds. They crisscross the country—and all the other countries—looking for that bright yellow glow. Looking for matchheads in the darkness. This particular young woman was on Route 90, actually headed for Pittsburgh to catch a plane home—to grab a little R-and-R—when she saw you. Or sensed you. Or whatever it is they do. The finders don’t really know themselves, any more than you really know what you did to Skipper. Do you?”

“What—”

He raised a hand. “I told you that you wouldn’t get all the answers you’d like—this is something you’ll have to decide on the basis of what you feel, not on what you know—but I can tell you a couple of things. To begin with, Dink, I work for an outfit called the Trans Corporation. Our job is getting rid of the world’s Skipper Brannigans—the big ones, the ones who do it on a grand scale. We have company headquarters in Chicago and a training center in Peoria ... where you’ll spend a week, if you agree to my proposal.”

I didn’t say anything then, but I knew already I was going to say yes to his proposal. Whatever it was, I was going to say yes.

“You’re a tranny, my young friend. Better get used to the idea.”

“What is it?”

“A trait. There are folks in our organization who think of what you have ... what you can do ... as a talent or an ability or even a kind of glitch, but they’re wrong. Talent and ability are born of trait. Trait is general, talent and ability are specific.”

“You’ll have to simplify that. I’m a high-school dropout, remember.”

“I know,” he said. “I also know that you didn’t drop out because you were stupid; you dropped out because you didn’t fit. In that way, you are like every other tranny I’ve ever met.” He laughed in the sharp way people do when they’re not really amused. “All twenty-one of them. Now listen to me, and don’t play dumb. Creativity is like a hand at the end of your arm. But a hand has many fingers, doesn’t it?”

“Well, at least five.”

“Think of those fingers as abilities. A creative person may write, paint, sculpt, or think up math formulae; he or she might dance or sing or play a musical instrument. Those are the fingers, but creativity is the hand that gives them life. And just as all hands are basically the same—form follows function—all creative people are the same once you get down to the place where the fingers join.

“Trans is also like a hand. Sometimes its fingers are called precognition, the ability to see the future. Sometimes they’re postcognition, the ability to see the past—we have a guy who knows who killed John F. Kennedy, and it wasn’t Lee Harvey Oswald; it was, in fact, a woman. There’s telepathy, pyrokinesis, telempathy, and who knows how many others. We don’t know, certainly; this is a new world, and we’ve barely begun to explore its first continent. But trans is different from creativity in one vital way: it’s much rarer. One person in eight hundred is what occupational psychologists call ‘gifted.’ We believe that there may only be one tranny in each eight million people.”

That took my breath away—the idea that you might be one in eight million would take anybody’s breath away, right?

“That’s about a hundred and twenty for every billion ordinary folks,” he said. “We think there may be no more than three thousand so-called trannies in the whole world. We’re finding them, one by one. It’s slow work. The sensing ability is fairly low-level, but we still only have a dozen or so finders, and each one takes a lot of training. This is a hard calling ... but it’s also fabulously rewarding. We’re finding trannies and we’re putting them to work. That’s what we want to do with you, Dink: put you to work. We want to help you focus your talent, sharpen it, and use it for the betterment of all mankind. You won’t be able to see any of your old friends again—there’s no security risk on earth like an old friend, we’ve found—and there’s not a whole lot of cash in it, at least to begin with, but there’s a lot of satisfaction, and what I’m going to offer you is only the bottom rung of what may turn out to be a very high ladder.”

“Don’t forget those fringe benefits,” I said, kind of raising my voice on the last word, turning it into a question, if he wanted to take it that way.

He grinned and clapped me on the shoulder. “That’s right,” he said. “Those famous fringe benefits.”

By then I was starting to get excited. My doubts weren’t gone, but they were melting away. “So tell me about it,” I said. My heart was beating hard, but it wasn’t fear. Not anymore. “Make me an offer I can’t refuse.”

And that’s just what he did.

XI

Three weeks later I'm on an airplane for the first time in my life—and what a way to lose your cherry! The only passenger in a Lear 35, listening to Counting Crows pouring out of quad speakers with a Coke in one hand, watching as the altimeter climbs all the way to forty-two thousand feet. That's over a mile higher than most commercial jetliners fly, the pilot told me. And a ride as smooth as the seat of a girl's underpants.

I spent a week in Peoria, and I was homesick. Really homesick. Surprised the shit out of me. There were a couple of nights when I even cried myself to sleep. I'm ashamed to say that, but I've been truthful so far, and don't want to start lying or leaving things out now.

Ma was the least of what I missed. You'd think we would have been close, as it was "us against the world," in a manner of speaking, but my mother was never much for loving and comforting. She didn't whip on my head or put out her cigarettes in my armpits or anything like that, but so what? I mean, big whoop. I've never had any kids, so I guess I can't say for sure, but I somehow don't think being a great parent is about the stuff you didn't do to your rug monkeys. Ma was always more into her friends than me, and her weekly trip to the beauty shop, and Friday nights out at the Reservation. Her big ambition in life was to win a twenty-number Bingo and drive home in a brand-new Monte Carlo. I'm not sitting on the pity-pot, either. I'm just telling you how it was.

Mr. Sharpton called Ma and told her that I'd been chosen to intern in the Trans Corporation's advanced computer training and placement project, a special deal for non-diploma kids with potential. The story was actually pretty believable. I was a shitty math student and froze up almost completely in classes like English, where you were supposed to talk, but I was always on good terms with the school computers. In fact, although I don't like to brag (and I never let any of the faculty in on this little secret), I could program rings around Mr.

Jacobois and Mrs. Wilcoxon. I never cared much about computer games—they're strictly for dickbrains, in my humble opinion—but I could keyjack like a mad motherfucker. Pug used to drop by and watch me, sometimes.

"I can't believe you," he said once. "Man, you got that thing smokin and tokin."

I shrugged. "Any fool can peel the Apple," I said. "It takes a real man to eat the core."

So Ma believed it (she might have had a few more questions if she knew the Trans Corporation was flying me out to Illinois in a private jet, but she didn't), and I didn't miss her all that much. But I missed Pug, and John Cassiday, who was our other friend from our Supr Savr days. John plays bass in a punk band, wears a gold ring in his left eyebrow, and has just about every Subpop record ever made. He cried when Kurt Cobain ate the dirt sandwich. Didn't try to hide it or blame it on allergies, either. Just said, "I'm sad because Kurt died." John's eventual.

And I missed Harkerville. Perverse but true. Being at the training center in Peoria was like being born again, somehow, and I guess being born always hurts.

I thought I might meet some other people like me—if this was a book or a movie (or maybe just an episode of The X-Files), I would meet a cute chick with nifty little tits and the ability to shut doors from across the room—but that didn't happen. I'm pretty sure there were other trannies at Peoria when I was there, but Dr. Wentworth and the other folks running the place were careful to keep us separated. I once asked why, and got a runaround. That's when I started to realize that not everybody who had TRANSCORP printed on their shirts or walked around with TransCorp clipboards was my pal, or wanted to be my long-lost Dad.

And it was about killing people; that's what I was training for. The folks in Peoria didn't talk about that all the time, but no one tried to

sugarcoat it, either. I just had to remember the targets were bad guys, dictators and spies and serial killers, and as Mr. Sharpton said, people did it in wars all the time. Plus, it wasn't personal. No guns, no knives, no garrotes. I'd never get blood splashed on me.

Like I told you, I never saw Mr. Sharpton again—at least not yet, I haven't—but I talked to him every day of the week I was in Peoria, and that eased the pain and strangeness considerably. Talking to him was like having someone put a cool cloth on your brow. He gave me his number the night we talked in his Mercedes, and told me to call him anytime. Even at three in the morning, if I was feeling upset. Once I did just that. I almost hung up on the second ring, because people may say call them anytime, even at three in the morning, but they don't really expect you to do it. But I hung in there. I was homesick, yeah, but it was more than that. The place wasn't what I had expected, exactly, and I wanted to tell Mr. Sharpton so. See how he took it, kind of.

He answered on the third ring, and although he sounded sleepy (big surprise there, huh?), he didn't sound at all pissed. I told him that some of the stuff they were doing was quite weird. The test with all the flashing lights, for example. They said it was a test for epilepsy, but—

"I went to sleep right in the middle of it," I said. "And when I woke up, I had a headache and it was hard to think. You know what I felt like? A file-cabinet after someone's been rummaging through it."

"What's your point, Dink?" Mr. Sharpton asked.

"I think they hypnotized me," I said.

A brief pause. Then: "Maybe they did. Probably they did."

"But why? Why would they? I'm doing everything they ask, so why would they want to hypnotize me?"

“I don’t know all their routines and protocols, but I suspect they’re programming you. Putting a lot of housekeeping stuff on the lower levels of your mind so they won’t have to junk up the conscious part ... and maybe screw up your special ability, while they’re at it. Really no different than programming a computer’s hard disk, and no more sinister.”

“But you don’t know for sure?”

“No—as I say, training and testing are not my purview. But I’ll make some calls, and Dr. Wentworth will talk to you. It may even be that an apology is due. If that’s the case, Dink, you may be sure that it will be tendered. Our trannies are too rare and too valuable to be upset needlessly. Now, is there anything else?”

I thought about it, then said no. I thanked him and hung up. It had been on the tip of my tongue to tell him I thought I’d been drugged, as well ... given some sort of mood-elevator to help me through the worst of my homesickness, but in the end I decided not to bother him. It was three in the morning, after all, and if they had been giving me anything, it was probably for my own good.

XII

Dr. Wentworth came to see me the next day—he was the Big Kahuna—and he did apologize. He was perfectly nice about it, but he had a look, I don't know, like maybe Mr. Sharpton had called him about two minutes after I hung up and gave him a hot reaming.

Dr. Wentworth took me for a walk on the back lawn—green and rolling and damned near perfect there at the end of spring—and said he was sorry for not keeping me “up to speed.” The epilepsy test really was an epilepsy test, he said (and a CAT-scan, too), but since it induced a hypnotic state in most subjects, they usually took advantage of it to give certain “baseline instructions.” In my case, they were instructions about the computer programs I'd be using in Columbia City. Dr. Wentworth asked me if I had any other questions. I lied and said no.

You probably think that's weird, but it's not. I mean, I had a long and sucky school career which ended three months short of graduation. I had teachers I liked as well as teachers I hated, but never one I entirely trusted. I was the kind of kid who always sat in the back of the room if the teacher's seating-chart wasn't alphabetical, and never took part in class discussions. I mostly said “Huh?” when I was called on, and wild horses wouldn't have dragged a question out of me. Mr. Sharpton was the only guy I ever met who was able to get into where I lived, and ole Doc Wentworth with his bald head and sharp eyes behind his little rimless glasses was no Mr. Sharpton. I could imagine pigs flying south for the winter before I could imagine opening up to that dude, let alone crying on his shoulder.

And fuck, I didn't know what else to ask, anyway. A lot of the time I liked it in Peoria, and I was excited by the prospects ahead—new job, new house, new town. People were great to me in Peoria. Even the food was great—meatloaf, fried chicken, milkshakes, everything I liked. Okay, I didn't like the diagnostic tests, those boogersnots you have to do with an IBM pencil, and sometimes I'd feel dopey, as if

someone had put something in my mashed potatoes (or hyper, sometimes I'd feel that way, too), and there were other times—at least two—when I was pretty sure I'd been hypnotized again. But so what? I mean, was any of it a big deal after you'd been chased around a supermarket parking lot by a maniac who was laughing and making race-car noises and trying to run you over with a shopping cart?

XIII

I had one more talk on the phone with Mr. Sharpton that I suppose I should mention. That was just a day before my second airplane ride, the one that took me to Columbia City, where a guy was waiting with the keys to my new house. By then I knew about the cleaners, and the basic money-rule—start every week broke, end every week broke—and I knew who to call locally if I had a problem. (Any big problem and I call Mr. Sharpton, who is technically my “control.”) I had maps, a list of restaurants, directions to the cinema complex and the mall. I had a line on everything but the most important thing of all.

“Mr. Sharpton, I don’t know what to do,” I said. I was talking to him on the phone just outside the caff. There was a phone in my room, but by then I was too nervous to sit down, let alone lie on my bed. If they were still putting shit in my food, it sure wasn’t working that day.

“I can’t help you there, Dink,” he said, calm as ever. “So solly, Cholly.”

“What do you mean? You’ve got to help me! You recruited me, for jeepers’ sake!”

“Let me give you a hypothetical case. Suppose I’m the President of a well-endowed college. Do you know what well-endowed means?”

“Lots of bucks. I’m not stupid, I told you that.”

“So you did—I apologize. Anyhow, let’s say that I, President Sharpton, use some of my school’s plentiful bucks to hire a great novelist as the writer-in-residence, or a great pianist to teach music. Would that entitle me to tell the novelist what to write, or the pianist what to compose?”

“Probably not.”

“Absolutely not. But let’s say it did. If I told the novelist, ‘Write a comedy about Betsy Ross screwing around with George Washington in Gay Paree,’ do you think he could do it?”

I got laughing. I couldn’t help it. Mr. Sharpton’s just got a vibe about him, somehow.

“Maybe,” I said. “Especially if you whipped a bonus on the guy.”

“Okay, but even if he held his nose and cranked it out, it would likely be a very bad novel. Because creative people aren’t always in charge. And when they do their best work, they’re hardly ever in charge. They’re just sort of rolling along with their eyes shut, yelling Wheeeee.”

“What’s all that got to do with me? Listen, Mr. Sharpton—when I try to imagine what I’m going to do in Columbia City, all I see is a great big blank. Help people, you said. Make the world a better place. Get rid of the Skippers. All that sounds great, except I don’t know how to do it!”

“You will,” he said. “When the time comes, you will.”

“You said Wentworth and his guys would focus my talent. Sharpen it. Mostly what they did was give me a bunch of stupid tests and make me feel like I was back in school. Is it all in my subconscious? Is it all on the hard disk?”

“Trust me, Dink,” he said. “Trust me, and trust yourself.”

So I did. I have. But just lately, things haven’t been so good. Not so good at all.

That goddam Neff—all the bad stuff started with him. I wish I’d never seen his picture. And if I had to see a picture, I wish I’d seen one where he wasn’t smiling.

XIV

My first week in Columbia City, I did nothing. I mean absolutely zilch. I didn't even go to the movies. When the cleaners came, I just went to the park and sat on a bench and felt like the whole world was watching me. When it came time to get rid of my extra money on Thursday, I ended up shredding better than fifty dollars in the garbage disposal. And doing that was new to me then, remember. Talk about feeling weird—man, you don't have a clue. While I was standing there, listening to the motor under the sink grinding away, I kept thinking about Ma. If Ma had been there to see what I was doing, she would have probably run me through with a butcher-knife to make me stop. That was a dozen twenty-number Bingo games (or two dozen cover-alls) going straight down the kitchen pig.

I slept like shit that week. Every now and then I'd go to the little study—I didn't want to, but my feet would drag me there. Like they say murderers always return to the scenes of their crimes, I guess. Anyway, I'd stand there in the doorway and look at the dark computer screen, at the Global Village modem, and I'd just sweat with guilt and embarrassment and fear. Even the way the desk was so neat and clean, without a single paper or note on it, made me sweat. I could just about hear the walls muttering stuff like "Nah, nothing going on in here" and "Who's this turkey, the cable-installer?"

I had nightmares. In one of them, the doorbell rings and when I open it, Mr. Sharpton's there. He's got a pair of handcuffs. "Put out your wrists, Dink," he says. "We thought you were a tranny, but obviously we were wrong. Sometimes it happens."

"No, I am," I say. "I am a tranny, I just need a little more time to get acclimated. I've never been away from home before, remember."

"You've had five years," he goes.

I'm stunned. I can't believe it. But part of me knows it's true. It feels like days, but it's really been five fucking years, and I haven't turned

on the computer in the little study a single time. If not for the cleaners, the desk it sits on would be six inches deep in dust.

“Hold out your hands, Dink. Stop making this hard on both of us.”

“I won’t,” I say, “and you can’t make me.”

He looks behind him then, and who should come up the steps but Skipper Brannigan. He is wearing his red nylon tunic, only now TRANSCORP is sewn on it instead of SUPR SAVR. He looks pale but otherwise okay. Not dead is what I mean. “You thought you did something to me, but you didn’t,” Skipper says. “You couldn’t do anything to anyone. You’re just a hippie waste.”

“I’m going to put these cuffs on him,” Mr. Sharpton says to Skipper. “If he gives me any trouble, run him over with a shopping cart.”

“Totally eventual,” Skipper says, and I wake up half out of my bed and on the floor, screaming.

XV

Then, about ten days after I moved in, I had another kind of dream. I don't remember what it was, but it must have been a good one, because when I woke up, I was smiling. I could feel it on my face, a big, happy smile. It was like when I woke up with the idea about Mrs. Bukowski's dog. Almost exactly like that.

I pulled on a pair of jeans and went into the study. I turned on the computer and opened the window marked TOOLS. There was a program in there called DINKY'S NOTEBOOK. I went right to it, and all my symbols were there—circles, triangles, japps, mirks, rhomboids, bews, smims, fouders, hundreds more. Thousands more. Maybe millions more. It's sort of like Mr. Sharpton said: a new world, and I'm on the coastline of the first continent.

All I know is that all at once it was there for me, I had a great big Macintosh computer to work with instead of a little piece of pink chalk, and all I had to do was type the words for the symbols and the symbols would appear. I was jacked to the max. I mean my God. It was like a river of fire burning in the middle of my head. I wrote, I called up symbols, I used the mouse to drag everything where it was supposed to be. And when it was done, I had a letter. One of the special letters.

But a letter to who?

A letter to where?

Then I realized it didn't matter. Make a few minor customizing touches, and there were many people the letter could go to ... although this one had been written for a man rather than a woman. I don't know how I knew that; I just did. I decided to start with Cincinnati, only because Cincinnati was the first city to come into my mind. It could as easily have been Zurich, Switzerland, or Waterville, Maine.

I tried to open a TOOLS program titled DINKYMAIL. Before the computer would let me in there, it prompted me to wake up my modem. Once the modem was running, the computer wanted a 312 area code. 312's Chicago, and I imagine that, as far as the phone company is concerned, my compu-calls all come from TransCorp's headquarters. I didn't care one way or another; that was their business. I had found my business and was taking care of it.

With the modem awake and linked to Chicago, the computer flashed
DINKYMAIL READY.

I clicked on LOCALE. I'd been in the study almost three hours by then, with only one break to take a quick piss, and I could smell myself, sweating and stinking like a monkey in a greenhouse. I didn't mind. I liked the smell. I was having the time of my life. I was fucking delirious.

I typed CINCINNATI and hit EXECUTE.

NO LISTINGS CINCINNATI

the computer said. Okay, not a problem. Try Columbus—closer to home, anyway. And yes, folks! We have a Bingo.

TWO LISTINGS COLUMBUS

There were two telephone numbers. I clicked on the top one, curious and a little afraid of what might pop out. But it wasn't a dossier, a profile, or—God forbid—a photograph. There was one single word:

MUFFIN.

Say what?

But then I knew. Muffin was Mr. Columbus's pet. Very likely a cat. I called up my special letter again, transposed two symbols and deleted a third. Then I added MUFFIN to the top, with an arrow pointing down. There. Perfect.

Did I wonder who Muffin's owner was, or what he had done to warrant TransCorp's attention, or exactly what was going to happen to him? I did not. The idea that my conditioning at Peoria might have been partially responsible for this disinterest never crossed my mind, either. I was doing my thing, that was all. Just doing my thing, and as happy as a clam at high tide.

I called the number on the screen. I had the computer's speaker on, but there was no hello, only the screechy mating-call of another computer. Just as well, really. Life's easier when you subtract the human element. Then it's like that movie, *Twelve O'Clock High*, cruising over Berlin in your trusty B-25, looking through your trusty Norden bombsight and waiting for just the right moment to push your trusty button. You might see smokestacks, or factory roofs, but no people. The guys who dropped the bombs from their B-25s didn't have to hear the screams of mothers whose children had just been reduced to guts, and I didn't even have to hear anyone say hello. A very good deal.

After a little bit, I turned off the speaker anyway. I found it distracting.

MODEM FOUND,

the computer flashed, and then

SEARCH FOR E-MAIL ADDRESS Y/N.

I typed Y and waited. This time the wait was longer. I think the computer was going back to Chicago again, and getting what it needed to unlock the e-mail address of Mr. Columbus. Still, it was less than thirty seconds before the computer was right back at me with

E-MAIL ADDRESS FOUND

SEND DINKYMAIL Y/N.

I typed Y with absolutely no hesitation. The computer flashed

SENDING DINKYMAIL

and then

DINKYMAIL SENT.

That was all. No fireworks.

I wonder what happened to Muffin, though.

You know. After.

XVI

That night I called Mr. Sharpton and said, "I'm working."

"That's good, Dink. Great news. Feel better?" Calm as ever. Mr. Sharpton is like the weather in Tahiti.

"Yeah," I said. The fact was, I felt blissful. It was the best day of my life. Doubts or no doubts, worries or no worries, I still say that. The most eventual day of my life. It was like a river of fire in my head, a fucking river of fire, can you get that? "Do you feel better, Mr. Sharpton? Relieved?"

"I'm happy for you, but I can't say I'm relieved, because—"

"—you were never worried in the first place."

"Got it in one," he said.

"Everything's eventual, in other words."

He laughed at that. He always laughs when I say that. "That's right, Dink. Everything's eventual."

"Mr. Sharpton?"

"Yes?"

"E-mail's not exactly private, you know. Anybody who's really dedicated can hack into it."

"Part of what you send is a suggestion that the recipient delete the message from all files, is it not?"

"Yes, but I can't absolutely guarantee that he'll do it. Or she."

"Even if they don't, nothing can happen to someone else who chances on such a message, am I correct? Because it's ..."

personalized.”

“Well, it might give someone a headache, but that would be about all.”

“And the communication itself would look like so much gibberish.”

“Or a code.”

He laughed heartily at that. “Let them try to break it, Dinky, eh? Just let them try!”

I sighed. “I suppose.”

“Let’s discuss something more important, Dink ... how did it feel?”

“Fucking wonderful.”

“Good. Don’t question wonder, Dink. Don’t ever question wonder.”

And he hung up.

XVII

Sometimes I have to send actual letters—print out the stuff I whomp up in DINKY'S NOTEBOOK, stick it in an envelope, lick stamps, and mail it off to somebody somewhere. Professor Ann Tevitch, University of New Mexico at Las Cruces. Mr. Andrew Neff, c/o The New York Post, New York, New York. Billy Unger, General Delivery, Stovington, Vermont. Only names, but they were still more upsetting than the phone numbers. More personal than the phone numbers. It was like seeing faces swim up at you for a second inside your Norden bombsight. I mean, what a freak-out, right? You're up there at twenty-five thousand feet, no faces allowed up there, but sometimes one shows up for a second or two, just the same.

I wondered how a University Professor could get along without a modem (or a guy whose address was a fucking New York newspaper, for that matter), but I never wondered too much. I didn't have to. We live in a modern world, but letters don't have to be sent by computer, after all. There's still snail-mail. And the stuff I really needed was always in the database. The fact that Unger had a 1957 Thunderbird, for instance. Or that Ann Tevitch had a loved one—perhaps her husband, perhaps her son, perhaps her father—named Simon.

And people like Tevitch and Unger were exceptions. Most of the folks I reach out and touch are like that first one in Columbus—fully equipped for the twenty-first century. SENDING DINKYMAIL, DINKYMAIL SENT, velly good, so long, Cholly.

I could have gone on like that for a long time, maybe forever—browsing the database (there's no schedule to follow, no list of primary cities and targets; I'm completely on my own ... unless all that shit is also in my subconscious, down there on the hard disk), going to afternoon movies, enjoying the Ma-less silence of my little house, and dreaming of my next step up the ladder, except I woke up feeling horny one day. I worked for an hour or so, browsing

around in Australia, but it was no good—my dick kept trespassing on my brain, so to speak. I shut off the computer and went down to News Plus to see if I could find a magazine featuring pretty ladies in frothy lingerie.

As I got there, a guy was coming out, reading the Columbus Dispatch. I never read the paper myself. Why bother? It's the same old shit day in and day out, dictators beating the ching-chong out of people weaker than they are, men in uniforms beating the ching-chong out of soccer balls or footballs, politicians kissing babies and kissing ass. Mostly stories about the Skipper Brannigans of the world, in other words. And I wouldn't have seen this story even if I'd happened to look at the newspaper display rack once I got inside, because it was on the bottom half of the front page, below the fold. But this fucking dimbulb comes out with the paper hanging open and his face buried inside it.

In the lower right corner was a picture of a white-haired guy smoking a pipe and smiling. He looked like a good-humored fuck, probably Irish, eyes all crinkled up and these white bushy eyebrows. And the headline over the photo—not a big one, but you could read it—said NEFF SUICIDE STILL PUZZLES, GRIEVES COLLEAGUES

For a second or two I thought I'd just skip News Plus that day, I didn't feel like ladies in lingerie after all, maybe I'd just go home and take a nap. If I went in, I'd probably pick up a copy of the Dispatch, wouldn't be able to help myself, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know any more about that Irish-looking guy than I already did ... which was nothing at all, as you can fucking believe I hastened to tell myself. Neff couldn't be that weird a name anyway, only four letters, not like Shittendookus or Horecake, there must be thousands of Neffs, if you're talking coast to coast. This one didn't have to be the Neff I knew about, the one who loved Frank Sinatra records.

It would be better, in any case, to just leave and come back tomorrow. Tomorrow the picture of that guy with the pipe would be gone. Tomorrow somebody else's picture would be there, on the lower right corner of page one. People always dying, right? People

who aren't superstars or anything, just famous enough to get their pictures down there in the lower right corner of page one. And sometimes people were puzzled about it, the way folks back home in Harkerville had been puzzled about Skipper's death—no alcohol in his blood, clear night, dry road, not the suicidal type.

The world is full of mysteries like that, though, and sometimes it's best not to solve them. Sometimes the solutions aren't, you know, too eventual.

But willpower has never been my strong point. I can't always keep away from the chocolate, even though I know my skin doesn't like it, and I couldn't keep away from the Columbus Dispatch that day. I went on inside and bought one.

I started home, then had a funny thought. The funny thought was that I didn't want a newspaper with Andrew Neff's picture on the front page going out with my trash. The trash pick-up guys came in a city truck, surely they didn't—couldn't—have anything to do with TransCorp, but ...

There was this show me and Pug used to watch one summer back when we were little kids. Golden Years, it was called. You probably don't remember it. Anyway, there was a guy on that show who used to say "Perfect paranoia is perfect awareness." It was like his motto. And I sort of believe that.

Anyway, I went to the park instead of back home. I sat on a bench and read the story, and when I was done, I stuck the paper in a park trashbarrel. I didn't even like doing that, but hey—if Mr. Sharpton has got a guy following me around and checking on every little thing I throw away, I'm fucked up the wazoo no matter what.

There was no doubt that Andrew Neff, age sixty-two, a columnist for the Post since 1970, had committed suicide. He took a bunch of pills that probably would have done the trick, then climbed into his bathtub, put a plastic bag over his head, and rounded the evening off

by slitting his wrists. There was a man totally dedicated to avoiding counselling.

He left no note, though, and the autopsy showed no signs of disease. His colleagues scoffed at the idea of Alzheimer's, or even early senility. "He was the sharpest guy I've ever known, right up to the day he died," a guy named Pete Hamill said. "He could have gone on Challenge Jeopardy! and run both boards. I have no idea why Andy did such a thing." Hamill went on to say that one of Neff's "charming oddities" was his complete refusal to participate in the computer revolution. No modems for him, no laptop word processor, no handheld spell-checker from Franklin Electronic Publishers. He didn't even have a CD player in his apartment, Hamill said; Neff claimed, perhaps only half-joking, that compact discs were the Devil's work. He loved the Chairman of the Board, but only on vinyl.

This guy Hamill and several others said Neff was unfailingly cheerful, right up to the afternoon he filed his last column, went home, drank a glass of wine, and then demo'd himself. One of the Post's chatter columnists, Liz Smith, said she'd shared a piece of pie with him just before he left on that last day, and Neff had seemed "a trifle distracted, but otherwise fine."

Distracted, sure. With a headful of fouders, bews, and smims, you'd be distracted, too.

Neff, the piece went on, had been something of an anomaly on the Post, which sticks up for the more conservative view of life—I guess they don't come right out and recommend electrocuting welfare recipients after three years and still no job, but they do hint that it's always an option. I guess Neff was the house liberal. He wrote a column called "Eneff Is Eneff," and in it he talked about changing the way New York treated single teen mothers, suggested that maybe abortion wasn't always murder, argued that the low-income housing in the outer boroughs was a self-perpetuating hate machine. Near the end of his life, he'd been writing columns about the size of the military, and asking why we as a country felt we had to keep pouring on the bucks when there was, essentially, no one left to fight except

for the terrorists. He said we'd do better to spend that money creating jobs. And Post readers, who would have crucified anyone else saying stuff like that, pretty much loved it when Neff laid it down. Because he was funny. Because he was charming. Maybe because he was Irish and had kissed the Blarney Stone.

That was about all. I started home. Somewhere along the way I took a detour, though, and ended up walking all over downtown. I zigged and zagged, walking down boulevards and cutting through parking lots, all the time thinking about Andrew Neff climbing into his bathtub and putting a Baggie over his head. A big one, a gallon-size, keeps all your leftovers supermarket-fresh.

He was funny. He was charming. And I had killed him. Neff had opened my letter and it had gotten into his head, somehow. Judging by what I'd read in the paper, the special words and symbols took maybe three days to fuck him up enough to swallow the pills and climb into the tub.

He deserved it.

That's what Mr. Sharpton said about Skipper, and maybe he was right ... that time. But did Neff deserve it? Was there shit about him I didn't know, did he maybe like little girls in the wrong way or push dope or go after people too weak to fight back, like Skipper had gone after me with the shopping cart?

We want to help you use your talent for the betterment of all mankind, Mr. Sharpton said, and surely that didn't mean making a guy off himself because he thought the Defense Department was spending too much money on smart-bombs. Paranoid shit like that is strictly for movies starring Steven Seagal and Jean-Claude Van Damme.

Then I had a bad idea—a scary idea.

Maybe TransCorp didn't want him dead because he wrote that stuff.

Maybe they wanted him dead because people—the wrong people—were starting to think about what he wrote.

“That’s crazy,” I said, right out loud, and a woman looking into the window of Columbia City-Oh So Pretty turned around and gave me the old fish-eye.

I ended up at the public library around two o’clock, with my legs aching and my head throbbing. I kept seeing that guy in the bathtub, with his wrinkled old man’s tits and white chest-hair, his nice smile gone, replaced by this vague Planet X look. I kept seeing him putting a Baggie over his head, humming a Sinatra tune (“My Way,” maybe) as he snugged it down tight, then peered through it the way you’d peer through a cloudy window, so he could see to slit the veins in his wrists. I didn’t want to see that stuff, but I couldn’t stop. My bombsight had turned into a telescope.

They had a computer room in the library, and you could get on the Internet at a very reasonable cost. I had to get a library card, too, but that was okay. A library card is good to have, you can never have too much ID.

It took me only three bucks’ worth of time to find Ann Tevitch and call up the report of her death. The story started, I saw with a sinking sensation, in the bottom righthand corner of page one, The Official Dead Folks’ Nook, and then jumped to the obituary page. Professor Tevitch had been a pretty lady, blond, thirty-seven. In the photo she was holding her glasses in her hand, as if she wanted people to know she wore them ... but as if she’d wanted people to see what pretty eyes she had, too. That made me feel sad and guilty.

Her death was startlingly like Skipper’s—coming home from her office at UNM just after dark, maybe hurrying a little because it was her turn to make supper, but what the hell, good driving conditions and great visibility. Her car—vanity license plate DNA FAN, I happened to know—had veered off the road, overturned, and landed in a drywash. She was still alive when someone spotted the

headlights and found her, but there had never been any real hope; her injuries were too grave.

There was no alcohol in her system and her marriage was in good shape (no kids, at least, thank God for small favors), so the idea of suicide was farfetched. She had been looking forward to the future, had even talked about getting a computer to celebrate a new research grant. She'd refused to own a PC since 1988 or so; had lost some valuable data in one when it locked up, and had distrusted them ever since. She would use her department's equipment when she absolutely had to, but that was all.

The coroner's verdict had been accidental death.

Professor Ann Tevitch, a clinical biologist, had been in the forefront of West Coast AIDS research. Another scientist, this one in California, said that her death might set back the search for a cure five years. "She was a key player," he said. "Smart, yes, but more—I once heard someone refer to her as 'a natural-born facilitator,' and that's as good a description as any. Ann was the kind of person who holds other people together. Her death is a great loss to the dozens of people who knew and loved her, but it's an even greater loss to this cause."

Billy Unger was also easy enough to find. His picture topped page one of the Stovington Weekly Courant instead of getting stuck down there in The Dead Folks' Nook, but that might have been because there weren't many famous people in Stovington. Unger had been General William "Roll Em" Unger, winner of the Silver Star and Bronze Star in Korea. During the Kennedy administration he was an Undersecretary of Defense (Acquisition Reform), and one of the really big war-hawks of that time. Kill the Russkies, drink their blood, keep America safe for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, that sort of thing.

Then, around the time Lyndon Johnson was escalating the war in Vietnam, Billy Unger had a change of mind and heart. He began writing letters to newspapers. He started his op-ed page career by

saying that we were handling the war wrong. He progressed to the idea that we were wrong to be in Vietnam at all. Then, around 1975 or so, he got to the point of saying all wars were wrong. That was okay with most Vermonters.

He served seven terms in the state legislature, starting in 1978. When a group of Progressive Democrats asked him to run for the U.S. Senate in 1996, he said he wanted to “do some reading and consider his options.” The implication was that he would be ready for a national career in politics by 2000, 2002 at the latest. He was getting old, but Vermonters like old guys, I guess. 1996 went past without Unger declaring himself a candidate for anything (possibly because his wife died of cancer), and before 2002 came around, he bought himself a big old dirt sandwich and ate every bite.

There was a small but loyal contingent in Stovington which claimed Roll Em’s death was an accident, that Silver Star winners don’t jump off their roofs even if they have lost a wife to cancer in the last year or so, but the rest pointed out that the guy probably hadn’t been repairing the shingles—not in his nightshirt, not at two o’clock in the morning.

Suicide was the verdict.

Yeah. Right. Kiss my ass and go to Heaven.

XVIII

I left the library and thought I'd head home. Instead, I went back to the same park bench again. I sat there until the sun was low and the place had pretty much emptied out of kids and Frisbee-catching dogs. And although I'd been in Columbia City for three months by then, it was the latest I'd ever been out. That's sad, I guess. I thought I was living a life here, finally getting away from Ma and living a life, but all I've been doing is throwing a shadow.

If people, certain people, were checking up on me, they might wonder why the change in routine. So I got up, went on home, boiled up a bag of that shit-on-a-shingle stuff, and turned on my TV. I've got cable, the full package including premium movie channels, and I've never seen a single bill. How's that for an eventual deal? I turned on Cinemax. Rutger Hauer was playing a blind karate-fighter. I sat down on the couch beneath my fake Rembrandt and watched the show. I didn't see it, but I ate my chow and looked at it.

I thought about stuff. About a newspaper columnist who had liberal ideas and a conservative readership. About an AIDS researcher who served an important linking function with other AIDS researchers. About an old general who changed his mind. I thought about the fact that I only knew these three by name because they didn't have modems and e-mail capability.

There was other stuff to think about, too. Like how you could hypnotize a talented guy, or drug him, or maybe even expose him to other talented guys in order to keep him from asking any of the wrong questions or doing any of the wrong things. Like how you could make sure such a talented guy couldn't run away even if he happened to wake up to the truth. You'd do that by setting him up in what was, essentially, a cashless existence ... a life where rule number one was no ratholing any extra dough, not even pocket-change. What sort of talented guy would fall for something like that? A naive one, with few friends and next to no self-image. A guy who

would sell you his talented soul for a few groceries and seventy bucks a week, because he believes that's about what it's worth.

I didn't want to think about any of that. I tried to concentrate on Rutger Hauer, doing all that amusing blind karate shit (Pug would have laughed his ass off if he'd been there, believe me), so I wouldn't have to think about any of that.

Two hundred, for instance. There was a number I didn't want to think about. 200. 10 x 20, 40 x 5. CC, to the old Romans. At least two hundred times I'd pushed the button that brought the message DINKYMAIL SENT up on my screen.

It occurred to me—for the first time, as if I was finally waking up—that I was a murderer. A mass murderer.

Yes indeed. That's what it comes down to.

Good of mankind? Bad of mankind? Indifferent of mankind? Who makes those judgements? Mr. Sharpton? His bosses? Their bosses? And does it matter?

I decided it didn't matter a fuck in a rabbit-hutch. I further decided I really couldn't spend too much time moaning (even to myself) how I had been drugged, hypnotized, or exposed to some kind of mind-control. The truth was, I'd been doing what I was doing because I loved the feeling I got when I was composing the special letters, the feeling that there was a river of fire running through the center of my head.

Mostly, I'd been doing it because I could.

"That's not true," I said ... but not real loud. I whispered it under my breath. They probably don't have any bugs planted here, I'm sure they don't, but it's best to be safe.

I started writing this ... what is it? A report, maybe. I started writing this report later that night ... as soon as the Rutger Hauer movie was

over, in fact. I write in a notebook, though, not on my computer, and I write in plain old English. No sankofites, no bews, no smims. There's a loose floor-tile under the Ping-Pong table down in the basement. That's where I keep my report. I just now looked back at how I started. I've got a good job now, I wrote, and no reason to feel glum. Idiotic. But of course, any fool who can pucker is apt to whistle past the graveyard.

When I went to bed that night, I dreamed I was in the parking lot of the Supr Savr. Pug was there, wearing his red duster and a hat on his head like the one Mickey Mouse wore in Fantasia—that's the movie where Mickey played the Sorcerer's Apprentice. Halfway across the parking lot, shopping carts were lined up in a row. Pug would raise his hand, then lower it. Each time he did this, a cart would start rolling by itself, gathering speed, rushing across the lot until it crashed into the brick side of the supermarket. They were piling up there, a glittering junkheap of metal and wheels. For once in his life, Pug wasn't smiling. I wanted to ask him what he was doing and what it meant, but of course I knew.

"He's been good to me," I told Pug in this dream. It was Mr. Sharpton I meant, of course. "He's been really, really eventual."

Pug turned fully to me then, and I saw it wasn't Pug at all. It was Skipper, and his head had been smashed in all the way down to the eyebrows. Shattered hunks of skull stuck up in a circle, making him look like he was wearing a bone crown.

"You're not looking through a bombsight," Skipper said, and grinned. "You are the bombsight. How do you like that, Dinkster?"

I woke up in the dark of my room, sweating, with my hands over my mouth to hold in a scream, so I guess I didn't like it very much.

XIX

Writing this has been a sad education, let me tell you. It's like hey, Dink, welcome to the real world. Mostly it's the image of grinding up dollar bills in the kitchen pig that comes to me when I think about what has happened to me, but I know that's only because it's easier to think of grinding up money (or chucking it into the storm-drain) than it is to think about grinding up people. Sometimes I hate myself, sometimes I'm scared for my immortal soul (if I have one), and sometimes I'm just embarrassed. Trust me, Mr. Sharpton said, and I did. I mean, duh, how dumb can you get? I tell myself I'm just a kid, the same age as the kids who crewed those B-25s I sometimes think about, that kids are allowed to be dumb. But I wonder if that's true when lives are at stake.

And, of course, I'm still doing it.

Yes.

I thought at first that I wouldn't be able to, no more than the kids in Mary Poppins could keep floating around the house when they lost their happy thoughts ... but I could. And once I sat down in front of the computer screen and that river of fire started to flow, I was lost. You see (at least I think you do), this is what I was put on Planet Earth for. Can I be blamed for doing the thing that finishes me off, that completes me?

Answer: yes. Absolutely.

But I can't stop. Sometimes I tell myself that I've gone on because if I do stop—maybe even for a day—they'll know I've caught on, and the cleaners will make an unscheduled stop. Except what they'll clean up this time will be me. But that's not why. I do it because I'm just another addict, same as a guy smoking crack in an alley or some chick taking a spike in her arm. I do it because of the hateful fucking rush, I do it because when I'm working in DINKY'S NOTEBOOK, everything's eventual. It's like being caught in a candy trap. And it's

all the fault of that dork who came out of News Plus with his fucking Dispatch open. If not for him, I'd still see nothing but cloud-hazy buildings in the crosshairs. No people, just targets.

You are the bombsight, Skipper said in my dream. You are the bombsight, Dinkster.

That's true. I know it is. Horrible but true. I'm just another tool, just the lens the real bombardier looks through. Just the button he pushes.

What bombardier, you ask?

Oh come on, get real.

I thought of calling him, how's that for crazy? Or maybe it's not. "Call me anytime, Dink, even three in the morning." That's what the man said, and I'm pretty sure that's what the man meant—about that, at least, Mr. Sharpton wasn't lying.

I thought of calling him and saying, "You want to know what hurts the most, Mr. Sharpton? That thing you said about how I could make the world a better place by getting rid of people like Skipper. The truth is, you're the guys like Skipper."

Sure. And I'm the shopping cart they chase people with, laughing and barking and making race-car sounds. I work cheap, too ... at bargain-basement rates. So far I've killed over two hundred people, and what did it cost TransCorp? A little house in a third-rate Ohio town, seventy bucks a week, and a Honda automobile. Plus cable TV. Don't want to forget that.

I stood there for awhile, looking at the telephone, then put it down again. Couldn't say any of that. It would be the same as putting a Baggie over my head and then slitting my wrists.

So what am I going to do?

Oh God, what am I going to do?

XX

It's been two weeks since I last took this notebook out from under the basement tile and wrote in it. Twice I've heard the mail-slot clack on Thursdays, during *As the World Turns*, and gone out into the hall to get my money. I've gone to four movies, all in the afternoon. Twice I've ground up money in the kitchen pig, and thrown my loose change down the storm-drain, hiding what I was doing behind the blue plastic recycling basket when I put it down on the curb. One day I went down to News Plus, thinking I'd get a copy of *Variations* or *Forum*, but there was a headline on the front of the *Dispatch* that once again took away any sexy feelings I might have had. POPE DIES OF HEART ATTACK ON PEACE MISSION, it said.

Did I do it? Nah, the story said he died in Asia, and I've been sticking to the American Northwest these last few weeks. But I could have been the one. If I'd been nosing around in Pakistan last week, I very likely would have been the one.

Two weeks of living in a nightmare.

Then, this morning, there was something in the mail. Not a letter, I've only gotten three or four of those (all from Pug, and now he's stopped writing, and I miss him so much), but a Kmart advertising circular. It flopped open just as I was putting it into the trash, and something fluttered out. A note, printed in block letters. DO YOU WANT OUT? it read. IF YES, SEND MESSAGE "DON'T STAND SO CLOSE TO ME" IS BEST POLICE SONG.

My heart was beating hard and fast, the way it did on the day I came into my house and saw the Rembrandt print over the sofa where the velvet clowns had been.

Below the message, someone had drawn a foudier. It was harmless just sitting there all by itself, but looking at it still made all the spit in my mouth dry up. It was a real message, the foudier proved it, but who had it come from? And how did the sender know about me?

I went into the study, walking slowly with my head down, thinking. A message tucked into an advertising circular. Hand-printed and tucked into an advertising circular. That meant someone close. Someone in town.

I turned on my computer and modem. I called the Columbia City Public Library, where you can surf cheap ... and in relative anonymity. Anything I sent would go through TransCorp in Chicago, but that wasn't going to matter. They weren't going to suspect a thing. Not if I was careful.

And, of course, if there was anybody there.

There was. My computer connected with the library's computer, and a menu flashed on my screen. For just a moment, something else flashed on my screen, as well.

A smim.

In the lower righthand corner. Just a flicker.

I sent the message about the best Police song and added a little touch of my own down in The Dead Folks' Nook: a sankofite.

I could write more—things have started to happen, and I believe that soon they'll be happening fast—but I don't think it would be safe. Up to now, I've just talked about myself. If I went any further, I'd have to talk about other people. But there are two more things I want to say.

First, that I'm sorry for what I've done—for what I did to Skipper, even. I'd take it back if I could. I didn't know what I was doing. I know that's a piss-poor excuse, but it's the only one I have.

Second, I've got it in mind to write one more special letter ... the most special of all.

I have Mr. Sharpton's e-mail address. And I have something even better: a memory of how he stroked his lucky tie as we sat in his big

expensive Mercedes. The loving way he ran his palm over those silk swords. So, you see, I know just enough about him. I know just what to add to his letter, how to make it eventual. I can close my eyes and see one word floating there in the darkness behind my lids—floating there like black fire, deadly as an arrow fired into the brain, and it's the only word that matters:

EXCALIBUR.



Esquire
FICTION

STEPHEN KING

The
GINGERBREAD
GIRL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD HIDO

THE GINGERBREAD GIRL

Stephen King

SYNOPSIS: In the emotional aftermath of her baby's sudden death, Em starts running. Soon she runs from her husband, to the airport, down to the Florida Gulf and out to the loneliest stretch of Vermillion Key, where her father has offered the use of a conch shack he has kept there for years. Em keeps up her running—barefoot on the beach, sneakers on the road—and sees virtually no one. This is doing her all kinds of good, until one day she makes the mistake of looking into the driveway of a man named Pickering. Pickering also enjoys the privacy of Vermillion Key, but the young women he brings there suffer the consequences. Will Em be next?

1

Only fast running would do.

AFTER THE BABY DIED, Emily took up running. At first it was just down to the end of the driveway, where she would stand bent over with her hands clutching her legs just above the knees, then to the end of the block, then all the way to Kozy's Qwik-Pik at the bottom of the hill. There she would pick up bread or margarine, maybe a Ho Ho or a Ring Ding if she could think of nothing else. At first she only walked back, but later she ran that way, too. Eventually she gave up the snack foods. It was surprisingly hard to do. She hadn't realized that sugar eased grief. Or maybe the snacks had become a fetish. Either way, in the end the Ho Hos had to go go. And did. Running was enough. Henry called the *running* a fetish, and she supposed he was right.

"What does Dr. Steiner say about it?" he asked. "Dr. Steiner says 'Dr. Steiner says run your ass off, get those endorphins going.'" She hadn't mentioned the running to Susan Steiner, hadn't even seen her since Amy's funeral. "She says she'll put it on a prescription pad, if you want."

Emily had always been able to bluff Henry. Even after Amy died. *We can have another one*, she had said, sitting beside him on the bed as he lay there with his ankles crossed and tears streaming down the sides of his face.

It eased him and that was good, but there was never going to be another baby, with the attendant risk of finding said infant gray and still in its crib. Never again the fruitless CPR or the screaming 911

call with the operator saying *Lower your voice, ma'am, I can't understand you*. But Henry didn't need to know that, and she was willing to comfort him, at least at the start. She believed that comfort, not bread, was the staff of life. Maybe eventually she would be able to find some for herself. In the meantime, she had produced a defective baby. That was the point. She would not risk another.

Then she started getting headaches. Real blinders. So she did go to a doctor, but it was Dr. Mendez, their general practitioner, not Susan Steiner. Mendez gave her a prescription for some stuff called Zomig. She took the bus to the family practice where Mendez hung out, then ran to the drugstore to get the scrip filled. After that she jogged home—it was two miles—and by the time she got there, she had what felt like a steel fork planted high up in her side, between the top of her ribs and her armpit. She didn't let it concern her. That was pain that would go away. Besides, she was exhausted and felt as if she could sleep for a while.

She did—all afternoon. On the same bed where Amy had been made and Henry had cried. When she woke up, she could see ghostly circles floating in the air, a sure sign that she was getting one of what she liked to call Em's Famous Headaches. She took one of her new pills, and to her surprise—almost shock—the headache turned tail and slunk away. First to the back of her head, then gone. She thought there ought to be a pill like that for the death of a child.

She thought she needed to explore the limits of her endurance, and she suspected the exploration would be a long one. There was a JuCo with a cinder track not too far from the house. She began to drive over there in the early mornings just after Henry left for work. Henry didn't understand the running. Jogging, sure—lots of women jogged. Keep those extra four pounds off the old fanny, keep those extra two inches off the old waistline. But Em didn't have an extra four pounds on her backside, and besides, jogging was no longer enough. She had to run, and fast. Only fast running would do.

She parked at the track and ran until she could run no more, until her sleeveless FSU sweatshirt was dark with sweat down the front

and back and she was shambling and sometimes puking with exhaustion.

Henry found out. Someone saw her there, running all by herself at eight in the morning, and told him. They had a discussion about it. The discussion escalated into a marriage-ending argument.

“It’s a hobby,” she said.

“Jodi Anderson said you ran until you fell down. She was afraid you’d had a heart attack. That’s not a hobby, Em. Not even a fetish. It’s an obsession.”

And he looked at her reproachfully. It would be a little while yet before she picked up the book and threw it at him, but that was what really tore it. That reproachful look. She could no longer stand it. Given his rather long face, it was like having a sheep in the house. *I married a Dorset gray, she thought, and now it’s just baa-baa-baa, all day long,*

But she tried one more time to be reasonable about something she knew in her heart had no reasonable core. There was magical thinking; there was also magical doing. Running, for instance.

“Marathoners run until they fall down,” she said.

“Are you planning to run in a marathon?”

“Maybe.” But she looked away. Out the window, at the driveway. The driveway called her. The driveway led to the sidewalk, and the sidewalk led to the world.

“No,” he said. “You’re not going to run in a marathon. You have no plans to run in a marathon.”

It occurred to her—with that sense of brilliant revelation the obvious can bring—that this was the essence of Henry, the fucking *apotheosis* of Henry. During the six years of their marriage he had always been perfectly aware of what she was thinking, feeling, planning.

I comforted you, she thought—not furious yet but beginning to be furious. You lay there on the bed leaking, and I comforted you.

“The running is a classic psychological response to the pain you feel,” he was saying in that same earnest way. “It’s called avoidance. But, honey, if you don’t feel your pain, you’ll never be able to—”

That’s when she grabbed the object nearest at hand, which happened to be a paperback copy of *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter*. This was a book she had tried and rejected, but Henry had picked it up and was now about three quarters of the way through, judging from the bookmark. *He even has the reading tastes of a Dorset gray*, she thought, and hucked it at him. It struck him on the shoulder. He stared at her with wide, shocked eyes, then grabbed at her. Probably just to hug her, but who knew? Who really knew anything?

If he had grabbed a moment earlier, he might have caught her by the arm or the wrist or maybe just the back of her T-shirt. But that moment of shock undid him. He missed, and she was running, slowing only to snatch her fanny pack off the table by the front door. Down the driveway, to the sidewalk. Then down the hill, where she had briefly pushed a pram with other mothers who now shunned her. This time she had no intention of stopping or even slowing. Dressed only in shorts, sneakers, and a T-shirt reading save the cheerleader, Emily ran out into the world. She put her fanny pack around her waist and snapped the catch as she pelted down the hill. And the feeling?

Exhilaration. Pure pow.

She ran downtown (two miles, twenty-two minutes), not even stopping when the light was against her; when that happened, she jogged in place. A couple of boys in a top-down Mustang—it was just getting to be top-down weather—passed her at the corner of Main and Eastern. One whistled. Em gave him the finger. He laughed and applauded as the Mustang accelerated down Main.

She didn’t have much cash, but she had a pair of credit cards. The American Express was the prize, because with it she could get traveler’s checks.

She realized she wasn't going home, not for a while. And when the realization caused a feeling of relief—maybe even fugitive excitement—instead of sorrow, she suspected this was not a temporary thing.

She went into the Morris Hotel to use the phone, then decided on the spur of the moment to take a room. Did they have anything for just the one night? They did. She gave the desk clerk her AmEx card.

“It doesn't look like you'll need a bellman,” the clerk said, taking in her shorts and T-shirt.

“I left in a hurry.”

“I see.” Spoken in the tone of voice that said he didn't see at all. She took the key he slid to her and hurried across the wide lobby to the elevators, restraining the urge to run.

2

You sound like you might be crying.

SHE WANTED TO BUY SOME CLOTHES—a couple of skirts, a couple of shirts, two pairs of jeans, another pair of shorts—but before shopping she had calls to make: one to Henry and one to her father. Her father was in Tallahassee. She decided she had better call him first. She couldn't recall the number of his office phone in the motor pool but had his cell-phone number memorized. He answered on the first ring. She could hear engines revving in the background.

“Em! How are you?”

That should have been a complex question, but wasn't. “I'm fine. Dad. But I'm in the Morris Hotel. I guess I've left Henry.”

“Permanently or just a kind of trial balloon?” He didn't sound surprised—he took things in stride; she loved that about him—but

the sound of the revving motors first faded, then disappeared. She imagined him going into his office, closing the door, perhaps picking up the picture of her that stood on his cluttered desk.

“Can’t say yet. Right now it doesn’t look too good.”

“What was it about?”

“Running.”

“*Running?*”

She sighed. “Not really. You know how sometimes a thing is about something else? Or a whole bunch of something else’s?”

“The baby.” Her father had not called her Amy since the crib death. Now it was always just *the baby*.

“And the way I’m handling it. Which is not the way Henry wants me to. It occurred to me that I’d like to handle things in my own way.”

“Henry’s a good man,” her father said, “but he has a way of seeing things. No doubt.”

She waited.

“What can I do?”

She told him. He agreed. She knew he would, but not until he heard her all the way out. The hearing out was the most important part, and Rusty Jackson was good at it. He hadn’t risen from one of three mechanics in the motor pool to maybe one of the four most important people at the Tallahassee campus (and she hadn’t heard that from him; he’d never say something like that to her or anyone else) by not listening.

“I’ll send Mariette in to clean the house,” he said.

“Dad, you don’t need to do that. I can clean.”

“I want to,” he said. “A total top-to-bottom is overdue. Damn place has been closed up for almost a year. I don’t get down to Vermillion much since your mother died. Seems like I can always find some more to do up here.”

Em's mother was no longer Debra to him, either. Since the funeral (ovarian cancer), she was *just your mother*.

Em almost said. *Are you sure you don't mind this?* but that was the kind of thing you said when a stranger offered to do you a favor. Or a different kind of father.

"You going there to run?" he asked. She could hear a smile in his voice. "There's plenty of beach to run on, and a good long stretch of road, too. As you well know. And you won't have to elbow people out of your way. Between now and October, Vermillion is as quiet as it ever gets."

"I'm going there to think. And—I guess—to finish mourning."

"That's all right, then," he said. "Want me to book your flight?"

"I can do that."

"Sure you can. Emmy, are you okay?"

"Yes," she said.

"You sound like you might be crying."

"A little bit," she said, and wiped her face. "It all happened very fast." *Like Amy's death*, she could have added. She had done it like a little lady; never a peep from the baby monitor. *Leave quietly, don't slam the door*, Em's own mother often said when Em was a teenager.

"Henry won't come there to the hotel and bother you, will he?"

She heard a faint, delicate hesitation before he chose *bother*, and smiled in spite of her tears, which had pretty well run their course, anyway. "If you're asking if he's going to come and beat me up... that's not his style."

"A man sometimes finds a different style when his wife up and leaves him—just takes off running."

"Not Henry," she said. "He's not a man to cause trouble."

"You sure you don't want to come to Tallahassee first?"

She hesitated. Part of her did, but-

"I need a little time on my own. Before anything else." And she repeated, "All this happened very fast." Although she suspected it

had been building for quite some time. It might even have been in the DNA of the marriage.

“All right. Love you, Emmy.”

“Love you, too, Dad. Thank you.” She swallowed. “So much.”

HENRY DIDN'T CAUSE TROUBLE. Henry didn't even ask where she was calling from. Henry said, “Maybe you're not the only one who needs a little time apart. Maybe this is for the best.”

She resisted an urge—it struck her as both normal and absurd—to thank him. Silence seemed like the best option. What he said next made her glad she'd chosen it.

“Who'd you call for help? The Motor-Pool King?”

This time the urge she resisted was to ask if he'd called his mother yet. Tit for tat never solved anything.

She said—evenly, she hoped: “I'm going to Vermillion Key. My dad's place there.”

“The conch shack.” She could almost hear him sniff. Like Ho Hos and Twinkies, houses with only three rooms and no garage were not a part of Henry's belief system.

Em said, “I'll call you when I get there.”

A long silence. She imagined him in the kitchen, head leaning against the wall, hand gripping the handset of the phone tight enough to turn his knuckles white, fighting to reject anger. Because of the six mostly good years they'd had together. She hoped he would make it. If that was indeed what was going on.

When he spoke next, he sounded calm but tired out. “Got your credit cards?”

“Yes. And I won't overuse them. But I want my half of—” She broke off, biting her lip. She had almost called their dead child *the baby*, and that wasn't right. Maybe it was for her father, but not for her. She started again.

“My half of Amy’s college money,” she said. “I don’t suppose there’s much, but—”

“There’s more than you think,” he said. He was starting to sound upset again. They had begun the fund not when Amy was born, or even when Em got pregnant, but when they first started trying. Trying had been a four-year process, and by the time Emily finally kindled, they were talking about fertility treatments. Or adoption. “Those investments weren’t just good, they were blessed by heaven—especially the software stocks. Mort got us in at the right time and out at the absolute golden moment. Emmy, you don’t want to take the eggs out of that nest.”

There he was again, telling her what she wanted to do.

“I’ll give you an address as soon as I have one,” she said. “Do whatever you want with your half, but make mine a cashier’s check.”

“Still running,” he said, and although that professorial, observational tone made her wish he was here so she could throw another book at him—a hardcover this time—she held her silence.

At last he sighed. “Listen, Em, I’m going to clear out of here for a few hours. Come on in and get your clothes or your whatever. And I’ll leave some cash for you on the dresser.”

For a moment she was tempted; then it occurred to her that leaving money on the dresser was what men did when they went to whores.

“No,” she said. “I want to start fresh.”

“Em.” There was a long pause. She guessed he was struggling with his emotions, and the thought of it caused her own eyes to blur over again. “Is this the end of us, kiddo?”

“I don’t know,” she said, working to keep her own voice straight. “Too soon to tell.”

“If I had to guess,” he said, “I’d guess yes. Today proves two things. One is that a healthy woman can run a long way.”

“I’ll call you,” she said.

“The other is that living babies are glue when it comes to marriage. Dead ones are acid.”

That hurt more than anything else he might have said, because it reduced Amy to an ugly metaphor. Em couldn't do that. She didn't think she'd ever be able to do that. “Ill call you,” she said, and hung up.

Vermillion Key lay dazed and all but deserted.

3

Vermillion Key lay dazed and all but deserted.

SO EMILY OWENSBY RAN DOWN TO the end of the driveway, then down the hill to Kozy's Qwik-Pik, and then at the Cleveland South Junior College track. She ran to the Morris Hotel. She ran out of her marriage the way a woman can run out of a pair of sandals when she decides to let go and really dash. Then she ran (with the help of Southwest Airlines) to Fort Myers, Florida, where she rented a car and drove south toward Naples. Vermillion Key lay dazed and all but deserted under the baking June light. Two miles of road ran along Vermillion Beach from the drawbridge to the stub of her father's driveway. At the end of the driveway stood the unpainted conch shack, a slummy-looking thing with a blue roof and peeling blue shutters on the outside, air-conditioned and comfy on the inside.

When she turned off the engine of her Avis Nissan, the only sounds were waves crashing on the empty beach, and, somewhere nearby, an alarmed bird shouting *Uh-oh! Uh-oh!* over and over.

Em lowered her head against the steering wheel and cried for five minutes, letting out all the strain and horror of the last half year. Trying to, anyway. There was no one in earshot except for the uh-oh

bird. When she was finally done, she took off her T-shirt and wiped everything away: the snot, the sweat, the tears. She wiped herself clean all the way down to the top of her plain gray sports bra. Then she walked to the house, shells and bits of coral crunching under her sneakers. As she bent to get the key from the Sucrets box hidden beneath the charming-in-spite-of-itself lawn gnome with its faded red hat, it occurred to her that she hadn't had one of her headaches in over a week. Which was a good thing, since her Zomig was more than a thousand miles away.

Fifteen minutes later, dressed in shorts and one of her father's old shirts, she was running on the beach.

FOR THE NEXT THREE WEEKS, her life became one of stark simplicity. She drank coffee and orange juice for breakfast, ate huge green salads for lunch, and devoured Stouffer's cuisine for dinner, usually macaroni and cheese or boil-in-the-bag chipped beef on toast—what her dad called shit on a shingle. The carbs came in handy. In the morning, when it was cool, she ran barefoot on the beach, down close to the water where the sand was firm and wet and mostly free of shells. In the afternoon, when it was hot (and frequently showery), she ran on the road, which was shady for most of its length. Sometimes she got soaked. On these occasions she ran on through the rain, often smiling, sometimes even laughing, and when she got back, she stripped in the foyer and dumped her soaking clothes in the washer, which was—conveniently—only three steps from the shower.

At first she ran two miles on the beach and a mile on the road. After three weeks, she was doing three miles on the beach and two on the road. Rusty Jackson was pleased to call his getaway place the Little Grass Shack, after some old song or other. It was at the extreme north end, and there was nothing like it on Vermillion; everything else had been taken over by the rich, the super-rich, and, at the extreme south end, where there were three Mc-Mansions, the

absurdly rich. Trucks filled with grounds keeping gear sometimes passed Em on her road runs, but rarely a car. The houses she passed were all closed up, their driveways chained, and they would stay that way until at least October, when the owners started to trickle back. She began to make up names for them in her head: the one with the columns was Tara, the one behind the high, barred iron fence was Club Fed, the big one hiding behind an ugly gray concrete wall was the Pillbox. The only other small one, mostly screened by palmettos and traveler palms, was the Troll House—where, she imagined, the in-season inhabitants subsisted on Troll House cookies.

On the beach, she sometimes saw volunteers from Turtle Watch, and soon came to hail them by name. They would give her a “Yo, Em!” in return as she ran past. There was rarely anyone else, although once a helicopter buzzed her. The passenger—a young man—leaned out and waved. Em waved back, her face safely masked by the shadow of her FSU ‘Noles cap.

She shopped at the Publix five miles north on U.S. 41. Often on her ride home, she would stop at Bobby Trickett’s Used Books, which was far bigger than her dad’s little retreat but still your basic conch shack. There she bought old paperback mysteries by Raymond Chandler and Ed McBain, their pages dark brown at the edges and yellow inside, their smell sweet and as nostalgic as the old Ford woody station wagon she sighted one day tooling down 41 with two lawn chairs strapped to the roof and a beat-to-shit surfboard sticking out the back. There was no need to buy any John D. MacDonalds; her father had the whole set packed into his orange-crate bookcases.

By the end of July she was running six and sometimes seven miles a day, her boobs no more than nubs, her butt mostly nonexistent, and she had lined two of her dad’s empty shelves with books that had titles like *Dead City* and *Six Bad Things*. The TV never went on at night, not even for the weather. Her father’s old PC stayed dark. She never bought a newspaper.

Her father called her every second day, but stopped asking if she wanted him to “yank free” and come on down after she told him that when she was ready to see him, she’d tell him so. In the meantime,

she said, she wasn't suicidal (true), not even depressed (not true), and she was eating. That was good enough for Rusty. They had always been straight up with each other. She also knew that summer was a busy time for him—everything that couldn't be done when kids were crawling all over the campus (which he always called *the plant*) had to be done between June 15 and September 15, when there was nobody around but summer students and whatever academic conferences the administration could pull in.

Also, he had a lady friend. Melody, her name was. Em didn't like to go there—it made her feel funny—but she knew Melody made her dad happy, so she always asked after her. Fine, her dad invariably replied. *Mel's as dandy as a peach.*

Once she called Henry, and once Henry called her. The night he called her, Em was pretty sure he was drunk. He asked her again if they were over, and she told him again that she didn't know, but that was a lie. *Probably* a lie.

Nights, she slept like a woman in a coma. At first she had bad dreams—reliving the morning they had found Amy dead over and over again. In some of the dreams, her baby had turned as black as a rotten strawberry. In others—these were worse—she found Amy struggling for breath and saved her by administering mouth-to-mouth. They were worse because she woke to the realization that Amy was actually the same old dead. She came from one of these latter dreams during a thunderstorm and slid naked from the bed to the floor, crying with her elbows propped on her knees and her palms pushing her cheeks up in a smile while lightning flashed over the Gulf and made momentary blue patterns on the wall.

As she extended herself—exploring those fabled limits of endurance—the dreams either ceased or played themselves out far below the eye of her memory. She began to awaken feeling not so much refreshed as unwound all the way to the core of herself. And although each day was essentially the same as the day before, each began to seem like a new thing—its own thing—instead of an extension of the old thing. One day she woke realizing that Amy's

death had begun to be something that *had* happened instead of something that *was* happening.

She decided she would ask her father to come down—and bring Melody if he wanted to. She would give them a nice dinner. They could stay over (what the hell, it *was* his house). And then she'd start thinking about what she wanted to do with her real life, the one she would soon resume on the other side of the drawbridge: what she wanted to keep and what she wanted to cast away.

She would make that call soon, she thought. In a week. Two, at the most. It wasn't quite time yet, but almost. Almost.

4

Not a very nice man.

ONE AFTERNOON NOT LONG AFTER July became August, Deke Hollis told her she had company on the island. He called it *the island*, never the key.

Deke was a weathered fifty, or maybe seventy. He was tall and rangy and wore a battered old straw hat that looked like an inverted soup bowl. From seven in the morning until seven at night, he ran the drawbridge between Vermillion and the mainland. This was Monday to Friday. On weekends, “the kid” took over (said kid being about thirty). Some days when Em ran up to the drawbridge and saw the kid instead of Deke in the old cane chair outside the gatehouse, reading *Maxim* or *Popular Mechanics* rather than *The New York Times*, she was startled to realize that Saturday had come around again.

This afternoon, though, it was Deke. The channel between Vermillion and the mainland—which Deke called *the thrut* (throat,

she assumed)—was deserted and dark under a dark sky. A heron stood on the drawbridge's Gulf-side rail, either meditating or looking for fish.

"Company?" Em said. "I don't have any company."

"I didn't mean it that way. Pickering's back. At 366? Brought one of his 'nieces.'" The punctuation for *nieces* was provided by a roll of Deke's eyes, of a blue so faded they were nearly colorless.

"I didn't see anyone," Em said.

"No," he agreed. "Crossed over in that big red M'cedes of his about an hour ago, while you were probably still lacin' up your tennies." He leaned forward over his newspaper; it crackled against his flat belly. She saw he had the crossword about half completed. "Different niece every summer. Always young." He paused. "Sometimes *two* nieces, one in August and one in September."

"I don't know him," Em said. "And I didn't see any red Mercedes." Nor did she know which house belonged to 366. She noticed the houses themselves, but rarely paid attention to the mailboxes. Except, of course, for 219. That was the one with the little line of carved birds on top of it. (The house behind it was, of course, Birdland.)

"Just as well," Deke said. This time instead of rolling his eyes, he twitched down the corners of his mouth, as if he had something bad tasting in there. "He brings 'em down in the M'cedes, then takes 'em back to St. Petersburg in his boat. Big white yacht. The *Playpen*. Went through this morning." The corners of his mouth did that thing again. In the far distance, thunder mumbled. "So the nieces get a tour of the house, then a nice little cruise up the coast, and we don't see Pickering again until January, when it gets cold up in Chicagoland."

Em thought she might have seen a moored white pleasure craft on her morning beach run but wasn't sure.

"Day or two from now—maybe a week—he'll send out a couple of fellas, and one will drive the M'cedes back to wherever he keeps it stored away. Near the private airport in Naples, I imagine."

“He must be very rich,” Em said. This was the longest conversation she’d ever had with Deke, and it was interesting, but she started jogging in place just the same. Partly because she didn’t want to stiffen up, mostly because her body was calling on her to run.

“Rich as Scrooge McDuck, but I got an idea Pickering actually *spends* his. Probably in ways Uncle Scrooge never imagined. Made it off some kind of computer thing, I heard.” The eye roll. “Don’t they all?”

“I guess,” she said, still jogging in place. The thunder cleared its throat with a little more authority this time.

“I know you’re anxious to be off, but I’m talking to you for a reason,” Deke said. He folded up his newspaper, put it beside the old cane chair, and stuck his coffee cup on top of it as a paperweight. “I don’t ordinarily talk out of school about folks on the island—a lot of ‘em’s rich and I wouldn’t last long if I did-but I like you, Emmy. You keep yourself to yourself, but you ain’t a bit snooty. Also, I like your father. Him and me’s lifted a beer, time to time.”

“Thanks,” she said. She was touched. And as a thought occurred to her, she smiled. “Did my dad ask you to keep an eye on me?”

Deke shook his head. “Never did. Never would. Not R. J.’s style. He’d tell you the same as I am, though—Jim Pickering’s not a very nice man. I’d steer clear of him. If he invites you in for a drink or even just a cup of coffee with him and his new ‘niece,’ I’d say no. And if he were to ask you to go cruising with him, I would *definitely* say no.”

“I have no interest in cruising anywhere,” she said. What she was interested in was finishing her work on Vermillion Key. She felt it was almost done. “And I better get back before the rain starts.”

“Don’t think it’s coming until five, at least,” Deke said. “Although if I’m wrong, I think you’ll still be okay.”

She smiled again. “Me too. Contrary to popular opinion, women don’t melt in the rain. I’ll tell my dad you said hello.”

“You do that.” He bent down to get his paper, then paused, looking at her from beneath that ridiculous hat. “How’re you doing,

anyway?”

“Better,” she said. “Better every day.” She turned and began her road run back to the Little Grass Shack. She raised her hand as she went, and as she did, the heron that had been perched on the drawbridge rail flapped past her with a fish in its long bill.

THREE SIXTY-SIX TURNED OUT to be the Pillbox, and for the first time since she'd come to Vermillion, the gate was standing ajar. Or had it been ajar when she ran past it toward the bridge? She couldn't remember—but of course she had taken up wearing a watch, a clunky thing with a big digital readout, so she could time herself. She had probably been looking at that when she went by.

She almost passed without slowing—the thunder was closer now—but she wasn't exactly wearing a thousand-dollar suede skirt from Jill Anderson, only an ensemble from the Athletic Attic: shorts and a T-shirt with the Nike swoosh on it. Besides, what had she said to Deke? *Women don't melt in the rain*. So she slowed, swerved, and had a peek. It was simple curiosity.

She thought the Mercedes parked in the courtyard was a 450 SL, because her father had one like it, although his was pretty old now and this one looked brand new. It was candy-apple red, its body brilliant even under the darkening sky. The trunk was open. A sheaf of long blond hair hung from it. There was blood in the hair.

Had Deke said the girl with Pickering was a blond? That was her first question, and she was so shocked, so fucking amazed, that there was no surprise in it. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable question, and the answer was Deke hadn't said. Only that she was young. And a niece. With the eye roll.

Thunder rumbled. Almost directly overhead now. The courtyard was empty except for the car (and the blond in the trunk, there was her). The house looked deserted, too: buttoned up and more like a pillbox than ever. Even the palms swaying around it couldn't soften it. It was too big, too stark, too gray. It was an ugly house.

Em thought she heard a moan. She ran through the gate and across the yard to the open trunk without even thinking about it. She looked in. The girl in the trunk hadn't moaned. Her eyes were open, but she had been stabbed in what looked like dozens of places, and her throat was cut ear to ear.

Em stood looking in, too shocked to move, too shocked to even breathe. Then it occurred to her that this was *a fake* dead girl, a movie prop. Even as her rational mind was telling her that was bullshit, the part of her that specialized in rationalization was nodding frantically. Even making up a story to backstop the idea. Deke didn't like Pickering, and Pickering's choice of female companionship? Well guess what, Pickering didn't like Deke, either! This was nothing but an elaborate practical joke. Pickering would go back across the bridge with the trunk deliberately ajar, that fake blond hair fluttering, and—

But there were smells rising out of the trunk now. They were the smells of shit and blood. Em reached forward and touched the cheek below one of those staring eyes. It was cold, but it was skin. Oh God, it was human skin.

There was a sound behind her. A footstep. She started to turn, and something came down on her head. There was no pain, but brilliant white seemed to leap across the world. Then the world went dark.

5

He looked like he was trying to play creep-mouse with her.

WHEN SHE WOKE UP, she was duct-taped to a chair in a big kitchen filled with terrible steel objects: sink, fridge, dishwasher, a stove that looked like it belonged in the kitchen of a restaurant. The back of her

head was sending long, slow waves of pain toward the front of her head, each one seeming to say *Fix this! Fix this!*

Standing at the sink was a tall, slender man in khaki shorts and an old Izod golf shirt. The kitchen's fluorescent fixtures sent down a merciless light, and Em could see the deepening crow's-foot at the corner of his eye, the smattering of gray along the side of his short power haircut. She put him at about fifty. He was washing his arm in the sink. There appeared to be a puncture wound in it, just below the elbow.

He snapped his head around. There was an animal quickness to him that made her stomach sink. His eyes were of a blue much more vivid than Deke Hollis's. She saw nothing in them she recognized as sanity, and her heart sank further. On the floor—the same ugly gray as the outside of the house, only tile instead of cement—there was a dark, filmy track about nine inches wide. Em thought it was probably blood. It was very easy to imagine the blond girl's hair making it as Pickering dragged her through the room by her feet, to some unknown destination.

"You're awake," he said. "Good deal. *Awesome*. Think I wanted to kill her? I didn't want to kill her. She had a knife in her gosh-damn *sock!* I pinched her on the arm, that's all." He seemed to consider this, and while he did, he blotted the dark, blood-filled gash below his elbow with a wad of paper towels. "Well, also on the tit. But all girls expect that. Or should. It's called *FORE-play*. Or in this case, *WHORE-play*"

He made quotation marks with the first and second fingers of his hands each time. To Em, he looked like he was trying to play creep-mouse with her. He also looked crazy. In fact, there was no doubt about his state of mind. Thunder crashed overhead, loud as a load of dropped furniture. Em jumped—as well as she could, bound to a kitchen chair—but the man standing by the stainless-steel double-basin sink didn't glance up at the sound. It was as though he hadn't heard. His lower lip was thrust out.

“So I took it away from her. And then I lost my head. I admit it. People think I’m Mr. Cool, and I try to live up to that. I do. I try to live up to that. But any man can lose his head. That’s what they don’t realize. Any man. Under the right set of circumstances.”

Rain poured down as if God had pulled the chain up there in His own personal WC.

“Who could reasonably assume you’re here?”

“Lots of people.” This answer came without hesitation.

He was across the room in a flash. *Flash* was the word. At one moment he was by the sink, at the next beside her and whacking her face hard enough to make white spots explode in front of her eyes. These shot around the room, drawing bright cometary tails after them. Her head snapped to the side. Her hair flew against her cheek, and she felt blood begin to flow into her mouth as her lower lip burst. The inner lining had been cut by her teeth, and deep. Almost all the way through, it felt like. Outside, the rain rushed down. *I’m going to die while it’s raining*, Em thought. But she didn’t believe it. Maybe no one did, when the deal actually came down.

“*Who knows?*” He was leaning over, bellowing into her face.

“*Lots of people,*” she reiterated, and the words came out *losh of people* because her lower lip was swelling. And she felt blood spilling down her chin in a small stream. Still, her *mind* wasn’t swelling, in spite of the pain and fear. It knew her one chance at life was making this man believe he’d be caught if he killed her. Of course he would also be caught if he let her go, but she would deal with that later. One nightmare at a time.

“*Losh of people!*” she said again, defiantly.

He flashed back to the sink and when he returned, he had a knife in his hand. A little one. Very likely the one the dead girl had taken from her sock. He put the tip on Em’s lower eyelid and pulled it down. That was when her bladder let go, all at once, in a rush.

An expression of somehow prissy disgust momentarily tightened Pickering’s face, yet he also seemed delighted. Some part of Em’s mind wondered how any person could hold two such conflicting

emotions in his mind at the same time. He took a half step back, but the point of the knife didn't waver. It still dimpled into her skin, simultaneously pulling down her lower eyelid and pushing her eyeball up gently in its socket. "Nice," he said. "Another mess to clean up. Not unexpected, though. No. And like the man said, there's more room out than there is in. That's what the man said." He actually laughed, one quick yip, and then he leaned forward, his vivid blue eyes staring into her hazel ones. "Tell me one person who knows you're here. Don't hesitate. Do not hesitate. If you hesitate I'll know you're making something up and I'll lift your eye right out of its socket and flip it into the sink. I can do it. So tell me. *Now*"

"Deke Hollis," she said. It was tattling, *bad* tattling, but it was also nothing but reflex. She didn't want to lose her eye.

"Who else?"

No name occurred to her—her mind was a roaring blank—and she believed him when he said hesitating would cost her her left eye. "*No one, okay?*" she cried. And surely Deke would be enough. Surely one person would be enough, unless he was so crazy that—

He drew the knife away, and although her peripheral vision couldn't quite pick it up, she felt a tiny seed pearl of blood blooming there. She didn't care. She was just glad to still *have* peripheral vision.

"Okay," Pickering said. "Okay, okay, good, okay." He walked back to the sink and tossed the little knife into it. She started to be relieved. Then he opened one of the drawers beside the sink and brought out a bigger one: a long, pointed butcher knife.

"Okay." He came back to her. There was no blood on him that she could see, not even a spot. How was that possible? How long had she been out?

"Okay, okay." He ran the hand not holding the knife through the short, stupidly expensive tailoring of his hair. It sprang right back into place. "Who's Deke Hollis?"

"The drawbridge keeper," she said. Her voice was unsteady, wavering. "*We talked* about you. That's why I stopped to look in."

She had a burst of inspiration. “He saw the girl! Your niece, he called her!”

“Yeah, yeah, the girls always go back by boat, that’s all he knows. That’s all he knows in the world. Are people ever nosy! Where’s your car? Answer me *now* or you get the new special, a breast amputation. Quick but *not* painless.”

“The Grass Shack!” It was all she could think of to say.

“What’s that?”

“The little conch house at the end of the key. It’s my dad’s.” She had another burst of inspiration. “*He* knows I’m here!”

“Yeah, yeah.” This didn’t seem to interest Pickering. “Yeah, okay. Right, big-time. Are you saying you *live* here?”

“Yes...”

He looked down at her shorts, now a darker blue. “Runner, are you?” She didn’t answer this, but Pickering didn’t seem to care. “Yeah, you’re a runner, damn right you are. Look at those legs.” Incredibly, he bowed at the waist—as if meeting royalty—and with a loud smack kissed her left thigh just below the hem of her shorts. When he straightened up, she observed with a sinking heart that the front of his pants were sticking out. Not good.

“You run up, you run back.” He flicked the blade of the butcher knife in an arc, like a conductor with a baton. It was hypnotic. Outside, the rain continued to pour down. It would go on that way for forty minutes, maybe an hour, and then the sun would come back out. Em wondered if she would be alive to see it. She didn’t think so. Yet this was still hard to believe. Impossible, really.



“You run up, you run back. Up and back. Sometimes you pass the time of day with that old man in the straw hat, but you don’t pass it

with anyone else.” She was scared, but not too scared to realize he wasn’t talking to her. “Right. Not with anyone else. Because there’s nobody else here. If any of the tree-planting, grass-cutting beaners who work down here saw you on your afternoon run, will they remember? Will they?”

The knife blade ticked back and forth. He eyed the tip, seeming to depend on this for an answer.

“No,” he said. “No, and 111 tell you why. Because you’re just another rich gringa running her buns off. They’re everywhere. See ‘em every day. Health nuts. Have to kick ‘em out of your way. If not running, on bikes. Wearing those dumb little potty helmets. Okay? Okay Say your prayers, Lady Jane, but make it quick. I’m in a hurry. Big, big hurry.”

He raised the knife to his shoulder. She saw his lips tighten down in anticipation of the killing stroke. For Em, the whole world suddenly came clear; everything stood out with exclamatory brilliance. She thought: *I’m coming. Amy.* And then, absurdly, something she might have heard on ESPN: *Be there, baby.*

But then he paused. He looked around, exactly as if someone had spoken. “Yeah,” he said. Then: “Yeah?” And then: “Yeah.” There was a Formica-topped island in the middle of the room, for food preparation. He dropped the knife on it with a clatter instead of sticking it into Emily.

He said, “Sit there. I’m not going to kill you. I changed my mind. Man can change his mind. I got nothing from Nicole but a poke in the arm.”

There was a depleted roll of duct tape on the island. He picked it up. A moment later he was kneeling in front of her, the back of his head and the naked nape of his neck exposed and vulnerable. In a better world—a fairer world—she could have laced her hands together and brought them down on that exposed nape, but her hands were bound at the wrists to the chair’s heavy maple arms. Her torso was bound to the back by more duct tape, thick corsets of the stuff at the waist and just below her breasts. Her legs were bound to

the chair's legs at the knees, the upper calves, the lower calves, and the ankles. He had been very thorough.

The legs of the chair were taped to the floor, and now he put on fresh layers, first in front of her, then behind. When he was finished, all the tape was gone. He stood up and put the empty cardboard core on the Formica island. "There," he said. "Not bad. Okay. All set. You wait here." He must have found something funny in this, because he cocked his head upward and loosed another of those brief, yapping laughs. "Don't get bored and run off, okay? I need to go take care of your nosy old friend, and I want to do it while it's still raining."

This time he flashed to a door that proved to be a closet. He yanked out a yellow slicker. "Knew this was in here somewhere. Everybody trusts a guy in a raincoat. I don't know why. It's just one of those mystery facts. Okay, girlfriend, sit tight." He uttered another of those laughs that sounded like the bark of an angry poodle, and then he was gone.

6

Still 9:15.

WHEN THE FRONT DOOR SLAMMED and Em knew he had really left, that abnormal brightness in the world started to turn gray, and she realized she was on the verge of fainting. She could not afford to faint. If there was an afterlife and she eventually saw her father there, how could she explain to Rusty Jackson that she had wasted her last minutes on earth in unconsciousness? He would be disappointed in her. Even if they met in heaven, standing ankle-deep in clouds while angels all around them played the music of the

spheres (arranged for harp), he would be disappointed in her for wasting her only chance in a Victorian swoon.

Em deliberately ground the lacerated lining of her lower lip against her teeth... then bit down, bringing fresh blood. The world jumped back to brightness. The sound of the wind and down-rushing rain swelled like strange music.

How long did she have? It was a quarter of a mile from the Pillbox to the drawbridge. Because of the slicker, and because she hadn't heard the Mercedes start up, she had to think he was running. She knew she might not have heard the engine over the rain and thunder, but she just didn't believe he would take his car. Deke Hollis knew the red Mercedes and didn't like the man who drove it. The red Mercedes might put Deke on his guard. Emily believed Pickering would know that. Pickering was crazy—part of the time he'd been talking to himself, but at least some of the time he'd been talking to someone he could see but she couldn't, an invisible partner in crime—but he wasn't stupid. Neither was Deke, of course, but he would be alone in his little gatehouse. No cars passing, no boats waiting to go through, either. Not in this downpour.

Plus, he was old.

"I have maybe fifteen minutes," she said to the empty room—or perhaps it was the bloodstain on the floor she was talking to. He hadn't gagged her, at least; why bother? There would be no one to hear her scream, not in this ugly, boxy, concrete fortress. She thought she could have stood in the middle of the road, screaming at the top of her lungs, and still no one would have heard her. Right now even the Mexican groundskeepers would be under cover, sitting in the cabs of their trucks drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes.

"Fifteen minutes at most."

Yes. Probably. Then Pickering would come back and rape her, as he had been planning to rape Nicole. After that he would kill her, as he had already killed Nicole. Her and how many other "nieces"? Em didn't know, but she felt certain this was not—as Rusty Jackson might have said—his first rodeo.

Fifteen minutes. Maybe just ten.

She looked down at her feet. They weren't duct-taped to the floor, but the feet of the chair were. Still...

You're a runner; damn right you are. Look at those legs.

They were good legs, all right, and she didn't need anyone to kiss them to make her aware of it. Especially not a lunatic like Pickering. She didn't know if they were good in the sense of being beautiful, or sexy, but in utilitarian terms, they were very good. They had carried her a long way since the morning she and Henry had found Amy dead in her crib. Pickering clearly had great faith in the powers of duct tape, had probably seen it employed by dozens of psycho killers in dozens of movies, and none of his "nieces" had given him any cause to doubt its efficacy. Maybe because he hadn't given them a chance, maybe because they were too frightened. But maybe... especially on a wet day, in an unaired house so damp she could smell the mildew...

Em leaned forward as far as the corsets binding her would allow and gradually began to flex the muscles of her thighs and calves: those new runner's muscles the lunatic had so admired. First just a little flex, then up to half. She was approaching full flex, and starting to lose hope, when she heard a sucking sound. It was low at first, barely more than a wish, but it got louder. The tape had been wrapped and then rewrapped in crisscrossing layers, it was hellishly strong, but it was pulling free of the floor just the same. But slowly. Dear God, so slowly.

She relaxed, breathing hard, sweat now breaking on her forehead, under her arms, between her breasts. She wanted to go again at once, but her experience running the Cleveland South track told her she must wait and let her rapidly pumping heart flush the lactic acid from her muscles. Her next effort would generate less force and be less successful if she didn't. But it was hard. Waiting was hard. She had no idea how long he had been gone. There was a clock on the wall—a sunburst executed in stainless steel (like seemingly everything else in this horrible, heartless room, except the red maple

chair she was bound to)-but it had stopped at 9:15. Probably it was a battery job and its battery had died.

She tried to remain still until she had counted to thirty (with a *delightful Maisie* after each number), and could only hold out to seventeen. Then she flexed again, pushing down with all her might. This time the sucking sound was immediate and louder. She felt the chair begin to *lift*. Just a little, but it was definitely rising.

Em strained, her head thrown back, her teeth bared, fresh blood running down her chin from her swollen lip. The cords on her neck stood out. The sucking sound became louder still, and now she also heard a low ripping sound.

Hot pain bloomed suddenly in her right calf, tightening it. For a moment Em almost kept on straining—the stakes were high, after all, the stakes were her *life—but* then she relaxed within her bonds again, gasping for air. And counting.

“*One, delightful Maisie. Two, delightful Maisie. Three...*”

Because she could probably pull the chair free of the floor in spite of that warning tightness. She was almost sure she could. But if she did so at the expense of a charley horse in her right calf (she’d had them there before; on a couple of occasions they’d hit so hard the muscle had felt like stone rather than flesh), she would lose more time than she gained. And she’d still be bound to the fucking chair. *Glued* to the fucking chair. She knew the clock on the wall was dead, but she looked at it anyway. It was a reflex. Still 9:15. Was he at the drawbridge yet? She had a sudden wild hope: Deke would blow the warning horn and scare him off. Could a thing like that happen? She thought it could. She thought Pickering was like a hyena, only dangerous when he was sure he had the upper hand. And, probably like a hyena, wasn’t able to imagine not having it.

She listened. She heard thunder, and steadily whooshing rain, but not the blare of the air horn mounted beside the drawbridge keeper’s cabin.

She tried pulling the chair off the floor again, and almost went catapulting face first into the stove when it came free almost at once.

She staggered, tottered, almost fell over, and backed against the Formica-topped service island in the middle of the kitchen to keep from doing so. Her heart was now running so fast, she couldn't detect the individual beats; it seemed to be just a steady hard hum in her chest and high in her neck, below the points of her jaw. If she had fallen over, she would have been like a turtle lying on its back. There wouldn't have been a chance in the world of getting up again.

I'm all right, she thought. It didn't happen.

No. But she could see herself lying there all the same, and with hellish clarity. Lying there with only the swash of blood made by Nicole's hair for company. Lying there and waiting for Pickering to come back and have his fun with her before ending her life. And he would be back when? In seven minutes? Five? Only three?

She looked at the clock. It was 9:15.

She hunched beside the counter, gasping for breath, a woman who had grown a chair out of her back. There was the butcher knife on the counter, but she couldn't reach it with her hands bound to the chair's arms. Even if she could have grasped it, what then? Just stand there, hunched over, with it in her hand. There was nothing she could reach with it, nothing she could cut with it.

She looked at the stove, and wondered if she could turn on one of the burners. If she could do that, then maybe...

Another hellish vision came to her: trying to burn through the tape and having her clothes catch on fire from the gas ring instead. She wouldn't risk it. If someone had offered her pills (or even a bullet in the head) to escape the possibility of rape, torture, and death—likely a slow one, preceded by unspeakable mutilations—she might have overcome the dissenting voice of her father (*“Never give up, Emmy. good things are always just around some corner or other”*) and gone for it. But risking the possibility of third-degree burns all over the upper half of her body? Lying half-baked on the floor, waiting for Pickering to come back, *praying for* him to come back and put her out of her misery?

No. She wouldn't do that. But what did that leave? She could feel time fleeting, fleeting. The clock on the wall still said 9:15, but she thought the beat of the rain had slacked off a bit. The idea filled her with horror. She pushed it back. Panic would get her killed.

The knife was a can't and the stove was a won't. What did that leave?

The answer was obvious. It left the chair. There weren't any others in the kitchen, only three high stools like barstools. She guessed he must have imported this one from a dining room she hoped never to see. Had he bound other women—other “nieces”—to heavy red maple chairs that belonged around a dining-room table? Maybe to this very one? In her heart she was sure he had.

And he trusted it even though it was wood instead of metal. What had worked once must work again; she was sure he thought like a hyena in that way, too.

She had to demolish the prison that held her. It was the only way, and she had only minutes to do it.

7

It's probably going to hurt.

SHE WAS CLOSE TO THE TENTER ISLAND, but the counter stuck out slightly, creating a kind of lip, and she didn't trust it. She didn't want to move—didn't want to risk falling over and becoming a turtle—but she did want a surface wider than that projecting lip to beat against. And so she started toward the refrigerator, which was also stainless steel... and big. All the beating surface a girl could want.

She shuffled along with the chair bound to her back and bottom and legs. Her progress was agonizingly slow. It was like trying to

walk with a weird, form-fitting coffin strapped to her back. And it *would be* her coffin, if she fell over. Or if she was still whacking it fruitlessly against the front of the KitchenAid when the man of the house returned.

Once she tottered on the edge of falling over—on her face—and managed to keep her balance by what seemed like willpower alone. The pain in her calf came back, once more threatening to become a charley horse and render her right leg useless. She willed that away, too, closing her eyes to do it. Sweat rolled down her face, washing away dried tears she did not remember crying.

How much time was passing? How much? The rain had slackened still more. Soon she would start to hear dripping instead of raining. Maybe Deke was putting up a fight. Maybe he even had a gun in a drawer of his cluttered old desk and had shot Pickering the way you'd shoot a rabid dog. Would she hear a gunshot in here? She didn't think so; the wind was still blowing pretty hard. More likely Pickering—twenty years younger than Deke, and obviously in shape—would take away any weapon Deke might produce and use it on the old man.

She tried to sweep all these thoughts away, but it was hard. It was hard even though they were useless. She shuffled forward with her eyes still closed and her pale face—swollen at the mouth—drawn down in effort. One baby step, two baby steps. *May I take another six baby steps?* Yes, you may. But on the fourth one, her knees—bent almost into a squat—bumped against the front of the refrigerator.

Em opened her eyes, unable to believe she had actually made this arduous safari safely—a distance an unbound person could have covered in three ordinary steps, but a safari for her. A fucking *trek*.

There was no time to waste congratulating herself, and not just because she might hear the Pillbox's front door open anytime. She had other problems. Her muscles were strained and trembling from trying to walk in what was almost a sitting position; she felt like an out-of-condition amateur attempting some outrageous tantra yoga

position. If she didn't do this at once, she wouldn't be able to do it at all. And if the chair was as strong as it looked—

But she pushed this thought away.

“It's probably going to hurt,” she panted. “You know that, don't you?” She knew, but thought Pickering might have even worse things in mind for her.

“Please,” she said, turning sideways to the refrigerator, giving it her profile. If that was praying, she had an idea it was her dead daughter she was praying to. “*Please*,” she said again, and swung her hips sideways, smacking the parasite she was wearing against the front of the fridge.

She wasn't as surprised as when the chair had come free of the floor all at once, almost causing her to flip headfirst onto the stove, but almost. There was a loud cracking sound from the chair back, and the seat slewed sideways on her bottom. Only the legs held firm.

“It's *rot* ten!” she cried to the empty kitchen. “The damn thing's *rotten!*” Maybe not actually, but—God bless the Florida climate—it sure wasn't as strong as it looked. Finally, a little stroke of luck... and if he came in now, just as she'd had it, Emily thought she would go insane.

How long now? How long had he been gone? She had no idea. She had always had a fairly accurate clock in her head, but now it was as useless as the one on the wall. It was uniquely horrible to have lost track of time so completely. She remembered her big clunky watch and looked down, but the watch was gone. There was just a pale patch where it had been. He must have taken it.

She almost swung sideways into the fridge again, then had a better idea. Her bottom was partly free of the chair seat now, and that gave her extra leverage. She strained with her back as she had strained with her thighs and calves while working to free the chair from the floor, and this time when she felt a warning pain way down low, just above the base of her spine, she didn't relax and wait and recycle. She didn't think she had the luxury of waiting anymore. She could see him coming back, running right down the center of the

deserted road, his feet spitting up sprays of water, the yellow slicker flapping. And, in one hand, some sort of a tool. A tire iron, perhaps, that he had snatched from the bloodstained trunk of his Mercedes.

Em strained upward. The pain in the small of her back deepened, took on a glassy intensity. But she could hear that ripping sound again as duct tape let go—not of the chair, but of itself. Of the overlapping layers of itself. Loosening. Loosening wasn't as good as freeing, but it was still good. It gave her more leverage.

She swung her hips against the refrigerator again, letting out a little scream of effort. The shock jarred through her. This time the chair didn't move. The chair clung to her like a limpet. She swung her hips again, harder, screaming louder: tantra yoga meets S&M disco. There was another *crack*, and this time the chair slewed to the right on her back and hips.

She swung again... again... again, pivoting on her increasingly tired hips and *smashing*. She lost count. She was crying again. She had split her shorts up the back. They had slid down crooked over one hip, and the hip itself was bleeding. She thought she had taken a splinter in it.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her runaway heart (small chance of that), and whacked herself and her wooden prison into the refrigerator again, as hard as she could. This time she finally struck the lever of the recessed automatic ice dispenser, releasing a jackpot of cubes onto the tiled floor. There was another crack, a sag, and all at once her left arm was free. She looked down at it, stupid-eyed with amazement. The arm of the chair was still bound to her forearm, but now the body of the chair hung askew on that side, held to her by long gray strips of duct tape. It was like being caught in a cobweb. And of course she was; the crazy bastard in the khaki shorts and Izod shirt was the spider. She still wasn't free, but now she could use the knife. All she had to do was shuffle back to the center island and get it.



“Don’t step on the cubes,” she advised herself in a ragged voice. She sounded—to her own ears, at least—like a manic grad student

who had studied herself to the edge of a nervous breakdown. “This would be a very bad time to go skating.”

She avoided the ice, but as she bent for the knife, her overstrained back gave a warning creak. The chair, much looser now but still bound to her midsection by those corsets of tape (and at the legs, as well), banged into the side of the island. She paid no attention. She was able to grasp the knife with her newly freed left hand and use it to saw through the tape binding her right arm, sobbing for breath and casting small darting glances at the swing door between the kitchen and whatever lay beyond—the dining room and the front hall, she assumed; it was the way he had gone out, and the way he would probably come back in. When her right hand was free, she tore off the broken chunk of chair still bound to her left arm and tossed it on the center island.

“Stop looking for him,” she told herself in the gray, shadowy kitchen. “Just do your work.” It was good advice, but hard to follow when you knew your death might come through that door, and soon.

She sawed through the band of tape just below her breasts. This should have been slow, careful work, but she couldn’t afford to go slow and nicked herself repeatedly with the tip of the knife. She could feel blood spreading on her skin.

The knife was sharp. The bad news about that were those repeated nicks just below her breastbone. The good news was that the duct tape split away without much argument, layer after layer. Finally it was cut through from top to bottom, and the chair sagged away from her back a little more. She set to work on the wide band of tape around her waist. Now she could bend further, and the work went faster, with less damage to her body. She cut all the way through at last, and the chair fell backward. But its legs were still bound to her legs, and the wooden feet suddenly shifted, digging in low on her calves where the Achilles tendons surfaced like cables just below the skin. The pain was excruciating, and she moaned miserably.

Em reached around and used her left hand to push the chair against her back again, relieving that horrible, digging pressure. It

was a filthy angle, all wrong for her arm, but she continued to press the chair to her while she shuffled around so she was once more facing the stove. Then she leaned back, using the center island to relieve the pressure. Gasping for breath, crying again (she wasn't aware of the tears), she leaned forward and began to saw through the tape binding her ankles. Her exertions had loosened these bands and the others binding her lower body to the fucking chair; consequently the work went faster and she cut herself less frequently, although she managed to give herself a fairly good slash on the right calf—as if some mad part of her were trying to punish it for seizing up while she was trying to push the chair free of the floor.

She was working on the tape holding her knees—the last ones left—when she heard the front door open and close. “I’m home, honey!” Pickering called cheerfully. “Miss me?” Em froze, bent over with her hair hanging in her face, and it took every last scrap of will to get moving again. No time for finesse now; she jammed the blade of the butcher knife under the belt of gray tape binding her right knee, miraculously avoided stabbing the tip into her own kneecap, and hauled upward with all her strength.

In the hall, there was a heavy *cluck* sound, and she knew he had just turned a key in a lock—a big lock, from the sound- Pickering wanted no interruptions, probably thought there had been interruptions enough for one day. He started up the hall. He must have been wearing sneakers (she hadn't noticed before), because she could hear them squelching. He was whistling “O Susanna.”

The tape holding her right knee parted, bottom to top, and the chair fell backward against the counter with a noisy clatter, now bound to her only at the left knee. For a moment the footsteps beyond the swing door—very close, now—stopped, and then they broke into a run. After that it all happened very, very fast.

He hit the door two-handed, and it burst open with a loud thump; those hands were still outstretched as he came racing into the kitchen. They were empty—no sign of the tire iron she had imagined. The sleeves of the yellow slicker were pulled halfway up his arms,

and Em had time to think. *That's too small for you, asshole—a wife would tell you, but you don't have a wife, do you?*

The hood of the slicker was pushed back. His power haircut was finally in disarray—*mild* disarray; it was too short for anything else—and rainwater dripped down the sides of his face and into his eyes. He took in the situation at a glance, seemed to understand everything. *“Oh. you annoying bitch!”* he bellowed, and ran around the counter to grab her.

She stabbed out with the butcher knife. The blade shot between the first and second fingers of his splayed right hand and sawed deep into the flesh at the bottom of the V. Blood poured down. Pickering screamed in pain and surprise—mostly surprise, she thought. Hyenas don't expect their victims to turn on th—

He reached out with his left hand, grabbed her wrist, twisted it. Something creaked. Or maybe snapped. Either way, pain bolted up her arm, as bright as light. She tried to hold on to the knife, but there was no chance. It went flying all the way across the room, and when he let go of her wrist, her right hand flopped, fingers splayed.

He bored in on her and Em pushed him backward, using both hands and ignoring the fresh scream of pain from her strained wrist. It was instinct only. Her rational mind would have told her that a push wasn't going to stop this guy, but her rational mind was now cringing in a corner of her head, able to do nothing but hope for the best.

He outweighed her, but her bottom was pressed against the chipped lip of the center island. He went staggering backward with a look of startlement that would have been comical in other circumstances, and came down on either one ice cube or a bunch of them. For a moment he looked like a cartoon character—Road Runner, perhaps—sprinting in place in an effort to stay on his feet. Then he stepped on more ice cubes (she saw them go spinning and glinting across the floor), went down hard, and rapped the back of his head against his newly dented refrigerator.

He held up his bleeding hand and looked at it. Then he looked at her. “You *cut* me,” he said. “You bitch, you dumb bitch, look at this, you *cut* me. Why did you cut me?”

He tried to scramble to his feet, but more ice cubes went zipping out from beneath him and he thumped down again. He pivoted on one knee, meaning to rise that way, and for a moment his back was to her. Em seized the chair’s broken left arm from the center island. Ragged strands of duct tape still dangled from it. Pickering got to his feet and turned toward her. Emily was waiting. She brought the arm down on his forehead using both hands—her right one didn’t want to close, but she made it. Some atavistic, survival-oriented part of her even remembered to choke up on the red maple rod, knowing it would maximize the force, and maximum force was good. It was a chair arm, after all, not a baseball bat.

There was a thump. It wasn’t as loud as the swing door had been when he hit it coming in, but it still sounded loud enough, perhaps because the rain had slackened even more. For a moment nothing else happened, and then blood began to run out of his power haircut and over his forehead. She stared at him, into his eyes. He stared back with dazed incomprehension.

“Don’t,” he said feebly, and reached out one hand to take the chair arm from her.

“Yes,” she said, and swung again, this time from the side: a slicing two-handed blow, her right hand giving up and letting go at the last moment, her left one holding firm. The end of the arm—ragged where it had broken, splinters sticking out—hammered into Pickering’s right temple. This time the blood burst at once as his head snapped to the side, all the way to his left shoulder. Bright drops ran down his cheek and pattered onto the gray tile.

“Stop,” he said thickly, pawing at the air with one hand. He looked like a drowning man begging for rescue.

“No,” she said, and brought the arm down on his head again.

Pickering screamed and staggered away from her in a head-tucked hunch, trying to put the center island between them. He stepped on

more ice cubes and skidded, but this time managed to stay upright. Only by luck, she had to believe, since he had to be all but out on his feet.

For a moment she almost let him go, thinking he would run out through the swing door. It was what she would have done. Then her dad spoke up, very calmly, in her head: *“He’s after the knife, sweetie.”*

“No,” she said, snarling it this time. “No, you *won’t*.”

She tried to run around the other side of the island and head him off, but she couldn’t run, not while she was dragging the shattered remains of the chair behind her like a ball and fucking chain—it was still duct-taped to her left knee. It banged against the island, slammed her in the butt, tried to get between her legs and trip her. The chair seemed to be on *his* side, and she was glad she had broken it.

Pickering got to the knife—it was lying against the bottom of the swing door—and fell on it like a football tackle covering a loose ball. He was making a guttural wheezing sound deep in his throat. Em reached him just as he started to turn over. She hammered him with the chair arm again and again, shrieking, aware in some part of her mind that it wasn’t heavy enough and she wasn’t generating anywhere near the amount of force she *wanted* to generate. She could see her right wrist, already puffing up, trying to address the outrage perpetrated on it just as if it expected to survive this day.

Pickering collapsed on the knife and lay still. She backed away a little, gasping for breath, those little white comets once more flying across her field of vision.

Men spoke in her mind. This was not uncommon with her, and not always unwelcome. Sometimes, but not always.

Henry: *“Get that damned knife and put it right between his shoulder blades.”*

Rusty: *“No, honey. Don’t go close to him. That’s what he expects. He’s playing possum.”*

Henry: “*Or the back of his neck. That’s good, too. His stinking neck.*”

Rusty: “*Reaching under him would be like sticking your hand into a hay baler, Emmy. You’ve got two choices. Beat him to death —*”

Henry, sounding reluctant but convinced: “*—or run.*”

Well, maybe. And maybe not.

There was a drawer on this side of the island. She yanked it open, hoping for another knife—for *lots* of them: carving knives, filleting knives, steak knives, serrated bread knives. She would settle for a goddamned *butter* knife. What she saw was mostly an array of fancy black plastic cooking tools: a pair of spatulas, a ladle, and one of those big serving spoons full of holes. There was some other bric-a-brac, but the most dangerous-looking thing her eye fell on was a potato peeler.

“Listen to me,” she said. Her voice was hoarse, almost guttural. Her throat was dry- “I don’t want to kill you, but I will if you make me. I’ve got a meat fork here. If you try to turn over, I’ll stick it in the back of your neck and keep pushing until it comes out the front.”

Did he believe her? That was one question. She was sure he’d removed all the knives except for the one underneath him on purpose, but could he be sure he’d gotten all the other sharp objects? Most men had no idea what was in the drawers of their kitchens—she knew this from life with Henry, and before Henry from life with father—but Pickering wasn’t most men and this wasn’t most kitchens. She had an idea it was more like an operating theater. Still, given how dazed he was (*was* he dazed?), and how he must surely believe that a lapse of memory could get him killed, she thought the bluff might run. Only there was another question: Was he even hearing her? Or understanding her if he did? A bluff couldn’t work if the person you were trying to bluff didn’t understand the stakes.

But she wasn’t going to stand here debating. That would be the worst thing she could do. She bent over, never taking her eyes from Pickering, and hooked her fingers under the last band of tape still

binding her to the chair. The fingers of her right hand wanted even less to work now, but she made them. And her sweat-drenched skin helped. She shoved downward, and the tape started coming free with another ill-tempered ripping sound. She supposed it hurt, it left a bright-red band across her kneecap (for some reason the word *Jupiter* floated randomly through her mind), but she was far past feeling such things. It let go all at once and slid down to her ankle, wrinkled and twisted and sticking to itself. She shook it off her foot and sidled backward, free. Her head was pounding, either from exertion or from where he'd hit her while she was looking at the dead girl in the trunk of his Mercedes.

“Nicole,” she said. “Her name was Nicole.”

Naming the dead girl seemed to bring Em back to herself a little. Now the idea of trying to get the butcher knife out from under him seemed like madness. The part of herself that sometimes talked in her father's voice was right—just staying in the same room with Pickering was pressing her luck. Which left leaving. Only that.

“I'm going now,” she said. “Do you hear me?”

He didn't move.

“I've got the meat fork. If you come after me, I'll stab you with it. I'll... I'll poke your eyes out. What you want to do is stay right where you are. Have you got that?”

He didn't move.

Emily backed away from him, then turned and left the kitchen by the door on the other side of the room. She was still holding the bloody chair arm.

8

There was a photograph on the wall by the bed.

IT WAS THE DINING ROOM ON THE OTHER SIDE. There was a long table with a glass top. Around it were seven red maple chairs. The spot where the eighth belonged was vacant. Of course. As she studied the empty place at the “mother” end of the table, a memory came to her: blood blooming in a tiny seed pearl below her eye as Pickering said. *Okay, good, okay.* He had believed her when she said only Deke could know she might be inside the Pillbox, so he had thrown the little knife—Nicole’s little knife, she had thought then—into the sink.

So there had been a knife to threaten him with all along. Still was. In the sink. But she wasn’t going back in there now. No way.

She crossed the room and went down a hall with five doors, two on each side and one at the end. The first two doors she passed were open, on her left a bathroom and on her right a laundry room. The washing machine was a top loader, its hatch open. A box of Tide stood on the shelf next to it. A bloodstained shirt was lying halfway in and halfway out of the hatch. Nicole’s shirt, Emily was quite sure, although she couldn’t be positive. And if it *was* hers, why had Pickering been planning to wash it? Washing wouldn’t take out the holes. Emily remembered thinking there had been dozens, although that surely wasn’t possible. Was it?

She thought it was, actually: Pickering in a frenzy.

She opened the door beyond the bathroom and saw a guest room. It was nothing but a dark and sterile box starring a king bed so stringently neat, you could no doubt bounce a nickel on the counterpane. And had a maid made up that bed? *Our survey says no*, Em thought. *Our survey says no maid has ever set foot in this house. Only “nieces.”*

The door across from the guest room gave way to a study. It was every bit as sterile as the room it faced across the hall. There were two filing cabinets in one corner. There was a big desk with nothing on it but a Dell PC hooded with a transparent plastic dust cover. The floor was plain oak planks. There was no rug. There were no pictures on the wall. The single big window was shuttered, admitting only a

few dull spokes of light. Like the guest room, this place looked dim and forgotten.

He has never worked in here, she thought, and knew it was true. It was stage dressing. The whole house was, including the room from which she had escaped—the room that looked like a kitchen but was actually an operating theater, complete with easy-clean counters and floors.

The door at the end of the hall was closed, and as she approached it, she knew it would be locked. She would be trapped at the end of this corridor if he entered it from the kitchen/dining-room end. Trapped with nowhere to run, and these days running was the only thing she was good at, the only thing she was good/or.

She hitched up her shorts—they felt like they were floating on her now, with the back seam split open—and grasped the knob. She was so full of her premonition that for a moment she couldn't believe it when the knob turned in her hand. She pushed the door open and stepped into what had to be Pickering's bedroom. It was almost as sterile as the guest room, but not quite. For one thing, there were two pillows instead of just one, and the counterpane of the bed (which looked like a twin of the guest-room bed) had been turned back in a neat triangle, ready to admit the owner to the comfort of fresh sheets after a hard day's work. And there was a carpet on the floor. Just a cheap nylon-pile thing, but wall-to-wall. Henry no doubt would have called it a Carpet Barn special, but it matched the blue walls and made the room look less skeletal than the others. There was also a small desk—it looked like an old school desk—and a plain wooden chair. And although this was pretty small shakes compared to the study setup, with its big (and unfortunately shuttered) window and expensive computer, she had a feeling this desk had been *used*. That Pickering sat there writing longhand, hunched over like a child in a country schoolroom. Writing what she did not like to think.

The window in here was also big. And unlike the windows in the study and the guest room, it wasn't shuttered. Before Em could look out and see what lay beyond, her attention was drawn to a photograph on the wall by the bed. Not hung and certainly not

framed, only tacked there with a pushpin. There were other tiny holes on the wall around it, as if other pictures had been pinned there over the years. This one was a color shot with 4-19-07 printed digitally in the right corner. Taken by an old-fashioned camera rather than a digital one, by the look of the paper, and not by anyone with much flair for photography. On the other hand, perhaps the photographer had been excited. The way hyenas might get excited, she supposed, when sundown comes and there's fresh prey in the offing. It was blurry, as if taken with a telephoto lens, and the subject wasn't centered. The subject was a long-legged young woman wearing denim shorts and a cropped top that said BEER O'CLOCK BAR. She had a tray balanced on the fingers of her left hand, like a waitress in a jolly old Norman Rockwell painting. She was laughing. Her hair was blond. Em couldn't be sure it was Nicole, not from this blurred photo and those few shocked instants when she had been looking down at the dead girl in the trunk of the Mercedes... but she *was* sure. Her heart was sure.

Rusty: *"It doesn't matter, sweetie. You have to get out of here. You have to get yourself some running room."*

As if to prove it, the door between the kitchen and the dining room hanged open—almost hard enough to tear it from the hinges, it sounded like.

No, she thought. All the sensation went out of her middle. She didn't think she wet herself again, but wouldn't have been able to tell if she had. *No, it can't be.*

"Want to play rough?" Pickering called. His voice sounded dazed and cheerful. "Okay, I can play rough. Sure. Not a problem. You want it? You bet. Daddy's gonna bring it."

Coming. Crossing the dining room. She heard a thump followed by a rough clatter as he stumbled into one of the other chairs (perhaps the one at the "father" end of the table) and shoved it aside. The world swam away from her, growing gray even though this room was relatively bright now that the storm was unraveling.

She bit down on her split lip. This sent a fresh stream of blood down her chin, but it also brought color and reality back into the world. She slammed the door and grabbed for the lock. There *was* no lock. She looked around and spied the humble wooden chair sitting before the humble wooden desk. As Pickering broke into a shambling run past his laundry room and study—and did he have the butcher knife clutched in one hand? Of course he did—she snatched the chair, placed it under the knob, and tilted it. Only an instant later, he hit the door with both hands.

She thought that if this floor had also been oak planking, the chair would have skidded away like a shuffleboard weight. Perhaps she would have grabbed it and stood him off with it: Em the Fearless Lion Tamer. She didn't think so. In any case, there was that carpet. Cheap nylon pile, but deep—it had that going for it, at least. The tilted legs of the chair dug in and held, although she saw a ripple go through the carpet.

Pickering roared and began to beat on the door with his fists. She hoped he was still holding on to the knife as he did it; maybe he would inadvertently cut his own throat.

“Open this door!” he shouted. “Open it! You're only making it worse for yourself!”

Like I could, Emily thought, backing away. And looking around. What now? The window? What else? There was only the one door, so it had to be the window.

“You're making me mad, Lady Jane!”

No, you were already mad. As in hatter.

She could see the window was a Florida special, the kind made only for looking out of, not for opening. Because of the air-conditioning. So what was next? Hurtle through it like Clint Eastwood in one of those old spaghetti westerns? Sounded possible: it was certainly the kind of thing that had appealed to her as a kid, but she had an idea she'd cut herself to ribbons if she actually tried it. Clint Eastwood and The Rock and Steven Seagal had stuntmen going for them when it came to things like the old through-the-saloon-

window sequences. And the stuntmen had special glass going for *them*.

She heard the rapid thump of footfalls beyond the door as he first backed up and then ran at it again. It was a heavy door, but Pickering wasn't kidding, and it shuddered in its frame. This time the chair jerked backward an inch or two before holding. Worse, that ripple went through the rug again and she heard a tearing sound that was not unlike the sound of duct tape letting go. He was remarkably lively for someone who had been beaten about the head and shoulders with a stout piece of red maple, but of course he was both crazy and just sane enough to know that if she got away, he wouldn't. She supposed that was a strong motivator.

I should have used the whole fucking chair on him, she thought.

"Want to play?" he panted. "I'll play. Sure. Bet your butt. But you're on *my* playground, okay? And here... I... *come!*" He hit the door again. It bucked in its frame, loose on its hinges now, and the chair jumped back another two or three inches. Em could see dark teardrop shapes between the tilted legs and the door: rips in the cheap carpet.

Out the window then. If she was going to die bleeding from Christ alone knew how many wounds, she would rather inflict them herself. Maybe... if she wrapped herself in the coverlet...

Then her eye fell on the desk.

"Mr. Pickering!" she called, grasping the desk by the sides. "Wait! I want to make a deal with you!"

"No deals with bitches, okay?" he said petulantly, but he had stopped for a moment—perhaps to get his breath back—and it gave her time. Time was all she wanted. Time was all she could possibly get from him; she didn't really need him to tell her he wasn't the sort of man who made deals with bitches. "What's your big plan? Tell Daddy Jim."

Currently the desk was her plan. She picked it up, half certain her strained lower back would just pop like a balloon. But the desk was

light, and lighter still when several rubber-banded stacks of what looked like university blue books came tumbling out.

“What are you doing?” he asked sharply, and then: “Don’t do that!”

She ran at the window, then stopped short and threw the desk. The sound of the breaking glass was enormous. Without pausing to think or look—thinking would do her no good at this point, and looking would only scare her if the drop was far—she yanked the coverlet from the bed.

Pickering hit the door again, and although the chair held again (she knew this; if it let go he would have been running across the room and grabbing for her), something gave a loud wooden crack.

Em wrapped the coverlet around her from chin to feet, for a moment looking like an N.C. Wyeth Indian woman about to set off into a snowstorm. Then she leaped through the jagged hole in the window just as the door crashed open behind her. Several arrows of glass sticking out of the frame wounded the coverlet, but not a single one touched Em.

“Oh, you fucking annoying bitch!” Pickering screamed behind her—*close* behind her—and then she was sailing.

9

Gravity is everyone’s mother.

SHE HAD BEEN A TOMBOY AS A KID, preferring boys’ games (the best one was simply called Guns) in the woods behind their house in suburban Chicago to goofing around with Barbie and Ken on the front porch. She lived in her Toughskins and shell tops, hair scooped back behind her head in a ponytail. She and her best friend

Becka watched old Eastwood and Schwarzenegger movies on TV instead of the Olsen twins, and when they watched *Scooby-Doo*, they identified with the dog rather than Velma or Daphne. For two years in grammar school, their lunches were Scooby Snacks.

And they climbed trees, of course. Emily seemed to remember her and Becka hanging out in the trees in their respective backyards for one whole summer. They might have been nine that year. Other than her father's lesson on how to fall, the only thing Em remembered clearly about the tree-climbing summer was her mother putting some kind of white cream on her nose every morning and telling her, "*Don't wipe that off, Emmy!*" in her obey-me-or-die voice.

One day, Becka lost her balance and came very close to falling fifteen feet to the Jackson lawn (maybe only ten, but at the time it had looked to the girls like twenty-five...even fifty). She saved herself by grabbing a branch, but then hung there, wailing for help.

Rusty had been mowing the lawn. He strolled over—yes, strolled; he even took time to kill the Briggs & Stratton—and held out his arms. "Drop," he said, and Becka, only two years past her belief in Santa and still sublimely trusting, dropped. Rusty caught her easily, then called Em down from the tree. He made both girls sit at the base. Becka was crying a little, and Em was scared—mostly that tree-climbing would now become an act that was *forbidden*, like walking down to the corner store alone after 7:00 p.m.

Rusty did not forbid them (although Emily's mother might have, if she had been looking out the kitchen window). What he did was teach them how to fall. And then they practiced for almost an hour.

What a cool day that had been.

AS SHE WENT OUT THROUGH THE WINDOW, Emily saw it was a damned good distance to the flagged patio below. Maybe only ten feet, but it looked like twenty-five as she dropped with the shredded coverlet fluttering around her. Or fifty.

Let your knees give way, Rusty had told them sixteen or seventeen years before, during Tree-Climbing Summer, also known as the Summer of the White Nose. Don't ask them to take the shock. They will—in nine cases out of ten, if the drop isn't too far, they will—but you could end up with a broken bone. Hip, leg, or ankle. Ankle, most likely. Remember that gravity is everyone's mother. Give in to her. Let her hug you. Let your knees give way, then tuck and roll.

Em hit the red Spanish-style flagstones and let her knees give way. At the same time she shoulder-checked the air, throwing her weight to the left. She tucked her head and rolled. There was no pain—no *immediate* pain—but a vast jarring went through her, as if her body had become an empty shaft and someone had dropped some large piece of furniture right down the center. But she kept her head from rapping the flagstones. And she didn't think she had broken either leg, although only standing would prove her right.

She struck a metal patio table hard enough to knock it over. Then she got to her feet, still not entirely sure her body was intact enough to do this until it actually did. She looked up and saw Pickering peering out the broken window. His face was cramped into a grimace, and he was brandishing the knife.

“Stop it!” he shouted. *“Stop running away and hold still¹.”*

As if, Em thought. The last of that afternoon's rain had turned to fog, dotting her upturned face with dew. It felt heavenly. She gave him the ringer, then shook it for emphasis.

Pickering roared, *“Don't you flip me the bird, you cunt!”* and threw the knife at her. It didn't even come close. It struck the flagstones with a clang and skittered away beneath his gas grill in two pieces, blade and handle. When she looked up again, the shattered window was vacant.

Her dad's voice told her Pickering was coming, but Em hardly needed that update. She went to the edge of the patio—walking easily, not limping, although she supposed she might owe that to the adrenaline surge—and looked down. Three measly feet to the sand

and sea oats. A bunny compared to the drop she had just survived. Beyond the patio was the beach, where she had done so many morning runs.

She looked the other way, toward the road, but that was no good. The ugly concrete wall was too high. And Pickering was coming. Of course he was.

She braced one hand on the ornamental brickwork, then dropped to the sand. Sea oats tickled her thighs. She hurried up the dune between the Pillbox and the beach, hitching at her ruined shorts and looking repeatedly back over her shoulder. Nothing... still nothing... and then Pickering burst out through the back door, yelling at her to stop right where she was. He had ditched the yellow slicker and had grabbed some other sharp object. He was waving it in his left hand as he ran down the walk to the patio. She couldn't see what it was, and didn't want to. She didn't want him that close.

She could outrun him. Something in his gait said he would be fast for a little while and then flag, no matter how strongly his insanity and his fear of exposure pricked him on.

She thought: *It's as if I was in training for this all along.*

Yet she almost made a crucial mistake when she got to the beach, almost turned south. That would have taken her to the end of Vermillion Key in less than a quarter of a mile. Of course she could hail the drawbridge gatehouse when she got there (scream her lungs out for help, actually), but if Pickering had done something to Deke Hollis—and she was afraid that was the case—she would then be toast. There might be a passing boat she could scream to but she had an idea Pickering was far past any restraint; at this point he would probably be willing to stab her to death on the stage of Radio City Music Hall as the Rockettes looked on.

So she turned north instead, where almost two miles of empty beach lay between her and the Grass Shack. She stripped off her sneakers and began to run.

What she had not expected was the beauty.

THIS WASN'T THE FIRST TIME she had run on the beach after one of these brief but powerful afternoon storms, and the feeling of wetness accumulating on her face and arms was familiar. So was the heightened sound of the surf (the tide was on the come now, the beach narrowing to a stripe) and the heightened aromas: salt, seaweed, flowers, even wet wood. She had expected to be frightened—the way she supposed people in combat were frightened while doing dangerous jobs that usually (but not always) came out all right. What she had not expected was the beauty.

The fog had come in from the Gulf. The water was a dull green phantom, heaving shoreward through the white. The fish must have been running, because it was a pelican all-you-can-eat buffet out there. She saw most as projected shadows, folding their wings and plummeting at the water. A few others bobbed up and down on the waves closer in, seemingly as dead as decoys, but watching her. Out there to her left, the sun was a small orange-yellow coin peering dully.

She was afraid her calf would cramp up again—if that happened, she was done, finished. But this was work it had become used to, and it felt loose enough, if a little too warm. Her lower back was more worrisome, broadcasting a twinge with every third or fourth stride and sending out a heavier flash of pain every two dozen or so. But she talked to it inside her head, babied it, promised it hot baths and Shiatsu massages when this was over and the feral creature behind her was safely incarcerated in the Collier County jail. It seemed to work. Either that or running was itself a kind of massage. She had reasons to think this was so.

Pickering bellowed twice more for her to stop, then fell silent, saving his breath for the chase. She looked back once and thought he was perhaps seventy yards behind, the only thing about him standing out in the misty late afternoon his red Izod shirt. She looked again and he was clearer; she could see his blood-spattered khaki shorts. Fifty yards behind. But panting. Good. Panting was good.

Emily leaped over a tangle of driftwood and her shorts slid down, threatening to hobble or even trip her up. She didn't have time to stop and take them off so she yanked them up savagely, wishing there was a drawstring she could pull, maybe even clutch in her teeth.

There was a yell from behind her and she thought there was fear as well as fury in it. It sounded as though Pickering was finally realizing this might not go his way. She risked another look back, hoping, and her hope was not in vain. He had tripped over the driftwood she had skipped over and gone to his knees. His new weapon lay before him, making an *X* in the sand. Scissors, then. Kitchen scissors. The big kind cooks used to snip gristle and bone. He snatched them up and scrambled to his feet.

Emily ran on, increasing her speed a little bit at a time. She didn't plan on doing this, but she didn't think it was her body taking over, either. There was something between body and mind, some interface. That was the part of her that wanted to be in charge now, and Em let it take over. That part wanted her to turn it on just bit by bit, almost gently, so that the animal behind her wouldn't realize what she was doing. That part wanted to tease Pickering into increasing his own speed to keep up with her, maybe even close the gap a little. That part wanted to use him up and blow him out. That part wanted to hear him gasping and wheezing. Maybe even coughing, if he was a smoker (although that seemed too much to hope for). Then she would put herself into the overdrive gear she now had but rarely used; that gear always seemed like tempting fate, somehow—like donning wax wings on a sunny day. But now she had no choice. And if she had tempted fate, it had been when she'd swerved to look into the Pillbox's flagged courtyard in the first place.

And what choice did I have, once I saw her hair? Maybe it was fate that tempted me.

She ran on, her feet printing the sand with her passing. She looked back again and saw Pickering only forty yards behind, but forty yards was okay. Given how red and strained his face was, forty was very okay.

To the west and directly overhead, the clouds tore open with tropical suddenness, instantly brightening the fog from dreary gray to dazzling white. Patches of sun dotted the beach with spotlights; Em ran into one and then out in a single stride, feeling the temperature spike with returning humidity and then drop again as the fog once more took her in. It was like running past an open Laundromat door on a cold day. Ahead of her, hazy blue opened in a long cat's eye. A double rainbow leaped out above it, each color blazing and distinct. The westward legs plunged into the unraveling fog and doused themselves in the water; those curving down toward the mainland disappeared into the palms and waxy fiddlewoods.

Her right foot clipped her left ankle and she stumbled. For a moment she was on the verge of falling, and then she regained her balance. But now he was just thirty yards behind, and thirty was too close. No more looking at rainbows. If she didn't take care of business, the ones up ahead would be her last.

She faced forward again and there was a man there, standing ankle-deep in the surf and staring at them. He was wearing nothing but a pair of cutoff denim shorts and a sopping red neckerchief. His skin was brown; his hair and eyes were dark. He was short, but his body was as trim as a glove. He walked out of the water, and she could see the concern on his face. Oh, thank God, she could see the concern. "Help!" she screamed. "*Help me!*"

The look of concern deepened. "*Senora? Que ha pasado? Que es lo que va mal?*"

She knew some Spanish—driblets and drablets—but at the sound of his, all of hers went out of her mind. It didn't matter. This was almost certainly one of the groundskeepers from one of the big

houses. He had taken advantage of the rain to cool off in the Gulf. He might not have a green card, but he didn't need one to save her life. He was a man, he was clearly strong, and he was concerned. She threw herself into his arms and felt the water on him soak onto her skin and shirt.

"He's crazy!" she shouted into his face. She could do this because they were almost exactly the same height. And at least one Spanish word came back to her. A valuable one, she thought, in this situation. "*Loco! Loco, loco!*"

The guy turned, one arm firmly around her. Emily looked where he was looking and saw Pickering. Pickering was grinning. It was an easy grin, rather apologetic. Even the blood spattered on his shorts and swelling face didn't render the grin entirely unconvincing. And there was no sign of the scissors, that was the worst. His hands—the right one slashed and now clotting between the first two fingers—were empty.

"*Es mi esposa,*" he said. His tone was as apologetic—and as convincing—as his grin. Even the fact that he was panting seemed all right. "*No te preocupes. Ella tiene...*" His Spanish either failed him or seemed to fail him. He spread his hands, still grinning. "Problems? She has problems?"

The Latino's eyes lit with comprehension and relief. "*Problemas?*"

"*Si*" Pickering agreed. Then one of his spread hands went to his mouth and made a bottle-tipping gesture.

"Ah!" the Latino said, nodding. "*Dreenk!*"

"No!" Em cried, sensing the guy was about to actually push her into Pickering's arms, wanting to be free of this unexpected *problema*, this unexpected *senora*. She blew breath into the man's face to show there was no liquor on it. Then inspiration struck and she tapped her swollen mouth. "*Loco!* He did this!"

"Nah, she did it to herself, mate," Pickering said. "Okay?"

"Okay," the Latino said, and nodded, but he didn't push Emily toward Pickering after all. Now he seemed undecided. And another word came to Emily, something dredged up from some educational

children's show she had watched—probably with the faithful Becka—when she wasn't watching *Scooby-Doo*.

"*Peligro*," she said, forcing herself not to shout. Shouting was what crazy *esposas* did. She pinned the Latino swimmer's eyes with her own. "*Peligro*. Him! *Senor Peligro!*"

Pickering laughed and reached for her. Panicked at how close he was (it was like having a hay baler suddenly grow hands), she pushed him. He wasn't expecting it, and he was still out of breath. He didn't fall down but did stagger back a step, eyes widening. And the scissors fell out from between the waistband of his shorts and the small of his back, where he had stashed them. For a moment all three of them stared at the metal *X* on the sand. The waves roared monotonously. Birds cried from inside the unraveling fog.

11

Then she was up and running again.

PICKERING'S EASY GRIN—the one he must have used on so many "nieces"—resurfaced. "I can explain that, but I don't have enough of the lingo. Perfectly good explanation, okay?" He tapped his chest like Tarzan. "*No Senor Loco, no Senor Peligro, okay?*" And! might have flown. But then, still smiling, pointing at "Em, he said: "*Ella es bobo perra.*"

She had no idea what *bobo perra* was, but she saw the way Pickering's face changed when he said it. Mostly it had to do with his upper lip, which wrinkled and then lifted, as the top half of a dog's snout does when it snarls. The Latino pushed Em a step backward with a sweep of his arm. Not completely behind him, but almost, and

the meaning was clear: protection. Then he bent down, reaching for the metal X on the sand.

If he had reached before pushing Em Back, things might still have worked out. But Pickering saw things tilting away from him and went for the scissors himself. He got them first, fell on his knees, and stabbed the points through the Latino's sand-caked left foot. The Latino shrieked, his eyes flying wide open.

He reached for Pickering, but Pickering first fell to one side, then got up (*Still so quick*, Em thought) and danced away. Then he moved back in. He curled an arm around the Latino's trim shoulders in a just-pals embrace, and drove the scissors into the Latino's chest. The Latino tried to back away, but Pickering held him fast, stabbing and stabbing. None of the strokes went deep—Pickering was working too fast for that—but blood flowed everywhere.

“No!” Emily screamed. “No, stop it!”

Pickering turned toward her for just an instant, eyes bright and unspeakable, then stabbed the Latino in the mouth, the scissors going deep enough for the steel finger loops to clash on the man's teeth. “Okay?” he asked. “Okay? That okay? That work for you, you fucking beaner?”

Emily looked around for anything, a single piece of driftwood to strike him with, and there was nothing. When she looked back, the scissors were sticking out of the Latino's eye. He crumpled slowly, almost seeming to bow from the waist, and Pickering bent with him, trying to pull the scissors free.

Em ran at him, screaming. She lowered her shoulder and hit him in the gut, realizing in some distant part of her consciousness that it was a soft gut—a lot of good meals had been stored there.

Pickering went sprawling on his back, panting for breath, glaring at her. When she tried to pull away, he grasped her left leg and dug in with his fingernails. Beside her, the Latino man lay on his side, twitching and covered with blood. The only feature she could still make out on a face that had been handsome thirty seconds before was his nose.

“Come here, Lady Jane,” Pickering said, and pulled her toward him. “Let me entertain you, okay? Entertainment okay with you, you useless bitch?” He was strong, and although she clawed at the sand, he was winning. She felt hot breath on the ball of her foot, and then his teeth sank gum-deep into her heel.

There had never been such pain; it made every grain on the beach jump clear in her wide eyes. Em screamed and lashed out with her right foot. Mostly by luck—she was far beyond such things as aim—she struck him, and hard. He howled (a muffled howl), and the needling agony in her left heel stopped as suddenly as it had begun, leaving only a burning hurt. Something had snapped in Pickering’s face. She both felt it and heard it. She thought his cheekbone. Maybe his nose.

She rolled to her hands and knees, her swollen wrist bellowing with pain that almost rivaled the pain in her foot. For a moment she looked, even with her torn shorts once more sagging from her hips, like a runner in the blocks, waiting for the gun. Then she was up and running again, only now at a kind of skipping limp. She angled closer to the water. Her head was roaring with incoherencies (that she must look like the limping deputy in some old TV western or other, for instance—the thought just whipping through her head, there and then gone), but the survival-oriented part of her was still lucid enough to want packed sand to run on. She yanked frantically at her shorts, and saw that her hands were covered with sand and blood. With a sob, she wiped first one and then the other against her T-shirt. She threw one glance back over her right shoulder, hoping against hope, but he was coming again.

She tried as hard as she could, *ran* as hard as she could, and the sand—cold and wet where she was running—soothed her fiery heel a little, but she could still get into nothing resembling her old gait. She looked back and saw him gaining, putting everything he had into a final sprint. Ahead of her the rainbows were fading as the day grew relentlessly brighter and hotter.

She tried as hard as she could and knew it wasn’t going to be enough. She could outrun an old lady, she could outrun an old man,

she could outrun her poor sad husband, but she couldn't outrun the mad bastard behind her. He was going to catch her. She looked for a weapon to hit him with when he did. but there was still nothing. She saw the charred remains of someone's beach-party campfire, but it was too far ahead and too far inland, just below the place where the dunes and sea oats took over from the beach. He would catch her even sooner if she diverted in that direction, where the sand was soft and treacherous. Things were bad enough down here by the water. She could hear him closing in, panting harshly and snorting back blood from his broken nose. She could even hear the rapid whack of his sneakers on the damp sand. She wished so hard for someone else on the beach that for a moment she hallucinated a tall, white-haired guy with a big bent nose and rough dark skin. Then she realized her yearning mind had conjured her own father—a last hope—and the illusion blew away.

He got close enough to reach out for her. His hand batted the back of her shirt, almost caught the fabric, fell away. Next time it wouldn't. She swerved into the water, splashing in first to her ankles, then to her calves. It was the only thing she could think of, the last thing. She had an idea—unformed, inarticulate—of either swimming away from him or at least facing him in the water, where they might be on more even terms; if nothing else, water might slow the strokes of the awful scissors. If she could get deep enough.

Before she could throw herself forward and begin stroking—before she could even get as far in as her thighs—he grabbed her by the neck of her shirt and pulled her backward, dragging her toward the shore again.

Em saw the scissors appear over her left shoulder and grabbed them. She tried to twist, but it was hopeless. Pickering had braced himself in knee-deep water, his legs apart, his feet planted firmly against the sand-sucking rush of the retreating waves. She tripped over one of them and fell against him. They splashed down together.

Pickering's reaction was fast and unmistakable, even in the wet confusion: pushing and bucking and convulsive thrashing. Truth lit up in her head like fireworks on a dark night. He couldn't swim.

Pickering couldn't swim. He had a house by the Gulf of Mexico, but he couldn't swim. And it made perfect sense. His visits to Vermillion Key had been dedicated to indoor sports.

She rolled away from him and he didn't try to grab her. He was sitting chest-deep in the rolling boil of the waves, which were still agitated from the storm, and all his efforts were focused on scrambling up and getting his precious respiration away from a medium it had never learned how to cope with.

Em would have spoken to him if she could have wasted the breath. Would have said, *If I'd known, we could have ended this right away. And that poor man would still be alive.*

Instead, she waded forward, reached out, and grabbed him.

"No!" he screamed. He beat at her with both hands. They were empty—he must have lost the scissors when he fell—and he was too scared and disorganized to even make fists. "No, don't! Let go, you bitch!"

Em didn't. She dragged him deeper instead. He could have broken her hold, and easily, if he had been able to control his panic, but he couldn't. And she realized it was probably more than the inability to swim; he was having some sort of phobic reaction.

What kind of a man with a water phobia would own a house on the Gulf? He'd have to be crazy.

That actually got her laughing, although he was beating on her, his madly waving hands slapping first her right cheek then hard on the left side of her head. A surge of green water slopped into her mouth and she spluttered it back out. She dragged him deeper, saw a big wave coming—smooth and glassy, just a little foam starting to break at the top—and shoved him into it, face-first. His screams became choked gurgles that disappeared as he went under. He thrust and bucked and twisted in her grip. The big wave washed over her and she held her breath. For a moment they were both under and she could see him, his face contorted into a pale mask of fear and horror that rendered it inhuman, and so turned him into what he really was. A galaxy of grit lazied between them in the green. One small, clueless

fish zipped past. Pickering's eyes bulged from their sockets. His power haircut wafted, and this was what she watched. She watched it closely as a silver track of bubbles drifted up from her nose. And when the strands of hair reversed direction, drifting in the direction of Texas rather than that of Florida, she shoved him with all of her might and let him go. Then she planted her feet on the sandy bottom and pistoned upward.

She rose into brilliant air, gasping. She tore breath after breath out of it, then began to walk backward a step at a time. It was hard going, even in close to shore. The retreating wave sucking past her hips and between her legs was almost strong enough to qualify as an undertow. A little farther out, it *would* be. Farther out still it would become a rip, and there even a strong swimmer would have little chance, unless he kept his head and stroked sideways, cutting a long slow angle back to safety.

She floundered, lost her balance, sat down, and another wave drenched her. It felt wonderful. Cold and wonderful. For the first time since Amy's death, she had a moment of feeling good. Better than good, actually; every part of her hurt, and she understood that she was crying again, but she felt divine.

Em struggled to her feet, shirt sopping and stuck to her midriff. She saw some faded blue thing floating away, looked down at herself, looked back, and realized she had lost her shorts.

"That's all right, they were ruined anyway," she said, and began to laugh as she backed toward the beach: now knee-deep, now shin-deep, now with only her feet in the boil. She could have stood there for a long time. The cold water almost doused the pain in her burning heel, and she was sure the salt was good for the wound; didn't they say the human mouth was the most germ-laden living thing on earth?

"Yes," she said, still laughing, "but who the hell is th-"

Then Pickering surfaced, screaming. He was now about twenty-five feet out. He waved wildly with both hands. "*Help me!*" he screamed. "*I can't swim!*"

“I know,” Em said. She raised one hand in a bon voyage wave and twiddled the fingers. “And you may even meet a shark. Deke Hollis told me last week they’re running.”

“*Help—*” A wave buried him. She thought he might not emerge, but he did. He was now thirty feet out. Thirty, at least, “*-me! Please!*”

His vitality was nothing short of amazing, especially since what he was doing—flailing his arms at the water, mostly, as if he thought he could fly away like a seagull—was counterproductive, but he was drifting out farther all the time, and there was no one on the beach to save him.

No one but her.

There was really no way he could get back in, she was sure of it, but she limped her way up to the remains of the beach-party campfire and plucked up the largest of the charred logs, just the same. Then she stood there with her shadow trailing out behind her and just watched.

12

I suppose I prefer to think that.

HE LASTED A LONG TIME. She had no idea exactly how long, because he had taken her watch. After a while he stopped screaming. Then he was just a white circle above the dark red blot of his Izod shirt, and pale arms that were trying to fly. Then all at once he was gone. She thought there might be one more sighting of an arm, surfacing like a periscope and waving around, but there wasn't. He was just gone. *Glub*. She was actually disappointed. Later she would be her real self again—a better self, maybe—but right now she wanted him to keep

suffering. She wanted him to die in terror, and not quickly. For Nicole and all the other nieces there might have been before Nicole.

Am I a niece now?

She supposed in a way she was. The last niece. The one who had run as fast as she could. The one who had survived. She sat down by the ruins of the campfire and cast the burned butt end of log away. It probably wouldn't have made a very good weapon, anyhow; probably would have shattered like an artist's charcoal stick when she fetched him the first lick. The sun was a deepening orange, kindling the western horizon. Soon the horizon would catch fire.

She thought about Henry. She thought about Amy. There was nothing there, but there had been once—something as beautiful as a double rainbow over the beach—and that was nice to know, nice to remember. She thought of her father. Soon she would get up, and trudge down to the Grass Shack, and call him. Hut not yet. Not Quite yet. For now it was all right to sit with her feet planted in the sand and her aching arms around her drawn-up knees.

The waves came in. There was no sign of her torn blue shorts or Pickering's red golf shirt. The Gulf had taken them both. Had he drowned? She supposed that was the likeliest thing, but the way he had gone down so suddenly, without so much as a final wave...

"I think something got him," she said to the deepening air. "I suppose I prefer to think that. God knows why."

"Because you're human, sweetie," her father said. *"Only that."* And she supposed it was that true and that simple.

In a horror movie, Pickering would make one last stand: either come roaring out of the surf or be waiting for her, dripping but still his old lively self, in the bedroom closet when she got back. But this wasn't a horror movie, it was her life. Her own little life. She would live it, starting with the long, limping walk back to where there was a house and a key to fit it hidden in a Secrets box under the old ugly gnome with the faded red hat. She would use it, and she would use the telephone too. She would call her father. Then she would call the police. Later, she supposed, she would call Henry. She guessed

Henry still had a right to know she was all right, although he would not have it always. Or, she guessed, even want to have it.

On the Gulf, three pelicans swooped low, skimming the water, then rose, looking down. She watched them, holding her breath, as they reached a point of perfect equilibrium in the orange air. Her face—mercifully she didn't know this—was that of the child who might have lived to climb trees.

The three birds folded their wings and dove in formation.

Then she wiped her arm across her eyes, pushed back her hair, got to her feet, and began to walk home.

Emily applauded, even though it hurt her swollen right wrist, and cried, "*Yo, pelicans!*" ¹²

A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE



A GOOD
MARRIAGE
STEPHEN KING
WITH BONUS STORY "1922"

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1922

*For Tabby
Still.*

A GOOD MARRIAGE

The one thing nobody asked in casual conversation, Darcy thought in the days after she found what she found in the garage, was this: *How's your marriage?* They asked *how was your weekend* and *how was your trip to Florida* and *how's your health* and *how are the kids*; they even asked *how's life been treatin you, hon?* But nobody asked *how's your marriage?*

Good, she would have answered the question before that night. *Everything's fine.*

She had been born Darcellen Madsen (Darcellen, a name only parents besotted with a freshly purchased book of baby names could love), in the year John F. Kennedy was elected President. She was raised in Freeport, Maine, back when it was a town instead of an adjunct to L.L. Bean, America's first superstore, and half a dozen other oversized retail operations of the sort that are called "outlets" (as if they were sewer drains rather than shopping locations). She went to Freeport High School, and then to Addison Business School, where she learned secretarial skills. She was hired by Joe Ransome Chevrolet, which by 1984, when she left the company, was the largest car dealership in Portland. She was plain, but with the help of two marginally more sophisticated girlfriends, learned enough makeup skills to make herself pretty on workdays and downright eye-catching on Friday and Saturday nights, when a bunch of them liked to go out for margaritas at The Lighthouse or Mexican Mike's (where there was live music).

In 1982, Joe Ransome hired a Portland accounting firm to help him figure out his tax situation, which had become complicated ("The kind of problem you want to have," Darcy overheard him tell one of the senior salesmen). A pair of briefcase-toting men came out, one old and one young. Both wore glasses and conservative suits; both combed their short hair neatly away from their foreheads in a way that made Darcy think of the photographs in her mother's MEMORIES OF '54 senior year-book, the one with the image of a

boy cheerleader holding a megaphone to his mouth stamped on its faux-leather cover.

The younger accountant was Bob Anderson. She got talking with him on their second day at the dealership, and in the course of their conversation, asked him if he had any hobbies. Yes, he said, he was a numismatist.

He started to tell her what that was and she said, “I know. My father collects Lady Liberty dimes and buffalo-head nickels. He says they’re his numismatical hobby-horse. Do you have a hobbyhorse, Mr. Anderson?”

He did: wheat pennies. His greatest hope was to some day come across a 1955 double-date, which was—

But she knew that, too. The ’55 double-date was a mistake. A *valuable* mistake.

Young Mr. Anderson, he of the thick and carefully combed brown hair, was delighted with this answer. He asked her to call him Bob. Later, during their lunch—which they took on a bench in the sunshine behind the body shop, a tuna on rye for him and a Greek salad in a Tupperware bowl for her—he asked if she would like to go with him on Saturday to a street sale in Castle Rock. He had just rented a new apartment, he said, and was looking for an armchair. Also a TV, if someone was selling a good one at a fair price. A *good one at a fair price* was a phrase with which she would grow comfortably familiar in the years to come.

He was as plain as she was, just another guy you’d pass on the street without noticing, and would never have makeup to make him prettier . . . except that day on the bench, he did. His cheeks flushed when he asked her out, just enough to light him up a little and give him a glow.

“No coin collections?” she teased.

He smiled, revealing even teeth. Small teeth, nicely cared for, and white. It never occurred to her that the thought of those teeth could make her shudder—why would it?

“If I saw a nice set of coins, of course I’d look,” he said.

“Especially wheat pennies?” Teasing, but just a little.

“Especially those. Would you like to come, Darcy?”

She came. And she came on their wedding night, too. Not terribly often after that, but now and then. Often enough to consider herself normal and fulfilled.

In 1986, Bob got a promotion. He also (with Darcy's encouragement and help) started up a small mail-order business in collectible American coins. It was successful from the start, and in 1990, he added baseball trading cards and old movie memorabilia. He kept no stock of posters, one-sheets, or window cards, but when people queried him on such items, he could almost always find them. Actually it was Darcy who found them, using her overstuffed Rolodex in those pre-computer days to call collectors all over the country. The business never got big enough to become full-time, and that was all right. Neither of them wanted such a thing. They agreed on that as they did on the house they eventually bought in Pownal, and on the children when it came time to have them. They agreed. When they didn't agree, they compromised. But mostly they agreed. They saw eye-to-eye.

How's your marriage?

It was good. A good marriage. Donnie was born in 1986—she quit her job to have him, and except for helping with Anderson Coins & Collectibles never held another one—and Petra was born in 1988. By then, Bob Anderson's thick brown hair was thinning at the crown, and by 2002, the year Darcy's Macintosh computer finally swallowed her Rolodex whole, he had a large shiny bald spot back there. He experimented with different ways of combing what was left, which only made the bald spot more conspicuous, in her opinion. And he irritated her by trying two of the magical grow-it-all-back formulas, the kind of stuff sold by shifty-looking hucksters on high cable late at night (Bob Anderson became something of a night owl as he slipped into middle age). He didn't tell her he'd done it, but they shared a bedroom and although she wasn't tall enough to see the top shelf of the closet unaided, she sometimes used a stool to put away his "Saturday shirts," the tees he wore for puttering in the garden. And there they were: a bottle of liquid in the fall of 2004, a bottle of little green gel capsules a year later. She looked the names up on the Internet, and they weren't cheap. *Of course magic never is*, she remembered thinking.

But, irritated or not, she had held her peace about the magic potions, and also about the used Chevy Suburban he for some reason just had to buy in the same year that gas prices really started to climb. As he had held his, she supposed (as she *knew*, actually), when she had insisted on good summer camps for the kids, an electric guitar for Donnie (he had played for two years, long enough to get surprisingly good, and then had simply stopped), horse rentals for Petra. A successful marriage was a balancing act—that was a thing everyone knew. A successful marriage was also dependent on a high tolerance for irritation—this was a thing *Darcy* knew. As the Stevie Winwood song said, you had to roll widdit, baby.

She rolled with it. So did he.

In 2004, Donnie went off to college in Pennsylvania. In 2006, Petra went to Colby, just up the road in Waterville. By then, Darcy Madsen Anderson was forty-six years old. Bob was forty-nine, and still doing Cub Scouts with Stan Morin, a construction contractor who lived half a mile down the road. She thought her balding husband looked rather amusing in the khaki shorts and long brown socks he wore for the monthly Wildlife Hikes, but never said so. His bald spot had become well entrenched; his glasses had become bifocals; his weight had spun up from one-eighty into the two-twenty range. He had become a partner in the accounting firm—Benson and Bacon was now Benson, Bacon & Anderson. They had traded the starter home in Pownal for a more expensive one in Yarmouth. Her breasts, formerly small and firm and high (her best feature, she'd always thought; she'd never wanted to look like a Hooters waitress), were now larger, not so firm, and of course they dropped down when she took off her bra at night—what else could you expect when you were closing in on the half-century mark?—but every so often Bob would still come up behind her and cup them. Every so often there was the pleasant interlude in the upstairs bedroom overlooking their peaceful two-acre patch of land, and if he was a little quick on the draw and often left her unsatisfied, often was not always, and the satisfaction of holding him afterward, feeling his warm man's body as he drowsed away next to her . . . that satisfaction never failed. It was, she supposed, the satisfaction of knowing they were still together when so many others were not; the satisfaction of knowing that as

they approached their Silver Anniversary, the course was still steady as she goes.

In 2009, twenty-five years down the road from their I-do's in a small Baptist church that no longer existed (there was now a parking lot where it had stood), Donnie and Petra threw them a surprise party at The Birches on Castle View. There were over fifty guests, champagne (the good stuff), steak tips, a four-tier cake. The honorees danced to Kenny Loggins's "Footloose," just as they had at their wedding. The guests applauded Bob's breakaway move, one she had forgotten until she saw it again, and its still-airy execution gave her a pang. Well it should have; he had grown a paunch to go with the embarrassing bald spot (embarrassing to him, at least), but he was still extremely light on his feet for an accountant.

But all of that was just history, the stuff of obituaries, and they were still too young to be thinking of those. It ignored the minutiae of marriage, and such ordinary mysteries, she believed (*firmly* believed), were the stuff that validated the partnership. The time she had eaten bad shrimp and vomited all night long, sitting on the edge of the bed with her sweaty hair clinging to the nape of her neck and tears rolling down her flushed cheeks and Bob sitting beside her, patiently holding the basin and then taking it to the bathroom, where he emptied and rinsed it after each ejection—so the smell of it wouldn't make her even sicker, he said. He had been warming up the car to take her to the Emergency Room at six the next morning when the horrible nausea had finally begun to abate. He had called in sick at B, B & A; he'd also canceled a trip to White River so he could sit with her in case the sickness came back.

That kind of thing worked both ways; one year's sauce for the goose was next year's sauce for the gander. She had sat with him in the waiting room at St. Stephen's—back in '94 or '95, this had been—waiting for the biopsy results after he had discovered (in the shower) a suspicious lump in his left armpit. The biopsy had been negative, the diagnosis an infected lymph node. The lump had lingered for another month or so, then went away on its own.

The sight of a crossword book on his knees glimpsed through the half-open bathroom door as he sat on the commode. The smell of cologne on his cheeks, which meant that the Suburban would be

gone from the driveway for a day or two and his side of the bed would be empty for a night or two because he had to straighten out someone's accounting in New Hampshire or Vermont (B, B & A now had clients in all the northern New England states). Sometimes the smell meant a trip to look at someone's coin collection at an estate sale, because not all the numismatic buying and selling that went with their side-business could be accomplished by computer, they both understood that. The sight of his old black suitcase, the one he would never give up no matter how much she nagged, in the front hall. His slippers at the end of the bed, one always tucked into the other. The glass of water on his end-table, with the orange vitamin pill next to it, on that month's issue of *Coin & Currency Collecting*. How he always said, "More room out than there is in" after belching and "Look out, gas attack!" after he farted. His coat on the first hook in the hall. The reflection of his toothbrush in the mirror (he would still be using the same one he'd had when they got married, Darcy believed, if she didn't regularly replace it). The way he dabbed his lips with his napkin after every second or third bite of food. The careful arrangement of camping gear (always including an extra compass) before he and Stan set out with yet another bunch of nine-year-olds on the hike up Dead Man's Trail—a dangerous and terrifying trek that took them through the woods behind the Golden Grove Mall and came out at Weinberg's Used Car City. The look of his nails, always short and clean. The taste of Dentyne on his breath when they kissed. These things and ten thousand others comprised the secret history of the marriage.

She knew he must have his own history of her, everything from the cinnamon-flavored ChapStick she used on her lips in the winter to the smell of her shampoo when he nuzzled the back of her neck (that nuzzle didn't come so often now, but it still came) to the click of her computer at two in the morning on those two or three nights a month when sleep for some reason jilted her.

Now it was twenty-seven years, or—she had amused herself figuring this one day using the calculator function on her computer—nine thousand eight hundred and fifty-five days. Almost a quarter of a million hours and over fourteen million minutes. Of course some of that time he'd been gone on business, and she'd taken a few trips

herself (the saddest to be with her parents in Minneapolis after her kid sister Brandolyn had died in a freak accident), but mostly they had been together.

Did she know everything about him? Of course not. No more than he knew everything about her—how she sometimes (mostly on rainy days or on those nights when the insomnia was on her) gobbled Butterfingers or Baby Ruths, for instance, eating the candybars even after she no longer wanted them, even after she felt sick to her stomach. Or how she thought the new mailman was sort of cute. There was no knowing everything, but she felt that after twenty-seven years, they knew all the important things. It was a good marriage, one of the fifty percent or so that kept working over the long haul. She believed that in the same unquestioning way she believed that gravity would hold her to the earth when she walked down the sidewalk.

Until that night in the garage.

The TV controller stopped working, and there were no double-A batteries in the kitchen cabinet to the left of the sink. There were D-cells and C-cells, even an unopened pack of the teeny tiny triple-As, but no goddamn frigging double-As. So she went out to the garage because she knew Bob kept a stash of Duracells there, and that was all it took to change her life. It was as if everyone was in the air, *high* in the air. One lousy little step in the wrong direction and you were falling.

The kitchen and the garage were connected by a breezeway. Darcy went through it in a hurry, clutching her housecoat against her—two days before their run of exceptionally warm Indian summer weather had broken, and now it felt more like November than October. The wind nipped at her ankles. She probably should have put on socks and a pair of slacks, but *Two and a Half Men* was going to come on in less than five minutes, and the goddamn TV was stuck on CNN. If Bob had been here, she would have asked him to change the channel manually—there were buttons for that somewhere, probably on the back where only a man could find them—and then sent him for the batteries. The garage was mostly his domain, after all. She only went there to get her car out, and that only on bad-weather days; otherwise she parked it in the driveway turnaround. But Bob was in Montpelier, evaluating a collection of World War II steel pennies, and she was, at least temporarily, in sole charge of *casa* Anderson.

She fumbled for the trio of switches beside the door and shoved them up with the heel of her hand. The overhead fluorescents buzzed on. The garage was spacious and neat, the tools hung on the pegboards and Bob's workbench in good order. The floor was a concrete slab painted battleship gray. There were no oilstains; Bob said that oil-stains on a garage floor either meant the people who owned the garage were running junk or were careless about maintenance. The year-old Prius he used for his weekday commutes

into Portland was there; he had taken his high-mileage SUV dinosaur to Vermont. Her Volvo was parked outside.

“It’s just as easy to pull it in,” he had said on more than one occasion (when you were married for twenty-seven years, original comments tended to be thin on the ground). “Just use the door opener on the visor.”

“I like it where I can see it,” she always replied, although the real reason was her fear of clipping the garage bay door while backing out. She hated backing. And she supposed he knew it . . . just as she knew that he had a peculiar fetish about keeping the paper money in his wallet heads-side up and would never leave a book facedown and open when he paused in his reading—because, he said, it broke the spines.

At least the garage was warm; big silver pipes (probably you called them ducts, but Darcy wasn’t quite sure) crisscrossed the ceiling. She walked to the bench, where several square tins were lined up, each neatly labeled: BOLTS, SCREWS, HINGES HASPS & L-CLAMPS, PLUMBING, and—she found this rather endearing—ODDS & ENDS. There was a calendar on the wall featuring a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit girl who looked depressingly young and sexy; to the left of the calendar two photos had been tacked up. One was an old snap of Donnie and Petra on the Yarmouth Little League field, dressed in Boston Red Sox jerseys. Below it, in Magic Marker, Bob had printed **THE HOME TEAM, 1999**. The other, much newer, showed a grownup and just-short-of-beautiful Petra standing with Michael, her fiancé, in front of a clam shack on Old Orchard Beach with their arms around each other. The Magic Marker caption below this one read **THE HAPPY COUPLE!**

The cabinet with the batteries bore a Dymo tape label reading ELECTRICAL STUFF and was mounted to the left of the photos. Darcy moved in that direction without looking where she was going—trusting to Bob’s just-short-of-maniacal neatness—and stumbled over a cardboard box that hadn’t been entirely pushed under the workbench. She tottered, then grabbed the workbench at the last possible second. She broke off a fingernail—painful and annoying—but saved herself a potentially nasty fall, which was good. *Very good*, considering there was no one in the house to call 911, had she

cracked her skull on the floor—greaseless and clean, but extremely hard.

She could simply have pushed the box back under with the side of her foot—later she would realize this and ponder it carefully, like a mathematician going over an abstruse and complicated equation. She was in a hurry, after all. But she saw a Patternworks knitting catalogue on top of the box, and knelt down to grab it and take it in with the batteries. And when she lifted it out, there was a Brookstone catalogue she had misplaced just underneath. And beneath that Paula Young . . . Talbots . . . Forzieri . . . Bloomingdale's . . .

“Bob!” she cried, only it came out in two exasperated syllables (the way it did when he tracked in mud or left his sopping towels on the bathroom floor, as if they were in a fancy hotel with maid service), not *Bob* but *BOH-ub!* Because, really, she could read him like a book. He thought she ordered too much from the mail-order catalogues, had once gone so far as to declare she was addicted to them (which was ridiculous, it was Butterfingers she was addicted to). That little psychological analysis had earned him a two-day cold shoulder. But he knew how her mind worked, and that with things that weren't absolutely vital, she was the original out-of-sight, out-of-mind girl. So he had gathered up her catalogues, the sneak, and stowed them out here. Probably the next stop would have been the recycling bin.

Danskin . . . Express . . . Computer Outlet . . . *Macworld* . . .
Monkey Ward . . . Layla Grace . . .

The deeper she went, the more exasperated she became. You'd think they were tottering on the edge of bankruptcy because of her spendthrift ways, which was utter bullshit. She had forgotten all about *Two and a Half Men*; she was already selecting the piece of her mind she intended to give Bob when he called from Montpelier (he always called after he'd had his dinner and was back at the motel). But first, she intended to take all these catalogues right back into the goddamn house, which would take three or possibly four trips, because the stack was at least two feet high, and those slick catalogues were *heavy*. It was really no wonder she'd stumbled over the box.

Death by catalogues, she thought. *Now that would be an ironic way to g—*

The thought broke off as clean as a dry branch. She was thumbing as she was thinking, now a quarter of the way down in the stack, and beneath Gooseberry Patch (country décor), she came to something that wasn't a catalogue. No, not a catalogue at all. It was a magazine called *Bondage Bitches*. She almost didn't take it out, and probably wouldn't have if she'd come across it in one of his drawers, or on that high shelf with the magic hair-replacement products. But finding it here, stashed in a pile of what had to be at least two hundred catalogues . . . *her* catalogues . . . there was something about that which went beyond the embarrassment a man might feel about a sexual kink.

The woman on the cover was bound to a chair and naked except for a black hood, but the hood only covered the top half of her face and you could see she was screaming. She was tied with heavy ropes that bit into her breasts and belly. There was fake blood on her chin, neck, and arms. Across the bottom of the page, in screaming yellow type, was this unpleasant come-on: **BAD BITCH BRENDA ASKED FOR IT AND GETS IT ON PAGE 49!**

Darcy had no intention of turning to page 49, or to any other page. She was already explaining to herself what this was: a *male investigation*. She knew about male investigations from a *Cosmo* article she'd read in the dentist's office. A woman had written in to one of the magazine's many advisors (this one the on-staff shrink who specialized in the often mysterious bearded sex) about finding a couple of gay magazines in her husband's briefcase. Very explicit stuff, the letter-writer had said, and now she was worried that her husband might be in the closet. Although if he was, she continued, he was certainly hiding it well in the bedroom.

Not to worry, the advice-lady said. Men were adventurous by nature, and many of them liked to investigate sexual behavior that was either alternative—gay sex being number one in that regard, group sex a close second—or fetishistic: water sports, cross-dressing, public sex, latex. And, of course, bondage. She had added that some women were also fascinated by bondage, which had

mystified Darcy, but she would have been the first to admit she didn't know everything.

Male investigation, that was all this was. He had maybe seen the magazine on a newsstand somewhere (although when Darcy tried to imagine that particular cover on a newsstand, her mind balked), and had been curious. Or maybe he'd picked it out of a trash can at a convenience store. He had taken it home, looked through it out here in the garage, had been as appalled as she was (the blood on the cover model was obviously fake, but that scream looked all too real), and had stuck it in this gigantic stack of catalogues bound for the recycling bin so she wouldn't come across it and give him a hard time. That was all it was, a one-off. If she looked through the rest of these catalogues, she'd find nothing else like it. Maybe a few *Penthouses* and panty-mags—she knew most men liked silk and lace, and Bob was no exception in this regard—but nothing more in the *Bondage Bitches* genre.

She looked at the cover again, and noticed an odd thing: there was no price on it. No bar code, either. She checked the back cover, curious about what such a magazine might cost, and winced at the picture there: a naked blonde strapped to what looked like a steel operating-room table. This one's expression of terror looked about as real as a three-dollar bill, however, which was sort of comforting. And the portly man standing over her with what appeared to be a Ginsu knife just looked ridiculous in his armlets and leather underpants—more like an accountant than someone about to carve up the Bondage Bitch du jour.

Bob's an accountant, her mind remarked.

A stupid thought launched from her brain's all-too-large Stupid Zone. She pushed it away just as she pushed the remarkably unpleasant magazine back into the pile of catalogues after ascertaining that there was no price or bar code on the back, either. And as she shoved the cardboard box under the workbench—she had changed her mind about carting the catalogues back into the house—the answer to the no-price/no-bar-code mystery came to her. It was one of those magazines they sold in a plastic wrapper, with all the naughty bits covered. The price and the code had been on the wrapper, of course that was it, what else could it be? He had to've

bought the goddamn thing somewhere, assuming he hadn't fished it out of the trash.

Maybe he bought it over the Internet. There are probably sites that specialize in that sort of thing. Not to mention young women dressed up to look like twelve-year-olds.

"Never mind," she said, and gave her head a single brisk nod. This was a done deal, a dead letter, a closed discussion. If she mentioned it on the phone when he called later tonight, or when he came home, he'd be embarrassed and defensive. He'd probably call her sexually naïve, which she supposed she was, and accuse her of overreacting, which she was determined not to do. What she was determined to do was roll widdit, baby. A marriage was like a house under constant construction, each year seeing the completion of new rooms. A first-year marriage was a cottage; one that had gone on for twenty-seven years was a huge and rambling mansion. There were bound to be crannies and storage spaces, most of them dusty and abandoned, some containing a few unpleasant relics you would just as soon you hadn't found. But that was no biggie. You either threw those relics out or took them to Goodwill.

She liked this thought (which had a conclusive feel) so well that she said it out loud: "No biggie." And to prove it, she gave the cardboard box a hard two-handed shove, sending it all the way to the rear wall.

Where there was a clunk. What was that?

I don't want to know, she told herself, and was pretty sure that thought wasn't coming from the Stupid Zone but from the smart one. It was shadowy back there under the worktable, and there might be mice. Even a well-kept garage like this one could have mice, especially once cold weather came, and a scared mouse might bite.

Darcy stood up, brushed off the knees of her housecoat, and left the garage. Halfway across the breezeway, she heard the phone begin to ring.

She was back in the kitchen before the answering machine kicked in, but she waited. If it was Bob, she'd let the robot take it. She didn't want to talk to him right this minute. He might hear something in her voice. He would assume she'd gone out to the corner store or maybe to Video Village and call back in an hour. In an hour, after her unpleasant discovery would have had a chance to settle a bit, she'd be fine and they could have a pleasant conversation.

But it wasn't Bob, it was Donnie. "Oh, shoot, I really wanted to talk to you guys."

She picked up the phone, leaned back against the counter, and said, "So talk. I was coming back from the garage."

Donnie was bubbling over with news. He was living in Cleveland, Ohio, now, and after two years of thankless toiling in an entry-level position with the city's largest ad firm, he and a friend had decided to strike out on their own. Bob had strongly advised against this, telling Donnie that Donnie and his partner would never get the start-up loan they needed to make it through the first year.

"Wake up," he'd said after Darcy turned the phone over to him. In the early spring this had been, with the last bits of snow still lurking beneath the trees and bushes in the backyard. "You're twenty-four, Donnie, and so's your pal Ken. You two galoots can't even get collision insurance on your cars for another year, just straight liability. No bank's going to underwrite a seventy-thousand-dollar start-up, especially with the economy the way it is."

But they *had* gotten the loan, and now had landed two big clients, both on the same day. One was a car dealership looking for a fresh approach that would attract thirtysomething buyers. The other was the very bank that had issued Anderson & Hayward their start-up loan. Darcy shouted with delight, and Donnie yelled right back. They talked for twenty minutes or so. Once during the conversation they were interrupted by the double-beep of an incoming call.

"Do you want to get that?" Donnie asked.

“No, it’s just your father. He’s in Montpelier, looking at a collection of steel pennies. He’ll call back before he turns in.”

“How’s he doing?”

Fine, she thought. *Developing new interests.*

“Upright and sniffin the air,” she said. It was one of Bob’s favorites, and it made Donnie laugh. She loved to hear him laugh.

“And Pets?”

“Call her yourself and see, Donald.”

“I will, I will. I always get around to it. In the meantime, thumbnail me.”

“She’s great. Full of wedding plans.”

“You’d think it was next week instead of next June.”

“Donnie, if you don’t make an effort to understand women, you’ll never get married yourself.”

“I’m in no hurry, I’m having too much fun.”

“Just as long as you have fun carefully.”

“I’m very careful and very polite. I’ve got to run, Ma. I’m meeting Ken for a drink in half an hour. We’re going to start brainstorming this car thing.”

She almost told him not to drink too much, then restrained herself. He might still look like a high school junior, and in her clearest memory of him he was a five-year-old in a red corduroy jumper, tirelessly pushing his scooter up and down the concrete paths of Joshua Chamberlain Park in Pownal, but he was neither of those boys anymore. He was a young man, and also, as improbable as it seemed, a young entrepreneur beginning to make his way in the world.

“Okay,” she said. “Thanks for calling, Donnie. It was a treat.”

“Same here. Say hello to the old feller when he calls back, and give him my love.”

“I will.”

“Upright and sniffin the air,” Donnie said, and snickered. “How many Cub Scout packs has he taught that one to?”

“All of them.” Darcy opened the refrigerator to see if there was perchance a Butterfinger in there, chilling and awaiting her amorous intentions. Nope. “It’s terrifying.”

“Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too.”

She hung up, feeling good again. Smiling. But as she stood there, leaning against the counter, the smile faded.

A clunk.

There had been a clunk when she pushed the box of catalogues back under the workbench. Not a clatter, as if the box had struck a dropped tool, but a *clunk*. Sort of hollow-sounding.

I don't care.

Unfortunately, this was not true. The clunk felt like unfinished business. The carton did, too. *Were* there other magazines like *Bondage Bitches* stashed in there?

I don't want to know.

Right, right, but maybe she should find out, just the same. Because if there was just the one, she was right about its being sexual curiosity that had been fully satisfied by a single peek into an unsavory (*and unbalanced*, she added to herself) world. If there were more, that might still be all right—he was throwing them out, after all—but maybe she should know.

Mostly . . . that clunk. It lingered on her mind more than the question about the magazines.

She snagged a flashlight from the pantry and went back out to the garage. She pinched the lapels of her housecoat shut immediately and wished she'd put on her jacket. It was really getting cold.

Darcy got down on her knees, pushed the box of catalogues to one side, and shone the light under the worktable. For a moment she didn't understand what she was seeing: two lines of darkness interrupting the smooth baseboard, one slightly fatter than the other. Then a thread of disquiet formed in her midsection, stretching from the middle of her breastbone down to the pit of her stomach. It was a hiding place.

Leave this alone, Darcy. It's his business, and for your own peace of mind you should let it stay that way.

Good advice, but she had come too far to take it. She crawled under the worktable with the flashlight in her hand, steeling herself for the brush of cobwebs, but there were none. If she was the original out-of-sight, out-of-mind girl, then her balding, coin-collecting, Cub Scouting husband was the original everything-polished, everything-clean boy.

Also, he's crawled under here himself, so no cobwebs would have a chance to form.

Was that true? She didn't actually know, did she?

But she thought she did.

The cracks were at either end of an eight-inch length of baseboard that appeared to have a dowel or something in the middle so it could pivot. She had struck it with the box just hard enough to jar it open, but that didn't explain the clunk. She pushed one end of the board. It swung in on one end and out on the other, revealing a hidey-hole eight inches long, a foot high, and maybe eighteen inches deep. She thought she might discover more magazines, possibly rolled up, but there were no magazines. There was a little wooden box, one she was pretty sure she recognized. It was the box that had made the clunking sound. It had been standing on end, and the pivoting baseboard had knocked it over.

She reached in, grasped it, and—with a sense of misgiving so strong it almost had a texture—brought it out. It was the little oak box

she had given to him at Christmas five years ago, maybe more. Or had it been for his birthday? She didn't remember, just that it had been a good buy at the craft shop in Castle Rock. Hand-carved on the top, in bas-relief, was a chain. Below the chain, also in bas-relief, was the box's stated purpose: **LINKS**. Bob had a clutter of cufflinks, and although he favored button-style shirts for work, some of his wrist-jewelry was quite nice. She remembered thinking the box would help keep them organized. Darcy knew she'd seen it on top of the bureau on his side of the bedroom for awhile after the gift was unwrapped and exclaimed over, but couldn't remember seeing it lately. Of course she hadn't. It was out here, in the hidey-hole under his worktable, and she would have bet the house and lot (another of his sayings) that if she opened it, it wouldn't be cufflinks she found inside.

Don't look, then.

More good advice, but now she had come *much* too far to take it. Feeling like a woman who has wandered into a casino and for some mad reason staked her entire life's savings on a single turn of a single card, she opened the box.

Let it be empty. Please God, if you love me let it be empty.

But it wasn't. There were three plastic oblongs inside, bound with an elastic band. She picked the bundle out, using just the tips of her fingers—as a woman might handle a cast-off rag she fears may be germy as well as dirty. Darcy slipped off the elastic.

They weren't credit cards, which had been her first idea. The top one was a Red Cross blood donor's card belonging to someone named Marjorie Duvall. Her type was A-positive, her region New England. Darcy turned the card over and saw that Marjorie—whoever she was—had last given blood on August sixteenth of 2010. Three months ago.

Who the hell was Marjorie Duvall? How did Bob know her? And why did the name ring a faint but very clear bell?

The next one was Marjorie Duvall's North Conway Library card, and it had an address: 17 Honey Lane, South Gansett, New Hampshire.

The last piece of plastic was Marjorie Duvall's New Hampshire driver's license. She looked like a perfectly ordinary American

woman in her mid-thirties, not very pretty (although nobody looked their best in driver's license photographs), but presentable. Darkish blond hair pulled back from her face, either bunned or ponytailed; in the picture you couldn't tell. DOB, January 6, 1974. The address was the same as the one on the library card.

Darcy realized that she was making a desolate mewling sound. It was horrible to hear a sound like that coming from her own throat, but she couldn't stop. And her stomach had been replaced by a ball of lead. It was pulling all of her insides down, stretching them into new and unpleasant shapes. She had seen Marjorie Duvall's face in the newspaper. Also on the six o'clock news.

With hands that had absolutely no feeling, she put the rubber band back around the ID cards, put them back in the box, then put the box back in his hidey-hole. She was getting ready to close it up again when she heard herself saying, "No, no, no, that isn't right. It can't be."

Was that the voice of Smart Darcy or Stupid Darcy? It was hard to tell. All she knew for sure was that Stupid Darcy had been the one to open the box. And thanks to Stupid Darcy, she was falling.

Taking the box back out. Thinking, *It's a mistake, it has to be, we've been married over half our lives, I'd know, I would know.* Opening the box. Thinking, *Does anybody really know anybody?*

Before tonight she certainly would have thought so.

Marjorie Duvall's driver's license was now on the top of the stack. Before, it had been on the bottom. Darcy put it there. But which of the others had been on top, the Red Cross card or the library card? It was simple, it *had* to be simple when there were only two choices, but she was too upset to remember. She put the library card on top and knew at once that was wrong, because the first thing she'd seen when she opened the box was a flash of red, red like blood, of course a blood donor card would be red, and that had been the one on top.

She put it there, and as she was putting the elastic back around the little collection of plastic, the phone in the house started to ring again. It was him. It was Bob, calling from Vermont, and were she in the kitchen to take the call, she'd hear his cheery voice (a voice she knew as well as her own) asking, *Hey, honey, how are you?*

Her fingers jerked and the rubber band snapped. It flew away, and she cried out, whether in frustration or fear she didn't know. But really, why would she be afraid? Twenty-seven years of marriage and he had never laid a hand on her, except to caress. On only a few occasions had he raised his voice to her.

The phone rang again . . . again . . . and then cut off in mid-ring. Now he would be leaving a message. *Missed you again! Damn! Give me a call so I won't worry, okay? The number is . . .*

He'd add the number of his room, too. He left nothing to chance, took nothing for granted.

What she was thinking absolutely couldn't be true. It was like one of those monster delusions that sometimes reared up from the mud at the bottom of a person's mind, sparkling with hideous plausibility: that the acid indigestion was the onset of a heart attack, the headache a brain tumor, and Petra's failure to call on Sunday night meant she had been in a car accident and was lying comatose in some hospital. But those delusions usually came at four in the morning, when the insomnia was in charge. Not at eight o'clock in the evening . . . and where was that damned rubber band?

She found it at last, lying behind the carton of catalogues she never wanted to look in again. She put it in her pocket, started to get up to look for another one without remembering where she was, and thumped her head on the bottom of the table. Darcy began to cry.

There were no rubber bands in any of the work-table's drawers, and that made her cry even harder. She went back through the breezeway, the terrible, inexplicable identity cards in her housecoat pocket, and got an elastic out of the kitchen drawer where she kept all sorts of semi-useful crap: paper clips, bread ties, fridge magnets that had lost most of their pull. One of these latter said DARCY RULES, and had been a stocking-stuffer present from Bob.

On the counter, the light on top of the phone blinked steadily, saying *message, message, message*.

She hurried back to the garage without holding the lapels of her housecoat. She no longer felt the outer chill, because the one inside was greater. And then there was the lead ball pulling down her guts. Elongating them. She was vaguely aware that she needed to move her bowels, and badly.

Never mind. Hold it. Pretend you're on the turnpike and the next rest area's twenty miles ahead. Get this done. Put everything back the way it was. Then you can—

Then she could what? Forget it?

Fat chance of that.

She bound the ID cards with the elastic, realized the driver's license had somehow gotten back on top, and called herself a stupid bitch . . . a pejorative for which she would have slapped Bob's face, had he ever tried to hang it on her. Not that he ever had.

"A stupid bitch but not a bondage bitch," she muttered, and a cramp knifed her belly. She dropped to her knees and froze that way, waiting for it to pass. If there had been a bathroom out here she would have dashed for it, but there wasn't. When the cramp let go—reluctantly—she rearranged the cards in what she was pretty sure was the right order (blood donor, library, driver's license), then put them back in the **LINKS** box. Box back in hole. Pivoting piece of baseboard closed up tight. Carton of catalogues back where it had been when she tripped on it: sticking out slightly. He would never know the difference.

But was she sure of that? If he was what she was thinking—monstrous that such a thing should even be in her mind, when all she'd wanted just a half an hour ago was fresh batteries for the goddamn remote control—if he *was*, then he'd been careful for a long time. And he *was* careful, he was neat, he was the original everything-polished, everything-clean boy, but if he was what those goddamn (no, *goddamned*) plastic cards seemed to suggest he was, then he must be *supernaturally* careful. Supernaturally watchful. Sly.

It was a word she had never thought of in connection to Bob until tonight.

"No," she told the garage. She was sweating, her hair was stuck to her face in unlovely spikelets, she was crampy and her hands were trembling like those of a person with Parkinson's, but her voice was weirdly calm, strangely serene. "No, he's not. It's a mistake. *My husband is not Beadie.*"

She went back into the house.

She decided to make tea. Tea was calming. She was filling the kettle when the phone began to ring again. She dropped the kettle into the sink—the *bong* sound made her utter a small scream—then went to the phone, wiping her wet hands on her housecoat.

Calm, calm, she told herself. *If he can keep a secret, so can I. Remember that there's a reasonable explanation for all this—*

Oh, really?

—and I just don't know what it is. I need time to think about it, that's all. So: calm.

She picked up the phone and said brightly, “If that’s you, handsome, come right over. My husband’s out of town.”

Bob laughed. “Hey, honey, how are you?”

“Upright and sniffin the air. You?”

There was a long silence. It felt long, anyway, although it couldn’t have been more than a few seconds. In it she heard the somehow terrible whine of the refrigerator, and water dripping from the faucet onto the teakettle she’d dropped in the sink, the beating of her own heart—that last sound seeming to come from her throat and ears rather than her chest. They had been married so long that they had become almost exquisitely attuned to each other. Did that happen in every marriage? She didn’t know. She only knew her own. Except now she had to wonder if she even knew that one.

“You sound funny,” he said. “All thick in the voice. Is everything okay, sweetie?”

She should have been touched. Instead she was terrified. Marjorie Duvall: the name did not just hang in front of her eyes; it seemed to blink on and off, like a neon bar sign. For a moment she was speechless, and to her horror, the kitchen she knew so well was wavering in front of her as more tears rose in her eyes. That crampy heaviness was back in her bowels, too. Marjorie Duvall. A-positive. 17 Honey Lane. As in *hey, hon, how's life been treatin you, are you upright and sniffin the air?*

“I was thinking about Brandolyn,” she heard herself say.

“Oh, baby,” he said, and the sympathy in his voice was all Bob. She knew it well. Hadn’t she leaned on it time after time since 1984? Even before, when they’d still been courting and she came to understand that he was the one? Sure she had. As he had leaned on her. The idea that such sympathy could be nothing but sweet icing on a poison cake was insane. The fact that she was at this moment lying to him was even more insane. If, that was, there were degrees of insanity. Or maybe insane was like unique, and there was no comparative or superlative form. And what was she thinking? In God’s name, what?

But he was talking, and she had no idea what he’d just said.

“Run that past me again. I was reaching for the tea.” Another lie, her hands were shaking too badly to reach for anything, but a small plausible one. And her voice wasn’t shaking. At least she didn’t think it was.

“I said, what got that going?”

“Donnie called and asked after his sister. It got me thinking about mine. I went out and walked around for awhile. I got sniffing, although some of that was just the cold. You probably heard it in my voice.”

“Yep, right away,” he said. “Listen, I should skip Burlington tomorrow and come back home.”

She almost cried out *No!*, but that would be exactly the wrong thing to do. That might get him on the road at first light, all solicitude.

“You do and I’ll punch you in the eye,” she said, and was relieved when he laughed. “Charlie Frady told you that estate sale in Burlington was worth going to, and his contacts are good. His instincts are, too. You’ve always said so.”

“Yeah, but I don’t like to hear you sounding so low.”

That he had known (and at once! at *once!*) that something was wrong with her was bad. That she needed to lie about what the trouble was—ah, that was worse. She closed her eyes, saw Bad Bitch Brenda screaming inside the black hood, and opened them again.

“I was low, but I’m not now,” she said. “It was just a momentary fugue. She was my sister, and I saw my father bring her home.

Sometimes I think about it, that's all."

"I know," he said. He did, too. Her sister's death wasn't the reason she'd fallen in love with Bob Anderson, but his understanding of her grief had tightened the connection.

Brandolyn Madsen had been struck and killed by a drunk snowmobiler while she was out cross-country skiing. He fled, leaving her body in the woods half a mile from the Madsen house. When Brandi wasn't back by eight o'clock, a pair of Freeport policemen and the local Neighborhood Watch had mounted a search party. It was Darcy's father who found her body and carried it home through half a mile of pine woods. Darcy—stationed in the living room, monitoring the phone and trying to keep her mother calm—had been the first to see him. He came walking up the lawn under the harsh glare of a full winter moon with his breath puffing out in white clouds. Darcy's initial thought (this was still terrible to her) had been of those corny old black-and-white love-movies they sometimes showed on TCM, the ones where some guy carries his new bride across the threshold of their happy honeymoon cottage while fifty violins pour syrup onto the soundtrack.

Bob Anderson, Darcy had discovered, could relate in a way many people could not. He hadn't lost a brother or sister; he had lost his best friend. The boy had darted out into the road to grab an errant throw during a game of pickup baseball (not Bob's throw, at least; no baseball player, he'd been swimming that day), had been struck by a delivery truck, and died in the hospital shortly afterward. This coincidence of old sorrows wasn't the only thing that made their pairing seem special to her, but it was the one that made it feel somehow mystical—not a coincidence but a planned thing.

"Stay in Vermont, Bobby. Go to the estate sale. I love you for being concerned, but if you come running home, I'll feel like a kid. Then I'll be mad."

"Okay. But I'm going to call you tomorrow at seven-thirty. Fair warning."

She laughed, and was relieved to hear it was a real one . . . or so close as to make no difference. And why shouldn't she be allowed a real laugh? Just why the heck not? She loved him, and would give him the benefit of the doubt. Of *every* doubt. Nor was this a choice.

You could not turn off love—even the rather absent, sometimes taken for granted love of twenty-seven years—the way you’d turn off a faucet. Love ran from the heart, and the heart had its own imperatives.

“Bobby, you always call at seven-thirty.”

“Guilty as charged. Call tonight if you—”

“—need anything, no matter what the hour,” she finished for him. Now she almost felt like herself again. It was really amazing, the number of hard hits from which a mind could recover. “I will.”

“Love you, honey.” The coda of so many conversations over the years.

“Love you, too,” she said, smiling. Then she hung up, put her forehead against the wall, closed her eyes, and began weeping before the smile could leave her face.

Her computer, an iMac now old enough to look fashionably retro, was in her sewing room. She rarely used it for anything but email and eBay, but now she opened Google and typed in Marjorie Duvall's name. She hesitated before adding *Beadie* to the search, but not long. Why prolong the agony? It would come up anyway, she was sure of it. She hit Enter, and as she watched the little wait-circle go around and around at the top of the screen, those cramps struck again. She hurried to the bathroom, sat down on the commode, and took care of her business with her face in her hands. There was a mirror on the back of the door, and she didn't want to see herself in it. Why was it there, anyway? Why had she *allowed* it to be there? Who wanted to watch themselves sitting on the pot? Even at the best of times, which this most certainly wasn't?

She went back to the computer slowly, dragging her feet like a child who knows she is about to be punished for the kind of thing Darcy's mother had called a Big Bad. She saw that Google had provided her with over five million results for her search: o omnipotent Google, so generous and so terrible. But the first one actually made her laugh; it invited her to follow Marjorie Duvall Beadie on Twitter. Darcy felt she could ignore that one. Unless she was wrong (and how wildly grateful that would make her), the Marjorie she was looking for had Twittered her last tweet some time ago.

The second result was from the *Portland Press Herald*, and when Darcy clicked on it, the photograph that greeted her (it felt like a slap, that greeting) was the one she remembered from TV, and probably in this very article, since the *Press Herald* was their paper. The article had been published ten days before, and was the lead story. **NEW HAMPSHIRE WOMAN MAY HAVE BEEN "BEADIE'S" 11th VICTIM**, the headline screamed. And the subhead: ***Police Source: "We're Ninety Per Cent Sure"***

Marjorie Duvall looked a lot prettier in the newspaper picture, a studio shot that showed her posed in classic fashion, wearing a swirly black dress. Her hair was down, and looked a much lighter blond in this photo. Darcy wondered if her husband had provided the picture. She supposed he had. She supposed it had been on their mantel at 17 Honey Lane, or perhaps mounted in the hall. The pretty hostess of the house greeting guests with her eternal smile.

Gentlemen prefer blondes because they get tired of squeezin them blackheads.

One of Bob's sayings. She had never much liked that one, and hated having it in her head now.

Marjorie Duvall had been found in a ravine six miles from her house in South Gansett, just over the North Conway town line. The County Sheriff speculated that the death had probably resulted from strangulation, but he couldn't say for sure; that was up to the County Medical Examiner. He refused to speculate further, or answer any other questions, but the reporter's unnamed source (whose information was at least semi-validated by being "close to the investigation") said that Duvall had been bitten and sexually molested "in a manner consistent with the other Beadie killings."

Which was a natural transition to a complete recap of the previous murders. The first had occurred in 1977. There had been two in 1978, another in 1980, and then two more in 1981. Two of the murders had occurred in New Hampshire, two in Massachusetts, the fifth and sixth in Vermont. After that, there had been a hiatus of sixteen years. The police assumed that one of three things had happened: Beadie had moved to another part of the country and was pursuing his hobby there, Beadie had been arrested for some other, unrelated crime and was in prison, or Beadie had killed himself. The one thing that *wasn't* likely, according to a psychiatrist the reporter had consulted for his story, was that Beadie had just gotten tired of it. "These guys don't get bored," the psychiatrist said. "It's their sport, their compulsion. More than that, it's their secret life."

Secret life. What a poison bonbon that phrase was.

Beadie's sixth victim had been a woman from Barre, uncovered in a snowdrift by a passing plow just a week before Christmas. *Such a holiday that must have been for her relatives*, Darcy thought. Not that

she'd had much of a Christmas herself that year. Lonely away from home (a fact wild horses wouldn't have dragged from her mouth when talking to her mother), working at a job she wasn't sure she was qualified for even after eighteen months and one merit raise, she had felt absolutely no spirit of the season. She had acquaintances (the Margarita Girls), but no real friends. She wasn't good when it came to making friends, never had been. Shy was the kind word for her personality, introverted probably a more accurate one.

Then Bob Anderson had walked into her life with a smile on his face—Bob who had asked her out and wouldn't take no for an answer. Not three months after the plow had uncovered the body of Beadie's last "early cycle" victim, that must have been. They fell in love. And Beadie stopped for sixteen years.

Because of her? Because he loved her? Because he wanted to stop doing Big Bads?

Or just a coincidence. It could be that.

Nice try, but the IDs she'd found squirreled away in the garage made the idea of coincidence seem a lot less likely.

Beadie's seventh victim, the first of what the paper called "the new cycle," had been a woman from Waterville, Maine, named Stacey Moore. Her husband found her in the cellar upon returning from Boston, where he and two friends had taken in a couple of Red Sox games. August of 1997, this had been. Her head had been stuffed into a bin of the sweet corn the Moores sold at their roadside Route 106 farmstand. She was naked, her hands bound behind her back, her buttocks and thighs bitten in a dozen places.

Two days later, Stacey Moore's driver's license and Blue Cross card, bound with a rubber band, had arrived in Augusta, addressed in block printing to BOOB ATTORNEY JENRAL DEPT. OF CRINIMAL INVESTIGATION. There was also a note: *HELLO! I'M BACK! BEADIE!*

This was a packet the detectives in charge of the Moore murder recognized at once. Similar selected bits of ID—and similar cheerful notes—had been delivered following each of the previous killings. He knew when they were alone. He tortured them, principally with his teeth; he raped or sexually molested them; he killed them; he sent

their identification to some branch of the police weeks or months later. Taunting them with it.

To make sure he gets the credit, Darcy thought dismally.

There had been another Beadie murder in 2004, the ninth and tenth in 2007. Those two were the worst, because one of the victims had been a child. The woman's ten-year-old son had been excused from school after complaining of a stomachache, and had apparently walked in on Beadie while he was at work. The boy's body had been found with his mother's, in a nearby creek. When the woman's ID—two credit cards and a driver's license—arrived at Massachusetts State Police Barracks #7, the attached card read: *HELLO! THE BOY WAS AN ACCIDENT! SORRY! BUT IT WAS QUICK, HE DID NOT "SUFFER!" BEADIE!*

There were many other articles she could have accessed (omnipotent Google), but to what end? The sweet dream of one more ordinary evening in an ordinary life had been swallowed by a nightmare. Would reading more about Beadie dispel the nightmare? The answer to that was obvious.

Her belly clenched. She ran for the bathroom—still smelly in spite of the fan, usually you could ignore what a smelly business life was, but not always—and fell on her knees in front of the toilet, staring into the blue water with her mouth open. For a moment she thought the need to vomit was going to pass, then she thought of Stacey Moore with her black strangled face shoved into the corn and her buttocks covered with blood dried to the color of chocolate milk. That tipped her over and she vomited twice, hard enough to splash her face with Ty-D-Bol and a few flecks of her own effluvium.

Crying and gasping, she flushed the toilet. The porcelain would have to be cleaned, but for now she only lowered the lid and laid her flushed cheek on its cool beige plastic.

What am I going to do?

The obvious step was to call the police, but what if she did that and it all turned out to be a mistake? Bob had always been the most generous and forgiving of men—when she'd run the front of their old van into a tree at the edge of the post office parking lot and shattered the windshield, his only concern had been if she had cut her face—but would he forgive her if she mistakenly fingered him for eleven

torture-killings he hadn't committed? And the world would know. Guilty or innocent, his picture would be in the paper. On the front page. Hers, too.

Darcy dragged herself to her feet, got the toilet-scrubbing brush from the bathroom closet, and cleaned up her mess. She did it slowly. Her back hurt. She supposed she had thrown up hard enough to pull a muscle.

Halfway through the job, the next realization thudded down. It wouldn't be just the two of them dragged into newspaper speculation and the filthy rinse-cycle of twenty-four-hour cable news; there were the kids to think about. Donnie and Ken had just landed their first two clients, but the bank and the car dealership looking for a fresh approach would be gone three hours after this shit-bomb exploded. Anderson & Hayward, which had taken its first real breath today, would be dead tomorrow. Darcy didn't know how much Ken Hayward had invested, but Donnie was all in the pot. That didn't amount to such of a much in cash, but there were other things you invested when you were starting out on your own voyage. Your heart, your brains, your sense of self-worth.

Then there were Petra and Michael, probably at this very moment with their heads together making more wedding plans, unaware that a two-ton safe was dangling above them on a badly frayed cord. Pets had always idolized her father. What would it do to her if she found out the hands which had once pushed her on the backyard swing were the same hands that had strangled the life out of eleven women? That the lips which had kissed her goodnight were hiding teeth that had bitten eleven women, in some cases all the way down to the bone?

Sitting at her computer again, a terrible newspaper headline rose in Darcy's mind. It was accompanied by a photograph of Bob in his neckerchief, absurd khaki shorts, and long socks. It was so clear it could already have been printed:

**MASS MURDERER "BEADIE"
LED CUB SCOUTS FOR 17 YEARS**

Darcy clapped a hand over her mouth. She could feel her eyes pulsing in their sockets. The notion of suicide occurred to her, and for a few moments (long ones) the idea seemed completely rational, the only reasonable solution. She could leave a note saying she'd done it because she was afraid she had cancer. Or early-onset Alzheimer's, that was even better. But suicide cast a deep shadow over families, too, and what if she was wrong? What if Bob had just found that ID packet by the side of the road, or something?

Do you know how unlikely that is? Smart Darcy sneered.

Okay, yes, but unlikely wasn't the same as impossible, was it? There was something else, too, something that made the cage she was in escape-proof: what if she was right? Wouldn't her death free Bob to kill more, because he no longer had to lead so deep a double life? Darcy wasn't sure she believed in a conscious existence after death, but what if there was one? And what if she were confronted there not by Edenic green fields and rivers of plenty but by a ghastly receiving line of strangled women branded by her husband's teeth, all accusing her of causing their deaths by taking the easy way out herself? And by ignoring what she had found (if such a thing were even possible, which she didn't believe for a minute), wouldn't the accusation be true? Did she really think she could condemn more women to horrible deaths just so her daughter could have a nice June wedding?

She thought: *I wish I was dead.*

But she wasn't.

For the first time in years, Darcy Madsen Anderson slipped from her chair onto her knees and began to pray. It did no good. The house was empty except for her.

She had never kept a diary, but she had ten years' worth of appointment books stored in the bottom of her capacious sewing chest. And decades' worth of Bob's travel records stuffed in one of the file drawers of the cabinet he kept in his home office. As a tax accountant (and one with his own duly incorporated side-business to boot), he was meticulous when it came to record-keeping, taking every deduction, tax credit, and cent of automotive depreciation he could.

She stacked his files beside her computer along with her appointment books. She opened Google and forced herself to do the research she needed, noting the names and dates of death (some of these were necessarily approximate) of Beadie's victims. Then, as the digital clock on her computer's control strip marched soundlessly past ten PM, she began the laborious work of cross-checking.

She would have given a dozen years of her life to find something that would have indisputably eliminated him from even one of the murders, but her appointment books only made things worse. Kellie Gervais, of Keene, New Hampshire, had been discovered in the woods behind the local landfill on March fifteenth of 2004. According to the medical examiner, she had been dead three to five days. Scrawled across March tenth to twelfth in Darcy's appointment book for 2004 was *Bob to Fitzwilliam, Brat*. George Fitzwilliam was a well-heeled client of Benson, Bacon & Anderson. *Brat* was her abbreviation for Brattleboro, where Fitzwilliam lived. An easy drive from Keene, New Hampshire.

Helen Shaverstone and her son Robert had been discovered in Newrie Creek, in the town of Amesbury, on November eleventh of 2007. They had lived in Tassel Village, some twelve miles away. On the November page of her 2007 address book, she had drawn a line across the eighth to the tenth, scrawling *Bob in Saugus, 2 estate sales plus Boston coin auc*. And did she remember calling his Saugus motel on one of those nights and not getting him? Assuming

he was out late with some coin salesman, sniffing for leads, or maybe in the shower? She *seemed* to remember that. If so, had he actually been on the road that night? Perhaps coming back from doing an errand (a little drop-off) in the town of Amesbury? Or, if he *had* been in the shower, what in God's name had he been washing off?

She turned to his travel records and vouchers as the clock on the control strip passed eleven and started climbing toward midnight, the witching hour when graveyards reputedly yawned. She worked carefully and stopped often to double-check. The stuff from the late seventies was spotty and not much help—he hadn't been much more than your basic office drone in those days—but everything from the eighties was there, and the correlations she found for the Beadie murders in 1980 and 1981 were clear and undeniable. He had been traveling at the right times and in the right areas. And, Smart Darcy insisted, if you found enough cat hairs in a person's house, you pretty much had to assume there was a feline on the premises somewhere.

So what do I do now?

The answer seemed to be, carry her confused and frightened head upstairs. She doubted if she could sleep, but at least she could take a hot shower and then lie down. She was exhausted, her back ached from throwing up, and she stank of her own sweat.

She shut off her computer and climbed to the second floor at a slow trudge. The shower eased her back and a couple of Tylenol would probably ease it more by two AM or so; she was sure she'd be awake to find out. When she put the Tylenol back in the medicine cabinet, she took the Ambien bottle out, held it in her hand for almost a full minute, then replaced that, too. It wouldn't put her to sleep, only make her muzzy and—perhaps—more paranoid than she was already.

She lay down and looked at the night table on the other side of the bed. Bob's clock. Bob's spare set of reading glasses. A copy of a book called *The Shack*. *You ought to read this, Darce, it's a life-changer*, he'd said two or three nights before this latest trip.

She turned off her lamp, saw Stacey Moore stuffed into the cornbin, and turned the lamp back on again. On most nights, the

dark was her friend—sleep’s kindly harbinger—but not tonight. Tonight the dark was populated by Bob’s harem.

You don’t know that. Remember that you don’t absolutely know that.

But if you find enough cat hairs . . .

Enough with the cat hairs, too.

She lay there, even more wide awake than she’d feared she’d be, her mind going around and around, now thinking of the victims, now thinking of her children, now thinking of herself, even thinking of some long-forgotten Bible story about Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. She glanced at Bob’s clock after what felt like an hour of going around that wretched worry-circle and saw that only twelve minutes had passed. She got up on one elbow and turned the clock’s face to the window.

He won’t be home until six tomorrow night, she thought . . . although, since it was now quarter past midnight, she supposed it was technically tonight that he’d be home. Still, that gave her eighteen hours. Surely enough time to make some sort of decision. It would help if she could sleep, even a little—sleep had a way of resetting the mind—but it was out of the question. She would drift a little, then think *Marjorie Duvall* or *Stacey Moore* or (this was the worst) *Robert Shaverstone, ten years old. HE DID NOT “SUFFER!”* And then any possibility of sleep would again be gone. The idea that she might never sleep again came to her. That was impossible, of course, but lying here with the taste of puke still in her mouth in spite of the Scope she had rinsed with, it seemed completely plausible.

At some point she found herself remembering the year in early childhood when she had gone around the house looking in mirrors. She would stand in front of them with her hands cupped to the sides of her face and her nose touching the glass, but holding her breath so she wouldn’t fog the surface.

If her mother caught her, she’d swat her away. *That leaves a smudge, and I have to clean it off. Why are you so interested in yourself, anyway? You’ll never be hung for your beauty. And why stand so close? You can’t see anything worth looking at that way.*

How old had she been? Four? Five? Too young to explain that it wasn’t her reflection she was interested in, anyway—or not primarily.

She had been convinced that mirrors were doorways to another world, and what she saw reflected in the glass wasn't *their* living room or bathroom, but the living room or bathroom of some other family. The Matsons instead of the Madsens, perhaps. Because it was *similar* on the other side of the glass, but not the *same*, and if you looked long enough, you could begin to pick up on some of the differences: a rug that appeared to be oval over there instead of round like over here, a door that seemed to have a turn-latch instead of a bolt, a light-switch that was on the wrong side of the door. The little girl wasn't the same, either. Darcy was sure they were related—sisters of the mirror?—but no, not the same. Instead of Darcellen Madsen that little girl might be named Jane or Sandra or even Eleanor Rigby, who for some reason (some *scary* reason) picked up the rice at churches where a wedding had been.

Lying in the circle of her bedside lamp, drowsing without realizing it, Darcy supposed that if she *had* been able to tell her mother what she was looking for, if she had explained about the Darker Girl who wasn't quite her, she might have passed some time with a child psychiatrist. But it wasn't the girl who interested her, it had never been the girl. What interested her was the idea that there was a whole other world behind the mirrors, and if you could walk through that other house (the Darker House) and out the door, the rest of that world would be waiting.

Of course this idea had passed and, aided by a new doll (which she had named Mrs. Butter-worth after the pancake syrup she loved) and a new dollhouse, she had moved on to more acceptable little-girl fantasies: cooking, cleaning, shopping, Scolding The Baby, Changing For Dinner. Now, all these years later, she had found her way through the mirror after all. Only there was no little girl waiting in the Darker House; instead there was a Darker Husband, one who had been living behind the mirror all the time, and doing terrible things there.

A good one at a fair price, Bob liked to say—an accountant's credo if ever there was one.

Upright and sniffin the air—an answer to *how you doin* that every kid in every Cub Scout pack he'd ever taken down Dead Man's Trail

knew well. A response some of those boys no doubt still repeated as grown men.

Gentlemen prefer blondes, don't forget that one. Because they get tired of squeezin . . .

But then sleep took Darcy, and although that soft nurse could not carry her far, the lines on her forehead and at the corners of her reddened, puffy eyes softened a bit. She was close enough to consciousness to stir when her husband pulled into the driveway, but not close enough to come around. She might have if the Suburban's headlights had splashed across the ceiling, but Bob had doused them halfway down the block so as not to wake her.

A cat was stroking her cheek with a velvet paw. Very lightly but very insistently.

Darcy tried to brush it away, but her hand seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. And it was a dream, anyway—surely had to be. They had no cat. *Although if there are enough cat hairs in a house, there must be one around somewhere*, her struggling-to-wake mind told her, quite reasonably.

Now the paw was stroking her bangs and the forehead beneath, and it couldn't be a cat because cats don't talk.

"Wake up, Darce. Wake up, hon. We have to talk."

The voice, as soft and soothing as the touch. Bob's voice. And not a cat's paw but a hand. Bob's hand. Only it couldn't be him, because he was in Montp—

Her eyes flew open and he was there, all right, sitting beside her on the bed, stroking her face and hair as he sometimes did when she was feeling under the weather. He was wearing a three-piece Jos. A. Bank suit (he bought all his suits there, calling it—another of his semi-amusing sayings—"Joss-Bank"), but the vest was unbuttoned and his collar undone. She could see the end of his tie poking out of his coat pocket like a red tongue. His midsection bulged over his belt and her first coherent thought was *You really have to do something about your weight, Bobby, that isn't good for your heart.*

"Wha—" It came out an almost incomprehensible crow-croak.

He smiled and kept stroking her hair, her cheek, the nape of her neck. She cleared her throat and tried again.

"What are you doing here, Bobby? It must be—" She raised her head to look at his clock, which of course did no good. She had turned its face to the wall.

He glanced down at his watch. He had been smiling as he stroked her awake, and was smiling now. "Quarter to three. I sat in my stupid old motel room for almost two hours after we talked, trying to

convince myself that what I was thinking couldn't be true. Only I didn't get to where I am by dodging the truth. So I jumped in the 'Burban and hit the road. No traffic whatsoever. I don't know why I don't do more traveling late at night. Maybe I will. If I'm not in Shawshank, that is. Or New Hampshire State Prison in Concord. But that's kind of up to you. Isn't it?"

His hand, stroking her face. The feel of it was familiar, even the smell of it was familiar, and she had always loved it. Now she didn't, and it wasn't just the night's wretched discoveries. How could she have never noticed how complacently possessive that stroking touch was? *You're an old bitch, but you're my old bitch*, that touch now seemed to say. *Only this time you piddled on the floor while I was gone, and that's bad. In fact, it's a Big Bad.*

She pushed his hand away and sat up. "What in God's name are you talking about? You come sneaking in, you wake me up—"

"Yes, you were sleeping with the light on—I saw it as soon as I turned up the driveway." There was no guilt in his smile. Nothing sinister, either. It was the same sweet-natured Bob Anderson smile she'd loved almost from the first. For a moment her memory flickered over how gentle he'd been on their wedding night, not hurrying her. Giving her time to get used to the new thing.

Which he will do now, she thought.

"You never sleep with the light on, Darce. And although you've got your nightgown on, you're wearing your bra under it, and you never do that, either. You just forgot to take it off, didn't you? Poor darlin. Poor tired girl."

For just a moment he touched her breast, then—thankfully—took his hand away.

"Also, you turned my clock around so you wouldn't have to look at the time. You've been upset, and I'm the cause. I'm sorry, Darce. From the bottom of my heart."

"I ate something that disagreed with me." It was all she could think of.

He smiled patiently. "You found my special hiding place in the garage."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

“Oh, you did a good job of putting things back where you found them, but I’m very careful about such things, and the strip of tape I put on above the pivot in the baseboard was broken. You didn’t notice that, did you? Why would you? It’s the kind of tape that’s almost invisible once it’s on. Also, the box inside was an inch or two to the left of where I put it—where I always put it.”

He reached to stroke her cheek some more, then withdrew his hand (seemingly without rancor) when she turned her face away.

“Bobby, I can see you’ve got a bee in your bonnet about something, but I honestly don’t know what it is. Maybe you’ve been working too hard.”

His mouth turned down in a *moue* of sadness, and his eyes were moistening with tears. Incredible. She actually had to stop herself from feeling sorry for him. Emotions were only another human habit, it seemed, as conditioned as any other. “I guess I always knew this day would come.”

“I haven’t got the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

He sighed. “I had a long ride back to think about this, honey. And the longer I thought, the *harder* I thought, the more it seemed like there was really only one question that needed an answer: WWDD.”

“I don’t—”

“Hush,” he said, and put a gentle finger on her lips. She could smell soap. He must have showered before he left the motel, a very Bob-like thing to do. “I’ll tell you everything. I’ll make a clean breast. I think that, down deep, I’ve always wanted you to know.”

He’d always wanted her to know? Dear God. There might be worse things waiting, but this was easily the most terrible thing so far. “I don’t *want* to know. Whatever it is you’ve got stuck in your head, I don’t *want* to know.”

“I see something different in your eyes, honey, and I’ve gotten very good at reading women’s eyes. I’ve become something of an expert. WWDD stands for What Would Darcy Do. In this case, What Would Darcy Do if she found my special hiding place, and what’s inside my special box. I’ve always loved that box, by the way, because you gave it to me.”

He leaned forward and planted a quick kiss between her brows. His lips were moist. For the first time in her life, the touch of them on

her skin revolted her, and it occurred to her that she might be dead before the sun came up. Because dead women told no tales. *Although*, she thought, *he'd try to make sure I didn't "suffer."*

"First, I asked myself if the name Marjorie Duvall would mean anything to you. I would have liked to answer that question with a big ole no, but sometimes a fellow has to be a realist. You're not the world's number one news junkie, but I've lived with you long enough to know that you follow the main stories on TV and in the news paper. I thought you'd know the name, and even if you didn't, I thought you'd recognize the picture on the driver's license. Besides, I said to myself, won't she be curious as to why I have those ID cards? Women are always curious. Look at Pandora."

Or Bluebeard's wife, she thought. *The woman who peeked into the locked room and found the severed heads of all her predecessors in matrimony.*

"Bob, I swear to you I don't have any idea what you're tal—"

"So the first thing I did when I came in was to boot up your computer, open Firefox—that's the search engine you always use—and check the history."

"The what?"

He chuckled as if she'd gotten off an exceptionally witty line. "You don't even know. I didn't think you did, because every time I check, everything's there. You *never* clear it!" And he chuckled again, as a man will do when a wife exhibits a trait he finds particularly endearing.

Darcy felt the first thin stirrings of anger. Probably absurd, given the circumstances, but there it was.

"You check my *computer*? You sneak! You dirty sneak!"

"Of *course* I check. I have a very bad friend who does very bad things. A man in a situation like that has to keep current with those closest to him. Since the kids left home, that's you and only you."

Bad friend? A bad friend who does bad things? Her head was swimming, but one thing seemed all too clear: further denials would be useless. She knew, and he knew she did.

"You haven't just been checking on Marjorie Duvall." She heard no shame or defensiveness in his voice, only a hideous regret that it

should have come to this. "You've been checking on all of them." Then he laughed and said, "Whoops!"

She sat up against the headboard, which pulled her slightly away from him. That was good. Distance was good. All those years she'd lain with him hip to hip and thigh to thigh, and now distance was good.

"What bad friend? What are you talking about?"

He cocked his head to one side, Bob's body language for *I find you dense, but amusingly so*. "Brian."

At first she had no idea who he was talking about, and thought it must be someone from work. Possibly an accomplice? It didn't seem likely on the face of it, she would have said Bob was as lousy at making friends as she was, but men who did such things sometimes did have accomplices. Wolves hunted in packs, after all.

"Brian Delahanty," he said. "Don't tell me you forgot Brian. I told you all about him after you told me about what happened to Brandolyn."

Her mouth dropped open. "Your friend from junior high? Bob, he's dead! He got hit by a truck while he was chasing down a baseball, and he's *dead*."

"Well . . ." Bob's smile grew apologetic. "Yes . . . and no. I almost always called him Brian when I talked about him to you, but that's not what I called him back in school, because he hated that name. I called him by his initials. I called him BD."

She started to ask him what that had to do with the price of tea in China, but then she knew. Of course she knew. BD.

Beadie.

He talked for a long time, and the longer he talked, the more horrified she became. All these years she'd been living with a madman, but how could she have known? His insanity was like an underground sea. There was a layer of rock over it, and a layer of soil over the rock; flowers grew there. You could stroll through them and never know the madwater was there . . . but it was. It always had been. He blamed BD (who had become Beadie only years later, in his notes to the police) for everything, but Darcy suspected Bob knew better than that; blaming Brian Delahanty only made it easier to keep his two lives separate.

It had been BD's idea to take guns to school and go on a rampage, for instance. According to Bob, this inspiration had occurred in the summer between their freshman and sophomore years at Castle Rock High School. "1971," he said, shaking his head goodnaturedly, as a man might do when recalling some harmless childhood peccadillo. "Long before those Columbine oafs were even a twinkle in their daddies' eyes. There were these girls that snooted us. Diane Ramadge, Laurie Swenson, Gloria Haggerty . . . there were a couple of others, too, but I forget their names. The plan was to get a bunch of guns—Brian's dad had about twenty rifles and pistols in his basement, including a couple of German Lugers from World War II that we were just *fascinated* with—and take them to school. No searches or metal detectors back then, you know.

"We were going to barricade ourselves in the science wing. We'd chain the doors shut, kill some people—mostly teachers, but also some of the guys we didn't like—and then stampede the rest of the kids outside through the fire door at the far end of the hall. Well . . . *most* of the kids. We were going to keep the girls who snooted us as hostages. We planned—*BD* planned—to do all of this before the cops could get there, right? He drew maps, and he kept a list of the steps we'd have to take in his geometry notebook. I think there were maybe twenty steps in all, starting with 'Pull fire alarms to create

confusion.” He chuckled. “And after we had the place locked down . . .”

He gave her a slightly shamefaced smile, but she thought what he was mostly ashamed of was how stupid the plan had been in the first place.

“Well, you can probably guess. Couple of teenage boys, hormones so high we got horny when the wind blew. We were going to tell those girls that if they’d, you know, fuck us real good, we’d let them go. If they didn’t, we’d have to kill them. And they’d fuck, all right.”

He nodded slowly.

“They’d fuck to live. BD was right about that.” He was lost in his story. His eyes were hazy with (grotesque but true) nostalgia. For what? The crazy dreams of youth? She was afraid that might actually be it.

“We didn’t plan to kill ourselves like those heavy-metal dumbbells in Colorado, either. No way. There was a basement under the science wing, and Brian said there was a tunnel down there. He said it went from the supply room to the old fire station on the other side of Route 119. Brian said that when the high school was just a K-through-eight grammar school back in the fifties, there was a park over there, and the little kids used to play in it at recess. The tunnel was so they could get to the park without having to cross the road.”

Bob laughed, making her jump.

“I took his word for all that, but it turned out he was full of shit. I went down there the next fall to look for myself. The supply room was there, full of paper and stinking of that mimeograph juice they used to use, but if there was a tunnel, I never found it, and even back then I was very thorough. I don’t know if he was lying to both of us or just to himself, I only know there was no tunnel. We would have been trapped upstairs, and who knows, we might have killed ourselves after all. You never know what a fourteen-year-old’s going to do, do you? They roll around like unexploded bombs.”

You’re not unexploded anymore, she thought. *Are you, Bob?*

“We probably would have chickened out, anyway. But maybe not. Maybe we would have tried to go through with it. BD got me all excited, talking about how we were going to feel them up first, then

make them take off each other's clothes . . ." He looked at her earnestly. "Yes, I know how it sounds, just boys' jack-off fantasies, but those girls really *were* snoots. You tried to talk to them, they'd laugh and walk away. Then stand in the corner of the caff, the bunch of them, looking us over and laughing some more. So you really couldn't blame us, could you?"

He looked at his fingers, drumming restlessly on his suit-pants where they stretched tight over his thighs, then back up at Darcy.

"The thing you have to understand—that you really have to see—is how persuasive Brian was. He was lots worse than me. He really *was* crazy. Plus it was a time when the whole country was rioting, don't forget, and that was part of it, too."

I doubt it, she thought.

The amazing thing was how he made it sound almost normal, as if every adolescent boy's sexual fantasies involved rape and murder. Probably he believed that, just as he had believed in Brian Delahanty's mythical escape tunnel. Or had he? How could she know? She was, after all, listening to the recollections of a lunatic. It was just hard to believe that—still!—because the madman was Bob. Her Bob.

"Anyway," he said, shrugging, "it never happened. That was the summer Brian ran into the road and got killed. There was a reception at his house after the funeral, and his mother said I could go up to his room and take something, if I wanted. As a souvenir, you know. And I did want to! You bet I did! I took his geometry notebook, so nobody would go leafing through it and come across his plans for The Great Castle Rock Shoot-Out and Fuck Party. That's what he called it, you know."

Bob laughed ruefully.

"If I was a religious fella, I'd say God saved me from myself. And who knows if there isn't Something . . . some Fate . . . that has its own plan for us."

"And this Fate's plan for you was for you to torture and kill women?" Darcy asked. She couldn't help herself.

He looked at her reproachfully. "They were snoots," he said, and raised a teacherly finger. "Also, it wasn't me. It was Beadie who did

that stuff—and I say *did* for a reason, Darce. I say *did* instead of *does* because all of that's behind me now.”

“Bob—your friend BD is dead. He's been dead for almost forty years. You must know that. I mean, on some level you *must*.”

He tossed his hands in the air: a gesture of good-natured surrender. “Do you want to call it guilt-avoidance? That's what a shrink would call it, I suppose, and it's fine if you do. But Darcy, listen!” He leaned forward and pressed a finger to her forehead, between her eyebrows. “Listen and get this through your head. It was Brian. He infected me with . . . well, certain ideas, let's say that. Some ideas, once you get them in your head, you can't unthink them. You can't . . .”

“Put the toothpaste back in the tube?”

He clapped his hands together, almost making her scream. “*That's it exactly!* You can't put the toothpaste back in the tube. Brian was dead, but the ideas were alive. Those ideas—getting women, doing whatever to them, whatever crazy idea came into your head—they became his ghost.”

His eyes shifted upward and to the left when he said this. She had read somewhere that this meant the person who was talking was telling a conscious lie. But did it matter if he was? Or which one of them he was lying to? She thought not.

“I won't go into the details,” he said. “It's nothing for a sweetheart like you to hear, and like it or not—I know you don't right now—you're still my sweetheart. But you have to know I fought it. For seven years I fought it, but those ideas—*Brian's* ideas—kept growing inside my head. Until finally I said to myself, ‘I'll try it once, just to get it out of my head. To get *him* out of my head. If I get caught, I get caught—at least I'll stop thinking about it. *Wondering* about it. What it would be like.”

“You're telling me it was a male exploration,” she said dully.

“Well, yes. I suppose you could say that.”

“Or like trying a joint just to see what all the shouting was about.”

He shrugged modestly, boyishly. “Kinda.”

“It wasn't an exploration, Bobby. It wasn't trying a joint. It was *taking a woman's life*.”

She had seen no guilt or shame, absolutely none—he appeared incapable of those things, it seemed the circuit-breaker that controlled them had been fried, perhaps even before birth—but now he gave her a sulky, put-upon look. A teenager’s you-don’t-understand-me look.

“Darcy, they were *snoots*.”

She wanted a glass of water, but she was afraid to get up and go into the bathroom. She was afraid he would stop her, and what would come after that? What then?

“Besides,” he resumed, “I didn’t think I’d get caught. Not if I was careful and made a plan. Not a half-baked and horny-fourteen-year-old boy’s plan, you know, but a realistic one. And I realized something else, too. I couldn’t do it myself. Even if I didn’t screw up out of nervousness, I might out of guilt. Because I was one of the good guys. That’s how I saw myself, and believe it or not, I still do. And I have the proof, don’t I? A good home, a good wife, two beautiful children who are all grown up and starting their own lives. And I give back to the community. That’s why I took the Town Treasurer’s job for two years, gratis. That’s why I work with Vinnie Eschler every year to put on the Halloween blood drive.”

You should have asked Marjorie Duvall to give, Darcy thought. *She was A-positive.*

Then, puffing out his chest slightly—a man nailing down his argument with one final, irrefutable point—he said: “That’s what the Cub Scouts are about. You thought I’d quit when Donnie went on to Boy Scouts, I know you did. Only I didn’t. Because it’s not just about him, and never was. It’s about the community. It’s about giving back.”

“Then give Marjorie Duvall back her life. Or Stacey Moore. Or Robert Shaverstone.”

That last one got through; he winced as if she had struck him. “The boy was an accident. He wasn’t supposed to be there.”

“But you being there wasn’t an accident?”

“It wasn’t *me*,” he said, then added the ultimate surreal absurdity. “I’m no adulterer. It was BD. It’s always BD. It was his fault for putting those ideas in my head in the first place. I never would have thought of them on my own. I signed my notes to the police with his name just to make that clear. Of course I changed the spelling, because I

sometimes called him BD back when I first told you about him. You might not remember that, but I did.”

She was impressed by the obsessive lengths he’d gone to. No wonder he hadn’t been caught. If she hadn’t stubbed her toe on that damned carton—

“None of them had any relation to me or my business. *Either* of my businesses. That would be very bad. Very dangerous. But I travel a lot, and I keep my eyes open. BD—the BD inside—he does, too. We watch out for the snooty ones. You can always tell. They wear their skirts too high and show their bra straps on purpose. They entice men. That Stacey Moore, for instance. You read about her, I’m sure. Married, but that didn’t keep her from brushing her titties against me. She worked as a waitress in a coffee shop—the Sunnyside in Waterville. I used to go up there to Mickleson’s Coins, remember? You even went with me a couple of times, when Pets was at Colby. This was before George Mickleson died and his son sold off all the stock so he could go to New Zealand or somewhere. That woman was *all over me*, Darce! Always asking me if I wanted a warm-up on my coffee and saying stuff like how ’bout those Red Sox, bending over, rubbing her titties on my shoulder, trying her best to get me hard. Which she did, I admit it, I’m a man with a man’s needs, and although you never turned me away or said no . . . well, rarely . . . I’m a man with a man’s needs and I’ve always been highly sexed. Some women sense that and like to play on it. It gets them off.”

He was looking down at his lap with dark, musing eyes. Then something else occurred to him and his head jerked up. His thinning hair flew, then settled back.

“Always smiling! Red lipstick and always smiling! Well, I recognize smiles like that. Most men do. ‘Ha-ha, I know you want it, I can smell it on you, but this little rub’s all you’re going to get, so deal with it.’ / could! I *could* deal with it! But not BD, not him.”

He shook his head slowly.

“There are lots of women like that. It’s easy to get their names. Then you can trace them down on the Internet. There’s a lot of information if you know how to look for it, and accountants know how. I’ve done that . . . oh, dozens of times. Maybe even a hundred.

You could call it a hobby, I guess. You could say I collect information as well as coins. Usually it comes to nothing. But sometimes BD will say, 'She's the one you want to follow through on, Bobby. That one right there. We'll make the plan together, and when the time comes, you just let me take over.' And that's what I do."

He took her hand, and folded her limp and chilly fingers into his.

"You think I'm crazy. I can see it in your eyes. But I'm not, honey. It's BD who's crazy . . . or Beadie, if you like his for-the-public name better. By the way, if you read the stories in the paper, you know I purposely put a lot of misspellings in my notes to the police. I even misspell the addresses. I keep a list of misspellings in my wallet so that I'll always do it the same way. It's misdirection. I want them to think Beadie's dumb—illiterate, anyway—and they do. Because *they're* dumb. I've only been questioned a single time, years ago, and that was as a witness, about two weeks after BD killed the Moore woman. An old guy with a limp, semi-retired. Told me to give him a call if I remembered anything. I said I would. That was pretty rich."

He chuckled soundlessly, as he sometimes did when they were watching *Modern Family* or *Two and a Half Men*. It was a way of laughing that had, until tonight, always heightened her own amusement.

"You want to know something, Darce? If they caught me dead to rights, I'd admit it—at least I guess I would, I don't think anybody knows a hundred percent for sure what they'd do in a situation like that—but I couldn't give them much of a confession. Because I don't remember much about the actual . . . well . . . acts. Beadie does them, and I kind of . . . I don't know . . . go unconscious. Get amnesia. Some damn thing."

Oh, you liar. You remember everything. It's in your eyes, it's even in the way your mouth turns down at the corners.

"And now . . . everything's in Darcellen's hands." He raised one of her hands to his lips and kissed the back of it, as if to emphasize this point. "You know that old punchline, the one that goes, 'I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you'? That doesn't apply here. I could never kill you. Everything I do, everything I've built . . . modest as it would look to some people, I guess . . . I've done and built for you."

For the kids too, of course, but mostly for you. You walked into my life, and do you know what happened?”

“You stopped,” she said.

He broke into a radiant grin. “For over twenty years!”

Sixteen, she thought but didn’t say.

“For most of those years, when we were raising the kids and struggling to get the coin business off the ground—although that was mostly you—I was racing around New England doing taxes and setting up foundations—”

“You were the one who made it work,” she said, and was a little shocked by what she heard in her voice: calmness and warmth. “You were the one with the expertise.”

He looked almost touched enough to start crying again, and when he spoke his voice was husky. “Thank you, hon. It means the world to hear you say that. You saved me, you know. In more ways than one.”

He cleared his throat.

“For a dozen years, BD never made a peep. I thought he was gone. I honestly did. But then he came back. Like a ghost.” He seemed to consider this, then nodded his head very slowly. “That’s what he is. A ghost, a bad one. He started pointing out women when I was traveling. ‘Look at that one, she wants to make sure you see her nipples, but if you touched them she’d call the police and then laugh with her friends when they took you away. Look at that one, licking her lips with her tongue, she knows you’d like her to put it in your mouth and she knows you know she never will. Look at that one, showing off her panties when she gets out of her car, and if you think that’s an accident, you’re an idiot. She’s just one more snoot who thinks she’ll never get what she deserves.’”

He stopped, his eyes once more dark and downcast. In them was the Bobby who had successfully evaded her for twenty-seven years. The one he was trying to pass off as a ghost.

“When I started to have those urges, I fought them. There are magazines . . . certain magazines . . . I bought them before we got married, and I thought if I did that again . . . or certain sites on the Internet . . . I thought I could . . . I don’t know . . . substitute fantasy

for reality, I guess you'd say . . . but once you've tried the real thing, fantasy isn't worth a damn."

He was talking, Darcy thought, like a man who had fallen in love with some expensive delicacy. Caviar. Truffles. Belgian chocolates.

"But the point is, I stopped. For all those years, I *stopped*. And I could stop again, Darcy. This time for good. If there's a chance for us. If you could forgive me and just turn the page." He looked at her, earnest and wet-eyed. "Is it possible you could do that?"

She thought of a woman buried in a snowdrift, her naked legs exposed by the careless swipe of a passing plow—some mother's daughter, once the apple of some father's eye as she danced clumsily across a grammar-school stage in a pink tutu. She thought of a mother and son discovered in a freezing creek, their hair rippling in the black, iceedged water. She thought of the woman with her head in the corn.

"I'd have to think about it," she said, very carefully.

He grasped her by the upper arms and leaned toward her. She had to force herself not to flinch, and to meet his eyes. They were his eyes . . . and they weren't. *Maybe there's something to that ghost business after all*, she thought.

"This isn't one of those movies where the psycho husband chases his screaming wife all around the house. If you decide to go to the police and turn me in, I won't lift a finger to stop you. But I know you've thought about what it would do to the kids. You wouldn't be the woman I married if you hadn't thought about that. What you might not have thought about is what it would do to you. Nobody would believe that you were married to me all these years and never knew . . . or at least suspected. You'd have to move away and live on what savings there are, because I've always been the breadwinner, and a man can't win bread when he's in jail. You might not even be able to get at what there is, because of the civil suits. And of course the kids—"

"Stop it, don't talk about them when you talk about this, don't you ever."

He nodded humbly, still holding lightly to her forearms. "I beat BD once—I beat him for twenty years—"

Sixteen, she thought again. *Sixteen, and you know it.*

“—and I can beat him again. With your help, Darce. With your help I can do anything. Even if he were to come back in another twenty years, so what? Big deal! I’d be seventy-three. Hard to go snoot-hunting when you’re shuffling around in a walker!” He laughed cheerily at this absurd image, then sobered again. “But—now listen to me carefully—if I were ever to backslide, even one single time, I’d kill myself. The kids would never know, they’d never have to be touched by that . . . that, you know, *stigma* . . . because I’d make it look like an accident . . . but *you’d* know. And you’d know why. So what do you say? Can we put this behind us?”

She appeared to consider. She *was* considering, in fact, although such thought processes as she could muster were probably not trending in a direction he would be likely to understand.

What she thought was: *It’s what drug addicts say. “I’ll never take any of that stuff again. I’ve quit before and this time I’ll quit for good. I mean it.” But they don’t mean it, even when they think they do they don’t, and neither does he.*

What she thought was: *What am I going to do? I can’t fool him, we’ve been married too long.*

A cold voice replied to that, one she had never suspected of being inside her, one perhaps related to the BD-voice that whispered to Bob about the snoots it observed in restaurants, laughing on street corners, riding in expensive sports cars with the top down, whispering and smiling to each other on apartment-building balconies.

Or perhaps it was the voice of the Darker Girl.

Why can’t you? it asked. *After all . . . he fooled you.*

And then what? She didn’t know. She only knew that now was now, and now had to be dealt with.

“You’d have to promise to stop,” she said, speaking very slowly and reluctantly. “Your most solemn, never-go-back promise.”

His face filled with a relief so total—so somehow boyish—that she was touched. He so seldom looked like the boy he had been. Of course that was also the boy who had once planned to go to school with guns. “I would, Darcy. I do. I *do* promise. I already told you.”

“And we could never talk about this again.”

“I get that.”

“You’re not to send the Duvall woman’s ID to the police, either.”

She saw the disappointment (also weirdly boyish) that came over his face when she said that, but she meant to stick to it. He had to feel punished, if only a little. That way he’d believe he had convinced her.

Hasn’t he? Oh Darcellen, hasn’t he?

“I need more than promises, Bobby. Actions speak louder than words. Dig a hole in the woods and bury that woman’s ID cards in it.”

“Once I do that, are we—”

She reached out and put her hand to his mouth. She strove to make herself sound stern. “Hush. No more.”

“Okay. Thank you, Darcy. So much.”

“I don’t know what you’re thanking me for.” And then, although the thought of him lying next to her filled her with revulsion and dismay, she forced herself to say the rest.

“Now get undressed and come to bed. We both need to get some sleep.”

He was under almost as soon as his head hit the pillow, but long after he'd commenced his small, polite snores, Darcy lay awake, thinking that if she allowed herself to drift off, she would awake with his hands around her throat. She was in bed with a madman, after all. If he added her, his score would be an even dozen.

But he meant it, she thought. This was right around the time that the sky began to lighten in the east. *He said he loves me, and he meant it. And when I said I'd keep his secret—because that's what it comes down to, keeping his secret—he believed me. Why wouldn't he? I almost convinced myself.*

Wasn't it possible he could carry through on his promise? Not all drug addicts failed at getting clean, after all. And while she could never keep his secret for herself, wasn't it possible she could for the kids?

I can't. I won't. But what choice?

What goddam choice?

It was while pondering this question that her tired, confused mind finally gave up and slipped away.

She dreamed of going into the dining room and finding a woman bound with chains to the long Ethan Allen table there. The woman was naked except for a black leather hood that covered the top half of her face. *I don't know that woman, that woman is a stranger to me*, she thought in her dream, and then from beneath the hood Petra said: "Mama, is that you?"

Darcy tried to scream, but sometimes in nightmares, you can't.

When she finally struggled awake—headachey, miserable, feeling hungover—the other half of the bed was empty. Bob had turned his clock back around, and she saw it was quarter past ten. It was the latest she'd slept in years, but of course she hadn't dropped off until first light, and such sleep as she'd gotten was populated with horrors.

She used the toilet, dragged her housecoat off the hook on the back of the bathroom door, then brushed her teeth—her mouth tasted foul. *Like the bottom of a birdcage*, Bob would say on the rare mornings after he'd taken an extra glass of wine with dinner or a second bottle of beer during a baseball game. She spat, began to put her brush back in the toothglass, then paused, looking at her reflection. This morning she saw a woman who looked old instead of middle-aged: pale skin, deep lines bracketing the mouth, purple bruises under the eyes, the crazed bed-head you only got from tossing and turning. But all this was only of passing interest to her; how she looked was the last thing on her mind. She peered over her reflection's shoulder and through the open bathroom door into their bedroom. Except it wasn't theirs; it was the Darker Bedroom. She could see his slippers, only they weren't his. They were obviously too big to be Bob's, almost a giant's slippers. They belonged to the Darker Husband. And the double bed with the wrinkled sheets and unanchored blankets? That was the Darker Bed. She shifted her gaze back to the wild-haired woman with the bloodshot, frightened eyes: the Darker Wife, in all her raddled glory. Her first name was Darcy, but her last name wasn't Anderson. The Darker Wife was Mrs. Brian Delahanty.

Darcy leaned forward until her nose was touching the glass. She held her breath and cupped her hands to the sides of her face just as she had when she was a girl dressed in grass-stained shorts and falling-down white socks. She looked until she couldn't hold her breath any longer, then exhaled in a huff that fogged the mirror. She

wiped it clean with a towel, and then went downstairs to face her first day as the monster's wife.

He had left a note for her under the sugarbowl.

Darce—

I will take care of those documents, as you asked. I love you, honey.

Bob

He had drawn a little Valentine heart around his name, a thing he hadn't done in years. She felt a wave of love for him, as thick and cloying as the scent of dying flowers. She wanted to wail like some woman in an Old Testament story, and stifled the sound with a napkin. The refrigerator kicked on and began its heartless whir. Water dripped in the sink, plinking away the seconds on the porcelain. Her tongue was a sour sponge crammed into her mouth. She felt time—all the time to come, as his wife in this house—close around her like a strait-jacket. Or a coffin. This was the world she had believed in as a child. It had been here all the time. Waiting for her.

The refrigerator whirred, the water dripped in the sink, and the raw seconds passed. This was the Darker Life, where every truth was written backward.

Her husband had coached Little League (also with Vinnie Eschler, that master of Polish jokes and big enveloping manhugs) during the years when Donnie had played shortstop for the Cavendish Hardware team, and Darcy still remembered what Bob said to the boys—many of them weeping—after they'd lost the final game of the District 19 tourney. Back in 1997 that would have been, probably only a month or so before Bob had murdered Stacey Moore and stuffed her into her cornbin. The talk he'd given to that bunch of drooping, sniffing boys had been short, wise, and (she'd thought so then and still did thirteen years later) incredibly kind.

I know how bad you boys feel, but the sun will still come up tomorrow. And when it does, you'll feel better. When the sun comes up the day after tomorrow, a little better still. This is just a part of your life, and it's over. It would have been better to win, but either way, it's over. Life will go on.

As hers did, following her ill-starred trip out to the garage for batteries. When Bob came home from work after her first long day at home (she couldn't bear the thought of going out herself, afraid her knowledge must be written on her face in capital letters), he said: "Honey, about last night—"

"Nothing happened last night. You came home early, that's all."

He ducked his head in that boyish way he had, and when he raised it again, his face was lit with a large and grateful smile. "That's fine, then," he said. "Case closed?"

"Closed book."

He opened his arms. "Give us a kiss, beautiful."

She did, wondering if he had kissed *them*.

Do a good job, really use that educated tongue of yours, and I won't cut you, she could imagine him saying. *Put your snooty little heart into it.*

He held her away from him, his hands on her shoulders. "Still friends?"

“Still friends.”

“Sure?”

“Yes. I didn’t cook anything, and I don’t want to go out. Why don’t you change into some grubbies and go grab us a pizza.”

“All right.”

“And don’t forget to take your Prilosec.”

He beamed at her. “You bet.”

She watched him go bounding up the stairs, thought of saying *Don’t do that, Bobby, don’t test your heart like that.*

But no.

No.

Let him test it all he wanted.

The sun came up the next day. And the next. A week went by, then two, then a month. They resumed their old ways, the small habits of a long marriage. She brushed her teeth while he was in the shower (usually singing some hit from the eighties in a voice that was on-key but not particularly melodious), although she no longer did it naked, meaning to step into the shower as soon as he'd vacated it; now she showered after he'd left for B, B & A. If he noticed this little change in her modus operandi, he didn't mention it. She resumed her book club, telling the other ladies and the two retired gentlemen who took part that she had been feeling under the weather and didn't want to pass on a virus along with her opinion of the new Barbara Kingsolver, and everyone chuckled politely. A week after that, she resumed the knitting circle, Knuts for Knitting. Sometimes she caught herself singing along with the radio when she came back from the post office or the grocery store. She and Bob watched TV at night—always comedies, never the forensic crime shows. He came home early now; there had been no more road trips since the one to Montpelier. He got something called Skype for his computer, saying he could look at coin collections just as easily that way and save on gas. He didn't say it would also save on temptation, but he didn't have to. She watched the papers to see if Marjorie Duvall's ID showed up, knowing if he had lied about that, he would lie about everything. But it didn't. Once a week they went out to dinner at one of Yarmouth's two inexpensive restaurants. He ordered steak and she ordered fish. He drank iced tea and she had a Cranberry Breeze. Old habits died hard. Often, she thought, they don't die until we do.

In the daytime, while he was gone, she now rarely turned on the television. It was easier to listen to the refrigerator with it off, and to the small creaks and groans of their nice Yarmouth house as it settled toward another Maine winter. It was easier to think. Easier to face the truth: he would do it again. He would hold off as long as he

could, she would gladly give him that much, but sooner or later Beadie would gain the upper hand. He wouldn't send the next woman's ID to the police, thinking that might be enough to fool her, but probably not caring if she saw through the change in MO. *Because, he would reason, she's a part of it now. She'd have to admit she knew. The cops would get it out of her even if she tried to hide that part.*

Donnie called from Ohio. The business was going great guns; they had landed an office products account that might go national. Darcy said hooray (and so did Bob, cheerily admitting he'd been wrong about Donnie's chances of making it so young). Petra called to say they had tentatively decided on blue dresses for the bridesmaids, A-line, knee-high, matching chiffon scarves, and did Darcy think that was all right, or would outfits like that look a bit childish? Darcy said she thought they would look sweet, and the two of them went on to a discussion of shoes—blue pumps with three-quarter-inch heels, to be exact. Darcy's mother got sick down in Boca Grande, and it looked like she might have to go into the hospital, but then they started her on some new medication and she got well. The sun came up and the sun went down. The paper jack-o'-lanterns in the store windows went down and paper turkeys went up. Then the Christmas decorations went up. The first snow flurries appeared, right on schedule.

In her house, after her husband had taken his briefcase and gone to work, Darcy moved through the rooms, pausing to look into the various mirrors. Often for a long time. Asking the woman inside that other world what she should do.

Increasingly the answer seemed to be that she would do nothing.

On an unseasonably warm day two weeks before Christmas, Bob came home in the middle of the afternoon, shouting her name. Darcy was upstairs, reading a book. She tossed it on the night table (beside the hand mirror that had now taken up permanent residence there) and flew down the hall to the landing. Her first thought (horror mixed with relief) was that it was finally over. He had been found out. The police would soon be here. They would take him away, then come back to ask her the two age-old questions: what did she know, and when did she know it? News vans would park on the street. Young men and women with good hair would do stand-ups in front of their house.

Except that wasn't fear in his voice; she knew it for what it was even before he reached the foot of the stairs and turned his face up to her. It was excitement. Perhaps even jubilation.

"Bob? What—"

"You'll never believe it!" His topcoat hung open, his face was flushed all the way to the forehead, and such hair as he still had was blown every which way. It was as if he had driven home with all his car windows open. Given the springlike quality of the air, Darcy supposed he might've.

She came down cautiously and stood on the first riser, which put them eye-to-eye. "Tell me."

"The most amazing luck! Really! If I ever needed a sign that I'm on the right track again—that we are—boy, this is it!" He held out his hands. They were closed into fists with the knuckles up. His eyes were sparkling. Almost dancing. "Which hand? Pick."

"Bob, I don't want to play g—"

"Pick!"

She pointed to his right hand, just to get it over with. He laughed. "You read my mind . . . but you always could, couldn't you?"

He turned his fist over and opened it. On his palm lay a single coin, tails-side up, so she could see it was a wheat penny. Not

uncirculated by any means, but still in great shape. Assuming there were no scratches on the Lincoln side, she thought it was either F or VF. She reached for it, then paused. He nodded for her to go ahead. She turned it over, quite sure of what she would see. Nothing else could adequately explain his excitement. It was what she expected: a 1955 double-date. A double-*die*, in numismatic terms.

“Holy God, Bobby! Where . . . ? Did you buy it?” An uncirculated ’55 double-die had recently sold at an auction in Miami for over eight thousand dollars, setting a new record. This one wasn’t in that kind of shape, but no coin dealer with half a brain would have let it go for under four.

“God no! Some of the other fellows invited me to lunch at that Thai place, Eastern Promises, and I almost went, but I was working the goddamn Vision Associates account—you know, the private bank I told you about?—and so I gave Monica ten bucks and told her to get me a sandwich and a Fruitopia at Subway. She brought it back with the change in the bag. I shook it out . . . and there it was!” He plucked the penny from her hand and held it over his head, laughing up at it.

She laughed with him, then thought (as these days she often did): *HE DID NOT “SUFFER!”*

“Isn’t it great, honey?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m happy for you.” And, odd or not (*perverse* or not), she really was. He had brokered sales of several over the years and could have bought one for himself any old time, but that wasn’t the same as just coming across one. He had even forbidden her to give him one for Christmas or his birthday. The great accidental find was a collector’s most joyous moment, he had said so during their first real conversation, and now he had what he had been checking handfuls of change for all his life. His heart’s desire had come spilling out of a white sandwich-shop paper bag along with a turkey-bacon wrap.

He enveloped her in a hug. She hugged him back, then pushed him gently away. “What are you going to do with it, Bobby? Put it in a Lucite cube?”

This was a tease, and he knew it. He cocked a fingergun and shot her in the head. Which was all right, because when you were shot

with a fingergun, you did not “suffer.”

She continued to smile at him, but now saw him again (after that brief, loving lapse) for what he was: the Darker Husband. Gollum, with his precious.

“You know better. I’m going to photo it, hang the photo on the wall, then tuck the penny away in our safe deposit box. What would you say it is, F or VF?”

She examined it again, then looked at him with a rueful smile. “I’d love to say VF, but—”

“Yeah, I know, I know—and I shouldn’t care. You’re not supposed to count the teeth when someone gives you a horse, but it’s hard to resist. Better than VG, though, right? Honest opinion, Darce.”

My honest opinion is that you’ll do it again.

“Better than VG, definitely.”

His smile faded. For a moment she was sure he had guessed what she was thinking, but she should have known better; on this side of the mirror, she could keep secrets, too.

“It’s not about the quality, anyway. It’s about the finding. Not getting it from a dealer or picking it out of a catalogue, but actually finding one when you least expect it.”

“I know.” She smiled. “If my dad was here right now, he’d be cracking a bottle of champagne.”

“I’ll take care of that little detail at dinner tonight,” he said. “Not in Yarmouth, either. We’re going to Portland. Pearl of the Shore. What do you say?”

“Oh, honey, I don’t know—”

He took her lightly by the shoulders as he always did when he wanted her to understand that he was really serious about a thing. “Come on—it’s going to be mild enough tonight for your prettiest summer dress. I heard it on the weather when I was driving back. And I’ll buy you all the champagne you can drink. How can you say no to a deal like that?”

“Well . . .” She considered. Then smiled. “I guess I can’t.”

They had not just one bottle of very pricey Moët et Chandon but two, and Bob drank most of it. Consequently it was Darcy who drove home in his quietly humming little Prius while Bob sat in the passenger seat, singing “Pennies from Heaven” in his on-key but not particularly melodious voice. He was drunk, she realized. Not just high, but actually drunk. It was the first time she had seen him that way in ten years. Ordinarily he watched his booze intake like a hawk, and sometimes, when someone at a party asked him why he wasn’t drinking, he’d quote a line from *True Grit*: “I would not put a thief in my mouth to steal my mind.” Tonight, high on his discovery of the double-date, he had allowed his mind to be stolen, and she knew what she intended to do as soon as he ordered that second bottle of bubbly. In the restaurant, she wasn’t sure she could carry it through, but listening to him sing on the way home, she knew. Of course she could do it. She was the Darker Wife now, and the Darker Wife knew that what he thought of as his good luck had really been her own.

Inside the house he whirled his sport coat onto the tree by the door and pulled her into his arms for a long kiss. She could taste champagne and sweet crème brûlée on his breath. It was not a bad combination, although she knew if things happened as they might, she would never want either again. His hand went to her breast. She let it linger there, feeling him against her, and then pushed him away. He looked disappointed, but brightened when she smiled.

“I’m going upstairs and getting out of this dress,” she said. “There’s Perrier in the refrigerator. If you bring me a glass—with a wedge of lime—you might get lucky, mister.”

He broke into a grin at that—his old, well-loved grin. Because there was one long-established habit of marriage they had not resumed since the night he had smelled her discovery (yes, smelled it, just as a wise old wolf may smell a poisoned bait) and come rushing home from Montpelier. Day by day they had walled up what he was—yes, as surely as Montresor had walled up his old pal Fortunato—and sex in the connubial bed would be the last brick.

He clicked his heels and threw her a British-style salute, fingers to forehead, palm out. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t be long,” she said pleasantly. “Mama wants what Mama wants.”

Going up the stairs, she thought: *This will never work. The only thing you’ll succeed in doing is getting yourself killed. He may not think he’s capable of it, but I think he is.*

Maybe that would be all right, though. Assuming he didn’t hurt her first, as he’d hurt those women. Maybe any sort of resolution would be all right. She couldn’t spend the rest of her life looking in mirrors. She wasn’t a kid anymore, and couldn’t get away with a kid’s craziness.

She went into the bedroom, but only long enough to toss her purse onto the table beside the hand mirror. Then she went out

again and called, "Are you coming, Bobby? I could really use those bubbles!"

"On my way, ma'am, just pouring it over ice!"

And here he came out of the living room and into the hall, holding one of their good crystal glasses up before him at eye level like a comicopera waiter, weaving slightly as he crossed to the foot of the stairs. He continued to hold the glass up as he mounted them, the wedge of lime bobbing around on top. His free hand trailed lightly along the banister; his face shone with happiness and good cheer. For a moment she almost weakened, and then the image of Helen and Robert Shaverstone filled her mind, hellishly clear: the son and his molested, mutilated mother floating together in a Massachusetts creek that had begun to grow lacings of ice at its sides.

"One glass of Perrier for the lady, coming right uh—"

She saw the knowledge leap into his eyes at the very last second, something old and yellow and ancient. It was more than surprise; it was shocked fury. In that moment her understanding of him was complete. He loved nothing, least of all her. Every kindness, caress, boyish grin, and thoughtful gesture—all were nothing but camouflage. He was a shell. There was nothing inside but howling emptiness.

She pushed him.

It was a hard push and he made a three-quarters somersault above the stairs before coming down on them, first on his knees, then on his arm, then full on his face. She heard his arm break. The heavy Waterford glass shattered on one of the uncarpeted risers. He rolled over again and she heard something else inside him snap. He screamed in pain and somersaulted one final time before landing on the hardwood hall floor in a heap, the broken arm (not broken in just one place but in several) cocked back over his head at an angle nature had never intended. His head was twisted, one cheek on the floor.

Darcy hurried down the stairs. At one point she stepped on an ice cube, slipped, and had to grab the banister to save herself. At the bottom she saw a huge knob now poking out of the skin on the nape of his neck, turning it white, and said: "Don't move, Bob, I think your neck is broken."

His eye rolled up to look at her. Blood was trickling from his nose—that looked broken, too—and a lot more was coming out of his mouth. Almost gushing out. “You pushed me,” he said. “Oh Darcy, why did you push me?”

“I don’t know,” she said, thinking *we both know*. She began to cry. Crying came naturally; he was her husband, and he was badly hurt. “Oh God, I don’t know. Something came over me. I’m sorry. Don’t move, I’ll call 911 and tell them to send an ambulance.”

His foot scraped across the floor. “I’m not paralyzed,” he said. “Thank God for that. But it *hurts*.”

“I know, honey.”

“Call the ambulance! Hurry!”

She went into the kitchen, spared a brief glance for the phone in its charger-cradle, then opened the cabinet under the sink. “Hello? Hello? Is this 911?” She took out the box of plastic GLAD bags, the storage-size ones she used for the leftovers when they had chicken or roast beef, and pulled one from the box. “This is Darcellen Anderson, I’m calling from 24 Sugar Mill Lane, in Yarmouth! Have you got that?”

From another drawer, she took a dishwiper from the top of the pile. She was still crying. *Nose like a firehose*, they’d said when they were kids. Crying was good. She needed to cry, and not just because it would look better for her later on. He was her husband, he was hurt, she needed to cry. She remembered when he still had a full head of hair. She remembered his flashy breakaway move when they danced to “Footloose.” He brought her roses every year on her birthday. He never forgot. They had gone to Bermuda, where they rode bikes in the morning and made love in the afternoon. They had built a life together and now that life was over and she needed to cry. She wrapped the dishwiper around her hand and then stuffed her hand into the plastic bag.

“I need an ambulance, my husband fell down the stairs. I think his neck might be broken. Yes! Yes! Right away!”

She walked back into the hall with her right hand behind her back. She saw he had pulled himself away from the foot of the stairs a little, and it looked like he’d tried to turn over on his back, but at that he hadn’t been successful. She knelt down beside him.

“I didn’t fall,” he said. “You pushed me. Why did you push me?”

“I guess for the Shaverstone boy,” she said, and brought her hand out from behind her back. She was crying harder than ever. He saw the plastic bag. He saw the hand inside clutching the wad of toweling. He understood what she meant to do. Perhaps he had done something like it himself. Probably he had.

He began screaming . . . only the screams weren’t really screams at all. His mouth was filled with blood, something had broken inside of his throat, and the sounds he produced were more guttural growls than screams. She jammed the plastic bag between his lips and deep inside his mouth. He had broken a number of teeth in the fall, and she could feel the jagged stumps. If they tore into her skin, she might have some serious explaining to do.

She yanked her hand free before he could bite, leaving the plastic bag and the dishwiper behind. She grabbed his jaw and chin. The other hand she put on top of his balding head. The flesh there was very warm. She could feel it throbbing with blood. She jammed his mouth shut on the wad of plastic and cloth. He tried to beat her off, but he only had one arm free, and that was the one that had been broken in the fall. The other was twisted beneath him. His feet paddled jerkily back and forth on the hardwood floor. One of his shoes came off. He was gurgling. She yanked her dress up to her waist, freeing her legs, then lunged forward, trying to straddle him. If she could do that, maybe she could pinch his nostrils shut.

But before she could try, his chest began to heave beneath her, and the gurgles became a deep grunting in his throat. It reminded her of how, when she was learning to drive, she would sometimes grind the transmission trying to find second gear, which was elusive on her father’s old Chevrolet standard. Bob jerked, the one eye she could see bulging and cowlike in its socket. His face, which had been a bright crimson, now began to turn purple. He settled back onto the floor. She waited, gasping for breath, her face lathered with snot and tears. The eye was no longer rolling, and no longer bright with panic. She thought he was d—

Bob gave one final, titanic jerk and flung her off. He sat up, and she saw his top half no longer exactly matched his bottom half; he had broken his back as well as his neck, it seemed. His plastic-lined

mouth yawned. His eyes met hers in a stare she knew she would never forget . . . but one she could live with, should she get through this.

“Dar! Arrrrrr!”

He fell backward. His head made an egglike cracking sound on the floor. Darcy crawled closer to him, but not close enough to be in the mess. She had his blood on her, of course, and that was all right—she had tried to help him, it was only natural—but that didn’t mean she wanted to bathe in it. She sat up, propped on one hand, and watched him while she waited for her breath to come back. She watched to see if he would move. He didn’t. When five minutes had gone by according to the little jeweled Michele on her wrist—the one she always wore when they went out—she reached a hand to the side of his neck and felt for a pulse there. She kept her fingers against his skin until she had counted all the way to thirty, and there was nothing. She lowered her ear to his chest, knowing this was the moment where he would come back to life and grab her. He didn’t come back to life because there was no life left in him: no beating heart, no breathing lungs. It was over. She felt no satisfaction (let alone triumph) but only a focused determination to finish this and do it right. Partly for herself, but mostly for Donnie and Pets.

She went into the kitchen, moving fast. They had to know she’d called as soon as she could; if they could tell there had been a delay (if his blood had a chance to coagulate too much, for instance), there might be awkward questions. *I’ll tell them I fainted, if I have to*, she thought. *They’ll believe that, and even if they don’t, they can’t disprove it. At least, I don’t think they can.*

She got the flashlight from the pantry, just as she had on the night when she had literally stumbled over his secret. She went back to where Bob lay, staring up at the ceiling with his glazed eyes. She pulled the plastic bag out of his mouth and examined it anxiously. If it was torn, there could be problems . . . and it was, in two places. She shone the flashlight into his mouth and spotted one tiny scrap of GLAD bag on his tongue. She picked it out with the tips of her fingers and put it in the bag.

Enough, that’s enough, Darcellen.

But it wasn't. She pushed his cheeks back with her fingers, first the right, then the left. And on the left side she found another tiny scrap of plastic, stuck to his gum. She picked that out and put it in the bag with the other one. Were there more pieces? Had he swallowed them? If so, they were beyond her reach and all she could do was pray they wouldn't be discovered if someone—she didn't know who—had enough questions to order an autopsy.

Meanwhile, time was passing.

She hurried through the breezeway and into the garage, not quite running. She crawled under the worktable, opened his special hiding place, and stowed away the blood-streaked plastic bag with the dishwiper inside. She closed the hidey-hole, put the carton of old catalogues in front of it, then went back into the house. She put the flashlight where it belonged. She picked up the phone, realized she had stopped crying, and put it back into its cradle. She went through the living room and looked at him. She thought about the roses, but that didn't work. *It's roses, not patriotism, that are the last resort of a scoundrel*, she thought, and was shocked to hear herself laugh. Then she thought of Donnie and Petra, who had both idolized their father, and that did the trick. Weeping, she went back to the kitchen phone and punched in 911. "Hello, my name is Darcellen Anderson, and I need an ambulance at—"

"Slow down a little, ma'am," the dispatcher said. "I'm having trouble understanding you."

Good, Darcy thought.

She cleared her throat. "Is this better? Can you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am, I can now. Just take it easy. You said you needed an ambulance?"

"Yes, at 24 Sugar Mill Lane."

"Are you hurt, Mrs. Anderson?"

"Not me, my husband. He fell down the stairs. He might only be unconscious, but I think he's dead."

The dispatcher said she would send an ambulance immediately. Darcy surmised she'd also send a Yarmouth police car. A state police car as well, if one were currently in the area. She hoped there wasn't. She went back into the front hall and sat on the bench there, but not for long. It was his eyes, looking at her. Accusing her.

She took his sport coat, wrapped it around herself, and went out on the front walk to wait for the ambulance.

The policeman who took her statement was Harold Shrewsbury, a local. Darcy didn't know him, but did know his wife, as it happened; Arlene Shrewsbury was a Knitting Knut. He talked to her in the kitchen while the EMTs first examined Bob's body and then took it away, not knowing there was another corpse inside him. A fellow who had been much more dangerous than Robert Anderson, CPA.

"Would you like coffee, Officer Shrewsbury? It's no trouble."

He looked at her trembling hands and said he would be very happy to make it for both of them. "I'm very handy in the kitchen."

"Arlene has never mentioned that," she said as he got up. He left his notebook open on the kitchen table. So far he had written nothing in it but her name, Bob's name, their address, and their telephone number. She took that as a good sign.

"No, she likes to hide my light under a bushel," he said. "Mrs. Anderson—Darcy—I'm very sorry for your loss, and I'm sure Arlene would say the same."

Darcy began to cry again. Officer Shrewsbury tore a handful of paper towels off the roll and gave them to her. "Sturdier than Kleenex."

"You have experience with this," she said.

He checked the Bunn, saw it was loaded, and flipped it on. "More than I'd like." He came back and sat down. "Can you tell me what happened? Do you feel up to that?"

She told him about Bob finding the double-date penny in his change from Subway, and how excited he'd been. About their celebratory dinner at Pearl of the Shore, and how he'd drunk too much. How he'd been clowning around (she mentioned the comic British salute he'd given when she asked for a glass of Perrier and lime). How he'd come up the stairs holding the glass high, like a waiter. How he was almost to the landing when he slipped. She even told about how she'd almost slipped herself, on one of the spilled ice cubes, while rushing down to him.

Officer Shrewsbury jotted something in his notebook, snapped it closed, then looked at her levelly. "Okay. I want you to come with me. Get your coat."

"What? Where?"

To jail, of course. Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars, go directly to jail. Bob had gotten away with almost a dozen murders, and she hadn't even been able to get away with one (of course he had planned his, and with an accountant's attention to detail). She didn't know where she'd slipped up, but it would undoubtedly turn out to be something obvious. Officer Shrewsbury would tell her on the way to the police station. It would be like the last chapter of an Elizabeth George.

"My house," he said. "You're staying with me and Arlene tonight."

She gaped at him. "I don't . . . I can't . . ."

"You can," he said, in a voice that brooked no argument. "She'd kill me if I left you here by yourself. Do you want to be responsible for my murder?"

She wiped tears from her face and smiled wanly. "No, I guess not. But . . . Officer Shrewsbury . . ."

"Harry."

"I have to make phone calls. My children . . . they don't know yet." The thought of this brought on fresh tears, and she put the last of the paper towels to work on them. Who knew a person could have so many tears inside them? She hadn't touched her coffee and now drank half of it in three long swallows, although it was still hot.

"I think we can stand the expense of a few long-distance calls," Harry Shrewsbury said. "And listen. Do you have something you can take? Anything of a, you know, calming nature?"

"Nothing like that," she whispered. "Only Ambien."

"Then Arlene will loan you one of her Valiums," he said. "You should take one at least half an hour before you start making any stressful calls. Meantime, I'll just let her know we're coming."

"You're very kind."

He opened first one of her kitchen drawers, then another, then a third. Darcy felt her heart slip into her throat as he opened the fourth. He took a dishwiper from it and handed it to her. "Sturdier than paper towels."

“Thank you,” she said. “So much.”

“How long were you married, Mrs. Anderson?”

“Twenty-seven years,” she said.

“Twenty-seven,” he marveled. “God. I am so sorry.”

“So am I,” she said, and lowered her face into the dishtowel.

Robert Emory Anderson was laid to rest in Yarmouth's Peace Cemetery two days later. Donnie and Petra flanked their mother as the minister talked about how a man's life was but a season. The weather had turned cold and overcast; a chilly wind rattled the leafless branches. B, B & A had closed for the day, and everyone had turned out. The accountants in their black overcoats clustered together like crows. There were no women among them. Darcy had never noticed this before.

Her eyes brimmed and she wiped at them periodically with the handkerchief she held in one black-gloved hand; Petra cried steadily and without letup; Donnie was red-eyed and grim. He was a good-looking young man, but his hair was already thinning, as his father's had at his age. *As long as he doesn't put on weight like Bob did*, she thought. *And doesn't kill women, of course*. But surely that kind of thing wasn't hereditary. Was it?

Soon this would be over. Donnie would stay only a couple of days—it was all the time he could afford to take away from the business at this point, he said. He hoped she could understand that and she said of course she did. Petra would be with her for a week, and said she could stay longer if Darcy needed her. Darcy told her how kind that was, privately hoping it would be no more than five days. She needed to be alone. She needed . . . not to think, exactly, but to find herself again. To re-establish herself on the right side of the mirror.

Not that anything had gone wrong; far from it. She didn't think things could have gone better if she had planned her husband's murder for months. If she had done that, she probably would have screwed it up by complicating things too much. Unlike for Bob, planning was not her forte.

There had been no hard questions. Her story was simple, believable, and almost true. The most important part was the solid bedrock beneath it: they had a marriage stretching back almost three

decades, a good marriage, and there had been no recent arguments to mar it. Really, what was there to question?

The minister invited the family to step forward. They did so.

“Rest in peace, Pop,” Donnie said, and tossed a clod of earth into the grave. It landed on the shiny surface of the coffin. Darcy thought it looked like a dog turd.

“Daddy, I miss you so much,” Petra said, and threw her own handful of earth.

Darcy came last. She bent, took up a loose handful in her black glove, and let it fall. She said nothing.

The minister invoked a moment of silent prayer. The mourners bowed their heads. The wind rattled the branches. Not too far distant, traffic rushed by on I-295. Darcy thought: *God, if You're there, let this be the end.*

It wasn't.

Seven weeks or so after the funeral—it was the new year now, the weather blue and hard and cold—the doorbell of the house on Sugar Mill Lane rang. When Darcy opened it, she saw an elderly gentleman wearing a black topcoat and red muffler. Held before him in his gloved hands was an old-school Homburg hat. His face was deeply lined (with pain as well as age, Darcy thought) and what remained of his gray hair was buzzed to a fuzz.

“Yes?” she said.

He fumbled in his pocket and dropped his hat. Darcy bent and picked it up. When she straightened, she saw that the elderly gentleman was holding out a leather-cased identification folder. In it was a gold badge and a picture of her caller (looking quite a bit younger) on a plastic card.

“Holt Ramsey,” he said, sounding apologetic about it. “State Attorney General’s Office. I’m sorry as hell to disturb you, Mrs. Anderson. May I come in? You’ll freeze standing out here in that dress.”

“Please,” she said, and stood aside.

She observed his hitching walk and the way his right hand went unconsciously to his right hip—as if to hold it together—and a clear memory rose in her mind: Bob sitting beside her on the bed, her cold fingers held prisoner by his warm ones. Bob talking. Gloating, actually. *I want them to think Beadie’s dumb, and they do. Because they’re dumb. I’ve only been questioned a single time, and that was as a witness, about two weeks after BD killed the Moore woman. An old guy with a limp, semi-retired.* And here that old guy was, standing not half a dozen steps from where Bob had died. From where she had killed him. Holt Ramsey looked both sick and in pain, but his eyes were sharp. They moved quickly to the left and right, taking in everything before returning to her face.

Be careful, she told herself. Be oh so careful of this one, Darcellen.

“How can I help you, Mr. Ramsey?”

“Well, one thing—if it’s not too much to ask—I could sure use a cup of coffee. I’m awfully cold. I’ve got a State car, and the heater doesn’t work worth a darn. Of course if it’s an imposition . . .”

“Not at all. But I wonder . . . could I see your identification again?”

He handed the folder over to her equably enough, and hung his hat on the coat tree while she studied it.

“This RET stamped below the seal . . . does that mean you’re retired?”

“Yes and no.” His lips parted in a smile that revealed teeth too perfect to be anything but dentures. “Had to go, at least officially, when I turned sixty-eight, but I’ve spent my whole life either in the State Police or working at SAG—State Attorney General’s Office, you know—and now I’m like an old firehorse with an honorary place in the barn. Kind of a mascot, you know.”

I think you’re a lot more than that.

“Let me take your coat.”

“No, nope, I think I’ll wear it. Won’t be staying that long. I’d hang it up if it was snowing outside—so I wouldn’t drip on your floor—but it’s not. It’s just boogery cold, you know. Too cold to snow, my father would have said, and at my age I feel the cold a lot more than I did fifty years ago. Or even twenty-five.”

Leading him into the kitchen, walking slowly so Ramsey could keep up, she asked him how old he was.

“Seventy-eight in May.” He spoke with evident pride. “If I make it. I always add that for good luck. It’s worked so far. What a nice kitchen you have, Mrs. Anderson—a place for everything and everything in its place. My wife would have approved. She died four years ago. It was a heart attack, very sudden. How I miss her. The way you must miss your husband, I imagine.”

His twinkling eyes—young and alert in creased, pain-haunted sockets—searched her face.

He knows. I don’t know how, but he does.

She checked the Bunn’s basket and turned it on. As she got cups from the cabinet, she asked, “How may I help you today, Mr.

Ramsey? Or is it Detective Ramsey?"

He laughed, and the laugh turned into a cough. "Oh, it's been donkey's years since anyone called me Detective. Never mind Ramsey, either, if you go straight to Holt, that'll work for me. And it was really your husband I wanted to talk to, you know, but of course he's passed on—again, my condolences—and so that's out of the question. Yep, entirely out of the question." He shook his head and settled himself on one of the stools that stood around the butcher-block table. His topcoat rustled. Somewhere inside his scant body, a bone creaked. "But I tell you what: an old man who lives in a rented room—which I do, although it's a nice one—sometimes gets bored with just the TV for company, and so I thought, what the hell, I'll drive on down to Yarmouth and ask my few little questions just the same. She won't be able to answer many of them, I said to myself, maybe not *any* of them, but why not go anyway? You need to get out before you get potbound, I said to myself."

"On a day when the high is supposed to go all the way up to ten degrees," she said. "In a State car with a bad heater."

"Ayuh, but I have my thermals on," he said modestly.

"Don't you have your own car, Mr. Ramsey?"

"I do, I do," he said, as if this had never occurred to him until now. "Come sit down, Mrs. Anderson. No need to lurk in the corner. I'm too old to bite."

"No, the coffee will be ready in a minute," she said. She was afraid of this old man. Bob should have been afraid of him, too, but of course Bob was now beyond fear. "In the meantime, perhaps you can tell me what you wanted to talk about with my husband."

"Well, you won't believe this, Mrs. Anderson—"

"Call me Darcy, why don't you?"

"Darcy!" He looked delighted. "Isn't that the nicest, old-fashioned name!"

"Thank you. Do you take cream?"

"Black as my hat, that's how I take it. Only I like to think of myself as one of the white-hats, actually. Well, I would, wouldn't I? Chasing down criminals and such. That's how I got this bad leg, you know. High-speed car chase, way back in '89. Fellow killed his wife and both of his children. Now a crime like that is usually an act of

passion, committed by a man who's either drunk or drugged or not quite right in the head." Ramsey tapped his fuzz with a finger arthritis had twisted out of true. "Not this guy. This guy did it for the insurance. Tried to make it look like a whatchacallit, home invasion. I won't go into all the details, but I sniffed around and sniffed around. For three years I sniffed around. And finally I felt I had enough to arrest him. Probably not enough to convict him, but there was no need to tell *him* that, was there?"

"I suppose not," Darcy said. The coffee was hot, and she poured. She decided to take hers black, too. And to drink it as fast as possible. That way the caffeine would hit her all at once and turn on her lights.

"Thanks," he said when she brought it to the table. "Thanks very much. You're kindness itself. Hot coffee on a cold day—what could be better? Mulled cider, maybe; I can't think of anything else. Anyway, where was I? Oh, I know. Dwight Cheminoux. Way up in The County, this was. Just south of the Hainesville Woods."

Darcy worked on her coffee. She looked at Ramsey over the rim of her cup and suddenly it was like being married again—a long marriage, in many ways a good marriage (but not in all ways), the kind that was like a joke: she knew that he knew, and he knew that she knew that he knew. That kind of relationship was like looking into a mirror and seeing another mirror, a hall of them going down into infinity. The only real question here was what he was going to do about what he knew. What he *could* do.

"Well," Ramsey said, setting down his coffee cup and unconsciously beginning to rub his sore leg, "the simple fact is I was hoping to provoke that fella. I mean, he had the blood of a woman and two kiddies on his hands, so I felt justified in playing a little dirty. And it worked. He ran, and I chased him right into the Hainesville Woods, where the song says there's a tombstone every mile. And there we both crashed on Wickett's Curve—him into a tree and me into him. Which is where I got this leg, not to mention the steel rod in my neck."

"I'm sorry. And the fellow you were chasing? What did he get?"

Ramsey's mouth curved upward at the corners in a dry-lipped smile of singular coldness. His young eyes sparkled. "He got death,

Darcy. Saved the state forty or fifty years of room and board in Shawshank.”

“You’re quite the hound of heaven, aren’t you, Mr. Ramsey?”

Instead of looking puzzled, he placed his misshapen hands beside his face, palms out, and recited in a singsong schoolboy’s voice: “I fled Him down the nights and down the days, I fled Him down the arches of the years, I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways . . .’ And so on.”

“You learned that in school?”

“No ma’am, in Methodist Youth Fellowship. Lo these many years ago. Won a Bible, which I lost at summer camp a year later. Only I didn’t lose it; it was stolen. Can you imagine someone low enough to steal a Bible?”

“Yes,” Darcy said.

He laughed. “Darcy, you go on and call me Holt. Please. All my friends do.”

Are you my friend? Are you?

She didn’t know, but of one thing she was sure: he wouldn’t have been Bob’s friend.

“Is that the only poem you have by heart? Holt?”

“Well, I used to know ‘The Death of the Hired Man,’” he said, “but now I only remember the part about how home is the place that, when you go there, they have to take you in. It’s a true thing, wouldn’t you say?”

“Absolutely.”

His eyes—they were a light hazel—searched hers. The intimacy of that gaze was indecent, as if he were looking at her with her clothes off. And pleasant, for perhaps the same reason.

“What did you want to ask my husband, Holt?”

“Well, I already talked to him once, you know, although I’m not sure he’d remember if he was still alive. A long time ago, that was. We were both a lot younger, and you must’ve been just a child yourself, given how young and pretty you are now.”

She gave him a chilly spare-me smile, then got up to pour herself a fresh cup of coffee. The first one was already gone.

“You probably know about the Beadie murders,” he said.

“The man who kills women and then sends their ID to the police?” She came back to the table, her coffee cup perfectly steady in her hand. “The newspapers dine out on that one.”

He pointed at her—Bob’s fingergun gesture—and tipped her a wink. “Got that right. Yessir. ‘If it bleeds, it leads,’ that’s their motto. I happened to work the case a little. I wasn’t retired then, but getting on to it. I had kind of a reputation as a fellow who could sometimes get results by sniffing around . . . following my whatdoyoucallums . . .”

“Instincts?”

Once more with the fingergun. Once more with the wink. As if there were a secret, and they were both in on it. “Anyway, they send me out to work on my own, you know—old limping Holt shows his pictures around, asks his questions, and kind’ve . . . you know . . . just *sniffs*. Because I’ve always had a nose for this kind of work, Darcy, and never really lost it. This was in the fall of 1997, not too long after a woman named Stacey Moore was killed. Name ring a bell?”

“I don’t think so,” Darcy said.

“You’d remember if you’d seen the crime scene photos. Terrible murder—how that woman must have suffered. But of course, this fellow who calls himself Beadie had stopped for a long time, over fifteen years, and he must have had a lot of steam built up in his boiler, just waiting to blow. And it was her that got scalded.

“Anyway, the fella who was SAG back then put me on it. ‘Let old Holt take a shot,’ he says, ‘he’s not doing anything else, and it’ll keep him out from underfoot.’ Even then old Holt was what they called me. Because of the limp, I should imagine. I talked to her friends, her relatives, her neighbors out there on Route 106, and the people she worked with in Waterville. Oh, I talked to them plenty. She was a waitress at a place called the Sunnyside Restaurant there in town. Lots of transients stop in, because the turnpike’s just down the road, but I was more interested in her regular customers. Her regular *male* customers.”

“Of course you would be,” she murmured.

“One of them turned out to be a presentable, well-turned-out fella in his mid or early forties. Came in every three or four weeks, always

took one of Stacey's booths. Now, probably I shouldn't say this, since the fella turned out to be your late husband—speaking ill of the dead, but since they're *both* dead, I kind've figure that cancels itself out, if you see what I mean . . ." Ramsey ceased, looking confused.

"You're getting all tangled up," Darcy said, amused in spite of herself. Maybe he *wanted* her to be amused. She couldn't tell. "Do yourself a favor and just say it, I'm a big girl. She flirted with him? Is that what it comes down to? She wouldn't be the first waitress to flirt with a man on the road, even if the man had a wedding ring on his finger."

"No, that wasn't quite it. According to what the other waitstaff told me—and of course you have to take it with a grain of salt, because they all liked her—it was *him* that flirted with *her*. And according to them, she didn't like it much. She said the guy gave her the creeps."

"That doesn't sound like my husband." Or what Bob had told her, for that matter.

"No, but it probably was. Your husband, I mean. And a wife doesn't always know what a hubby does on the road, although she may think she does. Anyway, one of the waitresses told me this fella drove a Toyota 4Runner. She knew because she had one just like it. And do you know what? A number of the Moore woman's neighbors had seen a 4Runner like that out and about in the area of the family farmstand just days before the woman was murdered. Once only a day before the killing took place."

"But not on *the* day."

"No, but of course a fella as careful as this Beadie would look out for a thing like that. Wouldn't he?"

"I suppose."

"Well, I had a description and I canvassed the area around the restaurant. I had nothing better to do. For a week all I got was blisters and a few cups of mercy-coffee—none as good as yours, though!—and I was about to give up. Then I happened to stop at a place downtown. Mickleson's Coins. Does *that* name ring a bell?"

"Of course. My husband was a numismatist and Mickleson's was one of the three or four best buy-and-sell shops in the state. It's gone now. Old Mr. Mickleson died and his son closed the business."

“Yep. Well, you know what the song says, time takes it all in the end—your eyes, the spring in your step, even your friggin jump shot, pardon my French. But George Mickleson was alive then—”

“Upright and sniffin the air,” Darcy murmured.

Holt Ramsey smiled. “Just as you say. Anyway, he recognized the description. ‘Why, that sounds like Bob Anderson,’ he says. And guess what? He drove a Toyota 4Runner.”

“Oh, but he traded that in a long time ago,” Darcy said. “For a—”

“Chevrolet Suburban, wasn’t it?” Ramsey pronounced the company name *Shivvalay*.

“Yes.” Darcy folded her hands and looked at Ramsey calmly. They were almost down to it. The only question was which partner in the now-dissolved Anderson marriage this sharp-eyed old man was more interested in.

“Don’t suppose you still have that Suburban, do you?”

“No. I sold it about a month after my husband died. I put an ad in *Uncle Henry’s* swap guide, and someone snapped it right up. I thought I’d have problems, with the high mileage and gas being so expensive, but I didn’t. Of course I didn’t get much.”

And two days before the man who’d bought it came to pick it up, she had searched it carefully, from stem to stern, not neglecting to pull out the carpet in the cargo compartment. She found nothing, but still paid fifty dollars to have it washed on the outside (which she didn’t care about) and steam-cleaned on the inside (which she did).

“Ah. Good old *Uncle Henry’s*. I sold my late wife’s Ford the same way.”

“Mr. Ramsey—”

“Holt.”

“Holt, were you able to positively identify my husband as the man who used to flirt with Stacey Moore?”

“Well, when I talked to Mr. Anderson, he admitted he’d been in the Sunnyside from time to time—admitted it freely—but he claimed he never noticed any of the waitresses in particular. Claimed he usually had his head buried in paperwork. But of course I showed his picture—from his driver’s license, you understand—and the staff allowed as how it was him.”

“Did my husband know you had a . . . a particular interest in him?”

“No. Far as he was concerned, I was just old Limpin’ Lennie looking for witnesses who might have seen something. No one fears an old duck like me, you know.”

I fear you plenty.

“It’s not much of a case,” she said. “Assuming you were trying to make one.”

“No case at all!” He laughed cheerily, but his hazel eyes were cold. “If I could have made a case, me and Mr. Anderson wouldn’t have had our little conversation in his office, Darcy. We would have had it in *my* office. Where you don’t get to leave until I say you can. Or until a lawyer springs you, of course.”

“Maybe it’s time you stopped dancing, Holt.”

“All right,” he agreed, “why not? Because even a box-step hurts me like hell these days. Damn that old Dwight Cheminoux, anyway! And I don’t want to take your whole morning, so let’s speed this up. I was able to confirm a Toyota 4Runner at or near the scene of two of the earlier murders—what we call Beadie’s first cycle. Not the same one; a different color. But I was also able to confirm that your husband owned another 4Runner in the seventies.”

“That’s right. He liked it, so he traded for the same kind.”

“Yep, men will do that. And the 4Runner’s a popular vehicle in places where it snows half the damn year. But after the Moore murder—and after I talked to him—he traded for a Suburban.”

“Not immediately,” Darcy said with a smile. “He had that 4Runner of his well after the turn of the century.”

“I know. He traded in 2004, not long before Andrea Honeycutt was murdered down Nashua way. Blue and gray Suburban; year of manufacture 2002. A Suburban of that approximate year and those *exact* colors was seen quite often in Mrs. Honeycutt’s neighborhood during the month or so before she was murdered. But here’s the funny thing.” He leaned forward. “I found one witness who said that Suburban had a Vermont plate, and another—a little old lady of the type who sits in her living room window and watches all the neighborhood doings from first light to last, on account of having nothing better to do—said the one *she* saw had a New York plate.”

“Bob’s had Maine plates,” Darcy said. “As you very well know.”

“Acourse, acourse, but plates can be stolen, you know.”

“What about the Shaverstone murders, Holt? Was a blue and gray Suburban seen in Helen Shaverstone’s neighborhood?”

“I see you’ve been following the Beadie case a little more closely than most people. A little more closely than you first let on, too.”

“Was it?”

“No,” Ramsey said. “As a matter of fact, no. But a gray-over-blue Suburban *was* seen near the creek in Amesbury where the bodies were dumped.” He smiled again while his cold eyes studied her. “Dumped like garbage.”

She sighed. “I know.”

“No one could tell me about the license plate of the Suburban seen in Amesbury, but if they had, I imagine it would have been Massachusetts. Or Pennsylvania. Or anything but Maine.”

He leaned forward.

“This Beadie sent us notes with his victims’ identification. Taunting us, you know—daring us to catch him. P’raps part of him even *wanted* to be caught.”

“Perhaps so,” Darcy said, although she doubted it.

“The notes were printed in block letters. Now people who do that think such printing can’t be identified, but most times it can. The similarities show up. I don’t suppose you have any of your husband’s files, do you?”

“The ones that haven’t gone back to his firm have been destroyed. But I imagine they’d have plenty of samples. Accountants never throw out anything.”

He sighed. “Yuh, but a firm like that, it’d take a court order to get anything loose, and to get one I’d have to show probable cause. Which I just don’t have. I’ve got a number of coincidences—although they’re not coincidences in my mind. And I’ve got a number of . . . well . . . *propinquities*, I guess you might call them, but nowhere near enough of them to qualify as circumstantial evidence. So I came to you, Darcy. I thought I’d probably be out on my ear by now, but you’ve been very kind.”

She said nothing.

He leaned forward even further, almost hunching over the table now. Like a bird of prey. But hiding not quite out of sight behind the

coldness in his eyes was something else. She thought it might be kindness. She prayed it was.

“Darcy, was your husband Beadie?”

She was aware that he might be recording this conversation; it was certainly not outside the realm of possibility. Instead of speaking, she raised one hand from the table, showing him her pink palm.

“For a long time you never knew, did you?”

She said nothing. Only looked at him. Looked *into* him, the way you looked into people you knew well. Only you had to be careful when you did that, because you weren’t always seeing what you thought you were seeing. She knew that now.

“And then you did? One day you did?”

“Would you like another cup of coffee, Holt?”

“Half a cup,” he said. He sat back up and folded his arms over his thin chest. “More’d give me acid indigestion, and I forgot to take my Zantac pill this morning.”

“I think there’s some Prilosec in the upstairs medicine cabinet,” she said. “It was Bob’s. Would you like me to get it?”

“I wouldn’t take anything of his even if I was burning up inside.”

“All right,” she said mildly, and poured him a little more coffee.

“Sorry,” he said. “Sometimes my emotions get the better of me. Those women . . . all those women . . . and the boy, with his whole life ahead of him. That’s worst of all.”

“Yes,” she said, passing him the cup. She noticed how his hand trembled, and thought this was probably his last rodeo, no matter how smart he was . . . and he was fearsomely smart.

“A woman who found out what her husband was very late in the game would be in a hard place,” Ramsey said.

“Yes, I imagine she would be,” Darcy said.

“Who’d believe she could live with a man all those years and never know what he was? Why, she’d be like a whatdoyoucallit, the bird that lives in a crocodile’s mouth.”

“According to the story,” Darcy said, “the crocodile lets that bird live there because it keeps the crocodile’s teeth clean. Eats the grain right out from between them.” She made pecking motions with the fingers of her right hand. “It’s probably not true . . . but it *is* true that I

used to drive Bobby to the dentist. Left to himself, he'd accidentally-on-purpose forget his appointments. He was such a baby about pain." Her eyes filled unexpectedly with tears. She wiped them away with the heels of her hands, cursing them. This man would not respect tears shed on Robert Anderson's account.

Or maybe she was wrong about that. He was smiling and nodding his head. "And your kids. They'd be run over once when the world found out their father was a serial killer and torturer of women. Then run over again when the world decided their mother had been covering up for him. Maybe even helping him, like Myra Hindley helped Ian Brady. Do you know who they were?"

"No."

"Never mind, then. But ask yourself this: what would a woman in a difficult position like that do?"

"What would *you* do, Holt?"

"I don't know. My situation's a little different. I may be just an old nag—the oldest horse in the firebarn—but I have a responsibility to the families of those murdered women. They deserve closure."

"They deserve it, no question . . . but do they *need* it?"

"Robert Shaverstone's penis was bitten off, did you know that?"

She hadn't. Of course she hadn't. She closed her eyes and felt the warm tears trickling through the lashes. *Did not "suffer" my ass*, she thought, and if Bob had appeared before her, hands out and begging for mercy, she would have killed him again.

"His father knows," Ramsey said. Speaking softly. "And he has to live with that knowledge about the child he loved every day."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I am so, so sorry."

She felt him take her hand across the table. "Didn't mean to upset you."

She flung it off. "Of course you did! But do you think I haven't been? Do you think I *haven't* been, you . . . you nosy old man?"

He chuckled, revealing those sparkling dentures. "No. I don't think that at all. Saw it as soon as you opened the door." He paused, then said deliberately: "I saw everything."

"And what do you see now?"

He got up, staggered a little, then found his balance. "I see a courageous woman who should be left alone to get after her

housework. Not to mention the rest of her life.”

She also got up. “And the families of the victims? The ones who deserve closure?” She paused, not wanting to say the rest. But she had to. This man had fought considerable pain—maybe even excruciating pain—to come here, and now he was giving her a pass. At least, she thought he was. “Robert Shaverstone’s father?”

“The Shaverstone boy is dead, and his father’s as good as.” Ramsey spoke in a calm, assessing tone Darcy recognized. It was a tone Bob used when he knew a client of the firm was about to be hauled before the IRS, and the meeting would go badly. “Never takes his mouth off the whiskey bottle from morning til night. Would knowing that his son’s killer—his son’s *mutilator*—was dead change that? I don’t think so. Would it bring any of the victims back? Nawp. Is the killer burning in the fires of hell for his crimes right now, suffering his own mutilations that will bleed for all of eternity? The Bible says he is. The Old Testament part of it, anyway, and since that’s where our laws come from, it’s good enough for me. Thanks for the coffee. I’ll have to stop at every rest area between here and Augusta going back, but it was worth it. You make a good cup.”

Walking him to the door, Darcy realized she felt on the right side of the mirror for the first time since she had stumbled over that carton in the garage. It was good to know he had been close to being caught. That he hadn’t been as smart as he’d assumed he was.

“Thank you for coming to visit,” she said as he set his hat squarely on his head. She opened the door, letting in a breeze of cold air. She didn’t mind. It felt good on her skin. “Will I see you again?”

“Nawp. I’m done as of next week. Full retirement. Going to Florida. I won’t be there long, according to my doctor.”

“I’m sorry to hear th—”

He abruptly pulled her into his arms. They were thin, but sinewy and surprisingly strong. Darcy was startled but not frightened. The brim of his Homburg bumped her temple as he whispered in her ear. “You did the right thing.”

And kissed her cheek.

He went slowly and carefully down the path, minding the ice. An old man's walk. *He should really have a cane*, Darcy thought. He was going around the front of his car, still looking down for ice patches, when she called his name. He turned back, bushy eyebrows raised.

"When my husband was a boy, he had a friend who was killed in an accident."

"Is that so?" The words came out in a puff of winter white.

"Yes," Darcy said. "You could look up what happened. It was very tragic, even though he wasn't a very nice boy, according to my husband."

"No?"

"No. He was the sort of boy who harbors dangerous fantasies. His name was Brian Delahanty, but when they were kids, Bob called him BD."

Ramsey stood by his car for several seconds, working it through. Then he nodded his head. "That's very interesting. I might have a look at the stories about it on my computer. Or maybe not; it was all a long time ago. Thank you for the coffee."

"Thank you for the conversation."

She watched him drive down the street (he drove with the confidence of a much younger man, she noticed—probably because his eyes were still so sharp) and then went inside. She felt younger, lighter. She went to the mirror in the hall. In it she saw nothing but her own reflection, and that was good.

1922

April 11, 1930

Magnolia Hotel
Omaha, Nebraska

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

My name is Wilfred Leland James, and this is my confession. In June of 1922 I murdered my wife, Arlette Christina Winters James, and hid her body by tugging it down an old well. My son, Henry Freeman James, aided me in this crime, although at 14 he was not responsible; I cozened him into it, playing upon his fears and beating down his quite normal objections over a period of 2 months. This is a thing I regret even more bitterly than the crime, for reasons this document will show.

The issue that led to my crime and damnation was 100 acres of good land in Hemingford Home, Nebraska. It was willed to my wife by John Henry Winters, her father. I wished to add this land to our freehold farm, which in 1922 totaled 80 acres. My wife, who never took to the farming life (or to being a farmer's wife), wished to sell it to the Farrington Company for cash money. When I asked her if she truly wanted to live downwind from a Farrington's hog butchery, she told me we could sell up the farm as well as her father's acreage—my father's farm, and his before him! When I asked her what we might do with money and no land, she said we could move to Omaha, or even St. Louis, and open a shop.

"I will never live in Omaha," I said. "Cities are for fools."

This is ironic, considering where I now live, but I will not live here for long; I know that as well as I know what is making the sounds I hear in the walls. And I know where I shall find myself after this earthly life is done. I wonder if Hell can be worse than the City of Omaha. Perhaps it *is* the City of Omaha, but with no good country surrounding it; only a smoking, brimstone-stinking emptiness full of lost souls like myself.

We argued bitterly over that 100 acres during the winter and spring of 1922. Henry was caught in the middle, yet tended more to

my side; he favored his mother in looks but me in his love for the land. He was a biddable lad with none of his mother's arrogance. Again and again he told her that he had no desire to live in Omaha or any city, and would go only if she and I came to an agreement, which we never could.

I thought of going to Law, feeling sure that, as the Husband in the matter, any court in the land would uphold my right to decide the use and purpose of that land. Yet something held me back. 'Twas not fear of the neighbors' chatter, I had no care for country gossip; 'twas something else. I had come to hate her, you see. I had come to wish her dead, and that was what held me back.

I believe that there is another man inside of every man, a stranger, a Conniving Man. And I believe that by March of 1922, when the Hemingford County skies were white and every field was a snow-scrimmed mudsuck, the Conniving Man inside Farmer Wilfred James had already passed judgment on my wife and decided her fate. 'Twas justice of the black-cap variety, too. The Bible says that an ungrateful child is like a serpent's tooth, but a nagging and ungrateful Wife is ever so much sharper than that.

I am not a monster; I tried to save her from the Conniving Man. I told her that if we could not agree, she should go to her mother's in Lincoln, which is sixty miles west—a good distance for a separation which is not quite a divorce yet signifies a dissolving of the marital corporation.

"And leave you my father's land, I suppose?" she asked, and tossed her head. How I had come to hate that pert head-toss, so like that of an ill-trained pony, and the little sniff which always accompanied it. "That will never happen, Wilf."

I told her that I would buy the land from her, if she insisted. It would have to be over a period of time—eight years, perhaps ten—but I would pay her every cent.

"A little money coming in is worse than none," she replied (with another sniff and head-toss). "This is something every woman knows. The Farrington Company will pay all at once, and their idea of top dollar is apt to be far more generous than yours. And I will never live in Lincoln. 'Tis not a city but only a village with more churches than houses."

Do you see my situation? Do you not understand the “spot” she put me in? Can I not count on at least a little of your sympathy? No? Then hear this.

In early April of that year—eight years to this very day, for all I know—she came to me all bright and shining. She had spent most of the day at the “beauty salon” in McCook, and her hair hung around her cheeks in fat curls that reminded me of the toilet-rolls one finds in hotels and inns. She said she’d had an idea. It was that we should sell the 100 acres *and* the farm to the Farrington combine. She believed they would buy it all just to get her father’s piece, which was near the railway line (and she was probably right).

“Then,” said this saucy vixen, “we can split the money, divorce, and start new lives apart from each other. We both know that’s what you want.” As if she didn’t.

“Ah,” I said (as if giving the idea serious consideration). “And with which of us does the boy go?”

“Me, of course,” she said, wide-eyed. “A boy of 14 needs to be with his mother.”

I began to “work on” Henry that very day, telling him his mother’s latest plan. We were sitting in the hay-mow. I wore my saddest face and spoke in my saddest voice, painting a picture of what his life would be like if his mother was allowed to carry through with this plan: how he would have neither farm nor father, how he would find himself in a much bigger school, all his friends (most since babyhood) left behind, how, once in that new school, he would have to fight for a place among strangers who would laugh at him and call him a country bumpkin. On the other hand, I said, if we could hold onto all the acreage, I was convinced we could pay off our note at the bank by 1925 and live happily debt-free, breathing sweet air instead of watching pig-guts float down our previously clear stream from sun-up to sun-down. “Now what is it you want?” I asked after drawing this picture in as much detail as I could manage.

“To stay here with you, Poppa,” he said. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. “Why does she have to be such a . . . such a . . .”

“Go on,” I said. “The truth is never cussing, Son.”

“Such a *bitch!*”

“Because most women are,” I said. “It’s an ineradicable part of their natures. The question is what we’re going to do about it.”

But the Conniving Man inside had already thought of the old well behind the cow barn, the one we only used for slop-water because it was so shallow and murky—only 20 feet deep and little more than a sluice. It was just a question of bringing him to it. And I *had* to, surely you see that; I could kill my wife but must save my lovely son. To what purpose the ownership of 180 acres—or a thousand—if you have no one to share them with and pass them on to?

I pretended to be considering Arlette’s mad plan to see good cornland turned into a hog-butchery. I asked her to give me time to get used to the idea. She assented. And during the next 2 months I worked on Henry, getting *him* used to a very different idea. ’Twasn’t as hard as it might have been; he had his mother’s looks (a woman’s looks are the honey, you know, that lure men on to the stinging hive) but not her God-awful stubbornness. It was only necessary to paint a picture of what his life would be like in Omaha or St. Louis. I raised the possibility that even those two overcrowded antheaps might not satisfy her; she might decide only Chicago would do. “Then,” I said, “you might find yourself going to high school with black niggers.”

He grew cold toward his mother; after a few efforts—all clumsy, all rebuffed—to regain his affections, she returned the chill. I (or rather the Conniving Man) rejoiced at this. In early June I told her that, after great consideration, I had decided I would never allow her to sell those 100 acres without a fight; that I would send us all to beggary and ruin if that was what it took.

She was calm. She decided to take legal advice of her own (for the Law, as we know, will befriend whomever pays it). This I foresaw. And smiled at it! Because she couldn’t pay for such advice. By then I was holding tight to what little cash money we had. Henry even turned his pig-bank over to me when I asked, so she couldn’t steal from that source, paltry as it was. She went, of course, to the Farrington Company offices in Deland, feeling quite sure (as was I) that they who had so much to gain would stand good her legal fees.

“They will, and she’ll win,” I told Henry from what had become our usual place of conversation in the hay-mow. I was not entirely sure of

this, but I had already taken my decision, which I will not go so far as to call “a plan.”

“But Poppa, that’s not fair!” he cried. Sitting there in the hay, he looked very young, more like 10 than 14.

“Life never is,” I said. “Sometimes the only thing to do is to take the thing that you must have. Even if someone gets hurt.” I paused, gauging his face. “Even if someone dies.”

He went white. “Poppa!”

“If she was gone,” I said, “everything would be the way it was. All the arguments would cease. We could live here peacefully. I’ve offered her everything I can to make her go, and she won’t. There’s only one other thing I can do. That we can do.”

“But I love her!”

“I love her, too,” I said. Which, however little you might believe it, was true. The hate I felt toward her in that year of 1922 was greater than a man can feel for any woman unless love is a part of it. And, bitter and willful though she was, Arlette was a warm-natured woman. Our “marital relations” had never ceased, although since the arguments about the 100 acres had begun, our grapplings in the dark had become more and more like animals rutting.

“It needn’t be painful,” I said. “And when it’s over . . . well . . .”

I took him out back of the barn and showed him the well, where he burst into bitter tears. “No, Poppa. Not that. No matter what.”

But when she came back from Deland (Harlan Cotterie, our nearest neighbor, carried her most of the way in his Ford, leaving her to walk the last two miles) and Henry begged her to “leave off so we can just be a family again,” she lost her temper, struck him across the mouth, and told him to stop begging like a dog.

“Your father’s infected you with his timidity. Worse, he’s infected you with his greed.”

As though she were innocent of *that* sin!

“The lawyer assures me the land is mine to do with as I wish, and I’m going to sell it. As for the two of you, you can sit here and smell roasting hogs together and cook your own meals and make your own beds. You, my son, can plow all the day and read *his* everlasting books all night. They’ve done him little good, but you may get on better. Who knows?”

“Mama, that’s not fair!”

She looked at her son as a woman might look at a strange man who had presumed to touch her arm. And how my heart rejoiced when I saw him looking back just as coldly. “You can go to the devil, both of you. As for me, I’m going to Omaha and opening a dress shop. That’s *my* idea of fair.”

This conversation took place in the dusty door-yard between the house and the barn, and her idea of fair was the last word. She marched across the yard, raising dust with her dainty town shoes, went into the house, and slammed the door. Henry turned to look at me. There was blood at the corner of his mouth and his lower lip was swelling. The rage in his eyes was of the raw, pure sort that only adolescents can feel. It is rage that doesn’t count the cost. He nodded his head. I nodded back, just as gravely, but inside the Conniving Man was grinning.

That slap was her death-warrant.

* * *

Two days later, when Henry came to me in the new corn, I saw he had weakened again. I wasn’t dismayed or surprised; the years between childhood and adulthood are gusty years, and those living through them spin like the weathercocks some farmers in the Midwest used to put atop their grain silos.

“We can’t,” he said. “Poppa, she’s in Error. And Shannon says those who die in Error go to Hell.”

God damn the Methodist church and Methodist Youth Fellowship, I thought . . . but the Conniving Man only smiled. For the next ten minutes we talked theology in the green corn while early summer clouds—the best clouds, the ones that float like schooners—sailed slowly above us, trailing their shadows like wakes. I explained to him that, quite the opposite of sending Arlette to Hell, we would be sending her to Heaven. “For,” I said, “a murdered man or woman dies not in God’s time but in Man’s. He . . . or she . . . is cut short before he . . . or she . . . can atone for sin, and so all errors must be forgiven. When you think of it that way, every murderer is a Gate of Heaven.”

“But what about us, Poppa? Wouldn’t we go to Hell?”

I gestured to the fields, brave with new growth. “How can you say so, when you see Heaven all around us? Yet she means to drive us away from it as surely as the angel with the flaming sword drove Adam and Eve from the Garden.”

He gazed at me, troubled. Dark. I hated to darken my son in such a way, yet part of me believed then and believes still that it was not I who did it to him, but she.

“And think,” I said. “If she goes to Omaha, she’ll dig herself an even deeper pit in Sheol. If she takes you, you’ll become a city boy —”

“I never will!” He cried this so loudly that crows took wing from the fenceline and swirled away into the blue sky like charred paper.

“You’re young and you will,” I said. “You’ll forget all this . . . you’ll learn city ways . . . and begin digging your own pit.”

If he had returned by saying that murderers had no hope of joining their victims in Heaven, I might have been stumped. But either his theology did not stretch so far or he didn’t want to consider such things. And is there Hell, or do we make our own on earth? When I consider the last eight years of my life, I plump for the latter.

“How?” he asked. “When?”

I told him.

“And we can go on living here after?”

I said we could.

“And it won’t hurt her?”

“No,” I said. “It will be quick.”

He seemed satisfied. And still it might not have happened, if not for Arlette herself.

* * *

We settled on a Saturday night about halfway through a June that was as fine as any I can remember. Arlette sometimes took a glass of wine on Summer evenings, although rarely more. There was good reason for this. She was one of those people who can never take two glasses without taking four, then six, then the whole bottle. And

another bottle, if there is another. “I have to be very careful, Wilf. I like it too much. Luckily for me, my willpower is strong.”

That night we sat on the porch, watching the late light linger over the fields, listening to the somnolent *reeeeee* of the crickets. Henry was in his room. He had hardly touched his supper, and as Arlette and I sat on the porch in our matching rockers with the MA and PA seat-cushions, I thought I heard a faint sound that could have been retching. I remember thinking that when the moment came, he would not be able to go through with it. His mother would wake up bad-tempered the following morning with a “hang-over” and no knowledge of how close she had come to never seeing another Nebraska dawn. Yet I moved forward with the plan. Because I was like one of those Russian nesting dolls? Perhaps. Perhaps every man is like that. Inside me was the Conniving Man, but inside the Conniving Man was a Hopeful Man. That fellow died sometime between 1922 and 1930. The Conniving Man, having done his damage, disappeared. Without his schemes and ambitions, life has been a hollow place.

I brought the bottle out to the porch with me, but when I tried to fill her empty glass, she covered it with her hand. “You needn’t get me drunk to get what you want. I want it, too. I’ve got an itch.” She spread her legs and put her hand on her crotch to show where the itch was. There was a Vulgar Woman inside her—perhaps even a Harlot—and the wine always let her loose.

“Have another glass anyway,” I said. “We’ve something to celebrate.”

She looked at me warily. Even a single glass of wine made her eyes wet (as if part of her was weeping for all the wine it wanted and could not have), and in the sunset light they looked orange, like the eyes of a jack-o’-lantern with a candle inside it.

“There will be no suit,” I told her, “and there will be no divorce. If the Farrington Company can afford to pay us for my 80 as well as your father’s 100, our argument is over.”

For the first and only time in our troubled marriage, she actually *gaped*. “What are you saying? Is it what I think you’re saying? Don’t fool with me, Wilf!”

“I’m not,” said the Conniving Man. He spoke with hearty sincerity. “Henry and I have had many conversations about this—”

“You’ve been thick as thieves, that’s true,” she said. She had taken her hand from the top of her glass and I took the opportunity to fill it. “Always in the hay-mow or sitting on the woodpile or with your heads together in the back field. I thought it was about Shannon Cotterie.” A sniff and a head-toss. But I thought she looked a little wistful, as well. She sipped at her second glass of wine. Two sips of a second glass and she could still put the glass down and go to bed. Four and I might as well hand her the bottle. Not to mention the other two I had standing by.

“No,” I said. “We haven’t been talking about Shannon.” Although I *had* seen Henry holding her hand on occasion as they walked the two miles to the Hemingford Home schoolhouse. “We’ve been talking about Omaha. He wants to go, I guess.” It wouldn’t do to lay it on too thick, not after a single glass of wine and two sips of another. She was suspicious by nature, was my Arlette, always looking for a deeper motive. And of course in this case I had one. “At least to try it on for size. And Omaha’s not that far from Hemingford . . .”

“No. It isn’t. As I’ve told you both a thousand times.” She sipped her wine, and instead of putting the glass down as she had before, she held it. The orange light above the western horizon was deepening to an otherworldly green-purple that seemed to burn in the glass.

“If it were St. Louis, that would be a different thing.”

“I’ve given that idea up,” she said. Which meant, of course, that she had investigated the possibility and found it problematic. Behind my back, of course. All of it behind my back except for the company lawyer. And she would have done *that* behind my back as well, if she hadn’t wanted to use it as a club to beat me with.

“Will they buy the whole piece, do you think?” I asked. “All 180 acres?”

“How would I know?” Sipping. The second glass half-empty. If I told her now that she’d had enough and tried to take it away from her, she’d refuse to give it up.

“You do, I have no doubt,” I said. “That 180 acres is like St. Louis. You’ve *investigated*.”

She gave me a shrewd sidelong look . . . then burst into harsh laughter. “P’raps I have.”

“I suppose we could hunt for a house on the outskirts of town,” I said. “Where there’s at least a field or two to look at.”

“Where you’d sit on your ass in a porch-rocker all day, letting your wife do the work for a change? Here, fill this up. If we’re celebrating, let’s celebrate.”

I filled both. It only took a splash in mine, as I’d taken but a single swallow.

“I thought I might look for work as a mechanic. Cars and trucks, but mostly farm machinery. If I can keep that old Farmall running”—I gestured with my glass toward the dark hulk of the tractor standing beside the barn—“then I guess I can keep anything running.”

“And Henry talked you into this.”

“He convinced me it would be better to take a chance at being happy in town than to stay here on my own in what would be sure misery.”

“The boy shows sense and the man listens! At long last! Hallelujah!” She drained her glass and held it out for more. She grasped my arm and leaned close enough for me to smell sour grapes on her breath. “You may get that thing you like tonight, Wilf.” She touched her purple-stained tongue to the middle of her upper lip. “That *nasty* thing.”

“I’ll look forward to that,” I said. If I had my way, an even nastier thing was going to happen that night in the bed we had shared for 15 years.

“Let’s have Henry down,” she said. She had begun to slur her words. “I want to congratulate him on finally seeing the light.” (Have I mentioned that the verb *to thank* was not in my wife’s vocabulary? Perhaps not. Perhaps by now I don’t need to.) Her eyes lit up as a thought occurred to her. “We’ll give ’im a glass of wine! He’s old enough!” She elbowed me like one of the old men you see sitting on the benches that flank the courthouse steps, telling each other dirty jokes. “If we loosen his tongue a little, we may even find out if he’s made any time with Shannon Cotterie . . . li’l baggage, but she’s got pretty hair, I’ll give ’er that.”

“Have another glass of wine first,” said the Conniving Man.

She had another two, and that emptied the bottle. (The first one.) By then she was singing “Avalon” in her best minstrel voice, and doing her best minstrel eye-rolls. It was painful to see and even more painful to hear.

I went into the kitchen to get another bottle of wine, and judged the time was right to call Henry. Although, as I’ve said, I was not in great hopes. I could only do it if he were my willing accomplice, and in my heart I believed that he would shy from the deed when the talk ran out and the time actually came. If so, we would simply put her to bed. In the morning I would tell her I’d changed my mind about selling my father’s land.

Henry came, and nothing in his white, woeful face offered any encouragement for success. “Poppa, I don’t think I can,” he whispered. “It’s *Mama*.”

“If you can’t, you can’t,” I said, and there was nothing of the Conniving Man in that. I was resigned; what would be would be. “In any case, she’s happy for the first time in months. Drunk, but happy.”

“Not just squiffy? She’s *drunk*?”

“Don’t be surprised; getting her own way is the only thing that ever makes her happy. Surely 14 years with her is long enough to have taught you that.”

Frowning, he cocked an ear to the porch as the woman who’d given him birth launched into a jarring but word-for-word rendition of “Dirty McGee.” Henry frowned at this barrelhouse ballad, perhaps because of the chorus (“She was willin’ to help him stick it in / For it was Dirty McGee again”), more likely at the way she was slurring the words. Henry had taken the Pledge at a Methodist Youth Fellowship Camp-Out on Labor Day weekend of the year before. I rather enjoyed his shock. When teenagers aren’t turning like weathervanes in a high wind, they’re as stiff as Puritans.

“She wants you to join us and have a glass of wine.”

“Poppa, you know I promised the Lord I would never drink.”

“You’ll have to take that up with her. She wants to have a celebration. We’re selling up and moving to Omaha.”

“*No!*”

“Well . . . we’ll see. It’s really up to you, Son. Come out on the porch.”

His mother rose tipsily to her feet when she saw him, wrapped her arms around his waist, pressed her body rather too tightly against his, and covered his face with extravagant kisses. Unpleasantly smelly ones, from the way he grimaced. The Conniving Man, meanwhile, filled up her glass, which was empty again.

“Finally we’re all together! My men see sense!” She raised her glass in a toast, and slopped a goodly portion of it onto her bosom. She laughed and gave me a wink. “If you’re good, Wilf, you can suck it out of the cloth later on.”

Henry looked at her with confused distaste as she plopped back down in her rocker, raised her skirts, and tucked them between her legs. She saw the look and laughed.

“No need to be so prissy. I’ve seen you with Shannon Cotterie. Li’l baggage, but she’s got pretty hair and a nice little figger.” She drank off the rest of her wine and belched. “If you’re not getting a touch of that, you’re a fool. Only you’d better be careful. Fourteen’s not too young to marry. Out here in the middle, fourteen’s not too young to marry your *cousin*.” She laughed some more and held out her glass. I filled it from the second bottle.

“Poppa, she’s had enough,” Henry said, as disapproving as a parson. Above us, the first stars were winking into view above that vast flat emptiness I have loved all my life.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said. “*In vino veritas*, that’s what Pliny the Elder said . . . in one of those *books* your mother’s always sneering about.”

“Hand on the plow all day, nose in a book all night,” Arlette said. “Except when he’s got something else in *me*.”

“*Mama!*”

“*Mama!*” she mocked, then raised her glass in the direction of Harlan Cotterie’s farm, although it was too far for us to see the lights. We couldn’t have seen them even if it had been a mile closer, now that the corn was high. When summer comes to Nebraska, each farmhouse is a ship sailing a vast green ocean. “Here’s to Shannon Cotterie and her brand-new bubbies, and if my son don’t know the color of her nipples, he’s a slowpoke.”

My son made no reply to this, but what I could see of his shadowed face made the Conniving Man rejoice.

She turned to Henry, grasped his arm, and spilled wine on his wrist. Ignoring his little mew of distaste, looking into his face with sudden grimness, she said: "Just make sure that when you're lying down with her in the corn or behind the barn, you're a *no-poke*." She made her free hand into a fist, poked out the middle finger, then used it to tap a circle around her crotch: left thigh, right thigh, right belly, navel, left belly, back again to the left thigh. "Explore all you like, and rub around it with your Johnny Mac until he feels good and spits up, but stay out of the home place lest you find yourself locked in for life, just like your mummer and daddy."

He got up and left, still without a word, and I don't blame him. Even for Arlette, this was a performance of extreme vulgarity. He must have seen her change before his eyes from his mother—a difficult woman but sometimes loving—to a smelly whorehouse madam instructing a green young customer. All bad enough, but he was sweet on the Cotterie girl, and that made it worse. Very young men cannot help but put their first loves on pedestals, and should someone come along and spit on the paragon . . . even if it happens to be one's mother . . .

Faintly, I heard his door slam. And faint but audible sobbing.

"You've hurt his feelings," I said.

She expressed the opinion that *feelings*, like *fairness*, were also the last resort of weaklings. Then she held out her glass. I filled it, knowing she would remember none of what she'd said in the morning (always supposing she was still there to greet the morning), and would deny it—vehemently—if I told her. I had seen her in this state of drunkenness before, but not for years.

We finished the second bottle (*she* did) and half of the third before her chin dropped onto her wine-stained bosom and she began to snore. Coming through her thus constricted throat, those snores sounded like the growling of an ill-tempered dog.

I put my arm around her shoulders, hooked my hand into her armpit, and hauled her to her feet. She muttered protests and slapped weakly at me with one stinking hand. "Lea' me 'lone. Want to go to slee'."

"And you will," I said. "But in your bed, not out here on the porch."

I led her—stumbling and snoring, one eye shut and the other open in a bleary glare—across the sitting room. Henry’s door opened. He stood in it, his face expressionless and much older than his years. He nodded at me. Just one single dip of the head, but it told me all I needed to know.

I got her on the bed, took off her shoes, and left her there to snore with her legs spread and one hand dangling off the mattress. I went back into the sitting room and found Henry standing beside the radio Arlette had hounded me into buying the year before.

“She can’t say those things about Shannon,” he whispered.

“But she will,” I said. “It’s how she is, how the Lord made her.”

“And she can’t take me away from Shannon.”

“She’ll do that, too,” I said. “If we let her.”

“Couldn’t you . . . Poppa, couldn’t you get your own lawyer?”

“Do you think any lawyer whose services I could buy with the little bit of money I have in the bank could stand up to the lawyers Farrington would throw at us? They swing weight in Hemingford County; I swing nothing but a sickle when I want to cut hay. They want that 100 acres and she means for them to have it. This is the only way, but you have to help me. Will you?”

For a long time he said nothing. He lowered his head, and I could see tears dropping from his eyes to the hooked rug. Then he whispered, “Yes. But if I have to watch it . . . I’m not sure I can . . .”

“There’s a way you can help and still not have to watch. Go into the shed and fetch a burlap sack.”

He did as I asked. I went into the kitchen and got her sharpest butcher knife. When he came back with the sack and saw it, his face paled. “Does it have to be *that*? Can’t you . . . with a pillow . . .”

“It would be too slow and too painful,” I said. “She’d struggle.” He accepted that as if I had killed a dozen women before my wife and thus knew. But I didn’t. All I knew was that in all my half-plans—my daydreams of being rid of her, in other words—I had always seen the knife I now held in my hand. And so the knife it would be. The knife or nothing.

We stood there in the glow of the kerosene lamps—there’d be no electricity except for generators in Hemingford Home until 1928—looking at each other, the great night-silence that exists out there in

the middle of things broken only by the unlovely sound of her snores. Yet there was a third presence in that room: her ineluctable will, which existed separate of the woman herself (I thought I sensed it then; these 8 years later I am sure). This is a ghost story, but the ghost was there even before the woman it belonged to died.

“All right, Poppa. We’ll . . . we’ll send her to Heaven.” Henry’s face brightened at the thought. How hideous that seems to me now, especially when I think of how he finished up.

“It will be quick,” I said. Man and boy I’ve slit nine-score hogs’ throats, and I thought it would be. But I was wrong.

* * *

Let it be told quickly. On the nights when I can’t sleep—and there are many—it plays over and over again, every thrash and cough and drop of blood in exquisite slowness, so let it be told quickly.

We went into the bedroom, me in the lead with the butcher knife in my hand, my son with the burlap sack. We went on tiptoe, but we could have come in clashing cymbals without waking her up. I motioned Henry to stand to my right, by her head. Now we could hear the Big Ben alarm clock ticking on her nightstand as well as her snores, and a curious thought came to me: we were like physicians attending the deathbed of an important patient. But I think physicians at deathbeds do not as a rule tremble with guilt and fear.

Please let there not be too much blood, I thought. Let the bag catch it. Even better, let him cry off now, at the last minute.

But he didn’t. Perhaps he thought I’d hate him if he did; perhaps he had resigned her to Heaven; perhaps he was remembering that obscene middle finger, poking a circle around her crotch. I don’t know. I only know he whispered, “Good-bye, Mama,” and drew the bag down over her head.

She snorted and tried to twist away. I had meant to reach under the bag to do my business, but he had to push down tightly on it to hold her, and I couldn’t. I saw her nose making a shape like a shark’s fin in the burlap. I saw the look of panic dawning on his face, too, and knew he wouldn’t hold on for long.

I put one knee on the bed and one hand on her shoulder. Then I slashed through the burlap and the throat beneath. She screamed and began to thrash in earnest. Blood welled through the slit in the burlap. Her hands came up and beat the air. Henry stumbled away from the bed with a screech. I tried to hold her. She pulled at the gushing bag with her hands and I slashed at them, cutting three of her fingers to the bone. She shrieked again—a sound as thin and sharp as a sliver of ice—and the hand fell away to twitch on the counterpane. I slashed another bleeding slit in the burlap, and another, and another. Five cuts in all I made before she pushed me away with her unwounded hand and then tore the burlap sack up from her face. She couldn't get it all the way off her head—it caught in her hair—and so she wore it like a snood.

I had cut her throat with the first two slashes, the first time deep enough to show the gristle of her wind-pipe. With the last two I had carved her cheek and her mouth, the latter so deeply that she wore a clown's grin. It stretched all the way to her ears and showed her teeth. She let loose a guttural, choked roar, the sound a lion might make at feeding-time. Blood flew from her throat all the way to the foot of the counterpane. I remember thinking it looked like the wine when she held her glass up to the last of the daylight.

She tried to get out of bed. I was first dumb-founded, then infuriated. She had been a trouble to me all the days of our marriage and was a trouble even now, at our bloody divorce. But what else should I have expected?

"Oh Poppa, make her stop!" Henry shrieked. *"Make her stop, o Poppa, for the love of God make her stop!"*

I leaped on her like an ardent lover and drove her back down on her blood-drenched pillow. More harsh growls came from deep in her mangled throat. Her eyes rolled in their sockets, gushing tears. I wound my hand into her hair, yanked her head back, and cut her throat yet again. Then I tore the counterpane free from my side of the bed and wrapped it over her head, catching all but the first pulse from her jugular. My face had caught that spray, and hot blood now dripped from my chin, nose, and eyebrows.

Behind me, Henry's shrieks ceased. I turned around and saw that God had taken pity on him (assuming He had not turned His face

away when He saw what we were about): he had fainted. Her thrashings began to weaken. At last she lay still . . . but I remained on top of her, pressing down with the counterpane, now soaked with her blood. I reminded myself that she had never done anything easily. And I was right. After thirty seconds (the tinny mail-order clock counted them off), she gave another heave, this time bowing her back so strenuously that she almost threw me off. *Ride 'em, Cowboy*, I thought. Or perhaps I said it aloud. That I can't remember, God help me. Everything else, but not that.

She subsided. I counted another thirty tinny ticks, then thirty after that, for good measure. On the floor, Henry stirred and groaned. He began to sit up, then thought better of it. He crawled into the farthest corner of the room and curled in a ball.

"Henry?" I said.

Nothing from the curled shape in the corner.

"Henry, she's dead. She's dead and I need help."

Nothing still.

"Henry, it's too late to turn back now. The deed is done. If you don't want to go to prison—and your father to the electric chair—then get on your feet and help me."

He staggered toward the bed. His hair had fallen into his eyes; they glittered through the sweat-clumped locks like the eyes of an animal hiding in the bushes. He licked his lips repeatedly.

"Don't step in the blood. We've got more of a mess to clean up in here than I wanted, but we can take care of it. If we don't track it all through the house, that is."

"Do I have to look at her? Poppa, do I have to *look*?"

"No. Neither of us do."

We rolled her up, making the counterpane her shroud. Once it was done, I realized we couldn't carry her through the house that way; in my half-plans and daydreams, I had seen no more than a discreet thread of blood marring the counterpane where her cut throat (her *neatly* cut throat) lay beneath. I had not foreseen or even considered the reality: the white counterpane was a blackish-purple in the dim room, oozing blood as a bloated sponge will ooze water.

There was a quilt in the closet. I could not suppress a brief thought of what my mother would think if she could see what use I

was making of that lovingly stitched wedding present. I laid it on the floor. We dropped Arlette onto it. Then we rolled her up.

“Quick,” I said. “Before this starts to drip, too. No . . . wait . . . go for a lamp.”

He was gone so long that I began to fear he’d run away. Then I saw the light come bobbing down the short hall past his bedroom and to the one Arlette and I shared. *Had* shared. I could see the tears gushing down his waxy-pale face.

“Put it on the dresser.”

He set the lamp down by the book I had been reading: Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*. I never finished it; I could never *bear* to finish it. By the light of the lamp, I pointed out the splashes of blood on the floor, and the pool of it right beside the bed.

“More is running out of the quilt,” he said. “If I’d known how much blood she had in her . . .”

I shook the case free of my pillow and snugged it over the end of the quilt like a sock over a bleeding shin. “Take her feet,” I said. “We need to do this part right now. And don’t faint again, Henry, because I can’t do it by myself.”

“I wish it was a dream,” he said, but he bent and got his arms around the bottom of the quilt. “Do you think it might be a dream, Poppa?”

“We’ll think it is, a year from now when it’s all behind us.” Part of me actually believed this. “Quickly, now. Before the pillow-case starts to drip. Or the rest of the quilt.”

We carried her down the hall, across the sitting room, and out through the front door like men carrying a piece of furniture wrapped in a mover’s rug. Once we were down the porch steps, I breathed a little easier; blood in the dooryard could easily be covered over.

Henry was all right until we got around the corner of the cow barn and the old well came in view. It was ringed by wooden stakes so no one would by accident step on the wooden cap that covered it. Those sticks looked grim and horrible in the starlight, and at the sight of them, Henry uttered a strangled cry.

“That’s no grave for a mum . . . muh . . .” He managed that much, and then fainted into the weedy scrub that grew behind the barn. Suddenly I was holding the dead weight of my murdered wife all by

myself. I considered putting the grotesque bundle down—its wrappings now all askew and the slashed hand peeking out—long enough to revive him. I decided it would be more merciful to let him lie. I dragged her to the side of the well, put her down, and lifted up the wooden cap. As I leaned it against two of the stakes, the well exhaled into my face: a stench of stagnant water and rotting weeds. I fought with my gorge and lost. Holding onto two of the stakes to keep my balance, I bowed at the waist to vomit my supper and the little wine I had drunk. There was an echoing splash when it struck the murky water at the bottom. That splash, like thinking *Ride 'em, Cowboy*, has been within a hand's reach of my memory for the last eight years. I will wake up in the middle of the night with the echo in my mind and feel the splinters of the stakes dig into my palms as I clutch them, holding on for dear life.

I backed away from the well and tripped over the bundle that held Arlette. I fell down. The slashed hand was inches from my eyes. I tucked it back into the quilt and then patted it, as if comforting her. Henry was still lying in the weeds with his head pillowed on one arm. He looked like a child sleeping after a strenuous day during harvest-time. Overhead, the stars shone down in their thousands and tens of thousands. I could see the constellations—Orion, Cassiopeia, the Dippers—that my father had taught me. In the distance, the Cotteries' dog Rex barked once and then was still. I remember thinking, *This night will never end*. And that was right. In all the important ways, it never has.

I picked the bundle up in my arms, and it twitched.

I froze, my breath held in spite of my thundering heart. *Surely I didn't feel that*, I thought. I waited for it to come again. Or perhaps for her hand to creep out of the quilt and try to grip my wrist with the slashed fingers.

There was nothing. I had imagined it. Surely I had. And so I tugged her down the well. I saw the quilt unravel from the end not held by the pillow-case, and then came the splash. A much bigger one than my vomit had made, but there was also a squelchy *thud*. I'd known the water down there wasn't deep, but had hoped it would be deep enough to cover her. That thud told me it wasn't.

A high siren of laughter commenced behind me, a sound so close to insanity that it made gooseflesh prickle all the way from the crack of my backside to the nape of my neck. Henry had come to and gained his feet. No, much more than that. He was capering behind the cow barn, waving his arms at the star-shot sky, and laughing.

“Mama down the well and I don’t care!” he singsonged. “Mama down the well and I don’t care, for my master’s gone *aw-aaay!*”

I reached him in three strides and slapped him as hard as I could, leaving bloody finger-marks on a downy cheek that hadn’t yet felt the stroke of a razor. “Shut up! Your voice will carry! Your—. There, fool boy, you’ve raised that god damned dog again.”

Rex barked once, twice, three times. Then silence. We stood, me grasping Henry’s shoulders, listening with my head cocked. Sweat ran down the back of my neck. Rex barked once more, then quit. If any of the Cotteries roused, they’d think it was a raccoon he’d been barking at. Or so I hoped.

“Go in the house,” I said. “The worst is over.”

“Is it, Poppa?” He looked at me solemnly. “Is it?”

“Yes. Are you all right? Are you going to faint again?”

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“I’m all right. I just . . . I don’t know why I laughed like that. I was confused. Because I’m relieved, I guess. It’s over!” A chuckle escaped him, and he clapped his hands over his mouth like a little boy who has inadvertently said a bad word in front of his grandma.

“Yes,” I said. “It’s over. We’ll stay here. Your mother ran away to St. Louis . . . or perhaps it was Chicago . . . but we’ll stay here.”

“She . . . ?” His eyes strayed to the well, and the cap leaning against three of those stakes that were somehow so grim in the starlight.

“Yes, Hank, she did.” His mother hated to hear me call him Hank, she said it was common, but there was nothing she could do about it now. “Up and left us cold. And of course we’re sorry, but in the meantime, chores won’t wait. Nor schooling.”

“And I can still be . . . friends with Shannon.”

“Of course,” I said, and in my mind’s eye I saw Arlette’s middle finger tapping its lascivious circle around her crotch. “Of course you

can. But if you should ever feel the urge to *confess* to Shannon—”

An expression of horror dawned on his face. “Not ever!”

“That’s what you think now, and I’m glad. But if the urge should come on you someday, remember this: she’d run from you.”

“Acourse she would,” he muttered.

“Now go in the house and get both wash-buckets out of the pantry. Better get a couple of milk-buckets from the barn, as well. Fill them from the kitchen pump and suds ’em up with that stuff she keeps under the sink.”

“Should I heat the water?”

I heard my mother say, *Cold water for blood, Wilf. Remember that.*

“No need,” I said. “I’ll be in as soon as I’ve put the cap back on the well.”

He started to turn away, then seized my arm. His hands were dreadfully cold. “No one can ever know!” He whispered this hoarsely into my face. “No one can ever know what we did!”

“No one ever will,” I said, sounding far bolder than I felt. Things had already gone wrong, and I was starting to realize that a deed is never like the dream of a deed.

“She won’t come back, will she?”

“*What?*”

“She won’t haunt us, will she?” Only he said *haint*, the kind of country talk that had always made Arlette shake her head and roll her eyes. It is only now, eight years later, that I had come to realize how much *haint* sounds like *hate*.

“No,” I said.

But I was wrong.

* * *

I looked down the well, and although it was only 20 feet deep, there was no moon and all I could see was the pale blur of the quilt. Or perhaps it was the pillow-case. I lowered the cover into place, straightened it a little, then walked back to the house. I tried to follow the path we’d taken with our terrible bundle, purposely scuffing my feet, trying to obliterate any traces of blood. I’d do a better job in the morning.

I discovered something that night that most people never have to learn: murder is sin, murder is damnation (surely of one's own mind and spirit, even if the atheists are right and there is no afterlife), but murder is also work. We scrubbed the bedroom until our backs were sore, then moved on to the hall, the sitting room, and finally the porch. Each time we thought we were done, one of us would find another splotch. As dawn began to lighten the sky in the east, Henry was on his knees scrubbing the cracks between the boards of the bedroom floor, and I was down on mine in the sitting room, examining Arlette's hooked rug square inch by square inch, looking for that one drop of blood that might betray us. There was none there—we had been fortunate in that respect—but a dime-sized drop beside it. It looked like blood from a shaving cut. I cleaned it up, then went back into our bedroom to see how Henry was faring. He seemed better now, and I felt better myself. I think it was the coming of daylight, which always seems to dispel the worst of our horrors. But when George, our rooster, let out his first lusty crow of the day, Henry jumped. Then he laughed. It was a small laugh, and there was still something wrong with it, but it didn't terrify me the way his laughter had done when he regained consciousness between the barn and the old livestock well.

"I can't go to school today, Poppa. I'm too tired. And . . . I think people might see it on my face. Shannon especially."

I hadn't even considered school, which was another sign of half-planning. Half-*assed* planning. I should have put the deed off until County School was out for the summer. It would only have meant waiting a week. "You can stay home until Monday, then tell the teacher you had the grippe and didn't want to spread it to the rest of the class."

"It's not the grippe, but I *am* sick."

So was I.

We had spread a clean sheet from her linen closet (so many things in that house were *hers* . . . but no more) and piled the bloody bedclothes onto it. The mattress was also bloody, of course, and would have to go. There was another, not so good, in the back shed. I bundled the bedclothes together, and Henry carried the mattress. We went back out to the well just before the sun cleared the horizon.

The sky above was perfectly clear. It was going to be a good day for corn.

“I can’t look in there, Poppa.”

“You don’t have to,” I said, and once more lifted the wooden cover. I was thinking that I should have left it up to begin with—*think ahead, save chores*, my own Poppa used to say—and knowing that I never could have. Not after feeling (or thinking I felt) that last blind twitch.

Now I could see to the bottom, and what I saw was horrible. She had landed sitting up with her legs crushed beneath her. The pillow-case was split open and lay in her lap. The quilt and counterpane had come loose and were spread around her shoulders like a complicated ladies’ stole. The burlap bag, caught around her head and holding her hair back like a snood, completed the picture: she almost looked as if she were dressed for a night on the town.

Yes! A night on the town! That’s why I’m so happy! That’s why I’m grinning from ear to ear! And do you notice how red my lipstick is, Wilf? I’d never wear this shade to church, would I? No, this is the kind of lipstick a woman puts on when she wants to do that nasty thing to her man. Come on down, Wilf, why don’t you? Don’t bother with the ladder, just jump! Show me how bad you want me! You did a nasty thing to me, now let me do one to you!

“Poppa?” Henry was standing with his face toward the barn and his shoulders hunched, like a boy expecting to be beaten. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes.” I flung down the bundle of linen, hoping it would land on top of her and cover that awful upturned grin, but a whim of draft floated it into her lap, instead. Now she appeared to be sitting in some strange and bloodstained cloud.

“Is she covered? Is she covered up, Poppa?”

I grabbed the mattress and tugged it in. It landed on end in the mucky water and then fell against the circular stone-cobbled wall, making a little lean-to shelter over her, at last hiding her cocked-back head and bloody grin.

“Now she is.” I lowered the old wooden cap back into place, knowing there was more work ahead: the well would have to be filled in. Ah, but that was long overdue, anyway. It was a danger, which

was why I had planted the circle of stakes around it. "Let's go in the house and have breakfast."

"I couldn't eat a single bite!"

But he did. We both did. I fried eggs, bacon, and potatoes, and we ate every bite. Hard work makes a person hungry. Everyone knows that.

* * *

Henry slept until late afternoon. I stayed awake. Some of those hours I spent at the kitchen table, drinking cup after cup of black coffee. Some of them I spent walking in the corn, up one row and down another, listening to the swordlike leaves rattle in a light breeze. When it's June and corn's on the come, it seems almost to talk. This disquiets some people (and there are the foolish ones who say it's the sound of the corn actually growing), but I had always found that quiet rustling a comfort. It cleared my mind. Now, sitting in this city hotel room, I miss it. City life is no life for a country man; for such a man that life is a kind of damnation in itself.

Confessing, I find, is also hard work.

I walked, I listened to the corn, I tried to plan, and at last I *did* plan. I had to, and not just for myself.

There had been a time not 20 years before, when a man in my position needn't have worried; in those days, a man's business was his own, especially if he happened to be a respected farmer: a fellow who paid his taxes, went to church on Sundays, supported the Hemingford Stars baseball team, and voted the straight Republican ticket. I think that in those days, all sorts of things happened on farms out in what we called "the middle." Things that went unremarked, let alone reported. In those days, a man's wife was considered a man's business, and if she disappeared, there was an end to it.

But those days were gone, and even if they hadn't been . . . there was the land. The 100 acres. The Farrington Company wanted those acres for their God damned hog butchery, and Arlette had led them to believe they were going to get them. That meant danger, and

danger meant that daydreams and half-plans would no longer suffice.

When I went back to the house at midafternoon, I was tired but clear-headed and calm at last. Our few cows were bellowing, their morning milking hours overdue. I did that chore, then put them to pasture where I'd let them stay until sunset, instead of herding them back in for their second milking just after supper. They didn't care; cows accept what *is*. If Arlette had been more like one of our bossies, I reflected, she would still be alive and nagging me for a new washing machine out of the Monkey Ward catalogue. I probably would have bought it for her, too. She could always talk me around. Except when it came to the land. About that she should have known better. Land is a man's business.

Henry was still sleeping. In the weeks that followed, he slept a great deal, and I let him, although in an ordinary summer I would have filled his days with chores once school let out. And he would have filled his evenings either visiting over at Cotteries' or walking up and down our dirt road with Shannon, the two of them holding hands and watching the moon rise. When they weren't kissing, that was. I hoped what we'd done had not spoiled such sweet pastimes for him, but believed it had. That I had. And of course I was right.

I cleared my mind of such thoughts, telling myself it was enough for now that he was sleeping. I had to make another visit to the well, and it would be best to do it alone. Our stripped bed seemed to shout murder. I went to the closet and studied her clothes. Women have so many, don't they? Skirts and dresses and blouses and sweaters and underthings—some of the latter so complicated and strange a man can't even tell which side is the front. To take them all would be a mistake, because the truck was still parked in the barn and the Model T under the elm. She had left on foot and taken only what she could carry. Why hadn't she taken the T? Because I would have heard it start and stopped her going. That was believable enough. So . . . a single valise.

I packed it with what I thought a woman would need and what she could not bear to leave. I put in her few pieces of good jewelry and the gold-framed picture of her mama and poppa. I debated over the toiletries in the bathroom, and decided to leave everything except for

her atomizer bottle of Florient perfume and her horn-backed brush. There was a Testament in her night table, given to her by Pastor Hawkins, but I had never seen her read it, and so left it where it was. But I took the bottle of iron pills, which she kept for her monthlies.

Henry was still sleeping, but now tossing from side to side as if in the grip of bad dreams. I hurried about my business as quickly as I could, wanting to be in the house when he woke up. I went around the barn to the well, put the valise down, and lifted the splintery old cap for the third time. Thank God Henry wasn't with me. Thank God he didn't see what I saw. I think it would have driven him insane. It almost drove me insane.

The mattress had been shunted aside. My first thought was that she had pushed it away before trying to climb out. Because she was still alive. She was breathing. Or so it seemed to me at first. Then, just as ratiocinative ability began to resurface through my initial shock—when I began to ask myself what sort of breathing might cause a woman's dress to rise and fall not just at the bosom but all the way from neckline to hem—her jaw began to move, as if she were struggling to talk. It was not words that emerged from her greatly enlarged mouth, however, but the rat which had been chewing on the delicacy of her tongue. Its tail appeared first. Then her lower jaw yawned wider as it backed out, the claws on its back feet digging into her chin for purchase.

The rat plopped into her lap, and when it did, a great flood of its brothers and sisters poured out from under her dress. One had something white caught in its whiskers—a fragment of her slip, or perhaps her skimmies. I chucked the valise at them. I didn't think about it—my mind was roaring with revulsion and horror—but just did it. It landed on her legs. Most of the rodents—perhaps all—avoided it nimbly enough. Then they streamed into a round black hole that the mattress (which they must have pushed aside through sheer weight of numbers) had covered, and were gone in a trice. I knew well enough what that hole was; the mouth of the pipe that had supplied water to the troughs in the barn until the water level sank too low and rendered it useless.

Her dress collapsed around her. The counterfeit breathing stopped. But she was *staring* at me, and what had seemed a clown's

grin now looked like a gorgon's glare. I could see rat-bites on her cheeks, and one of her earlobes was gone.

"Dear God," I whispered. "Arlette, I'm so sorry."

Your apology is not accepted, her glare seemed to say. And when they find me like this, with rat-bites on my dead face and the underwear beneath my dress chewed away, you'll ride the lightning over in Lincoln for sure. And mine will be the last face you see. You'll see me when the electricity fries your liver and sets fire to your heart, and I'll be grinning.

I lowered the cap and staggered to the barn. There my legs betrayed me, and if I'd been in the sun, I surely would have passed out the way Henry had the night before. But I was in the shade, and after I sat for five minutes with my head lowered almost to my knees, I began to feel myself again. The rats had gotten to her—so what? Don't they get to all of us in the end? The rats and bugs? Sooner or later even the stoutest coffin must collapse and let in life to feed on death. It's the way of the world, and what did it matter? When the heart stops and the brain asphyxiates, our spirits either go somewhere else, or simply wink out. Either way, we aren't there to feel the gnawing as our flesh is eaten from our bones.

I started for the house and had reached the porch steps before a thought stopped me: what about the twitch? What if she had been alive when I threw her into the well? What if she had *still* been alive, paralyzed, unable to move so much as one of her slashed fingers, when the rats came out of the pipe and began their depredations? What if she had felt the one that had squirmed into her conveniently enlarged mouth and began to—!

"No," I whispered. "She didn't feel it because she didn't twitch. Never did. She was dead when I threw her in."

"Poppa?" Henry called in a sleep-muzzy voice. "Pop, is that you?"

"Yes."

"Who are you talking to?"

"No one. Myself."

I went in. He was sitting at the kitchen table in his singlet and undershorts, looking dazed and unhappy. His hair, standing up in cowlicks, reminded me of the tyke he had once been, laughing and

chasing the chickens around the dooryard with his hound dog Boo (long dead by that summer) at his heels.

"I wish we hadn't done it," he said as I sat down opposite him.

"Done is done and can't be undone," I said. "How many times have I told you that, boy?"

"'Bout a million." He lowered his head for a few moments, then looked up at me. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot. "Are we going to be caught? Are we going to jail? Or . . ."

"No. I've got a plan."

"You had a plan that it wouldn't hurt her! Look how *that* turned out!"

My hand itched to slap him for that, so I held it down with the other. This was not the time for recriminations. Besides, he was right. Everything that had gone wrong was my fault. *Except for the rats*, I thought. *They are not my fault*. But they were. Of course they were. If not for me, she would have been at the stove, putting on supper. Probably going on and on about those 100 acres, yes, but alive and well instead of *in* the well.

The rats are probably back already, a voice deep in my mind whispered. *Eating her. They'll finish the good parts, the tasty parts, the delicacies, and then . . .*

Henry reached across the table to touch my knotted hands. I started.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We're in it together."

I loved him for that.

"We're going to be all right, Hank; if we keep our heads, we'll be fine. Now listen to me."

He listened. At some point he began to nod. When I finished, he asked me one question: when were we going to fill in the well?

"Not yet," I said.

"Isn't that risky?"

"Yes," I said.

* * *

Two days later, while I was mending a piece of fence about a quarter-mile from the farm, I saw a large cloud of dust boiling down

our road from the Omaha-Lincoln Highway. We were about to have a visit from the world that Arlette had so badly wanted to be a part of. I walked back to the house with my hammer tucked into a belt loop and my carpenter's apron around my waist, its long pouch full of jingling nails. Henry was not in view. Perhaps he'd gone down to the spring to bathe; perhaps he was in his room, sleeping.

By the time I got to the dooryard and sat on the chopping block, I had recognized the vehicle pulling the rooster-tail: Lars Olsen's Red Baby delivery truck. Lars was the Hemingford Home blacksmith and village milkman. He would also, for a price, serve as a kind of chauffeur, and it was that function he was fulfilling on this June afternoon. The truck pulled into the dooryard, putting George, our bad-tempered rooster, and his little harem of chickens to flight. Before the motor had even finished coughing itself to death, a portly man wrapped in a flapping gray duster got out on the passenger side. He pulled off his goggles to reveal large (and comical) white circles around his eyes.

"Wilfred James?"

"At your service," I said, getting up. I felt calm enough. I might have felt less so if he'd come out in the county Ford with the star on the side. "You are—?"

"Andrew Lester," he said. "Attorney-at-law."

He put his hand out. I considered it.

"Before I shake that, you'd better tell me whose lawyer you are, Mr. Lester."

"I'm currently being retained by the Farrington Livestock Company of Chicago, Omaha, and Des Moines."

Yes, I thought, *I've no doubt. But I'll bet your name isn't even on the door. The big boys back in Omaha don't have to eat country dust to pay for their daily bread, do they? The big boys have got their feet up on their desks, drinking coffee and admiring the pretty ankles of their secretaries.*

I said, "In that case, sir, why don't you just go on and put that hand away? No offense."

He did just that, and with a lawyer's smile. Sweat was cutting clean lines down his chubby cheeks, and his hair was all matted and tangled from the ride. I walked past him to Lars, who had thrown up

the wing over his engine and was fiddling with something inside. He was whistling and sounded just as happy as a bird on a wire. I envied him that. I thought Henry and I might have another happy day—in a world as varied as this one, anything is possible—but it would not be in the summer of 1922. Or the fall.

I shook Lars's hand and asked how he was.

"Tolerable fair," he said, "but dry. I could use a drink."

I nodded toward the east side of the house. "You know where it is."

"I do," he said, slamming down the wing with a metallic clatter that sent the chickens, who'd been creeping back, into flight once more. "Sweet and cold as ever, I guess?"

"I'd say so," I agreed, thinking: *But if you could still pump from that other well, Lars, I don't think you'd care for the taste at all.* "Try it and see."

He started around to the shady side of the house where the outside pump stood in its little shelter. Mr. Lester watched him go, then turned back to me. He had unbuttoned his duster. The suit beneath would need dry-cleaning when he got back to Lincoln, Omaha, Deland, or wherever he hung his hat when he wasn't doing Cole Farrington's business.

"I could use a drink myself, Mr. James."

"Me, too. Nailing fence is hot work." I looked him up and down. "Not as hot as riding twenty miles in Lars's truck, though, I'll bet."

He rubbed his butt and smiled his lawyer's smile. This time it had a touch of rue in it. I could see his eyes already flicking here, there, and everywhere. It would not do to sell this man short just because he'd been ordered to rattle twenty miles out into the country on a hot summer's day. "My sit-upon may never be the same."

There was a dipper chained to the side of the little shelter. Lars pumped it full, drank it down with his Adam's apple rising and falling in his scrawny, sunburned neck, then filled it again and offered it to Lester, who looked at it as doubtfully as I'd looked at his outstretched hand. "Perhaps we could drink it inside, Mr. James. It would be a little cooler."

"It would," I agreed, "but I'd no more invite you inside than I'd shake your hand."

Lars Olsen saw how the wind was blowing and wasted no time going back to his truck. But he handed the dipper to Lester first. My visitor didn't drink in gulps, as Lars had, but in fastidious sips. Like a lawyer, in other words—but he didn't stop until the dipper was empty, and that was also like a lawyer. The screen door slammed and Henry came out of the house in his overalls and bare feet. He gave us a glance that seemed utterly disinterested—good boy!—and then went where any red-blooded country lad would have gone: to watch Lars work on his truck, and, if he were lucky, to learn something.

I sat down on the woodpile we kept under a swatch of canvas on this side of the house. "I imagine you're out here on business. My wife's."

"I am."

"Well, you've had your drink, so we better get down to it. I've still got a full day's work ahead of me, and it's three in the afternoon."

"Sunrise to sunset. Farming's a hard life." He sighed as if he knew.

"It is, and a difficult wife can make it even harder. She sent you, I suppose, but I don't know why—if it was just some legal paperwork, I reckon a sheriff's deputy would have come out and served it on me."

He looked at me in surprise. "Your wife didn't send me, Mr. James. In point of fact, I came out here to look for *her*."

It was like a play, and this was my cue to look puzzled. Then to chuckle, because chuckling came next in the stage directions. "That just proves it."

"Proves what?"

"When I was a boy in Fordyce, we had a neighbor—a nasty old rip name of Bradlee. Everyone called him Pop Bradlee."

"Mr. James—"

"My father had to do business with him from time to time, and sometimes he took me with him. Back in the buckboard days, this was. Seed corn was what their trading was mostly about, at least in the spring, but sometimes they also swapped tools. There was no mail-order back then, and a good tool might circle the whole county before it got back home."

"Mr. James, I hardly see the rel—"

“And every time we went to see that old fellow, my mama told me to plug my ears, because every other word that came out of Pop Bradlee’s mouth was a cuss or something filthy.” In a sour sort of way, I was starting to enjoy this. “So naturally I listened all the harder. I remember that one of Pop’s favorite sayings was ‘Never mount a mare without a bridle, because you can never tell which way a bitch will run.’”

“Am I supposed to understand that?”

“Which way do you suppose *my* bitch ran, Mr. Lester?”

“Are you telling me your wife has . . . ?”

“Absconded, Mr. Lester. Decamped. Took French leave. Did a midnight flit. As an avid reader and student of American slang, such terms occur naturally to me. Lars, however—and most other town folks—will just say ‘She run off and left him’ when the word gets around. Or him and the boy, in this case. I naturally thought she would have gone to her hog-fancying friends at the Farrington Company, and the next I heard from her would have been a notice that she was selling her father’s acreage.”

“As she means to do.”

“Has she signed it over yet? Because I guess I’d have to go to law, if she has.”

“As a matter of fact, she hasn’t. But when she does, I would advise you against the expense of a legal action you would surely lose.”

I stood up. One of my overall straps had fallen off my shoulder, and I hooked it back into place with a thumb. “Well, since she’s not here, it’s what the legal profession calls ‘a moot question,’ wouldn’t you say? I’d look in Omaha, if I were you.” I smiled. “Or Saint Louis. She was *always* talking about Sain’-Loo. It sounds to me as if she got as tired of you fellows as she did of me and the son she gave birth to. Said good riddance to bad rubbish. A plague on both your houses. That’s Shakespeare, by the way. *Romeo and Juliet*. A play about love.”

“You’ll pardon me for saying, but all this seems very strange to me, Mr. James.” He had produced a silk handkerchief from a pocket inside his suit—I bet traveling lawyers like him have lots of pockets—and began to mop his face with it. His cheeks were now not just

flushed but bright red. It wasn't the heat of the day that had turned his face that color. "Very strange indeed, considering the amount of money my client is willing to pay for that piece of property, which is contiguous with Hemingford Stream and close to the Great Western rail line."

"It's going to take some getting used to on my part as well, but I have the advantage of you."

"Yes?"

"I know her. I'm sure you and your *clients* thought you had a deal all made, but Arlette James . . . let's just say that nailing her down to something is like trying to nail jelly to the floor. We need to remember what Pop Bradlee said, Mr. Lester. Why, the man was a countrified genius."

"Could I look in the house?"

I laughed again, and this time it wasn't forced. The man had gall, I'll give him that, and not wanting to go back empty-handed was understandable. He'd ridden twenty miles in a dusty truck with no doors, he had twenty more to bounce across before he got back to Hemingford City (and a train ride after that, no doubt), he had a sore ass, and the people who'd sent him out here weren't going to be happy with his report when he finally got to the end of all that hard traveling. Poor feller!

"I'll ask you one back: could you drop your pants so I could look at your goolie-bits?"

"I find that offensive."

"I don't blame you. Think of it as a . . . not a simile, that's not right, but a kind of *parable*."

"I don't understand you."

"Well, you've got an hour back to the city to think it over—two, if Lars's Red Baby throws a tire. And I can assure you, Mr. Lester, that if I *did* let you poke around through my house—my private place, my castle, my goolie-bits—you wouldn't find my wife's body in the closet or . . ." There was a terrible moment when I almost said *or down the well*. I felt sweat spring out on my forehead. "Or under the bed."

"I never said—"

"Henry!" I called. "Come over here a minute!"

Henry came with his head down and his feet dragging in the dust. He looked worried, maybe even guilty, but that was all right. "Yes, sir?"

"Tell this man where's your mama."

"I don't know. When you called me to breakfast Friday morning, she was gone. Packed and gone."

Lester was looking at him keenly. "Son, is that the truth?"

"Yes, sir."

"The whole truth and nothing *but* the truth, so help you God?"

"Poppa, can I go back in the house? I've got schoolwork to make up from being sick."

"Go on, then," I said, "but don't be slow. Remember, it's your turn to milk."

"Yes, sir."

He trudged up the steps and inside. Lester watched him go, then turned back to me. "There's more here than meets the eye."

"I see you wear no wedding ring, Mr. Lester. If there comes a time when you've worn one as long as I have, you'll know that in families, there always is. And you'll know something else as well: you can never tell which way a bitch will run."

He got up. "This isn't finished."

"It is," I said. Knowing it wasn't. But if things went all right, we were closer to the end than we had been. *If*.

He started across the dooryard, then turned back. He used his silk handkerchief to mop off his face again, then said, "If you think those 100 acres are yours just because you've scared your wife away . . . sent her packing to her aunt in Des Moines or a sister in Minnesota —"

"Check Omaha," I said, smiling. "Or Sain'-Loo. She had no use for her relations, but she was crazy about the idea of living in Sain'-Loo. God knows why."

"If you think you'll plant and harvest out there, you'd better think again. That land's not yours. If you so much as drop a seed there, you will be seeing me in court."

I said, "I'm sure you'll hear from her as soon as she gets a bad case of broke-itis."

What I wanted to say was, *No, it's not mine . . . but it's not yours, either. It's just going to sit there. And that's all right, because it will be mine in seven years, when I go to court to have her declared legally dead. I can wait. Seven years without smelling pigshit when the wind's out of the west? Seven years without hearing the screams of dying hogs (so much like the screams of a dying woman) or seeing their intestines float down a creek that's red with blood? That sounds like an excellent seven years to me.*

"Have yourself a fine day, Mr. Lester, and mind the sun going back. It gets pretty fierce in the late afternoon, and it'll be right in your face."

He got into the truck without replying. Lars waved to me and Lester snapped at him. Lars gave him a look that might have meant *Snap and yap all you want, it's still twenty miles back to Hemingford City.*

When they were gone except for the rooster-tail of dust Henry came back out on the porch. "Did I do it right, Poppa?"

I took his wrist, gave it a squeeze, and pretended not to feel the flesh tighten momentarily under my hand, as if he had to override an impulse to pull away. "Just right. Perfect."

"Are we going to fill in the well tomorrow?"

I thought about this carefully, because our lives might depend on what I decided. Sheriff Jones was getting on in years and up in pounds. He wasn't lazy, but it was hard to get him moving without a good reason. Lester would eventually convince Jones to come out here, but probably not until Lester got one of Cole Farrington's two hell-for-leather sons to call and remind the sheriff what company was the biggest taxpayer in Hemingford County (not to mention the neighboring counties of Clay, Fillmore, York, and Seward). Still, I thought we had at least two days.

"Not tomorrow," I said. "The day after."

"Poppa, *why?*"

"Because the High Sheriff will be out here, and Sheriff Jones is old but not stupid. A filled-in well might make him suspicious about *why* it got filled in, so recent and all. But one that's still *being* filled in . . . and for a good reason . . ."

"What reason? Tell me!"

“Soon,” I said. “Soon.”

* * *

All the next day we waited to see dust boiling toward us down our road, not being pulled by Lars Olsen’s truck but by the County Sheriff’s car. It didn’t come. What came was Shannon Cotterie, looking pretty in a cotton blouse and gingham skirt, to ask if Henry was all right, and could he take supper with her and her mama and her poppa if he was?

Henry said he was fine, and I watched them go up the road, hand-in-hand, with deep misgivings. He was keeping a terrible secret, and terrible secrets are heavy. Wanting to share them is the most natural thing in the world. And he loved the girl (or thought he did, which comes to the same when you’re just going on 15). To make things worse, he had a lie to tell, and she might know it was a lie. They say that loving eyes can never see, but that’s a fool’s axiom. Sometimes they see too much.

I hoed in the garden (pulling up more peas than weeds), then sat on the porch, smoking a pipe and waiting for him to come back. Just before moon-rise, he did. His head was down, his shoulders were slumped, and he was trudging rather than walking. I hated to see him that way, but I was still relieved. If he had shared his secret—or even part of it—he wouldn’t have been walking like that. If he’d shared his secret, he might not have come back at all.

“You told it the way we decided?” I asked him when he sat down.

“The way *you* decided. Yes.”

“And she promised not to tell her folks?”

“Yes.”

“But will she?”

He sighed. “Probably, yes. She loves them and they love her. They’ll see something in her face, I reckon, and get it out of her. And even if they don’t, she’ll probably tell the Sheriff. If he bothers to talk to the Cotteries at all, that is.”

“Lester will see that he does. He’ll bark at Sheriff Jones because his bosses in Omaha are barking at him. Round and round it goes, and where it stops, nobody knows.”

“We never should have done it.” He considered, then said it again in a fierce whisper.

I said nothing. For awhile, neither did he. We watched the moon rise out of the corn, red and pregnant.

“Poppa? Can I have a glass of beer?”

I looked at him, surprised and not surprised. Then I went inside and poured us each a glass of beer. I gave one to him and said, “None of this tomorrow or the day after, mind.”

“No.” He sipped, grimaced, then sipped again. “I hated lying to Shan, Poppa. Everything about this is dirty.”

“Dirt washes off.”

“Not this kind,” he said, and took another sip. This time he didn’t grimace.

A little while later, after the moon had gone to silver, I stepped around to use the privy, and to listen to the corn and the night breeze tell each other the old secrets of the earth. When I got back to the porch, Henry was gone. His glass of beer stood half-finished on the railing by the steps. Then I heard him in the barn, saying “Soo, Boss. Soo.”

I went out to see. He had his arms around Elphis’s neck and was stroking her. I believe he was crying. I watched for awhile, but in the end said nothing. I went back to the house, undressed, and lay down in the bed where I’d cut my wife’s throat. It was a long time before I went to sleep. And if you don’t understand why—*all* the reasons why—then reading this is of no use to you.

* * *

I had named all our cows after minor Greek goddesses, but Elphis turned out to be either a bad choice or an ironic joke. In case you don’t remember the story of how evil came to our sad old world, let me refresh you: all the bad things flew out when Pandora gave in to her curiosity and opened the jar that had been left in her keeping. The only thing that remained when she regained enough wits to put the lid back on was Elphis, the goddess of hope. But in that summer of 1922, there was no hope left for our Elphis. She was old and cranky, no longer gave much milk, and we’d all but given up trying to

get what little she had; as soon as you sat down on the stool, she'd try to kick you. We should have converted her into comestibles a year before, but I balked at the cost of having Harlan Cotterie butcher her, and I was no good at slaughtering much beyond hogs . . . a self-assessment with which you, Reader, must now surely agree.

"And she'd be tough," Arlette (who had shown a sneaking affection for Elphis, perhaps because she was never the one to milk her) said. "Better leave well enough alone." But now we had a use for Elphis—in the well, as it so happened—and her death might serve an end far more useful than a few stringy cuts of meat.

Two days after Lester's visit, my son and I put a nose-halter on her and led her around the side of the barn. Halfway to the well, Henry stopped. His eyes shone with dismay. "Poppa! I *smell* her!"

"Go into the house then, and get some cotton balls for your nose. They're on her dresser."

Although his head was lowered, I saw the sidelong glance he shot me as he went. *This is all your fault*, that look said. *All your fault because you couldn't let go*.

Yet I had no doubt that he would help me do the work that lay ahead. Whatever he now thought of me, there was a girl in the picture as well, and he didn't want her to know what he had done. I had forced him to it, but she would never understand that.

We led Elphis to the well-cap, where she quite reasonably balked. We went around to the far side, holding the halter-strings like ribbons in a Maypole dance, and hauled her out onto the rotted wood by main force. The cap cracked beneath her weight . . . bowed down . . . but held. The old cow stood on it, head lowered, looking as stupid and as stubborn as ever, showing the greenish-yellow rudiments of her teeth.

"What now?" Henry asked.

I started to say I didn't know, and that was when the well-cap broke in two with a loud and brittle snap. We held onto the halter-strings, although I thought for a moment I was going to be dragged into that damned well with two dislocated arms. Then the nose-rig ripped free and flew back up. It was split down both the sides. Below, Elphis began to low in agony and drum her hoofs against the well's rock sides.

“*Poppa!*” Henry screamed. His hands were fists against his mouth, the knuckles digging into his upper lip. “*Make her stop!*”

Elphis uttered a long, echoing groan. Her hoofs continued to beat against the stone.

I took Henry’s arm and hauled him, stumbling, back to the house. I pushed him down on Arlette’s mail-order sofa and ordered him to stay there until I came back to get him. “And remember, this is almost over.”

“It’ll never be over,” he said, and turned facedown on the sofa. He put his hands over his ears, even though Elphis couldn’t be heard from in here. Except Henry still *was* hearing her, and so was I.

I got my varmint gun from the high shelf in the pantry. It was only a .22, but it would do the job. And if Harlan heard shots rolling across the acres between his place and mine? That would fit our story, too. If Henry could keep his wits long enough to tell it, that was.

* * *

Here is something I learned in 1922: there are always worse things waiting. You think you have seen the most terrible thing, the one that coalesces all your nightmares into a freakish horror that actually exists, and the only consolation is that there can be nothing worse. Even if there is, your mind will snap at the sight of it, and you will know no more. But there *is* worse, your mind does *not* snap, and somehow you carry on. You might understand that all the joy has gone out of the world for you, that what you did has put all you hoped to gain out of your reach, you might wish you were the one who was dead—but you go on. You realize that you are in a hell of your own making, but you go on nevertheless. Because there is nothing else to do.

Elphis had landed on top of my wife’s body, but Arlette’s grinning face was still perfectly visible, still tilted up to the sunlit world above, still seeming to look at me. And the rats had come back. The cow falling into their world had doubtless caused them to retreat into the pipe I would eventually come to think of as Rat Boulevard, but then they had smelled fresh meat, and had come hurrying out to investigate. They were already nibbling at poor old Elphis as she

lowed and kicked (more feebly now), and one sat on top of my dead wife's head like an eldritch crown. It had picked a hole in the burlap sack and pulled a tuft of her hair out with its clever claws. Arlette's cheeks, once so round and pretty, hung in shreds.

Nothing can be any worse than this, I thought. Surely I've reached the end of horror.

But yes, there are always worse things waiting. As I peered down, frozen with shock and revulsion, Elphis kicked out again, and one of her hoofs connected with what remained of Arlette's face. There was a snap as my wife's jaw broke, and everything below her nose shifted to the left, as if on a hinge. Still the ear-to-ear grin remained. That it was no longer aligned with her eyes made it even worse. It was as if she now had two faces to haunt me with instead of just one. Her body shifted against the mattress, making it slide. The rat on her head scurried down behind it. Elphis lowed again. I thought that if Henry came back now, and looked into the well, he would kill me for making him a part of this. I probably deserved killing. But that would leave him alone, and alone he would be defenseless.

Part of the cap had fallen into the well; part of it was still hanging down. I loaded my rifle, rested it on this slope, and aimed at Elphis, who lay with her neck broken and her head cocked against the rock wall. I waited for my hands to steady, then pulled the trigger.

One shot was enough.

* * *

Back in the house, I found that Henry had gone to sleep on the couch. I was too shocked myself to consider this strange. At that moment, he seemed to me like the only truly hopeful thing in the world: soiled, but not so filthy he could never be clean again. I bent and kissed his cheek. He moaned and turned his head away. I left him there and went to the barn for my tools. When he joined me three hours later, I had pulled the broken and hanging piece of the well-cap out of the hole and had begun to fill it in.

"I'll help," he said in a flat and dreary voice.

"Good. Get the truck and drive it out to the dirtpile at West Fence
—"

“By myself?” The disbelief in his voice was only faint, but I was encouraged to hear any emotion at all.

“You know all the forward gears, and you can find reverse, can’t you?”

“Yes—”

“Then you’ll be fine. I’ve got enough to be going on with in the meantime, and when you come back, the worst will be over.”

I waited for him to tell me again that the worst would never be over, but he didn’t. I recommenced shoveling. I could still see the top of Arlette’s head and the burlap with that terrible picked-over tuft sticking out of it. There might already be a litter of newborn rattlings down there in the cradle of my dead wife’s thighs.

I heard the truck cough once, then twice. I hoped the crank wouldn’t kick back and break Henry’s arm.

The third time he turned the crank, our old truck bellowed into life. He retarded the spark, gunned the throttle a time or two, then drove away. He was gone for almost an hour, but when he came back, the truck’s bed was full of rocks and soil. He drove it to the edge of the well and killed the engine. He had taken off his shirt, and his sweat-shiny torso looked too thin; I could count his ribs. I tried to think when I’d last seen him eat a big meal, and at first I couldn’t. Then I realized it must have been breakfast on the morning after we’d done away with her.

I’ll see that he gets a good dinner tonight, I thought. I’ll see that we both do. No beef, but there’s pork in the icebox—

“Look yonder,” he said in his new flat voice, and pointed.

I saw a rooster-tail of dust coming toward us. I looked down into the well. It wasn’t good enough, not yet. Half of Elphis was still sticking up. That was all right, of course, but the corner of the bloodstained mattress was also still poking out of the dirt.

“Help me,” I said.

“Do we have enough time, Poppa?” He sounded only mildly interested.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Don’t just stand there, help me.”

The extra shovel was leaning against the side of the barn beside the splintered remains of the well-cap. Henry grabbed it, and we

began shoveling dirt and rocks out of the back of the truck as fast as ever we could.

* * *

When the County Sheriff's car with the gold star on the door and the spotlight on the roof pulled up by the chopping block (once more putting George and the chickens to flight), Henry and I were sitting on the porch steps with our shirts off and sharing the last thing Arlette James had ever made: a pitcher of lemonade. Sheriff Jones got out, hitched up his belt, took off his Stetson, brushed back his graying hair, and resettled his hat along the line where the white skin of his brow ended and coppery red took over. He was by his lonesome. I took that as a good sign.

"Good day, gents." He took in our bare chests, dirty hands, and sweaty faces. "Hard chorin' this afternoon, is it?"

I spat. "My own damn fault."

"Is that so?"

"One of our cows fell in the old livestock well," Henry said.

Jones asked again, "Is that so?"

"It is," I said. "Would you want a glass of lemonade, Sheriff? It's Arlette's."

"Arlette's, is it? She decided to come back, did she?"

"No," I said. "She took her favorite clothes but left the lemonade. Have some."

"I will. But first I need to use your privy. Since I turned fifty-five or so, seems like I have to wee on every bush. It's a God damned inconvenience."

"It's around the back of the house. Just follow the path and look for the crescent moon on the door."

He laughed as though this were the funniest joke he'd heard all year, and went around the house. Would he pause on his way to look in the windows? He would if he was any good at his job, and I'd heard he was. At least in his younger days.

"Poppa," Henry said. He spoke in a low voice.

I looked at him.

“If he finds out, we can’t do anything else. I can lie, but there can’t be anymore killing.”

“All right,” I said. That was a short conversation, but one I have pondered often in the eight years since.

Sheriff Jones came back, buttoning his fly.

“Go in and get the Sheriff a glass,” I told Henry.

Henry went. Jones finished with his fly, took off his hat, brushed back his hair some more, and reset the hat. His badge glittered in the early-afternoon sun. The gun on his hip was a big one, and although Jones was too old to have been in the Great War, the holster looked like AEF property. Maybe it was his son’s. His son had died over there.

“Sweet-smelling privy,” he said. “Always nice on a hot day.”

“Arlette used to put the quicklime to it pretty constantly,” I said. “I’ll try to keep up the practice if she stays away. Come on up to the porch and we’ll sit in the shade.”

“Shade sounds good, but I believe I’ll stand. Need to stretch out my spine.”

I sat in my rocker with the PA cushion on it. He stood beside me, looking down. I didn’t like being in that position but tried to bear up patiently. Henry came out with a glass. Sheriff Jones poured his own lemonade, tasted, then gulped most of it down at a go and smacked his lips.

“Good, isn’t it? Not too sour, not too sweet, just right.” He laughed. “I’m like Goldilocks, aren’t I?” He drank the rest, but shook his head when Henry offered to refill his glass. “You want me pissing on every fencepost on the way back to Hemingford Home? And then all the way to Hemingford City after that?”

“Have you moved your office?” I asked. “I thought you were right there in the Home.”

“I am, aren’t I? The day they make me move the Sheriff’s Office to the county seat is the day I resign and let Hap Birdwell take over, like he wants to. No, no, it’s just a court hearing up to the City. Amounts to no more than paperwork, but there it is. And you know how Judge Cripps is . . . or no, I guess you don’t, being a law-abiding sort. He’s bad-tempered, and if a fellow isn’t on time, his temper gets worse. So even though it comes down to just saying so help me God and

then signing my name to a bunch of legal folderol, I have to hurry right along with my business out here, don't I? And hope my God damned Maxie doesn't break down on the way back."

I said nothing to this. He didn't *talk* like a man who was in a hurry, but perhaps that was just his way.

He took his hat off and brushed his hair back some more, but this time he didn't put the hat back on. He looked at me earnestly, then at Henry, then back at me again. "Guess you know I'm not out here on my own hook. I believe that doings between a man and his wife are their own business. It has to be that way, doesn't it? Bible says the man is the head of a woman, and that if a woman should learn any thing, it should be taught by her husband at home. Book of Corinthians. If the Bible was my only boss, I'd do things the Bible's way and life would be simpler."

"I'm surprised Mr. Lester's not out here with you," I said.

"Oh, he wanted to come, but I put the kye-bosh on that. He also wanted me to get a search warrant, but I told him I didn't need one. I said you'd either let me look around or you wouldn't." He shrugged. His face was placid, but the eyes were keen and always in motion: peeking and prying, prying and peeking.

When Henry asked me about the well, I'd said, *We'll watch him and decide how sharp he is. If he's sharp, we'll show him ourselves. We can't look as if we have anything to hide. If you see me flick my thumb, that means I think we have to take the chance. But we have to agree, Hank. If I don't see you flick yours back, I'll keep my mouth shut.*

I raised my glass and drank the last of my lemonade. When I saw Henry looking at me, I flicked my thumb. Just a little. It could have been a muscle twitch.

"What does that Lester think?" Henry asked, sounding indignant. "That we've got her tied up in the cellar?" His own hands stayed at his sides, not moving.

Sheriff Jones laughed heartily, his big belly shaking behind his belt. "I don't know *what* he's thinking, do I? I don't care much, either. Lawyers are fleas on the hide of human nature. I can say that, because I've worked for 'em—and against 'em, that too—my whole adult life. But . . ." The keen eyes fastened on mine. "I wouldn't mind

a look, just because you wouldn't let *him* look. He's pretty hot under the collar about that."

Henry scratched his arm. His thumb flicked twice as he did it.

"I didn't let him in the house because I took against him," I said. "Although to be fair, I guess I would have taken against John the Apostle if he came out here batting for Cole Farrington's team."

Sheriff Jones laughed big at that: *Haw, haw, haw!* But his eyes didn't laugh.

I stood up. It was a relief to be on my feet. Standing, I had three or four inches on Jones. "You can look to your heart's content."

"I appreciate that. It'll make my life a lot easier, won't it? I've got Judge Cripps to deal with when I go back, and that's enough. Don't need to listen to one of Farrington's legal beagles yapping at me, not if I can help it."

We went into the house with me leading and Henry bringing up the rear. After a few complimentary remarks about how neat the sitting room was and how tidy the kitchen was, we walked down the hall. Sheriff Jones had a perfunctory peek into Henry's room, and then we arrived at the main attraction. I pushed open the door to our bedroom with a queer sense of certainty: the blood would be back. It would be pooled on the floor, splashed on the walls, and soaking into the new mattress. Sheriff Jones would look. Then he would turn to me, remove the handcuffs that sat on his meaty hip across from his revolver, and say: *I'm arresting you for the murder of Arlette James, aren't I?*

There was no blood and no smell of blood, because the room had had days to air out. The bed was made, although not the way Arlette made it; my way was more Army-style, although my feet had kept me out of the war that had taken the Sheriff's son. Can't go kill Krauts if you have flat feet. Men with flat feet can only kill wives.

"Lovely room," Sheriff Jones remarked. "Gets the early light, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "And stays cool most afternoons, even in summer, because the sun's over on the other side." I went to the closet and opened it. That sense of certainty returned, stronger than ever. *Where's the quilt?* he'd say. *The one that belongs there in the middle of the top shelf?*

He didn't, of course, but he came forward with alacrity when I invited him to. His sharp eyes—bright green, almost feline—went here, there, and everywhere. “Lot o’ duds,” he said.

“Yes,” I admitted, “Arlette liked clothes and she liked the mail-order catalogues. But since she only took the one valise—we have two, and the other one’s still there, see it in the back corner?—I’d have to say she only took the ones she liked the best. And the ones that were practical, I suppose. She had two pairs of slacks and a pair of blue denims, and those are gone, even though she didn’t care for pants.”

“Pants’re good for traveling in, though, aren’t they? Man or woman, pants are good for traveling. And a woman might choose them. If she was in a hurry, that is.”

“I suppose.”

“She took her good jewelry and her picture of Nana and Pop-Pop,” Henry said from behind us. I jumped a little; I’d almost forgotten he was there.

“Did she, now? Well, I suppose she would.”

He took another flick through the clothes, then closed the closet door. “Nice room,” he said, trudging back toward the hall with his Stetson in his hands. “Nice *house*. Woman’d have to be crazy to leave a nice room and a nice house like this.”

“Mama talked about the city a lot,” Henry said, and sighed. “She had the idea of opening some kind of shop.”

“Did she?” Sheriff Jones regarded him brightly with his green cat’s eyes. “Well! But a thing like that takes money, doesn’t it?”

“She’s got those acres from her father,” I said.

“Yes, yes.” Smiling bashfully, as if he’d forgotten those acres. “And maybe it’s for the best. ‘Better to be living in a wasteland than with a bitter-tongued, angry woman.’ Book of Proverbs. Are you glad she’s gone, Son?”

“No,” Henry said, and tears overspilled his eyes. I blessed each one.

Sheriff Jones said, “There-there.” And after offering that perfunctory comfort, he bent down with his hands braced on his pudgy knees, and looked under the bed. “Appears to be a pair of

woman's shoes under there. Broke in, too. The kind that would be good for walking. Don't suppose she ran away barefooty, do you?"

"She wore her canvas shoes," I said. "Those are the ones that are gone."

They were, too. The faded green ones she used to call her gardening shoes. I'd remembered them just before starting to fill in the well.

"Ah!" he said. "Another mystery solved." He pulled a silver-plated watch from his vest pocket and consulted it. "Well, I'd better get on the roll. Tempus is fugiting right along."

We went back through the house, Henry bringing up the rear, perhaps so he could swipe his eyes dry in privacy. We walked with the Sheriff toward his Maxwell sedan with the star on the door. I was about to ask him if he wanted to see the well—I even knew what I was going to call it—when he stopped and gave my son a look of frightening kindness.

"I stopped at the Cotteries'," he said.

"Oh?" Henry said. "Did you?"

"Told you these days I have to water just about every bush, but I'll use a privy anytime there's one handy, always assuming folks keep it clean and I don't have to worry about wasps while I'm waiting for my dingus to drip a little water. And the Cotteries are clean folks. Pretty daughter, too. Just about your age, isn't she?"

"Yes, sir," Henry said, lifting his voice just a tiny bit on the *sir*.

"Kind of sweet on her, I guess? And her on you, from what her mama says."

"Did she say that?" Henry asked. He sounded surprised, but pleased, too.

"Yes. Mrs. Cotterie said you were troubled about your own mama, and that Shannon had told her something you said on that subject. I asked her what it was, and she said it wasn't her place to tell, but I could ask Shannon. So I did."

Henry looked at his feet. "I told her to keep it to herself."

"You aren't going to hold it against her, are you?" Sheriff Jones asked. "I mean, when a big man like me with a star on his chest asks a little thing like her what she knows, it's kind of hard for the little thing to keep mum, isn't it? She just about has to tell, doesn't she?"

"I don't know," Henry said, still looking down. "Probably." He wasn't just *acting* unhappiness; he *was* unhappy. Even though it was going just the way we had hoped it would.

"Shannon says your ma and your pop here had a big fight about selling those hundred acres, and when you came down on your poppa's side, Missus James slapped you up pretty good."

"Yes," Henry said colorlessly. "She'd had too much to drink."

Sheriff Jones turned to me. "Was she drunk or just tiddly?"

"Somewhere in between," I said. "If she'd been all the way to drunk, she would have slept all night instead of getting up and packing a grip and creeping away like a thief."

"Thought she'd come back once she sobered up, did you?"

"I did. It's over four miles out to the tarvy. I thought for sure she'd come back. Someone must have come along and given her a ride before her head cleared. A trucker on the Lincoln-Omaha run would be my guess."

"Yep, yep, that'd be mine, too. You'll hear from her when she contacts Mr. Lester, I'm sure. If she means to stay out on her own, if she's got that in her head, she'll need money to do it."

So he knew that, too.

His eyes sharpened. "Did she have any money at all, Mr. James?"

"Well . . ."

"Don't be shy. Confession's good for the soul. The Catholics have got hold of something there, don't they?"

"I kept a box in my dresser. There was 200 dollars put by in it, to help pay the pickers when they start next month."

"And Mr. Cotterie," Henry reminded. To Sheriff Jones, he said: "Mr. Cotterie has a corn harvester. A Harris Giant. Almost new. It's a pip."

"Yep, yep, saw it in his dooryard. Big bastid, isn't it? Pardon my Polish. Money all gone out'n that box, was it?"

I smiled sourly—only it wasn't really me making that smile; the Conniving Man had been in charge ever since Sheriff Jones pulled up by the chopping block. "She left twenty. Very generous of her. But twenty's all Harlan Cotterie will ever take for the use of his harvester, so *that's* all right. And when it comes to the pickers, I guess Stoppenhauser at the bank'll advance me a shortie loan. Unless he

owes favors to the Farrington Company, that is. Either way, I've got my best farmhand right here."

I tried to ruffle Henry's hair. He ducked away, embarrassed.

"Well, I've got a good budget of news to tell Mr. Lester, don't I? He won't like any of it, but if he's as smart as he thinks he is, I guess he'll know enough to expect her in his office, and sooner rather than later. People have a way of turning up when they're short on folding green, don't they?"

"That's been my experience," I said. "If we're done here, Sheriff, my boy and I better get back to work. That useless well should have been filled in three years ago. An old cow of mine—"

"Elphis." Henry spoke like a boy in a dream. "Her name was Elphis."

"Elphis," I agreed. "She got out of the barn and decided to take a stroll on the cap, and it gave way. Didn't have the good grace to die on her own, either. I had to shoot her. Come around the back of the barn I'll show you the wages of laziness with its damn feet sticking up. We're going to bury her right where she lies, and from now on I'm going to call that old well Wilfred's Folly."

"Well, I would, wouldn't I? It'd be somethin' to see. But I've got that bad-tempered old judge to contend with. Another time." He hoisted himself into the car, grunting as he did so. "Thank you for the lemonade, and for bein' so gracious. You could have been a lot less so, considering who sent me out here."

"It's all right," I said. "We all have our jobs."

"And our crosses to bear." His sharp eyes fastened on Henry again. "Son, Mr. Lester told me you were hidin' something. He was sure of it. And you were, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir," Henry said in his colorless and somehow awful voice. As if all his emotions had flown away, like those things in Pandora's jar when she opened it. But there was no Elphis for Henry and me; our Elphis was dead in the well.

"If he asks me, I'll tell him he was wrong," Sheriff Jones said. "A company lawyer don't need to know that a boy's mother put her hand to him while she was in drink." He groped under his seat, came up with a long S-shaped tool I knew well, and held it out to Henry. "Would you save an old man's back and shoulder, son?"

“Yes, sir, happy to.” Henry took the crank and went around to the front of the Maxwell.

“Mind your wrist!” Jones hollered. “She kicks like a bull!” Then he turned to me. The inquisitive glitter had gone out of his eyes. So had the green. They looked dull and gray and hard, like lake water on a cloudy day. It was the face of a man who could beat a railroad bum within an inch of his life and never lose a minute’s sleep over it. “Mr. James,” he said. “I need to ask you something. Man to man.”

“All right,” I said. I tried to brace myself for what I felt sure was coming next: *Is there another cow in yonder well? One named Arlette?* But I was wrong.

“I can put her name and description out on the telegraph wire, if you want. She won’t have gone no further than Omaha, will she? Not on just a hundred and eighty smackers. And a woman who’s spent most of her life keepin’ house has no idea of how to hide out. She’ll like as not be in a rooming house over on the east side, where they run cheap. I could have her brought back. *Dragged* back by the hair of the head, if you want.”

“That’s a generous offer, but—”

The dull gray eyes surveyed me. “Think it over before you say yea or nay. Sometimes a fee-male needs talking to by hand, if you take my meaning, and after that they’re all right. A good whacking has a way of sweetening some gals up. Think it over.”

“I will.”

The Maxwell’s engine exploded into life. I stuck out my hand—the one that had cut her throat—but Sheriff Jones didn’t notice. He was busy retarding the Maxwell’s spark and adjusting her throttle.

Two minutes later he was no more than a diminishing boil of dust on the farm road.

“He never even wanted to look,” Henry marveled.

“No.”

And that turned out to be a very good thing.

* * *

We had shoveled hard and fast when we saw him coming, and nothing stuck up now but one of Elphis’s lower legs. The hoof was

about four feet below the lip of the well. Flies circled it in a cloud. The Sheriff would have marveled, all right, and he would have marveled even more when the dirt in front of that protruding hoof began to pulse up and down.

Henry dropped his shovel and grabbed my arm. The afternoon was hot, but his hand was ice-cold. "It's her!" he whispered. His face seemed to be nothing but eyes. "*She's trying to get out!*"

"Stop being such a God damned ninny," I said, but I couldn't take my eyes off that circle of heaving dirt. It was as if the well were alive, and we were seeing the beating of its hidden heart.

Then dirt and pebbles sprayed to either side and a rat surfaced. The eyes, black as beads of oil, blinked in the sunshine. It was almost as big as a full-grown cat. Caught in its whiskers was a shred of bloodstained brown burlap.

"*Oh you fuck!*" Henry screamed.

Something whistled inches past my ear and then the edge of Henry's shovel split the rat's head in two as it looked up into the dazzle.

"She sent it," Henry said. He was grinning. "The rats are hers, now."

"No such thing. You're just upset."

He dropped his shovel and went to the pile of rocks with which we meant to finish the job once the well was mostly filled in. There he sat down and stared at me raptly. "Are you sure? Are you positive she ain't haunting us? People say someone who's murdered will come back to haunt whoever—"

"People say lots of things. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place, a broken mirror brings seven years' bad luck, a whippoorwill calling at midnight means someone in the family's going to die." I sounded reasonable, but I kept looking at the dead rat. And that shred of bloodstained burlap. From her *snood*. She was still wearing it down there in the dark, only now there was a hole in it with her hair sticking up. *That look is all the rage among dead women this summer*, I thought.

"When I was a kid, I really believed that if I stepped on a crack, I'd break my mother's back," Henry said musingly.

"There—you see?"

He brushed rock-dust from the seat of his pants, and stood beside me. “I got him, though—I got that fucker, didn’t I?”

“You did!” And because I didn’t like how he sounded—no, not at all—I clapped him on the back.

Henry was still grinning. “If the Sheriff had come back here to look, like you invited him, and seen that rat come tunneling to the top, he might have had a few more questions, don’t you think?”

Something about this idea set Henry to laughing hysterically. It took him four or five minutes to laugh himself out, and he scared a murder of crows up from the fence that kept the cows out of the corn, but eventually he got past it. By the time we finished our work it was past sundown, and we could hear owls comparing notes as they launched their pre-moonrise hunts from the barn loft. The rocks on top of the vanished well were tight together, and I didn’t think any more rats would be squirming to the surface. We didn’t bother replacing the broken cap; there was no need. Henry seemed almost like his normal self again, and I thought we both might get a decent night’s sleep.

“What do you say to sausage, beans, and corn-bread?” I asked him.

“Can I start the generator and play *Hayride Party* on the radio?”

“Yessir, you can.”

He smiled at that, his old good smile. “Thanks, Poppa.”

I cooked enough for four farmhands, and we ate it all.

* * *

Two hours later, while I was deep in my sitting room chair and nodding over a copy of *Silas Marner*, Henry came in from his room, dressed in just his summer underdrawers. He regarded me soberly. “Mama always insisted on me saying my prayers, did you know that?”

I blinked at him, surprised. “Still? No. I didn’t.”

“Yes. Even after she wouldn’t look at me unless I had my pants on, because she said I was too old and it wouldn’t be right. But I can’t pray now, or ever again. If I got down on my knees, I think God would strike me dead.”

"If there is one," I said.

"I hope there isn't. It's lonely, but I hope there isn't. I imagine all murderers hope there isn't. Because if there's no Heaven, there's no Hell."

"Son, I was the one who killed her."

"No—we did it together."

It wasn't true—he was no more than a child, and I had cozened him—but it was true to him, and I thought it always would be.

"But you don't have to worry about me, Poppa. I know you think I'll slip—probably to Shannon. Or I might get feeling guilty enough to just go into Hemingford and confess to that Sheriff."

Of course these thoughts had crossed my mind.

Henry shook his head, slowly and emphatically. "That Sheriff—did you see the way he looked at everything? Did you see his eyes?"

"Yes."

"He'd try to put us both in the 'lectric chair, that's what I think, and never mind me not fifteen until August. He'd be there, too, lookin' at us with those hard eyes of his when they strapped us in and—"

"Stop it, Hank. That's enough."

It wasn't, though; not for him. "—and pulled the switch. I ain't never letting that happen, if I can help it. Those eyes aren't never going to be the last thing I see." He thought over what he'd just said.

"Ever, I mean. Aren't ever."

"Go to bed, Henry."

"Hank."

"Hank. Go to bed. I love you."

He smiled. "I know, but I don't much deserve it." He shuffled off before I could reply.

* * *

And so to bed, as Mr. Pepys says. We slept while the owls hunted and Arlette sat in her deeper darkness with the lower part of her hoof-kicked face swung off to one side. The next day the sun came up, it was a good day for corn, and we did chores.

When I came in hot and tired to fix us a noon meal, there was a covered casserole dish sitting on the porch. There was a note

fluttering beneath one edge. It said: *Wilf—We are so sorry for your trouble and will help any way we can. Harlan says dont worry about paying for the harvester this summer. Please if you hear from your wife let us know. Love, Sallie Cotterie. PS: If Henry comes calling on Shan, I will send back a blueberry cake.*

I stuck the note in the front pocket of my overalls with a smile. Our life after Arlette had begun.

* * *

If God rewards us on earth for good deeds—the Old Testament suggests it's so, and the Puritans certainly believed it—then maybe Satan rewards us for evil ones. I can't say for sure, but I can say that was a good summer, with plenty of heat and sun for the corn and just enough rain to keep our acre of vegetable garden refreshed. There was thunder and lightning some afternoons, but never one of those crop-crippling winds Midwestern farmers fear. Harlan Cotterie came with his Harris Giant and it never broke down a single time. I had worried that the Farrington Company might meddle in my business, but it didn't. I got my loan from the bank with no trouble, and paid back the note in full by October, because that year corn prices were sky-high and the Great Western's freight fees were at rock bottom. If you know your history, you know that those two things—the price of produce and the price of shippage—had changed places by '23, and have stayed changed ever since. For farmers out in the middle, the Great Depression started when the Chicago Agricultural Exchange crashed the following summer. But the summer of 1922 was as perfect as any farmer could hope for. Only one incident marred it, having to do with another of our bovine goddesses, and that I will tell you about soon.

Mr. Lester came out twice. He tried to badger us, but he had nothing to badger with, and he must have known it, because he was looking pretty harried that July. I imagine his bosses were badgering *him*, and he was only passing it along. Or trying to. The first time, he asked a lot of questions that really weren't questions at all, but insinuations. Did I think my wife had had an accident? She must have, didn't I think, or she would either have contacted him in order

to make a cash settlement on those 100 acres or just crept back to the farm with her (metaphorical) tail between her legs. Or did I think she had fallen afoul of some bad actor while on the road? Such things did happen, didn't they, from time to time? And it would certainly be convenient for me, wouldn't it?

The second time he showed up, he looked desperate as well as harried, and came right out with it: had my wife had an accident right there on the farm? Was that what had happened? Was it why she hadn't turned up either alive or dead?

"Mr. Lester, if you're asking me if I murdered my wife, the answer is no."

"Well of course you'd say so, wouldn't you?"

"That's your last question to me, sir. Get in yonder truck, drive away, and don't come back here. If you do, I'll take an axe-handle to you."

"You'd go to jail for assault!" He was wearing a celluloid collar that day, and it had come all askew. It was almost possible to feel sorry for him as he stood there with that collar poking into the underside of his chin and sweat cutting lines through the dust on his chubby face, his lips twitching and his eyes bulging.

"No such thing. I have warned you off my property, as is my right, and I intend to send a registered letter to your firm stating that very thing. Come back again and that's trespassing and I *will* beat you. Take warning, sir." Lars Olsen, who had brought Lester out again in his Red Baby, had all but cupped his hands around his ears to hear better.

When Lester reached the doorless passenger side of the truck, he whirled with an arm outstretched and a finger pointing, like a courtroom lawyer with a bent for the theatrical. "I think you killed her! And sooner or later, murder will out!"

Henry—or Hank, as he now preferred to be called—came out of the barn. He had been pitching hay and he held the pitchfork across his chest like a rifle at port arms. "What I think is you better get out of here before you start bleeding," he said. The kind and rather timid boy I had known until the summer of '22 would never have said such a thing, but this one did, and Lester saw that he meant it. He got in. With no door to slam, he settled for crossing his arms over his chest.

“Come back anytime, Lars,” I said pleasantly, “but don’t bring him, no matter how much he offers you to cart his useless ass.”

“No, sir, Mr. James,” Lars said, and off they went.

I turned to Henry. “Would you have stuck him with that pitchfork?”

“Yessir. Made him squeal.” Then, unsmiling, he went back into the barn.

* * *

But he wasn’t *always* unsmiling that summer, and Shannon Cotterie was the reason why. He saw a lot of her (more of her than was good for either of them; that I found out in the fall). She began coming to the house on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, long-skirted and neatly bonneted, toting a side-sack loaded with good things to eat. She said she knew “what men cook”—as though she were 30 instead of just 15—and said she intended to see we had at least two decent suppers a week. And although I had only one of her mother’s casseroles for comparison, I’d have to say that even at 15 she was the superior cook. Henry and I just threw steaks in a skillet on the stove; she had a way of seasoning that made plain old chew-meat delicious. She brought fresh vegetables in her side-sack—not just carrots and peas but exotic (to us) things like asparagus and fat green beans she cooked with pearl onions and bacon. There was even dessert. I can close my eyes in this shabby hotel room and smell her pastry. I can see her standing at the kitchen counter with her bottom swaying as she beat eggs or whipped cream.

Generous was the word for Shannon: of hip, of bust, of heart. She was gentle with Henry, and she cared for him. That made me care for her . . . only that’s too thin, Reader. I loved her, and we both loved Henry. After those Tuesday and Thursday dinners, I’d insist on doing the washing-up and send them out on the porch. Sometimes I heard them murmuring to each other, and would peek out to see them sitting side by side in the wicker chairs, looking out at West Field and holding hands like an old married couple. Other times I spied them kissing, and there was nothing of the old married couple about that at all. There was a sweet urgency to those kisses that belongs only to the very young, and I stole away with my heart aching.

One hot Tuesday afternoon she came early. Her father was out in our North Field on his harvester, Henry riding with him, a little crew of Indians from the Shoshone reservation in Lyme Biska walking along behind . . . and behind them, Old Pie driving the gather-truck. Shannon asked for a dipper of cold water, which I was glad to provide. She stood there on the shady side of the house, looking impossibly cool in a voluminous dress that covered her from throat to shin and shoulder to wrist—a Quaker dress, almost. Her manner was grave, perhaps even scared, and for a moment I was scared myself. *He's told her*, I thought. That turned out not to be true. Except, in a way, it was.

“Mr. James, is Henry sick?”

“Sick? Why, no. Healthy as a horse, I'd say. And eats like one, too. You've seen that for yourself. Although I think even a man who *was* sick would have trouble saying no to your cooking, Shannon.”

That earned me a smile, but it was of the distracted variety. “He's different this summer. I always used to know what he was thinking, but now I don't. He *broods*.”

“Does he?” I asked (too heartily).

“You haven't seen it?”

“No, ma'am.” (I had.) “He seems like his old self to me. But he cares for you an awful lot, Shan. Maybe what looks like brooding to you feels like the lovesicks to him.”

I thought that would get me a real smile, but no. She touched my wrist. Her hand was cool from the dipper handle. “I've thought of that, but . . .” The rest she blurted out. “Mr. James, if he was sweet on someone else—one of the girls from school—you'd tell me, wouldn't you? You wouldn't try to . . . to spare my feelings?”

I laughed at that, and I could see her pretty face lighten with relief. “Shan, listen to me. Because I *am* your friend. Summer's always a hardworking time, and with Arlette gone, Hank and I have been busier than one-armed paperhangers. When we come in at night, we eat a meal—a fine one, if you happen to show up—and then read for an hour. Sometimes he talks about how he misses his mama. After that we go to bed, and the next day we get up and do it all again. He barely has time to spark *you*, let alone another girl.”

“He’s sparked me, all right,” she said, and looked off to where her father’s harvester was chugging along the skyline.

“Well . . . that’s good, isn’t it?”

“I just thought . . . he’s so quiet now . . . so moody . . . sometimes he looks off into the distance and I have to say his name twice or three times before he hears me and answers.” She blushed fiercely. “Even his kisses seem different. I don’t know how to explain it, but they do. And if you ever tell him I said that, I’ll die. I will just *die*.”

“I never would,” I said. “Friends don’t peach on friends.”

“I guess I’m being a silly-billy. And of course he misses his mama, I know he does. But so many of the girls at school are prettier than me . . . prettier than me . . .”

I tilted her chin up so she was looking at me. “Shannon Cotterie, when my boy looks at you, he sees the prettiest girl in the world. And he’s right. Why, if I was his age, I’d spark you myself.”

“Thank you,” she said. Tears like tiny diamonds stood in the corners of her eyes.

“The only thing you need to worry about is putting him back in his place if he gets out of it. Boys can get pretty steamed up, you know. And if I’m out of line, you just go on and tell me so. That’s another thing that’s all right, if it’s between friends.”

She hugged me then, and I hugged her back. A good strong hug, but perhaps better for Shannon than me. Because Arlette was between us. She was between me and everyone else in the summer of 1922, and it was the same for Henry. Shannon had just told me so.

* * *

One night in August, with the good picking done and Old Pie’s crew paid up and back on the rez, I woke to the sound of a cow lowing. *I overslept milking time*, I thought, but when I fumbled my father’s pocket watch off the table beside my bed and peered at it, I saw it was quarter past three in the morning. I put the watch to my ear to see if it was still ticking, but a look out the window into the moonless dark would have served the same purpose. Those weren’t the mildly uncomfortable calls of a cow needing to be rid of her milk, either. It

was the sound of an animal in pain. Cows sometimes sound that way when they're calving, but our goddesses were long past that stage of their lives.

I got up, started out the door, then went back to the closet for my .22. I heard Henry sawing wood behind the closed door of his room as I hurried past with the rifle in one hand and my boots in the other. I hoped he wouldn't wake up and want to join me on what could be a dangerous errand. There were only a few wolves left on the plains by then, but Old Pie had told me there was summer-sick in some of the foxes along the Platte and Medicine Creek. It was what the Shoshone called rabies, and a rabid critter in the barn was the most likely cause of those cries.

Once I was outside the house, the agonized lowing was very loud, and hollow, somehow. Echoing. *Like a cow in a well*, I thought. That thought chilled the flesh on my arms and made me grip the .22 tighter.

By the time I reached the barn doors and shouldered the right one open, I could hear the rest of the cows starting to moo in sympathy, but those cries were calm inquiries compared to the agonized bawling that had awakened me . . . and would awaken Henry, too, if I didn't put an end to what was causing it. There was a carbon arc-lamp hanging on a hook to the right of the door—we didn't use an open flame in the barn unless we absolutely had to, especially in the summertime, when the loft was loaded with hay and every corncrib crammed full to the top.

I felt for the spark-button and pushed it. A brilliant circle of blue-white radiance leaped out. At first my eyes were too dazzled to make out anything; I could only hear those painful cries and the hoof-thuds as one of our goddesses tried to escape from whatever was hurting her. It was Achelois. When my eyes adjusted a bit, I saw her tossing her head from side to side, backing up until her hindquarters hit the door of her stall—third on the right, as you walked up the aisle—and then lurching forward again. The other cows were working themselves into a full-bore panic.

I hauled on my muckies, then trotted to the stall with the .22 tucked under my left arm. I threw the door open, and stepped back. Achelois means "she who drives away pain," but this Achelois was in

agony. When she blundered into the aisle, I saw her back legs were smeared with blood. She reared up like a horse (something I never saw a cow do before), and when she did, I saw a huge Norway rat clinging to one of her teats. The weight had stretched the pink stub to a taut length of cartilage. Frozen in surprise (and horror), I thought of how, as a child, Henry would sometimes pull a string of pink bubble-gum out of his mouth. *Don't do that*, Arlette would scold him. *No one wants to look at what you've been chewing.*

I raised the gun, then lowered it. How could I shoot, with the rat swinging back and forth like a living weight at the end of a pendulum?

In the aisle now, Achelois lowed and shook her head from side to side, as if that might somehow help. Once all four of her feet were back on the floor, the rat was able to stand on the hay-littered barnboards. It was like some strange freak puppy with beads of bloodstained milk in its whiskers. I looked around for something to hit it with, but before I could grab the broom Henry had left leaning against Phemonoe's stall, Achelois reared again and the rat thumped to the floor. At first I thought she had simply dislodged it, but then I saw the pink and wrinkled stub protruding from the rat's mouth, like a flesh cigar. The damned thing had torn one of poor Achelois's teats right off. She laid her head against one of the barn beams and mooed at me tiredly, as if to say: *I've given you milk all these years and offered no trouble, not like some I could mention, so why did you let this happen to me?* Blood was pooling beneath her udder. Even in my shock and revulsion, I didn't think she would die of her wound, but the sight of her—and of the rat, with her blameless teat in its mouth—filled me with rage.

I still didn't shoot at it, partly because I was afraid of fire, but mostly because, with the carbon lamp in one hand, I was afraid I'd miss. Instead, I brought the rifle-stock down, hoping to kill this intruder as Henry had killed the survivor from the well with his shovel. But Henry was a boy with quick reflexes, and I was a man of middle age who had been roused from a sound sleep. The rat avoided me with ease and went trotting up the center aisle. The severed teat bobbed up and down in its mouth, and I realized the rat was eating it—warm and no doubt still full of milk—even as it ran. I

gave chase, smacked at it twice more, and missed both times. Then I saw where it was running: the pipe leading into the defunct livestock well. Of course! Rat Boulevard! With the well filled in, it was their only means of egress. Without it, they'd have been buried alive. Buried with *her*.

But surely, I thought, that thing is too big for the pipe. It must have come from outside—a nest in the manure pile, perhaps.

It leaped for the opening, and as it did so, it elongated its body in the most amazing fashion. I swung the stock of the varmint gun one last time and shattered it on the lip of the pipe. The rat I missed entirely. When I lowered the carbon lamp to the pipe's mouth, I caught one blurred glimpse of its hairless tail slithering away into the darkness, and heard its little claws scraping on the galvanized metal. Then it was gone. My heart was pounding hard enough to put white dots in front of my eyes. I drew in a deep breath, but with it came a stench of putrefaction and decay so strong that I fell back with my hand over my nose. The need to scream was strangled by the need to retch. With that smell in my nostrils I could almost see Arlette at the other end of the pipe, her flesh now teeming with bugs and maggots, liquefying; her face beginning to drip off her skull, the grin of her lips giving way to the longer-lasting bone grin that lay beneath.

I crawled back from that awful pipe on all fours, spraying vomit first to my left and then to my right, and when my supper was all gone, I gagged up long strings of bile. Through watering eyes I saw that Achelois had gone back into her stall. That was good. At least I wasn't going to have to chase her through the corn and put a nose-halter on her to lead her back.

What I wanted to do first was plug the pipe—I wanted to do that before anything—but as my gorge quieted, clear thinking reasserted itself. Achelois was the priority. She was a good milker. More important, she was my responsibility. I kept a medicine chest in the little barn office where I did the books. In the chest I found a large can of Rawleigh Antiseptic Salve. There was a pile of clean rags in the corner. I took half of them and went back to Achelois's stall. I closed the door of her stall to minimize the risk of being kicked, and sat on the milking stool. I think part of me felt I *deserved* to be kicked. But dear old Achelois stilled when I stroked her flank and

whispered, “Soo, Boss, soo, Bossy-boss,” and although she shivered when I smeared the salve on her hurt part, she stood quiet.

When I’d taken what steps I could to prevent infection, I used the rags to wipe up my vomit. It was important to do a good job, for any farmer will tell you that human vomit attracts predators every bit as much as a garbage-hole that hasn’t been adequately covered. Raccoons and woodchucks, of course, but mostly rats. Rats love human leavings.

I had a few rags left over, but they were Arlette’s kitchen castoffs and too thin for my next job. I took the hand-scythe from its peg, lit my way to our woodpile, and chopped a ragged square from the heavy canvas that covered it. Back in the barn, I bent down and held the lamp close to the pipe’s mouth, wanting to make sure the rat (or another; where there was one, there would surely be more) wasn’t lurking, ready to defend its territory, but it was empty for as far as I could see, which was four feet or so. There were no droppings, and that didn’t surprise me. It was an active thoroughfare—now their *only* thoroughfare—and they wouldn’t foul it as long as they could do their business outside.

I stuffed the canvas into the pipe. It was stiff and bulky, and in the end I had to use a broomhandle to poke it all the way in, but I managed. “There,” I said. “See how you like that. Choke on it.”

I went back and looked at Achelois. She stood quietly, and gave me a mild look over her shoulder as I stroked her. I knew then and know now she was only a cow—farmers hold few romantic notions about the natural world, you’ll find—but that look still brought tears to my eyes, and I had to stifle a sob. *I know you did your best*, it said. *I know it’s not your fault*.

But it was.

I thought I would lie awake long, and when I went to sleep I would dream of the rat scurrying up the hay-littered barnboards toward its escape-hatch with that teat in its mouth, but I fell asleep at once and my sleep was both dreamless and restorative. I woke with morning light flooding the room and the stench of my dead wife’s decaying body thick on my hands, sheets, and pillow-case. I sat bolt upright, gasping but already aware that the smell was an illusion. That smell

was my bad dream. I had it not at night but by the morning's first, sanest light, and with my eyes wide open.

* * *

I expected infection from the rat-bite in spite of the salve, but there was none. Achelois died later that year, but not of that. She never gave milk again, however; not a single drop. I should have butchered her, but I didn't have the heart to do it. She had suffered too much on my account.

* * *

The next day, I handed Henry a list of supplies and told him to take the truck over to The Home and get them. A great, dazzled smile broke across his face.

"The truck? *Me*? On my own?"

"You still know all the forward gears? And you can still find reverse?"

"Gosh, sure!"

"Then I think you're ready. Maybe not for Omaha just yet—or even Lincoln—but if you take her slow, you ought to be just fine in Hemingford Home."

"Thanks!" He threw his arms around me and kissed my cheek. For a moment it seemed like we were friends again. I even let myself believe it a little, although in my heart I knew better. The evidence might be belowground, but the truth was between us, and always would be.

I gave him a leather wallet with money in it. "That was your grandfather's. You might as well keep it; I was going to give it to you for your birthday this fall, anyway. There's money inside. You can keep what's left over, if there is any." I almost added, *And don't bring back any stray dogs*, but stopped myself in time. That had been his mother's stock witticism.

He tried to thank me again, and couldn't. It was all too much.

"Stop by Lars Olsen's smithy on your way back and fuel up. Mind me, now, or you'll be on foot instead of behind the wheel when you

get home.”

“I won’t forget. And Poppa?”

“Yes.”

He shuffled his feet, then looked at me shyly. “Could I stop at Cotteries’ and ask Shan to come?”

“No,” I said, and his face fell before I added: “You ask Sallie or Harlan if Shan can come. And you make sure you tell them that you’ve never driven in town before. I’m putting you on your honor, Son.”

As if either of us had any left.

* * *

I watched by the gate until our old truck disappeared into a ball of its own dust. There was a lump in my throat that I couldn't swallow. I had a stupid but very strong premonition that I would never see him again. I suppose it's something most parents feel the first time they see a child going away on his own and face the realization that if a child is old enough to be sent on errands without supervision, he's not totally a child any longer. But I couldn't spend too much time wallowing in my feelings; I had an important chore to do, and I'd sent Henry away so I could attend to it by myself. He would see what had happened to the cow, of course, and probably guess what had done it, but I thought I could still ease the knowledge for him a little.

I first checked on Achelois, who seemed listless but otherwise fine. Then I checked the pipe. It was still plugged, but I was under no illusions; it might take time, but eventually the rats would gnaw through the canvas. I had to do better. I took a bag of Portland cement around to the house-well and mixed up a batch in an old pail. Back in the barn, while I waited for it to thicken, I poked the swatch of canvas even deeper into the pipe. I got it in at least two feet, and those last two feet I packed with cement. By the time Henry got back (and in fine spirits; he had indeed taken Shannon, and they had shared an ice-cream soda bought with change from the errands), it had hardened. I suppose a few of the rats must have been out foraging, but I had no doubt I'd immured most of them—including the one that had savaged poor Achelois—down there in the dark. And down there in the dark they would die. If not of suffocation, then of starvation once their unspeakable pantry was exhausted.

So I thought then.

* * *

In the years between 1916 and 1922, even stupid Nebraska farmers prospered. Harlan Cotterie, being far from stupid, prospered more than most. His farm showed it. He added a barn and a silo in 1919, and in 1920 he put in a deep well that pumped an unbelievable six gallons per minute. A year later, he added indoor plumbing (although he sensibly kept the backyard privy). Then, three times a week, he

and his womenfolk could enjoy what was an unbelievable luxury that far out in the country: hot baths and showers supplied not by pots of water heated on the kitchen stove but from pipes that first brought the water from the well and then carried it away to the sump. It was the showerbath that revealed the secret Shannon Cotterie had been keeping, although I suppose I already knew, and had since the day she said, *He's sparked me, all right*—speaking in a flat, lusterless voice that was unlike her, and looking not at me but off at the silhouettes of her father's harvester and the gleaners trudging behind it.

This was near the end of September, with the corn all picked for another year but plenty of garden-harvesting left to do. One Saturday afternoon, while Shannon was enjoying the showerbath, her mother came along the back hall with a load of laundry she'd taken in from the line early, because it was looking like rain. Shannon probably thought she had closed the bathroom door all the way—most ladies are private about their bathroom duties, and Shannon Cotterie had a special reason to feel that way as the summer of 1922 gave way to fall—but perhaps it came off the latch and swung open partway. Her mother happened to glance in, and although the old sheet that served as a shower-curtain was pulled all the way around on its U-shaped rail, the spray had rendered it translucent. There was no need for Sallie to see the girl herself; she saw the *shape* of the girl, for once without one of her voluminous Quaker-style dresses to hide it. That was all it took. The girl was five months along, or near to it; she probably could not have kept her secret much longer in any case.

Two days later, Henry came home from school (he now took the truck) looking frightened and guilty. "Shan hasn't been there the last two days," he said, "so I stopped by Cotteries' to ask if she was all right. I thought she might have come down with the Spanish Flu. They wouldn't let me in. Mrs. Cotterie just told me to get on, and said her husband would come to talk to you tonight, after his chores were done. I ast if I could do anything, and she said, 'You've done enough, Henry.'"

Then I remembered what Shan had said. Henry put his face in his hands and said, "She's pregnant, Poppa, and they found out. I know

that's it. We want to get married, but I'm afraid they won't let us."

"Never mind them," I said, "*I* won't let you."

He looked at me from wounded, streaming eyes. "Why not?"

I thought: *You saw what it came to between your mother and me and you even have to ask?* But what I said was, "She's 15 years old, and you won't even be that for another two weeks."

"But we love each other!"

O, that loonlike cry. That milksop hoot. My hands were clenched on the legs of my overalls, and I had to force them open and flat. Getting angry would serve no purpose. A boy needed a mother to discuss a thing like this with, but his was sitting at the bottom of a filled-in well, no doubt attended by a retinue of dead rats.

"I know you do, Henry—"

"*Hank!* And others get married that young!"

Once they had; not so much since the century turned and the frontiers closed. But this I didn't say. What I said was that I had no money to give them a start. Maybe by '25, if crops and prices stayed good, but now there was nothing. And with a baby on the way—

"There *would* be enough!" he said. "If you hadn't been such a bugger about that hundred acres, there'd be *plenty!* *She* would've given me some of it! And *she* wouldn't have talked to me this way!"

At first I was too shocked to say anything. It had been six weeks or more since Arlette's name—or even the vague pronounal alias *she*—had passed between us.

He was looking at me defiantly. And then, far down our stub of road, I saw Harlan Cotterie on his way. I had always considered him my friend, but a daughter who turns up pregnant has a way of changing such things.

"No, she wouldn't have talked to you this way," I agreed, and made myself look him straight in the eye. "She would have talked to you worse. And laughed, likely as not. If you search your heart, Son, you'll know it."

"No!"

"Your mother called Shannon a little baggage, and then told you to keep your willy in your pants. It was her last advice, and although it was as crude and hurtful as most of what she had to say, you should have followed it."

Henry's anger collapsed. "It was only after that . . . after that night . . . that we . . . Shan didn't want to, but I talked her into it. And once we started, she liked it as much as I did. Once we started, she asked for it." He said that with a strange, half-sick pride, then shook his head wearily. "Now that hundred acres just sits there sprouting weeds, and I'm in Dutch. If Momma was here, she'd help me fix it. Money fixes everything, that's what *he* says." Henry nodded at the approaching ball of dust.

"If you don't remember how tight your momma was with a dollar, then you forget too fast for your own good," I said. "And if you've forgotten how she slapped you across the mouth that time—"

"I ain't," he said sullenly. Then, more sullenly still: "I thought you'd help me."

"I mean to try. Right now I want you to make yourself scarce. You being here when Shannon's father turns up would be like waving a red rag in front of a bull. Let me see where we are—and how he is—and I may call you out on the porch." I took his wrist. "I'm going to do my best for you, Son."

He pulled his wrist out of my grasp. "You better."

He went into the house, and just before Harlan pulled up in his new car (a Nash as green and gleaming under its coating of dust as a bottlefly's back), I heard the screen door slam out back.

The Nash chugged, backfired, and died. Harlan got out, took off his duster, folded it, and laid it on the seat. He'd worn the duster because he was dressed for the occasion: white shirt, string tie, good Sunday pants held up by a belt with a silver buckle. He hitched at that, getting the pants set the way he wanted them just below his tidy little paunch. He'd always been good to me, and I'd always considered us not just friends but good friends, yet in that moment I hated him. Not because he'd come to tax me about my son; God knows I would have done the same, if our positions had been reversed. No, it was the brand-new shiny green Nash. It was the silver belt buckle made in the shape of a dolphin. It was the new silo, painted bright red, and the indoor plumbing. Most of all it was the plain-faced, biddable wife he'd left back at his farm, no doubt making supper in spite of her worry. The wife whose sweetly given reply in the face of any problem would be, *Whatever you think is best, dear.*

Women, take note: a wife like that never needs to fear bubbling away the last of her life through a cut throat.

He strode to the porch steps. I stood and held out my hand, waiting to see if he'd take it or leave it. There was a hesitation while he considered the pros and cons, but in the end he gave it a brief squeeze before letting loose. "We've got a considerable problem here, Wilf," he said.

"I know it. Henry just told me. Better late than never."

"Better never at all," he said grimly.

"Will you sit down?"

He considered this, too, before taking what had always been Arlette's rocker. I knew he didn't want to sit—a man who's mad and upset doesn't feel good about sitting—but he did, just the same.

"Would you want some iced tea? There's no lemonade, Arlette was the lemonade expert, but—"

He waved me quiet with one pudgy hand. Pudgy but hard. Harlan was one of the richest farmers in Hemingford County, but he was no straw boss; when it came to haying or harvest, he was right out there with the hired help. "I want to get back before sundown. I don't see worth a shit by those headlamps. My girl has got a bun in her oven, and I guess you know who did the damn cooking."

"Would it help to say I'm sorry?"

"No." His lips were pressed tight together, and I could see hot blood beating on both sides of his neck. "I'm madder than a hornet, and what makes it worse is that I've got no one to be mad *at*. I can't be mad at the kids because they're just kids, although if she wasn't with child, I'd turn Shannon over my knee and paddle her for not doing better when she *knew* better. She was raised better and churched better, too."

I wanted to ask him if he was saying Henry was raised wrong. I kept my mouth shut instead, and let him say all the things he'd been fuming about on his drive over here. He'd thought up a speech, and once he said it, he might be easier to deal with.

"I'd like to blame Sallie for not seeing the girl's condition sooner, but first-timers usually carry high, everyone knows that . . . and my God, you know the sort of dresses Shan wears. That's not a new

thing, either. She's been wearing those granny-go-to-meetin' dresses since she was 12 and started getting her . . ."

He held his pudgy hands out in front of his chest. I nodded.

"And I'd like to blame *you*, because it seems like you skipped that talk fathers usually have with sons." *As if you'd know anything about raising sons*, I thought. "The one about how he's got a pistol in his pants and he should keep the safety on." A sob caught in his throat and he cried, "My . . . little . . . *girl* . . . is too young to be a mother!"

Of course there was blame for me Harlan didn't know about. If I hadn't put Henry in a situation where he was desperate for a woman's love, Shannon might not be in the fix she was in. I also could have asked if Harlan had maybe saved a little blame for himself while he was busy sharing it out. But I held quiet. Quiet never came naturally to me, but living with Arlette had given me plenty of practice.

"Only I can't blame you, either, because your wife went and run off this spring, and it's natural your attention would lapse at a time like that. So I went out back and chopped damn near half a cord of wood before I came over here, trying to get some of that mad out, and it must have worked. I shook your hand, didn't I?"

The self-congratulation I heard in his voice made me itch to say, *Unless it was rape, I think it still takes two to tango*. But I just said, "Yes, you did," and left it at that.

"Well, that brings us to what you're going to do about it. You and that boy who sat at my table and ate the food my wife cooked for him."

Some devil—the creature that comes into a fellow, I suppose, when the Conniving Man leaves—made me say, "Henry wants to marry her and give the baby a name."

"That's so God damned ridiculous I don't want to hear it. I won't say Henry doesn't have a pot to piss in nor a window to throw it out of—I know you've done right, Wilf, or as right as you can, but that's the best I can say. These have been fat years, and you're still only one step ahead of the bank. Where are you going to be when the years get lean again? And they always do. If you had the cash from that back hundred, then it might be different—cash cushions hard

times, everyone knows that—but with Arlette gone, there they sit, like a constipated old maid on a chamberpot.”

For just a moment part of me tried to consider how things would have been if I had given in to Arlette about that fucking land, as I had about so many other things. *I'd be living in stink, that's how it would have been. I would have had to dig out the old spring for the cows, because cows won't drink from a brook that's got blood and pigs' guts floating in it.*

True. But I'd be living instead of just existing, Arlette would be living with me, and Henry wouldn't be the sullen, anguished, difficult boy he had turned into. The boy who had gotten his friend since childhood into a peck of trouble.

“Well, what do you want to do?” I asked. “I doubt you made this trip with nothing in mind.”

He appeared not to have heard me. He was looking out across the fields to where his new silo stood on the horizon. His face was heavy and sad, but I've come too far and written too much to lie; that expression did not move me much. 1922 had been the worst year of my life, one where I'd turned into a man I no longer knew, and Harlan Cotterie was just another washout on a rocky and miserable stretch of road.

“She's bright,” Harlan said. “Mrs. McReady at school says Shan's the brightest pupil she's taught in her whole career, and that stretches back almost 40 years. She's good in English, and she's even better in the maths, which Mrs. McReady says is rare in girls. She can do triggeronomy, Wilf. Did you know that? Mrs. McReady herself can't do triggeronomy.”

No, I hadn't known, but I knew how to say the word. I felt, however, that this might not be the time to correct my neighbor's pronunciation.

“Sallie wanted to send her to the normal school in Omaha. They've taken girls as well as boys since 1918, although no females have graduated so far.” He gave me a look that was hard to take: mingled disgust and hostility. “The females always want to get *married*, you see. And *have babies*. Join *Eastern Star* and sweep the God damned *floor*.”

He sighed.

“Shan could be the first. She has the skills and she has the brains. You didn’t know that, did you?”

No, in truth I had not. I had simply made an assumption—one of many that I now know to have been wrong—that she was farm wife material, and no more.

“She might even teach college. We planned to send her to that school as soon as she turned 17.”

Sallie planned, is what you mean, I thought. Left to your own devices, such a crazy idea never would have crossed your farmer’s mind.

“Shan was willing, and the money was put aside. It was all arranged.” He turned to look at me, and I heard the tendons in his neck creak. “It’s *still* all arranged. But first—almost right away—she’s going to the St. Eusebia Catholic Home for Girls in Omaha. She doesn’t know it yet, but it’s going to happen. Sallie talked about sending her to Deland—Sal’s sister lives there—or to my aunt and uncle in Lyme Biska, but I don’t trust any of those people to carry through on what we’ve decided. Nor does a girl who causes this kind of problem deserve to go to people she knows and loves.”

“What is it you’ve decided, Harl? Besides sending your daughter to some kind of an . . . I don’t know . . . orphanage?”

He bristled. “It’s not an orphanage. It’s a clean, wholesome, and busy place. So I’ve been told. I’ve been on the exchange, and all the reports I get are good ones. She’ll have chores, she’ll have her schooling, and in another four months she’ll have her baby. When that’s done, the kid will be given up for adoption. The sisters at St. Eusebia will see to that. Then she can come home, and in another year and a half she can go to teachers’ college, just like Sallie wants. And me, of course. Sallie and me.”

“What’s my part in this? I assume I must have one.”

“Are you smarting on me, Wilf? I know you’ve had a tough year, but I still won’t bear you smarting on me.”

“I’m not smarting on you, but you need to know you’re not the only one who’s mad and ashamed. Just tell me what you want, and maybe we can stay friends.”

The singularly cold little smile with which he greeted this—just a twitch of the lips and a momentary appearance of dimples at the

corners of his mouth—said a great deal about how little hope he held out for *that*.

“I know you’re not rich, but you still need to step up and take your share of the responsibility. Her time at the home—the sisters call it prenatal care—is going to cost me 300 dollars. Sister Camilla called it a donation when I talked to her on the phone, but I know a fee when I hear one.”

“If you’re going to ask me to split it with you—”

“I know you can’t lay your hands on 150 dollars, but you better be able to lay them on 75, because that’s what the tutor’s going to cost. The one who’s going to help her keep up with her lessons.”

“I can’t do that. Arlette cleaned me out when she left.” But for the first time I found myself wondering if she might’ve socked a little something away. That business about the 200 she was supposed to have taken when she ran off had been a pure lie, but even pin-and-ribbon money would help in this situation. I made a mental note to check the cupboards and the canisters in the kitchen.

“Take another shortie loan from the bank,” he said. “You paid the last one back, I hear.”

Of course he heard. Such things are supposed to be private, but men like Harlan Cotterie have long ears. I felt a fresh wave of dislike for him. He had loaned me the use of his corn harvester and only taken 20 dollars for the use of it? So what? He was asking for that and more, as though his precious daughter had never spread her legs and said *come on in and paint the walls*.

“I had crop money to pay it back with,” I said. “Now I don’t. I’ve got my land and my house and that’s pretty much it.”

“You find a way,” he said. “Mortgage the house, if that’s what it takes. 75 dollars is your share, and compared to having your boy changing didies at the age of 15, I think you’re getting off cheap.”

He stood up. I did, too. “And if I can’t find a way? What then, Harl? You send the Sheriff?”

His lips curled in an expression of contempt that turned my dislike of him to hate. It happened in an instant, and I still feel that hate today, when so many other feelings have been burned out of my heart. “I’d never go to law on a thing like this. But if you don’t take your share of the responsibility, you and me’s done.” He squinted

into the declining daylight. "I'm going. Got to, if I want to get back before dark. I won't need the 75 for a couple of weeks, so you got that long. And I won't come dunning you for it. If you don't, you don't. Just don't say you can't, because I know better. You should have let her sell that acreage to Farrington, Wilf. If you'd done that, she'd still be here and you'd have some money in hand. And my daughter might not be in the fam'ly way."

In my mind, I pushed him off the porch and jumped on his hard round belly with both feet when he tried to get up. Then I got my hand-scythe out of the barn and put it through one of his eyes. In reality, I stood with one hand on the railing and watched him trudge down the steps.

"Do you want to talk to Henry?" I asked. "I can call him. He feels as bad about this as I do."

Harlan didn't break stride. "She was clean and your boy filthied her up. If you hauled him out here, I might knock him down. I might not be able to help myself."

I wondered about that. Henry was getting his growth, he was strong, and perhaps most important of all, he knew about murder. Harl Cotterie didn't.

He didn't need to crank the Nash but only push a button. Being prosperous was nice in all sorts of ways. "75 is what I need to close this business," he called over the punch and blat of the engine. Then he whirled around the chopping block, sending George and his retinue flying, and headed back to his farm with its big generator and indoor plumbing.

When I turned around, Henry was standing beside me, looking sallow and furious. "They can't send her away like that."

So he had been listening. I can't say I was surprised.

"Can and will," I said. "And if you try something stupid and headstrong, you'll only make a bad situation worse."

"We could run away. We wouldn't get caught. If we could get away with . . . with what we did . . . then I guess I could get away with eloping off to Colorado with my gal."

"You couldn't," I said, "because you'd have no money. Money fixes everything, he says. Well, this is what I say: *no money spoils*

everything. I know it, and Shannon will, too. She's got her baby to watch out for now—"

"Not if they make her give it away!"

"That doesn't change how a woman feels when she's got the chap in her belly. A chap makes them wise in ways men don't understand. I haven't lost any respect for you or her just because she's going to have a baby—you two aren't the first, and you won't be the last, even if Mr. High and Mighty had the idea she was only going to use what's between her legs in the water-closet. But if you asked a five-months-pregnant girl to run off with you . . . and she agreed . . . I'd lose respect for both of you."

"What do you know?" he asked with infinite contempt. "You couldn't even cut a throat without making a mess of it."

I was speechless. He saw it, and left me that way.

* * *

He went off to school the next day without any argument even though his sweetie was no longer there. Probably because I let him take the truck. A boy will take any excuse to drive a truck when driving's new. But of course the new wears off. The new wears off everything, and it usually doesn't take long. What's beneath is gray and shabby, more often than not. Like a rat's hide.

Once he was gone, I went into the kitchen. I poured the sugar, flour, and salt out of their tin canisters and stirred through them. There was nothing. I went into the bedroom and searched her clothes. There was nothing. I looked in her shoes and there was nothing. But each time I found nothing, I became more sure there was *something*.

I had chores in the garden, but instead of doing them, I went out back of the barn to where the old well had been. Weeds were growing on it now: witchgrass and scraggly fall goldenrod. Elphis was down there, and Arlette was, too. Arlette with her face cocked to the side. Arlette with her clown's grin. Arlette in her *snood*.

"Where is it, you contrary bitch?" I asked her. "Where did you hide it?"

I tried to empty my mind, which was what my father advised me to do when I'd misplaced a tool or one of my few precious books. After a little while I went back into the house, back into the bedroom, back into the closet. There were two hatboxes on the top shelf. In the first one I found nothing but a hat—the white one she wore to church (when she could trouble herself to go, which was about once a month). The hat in the other box was red, and I'd never seen her wear it. It looked like a whore's hat to me. Tucked into the satin inner band, folded into tiny squares no bigger than pills, were two 20-dollar bills. I tell you now, sitting here in this cheap hotel room and listening to the rats scuttering and scampering in the walls (yes, my old friends are here), that those two 20-dollar bills were the seal on my damnation.

* * *

Because they weren't enough. You see that, don't you? Of course you do. One doesn't need to be an expert in triggeronomy to know that one needs to add 35 to 40 to make 75. Doesn't sound like much, does it? But in those days you could buy two months' worth of groceries for 35 dollars, or a good used harness at Lars Olsen's smithy. You could buy a train ticket all the way to Sacramento . . . which I sometimes wish I had done.

35.

And sometimes when I lie in bed at night, I can actually see that number. It flashes red, like a warning not to cross a road because a train is coming. I tried to cross anyway, and the train ran me down. If each of us has a Conniving Man inside, each of us also has a Lunatic. And on those nights when I can't sleep because the flashing number won't *let* me sleep, my Lunatic says it was a conspiracy: that Cotterie, Stoppenhauser, and the Farrington shyster were all in it together. I know better, of course (at least in daylight). Cotterie and Mr. Attorney Lester might have had a talk with Stoppenhauser later on—after I did what I did—but it was surely innocent to begin with; Stoppenhauser was actually trying to help me out . . . and do a little business for Home Bank & Trust, of course. But when Harlan or Lester—or both of them together—saw an opportunity, they took it.

The Conniving Man out-connived: how do you like that? By then I hardly cared, because by then I had lost my son, but do you know who I really blame?

Arlette.

Yes.

Because it was she who left those two bills inside her red whore's hat for me to find. And do you see how fiendishly clever she was? Because it wasn't the 40 that did me in; it was the money between that and what Cotterie demanded for his pregnant daughter's tutor; what he wanted so she could study Latin and keep up with her *triggeronomy*.

35, 35, 35.

* * *

I thought about the money he wanted for the tutor all the rest of that week, and over the weekend, too. Sometimes I took out those two bills—I had unfolded them but the creases still remained—and studied at them. On Sunday night I made my decision. I told Henry that he'd have to take the Model T to school on Monday; I had to go to Hemingford Home and see Mr. Stoppenhauser at the bank about a shortie loan. A small one. Just 35 dollars.

"What for?" Henry was sitting at the window and looking moodily out at the darkening West Field.

I told him. I thought it would start another argument about Shannon, and in a way, I wanted that. He'd said nothing about her all week, although I knew Shan was gone. Mert Donovan had told me when he came by for a load of seed corn. "Went off to some fancy school back in Omaha," he said. "Well, more power to her, that's what I think. If they're gonna vote, they better learn. Although," he added after a moment's cogitation, "mine does what I tell her. She better, if she knows what's good for her."

If I knew she was gone, Henry also knew, and probably before I did—schoolchildren are enthusiastic gossips. But he had said nothing. I suppose I was trying to give him a reason to let out all the hurt and recrimination. It wouldn't be pleasant, but in the long run it might be beneficial. Neither a sore on the forehead or in the brain

behind the forehead should be allowed to fester. If they do, the infection is likely to spread.

But he only grunted at the news, so I decided to poke a little harder.

“You and I are going to split the payback,” I said. “It’s apt to come to no more than 38 dollars if we retire the loan by Christmas. That’s 19 apiece. I’ll take yours out of your choring money.”

Surely, I thought, this would result in a flood of anger . . . but it brought only another surly little grunt. He didn’t even argue about having to take the Model T to school, although he said the other kids made fun of it, calling it “Hank’s ass-breaker.”

“Son?”

“What.”

“Are you all right?”

He turned to me and smiled—his lips moved around, at least. “I’m fine. Good luck at the bank tomorrow, Poppa. I’m going to bed.”

As he stood up, I said: “Will you give me a little kiss?”

He kissed my cheek. It was the last one.

* * *

He took the T to school and I drove the truck to Hemingford Home, where Mr. Stoppenhauser brought me into his office after a mere five-minute wait. I explained what I needed, but declined to say what I needed it for, only citing personal reasons. I thought for such a piddling amount I would not need to be more specific, and I was right. But when I’d finished, he folded his hands on his desk blotter and gave me a look of almost fatherly sternness. In the corner, the Regulator clock ticked away quiet slices of time. On the street—considerably louder—came the blat of an engine. It stopped, there was silence, and then another engine started up. Was that my son, first arriving in the Model T and then stealing my truck? There’s no way I can know for sure, but I think it was.

“Wilf,” Mr. Stoppenhauser said, “you’ve had a little time to get over your wife leaving the way she did—pardon me for bringing up a painful subject, but it seems pertinent, and besides, a banker’s office is a little like a priest’s confessional—so I’m going to talk to you like a

Dutch uncle. Which is only fitting, since that's where my mother and father came from."

I had heard this one before—as had, I imagine, most visitors to that office—and I gave it the dutiful smile it was meant to elicit.

"Will Home Bank & Trust loan you 35 dollars? You bet. I'm tempted to put it on a man-to-man basis and do the deal out of my own wallet, except I never carry more than what it takes to pay for my lunch at the Splendid Diner and a shoe-shine at the barber shop. Too much money's a constant temptation, even for a wily old cuss like me, and besides, business is business. *But!*" He raised his finger. "You don't *need* 35 dollars."

"Sad to say, I do." I wondered if he knew why. He might have; he was indeed a wily old cuss. But so was Harl Cotterie, and Harl was also a shamed old cuss that fall.

"No; you don't. You need 750, that's what you need, and you could have it today. Either bank it or walk out with it in your pocket, all the same to me either way. You paid off the mortgage on your place 3 years ago. It's free and clear. So there's absolutely no reason why you shouldn't turn around and take out another mortgage. It's done all the time, my boy, and by the best people. You'd be surprised at some of the paper we're carrying. All the best people. Yessir."

"I thank you very kindly, Mr. Stoppenhauser, but I don't think so. That mortgage was like a gray cloud over my head the whole time it was in force, and—"

"Wilf, that's the *point!*" The finger went up again. This time it wagged back and forth, like the pendulum of the Regulator. "That is exactly the rootin'-tootin', cowboy-shootin' *point!* It's the fellows who take out a mortgage and then feel like they're always walking around in sunshine who end up defaulting and losing their valuable property! Fellows like you, who carry that bank-paper like a barrowload of rocks on a gloomy day, are the fellows who always pay back! And do you want to tell me that there aren't improvements you could make? A roof to fix? A little more livestock?" He gave me a sly and roguish look. "Maybe even indoor plumbing, like your neighbor down the road? Such things pay for themselves, you know. You could end up

with improvements that far outweigh the cost of a mortgage. Value for money, Wilf! Value for money!”

I thought it over. At last I said, “I’m very tempted, sir. I won’t lie about that—”

“No need to. A banker’s office, the priest’s confessional—very little difference. The best men in this county have sat in that chair, Wilf. The very best.”

“But I only came in for a shortie loan—which you have kindly granted—and this new proposal needs a little thinking about.” A new idea occurred to me, one that was surprisingly pleasant. “And I ought to talk it over with my boy, Henry—Hank, as he likes to be called now. He’s getting to an age where he needs to be consulted, because what I’ve got will be his someday.”

“Understood, completely understood. But it’s the right thing to do, believe me.” He got to his feet and stuck out his hand. I got to mine and shook it. “You came in here to buy a fish, Wilf. I’m offering to sell you a pole. Much better deal.”

“Thank you.” And, leaving the bank, I thought: *I’ll talk it over with my son*. It was a good thought. A warm thought in a heart that had been chilly for months.

* * *

The mind is a funny thing, isn’t it? Preoccupied as I was by Mr. Stoppenhauser’s unsolicited offer of a mortgage, I never noticed that the vehicle I’d come in had been replaced by the one Henry had taken to school. I’m not sure I would have noticed right away even if I’d had less weighty matters on my mind. They were both familiar to me, after all; they were both mine. I only realized when I was leaning in to get the crank and saw a folded piece of paper, held down by a rock, on the driving seat.

I just stood there for a moment, half in and half out of the T, one hand on the side of the cab, the other reaching under the seat, which was where we kept the crank. I suppose I knew why Henry had left school and made this swap even before I pulled his note from beneath the makeshift paperweight and unfolded it. The truck was more reliable on a long trip. A trip to Omaha, for instance.

Poppa,

I have taken the truck. I guess you know where I am going. Leave me alone. I know you can send Sheriff Jones after me to bring me back, but if you do I will tell everything. You might think I'd change my mind because I am "just a kid," BUT I WONT. Without Shan I dont care about nothing. I love you Poppa even if I don't know why, since everything we did has brought me mizzery.

*Your Loving Son,
Henry "Hank" James*

I drove back to the farm in a daze. I think some people waved to me—I think even Sallie Cotterie, who was minding the Cotteries' roadside vegetable stand, waved to me—and I probably waved back, but I've no memory of doing so. For the first time since Sheriff Jones had come out to the farm, asking his cheerful, no-answers-needed questions and looking at everything with his cold inquisitive eyes, the electric chair seemed like a real possibility to me, so real I could almost feel the buckles on my skin as the leather straps were tightened on my wrists and above my elbows.

He would be caught whether I kept my mouth shut or not. That seemed inevitable to me. He had no money, not even six bits to fill the truck's gas tank, so he'd be walking long before he even got to Elkhorn. If he managed to steal some gas, he'd be caught when he approached the place where she was now living (Henry assumed as a prisoner; it had never crossed his unfinished mind that she might be a willing guest). Surely Harlan had given the person in charge—Sister Camilla—Henry's description. Even if he hadn't considered the possibility of the outraged swain making an appearance at the site of his lady-love's durance vile, Sister Camilla would have. In her business, she had surely dealt with outraged swains before.

My only hope was that, once accosted by the authorities, Henry would keep silent long enough to realize that he'd been snared by his own foolishly romantic notions rather than by my interference. Hoping for a teenage boy to come to his senses is like betting on a long shot at the horse track, but what else did I have?

As I drove into the dooryard, a wild thought crossed my mind: leave the T running, pack a bag, and take off for Colorado. The idea lived for no more than two seconds. I had money—75 dollars, in fact—but the T would die long before I crossed the state line at Julesburg. And that wasn't the important thing; if it had been, I could always have driven as far as Lincoln and then traded the T and 60 of my dollars for a reliable car. No, it was the place. The home place. *My* home place. I had murdered my wife to keep it, and I wasn't going to leave it now because my foolish and immature accomplice had gotten it into his head to take off on a romantic quest. If I left the farm, it wouldn't be for Colorado; it would be for state prison. And I would be taken there in chains.

* * *

That was Monday. There was no word on Tuesday or Wednesday. Sheriff Jones didn't come to tell me Henry had been picked up hitchhiking on the Lincoln-Omaha Highway, and Harl Cotterie didn't come to tell me (with Puritanical satisfaction, no doubt) that the Omaha police had arrested Henry at Sister Camilla's request, and he was currently sitting in the pokey, telling wild tales about knives and wells and burlap bags. All was quiet on the farm. I worked in the garden harvesting pantry-vegetables, I mended fence, I milked the cows, I fed the chickens—and I did it all in a daze. Part of me, and not a small part, either, believed that all of this was a long and terribly complex dream from which I would awake with Arlette snoring beside me and the sound of Henry chopping wood for the morning fire.

Then, on Thursday, Mrs. McReady—the dear and portly widow who taught academic subjects at Hemingford School—came by in her own Model T to ask me if Henry was all right. “There's an . . . an intestinal *distress* going around,” she said. “I wondered if he caught it. He left very suddenly.”

“He's distressed all right,” I said, “but it's a love-bug instead of a stomach-bug. He's run off, Mrs. McReady.” Unexpected tears, stinging and hot, rose in my eyes. I took the handkerchief from the

pocket on the front of my biballs, but some of them ran down my cheeks before I could wipe them away.

When my vision was clear again, I saw that Mrs. McReady, who meant well by every child, even the difficult ones, was near tears herself. She must have known all along what kind of bug Henry was suffering from.

“He’ll be back, Mr. James. Don’t you fear. I’ve seen this before, and I expect to see it a time or two again before I retire, although that time’s not so far away as it once was.” She lowered her voice, as if she feared George the rooster or one of his feathered harem might be a spy. “The one you want to watch out for is her father. He’s a hard and unbending man. Not a bad man, but hard.”

“I know,” I said. “And I suppose you know where his daughter is now.”

She lowered her eyes. It was answer enough.

“Thank you for coming out, Mrs. McReady. Can I ask you to keep this to yourself?”

“Of course . . . but the children are already whispering.”

Yes. They would be.

“Are you on the exchange, Mr. James?” She looked for telephone wires. “I see you are not. Never mind. If I hear anything, I’ll come out and tell you.”

“You mean if you hear anything before Harlan Cotterie or Sheriff Jones.”

“God will take care of your son. Shannon, too. You know, they really were a lovely couple; everyone said so. Sometimes the fruit ripens too early, and a frost kills it. Such a shame. Such a sad, sad shame.”

She shook my hand—a man’s strong grip—and then drove away in her flivver. I don’t think she realized that, at the end, she had spoken of Shannon and my son in the past tense.

* * *

On Friday Sheriff Jones came out, driving the car with the gold star on the door. And he wasn’t alone. Following along behind was my

truck. My heart leaped at the sight of it, then sank again when I saw who was behind the wheel: Lars Olsen.

I tried to wait quietly while Jones went through his Ritual of Arrival: belt-hitching, forehead-wiping (even though the day was chilly and overcast), hair-brushing. I couldn't do it. "Is he all right? Did you find him?"

"No, nope, can't say we did." He mounted the porch steps. "Line-rider over east of Lyme Biska found the truck, but no sign of the kid. We might know better about the state of his health if you'd reported this when it happened. Wouldn't we?"

"I was hoping he'd come back on his own," I said dully. "He's gone to Omaha. I don't know how much I need to tell you, Sheriff—"

Lars Olsen had meandered into auditory range, ears all but flapping. "Go on back to my car, Olsen," Jones said. "This is a private conversation."

Lars, a meek soul, scurried off without demur. Jones turned back to me. He was far less cheerful than on his previous visit, and had dispensed with the bumbling persona, as well.

"I already know enough, don't I? That your kid got Harl Cotterie's daughter in the fam'ly way and has probably gone haring off to Omaha. He run the truck off the road into a field of high grass when he knew the tank was 'bout dry. That was smart. He get that kind of smart from you? Or from Arlette?"

I said nothing, but he'd given me an idea. Just a little one, but it might come in handy.

"I'll tell you one thing he did that we'll thank him for," Jones said. "Might keep him out of jail, too. He yanked all the grass from under the truck before he went on his merry way. So the exhaust wouldn't catch it afire, you know. Start a big prairie fire that burned a couple thousand acres, a jury might get a bit touchy, don't you think? Even if the offender was only 15 or so?"

"Well, it didn't happen, Sheriff—he did the right thing—so why are you going on about it?" I knew the answer, of course. Sheriff Jones might not give a hoot in a high wind for the likes of Andrew Lester, attorney-at-law, but he was good friends with Harl. They were both members of the newly formed Elks Lodge, and Harl had it in for my son.

“A little touchy, aren’t you?” He wiped his forehead again, then resettled his Stetson. “Well, I might be touchy, too, if it was my son. And you know what? If it was my son and Harl Cotterie was my neighbor—my *good* neighbor—I might’ve just taken a run down there and said, ‘Harl? You know what? I think my son might be going to try and see your daughter. You want to tell someone to be on the peep for him?’ But you didn’t do that, either, did you?”

The idea he’d given me was looking better and better, and it was almost time to spring it.

“He hasn’t shown up wherever she is, has he?”

“Not yet, no, he may still be looking for it.”

“I don’t think he ran away to see Shannon,” I said.

“Why, then? Do they have a better brand of ice cream there in Omaha? Because that’s the way he was headed, sure as your life.”

“I think he went looking for his mother. I think she may have gotten in touch with him.”

That stopped him for a good ten seconds, long enough for a wipe of the forehead and a brush of the hair. Then he said, “How would she do that?”

“A letter would be my best guess.” The Hemingford Home Grocery was also the post office, where all the general delivery went. “They would have given it to him when he went in for candy or a bag of peanuts, as he often does on his way back from school. I don’t know for sure, Sheriff, any more than I know why you came out here acting like I committed some kind of crime. I wasn’t the one who knocked her up.”

“You ought to hush that kind of talk about a nice girl!”

“Maybe yes and maybe no, but this was as much a surprise to me as it was to the Cotteries, and now my boy is gone. They at least know where their daughter is.”

Once again he was stumped. Then he took out a little notebook from his back pocket and jotted something in it. He put it back and asked, “You don’t know for sure that your wife got in touch with your kid, though—that’s what you’re telling me? It’s just a guess?”

“I know he talked a lot about his mother after she left, but then he stopped. And I know he hasn’t shown up at that home where Harlan and his wife stuck Shannon.” And on that score I was as surprised

as Sheriff Jones . . . but awfully grateful. “Put the two things together, and what do you get?”

“I don’t know,” Jones said, frowning. “I truly don’t. I thought I had this figured out, but I’ve been wrong before, haven’t I? Yes, and will be again. ‘We are all bound in error,’ that’s what the Book says. But good God, kids make my life hard. If you hear from your son, Wilfred, I’d tell him to get his skinny ass home and stay away from Shannon Cotterie, if he knows where she is. She won’t want to see him, guarantee you that. Good news is no prairie fire, and we can’t arrest him for stealing his father’s truck.”

“No,” I said grimly, “you’d never get me to press charges on that one.”

“*But.*” He raised his finger, which reminded me of Mr. Stoppenhauser at the bank. “Three days ago, in Lyme Biska—not so far from where the rider found your truck—someone held up that grocery and ethyl station on the edge of town. The one with the Blue Bonnet Girl on the roof? Took 23 dollars. I got the report sitting on my desk. It was a young fella dressed in old cowboy clothes, with a bandanna pulled up over his mouth and a plainsman hat slouched down over his eyes. The owner’s mother was tending the counter, and the fella menaced her with some sort of tool. She thought it might have been a crowbar or a pry-rod, but who knows? She’s pushing 80 and half-blind.”

It was my time to be silent. I was flabbergasted. At last I said, “Henry left from school, Sheriff, and so far as I can remember he was wearing a flannel shirt and corduroy trousers that day. He didn’t take any of his clothes, and in any case he doesn’t *have* any cowboy clothes, if you mean boots and all. Nor does he have a plainsman’s hat.”

“He could have stolen those things, too, couldn’t he?”

“If you don’t know anything more than what you just said, you ought to stop. I know you’re friends with Harlan—”

“Now, now, this has nothing to do with that.”

It did and we both knew it, but there was no reason to go any farther down that road. Maybe my 80 acres didn’t stack up very high against Harlan Cotterie’s 400, but I was still a landowner and a

taxpayer, and I wasn't going to be browbeaten. That was the point I was making, and Sheriff Jones had taken it.

"My son's not a robber, and he doesn't threaten women. That's not how he acts and not the way he was raised."

Not until just lately, anyway, a voice inside whispered.

"Probably just a drifter looking for a quick payday," Jones said. "But I felt like I had to bring it up, and so I did. And we don't know what people might say, do we? Talk gets around. Everybody talks, don't they? Talk's cheap. The subject's closed as far as I'm concerned—let the Lyme County Sheriff worry about what goes on in Lyme Biska, that's my motto—but you should know that the Omaha police are keeping an eye on the place where Shannon Cotterie's at. Just in case your son gets in touch, you know."

He brushed back his hair, then resettled his hat a final time.

"Maybe he'll come back on his own, no harm done, and we can write this whole thing off as, I don't know, a bad debt."

"Fine. Just don't call him a bad son, unless you're willing to call Shannon Cotterie a bad daughter."

The way his nostrils flared suggested he didn't like that much, but he didn't reply to it. What he said was, "If he comes back and says he's seen his mother, let me know, would you? We've got her on the books as a missing person. Silly, I know, but the law is the law."

"I'll do that, of course."

He nodded and went to his car. Lars had settled behind the wheel. Jones shooed him over—the sheriff was the kind of man who did his own driving. I thought about the young man who'd held up the store, and tried to tell myself that my Henry would never do such a thing, and even if he were driven to it, he wouldn't be sly enough to put on clothes he'd stolen out of somebody's barn or bunkhouse. But Henry was different now, and murderers *learn* slyness, don't they? It's a survival skill. I thought that maybe—

But no. I won't say it that way. It's too weak. This is my confession, my last word on everything, and if I can't tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, what good is it? What good is anything?

It was him. It was Henry. I had seen by Sheriff Jones's eyes that he only brought up that side-o'-the-road robbery because I wouldn't

kowtow to him the way he thought I should've, but / believed it. Because I knew more than Sheriff Jones. After helping your father to murder your mother, what was stealing some new clothes and waving a crowbar in an old granny's face? No such much. And if he tried it once, he would try it again, once those 23 dollars were gone. Probably in Omaha. Where they would catch him. And then the whole thing might come out. Almost certainly *would* come out.

I climbed to the porch, sat down, and put my face in my hands.

* * *

Days went by. I don't know how many, only that they were rainy. When the rain comes in the fall, outside chores have to wait, and I didn't have enough livestock or outbuildings to fill the hours with inside chores. I tried to read, but the words wouldn't seem to string together, although every now and then a single one would seem to leap off the page and scream. Murder. Guilt. Betrayal. Words like those.

Days I sat on the porch with a book in my lap, bundled into my sheepskin coat against the damp and the cold, watching the rainwater drip off the overhang. Nights I lay awake until the small hours of the morning, listening to the rain on the roof overhead. It sounded like timid fingers tapping for entry. I spent too much time thinking about Arlette in the well with Elphis. I began to fancy that she was still . . . not alive (I was under stress but not crazy), but somehow *aware*. Somehow watching developments from her makeshift grave, and with pleasure.

Do you like how things have turned out, Wilf? she'd ask if she could (and, in my imagination, did). *Was it worth it? What do you say?*

* * *

One night about a week after Sheriff Jones's visit, as I sat trying to read *The House of the Seven Gables*, Arlette crept up behind me, reached around the side of my head, and tapped the bridge of my nose with one cold, wet finger.

I dropped the book on the braided sitting room rug, screamed, and leaped to my feet. When I did, the cold fingertip ran down to the corner of my mouth. Then it touched me again, on top of my head, where the hair was getting thin. This time I laughed—a shaky, angry laugh—and bent to pick up my book. As I did, the finger tapped a third time, this one on the nape of the neck, as if my dead wife were saying, *Have I got your attention yet, Wilf?* I stepped away—so the fourth tap wouldn't be in the eye—and looked up. The ceiling overhead was discolored and dripping. The plaster hadn't started to bulge yet, but if the rain continued, it would. It might even dissolve and come down in chunks. The leak was above my special reading-place. Of course it was. The rest of the ceiling looked fine, at least so far.

I thought of Stoppenhauser saying, *Do you want to tell me there aren't improvements you could make? A roof to fix?* And that sly look. As if he had *known*. As if he and Arlette were in on it together.

Don't be getting such things in your head, I told myself. *Bad enough that you keep thinking of her, down there. Have the worms gotten her eyes yet, I wonder? Have the bugs eaten away her sharp tongue, or at least blunted it?*

I went to the table in the far corner of the room, got the bottle that stood there, and poured myself a good-sized hooker of brown whiskey. My hand trembled, but only a little. I downed it in two swallows. I knew it would be a bad business to turn such drinking into a habit, but it's not every night that a man feels his dead wife tap him on the nose. And the hooch made me feel better. More in control of myself. I didn't need to take on a 750-dollar mortgage to fix my roof, I could patch it with scrap lumber when the rain stopped. But it would be an ugly fix; would make the place look like what my mother would have called trash-poor. Nor was that the point. Fixing a leak would take only a day or two. I needed work that would keep me through the winter. Hard labor would drive out thoughts of Arlette on her dirt throne, Arlette in her burlap *snood*. I needed home improvement projects that would send me to bed so tired that I'd sleep right through, and not lie there listening to the rain and wondering if Henry was out in it, maybe coughing from the grippe. Sometimes work is the only thing, the only answer.

The next day I drove to town in my truck and did what I never would have thought of doing if I hadn't needed to borrow 35 dollars: I took out a mortgage for 750. In the end we are all caught in devices of our own making. I believe that. In the end we are all caught.

* * *

In Omaha that same week, a young man wearing a plainsman's hat walked into a pawnshop on Dodge Street and bought a nickel-plated .32 caliber pistol. He paid with 5 dollars that had no doubt been handed to him, under duress, by a half-blind old woman who did business beneath the sign of the Blue Bonnet Girl. The next day, a young man wearing a flat cap on his head and a red bandanna over his mouth and nose walked into the Omaha branch of the First Agricultural Bank, pointed a gun at a pretty young teller named Rhoda Penmark, and demanded all the money in her drawer. She passed over about 200 dollars, mostly in ones and fives—the grimy kind farmers carry rolled up in the pockets of their bib overalls.

As he left, stuffing the money into his pants with one hand (clearly nervous, he dropped several bills on the floor), the portly guard—a retired policeman—said: “Son, you don't want to do this.”

The young man fired his .32 into the air. Several people screamed. “I don't want to shoot you, either,” the young man said from behind his bandanna, “but I will if I have to. Fall back against that post, sir, and stay there if you know what's good for you. I've got a friend outside watching the door.”

The young man ran out, already stripping the bandanna from his face. The guard waited for a minute or so, then went out with his hands raised (he had no sidearm), just in case there really was a friend. There wasn't, of course. Hank James had no friends in Omaha except for the one with his baby growing in her belly.

* * *

I took 200 dollars of my mortgage money in cash and left the rest in Mr. Stoppenhauser's bank. I went shopping at the hardware, the lumberyard, and the grocery store where Henry might have gotten a

letter from his mother . . . if she were still alive to write one. I drove out of town in a drizzle that had turned to slashing rain by the time I got home. I unloaded my newly purchased lumber and shingles, did the feeding and milking, then put away my groceries—mostly dry goods and staples that were running low without Arlette to ride herd on the kitchen. With that chore done, I put water on the woodstove to heat for a bath and stripped off my damp clothes. I pulled the wad of money out of the right front pocket of my crumpled biballs, counted it, and saw I still had just shy of 160 dollars. Why had I taken so much in cash? Because my mind had been elsewhere. *Where* elsewhere, pray? On Arlette and Henry, of course. Not to mention Henry and Arlette. They were pretty much all I thought about on those rainy days.

I knew it wasn't a good idea to have so much cash money around. It would have to go back to the bank, where it could earn a little interest (although not nearly enough to equal the interest on the loan) while I was thinking about how best to put it to work. But in the meantime, I should lay it by someplace safe.

The box with the red whore's hat in it came to mind. It was where she'd stashed her own money, and it had been safe there for God knew how long. There was too much in my wad to fit in the band, so I thought I'd put it in the hat itself. It would only be there until I found an excuse to go back to town.

I went into the bedroom, stark naked, and opened the closet door. I shoved aside the box with her white church-hat in it, then reached for the other one. I'd pushed it all the way to the back of the shelf and had to stand on tiptoe to reach it. There was an elastic cord around it. I hooked my finger under it to pull it forward, was momentarily aware that the hatbox felt much too heavy—as though there were a brick inside it instead of a bonnet—and then there was a strange *freezing* sensation, as though my hand had been doused in ice-water. A moment later the freeze turned to fire. It was a pain so intense that it locked all the muscles in my arm. I stumbled backwards, roaring in surprise and agony and dropping money everywhere. My finger was still hooked into the elastic, and the hatbox came tumbling out. Crouched on top of it was a Norway rat that looked all too familiar.

You might say to me, “Wilf, one rat looks like another,” and ordinarily you’d be right, but I knew this one; hadn’t I seen it running away from me with a cow’s teat jutting from its mouth like the butt of a cigar?

The hatbox came free of my bleeding hand, and the rat tumbled to the floor. If I had taken time to think, it would have gotten away again, but conscious thinking had been canceled by pain, surprise, and the horror I suppose almost any man feels when he sees blood pouring from a part of his body that was whole only seconds before. I didn’t even remember that I was as naked as the day I was born, just brought my right foot down on the rat. I heard its bones crunch and felt its guts squash. Blood and liquefied intestines squirted from beneath its tail and doused my left ankle with warmth. It tried to twist around and bite me again; I could see its large front teeth gnashing, but it couldn’t quite reach me. Not, that was, as long as I kept my foot on it. So I did. I pushed harder, holding my wounded hand against my chest, feeling the warm blood mat the thick pelt that grew there. The rat twisted and flopped. Its tail first lashed my calf, then wrapped around it like a grass snake. Blood gushed from its mouth. Its black eyes bulged like marbles.

I stood there with my foot on the dying rat for a long time. It was smashed to pieces inside, its innards reduced to gruel, and still it thrashed and tried to bite. Finally it stopped moving. I stood on it for another minute, wanting to make sure it wasn’t just playing possum (a rat playing possum—ha!), and when I was sure it was dead, I limped into the kitchen, leaving bloody footprints and thinking in a confused way of the oracle warning Pelias to beware of a man wearing just one sandal. But I was no Jason; I was a farmer half-mad with pain and amazement, a farmer who seemed condemned to foul his sleeping-place with blood.

As I held my hand under the pump and froze it with cold water, I could hear someone saying, “No more, no more, no more.” It was me, I knew it was, but it sounded like an old man. One who had been reduced to beggary.

* * *

I can remember the rest of that night, but it's like looking at old photographs in a mildewy album. The rat had bitten all the way through the webbing between my left thumb and forefinger—a terrible bite, but in a way, lucky. If it had seized on the finger I'd hooked under that elastic cord, it might have bitten the finger entirely off. I realized that when I went back into the bedroom and picked up my adversary by the tail (using my right hand; the left was too stiff and painful to flex). It was two feet long, a six-pounder, at least.

Then it wasn't the same rat that escaped into the pipe, I hear you saying. *It couldn't have been.* But it was, I tell you it was. There was no identifying mark—no white patch of fur or conveniently memorable chewed ear—but I knew it was the one that had savaged Achelois. Just as I knew it hadn't been crouched up there by accident.

I carried it into the kitchen by the tail and dumped it in the ash bucket. This I took out to our swill-pit. I was naked in the pouring rain, but hardly aware of it. What I was mostly aware of was my left hand, throbbing with a pain so intense it threatened to obliterate all thought.

I took my duster from the hook in the mud-room (it was all I could manage), shrugged into it, and went out again, this time into the barn. I smeared my wounded hand with Rawleigh Salve. It had kept Achelois's udder from infecting, and might do the same for my hand. I started to leave, then remembered how the rat had escaped me last time. The pipe! I went to it and bent over, expecting to see the cement plug either chewed to pieces or completely gone, but it was intact. Of course it was. Even six-pound rats with oversized teeth can't chew through concrete. That the idea had even crossed my mind shows the state I was in. For a moment I seemed to see myself as if from outside: a man naked except for an unbuttoned duster, his body-hair matted with blood all the way to the groin, his torn left hand glistening under a thick snotlike coating of cow-salve, his eyes bugging out of his head. The way the rat's had bugged out, when I stepped on it.

It wasn't the same rat, I told myself. *The one that bit Achelois is either lying dead in the pipe or in Arlette's lap.*

But I knew it was. I knew it then and I know it now.

It was.

Back in the bedroom, I got down on my knees and picked up the bloodstained money. It was slow work with only one hand. Once I bumped my torn hand on the side of the bed and howled with pain. I could see fresh blood staining the salve, turning it pink. I put the cash on the dresser, not even bothering to cover it with a book or one of Arlette's damned ornamental plates. I couldn't even remember why it had seemed so important to hide the bills in the first place. The red hatbox I kicked into the closet, and then slammed the door. It could stay there until the end of time, for all of me.

* * *

Anyone who's ever owned a farm or worked on one will tell you that accidents are commonplace, and precautions must be taken. I had a big roll of bandage in the chest beside the kitchen pump—the chest Arlette had always called the “hurt-locker.” I started to get the roll out, but then the big pot steaming on the stove caught my eye. The water I'd put on for a bath when I was still whole and when such monstrous pain as that which seemed to be consuming me was only theoretical. It occurred to me that hot soapy water might be just the thing for my hand. The wound couldn't hurt any worse, I reasoned, and the immersion would cleanse it. I was wrong on both counts, but how was I to know? All these years later, it still seems like a reasonable idea. I suppose it might even have worked, if I had been bitten by an ordinary rat.

I used my good right hand to ladle hot water into a basin (the idea of tilting the pot and pouring from it was out of the question), then added a cake of Arlette's coarse brown washing soap. The last cake, as it turned out; there are so many supplies a man neglects to lay in when he's not used to doing it. I added a rag, then went into the bedroom, got down on my knees again, and began mopping up the blood and guts. All the time remembering (of course) the last time I had cleaned blood from the floor in that damned bedroom. That time at least Henry had been with me to share the horror. Doing it alone, and in pain, was a terrible job. My shadow bumped and flitted on the wall, making me think of Quasimodo in Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*.

With the job almost finished, I stopped and cocked my head, breath held, eyes wide, my heart seeming to thud in my bitten left hand. I heard a *scuttering* sound, and it seemed to come from everywhere. The sound of running rats. In that moment I was sure of it. The rats from the well. Her loyal courtiers. They had found another way out. The one crouched on top of the red hatbox had only been the first and the boldest. They had infiltrated the house, they were in the walls, and soon they would come out and overwhelm me. She would have her revenge. I would hear her laughing as they tore me to pieces.

The wind gusted hard enough to shake the house and shriek briefly along the eaves. The scuttering sound intensified, then faded a bit when the wind died. The relief that filled me was so intense it overwhelmed the pain (for a few seconds, at least). It wasn't rats; it was sleet. With the coming of dark, the temperature had fallen and the rain had become semi-solid. I went back to scrubbing away the remains.

When I was done, I dumped the bloody wash-water over the porch rail, then went back to the barn to apply a fresh coating of salve to my hand. With the wound completely cleansed, I could see that the webbing between my thumb and forefinger was torn open in three slashes that looked like a sergeant's stripes. My left thumb hung askew, as if the rat's teeth had severed some important cable between it and the rest of my left hand. I applied the cow-goop and then plodded back to the house, thinking, *It hurts but at least it's clean. Achelois was all right; I'll be all right, too. Everything's fine.* I tried to imagine my body's defenses mobilizing and arriving at the scene of the bite like tiny firemen in red hats and long canvas coats.

At the bottom of the hurt-locker, wrapped in a torn piece of silk that might once have been part of a lady's slip, I found a bottle of pills from the Hemingford Home Drug Store. Fountain-penned on the label in neat capital letters was **ARLETTE JAMES Take 1 or 2 at Bed-Time for Monthly Pain.** I took three, with a large shot of whiskey. I don't know what was in those pills—morphia, I suppose—but they did the trick. The pain was still there, but it seemed to belong to a Wilfred James currently existing on some other level of reality. My head swam; the ceiling began to turn gently above me;

the image of tiny firemen arriving to douse the blaze of infection before it could take hold grew clearer. The wind was strengthening, and to my half-dreaming mind, the constant low rattle of sleet against the house sounded more like rats than ever, but I knew better. I think I even said so aloud: "I know better, Arlette, you don't fool me."

As consciousness dwindled and I began to slip away, I realized that I might be going for good: that the combination of shock, booze, and morphine might end my life. I would be found in a cold farmhouse, my skin blue-gray, my torn hand resting on my belly. The idea did not frighten me; on the contrary, it comforted me.

While I slept, the sleet turned to snow.

* * *

When I woke at dawn the following morning, the house was as chilly as a tomb and my hand had swelled up to twice its ordinary size. The flesh around the bite was ashy gray but the first three fingers had gone a dull pink that would be red by the end of the day. Touching anywhere on that hand except for the pinky caused excruciating pain. Nevertheless, I wrapped it as tightly as I could, and that reduced the throbbing. I got a fire started in the kitchen stove—one-handed it was a long job, but I managed—and then drew up close, trying to get warm. All of me except for the bitten hand, that was; that part of me was warm already. Warm and pulsing like a glove with a rat hiding inside it.

By midafternoon I was feverish, and my hand had swelled so tightly against the bandages that I had to loosen them. Just doing that made me cry out. I needed doctoring, but it was snowing harder than ever, and I wouldn't be able to get as far as Cotteries', let alone all the way to Hemingford Home. Even if the day had been clear and bright and dry, how would I ever have managed to crank the truck or the T with just one hand? I sat in the kitchen, feeding the stove until it roared like a dragon, pouring sweat and shaking with cold, holding my bandaged club of a hand to my chest, and remembering the way kindly Mrs. McReady had surveyed my cluttered, not-particularly-prosperous dooryard. *Are you on the exchange, Mr. James? I see you are not.*

No. I was not. I was by myself on the farm I had killed for, with no means of summoning help. I could see the flesh beginning to turn red beyond where the bandages stopped: at the wrist, full of veins that would carry the poison all through my body. The firemen had failed. I thought of tying the wrist off with elastics—of killing my left hand in an effort to save the rest of me—and even of amputating it with the hatchet we used to chop up kindling and behead the occasional chicken. Both ideas seemed perfectly plausible, but they also seemed like too much work. In the end I did nothing except hobble back to the hurt-locker for more of Arlette's pills. I took three more, this time with cold water—my throat was burning—and then resumed my seat by the fire. I was going to die of the bite. I was sure of it and resigned to it. Death from bites and infections was as common as dirt on the plains. If the pain became more than I could bear, I would swallow all the remaining pain-pills at once. What kept me from doing it right away—apart from the fear of death, which I suppose afflicts all of us, to a greater or lesser degree—was the possibility that someone might come: Harlan, or Sheriff Jones, or kindly Mrs. McReady. It was even possible that Attorney Lester might show up to hector me some more about those god damned 100 acres.

But what I hoped most of all was that Henry might return. He didn't, though.

It was Arlette who came.

* * *

You may have wondered how I know about the gun Henry bought in the Dodge Street pawnshop, and the bank robbery in Jefferson Square. If you did, you probably said to yourself, *Well, it's a lot of time between 1922 and 1930; enough to fill in plenty of details at a library stocked with back issues of the Omaha World-Herald.*

I *did* go to the newspapers, of course. And I wrote to people who met my son and his pregnant girlfriend on their short, disastrous course from Nebraska to Nevada. Most of those people wrote back, willing enough to supply details. That sort of investigative work makes sense, and no doubt satisfies you. But those investigations

came years later, after I left the farm, and only confirmed what I already knew.

Already? you ask, and I answer simply: *Yes. Already. And I knew it not just as it happened, but at least part of it before it happened. The last part of it.*

How? The answer is simple. My dead wife told me.

You disbelieve, of course. I understand that. Any rational person would. All I can do is reiterate that this is my confession, my last words on earth, and I've put nothing in it I don't know to be true.

* * *

I woke from a doze in front of the stove the following night (or the next; as the fever settled in, I lost track of time) and heard the rustling, scuttering sounds again. At first I assumed it had recommenced sleeting, but when I got up to tear a chunk of bread from the hardening loaf on the counter, I saw a thin orange sunset-streak on the horizon and Venus glowing in the sky. The storm was over, but the scuttering sounds were louder than ever. They weren't coming from the walls, however, but from the back porch.

The door-latch began moving. At first it only trembled, as if the hand trying to operate it was too weak to lift it entirely clear of the notch. The movement ceased, and I had just decided I hadn't seen it at all—that it was a delusion born of the fever—when it went all the way up with a little *clack* sound and the door swung open on a cold breath of wind. Standing on the porch was my wife. She was still wearing her burlap snood, now flecked with snow; it must have been a slow and painful journey from what should have been her final resting place. Her face was slack with decay, the lower half slewed to one side, her grin wider than ever. It was a knowing grin, and why not? The dead understand everything.

She was surrounded by her loyal court. It was they that had somehow gotten her out of the well. It was they that were holding her up. Without them, she would have been no more than a ghost, malevolent but helpless. But they had animated her. She was their queen; she was also their puppet. She came into the kitchen, moving with a horribly boneless gait that had nothing to do with walking. The

rats scurried all around her, some looking up at her with love, some at me with hate. She swayed all the way around the kitchen, touring what had been her domain as clods fell from the skirt of her dress (there was no sign of the quilt or the counterpane) and her head bobbed and rolled on her cut throat. Once it tilted back all the way to her shoulder blades before snapping forward again with a low and fleshy smacking sound.

When she at last turned her cloudy eyes on me, I backed into the corner where the woodbox stood, now almost empty. "Leave me alone," I whispered. "You aren't even here. You're in the well and you can't get out even if you're not dead."

She made a gurgling noise—it sounded like someone choking on thick gravy—and kept coming, real enough to cast a shadow. And I could smell her decaying flesh, this woman who had sometimes put her tongue in my mouth during the throes of her passion. She was there. She was real. So was her royal retinue. I could feel them scurrying back and forth over my feet and tickling my ankles with their whiskers as they sniffed at the bottoms of my longjohn trousers.

My heels struck the woodbox, and when I tried to bend away from the approaching corpse, I over-balanced and sat down in it. I banged my swollen and infected hand, but hardly registered the pain. She was bending over me, and her face . . . *dangled*. The flesh had come loose from the bones and her face hung down like a face drawn on a child's balloon. A rat climbed the side of the wood-box, plopped onto my belly, ran up my chest, and sniffed at the underside of my chin. I could feel others scurrying around beneath my bent knees. But they didn't bite me. That particular task had already been accomplished.

She bent closer. The smell of her was overwhelming, and her cocked ear-to-ear grin . . . I can see it now, as I write. I told myself to die, but my heart kept pounding. Her hanging face slid alongside mine. I could feel my beard-stubble pulling off tiny bits of her skin; could hear her broken jaw grinding like a branch with ice on it. Then her cold lips were pressed against the burning, feverish cup of my ear, and she began whispering secrets that only a dead woman could know. I shrieked. I promised to kill myself and take her place in Hell if she would only stop. But she didn't. She wouldn't. The dead don't stop.

That's what I know now.

* * *

After fleeing the First Agricultural Bank with 200 dollars stuffed into his pocket (or probably more like 150 dollars; some of it went on the floor, remember), Henry disappeared for a little while. He “laid low,” in the criminal parlance. I say this with a certain pride. I thought he would be caught almost immediately after he got to the city, but he proved me wrong. He was in love, he was desperate, he was still burning with guilt and horror over the crime he and I had committed . . . but in spite of those distractions (those *infections*), my son demonstrated bravery and cleverness, even a certain sad nobility. The thought of that last is the worst. It still fills me with melancholy for his wasted life (*three* wasted lives; I mustn't forget poor pregnant Shannon Cotterie) and shame for the ruination to which I led him, like a calf with a rope around its neck.

Arlette showed me the shack where he went to ground, and the bicycle stashed out back—that bicycle was the first thing he purchased with his stolen cash. I couldn't have told you then exactly where his hideout was, but in the years since I have located it and even visited it; just a side-o'-the-road lean-to with a fading Royal Crown Cola advertisement painted on the side. It was a few miles beyond Omaha's western outskirts and within sight of Boys Town, which had begun operating the year before. One room, a single glassless window, and no stove. He covered the bicycle with hay and weeds and laid his plans. Then, a week or so after robbing the First Agricultural Bank—by then police interest in a very minor robbery would have died down—he began making bicycle trips into Omaha.

A thick boy would have gone directly to the St. Eusebia Catholic Home and been snared by the Omaha cops (as Sheriff Jones had no doubt expected he would be), but Henry Freeman James was smarter than that. He sussed out the Home's location, but didn't approach it. Instead, he looked for the nearest candy store and soda fountain. He correctly assumed that the girls would frequent it whenever they could (which was whenever their behavior merited a free afternoon and they had a little money in their bags), and

although the St. Eusebia girls weren't required to wear uniforms, they were easy enough to pick out by their dowdy dresses, downcast eyes, and their behavior—alternately flirty and skittish. Those with big bellies and no wedding rings would have been particularly conspicuous.

A thick boy would have attempted to strike up a conversation with one of these unfortunate daughters of Eve right there at the soda fountain, thus attracting attention. Henry took up a position outside, at the mouth of an alley running between the candy store and the notions shoppe next to it, sitting on a crate and reading the newspaper with his bike leaning against the brick next to him. He was waiting for a girl a little more adventurous than those content simply to sip their ice-cream sodas and then scuttle back to the sisters. That meant a girl who smoked. On his third afternoon in the alley, such a girl arrived.

I have found her since, and talked with her. There wasn't much detective work involved. I'm sure Omaha seemed like a metropolis to Henry and Shannon, but in 1922 it was really just a larger-than-average Midwestern town with city pretensions. Victoria Hallett is a respectable married woman with three children now, but in the fall of 1922, she was Victoria Stevenson: young, curious, rebellious, six months pregnant, and very fond of Sweet Caporals. She was happy enough to take one of Henry's when he offered her the pack.

"Take another couple for later," he invited.

She laughed. "I'd have to be a ding-dong to do that! The sisters search our bags and pull our pockets inside-out when we come back. I'll have to chew three sticks of Black Jack just to get the smell of this one fag off my breath." She patted her bulging tummy with amusement and defiance. "I'm in trouble, as I guess you can see. Bad girl! And my sweetie ran off. Bad *boy*, but the world don't care about that! So then the dapper stuck me in a jail with penguins for guards—"

"I don't get you."

"Jeez! The dapper's my dad! And penguins is what we call the sisters!" She laughed. "You're some country palooka, all right! And how! *Anyway*, the jail where I'm doing time's called—"

"St. Eusebia's."

“Now you’re cooking with gas, Jackson.” She puffed her cig, narrowed her eyes. “Say, I bet I know who you are—Shan Cotterie’s boyfriend.”

“Give that girl a Kewpie doll,” Hank said.

“Well, I wouldn’t get within two blocks of our place, that’s my advice. The cops have got your description.” She laughed cheerily. “Yours and half a dozen other Lonesome Lennies, but none of ’em green-eyed clodhoppers like you, and none with gals as good-looking as Shannon. She’s a real Sheba! Yow!”

“Why do you think I’m here instead of there?”

“I’ll bite—why *are* you here?”

“I want to get in touch, but I don’t want to get caught doing it. I’ll give you 2 bucks to take a note to her.”

Victoria’s eyes went wide. “Buddy, for a 2-spot, I’d tuck a bugle under my arm and take a message to Garcia—that’s how tapped out I am. Hand it over!”

“And another 2 if you keep your mouth shut about it. Now and later.”

“For that you don’t have to pay extra,” she said. “I love pulling the business on those holier-than-thou bitches. Why, they smack your hand if you try to take an extra dinner roll! It’s like *Gulliver Twist!*”

He gave her the note, and Victoria gave it to Shannon. It was in her little bag of things when the police finally caught up with her and Henry in Elko, Nevada, and I have seen a police photograph of it. But Arlette told me what it said long before then, and the actual item matched word for word.

I’ll wait from midnight to dawn behind yr place every night for 2 weeks, the note said. If you don’t show up, I’ll know it’s over between us & go back to Hemingford & never bother you again even tho’ I will go on loving you forever. We are young but we could lie about our ages & start a good life in another place (California). I have some money & know how to get more. Victoria knows how to find me if you want to send me a note, but only once. More would not be safe.

I suppose Harlan and Sallie Cotterie might have that note. If so, they have seen that my son signed his name in a heart. I wonder if that was what convinced Shannon. I wonder if she even needed convincing. It’s possible that all she wanted on earth was to keep

(and legitimize) a baby she had already fallen in love with. That's a question Arlette's terrible whispering voice never addressed. Probably she didn't care one way or the other.

* * *

Henry returned to the mouth of the alley every day after that meeting. I'm sure he knew that the cops might arrive instead of Victoria, but felt he had no choice. On the third day of his vigil, she came. "Shan wrote back right away, but I couldn't get out any sooner," she said. "Some goofy-weed showed up in that hole they have the nerve to call a music room, and the penguins have been on the warpath ever since."

Henry held out his hand for the note, which Victoria gave over in exchange for a Sweet Caporal. There were only four words: *Tomorrow morning. 2 o'clock.*

Henry threw his arms around Victoria and kissed her. She laughed with excitement, eyes sparkling. "Gosh! Some girls get all the luck."

They undoubtedly do. But when you consider that Victoria ended up with a husband, three kids, and a nice home on Maple Street in the best part of Omaha, and Shannon Cotterie didn't live out that curse of a year . . . which of them would *you* say struck lucky?

* * *

I have some money & know how to get more, Henry had written, and he did. Only hours after kissing the saucy Victoria (who took the message *He says he'll be there with bells on* back to Shannon), a young man with a flat cap pulled low on his forehead and a bandanna over his mouth and nose robbed the First National Bank of Omaha. This time the robber got 800 dollars, which was a fine haul. But the guard was younger and more enthusiastic about his responsibilities, which was not so fine. The thief had to shoot him in the thigh in order to effect his escape, and although Charles Griner lived, an infection set in (I could sympathize), and he lost the leg. When I met with him at his parents' house in the spring of 1925, Griner was philosophical about it.

“I’m lucky to be alive at all,” he said. “By the time they got a tourniquet on my leg, I was lying in a pool of blood damn near an inch deep. I bet it took a whole box of Dreft to get *that* mess up.”

When I tried to apologize for my son, he waved it away.

“I never should have approached him. The cap was pulled low and the bandanna was yanked high, but I could see his eyes all right. I should have known he wasn’t going to stop unless he was shot down, and I never had a chance to pull my gun. It was in his eyes, see. But I was young myself. I’m older now. Older’s something your son never got a chance to get. I’m sorry for your loss.”

* * *

After that job, Henry had more than enough money to buy a car—a nice one, a tourer—but he knew better. (Writing that, I again feel that sense of pride: low but undeniable.) A kid who looked like he only started shaving a week or two before, waving around enough wampum to buy an almost-new Olds? That would have brought John Law down on him for sure.

So instead of buying a car, he stole one. Not a touring car, either; he plumped for a nice, nondescript Ford coupe. That was the car he parked behind St. Eusebia’s, and that was the one Shannon climbed into, after sneaking out of her room, creeping downstairs with her traveling bag in her hand, and wriggling through the window of the washroom adjacent to the kitchen. They had time to exchange a single kiss—Arlette didn’t say so, but I still have my imagination—and then Henry pointed the Ford west. By dawn they were on the Omaha-Lincoln Highway. They must have passed close to his old home—and hers—around 3 that afternoon. They might have looked in that direction, but I doubt if Henry slowed; he would not want to stop for the night in an area where they might be recognized.

Their life as fugitives had begun.

Arlette whispered more about that life than I wished to know, and I don’t have the heart to put more than the bare details down here. If you want to know more, write to the Omaha Public Library. For a fee, they will send you hectograph copies of stories having to do with the Sweetheart Bandits, as they became known (and as they called

themselves). You may even be able to find stories from your own paper, if you do not live in Omaha; the conclusion of the tale was deemed heartrending enough to warrant national coverage.

Handsome Hank and Sweet Shannon, the *World-Herald* called them. In the photographs, they looked impossibly young. (And of course they were.) I didn't want to look at those photographs, but I did. There's more than one way to be bitten by rats, isn't there?

The stolen car blew a tire in Nebraska's sandhill country. Two men came walking up just as Henry was mounting the spare. One drew a shotgun from a sling setup he had under his coat—what was called a bandit hammerclaw back in the Wild West days—and pointed it at the runaway lovers. Henry had no chance at all to get his own gun; it was in his coat pocket, and if he'd tried for it, he almost certainly would have been killed. So the robber was robbed. Henry and Shannon walked hand-in-hand to a nearby farmer's house under a cold autumn sky, and when the farmer came to the door to ask how he could help, Henry pointed his gun at the man's chest and said he wanted his car and all his cash.

The girl with him, the farmer told a reporter, stood on the porch looking away. The farmer said he thought she was crying. He said he felt sorry for her, because she was no bigger than a minute, just as pregnant as the old woman who lived in a shoe, and traveling with a young desperado bound for a bad end.

Did she try to stop him? the reporter asked. Try to talk him out of it?

No, the farmer said. Just stood with her back turned, like she thought that if she didn't see it, it wasn't happening. The farmer's old rattletrap Reo was found abandoned near the McCook train depot, with a note on the seat: *Here is your car back, we will send the money we stole when we can. We only took from you because we were in a scrape. Very truly yours, "The Sweetheart Bandits."* Whose idea was that name? Shannon's, probably; the note was in her handwriting. They only used it because they didn't want to give their names, but of such things legends are made.

A day or two later, there was a hold-up in the tiny Frontier Bank of Arapahoe, Colorado. The thief—wearing a flat cap yanked low and a bandanna yanked high—was alone. He got less than \$100 and

drove off in a Hupmobile that had been reported stolen in McCook. The next day, in The First Bank of Cheyenne Wells (which was the only bank of Cheyenne Wells), the young man was joined by a young woman. She disguised her face with a bandanna of her own, but it was impossible to disguise her pregnant state. They made off with \$400 and drove out of town at high speed, headed west. A roadblock was set up on the road to Denver, but Henry played it smart and stayed lucky. They turned south not long after leaving Cheyenne Wells, picking their way along dirt roads and cattle tracks.

A week later, a young couple calling themselves Harry and Susan Freeman boarded the train for San Francisco in Colorado Springs. Why they suddenly got off in Grand Junction I don't know and Arlette didn't say—saw something that put their wind up, I suppose. All I know is that they robbed a bank there, and another in Ogden, Utah. Their version of saving up money for their new life, maybe. And in Ogden, when a man tried to stop Henry outside the bank, Henry shot him in the chest. The man grappled with Henry anyway, and Shannon pushed him down the granite steps. They got away. The man Henry shot died in the hospital two days later. The Sweetheart Bandits had become murderers. In Utah, convicted murderers got the rope.

By then it was near Thanksgiving, although which side of it I don't know. The police west of the Rockies had their descriptions and were on the lookout. I had been bitten by the rat hiding in the closet—I think—or was about to be. Arlette told me they were dead, but they weren't; not when she and her royal court came to visit me, that was. She either lied or prophesied. To me they are both the same.

* * *

Their next-to-last stop was Deeth, Nevada. It was a bitterly cold day in late November or early December, the sky white and beginning to spit snow. They only wanted eggs and coffee at the town's only diner, but their luck was almost all gone. The counterman was from Elkhorn, Nebraska, and although he hadn't been home in years, his mother still faithfully sent him issues of the *World-Herald* in large bundles. He had received just such a bundle a few days before, and

he recognized the Omaha Sweetheart Bandits sitting in one of the booths.

Instead of ringing the police (or pit security at the nearby copper mine, which would have been quicker and more efficient), he decided to make a citizen's arrest. He took a rusty old cowboy pistol from under the counter, pointed it at them, and told them—in the finest Western tradition—to throw up their hands. Henry did no such thing. He slid out of the booth and walked toward the fellow, saying: "Don't do that, my friend, we mean you no harm, we'll just pay up and go."

The counterman pulled the trigger and the old pistol misfired. Henry took it out of his hand, broke it, looked at the cylinder, and laughed. "Good news!" he told Shannon. "These bullets have been in there so long they're green."

He put 2 dollars on the counter—for their food—and then made a terrible mistake. To this day I believe things would have ended badly for them no matter what, yet still I wish I could call to him across the years: *Don't put that gun down still loaded. Don't do that, son! Green or not, put those bullets in your pocket!* But only the dead can call across time; I know that now, and from personal experience.

As they were leaving (*hand-in-hand*, Arlette whispered in my burning ear), the counterman snatched that old horse-pistol off the counter, held it in both hands, and pulled the trigger again. This time it fired, and although he probably thought he was aiming at Henry, the bullet struck Shannon Cotterie in the lower back. She screamed and stumbled forward out the door into the blowing snow. Henry caught her before she could fall and helped her into their last stolen car, another Ford. The counterman tried to shoot him through the window, and that time the old gun blew up in his hands. A piece of metal took out his left eye. I have never been sorry. I am not as forgiving as Charles Griner.

Seriously wounded—perhaps dying already—Shannon went into labor as Henry drove through thickening snow toward Elko, thirty miles to the southwest, perhaps thinking he might find a doctor there. I don't know if there was a doctor or not, but there was certainly a police station, and the counterman rang it with the remains of his eye-ball still drying on his cheek. Two local cops and four members

of the Nevada State Patrol were waiting for Henry and Shannon at the edge of town, but Henry and Shannon never saw them. It's 30 miles between Deeth and Elko, and Henry made only 28 of them.

Just inside the town limits (but still well beyond the edge of the village), the last of Henry's luck let go. With Shannon screaming and holding her belly as she bled all over the seat, he must have been driving fast—too fast. Or maybe he just hit a pothole in the road. However it was, the Ford skidded into the ditch and stalled. There they sat in that high-desert emptiness while a strengthening wind blew snow all around them, and what was Henry thinking? That what he and I had done in Nebraska had led him and the girl he loved to that place in Nevada. Arlette didn't tell me that, but she didn't have to. I knew.

He spied the ghost of a building through the thickening snow, and got Shannon out of the car. She managed a few steps into the wind, then could manage no more. The girl who could do triggeronomy and might have been the first female graduate of the normal school in Omaha laid her head on her young man's shoulder and said, "I can't go any farther, honey, put me on the ground."

"What about the baby?" he asked her.

"The baby is dead, and I want to die, too," she said. "I can't stand the pain. It's terrible. I love you, honey, but put me on the ground."

He carried her to that ghost of a building instead, which turned out to be a line shack not much different from the shanty near Boys Town, the one with the faded bottle of Royal Crown Cola painted on the side. There was a stove, but no wood. He went out and scrounged a few pieces of scrap lumber before the snow could cover them, and when he went back inside, Shannon was unconscious. Henry lit the stove, then put her head on his lap. Shannon Cotterie was dead before the little fire he'd made burned down to embers, and then there was only Henry, sitting on a mean line shack cot where a dozen dirty cowboys had lain themselves down before him, drunk more often than sober. He sat there and stroked Shannon's hair while the wind shrieked outside and the shack's tin roof shivered.

All these things Arlette told me on a day when those two doomed children were still alive. All these things she told me while the rats

crawled around me and her stink filled my nose and my infected, swollen hand ached like fire.

I begged her to kill me, to open my throat as I had opened hers, and she wouldn't.

That was her revenge.

* * *

It might have been two days later when my visitor arrived at the farm, or even three, but I don't think so. I think it was only one. I don't believe I could have lasted two or three more days without help. I had stopped eating and almost stopped drinking. Still, I managed to get out of bed and stagger to the door when the hammering on it commenced. Part of me thought it might be Henry, because part of me still dared hope that Arlette's visit had been a delusion hatched in delirium . . . and even if it had been real, that she had lied.

It was Sheriff Jones. My knees loosened when I saw him, and I pitched forward. If he hadn't caught me, I would have gone tumbling out onto the porch. I tried to tell him about Henry and Shannon—that Shannon was going to be shot, that they were going to end up in a line shack on the outskirts of Elko, that he, Sheriff Jones, had to call somebody and stop it before it happened. All that came out was a garble, but he caught the names.

"He's run off with her, all right," Jones said. "But if Harl came down and told you that, why'd he leave you like *this*? What bit you?"

"Rat," I managed.

He got an arm around me and half-carried me down the porch steps and toward his car. George the rooster was lying frozen to the ground beside the woodpile, and the cows were lowing. When had I last fed them? I couldn't remember.

"Sheriff, you have to—"

But he cut me off. He thought I was raving, and why not? He could feel the fever baking off me and see it glowing in my face. It must have been like carrying an oven. "You need to save your strength. And you need to be grateful to Arlette, because I never would have come out here if not for her."

"Dead," I managed.

“Yes. She’s dead, all right.”

So then I told him I’d killed her, and oh, the relief. A plugged pipe inside my head had magically opened, and the infected ghost which had been trapped in there was finally gone.

He slung me into his car like a bag of meal. “We’ll talk about Arlette, but right now I’m taking you to Angels of Mercy, and I’ll thank you not to upchuck in my car.”

As he drove out of the dooryard, leaving the dead rooster and lowing cows behind (and the rats! don’t forget them! Ha!), I tried to tell him again that it might not be too late for Henry and Shannon, that it still might be possible to save them. I heard myself saying *these are things that may be*, as if I were the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come in the Dickens story. Then I passed out. When I woke up, it was the second of December, and the Western newspapers were reporting “SWEETHEART BANDITS” ELUDE ELKO POLICE, ESCAPE AGAIN. They hadn’t, but no one knew that yet. Except Arlette, of course. And me.

* * *

The doctor thought the gangrene hadn’t advanced up my forearm, and gambled my life by amputating only my left hand. That was a gamble he won. Five days after being carried into Hemingford City’s Angels of Mercy Hospital by Sheriff Jones, I lay wan and ghostly in a hospital bed, twenty-five pounds lighter and minus my left hand, but alive.

Jones came to see me, his face grave. I waited for him to tell me he was arresting me for the murder of my wife, and then handcuff my remaining hand to the hospital bedpost. But that never happened. Instead, he told me how sorry he was for my loss. My loss! What did that idiot know about loss?

* * *

Why am I sitting in this mean hotel room (but not alone!) instead of lying in a murderer’s grave? I’ll tell you in two words: my mother.

Like Sheriff Jones, she had a habit of peppering her conversation with rhetorical questions. With him it was a conversational device he'd picked up during a lifetime in law enforcement—he asked his silly little questions, then observed the person he was talking to for any guilty reaction: a wince, a frown, a small shift of the eyes. With my mother, it was only a habit of speech she had picked up from her own mother, who was English, and passed on to me. I've lost any faint British accent I might once have had, but never lost my mother's way of turning statements into questions. *You'd better come in now, hadn't you?* she'd say. Or *Your father forgot his lunch again; you'll have to take it to him, won't you?* Even observations about the weather came couched as questions: *Another rainy day, isn't it?*

Although I was feverish and very ill when Sheriff Jones came to the door on that late November day, I wasn't delirious. I remember our conversation clearly, the way a man or woman may remember images from a particularly vivid nightmare.

You need to be grateful to Arlette, because I never would have come out here if not for her, he said.

Dead, I replied.

Sheriff Jones: *She's dead, all right.*

And then, speaking as I had learned to speak at my mother's knee: *I killed her, didn't I?*

Sheriff Jones took my mother's rhetorical device (and his own, don't forget) as a real question. Years later—it was in the factory where I found work after I lost the farm—I heard a foreman berating a clerk for sending an order to Des Moines instead of Davenport before the clerk had gotten the shipping form from the front office. *But we always send the Wednesday orders to Des Moines,* the soon-to-be-fired clerk protested. *I simply assumed—*

Assume makes an ass out of you and me, the foreman replied. An old saying, I suppose, but that was the first time I heard it. And is it any wonder that I thought of Sheriff Frank Jones when I did? My mother's habit of turning statements into questions saved me from the electric chair. I was never tried by a jury for the murder of my wife.

Until now, that is.

* * *

They're here with me, a lot more than twelve, lined up along the baseboard all the way around the room, watching me with their oily eyes. If a maid came in with fresh sheets and saw those furry jurors, she would run, shrieking, but no maid will come; I hung the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door two days ago, and it's been there ever since. I haven't been out. I could order food sent up from the restaurant down the street, I suppose, but I suspect food would set them off. I'm not hungry, anyway, so it's no great sacrifice. They have been patient so far, my jurors, but I suspect they won't be for much longer. Like any jury, they're anxious for the testimony to be done so they can render a verdict, receive their token fee (in this case to be paid in flesh), and go home to their families. So I must finish. It won't take long. The hard work is done.

* * *

What Sheriff Jones said when he sat down beside my hospital bed was, "You saw it in my eyes, I guess. Isn't that right?"

I was still a very sick man, but enough recovered to be cautious. "Saw what, Sheriff?"

"What I'd come to tell you. You don't remember, do you? Well, I'm not surprised. You were one sick American, Wilf. I was pretty sure you were going to die, and I thought you might do it before I got you back to town. I guess God's not done with you yet, is he?"

Something wasn't done with me, but I doubted if it was God.

"Was it Henry? Did you come out to tell me something about Henry?"

"No," he said, "it was Arlette I came about. It's bad news, the worst, but you can't blame yourself. It's not like you beat her out of the house with a stick." He leaned forward. "You might have got the idea that I don't like you, Wilf, but that's not true. There's some in these parts who don't—and we know who they are, don't we?—but don't put me in with them just because I have to take their interests into account. You've irritated me a time or two, and I believe that

you'd still be friends with Harl Cotterie if you'd kept your boy on a tighter rein, but I've always respected you."

I doubted it, but kept my lip buttoned.

"As for what happened to Arlette, I'll say it again, because it bears repeating: you can't blame yourself."

I couldn't? I thought *that* was an odd conclusion to draw even for a lawman who would never be confused with Sherlock Holmes.

"Henry's in trouble, if some of the reports I'm getting are true," he said heavily, "and he's dragged Shan Cotterie into the hot water with him. They'll likely boil in it. That's enough for you to handle without claiming responsibility for your wife's death, as well. You don't have to—"

"Just tell me," I said.

Two days previous to his visit—perhaps the day the rat bit me, perhaps not, but around that time—a farmer headed into Lyme Biska with the last of his produce had spied a trio of coydogs fighting over something about twenty yards north of the road. He might have gone on if he hadn't also spied a scuffed ladies' patent leather shoe and a pair of pink step-ins lying in the ditch. He stopped, fired his rifle to scare off the coys, and advanced into the field to inspect their prize. What he found was a woman's skeleton with the rags of a dress and a few bits of flesh still hanging from it. What remained of her hair was a listless brown, the color to which Arlette's rich auburn might have gone after months out in the elements.

"Two of the back teeth were gone," Jones said. "Was Arlette missing a couple of back teeth?"

"Yes," I lied. "Lost them from a gum infection."

"When I came out that day just after she ran off, your boy said she took her good jewelry."

"Yes." The jewelry that was now in the well.

"When I asked if she could have laid her hands on any money, you mentioned 200 dollars. Isn't that right?"

Ah yes. The fictional money Arlette had supposedly taken from my dresser. "That's right."

He was nodding. "Well, there you go, there you go. Some jewelry and some money. That explains everything, wouldn't you say?"

"I don't see—"

“Because you’re not looking at it from a lawman’s point of view. She was robbed on the road, that’s all. Some bad egg spied a woman hitchhiking between Hemingford and Lyme Biska, picked her up, killed her, robbed her of her money and her jewelry, then carried her body far enough into the nearest field so it couldn’t be seen from the road.” From his long face I could see he was thinking she had probably been raped as well as robbed, and that it was probably a good thing that there wasn’t enough of her left to tell for sure.

“That’s probably it, then,” I said, and somehow I was able to keep a straight face until he was gone. Then I turned over, and although I thumped my stump in doing so, I began to laugh. I buried my face in my pillow, but not even that would stifle the sound. When the nurse—an ugly old battleaxe—came in and saw the tears streaking my face, she assumed (which makes an ass out of you *and* me) that I had been crying. She softened, a thing I would have thought impossible, and gave me an extra morphine pill. I was, after all, the grieving husband and bereft father. I deserved comfort.

And do you know why I was laughing? Was it Jones’s well-meaning stupidity? The fortuitous appearance of a dead female hobo who might have been killed by her male traveling companion while they were drunk? It was both of those things, but mostly it was the shoe. The farmer had only stopped to investigate what the coydogs were fighting over because he’d seen a ladies’ patent leather shoe in the ditch. But when Sheriff Jones had asked about footwear that day at the house the previous summer, I’d told him Arlette’s *canvas* shoes were the ones that were gone. The idiot had forgotten.

And he never remembered.

* * *

When I got back to the farm, almost all my livestock was dead. The only survivor was Achelois, who looked at me with reproachful, starveling eyes and lowed plaintively. I fed her as lovingly as you might feed a pet, and really, that was all she was. What else would you call an animal that can no longer contribute to a family’s livelihood?

There was a time when Harlan, assisted by his wife, would have taken care of my place while I was in the hospital; it's how we neighbored out in the middle. But even after the mournful blat of my dying cows started drifting across the fields to him while he sat down to his supper, he stayed away. If I'd been in his place, I might have done the same. In Harl Cotterie's view (and the world's), my son hadn't been content just to ruin his daughter; he'd followed her to what should have been a place of refuge, stolen her away, and forced her into a life of crime. How that "Sweetheart Bandits" stuff must have eaten into her father! Like acid! Ha!

The following week—around the time the Christmas decorations were going up in farmhouses and along Main Street in Hemingford Home—Sheriff Jones came out to the farm again. One look at his face told me what his news was, and I began to shake my head. "No. No more. I won't have it. I can't have it. Go away."

I went back in the house and tried to bar the door against him, but I was both weak and one-handed, and he forced his way in easily enough. "Take hold, Wilf," he said. "You'll get through this." As if he knew what he was talking about.

He looked in the cabinet with the decorative ceramic beer stein on top of it, found my sadly depleted bottle of whiskey, poured the last finger into the stein, and handed it to me. "Doctor wouldn't approve," he said, "but he's not here and you're going to need it."

The Sweetheart Bandits had been discovered in their final hideout, Shannon dead of the counterman's bullet, Henry of one he had put into his own brain. The bodies had been taken to the Elko mortuary, pending instructions. Harlan Cotterie would see to his daughter, but would have nothing to do with my son. Of course not. I did that myself. Henry arrived in Hemingford by train on the eighteenth of December, and I was at the depot, along with a black funeral hack from Castings Brothers. My picture was taken repeatedly. I was asked questions which I didn't even try to answer. The headlines in both the *World-Herald* and the much humbler *Hemingford Weekly* featured the phrase GRIEVING FATHER.

If the reporters had seen me at the funeral home, however, when the cheap pine box was opened, they would have seen real grief; they could have featured the phrase SCREAMING FATHER. The

bullet my son fired into his temple as he sat with Shannon's head on his lap had mushroomed as it crossed his brain and taken out a large chunk of his skull on the left side. But that wasn't the worst. His eyes were gone. His lower lip was chewed away so that his teeth jutted in a grim grin. All that remained of his nose was a red stub. Before some cop or sheriff's deputy had discovered the bodies, the rats had made a merry meal of my son and his dear love.

"Fix him up," I told Herbert Castings when I could talk rationally again.

"Mr. James . . . sir . . . the damage is . . ."

"I see what the damage is. Fix him up. And get him out of that shitting box. Put him in the finest coffin you have. I don't care what it costs. I have money." I bent and kissed his torn cheek. No father should have to kiss his son for the last time, but if any father ever deserved such a fate, it was I.

Shannon and Henry were both buried out of the Hemingford Glory of God Methodist Church, Shannon on the twenty-second and Henry on Christmas Eve. The church was full for Shannon, and the weeping was almost loud enough to raise the roof. I know, because I was there, at least for a little while. I stood in the back, unnoticed, then slunk out halfway through Reverend Thursby's eulogy. Rev. Thursby also presided at Henry's funeral, but I hardly need tell you that the attendance was much smaller. Thursby saw only one, but there was another. Arlette was there, too, sitting next to me, unseen and smiling. Whispering in my ear.

Do you like how things have turned out, Wilf? Was it worth it?

Adding in the funeral cost, the burial expenses, the mortuary expenses, and the cost of shipping the body home, the disposal of my son's earthly remains cost just over \$300. I paid out of the mortgage money. What else did I have? When the funeral was finished, I went home to an empty house. But first I bought a fresh bottle of whiskey.

* * *

1922 had one more trick left in its bag. The day after Christmas, a huge blizzard roared out of the Rockies, socking us with a foot of

snow and gale-force winds. As dark came down, the snow turned first to sleet and then to driving rain. Around midnight, as I sat in the darkened parlor, doctoring my bellowing stump with little sips of whiskey, a grinding, rending sound came from the back of the house. It was the roof coming down on that side—the part I'd taken out the mortgage, at least in part, to fix. I toasted it with my glass, then had another sip. When the cold wind began to blow in around my shoulders, I took my coat from its hook in the mudroom, put it on, then sat back down and drank a little more whiskey. At some point I dozed. Another of those grinding crashes woke me around three o'clock. This time it was the front half of the barn that had collapsed. Achelois survived yet again, and the next night I took her into the house with me. Why? you might ask me, and my answer would be, Why not? Just why the hell not? We were the survivors. We were the survivors.

* * *

On Christmas morning (which I spent sipping whiskey in my cold sitting room, with my surviving cow for company), I counted what was left of the mortgage money, and realized it would not begin to cover the damage done by the storm. I didn't much care, because I had lost my taste for the farming life, but the thought of the Farrington Company putting up a hog butchery and polluting the stream still made me grind my teeth in rage. Especially after the high cost I had paid for keeping those triple-goddamned 100 acres out of the company's hands.

It suddenly struck home to me that, with Arlette officially dead instead of missing, those acres were mine. So two days later I swallowed my pride and went to see Harlan Cotterie.

The man who answered my knock had fared better than I, but that year's shocks had taken their toll, just the same. He had lost weight, he had lost hair, and his shirt was wrinkled—although not as wrinkled as his face, and the shirt, at least, would iron out. He looked sixty-five instead of forty-five.

“Don't hit me,” I said when I saw him ball his fists. “Hear me out.”

“I wouldn’t hit a man with only one hand,” he said, “but I’ll thank you to keep it short. And we’ll have to talk out here on the stoop, because you are never going to set foot inside my house again.”

“That’s fine,” I said. I had lost weight myself—plenty—and I was shivering, but the cold air felt good on my stump, and on the invisible hand that still seemed to exist below it. “I want to sell you 100 acres of good land, Harl. The hundred Arlette was so determined to sell to the Farrington Company.”

He smiled at that, and his eyes sparkled in their new deep hollows. “Fallen on hard times, haven’t you? Half your house and half your barn caved in. Hermie Gordon says you’ve got a cow living in there with you.” Hermie Gordon was the rural route mailman, and a notorious gossip.

I named a price so low that Harl’s mouth fell open and his eyebrows shot up. It was then that I noticed a smell wafting out of the neat and well-appointed Cotterie farmhouse that seemed entirely alien to that place: burnt fried food. Sallie Cotterie was apparently not doing the cooking. Once I might have been interested in such a thing, but that time had passed. All I cared about right then was getting shed of the 100 acres. It only seemed right to sell them cheap, since they had cost me so dear.

“That’s pennies on the dollar,” he said. Then, with evident satisfaction: “Arlette would roll in her grave.”

She’s done more than just roll in it, I thought.

“What are you smiling about, Wilf?”

“Nothing. Except for one thing, I don’t care about that land anymore. The one thing I *do* care about is keeping that god damned Farrington slaughter-mill off it.”

“Even if you lose your own place?” He nodded as if I’d asked a question. “I know about the mortgage you took out. No secrets in a small town.”

“Even if I do,” I agreed. “Take the offer, Harl. You’d be crazy not to. That stream they’ll be filling up with blood and hair and hog intestines—that’s your stream, too.”

“No,” he said.

I stared at him, too surprised to say anything. But again he nodded as if I’d asked a question.

“You think you know what you’ve done to me, but you don’t know all of it. Sallie’s left me. She’s gone to stay with her folks down McCook. She says she may be back, says she’ll think things over, but I don’t think she will be. So that puts you and me in the same old broke wagon, doesn’t it? We’re two men who started the year with wives and are ending it without them. We’re two men who started the year with living children and are ending it with dead ones. The only difference I can see is that I didn’t lose half my house and most of my barn in a storm.” He thought about it. “And I’ve still got both hands. There’s that, I suppose. When it comes to pulling my peter—should I ever feel the urge to—I’d have a choice of which one to use.”

“What . . . why would she—”

“Oh, use your head. She blames me as well as you for Shannon’s death. She said that if I hadn’t gotten on my high horse and sent Shan away, she’d still be alive and living with Henry at your farm just down the road instead of lying frozen in a box underground. She says she’d have a grandchild. She called me a self-righteous fool, and she’s right.”

I reached for him with my remaining hand. He slapped it away.

“Don’t touch me, Wilf. A single warning on that is all you get.”

I put my hand back at my side.

“One thing I know for sure,” he said. “If I took you up on that offer, tasty as it is, I’d regret it. Because that land is cursed. We may not agree on everything, but I bet we would on that. If you want to sell it, sell it to the bank. You’ll get your mortgage paper back, and some cash besides.”

“They’d just turn around and sell it to Farrington!”

“Tough titty said the kitty” was his final word on it as he closed the door in my face.

* * *

On the last day of the year, I drove to Hemingford Home and saw Mr. Stoppenhauser at the bank. I told him that I’d decided I could no longer live on the farm. I told him I would like to sell Arlette’s acreage to the bank and use the balance of the proceeds to retire the

mortgage. Like Harlan Cotterie, he said no. For a moment or two I just sat in the chair facing his desk, not able to believe what I had heard.

“Why not? That’s good land!”

He told me that he worked for a bank, and a bank was not a real estate agency. He addressed me as Mr. James. My days of being Wilf in that office were over.

“That’s just . . .” *Ridiculous* was the word that came to mind, but I didn’t want to risk offending him if there was even a chance he might change his mind. Once I had made the decision to sell the land (and the cow, I would have to find a buyer for Achelois, too, possibly a stranger with a bag of magic beans to trade), the idea had taken hold of me with the force of an obsession. So I kept my voice low and spoke calmly.

“That’s not exactly true, Mr. Stoppenhauser. The bank bought the Rideout place last summer when it came up for auction. The Triple M, as well.”

“Those were different situations. We hold a mortgage on your original 80, and we’re content with that. What you do with that hundred acres of pasturage is of no interest to us.”

“Who’s been in to see you?” I asked, then realized I didn’t have to. “It was Lester, wasn’t it? Cole Farrington’s dogsbody.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Stoppenhauser said, but I saw the flicker in his eyes. “I think your grief and your . . . your injury . . . have temporarily damaged your ability to think clearly.”

“Oh no,” I said, and began to laugh. It was a dangerously unbalanced sound, even to my own ears. “I’ve never thought more clearly in my life, sir. He came to see you—him or another, I’m sure Cole Farrington can afford to retain all the shysters he wants—and you made a deal. You *c-c-colluded!*” I was laughing harder than ever.

“Mr. James, I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“Maybe you had it all planned out beforehand,” I said. “Maybe that’s why you were so anxious to talk me into the god damned mortgage in the first place. Or maybe when Lester heard about my son, he saw a golden opportunity to take advantage of my misfortune and came running to you. Maybe he sat right in this chair and said, ‘This is going to work out for both of us, Stoppie—you get

the farm, my client gets the land by the crick, and Wilf James can go to Hell.' Isn't that pretty much how it went?"

He had pushed a button on his desk, and now the door opened. It was just a little bank, too small to employ a security guard, but the teller who leaned in was a beefy lad. One of the Rohrbacher family, from the look of him; I'd gone to school with his father, and Henry would have gone with his younger sister, Mandy.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Stoppenhauser?" he asked.

"Not if Mr. James leaves now," he said. "Won't you see him out, Kevin?"

Kevin came in, and when I was slow to rise, he clamped a hand just above my left elbow. He was dressed like a banker, right down to the suspenders and the bow tie, but it was a farmer's hand, hard and callused. My still-healing stump gave a warning throb.

"Come along, sir," he said.

"Don't pull me," I said. "It hurts where my hand used to be."

"Then come along."

"I went to school with your father. He sat beside me and used to cheat off my paper during Spring Testing Week."

He pulled me out of the chair where I had once been addressed as Wilf. Good old Wilf, who would be a fool not to take out a mortgage. The chair almost fell over.

"Happy New Year, Mr. James," Stoppenhauser said.

"And to you, you cozening fuck," I replied. Seeing the shocked expression on his face may have been the last good thing to happen to me in my life. I have sat here for five minutes, chewing on the end of my pen and trying to think of one since—a good book, a good meal, a pleasant afternoon in the park—and I can't.

* * *

Kevin Rohrbacher accompanied me across the lobby. I suppose that is the correct verb; it wasn't quite dragging. The floor was marble, and our footfalls echoed. The walls were dark oak. At the high tellers' windows, two women served a little group of year-end customers. One of the tellers was young and one was old, but their big-eyed expressions were identical. Yet it wasn't their horrified, almost

prurient interest that took my own eye; it was captivated by something else entirely. A burlled oak rail three inches wide ran above the tellers' windows, and scurrying busily along it—

“Ware that rat!” I cried, and pointed.

The young teller voiced a little scream, looked up, then exchanged a glance with her older counterpart. There was no rat, only the passing shadow of the ceiling fan. And now everyone was looking at me.

“Stare all you want!” I told them. “Look your fill! Look until your God damned eyes fall out!”

Then I was in the street, and puffing out cold winter air that looked like cigarette smoke. “Don’t come back unless you have business to do,” Kevin said. “And unless you can keep a civil tongue.”

“Your father was the biggest God damned cheater I ever went to school with,” I told him. I wanted him to hit me, but he only went back inside and left me alone on the sidewalk, standing in front of my saggy old truck. And that was how Wilfred Leland James spent his visit to town on the last day of 1922.

* * *

When I got home, Achelois was no longer in the house. She was in the yard, lying on her side and puffing her own clouds of white vapor. I could see the snow-scuffs where she’d gone galloping off the porch, and the bigger one where she had landed badly and broken both front legs. Not even a blameless cow could survive around me, it seemed.

I went into the mudroom to get my gun, then into the house, wanting to see—if I could—what had frightened her so badly that she’d left her new shelter at a full gallop. It was rats, of course. Three of them sitting on Arlette’s treasured sideboard, looking at me with their black and solemn eyes.

“Go back and tell her to leave me alone,” I told them. “Tell her she’s done damage enough. For God’s sake tell her to let me be.”

They only sat looking at me with their tails curled around their plump black-gray bodies. So I lifted my varmint rifle and shot the one in the middle. The bullet tore it apart and splattered its leavings all

over the wallpaper Arlette had picked out with such care 9 or 10 years before. When Henry was still just a little 'un and things among the three of us were fine.

The other two fled. Back to their secret way underground, I have no doubt. Back to their rotting queen. What they left behind on my dead wife's sideboard were little piles of rat-shit and three or four bits of the burlap sack Henry fetched from the barn on that early summer night in 1922. The rats had come to kill my last cow and bring me little pieces of Arlette's *snood*.

I went outside and patted Achelois on the head. She stretched her neck up and lowed plaintively. *Make it stop. You're the master, you're the god of my world, so make it stop.*

I did.

Happy New Year.

* * *

That was the end of 1922, and that is the end of my story; all the rest is epilogue. The emissaries crowded around this room—how the manager of this fine old hotel would scream if he saw them!—will not have to wait much longer to render their verdict. She is the judge, they are the jury, but I'll be my own executioner.

I lost the farm, of course. Nobody, including the Farrington Company, would buy those 100 acres until the home place was gone, and when the hog-butchers finally swooped in, I was forced to sell at an insanely low price. Lester's plan worked perfectly. I'm sure it was his, and I'm sure he got a bonus.

Oh, well; I would have lost my little toehold in Hemingford County even if I'd had financial resources to fall back on, and there is a perverse sort of comfort in that. They say this depression we are in started on Black Friday of last year, but people in states like Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska know it started in 1923, when the crops that survived the terrible storms that spring were killed in the drought that followed, a drought that lasted for 2 years. The few crops that did find their way to the big city markets and the small city agricultural exchanges brought a beggar's price. Harlan Cotterie hung on until 1925 or so, and then the bank took his farm. I happened on that

news while perusing the Bank Sales items in the *World-Herald*. By 1925, such items sometimes took up whole pages in the newspaper. The small farms had begun to go, and I believe that in a hundred years—maybe only 75—they'll all be gone. Come 2030 (if there is such a year), all Nebraska west of Omaha will be one big farm. Probably it will be owned by the Farrington Company, and those unfortunate enough to live on that land will pass their existence under dirty yellow skies and wear gas masks to keep from choking on the stench of dead hogs. And every stream will run red with the blood of slaughter.

Come 2030, only the rats will be happy.

That's pennies on the dollar, Harlan said on the day I offered to sell him Arlette's land, and eventually I was forced to sell to Cole Farrington for even fewer on the dollar. Andrew Lester, attorney-at-law, brought the papers to the Hemingford City rooming house where I was then living, and he smiled as I signed them. Of course he did. The big boys always win. I was a fool to think it could ever be any different. I was a fool, and everyone I ever loved paid the price. I sometimes wonder if Sallie Cotterie ever came back to Harlan, or if he went to her in McCook after he lost the farm. I don't know, but I think Shannon's death probably ended that previously happy marriage. Poison spreads like ink in water.

Meanwhile, the rats have begun to move in from the baseboards of this room. What was a square has become a closing circle. They know that this is just the *after*, and nothing that comes after an irrevocable act matters much. Yet I will finish. And they won't have me while I'm alive; the final small victory will be mine. My old brown jacket is hung on the back of the chair I'm sitting in. The pistol is in the pocket. When I've finished the last few pages of this confession, I'll use it. They say suicides and murderers go to Hell. If so, I will know my way around, because I've been there for the last eight years.

* * *

I went to Omaha, and if it is indeed a city of fools, as I used to claim, then I was at first a model citizen. I set to work drinking up Arlette's

100 acres, and even at pennies on the dollar, it took 2 years. When I wasn't drinking, I visited the places Henry had been during the last months of his life: the grocery and gasoline station in Lyme Biska with the Blue Bonnet Girl on the roof (by then closed with a sign on the boarded-up door reading FOR SALE BY BANK), the pawnshop on Dodge Street (where I emulated my son and bought the pistol now in my jacket pocket), the Omaha branch of the First Agricultural. The pretty young teller still worked there, although her last name was no longer Penmark.

"When I passed him the money, he said thank you," she told me. "Maybe he went wrong, but somebody raised him right. Did you know him?"

"No," I said, "but I knew his family."

Of course I went to St. Eusebia's, but made no attempt to go in and inquire about Shannon Cotterie to the governess or matron or whatever her title may have been. It was a cold and forbidding hulk of a building, its thick stone and slit windows expressing perfectly how the papist hierarchy seems to feel in their hearts about women. Watching the few pregnant girls who slunk out with downcast eyes and hunched shoulders told me everything I needed to know about why Shan had been so willing to leave it.

Oddly enough, I felt closest to my son in an alley. It was the one next to the Gallatin Street Drug Store & Soda Fountain (Schrafft's Candy & Best Homemade Fudge Our Specialty), two blocks from St. Eusebia's. There was a crate there, probably too new to be the one Henry sat on while waiting for a girl adventurous enough to trade information for cigarettes, but I could pretend, and I did. Such pretense was easier when I was drunk, and most days when I turned up on Gallatin Street, I was very drunk indeed. Sometimes I pretended it was 1922 again and it was I who was waiting for Victoria Stevenson. If she came, I would trade her a whole carton of cigarettes to take one message: *When a young man who calls himself Hank turns up here, asking about Shan Cotterie, tell him to get lost. To take his jazz elsewhere. Tell him his father needs him back on the farm, that maybe with two of them working together, they can save it.*

But that girl was beyond my reach. The only Victoria I met was the later version, the one with the three comely children and the respectable title of Mrs. Hallett. I had stopped drinking by then, I had a job at the Bilt-Rite Clothing factory, and had reacquainted myself with razor blade and shaving soap. Given this veneer of respectability, she received me willingly enough. I told her who I was only because—if I am to be honest to the end—lying was not an option. I could see in the slight widening of her eyes that she had noted the resemblance.

“Gee, but he was sweet,” she said. “And so crazy in love. I’m sorry for Shan, too. She was a great gal. It’s like a tragedy out of Shakespeare, isn’t it?”

Only she said it *trad-a-gee*, and after that I didn’t go back to the Gallatin Street alley anymore, because for me Arlette’s murder had poisoned even this blameless young Omaha matron’s attempt at kindness. She thought Henry and Shannon’s deaths were like a *trad-a-gee* out of Shakespeare. She thought it was romantic. Would she still have thought so, I wonder, if she had heard my wife screaming her last from inside a blood-sodden burlap sack? Or glimpsed my son’s eyeless, lipless face?

* * *

I held two jobs during my years in the Gateway City, also known as the City of Fools. You will say of *course* I held jobs; I would have been living on the street otherwise. But men more honest than I have continued drinking even when they want to stop, and men more decent than I have ended up sleeping in doorways. I suppose I could say that after my lost years, I made one more effort to live an actual life. There were times when I actually believed that, but lying in bed at night (and listening to the rats scampering in the walls—they have been my constant companions), I always knew the truth: I was still trying to win. Even after Henry’s and Shannon’s deaths, even after losing the farm, I was trying to beat the corpse in the well. She and her *minions*.

John Hanrahan was the storage foreman at the Bilt-Rite factory. He didn’t want to hire a man with only one hand, but I begged for a

trial, and when I proved to him that I could pull a pallet fully loaded with shirts or overalls as well as any man on his payroll, he took me on. I hauled those pallets for 14 months, and often limped back to the boardinghouse where I was staying with my back and stump on fire. But I never complained, and I even found time to learn sewing. This I did on my lunch hour (which was actually 15 minutes long), and during my afternoon break. While the other men were out back on the loading dock, smoking and telling dirty jokes, I was teaching myself to sew seams, first in the burlap shipping bags we used, and then in the overalls that were the company's main stock-in-trade. I turned out to have a knack for it; I could even lay in a zipper, which is no mean skill on a garment assembly line. I'd press my stump on the garment to hold it in place as my foot ran the electric treadle.

Sewing paid better than hauling, and it was easier on my back, but the Sewing Floor was dark and cavernous, and after four months or so I began to see rats on the mountains of freshly blued denim and hunkering in the shadows beneath the hand-trucks that first brought in the piecework and then rolled it out again.

On several occasions I called the attention of my co-workers to these vermin. They claimed not to see them. Perhaps they really did not. I think it far more likely that they were afraid the Sewing Floor might be temporarily closed down so the ratcatchers could come in and do their work. The sewing crew might have lost three days' wages, or even a week. For men and women with families, that would have been catastrophic. It was easier for them to tell Mr. Hanrahan that I was seeing things. I understood. And when they began to call me Crazy Wilf? I understood that, too. It wasn't why I quit.

I quit because the rats kept moving in.

* * *

I had been putting a little money away, and was prepared to live on it while I looked for another job, but I didn't have to. Only three days after leaving Bilt-Rite, I saw an ad in the paper for a librarian at the Omaha Public Library—must have references or a degree. I had no degree, but I have been a reader my whole life, and if the events of

1922 taught me anything, it was how to deceive. I forged references from public libraries in Kansas City and Springfield, Missouri, and got the job. I felt sure Mr. Quarles would check the references and discover they were false, so I worked at becoming the best librarian in America, and I worked fast. When my new boss confronted me with my deception, I would simply throw myself on his mercy and hope for the best. But there was no confrontation. I held my job at the Omaha Public Library for four years. Technically speaking, I suppose I still hold it now, although I haven't been there in a week and have not 'phoned in sick.

The rats, you see. They found me there, too. I began to see them crouched on piles of old books in the Binding Room, or scuttering along the highest shelves in the stacks, peering down at me knowingly. Last week, in the Reference Room, I pulled out a volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for an elderly patron (it was Ra-St, which no doubt contains an entry for *Rattus norvegicus*, not to mention *slaughterhouse*) and saw a hungry gray-black face staring out at me from the vacant slot. It was the rat that bit off poor Achelois's teat. I don't know how that could be—I'm sure I killed it—but there was no doubt. I recognized it. How could I not? There was a scrap of burlap, *bloodstained* burlap, caught in its whiskers.

Snood!

I brought the volume of *Britannica* to the old lady who had requested it (she wore an ermine stole, and the thing's little black eyes regarded me bleakly). Then I simply walked out. I wandered the streets for hours, and eventually came here, to the Magnolia Hotel. And here I have been ever since, spending the money I have saved as a librarian—which doesn't matter any longer—and writing my confession, which does. I—

One of them just nipped me on the ankle. As if to say *Get on with it, time's almost up*. A little blood has begun to stain my sock. It doesn't disturb me, not in the slightest. I have seen more blood in my time; in 1922 there was a room filled with it.

And now I think I hear . . . is it my imagination?

No.

Someone has come visiting.

I plugged the pipe, but the rats still escaped. I filled in the well, but *she* also found her way out. And this time I don't think she's alone. I think I hear two sets of shuffling feet, not just one. Or—

Three? Is it three? Is the girl who would have been my daughter-in-law in a better world with them as well?

I think she is. Three corpses shuffling up the hall, their faces (what remains of them) disfigured by rat-bites, Arlette's cocked to one side as well . . . by the kick of a dying cow.

Another bite on the ankle.

And another!

How the management would—

Ow! Another. But they won't have me. And my visitors won't, either, although now I can see the doorknob turning and I can smell them, the remaining flesh hanging on their bones giving off the stench of slaughtered

slaught

The gun

god where is the

stop

OH MAKE THEM STOP BITING M

From the *Omaha World-Herald*, April 14th, 1930

LIBRARIAN COMMITS SUICIDE IN LOCAL HOTEL Bizarre Scene Greeted Hotel Security Man

The body of Wilfred James, a librarian at the Omaha Public Library, was found in a local hotel on Sunday when efforts by hotel staff to contact him met with no response. The resident of a nearby room had complained of "a smell like bad meat," and a hotel chambermaid reported hearing "muffled shouting or crying, like a man in pain" late Friday afternoon.

After knocking repeatedly and receiving no response, the hotel's Chief of Security used his pass-key and discovered the body of Mr. James, slumped over the room's writing desk. "I saw a pistol and assumed he had shot himself," the security man said, "but no-one had reported a gunshot, and there was no smell of expended powder. When I checked the gun, I determined it was a badly maintained .25, and not loaded.

"By then, of course, I had seen the blood. I have never seen anything like that before, and never want to again. He had bitten himself all over—arms, legs, ankles, even his toes. Nor was that all. It was clear he had been busy with some sort of writing project, but he had chewed up the paper, as well. It was all over the floor. It looked like paper does when rats chew it up to make their nests. In the end, he chewed his own wrists open. I believe that's what killed him. He certainly must have been deranged."

Little is known of Mr. James at this writing. Ronald Quarles, the head librarian at the Omaha Public Library, took Mr. James on in late 1926. "He was obviously down on his luck, and handicapped by the loss of a hand, but he knew his books and his references were good," Quarles said. "He was collegial but distant. I believe he had been doing factory work before applying for a position here, and he told people that before

losing his hand, he had owned a small farm in Hemingford County.”

The *World-Herald* is interested in the unfortunate Mr. James, and solicits information from any readers who may have known him. The body is being held at the Omaha County Morgue, pending disposition by next of kin. “If no next of kin appears,” said Dr. Tattersall, the Morgue’s Chief Medical Officer, “I suppose he will be buried in public ground.”



STEPHEN KING is the author of more than fifty worldwide bestsellers. He was the recipient of the 2003 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters and the 2007 Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America. He lives in Bangor, Maine, with his wife, novelist Tabitha King.



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Previously published in 2010 in a collection of novellas title *Full Dark, No Stars*

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First Scribner ebook edition September 2014

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AFTERWORD

The stories in this book are harsh. You may have found them hard to read in places. If so, be assured that I found them equally hard to write in places. When people ask me about my work, I have developed a habit of skirting the subject with jokes and humorous personal anecdotes (which you can't quite trust; never trust anything a fiction writer says about himself). It's a form of deflection, and a little more diplomatic than the way my Yankee forebears might have answered such questions: *It's none of your business, chummy*. But beneath the jokes, I take what I do very seriously, and have since I wrote my first novel, *The Long Walk*, at the age of eighteen.

I have little patience with writers who *don't* take the job seriously, and none at all with those who see the art of story-fiction as essentially worn out. It's not worn out, and it's not a literary game. It's one of the vital ways in which we try to make sense of our lives, and the often terrible world we see around us. It's the way we answer the question, *How can such things be?* Stories suggest that sometimes—not always, but sometimes—there's a *reason*.

From the start—even before a young man I can now hardly comprehend started writing *The Long Walk* in his college dormitory room—I felt that the best fiction was both propulsive and assaultive. It gets in your face. Sometimes it shouts in your face. I have no quarrel with literary fiction, which usually concerns itself with extraordinary people in ordinary situations, but as both a reader and a writer, I'm much more interested by ordinary people in extraordinary situations. I want to provoke an emotional, even visceral, reaction in my readers. Making them think *as they read* is not my deal. I put that in italics, because if the tale is good enough and the characters vivid enough, thinking will supplant emotion when the tale has been told and the book set aside (sometimes with relief). I can remember reading George Orwell's *1984* at the age of thirteen or so with growing dismay, anger, and outrage, charging through the

pages and gobbling up the story as fast as I could, and what's wrong with that? Especially since I continue to think about it to this day when some politician (I'm thinking of Sarah Palin and her scurrilous "death-panel" remarks) has some success in convincing the public that white is really black, or vice-versa.

Here's something else I believe: if you're going into a very dark place—like Wilf James's Nebraska farmhouse in "1922"—then you should take a bright light, and shine it on everything. If you don't want to see, why in God's name would you dare the dark at all? The great naturalist writer Frank Norris has always been one of my literary idols, and I've kept what he said on this subject in mind for over forty years: "I never truckled; I never took off my hat to Fashion and held it out for pennies. By God, I told them the truth."

But Steve, you say, you've made a great many pennies during your career, and as for truth . . . that's variable, isn't it? Yes, I've made a good amount of money writing my stories, but the money was a side effect, never the goal. Writing fiction for money is a mug's game. And sure, truth is in the eye of the beholder. But when it comes to fiction, the writer's only responsibility is to look for the truth inside his own heart. It won't always be the reader's truth, or the critic's truth, but as long as it's the *writer's* truth—as long as he or she doesn't truckle, or hold out his or her hat to Fashion—all is well. For writers who knowingly lie, for those who substitute unbelievable human behavior for the way people really act, I have nothing but contempt. Bad writing is more than a matter of shit syntax and faulty observation; bad writing usually arises from a stubborn refusal to tell stories about what people actually do—to face the fact, let us say, that murderers sometimes help old ladies cross the street.

I have tried my best in *Full Dark, No Stars* to record what people might do, and how they might behave, under certain dire circumstances. The people in these stories are not without hope, but they acknowledge that even our fondest hopes (and our fondest wishes for our fellowmen and the society in which we live) may sometimes be vain. Often, even. But I think they also say that nobility most fully resides not in success but in trying to do the right thing . . . and that when we fail to do that, or willfully turn away from the challenge, hell follows.

“1922” was inspired by a nonfiction book called *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973), written by Michael Lesy and featuring photographs taken in the small city of Black River Falls, Wisconsin. I was impressed by the rural isolation of these photographs, and the harshness and deprivation in the faces of many of the subjects. I wanted to get that feeling in my story.

In 2007, while traveling on Interstate 84 to an autographing in western Massachusetts, I stopped at a rest area for a typical Steve King Health Meal: a soda and a candybar. When I came out of the refreshment shack, I saw a woman with a flat tire talking earnestly to a long-haul trucker parked in the next slot. He smiled at her and got out of his rig.

“Need any help?” I asked.

“No, no, I got this,” the trucker said.

The lady got her tire changed, I’m sure. I got a Three Musketeers and the story idea that eventually became “Big Driver.”

In Bangor, where I live, a thoroughfare called the Hammond Street Extension skirts the airport. I walk three or four miles a day, and if I’m in town, I often go out that way. There’s a gravel patch beside the airport fence about halfway along the Extension, and there any number of roadside vendors have set up shop over the years. My favorite is known locally as Golf Ball Guy, and he always appears in the spring. Golf Ball Guy goes up to the Bangor Municipal Golf Course when the weather turns warm, and scavenges up hundreds of used golf balls that have been abandoned under the snow. He throws away the really bad ones and sells the rest at the little spot out on the Extension (the windshield of his car is lined with golf balls—a nice touch). One day when I spied him, the idea for “Fair Extension” came into my mind. Of course I set it in Derry, home of the late and unlamented clown Pennywise, because Derry is just Bangor masquerading under a different name.

The last story in this book came to my mind after reading an article about Dennis Rader, the infamous BTK (bind, torture, and kill) murderer who took the lives of ten people—mostly women, but two of his victims were children—over a period of roughly sixteen years. In many cases, he mailed pieces of his victims’ identification to the police. Paula Rader was married to this monster for thirty-four years,

and many in the Wichita area, where Rader claimed his victims, refuse to believe that she could live with him and not know what he was doing. I did believe—I *do* believe—and I wrote this story to explore what might happen in such a case if the wife suddenly found out about her husband's awful hobby. I also wrote it to explore the idea that it's impossible to fully know anyone, even those we love the most.

All right, I think we've been down here in the dark long enough. There's a whole other world upstairs. Take my hand, Constant Reader, and I'll be happy to lead you back into the sunshine. I'm happy to go there, because I believe most people are essentially good. I know that I am.

It's *you* I'm not entirely sure of.

Bangor, Maine
December 23, 2009

GALLERY BOOKS PRESENTS

“UNDER THE WEATHER”

A NEW STORY FROM
STEPHEN KING...

I've been having this bad dream for a week now, but it must be one of the lucid ones, because I'm always able to back out before it turns into a nightmare. Only this time it seems to have followed me, because Ellen and I aren't alone. There's something under the bed. I can hear it chewing.

You know how it is when you're really scared, right? Your heart seems to stop, your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth, your skin goes cold and goose bumps rise up all over your body. Instead of meshing, the cogs in your head just spin and the whole engine heats up. I almost scream, I really do. I think, *It's the thing I don't want to look at. It's the thing in the window seat.*

Then I see the fan overhead, the blades turning at their slowest speed. I see a crack of early morning light running down the middle of the pulled drapes. I see the graying milkweed fluff of Ellen's hair on the other side of the bed. I'm here on the Upper East Side, fifth floor, and everything's okay. The dream was just a dream. As for what's under the bed—

I toss back the covers and slide out onto my knees, like a man who means to pray. But instead of that, I lift the flounce and peer under the bed. I only see a dark shape at first. Then the shape's head turns and two eyes gleam at me. It's Lady. She's not supposed to be under there, and I guess she knows it (hard to tell what a dog knows and what it doesn't), but I must have left the door open when I came to bed. Or maybe it didn't quite latch and she pushed it open with her snout. She must have brought one of her toys with her from the basket in the hall. At least it wasn't the blue bone or the red rat. Those have squeakers in them, and would have wakened Ellen for sure. And Ellen needs her rest. She's been under the weather.

"Lady," I whisper. "Lady, come out of there."

She only looks at me. She's getting on in years and not so steady on her pins as she used to be, but—as the saying goes—she ain't stupid. She's under Ellen's side, where I can't reach her. If I raise my voice she'll have to come, but she knows (I'm pretty sure she knows) that I won't do that, because if I raise my voice, that will wake Ellen.

As if to prove this, Lady turns away from me and the chewing recommences.

Well, I can handle that. I've been living with Lady for eleven years, nearly half my married life. There are three things that get her on her feet. One is the rattle of her leash and a call of "Elevator!" One is the thump of her food dish on the floor. The third—

I get up and walk down the short hall to the kitchen. From the cupboard I take the bag of Snackin' Slices, making sure to rattle it. I don't have to wait long for the muted clitter of cockerclaws. Five seconds and she's right there. She doesn't even bother to bring her toy.

I show her one of the little carrot shapes, then toss it into the living room. A little mean, maybe, and I know she didn't mean to scare the life out of me, but she did. Besides, the fat old thing can use the exercise. She chases her treat. I linger long enough to start the coffeemaker, then go back into the bedroom. I'm careful to pull the door all the way shut.

Ellen's still sleeping, and getting up early has one benefit: no need for the alarm. I turn it off. Let her sleep a little later. It's a bronchial infection. I was scared for a while there, but now she's on the mend.

I go into the bathroom and officially christen the day by brushing my teeth (I've read that in the morning a person's mouth is as germicidally dead as it ever gets, but the habits we learn as children are hard to break). I turn on the shower, get it good and hot, and step in.

The shower's where I do my best thinking, and this morning I think about the dream. Five nights in a row I've had it. (But who's counting.) Nothing really awful happens, but in a way that's the worst part. Because in the dream I know—absolutely *know*—that something awful *will* happen. If I let it.

I'm in an airplane, in business class. I'm in an aisle seat, which is where I prefer to be, so I don't have to squeeze past anybody if I have to go to the toilet. My tray table is down. On it is a bag of peanuts and an orange drink that looks like a vodka sunrise, a drink I've never ordered in real life. The ride is smooth. If there are clouds, we're above them. The cabin is filled with sunlight. Someone is sitting in the window seat, and I know if I look at him (or her, or possibly *it*), I'll see something that will turn my bad dream into a nightmare. If I look into the face of my seatmate, I may lose my mind.

It could crack open like an egg and all the darkness there is might pour out.

I give my soapy hair a quick rinse, step out, dry off. My clothes are folded on a chair in the bedroom. I take them and my shoes into the kitchen, which is now filling with the smell of coffee. Nice. Lady's curled up by the stove, looking at me reproachfully.

"Don't go giving me the stinkeye," I tell her, and nod toward the closed bedroom door. "You know the rules."

She puts her snout down on the floor between her paws.

* * *

I choose cranberry juice while I wait for the coffee. There's OJ, which is my usual morning drink, but I don't want it. Too much like the drink in the dream, I suppose. I have my coffee in the living room with CNN on mute, just reading the crawl at the bottom, which is all a person really needs. Then I turn it off and have a bowl of All-Bran. Quarter to eight. I decide that if the weather's nice when I walk Lady, I'll skip the cab and walk to work.

The weather's nice all right, spring edging into summer and a shine on everything. Carlo, the doorman, is under the awning, talking on his cell phone. "Yuh," he says. "Yuh, I finally got hold of her. She says go ahead, no problem as long as I'm there. She don't trust nobody, and I don't blame her. She got a lot of nice things up there. You come when? Three? You can't make it earlier?" He tips me a wave with one white-gloved hand as I walk Lady down to the corner.

We've got this down to a science, Lady and I. She does it at pretty much the same place every day, and I'm fast with the poop bag. When I come back, Carlo stoops to give her a pat. Lady waves her tail back and forth most fetchingly, but no treat is forthcoming from Carlo. He knows she's on a diet. Or supposed to be.

"I finally got hold of Mrs. Warshawski," Carlo tells me. Mrs. Warshawski is in 5-C, but only technically. She's been gone for a couple of months now. "She was in Vienna."

"Vienna, is that so," I say.

"She told me to go ahead with the exterminators. She was horrified when I told her. You're the only one on four, five, or six who

hasn't complained. The rest of them . . ." He shakes his head and makes a *whoo* sound.

"I grew up in a Connecticut mill town. It pretty well wrecked my sinuses. I can smell coffee, and Ellie's perfume if she puts it on thick, but that's about all."

"In this case, that's probably a blessing. How *is* Mrs. Nathan? Still under the weather?"

"It'll be a few more days before she's ready to go back to work, but she's a hell of a lot better. She gave me a scare for a while."

"Me, too. She was going out one day—in the rain, naturally—"

"That's El," I say. "Nothing stops her. If she feels like she has to go somewhere, she goes."

"—and I thought to myself, 'That's a real graveyard cough.'" He raises one of his gloved hands in a *stop* gesture. "Not that I really thought—"

"It was on the way to being a hospital cough, anyway. But I finally got her to see the doctor, and now . . . road to recovery."

"Good. Good." Then, returning to what's really on his mind: "Mrs. Warshawski was pretty grossed out when I told her. I said we'd probably just find some spoiled food in the fridge, but I know it's worse than that. So does anybody else on those floors with an intact smeller." He gives a grim little nod. "They're going to find a dead rat in there, you mark my words. Food stinks, but not like that. Only dead things stink like that. It's a rat, all right, maybe a couple of them. She probably put down poison and doesn't want to admit it." He bends down to give Lady another pat. "*You* smell it, don't you, girl? You bet you do."

* * *

There's a litter of purple notes around the coffee-maker. I take the purple pad they came from to the kitchen table and write another.

Ellen: Lady all walked. Coffee ready. If you feel well enough to go out to the park, go! Just not too far. Don't want you to overdo now that you're finally on the mend. Carlo told me again that he "smells a rat." I guess so does everyone else in the neighborhood of 5-C. Lucky for us that you're plugged up and I'm "olfac'trilly challenged."

Haha! If you hear people in Mrs. W's, it's the exterminators. Carlo will be with them, so don't worry. I'm going to walk to work. Need to think summore about the latest male wonder drug. Wish they'd consulted us before they hung that name on it. Remember, DON'T OVERDO. Love you—love you.

I jot half a dozen X's just to underline the point, and sign it with a B in a heart. Then I add it to the other notes around the coffeemaker. I refill Lady's water dish before I leave.

It's twenty blocks or so, and I don't think about the latest male wonder drug. I think about the exterminators, who will be coming at three. Earlier, if they can make it.

* * *

The walk might have been a mistake. The dreams have interrupted my sleep cycle, I guess, and I almost fall asleep during the morning meeting in the conference room. But I come around in a hurry when Pete Wendell shows a mock-up poster for the new Petrov Vodka campaign. I've seen it already, on his office computer while he was fooling with it last week, and looking at it again I know where at least one element of my dream came from.

"Petrov Vodka," Aura McLean says. Her admirable breasts rise and fall in a theatrical sigh. "If that's an example of the new Russian capitalism, it's dead on arrival." The heartiest laughter at this comes from the younger men, who'd like to see Aura's long blond hair spread on a pillow next to them. "No offense to you intended, Pete, it's a great leader."

"None taken," Pete says with a game smile. "We do what we can."

The poster shows a couple toasting each other on a balcony while the sun sinks over a harbor filled with expensive pleasure boats. The cutline beneath reads SUNSET. THE PERFECT TIME FOR A VODKA SUNRISE.

There's some discussion about the placement of the Petrov bottle—right? left? center? below?—and Frank Bernstein suggests that actually adding the recipe might prolong the page view, especially in mags like *Playboy* and *Esquire*. I tune out, thinking about the drink sitting on the tray in my airplane dream, until I realize George

Slattery is calling on me. I'm able to replay the question, and that's a good thing. You don't ask George to chew his cabbage twice.

"I'm actually in the same boat as Pete," I say. "The client picked the name, I'm just doing what I can."

There's some good-natured laughter. There have been many jokes about Vonnell Pharmaceutical's newest drug product.

"I may have something to show you by Monday," I tell them. I'm not looking at George, but he knows where I'm aiming. "By the middle of next week for sure. I want to give Billy a chance to see what he can do." Billy Ederle is our newest hire, and doing his break-in time as my assistant. He doesn't get an invite to the morning meetings yet, but I like him. Everybody at Andrews-Slattery likes him. He's bright, he's eager, and I bet he'll start shaving in a year or two.

George considers this. "I was really hoping to see a treatment today. Even rough copy."

Silence. People study their nails. It's as close to a public rebuke as George gets, and maybe I deserve it. This hasn't been my best week, and laying it off on the kid doesn't look so good. It doesn't feel so good, either.

"Okay," George says at last, and you can feel the relief in the room. It's like a light cool breath of breeze, there and then gone. No one wants to witness a conference room caning on a sunny Friday morning, and I sure don't want to get one. Not with all the other stuff on my mind.

George smells a rat, I think.

"How's Ellen doing?" he asks.

"Better," I tell him. "Thanks for asking."

There are a few more presentations. Then it's over. Thank God.

* * *

I'm almost dozing when Billy Ederle comes into my office twenty minutes later. Check that: I *am* dozing. I sit up fast, hoping the kid just thinks he caught me deep in thought. He's probably too excited to have noticed either way. In one hand he's holding a piece of

poster board. I think he'd look right at home in Podunk High School, putting up a big notice about the Friday night dance.

"How was the meeting?" he asks.

"It was okay."

"Did they bring us up?"

"You know they did. What have you got for me, Billy?"

He takes a deep breath and turns his poster board around so I can see it. On the left is a prescription bottle of Viagra, either actual size or close enough not to matter. On the right—the power side of the ad, as anyone in advertising will tell you—is a prescription bottle of our stuff, but much bigger. Beneath is the cutline: PO-10S, TEN TIMES MORE EFFECTIVE THAN VIAGRA!

As Billy looks at me looking at it, his hopeful smile starts to fade. "You don't like it."

"It's not a question of like or don't like. In this business it never is. It's a question of what works and what doesn't. This doesn't."

Now he's looking sulky. If George Slattery saw that look, he'd take the kid to the woodshed. I won't, although it might feel that way to him because it's my job to teach him. In spite of everything else on my mind, I'll try to do that. Because I love this business. It gets very little respect, but I love it anyway. Also, I can hear Ellen say, you don't let go. Once you get your teeth in something, they stay there. Determination like that can be a little scary.

"Sit down, Billy."

He sits.

"And wipe that pout off your puss, okay? You look like a kid who just dropped his binky in the toilet."

He does his best. Which I like about him. Kid's a trier, and if he's going to work in the Andrews-Slattery shop, he'd better be.

"Good news is I'm not taking it away from you, mostly because it's not your fault Vonnell Pharmaceutical saddled us with a name that sounds like a multivitamin. But we're going to make a silk purse out of this sow's ear. In advertising, that's the main job seven times out of every ten. Maybe eight. So pay attention."

He gets a little grin. "Should I take notes?"

"Don't be a smart-ass. First, when you're shouting a drug, you *never* show a prescription bottle. The logo, sure. The pill itself,

sometimes. It depends. You know why Pfizer shows the Viagra pill? Because it's blue. Consumers like blue. The shape helps, too. Consumers have a very positive response to the shape of the Viagra tab. But people *never like to see the prescription bottle their stuff comes in*. Prescription bottles make them think of sickness. Got that?"

"So maybe a little Viagra pill and a big Po-10s pill? Instead of the bottles?" He raises his hands, framing an invisible cutline. "'Po-10s, ten times bigger, ten times better.' Get it?"

"Yes, Billy, I get it. The FDA will get it, too, and they won't like it. In fact, they could make us take ads with a cutline like that out of circulation, which would cost a bundle. Not to mention a very good client."

"*Why?*" It's almost a bleat.

"Because it *isn't* ten times bigger, and it isn't ten times better. Viagra, Cialis, Levitra, Po-10s, they all have about the same penis-elevation formula. Do your research, kiddo. And a little refresher course in advertising law wouldn't hurt. Want to say Blowhard's Bran Muffins are ten times tastier than Bigmouth's Bran Muffins? Have at it, taste is a subjective judgment. What gets your prick hard, though, and for how long . . ."

"Okay," he says in a small voice.

"Here's the other half. 'Ten times more' anything is—speaking in erectile dysfunction terms—pretty limp. It went out of vogue around the same time as Two Cs in a K."

He looks blank.

"Two cunts in a kitchen. It's how advertising guys used to refer to their TV ads on the soaps back in the fifties."

"You're joking!"

"Afraid not. Now here's something I've been playing with." I jot on a pad, and for a moment I think of all those notes scattered around the coffeemaker back in good old 5-B—why are they still there?

"Can't you just tell me?" the kid asks from a thousand miles away.

"No, because advertising isn't an oral medium," I say. "Never trust an ad that's spoken out loud. Write it down and show it to someone. Show it to your best friend. Or your . . . you know, your wife."

"Are you okay, Brad?"

“Fine. Why?”

“I don’t know, you just looked funny for a minute.”

“Just as long as I don’t look funny when I present on Monday. Now—what does this say to you?” I turn the pad around and show him what I’ve printed there: PO-10S . . . FOR MEN WHO WANT TO DO IT THE HARD WAY.

“It’s like a dirty joke!” he objects.

“You’ve got a point, but I’ve printed it in block caps. Imagine it in a soft italic type, almost a girly type. Maybe even in parentheses.” I add them, although they don’t work with the caps. But they will. It’s a thing I just know, because I can see it. “Now, playing off that, think of a photo showing a big, burly guy. In low-slung jeans that show the top of his underwear. And a sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off, let’s say. See him with some grease and dirt on his guns.”

“Guns?”

“Biceps. And he’s standing beside a muscle car with the hood up. Now, is it still a dirty joke?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“Neither do I, not for sure, but my gut tells me it’ll pull the plow. But not quite as is. The cutline still doesn’t work, you’re right about that, and it’s got to, because it’ll be the basis of the TV and ’Net ads. So play with it. Make it work. Just remember the key word . . .”

Suddenly, just like that, I know where the rest of that damn dream came from.

“Brad?”

“The key word is *hard*,” I say. “Because a man . . . when something’s not working—his prick, his plan, his *life*—he *takes* it hard. He doesn’t want to give up. He remembers how it was, and he wants it that way again.”

Yes, I think. Yes he does.

Billy smirks. “I wouldn’t know.”

I manage a smile. It feels god-awful heavy, as if there are weights hanging from the corners of my mouth. All at once it’s like being in the bad dream again. Because there’s something close to me I don’t want to look at. Only this isn’t a lucid dream I can back out of. This is lucid reality.

* * *

After Billy leaves, I go down to the can. It's ten o'clock, and most of the guys in the shop have off-loaded their morning coffee and are taking on more in our little caff, so I have it to myself. I drop my pants so if someone wanders in and happens to look under the door he won't think I'm weird, but the only business I've come in here to do is thinking. Or remembering.

Four years after coming on board at Andrews-Slattery, the Fasprin Pain Reliever account landed on my desk. I've had some special ones over the years, some breakouts, and that was the first. It happened fast. I opened the sample box, took out the bottle, and the basis of the campaign—what admen sometimes call the heartwood—came to me in an instant. I ditzed around a little, of course—you don't want to make it look *too* easy—then did some comps. Ellen helped. This was just after we found out she couldn't conceive. It was something to do with a drug she'd been given when she had rheumatic fever as a kid. She was pretty depressed. Helping with the Fasprin comps took her mind off it, and she really threw herself into the thing.

Al Andrews was still running things back then, and he was the one I took the comps to. I remember sitting in front of his desk in the sweat-seat with my heart in my mouth as he shuffled slowly through the comps we'd worked up. When he finally put them down and raised his shaggy old head to look at me, the pause seemed to go on for at least an hour. Then he said, "These are good, Bradley. More than good, terrific. We'll meet with the client tomorrow afternoon. You do the prez."

I did the prez, and when the Dugan Drug VP saw the picture of the young working woman with the bottle of Fasprin poking out of her rolled-up sleeve, he flipped for it. The campaign brought Fasprin right up there with the big boys—Bayer, Anacin, Bufferin—and by the end of the year we were handling the whole Dugan account. Billing? Seven figures. Not a low seven, either.

I used the bonus to take Ellen to Nassau for ten days. We left from Kennedy, on a morning that was pelting down rain, and I still remember how she laughed and said, "Kiss me, beautiful," when the

plane broke through the clouds and the cabin filled with sunlight. I did kiss her, and the couple on the other side of the aisle—we were flying in business class—applauded.

That was the best. The worst came half an hour later, when I turned to her and for a moment thought she was dead. It was the way she was sleeping, with her head cocked over on her shoulder and her mouth open and her hair kind of sticking to the window. She was young, we both were, but the idea of sudden death had a hideous possibility in Ellen's case.

"They used to call your condition 'barren,' Mrs. Franklin," the doctor said when he gave us the bad news, "but in your case, the condition could more accurately be called a blessing. Pregnancy puts a strain on the heart, and thanks to a disease that was badly treated when you were a child, yours isn't strong. If you did happen to conceive, you'd be in bed for the last four months of the pregnancy, and even then the outcome would be dicey."

She wasn't pregnant when we left on that trip, but she'd been excited about it for the last two weeks. The climb up to cruising altitude had been plenty rough . . . and she didn't look like she was breathing.

Then she opened her eyes. I settled back into my aisle seat, letting out a long and shaky breath.

She looked at me, puzzled. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. The way you were sleeping, that's all."

She wiped at her chin. "Oh God, did I drool?"

"No." I laughed. "But for a minute there you looked . . . well, dead."

She laughed, too. "And if I was, you'd ship the body back to New York, I suppose, and take up with some Bahama mama."

"No," I said. "I'd take you, anyway."

"What?"

"Because I wouldn't accept it. No way would I."

"You'd have to after a few days. I'd get all smelly."

She was smiling. She thought it was still a game, because she hadn't really understood what the doctor was telling her that day. She hadn't—as the saying goes—taken it to heart. And she didn't know how she'd looked, with the sun shining on her winter-pale cheeks and smudged eyelids and slack mouth. But I'd seen, and I'd

taken it to heart. She *was* my heart, and I guard what's in my heart. Nobody takes it away from me.

"You wouldn't," I said. "I'd keep you alive."

"Really? How? Necromancy?"

"By refusing to give up. And by using an adman's most valuable asset."

"Which is what, Mr. Fasprin?"

"Imagination. Now can we talk about something more pleasant?"

* * *

The call I've been expecting comes around three-thirty. It's not Carlo. It's Berk Ostrow, the building super. He wants to know what time I'm going to be home, because the rat everybody's been smelling isn't in 5-C, it's in our place next door. Ostrow says the exterminators have to leave by four to get to another job, but that isn't the important thing. What's important is what's wrong in there, and by the way, Carlo says no one's seen your wife in over a week. Just you and the dog.

I explain about my deficient sense of smell, and Ellen's bronchitis. In her current condition, I say, she wouldn't know the drapes were on fire until the smoke detector went off. I'm sure Lady smells it, I tell him, but to a dog, the stench of a decaying rat probably smells like Chanel No. 5.

"I get all that, Mr. Franklin, but I still need to get in there to see what's what. And the exterminators will have to be called back. I think you're probably going to be on the hook for their bill, which is apt to be quite high. I could let myself in with the passkey, but I'd really be more comfortable if you were—"

"Yes, I'd be more comfortable, too. Not to mention my wife."

"I tried calling her, but she didn't answer the phone." I can hear the suspicion creeping back into his voice. I've explained everything, advertising men are good at that, but the convincing effect only lasts for sixty seconds or so.

"She's probably got it on mute. Plus, the medication the doctor gave her makes her sleep quite heavily."

“What time will you be home, Mr. Franklin? I can stay until seven; after that there’s only Alfredo.” The disparaging note in his voice suggests I’d be better off dealing with a no-English wetback.

Never, I think. I’ll never be home. In fact, I was never there in the first place. Ellen and I enjoyed the Bahamas so much we moved to Cable Beach, and I took a job with a little firm in Nassau. I shouted Cruise Ship Specials, Stereo Blowout Sales, and supermarket openings. All this New York stuff has just been a lucid dream, one I can back out of at any time.

“Mr. Franklin? Are you there?”

“Sure. Just thinking.” What I’m thinking is that if I leave right now, and take a taxi, I can be there in twenty minutes. “I’ve got one meeting I absolutely can’t miss, but why don’t you meet me in the apartment around six?”

“How about in the lobby, Mr. Franklin? We can go up together.”

I think of asking him how he believes I’d get rid of my murdered wife’s body at rush hour—because that *is* what he’s thinking. Maybe it’s not at the very front of his mind, but it’s not all the way in back, either. Does he think I’d use the service elevator? Or maybe dump her down the incinerator chute?

“The lobby is absolutely okey-fine,” I say. “Six. Quarter of, if I can possibly make it.”

I hang up and head for the elevators. I have to pass the caff to get there. Billy Ederle’s leaning in the doorway, drinking a Nozzy. It’s a remarkably lousy soda, but it’s all we vend. The company’s a client.

“Where are you off to?”

“Home. Ellen called. She’s not feeling well.”

“Don’t you want your briefcase?”

“No.” I don’t expect to be needing my briefcase for a while. In fact, I may never need it again.

“I’m working on the new Po-10s direction. I think it’s going to be a winner.”

“I’m sure,” I say, and I am. Billy Ederle will soon be movin’ on up, and good for him. “I’ve got to get a wiggle on.”

“Sure, I understand.” He’s twenty-four and understands nothing. “Give her my best.”

* * *

We take on half a dozen interns a year at Andrews-Slattery; it's how Billy Ederle got started. Most are terrific, and at first Fred Willits seemed terrific, too. I took him under my wing, and so it became my responsibility to fire him—I guess you'd say that, although interns are never actually "hired" in the first place—when it turned out he was a klepto who had decided our supply room was his private game preserve. God knows how much stuff he lifted before Maria Ellington caught him loading reams of paper into his suitcase-sized briefcase one afternoon. Turned out he was a bit of a psycho, too. He went nuclear when I told him he was through. Pete Wendell called security while the kid was yelling at me in the lobby and had him removed forcibly.

Apparently old Freddy had a lot more to say, because he started hanging around my building and haranguing me when I came home. He kept his distance, though, and the cops claimed he was just exercising his right to free speech. But it wasn't his mouth I was afraid of. I kept thinking he might have lifted a box cutter or an X-ACTO knife as well as printer cartridges and about fifty reams of copier paper. That was when I got Alfredo to give me a key to the service entrance, and I started going in that way. All that was in the fall of the year, September or October. Young Mr. Willits gave up and took his issues elsewhere when the weather turned cold, but Alfredo never asked for the return of the key, and I never gave it back. I guess we both forgot.

That's why, instead of giving the taxi driver my address, I get him to let me out on the next block. I pay him, adding a generous tip—hey, it's only money—and then walk down the service alley. I have a bad moment when the key doesn't work, but when I jiggle it a little, it turns. The service elevator has brown quilted movers' pads hanging from the walls. Previews of the padded cell they'll put me in, I think, but of course that's just melodrama. I'll probably have to take a leave of absence from the shop, and what I've done is a lease breaker for sure, but—

What *have* I done, exactly?

For that matter, what have I been doing for the last week?

“Keeping her alive,” I say as the elevator stops at the fifth floor. “Because I couldn’t bear for her to be dead.”

She *isn’t* dead, I tell myself, just under the weather. It sucks as a cutline, but for the last week it has served me very well, and in the advertising biz the short term is what counts.

I let myself in. The air is still and warm, but I don’t smell anything. So I tell myself, and in the advertising biz imagination is *also* what counts.

“Honey, I’m home,” I call. “Are you awake? Feeling any better?”

I guess I forgot to close the bedroom door before I left this morning, because Lady slinks out. She’s licking her chops. She gives me a guilty glance, then waddles into the living room with her tail tucked way down low. She doesn’t look back.

“Honey? EI?”

I go into the bedroom. There’s still nothing to be seen of her but the milkweed fluff of her hair and the shape of her body under the quilt. The quilt is slightly rumpled, so I know she’s been up—if only to have some coffee—and then gone back to bed again. It was last Friday when I came home and she wasn’t breathing and since then she’s been sleeping a lot.

I go around to her side and see her hand hanging down. There’s not much left of it but bones and hanging strips of flesh. I gaze at this and think there’s two ways of seeing it. Look at it one way, and I’ll probably have to have my dog—Ellen’s dog, really, Lady always loved Ellen best—euthanized. Look at it another way and you could say Lady got worried and was trying to wake her up. Come on, Ellie, I want to go to the park. Come on, Ellie, let’s play with my toys.

I tuck the reduced hand under the sheets. That way it won’t get cold. Then I wave away some flies. I can’t remember ever seeing flies in our apartment before. They probably smelled that dead rat Carlo was talking about.

“You know Billy Ederle?” I say. “I gave him a slant on that damn Po-10s account, and I think he’s going to run with it.”

Nothing from Ellen.

“You can’t be dead,” I say. “That’s unacceptable.”

Nothing from Ellen.

“Do you want coffee?” I glance at my watch. “Something to eat? We’ve got chicken soup. Just the kind that comes in the pouches, but it’s not bad when it’s hot. What do you say, EI?”

She says nothing.

“All right,” I say. “That’s all right. Remember when we went to the Bahamas, hon? When we went snorkeling and you had to quit because you were crying? And when I asked why, you said, ‘Because it’s all so beautiful.’”

Now *I’m* the one who’s crying.

“Are you sure you don’t want to get up and walk around a little? I’ll open the windows and let in some fresh air.”

Nothing from Ellen.

I sigh. I stroke that fluff of hair. “All right,” I say, “why don’t you just sleep for a little while longer? I’ll sit here beside you.”

The poster features a central image of Earth from space, with a bright orange and yellow horizon line. The background is a dark, swirling nebula of red and orange. The text is centered and reads:

Stephen King's
THE
LANGOLIERS

Prepare yourself for the flight of your life!

THE LANGOLIERS

Stephen King

ONE PAST MIDNIGHT: A note on 'The Langoliers'

Stories come at different times and places for me - in the car, in the shower, while walking, even while standing around at parties. On a couple of occasions, stories have come to me in dreams. But it's very rare for me to write one as soon as the idea comes, and I don't keep an 'idea notebook.' Not writing ideas down is an exercise in self-preservation. I get a lot of them, but only a small percentage are any good, so I tuck them all into a kind of mental file. The bad ones eventually self-destruct in there, like the tape from *Control* at the beginning of every *Mission: Impossible* episode. The good ones don't do that. Every now and then, when I open the file drawer to peek at what's left inside, this small handful of ideas looks up at me, each with its own bright central image.

With 'The Langoliers,' that image was of a woman pressing her hand over a crack in the wall of a commercial jetliner.

It did no good to tell myself I knew very little about commercial aircraft; I did exactly that, but the image was there every time I opened the file cabinet to dump in another idea, nevertheless. It got so I could even smell that woman's perfume (it was L'Envoi), see her green eyes, and hear her rapid, frightened breathing.

One night, while I was lying in bed, on the edge of sleep, I realized this woman was a ghost.

I remember sitting up, swinging my feet out onto the floor, and turning on the light. I sat that way for a little while, not thinking about much of anything ... at least on top. Underneath, however, the guy who really runs this job for me was busy clearing his work-space and getting ready to start up all his machines again. The next day, I - or he - began writing this story. It took about a month, and it came the most easily of all the stories in this book, layering itself sweetly and naturally as it went along. Once in awhile both stories and babies arrive in the world almost without labor pains, and this story was like that. Because it had an apocalyptic feel similar to an earlier novella of mine called 'The Mist,' I headed each chapter in the same old-

fashioned, rococo way. I came out of this one feeling almost as good about it as I did going in ... a rare occurrence.

I'm a lazy researcher, but I tried very hard to do my homework this time. Three pilots - Michael Russo, Frank Soares, and Douglas Damon - helped me to get my facts straight and keep them straight. They were real sports, once I promised not to break anything.

Have I gotten everything right? I doubt it. Not even the great Daniel Defoe did that; in *Robinson Crusoe*, our hero strips naked, swims out to the ship he has recently escaped ... and then fills up his pockets with items he will need to stay alive on his desert island. And then there is the novel (title and author will be mercifully omitted here) about the New York subway system where the writer apparently mistook the motormen's cubicles for public toilets.

My standard *caveat* goes like this: for what I got right, thank Messrs Russo, Soares, and Damon. For what I got wrong, blame me. Nor is the statement one of hollow politeness. Factual mistakes usually result from a failure to ask the right question and not from erroneous information. I *have* taken a liberty or two with the airplane you will shortly be entering; these liberties are small, and seemed necessary to the course of the tale.

Well, that's enough out of me; step aboard.

Let's fly the unfriendly skies.

CHAPTER 1

Bad News for Captain Engle. The Little Blind Girl. The Lady's Scent. The Dalton Gang Arrives in Tombstone. The Strange Plight of Flight 29.

1

Brian Engle rolled the American Pride L1011 to a stop at Gate 22 and flicked off the FASTEN SEATBELT light at exactly 10:14 P.M. He let a long sigh hiss through his teeth and unfastened his shoulder harness.

He could not remember the last time he had been so relieved - and so tired - at the end of a flight. He had a nasty, pounding headache, and his plans for the evening were firmly set. No drink in the pilots' lounge, no dinner, not even a bath when he got back to Westwood. He intended to fall into bed and sleep for fourteen hours.

American Pride's Flight 7 - Flagship Service from Tokyo to Los Angeles - had been delayed first by strong headwinds and then by typical congestion at LAX ... which was, Engle thought, arguably America's worst airport, if you left out Logan in Boston. To make matters worse, a pressurization problem had developed during the latter part of the flight. Minor at first, it had gradually worsened until it was scary. It had almost gotten to the point where a blowout and explosive decompression could have occurred ... and had mercifully grown no worse. Sometimes such problems suddenly and mysteriously stabilized themselves, and that was what had happened this time. The passengers now disembarking just behind the control cabin had not the slightest idea how close they had come to being people pats on tonight's flight from Tokyo, but Brian knew ... and it had given him a whammer of a headache.

'This bitch goes right into diagnostic from here,' he told his co-pilot. 'They know it's coming and what the problem is, right?'

The co-pilot nodded. 'They don't like it, but they know.'

'I don't give a shit what they like and what they don't like, Danny. We came close tonight.'

Danny Keene nodded. He knew they had.

Brian sighed and rubbed a hand up and down the back of his neck. His head ached like a bad tooth. 'Maybe I'm getting too old for this business.'

That was, of course, the sort of thing anyone said about his job from time to time, particularly at the end of a bad shift, and Brian knew damned well he wasn't too old for the job - at forty-three, he was just entering prime time for airline pilots. Nevertheless, tonight he almost believed it. God, he was tired.

There was a knock at the compartment door; Steve Searles, the navigator, turned in his seat and opened it without standing up. A man in a green American Pride blazer was standing there. He looked like a gate agent, but Brian knew he wasn't. It was John (or maybe it was James) Deegan, Deputy Chief of Operations for American Pride at LAX.

'Captain Engle?'

'Yes?' An internal set of defenses went up, and his headache flared. His first thought, born not of logic but of strain and weariness, was that they were going to try and pin responsibility for the leaky aircraft on him. Paranoid, of course, but he was in a paranoid frame of mind.

'I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, Captain.'

'Is this about the leak?' Brian's voice was too sharp, and a few of the disembarking passengers glanced around, but it was too late to do anything about that now.

Deegan was shaking his head. 'It's your wife, Captain Engle.'

For a moment Brian didn't have the foggiest notion what the man was talking about and could only stand there, gaping at him and feeling exquisitely stupid. Then the penny dropped. He meant Anne, of course.

'She's my ex-wife. We were divorced eighteen months ago. What about her?'

'There's been an accident,' Deegan said. 'Perhaps you'd better come up to the office.'

Brian looked at him curiously. After the last three long, tense hours, all of this seemed strangely unreal. He resisted an urge to tell Deegan that if this was some sort of *Candid Camera* bullshit, he could go fuck himself. But of course it wasn't. Airline brass weren't into pranks and games, especially at the expense of pilots who had just come very close to having nasty midair mishaps.

'What about Anne?' Brian heard himself asking again, this time in a softer voice. He was aware that his co-pilot was looking at him with cautious sympathy. 'Is she all right?'

Deegan looked down at his shiny shoes and Brian knew that the news was very bad indeed, that Anne was a lot more than not all right. Knew, but found it impossible to believe. Anne was only thirty-four, healthy, and careful in her habits. He had also thought on more than one occasion that she was the only completely sane driver in the city of Boston ... perhaps in the whole state of Massachusetts.

Now he heard himself asking something else, and it was really like that - as if some stranger had stepped into his brain and was using his mouth as a loudspeaker. 'Is she dead?'

John or James Deegan looked around, as if for support, but there was only a single flight attendant standing by the hatch, wishing the deplaning passengers a pleasant evening in Los Angeles and glancing anxiously toward the cockpit every now and then, probably worried about the same thing that had crossed Brian's mind - that the crew was for some reason to be blamed for the slow leak which had made the last few hours of the flight such a nightmare. Deegan was on his own. He looked at Brian again and nodded. 'Yes - I'm afraid she is. Would you come with me, Captain Engle?'

2

At quarter past midnight, Brian Engle was settling into seat 5A of American Pride's Flight 29 - Flagship Service from Los Angeles to Boston. In fifteen minutes or so, that flight known to transcontinental travellers as the red-eye would be airborne. He remembered thinking earlier that if LAX wasn't the most dangerous commercial airport in America, then Logan was. Through the most unpleasant of

coincidences, he would now have a chance to experience both places within an eight-hour span of time: into LAX as the pilot, into Logan as a deadheading passenger.

His headache, now a good deal worse than it had been upon landing Flight 7, stepped up another notch.

A fire, he thought. A goddamned fire. What happened to the smoke-detectors, for Christ's sake? It was a brand-new building.'

It occurred to him that he had hardly thought about Anne at all for the last four or five months. During the first year of the divorce, she was all he *had* thought about, it seemed - what she was doing, what she was wearing, and, of course, who she was seeing. When the healing finally began, it had happened very fast ... as if he had been injected with some spirit-reviving antibiotic. He had read enough about divorce to know what that reviving agent usually was: not an antibiotic but another woman. The rebound effect, in other words.

There had been no other woman for Brian - at least not yet. A few dates and one cautious sexual encounter (he had come to believe that all sexual encounters outside of marriage in the Age of AIDS were cautious), but no other woman. He had simply ... healed.

Brian watched his fellow passengers come aboard. A young woman with blonde hair was walking with a little girl in dark glasses. The little girl's hand was on the blonde's elbow. The woman murmured to her charge, the girl looked immediately toward the sound of her voice, and Brian understood she was blind - it was something in the gesture of the head. Funny, he thought, how such small gestures could tell so much.

Anne, he thought. Shouldn't you be thinking about Anne?

But his tired mind kept trying to slip away from the subject of Anne Anne -who had been his wife, Anne, who was the only woman he had ever struck in anger, Anne who was now dead.

He supposed he could go on a lecture tour; he would talk to groups of divorced men. Hell, divorced women as well, for that matter. His subject would be divorce and the art of forgetfulness.

Shortly after the fourth anniversary is the optimum time for divorce, he would tell them. Take my case, I spent the following year in purgatory, wondering just how much of it was my fault and how much was hers, wondering how right or wrong it was to keep pushing her

on the subject of kids - that was the big thing with us, nothing dramatic like drugs or adultery, just the old kids-versus-career thing - and then it was like there was an express elevator inside my head, and Anne was in it, and down it went.

Yes. Down it had gone. And for the last several months, he hadn't really thought of Anne at all ... not even when the monthly alimony check was due. It was a very reasonable, very civilized amount; Anne had been making eighty thousand a year on her own before taxes. His lawyer paid it, and it was just another item on the monthly statement Brian got, a little two thousand-dollar item tucked between the electricity bill and the mortgage payment on the condo.

He watched a gangly teenaged boy with a violin case under his arm and a *yarmulke* on his head walk down the aisle. The boy looked both nervous and excited, his eyes full of the future. Brian envied him.

There had been a lot of bitterness and anger between the two of them during the last year of the marriage, and finally, about four months before the end, it had happened: his hand had said go before his brain could say no. He didn't like to remember that. She'd had too much to drink at a party, and she had really torn into him when they got home.

Leave me alone about it, Brian. Just leave me alone. No more talk about kids. If you want a sperm-test, go to a doctor. My job is advertising, not baby-making. I'm so tired of all your macho bullsh-

That was when he had slapped her, hard, across the mouth. The blow had clipped the last word off with brutal neatness. They had stood looking at each other in the apartment where she would later die, both of them more shocked and frightened than they would ever admit (except maybe now, sitting here in seat 5A and watching Flight 29's passengers come on board, he was admitting it, finally admitting it to himself). She had touched her mouth, which had started to bleed. She held out her fingers toward him.

You hit me, she said. It was not anger in her voice but wonder. He had an idea it might have been the first time anyone had ever laid an angry hand upon any part of Anne Quinlan Engle's body.

Yes, he had said. *You bet. And I'll do it again if you don't shut up. You're not going to whip me with that tongue of yours anymore,*

sweetheart. You better put a padlock on it. I'm telling you for your own good. Those days are over. If you want something to kick around the house, buy a dog.

The marriage had crutched along for another few months, but it had really ended in that moment when Brian's palm made brisk contact with the side of Anne's mouth. He had been provoked - God knew he had been provoked - but he still would have given a great deal to take that one wretched second back.

As the last passengers began to trickle on board, he found himself also thinking, almost obsessively, about Anne's perfume. He could recall its fragrance exactly, but not the name. What had it been? Lissome? Lithsome? Lithium, for God's sake? It danced just beyond his grasp. It was maddening.

I miss her, he thought dully. *Now that she's gone forever, I miss her. Isn't that amazing?*

Lawnboy? Something stupid like that?

Oh stop it, he told his weary mind. *Put a cork in it.*

Okay,

his mind agreed.

No problem; I can quit. I can quit anytime I want. Was it maybe Lifebuoy? No - that's soap. Sorry. Lovebite? Lovelorn?

Brian snapped his seatbelt shut, leaned back, closed his eyes, and smelled a perfume he could not quite name.

That was when the flight attendant spoke to him. Of course: Brian Engle had a theory that they were taught - in a highly secret post-graduate course, perhaps called Teasing the Geese - to wait until the passenger closed his or her eyes before offering some not-quite-essential service. And, of course, they were to wait until they were reasonably sure the passenger was asleep before waking them to ask if he would like a blanket or a pillow.

'Pardon me ...' she began, then stopped. Brian saw her eyes go from the epaulets on the shoulders of his black jacket to the hat, with its meaningless squiggle of scrambled eggs, on the empty seat beside him.

She rethought herself and started again.

'Pardon me, Captain, would you like coffee or orange juice?' Brian was faintly amused to see he had flustered her a little. She gestured toward the table at the front of the compartment, just below the small rectangular movie screen. There were two ice-buckets on the table. The slender green neck of a wine bottle poked out of each. 'Of course, I also have champagne.'

Engle considered

(Love Bo that's not it close but no cigar)

the champagne, but only briefly. 'Nothing, thanks,' he said. 'And no in-flight service. I think I'll sleep all the way to Boston. How's the weather look?'

'Clouds at 20,000 feet from the Great Plains all the way to Boston, but no problem. We'll be at thirty-six. Oh, and we've had reports of the aurora borealis over the Mojave Desert. You might want to stay awake for that.'

Brian raised his eyebrows. 'You're kidding. The aurora borealis over California? And at this time of year?'

'That's what we've been told.'

'Somebody's been taking too many cheap drugs,' Brian said, and she laughed. 'I think I'll just snooze, thanks.'

'Very good, Captain.' She hesitated a moment longer. 'You're the captain who just lost his wife, aren't you?'

The headache pulsed and snarled, but he made himself smile. This woman -who was really no more than a girl - meant no harm. 'She was my ex-wife, but otherwise, yes. I am.'

'I'm awfully sorry for your loss.'

'Thank you.'

'Have I flown with you before, sir?'

His smile reappeared briefly. 'I don't think so. I've been on overseas for the past four years or so.' And because it seemed somehow necessary, he offered his hand. 'Brian Engle.'

She shook it. 'Melanie Trevor.'

Engle smiled at her again, then leaned back and closed his eyes once more. He let himself drift, but not sleep - the pre-flight announcements, followed by the take-off roll, would only wake him up again. There would be time enough to sleep when they were in the air.

Flight 29, like most red-eye flights, left promptly - Brian reflected that was high on their meager list of attractions. The plane was a 767, a little over half full. There were half a dozen other passengers in first class. None of them looked drunk or rowdy to Brian. That was good. Maybe he really would sleep all the way to Boston.

He watched Melanie Trevor patiently as she pointed out the exit doors, demonstrated how to use the little gold cup if there was a pressure loss (a procedure Brian had been reviewing in his own mind, and with some urgency, not long ago), and how to inflate the life vest under the seat. When the plane was airborne, she came by his seat and asked him again if she could get him something to drink. Brian shook his head, thanked her, then pushed the button which caused his seat to recline. He closed his eyes and promptly fell asleep.

He never saw Melanie Trevor again.

3

About three hours after Flight 29 took off, a little girl named Dinah Bellman woke up and asked her Aunt Vicky if she could have a drink of water.

Aunt Vicky did not answer, so Dinah asked again. When there was still no answer, she reached over to touch her aunt's shoulder, but she was already quite sure that her hand would touch nothing but the back of an empty seat, and that was what happened. Dr Feldman had told her that children who were blind from birth often developed a high sensitivity - almost a kind of radar - to the presence or absence of people in their immediate area, but Dinah hadn't really needed the information. She knew it was true. It didn't always work, but it usually did ... especially if the person in question was her Sighted Person.

Well, she's gone to the bathroom and she'll be right back, Dinah thought, but she felt an odd, vague disquiet settle over her just the same. She hadn't come awake all at once; it had been a slow process, like a diver kicking her way to the surface of a lake. If Aunt

Vicky, who had the window seat, had brushed by her to get to the aisle in the last two or three minutes, Dinah should have felt her.

So she went sooner, she told herself. Probably she had to Number Two - It's really no big deal, Dinah. Or maybe she stopped to talk with somebody on her way back.

Except Dinah couldn't hear *anyone* talking in the big airplane's main cabin; only the steady soft drone of the jet engines. Her feeling of disquiet grew.

The voice of Miss Lee, her therapist (except Dinah always thought of her as her blind teacher), spoke up in her head: *You mustn't be afraid to be afraid, Dinah - all children are afraid from time to time, especially in situations that are new to them. That goes double for children who are blind. Believe me, I know.* And Dinah did believe her, because, like Dinah herself, Miss Lee had been blind since birth. *Don't give up your fear ... but don't give in to it, either. Sit still and try to reason things out. You'll be surprised how often it works.*

Especially in situations that are new to them.

Well, that certainly fits; this was the first time Dinah had ever flown in *anything*, let alone coast to coast in a huge transcontinental jetliner.

Try to reason it out.

Well, she had awakened in a strange place to find her Sighted Person gone. Of course that was scary, even if you knew the absence was only temporary - after all, your Sighted Person couldn't very well decide to pop off to the nearest Taco Bell because she had the munchies when she was shut up in an airplane flying at 37,000 feet. As for the strange silence in the cabin ... well, this was the red-eye, after all. The other passengers were probably sleeping.

All of them? the worried part of her mind asked doubtfully. *ALL of them are sleeping? Can that be?*

Then the answer came to her: the movie. The ones who were awake were watching the in-flight movie. Of course.

A sense of almost palpable relief swept over her. Aunt Vicky had told her the movie was Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally*, and said she planned to watch it herself ... if she could stay awake, that was.

Dinah ran her hand lightly over her aunt's seat, feeling for her headphones, but they weren't there. Her fingers touched a paperback book instead. One of the romance novels Aunt Vicky liked to read, no doubt - tales of the days when men were men and women weren't, she called them.

Dinah's fingers went a little further and happened on something else - smooth, fine-grained leather. A moment later she felt a zipper, and a moment after that she felt the strap.

It was Aunt Vicky's purse.

Dinah's disquiet returned. The earphones weren't on Aunt Vicky's seat, but her purse was. All the traveller's checks, except for a twenty tucked deep into Dinah's own purse, were in there - Dinah knew, because she had heard Mom and Aunt Vicky discussing them before they left the house in Pasadena.

Would Aunt Vicky go off to the bathroom and leave her purse on the seat? Would she do that when her travelling companion was not only ten, not only asleep, but *blind*?

Dinah didn't think so.

Don't give up your fear ... but don't give in to it, either. Sit still and try to reason things out.

But she didn't like that empty seat, and she didn't like the silence of the plane. It made perfect sense to her that most of the people would be asleep, and that the ones who were awake would be keeping as quiet as possible out of consideration for the rest, but she still didn't like it. An animal, one with extremely sharp teeth and claws, awakened and started to snarl inside of her head. She knew the name of that animal; it was panic, and if she didn't control it fast, she might do something which would embarrass both her and Aunt Vicky.

When I can see, when the doctors in Boston fix my eyes, I won't have to go through stupid stuff like this.

This was undoubtedly true, but it was absolutely no help to her right *now*.

Dinah suddenly remembered that, after they sat down, Aunt Vicky had taken her hand, folded all the fingers but the pointer under, and then guided that one finger to the side of her seat. The controls were there - only a few of them, simple, easy to remember. There were

two little wheels you could use once you put on the headphones - one switched around to the different audio channels; the other controlled the volume. The small rectangular switch controlled the light over her seat. You *won't need that one*, Aunt Vicky had said with a smile in her voice. *At least, not yet*. The last one was a square button - when you pushed that one, a flight attendant came.

Dinah's finger touched this button now, and skated over its slightly convex surface.

Do you really want to do this? she asked herself, and the answer came back at once. *Yeah, I do*.

She pushed the button and heard the soft chime. Then she waited. No one came.

There was only the soft, seemingly eternal whisper of the jet engines. No one spoke. No one laughed (*Guess that movie isn't as funny as Aunt Vicky thought it would be*, Dinah thought). No one coughed. The seat beside her, Aunt Vicky's seat, was still empty, and no flight attendant bent over her in a comforting little envelope of perfume and shampoo and faint smells of make-up to ask Dinah if she could get her something - a snack, or maybe that drink of water.

Only the steady soft drone of the jet engines.

The panic animal was yammering louder than ever. To combat it, Dinah concentrated on focussing that radar gadget, making it into a kind of invisible cane she could jab out from her seat here in the middle of the main cabin. She was good at that; at times, when she concentrated *very hard*, she almost believed she could see through the eyes of others. If she thought about it hard enough, wanted to hard enough. Once she had told Miss Lee about this feeling, and Miss Lee's response had been uncharacteristically sharp. *Sight-sharing is a frequent fantasy of the blind*, she'd said. *Particularly of blind children. Don't ever make the mistake of relying on that feeling, Dinah, or you're apt to find yourself in traction after falling down a flight of stairs or stepping in front of a car*.

So she had put aside her efforts to 'sight-share,' as Miss Lee had called it, and on the few occasions when the sensation stole over her again - that she was seeing the world, shadowy, wavery, but *there - through* her mother's eyes or Aunt Vicky's eyes, she had tried to get rid of it ... as a person who fears he is losing his mind will try to block

out the murmur of phantom voices. But now she was afraid and so she felt for others, *sensed* for others, and did not find them.

Now the terror was very large in her, the yammering of the panic animal very loud. She felt a cry building up in her throat and clamped her teeth against it. Because it would not come out as a cry, or a yell; if she let it out, it would exit her mouth as a firebell scream.

I won't scream, she told herself fiercely. *I won't scream and embarrass Aunt Vicky. I won't scream and wake up all the ones who are asleep and scare all the ones who are awake and they'll all come running and say look at the scared little girl, look at the scared little blind girl.*

But now that radar sense - that part of her which evaluated all sorts of vague sensory input and which sometimes *did* seem to see through the eyes of others (no matter what Miss Lee said) - was adding to her fear rather than alleviating it.

Because that sense was telling her there was *nobody* within its circle of effectiveness.

Nobody at all.

4

Brian Engle was having a very bad dream. In it, he was once again piloting Flight 7 from Tokyo to LA, but this time the leak was much worse. There was a palpable feeling of doom in the cockpit; Steve Searles was weeping as he ate a Danish pastry.

If you're so upset, how come you're eating? Brian asked. A shrill, teakettle whistling had begun to fill the cockpit - the sound of the pressure leak, he reckoned. This was silly, of course - leaks were almost always silent until the blowout occurred - but he supposed in dreams anything was possible.

Because I love these things, and I'm never going to get to eat another one, Steve said, sobbing harder than ever.

Then, suddenly, the shrill whistling sound stopped. A smiling, relieved flight attendant - it was, in fact, Melanie Trevor - appeared to tell him the leak had been found and plugged. Brian got up and followed her through the plane to the main cabin, where Anne

Quinlan Engle, his ex-wife, was standing in a little alcove from which the seats had been removed. Written over the window beside her was the cryptic and somehow ominous phrase SHOOTING STARS ONLY. It was written in red, the color of danger.

Anne was dressed in the dark-green uniform of an American Pride flight attendant, which was strange - she was an advertising executive with a Boston agency, and had always looked down her narrow, aristocratic nose at the stewards with whom her husband flew. Her hand was pressed against a crack in the fuselage.

See, darling? she said proudly. *It's all taken care of. It doesn't even matter that you hit me. I have forgiven you.*

Don't do that, Anne!

he cried, but it was already too late. A fold appeared in the back of her hand, mimicking the shape of the crack in the fuselage. It grew deeper as the pressure differential sucked her hand relentlessly outward. Her middle finger went through first, then the ring finger, then the first finger and her pinky. There was a brisk popping sound, like a champagne cork being drawn by an overeager waiter, as her entire hand was pulled through the crack in the airplane.

Yet Anne went on smiling.

It's L'Envoi, darling, she said as her arm began to disappear. Her hair was escaping the clip which held it back and blowing around her face in a misty cloud. *It's what I've always worn, don't you remember?*

He did ... now he did. But now it didn't matter.

Anne, come back! he screamed.

She went on smiling as her arm was sucked slowly into the emptiness outside the plane. *It doesn't hurt at all, Brian - believe me.*

The sleeve of her green American Pride blazer began to flutter, and Brian saw that her flesh was being pulled out through the crack in a thickish white ooze. It looked like Elmer's Glue.

L'Envoi, remember? Anne asked as she was sucked out through the crack, and now Brian could hear it again - that sound which the poet James Dickey once called 'the vast beast-whistle of space.' It grew steadily louder as the dream darkened, and at the same time it

began to broaden. To become not the scream of wind but that of a human voice.

Brian's eyes snapped open. He was disoriented by the power of the dream for a moment, but only a moment - he was a professional in a high-risk, high-responsibility job, a job where one of the absolute prerequisites was fast reaction time. He was on Flight 29, not Flight 7, not Tokyo to Los Angeles but Los Angeles to Boston, where Anne was already dead - not the victim of a pressure leak but of a fire in her Atlantic Avenue condominium near the waterfront. But the sound was still there.

It was a little girl, screaming shrilly.

5

'Would somebody speak to me, please?' Dinah Bellman asked in a low, clear voice. 'I'm sorry, but my aunt is gone and I'm blind.'

No one answered her. Forty rows and two partitions forward, Captain Brian Engle was dreaming that his navigator was weeping and eating a Danish pastry.

There was only the continuing drone of the jet engines.

The panic overshadowed her mind again, and Dinah did the only thing she could think of to stave it off: she unbuckled her seatbelt, stood up, and edged into the aisle.

'Hello?' she asked in a louder voice. 'Hello, *anybody!*'

There was still no answer. Dinah began to cry. She held onto herself grimly, nonetheless, and began walking forward slowly along the portside aisle. *Keep count, though*, part of her mind warned frantically. *Keep count of how many rows you pass, or you'll get lost and never find your way back again.*

She stopped at the row of portside seats just ahead of the row in which she and Aunt Vicky had been sitting and bent, arms outstretched, fingers splayed. She knew there *was* a man here, because Aunt Vicky had spoken to him only a minute or so before the plane took off. When he spoke back to her, his voice had come from the seat directly in front of Dinah's own. She knew that; marking the locations of voices was part of her life, an ordinary fact of

existence like breathing. The sleeping man would jump when her outstretched fingers touched him, but Dinah was beyond caring.

Except the seat was empty.

Completely empty.

Dinah straightened up again, her cheeks wet, her head pounding with fright. They couldn't be in the bathroom *together*, could they? Of course not.

Perhaps there were two bathrooms. In a plane this big there *must* be two bathrooms.

Except that didn't matter, either.

Aunt Vicky wouldn't have left her purse, no matter what. Dinah was sure of it.

She began to walk slowly forward, stopping at each row of seats, reaching into the two closest her first on the port side and then on the starboard.

She felt another purse in one, what felt like a briefcase in another, a pen and a pad of paper in a third. In two others she felt headphones. She touched something sticky on an earpiece of the second set. She rubbed her fingers together, then grimaced and wiped them on the mat which covered the headrest of the seat. That had been earwax. She was sure of it. It had its own unmistakable, yucky texture.

Dinah Bellman felt her slow way up the aisle, no longer taking pains to be gentle in her investigations. It didn't matter. She poked no eye, pinched no cheek, pulled no hair.

Every seat she investigated was empty.

This can't be, she thought wildly. *It just can't be! They were all around us when we got on! I heard them! I felt them! I smelled them! Where have they all gone?*

She didn't know, but they *were* gone: she was becoming steadily more sure of that.

At some point, while she slept, her aunt and everyone else on Flight 29 had disappeared.

No! The rational part of her mind clamored in the voice of Miss Lee. *No, that's impossible, Dinah! If everyone's gone, who is flying the plane?*

She began to move forward faster now, hands gripping the edges of the seats, her blind eyes wide open behind her dark glasses, the hem of her pink travelling dress fluttering. She had lost count, but in her greater distress over the continuing silence, this did not matter much to her.

She stopped again, and reached her groping hands into the seat on her right. This time she touched hair ... but its location was all wrong. The hair was on the seat - how could that be?

Her hands closed around it ... and lifted it. Realization, sudden and terrible, came to her.

It's hair, but the man it belongs to is gone. It's a scalp. I'm holding a dead man's scalp.

That was when Dinah Bellman opened her mouth and began to give voice to the shrieks which pulled Brian Engle from his dream.

6

Albert Kaussner was belly up to the bar, drinking Branding Iron Whiskey. The Earp brothers, Wyatt and Virgil, were on his right, and Doc Halliday was on his left. He was just lifting his glass to offer a toast when a man with a peg leg ran-hopped into the Sergio Leone Saloon.

'It's the Dalton Gang!' he screamed. 'The Daltons have just rid into Dodge!'

Wyatt turned to face him calmly. His face was narrow, tanned, and handsome. He looked a great deal like Hugh O'Brian. 'This here is Tombstone, Muffin,' he said. 'You got to get yore stinky ole shit together.'

'Well, they're ridin in, wherever we are!' Muffin exclaimed. 'And they look *maaad*, Wyatt! They look *reeely reeely maaaaaad!*'

As if to prove this, guns began to fire in the street outside - the heavy thunder of Army .44s (probably stolen) mixed in with the higher whipcrack explosions of Garand rifles.

'Don't get your panties all up in a bunch, Muffy,' Doc Halliday said, and tipped his hat back. Albert was not terribly surprised to see that Doc looked like Robert De Niro. He had always believed that if

anyone was absolutely right to play the consumptive dentist, De Niro was the one.

'What do you say, boys?' Virgil Earp asked, looking around. Virgil didn't look like much of anyone.

'Let's go,' Wyatt said. 'I've had enough of these damned Clantons to last me a lifetime.'

'It's the Daltons, Wyatt,' Albert said quietly.

'I don't care if it's John Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd!' Wyatt exclaimed. 'Are you with us or not, Ace?'

'I'm with you,' Albert Kaussner said, speaking in the soft but menacing tones of the born killer. He dropped one hand to the butt of his long-barrelled Buntline Special and put the other to his head for a moment to make sure his *yarmulke* was on solidly. It was.

'Okay, boys,' Doc said. 'Let's go cut some Dalton butt.'

They strode out together, four abreast through the batwing doors, just as the bell in the Tombstone Baptist Church began to toll high noon.

The Daltons were coming down Main Street at a full gallop, shooting holes in plate-glass windows and false fronts. They turned the waterbarrel in front of Duke's Mercantile and Reliable Gun Repair into a fountain.

Ike Dalton was the first to see the four men standing in the dusty street, their frock coats pulled back to free the handles of their guns. Ike reined his horse in savagely and it rose on its rear legs, squealing, foam splattering in thick curds around the bit. Ike Dalton looked quite a bit like Rutger Hauer.

'Look what we have got here,' he sneered. 'It is Wyatt Earp and his pansy brother Virgil.'

Emmett Dalton (who looked like Donald Sutherland after a month of hard nights) pulled up beside Ike. 'And their faggot dentist friend, too,' he snarled. 'Who else wants -' Then he looked at Albert and paled. The thin sneer faltered on his lips.

Paw Dalton pulled up beside his two sons. Paw bore a strong resemblance to Slim Pickens.

'Christ,' Paw whispered. 'It's Ace Kaussner!'

Now Frank James pulled *his* mount into line next to Paw. His face was the color of dirty parchment. 'What the hell, boys!' Frank cried. 'I

don't mind hoorawin a town or two on a dull day, but nobody told me The Arizona Jew was gonna be here!

Albert 'Ace' Kaussner, known from Sedalia to Steamboat Springs as The Arizona Jew, took a step forward. His hand hovered over the butt of his Buntline. He spat a stream of tobacco to one side, never taking his chilly gray eyes from the hardcases mounted twenty feet in front of him.

'Go on and make your moves, boys,' said The Arizona Jew. 'By my count, hell ain't half full.'

The Dalton Gang slapped leather just as the clock in the tower of the Tombstone Baptist Church beat the last stroke of noon into the hot desert air. Ace went for his own gun, his draw as fast as blue blazes, and as he began to fan the hammer with the flat of his left hand, sending a spray of .45-caliber death into the Dalton Gang, a little girl standing outside The Longhorn Hotel began to scream.

Somebody make that brat stop yowling, Ace thought. What's the matter with her, anyway? I got this under control. They don't call me the fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi for nothing.

But the scream went on, ripping across the air, darkening it as it came, and everything began to break up.

For a moment Albert was nowhere at all - lost in a darkness through which fragments of his dream tumbled and spun in a whirlpool. The only constant was that terrible scream; it sounded like the shriek of an overloaded teakettle.

He opened his eyes and looked around. He was in his seat toward the front of Flight 29's main cabin. Coming up the aisle from the rear of the plane was a girl of about ten or twelve, wearing a pink dress and a pair of ditty-bop shades.

What is she, a movie star or something? he thought, but he was badly frightened, all the same. It was a bad way to exit his favorite dream.

'Hey!' he cried - but softly, so as not to wake the other passengers. 'Hey, kid! What's the deal?'

The little girl whiplashed her head toward the sound of his voice. Her body turned a moment later, and she collided with one of the seats which ran down the center of the cabin in four-across rows.

She struck it with her thighs, rebounded, and tumbled backward over the armrest of a portside seat. She fell into it with her legs up.

'Where is everybody?' she was screaming. *'Help me! Help me!'*

'Hey, stewardess!' Albert yelled, concerned, and unbuckled his seatbelt. He stood up, slipped out of his seat, turned toward the screaming little girl ... and stopped. He was now facing fully toward the back of the plane, and what he saw froze him in place.

The first thought to cross his mind was, *I guess I don't have to worry about waking up the other passengers, after all.*

To Albert it looked like the entire main cabin of the 767 was empty.

7

Brian Engle was almost to the partition separating Flight 29's first-class and business-class sections when he realized that first class was now entirely empty. He stopped for just a moment, then got moving again. The others had left their seats to see what all the screaming was about, perhaps.

Of course he knew this was not the case; he had been flying passengers long enough to know a good bit about their group psychology. When a passenger freaked out, few if any of the others ever moved. Most air travellers meekly surrendered their option to take individual action when they entered the bird, sat down, and buckled their seatbelts around them. Once those few simple things were accomplished, all problem-solving tasks became the crew's responsibility. Airline personnel called them geese, but they were really sheep ... an attitude most flight crews liked just fine. It made the nervous ones easier to handle.

But, since it was the only thing that made even remote sense, Brian ignored what he knew and plunged on. The rags of his own dream were still wrapped around him, and a part of his mind was convinced that it was Anne who was screaming, that he would find her halfway down the main cabin with her hand plastered against a crack in the body of the airliner, a crack located beneath a sign which read SHOOTING STARS ONLY.

There was only one passenger in the business section, an older man in a brown three-piece suit. His bald head gleamed mellowly in the glow thrown by his reading lamp. His arthritis-swollen hands were folded neatly over the buckle of his seatbelt. He was fast asleep and snoring loudly, ignoring the whole ruckus.

Brian burst through into the main cabin and there his forward motion was finally checked by utter stunned disbelief. He saw a teenaged boy standing near a little girl who had fallen into a seat on the port side about a quarter of the way down the cabin. The boy was not looking at her, however; he was staring toward the rear of the plane, with his jaw hanging almost all the way to the round collar of his Hard Rock Cafe tee-shirt.

Brian's first reaction was about the same as Albert Kaussner's: *My God, the whole plane is empty!*

Then he saw a woman on the starboard side of the airplane stand up and walk into the aisle to see what was happening. She had the dazed, puffy look of someone who has just been jerked out of a sound sleep. Halfway down, in the center aisle, a young man in a crew-necked jersey was craning his neck toward the little girl, and staring with flat, incurious eyes. Another man, this one about sixty, got up from a seat close to Brian and stood there indecisively. He was dressed in a red flannel shirt and he looked utterly bewildered. His hair was fluffed up around his head in untidy mad-scientist corkscrews.

'Who's screaming?' he asked Brian. 'Is the plane in trouble, mister? You don't think we're goin down, do you?'

The little girl stopped screaming. She struggled up from the seat she had fallen into, and then almost tumbled forward in the other direction. The kid caught her just in time; he was moving with dazed slowness.

Where have they gone? Brian thought. *My dear God, where have they all gone?*

But his feet were moving toward the teenager and the little girl now. As he went, he passed another passenger who was still sleeping, this one a girl of about seventeen. Her mouth was open in an unlovely yawp and she was breathing in long, dry inhalations.

He reached the teenager and the girl in the pink dress.

'Where are they, man?' Albert Kaussner asked. He had an arm around the shoulders of the sobbing child, but he wasn't looking at her; his eyes slipped relentlessly back and forth across the almost deserted main cabin. 'Did we land someplace while I was asleep and let them off?'

'My aunt's gone!' the little girl sobbed. 'My Aunt Vicky! I thought the plane was empty! I thought I was the only one! Where's my aunt, please? I want my aunt!'

Brian knelt beside her for a moment, so they were at approximately the same level. He noticed the sunglasses and remembered seeing her get on with the blonde woman.

'You're all right,' he said. 'You're all right, young lady. What's your name?'

'Dinah,' she sobbed. 'I can't find my aunt. I'm blind and I can't see her. I woke up and the seat was empty -'

'What's going on?' the young man in the crew-neck jersey asked. He was talking over Brian's head, ignoring both Brian and Dinah, speaking to the boy in the Hard Rock tee-shirt and the older man in the flannel shirt. 'Where's everybody else?'

'You're all right, Dinah,' Brian repeated. 'There are other people here. Can you hear them?'

'Y-Yes. I can hear them. But where's Aunt Vicky? And who's been killed?'

'Killed?' a woman asked sharply. It was the one from the starboard side. Brian glanced up briefly and saw she was young, dark-haired, pretty. '*Has* someone been killed? Have we been hijacked?'

'No one's been killed,' Brian said. It was, at least, something to say. His mind felt weird: like a boat which has slipped its moorings. 'Calm down, honey.'

'I felt his hair!' Dinah insisted. 'Someone cut off his HAIR!'

This was just too odd to deal with on top of everything else, and Brian dismissed it. Dinah's earlier thought suddenly struck home to him with chilly intensity - who the fuck was flying the plane?

He stood up and turned to the older man in the red shirt. 'I have to go forward,' he said. 'Stay with the little girl.'

'All right,' the man in the red shirt said. 'But what's happening?'

They were joined by a man of about thirty-five who was wearing pressed blue-jeans and an oxford shirt. Unlike the others, he looked utterly calm. He took a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles from his pocket, shook them out by one bow, and put them on. 'We seem a few passengers short, don't we?' he said. His British accent was almost as crisp as his shirt. 'What about crew? Anybody know?'

'That's what I'm going to find out,' Brian said, and started forward again. At the head of the main cabin he turned back and counted quickly. Two more passengers had joined the huddle around the girl in the dark glasses. One was the teenaged girl who had been sleeping so heavily; she swayed on her feet as if she were either drunk or stoned. The other was an elderly gent in a fraying sport-coat. Eight people in all. To those he added himself and the guy in business class, who was, at least so far, sleeping through it all.

Ten people.

For the love of God, where are the rest of them?

But this was not the time to worry about it - there were bigger problems at hand. Brian hurried forward, barely glancing at the old bald fellow snoozing in business class.

8

The service area squeezed behind the movie screen and between the two first-class heads was empty. So was the galley, but there Brian saw something which was extremely troubling: the beverage trolley was parked kitty-corner by the starboard bathroom. There were a number of used glasses on its bottom shelf.

They were just getting ready to serve drinks, he thought. When it happened -whatever 'it' was - they'd just taken out the trolley. Those used glasses are the ones that were collected before the roll-out. So whatever happened must have happened within half an hour of take-off, maybe a little longer - weren't there turbulence reports over the desert? I think so. And that weird shit about the aurora borealis

For a moment Brian was almost convinced that last was a part of his dream - it was certainly odd enough - but further reflection

convinced him that Melanie Trevor, the flight attendant, had actually said it.

Never mind that; what did happen? In God's name, what?

He didn't know, but he *did* know that looking at the abandoned drinks trolley put an enormous feeling of terror and superstitious dread into his guts. For just a moment he thought that this was what the first boarders of the *Mary Celeste* must have felt like, coming upon a totally abandoned ship where all the sail was neatly laid on, where the captain's table had been set for dinner, where all ropes were neatly coiled and some sailor's pipe was still smouldering away the last of its tobacco on the foredeck ...

Brian shook these paralyzing thoughts off with a tremendous effort and went to the door between the service area and the cockpit. He knocked. As he had feared, there was no response. And although he knew it was useless to do so, he curled his fist up and hammered on it.

Nothing.

He tried the doorknob. It didn't move. That was SOP in the age of unscheduled side-trips to Havana, Lebanon, and Tehran. Only the pilots could open it. Brian could fly this plane ... but not from out here.

'Hey!' he shouted. 'Hey, you guys! Open the door!'

Except he knew better. The flight attendants were gone; almost all the passengers were gone; Brian Engle was willing to bet the 767's two-man cockpit crew was also gone.

He believed Flight 29 was heading east on automatic pilot.

CHAPTER 2

Darkness and Mountains. The Treasure Trove.
Crew-Neck's Nose. The Sound of No Dogs Barking.
Panic Is Not Allowed. A Change of Destination.

1

Brian had asked the older man in the red shirt to look after Dinah, but as soon as Dinah heard the woman from the starboard side - the one with the pretty young voice - she imprinted on her with scary intensity, crowding next to her and reaching with a timid sort of determination for her hand. After the years spent with Miss Lee, Dinah knew a teacher's voice when she heard one. The dark-haired woman took her hand willingly enough.

'Did you say your name was Dinah, honey?'

'Yes,' Dinah said. 'I'm blind, but after my operation in Boston, I'll be able to see again. *Probably* be able to see. The doctors say there's a seventy per cent chance I'll get some vision, and a forty per cent chance I'll get all of it. What's your name?'

'Laurel Stevenson,' the dark-haired woman said. Her eyes were still conning the main cabin, and her face seemed unable to break out of its initial expression: dazed disbelief.

'Laurel, that's a flower, isn't it?' Dinah asked. She spoke with feverish vivacity.

'Uh-huh,' Laurel said.

'Pardon me,' the man with the horn-rimmed glasses and the British accent said. 'I'm going forward to join our friend.'

'I'll come along,' the older man in the red shirt said.

'I want to know what's going on here!' the man in the crew-neck jersey exclaimed abruptly. His face was dead pale except for two spots of color, as bright as rouge, on his cheeks. 'I want to know what's going on right *now*.'

'Nor am I a bit surprised,' the Brit said, and then began walking forward. The man in the red shirt trailed after him. The teenaged girl

with the dopey look drifted along behind them for awhile and then stopped at the partition between the main cabin and the business section, as if unsure of where she was.

The elderly gent in the fraying sport-coat went to a portside window, leaned over, and peered out.

'What do you see?' Laurel Stevenson asked.

'Darkness and mountains,' the man in the sport-coat said.

'The Rockies?' Albert asked.

The man in the frayed sport-coat nodded. 'I believe so, young man.'

Albert decided to go forward himself. He was seventeen, fiercely bright, and this evening's Bonus Mystery Question had also occurred to him: who was flying the plane?

Then he decided it didn't matter ... at least for the moment. They were moving smoothly along, so presumably *someone* was, and even if *someone* turned out to be *something* - *the* autopilot, in other words - there wasn't a thing he could do about it. As Albert Kaussner he was a talented violinist - not quite a prodigy - on his way to study at The Berklee College of Music. As Ace Kaussner he was (in his dreams, at least) the fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi, a bounty hunter who took it easy on Saturdays, was careful to keep his shoes off the bed, and always kept one eye out for the main chance and the other for a good kosher cafe somewhere along the dusty trail. Ace was, he supposed, his way of sheltering himself from loving parents who hadn't allowed him to play Little League baseball because he might damage his talented hands and who had believed, in their hearts, that every snuffle signalled the onset of pneumonia. He was a gunslinging violinist - an interesting combination - but he didn't know a thing about flying planes. And the little girl had said something which had simultaneously intrigued him and curdled his blood. I felt *his hair!* she had said. *Someone cut off his HAIR!*

He broke away from Dinah and Laurel (the man in the ratty sport-coat had moved to the starboard side of the plane to look out one of those windows, and the man in the crew-necked jersey was going forward to join the others, his eyes narrowed pugnaciously) and began to retrace Dinah's progress up the portside aisle.

Someone cut off his HAIR! she had said, and not too many rows down, Albert saw what she had been talking about.

2

'I am praying, sir,' the Brit said, 'that the pilot's cap I noticed in one of the first-class seats belongs to you.'

Brian was standing in front of the locked door, head down, thinking furiously. When the Brit spoke up behind him, he jerked in surprise and whirled on his heels.

'Didn't mean to Put Your wind up,' the Brit said mildly. 'I'm Nick Hopewell.' He stuck out his hand.

Brian shook it. As he did so, performing his half of the ancient ritual, it occurred to him that this must be a dream. The scary flight from Tokyo and finding out that Anne was dead had brought it on.

Part of his mind knew this was not so, just as part of his mind had known the little girl's scream had had nothing to do with the deserted first-class section, but he seized on this idea just as he had seized on that one. It helped, so why not? Everything else was nuts - so nutty that even attempting to think about it made his mind feel sick and feverish. Besides, there was really no time to think, simply no time, and he found that this was also something of relief.

'Brian Engle,' he said. 'I'm pleased to meet you, although the circumstances are -' He, shrugged helplessly. What *were* the circumstances, exactly? He could not think of an adjective which would adequately describe them.

'Bit bizarre, aren't they?' Hopewell agreed. 'Best not to think of them right now, I suppose. Does the crew answer?'

'No,' Brian said, and abruptly struck his fist against the door in frustration.

'Easy, easy,' Hopewell soothed.-' Tell me about the cap, Mr Engle. You have no idea what satisfaction and relief it would give me to address you as Captain Engle.'

Brian grinned in spite of himself. 'I *am* Captain Engle,' he *said*, 'but under the circumstances, I guess you can call me Brian.'

Nick Hopewell seized Brian's left hand and kissed it heartily. 'I believe I'll call you Savior instead,' he said. 'Do you mind awfully?'

Brian threw his head back and began to laugh. Nick joined him. They were standing there in front of the locked door in the nearly empty plane, laughing wildly, when the man in the red shirt and the man in the crew-necked jersey arrived, looking at them as if they had both gone crazy.

3

Albert Kaussner held the hair in his right hand for several moments, looking at it thoughtfully. It was black and glossy in the overhead lights, a right proper pelt, and he wasn't at all surprised it had scared the hell out of the little girl. It would have scared Albert, too, if he hadn't been able to see it.

He tossed the wig back into the seat, glanced at the purse lying in the next seat, then looked more closely at what was lying next to the purse. It was a plain gold wedding ring. He picked it up, examined it, then put it back where it had been. He began walking slowly toward the back of the airplane. In less than a minute, Albert was so struck with wonder that he had forgotten all about who was flying the plane, or how the hell they were going to get down from here if it was the automatic pilot.

Flight 29's passengers were gone, but they had left a fabulous - and sometimes perplexing - treasure trove behind. Albert found jewelry on almost every seat: wedding rings, mostly, but there were also diamonds, emeralds, and rubies. There were earrings, most of them five-and-dime stuff but some which looked pretty expensive to Albert's eye. His mom had a few good pieces, and some of this stuff made her best jewelry look like rummage-sale buys. There were studs, necklaces, cufflinks, ID bracelets. And watches, watches, watches. From Timex to Rolex, there seemed to be at least two hundred of them, lying on seats, lying on the floor between seats, lying in the aisles. They twinkled in the lights.

There were at least sixty pairs of spectacles. Wire-rimmed, horn-rimmed., gold-rimmed. There were prim glasses, punky glasses, and

glasses with rhinestones set in the bows. There were Ray-Bans, Polaroids, and Foster Grants.

There were belt buckles and service pins and piles of pocket-change. No bills, but easily four hundred dollars in quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies. There were wallets - not as many wallets as purses, but still a good dozen of them, from fine leather to plastic. There were pocket knives. There were at least a dozen hand-held calculators.

And odder things as well. He picked up a flesh-colored plastic cylinder and examined it for almost thirty seconds before deciding it really *was* a dildo and putting it down again in a hurry. There was a small gold spoon on a fine gold chain. There were bright speckles of metal here and there on the seats and on the floor, mostly silver but some gold. He picked up a couple of these to verify the judgment of his own wondering mind: some were dental caps, but most were fillings from human teeth. And, in one of the back rows, he picked up two tiny steel rods. He looked at these for several moments before realizing they were surgical pins, and that they belonged not on the floor of a nearly deserted airliner but in some passenger's knee or shoulder.

He discovered one more passenger, a young bearded man who was sprawled over two seats in the very last row, snoring loudly and smelling like a brewery.

Two seats away, he found a gadget that looked like a pacemaker implant.

Albert stood at the rear of the plane and looked forward along the large, empty tube of the fuselage.

'What in the fuck is going on here?' he asked in a soft, trembling voice.

4

'I demand to know just what is going on here!' the man in the crew-neck jersey said in a loud voice. He strode into the service area at the head of first class like a corporate raider mounting a hostile takeover.

'Currently? We're just about to break the lock on this door,' Nick Hopewell said, fixing Crew-Neck with a bright gaze. 'The flight crew appears to have abdicated along with everyone else, but we're in luck, just the same. My new acquaintance here is a pilot who just happened to be deadheading, and -'

'*Someone* around here is a deadhead, all right,' Crew-Neck said, 'and I intend to find out who, believe me.' He pushed past Nick without a glance and stuck his face into Brian's, as aggressive as a ballplayer disputing an umpire's call. 'Do you work for American Pride, friend?'

'Yes,' Brian said, 'but why don't we put that off for now, sir? It's important that -'

'I'll tell you what's important!' Crew-Neck shouted. A fine mist of spit settled on Brian's cheeks and he had to sit on a sudden and amazingly strong impulse to clamp his hands around this twerp's neck and see how far he could twist his head before something inside cracked. 'I've got a meeting at the Prudential Center with representatives of Bankers International at nine o'clock this morning! *Promptly* at nine o'clock! I booked a seat on this conveyance in good faith, and I have no intention of being late for my appointment! I want to know three things: who authorized an unscheduled stop for this airliner while I was asleep, *where* that stop was made, and *why it was done!*'

'Have you ever watched *Star Trek*?' Nick Hopewell asked suddenly.

Crew-Neck's face, suffused with angry blood, swung around. His expression said that he believed the Englishman was clearly mad. 'What in the hell are you talking about?'

'Marvellous American program,' Nick said. 'Science fiction. Exploring strange new worlds, like the one which apparently exists inside your head. And if you don't shut your gob at once, you bloody idiot, I'll be happy to demonstrate Mr Spock's famous Vulcan sleeper-hold for you.'

'You can't talk to me like that!' Crew-Neck snarled. 'Do you know who I am?'

'Of course,' Nick said. 'You're a bloody-minded little bugger who has mistaken his airline boarding pass for credentials proclaiming

him to be the Grand High Poobah of Creation. You're also badly frightened. No harm in that, but you are in the way.'

Crew-Neck's face was now so clogged with blood that Brian began to be afraid his entire head would explode. He had once seen a movie where that happened. He did not want to see it in real life. 'You can't talk to me like that! You're not even an American citizen!'

Nick Hopewell moved so fast that Brian barely saw what was happening. At one moment the man in the crew-neck jersey was yelling into Nick's face while Nick stood at ease beside Brian, his hands on the hips of his pressed jeans. A moment later, Crew-Neck's nose was caught firmly between the first and second fingers of Nick's right hand.

Crew-Neck tried to pull away. Nick's fingers tightened ... and then his hand turned slightly, in the gesture of a man tightening a screw or winding an alarm clock. Crew-Neck bellowed.

'I can break it,' Nick said softly. 'Easiest thing in the world, believe me.'

Crew-Neck tried to jerk backward. His hands beat ineffectually at Nick's arm. Nick twisted again and Crew-Neck bellowed again.

'I don't think you heard me. I can break it. Do you understand? Signify if you have understanding.'

He twisted Crew-Neck's nose a third time.

Crew-Neck did not just bellow this time; he screamed.

'Oh, wow,' the stoned-looking girl said from behind them. 'A nose-hold.'

'I don't have time to discuss your business appointments,' Nick said softly to Crew-Neck. 'Nor do I have time to deal with hysteria masquerading as aggression. We have a nasty, perplexing situation here. You, sir, are clearly not part of the solution, and I have no intention whatever of allowing you to become part of the problem. Therefore, I am going to send you back into the main cabin. This gentleman in the red shirt -'

'Don Gaffney,' the gentleman in the red shirt said. He looked as vastly surprised as Brian felt.

'Thank you,' Nick said. He still held Crew-Neck's nose in that amazing clamp, and Brian could now see a thread of blood lining one of the man's pinched nostrils.

Nick pulled him closer and spoke in a warm, confidential voice.

'Mr Gaffney here will be your escort. Once you arrive in the main cabin, my buggardly friend, you will take a seat with your safety belt fixed firmly around your middle. Later, when the captain here has assured himself we are not going to fly into a mountain, a building, or another plane, we may be able to discuss our current situation at greater length. For the present, however, your input is not necessary. Do you understand all these things I have told you?'

Crew-Neck uttered a pained, outraged bellow.

'If you understand. please favor me with a thumbs-up.'

Crew-Neck raised one thumb. The nail, Brian saw, was neatly manicured.

'Fine,' Nick said. 'One more thing. When I let go of your nose, you may feel vengeful. To *feel* that way is fine. To give vent to the feeling would be a terrible mistake. I want you to remember that what I have done to your nose I can just as easily do to your testicles. In fact, I can wind them up so far that when I let go of them, you may actually fly about the cabin like a child's airplane. I expect you to leave with Mr -'

He looked questioningly at the man in the red shirt.

'Gaffney,' the man in the red shirt repeated.

'Gaffney, right. Sorry. I expect you to leave with Mr Gaffney. You will not remonstrate. You will not indulge in rebuttal. In fact, if you say so much as a single word. you will find yourself investigating hitherto unexplored realms of pain. Give me a thumbs-up if you understand this.'

Crew-Neck waved his thumb so enthusiastically that for a moment he looked like a hitchhiker with diarrhea.

'Right, then!' Nick said, and let go of Crew-Neck's nose.

Crew-Neck stepped back, staring at Nick Hopewell with angry, perplexed eyes - he looked like a cat which had just been doused with a bucket of cold water. By itself, anger would have left Brian unmoved. It was the perplexity that made him feel a little sorry for Crew-Neck. He felt mightily perplexed himself.

Crew-Neck raised a hand to his nose, verifying that it was still there. A narrow ribbon of blood, no wider than the pull-strip on a pack of cigarettes, ran from each nostril. The tips of his fingers came

away bloody, and he looked at them unbelievably. He opened his mouth.

'I wouldn't, mister,' Don Gaffney said. 'Guy means it. You better come along with me.'

He took Crew-Neck's arm. For a moment Crew-Neck resisted Gaffney's gentle tug. He opened his mouth again.

'Bad idea,' the girl who looked stoned told him.

Crew-Neck closed his mouth and allowed Gaffney to lead him back toward the rear of first class. He looked over his shoulder once, his eyes wide and stunned, and then dabbed his fingers under his nose again.

Nick, meanwhile, had lost all interest in the man. He was peering out one of the windows. 'We appear to be over the Rockies,' he said, 'and we seem to be at a safe enough altitude.'

Brian looked out himself for a moment. It was the Rockies, all right, and near the center of the range, by the look. He put their altitude at about 35,000 feet. Just about what Melanie Trevor had told him. So they were fine ... at least, so far.

'Come on,' he said. 'Help me break down this door.'

Nick joined him in front of the door. 'Shall I captain this part of the operation, Brian? I have some experience.'

'Be my guest.' Brian found himself wondering exactly how Nick Hopewell had come by his experience in twisting noses and breaking down doors. He had an idea it was probably a long story.

'It would be helpful to know how strong the lock is,' Nick said. 'If we hit it too hard, we're apt to go catapulting straight into the cockpit. I wouldn't want to run into something that won't bear running into.'

'I don't know,' Brian said truthfully. 'I don't think it's tremendously strong, though.'

'All right,' Nick said. 'Turn and face me - your right shoulder pointing at the door, my left.'

Brian did.

'I'll count off. We're going to shoulder it together on three. Dip your legs as we go in; we're more apt to pop the lock if we hit the door lower down.

'*Don't* hit it as hard as you can. About half. If that isn't enough, we can always go again. Got it?'

'I've got it.'

The girl, who looked a little more awake and with it now, said: 'I don't suppose they leave a key under the doormat or anything, huh?'

Nick looked at her, startled, then back at Brian. 'Do they by any chance leave a key someplace?'

Brian shook his head. 'I'm afraid not. It's an anti-terrorist precaution.'

'Of course,' Nick said. 'Of course it is.' He glanced at the girl and winked. 'But that's using your head, just the same.'

The girl smiled at him uncertainly.

Nick turned back to Brian. 'Ready, then?'

'Ready.'

'Right, then. One ... two ... *three!*'

They drove forward into the door, dipping down in perfect synchronicity just before they hit it, and the door popped open with absurd ease. There was a small lip - too short by at least three inches to be considered a step between the service area and the cockpit. Brian struck this with the edge of his shoe and would have fallen sideways into the cockpit if Nick hadn't grabbed him by the shoulder. The man was as quick as a cat.

'Right, then,' he said, more to himself than to Brian. 'Let's just see what we're dealing with here, shall we?'

5

The cockpit was empty. Looking into it made Brian's arms and neck prickle with gooseflesh. It was all well and good to know that a 767 could fly thousands of miles on autopilot, using information which had been programmed into its inertial navigation system - God knew he had flown enough miles that way himself - but it was another to see two empty seats. *That* was what chilled him. He had never seen an empty in-flight cockpit during his entire career.

He was seeing one now. The pilot's controls moved by themselves, making the infinitesimal corrections necessary to keep the plane on its plotted course to Boston. The board was green. The two small wings on the plane's attitude indicator were steady above

the artificial horizon. Beyond the two small, slanted-forward windows, a billion stars twinkled in an early-morning sky.

'Oh. wow,' the teenaged girl said softly.

'Coo-eee,' Nick said at the same moment. 'Look there, matey.'

Nick was pointing at a half-empty cup of coffee on the service console beside the left arm of the pilot's seat. Next to the coffee was a Danish pastry with two bites gone. This brought Brian's dream back in a rush, and he shivered violently.

'It happened fast, whatever it was,' Brian said. 'And look there. And there.'

He pointed first to the seat of the pilot's chair and then to the floor by the co-pilot's seat. Two wristwatches glimmered in the lights of the controls, one a pressure-proof Rolex, the other a digital Pulsar.

'If you want watches, you can take your pick,' a voice said from behind them. 'There's tons of them back there.' Brian looked over his shoulder and saw Albert Kaussner, looking neat and very young in his small black skull-cap and his Hard Rock Cafe tee-shirt. Standing beside him was the elderly gent in the fraying sport-coat.

'Are there indeed?' Nick asked. For the first time he seemed to have lost his self-possession.

'Watches, jewelry, and glasses,' Albert said. 'Also purses. But the weirdest thing is ... there's stuff I'm pretty sure came from *inside* people. Things like surgical pins and pacemakers.'

Nick looked at Brian Engle. The Englishman had paled noticeably. 'I had been going on roughly the same assumption as our rude and loquacious friend,' he said. 'That the plane set down someplace, for some reason, while I was asleep. That most of the passengers - and the crew - were somehow offloaded.'

'I would have woken the minute descent started,' Brian said. 'It's habit.' He found he could not take his eyes off the empty seats, the half-drunk cup of coffee, the half-eaten Danish.

'Ordinarily, I'd say the same,' Nick agreed, 'so I decided my drink had been doped.'

I don't know what this guy does for a living, Brian thought, *but he sure doesn't sell used cars.*

'No one doped my drink,' Brian said, 'because I didn't have one.'

'Neither did I,' Albert said.

'In any case, there *couldn't* have been a landing and take-off while we were sleeping,' Brian told them. 'You can fly a plane on autopilot, and the Concorde can *land* on autopilot, but you need a human being to take one up.'

'We didn't land, then,' Nick said.

'Nope.'

'So where did they go, Brian?'

'I don't know,' Brian said. He moved to the pilot's chair and sat down.

6

Flight 29 was flying at 36,000 feet, just as Melanie Trevor had told him, on heading 090. An hour or two from now that would change as the plane doglegged further north. Brian took the navigator's chart book, looked at the airspeed indicator, and made a series of rapid calculations. Then he put on the headset.

'Denver Center, this is American Pride Flight 29, over?'

He flicked the toggle ... and heard nothing. Nothing at all. No static; no chatter; no ground control, no other planes. He checked the transponder setting: 7700, just as it should be. Then he flicked the toggle back to transmit again. 'Denver Center, come in please, this is American Pride Flight 29, repeat, American Pride Heavy, and I have a problem, Denver, I have a problem.'

Flicked back the toggle to receive. Listened.

Then Brian did something which made Albert 'Ace' Kaussner's heart begin to bump faster with fear: he hit the control panel just below the radio equipment with the heel of his hand. The Boeing 767 was a high-tech, state-of-the-art passenger plane. One did not try to make the equipment on such a plane operate in such a fashion. What the pilot had just done was what you did when the old Philco radio you bought for a buck at the Kiwanis Auction wouldn't play after you got it home.

Brian tried Denver Center again. And got no response. No response at all.

7

To this moment, Brian had been dazed and terribly perplexed. Now he began to feel frightened - really frightened - as well. Up until now there had been no *time* to be scared. He wished that were still so ... but it wasn't. He flicked the radio to the emergency band and tried again. There was no response. This was the equivalent of dialing 911 in Manhattan and getting a recording which said everyone had left for the weekend. When you called for help on the emergency band, you *always* got a prompt response.

Until now, at least, Brian thought.

He switched to UNICOM, where private pilots obtained landing advisories at small airports. No response. He listened ... and heard nothing at all. Which just couldn't be. Private pilots chattered like grackles on a telephone line. The gal in the Piper wanted to know the weather. The guy in the Cessna would just flop back dead in his seat if he couldn't get someone to call his wife and tell her he was bringing home three extra for dinner. The guys in the Lear wanted the girl on the desk at the Arvada Airport to tell their charter passengers that they were going to be fifteen minutes late and to hold their water, they would still make the baseball game in Chicago on time.

But none of that was there. All the grackles had flown, it seemed, and the telephone lines were bare.

He flicked back to the FAA emergency band. 'Denver, come in! Come in right now! This is AP *Flight 29, you answer me, goddammit!*'

Nick touched his shoulder. 'Easy, mate.'

'The dog won't bark!' Brian said frantically. 'That's impossible, but that's what's happening! Christ, what did they do, have a fucking nuclear war?'

'Easy,' Nick repeated. 'Steady down, Brian, and tell me what you mean, the dog won't bark.'

'I mean Denver Control!' Brian said. '*That* dog! I mean FAA Emergency! *That* dog! UNICOM, that dog, too! I've never -'

He flicked another switch. 'Here,' he said, 'this is the medium shortwave band. They should be jumping all over each other like

frogs on a hot sidewalk, but I can't pick up jack shit.'

He flicked another switch, then looked up at Nick and Albert Kaussner, who had crowded in close. 'There's no VOR beacon out of Denver,' he said.

'Meaning?'

'Meaning I have no radio, I have no Denver navigation beacon, and my board says everything is just peachy keen. Which is crap. Got to be.'

A terrible idea began to surface in his mind, coming up like a bloated corpse rising to the top of a river.

'Hey, kid - look out the window. Left side of the plane. Tell me what you see.'

Albert Kaussner looked out. He looked out for a long time.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Nothing at all. Just the last of the Rockies and the beginning of the plains.'

'No lights?'

'No.'

Brian got up on legs which felt weak and watery. He stood looking down for a long time.

At last Nick Hopewell said quietly, 'Denver's gone, isn't it?'

Brian knew from the navigator's charts and his on-board navigational equipment that they should now be flying less than fifty miles south of Denver ... but below them he saw only the dark, featureless landscape that marked the beginning of the Great Plains.

'Yes,' he said. 'Denver's gone.'

8

There was a moment of utter silence in the cockpit, and then Nick Hopewell turned to the peanut gallery, currently consisting of Albert, the man in the ratty sport-coat, and the young girl. Nick clapped his hands together briskly, like a kindergarten teacher. He sounded like one, too, when he spoke. 'All right, people! Back to your seats. I think we need a little quiet here.'

'We *are* being quiet,' the girl objected, and reasonably enough.

'I believe that what the gentleman actually means isn't quiet but a little privacy,' the man in the ratty sport-coat said. He spoke in cultured tones. but his soft, worried eyes were fixed on Brian.

'That's *exactly* what I mean,' Nick agreed. 'Please?'

'Is he going to be all right?' the man in the ratty sport-coat asked in a low voice. 'He looks rather upset.'

Nick answered in the same confidential tone. 'Yes,' he said. 'He'll be fine. I'll see to it.'

'Come on, children,' the man in the ratty sport-coat said. He put one arm around the girl's shoulders, the other around Albert's. 'Let's go back and sit down. Our pilot has work to do.'

They need not have lowered their voices even temporarily as far as Brian Engle was concerned. He might have been a fish feeding in a stream while a small flock of birds passes overhead. The sound may reach the fish, but he certainly attaches no significance to it. Brian was busy working his way through the radio bands and switching from one navigational touchpoint to another. It was useless. No Denver; no Colorado Springs; no Omaha. All gone.

He could feel sweat trickling down his cheeks like tears, could feel his shirt sticking to his back.

I must smell like a pig, he thought, *or a—*

Then inspiration struck. He switched to the military-aircraft band, although regulations expressly forbade his doing so. The Strategic Air Command practically owned Omaha. *They* would not be off the air. They might tell him to get the fuck off their frequency, would probably threaten to report him to the FAA, but Brian would accept all this cheerfully. Perhaps he would be the first to tell them that the city of Denver had apparently gone on vacation.

'Air Force Control, Air Force Control, this is American Pride Flight 29 and we have a problem here, a *big* problem here, do you read me? Over.'

No dog barked there, either.

That was when Brian felt something - something like a bolt - starting to give way deep inside his mind. That was when he felt his entire structure of organized thought begin to slide slowly toward some dark abyss.

9

Nick Hopewell clamped a hand on him then, high up on his shoulder, near the neck. Brian jumped in his seat and almost cried out aloud. He turned his head and found Nick's face less than three inches from his own.

Now he'll grab my nose and start to twist it, Brian thought.

Nick did not grab his nose. He spoke with quiet intensity, his eyes fixed unflinchingly on Brian's. 'I see a look in your eyes, my friend ... but I didn't need to see your eyes to know it was there. I can hear it in your voice and see it in the way you're sitting in your seat. Now listen to me, and listen well: *panic is not allowed.*'

Brian stared at him, frozen by that blue gaze.

'Do you understand me?'

He spoke with great effort. 'They don't let guys do what I do for a living if they panic, Nick.'

'I know that,' Nick said, 'but this is a unique situation. You need to remember, however, that there are a dozen or more people on this plane, and your job is the same as it ever was: to bring them down in one piece.'

'You don't need to tell me what my job is!' Brian snapped.

'I'm afraid I did,' Nick said, 'but you're looking a hundred per cent better now, I'm relieved to say.'

Brian was doing more than looking better; he was starting to *feel* better again. Nick had stuck a pin into the most sensitive place - his sense of responsibility. *Just where he meant to stick me,* he thought.

'What do you do for a living, Nick?' he asked a trifle shakily.

Nick threw back his head and laughed. 'Junior attache, British embassy, old man.'

'My aunt's hat.'

Nick shrugged. 'Well ... that's what it says on my papers, and I reckon that's good enough. If they said anything else, I suppose it would be Her Majesty's Mechanic. I fix things that need fixing. Right now that means you.'

'Thank you,' Brian said touchily, 'but I'm fixed.'

'All right, then - what do you mean to do? Can you navigate without those ground-beam thingies? Can you avoid other planes?'

'I can navigate just fine with on-board equipment,' Brian said. 'As for other planes -' He pointed at the radar screen. 'This bastard says there *aren't* any other planes.'

'Could be there are, though,' Nick said softly. 'Could be that radio and radar conditions are snafued, at least for the time being. You mentioned nuclear war, Brian. I think if there had been a nuclear exchange, we'd know. But that doesn't mean there hasn't been some sort of accident. Are you familiar with the phenomenon called the electromagnetic pulse?'

Brian thought briefly of Melanie Trevor. *Oh, and we've had reports of the aurora borealis over the Mojave Desert. You might want to stay awake for that.*

Could that be it? Some freakish weather phenomenon?

He supposed it was just possible. But, if so, how come he heard no static on the radio? How come there was no wave interference across the radar screen? Why just this dead blankness? And he didn't think the aurora borealis had been responsible for the disappearance of a hundred and fifty to two hundred passengers.

'Well?' Nick asked.

'You're some mechanic, Nick,' Brian said at last, 'but I don't think it's EMP. All on-board equipment - including the directional gear - seems to be working just fine.' He pointed to the digital compass readout. 'If we'd experienced an electromagnetic pulse, that baby would be all over the place. But it's holding dead steady.'

'So. Do you intend to continue on to Boston?'

Do you intend ... ?

And with that, the last of Brian's panic drained away. *That's right, he thought. I'm the captain of this ship now ... and in the end, that's all it comes down to. You should have reminded me of that in the first place, my friend, and saved us both a lot of trouble.*

'Logan at dawn, with no idea what's going on in the country below us, or the rest of the world? No way.'

'Then what is our destination? Or do you need time to consider that matter?'

Brian didn't. And now the other things he needed to do began to click into place.

'I know,' he said. 'And I think it's time to talk to the passengers. The few that are left, anyway.'

He picked up the microphone, and that was when the bald man who had been sleeping in the business section poked his head into the cockpit. 'Would one of you gentlemen be so kind as to tell me what's happened to all the service personnel on this craft?' he asked querulously. 'I've had a very nice nap ... but now I'd like my dinner.'

10

Dinah Bellman felt much better. It was good to have other people around her, to feel their comforting presence. She was sitting in a small group with Albert Kaussner, Laurel Stevenson, and the man in the ratty sport-coat, who had introduced himself as Robert Jenkins. He was, he said, the author of more than forty mystery novels, and had been on his way to Boston to address a convention of mystery fans.

'Now,' he said, 'I find myself involved in a mystery a good deal more extravagant than any I would ever have dared to write.'

These four were sitting in the center section, near the head of the main cabin. The man in the crew-neck jersey sat in the starboard aisle, several rows down, holding a handkerchief to his nose (which had actually stopped bleeding several minutes ago) and fuming in solitary splendor. Don Gaffney sat nearby, keeping an uneasy watch on him. Gaffney had only spoken once, to ask Crew-Neck what his name was. Crew-Neck had not replied. He simply fixed Gaffney with a gaze of baleful intensity over the crumpled bouquet of his handkerchief.

Gaffney had not asked again.

'Does anyone have the *slightest* idea of what's going on here?' Laurel almost pleaded. 'I'm supposed to be starting my first real vacation in ten years tomorrow, and now *this* happens.'

Albert happened to be looking directly at Miss Stevenson as she spoke. As she dropped the line about this being her first real vacation in ten years, he saw her eyes suddenly shift to the right and blink rapidly three or four times, as if a particle of dust had landed in

one of them. An idea so strong it was a certainty rose in his mind: the lady was lying. For some reason, the lady was lying. He looked at her more closely and saw nothing really remarkable - a woman with a species of fading prettiness, a woman falling rapidly out of her twenties and toward middle age (and to Albert, thirty was definitely where middle age began), a woman who would soon become colorless and invisible. But she had color now; her cheeks flamed with it. He didn't know what the lie meant, but he could see that it had momentarily refreshed her prettiness and made her nearly beautiful.

There's a lady who should lie more often, Albert thought. Then, before he or anyone else could reply to her, Brian's voice came from the overhead speakers.

'Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain.'

'Captain my ass,' Crew-Neck snarled.

'Shut up!' Gaffney exclaimed from across the aisle.

Crew-Neck looked at him, startled, and subsided.

'As you undoubtedly know, we have an extremely odd situation on our hands here,' Brian continued. 'You don't need me to explain it; you only have to look around yourselves to understand.'

'I don't understand anything,' Albert muttered.

'I know a few other things, as well. They won't exactly make your day, I'm afraid, but since we're in this together, I want to be as frank as I possibly can. I have no cockpit-to-ground communication. And about five minutes ago we should have been able to see the lights of Denver clearly from the airplane. We couldn't. The only conclusion I'm willing to draw right now is that somebody down there forgot to pay the electricity bill. And until we know a little more, I think that's the only conclusion *any* of us should draw.'

He paused. Laurel was holding Dinah's hand. Albert produced a low, awed whistle. Robert Jenkins, the mystery writer, was staring dreamily into space with his hands resting on his thighs.

'All of that is the bad news,' Brian went on. 'The good news is this: the plane is undamaged, we have plenty of fuel, and I'm qualified to fly this make and model. Also to land it. I think we'll all agree that landing safely is our first priority. There isn't a thing we can do until

we accomplish that, and I want you to rest assured that it will be done.

'The last thing I want to pass on to you is that our destination will now be Bangor, Maine.'

Crew-Neck sat up with a jerk. *'Whaaat?'* he bellowed.

'Our in-flight navigation equipment is in five-by-five working order, but I can't say the same for the navigational beams - VOR - which we also use. Under these circumstances, I have elected not to enter Logan airspace. I haven't been able to raise anyone, in air or on ground, by radio. The aircraft's radio equipment appears to be working, but I don't feel I can depend on appearances in the current circumstances. Bangor International Airport has the following advantages: the short approach is over land rather than water; air traffic at our ETA, about 8:30 A.M., will be much lighter - assuming there's any at all; and BIA, which used to be Dow Air Force Base, has the longest commercial runway on the East Coast of the United States. Our British and French friends land the Concorde there when they can't get into New York.'

Crew-Neck bawled: *'I have an important business meeting at the Pru this morning at nine o'clock AND I FORBID YOU TO FLY INTO SOME DIPSHIT MAINE AIRPORT!'*

Dinah jumped and then cringed away from the sound of Crew-Neck's voice, pressing her cheek against the side of Laurel Stevenson's breast. She was not crying - not yet, anyway - but Laurel felt her chest begin to hitch.

'DO YOU HEAR ME?' Crew-Neck was bellowing. *'I AM DUE IN BOSTON TO DISCUSS AN UNUSUALLY LARGE BOND TRANSACTION, AND I HAVE EVERY INTENTION OF ARRIVING AT THAT MEETING ON TIME!'* He unlatched his seatbelt and began to stand up. His cheeks were red, his brow waxy white. There was a blank look in his eyes which Laurel found extremely frightening. *'Do You UNDERSTA -'*

'Please,' Laurel said. 'Please, mister, you're scaring the little girl.'

Crew-Neck turned his head and that unsettling blank gaze fell on her. Laurel could have waited. *'SCARING THE LITTLE GIRL? WE'RE DIVERTING TO SOME TINPOT, CHICKEN-SHIT AIRPORT*

IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, AND ALL YOU'VE GOT TO WORRY ABOUT IS -'

'Sit down and shut up or I'll pop you one,' Gaffney said, standing up. He had at least twenty years on Crew-Neck, but he was heavier and much broader through the chest. He had rolled the sleeves of his red flannel shirt to the elbows, and when he clenched his hands into fists, the muscles in his forearms bunched. He looked like a lumberjack just starting to soften into retirement.

Crew-Neck's upper lip pulled back from his teeth. This doglike grimace scared Laurel, because she didn't believe the man in the crew-neck jersey knew he was making a face. She was the first of them to wonder if this man might not be crazy.

'I don't think you could do it alone, pops,' he said.

'He won't have to.' It was the bald man from the business section. 'I'll take a swing at you myself, if you don't shut up.'

Albert Kaussner mustered all his courage and said, 'So will I, you putz.'

Saying it was a great relief. He felt like one of the guys at the Alamo, stepping over the line Colonel Travis had drawn in the dirt.

Crew-Neck looked around. His lip rose and fell again in that queer, doglike snarl. 'I see. I see. You're all against me. Fine.' He sat down and stared at them truculently. 'But if you knew anything about the market in South American bonds -' He didn't finish. There was a cocktail napkin sitting on the arm of the seat next to him. He picked it up, looked at it, and began to pluck at it.

'Doesn't have to be this way,' Gaffney said. 'I wasn't born a hardass, mister, and I ain't one by inclination, either.' He was trying to sound pleasant, Laurel thought, but wariness showed through, perhaps anger as well. 'You ought to just relax and take it easy. Look on the bright side! The airline'll probably refund your full ticket price on this trip.'

Crew-Neck cut his eyes briefly in Don Gaffney's direction, then looked back at the cocktail napkin. He quit plucking it and began to tear it into long strips.

'Anyone here know how to run that little oven in the galley?' Baldy asked, as if nothing had happened. 'I want my dinner.'

No one answered.

'I didn't think so,' the bald man said sadly. 'This is the era of specialization. A shameful time to be alive.' With this philosophical pronouncement, Baldy retreated once more to business class.

Laurel looked down and saw that, below the rims of the dark glasses with their jaunty red plastic frames, Dinah Bellman's cheeks were wet with tears. Laurel forgot some of her own fear and perplexity, at least temporarily, and hugged the little girl. 'Don't cry, honey - that man was just upset. He's better now.'

If you call sitting there and looking hypnotized while you tear a paper napkin into teeny shreds better, she thought.

'I'm scared,' Dinah whispered. 'We all look like monsters to that man.'

'No, I don't think so,' Laurel said, surprised and a little taken aback. 'Why would you think a thing like that?'

'I don't know,' Dinah said. She liked this woman - had liked her from the instant she heard her voice - but she had no intention of telling Laurel that for just a moment she had seen them all, herself included, looking back at the man with the loud voice. She had been *inside* the man with the loud voice - his name was Mr Tooms or Mr Tunney or something like that - and to him they looked like a bunch of evil, selfish trolls.

If she told Miss Lee something like that, Miss Lee would think she was crazy. Why would this woman, whom Dinah had just met, think any different?

So Dinah said nothing.

Laurel kissed the girl's cheek. The skin was hot beneath her lips. 'Don't be scared, honey. We're going along just as smooth as can be - can't you feel it? -and in just a few hours we'll be safe on the ground again.'

'That's good. I want my Aunt Vicky, though. Where is she, do you think?'

'I don't know, hon,' Laurel said. 'I wish I did.'

Dinah thought again of the faces the yelling man saw: evil faces, cruel faces. She thought of her own face as he perceived it, a piggish baby face with the eyes hidden behind huge black lenses. Her courage broke then, and she began to weep in hoarse racking sobs that hurt Laurel's heart. She held the girl, because it was the

only thing she could think of to do, and soon she was crying herself. They cried together for nearly five minutes, and then Dinah began to calm again. Laurel looked over at the slim young boy, whose name was either Albert or Alvin, she could not remember which, and saw that his eyes were also wet. He caught her looking and glanced hastily down at his hands.

Dinah fetched one final gasping sob and then just lay with her head pillowed against Laurel's breast. 'I guess crying won't help, huh?'

'No, I guess not,' Laurel agreed. 'Why don't you try going to sleep, Dinah?'

Dinah sighed - a watery, unhappy sound. 'I don't think I can. I was asleep.'

Tell me about it, Laurel thought. And Flight 29 continued east at 36,000 feet, flying at over five hundred miles an hour above the dark midsection of America.

CHAPTER 3

The Deductive Method. Accidents and Statistics. Speculative Possibilities. Pressure in the Trenches. Bethany's Problem. The Descent Begins.

1

'That little girl said something interesting an hour or so ago,' Robert Jenkins said suddenly.

The little girl in question had gone to sleep again in the meantime, despite her doubts about her ability to do so. Albert Kaussner had also been nodding, perchance to return once more to those mythic streets of Tombstone. He had taken his violin case down from the overhead compartment and was holding it across his lap.

'Huh!' he said, and straightened up.

'I'm sorry,' Jenkins said. 'Were you dozing?'

'Nope,' Albert said. 'Wide awake.' He turned two large, bloodshot orbs on Jenkins to prove this. A darkish shadow lay under each. Jenkins thought he looked a little like a raccoon which has been startled while raiding garbage cans. 'What did she say?'

'She told Miss Stevenson she didn't think she could get back to sleep because she *had* been sleeping. Earlier.'

Albert gazed at Dinah for a moment. 'Well, she's out now,' he said.

'I see she is, but that is not the point, dear boy. Not the point at all.'

Albert considered telling Mr Jenkins that Ace Kaussner, the fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi and the only Texan to survive the Battle of the Alamo, did not much cotton to being called dear boy, and decided to let it pass ... at least for the time being. 'Then what is the point?'

'I was also asleep. Corked off even before the captain - our *original* captain, I mean - turned off the NO SMOKING light. I've always been that way. Trains, busses, planes - I drift off like a baby the minute they turn on the motors. What about you, dear boy?'

What about me what?'

Were you asleep? You were, weren't you?'

'Well, yeah.'

We were *all* asleep. The people who disappeared were all awake.'

Albert thought about this. 'Well ... maybe.'

'Nonsense,' Jenkins said almost jovially. 'I write mysteries for a living. Deduction is my bread and butter, you might say. Don't you think that if someone had been awake when all those people were eliminated, that person would have screamed bloody murder, waking the rest of us?'

'I guess so,' Albert agreed thoughtfully. 'Except maybe for that guy all the way in the back. I don't think an air-raid siren would wake *that* guy up.'

'All right; your exception is duly noted. But *no one* screamed, did they? And no one has offered to tell the rest of us what happened. So I deduce that only waking passengers were subtracted. Along with the flight crew, of course.'

'Yeah. Maybe so.'

'You look troubled, dear boy. Your expression says that, despite its charms, the idea does not scan perfectly for you. May I ask why not? Have I missed something?' Jenkins's expression said he didn't believe that was possible, but that his mother had raised him to be polite.

'I don't know,' Albert said honestly. 'How many of us are there? Eleven?'

'Yes. Counting the fellow in the back - the one who is comatose - we number eleven.'

'If you're right, shouldn't there be more of us?'

'Why?'

But Albert fell silent, struck by a sudden, vivid image from his childhood. He had been raised in a theological twilight zone by parents who were not Orthodox but who were not agnostics, either. He and his brothers had grown up observing most of the dietary traditions (or laws, or whatever they were), they had had their Bar Mitzvalis, and they had been raised to know who they were, where they came from, and what that was supposed to mean. And the story Albert remembered most clearly from his childhood visits to temple

was the story of the final plague which had been visited on Pharaoh - the gruesome tribute exacted by God's dark angel of the morning.

In his mind's eye he now saw that angel moving not over Egypt but through Flight 29, gathering most of the passengers to its terrible breast ... not because they had neglected to daub their lintels (or their seat-backs, perhaps) with the blood of a lamb, but because ...

Why? Because *why*?

Albert didn't know, but he shivered just the same. And wished that creepy old story had never occurred to him. *Let my Frequent Fliers go*, he thought. Except it wasn't funny.

'Albert?' Mr Jenkins's voice seemed to come from a long way off. 'Albert, are you all right?'

'Yes. just thinking.' He cleared his throat. 'If all the sleeping passengers were, you know, passed over, there'd be at least sixty of us. Maybe more. I mean, this is the red-eye.'

'Dear boy, have you ever -'

'Could you call me Albert, Mr Jenkins? That's my name.'

Jenkins patted Albert's shoulder. 'I'm sorry. Really. I don't mean to be patronizing. I'm upset, and when I'm upset, I have a tendency to retreat ... like a turtle pulling his head back into his shell. Only what I retreat into is fiction. I believe I was playing Philo Vance. He's a detective - a *great* detective - created by the late S. S. Van Dyne. I suppose you've never read him. Hardly anyone does these days, which is a pity. At any rate, I apologize.'

'It's okay,' Albert said uncomfortably.

'Albert you are and Albert you shall be from now on,' Robert Jenkins promised. 'I started to ask if you've ever taken the red-eye before.'

'No. I've never even flown across the country before.'

'Well, I have. Many times. On a few occasions I have even gone against my natural inclination and stayed awake for awhile. Mostly when I was a younger man and the flights were noisier. Having said that much, I may as well date myself outrageously by admitting that my first coast-to-coast trip was on a TWA prop-job that made two stops ... to refuel.'

'My observation is that very few people go to sleep on such flights during the first hour or so ... and then just about *everyone* goes to

sleep. During that first hour, people occupy themselves with looking at the scenery, talking with their spouses or their travelling companions, having a drink or two -'

'Settling in, you mean,' Albert suggested. What Mr Jenkins was saying made perfect sense to him, although he had done precious little settling in himself; he had been so excited about his coming journey and the new life which would be waiting for him that he had hardly slept at all during the last couple of nights. As a result, he had gone out like a light almost as soon as the 767 left the ground.

'Making little nests for themselves,' Jenkins agreed. 'Did you happen to notice the drinks trolley outside the cockpit, dea - Albert?'

'I saw it was there,' Albert agreed.

Jenkins's eyes shone. 'Yes indeed - it was either see it or fall over it. But did you really *notice* it?'

'I guess not, if you saw something I didn't.'

'It's not the eye that notices, but the *mind*, Albert. The trained deductive mind. I'm no Sherlock Holmes, but I *did* notice that it had just been taken out of the small closet in which it is stored, and that the used glasses from the pre-flight service were still stacked on the bottom shelf. From this I deduce the following: the plane took off uneventfully, it climbed toward its cruising altitude, and the autopilot device was fortunately engaged. Then the captain turned off the seatbelt light. This would all be about thirty minutes into the flight, if I'm reading the signs correctly - about 1:00 A.M., PDT.

When the seatbelt light was turned out, the stewardesses arose and began their first task - cocktails for about one hundred and fifty at about 24,000 feet and rising. The pilot, meanwhile, has programmed the autopilot to level the plane off at 36,000 feet and fly east on heading thus-and-such. A few passengers - eleven of us, in fact - have fallen asleep. Of the rest, some are dozing, perhaps (but not deeply enough to save them from whatever happened), and the rest are all wide awake.'

'Building their nests,' Albert said.

'Exactly! Building their nests!' Jenkins paused and then added, not without some melodrama: 'And then it happened!'

'*What* happened, Mr Jenkins?' Albert asked. 'Do you have any ideas about that?'

Jenkins did not answer for a long time, and when he finally did, a lot of the fun had gone out of his voice. Listening to him, Albert understood for the first time that, beneath the slightly theatrical veneer, Robert Jenkins was as frightened as Albert was himself. He found he did not mind this; it made the elderly mystery writer in his running-to-seed sport-coat seem more real.

'The locked-room mystery is the tale of deduction at its most pure,' Jenkins said. 'I've written a few of them myself - more than a few, to be completely honest -but I never expected to be a part of one.'

Albert looked at him and could think of no reply. He found himself remembering a Sherlock Holmes story called 'The Speckled Band.' In that story a poisonous snake had gotten into the famous locked room through a ventilating duct. The immortal Sherlock hadn't even had to wake up all his brain-cells to solve that one.

But even if the overhead luggage compartments of Flight 29 had been filled with poisonous snakes - stuffed with them - where were the bodies? *Where were the bodies?* Fear began to creep into him again, seeming to flow up his legs toward his vitals. He reflected that he had never felt less like that famous gunslinger Ace Kaussner in his whole life.

'If it were just the plane,' Jenkins went on softly, 'I suppose I could come up with a scenario - it is, after all, how I have been earning my daily bread for the last twenty-five years or so. Would you like to hear one such scenario?'

'Sure,' Albert said.

'Very well. Let us say that some shadowy government organization like The Shop has decided to carry out an experiment, and we are the test subjects. The purpose of such an experiment, given the circumstances, might be to document the effects of severe mental and emotional stress on a number of average Americans. They, the scientists running the experiment, load the airplane's oxygen system with some sort of odorless hypnotic drug

'Are there such things?' Albert asked, fascinated.

'There are indeed,' Jenkins said. 'Diazaline, for one. Methoprominol, for another. I remember when readers who liked to think of themselves as "serious-minded" laughed at Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu novels. They called them panting melodrama at its most

shameful.' Jenkins shook his head slowly. 'Now, thanks to biological research and the paranoia of alphabet agencies like the CIA and the DIA, we're living in a world that could be Sax Rohmer's worst nightmare.

'Diazaline, which is actually a nerve gas, would be best. It's supposed to be very fast. After it is released into the air, *everyone* falls asleep, except for the pilot, who is breathing uncontaminated air through a mask.'

'But -' Albert began.

Jenkins smiled and raised a hand. 'I know what your objection is, Albert, and I can explain it. Allow me?'

Albert nodded.

'The pilot lands the plane - at a secret airstrip in Nevada, let us say. The passengers who were awake when the gas was released - and the stewardesses, of course - are off-loaded by sinister men wearing white *Andromeda Strain* suits. The passengers who were asleep - you and I among them, my young friend - simply go on sleeping, only a little more deeply than before. The pilot then returns Flight 29 to its proper altitude and heading. He engages the autopilot. As the plane reaches the Rockies, the effects of the gas begin to wear off. Diazaline is a so-called clear drug, one that leaves no appreciable after-effects. No hangover, in other words. Over his intercom, the pilot can hear the little blind girl crying out for her aunt. He knows she will wake the others. The experiment is about to commence. So he gets up and leaves the cockpit, closing the door behind him.'

'How could he do that? There's no knob on the outside.'

Jenkins waved a dismissive hand. 'Simplest thing in the world, Albert. He uses a strip of adhesive tape, sticky side out. Once the door latches from the inside, it's locked.'

A smile of admiration began to overspread Albert's face - and then it froze. 'In that case, the pilot would be one of us,' he said.

'Yes and no. In my scenario, Albert, the pilot is the pilot. The pilot who just happened to be on board, supposedly deadheading to Boston. The pilot who was sitting in first class, less than thirty feet from the cockpit door, when the manure hit the fan.'

'Captain Engle,' Albert said in a low, horrified voice.

Jenkins replied in the pleased but complacent tone of a geometry professor who has just written QED below the proof of a particularly difficult theorem. 'Captain Engle,' he agreed.

Neither of them noticed Crew-Neck looking at them with glittering, feverish eyes. Now Crew-Neck took the in-flight magazine from the seatpocket in front of him, pulled off the cover, and began to tear it in long, slow strips. He let them flutter to the floor, where they joined the shreds of the cocktail napkin around his brown loafers. His lips were moving soundlessly.

2

Had Albert been a student of the New Testament, he would have understood how Saul, that most zealous persecutor of the early Christians, must have felt when the scales fell from his eyes on the road to Damascus. He stared at Robert Jenkins with shining enthusiasm, every vestige of sleepiness banished from his brain.

Of course, when you thought about it - or when somebody like Mr Jenkins, who was clearly a real head, ratty sport-coat or no ratty sport-coat, thought about it for you - it was just too big and too obvious to miss. Almost the entire cast and crew of American Pride's Flight 29 had disappeared between the Mojave Desert and the Great Divide ... but one of the few survivors just happened to be -surprise, surprise! - another American Pride pilot who was, in his own words, 'qualified to fly this make and model - also to land it.'

Jenkins had been watching Albert closely, and now he smiled. There wasn't much humor in that smile. 'It's a tempting scenario,' he said, 'isn't it?'

'We'll have to capture him as soon as we land,' Albert said, scraping one hand feverishly up the side of his face. 'You, me, Mr Gaffney, and that British guy. He looks tough. Only ... what if the Brit's in on it, too? He could be Captain Engle's, you know, bodyguard. Just in case someone figured things out the way you did.'

Jenkins opened his mouth to reply, but Albert rushed on before he could.

'We'll just have to put the arm on them both. Somehow.' He offered Mr Jenkins a narrow smile - an Ace Kaussner smile. Cool, tight, dangerous. The smile of a man who is faster than blue blazes, and knows it. 'I may not be the world's smartest guy, Mr Jenkins, but I'm nobody's lab rat.'

'But it doesn't stand up, you know,' Jenkins said mildly.

Albert blinked. 'What?'

'The scenario I just outlined for you. It doesn't stand up.'

'But - you said -'

'I said *if it were just the plane*, I could come up with a scenario. And I did. A good one. If it was a book idea, I'll bet my agent could sell it. Unfortunately, it *isn't* just the plane. Denver might still have been down there, but all the lights were off if it was. I have been coordinating our route of travel with my wristwatch, and I can tell you now that it's not just Denver, either. Omaha, Des Moines - no sign of them down there in the dark, my boy. I have seen no lights at all, in fact. No farmhouses, no grain storage and shipping locations, no interstate turnpikes. Those things show up at night, you know -with the new high-intensity lighting, they show up very well, even when one is almost six miles up. The land is utterly dark. Now I can believe that there *might* be a government agency unethical enough to drug us all in order to observe our reactions. Hypothetically, at least. What I cannot believe is that even The Shop could have persuaded everyone over our flight-path to turn off their lights in order to reinforce the illusion that we are all alone.'

'Well ... maybe it's all a fake,' Albert suggested. 'Maybe we're really still on the ground and everything we can see outside the window is, you know, projected. I saw a movie something like that once.'

Jenkins shook his head slowly, regretfully. 'I'm sure it was an interesting film, but I don't believe it would work in real life. Unless our theoretical secret agency has perfected some sort of ultra-wide-screen 3-D projection, I think not. Whatever is happening is not just going on inside this plane, Albert, and that is where deduction breaks down.'

'But the pilot!' Albert said wildly. 'What about him just happening to be here at the right place and time?'

'Are you a baseball fan, Albert?'

'Huh? No. I mean, sometimes I watch the Dodgers on TV, but not really.'

'Well, let me tell you what may be the most amazing statistic ever recorded in a game which thrives on statistics. In 1957, Ted Williams reached base on sixteen consecutive at-bats. This streak encompassed six baseball games. In 1941, Joe DiMaggio batted safely in fifty-six straight games, but the odds against what DiMaggio did pale next to the odds against Williams's accomplishment, which have been put somewhere in the neighborhood of two *billion* to one. Baseball fans like to say DiMaggio's streak will never be equalled. I disagree. But I'd be willing to bet that, if they're still playing baseball a thousand years from now, Williams's sixteen on-bases in a row will still stand.'

'All of which means what?'

'It means that I believe Captain Engle's presence on board tonight is nothing more or less than an accident, like Ted Williams's sixteen consecutive on-bases. And, considering our circumstances, I'd say it's a very lucky accident indeed. If life was like a mystery novel, Albert, where coincidence is not allowed and the odds are never beaten for long, it would be a much tidier business. I've found, though, that in real life coincidence is not the exception but the rule.'

'Then what is happening?' Albert whispered.

Jenkins uttered a long, uneasy sigh. 'I'm the wrong person to ask, I'm afraid. It's too bad Larry Niven or John Varley isn't on board.'

'Who are those guys?'

'Science-fiction writers,' Jenkins said.

3

'I don't suppose you read science fiction, do you?' Nick Hopewell asked suddenly. Brian turned around to look at him. Nick had been sitting quietly in the navigator's seat since Brian had taken control of Flight 29, almost two hours ago now. He had listened wordlessly as Brian continued trying to reach someone - anyone - *on* the ground or in the air.

'I was crazy about it as a kid,' Brian said. 'You?'

Nick smiled. 'Until I was eighteen or so, I firmly believed that the Holy Trinity consisted of Robert Heinlein, John Christopher, and John Wyndham. I've been sitting here and running all those old stories through my head, matey. And thinking about such exotic things as time-warps and space-warps and alien raiding parties.'

Brian nodded. He felt relieved; it was good to know he wasn't the only one who was thinking crazy thoughts.

'I mean, we don't really have any way of knowing if *anything is* left down there, do we?'

'No,' Brian said. 'We don't.'

Over Illinois, low-lying clouds had blotted out the dark bulk of the earth far below the plane. He was sure it still *was* the earth - the Rockies had looked reassuringly familiar, even from 36,000 feet - but beyond that he was sure of nothing. And the cloud cover might hold all the way to Bangor. With Air Traffic Control out of commission, he had no real way of knowing. Brian had been playing with a number of scenarios, and the most unpleasant of the lot was this: that they would come out of the clouds and discover that every sign of human life - including the airport where he hoped to land - was gone. Where would he put this bird down then?

'I've always found waiting the hardest part,' Nick said.

The hardest part of what? Brian wondered, but he did not ask.

'Suppose you took us down to 5,000 feet or so?' Nick proposed suddenly. 'Just for a quick look-see. Perhaps the sight of a few small towns and interstate highways will set our minds at rest.'

Brian had already considered this idea. Had considered it with great longing. 'It's tempting,' he said, 'but I can't do it.'

'Why not?'

'The passengers are still my first responsibility, Nick. They'd probably panic, even if I explained what I was going to do in advance. I'm thinking of our loudmouth friend with the pressing appointment at the Pru in particular. The one whose nose you twisted.'

'I can handle him,' Nick replied. 'Any others who cut up rough, as well.'

'I'm sure you can,' Brian said, 'but I still see no need of scaring them unnecessarily. And we will find out, eventually. We can't stay up here forever, you know.'

'Too true, matey,' Nick said dryly.

'I might do it anyway, if I could be sure I could get under the cloud cover at 4000 or 5000 feet, but with no ATC and no other planes to talk to, I can't be sure. I don't even know for sure what the weather's like down there, and I'm not talking about normal stuff, either. You can laugh at me if you want to -'

'I'm not laughing, matey. I'm not even *close* to laughing. Believe me.'

'Well, suppose we *have* gone through a time-warp, like in a science-fiction story? What if I took us down through the clouds and we got one quick look at a bunch of brontosauruses grazing in some Farmer John's field before we were torn apart by a cyclone or fried in an electrical storm?'

'Do you really think that's possible?' Nick asked. Brian looked at him closely to see if the question was sarcastic. It didn't appear to be, but it was hard to tell. The British were famous for their dry sense of humor, weren't they?

Brian started to tell him he had once seen something just like that on an old *Twilight Zone* episode and then decided it wouldn't help his credibility at all. 'It's pretty unlikely, I suppose, but you get the idea - we just don't know what we're dealing with. We might hit a brand-new mountain in what used to be upstate New York. Or another plane. Hell - maybe even a rocket-shuttle. After all, if it's a time-warp, we could as easily be in the future as in the past. '

Nick looked out through the window. 'We seem to have the sky pretty much to ourselves.'

'Up here, that's true. Down there, who knows? And who knows is a very dicey situation for an airline pilot. I intend to overfly Bangor when we get there, if these clouds still hold. I'll take us out over the Atlantic and drop under the ceiling as we head back. Our odds will be better if we make our initial descent over water.'

'So for now, we just go on.'

'Right.'

'And wait.'

'Right again.'

Nick sighed. 'Well, you're the captain.'

Brian smiled. 'That's three in a row.'

4

Deep in the trenches carved into the floors of the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, there are fish which live and die without ever seeing or sensing the sun. These fabulous creatures cruise the depths like ghostly balloons, lit from within by their own radiance. Although they look delicate, they are actually marvels of biological design, built to withstand pressures that would squash a man as flat as a windowpane in the blink of an eye. Their great strength, however, is also their great weakness. Prisoners of their own alien bodies, they are locked forever in their dark depths. If they are captured and drawn toward the surface, toward the sun, they simply explode. It is not external pressure that destroys them, but its absence.

Craig Toomy had been raised in his own dark trench, had lived in his own atmosphere of high pressure. His father had been an executive in the Bank of America, away from home for long stretches of time, a caricature type-A overachiever. He drove his only child as furiously and as unforgivingly as he drove himself. The bedtime stories he told Craig in Craig's early years terrified the boy. Nor was this surprising, because terror was exactly the emotion Roger Toomy meant to awaken in the boy's breast. These tales concerned themselves, for the most part, with a race of monstrous beings called the langoliers.

Their job, their mission in life (in the world of Roger Toomy, *everything* had a job, *everything* had serious work to do), was to prey on lazy, time-wasting children. By the time he was seven, Craig was a dedicated type-A overachiever, just like Daddy. He had made up his mind: the langoliers were never going to get him.

A report card which did not contain all A's was an unacceptable report card. An A- was the subject of a lecture fraught with dire warnings of what life would be like digging ditches or emptying garbage cans, and a B resulted in punishment - most commonly

confinement to his room for a week. During that week, Craig was allowed out only for school and for meals. There was no time off for good behavior. On the other hand, extraordinary achievement - the time Craig won the tri-school decathlon, for instance - warranted no corresponding praise. When Craig showed his father the medal which had been awarded him on that occasion - in an assembly before the entire student body - his father glanced at it, grunted once, and went back to his newspaper. Craig was nine years old when his father died of a heart attack. He was actually sort of relieved that the Bank of America's answer to General Patton was gone.

His mother was an alcoholic whose drinking had been controlled only by her fear of the man she had married. Once Roger Toomy was safely in the ground, where he could no longer search out her bottles and break them, or slap her and tell her to get hold of herself, for God's sake, Catherine Toomy began her life's work in earnest. She alternately smothered her son with affection and froze him with rejection, depending on how much gin was currently perking through her bloodstream. Her behavior was often odd and sometimes bizarre. On the day Craig turned ten, she placed a wooden kitchen match between two of his toes, lit it, and sang 'Happy Birthday to You' while it burned slowly down toward his flesh. She told him that if he tried to shake it out or kick it loose, she would take him to THE ORPHAN'S HOME at once. The threat of THE ORPHAN'S HOME was a frequent one when Catherine Toomy was loaded. 'I ought to, anyway,' she told him as she lit the match which stuck up between her weeping son's toes like a skinny birthday candle. 'You're just like your father. He didn't know how to have fun, and neither do you. You're a *bore*, Craiggy-weggy.' She finished the song and blew out the match before the skin of Craig's second and third right toes was more than singed, but Craig never forgot the yellow flame, the curling, blackening stick of wood, and the growing heat as his mother warbled 'Happy birthday, dear Craiggy-weggy, happy birthday to yooooou' in her droning, off-key drunk's voice.

Pressure.

Pressure in the trenches.

Craig Toomy continued to get all A's, and he continued to spend a lot of time in his room. The place which had been his Coventry had become his refuge. Mostly he studied there, but sometimes - when things were going badly, when he felt pressed to the wall - he would take one piece of notepaper after another and tear them into narrow strips. He would let them flutter around his feet in a growing drift while his eyes stared out blankly into space. But these blank periods were not frequent. Not then.

He graduated valedictorian from high school. His mother didn't come. She was drunk. He graduated ninth in his class from the UCLA Graduate School of Management. His mother didn't come. She was dead. In the dark trench which existed in the center of his own heart, Craig was quite sure that the langoliers had finally come for her.

Craig went to work for the Desert Sun Banking Corporation of California as part of the executive training program. He did very well, which was not surprising; Craig Toomy had been built, after all, to get all A's, built to thrive under the pressures which exist in the deep fathoms. And sometimes, following some small reverse at work (and in those days, only five short years ago, all the reverses had been small ones), he would go back to his apartment in Westwood, less than half a mile from the condo Brian Engle would occupy following his divorce, and tear small strips of paper for hours at a time. The paper-tearing episodes were gradually becoming more frequent.

During those five years, Craig ran the corporate fast truck like a greyhound chasing a mechanical rabbit. Water-cooler gossips speculated that he might well become the youngest vice-president in Desert Sun's glorious forty-year history. But some fish are built to rise just so far and no further; they explode if they transgress their built-in limits.

Eight months ago, Craig Toomy had been put in sole charge of his first big project - the corporate equivalent of a master's thesis. This project was created by the bonds department. Bonds - foreign bonds and junk bonds (they were frequently the same) - were Craig's specialty. This project proposed buying a limited number of questionable South American bonds - sometimes called Bad Debt Bonds - on a carefully set schedule. The theory behind these buys

was sound enough, given the limited insurance on them that was available, and the much larger tax-breaks available on turn-overs resulting in a profit (Uncle Sam was practically falling all over himself to keep the complex structure of South American indebtedness from collapsing like a house of cards). It just had to be done carefully.

Craig Toomy had presented a daring plan which raised a good many eyebrows. It centered upon a large buy of various Argentinian bonds, generally considered to be the worst of a bad lot. Craig had argued forcefully and persuasively for his plan, producing facts, figures, and projections to prove his contention that Argentinian bonds were a good deal more solid than they looked. In one bold stroke, he argued, Desert Sun could become the most important - and richest - buyer of foreign bonds in the American West. The money they made, he said, would be a lot less important than the long-run credibility they would establish.

After a good deal of discussion - some of it hot - Craig's take on the project got a green light. Tom Holby, a senior vice-president, had drawn Craig aside after the meeting to offer congratulations ... and a word of warning. 'If this comes off the way you expect at the end of the fiscal year, you're going to be everyone's fair-haired boy. If it doesn't, you are going to find yourself in a very windy place, Craig. I'd suggest that the next few months might be a good time to build a storm-shelter.'

'I won't need a storm-shelter, Mr Holby,' Craig said confidently. 'After this, what I'll need is a hang-glider. This is going to be the bond-buy of the century -like finding diamonds at a barn-sale. Just wait and see.'

He had gone home early that night, and as soon as his apartment door was closed and triple-locked behind him, the confident smile had slipped from his face. What replaced it was that unsettling look of blankness. He had bought the news magazines on the way home. He took them into the kitchen, squared them up neatly in front of him on the table, and began to rip them into long, narrow strips. He went on doing this for over six hours. He ripped until *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *US News & World Report* lay in shreds on the floor all around him. His Gucci loafers were buried. He looked like the lone survivor of an explosion in a tickertape factory.

The bonds he had proposed buying - the Argentinian bonds in particular - were a much higher risk than he had let on. He had pushed his proposal through by exaggerating some facts, suppressing others ... and even making some up out of whole cloth. Quite a few of these latter, actually. Then he had gone home, ripped strips of paper for hours, and wondered why he had done it. He did not know about the fish that exist in trenches, living their lives and dying their deaths without ever seeing the sun. He did not know that there are both fish and men whose *bete noire* is not pressure but the lack of it. He only knew that he had been under an unbreakable compulsion to buy those bonds, to paste a target on his own forehead.

Now he was due to meet with bond representatives of five large banking corporations at the Prudential Center in Boston. There would be much comparing of notes, much speculation about the future of the world bond market, much discussion about the buys of the last sixteen months and the result of those buys. And before the first day of the three-day conference was over, they would all know what Craig Toomy had known for the last ninety days: the bonds he had purchased were now worth less than six cents on the dollar. And not long after that, the top brass at Desert Sun would discover the rest of the truth: that he had bought more than three times as much as he had been empowered to buy. He had also invested every penny of his personal savings ... not that they would care about *that*.

Who knows how the fish captured in one of those deep trenches and brought swiftly toward the surface - toward the light of a sun it has never suspected - may feel? Is it not at least possible that its final moments are filled with ecstasy rather than horror? That it senses the crushing reality of all that pressure only as it finally falls away? That it thinks - as far as fish may be supposed to think, that is - in a kind of joyous frenzy, *I am free of that weight at last!* in the seconds before it explodes? Probably not. Fish from those dark depths may not feel at all, at least not in any way we could recognize, and they certainly do not think ... but people do.

Instead of feeling shame, Craig Toomy had been dominated by vast relief and a kind of hectic, horrified happiness as he boarded American Pride's Flight 29 to Boston. He was going to explode, and

he found he didn't give a damn. In fact, he found himself looking forward to it. He could feel the pressure peeling away from all the surfaces of his skin as he rose toward the surface. For the first time in weeks, there had been no paper-ripping. He had fallen asleep before Flight 29 even left the gate, and he had slept like a baby until that blind little brat had begun to caterwaul.

And now they told him everything had changed, and that simply could not be allowed. It must not be allowed. He had been firmly caught in the net, had felt the dizzying rise and the stretch of his skin as it tried to compensate. They could not now change their minds and drop him back into the deeps.

Bangor?

Bangor, *Maine*?

Oh no. No indeed.

Craig Toomy was vaguely aware that most of the people on Flight 29 had disappeared, but he didn't care. They weren't the important thing. They weren't part of what his father had always liked to call THE BIG PICTURE. The meeting at the Pru was part of THE BIG PICTURE.

This crazy idea of diverting to Bangor, Maine ... whose scheme, exactly, had *that* been?

It had been the pilot's idea, of course. Engle's idea. The so-called captain. Engle, now ... Engle might very well be part of THE BIG PICTURE. He might, in fact, be an AGENT OF THE ENEMY. Craig had suspected this in his heart from the moment when Engle had begun to speak over the intercom, but in this case he hadn't needed to depend on his heart, had he? No indeed. He had been listening to the conversation between the skinny kid and the man in the fire-sale sport-coat. The man's taste in clothes was terrible, but what he had to say made perfect sense to Craig Toomy ... at least, up to a point.

In that case, the pilot would be one of us, the kid had said.

Yes and no, the guy in the fire-sale sport-coat had replied. *In my scenario, the pilot is the pilot. The pilot who just happened to be on board, supposedly deadheading to Boston, the pilot who just happened to be sitting less than thirty feet from the cockpit door.*

Engle, in other words.

And the other fellow, the one who had twisted Craig's nose, was clearly in on it with him, serving as a kind of sky-marshall to protect Engle from anyone who happened to catch on.

He hadn't eavesdropped on the conversation between the kid and the man in the fire-sale sport-coat much longer, because around that time the man in the fire-sale sport-coat stopped making sense and began babbling a lot of crazy shit about Denver and Des Moines and Omaha being gone. The idea that three large American cities could simply disappear was absolutely out to lunch ... but that didn't mean *everything* the old guy had to say was out to lunch.

It *was* an experiment, of course. *That* idea wasn't silly, not a bit. But the old guy's idea that all of them were test subjects was just more crackpot stuff.

Me, Craig thought. It's me. I'm the test subject.

All his life Craig had felt himself a test subject in an experiment just like this one. *This is a question, gentlemen, of ratio: pressure to success. The right ratio produces some x-factor. What x-factor? That is what our test subject, Mr Craig Toomy, will show us.*

But then Craig Toomy had done something they hadn't expected, something none of their cats and rats and guinea pigs had ever dared to do: he had told them he was pulling out.

But you can't do that! You'll explode!

Will I? Fine.

And now it had all become clear to him, so clear. These other people were either innocent bystanders or extras who had been hired to give this stupid little drama some badly needed verisimilitude. The whole thing had been rigged with one object in mind: to keep Craig Toomy away from Boston, to keep Craig Toomy from opting out of the experiment.

But I'll show them, Craig thought. He pulled another sheet from the in-flight magazine and looked at it. It showed a happy man, a man who had obviously never heard of the langoliers, who obviously did not know they were lurking everywhere, behind every bush and tree, in every shadow, just over the horizon. The happy man was driving down a country road behind the wheel of his Avis rental car. The ad said that when you showed your American Pride Frequent Flier Card at the Avis desk, they'd just about *give* you that rental car, and

maybe a game-show hostess to drive it, as well. He began to tear a strip of paper from the side of the glossy ad. The long, slow ripping sound was at the same time excruciating and exquisitely calming.

I'll show them that when I say I'm getting out, I mean what I say.

He dropped the strip onto the floor and began on the next one. It was important to rip slowly. It was important that each strip should be as narrow as possible, but you couldn't make them *too* narrow or they got away from you and petered out before you got to the bottom of the page. Getting each one just right demanded sharp eyes and fearless hands. *And I've got them. You better believe it. You just better believe it.*

Rii-ip.

I might have to kill the pilot.

His hands stopped halfway down the page. He looked out the window and saw his own long, pallid face superimposed over the darkness.

I might have to kill the Englishman, too.

Craig Toomy had never killed anyone in his life. Could he do it? With growing relief, he decided that he could. Not while they were still in the air, of course; the Englishman was very fast, very strong, and up here there were no weapons that were sure enough. But once they landed?

Yes. If I have to, yes.

After all, the conference at the Pru was scheduled to last for three days. It seemed now that his late arrival was unavoidable, but at least he would be able to explain: he had been drugged and taken hostage by a government agency. It would stun them. He could see their startled faces as he stood before them, the three hundred bankers from all over the country assembled to discuss bonds and indebtedness, bankers who would instead hear the dirty truth about what the government was up to. *My friends, I was abducted by*

Rii-ip.

- and was able to escape only when I

Rii-ip.

If I have to, I can kill them both. In fact, I can kill them all.

Craig Toomy's hands began to move again. He tore off the rest of the strip, dropped it on the floor, and began on the next one. There

were a lot of pages in the magazine, there were a lot of strips to each page, and that meant a lot of work lay ahead before the plane landed. But he wasn't worried.

Craig Toomy was a can-do type of guy.

5

Laurel Stevenson didn't go back to sleep but she did slide into a light doze. Her thoughts - which became something close to dreams in this mentally untethered state - turned to why she had really been going to Boston.

I'm supposed to be starting my first real vacation in ten years, she had said, but that was a lie. It contained a small grain of truth, but she doubted if she had been very believable when she told it; she had not been raised to tell lies, and her technique was not very good. Not that any of the people left on Flight 29 would have cared much either way, she supposed. Not in this situation. The fact that you were going to Boston to meet - and almost certainly sleep - with a man you had never met paled next to the fact that you were heading east in an airplane from which most of the passengers and all of the crew had disappeared.

Dear Laurel

I am so much looking forward to meeting you. You won't even have to double-check my photo when you step out of the jetway. I'll have so many butterflies in my stomach that all you need to do is look for the guy who's floating somewhere near the ceiling ...

His name was Darren Crosby.

She wouldn't need to look at his photograph; that much was true. She had memorized his face, just as she had memorized most of his letters. The question was *why*. And to that question she had no answer. Not even a clue. It was just another proof of J. R. R. Tolkien's observation: you must be careful each time you step out of your door, because your front walk is really a road, and the road leads ever onward. If you aren't careful, you're apt to find yourself ... well ... simply swept away, a stranger in a strange land with no clue as to how you got there.

Laurel had told everyone where she was going, but she had told no one *why* she was going or what she was doing. She was a graduate of the University of California with a master's degree in library science. Although she was no model, she was cleanly built and pleasant enough to look at. She had a small circle of good friends, and they would have been flabbergasted by what she was up to: heading off to Boston, planning to stay with a man she knew only through correspondence, a man she had met through the extensive personals column of a magazine called *Friends and Lovers*.

She was, in fact, flabbergasted herself.

Darren Crosby was six-feet-one, weighed one hundred and eighty pounds, and had dark-blue eyes. He preferred Scotch (although not to excess), he had a cat named Stanley, he was a dedicated heterosexual, he was a perfect gentleman (or so he claimed), and he thought Laurel was the most beautiful name he had ever heard. The picture he had sent showed a man with a pleasant, open, intelligent face. She guessed he was the sort of man who would look sinister if he didn't shave twice a day. And that was really all she knew.

Laurel had corresponded with half a dozen men over half a dozen years - it was a hobby, she supposed - but she had never expected to take the next step - this step. She supposed that Darren's wry and self-deprecating sense of humor was part of the attraction, but she was dimly aware that her real reasons were not in him at all, but in herself. And wasn't the real attraction her own inability to understand this strong desire to step out of character? To just fly off into the unknown, hoping for the right kind of lightning to strike?

What are you doing? she asked herself again.

The plane ran through some light turbulence and back into smooth air again. Laurel stirred out of her doze and looked around. She saw the young teenaged girl had taken the seat across from her. She was looking out the window.

'What do you see?' Laurel asked. 'Anything?'

'Well, the sun's up,' the girl said, 'but that's all.'

'What about the ground?' Laurel didn't want to get up and look for herself. Dinah's head was still resting against her, and Laurel didn't want to wake her.

'Can't see it. It's all clouds down there.' She looked around. Her eyes had cleared and a little color - not much, but a little - had come back into her face. 'My name's Bethany Simms. What's yours?'

'Laurel Stevenson.'

'Do you think we'll be all right?'

'I think so,' Laurel said, and then added reluctantly: 'I hope so.'

'I'm scared about what might be under those clouds,' Bethany said, 'but I was scared anyway. About Boston. My mother all at once decided how it would be a great idea if I spent a couple of weeks with my Aunt Shawna, even though school starts again in ten days. I think the idea was for me to get off the plane, just like Mary's little lamb, and then Aunt Shawna pulls the string on me.'

'What string?'

'Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars, go directly to the nearest rehab, and start drying out,' Bethany said. She raked her hands through her short dark hair. 'Things were already so weird that this seems like just more of the same.' She looked Laurel over carefully and then added with perfect seriousness: 'This is really happening, isn't it? I mean, I've already pinched myself. *Several* times. Nothing changed.'

'It's real.'

'It doesn't *seem* real,' Bethany said. 'It seems like one of those stupid disaster movies. Airport 1990, something like that. I keep looking around for a couple of old actors like Wilford Brimley and Olivia De Havilland. They're supposed to meet during the shitstorm and fall in love, you know?'

'I don't think they're on the plane,' Laurel said gravely. They glanced into each other's eyes and for a moment they almost laughed together. It could have made them friends if it had happened ... but it didn't. Not quite.

'What about you, Laurel? Do you have a disaster-movie problem?'

'I'm afraid not,' Laurel replied ... and then she *did* begin to laugh. Because the thought which shot across her mind in red neon was Oh you liar!

Bethany put a hand over her mouth and giggled.

'Jesus,' she said after a minute. 'I mean, this is the ultimate hairball, you know?'

Laurel nodded. 'I know.' She paused and then asked, 'Do you need a rehab, Bethany?'

'I don't know.' She turned to look out the window again. Her smile was gone and her voice was morose. 'I guess I might. I used to think it was just party-time, but now I don't know. I guess it's out of control. But getting shipped off this way ... I feel like a pig in a slaughterhouse chute.'

'I'm sorry,' Laurel said, but she was also sorry for herself. The blind girl had already adopted her; she did not need a second adoptee. Now that she was fully awake again she found herself scared - badly scared. She did not want to be behind this kid's dumpster if she was going to offload a big pile of disaster-movie angst. The thought made her grin again; she simply couldn't help it. It was the ultimate hairball. It really was.

'I'm sorry, too,' Bethany said, 'but I guess this is the wrong time to worry about it, huh?'

'I guess maybe it is,' Laurel said.

'The pilot never disappeared in any of those Airport movies, did he?'

'Not that I remember.'

'It's almost six o'clock. Two and a half hours to go.'

'Yes.'

'If only the world's still there,' Bethany said, 'that'll be enough for a start.' She looked closely at Laurel again. 'I don't suppose you've got any grass, do you?'

'I'm afraid not.'

Bethany shrugged and offered Laurel a tired smile which was oddly winning. 'Well,' she said, 'you're one ahead of me - I'm just afraid.'

6

Some time later, Brian Engle rechecked his heading, his airspeed, his navigational figures, and his charts. Last of all he checked his wristwatch. It was two minutes past eight.

'Well,' he said, to Nick without looking around, 'I think it's about that time. Shit or git.'

He reached forward and flicked on the FASTEN SEATBELTS sign. The bell made its low, pleasant chime. Then he flicked the intercom toggle and picked up the mike.

'Hello, ladies and gentlemen. This is Captain Engle again. We're currently over the Atlantic Ocean, roughly thirty miles east of the Maine coast, and I'll be commencing our initial descent into the Bangor area very soon. Under ordinary circumstances I wouldn't turn on the seatbelt sign so early, but these circumstances aren't ordinary, and my mother always said prudence is the better part of valor. In that spirit, I want you to make sure your lap-belts are snug and secure. Conditions below us don't look especially threatening, but since I have no radio communication, the weather is going to be something of a surprise package for all of us. I kept hoping the clouds would break, and I did see a few small holes over Vermont, but I'm afraid they've closed up again. I can tell you from my experience as a pilot that the clouds you see below us don't suggest very bad weather to me. I think the weather in Bangor may be overcast, with some light rain. I'm beginning our descent now. Please be calm; my board is green across and all procedures here on the flight deck remain routine.'

Brian had not bothered programming the autopilot for descent; he now began the process himself. He brought the plane around in a long, slow turn, and the seat beneath him canted slightly forward as the 767 began its slow glide down toward the clouds at 4,000 feet.

'Very comforting, that,' Nick said. 'You should have been a politician, matey.'

'I doubt if they're feeling very comfortable right now,' Brian said. 'I know I'm not.'

He was, in fact, more frightened than he had ever been while at the controls of an airplane. The pressure-leak on Flight 7 from Tokyo seemed like a minor glitch in comparison to this situation. His heart was beating slowly and heavily in his chest, like a funeral drum. He swallowed and heard a click in his throat. Flight 29 passed through 30,000 feet, still descending. The white, featureless clouds were

closer now. They stretched from horizon to horizon like some strange ballroom floor.

'I'm scared shitless, mate,' Nick Hopewell said in a strange, hoarse voice. 'I saw men die in the Falklands, took a bullet in the leg there myself, got the Teflon knee to prove it, and I came within an ace of getting blown up by a truck bomb in Beirut - in '82, that was - but I've never been as scared as I am right now. Part of me would like to grab you and make you take us right back up just as far up as this bird will go.'

'It wouldn't do any good,' Brian replied. His own voice was no longer steady; he could hear his heartbeat in it, making it jig-jag up and down in minute variations. 'Remember what I said before - we can't stay up here forever.'

'I know it. But I'm afraid of what's under those clouds. Or *not* under them.'

'Well, we'll all find out together.'

'No help for it, is there, mate?'

'Not a bit.'

The 767 passed through 25,000 feet, still descending.

7

All the passengers were in the main cabin; even the bald man, who had stuck stubbornly to his seat in business class for most of the flight, had joined them. And they were all awake, except for the bearded man at the very back of the plane. They could hear him snoring blithely away, and Albert Kaussner felt one moment of bitter jealousy, a wish that *he* could wake up after they were safely on the ground as the bearded man would most likely do, and say what the bearded man was most likely to say: *Where the hell are we?*

The only other sound was the soft rii-ip ... rii-ip ... rii-ip of Craig Toomy dismembering the in-flight magazine. He sat with his shoes in a deep pile of paper strips.

'Would you mind stopping that?' Don Gaffney asked. His voice was tight and strained. 'It's driving me up the wall, buddy.'

Craig turned his head. Regarded Don Gaffney with a pair of wide, smooth, empty eyes. Turned his head back. Held up the page he was currently working on, which happened to be the eastern half of the American Pride route map.

Rii-ip.

Gaffney opened his mouth to say something, then closed it tight.

Laurel had her arm around Dinah's shoulders. Dinah was holding Laurel's free hand in both of hers.

Albert sat with Robert Jenkins, just ahead of Gaffney. Ahead of him was the girl with the short dark hair. She was looking out the window, her body held so stiffly upright it might have been wired together. And ahead of her sat Baldy from business class.

'Well, at least we'll be able to get some chow!' he said loudly.

No one answered. The main cabin seemed encased in a stiff shell of tension. Albert Kaussner felt each individual hair on his body standing at attention. He searched for the comforting cloak of Ace Kaussner, that duke of the desert, that baron of the Buntline, and could not find him. Ace had gone on vacation.

The clouds were much closer. They had lost their flat look; Laurel could now see fluffy curves and mild crenellations filled with early-morning shadows. She wondered if Darren Crosby was still down there, patiently waiting for her at a Logan Airport arrivals gate somewhere along the American Pride concourse. She was not terribly surprised to find she didn't care much, one way or another. Her gaze was drawn back to the clouds, and she forgot all about Darren Crosby, who liked Scotch (although not to excess) and claimed to be a perfect gentleman.

She imagined a hand, a huge green hand, suddenly slamming its way up through those clouds and seizing the 767 the way an angry child might seize a toy. She imagined the hand *squeezing*, saw jet-fuel exploding in orange licks of flame between the huge knuckles, and closed her eyes for a moment.

Don't go down there! she wanted to scream. *Oh please, don't go down there!*

But what choice had they? What choice?

'I'm very scared,' Bethany Simms said in a blurred, watery voice. She moved to one of the seats in the center section, fastened her

lap-belt, and pressed her hands tightly against her middle. 'I think I'm going to pass out.'

Craig Toomy glanced at her, and then began ripping a fresh strip from the route map. After a moment, Albert unbuckled his seatbelt, got up, sat down beside Bethany, and buckled up again. As soon as he had, she grasped his hands. Her skin was as cold as marble.

'It's going to be all right,' he said, striving to sound tough and unafraid, striving to sound like the fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi. Instead he only sounded like Albert Kaussner, a seventeen-year-old violin student who felt on the verge of pissing his pants.

'I hope -' she began, and then Flight 29 began to bounce. Bethany screamed.

'What's wrong?' Dinah asked Laurel in a thin, anxious voice. 'Is something wrong with the plane? Are we going to crash?'

'I don't -'

Brian's voice came over the speakers. 'This is ordinary light turbulence, folks,' he said. 'Please be calm. We're apt to hit some heavier bumps when we go into the clouds. Most of you have been through this before, so just settle down.'

Rii-ip.

Don Gaffney looked toward the man in the crew-neck jersey again and felt a sudden, almost overmastering urge to rip the flight magazine out of the weird son of a bitch's hands and begin whacking him with it.

The clouds were very close now. Robert Jenkins could see the 767's black shape rushing across their white surfaces just below the plane. Shortly the plane would kiss its own shadow and disappear. He had never had a premonition in his life, but one came to him now, one which was sure and complete. *When we break through those clouds, we are going to see something no human being has ever seen before. It will be something which is utterly beyond belief... yet we will be forced to believe it. We will have no choice.*

His hands curled into tight knobs on the arms of his seat. A drop of sweat ran into one eye. Instead of raising a hand to wipe the eye clear, Jenkins tried to blink the sting away. His hands felt nailed to the arms of the seat.

'Is it going to be all right?' Dinah asked frantically. Her hands were locked over Laurel's. They were small, but they squeezed with almost painful force. 'Is it really going to be all right?'

Laurel looked out the window. Now the 767 was skimming the tops of the clouds, and the first cotton-candy wisps drifted past her window. The plane ran through another series of jolts and she had to close her throat against a moan. For the first time in her life she felt physically ill with terror.

'I hope so, honey,' she said. 'I hope so, but I really don't know.'

8

'What's on your radar, Brian?' Nick asked. 'Anything unusual? Anything at all?'

'No,' Brian said. 'It says the world is down there, and that's all it says. We're -'

'Wait,' Nick said. His voice had a tight, strangled sound, as if his throat had closed down to a bare pinhole. 'Climb back up. Let's think this over. Wait for the clouds to break -'

'Not enough time and not enough fuel.' Brian's eyes were locked on his instruments. The plane began to bounce again. He made the corrections automatically. 'Hang on. We're going in.'

He pushed the wheel forward. The altimeter needle began to move more swiftly beneath its glass circle. And Flight 29 slid into the clouds. For a moment its tail protruded, cutting through the fluffy surface like the fin of a shark. A moment later that was also gone and the sky was empty ... as if no plane had ever been there at all.

CHAPTER 4

In the Clouds. Welcome to Bangor. A Round of Applause. The Slide and the Conveyor Belt. The Sound of No Phones Ringing. Craig Toomy Makes a Side-Trip. The Little Blind Girl's Warning.

1

The main cabin went from bright sunlight to the gloom of late twilight and the plane began to buck harder. After one particularly hard washboard bump, Albert felt a pressure against his right shoulder. He looked around and saw Bethany's head lying there, as heavy as a ripe October pumpkin. The girl had fainted.

The plane leaped again and there was a heavy thud in first class. This time it was Dinah who shrieked, and Gaffney let out a yell: 'What was that? For *God's sake what was that?*'

'The drinks trolley,' Bob Jenkins said in a low, dry voice. He tried to speak louder so they would all hear him and found himself unable. 'The drinks trolley was left out, remember? I think it must have rolled across -'

The plane took a dizzying rollercoaster leap, came down with a jarring smack, and the drinks trolley fell over with a bang. Glass shattered. Dinah screamed again.

'It's all right,' Laurel said frantically. 'Don't hold me so tight, Dinah, honey, it's okay -'

'Please, I don't want to die! I just don't want to *die!*'

'Normal turbulence, folks.' Brian's voice, coming through the speakers, sounded calm ... but Bob Jenkins thought he heard barely controlled terror in that voice. 'Just be -'

Another rocketing, twisting bump. Another crash as more glasses and mini-bottles fell out of the overturned drinks trolley.

'-calm,' Brian finished.

From across the aisle on Don Gaffney's left: rii-ip.

Gaffney turned in that direction. 'Quit it right now, motherfucker, or I'll stuff what's left of that magazine right down your throat.'

Craig looked at him blandly. 'Try it, you old jackass.'

The plane bumped up and down again. Albert leaned over Bethany toward the window. Her breasts pressed softly against his arm as he did, and for the first time in the last five years that sensation did not immediately drive everything else out of his mind. He stared out the window, desperately looking for a break in the clouds, trying to will a break in the clouds.

There was nothing but shades of dark gray.

2

'How low is the ceiling, mate?' Nick asked. Now that they were actually in the clouds, he seemed calmer.

'I don't know,' Brian said. 'Lower than I'd hoped, I can tell you that.'

'What happens if you run out of room?'

'If my instruments are off even a little, we'll go into the drink,' he said flatly. 'I doubt if they are, though. If I get down to five hundred feet and there's still no joy, I'll take us up again and fly down to Portland.'

'Maybe you ought to just head that way now.'

Brian shook his head. 'The weather there is almost always worse than the weather here.'

'What about Presque Isle? Isn't there a long-range SAC base there?'

Brian had just a moment to think that this guy really did know much more than he should. 'It's out of our reach. We'd crash in the woods.'

'Then Boston is out of reach, too.'

'You bet.'

'This is starting to look like being a bad decision, matey.'

The plane struck another invisible current of turbulence, and the 767 shivered like a dog with a bad chill. Brian heard faint screams from the main cabin even as he made the necessary corrections and wished he could tell them all that this was nothing, that the 767 could

ride out turbulence twenty times this bad. The real problem was the ceiling.

'We're not struck out yet,' he said. The altimeter stood at 2,200 feet.

'But we *are* running out of room.'

'We -' Brian broke off. A wave of relief rushed over him like a cooling hand. 'Here we are,' he said. 'Coming through.'

Ahead of the 767's black nose, the clouds were rapidly thinning. For the first time since they had overflowed Vermont, Brian saw a gauzy rip in the whitish-gray blanket. Through it he saw the leaden color of the Atlantic Ocean.

Into the cabin microphone, Brian said: 'We've reached the ceiling, ladies and gentlemen. I expect this minor turbulence to ease off once we pass through. In a few minutes, you're going to hear a thump from below. That will be the landing gear descending and locking into place. I am continuing our descent into the Bangor area.' He clicked off and turned briefly to the man in the navigator's seat. 'Wish me luck, Nick.' 'Oh, I do, matey - I do.'

3

Laurel looked out the window with her breath caught in her throat. The clouds were unravelling fast now. She saw the ocean in a series of brief winks: waves, whitecaps, then a large chunk of rock poking out of the water like the fang of a dead monster. She caught a glimpse of bright orange that might have been a buoy.

They passed over a small, tree-shrouded island, and by leaning and craning her neck, she could see the coast dead ahead. Thin wisps of smoky cloud obscured the view for an endless forty-five seconds. When they cleared, the 767 was over land again. They passed above a field; a patch of forest; what looked like a pond.

But where are the houses? Where are the roads and the cars and the buildings and the high-tension wires?

Then a cry burst from her throat.

'What is it?' Dinah nearly screamed. 'What is it, Laurel? What's wrong?'

'Nothing!' she shouted triumphantly. Down below she could see a narrow road leading into a small seaside village. From up here, it looked like a toy town with tiny toy cars parked along the main street. She saw a church steeple, a town gravel pit, a Little League baseball field. 'Nothing's wrong! *It's all there! It's all still there!*'

From behind her, Robert Jenkins spoke. His voice was calm, level, and deeply dismayed. 'Madam,' he said, 'I'm afraid you are quite wrong.'

4

A long white passenger jet cruised slowly above the ground thirty-five miles east of Bangor International Airport. 767 was printed on its tail in large, proud numerals. Along the fuselage, the words AMERICAN PRIDE were written in letters which had been raked backward to indicate speed. On both sides of the nose was the airline's trademark: a large red eagle. Its spread wings were spangled with blue stars; its talons were flexed and its head was slightly bent. Like the airliner it decorated, the eagle appeared to be coming in for a landing.

The plane printed no shadow on the ground below it as it flew toward the cluster of city ahead; there was no rain, but the morning was gray and sunless. Its belly slid open. The undercarriage dropped down and spread out. The wheels locked into place below the body of the plane and the cockpit area.

American Pride Flight 29 slipped down the chute toward Bangor. It banked slightly left as it went; Captain Engle was now able to correct his course visually, and he did so.

'I see it!' Nick cried. 'I see the airport! My God, what a beautiful sight!'

'If you see it, you're out of your seat,' Brian said. He spoke without turning around. There was no time to turn around now. 'Buckle up and shut up.'

But that single long runway was a beautiful sight.

Brian centered the plane's nose on it and continued down the slide, passing through 1,000 to 800. Below him, a seemingly endless

pine forest passed beneath Flight 29's wings. This finally gave way to a sprawl of buildings - Brian's restless eyes automatically recorded the usual litter of motels, gas stations, and fast-food restaurants - and then they were passing over the Penobscot River and into Bangor airspace. Brian checked the board again, noted he had green lights on his flaps, and then tried the airport again ... although he knew it was hopeless.

'Bangor tower, this is Flight 29,' he said. 'I am declaring an emergency. Repeat, I *am declaring an emergency*. If you have runway traffic, get it out of my way. I'm coming in.'

He glanced at the airspeed indicator just in time to see it drop below 140, the speed which theoretically committed him to landing. Below him, thinning trees gave way to a golf-course. He caught a quick glimpse of a green Holiday Inn sign and then the lights which marked the end of the runway - 33 painted on it in big white numerals - were rushing toward him.

The lights were not red, not green.

They were simply dead.

No time to think about it. No time to think about what would happen to them if a Learjet or a fat little Doyka puddle-jumper suddenly trundled onto the runway ahead of them. No time to do anything now but land the bird.

They passed over a short strip of weeds and gravel and then concrete runway was unrolling thirty feet below the plane. They passed over the first set of white stripes and then the skidmarks - probably made by Air National Guard jets this far out - began just below them.

Brian babied the 767 down toward the runway. The second set of stripes flashed just below them ... and a moment later there was a light bump as the main landing gear touched down. Now Flight 29 streaked along Runway 33 at a hundred and twenty miles an hour with its nose slightly up and its wings tilted at a mild angle. Brian applied full flaps and reversed the thrusters. There was another bump, even lighter than the first, as the nose came down.

Then the plane was slowing, from a hundred and twenty to a hundred, from a hundred to eighty, from eighty to forty, from forty to the speed at which a man might run.

It was done. They were down.

'Routine landing,' Brian said. 'Nothing to it.' Then he let out a long, shuddery breath and brought the plane to a full stop still four hundred yards from the nearest taxiway. His slim body was suddenly twisted by a flock of shivers. When he raised his hand to his face, it wiped away a great warm handful of sweat. He looked at it and uttered a weak laugh.

A hand fell on his shoulder. 'You all right, Brian?'

'Yes,' he said, and picked up the intercom mike again. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'welcome to Bangor.'

From behind him Brian heard a chorus of cheers and he laughed again.

Nick Hopewell was not laughing. He was leaning over Brian's seat and peering out through the cockpit window. Nothing moved on the gridwork of runways; nothing moved on the taxiways. No trucks or security vehicles buzzed back and forth on the tarmac. He could see a few vehicles, he could see an Army transport plane - a C-12 - parked on an outer taxiway and a Delta 727 parked at one of the jetways, but they were as still as statues.

'Thank you for the welcome, my friend,' Nick said softly. 'My deep appreciation stems from the fact that it appears you are the only one who is going to extend one. This place is utterly deserted.'

5

In spite of the continued radio silence, Brian was reluctant to accept Nick's judgment ... but by the time he had taxied to a point between two of the passenger terminal's jetways, he found it impossible to believe anything else. It was not just the absence of people; not just the lack of a single security car rushing out to see what was up with this unexpected 767; it was an air of utter lifelessness, as if Bangor International Airport had been deserted for a thousand years, or a hundred thousand. A jeep-driven baggage train with a few scattered pieces of luggage on its flatties was parked beneath one wing of the Delta jet. It was to this that Brian's eyes kept returning as he brought Flight 29 as close to the terminal as he

dared and parked it. The dozen or so bags looked as ancient as artifacts exhumed from the site of some fabulous ancient city. *I wonder if the guy who discovered King Tut's tomb felt the way I do now*, he thought.

He let the engines die and just sat there for a moment. Now there was no sound but the faint whisper of an auxiliary power unit - one of four - at the rear of the plane. Brian's hand moved toward a switch marked INTERNAL POWER and actually touched it before drawing his hand back. Suddenly he didn't want to shut down completely. There was no reason not to, but the voice of instinct was very strong.

Besides, he thought, I don't think there's anyone around to bitch about wasting fuel ... what little there is left to waste.

Then he unbuckled his safety harness and got up.

'Now what, Brian?' Nick asked. He had also risen, and Brian noticed for the first time that Nick was a good four inches taller than he was. He thought: *I have been in charge. Ever since this weird thing happened - ever since we discovered it had happened, to be more accurate - I have been in charge. But I think that's going to change very shortly.*

He discovered he didn't care. Flying the 767 into the clouds had taken every ounce of courage he possessed, but he didn't expect any thanks for keeping his head and doing his job; courage was one of the things he got paid for. He remembered a pilot telling him once, 'They pay us a hundred thousand dollars or more a year, Brian, and they really do it for just one reason. They know that in almost every pilot's career, there are thirty or forty seconds when he might actually make a difference. They pay us not to freeze when those seconds finally come.'

It was all very well for your brain to tell you that you had to go down, clouds or no clouds, that there was simply no choice; your nerve-endings just went on screaming their old warning, telegraphing the old high-voltage terror of the unknown. Even Nick, whatever he was and whatever he did on the ground, had wanted to back away from the clouds when it came to the sticking point. He had needed Brian to do what needed to be done. He and all the others had needed Brian to be their guts. Now they were down and there were

no monsters beneath the clouds; only this weird silence and one deserted luggage train sitting beneath the wing of a Delta 727.

So if you want to take over and be the captain, my nose-twisting friend, you have my blessing. I'll even let you wear my cap if you want to. But not until we're off the plane. Until you and the rest of the geese actually stand on the ground, you're my responsibility.

But Nick had asked him a question, and Brian supposed he deserved an answer.

'Now we get off the airplane and see what's what,' he said, brushing past the Englishman.

Nick put a restraining hand on his shoulder. 'Do you think-'

Brian felt a flash of uncharacteristic anger. He shook loose from Nick's hand. 'I think we get off the plane,' he said. 'There's no one to extend a jetway or run us out a set of stairs, so I think we use the emergency slide. After that, you think. *Matey.*'

He pushed through into first class ... and almost fell over the drinks trolley, which lay on its side. There was a lot of broken glass and an eye-watering stink of alcohol. He stepped over it. Nick caught up with him at the rear of the first-class compartment.

'Brian, if I said something to offend you, I'm sorry. You did a hell of a fine job.'

'You didn't offend me,' Brian said. 'It's just that in the last ten hours or so I've had to cope with a pressure leak over the Pacific Ocean, finding out that my ex-wife died in a stupid apartment fire in Boston, and that the United States has been cancelled. I'm feeling a little zonked.'

He walked through business class into the main cabin. For a moment there was utter silence; they only sat there, looking at him from their white faces with dumb incomprehension.

Then Albert Kaussner began to applaud.

After a moment, Bob Jenkins joined him ... and Don Gaffney ... and Laurel Stevenson. The bald man looked around and also began to applaud.

'What is it?' Dinah asked Laurel. 'What's happening?'

'It's the captain,' Laurel said. She began to cry. 'It's the captain who brought us down safe.'

Then Dinah began to applaud, too.

Brian stared at them, dumbfounded. Standing behind him, Nick joined in. They unbuckled their belts and stood in front of their seats, applauding him. The only three who did not join in were Bethany, who had fainted, the bearded man, who was still snoring in the back row, and Craig Toomy, who panned them all with his strange lunar gaze and then began to rip a fresh strip from the airline magazine.

6

Brian felt his face flush - this was just too goony. He raised his hands but for a moment they went on, regardless.

'Ladies and gentlemen, please ... please ... I assure you, it was a very routine landing -'

'Shucks, ma'am - t'warn't nothin,' Bob Jenkins said, doing a very passable Gary Cooper imitation, and Albert burst out laughing. Beside him, Bethany's eyes fluttered open and she looked around, dazed.

'We got down alive, didn't we?' she said. 'My God! That's great! I thought we were all dead meat!'

'Please,' Brian said. He raised his arms higher and now he felt weirdly like Richard Nixon, accepting his party's nomination for four more years. He had to struggle against sudden shrieks of laughter. He couldn't do that; the passengers wouldn't understand. They wanted a hero, and he was elected. He might as well accept the position ... and use it. He still had to get them off the plane, after all. 'If I could have your attention, please!'

They stopped applauding one by one and looked at him expectantly - all except Craig, who threw his magazine aside in a sudden resolute gesture. He unbuckled his seatbelt, rose, and stepped out into the aisle, kicking a drift of paper strips aside. He began to rummage around in the compartment above his seat, frowning with concentration as he did so.

'You've looked out the windows, so you know as much as I do,' Brian said. 'Most of the passengers and all of the crew on this flight disappeared while we were asleep. That's crazy enough, but now we appear to be faced with an even crazier proposition. It looks like a lot

of other people have disappeared as well ... but logic suggests that other people must be around *somewhere*. We survived whatever-it-was, so others must have survived it as well.'

Bob Jenkins, the mystery writer, whispered something under his breath. Albert heard him but could not make out the words. He half-turned in Jenkins's direction just as the writer muttered the two words again. This time Albert caught them. They were *false logic*.

'The best way to deal with this, I think, is to take things one step at a time. Step one is exiting the plane.'

'I bought a ticket to Boston,' Craig Toomy said in a calm, rational voice. 'Boston is where I want to go.'

Nick stepped out from behind Brian's shoulder. Craig glanced at him and his eyes narrowed. For a moment he looked like a bad-tempered housecat again. Nick raised one hand with the fingers curled in against his palm and scissored two of his knuckles together in a nose-pinching gesture. Craig Toomy, who had once been forced to stand with a lit match between his toes while his mother sang 'Happy Birthday,' got the message at once. He had always been a quick study. And he could wait.

'We'll have to use the emergency slide,' Brian said, 'so I want to review the procedures with you. Listen carefully, then form a single-file line and follow me to the front of the aircraft.'

7

Four minutes later, the forward entrance of American Pride's Flight 29 Swung inward. Some murmured conversation drifted out of the opening and seemed to fall immediately dead on the cool, still air. There was a hissing sound and a large clump of orange fabric suddenly bloomed in the doorway. For a moment it looked like a strange hybrid sunflower. It grew and took shape as it fell, its surface inflating into a plump ribbed slide. As the foot of the slide struck the tarmac there was a low pop! and then it just leaned there, looking like a giant orange air mattress.

Brian and Nick stood at the head of the short line in the portside row of first class.

'There's something wrong with the air out there,' Nick said in a low voice.

'What do you mean?' Brian asked. He pitched his voice even lower. 'Poisoned?'

'No ... at least I don't think so. But it has no smell, no taste.'

'You're nuts,' Brian said uneasily.

'No I'm not,' Nick said. 'This is an *airport*, mate, not a bloody hayfield, but can you smell oil or gas? I can't.'

Brian sniffed. And there was nothing. If the air was poisoned - he didn't believe it was, but if - it was a slow-acting toxin. His lungs seemed to be processing it just fine. But Nick was right. There was no smell. And that other, more elusive, quality that the Brit had called taste ... that wasn't there, either. The air outside the open door tasted utterly neutral. It tasted canned.

'Is something wrong?' Bethany Simms asked anxiously. 'I mean, I'm not sure if I really want to know if there is, but -'

'There's nothing wrong,' Brian said. He counted heads, came up with ten, and turned to Nick again. 'That guy in the back is still asleep. Do you think we should wake him up?'

Nick thought for a moment, then shook his head. 'Let's not. Haven't we got enough problems for now without having to play nursemaid to a bloke with a hangover?'

Brian grinned. They were his thoughts exactly. 'Yes, I think we do. All right -you go down first, Nick. Hold the bottom of the slide. I'll help the rest off.'

'Maybe *you'd* better go first. In case my loudmouthed friend decides to cut up rough about the unscheduled stop again.' He pronounced *unscheduled* as *un-shed-youled*.

Brian glanced at the man in the crew-necked jersey. He was standing at the rear of the line, a slim monogrammed briefcase in one hand, staring blankly at the ceiling. His face had all the expression of a department-store dummy. 'I'm not going to have any trouble with him,' he said, 'because I don't give a crap what he does. He can go or stay, it's all the same to me.'

Nick grinned. 'Good enough for me, too. Let the grand exodus begin.'

'Shoes off?'

Nick held up a pair of black kidskin loafers.

'Okay - away you go.' Brian turned to Bethany. 'Watch closely, miss you're next.'

'Oh God - I *hate* shit like this.'

Bethany nevertheless crowded up beside Brian and watched apprehensively as Nick Hopewell addressed the slide. He jumped, raising both legs at the same time so he looked like a man doing a seat-drop on a trampoline. He landed on his butt and slid to the bottom. It was neatly done; the foot of the slide barely moved. He hit the tarmac with his stockinged feet, stood up, twirled around, and made a mock bow with his arms held out behind him.

'Easy as pie!' he called up. 'Next customer!'

'That's you, miss,' Brian said. 'Is it Bethany?'

'Yes,' she said nervously. 'I don't think I can do this. I flunked gym all three semesters and they finally let me take home ec again instead.'

'You'll do fine,' Brian told her. He reflected that people used the slide with much less coaxing and a lot more enthusiasm when there was a threat they could see - a hole in the fuselage or a fire in one of the portside engines. 'Shoes off?'

Bethany's shoes - actually a pair of old pink sneakers - were off, but she tried to withdraw from the doorway and the bright-orange slide just the same. 'Maybe if I could just have a drink before -'

'Mr Hopewell's holding the slide and you'll be fine,' Brian coaxed, but he was beginning to be afraid he might have to push her. He didn't want to, but if she didn't jump soon, he would. You couldn't let them go to the end of the line until their courage returned; that was the big no-no when it came to the escape slide. If you did that, they *all* wanted to go to the end of the line.

'Go on, Bethany,' Albert said suddenly. He had taken his violin case from the overhead compartment and held it tucked under one arm. 'I'm scared to death of that thing, and if you go, I'll have to.'

She looked at him, surprised. 'Why?'

Albert's face was very red. 'Because you're a girl,' he said simply. 'I know I'm a sexist rat, but that's it.'

Bethany looked at him a moment longer, then laughed and turned to the slide. Brian had made up his mind to push her if she looked

around or drew back again, but she didn't. 'Boy, I wish I had some grass,' she said, and jumped.

She had seen Nick's seat-drop maneuver and knew what to do, but at the last moment she lost her courage and tried to get her feet under her again. As a result, she skidded to one side when she came down on the slide's bouncy surface. Brian was sure she was going to tumble off, but Bethany herself saw the danger and managed to roll back. She shot down the slope on her right side, one hand over her head, her blouse rucking up almost to the nape of her neck. Then Nick caught her and she stepped off.

'Oh boy,' she said breathlessly. 'Just like being a kid again.'

'Are you all right?' Nick asked.

'Yeah. I think I might have wet my pants a little, but I'm okay.'

Nick smiled at her and turned back to the slide.

Albert looked apologetically at Brian and extended the violin case. 'Would you mind holding this for me? I'm afraid if I fall off the slide, it might get broken. My folks'd kill me. It's a Gretsch.'

Brian took it. His face was calm and serious, but he was smiling inside. 'Could I look? I used to play one of these about a thousand years ago.'

'Sure,' Albert said.

Brian's interest had a calming effect on the boy ... which was exactly what he had hoped for. He unsnapped the three catches and opened the case. The violin inside was indeed a Gretsch, and not from the bottom of that prestigious line, either. Brian guessed you could buy a compact car for the amount of money this had cost.

'Beautiful,' he said, and plucked out four quick notes along the neck: *My dog has fleas*. They rang sweetly and beautifully. Brian closed and latched the case again. 'I'll keep it safe. Promise.'

'Thanks.' Albert stood in the doorway, took a deep breath, then let it out again. 'Geronimo,' he said in a weak little voice and jumped. He tucked his hands into his armpits as he did so - protecting his hands in any situation where physical damage was possible was so ingrained in him that it had become a reflex. He seat-dropped onto the slide and shot neatly to the bottom.

'Well done!' Nick said.

'Nothing to it,' Ace Kaussner drawled, stepped off, and then nearly tripped over his own feet.

'Albert!' Brian called down. 'Catch!' He leaned out, placed the violin case on the center of the slide, and let it go. Albert caught it easily five feet from the bottom, tucked it under his arm, and stood back.

Jenkins shut his eyes as he leaped and came down aslant on one scrawny buttock. Nick stepped nimbly to the left side of the slide and caught the writer just as he fell off, saving him a nasty tumble to the concrete.

'Thank you, young man.'

'Don't mention it, matey.'

Gaffney followed; so did the bald man. Then Laurel and Dinah Bellman stood in the hatchway.

'I'm scared,' Dinah said in a thin, wavery voice.

'You'll be fine, honey,' Brian said. 'You don't even have to jump.' He put his hands on Dinah's shoulders and turned her so she was facing him with her back to the slide. 'Give me your hands and I'll lower you onto the slide.'

But Dinah put them behind her back. 'Not you. I want Laurel to do it.'

Brian looked at the youngish woman with the dark hair. 'Would you?'

'Yes,' she said. 'If you tell me what to do.'

'Dinah already knows. Lower her onto the slide by her hands. When she's lying on her tummy with her feet pointed straight, she can shoot right down.'

Dinah's hands were cold in Laurel's. 'I'm scared,' she repeated.

'Honey, it'll be just like going down a playground slide,' Brian said. 'The man with the English accent is waiting at the bottom to catch you. He's got his hands up just like a catcher in a baseball game.' Not, he reflected, that Dinah would know what that looked like.

Dinah looked at him as if he were being quite foolish. 'Not of *that*. I'm scared of this *place*. It smells funny.'

Laurel, who detected no smell but her own nervous sweat, looked helplessly at Brian.

'Honey,' Brian said, dropping to one knee in front of the little blind girl, 'we have to get off the plane. You know that, don't you?'

The lenses of the dark glasses turned toward him. '*Why? Why* do we have to get off the plane? There's no one here.'

Brian and Laurel exchanged a glance.

'Well,' Brian said, 'we won't really know that until we check, will we?'

'I know already,' Dinah said. 'There's nothing to smell and nothing to hear. But ... but ...'

'But what, Dinah?' Laurel asked.

Dinah hesitated. She wanted to make them understand that the way she had to leave the plane was really not what was bothering her. She had gone down slides before, and she trusted Laurel. Laurel would not let go of her hands if it was dangerous. Something was *wrong* here, *wrong*, and that was what she was afraid of - the wrong thing. It wasn't the quiet and it wasn't the emptiness. It might have to do with those things, but it was more than those things.

Something *wrong*.

But grownups did not believe children, especially not blind children, even more especially not blind *girl* children. She wanted to tell them they couldn't stay here, that it wasn't *safe* to stay here, that they had to start the plane up and get going again. But what would they say? Okay, sure, Dinah's right, everybody back on the plane? No way.

They'll see. They'll see that it's empty and then we'll get back on the airplane and go someplace else. Someplace where it doesn't feel wrong. There's still time.

I think.

'Never mind,' she told Laurel. Her voice was low and resigned. 'Lower me down.'

Laurel lowered her carefully onto the slide. A moment later Dinah was looking up at her - except *she's not* really *looking*, Laurel thought, *she can't* really *look at all* - *with* her bare feet splayed out behind her on the orange slide.

'Okay, Dinah?' Laurel asked.

'No,' Dinah said. '*Nothing's* okay here.' And before Laurel could release her, Dinah unlocked her hands from Laurel's and released herself. She slid to the bottom, and Nick caught her.

Laurel went next, dropping neatly onto the slide and holding her skirt primly as she slid to the bottom. That left Brian, the snoozing drunk at the back of the plane, and that fun-loving, paper-ripping party animal, Mr Crew-Neck jersey.

I'm not going to have any trouble with him, Brian had said, *because I don't give a crap what he does*. Now he discovered that was not really true. The man was not playing with a full deck. Brian suspected even the little girl knew that, and the little girl was blind. What if they left him behind and the guy decided to go on a rampage? What if, in the course of that rampage, he decided to trash the cockpit?

So what? You're not going anyplace. The tanks are almost dry.

Still, he didn't like the idea, and not just because the 767 was a multimillion-dollar piece of equipment, either. Perhaps what he felt was a vague echo of what he had seen in Dinah's face as she looked up from the slide. Things here seemed wrong, even wronger than they looked ... and that was scary, because he didn't know how things could be wronger than that. The plane, however, was right. Even with its fuel tanks all but empty, it was a world he knew and understood.

'Your turn, friend,' he said as civilly as he could.

'You know I'm going to report you for this, don't you?' Craig Toomy asked in a queerly gentle voice. 'You know I plan to sue this entire airline for thirty million dollars, and that I plan to name you a primary respondent?'

'That's your privilege, Mr -'

'Toomy. Craig Toomy.'

'Mr Toomy,' Brian agreed. He hesitated. 'Mr Toomy, are you aware of what has happened to us?'

Craig looked out the open doorway for a moment - looked at the deserted tarmac and the wide, slightly polarized terminal windows on the second level, where no happy friends and relatives stood waiting to embrace arriving passengers, where no impatient travellers waited for their flights to be called.

Of course he knew. It was the langoliers. The langoliers had come for all the foolish, lazy people, just as his father had always said they would.

In that same gentle voice, Craig said: 'In the Bond Department of the Desert Sun Banking Corporation, I am known as The Wheelhorse. Did you know that?' He paused for a moment, apparently waiting for Brian to make some response. When Brian didn't, Craig continued. 'Of course you didn't. No more than you know how important this meeting at the Prudential Center in Boston is. No more than you care. But let me tell you something, Captain: the economic fate of nations may hinge upon the results of that meeting - that meeting from which I will be absent when the roll is taken.'

'Mr Toomy, all that's very interesting, but I really don't have time *Time!*' Craig screamed at him suddenly. 'What in the hell do you know about time? Ask me! Ask me! I know about time! I know all *about* time! Time is short, sir! Time is *very fucking short!*'

Hell with it, I'm going to push the crazy son of a bitch,

Brian thought, but before he could, Craig Toomy turned and leaped. He did a perfect seat-drop, holding his briefcase to his chest as he did so, and Brian was crazily reminded of that old Hertz ad on TV, the one where O.J.Simpson went flying through airports in a suit and a tie.

'Time is short as hell!' Craig shouted as he slid down, briefcase over his chest like a shield, pantslegs pulling up to reveal his knee-high dress-for-success black nylon socks.

Brian muttered: 'Jesus, what a fucking weirdo.' He paused at the head of the slide, looked around once more at the comforting, known world of his aircraft ... and jumped.

8

Ten people stood in two small groups beneath the giant wing of the 767 with the red-and-blue eagle on the nose. In one group were Brian, Nick, the bald man, Bethany Simms, Albert Kaussner, Robert Jenkins, Dinah, Laurel, and Don Gaffney. Standing slightly apart from them and constituting his own group was Craig Toomy, a.k.a. The Wheelhorse. Craig bent and shook out the creases of his pants

with fussy concentration, using his left hand to do it. The right hand was tightly locked around the handle of his briefcase. Then he simply stood and looked around with wide, disinterested eyes.

'What now, Captain?' Nick asked briskly.

'You tell me. Us.'

Nick looked at him for a moment, one eyebrow slightly raised, as if to ask Brian if he really meant it. Brian inclined his head half an inch. It was enough.

'Well, inside the terminal will do for a start, I reckon,' Nick said.

'What would be the quickest way to get there? Any idea?'

Brian nodded toward a line of baggage trains parked beneath the overhang of the main terminal. 'I'd guess the quickest way in without a jetway would be the luggage conveyor.'

'All right; let's hike on over, ladies and gentlemen, shall we?'

It was a short walk, but Laurel, who walked hand-in-hand with Dinah, thought it was the strangest one she had ever taken in her life. She could see them as if from above, less than a dozen dots trundling slowly across a wide concrete plain. There was no breeze. No birds sang. No motors revved in the distance, and no human voice broke the unnatural quiet. Even their footfalls seemed wrong to her. She was wearing a pair of high heels, but instead of the brisk click she was used to, she seemed to hear only small, dull thuds.

Seemed, she thought. That's the key word. Because the situation is so strange, everything begins to seem strange. It's the concrete, that's all. High heels sound different on concrete.

But she had walked on concrete in high heels before. She didn't remember ever hearing a sound precisely like this. It was ... pallid, somehow. Strengthless.

They reached the parked luggage trains. Nick wove between them, leading the line, and stopped at a dead conveyor belt which emerged from a hole lined with hanging strips of rubber. The conveyor made a wide circle on the apron where the handlers normally stood to unload the flatties, then re-entered the terminal through another hole hung with rubber strips.

'What are those pieces of rubber for?' Bethany asked nervously.

'To keep out the draft in cold weather, I imagine,' Nick said. 'Just let me poke my head through and have a look. No fear; won't be a

moment.' And before anyone could reply, he had boosted himself onto the conveyor belt and was walking bent-over down to one of the holes cut into the building. When he got there, he dropped to his knees and poked his head through the rubber strips.

We're going to hear a whistle and then a thud, Albert thought wildly, and when we pull him back, his head will be gone.

There was no whistle, no thud. When Nick withdrew, his head was still firmly attached to his neck, and his face wore a thoughtful expression. 'Coast's clear,' he said, and to Albert his cheery tone now sounded manufactured. 'Come on through, friends. When a body meet a body, and all that.'

Bethany held back. 'Are there bodies? Mister, are there dead people in there?'

'Not that I saw, miss,' Nick said, and now he had dropped any attempt at lightness. 'I was misquoting old Bobby Burns in an attempt to be funny. I'm afraid I achieved tastelessness instead of humor. The fact is, I didn't see anyone at all. But that's pretty much what we expected, isn't it?'

It was ... but it struck heavily at their hearts just the same. Nick's as well, from his tone.

One after the other they climbed onto the conveyor belt and crawled after him through the hanging rubber strips.

Dinah paused just outside the entrance hole and turned her head back toward Laurel. Hazy light flashed across her dark glasses, turning them to momentary mirrors.

'It's really wrong here,' she repeated, and pushed through to the other side.

9

One by one they emerged into the main terminal of Bangor International Airport, exotic baggage crawling along a stalled conveyor belt. Albert helped Dinah off and then they all stood there, looking around in silent wonder.

The shocked amazement at waking to a plane which had been magically emptied of people had worn off; now dislocation had taken

the place of wonder. None of them had ever been in an airport terminal which was utterly empty. The rental-car stalls were deserted. The ARRIVALS/DEPARTURES monitors were dark and dead. No one stood at the bank of counters serving Delta, United, Northwest Air-Link, or Mid-Coast Airways. The huge tank in the middle of the floor with the BUY MAINE LOBSTERS banner stretched over it was full of water, but there were no lobsters in it. The overhead fluorescents were off, and the small amount of light entering through the doors on the far side of the large room petered out halfway across the floor, leaving the little group from Flight 29 huddled together in an unpleasant nest of shadows.

'Right, then,' Nick said, trying for briskness and managing only unease. 'Let's try the telephones, shall we?'

While he went to the bank of telephones, Albert wandered over to the Budget Rent A Car desk. In the slots on the rear wall he saw folders for BRIGGS, HANDLEFORD, MARCHANT, FENWICK, and PESTLEMAN. There was, no doubt, a rental agreement inside each one, along with a map of the central Maine area, and on each map there would be an arrow with the legend You ARE HERE on it, pointing at the city of Bangor.

But where are we really? Albert wondered. And where are Briggs, Handleford, Marchant, Fenwick, and Pestleman? Have they been transported to another dimension? Maybe it's the Grateful Dead. Maybe the Dead's playing somewhere downstate and everybody left for the show.

There was a dry scratching noise just behind him. Albert nearly jumped out of his skin and whirled around fast, holding his violin case up like a cudgel. Bethany was standing there, just touching a match to the tip of her cigarette.

She raised her eyebrows. 'Scare you?'

'A little,' Albert said, lowering the case and offering her a small, embarrassed smile.

'Sorry.' She shook out the match, dropped it on the floor, and drew deeply on her cigarette. 'There. At least *that's* better. I didn't dare to on the plane. I was afraid something might blow up.'

Bob Jenkins strolled over. 'You know, I quit those about ten years ago.'

'No lectures, please,' Bethany said. 'I've got a feeling that if we get out of this alive and sane, I'm in for about a month of lectures. Solid. Wall-to-wall.'

Jenkins raised his eyebrows but didn't ask for an explanation. 'Actually,' he said, 'I was going to ask you if I could have one. This seems like an excellent time to renew acquaintances with old habits.'

Bethany smiled and offered him a Marlboro. Jenkins took it and she lit it for him. He inhaled, then coughed out a series of smoke-signal puffs.

'*You have* been away,' she observed matter-of-factly.

Jenkins agreed. 'But I'll get used to it again in a hurry. That's the real horror of the habit, I'm afraid. Did you two notice the clock?'

'No,' Albert said.

Jenkins pointed to the wall above the doors of the men's and women's bathrooms. The clock mounted there had stopped at 4:07.

'It fits,' he said. 'We knew we had been in the air for awhile when - let's call it The Event, for want of a better term - when The Event took place. 4:07 A.M. Eastern Daylight Time is 1:07 A.M. PDT. So now we know the when.'

'Gee, that's great,' Bethany said.

'Yes,' Jenkins said, either not noticing or preferring to ignore the light overlay of sarcasm in her voice. 'But there's something wrong with it. I only wish the sun was out. Then I could be sure.'

'What do you mean?' Albert asked.

'The clocks - the electric ones, anyway - are no good. There's no juice. But if the sun was out, we could get at least a rough idea of what time it is by the length and direction of our shadows. My watch says it's going on quarter of nine, but I don't trust it. It feels later to me than that. I have no proof for it, and I can't explain it, but it does.'

Albert thought about it. Looked around. Looked back at Jenkins. 'You know,' he said, 'it *does*. It feels like it's almost lunchtime. Isn't that nuts?'

'It's not nuts,' Bethany said, 'it's just jetlag.'

'I disagree,' Jenkins said. 'We travelled west to east, young lady. Any temporal dislocation west-east travellers feel goes the other way. They feel it's *earlier* than it should be.'

'I want to ask you about something you said on the plane,' Albert said. 'When the captain told us that there must be *some* other people here, you said "false logic." In fact, you said it twice. But it seems straight enough to me. We were all asleep, and *we're* here. And if this thing happened at -' Albert glanced toward the clock '- at 4:07, Bangor time, almost everyone in *town* must have been asleep.'

'Yes,' Jenkins said blandly. 'So where are they?'

Albert was nonplussed. 'Well ...'

There was a bang as Nick forcibly hung up one of the pay telephones. It was the last in a long line of them; he had tried every one. 'It's a wash-' out,' he said. 'They're all dead. The coin-fed ones as well as the direct-dials. You can add the sound of no phones ringing to that of no dogs barking, Brian.'

'So what do we do now?' Laurel asked. She heard the forlorn sound of her own voice and it made her feel very small, very lost. Beside her, Dinah was turning in slow circles. She looked like a human radar dish.

'Let's go upstairs,' Baldy proposed. 'That's where the restaurant must be.'

They all looked at him. Gaffney snorted. 'You got a one-track mind, mister.'

The bald man looked at him from beneath one raised eyebrow. 'First, the name is Rudy Warwick, not mister,' he replied. 'Second, people think better when their stomachs are full.' He shrugged. 'It's just a law of nature.'

'I think Mr Warwick is quite right,' Jenkins said. 'We all *could* use something to eat ... and if we go upstairs, we may find some other clues pointing toward what has happened. In fact, I rather think we will.'

Nick shrugged. He looked suddenly tired and confused. 'Why not?' he said. 'I'm starting to feel like Mr Robinson Bloody Crusoe.'

They started toward the escalator, which was also dead, in a straggling little group. Albert, Bethany, and Bob Jenkins walked together, toward the rear.

'You know something, don't you?' Albert asked abruptly. 'What is it?'

'I *might* know something,' Jenkins corrected. 'I might not. For the time being I'm going to hold my peace ... except for one suggestion.'

'What?'

'It's not for you; it's for the young lady.' He turned to Bethany. 'Save your matches. That's my suggestion.'

'What?' Bethany frowned at him.

'You heard me.'

'Yeah, I guess I did, but I don't get what you mean. There's probably a newsstand upstairs, Mr Jenkins. They'll have lots of matches. Cigarettes and disposable lighters, too.'

'I agree,' Jenkins said. 'I still advise you to save your matches.'

He's playing Philo Christie or whoever it was again, Albert thought.

He was about to point this out and ask Jenkins to please remember that this wasn't one of his novels when Brian Engle stopped at the foot of the escalator, so suddenly that Laurel had to jerk sharply on Dinah's hand to keep the blind girl from running into him.

'Watch where you're going, okay?' Laurel asked. 'In case you didn't notice, the kid here can't see.'

Brian ignored her. He was looking around at the little group of refugees. 'Where's Mr Toomy?'

'Who?' the bald man - Warwick - asked.

'The guy with the pressing appointment in Boston.'

'Who cares?' Gaffney asked. 'Good riddance to bad rubbish.'

But Brian was uneasy. He didn't like the idea that Toomy had slipped away and gone off on his own. He didn't know why, but he didn't like that idea at all. He glanced at Nick. Nick shrugged, then shook his head. 'Didn't see him go, mate. I was fooling with the phones. Sorry.'

'*Toomy!*' Brian shouted. '*Craig Toomy! Where are you?*'

There was no response. Only that queer, oppressive silence. And Laurel noticed something then, something that made her skin cold. Brian had cupped his hands and shouted up the escalator. In a high-ceilinged place like this one, there should have been at least some echo.

But there had been none. No echo at all.

10

While the others were occupied downstairs - the two teenagers and the old geezer standing by one of the car-rental desks, the others watching the British thug as he tried the phones - Craig Toomy had crept up the stalled escalator as quietly as a mouse. He knew exactly where he wanted to go; he knew exactly what to look for when he got there.

He strode briskly across the large waiting room with his briefcase swinging beside his right knee, ignoring both the empty chairs and an empty bar called The Red Baron. At the far end of the room was a sign hanging over the mouth of a wide, dark corridor. It read

GATE 5 INTERNATIONAL ARRIVALS

DUTY FREE SHOPS

U.S. CUSTOMS

AIRPORT SECURITY

He had almost reached the head of this corridor when he glanced out one of the wide windows at the tarmac again ... and his pace faltered. He approached the glass slowly and looked out.

There was nothing to see but the empty concrete and the moveless white sky, but his eyes began to widen nonetheless and he felt fear begin to steal into his heart.

They're coming, a dead voice suddenly told him. It was the voice of his father, and it spoke from a small, haunted mausoleum tucked away in a gloomy corner of Craig Toomy's heart.

'No,' he whispered, and the word spun a little blossom of fog on the window in front of his lips. 'No one is coming.'

You've been bad. Worse, you've been lazy.

'No!'

Yes. You had an appointment and you skipped it. You ran away. You ran away to Bangor, Maine, of all the silly places.

'It wasn't my fault,' he muttered. He was gripping the handle of the briefcase with almost painful tightness now. 'I was taken against my will. I ... I was shanghaied!'

No reply from that interior voice. Only waves of disapproval. And once again Craig intuited the pressure he was under, the terrible never-ending pressure, the weight of the fathoms. The interior voice

did not have to tell him there were no excuses; Craig knew that. He knew it of old.

THEY were here ... and they will be back. You know that, don't you?

He knew. The langoliers would be back. They would be back for him. He could sense them. He had never seen them, but he knew how horrible they would be. And was he alone in his knowledge? He thought not.

He thought perhaps the little blind girl knew something about the langoliers as well.

But that didn't matter. The only thing which did was getting to Boston getting to Boston before the langoliers could arrive in Bangor from their terrible, doomish lair to eat him alive and screaming. He had to get to that meeting at the Pru, had to let them know what he had done, and then he would be ...

Free.

He would be free.

Craig pulled himself away from the window, away from the emptiness and the stillness, and plunged into the corridor beneath the sign. He passed the empty shops without a glance. Beyond them he came to the door he was looking for. There was a small rectangular plaque mounted on it, just above a bullseye peephole. AIRPORT SECURITY, it said.

He had to get in there. One way or another, he *had* to get in there.

All of this ... this craziness ... it doesn't have to belong to me. I don't have to own it. Not anymore.

Craig reached out and touched the doorknob of the Airport Security office. The blank look in his eyes had been replaced by an expression of clear determination.

I have been under stress for a long, a very long, time. Since I was seven? No - I think it started even before that. The fact is, I've been under stress for as long as I can remember. This latest piece of craziness is just a new variation. It's probably just what the man in the ratty sport-coat said it was: a test. Agents of some secret government agency or sinister foreign power running a test. But I choose not to participate in any more tests. I don't care if it's my father in charge, or my mother, or the dean of the Graduate School

of Management, or the Desert Sun Banking Corporation's Board of Directors. I choose not to participate. I choose to escape. I choose to get to Boston and finish what I set out to do when I presented the Argentinian bond-buy in the first place. If I don't ...

But he knew what would happen if he didn't.

He would go mad.

Craig tried the doorknob. It did not move beneath his hand, but when he gave it a small, frustrated push, the door swung open. Either it had been left slightly unlatched, or it had unlocked when the power went off and the security systems went dead. Craig didn't care which. The important thing was that he wouldn't need to muss his clothes trying to crawl through an air-conditioning duct or something. He still had every intention of showing up at his meeting before the end of the day, and he didn't want his clothes smeared with dirt and grease when he got there. One of the simple, unexceptional truths of life was this: guys with dirt on their suits have no credibility.

He pushed the door open and went inside.

11

Brian and Nick reached the top of the escalator first, and the others gathered around them. This was BIA's central waiting room, a large square box filled with contour plastic seats (some with coin-op TVs bolted to the arms) and dominated by a wall of polarized floor-to-ceiling windows. To their immediate left was the airport newsstand and the security checkpoint which served Gate I; to their right and all the way across the room was The Red Baron Bar and The Cloud Nine Restaurant. Beyond the restaurant was the corridor leading to the Airport Security Office and the International Arrivals Annex.

'Come on -' Nick began, and Dinah said, 'Wait.'

She spoke in a strong, urgent voice and they all turned toward her curiously.

Dinah dropped Laurel's hand and raised both of her own. She cupped the thumbs behind her ears and splayed her fingers out like fans. Then she simply stood there, still as a post, in this odd and rather weird listening posture.

'What -' Brian began, and Dinah said '*Shhh!*' in an abrupt, inarguable sibilant.

She turned slightly to the left, paused, then turned in the other direction until the white light coming through the windows fell directly on her, turning her already pale face into something which was ghostlike and eerie. She took off her dark glasses. The eyes beneath were wide, brown, and not quite blank.

'There,' she said in a low, dreaming voice, and Laurel felt terror begin to stroke at her heart with chilly fingers. Nor was she alone. Bethany was crowding close to her on one side, and Don Gaffney moved in against her other side. 'There - I can feel the light. They said that's how they know I can see again. I can always feel the light. It's like heat inside my head.'

'Dinah, what -' Brian began.

Nick elbowed him. The Englishman's face was long and drawn, his forehead ribbed with lines. 'Be quiet, mate.'

'The light is ... here.'

She walked slowly away from them, her hands still fanned out by her ears, her elbows held out before her to encounter any object which might stand in her way. She advanced until she was less than two feet from the window. Then she slowly reached out until her fingers touched the glass. They looked like black starfish outlined against the white sky. She let out a small, unhappy Murmur.

'The glass is wrong, too,' she said in that dreaming voice.

'Dinah -' Laurel began.

'Shhh ...' she whispered without turning round. She stood at the window like a little girl waiting for her father to come home from work. '*I hear something.*'

These whispered words sent a wordless, thoughtless horror through Albert Kaussner's mind. He felt pressure on his shoulders and looked down to see he had crossed his arms across his chest and was clutching himself hard.

Brian listened with all his concentration. He heard his own breathing, and the breathing of the others ... but he heard nothing else. '*It's her imagination, he thought. That's all it is.*

But he wondered.

'What?' Laurel asked urgently. 'What do you hear, Dinah?'

'I don't know,' she said without turning from the window. 'It's very faint. I thought I heard it when we got off the airplane, and then I decided it was just my imagination. Now I can hear it better. I can hear it even through the glass. It sounds ... a little like Rice Krispies after you pour in the milk.'

Brian turned to Nick and spoke in a low voice. 'Do you hear anything?'

'Not a bloody thing,' Nick said, matching Brian's tone. 'But she's blind. She's used to making her ears do double duty.'

'I think it's hysteria,' Brian said. He was whispering now, his lips almost touching Nick's ear.

Dinah turned from the window.

""Do you hear anything?"" she mimicked. ""Not a bloody thing. But she's blind. She's used to making her ears do double duty."" She paused, then added: ""I think it's hysteria.""

'Dinah, what are you talking about?' Laurel asked, perplexed and frightened. She had not heard Brian and Nick's muttered conversation, although she had been standing much closer to them than Dinah was.

'Ask *them*,' Dinah said. Her voice was trembling. 'I'm not crazy! I'm blind, but I'm *not* crazy!'

'All right,' Brian said, shaken. 'All right, Dinah.' And to Laurel he said: 'I was talking to Nick. She heard us. From over there by the windows, she heard us.'

You've got great ears, hon,' Bethany said.

I hear what I hear,' Dinah said. 'And I hear something out there. In that direction.' She pointed due east through the glass. Her unseeing eyes swept them. 'And it's *bad*. It's an awful sound, a scary sound.'

Don Gaffney said hesitantly: 'If you knew what it was, little miss, that would help, maybe.'

'I don't,' Dinah said. 'But I know that it's closer than it was.' She put her dark glasses back on with a hand that was trembling. 'We have to get out of here. And we have to get out soon. Because something is coming. The bad something making the cereal noise.'

'Dinah,' Brian said, 'the plane we came in is almost out of fuel.'

'*Then you have to put some more in it!*' Dinah screamed shrilly at him. '*It's coming*, don't you understand? *It's coming*, and if we

haven't gone when it gets here, we're going to die! *We're all going to die!*

Her voice cracked and she began to sob. She was not a sibyl or a medium but only a little girl forced to live her terror in a darkness which was almost complete. She staggered toward them, her self-possession utterly gone. Laurel grabbed her before she could stumble over one of the guide-ropes which marked the way to the security checkpoint and hugged her tight. She tried to soothe the girl, but those last words echoed and rang in Laurel's confused, shocked mind: *If we haven't gone when it gets here, we're going to die.*

We're all going to die.

12

Craig Toomy heard the brat begin to caterwaul back there someplace and ignored it. He had found what he was looking for in the third locker he opened, the one with the name MARKEY Dymotaped to the front. Mr Markey's lunch - a sub sandwich poking out of a brown paper bag - was on the top shelf. Mr Markey's street shoes were placed neatly side by side on the bottom shelf. Hanging in between, from the same hook, were a plain white shirt and a gunbelt. Protruding from the holster was the butt of Mr Markey's service revolver.

Craig unsnapped the safety strap and took the gun out. He didn't know much about guns - this could have been a .32, a .38, or even a .45, for all of him - but he was not stupid, and after a few moments of fumbling he was able to roll the cylinder. All six chambers were loaded. He pushed the cylinder back in, nodding slightly when he heard it click home, and then inspected the hammer area and both sides of the grip. He was looking for a safety catch, but there didn't appear to be one. He put his finger on the trigger and tightened until he saw both the hammer and the cylinder move slightly. Craig nodded, satisfied.

He turned around and without warning the most intense loneliness of his adult life struck him. The gun seemed to take on weight and the hand holding it sagged. Now he stood with his shoulders

slumped, the briefcase dangling from his right hand, the security guard's pistol dangling from his left. On his face was an expression of utter, abject misery. And suddenly a memory recurred to him, something he hadn't thought of in years: Craig Toomy, twelve years old, lying in bed and shivering as hot tears ran down his face. In the other room the stereo was turned up loud and his mother was singing along with Merrilee Rush in her droning off-key drunk's voice: 'Just call me *angel* ... *of the morn-ing, bay-bee* ... just touch my cheek ... before you leave me, bay-bee ...'

Lying there in bed. Shaking. Crying. Not making a sound. And thinking: *Why can't you love me and leave me alone, Momma? Why can't you just love me and leave me alone?*

'I don't want to hurt anyone,' Craig Toomy muttered through his tears. 'I don't want to, but this ... this is intolerable.'

Across the room was a bank of TV monitors, all blank. For a moment, as he looked at them, the truth of what had happened, what was *still* happening, tried to crowd in on him. For a moment it almost broke through his complex system of neurotic shields and into the air-raid shelter where he lived his life.

Everyone is gone, Craigggy-weggy. The whole world is gone except for you and the people who were on that plane.

'No,' he moaned, and collapsed into one of the chairs standing around the Formica-topped kitchen table in the center of the room. 'No, that's not so. That's just not so. I refute that idea. I refute it *utterly.*'

The langoliers were here, and they will be back, his father said. It overrode the voice of his mother, as it always had. You *better be gone when they get here ... or you know what will happen.*

He knew, all right. They would eat him. The langoliers would eat him up.

'But I don't want to hurt anyone,' he repeated in a dreary, distraught voice. There was a mimeographed duty roster lying on the table. Craig let go of his briefcase and laid the gun on the table beside him. Then he picked up the duty roster, looked at it for a moment with unseeing eyes, and began to tear a long strip from the lefthand side.

Rii-ip.

Soon he was hypnotized as a pile of thin strips - maybe the thinnest ever! - began to flutter down onto the table. But even then the cold voice of his father would not entirely leave him:

Or you know what will happen.

CHAPTER 5

A Book of Matches. The Adventure of the Salami Sandwich. Another Example of the Deductive Method. The Arizona Yew Plays the Violin. The Only Sound in Town.

1

The frozen silence following Dinah's warning was finally broken by Robert Jenkins. 'We have some problems,' he said in a dry lecture-hall voice. 'If Dinah hears something - and following the remarkable demonstration she's just given us, I'm inclined to think she does - it would be helpful if we knew what it is. We don't. That's one problem. The plane's lack of fuel is another problem.'

'There's a 727 Out there,' Nick said, 'all cozied up to a jetway. Can you fly one of those, Brian?'

'Yes,' Brian said.

Nick spread his hands in Bob's direction and shrugged, as if to say *There you are: one knot untied already.*

'Assuming we *do* take off again, where should we go?' Bob Jenkins went on. 'A third problem.'

'Away,' Dinah said immediately. 'Away from that sound. We *have* to get away from that sound, and what's making it.'

'How long do you think we have?' Bob asked her gently. 'How long before it gets here, Dinah? Do you have any idea at all?'

'No,' she said from the safe circle of Laurel's arms. 'I think it's still far. I think there's still time. But ...'

'Then I suggest we do exactly as Mr Warwick has suggested,' Bob said. 'Let's step over to the restaurant, have a bite to eat, and discuss what happens next. Food *does* have a beneficial effect on what Monsieur Poirot liked to call the little gray cells.'

'We shouldn't *wait*,' Dinah said fretfully.

'Fifteen minutes,' Bob said. 'No more than that. And even at your age, Dinah, you should know that useful thinking must always precede useful action.'

Albert suddenly realized that the mystery writer had his own reasons for wanting to go to the restaurant. Mr Jenkins's little gray cells were all in apple-pie working order - or at least he *believed* they were - and following his eerily sharp assessment of their situation on board the plane, Albert was willing at least to give him the benefit of the doubt. *He wants to show us something, or prove something to us*, he thought.

'Surely we have fifteen minutes?' he coaxed.

'Well ...' Dinah said unwillingly. 'I guess so.'

'Fine,' Bob said briskly. 'It's decided.' And he struck off across the room toward the restaurant, as if taking it for granted that the others would follow him.

Brian and Nick looked at each other.

'We better go along,' Albert said quietly. 'I think he knows stuff.'

'What kind of stuff?' Brian asked.

'I don't know, exactly, but I think it might be stuff worth finding out.'

Albert followed Bob; Bethany followed Albert; the others fell in behind them, Laurel leading Dinah by the hand. The little girl was very pale.

2

The Cloud Nine Restaurant was really a cafeteria with a cold-case full of drinks and sandwiches at the rear and a stainless steel counter running beside a long, compartmentalized steam-table. All the compartments were empty, all sparkling clean. There wasn't a speck of grease on the grill. Glasses - those tough cafeteria glasses with the ripply sides - were stacked in neat pyramids on rear shelves, along with a wide selection of even tougher cafeteria crockery.

Robert Jenkins was standing by the cash register. As Albert and Bethany came in, he said: 'May I have another cigarette, Bethany?'

'Gee, you're a real mooch,' she said, but her tone was good-natured. She produced her box of Marlboros and shook one out. He

took it, then touched her hand as she also produced her book of matches.

'I'll just use one of these, shall I?' There was a bowl filled with paper matches advertising LaSalle Business School by the cash register. FOR OUR MATCHLESS FRIENDS, a little sign beside the bowl read. Bob took a book of these matches, opened it, and pulled one of the matches free.

'Sure,' Bethany said, 'but why?'

'That's what we're going to find out,' he said. He glanced at the others. They were standing around in a semicircle, watching - all except Rudy Warwick, who had drifted to the rear of the serving area and was closely inspecting the contents of the cold-case.

Bob struck the match. It left a little smear of white stuff on the striker but didn't light. He struck it again with the same result. On the third try, the paper match bent. Most of the flammable head was gone, anyway.

'My, my,' he said in an utterly unsurprised tone. 'I suppose they must be wet. Let's try a book from the bottom, shall we? *They* should be dry.'

He dug to the bottom of the bowl, spilling a number of matchbooks off the top and onto the counter as he did so. They all looked perfectly dry to Albert. Behind him, Nick and Brian exchanged another glance.

Bob fished out another book of matches, pulled one, and tried to strike it. It didn't light.

'Son of a bee,' he said. 'We seem to have discovered yet another problem. May I borrow your book of matches, Bethany?'

She handed it over without a word.

'Wait a minute,' Nick said slowly. 'What do you know, matey?'

'Only that this situation has even wider implications than we at first thought,' Bob said. His eyes were calm enough, but the face from which they looked was haggard. 'And I have an idea that we all may have made one *big* mistake. Understandable enough under the circumstances ... but until we've rectified our thinking on this subject, I don't believe we can make any progress. An error of perspective, I'd call it.'

Warwick was wandering back toward them. He had selected a wrapped sandwich and a bottle of beer. His acquisitions seemed to have cheered him considerably. 'What's happening, folks?'

'I'll be damned if I know,' Brian said, 'but I don't like it much.'

Bob Jenkins pulled one of the matches from Bethany's book and struck it. It lit on the first strike. 'Ah,' he said, and applied the flame to the tip of his cigarette. The smoke smelled incredibly pungent, incredibly sweet to Brian, and a moment's reflection suggested a reason why: it was the only thing, save for the faint tang of Nick Hopewell's shaving lotion and Laurel's perfume, that he could smell. Now that he thought about it, Brian realized that he could also smell his travelling companions' sweat.

Bob still held the lit match in his hand. Now he bent back the top of the book he'd taken from the bowl, exposing all the matches, and touched the lit match to the heads of the others. For a long moment nothing happened. The writer slipped the flame back and forth along the heads of the matches, but they didn't light. The others watched, fascinated.

At last there was a sickly phsssss sound, and a few of the matches erupted into dull, momentary life. They did not really burn at all; there was a weak glow and they went out. A few tendrils of smoke drifted up ... smoke which seemed to have no odor at all.

Bob looked around at them and smiled grimly. 'Even that,' he said, 'is more than I expected.'

'All right,' Brian said. 'Tell us about it. I know -'

At that moment, Rudy Warwick uttered a cry of disgust. Dinah gave a little shriek and pressed closer to Laurel. Albert felt his heart take a high skip in his chest.

Rudy had unwrapped his sandwich - it looked to Brian like salami and cheese -and had taken a large bite. Now he spat it out onto the floor with a grimace of disgust.

'It's spoiled!' Rudy cried. 'Oh, goddam! I *hate* that!'

'Spoiled?' Bob Jenkins said swiftly. His eyes gleamed like blue electrical sparks. 'Oh, I doubt that. Processed meats are so loaded with preservatives these days that it takes eight hours or more in the hot sun to send them over. And we know by the clocks that the power in that cold-case went out less than five hours ago.'

'Maybe not,' Albert spoke up. 'You were the one who said it felt later than our wristwatches say.'

'Yes, but I don't think ... Was the case still cold, Mr Warwick? When you opened it, was the case still cold?'

'Not cold, exactly, but cool,' Rudy said. 'That sandwich is all fucked up, though. Pardon me, ladies. Here.' He held it out. 'If you don't think it's spoiled, you try it.'

Bob stared at the sandwich, appeared to screw up his courage, and then did just that, taking a small bite from the untouched half. Albert saw an expression of disgust pass over his face, but he did not get rid of the food immediately. He chewed once ... twice ... then turned and spat into his hand. He stuffed the half-chewed bite of sandwich into the trash-bin below the condiments shelf, and dropped the rest of the sandwich in after it.

'Not spoiled,' he said. 'Tasteless. And not just that, either. It seemed to have no texture.' His mouth drew down in an involuntary expression of disgust. 'We talk about things being bland - unseasoned white rice, boiled potatoes - but even the blandest food has *some* taste, I think. That had none. It was like chewing paper. No wonder you thought it was spoiled.'

'It was spoiled,' the bald man reiterated stubbornly.

'Try your beer,' Bob invited. '*That* shouldn't be spoiled. The cap is still on, and a capped bottle of beer shouldn't spoil even if it isn't refrigerated.'

Rudy looked thoughtfully at the bottle of Budweiser in his hand, then shook his head and held it out to Bob. 'I don't want it anymore,' he said. He glanced at the cold-case. His gaze was baleful, as if he suspected Jenkins of having played an unfunny practical joke on him.

'I will if I have to,' Bob said, 'but I've already offered my body up to science once. Will somebody else try this beer? I think it's very important.'

'Give it to me,' Nick said.

'No.' It was Don Gaffney. 'Give it to me. I could use a beer, by God. I've drunk 'em warm before and they don't cross my eyes none.'

He took the beer, twisted off the cap, and upended it. A moment later he whirled and sprayed the mouthful he had taken onto the

floor.

'Jesus!' he cried. 'Flat! Flat as a pancake!'

'Is it?' Bob asked brightly. 'Good! Great! Something we can all see!' He was around the counter in a flash, and taking one of the glasses down from the shelf. Gaffney had set the bottle down beside the cash register, and Brian looked at it closely as Bob Jenkins picked it up. He could see no foam clinging to the inside of the bottleneck. *It might as well be water in there*, he thought.

What Bob poured out didn't look like water, however; it looked like beer. Flat beer. There was no head. A few small bubbles clung to the inside of the glass, but none of them came pinging up through the liquid to the surface.

'All right,' Nick said slowly, 'it's flat. Sometimes that happens. The cap doesn't get screwed on all the way at the factory and the gas escapes. Everyone's gotten a flat lager from time to time.'

'But when you add in the tasteless salami sandwich, it's suggestive, isn't it?'

'Suggestive of *what?*' Brian exploded.

'In a moment,' Bob said. 'Let's take care of Mr Hopewell's *caveat* first, shall we?' He turned, grabbed glasses with both hands (a couple of others fell off the shelf and shattered on the floor), then began to set them out along the counter with the agile speed of a bartender. 'Bring me some more beer. And a couple of soft drinks, while you're at it.'

Albert and Bethany went down to the cold-case and each took four or five bottles, picking at random.

'Is he nuts?' Bethany asked in a low voice.

'I don't think so,' Albert said. He had a vague idea of what the writer was trying to show them ... and he didn't like the shape it made in his mind. 'Remember when he told you to save your matches? He knew something like this was going to happen. That's why he was so hot to get us over to the restaurant. He wanted to show us.'

The duty roster was ripped into three dozen narrow strips and the langoliers were closer now.

Craig could feel their approach at the back of his mind - more weight.

More insupportable weight.

It was time to go.

He picked up the gun and his briefcase, then stood up and left the security room. He walked slowly, rehearsing as he went: *I don't want to shoot you, but I will if I have to. Take me to Boston. I don't want to shoot you, but I will if I have to. Take me to Boston.*

'I will if I have to,' Craig muttered as he walked back into the waiting room. 'I will if I have to.' His finger found the hammer of the gun and cocked it back.

Halfway across the room, his attention was once more snared by the pallid light which fell through the windows, and he turned in that direction. He could feel them out there. The langoliers. They had eaten all the useless, lazy people, and now they were returning for him. He *had* to get to Boston. It was the only way he knew to save the rest of himself ... because *their* death would be horrible. Their death would be horrible indeed.

He walked slowly to the windows and looked out, ignoring - at least for the time being - the murmur of the other passengers behind him.

4

Bob Jenkins poured a little from each bottle into its own glass. The contents of each was as flat as the first beer had been. 'Are you convinced?' he asked Nick.

'Yes,' Nick said. 'If you know what's going on here, mate, spill it. Please spill it.'

'I have an idea,' Bob said. 'It's not ... I'm afraid it's not very comforting, but I'm one of those people who believe that knowledge is always better - safer - in the long run than ignorance, no matter how dismayed one may feel when one first understands certain facts. Does that make any sense?'

'No,' Gaffney said at once.

Bob shrugged and offered a small, wry smile. 'Be that as it may, I stand by my statement. And before I say anything else, I want to ask you all to look around this place and tell me what you see.'

They looked around, concentrating so fiercely on the little clusters of tables and chairs that no one noticed Craig Toomy standing on the far side of the waiting room, his back to them, gazing out at the tarmac.

'Nothing,' Laurel said at last. 'I'm sorry, but I don't see anything. Your eyes must be sharper than mine, Mr Jenkins.'

'Not a bit. I see what you see: nothing. But airports are open twenty-four hours a day. When this thing - this Event - happened, it was probably at the dead low tide of its twenty-four-hour cycle, but I find it difficult to believe there weren't at least a few people in here, drinking coffee and perhaps eating early breakfasts. Aircraft maintenance men. Airport personnel. Perhaps a handful of connecting passengers who elected to save money by spending the hours between midnight and six or seven o'clock in the terminal instead of in a nearby motel. When I first got off that baggage conveyor and looked around, I felt utterly dislocated. Why? Because airports are *never* completely deserted, just as police and fire stations are never completely deserted. Now look around again, and ask yourself this: where are the half-eaten meals, the half-empty glasses? Remember the drinks trolley on the airplane with the dirty glasses on the lower shelf? Remember the half-eaten pastry and the half-drunk cup of coffee beside the pilot's seat in the cockpit? There's nothing like that here. *Where is the least sign that there were people here at all when this Event occurred?*'

Albert looked around again and then said slowly, 'There's no pipe on the foredeck, is there?'

Bob looked at him closely. 'What? What do you say, Albert?'

'When we were on the plane,' Albert said slowly, 'I was thinking of this sailing ship I read about once. It was called the *Mary Celeste*, and someone spotted it, just floating aimlessly along. Well ... not really *floating*, I guess, because the book said the sails were set, but when the people who found it boarded her, everyone on the *Mary Celeste* was gone. Their stuff was still there, though, and there was

food cooking on the stove. Someone even found a pipe on the foredeck. It was still lit.'

'Bravo!' Bob cried, almost feverishly. They were all looking at him now, and no one saw Craig Toomy walking slowly toward them. The gun he had found was no longer pointed at the floor.

'Bravo, Albert! You've put your finger on it! And there was another famous disappearance - an entire colony of settlers at a place called Roanoke Island ... off the coast of North Carolina, I believe. All gone, but they had left remains of campfires, cluttered houses, and trash middens behind. Now, Albert, take this a step further. How else does this terminal differ from our airplane?'

For a moment Albert looked entirely blank, and then understanding dawned in his eyes. 'The rings!' he shouted. 'The purses! The wallets! The money! The surgical pins! None of that stuff is here!'

'Correct,' Bob said softly. 'One hundred per cent correct. As you say, none of that stuff is here. But it was on the airplane when we survivors woke up, wasn't it? There were even a cup of coffee and a half-eaten Danish in the cockpit. The equivalent of a smoking pipe on the foredeck.'

'You think we've flown into another dimension, don't you?' Albert said. His voice was awed. 'Just like in a science-fiction story.'

Dinah's head cocked to one side, and for a moment she looked strikingly like Nipper, the dog on the old RCA Victor labels.

'No,' Bob said, 'I think -'

'Watch out!' Dinah cried sharply. 'I hear some-'

She was too late. Once Craig Toomy broke the paralysis which had held him and he started to move, he moved fast. Before Nick or Brian could do more than begin to turn around, he had locked one forearm around Bethany's throat and was dragging her backward. He pointed the gun at her temple. The girl uttered a desperate, terrorized squawk.

'I don't want to shoot her, but I will if I have to,' Craig panted. 'Take me to Boston.' His eyes were no longer blank; they shot glances full of terrified, paranoid intelligence in every direction. 'Do you hear me? Take me to Boston!'

Brian started toward him, and Nick placed a hand against his chest without shifting his eyes away from Craig. 'Steady down, mate,' he said in a low voice. 'It wouldn't be safe. Our friend here is quite bonkers.'

Bethany was squirming under Craig's restraining forearm. 'You're choking me! Please stop *choking* me.'

'What's happening?' Dinah cried. 'What is it?'

'Stop that!' Craig shouted at Bethany. 'Stop moving around! You're going to force me to do something I don't want to do!' He pressed the muzzle of the gun against the side of her head. She continued to struggle, and Albert suddenly realized she didn't know he had a gun - even with it pressed against her skull she didn't know.

'Quit it, girl!' Nick said sharply. 'Quit fighting!'

For the first time in his waking life, Albert found himself not just thinking like The Arizona Jew but possibly called upon to *act* like that fabled character. Without taking his eyes off the lunatic in the crew-neck jersey, he slowly began to raise his violin case. He switched his grip from the handle and settled both hands around the neck of the case. Toomy was not looking at him; his eyes were shuttling rapidly back and forth between Brian and Nick, and he had his hands full - quite literally - holding onto Bethany.

'I don't want to shoot her -' Craig was beginning again, and then his arm slipped upward as the girl bucked against him, socking her behind into his crotch. Bethany immediately sank her teeth into his wrist. 'Ow!' Craig screamed. 'owww!'

His grip loosened. Bethany ducked under it. Albert leaped forward, raising the violin case, as Toomy pointed the gun at Bethany. Toomy's face was screwed into a grimace of pain and anger.

'*No, Albert!*' Nick bawled.

Craig Toomy saw Albert coming and shifted the muzzle toward him. For one moment Albert looked straight into it, and it was like none of his dreams or fantasies. Looking into the muzzle was like looking into an open grave.

I might have made a mistake here, he thought, and then Craig pulled the trigger.

Instead of an explosion there was a small pop - the sound of an old Daisy air rifle, no more. Albert felt something thump against the chest of his Hard Rock Cafe tee-shirt, had time to realize he had been shot, and then he brought the violin case down on Craig's head. There was a solid thud which ran all the way up his arms and the indignant voice of his father suddenly spoke up in his mind: *What's the matter with you, Albert? That's no way to treat an expensive musical instrument!*

There was a startled *broink!* from inside the case as the violin jumped. One of the brass latches dug into Toomy's forehead and blood splashed outward in an amazing spray. Then the man's knees came unhinged and he went down in front of Albert like an express elevator. Albert saw his eyes roll up to whites, and then Craig Toomy was lying at his feet, unconscious.

A crazy but somehow wonderful thought filled Albert's mind for a moment: *By God, I never played better in my life!* And then he realized that he was no longer able to get his breath. He turned to the others, the corners of his mouth turning up in a thin-lipped, slightly confused smile. 'I think I have been plugged,' Ace Kaussner said, and then the world bleached out to shades of gray and his own knees came unhinged. He crumpled to the floor on top of his violin case.

6

He was out for less than thirty seconds. When he came around, Brian was slapping his cheeks lightly and looking anxious. Bethany was on her knees beside him, looking at Albert with shining my-hero eyes. Behind her, Dinah Bellman was still crying within the circle of Laurel's arms. Albert looked back at Bethany and felt his heart - apparently still whole - expand in his chest. 'The Arizona Jew rides again,' he muttered.

'What, Albert?' she asked, and stroked his cheek. Her hand was wonderfully soft, wonderfully cool. Albert decided he was in love.

'Nothing,' he said, and then the pilot whacked him across the face again.

'Are you all right, kid?' Brian was asking. 'Are you all right?'

'I think so,' Albert said. 'Stop doing that, okay? And the name is Albert. Ace, to my friends. How bad am I hit? I can't feel anything yet. Were you able to stop the bleeding?'

Nick Hopewell squatted beside Bethany. His face wore a bemused, unbelieving smile. 'I think you'll live, matey. I never saw anything like that in my life ... and I've seen a lot. You Americans are too foolish not to love. Hold out your hand and I'll give you a souvenir.'

Albert held out a hand which shook uncontrollably with reaction, and Nick dropped something into it. Albert held it up to his eyes and saw it was a bullet.

'I picked it up off the floor,' Nick said. 'Not even misshapen. It must have hit you square in the chest - there's a little powder mark on your shirt - and then bounced off. It was a misfire. God must like you, mate.'

'I was thinking of the matches,' Albert said weakly. 'I sort of thought it wouldn't fire at all.'

'That was very brave and very foolish, my boy,' Bob Jenkins said. His face was dead white and he looked as if he might pass out himself in another few moments. 'Never believe a writer. Listen to them, by all means, but never *believe* them. My God, what if I'd been wrong?'

'You almost were,' Brian said. He helped Albert to his feet. 'It was like when you lit the other matches - the ones from the bowl. There was just enough pop to drive the bullet out of the muzzle. A little more pop and Albert would have had a bullet in his lung.'

Another wave of dizziness washed over Albert. He swayed on his feet, and Bethany immediately slipped an arm around his waist. 'I thought it was really brave,' she said, looking up at him with eyes which suggested she believed Albert Kaussner must shit diamonds from a platinum asshole. 'I mean *incredible*.'

'Thanks,' Ace said, smiling coolly (if a trifle woozily). 'It wasn't much.' The fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi was aware that there was a great deal of girl pressed tightly against him, and that the girl smelled almost unbearably good. Suddenly *he* felt good. In fact, he believed he had never felt better in his life. Then he

remembered his violin, bent down, and picked up the case. There was a deep dent in one side, and one of the catches had been sprung. There was blood and hair on it, and Albert felt his stomach turn over lazily. He opened the case and looked in. The instrument looked all right, and he let out a little sigh.

Then he thought of Craig Toomy, and alarm replaced relief.

'Say, I didn't kill that guy, did I? I hit him pretty hard.' He looked towards Craig, who was lying near the restaurant door with Don Gaffney kneeling beside him. Albert suddenly felt like passing out again. There was a great deal of blood on Craig's face and forehead.

'He's alive,' Don said, 'but he's out like a light.'

Albert, who had blown away more hardcases than The Man with No Name in his dreams, felt his gorge rise. 'Jesus, there's so much *blood!*'

'Doesn't mean a thing,' Nick said. 'Scalp wounds tend to bleed a lot.' He joined Don, picked up Craig's wrist, and felt for a pulse. 'You want to remember he had a gun to that girl's head, matey. If he'd pulled the trigger at point-blank range, he might well have done for her. Remember the actor who killed himself with a blank round a few years ago? Mr Toomy brought this on himself; he owns it completely. Don't take on.'

Nick dropped Craig's wrist and stood up.

'Besides,' he said, pulling a large swatch of paper napkins from the dispenser on one of the tables, 'his pulse is strong and regular. I think he'll wake up in a few minutes with nothing but a bad headache. I also think it might be prudent to take a few precautions against that happy event. Mr Gaffney, the tables in yonder watering hole actually appear to be equipped with tablecloths - strange but true. I wonder if you'd get a couple? We might be wise to bind old Mr I've-Got-to-Get-to-Boston's hands behind him.'

'Do you really have to do that?' Laurel asked quietly. 'The man is unconscious, after all, and bleeding.'

Nick pressed his makeshift napkin compress against Craig Toomy's headwound and looked up at her. 'You're Laurel, right?'

'Right.'

'Well, Laurel, let's not paint it fine. This man is a lunatic. I don't know if our current adventure did that to him or if he just grewed that

way, like Topsy, but I *do* know he's dangerous. He would have grabbed Dinah instead of Bethany if she had been closer. If we leave him untied, he might do just that next time.'

Craig groaned and waved his hands feebly. Bob Jenkins stepped away from him the moment he began to move, even though the revolver was now safely tucked into the waistband of Brian Engle's pants, and Laurel did the same, pulling Dinah with her.

'Is anybody dead?' Dinah asked nervously. 'No one is, are they?'

'No, honey.'

'I should have heard him sooner, but I was listening to the man who sounds like a teacher.'

'It's okay,' Laurel said. 'It turned out all right, Dinah.' Then she looked out at the empty terminal and her own words mocked her. *Nothing* was all right here. Nothing at all.

Don returned with a red-and-white-checked tablecloth in each fist.

'Marvellous,' Nick said. He took one of them and spun it quickly and expertly into a rope. He put the center of it in his mouth, clamping his teeth on it to keep it from unwinding, and used his hands to flip Craig over like a human omelette.

Craig cried out and his eyelids fluttered.

'Do you have to be so *rough*?' Laurel asked sharply.

Nick gazed at her for a moment, and she dropped her eyes at once. She could not help comparing Nick Hopewell's eyes with the eyes in the pictures which Darren Crosby had sent her. Widely spaced, clear eyes in a goodlooking - if unremarkable - face. But the eyes had also been rather unremarkable, hadn't they? And didn't Darren's eyes have something, perhaps even a great deal, to do with why she had made this trip in the first place? Hadn't she decided, after a great deal of close study, that they were the eyes of a man who would behave himself? A man who would back off if you told him to back off?

She had boarded Flight 29 telling herself that this was her great adventure, her one extravagant tango with romance - an impulsive transcontinental dash into the arms of the tall, dark stranger. But sometimes you found yourself in one of those tiresome situations where the truth could no longer be avoided, and Laurel reckoned the truth to be this: she had chosen Darren Crosby because his pictures

and letters had told her he wasn't much different from the placid boys and men she had been dating ever since she was fifteen or so, boys and men who would learn quickly to wipe their feet on the mat before they came in on rainy nights, boys and men who would grab a towel and help with the dishes without being asked, boys and men who would let you go if you told them to do it in a sharp enough tone of voice.

Would she have been on Flight 29 tonight if the photos had shown Nick Hopewell's dark-blue eyes instead of Darren's mild brown ones? She didn't think so. She thought she would have written him a kind but rather impersonal note *Thank you for your reply and your picture, Mr Hopewell, but I somehow don't think we would be right for each other - and gone on looking for a man like Darren.* And, of course, she doubted very much if men like Mr Hopewell even read the lonely-hearts magazines, let alone placed ads in their personals columns. All the same, she was here with him now, in this weird situation.

Well, she had wanted to have an adventure, just one adventure, before middle-age settled in for keeps. Wasn't that true? Yes. And here she was, proving Tolkien right - she had stepped out of her own door last evening, just the same as always, and look where she had ended up: a strange and dreary version of Fantasyland. But it was an adventure, all right. Emergency landings ... deserted airports ... a lunatic with a gun. Of course it was an adventure. Something she had read years ago suddenly popped into Laurel's mind. *Be careful what you pray for, because you just might get it.*

How true.

And how confusing.

There was no confusion in Nick Hopewell's eyes ... but there was no mercy in them, either. They made Laurel feel shivery, and there was nothing romantic in the feeling.

Are you sure? a voice whispered, and Laurel shut it up at once.

Nick pulled Craig's hands out from under him, then brought his wrists together at the small of his back. Craig groaned again, louder this time, and began to struggle weakly.

'Easy now, my good old mate,' Nick said soothingly. He wrapped the tablecloth rope twice around Craig's lower forearms and knotted

it tightly. Craig's elbows flapped and he uttered a strange weak scream. 'There!' Nick said, standing up. 'Trussed as neatly as Father John's Christmas turkey. We've even got a spare if that one looks like not holding.' He sat on the edge of one of the tables and looked at Bob Jenkins. 'Now, what were you saying when we were so rudely interrupted?'

Bob looked at him, dazed and unbelieving. 'What?'

'Go on,' Nick said. He might have been an interested lecture-goer instead of a man sitting on a table in a deserted airport restaurant with his feet planted beside a bound man lying in a pool of his own blood. 'You had just got to the part about Flight 29 being like the *Mary Celeste*. Interesting concept, that.'

'And you want me to ... to just go on?' Bob asked incredulously. 'As if nothing had happened?'

'Let me up!' Craig shouted. His words were slightly muffled by the tough industrial carpet on the restaurant floor, but he still sounded remarkably lively for a man who had been coldcocked with a violin case not five minutes previous. 'Let me up right *now!* I demand that you -'

Then Nick did something that shocked all of them, even those who had seen the Englishman twist Craig's nose like the handle of a bathtub faucet. He drove a short, hard kick into Craig's ribs. He pulled it at the last instant ... but not much. Craig uttered a pained grunt and shut up.

'Start again, mate, and I'll stave them in,' Nick said grimly. 'My patience with you has run out.'

'Hey!' Gaffney cried, bewildered. 'What did you do that f -'

'Listen to me!' Nick said, and looked around. His urbane surface was entirely gone for the first time; his voice vibrated with anger and urgency. 'You need waking up, fellows and girls, and I haven't the time to do it gently. That little girl Dinah - says we are in bad trouble here, and I believe her. She says she hears something, something which may be coming our way, and I rather believe that, too. I don't hear a bloody thing, but my nerves are jumping like grease on a hot griddle, and I'm used to paying attention when they do that. I think something is coming, and I don't believe it's going to try and sell us vacuum-cleaner attachments or the latest insurance scheme when it

gets here. Now we can make all the correct civilized noises over this bloody madman or we can try to understand what has happened to us. Understanding may not save our lives, but I'm rapidly becoming convinced that the lack of it may end them, and soon.' His eyes shifted to Dinah. 'Tell me I'm wrong if you believe I am, Dinah. I'll listen to you, and gladly.'

'I don't want you to hurt Mr Toomy, but I don't think you're wrong, either,' Dinah said in a small, wavery voice.

'All right,' Nick said. 'Fair enough. I'll try my very best not to hurt him again ... but I make no promises. Let's begin with a very simple concept. This fellow I've trussed up -'

'Toomy,' Brian said. 'His name is Craig Toomy.'

'All right. Mr Toomy is mad. Perhaps if we find our way back to our proper place, or if we find the place where all the people have gone, we can get some help for him. But for now, we can only help him by putting him out of commission - which I have done, with the generous if foolhardy assistance of Albert there - and getting back to our current business. Does anyone hold a view which runs counter to this?'

There was no reply. The other passengers who had been aboard Flight 29 looked at Nick uneasily.

'All right,' Nick said. 'Please go on, Mr Jenkins.'

'I ... I'm not used to ...' Bob made a visible effort to collect himself. 'In books, I suppose I've killed enough people to fill every seat in the plane that brought us here, but what just happened is the first act of violence I've ever personally witnessed. I'm sorry if I've ... er ... behaved badly.'

'I think you're doing great, Mr Jenkins,' Dinah said. 'And I like listening to you, too. It makes me feel better.'

Bob looked at her gratefully and smiled. 'Thank you, Dinah.' He stuffed his hands in his pockets, cast a troubled glance at Craig Toomy, then looked beyond them, across the empty waiting room.

'I think I mentioned a central fallacy in our thinking,' he said at last. 'It is this: we all assumed, when we began to grasp the dimensions of this Event, that something had happened to *the rest of the world*. That assumption is easy enough to understand, since we are all fine and everyone else - including those other passengers with whom we

boarded at Los Angeles International - seems to have disappeared. But the evidence before us doesn't bear the assumption out. What has happened has happened to us and us alone. I am convinced that the world as we have always known it is ticking along just as it always has.

'It's us - the missing passengers and the eleven survivors of Flight 29 - who are lost.'

7

'Maybe I'm dumb, but I don't understand what you're getting at,' Rudy Warwick said after a moment.

'Neither do I,' Laurel added.

'We've mentioned two famous disappearances,' Bob said quietly. Now even Craig Toomy seemed to be listening ... he had stopped struggling, at any rate. 'One, the case of the *Mary Celeste*, took place at sea. The second, the case of Roanoke Island, took place *near* the sea. They are not the only ones, either. I can think of at least two others which involved aircraft: the disappearance of the aviatrix Amelia Earhart over the Pacific Ocean, and the disappearance of several Navy planes over that part of the Atlantic known as the Bermuda Triangle. That happened in 1945 or 1946, I believe. There was some sort of garbled transmission from the lead aircraft's pilot, and rescue planes were sent out at once from an airbase in Florida, but no trace of the planes or their crews was ever found.'

'I've heard of the case,' Nick said. 'It's the basis for the Triangle's infamous reputation, I think.'

'No, there have been *lots of* ships and planes lost there,' Albert put in. 'I read the book about it by Charles Berlitz. Really interesting.' He glanced around. 'I just never thought I'd be *in* it, *if you* know what I mean.'

Jenkins said, 'I don't know *if* an aircraft has ever disappeared over the continental United States before, but -'

'It's happened *lots of* times with small planes,' Brian said, 'and once, about thirty-five years ago, it happened with a commercial

passenger plane. There were over a hundred people aboard. 1955 or '56, this was. The carrier was either TWA or Monarch, I can't remember which. The plane was bound for Denver out of San Francisco. The pilot made radio contact with the Reno tower - absolutely routine - and the plane was never heard from again. There was a search, of course, but ... nothing.'

Brian saw they were all looking at him with a species of dreadful fascination, and he laughed uncomfortably.

'Pilot ghost stories,' he said with a note of apology in his voice. 'It sounds like a caption for a Gary Larson cartoon.'

'I'll bet they all went through,' the writer muttered. He had begun to scrub the side of his face with his hand again. He looked distressed - almost horrified. 'Unless they found bodies ... ?'

'Please tell us what you know, or what you think you know,' Laurel said. 'The effect of this ... this thing ... seems to pile up on a person. If I don't get some answers soon, I think you can tie me up and put me down next to Mr Toomy.'

'Don't flatter yourself,' Craig said, speaking clearly if rather obscurely.

Bob favored him with another uncomfortable glance and then appeared to muster his thoughts. 'There's no mess here, but there's a mess on the plane. There's no electricity here, but there's electricity on the plane. That isn't conclusive, of course - the plane has its own self-contained power supply, while the electricity here comes from a power plant somewhere. But then consider the matches. Bethany was on the plane, and her matches work fine. The matches I took from the bowl in here wouldn't strike. The gun which Mr Toomy took - from the Security office, I imagine - barely fired. I think that, if you tried a battery-powered flashlight, you'd find that wouldn't work, either. Or, if it did work, it wouldn't work for long.'

'You're right,' Nick said. 'And we don't need to find a flashlight in order to test your theory.' He pointed upward. There was an emergency light mounted on the wall behind the kitchen grill. It was as dead as the overhead lights. 'That's battery-powered,' Nick went on. 'A light-sensitive solenoid turns it on when the power fails. It's dim enough in here for that thing to have gone into operation, but it

didn't do so. Which means that either the solenoid's circuit failed or the battery is dead.'

'I suspect it's both,' Bob Jenkins said. He walked slowly toward the restaurant door and looked out. 'We find ourselves in a world which appears to be whole and in reasonably good order, but it is also a world which seems almost exhausted. The carbonated drinks are flat. The food is tasteless. The air is odorless. *We* still give off scents - I can smell Laurel's perfume and the captain's aftershave lotion, for instance - but everything else seems to have lost its smell.'

Albert picked up one of the glasses with beer in it and sniffed deeply. There *was* a smell, he decided, but it was very, very faint. A flower-petal pressed for many years between the pages of a book might give off the same distant memory of scent.

'The same is true for sounds,' Bob went on. 'They are flat, one-dimensional, utterly without resonance.'

Laurel thought of the listless clup-clup sound of her high heels on the cement, and the lack of echo when Captain Engle cupped his hands around his mouth and called up the escalator for Mr Toomy.

'Albert, could I ask you to play something on your violin?' Bob asked.

Albert glanced at Bethany. She smiled and nodded.

'All right. Sure. In fact, I'm sort of curious about how it sounds after ...' He glanced at Craig Toomy. 'You know.'

He opened the case, grimacing as his fingers touched the latch which had opened the wound in Craig Toomy's forehead, and drew out his violin. He caressed it briefly, then took the bow in his right hand and tucked the violin under his chin. He stood like that for a moment, thinking. What was the proper sort of music for this strange new world where no phones rang and no dogs barked? Ralph Vaughan Williams? Stravinsky? Mozart? Dvorak, perhaps? No. None of them were right. Then inspiration struck, and he began to play 'Someone's in the Kitchen with Dinah.'

Halfway through the tune the bow faltered to a stop.

'I guess you must have hurt your fiddle after all when you bopped that guy with it,' Don Gaffney said. 'It sounds like it's stuffed full of cotton batting.'

'No,' Albert said slowly. 'My violin is perfectly okay. I can tell just by the way it feels, and the action of the strings under my fingers ... but there's something else as well. Come on over here, Mr Gaffney.' Gaffney came over and stood beside Albert. 'Now get as close to my violin as you can. No ... not that close; I'd put out your eye with the bow. There. Just right. Listen again.'

Albert began to play, singing along in his mind, as he almost always did when he played this corny but endlessly cheerful shitkicking music:

Singing fee-fi-fiddly-I-oh, Fee-fi-fiddly-I-oh-oh-oh-oh, Fee-fi-fiddly-I-oh, Strummin' on the old banjo.

'Did you hear the difference?' he asked when he had finished.

'It sounds a lot better close up, if that's what you mean,' Gaffney said. He was looking at Albert with real respect. 'You play good, kid.'

Albert smiled at Gaffney, but it was really Bethany Simms he was talking to. 'Sometimes, when I'm sure my music teacher isn't around, I play old Led Zeppelin songs,' he said. 'That stuff *really* cooks on the violin. You'd be surprised.' He looked at Bob. 'Anyway, it fits right in with what you were saying. The closer you get, the better the violin sounds. It's the *air* that's wrong, not the instrument. It's not conducting the sounds the way it should, and so what comes out sounds the way the beer tasted.'

'Flat,' Brian said.

Albert nodded.

'Thank you, Albert,' Bob said.

'Sure. Can I put it away now?'

'Of course.' Bob continued as Albert replaced his violin in its case, and then used a napkin to clean off the fouled latches and his own fingers. 'Taste and sound are not the only off-key elements of the situation in which we find ourselves. Take the clouds, for instance.'

'What about them?' Rudy Warwick asked.

'They haven't moved since we arrived, and I don't think they're *going* to move. I think the weather patterns we're all used to living with have either stopped or are running down like an old pocket-watch.'

Bob paused for a moment. He suddenly looked old and helpless and frightened.

'As Mr Hopewell would say, let's not draw it fine. *Everything* here feels wrong. Dinah, whose senses - including that odd, vague one we call the sixth sense - are more developed than ours, has perhaps felt it the most strongly, but I think we've all felt it to some degree. Things here are just *wrong*.

'And now we come to the very hub of the matter.'

He turned to face them.

'I said not fifteen minutes ago that it felt like lunchtime. It now feels much later than that to me. Three in the afternoon, perhaps four. It isn't breakfast my stomach is grumbling for right now; it wants high tea. I have a terrible feeling that it may start to get dark outside before our watches tell us it's quarter to ten in the morning.'

'Get to it, mate,' Nick said.

'I think it's about time,' Bob said quietly. 'Not about dimension, as Albert suggested, but time. Suppose that, every now and then, a hole appears in the time stream? Not a time-warp, but a time-rip. A rip in the temporal fabric.'

'That's the craziest shit I ever heard!' Don Gaffney exclaimed.

'Amen!' Craig Toomy seconded from the floor.

'No,' Bob replied sharply. 'If you want crazy shit, think about how Albert's violin sounded when you were standing six feet away from it. Or look around you, Mr Gaffney. just look around you. What's happening to us ... what we're *in* ... that's crazy shit.'

Don frowned and stuffed his hands deep in his pockets.

'Go on,' Brian said.

'All right. I'm not saying that I've got this right; I'm just offering a hypothesis that fits the situation in which we have found ourselves. Let us say that such rips in the fabric of time appear every now and then, but mostly over unpopulated areas - by which I mean the ocean, of course. I can't say why that would be, but it's still a logical assumption to make, since that's where most of these disappearances seem to occur.'

'Weather patterns over water are almost always different from weather patterns over large land-masses,' Brian said. 'That could be it.'

Bob nodded. 'Right or wrong, it's a good way to think of it, because it puts it in a context we're all familiar with. This could be similar to

rare weather phenomena which are sometimes reported: upside-down tornadoes, circular rainbows, daytime starlight. These time-rips may appear and disappear at random, or they may move, the way fronts and pressure systems move, but they very rarely appear over land.

'But a statistician will tell you that sooner or later whatever can happen will happen, so let us say that last night one *did* appear over land ... and we had the bad luck to fly into it. And we know something else. Some unknown rule or property of this fabulous meteorological freak makes it impossible for any living being to travel through unless he or she is fast asleep.'

'Aw, this is a fairy tale,' Gaffney said.

'I agree completely,' Craig said from the floor.

'Shut your cake-hole,' Gaffney growled at him. Craig blinked, then lifted his upper lip in a feeble sneer.

'It feels right,' Bethany said in a low voice. 'It feels as if we're out of step with ... with everything.'

'What happened to the crew and the passengers?' Albert asked. He sounded sick. 'If the plane came through, and we came through, what happened to the rest of them?'

His imagination provided him with an answer in the form of a sudden indelible image: hundreds of people falling out of the sky, ties and trousers rippling, dresses skating up to reveal garter-belts and underwear, shoes falling off, pens (the ones which weren't back on the plane, that was) shooting out of pockets; people waving their arms and legs and trying to scream in the thin air; people who had left wallets, purses, pocket-change, and, in at least one case, a pacemaker implant, behind. He saw them hitting the ground like dud bombs, squashing bushes flat, kicking up small clouds of stony dust, imprinting the desert floor with the shapes of their bodies.

'My guess is that they were vaporized,' Bob said. 'Utterly disincorporated.'

Dinah didn't understand at first; then she thought of Aunt Vicky's purse with the traveller's checks still inside and began to cry softly. Laurel crossed her arms over the little blind girl's shoulders and hugged her. Albert, meanwhile, was fervently thanking God that his

mother had changed her mind at the last moment, deciding not to accompany him east after all.

'In many cases their things went with them,' the writer went on. 'Those who left wallets and purses may have had them out at the time of The ... The Event. It's hard to say, though. What was taken and what was left behind - I suppose I'm thinking of the wig more than anything else - doesn't seem to have a lot of rhyme or reason to it.'

'You got that right,' Albert said. 'The surgical pins, for instance. I doubt if the guy they belonged to took them out of his shoulder or knee to play with because he got bored.'

'I agree,' Rudy Warwick said. 'It was too early in the flight to get that bored.'

Bethany looked at him, startled, then burst out laughing.

'I'm originally from Kansas,' Bob said, 'and the element of caprice makes me think of the twisters we used to sometimes get in the summer. They'd totally obliterate a farmhouse and leave the privy standing, or they'd rip away a barn without pulling so much as a shingle from the silo standing right next to it.'

'Get to the bottom line, mate,' Nick said. 'Whatever time it is we're in, I can't help feeling that it's very late in the day.'

Brian thought of Craig Toomy, Old Mr I've-Got-to-Get-to-Boston, standing at the head of the emergency slide and screaming: *Time is short! Time is very fucking short!*

'All right,' Bob said. 'The bottom line. Let's suppose there *are* such things as time-rips, and we've gone through one. I think we've gone into the past and discovered the unlovely truth of time-travel: you can't appear in the Texas Book Depository on November 22, 1963, and put a stop to the Kennedy assassination; you can't watch the building of the pyramids or the sack of Rome; you can't investigate the Age of the Dinosaurs at first hand.'

He raised his arms, hands outstretched, as if to encompass the whole silent world in which they found themselves.

'Take a good look around you, fellow time-travellers. This is the past. It is empty; it is silent. It is a world - perhaps a *universe* - *with* all the sense and meaning of a discarded paint-can. I believe we may have hopped an absurdly short distance in time, perhaps as

little as fifteen minutes ... at least initially. But the world is clearly unwinding around us. Sensory input is disappearing. Electricity has already disappeared. The weather is what the weather was when we made the jump into the past. But it seems to me that as the world winds down, time itself is winding up in a kind of spiral crowding in on itself.'

'Couldn't this be the future?' Albert asked cautiously.

Bob Jenkins shrugged. He suddenly looked very tired. 'I don't know for sure, of course - how could I? - but I don't think so. This place we're in feels old and stupid and feeble and meaningless. It feels I don't know .

Dinah spoke then. They all looked toward her.

'It feels *over*,' she said softly.

'Yes,' Bob said. 'Thank you, dear. That's the word I was looking for.'

'Mr Jenkins?'

'Yes?'

'The sound I told you about before? I can hear it again.' She paused. 'It's getting closer.'

8

They all fell silent, their faces long and listening. Brian thought he heard something, then decided it was the sound of his own heart. Or simply imagination.

'I want to go out by the windows again,' Nick said abruptly. He stepped over Craig's prone body without so much as a glance down and strode from the restaurant without another word.

'Hey!' Bethany cried. 'Hey, I want to come, too!'

Albert followed her; most of the others trailed after. 'What about you two?' Brian asked Laurel and Dinah.

'I don't want to go,' Dinah said. 'I can hear it as well as I want to from here.' She paused and added: 'But I'm going to hear it better, I think, if we don't get out of here soon.'

Brian glanced at Laurel Stevenson.

'I'll stay here with Dinah,' she said quietly.

'All right,' Brian said. 'Keep away from Mr Toomy.'

"'Keep away from Mr Toomy.'" Craig mimicked savagely from his place on the floor. He turned his head with an effort and rolled his eyes in their sockets to look at Brian. 'You really can't get away with this, Captain Engle. I don't know what game you and your Limey friend think you're playing, but you can't get away with it. Your next piloting job will probably be running cocaine in from Colombia after dark. At least you won't be lying when you tell your friends all about what a crack pilot you are.'

Brian started to reply, then thought better of it. Nick said this man was at least temporarily insane, and Brian thought Nick was right. Trying to reason with a madman was both useless and time-consuming.

'We'll keep our distance, don't worry,' Laurel said. She drew Dinah over to one of the small tables and sat down with her. 'And we'll be fine.'

'All right,' Brian said. 'Yell if he starts trying to get loose.'

Laurel smiled wanly. 'You can count on it.'

Brian bent, checked the tablecloth with which Nick had bound Craig's hands, then walked across the waiting room to join the others, who were standing in a line at the floor-to-ceiling windows.

9

He began to hear it before he was halfway across the waiting room, and by the time he had joined the others, it was impossible to believe it was an auditory hallucination.

That girl's hearing is really remarkable, Brian thought.

The sound was very faint - to him, at least - but it was there, and it *did* seem to be coming from the east. Dinah had said it sounded like Rice Krispies after you poured milk over it. To Brian it sounded more like radio static - the exceptionally rough static you got sometimes during periods of high sunspot activity. He agreed with Dinah about one thing, though; it sounded *bad*.

He could feel the hairs on the nape of his neck stiffening in response to that sound. He looked at the others and saw identical

expressions of frightened dismay on every face. Nick was controlling himself the best, and the young girl who had almost balked at using the slide - Bethany - looked the most deeply scared, but they all heard the same thing in the sound.

Bad.

Something bad on the way. *Hurrying.*

Nick turned toward him. 'What do you make of it, Brian? Any ideas?'

'No,' Brian said. 'Not even a little one. All I know is that it's the only sound in town.'

'It's not in town yet,' Don said, 'but it's going to be, I think. I only wish I knew how long it was going to take.'

They were quiet again, listening to the steady hissing crackle from the east. And Brian thought: *I almost know the sound, I think. Not cereal in milk, not radio static, but ... what? If only it wasn't so faint ...*

But he didn't want to know. He suddenly realized that, and very strongly. He didn't want to know at all. The sound filled him with a bone-deep loathing.

'We *do* have to get out of here!' Bethany said. Her voice was loud and wavery. Albert put an arm around her waist and she gripped his hand in both of hers. Gripped it with panicky tightness. 'We have to get out of here *right now!*'

'Yes,' Bob Jenkins said. 'She's right. That sound - I don't know what it is, but it's *awful*. We have to get out of here.'

They were all looking at Brian and he thought, *It looks like I'm the captain again. But not for long.* Because they didn't understand. Not even Jenkins understood, sharp as some of his other deductions might have been, that they weren't going anywhere.

Whatever was making that sound was on its way, and it didn't matter, because they would still be here when it arrived. There was no way out of that. He understood the reason why it was so, even if none of the others did ... and Brian Engle suddenly understood how an animal caught in a trap must feel as it hears the steady thud of the hunter's approaching boots.

CHAPTER 6

Stranded. Bethany's Matches. Two-Way Traffic Ahead. Albert's Experiment. Nightfall. The Dark and the Blade.

1

Brian turned to look at the writer. 'You say we have to get out of here, right?'

'Yes. I think we must do that just as soon as we possibly -'

'And where do you suggest we go? Atlantic City? Miami Beach? Club Med?'

'You are suggesting, Captain Engle, that there's no place we *can* go. I think - *I hope* - that you're wrong about that. I have an idea.'

'Which is?'

'In a moment. First, answer one question for me. Can you refuel the airplane? Can you do that even if there's no power?'

'I think so, yes. Let's say that, with the help of a few able-bodied men, I could. Then what?'

'Then we take off again,' Bob said. Little beads of sweat stood out on his deeply lined face. They looked like droplets of clear oil. 'That sound - that crunchy sound - is coming from the east. The time-rip was several thousand miles west of here. If we retraced our original course ... could you do that?'

'Yes,' Brian said. He had left the auxiliary power units running, and that meant the INS computer's program was still intact. That program was an exact log of the trip they had just made, from the moment Flight 29 had left the ground in southern California until the moment it had set down in central Maine. One touch of a button would instruct the computer to simply reverse that course; the touch of another button, once in the air, would put the autopilot to work flying it. The Teledyne inertial navigation system would re-create the trip down to the smallest degree deviations. 'I could do that, but why?'

'Because the rip may still be there. Don't you see? *We might be able to fly back through it.*'

Nick looked at Bob in sudden startled concentration, then turned to Brian. 'He might have something there, mate. He just might.'

Albert Kaussner's mind was diverted onto an irrelevant but fascinating side-track: if the rip were still there, and if Flight 29 had been on a frequently used altitude and heading - a kind of east-west avenue in the sky - then perhaps other planes had gone through it between 1:07 this morning and now (whenever *now* was). Perhaps there were other planes landing or landed at other deserted American airports, other crews and passengers wandering around, stunned ...

No, he thought. *We happened to have a pilot on board. What are the chances of that happening twice?*

He thought of what Mr Jenkins had said about Ted Williams's sixteen consecutive on-bases and shivered.

'He might or he might not,' Brian said. 'It doesn't really matter, because we're not going anyplace in that plane.'

'Why not?' Rudy asked. 'If you could refuel it, I don't see .

'Remember the matches? The ones from the bowl in the restaurant? The ones that wouldn't light?'

Rudy looked blank, but an expression of huge dismay dawned on Bob Jenkins's face. He put his hand to his forehead and took a step backwards. He actually seemed to shrink before them.

'What?' Don asked. He was looking at Brian from beneath drawn-together brows. It was a look which conveyed both confusion and suspicion. 'What does that have to -'

But Nick knew.

'Don't you see?' he asked quietly. 'Don't you see, mate? If batteries don't work, if matches don't light -'

'then jet-fuel won't burn,' Brian finished. 'It will be as used up and worn out as everything else in this world.' He looked at each one of them in turn. 'I might as well fill up the fuel tanks with molasses.'

'Have either of you fine ladies ever heard of the langoliers?' Craig asked suddenly. His tone was light, almost vivacious.

Laurel jumped and looked nervously toward the others, who were still standing by the windows and talking. Dinah only turned toward Craig's voice, apparently not surprised at all.

'No,' she said calmly. 'What are those?'

'Don't talk to him, Dinah,' Laurel whispered.

'I heard that,' Craig said in the same pleasant tone of voice.

'Dinah's not the only one with sharp ears, you know.'

Laurel felt her face grow warm.

'I wouldn't hurt the child, anyway,' Craig went on. 'No more than I would have hurt that girl. I'm just frightened. Aren't you?'

'Yes,' Laurel snapped, 'but I don't take hostages and then try to shoot teenage boys when I'm frightened.'

'You didn't have what looked like the whole front line of the Los Angeles Rams caving in on you at once,' Craig said. 'And that English fellow ...' He laughed. The sound of his laughter in this quiet place was disturbingly merry, disturbingly *normal*. 'Well, all I can say is that if you think *I'm* crazy, you haven't been watching *him* at all. That man's got a chainsaw for a mind.'

Laurel didn't know what to say. She knew it hadn't been the way Craig Toomy was presenting it, but when he spoke it seemed as though it *should* have been that way ... and what he said about the Englishman was too close to the truth. The man's eyes ... and the kick he had chopped into Mr Toomy's ribs after he had been tied up ... Laurel shivered.

'What are the langoliers, Mr Toomy?' Dinah asked.

'Well, I always used to think they were just make-believe,' Craig said in that same good-humored voice. 'Now I'm beginning to wonder ... because I hear it, too, young lady. Yes I do.'

'The sound?' Dinah asked softly. 'That sound is the langoliers?'

Laurel put one hand on Dinah's shoulder. 'I really wish you wouldn't talk to him anymore, honey. He makes me nervous.'

'Why? He's tied up, isn't he?'

'Yes, but -'

'And you could always call for the others, couldn't you?'

'Well, I think -'

'I want to know about the langoliers.'

With some effort, Craig turned his head to look at them ... and now Laurel felt some of the charm and force of personality which had kept Craig firmly on the fast track as he worked out the high-pressure script his parents had written for him. She felt this even though he was lying on the floor with his hands tied behind him and his own blood drying on his forehead and left cheek.

'My father said the langoliers were little creatures that lived in closets and sewers and other dark places.'

'Like elves?' Dinah wanted to know.

Craig laughed and shook his head. 'Nothing so pleasant, I'm afraid. He said that all they really were was hair and teeth and fast little legs - their little legs were fast, he said, so they could catch up with bad boys and girls no matter how quickly they scampered.'

'Stop it,' Laurel said coldly. 'You're scaring the child.'

'No, he's not,' Dinah said. 'I know make-believe when I hear it. It's interesting, that's all.' Her face said it was something more than interesting, however. She was intent, fascinated.

'It is, isn't it?' Craig said, apparently pleased by her interest. 'I think what Laurel means is that I'm scaring *her*. Do I win the cigar, Laurel? If so, I'd like an El Producto, please. None of those cheap White Owls for me.' He laughed again.

Laurel didn't reply, and after a moment Craig resumed.

'My dad said there were thousands of langoliers. He said there had to be, because there were *millions* of bad boys and girls scampering about the world. That's how he always put it. My father never saw a child run in his entire life. They always scampered. I think he liked that word because it implies senseless, directionless, non-productive motion. But the langoliers ... *they* run. *They* have purpose. In fact, you could say that the langoliers are purpose personified.'

'What did the kids do that was so bad?' Dinah asked. 'What did they do that was so bad the langoliers had to run after them?'

'You know, I'm glad you asked that question,' Craig said. 'Because when my father said someone was bad, Dinah, what he meant was lazy. A lazy person couldn't be part of THE BIG PICTURE. No way. In my house, you were either part of THE BIG PICTURE or you were

LYING DOWN ON THE JOB, and that was the worst kind of bad you could be. Throat-cutting was a venial sin compared to LYING DOWN ON THE JOB. He said that if you weren't part of THE BIG PICTURE, the langoliers would come and take you out of the picture completely. He said you'd be in your bed one night and then you'd hear them coming ... crunching and smacking their way toward you ... and even if you tried to scamper off, they'd get you. Because of their fast little -'

'That's enough,' Laurel said. Her voice was flat and dry.

'The sound is out there, though,' Craig said. His eyes regarded her brightly, almost roguishly. 'You can't deny that. The sound really is out th -'

'Stop it or I'll hit you with something myself.'

'Okay,' Craig said. He rolled over on his back, grimaced, and then rolled further, onto his other side and away from them. 'A man gets tired of being hit when he's down and hog-tied.'

Laurel's face grew not just warm but hot this time. She bit her lip and said nothing. She felt like crying. How was she supposed to handle someone like this? How? First the man seemed as crazy as a bedbug, and then he seemed as sane as could be. And meanwhile, the whole world - Mr Toomy's BIG PICTURE - had gone to hell.

'I bet you were scared of your dad, weren't you, Mr Toomy?'

Craig looked back over his shoulder at Dinah, startled. He smiled again, but this smile was different. It was a rueful, hurt smile with no public relations in it. 'This time you win the cigar, miss,' he said. 'I was terrified of him.'

'Is he dead?'

'Yes.'

'Was he LYING DOWN ON THE JOB? Did the langoliers get him?'

Craig thought for a long time. He remembered being told that his father had had his heart attack while in his office. When his secretary buzzed him for his ten o'clock staff meeting and there was no answer, she had come in to find him dead on the carpet, eyes bulging, foam drying on his mouth.

Did someone tell you that? he wondered suddenly. *That his eyes were bugging out, that there was foam on his mouth? Did someone*

actually tell you that - Mother, perhaps, when she was drunk - or was it just wishful thinking?

'Mr Toomy? Did they?'

'Yes,' Craig said thoughtfully. 'I guess he was, and I guess they did.'

'Mr Toomy?'

'What?'

'I'm not the way you see me. I'm not ugly. None of us are.'

He looked at her, startled. 'How would you know how you look to me, little blind miss?'

'You might be surprised,' Dinah said.

Laurel turned toward her, suddenly more uneasy than ever ... but of course there was nothing to see. Dinah's dark glasses defeated curiosity.

3

The other passengers stood on the far side of the waiting room, listening to that low rattling sound and saying nothing. It seemed there was nothing left to say.

'What do we do now?' Don asked. He seemed to have wilted inside his red lumberjack's shirt. Albert thought the shirt itself had lost some of its cheerfully macho vibrancy.

'I don't know,' Brian said. He felt a horrible impotence toiling away in his belly. He looked out at the plane, which had been *his* plane for a little while, and was struck by its clean lines and smooth beauty. The Delta 727 sitting to its left at the jetway looked like a dowdy matron by comparison. *It looks good to you because it's never going to fly again, that's all. It's like glimpsing a beautiful woman for just a moment in the back seat of a limousine - she looks even more beautiful than she really is because you know she's not yours, can never be yours.*

'How much fuel is left, Brian?' Nick asked suddenly. 'Maybe the burn-rate isn't the same over here. Maybe there's more than you realize.'

'All the gauges are in apple-pie working order,' Brian said. 'When we landed, I had less than 600 pounds. To get back to where this happened, we'd need at least 50,000.'

Bethany took out her cigarettes and offered the pack to Bob. He shook his head. She stuck one in her mouth, took out her matches, and struck one.

It didn't light.

'Oh-oh,' she said.

Albert glanced over. She struck the match again ... and again ... and again. There was nothing. She looked at him, frightened.

'Here,' Albert said. 'Let me.'

He took the matches from her hand and tore another one loose. He struck it across the strip on the back. There was nothing.

'Whatever it is, it seems to be catching,' Rudy Warwick observed.

Bethany burst into tears, and Bob offered her his handkerchief.

'Wait a minute,' Albert said, and struck the match again. This time it lit ... but the flame was low, guttering, unenthusiastic. He applied it to the quivering tip of Bethany's cigarette and a clear image suddenly filled his mind: a sign he had passed as he rode his ten-speed to Pasadena High School every day for the last three years. CAUTION, this sign said. TWO-WAY TRAFFIC AHEAD.

What in the hell does that mean?

He didn't know ... at least not yet. All he knew for sure was that some idea wanted out but was, at least for the time being, stuck in the gears.

Albert shook the match out. It didn't take much shaking.

Bethany drew on her cigarette, then grimaced. 'Blick! It tastes like a Carlton, or something.'

'Blow smoke in my face,' Albert said.

'What?'

'You heard me. Blow some in my face.'

She did as he asked. and Albert sniffed at the smoke. Its former sweet fragrance was now muted.

Whatever it is, it seems to be catching

CAUTION: TWO-WAY TRAFFIC AHEAD.

'I'm going back to the restaurant,' Nick said. He looked depressed. 'Yon Cassius has a lean and slippery feel. I don't like leaving him

with the ladies for too long.'

Brian started after him and the others followed. Albert thought there was something a little amusing about these tidal flows - they were behaving like cows which sense thunder in the air.

'Come on,' Bethany said. 'Let's go.' She dropped her half-smoked cigarette into an ashtray and used Bob's handkerchief to wipe her eyes. Then she took Albert's hand.

They were halfway across the waiting room and Albert was looking at the back of Mr Gaffney's red shirt when it struck him again. more forcibly this time: *TWO-WAY TRAFFIC AHEAD*.

'Wait a minute!' he yelled. He suddenly slipped an arm around Bethany's waist, pulled her to him, put his face into the hollow of her throat, and breathed in deeply.

'Oh my! We hardly know each other!' Bethany cried. Then she began to giggle helplessly and put her arms around Albert's neck. Albert, a boy whose natural shyness usually disappeared only in his daydreams, paid no notice. He took another deep breath through his nose. The smells of her hair, sweat, and perfume were still there, but were faint; very faint.

They all looked around, but Albert had already let Bethany go and was hurrying back to the windows.

'Wow!' Bethany said. She was still giggling a little, and blushing brightly. 'Strange dude!'

Albert looked at Flight 29 and saw what Brian had noticed a few minutes earlier: it was clean and smooth and almost impossibly white. It seemed to vibrate in the dull stillness outside.

Suddenly the idea came up for him. It seemed to burst behind his eyes like a firework. The central concept was a bright, burning ball; implications radiated out from it like fiery spangles and for a moment he quite literally forgot to breathe.

'Albert?' Bob asked. 'Albert, what's wro-'

'*Captain Engle!*' Albert screamed. In the restaurant, Laurel sat bolt upright and Dinah clasped her arm with hands like talons. Craig Toomy craned his neck to look. '*Captain Engle, come here!*'

Outside, the sound was louder.

To Brian it was the sound of radio static. Nick Hopewell thought it sounded like a strong wind rattling dry tropical grasses. Albert, who had worked at McDonald's the summer before, was reminded of the sound of french fries in a deep-fat fryer, and to Bob Jenkins it was the sound of paper being crumpled in a distant room.

The four of them crawled through the hanging rubber strips and then stepped down into the luggage-unloading area, listening to the sound of what Craig Toomy called the langoliers.

'How much closer is it?' Brian asked Nick.

'Can't tell. It sounds closer, but of course we were inside before.'

'Come on,' Albert said impatiently. 'How do we get back aboard? Climb the slide?'

'Won't be necessary,' Brian said, and pointed. A rolling stairway stood on the far side of Gate 2. They walked toward it, their shoes clapping listlessly on the concrete.

'You know what a long shot this is, don't you, Albert?' Brian asked as they walked.

'Yes, but'

'Long shots are better than no shots at all,' Nick finished for him.

'I just don't want him to be too disappointed if it doesn't pan out.'

'Don't worry,' Bob said softly. 'I will be disappointed enough for all of us. The lad's idea makes good logical sense. It *should* prove out ... although, Albert, you do realize there may be factors here which we haven't discovered, don't you?'

'Yes.'

They reached the rolling ladder, and Brian kicked up the foot-brakes on the wheels. Nick took a position on the grip which jutted from the left railing, and Brian laid hold of the one on the right.

'I hope it still rolls,' Brian said.

'It should,' Bob Jenkins answered. 'Some - perhaps even most - of the ordinary physical and chemical components of life seem to remain in operation; our bodies are able to process the air, doors open and close.'

'Don't forget gravity,' Albert put in. 'The earth still sucks.'

'Let's quit talking about it and just try it,' Nick said.

The stairway rolled easily. The two men trundled it across the tarmac toward the 767 with Albert and Bob walking behind them. One of the wheels squeaked rhythmically. The only other sound was that low, constant crunch-rattle-crunch from somewhere over the eastern horizon.

'Look at it,' Albert said as they neared the 767. 'Just look at it. Can't you see? Can't you see how much more *there* it is than anything else?'

There was no need to answer, and no one did. They could all see it. And reluctantly, almost against his will, Brian began to think the kid might have something.

They set the stairway at an angle between the escape slide and the fuselage of the plane, with the top step only a long stride away from the open door. 'I'll go first,' Brian said. 'After I pull the slide in, Nick, you and Albert roll the stairs into better position.'

'Aye-aye, Captain,' Nick said, and clipped off a smart little salute, the knuckles of his first and second fingers touching his forehead.

Brian snorted. 'Junior attache,' he said, and then ran fleetly up the stairs. A few moments later he had used the escape slide's lanyard to pull it back inside. Then he leaned out to watch as Nick and Albert carefully maneuvered the rolling staircase into position with its top step just below the 767's forward entrance.

5

Rudy Warwick and Don Gaffney were now babysitting Craig. Bethany, Dinah, and Laurel were lined up at the waiting-room windows, looking out. 'What are they doing?' Dinah asked.

'They've taken away the slide and put a stairway by the door,' Laurel said. 'Now they're going up.' She looked at Bethany. 'You're sure you don't know what they're up to?'

Bethany shook her head. 'All I know is that Ace - Albert, I mean - almost went nuts. I'd like to think it was this mad sexual attraction, but I don't think it was.' She paused, smiled, and added: 'At least, not yet. He said something about the plane being more *there*. And my perfume being *less* there, which probably wouldn't please Coco

Chanel or whatever her name is. And two-way traffic. I didn't get it. He was really jabbering.'

'I bet I know,' Dinah said.

'What's your guess, hon?'

Dinah only shook her head. 'I just hope they hurry up. Because poor Mr Toomy is right. The langoliers are coming.'

'Dinah, that's just something his father made up.'

'Maybe once it was make-believe,' Dinah said, turning her sightless eyes back to the windows, 'but not anymore.'

6

'All right, Ace,' Nick said. 'On with the show.'

Albert's heart was thudding and his hands shook as he set the four elements of his experiment out on the shelf in first class, where, a thousand years ago and on the other side of the continent, a woman named Melanie Trevor had supervised a carton of orange juice and two bottles of champagne.

Brian watched closely as Albert put down a book of matches, a bottle of Budweiser, a can of Pepsi, and a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich from the restaurant cold-case. The sandwich had been sealed in plastic wrap.

'Okay,' Albert said, and took a deep breath. 'Let's see what we got here.'

7

Don left the restaurant and walked over to the windows. 'What's happening?'

'We don't know,' Bethany said. She had managed to coax a flame from another of her matches and was smoking again. When she removed the cigarette from her mouth, Laurel saw she had torn off the filter. 'They went inside the plane; they're still inside the plane; end of story.'

Don gazed out for several seconds. 'It looks different outside. I can't say just why, but it does.'

'The light's going,' Dinah said. 'That's what's different.' Her voice was calm enough, but her small face was an imprint of loneliness and fear. 'I can feel it going.'

'She's right,' Laurel agreed. 'It's only been daylight for two or three hours, but it's already getting dark again.'

'I keep thinking this is a dream, you know,' Don said. 'I keep thinking it's the worst nightmare I ever had but I'll wake up soon.'

Laurel nodded. 'How is Mr Toomy?'

Don laughed without much humor. 'You won't believe it.'

'Won't believe what?' Bethany asked.

'He's gone to sleep.'

8

Craig Toomy, of course, was not sleeping. People who fell asleep at critical moments, like that fellow who was supposed to have been keeping an eye out while Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, were most definitely not part of THE BIG PICTURE.

He had watched the two men carefully through eyes which were not quite shut and willed one or both of them to go away. Eventually the one in the red shirt *did* go away. Warwick, the bald man with the big false teeth, walked over to Craig and bent down. Craig let his eyes close all the way.

'Hey,' Warwick said. 'Hey, you 'wake?'

Craig lay still, eyes closed, breathing regularly. He considered manufacturing a small snore and thought better of it.

Warwick poked him in the side.

Craig kept his eyes shut and went on breathing regularly.

Baldy straightened up, stepped over him, and went to the restaurant door to watch the others. Craig cracked his eyelids and made sure Warwick's back was turned. Then, very quietly and very carefully, he began to work his wrists up and down inside the tight figure-eight of cloth which bound them. The tablecloth rope felt looser already.

He moved his wrists in short strokes, watching Warwick's back, ready to cease movement and close his eyes again the instant

Warwick showed signs of turning around. He willed Warwick *not* to turn around. He wanted to be free before the assholes came back from the plane. Especially the English asshole, the one who had hurt his nose and then kicked him while he was down. The English asshole had tied him up pretty well; thank God it was only a tablecloth instead of a length of nylon line. Then he would have been out of luck, but as it was one of the knots loosened, and now Craig began to rotate his wrists from side to side. He could hear the langoliers approaching. He intended to be out of here and on his way to Boston before they arrived. In Boston he would be safe. When you were in a boardroom filled with bankers, no scampering was allowed.

And God help anyone - man, woman or child - who tried to get in his way.

9

Albert picked up the book of matches he had taken from the bowl in the restaurant. 'Exhibit A,' he said. 'Here goes.'

He tore a match from the book and struck it. His unsteady hands betrayed him and he struck the match a full two inches above the rough strip which ran along the bottom of the paper folder. The match bent.

'Shit!' Albert cried.

'Would you like me to -' Bob began.

'Let him alone,' Brian said. 'It's Albert's show.'

'Steady on, Albert,' Nick said.

Albert tore another match from the book, offered them a sickly smile, and struck it.

The match didn't light.

He struck it again.

The match didn't light.

'I guess that does it,' Brian said. 'There's nothing -'

'*I smelled it,*' Nick said. 'I smelled the sulphur! Try another one, Ace!'

Instead, Albert snapped the same match across the rough strip a third time ... and this time it flared alight. It did not just burn the

flammable head and then gutter out; it stood up in the familiar little teardrop shape, blue at its base, yellow at its tip, and began to burn the paper stick.

Albert looked up, a wild grin on his face. 'You see?' he said. 'You see?'

He shook the match out, dropped it, and pulled another. This one lit on the first strike. He bent back the cover of the matchbook and touched the lit flame to the other matches, just as Bob Jenkins had done in the restaurant. This time they all flared alight with a dry fsss! sound. Albert blew them out like a birthday candle. It took two puffs of air to do the job.

'You see?' he asked. 'You see what it means? Two-way traffic! *We brought our own time with us!* There's the past out there ... and everywhere, I guess, east of the hole we came through ... but the present is still in here! *Still caught inside this airplane!*'

'I don't know,' Brian said, but suddenly everything seemed possible again. He felt a wild, almost unrestrainable urge to pull Albert into his arms and pound him on the back.

'Bravo, Albert!' Bob said. 'The beer! Try the beer!'

Albert spun the cap off the beer while Nick fished an unbroken glass from the wreckage around the drinks trolley.

'Where's the smoke?' Brian asked.

'Smoke?' Bob asked, puzzled.

'Well, I guess it's not smoke, exactly, but when you open a beer there's usually something that looks like smoke around the mouth of the bottle.'

Albert sniffed, then tipped the beer toward Brian. 'Smell.'

Brian did, and began to grin. He couldn't help it. 'By God, it sure *smells* like beer, smoke or no smoke.'

Nick held out the glass, and Albert was pleased to see that the Englishman's hand was not quite steady, either. 'Pour it,' he said. 'Hurry up, mate - my sawbones says suspense is bad for the old ticker.'

Albert poured the beer and their smiles faded.

The beer was flat. Utterly flat. It simply sat in the whiskey glass Nick had found, looking like a urine sample.

10

'Christ almighty, it's getting dark!'

The people standing at the windows looked around as Rudy Warwick joined them.

'You're supposed to be watching the nut,' Don said.

Rudy gestured impatiently. 'He's out like a light. I think that whack on the head rattled his furniture a little more than we thought at first. What's going on out there? And why is it getting dark so fast?'

'We don't know,' Bethany said. 'It just is. Do you think that weird dude is going into a coma, or something like that?'

'I don't know,' Rudy said. 'But if he is, we won't have to worry about him anymore, will we? Christ, is that sound *creepy!* It sounds like a bunch of coked-up termites in a balsa-wood glider.' For the first time, Rudy seemed to have forgotten his stomach.

Dinah looked up at Laurel. 'I think we better check on Mr Toomy,' she said. 'I'm worried about him. I bet he's scared.'

'If he's unconscious, Dinah, there isn't anything we can -'

'I don't think he's unconscious,' Dinah said quietly. 'I don't think he's even asleep.'

Laurel looked down at the child thoughtfully for a moment and then took her hand. 'All right,' she said. 'Let's have a look.'

11

The knot Nick Hopewell had tied against Craig's right wrist finally loosened enough for him to pull his hand free. He used it to push down the loop holding his left hand. He got quickly to his feet. A bolt of pain shot through his head, and for a moment he swayed. Flocks of black dots chased across his field of vision and then slowly cleared away. He became aware that the terminal was being swallowed in gloom. Premature night was falling. He could hear the chew-crunch-chew sound of the langoliers much more clearly now, perhaps because his ears had become attuned to them, perhaps because they were closer.

On the far side of the terminal he saw two silhouettes, one tall and one short, break away from the others and start back toward the restaurant. The woman with the bitchy voice and the little blind girl with the ugly, pouty face. He couldn't let them raise the alarm. That would be very bad.

Craig backed away from the bloody patch of carpet where he had been lying, never taking his eyes from the approaching figures. He could not get over how rapidly the light was failing.

There were pots of eating utensils set into a counter to the left of the cash register, but it was all plastic crap, no good to him. Craig ducked around the cash register and saw something better: a butcher knife lying on the counter next to the grill. He took it and crouched behind the cash register to watch them approach. He watched the little girl with a particular anxious interest. The little girl knew a lot ... too much, maybe. The question was, where had she come by her knowledge?

That was a very interesting question indeed.

Wasn't it?

12

Nick looked from Albert to Bob. 'So,' he said. 'The matches work but the lager doesn't.' He turned to set the glass of beer on the counter. 'What does that mea -'

All at once a small mushroom cloud of bubbles burst from nowhere in the bottom of the glass. They rose rapidly, spread, and burst into a thin head at the top. Nick's eyes widened.

'Apparently,' Bob said dryly, 'it takes a moment or two for things to catch up.' He took the glass, drank it off, and smacked his lips.

'Excellent,' he said. They all looked at the complicated lace of white foam on the inside of the glass. 'I can say without doubt that it's the best glass of beer I ever drank in my life.'

Albert poured more beer into the glass. This time it came out foaming; the head overspilled the rim and ran down the outside. Brian picked it up.

'Are you sure you want to do that, matey?' Nick asked, grinning. 'Don't you fellows like to say "twenty-four hours from bottle to throttle"?'

'In cases of time-travel, the rule is suspended,' Brian said. 'You could look it up.' He tilted the glass, drank, then laughed out loud. 'You're right,' he said to Bob. 'It's the best goddam beer there ever was. Try the Pepsi, Albert.'

Albert opened the can and they all heard the familiar *pop-hiss* of carbonation, mainstay of a hundred soft-drink commercials. He took a deep drink. When he lowered the can he was grinning ... but there were tears in his eyes.

'Gentlemen, the Pepsi-Cola is also very good today,' he said in a plummy headwaiter's tones, and they all began to laugh.

13

Don Gaffney caught up with Laurel and Dinah just as they entered the restaurant. 'I thought I'd better -' he began, and then stopped. He looked around. 'Oh, shit. Where is he?'

'I don't -' Laurel began, and then, from beside her, Dinah Bellman said, '*Be quiet.*'

Her head turned slowly, like the lamp of a dead searchlight. For a moment there was no sound at all in the restaurant ... at least no sound Laurel could hear.

'There,' Dinah said at last, and pointed toward the cash register. 'He's hiding over there. Behind something.'

'How do you know that?' Don asked in a dry, nervous voice. 'I don't hear -'

'I do,' Dinah said calmly. 'I hear his fingernails on metal. And I hear his heart. It's beating very fast and very hard. He's scared to death. I feel so sorry for him.' She suddenly disengaged her hand from Laurel's and stepped forward.

'*Dinah, no!*' Laurel screamed.

Dinah took no notice. She walked toward the cash register, arms out, fingers seeking possible obstacles. The shadows seemed to reach for her and enfold her.

'Mr Toomy? Please come out. We don't want to hurt you. Please don't be afraid -'

A sound began to rise from behind the cash register. It was a high, keening scream. It was a word, or something which was trying to *be* a word, but there was no sanity in it.

'Youuuuuuuuuuuuu'

Craig arose from his hiding place, eyes blazing, butcher knife upraised, suddenly understanding that it was *her*, she was one of *them*, behind those dark glasses she was one of *them*, she was not only a langolier but the *head* langolier, the one who was calling the others, calling them with her dead blind eyes.

'Youuuuuuuuuuuuu'

He rushed at her, shrieking. Don Gaffney shoved Laurel out of his way, almost knocking her to the floor, and leaped forward. He was fast, but not fast enough. Craig Toomy was crazy, and he moved with the speed of a langolier himself. He approached Dinah at a dead-out run. No scampering for him.

Dinah made no effort to draw away. She looked up from her darkness and into his, and now she held her arms out, as if to enfold him and comfort him.

'Yooooouuuuuuuuuu '

'It's all right, Mr Toomy,' she said. 'Don't be afr -' And then Craig buried the butcher knife in her chest and ran past Laurel into the terminal, still shrieking.

Dinah stood where she was for a moment. Her hands found the wooden handle jutting out of the front of her dress and her fingers fluttered over it, exploring it. Then she sank slowly, gracefully, to the floor, becoming just another shadow in the growing darkness.

CHAPTER 7

Dinah in the Valley of the Shadow.
The Fastest Toaster East of the
Mississippi. Racing Against Time.
Nick Makes a Decision.

1

Albert, Brian, Bob, and Nick passed the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich around. They each got two bites and then it was gone ... but while it lasted, Albert thought he had never sunk his teeth into such wonderful chow in his life. His belly awakened and immediately began clamoring for more.

'I think our bald friend Mr Warwick is going to like this part best,' Nick said, swallowing. He looked at Albert. 'You're a genius, Ace. You know that, don't you? Nothing but a pure genius.'

Albert flushed happily. 'It wasn't much,' he said. 'Just a little of what Mr Jenkins calls the deductive method. If two streams flowing in different directions come together, they mix and make a whirlpool. I saw what was happening with Bethany's matches and thought something like that might be happening here. And there was Mr Gaffney's bright-red shirt. It started to lose its color. So I thought, well, if stuff starts to fade when it's not on the plane anymore, maybe if you brought faded stuff *onto* the plane, it would -'

'I hate to interrupt,' Bob said softly, 'but I think that if we intend to try and get back, we should start the process as soon as possible. The sounds we are hearing worry me, but there's something else that worries me more. This airplane is not a closed system. I think there's a good chance that before long it will begin to lose its ... its ...'

'Its temporal integrity?' Albert suggested.

'Yes. Well put. Any fuel we load into its tanks now may burn ... but a few hours from now, it may not.'

An unpleasant idea occurred to Brian: that the fuel might stop burning halfway across the country, with the 767 at 36,000 feet. He

opened his mouth to tell them this ... and then closed it again. What good would it do to put the idea in their minds, when they could do nothing about it?

'How do we start, Brian?' Nick asked in clipped, businesslike tones.

Brian ran the process over in his mind. It would be a little awkward, especially working with men whose only experience with aircraft probably began and ended with model planes, but he thought it could be done.

'We start by turning on the engines and taxiing as close to that Delta 727 as we can get,' he said. 'When we get there, I'll kill the starboard engine and leave the portside engine turning over. We're lucky. This 767 is equipped with wet-wing fuel tanks and an APU system that -'

A shrill, panicked scream drifted up to them, cutting across the low rattling background noise like a fork drawn across a slate blackboard. It was followed by running footfalls on the ladder. Nick turned in that direction and his hands came up in a gesture Albert recognized at once; he had seen some of the martial-arts freaks at school back home practicing the move. It was the classic Tae Kwan Do defensive position. A moment later Bethany's pallid, terrified face appeared in the doorway and Nick let his hands relax.

'*Come!*' Bethany screamed. 'You've got to *come!*' She was panting, out of breath, and she reeled backward on the platform of the ladder. For a moment Albert and Brian were sure she was going to tumble back down the steep steps, breaking her neck on the way. Then Nick leaped forward, cupped a hand on the nape of her neck, and pulled her into the plane. Bethany did not even seem to realize she had had a close call. Her dark eyes blazed at them from the white circle of her face. 'Please come! He's stabbed her! I think she's dying!'

Nick put his hands on her shoulders and lowered his face toward hers as if he intended to kiss her. 'Who has stabbed whom?' he asked very quietly. 'Who is dying?'

'I ... she ... Mr T-T-Toomy

'Bethany, say teacup.'

She looked at him, eyes shocked and uncomprehending. Brian was looking at Nick as though he had gone insane.

Nick gave the girl's shoulders a little shake.

'Say teacup. Right now.'

'T-T-Teacup.'

'Teacup and saucer. Say it, Bethany.'

'Teacup and saucer.'

'All right. Better?'

She nodded. 'Yes.'

'Good. If you feel yourself losing control again, say teacup at once and you'll come back. Now - who's been stabbed?'

'The blind girl. Dinah.'

'Bloody *shit*. All right, Bethany. Just -' Nick raised his voice sharply as he saw Brian move behind Bethany, headed for the ladder, with Albert right behind him. 'No!' he shouted in a bright, hard tone that stopped both of them. 'Stay fucking *put!*'

Brian, who had served two tours in Vietnam and knew the sound of unquestionable command when he heard it, stopped so suddenly that Albert ran face-first into the middle of his back. I *knew it*, he thought. I *knew he'd take over. It was just a matter of time and circumstance.*

'Do you know how this happened or where our wretched travelling companion is now?' Nick asked Bethany.

'The guy ... the guy in the red shirt said'

'All right. Never mind.' He glanced briefly up at Brian. His eyes were red with anger. 'The bloody fools left him alone. I'd wager my pension on it. Well, it won't happen again. Our Mr Toomy has cut his last caper.'

He looked back at the girl. Her head drooped; her hair hung dejectedly in her face; she was breathing in great, watery swoops of breath.

'Is she alive, Bethany?' he asked gently.

'I ... I ... I ... I

'Teacup, Bethany.'

'*Teacup!*' Bethany shouted, and looked up at him from teary, red-rimmed eyes. 'I don't know. She was alive when I ... you know, came for you. She might be dead now. He really got her. Jesus, why did

we have to get stuck with a fucking psycho? Weren't things bad enough without that?'

'And none of you who were supposed to be minding this fellow have the slightest idea where he went following the attack, is that right?'

Bethany put her hands over her face and began to sob. It was all the answer any of them needed.

'Don't be so hard on her,' Albert said quietly, and slipped an arm around Bethany's waist. She put her head on his shoulder and began to sob more strenuously.

Nick moved the two of them gently aside. 'If I was inclined to be hard on someone, it would be myself, Ace. I should have stayed behind.'

He turned to Brian.

'I'm going back into the terminal. You're not. Mr Jenkins here is almost certainly right; our time here is short. I don't like to think just *how* short. Start the engines but don't move the aircraft yet. If the girl is alive, we'll need the stairs to bring her up. Bob, bottom of the stairs. Keep an eye out for that bugger Toomy. Albert, you come with me.'

Then he said something which chilled them all.

'I almost hope she's dead, God help me. It will save time if she is.'

2

Dinah was not dead, not even unconscious. Laurel had taken off her sunglasses to wipe away the sweat which had sprung up on the girl's face, and Dinah's eyes, deep brown and very wide, looked up unseeingly into Laurel's blue-green ones. Behind her, Don and Rudy stood shoulder to shoulder, looking down anxiously.

'I'm sorry,' Rudy said for the fifth time. 'I really thought he was out. Out *cold*.'

Laurel ignored him. 'How are you, Dinah?' she asked softly. She didn't want to look at the wooden handle growing out of the girl's dress, but couldn't take her eyes from it. There was very little blood,

at least so far; a circle the size of a demitasse cup around the place where the blade had gone in, and that was all.

So far.

'It hurts,' Dinah said in a faint voice. 'It's hard to breathe. And it's *hot*.'

'You're going to be all right,' Laurel said, but her eyes were drawn relentlessly back to the handle of the knife. The girl was very small, and she couldn't understand why the blade hadn't gone all the way through her. Couldn't understand why she wasn't dead already.

'... out of here,' Dinah said. She grimaced, and a thick, slow curdle of blood escaped from the corner of her mouth and ran down her cheek.

'Don't try to talk, honey,' Laurel said, and brushed damp curls back from Dinah's forehead.

'You have to get *out* of here,' Dinah insisted. Her voice was little more than a whisper. 'And you shouldn't blame Mr Toomy. He's ... he's scared, that's all. Of *them*.'

Don looked around balefully. 'If I find that bastard, I'll scare him,' he said, and curled both hands into fists. A lodge ring gleamed above one knuckle in the growing gloom. 'I'll make him wish he was born dead.'

Nick came into the restaurant then, followed by Albert. He pushed past Rudy Warwick without a word of apology and knelt next to Dinah. His bright gaze fixed upon the handle of the knife for a moment, then moved to the child's face.

'Hello, love.' He spoke cheerily, but his eyes had darkened. 'I see you've been air-conditioned. Not to worry; you'll be right as a trivet in no time flat.'

Dinah smiled a little. 'What's a trivet?' she whispered. More blood ran out of her mouth as she spoke, and Laurel could see it on her teeth. Her stomach did a slow, lazy roll.

'I don't know, but I'm sure it's something nice,' Nick replied. 'I'm going to turn your head to one side. Be as still as you can.'

'Okay.'

Nick moved her head, very gently, until her cheek was almost resting on the carpet. 'Hurt?'

'Yes,' Dinah whispered. 'Hot. Hurts to ... breathe.' Her whispery voice had taken on a hoarse, cracked quality. A thin stream of blood ran from her mouth and pooled on the carpet less than ten feet from the place where Craig Toomy's blood was drying.

From outside came the sudden high-pressure whine of aircraft engines starting. Don, Rudy, and Albert looked in that direction. Nick never looked away from the girl. He spoke gently. 'Do you feel like coughing, Dinah?'

'Yes ... no ... don't know.'

'It's better if you don't,' he said. 'If you get that tickly feeling, try to ignore it. And don't talk anymore, right?'

'Don't ... hurt ... Mr Toomy.' Her words, whispered though they were, conveyed great emphasis, great urgency.

'No, love, wouldn't think of it. Take it from me.'

'... don't ... trust ... you ...'

He bent, kissed her cheek, and whispered in her ear: 'But you *can*, you know - trust me, I mean. For now, all you've got to do is lie still and let us take care of things.'

He looked up at Laurel.

'You didn't try to remove the knife?'

'I ... no.' Laurel swallowed. There was a hot, harsh lump in her throat. The swallow didn't move it. 'Should I have?'

'If you had, there wouldn't be much chance. Do you have any nursing experience?'

'No.'

'All right, I'm going to tell you what to do ... but first I need to know if the sight of blood - quite a bit of it - is going to make you pass out. And I need the truth.'

Laurel said, 'I haven't really *seen* a lot of blood since my sister ran into a door and knocked out two of her teeth while we were playing hide-and-seek. But I didn't faint then.'

'Good. And you're not going to faint now. Mr Warwick, bring me half a dozen tablecloths from that grotty little pub around the corner.' He smiled down at the girl. 'Give me a minute or two, Dinah, and I think you'll feel much better. Young Dr Hopewell is ever so gentle with the ladies - especially the ones who are young and pretty.'

Laurel felt a sudden and absolutely absurd desire to reach out and touch Nick's hair.

What's the matter with you? This little girl is probably dying, and you're wondering what his hair feels like! Quit it! How stupid can you be?

Well, let's see ... Stupid enough to have been flying across the country to meet a man I first contacted through the personals column of a so-called friendship magazine. Stupid enough to have been planning to sleep with him if he turned out to be reasonably presentable ... and if he didn't have bad breath, of course.

Oh, quit it! Quit it, Laurel!

Yes, the other voice in her mind agreed. *You're absolutely right, it's crazy to be thinking things like that at a time like this, and I will quit it ... but I wonder what young Dr Hopewell would be like in bed? I wonder if he would be gentle or* Laurel shivered and wondered if this was the way your average nervous breakdown started.

'They're closer,' Dinah said. 'You really' She coughed, and a large bubble of blood appeared between her lips. It popped, splattering her cheeks. Don Gaffney muttered and turned away. 'really have to hurry,' she finished.

Nick's cheery smile didn't change a bit. 'I know,' he said.

3

Craig dashed across the terminal, nimbly vaulted the escalator's handrail, and ran down the frozen metal steps with panic roaring and beating in his head like the sound of the ocean in a storm; it even drowned out that other sound, the relentless chewing, crunching sound of the langoliers. No one saw him go. He sprinted across the lower lobby toward the exit doors ... and crashed into them. He had forgotten everything, including the fact that the electric-eye door-openers wouldn't work with the power out.

He rebounded, the breath knocked out of him, and fell to the floor, gasping like a netted fish. He lay there for a moment, groping for whatever remained of his mind, and found himself gazing at his right hand. It was only a white blob in the growing darkness, but he could

see the black splatters on it, and he knew what they were: the little girl's blood.

Except she wasn't a little girl, not really. She just looked like a little girl. She was the head langolier, and with her gone the others won't be able to ... won't be able to ... to ...

To what?

To find him?

But he could still hear the hungry sound of their approach: that maddening chewing sound, as if somewhere to the east a tribe of huge, hungry insects was on the march.

His mind whirled. Oh, he was so confused.

Craig saw a smaller door leading outside, got up, and started in that direction. Then he stopped. There was a road out there, and the road undoubtedly led to the town of Bangor, but so what? He didn't care about *Bangor*; Bangor was most definitely not part of that fabled BIG PICTURE. It was *Boston* that he had to get to. If he could get there, everything would be all right. And what did that mean? His father would have known. It meant he had to STOP SCAMPERING AROUND and GET WITH THE PROGRAM.

His mind seized on this idea the way a shipwreck victim seizes upon a piece of wreckage - anything that still floats, even if it's only the shithouse door, is a prize to be cherished. If he could get to Boston, this whole experience would be ... would be ...

'Set aside,' he muttered.

At the words, a bright beam of rational light seemed to shaft through the darkness inside his head, and a voice (it might have been his father's) cried out YES!! in affirmation.

But how was he to do that? Boston was too far to walk and the others wouldn't let him back on board the only plane that still worked. Not after what he had done to their little blind mascot.

'But they don't know,' Craig whispered. 'They don't know I did them a favor, because they don't know what she is.' He nodded his head sagely. His eyes, huge and wet in the dark, gleamed.

Stow away, his father's voice whispered to him. *Stow away on the plane.*

Yes! his mother's voice added. *Stow away! That's the ticket. Craiggy-weggy! Only if you do that, you won't need a ticket, will you?*

Craig looked doubtfully toward the luggage conveyor belt. He could use it to get to the tarmac, but suppose they had posted a guard by the plane? The pilot wouldn't think of it - once out of his cockpit, the man was obviously an imbecile - but the Englishman almost surely would.

So what was he supposed to do?

If the Bangor side of the terminal was no good, and the runway side of the terminal was *also* no good, what was he supposed to do and where was he supposed to go?

Craig looked nervously at the dead escalator. They would be hunting him soon - the Englishman undoubtedly leading the pack - and here he stood in the middle of the floor, as exposed as a stripper who has just tossed her pasties and g-string into the audience.

I have to hide, at least for awhile.

He had heard the jet engines start up outside, but this did not worry him; he knew a little about planes and understood that Engle couldn't go anywhere until he had refuelled. And refuelling would take time. He didn't have to worry about them leaving without him.

Not yet, anyway.

Hide, Craiggy-weggy. That's what you have to do right now. You have to hide before they come for you.

He turned slowly, looking for the best place, squinting into the growing dark. And this time he saw a sign on a door tucked between the Avis desk and the Bangor Travel Agency.

AIRPORT SERVICES

it read. A sign which could mean almost anything.

Craig hurried across to the door, casting nervous looks back over his shoulder as he went, and tried it. As with the door to Airport Security, the knob would not turn but the door opened when he pushed on it. Craig took one final look over his shoulder, saw no one, and closed the door behind him.

Utter, total dark swallowed him; in here, he was as blind as the little girl he had stabbed. Craig didn't mind. He was not afraid of the dark; in fact, he rather liked it. Unless you were with a woman, no one expected you to do anything significant in the dark. In the dark, performance ceased to be a factor.

Even better, the chewing sound of the langoliers was muffled.

Craig felt his way slowly forward, hands outstretched, feet shuffling. After three of these shuffling steps, his thigh came in contact with a hard object that felt like the edge of a desk. He reached forward and down. Yes. A desk. He let his hands flutter over it for a moment, taking comfort in the familiar accoutrements of white-collar America: a stack of papers, an IN/OUT basket, the edge of a blotter, a caddy filled with paper-clips, a pencil-and-pen set. He worked his way around the desk to the far side, where his hip bumped the arm of a chair. Craig maneuvered himself between the chair and the desk and then sat down. Being behind a desk made him feel better still. It made him feel like himself - calm, in control. He fumbled for the top drawer and pulled it open. Felt inside for a weapon - something sharp. His hand happened almost immediately upon a letter-opener.

He took it out, shut the drawer, and put it on the desk by his right hand.

He just sat there for a moment, listening to the muffled *whisk-thud* of his heartbeat and the dim sound of the jet engines, then sent his hands fluttering delicately over the surface of the desk again until they re-encountered the stack of papers. He took the top sheet and brought it toward him, but there wasn't a glimmer of white ... not even when he held it right in front of his eyes.

That's all right, Craiggy-weggy. You just sit here in the dark. Sit here and wait until it's time to move. When the time comes I'll tell you, his father finished grimly.

'That's right,' Craig said. His fingers spidered up the unseen sheet of paper to the righthand corner. He tore smoothly downward.

Riii-ip.

Calm filled his mind like cool blue water. He dropped the unseen strip on the unseen desk and returned his fingers to the top of the sheet. Everything was going to be fine. just fine. He began to sing under his breath in a tuneless little whisper.

'Just call me angel ... of the morn-ing, ba-by -'

Riii-ip.

'Just touch my cheek before you leave me ... ba-by .

Calm now, at peace, Craig sat and waited for his father to tell him what he should do next, just as he had done so many times as a

child.

4

'Listen carefully, Albert,' Nick said. 'We have to take her on board the plane, but we'll need a litter to do it. There won't be one on board, but there must be one in here. Where?'

'Gee, Mr Hopewell, Captain Engle would know better than -'

'But Captain Engle isn't here,' Nick said patiently. 'We shall have to manage on our own.'

Albert frowned ... then thought of a sign he had seen on the lower level. 'Airport Services?' he asked. 'Does that sound right?'

'It bloody well does,' Nick said. 'Where did you see that?'

'On the lower level. Next to the rent-a-car counters.'

'All right,' Nick said. 'Here's how we're going to handle this. You and Mr Gaffney are designated litter-finders and litter-bearers. Mr Gaffney, I suggest you check by the grill behind the counter. I expect you'll find some sharp knives. I'm sure that's where our unpleasant friend found his. Get one for you and one for Albert.'

Don went behind the counter without a word. Rudy Warwick returned from The Red Baron Bar with an armload of red-and-white checked tablecloths.

'I'm really sorry -' he began again, but Nick cut him off. He was still looking at Albert, his face now only a circle of white above the deeper shadow of Dinah's small body. The dark had almost arrived.

'You probably won't see Mr Toomy; my guess is that he left here unarmed, in a panic. I imagine he's either found a bolthole by now or has left the terminal. If you do see him, I advise you very strongly not to engage him unless he makes it necessary.' He swung his head to look at Don as Don returned with a pair of butcher knives. 'Keep your priorities straight, you two. Your mission isn't to recapture Mr Toomy and bring him to justice. Your job is to get a stretcher and bring it here as quick as you can. We have to get out of here.'

Don offered Albert one of the knives, but Albert shook his head and looked at Rudy Warwick. 'Could I have one of those tablecloths instead?'

Don looked at him as if Albert had gone crazy. 'A tablecloth? What in God's name for?'

'I'll show you.'

Albert had been kneeling by Dinah. Now he got up and went behind the counter. He peered around, not sure exactly what he was looking for, but positive he would know it when he saw it. And so he did. There was an old-fashioned two-slice toaster sitting well back on the counter. He picked it up, jerking the plug out of the wall, and wrapped the cord tightly around it as he came back to where the others were. He took one of the tablecloths, spread it, and placed the toaster in one corner. Then he turned it over twice wrapping the toaster in the end of the tablecloth like a Christmas present.

He fashioned tight rabbit's-ear knots in the corners to make a pocket. When he gripped the loose end of the tablecloth and stood up, the wrapped toaster had become a rock in a makeshift sling.

'When I was a kid, we used to play Indiana Jones,' Albert said apologetically. 'I made something like this and pretended it was my whip. I almost broke my brother David's arm once. I loaded an old blanket with a sashweight I found in the garage. Pretty stupid, I guess. I didn't know how hard it would hit. I got a hell of a spanking for it. It looks stupid, I guess, but it actually works pretty well. It always did, at least.'

Nick looked at Albert's makeshift weapon dubiously but said nothing. If a toaster wrapped in a tablecloth made Albert feel more comfortable about going downstairs in the dark, so be it.

'Good enough, then. Now go find a stretcher and bring it back. If there isn't one in the Airport Services office, try someplace else. If you don't find anything in fifteen minutes - no, make that ten - just come back and we'll carry her.'

'You can't do that!' Laurel cried softly. 'If there's internal bleeding

Nick looked up at her. 'There's internal bleeding already. And ten minutes is all the time I think we can spare.'

Laurel opened her mouth to answer, to argue, but Dinah's husky whisper stopped her. 'He's right.'

Don slipped the blade of his knife into his belt. 'Come on, son,' he said. They crossed the terminal together and started down the

escalator to the first floor. Albert wrapped the end of his loaded tablecloth around his hand as they went.

5

Nick turned his attention back to the girl on the floor. 'How are you feeling, Dinah?'

'Hurts bad,' Dinah said faintly.

'Yes, of course it does,' Nick said. 'And I'm afraid that what I'm about to do is going to make it hurt a good deal more, for a few seconds, at least. But the knife is in your lung, and it's got to come out. You know that, don't you?'

'Yes.' Her dark, unseeing eyes looked up at him. 'Scared.'

'So am I, Dinah. So am I. But it has to be done. Are you game?'

'Yes.'

'Good girl.' Nick bent and planted a soft kiss on her cheek. 'That's a good, brave girl. It won't take long, and that's a promise. I want you to lie just as still as you can, Dinah, and try not to cough. Do you understand me? It's very important. Try *not to cough*.'

'I'll try.'

'There may be a moment or two when you feel that you can't breathe. You may even feel that you're leaking, like a tire with a puncture. That's a scary feeling, love, and it may make you want to move around, or cry out. You mustn't do it. *And you mustn't cough*.'

Dinah made a reply none of them could hear.

Nick swallowed, armed sweat off his forehead in a quick gesture, and turned to Laurel. 'Fold two of those tablecloths into square pads. Thick as you can. Kneel beside me. Close as you can get. Warwick, take off your belt.'

Rudy began to comply at once.

Nick looked back at Laurel. She was again struck, and not unpleasantly this time, by the power of his gaze. 'I'm going to grasp the handle of the knife and draw it out. If it's not caught on one of her ribs - and judging from its position, I don't think it is - the blade should come out in one slow, smooth pull. The moment it's out, I will draw back, giving you clear access to the girl's chest area. You will

place one of your pads over the wound and press. Press *hard*. You're not to worry about hurting her, or compressing her chest so much she can't breathe. She's got at least one perforation in her lung, and I'm betting there's a pair of them. Those are what we've got to worry about. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'When you've placed the pad, I'm going to lift her against the pressure you're putting on. Mr Warwick here will then slip the other pad beneath her if we see blood on the back of her dress. Then we're going to tie the compresses in place with Mr Warwick's belt.' He glanced up at Rudy. 'When I call for it, my friend, give it to me. Don't make me ask you twice.'

'I won't.'

'Can you see well enough to do this, Nick?' Laurel asked.

'I think so,' Nick replied. 'I hope so.' He looked at Dinah again.

'Ready?'

Dinah muttered something.

'All right,' Nick said. He drew in a long breath and then let it out.

'Jesus help me.'

He wrapped his slim, long-fingered hands around the handle of the knife like a man gripping a baseball bat. He pulled. Dinah shrieked. A great gout of blood spewed from her mouth. Laurel had been leaning tensely forward, and her face was suddenly bathed in Dinah's blood. She recoiled.

'No!' Nick spat at her without looking around. 'Don't you *dare* go weaksister on me! Don't you *dare*!'

Laurel leaned forward again, gagging and shuddering. The blade, a dully gleaming triangle of silver in the deep gloom, emerged from Dinah's chest and glimmered in the air. The little blind girl's chest heaved and there was a high, unearthly whistling sound as the wound sucked inward.

'Now!' Nick grunted. 'Press down! Hard as you can!'

Laurel leaned forward. For just a moment she saw blood pouring out of the hole in Dinah's chest, and then the wound was covered. The tablecloth pad grew warm and wet under her hands almost immediately.

'Harder!' Nick snarled at her. 'Press harder! Seal it! Seal the wound!'

Laurel now understood what people meant when they talked about coming completely unstrung, because she felt on the verge of it herself. 'I can't! I'll break her ribs if -'

'Fuck her ribs! You have to make a seal!'

Laurel rocked forward on her knees and brought her entire weight down on her hands. Now she could feel liquid seeping slowly between her fingers, although she had folded the tablecloth thick.

The Englishman tossed the knife aside and leaned forward until his face was almost touching Dinah's. Her eyes were closed. He rolled one of the lids. 'I think she's finally out,' he said. 'Can't tell for sure because her eyes are so odd, but I hope to heaven she is.' Hair had fallen over his brow. He tossed it back impatiently with a jerk of his head and looked at Laurel. 'You're doing well. Stay with it, all right? I'm rolling her now. Keep the pressure on as I do.'

'There's so much blood,' Laurel groaned. 'Will she drown?'

'I don't know. Keep the pressure on. Ready, Mr Warwick?'

'Oh Christ I guess so,' Rudy Warwick croaked.

'Right. Here we go.' Nick slipped his hands beneath Dinah's right shoulderblade and grimaced. 'It's worse than I thought,' he muttered. 'Far worse. She's *soaked*.' He began to pull Dinah slowly upward against the pressure Laurel was putting on. Dinah uttered a thick, croaking moan. A gout of half-congealed blood flew from her mouth and splattered across the floor. And now Laurel could hear a rain of blood pattering down on the carpet from beneath the girl.

Suddenly the world began to swim away from her.

'Keep that pressure *on!*' Nick cried. 'Don't let up!'

But she was fainting.

It was her understanding of what Nick Hopewell would think of her if she *did* faint which caused her to do what she did next. Laurel stuck her tongue out between her teeth like a child making a face and bit down on it as hard as she could. The pain was bright and exquisite, the salty taste of her own blood immediately filled her mouth ... but that sensation that the world was swimming away from her like a big lazy fish in an aquarium passed. She was *here* again.

Downstairs, there was a sudden shriek of pain and surprise. It was followed by a hoarse shout. On the heels of the shout came a loud, drilling scream.

Rudy and Laurel both turned in that direction. 'The boy!' Rudy said. 'Him and Gaffney! They -'

'They've found Mr Toomy after all,' Nick said. His face was a complicated mask of effort. The tendons on his neck stood out like steel pulleys. 'We'll just have to hope -'

There was a thud from downstairs, followed by a terrible howl of agony. Then a whole series of muffled thumps. '- that they're on top of the situation. We can't do anything about it now. If we stop in the middle of what we're doing, this little girl is going to die for sure.'

'But that sounded like the *kid!*'

'Can't be helped, can it? Slide the pad under her, Warwick. Do it right now, or I'll kick your bloody arse square.'

6

Don led the way down the escalator, then stopped briefly at the bottom to fumble in his pocket. He brought out a square object that gleamed faintly in the dark. 'It's my Zippo,' he said. 'Do you think it'll still work?'

'I don't know,' Albert said. 'It might ... for awhile. You better not try it until you have to. I sure hope it does. We won't be able to see a thing without it.'

'Where's this Airport Services place?'

Albert pointed to the door Craig Toomy had gone through less than five minutes before. 'Right over there.'

'Do you think it's unlocked?'

'Well,' Albert said, 'there's only one way to find out.'

They crossed the terminal, Don still leading the way with his lighter in his right hand.

7

Craig heard them coming - more servants of the langoliers, no doubt. But he wasn't worried. He had taken care of the thing which had been masquerading as a little girl, and he would take care of these other things as well. He curled his hand around the letter-opener, got up, and sidled back around the desk.

'Do you think it's unlocked?'

'Well, there's only one way to find out.'

You're going to find out something, anyway, Craig thought. He reached the wall beside the door. It was lined with paper-stacked shelves. He reached out and felt doorhinges. Good. The opening door would block him off from them ... not that they were likely to see him, anyway. It was as black as an elephant's asshole in here. He raised the letter-opener to shoulder height.

'The knob doesn't move.' Craig relaxed ... but only for a moment. 'Try pushing it.' That was the smart-ass kid. The door began to open.

8

Don stepped in, blinking at the gloom. He thumbed the cover of his lighter back, held it up, and flicked the wheel. There was a spark and the wick caught at once, producing a low flame. They saw what was apparently a combined office and storeroom. There was an untidy stack of luggage in one corner and a Xerox machine in another. The back wall was lined with shelves and the shelves were stacked with what looked like forms of various kinds.

Don stepped further into the office, lifting his lighter like a spelunker holding up a guttering candle in a dark cave. He pointed to the right wall. 'Hey, kid! Ace! Look!'

A poster mounted there showed a tipsy guy in a business suit staggering out of a bar and looking at his watch. WORK IS THE CURSE OF THE DRINKING CLASS, the poster advised. Mounted on the wall beside it was a white plastic box with a large red cross on it. And leaning below it was a folded stretcher ... the kind with wheels.

Albert wasn't looking at the poster or the first-aid kit or the stretcher, however. His eyes were fixed on the desk in the center of

the room.

On it he saw a heaped tangle of paper strips.

'Look out!' he shouted. 'Look out, he's in h -'

Craig Toomy stepped out from behind the door and struck.

9

'Belt,' Nick said.

Rudy didn't move or reply. His head was turned toward the door of the restaurant. The sounds from downstairs had ceased. There was only the rattling noise and the steady, throbbing rumble of the jet engine in the dark outside.

Nick kicked backward like a mule, connecting with Rudy's shin.

'Ow!'

'Belt! Now!'

Rudy dropped clumsily to his knees and moved next to Nick, who was holding Dinah up with one hand and pressing a second tablecloth pad against her back with the other.

'Slip it under the pad,' Nick said. He was panting, and sweat was running down his face in wide streams. 'Quick! I can't hold her up forever!'

Rudy slid the belt under the pad. Nick lowered Dinah, reached across the girl's small body, and lifted her left shoulder long enough to pull the belt out the other side. Then he looped it over her chest and cinched it tight. He put the belt's free end in Laurel's hand. 'Keep the pressure on,' he said, standing up. 'You can't use the buckle - she's much too small.'

'Are you going downstairs?' Laurel asked.

'Yes. That seems indicated.'

'Be careful. Please be careful.'

He grinned at her, and all those white teeth suddenly shining out in the gloom were startling ... but not frightening, she discovered. Quite the opposite.

'Of course. It's how I get along.' He reached down and squeezed her shoulder. His hand was warm, and at his touch a little shiver chased through her. 'You did very well, Laurel. Thank you.'

He began to turn away, and then a small hand groped out and caught the cuff of his blue-jeans. He looked down and saw that Dinah's blind eyes were open again.

'Don't . she began, and then a choked sneezing fit shook her. Blood flew from her nose in a spray of fine droplets.

'Dinah, you mustn't -'

'Don't ... *you* ... kill him!' she said, and even in the dark Laurel could sense the fantastic effort she was making to speak at all.

Nick looked down at her thoughtfully. 'The bugger stabbed you, you know. Why are you so insistent on keeping him whole?'

Her narrow chest strained against the belt. The bloodstained tablecloth pad heaved. She struggled and managed to say one thing more. They all heard it; Dinah was at great pains to speak clearly. 'All ... I know ... *is* that we need him,' she whispered, and then her eyes closed again.

10

Craig buried the letter-opener fist-deep in the nape of Don Gaffney's neck. Don screamed and dropped the lighter. It struck the floor and lay there, guttering sickishly. Albert shouted in surprise as he saw Craig step toward Don, who was now staggering in the direction of the desk and clawing weakly behind him for the protruding object.

Craig grabbed the opener with one hand and planted his other against Don's back. As he simultaneously pushed and pulled, Albert heard the sound of a hungry man pulling a drumstick off a well-done turkey. Don screamed again, louder this time, and went sprawling over the desk. His arms flew out ahead of him, knocking an IN/OUT box and the stack of lost-luggage forms Craig had been ripping.

Craig turned toward Albert, flicking a spray of blood-droplets from the blade of the letter-opener as he did so. 'You're one of them, too,' he breathed. 'Well, fuck you. I'm going to Boston and you can't stop me. *None* of you can stop me.' Then the lighter on the floor went out and they were in darkness

Albert took a step backward and felt a warm swoop of air in his face as Craig swung the blade through the spot where he had been only a second before. He flailed behind him with his free hand, terrified of backing into a corner where Craig could use the knife (in the Zippo's pallid, fading light, that was what he had thought it was) on him at will and his own weapon would be useless as well as stupid. His fingers found only empty space, and he backed through the door into the lobby. He did not feel cool; he did not feel like the fastest Hebrew on *any* side of the Mississippi; he did not feel faster than blue blazes. He felt like a scared kid who had foolishly chosen a childhood playtoy instead of a real weapon because he had been unable to believe - really, really believe - that it could come to this in spite of what the lunatic asshole had done to the little girl upstairs. He could smell himself. Even in the dead air he could smell himself. It was the rancid monkeypiss aroma of fear.

Craig came gliding out through the door with the letter-opener raised. He moved like a dancing shadow in the dark. 'I see you, sonny,' he breathed. 'I see you just like a cat.'

He began to slide forward. Albert backed away from him. At the same time he began to pendulum the toaster back and forth, reminding himself that he would have only one good shot before Toomy moved in and planted the blade in his throat or chest.

And if the toaster goes flying out of the goddam pocket before it hits him, I'm a goner.

Craig closed in, weaving the top half of his body from side to side like a snake coming out of a basket. An absent little smile touched the corners of his lips and made small dimples there. *That's right*, Craig's father said grimly from his undying stronghold inside Craig's head. *If you have to pick them off one by one, you can do that. EPO, Craig. remember? EPO. Effort Pays Off.*

That's right, Craiggy-weggy,

his mother chimed in. You

can do it, and you

have

to do it.

'I'm sorry,' Craig murmured to the white-faced boy through his smile. 'I'm really, really sorry, but I have to do it. If you could see things from my perspective, you'd understand.'

He closed in on Albert, raising the letter-opener to his eyes.

12

Albert shot a quick glance behind him and saw he was backing toward the United Airlines ticket desk. If he retreated much further, the backward arc of his swing would be restricted. It had to be soon. He began to pendulum the toaster more rapidly, his sweaty hand clutching the twist of tablecloth.

Craig caught the movement in the dark, but couldn't tell what it was the kid was swinging. It didn't matter. He couldn't *let* it matter. He gathered himself, then sprang forward.

'I'M GOING TO BOSTON!' he shrieked. 'I'M GOING TO-'

Albert's eyes were adjusting to the dark, and he saw Craig make his move. The toaster was on the rearward half of its arc. Instead of snapping his wrist forward to reverse its direction, Albert let his arm go with the weight of the toaster, swinging it up and over his head in an exaggerated pitching gesture. At the same time he stepped to the left. The lump at the end of the tablecloth made a short, hard circlet in the air, held firmly in its pocket by centripetal force. Craig cooperated by stepping forward into the toaster's descending arc. It met his forehead and the bridge of his nose with a hard, toneless crunch.

Craig wailed with agony and dropped the letter-opener. His hands went to his face and he staggered backwards. Blood from his broken nose poured between his fingers like water from a busted hydrant. Albert was terrified of what he had done but even more terrified of letting up now that Toomy was hurt. Albert took another step to the left and swung the tablecloth sidearm. It whipped through the air and smashed into the center of Craig's chest with a hard thump. Craig fell over backward, still howling.

For Albert 'Ace' Kaussner, only one thought remained; all else was a tumbling, fragmented swirl of color, image, and emotion.

I have to make him stop moving or he'll get up and kill me. I have to make him stop moving or he'll get up and kill me.

At least Toomy had dropped his weapon; it lay glinting on the lobby carpet. Albert planted one of his loafers on it and unloaded with the toaster again. As it came down. Albert bowed from the waist like an old-fashioned butler greeting a member of the royal family. The lump at the end of the tablecloth smashed into Craig Toomy's gasping mouth. There was a sound like glass being crushed inside of a handkerchief.

Oh God, Albert thought. That was his teeth.

Craig flopped and squirmed on the floor. It was terrible to watch him, perhaps more terrible because of the poor light. There was something monstrous and unkillable and insectile about his horrible vitality.

His hand closed upon Albert's loafer. Albert stepped away from the letter-opener with a little cry of revulsion, and Craig tried to grasp it when he did. Between his eyes, his nose was a burst bulb of flesh. He could hardly see Albert at all; his vision was eaten up by a vast white corona of light. A steady high keening note rang in his head, the sound of a TV test-pattern turned up to full volume.

He was beyond doing any more damage, but Albert didn't know it. In a panic, he brought the toaster down on Craig's head again. There was a metallic crunch-rattle as the heating elements inside it broke free.

Craig stopped moving.

Albert stood over him, sobbing for breath, the weighted tablecloth dangling from one hand. Then he took two long, shambling steps toward the escalator bowed deeply again, and vomited on the floor.

13

Brian crossed himself as he thumped back the black plastic shield which covered the screen of the 767's INS video-display terminal,

half-expecting it to be smooth and blank. He looked at it closely ... and let out a deep sigh of relief.

LAST PROGRAM

COMPLETE,

it informed him in cool blue-green letters, and below that:

NEW PROGRAM? Y N

Brian typed Y, then:

REVERSE

AP29:LAX/LOGAN

The screen went dark for a moment. Then:

INCLUDE DIVERSION IN AP 29? Y N

Brian typed Y.

REVERSE

the screen informed him, and, less than five seconds later:

PROGRAM

COMPLETE

'Captain Engle?'

He turned around. Bethany was standing in the cockpit doorway. She looked pale and haggard in the cabin lights.

'I'm a little busy right now, Bethany.'

'Why aren't they back?'

'I can't say.'

'I asked Bob - Mr Jenkins - if he could see anyone moving around inside the terminal, and he said he couldn't. What if they're all dead?'

'I'm sure they're not. If it will make you feel better, why don't you join him at the bottom of the ladder? I've got some more work to do here.' *At least I hope I do.*

'Are you scared?' she asked.

'Yes. I sure am.'

She smiled a little. 'I'm sort of glad. It's bad to be scared all by yourself - totally bogus. I'll leave you alone now.'

'Thanks. I'm sure they'll be out soon.'

She left. Brian turned back to the INS monitor and typed:

ARE THERE PROBLEMS WITH THIS PROGRAM?

He hit EXECUTE.

NO PROBLEMS. THANK YOU FOR FLYING AMERICAN PRIDE.

'You're welcome, I'm sure,' Brian murmured. and wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

Now, he thought, *if only the fuel will burn.*

14

Bob heard footsteps on the ladder and turned quickly. It was only Bethany, descending slowly and carefully, but he still felt jumpy. The sound coming out of the east was gradually growing louder.

Closer.

'Hi, Bethany. May I borrow another of your cigarettes?'

She offered the depleted pack to him, then took one herself. She had tucked Albert's book of experimental matches into the cellophane covering the pack, and when she tried one it lit easily.

'Any sign of them?'

'Well, it all depends on what you mean by "any sign," I guess,' Bob said cautiously. 'I think I heard some shouting just before you came down.' What he had heard actually sounded like screaming - shrieking, not to put too fine a point on it - but he saw no reason to tell the girl that. She looked as frightened as Bob felt, and he had an idea she'd taken a liking to Albert.

'I hope Dinah's going to be all right,' she said, 'but I don't know. He cut her really bad.'

'Did you see the captain?'

Bethany nodded. 'He sort of kicked me out. I guess he's programming his instruments, or something.'

Bob Jenkins nodded soberly. 'I hope so.'

Conversation lapsed. They both looked east. A new and even more ominous sound now underlay the crunching, chewing noise: a high, inanimate screaming. It was a strangely mechanical sound, one that made Bob think of an automatic transmission low on fluid.

'It's a lot closer now, isn't it?'

Bob nodded reluctantly. He drew on his cigarette and the glowing ember momentarily illuminated a pair of tired, terrified eyes.

'What do you suppose it is, Mr Jenkins?'

He shook his head slowly. 'Dear girl, I hope we never have to find out.'

15

Halfway down the escalator, Nick saw a bent-over figure standing in front of the useless bank of pay telephones. It was impossible to tell if it was Albert or Craig Toomy. The Englishman reached into his right front pocket, holding his left hand against it to prevent any jingling, and by touch selected a pair of quarters from his change. He closed his right hand into a fist and slipped the quarters between his fingers, creating a makeshift set of brass knuckles. Then he continued down to the lobby.

The figure by the telephones looked up as Nick appeared. It was Albert. 'Don't step in the puke,' he said dully.

Nick dropped the quarters back into his pocket and hurried to where the boy was standing with his hands propped above his knees like an old man who has badly overestimated his capacity for exercise. He could smell the high, sour stench of vomit. That and the sweaty stink of fear coming off the boy were smells with which he was all too familiar. He knew them from the Falklands, and even more intimately from Northern Ireland. He put his left arm around the boy's shoulders and Albert straightened very slowly.

'Where are they, Ace?' Nick asked quietly. 'Gaffney and Toomy - where are they?'

'Mr Toomy's there.' He pointed toward a crumpled shape on the floor. 'Mr Gaffney's in the Airport Services office. I think they're both dead. Mr Toomy was in the Airport Services office. Behind the door, I guess. He killed Mr Gaffney because Mr Gaffney walked in first. If I'd walked in first, he would have killed me instead.'

Albert swallowed hard.

'Then I killed Mr Toomy. I had to. He came after me, see? He found another knife someplace and he came after me.' He spoke in a tone which could have been mistaken for indifference, but Nick knew better. And it was not indifference he saw on the white blur of Albert's face.

'Can you get hold of yourself, Ace?' Nick asked.

'I don't know. I never k-k-killed anyone before, and -' Albert uttered a strangled, miserable sob.

'I know,' Nick said. 'It's a horrible thing, but it can be gotten over. I know. And you must get over it, Ace. We have miles to go before we sleep, and there's no time for therapy. The sound is louder.'

He left Albert and went over to the crumpled form on the floor. Craig Toomy was lying on his side with one upraised arm partially obscuring his face. Nick rolled him onto his back, looked, whistled softly. Toomy was still alive - he could hear the harsh rasp of his breath - but Nick would have bet his bank account that the man was not shamming this time. His nose hadn't just been broken; it looked vaporized. His mouth was a bloody socket ringed with the shattered remains of his teeth. And the deep, troubled dent in the center of Toomy's forehead suggested that Albert had done some creative retooling of the man's skull-plate.

'He did all this with a *toaster*?' Nick muttered. 'Jesus and Mary, Tom, Dick and Harry.' He got up and raised his voice. 'He's not dead, Ace.'

Albert had bent over again when Nick left him. Now he straightened slowly and took a step toward him. 'He's not?'

'Listen for yourself. Out for the count, but still in the game.' *Not for long, though; not by the sound of him.* 'Let's check on Mr Gaffney - maybe he got off lucky, too. And what about the stretcher?'

'Huh?' Albert looked at Nick as though he had spoken in a foreign language.

'The stretcher,' Nick repeated patiently as they walked toward the open Airport Services door.

'We found it,' Albert said.

'Did you? Super!'

Albert stopped just inside the door. 'Wait a minute,' he muttered, then squatted and felt around for Don's lighter. He found it after a moment or two. It was still warm. He stood up again. 'Mr Gaffney's on the other side of the desk, I think.'

They walked around, stepping over the tumbled stacks of paper and the IN/OUT basket. Albert held the lighter and flicked the wheel. On the fifth try the wick caught and burned feebly for three or four

seconds. It was enough. Nick had actually seen enough in the spark-flashes the lighter's wheel had struck, but he hadn't liked to say so to Albert. Don Gaffney lay sprawled on his back, eyes open, a look of terrible surprise still fixed on his face. He hadn't gotten off lucky after all.

'How was it that Toomy didn't get you as well?' Nick asked after a moment. 'I knew he was in here,' Albert said. 'Even before he struck Mr Gaffney, I knew.' His voice was still dry and shaky, but he felt a little better. Now that he had actually faced poor Mr Gaffney - looked him in the eye, so to speak - he felt a little better.

'Did you hear him?'

'No - I saw those. On the desk.' Albert pointed to the little heap of torn strips .

'Lucky you did.' Nick put his hand on Albert's shoulder in the dark. 'You deserve to be alive, mate. You earned the privilege. All right?'

'I'll try,' Albert said.

'You do that, old son. It saves a lot of nightmares. You're looking at a man who knows.'

Albert nodded.

'Keep it together, Ace. That's all there is to it - just keep things together and you'll be fine.'

'Mr Hopewell?'

'Yes?'

'Would you mind not calling me that? I -' His voice clogged, and Albert cleared his throat violently. 'I don't think I like it anymore.'

16

They emerged from the dark cave which was Airport Services thirty seconds later, Nick carrying the folded stretcher by the handle. When they reached the bank of phones, Nick handed the stretcher to Albert, who accepted it wordlessly. The tablecloth lay on the floor about five feet away from Toomy, who was snoring now in great rhythmless snatches of air.

Time was short, time was very fucking short, but Nick had to see this. He *had* to.

He picked up the tablecloth and pulled the toaster out. One of the heating elements caught in a bread slot; the other tumbled out onto the floor. The timer-dial and the handle you used to push the bread down fell off. One corner of the toaster was crumpled inward. The left side was bashed into a deep circular dent.

That's the part that collided with Friend Toomy's sniffer, Nick thought. *Amazing.* He shook the toaster and listened to the loose rattle of broken parts inside.

'A toaster,' he marvelled. 'I have friends, Albert - professional friends - who wouldn't believe it. I hardly believe it myself. I mean ... a *toaster.*'

Albert had turned his head. 'Throw it away,' he said hoarsely. 'I don't want to look at it.'

Nick did as the boy asked, then clapped him on the shoulder. 'Take the stretcher upstairs. I'll join you directly.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I want to see if there's anything else we can use in that office.'

Albert looked at him for a moment, but he couldn't make out Nick's features in the dark. At last he said, 'I don't believe you.'

'Nor do you have to,' Nick said in an oddly gentle voice. 'Go on, Ace . Albert, I mean. I'll join you soon. And don't look back.'

Albert stared at him a moment longer, then began to trudge up the frozen escalator, his head down, the stretcher dangling like a suitcase from his right hand. He didn't look back.

17

Nick waited until the boy had disappeared into the gloom. Then he walked back over to where Craig Toomy lay and squatted beside him. Toomy was still out, but his breathing seemed a little more regular. Nick supposed it was not impossible, given a week or two of constant-care treatment in hospital, that Toomy might recover. He had proved at least one thing: he had an awesomely hard head.

Shame the brains underneath are so soft, mate, Nick thought. He reached out, meaning to put one hand over Toomy's mouth and the other over his nose - or what remained of it. It would take less than a

minute, and they would not have to worry about Mr Craig Toomy anymore. The others would have recoiled in horror at the act - would have called it cold-blooded murder - but Nick saw it as an insurance policy, no more and no less. Toomy had arisen once from what appeared to be total unconsciousness and now one of their number was dead and another was badly, perhaps mortally, wounded. There was no sense taking the same chance again.

And there was something else. If he left Toomy alive, what, exactly, would he be leaving him alive *for*? A short, haunted existence in a dead world? A chance to breathe dying air under a moveless sky in which all weather patterns appeared to have ceased? An opportunity to meet whatever was approaching from the east ... approaching with a sound like that of a colony of giant, marauding ants?

No. Best to see him out of it. It would be painless, and that would have to be good enough.

'Better than the bastard deserves,' Nick said, but still he hesitated.

He remembered the little girl looking up at him with her dark, unseeing eyes.

Don't you kill him! Not a plea; that had been a command. She had summoned up a little strength from some hidden last reserve in order to give him that command. *All I know is that we need him.*

Why is she so bloody protective of him?

He squatted a moment longer, looking into Craig Toomy's ruined face. And when Rudy Warwick spoke from the head of the escalator, he jumped as if it had been the devil himself.

'Mr Hopewell? Nick? Are you coming?'

'In a jiffy!' he called back over his shoulder. He reached toward Toomy's face again and stopped again, remembering her dark eyes.

We need him.

Abruptly he stood up, leaving Craig Toomy to his tortured struggle for breath. 'Coming now,' he called, and ran lightly up the escalator.

CHAPTER 8

Refuelling. Dawn's Early Light.
The Approach of the Langoliers.
Angel of the Morning. The Time-Keepers
of Eternity. Take-off.

1

Bethany had cast away her almost tasteless cigarette and was halfway up the ladder again when Bob Jenkins shouted: 'I think they're coming out!'

She turned and ran back down the stairs. A series of dark blobs was emerging from the luggage bay and crawling along the conveyor belt. Bob and Bethany ran to meet them.

Dinah was strapped to the stretcher. Rudy had one end, Nick the other. They were walking on their knees, and Bethany could hear the bald man breathing in harsh, out-of-breath gasps.

'Let me help,' she told him, and Rudy gave up his end of the stretcher willingly.

'Try not to jiggle her,' Nick said, swinging his legs off the conveyor belt. 'Albert, get on Bethany's end and help us take her up the stairs. We want this thing to stay as level as possible.'

'How bad is she?' Bethany asked Albert.

'Not good,' he said grimly. 'Unconscious but still alive. That's all I know.'

'Where are Gaffney and Toomy?' Bob asked as they crossed to the plane. He had to raise his voice slightly to be heard; the crunching sound was louder now, and that shrieking wounded-transmission undertone was becoming a dominant, maddening note.

'Gaffney's dead and Toomy might as well be,' Nick said. 'Right now there's no time.' He halted at the foot of the stairs. 'Mind you keep your end up, you two.'

They moved the stretcher slowly and carefully up the stairs, Nick walking backward and bent over the forward end, Albert and

Bethany holding the stretcher up at forehead level and jostling hips on the narrow stairway at the rear. Bob, Rudy, and Laurel followed behind. Laurel had spoken only once since Albert and Nick had returned, to ask if Toomy was dead. When Nick told her he wasn't, she had looked at him closely and then nodded her head with relief.

Brian was standing at the cockpit door when Nick reached the top of the ladder and eased his end of the stretcher inside.

'I want to put her in first class,' Nick said, 'with this end of the stretcher raised so her head is up. Can I do that?'

'No problem. Secure the stretcher by looping a couple of seatbelts through the head-frame. Do you see where?'

'Yes.' And to Albert and Bethany: 'Come on up. You're doing fine.'

In the cabin lights, the blood smeared on Dinah's cheeks and chin stood out starkly against her yellow-white skin. Her eyes were closed; her lids were a delicate shade of lavender. Under the belt (in which Nick had punched a new hole, high above the others), the makeshift compress was dark red. Brian could hear her breathing. It sounded like a straw dragging wind at the bottom of an almost empty glass.

'It's bad, isn't it?' Brian asked in a low voice.

'Well, it's her lung and not her heart, and she's not filling up anywhere near as fast as I was afraid she might ... but it's bad, yes.'

'Will she live until we get back?'

'How in hell should I know?' Nick shouted at him suddenly. 'I'm a soldier, not a bloody sawbones!'

The others froze, looking at him with cautious eyes. Laurel felt her skin prickle again.

'I'm sorry,' Nick muttered. 'Time travel plays the very devil with one's nerves, doesn't it? I'm very sorry.'

'No need to apologize,' Laurel said, and touched his arm. 'We're all under strain.'

He gave her a tired smile and touched her hair. 'You're a sweetheart, Laurel, and no mistake. Come on - let's strap her in and see what we can do about getting the hell out of here.'

Five minutes later Dinah's stretcher had been secured in an inclined position to a pair of first-class seats, her head up, her feet down. The rest of the passengers were gathered in a tight little knot around Brian in the first-class serving area.

'We need to refuel the plane,' Brian said. 'I'm going to start the other engine now and pull over as close as I can to that 727-400 at the jetway.' He pointed to the Delta plane, which was just a gray lump in the dark. 'Because our aircraft sits higher, I'll be able to lay our right wing right over the Delta's left wing. While I do that, four of you are going to bring over a hose cart - there's one sitting by the other jetway. I saw it before it got dark.'

'Maybe we better wake Sleeping Beauty at the back of the plane and get him to lend a hand,' Bob said.

Brian thought it over briefly and then shook his head. 'The last thing we need right now is another scared, disoriented passenger on our hands - and one with a killer hangover to boot. And we won't need him - two strong men can push a hose cart in a pinch. I've seen it done. Just check the transmission lever to make sure it's in neutral. It wants to end up directly beneath the overlapping wings. Got it?'

They all nodded. Brian looked them over and decided that Rudy and Bethany were still too blown from wrestling the stretcher to be of much help. 'Nick, Bob, and Albert. You push. Laurel, you steer. Okay?'

They nodded.

'Go on and do it, then. Bethany? Mr Warwick? Go down with them. Pull the ladder away from the plane, and when I've got the plane repositioned, place it next to the overlapping wings. The wings, not the door. Got it?'

They nodded. Looking around at them, Brian saw that their eyes looked clear and bright for the first time since they had landed. Of course, he thought. *They have something to do now. And so do I, thank God.*

As they approached the hose cart sitting off to the left of the unoccupied jetway, Laurel realized she could actually see it. 'My God,' she said. 'It's coming daylight again already. How long has it been since it got dark?'

'Less than forty minutes, by my watch,' Bob said, 'but I have a feeling that my watch doesn't keep very accurate time when we're outside the plane. I've also got a feeling time doesn't matter much here, anyway.'

'What's going to happen to Mr Toomy?' Laurel asked.

They had reached the cart. It was a small vehicle with a tank on the back, an open-air cab, and thick black hoses coiled on either side. Nick put an arm around her waist and turned her toward him. For a moment she had the crazy idea that he meant to kiss her, and she felt her heart speed up.

'I don't know what's going to happen to him,' he said. 'All I know is that when the chips were down, I chose to do what Dinah wanted. I left him lying unconscious on the floor. All right?'

'No,' she said in a slightly unsteady voice, 'but I guess it will have to do.'

He smiled a little, nodded, and gave her waist a brief squeeze. 'Would you like to go to dinner with me when and if we make it back to LA?'

'Yes,' she said at once. 'That would be something to look forward to.'

He nodded again. 'For me, too. But unless we can get this airplane refuelled, we're not going anywhere.' He looked at the open cab of the hose cart. 'Can you find neutral, do you think?'

Laurel eyed the stick-shift jutting up from the floor of the cab. 'I'm afraid I only drive an automatic.'

'I'll do it.' Albert jumped into the cab, depressed the clutch, then peered at the diagram on the knob of the shift lever. Behind him, the 767's second engine whined into life and both engines began to throb harder as Brian powered up. The noise was very loud, but Laurel found she didn't mind at all. It blotted out that other sound, at least temporarily. And she kept wanting to look at Nick. Had he actually invited her out to dinner? Already it seemed hard to believe.

Albert changed gears, then waggled the shift lever. 'Got it,' he said, and jumped down - 'Up you go, Laurel. Once we get it rolling, you'll have to hang a hard right and bring it around in a circle.'

'All right.'

She looked back nervously as the three men lined themselves up along the rear of the hose cart with Nick in the middle.

'Ready, you lot?' he asked.

Albert and Bob nodded.

'Right, then - all together.'

Bob had been braced to push as hard as he could, and damn the low back pain which had plagued him for the last ten years, but the hose cart rolled with absurd ease. Laurel hauled the stiff, balky steering wheel around with all her might. The yellow cart described a small circle on the gray tarmac and began to roll back toward the 767, which was trundling slowly into position on the righthand side of the parked Delta jet.

'The difference between the two aircraft is incredible,' Bob said.

'Yes,' Nick agreed. 'You were right, Albert. We may have wandered away from the present, but in some strange way, that airplane is still a part of it.'

'So are we,' Albert said. 'At least, so far.'

The 767's turbines died, leaving only the steady low rumble of the APUs - Brian was now running all four of them. They were not loud enough to cover the sound in the east. Before, that sound had had a kind of massive uniformity, but as it neared it was fragmenting; there seemed to be sounds within sounds, and the sum total began to seem horribly familiar.

Animals at feeding time, Laurel thought, and shivered. *That's what it sounds like - the sound of feeding animals, sent through an amplifier and blown up to grotesque proportions.*

She shivered violently and felt panic begin to nibble at her thoughts, an elemental force she could control no more than she could control whatever was making that sound.

'Maybe if we could see it, we could deal with it,' Bob said as they began to push the fuel cart again.

Albert glanced at him briefly and said, 'I don't think so.'

4

Brian appeared in the forward door of the 767 and motioned Bethany and Rudy to roll the ladder over to him. When they did, he stepped onto the platform at the top and pointed to the overlapping wings. As they rolled him in that direction, he listened to the approaching noise and found himself remembering a movie he had seen on the late show a long time ago. In it, Charlton Heston had owned a big plantation in South America. The plantation had been attacked by a vast moving carpet of soldier ants, ants which ate everything in their path - trees, grass, buildings, cows, men. What had that movie been called? Brian couldn't remember. He only remembered that Charlton had kept trying increasingly desperate tricks to stop the ants, or at least delay them. Had he beaten them in the end? Brian couldn't remember, but a fragment of his dream suddenly recurred, disturbing in its lack of association to anything: an ominous red sign which read SHOOTING STARS ONLY.

'Hold it!' he shouted down to Rudy and Bethany.

They ceased pushing, and Brian carefully climbed down the ladder until his head was on a level with the underside of the Delta jet's wing. Both the 767 and 727 were equipped with single-point fuelling ports in the left wing. He was now looking at a small square hatch with the words FUEL TANK ACCESS and CHECK SHUT-OFF VALVE BEFORE REFUELLING stencilled across it. And some wit had pasted a round yellow happy-face sticker to the fuel hatch. It was the final surreal touch.

Albert, Bob, and Nick had pushed the hose cart into position below him and were now looking up, their faces dirty gray circles in the brightening gloom. Brian leaned over and shouted down to Nick.

'There are two hoses, one on each side of the cart! I want the short one!'

Nick pulled it free and handed it up. Holding both the ladder and the nozzle of the hose with one hand, Brian leaned under the wing and opened the refuelling hatch. Inside was a male connector with a steel prong poking out like a finger. Brian leaned further out ... and slipped. He grabbed the railing of the ladder.

'Hold on, mate,' Nick said, mounting the ladder. 'Help is on the way.' He stopped three rungs below Brian and seized his belt. 'Do me a favor, all right?'

'What's that?'

'Don't fart.'

'I'll try, but no promises.'

He leaned out again and looked down at the others. Rudy and Bethany had joined Bob and Albert below the wing. 'Move away, unless you want a jet-fuel shower!' he called. 'I can't control the Delta's shut-off valve, and it may leak!' As he waited for them to back away he thought, *Of course, it may not. For all I know, the tanks on this thing are as dry as a goddam bone.*

He leaned out again, using both hands now that Nick had him firmly anchored, and slammed the nozzle into the fuel port. There was a brief, spattering shower of jet-fuel - a very welcome shower, under the circumstances - and then a hard metallic click. Brian twisted the nozzle a quarter-turn to the right, locking it into place, and listened with satisfaction as jet-fuel ran down the hose to the cart, where a closed valve would dam its flow.

'Okay,' he sighed, pulling himself back to the ladder. 'So far. so good.'

'What now, mate? How do we make that cart run? Do we jump-start it from the plane, or what?'

'I doubt if we could do that even if someone had remembered to bring the Jumper cables,' Brian said. 'Luckily, it doesn't *have* to run. Essentially, the cart is just a gadget to filter and transfer fuel. I'm going to use the auxiliary power units on our plane to suck the fuel out of the 727 the way you'd use a straw to suck lemonade out of a glass.'

'How long is it going to take?'

'Under optimum conditions - which would mean pumping with ground power -we could load 2,000 pounds of fuel a minute. Doing it like this makes it harder to figure. I've never had to use the APUs to pump fuel before. At least an hour. Maybe two.'

Nick gazed anxiously eastward for a moment, and when he spoke again his voice was low. 'Do me a favor, mate - don't tell the others that.'

'Why not?'

'Because I don't think we *have* two hours. We may not even have one.'

5

Alone in first class, Dinah Catherine Bellman opened her eyes. And saw. 'Craig,' she whispered.

6

Craig.

But he didn't want to hear his name. He only wanted to be left alone; he never wanted to hear his name again. When people called his name, something bad always happened. *Always.*

Craig! Get up, Craig!

No. He *wouldn't* get up. His head had become a vast chambered hive; pain roared and raved in each irregular room and crooked corridor. Bees had come. The bees had thought he was dead. They had invaded his head and turned his skull into a honeycomb. And now ... now ...

They sense my thoughts and are trying to sting them to death, he thought, and uttered a thick, agonized groan. His blood-streaked hands opened and closed slowly on the industrial carpet which covered the lower-lobby floor. *Let me die, oh please just let me die.*

Craig, you have to get up! Now!

It was his father's voice, the one voice he had never been able to refuse or shut out. But he would refuse it now. He would shut it out now.

'Go away,' he croaked. 'I hate you. Go away.'

Pain blared through his head in a golden shriek of trumpets. Clouds of bees, furious and stinging, flew from the bells as they blew.

Oh let me die, he thought. *Oh let me die. This is hell. I am in a hell of bees and big-band horns.*

Get up, Craiggy-weggy. It's your birthday, and guess what? As soon as you get up, someone's going to hand you a beer and hit you over the head ... because THIS thud's for you!

'No,' he said. 'No more hitting.' His hands shuffled on the carpet. He made an effort to open his eyes, but a glue of drying blood had stuck them shut. 'You're dead. Both of you are dead. You can't hit me, and you can't make me do things. Both of you are dead, and I want to be dead, too.'

But he wasn't dead. Somewhere beyond these phantom voices he could hear the whine of jet engines ... and that other sound. The sound of the langoliers on the march. On the *run*.

Craig. get up. You have to get up.

He realized that it wasn't the voice of his father, or of his mother, either. That had only been his poor, wounded mind trying to fool itself. This was a voice from ... from

(above?)

some other place, some high bright place where pain was a myth and pressure was a dream.

Craig, they've come to you - all the people you wanted to see. They left Boston and came here. That's how important you are to them. You can still do it, Craig. You can still pull the pin. There's still time to hand in your papers and fall out of your father's army ... if you're man enough to do it, that is.

If you're man enough to do it.

'Man enough?' he croaked. '*Man* enough? Whoever you are, you've *got* to be shitting me.'

He tried again to open his eyes. The tacky blood holding them shut gave a little but would not let go. He managed to work one hand up to his face.

It brushed the remains of his nose and he gave voice to a low, tired scream of pain. Inside his head the trumpets blared and the bees swarmed. He waited until the worst of the pain had subsided, then poked out two fingers and used them to pull his own eyelids up.

That corona of light was still there. It made a vaguely evocative shape in the gloom.

Slowly, a little at a time, Craig raised his head.

And saw *her*.

She stood within the corona of light.

It was the little girl, but her dark glasses were gone and she was looking at him, and her eyes were kind.

Come on, Craig. Get up. I know it's hard, but you have to get up - you have to. Because they are all here, they are all waiting ... but they won't wait forever. The langoliers will see to that.

She was not standing on the floor, he saw. Her shoes appeared to float an inch or two above it, and the bright light was all around her. She was outlined in spectral radiance.

Come, Craig. Get up.

He started struggling to his feet. It was very hard. His sense of balance was almost gone, and it was hard to hold his head up - because, of course, it was full of angry honeybees. Twice he fell back, but each time he began again, mesmerized and entranced by the glowing girl with her kind eyes and her promise of ultimate release.

They are all waiting, Craig. For you.

They are waiting for you.

7

Dinah lay on the stretcher, watching with her blind eyes as Craig Toomy got to one knee, fell over on his side, then began trying to rise once more. Her heart was suffused with a terrible stern pity for this hurt and broken man, this murdering fish that only wanted to explode. On his ruined, bloody face she saw a terrible mixture of emotions: fear, hope, and a kind of merciless determination.

I'm sorry, Mr Toomy, she thought. In spite of what you did, I'm sorry. But we need you.

Then called to him again, called with her own dying consciousness:

Get up, Craig! Hurry! It's almost too late!

And she sensed that it was.

8

Once the longer of the two hoses was looped under the belly of the 767 and attached to its fuel port, Brian returned to the cockpit, cycled up the APUs' and went to work sucking the 727-400's fuel tanks dry. As he watched the LED readout on his right tank slowly climb toward 24,000 pounds, he waited tensely for the APUs to start chugging and lugging, trying to eat fuel which would not burn.

The right tank had reached the 8,000-pound mark when he heard the note of the small jet engines at the rear of the plane change - they grew rough and labored.

'What's happening, mate?' Nick asked. He was sitting in the co-pilot's chair again. His hair was disarrayed, and there were wide streaks of grease and blood across his formerly natty button-down shirt.

'The APU engines are getting a taste of the 727's fuel and they don't like it,' Brian said. 'I hope Albert's magic works, Nick, but I don't know.'

Just before the LED reached 9,000 pounds in the right tank, the first APU cut out. A red ENGINE SHUTDOWN light appeared on Brian's board. He flicked the APU off.

'What can you do about it?' Nick asked, getting up and coming to look over Brian's shoulder.

'Use the other three APUs to keep the pumps running and hope,' Brian said.

The second APU cut out thirty seconds later, and while Brian was moving his hand to shut it down, the third went. The cockpit lights went with it; now there was only the irregular chug of the hydraulic pumps and the lights on Brian's board, which were flickering. The last APU was roaring choppily, cycling up and down, shaking the plane.

'I'm shutting down completely,' Brian said. He sounded harsh and strained to himself, a man who was way out of his depth and tiring fast in the undertow. 'We'll have to wait for the Delta's fuel to join our plane's time-stream, or time-frame, or whatever the fuck it is. We can't go on like this. A strong power-surge before the last APU cuts out could wipe the INS clean. Maybe even fry it.'

But as Brian reached for the switch, the engine's choppy note suddenly began to smooth out. He turned and stared at Nick

unbelievably. Nick looked back, and a big, slow grin lit his face.

'We might have lucked out, mate.'

Brian raised his hands, crossed both sets of fingers, and shook them in the air. 'I hope so,' he said, and swung back to the boards. He flicked the switches marked APU 1, 3, and 4. They kicked in smoothly. The cockpit lights flashed back on. The cabin bells binged. Nick whooped and clapped Brian on the back.

Bethany appeared in the doorway behind them. 'What's happening? Is everything all right?'

'I think,' Brian said without turning, 'that we might just have a shot at this thing.'

9

Craig finally managed to stand upright. The glowing girl now stood with her feet just above the luggage conveyor belt. She looked at him with a supernatural sweetness and something else ... something he had longed for his whole life. What was it?

He groped for it, and at last it came to him.

It was compassion.

Compassion and understanding.

He looked around and saw that the darkness was draining away. That meant he had been out all night, didn't it? He didn't know. And it didn't matter. All that mattered was that the glowing girl had brought *them to him* - the investment bankers, the bond specialists, the commission-brokers, and the stock-rollers. They were here, they would want an explanation of just what young Mr Craiggy-Weggy Toomy-Woomy had been up to, and here was the ecstatic truth: *monkey-business!* That was what he had been up to - yards and yards of monkey-business - miles of monkey-business. And when he told them that ...

'They'll have to let me go ... won't they?'

Yes, she said. *But you have to hurry, Craig. You have to hurry before they decide you're not coming and leave.*

Craig began to make his slow way forward. The girl's feet did not move, but as he approached her she floated backward like a mirage,

toward the rubber strips which hung between the luggage-retrieval area and the loading dock outside.

And ... oh, glorious: she was *smiling*.

10

They were all back on the plane now, all except Bob and Albert, who were sitting on the stairs and listening to the sound roll toward them in a slow, broken wave.

Laurel Stevenson was standing at the open forward door and looking at the terminal, still wondering what they were going to do about Mr Toomy, when Bethany tugged at the back of her blouse.

'Dinah is talking in her sleep, or something. I think she might be delirious. Can you come?'

Laurel came. Rudy Warwick was sitting across from Dinah, holding one of her hands and looking at her anxiously.

'I dunno,' he said worriedly. 'I dunno, but I think she might be going.'

Laurel felt the girl's forehead. It was dry and very hot. The bleeding had either slowed down or stopped entirely, but the girl's respiration came in a series of pitiful whistling sounds. Blood was crusted around her mouth like strawberry sauce.

Laurel began, 'I think -' and then Dinah said, quite clearly, 'You have to hurry before they all decide you're not coming and leave.'

Laurel and Bethany exchanged puzzled, frightened glances.

'I think she's dreaming about that guy Toomy,' Rudy told Laurel. 'She said his name once.'

'Yes,' Dinah said. Her eyes were closed, but her head moved slightly and she appeared to listen. 'Yes I will be,' she said. 'If you want me to, I will. But hurry. I know it hurts, but you have to hurry.'

'She is delirious, isn't she?' Bethany whispered.

'No,' Laurel said. 'I don't think so. I think she might be ... dreaming.'

But that was not what she thought at all. What she really thought was that Dinah might be

(seeing)

doing something else. She didn't think she wanted to know what that something might be, although an idea whirled and danced far back in her mind. Laurel knew she could summon that idea if she wanted to, but she didn't. Because something creepy was going on here, *extremely* creepy, and she could not escape the idea that it *did* have something to do with

(don't kill him ... we need him)

Mr Toomy.

'Leave her alone,' she said in a dry, abrupt tone of voice. 'Leave her alone and let her

(do what she has to do to him)

sleep.'

'God, I hope we take off soon,' Bethany said miserably, and Rudy put a comforting arm around her shoulders.

11

Craig reached the conveyor belt and fell onto it. A white sheet of agony ripped through his head, his neck, his chest. He tried to remember what had happened to him and couldn't. He had run down the stalled escalator, he had hidden in a little room, he had sat tearing strips of paper in the dark ... and that was where memory stopped.

He raised his head, hair hanging in his eyes, and looked at the glowing girl, who now sat cross-legged in front of the rubber strips, an inch off the conveyor belt. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life; how could he ever have thought she was one of *them*?

'Are you an angel?' he croaked.

Yes, the glowing girl replied, and Craig felt his pain overwhelmed with joy. His vision blurred and then tears - the first ones he had ever cried as an adult - began to run slowly down his cheeks. Suddenly he found himself remembering his mother's sweet, droning, drunken voice as she sang that old song.

'Are you an angel of the morning? Will you be *my* angel of the morning?'

Yes - I will be. If you want me to, I will. But hurry. I know it hurts, Mr Toomy, but you have to hurry.

'Yes,' Craig sobbed, and began to crawl eagerly along the luggage conveyor belt toward her. Every movement sent fresh pain jig-jagging through him on irregular courses; blood dripped from his smashed nose and shattered mouth. Yet he still hurried as much as he could. Ahead of him, the little girl faded back through the hanging rubber strips, somehow not disturbing them at all as she went.

'Just touch my cheek before you leave me, baby,' Craig said. He hawked up a spongy mat of blood, spat it on the wall where it clung like a huge dead spider, and tried to crawl faster.

12

To the east of the airport, a large cracking, rending sound filled the freakish morning. Bob and Albert got to their feet, faces pallid and filled with dreadful questions.

'What was that?' Albert asked.

'I think it was a tree,' Bob replied, and licked his lips.

'But there's no wind!'

'No,' Bob agreed. 'There's no wind.'

The noise had now become a moving barricade of splintered sound. Parts of it would seem to come into focus ... and then drop back again just before identification was possible. At one moment Albert could swear he heard something barking, and then the barks ... or yaps ... or whatever they were ... would be swallowed up by a brief sour humming sound like evil electricity. The only constants were the crunching and the steady drilling whine.

'What's happening?' Bethany called shrilly from behind them.

'Noth -' Albert began, and then Bob seized his shoulder and pointed.

'Look!' he shouted. 'Look over there!'

Far to the east of them, on the horizon, a series of power pylons marched north and south across a high wooded ridge. As Albert looked, one of the pylons tottered like a toy and then fell over, pulling

a snarl of power cables after it. A moment later another pylon went, and another, and another.

'That's not all, either,' Albert said numbly. 'Look at the trees. The trees over there are shaking like shrubs.'

But they were not just shaking. As Albert and the others looked, the trees began to fall over, to disappear.

Crunch, smack, crunch, thud, BARK!

Crunch, smack, BARK! thump, crunch.

'We have to get out of here,' Bob said. He gripped Albert with both hands. His eyes were huge, avid with a kind of idiotic terror. The expression stood in sick, jagged contrast to his narrow, intelligent face. 'I believe we have to get out of here *right now.*'

On the horizon, perhaps ten miles distant, the tall gantry of a radio tower trembled, rolled outward, and crashed down to disappear into the quaking trees. Now they could feel the very earth beginning to vibrate; it ran up the ladder and shook their feet in their shoes.

'Make it stop!' Bethany suddenly screamed from the doorway above them. She clapped her hands to her ears. '*Oh please make it STOP!*'

But the sound-wave rolled on toward them - the crunching, smacking, eating sound of the langoliers.

13

'I don't like to tease, Brian, but how much longer?' Nick's voice was taut. 'There's a river about four miles east of here - I saw it when we were coming down - and I reckon whatever's coming is just now on the other side of it.'

Brian glanced at his fuel readouts. 24,000 pounds in the right wing; 16,000 pounds in the left. It was going faster now that he didn't have to pump the Delta's fuel overwing to the other side.

'Fifteen minutes,' he said. He could feel sweat standing out on his brow in big drops. 'We've got to have more fuel, Nick, or we'll come down dead in the Mojave Desert. Another ten minutes to unhook, button up, and taxi out.'

'You can't cut that? You're sure you can't cut that?'

Brian shook his head and turned back to his gauges.

14

Craig crawled slowly through the rubber strips, feeling them slide down his back like limp fingers. He emerged in the white, dead light of a new - and vastly shortened - day. The sound was terrible, overwhelming, the sound of an invading cannibal army. Even the sky seemed to shake with it, and for a moment fear froze him in place.

Look, his angel of the morning said, and pointed.

Craig looked ... and forgot his fear. Beyond the American Pride 767, in a triangle of dead grass bounded by two taxiways and a runway, there was a long mahogany boardroom table. It gleamed brightly in the listless light. At each place was a yellow legal pad, a pitcher of ice water, and a Waterford glass. Sitting around the table were two dozen men in sober bankers' suits, and now they were all turning to look at him.

Suddenly they began to clap their hands. They stood and faced him applauding his arrival. Craig felt a huge, grateful grin begin to stretch his face.

15

Dinah had been left alone in first class. Her breathing had become very labored now, and her voice was a strangled choke.

'Run to them, Craig! Quick! Quick!'

16

Craig tumbled off the conveyor, struck the concrete with a bone-rattling thump, and flailed to his feet. The pain no longer mattered. The angel had brought them! Of *course* she had brought them! Angels were like the ghosts in the story about Mr Scrooge - they could do anything they wanted! The corona around her had begun to

dim and she was fading out, but it didn't matter. She had brought his salvation: a net in which he was finally, blessedly caught.

Run to them, Craig! Run around the plane! Run away from the plane! Run to them now!

Craig began to run - a shambling stride that quickly became a crippled sprint. As he ran his head nodded up and down like a sunflower on a broken stalk. He ran toward humorless, unforgiving men who were his salvation, men who might have been fisher-folk standing in a boat beyond an unsuspected silver sky, retrieving their net to see what fabulous things they had caught.

17

The LED readout for the left tank began to slow down when it reached 21,000 pounds, and by the time it topped 22,000 it had almost stopped. Brian understood what was happening and quickly flicked two switches, shutting down the hydraulic pumps. The 727-400 had given them what she had to give: a little over 46,000 pounds of jet-fuel. It would have to be enough.

'All right,' he said, standing up.

'All right what?' Nick asked, also standing.

'We're uncoupling and getting the fuck out of here.'

The approaching noise had reached deafening levels. Mixed into the crunching smacking sound and the transmission squeal were falling trees and the dull crump of collapsing buildings. Just before shutting the pumps down he had heard a number of crackling thuds followed by a series of deep splashes. A bridge falling into the river Nick had seen, he imagined.

'Mr Toomy!' Bethany screamed suddenly. *'It's Mr Toomy!'*

Nick beat Brian out the door and into first class, but they were both in time to see Craig go shambling and lurching across the taxiway. He ignored the plane completely. His destination appeared to be an empty triangle of grass bounded by a pair of crisscrossing taxiways.

'What's he doing?' Rudy breathed.

'Never mind him,' Brian said. 'We're all out of time. Nick? Go down the ladder ahead of me. Hold me while I uncouple the hose.' Brian

felt like a man standing naked on a beach as a tidal wave humps up on the horizon and rushes toward the shore.

Nick followed him down and laid hold of Brian's belt again as Brian leaned out and twisted the nozzle of the hose, unlocking it. A moment later he yanked the hose free and dropped it to the cement, where the nozzle-ring clanged dully. Brian slammed the fuel-port door shut.

'Come on,' he said after Nick had pulled him back. His face was dirty gray. 'Let's get out of here.'

But Nick did not move. He was frozen in place, staring to the east. His skin had gone the color of paper. On his face was an expression of dreamlike horror. His upper lip trembled, and in that moment he looked like a dog that is too frightened to snarl.

Brian turned his head slowly in that direction, hearing the tendons in his neck creak like a rusty spring on an old screen door as he did so. He turned his head and watched as the langoliers finally entered stage left.

18

'So you see,' Craig said, approaching the empty chair at the head of the table and standing before the men seated around it, 'the brokers with whom I did business were not only unscrupulous; many of them were actually CIA plants whose job it was to contact and fake out just such bankers as myself - men looking to fill up skinny portfolios in a hurry. As far as they are concerned, the end - keeping communism out of South America - justifies any available means.'

'What procedures did you follow to check these fellows out?' a fat man in an expensive blue suit asked. 'Did you use a bond-insurance company, or does your bank retain a specific investigation firm in such cases?' Blue Suit's round, jowly face was perfectly shaved; his cheeks glowed either with good health or forty years of Scotch and sodas; his eyes were merciless chips of blue ice. They were wonderful eyes; they were father-eyes.

Somewhere, far away from this boardroom two floors below the top of the Prudential Center, Craig could hear a hell of a racket going

on. Road construction, he supposed. There was always road construction going on in Boston, and he suspected that most of it was unnecessary, that in most cases it was just the old, old story - the unscrupulous taking cheerful advantage of the unwary. It had nothing to do with him. Nothing whatever. His job was to deal with the man in the blue suit, and he couldn't wait to get started.

'We're waiting, Craig,' the president of his own banking institution said. Craig felt momentary surprise - Mr Parker hadn't been scheduled to attend this meeting - and then the feeling was overwhelmed by happiness.

'No procedures at all!' he screamed joyfully into their shocked faces. 'I just bought and bought and bought! I followed No ... PROCEDURES ... AT ALL!'

He was about to go on, to elaborate on this theme, to really *expound* on it, when a sound stopped him. *This* sound was not miles away; this sound was close, very close, perhaps in the boardroom itself.

A whickering chopping sound, like dry hungry teeth.

Suddenly Craig felt a deep need to tear some paper - any paper would do. He reached for the legal pad in front of his place at the table, but the pad was gone. So was the table. So were the bankers. So was *Boston*.

'Where *am I?*' he asked in a small, perplexed voice, and looked around. Suddenly he realized ... and suddenly he saw *them*.

The langoliers had come.

They had come for *him*.

Craig Toomy began to scream.

19

Brian could see them, but could not understand what it was he was seeing. In some strange way they seemed to *defy* seeing, and he sensed his frantic, overstressed mind trying to change the incoming information, to make the shapes which had begun to appear at the east end of Runway 21 into something it could understand.

At first there were only two shapes, one black, one a dark tomato red.

Are they balls? his mind asked doubtfully. Could *they be balls?*

Something actually seemed to *click* in the center of his head and they *were* balls, sort of like beachballs, but balls which rippled and contracted and then expanded again, as if he was seeing them through a heat-haze. They came bowling out of the high dead grass at the end of Runway 21, leaving cut swaths of blackness behind them. They were somehow cutting the grass

No, his mind reluctantly denied. *They are not just cutting the grass, and you know it. They are cutting a lot more than the grass.*

What they left behind were narrow lines of perfect blackness. And now, as they raced playfully down the white concrete at the end of the runway, they were *still* leaving narrow dark tracks behind. They glistened like tar.

No, his mind reluctantly denied. *Not tar. You know what that blackness is. It's nothing. Nothing at all. They are eating a lot more than the surface of the runway.*

There was something malignantly joyful about their behavior. They crisscrossed each other's paths, leaving a wavy black X on the outer taxiway. They bounced high in the air, did an exuberant, crisscrossing maneuver, and then raced straight for the plane.

As they did, Brian screamed and Nick screamed beside him. *Faces* lurked below the surfaces of the racing balls - monstrous, alien faces. They shimmered and twitched and wavered like faces made of glowing swamp-gas. The eyes were only rudimentary indentations, but the mouths were huge: semicircular caves lined with gnashing, blurring teeth.

They ate as they came, rolling up narrow strips of the world.

A Texaco fuel truck was parked on the outer taxiway. The langoliers pounced upon it, high-speed teeth whirring and crunching and bulging out of their blurred bodies. They went through it without pause. One of them burrowed a path directly through the rear tires, and for a moment, before the tires collapsed, Brian could see the shape it had cut - a shape like a cartoon mouse-hole in a cartoon baseboard.

The other leaped high, disappeared for a moment behind the Texaco truck's boxy tank, and then blasted straight through, leaving a metal-ringed hole from which av-gas sprayed in a dull amber flood. They struck the ground, bounced as if on springs, crisscrossed again, and raced on toward the airplane. Reality peeled away in narrow strips beneath them, peeled away wherever and whatever they touched, and as they neared, Brian realized that they were unzipping more than the world - they were opening all the depths of forever.

They reached the edge of the tarmac and paused. They jittered uncertainly in place for a moment, looking like the bouncing balls that hopped over the words in old movie-house sing-alongs.

Then they turned and zipped off in a new direction.

Zipped off in the direction of Craig Toomy who stood watching them and screaming into the white day.

With a huge effort, Brian snapped the paralysis which held him. He elbowed Nick, who was still frozen below him. 'Come on!' Nick didn't move and Brian drove his elbow back harder this time, connecting solidly with Nick's forehead. 'Come on, I said! Move your ass! *We're getting out of here!*'

Now more black and red balls were appearing at the edge of the airport. They bounced, danced, circled ... and then raced toward them.

20

You can't get away from them, his father had said, because of their legs. Their fast little legs.

Craig tried, nevertheless.

He turned and ran for the terminal, casting horrified grimacing looks behind him as he did. His shoes rattled on the pavement. He ignored the American Pride 767, which was now cycling up again, and ran for the luggage area instead.

No, Craig, his father said. You may THINK you're running, but you're not. You know what you're really doing - you're SCAMPERING!

Behind him the two ball-shapes sped up, closing the gap with effortless, happy speed. They crisscrossed twice, just a pair of daffy showoffs in a dead world, leaving spiky lines of blackness behind them. They rolled after Craig about seven inches apart, creating what looked like negative ski-tracks behind their weird, shimmering bodies. They caught him twenty feet from the luggage conveyor belt and chewed off his feet in a millisecond. At one moment his briskly scampering feet were there. At the next, Craig was three inches shorter; his feet, along with his expensive Bally loafers, had simply ceased to exist. There was no blood; the wounds were cauterized instantly in the langoliers' scorching passage.

Craig didn't know his feet had ceased to exist. He scampered on the stumps of his ankles, and as the first pain began to sizzle up his legs, the langoliers banked in a tight turn and came back, rolling up the pavement side by side. Their trails crossed twice this time, creating a crescent of cement bordered in black, like a depiction of the moon in a child's coloring book. Only this crescent began to *sink*, not into the earth - for there appeared to be no earth beneath the surface - but into nowhere at all.

This time the langoliers bounced upward in perfect tandem and clipped Craig off at the knees. He came down, still trying to run, and then fell sprawling, waving his stumps. His scampering days were over.

'No!' he screamed. 'No, Daddy! No! I'll be good! Please make them go away! I'll be good, I SWEAR I'LL BE GOOD FROM NOW ON IF YOU JUST MAKE THEM GO AW -'

Then they rushed at him again, gibbering yammering buzzing whining, and he saw the frozen machine blur of their gnashing teeth and felt the hot bellows of their frantic, blind vitality in the half-instant before they began to cut him apart in random chunks.

His last thought was: *How can their little legs be fast? They have no le*

Scores of the black things had now appeared, and Laurel understood that soon there would be hundreds, thousands, millions, billions. Even with the jet engines screaming through the open forward door as Brian pulled the 767 away from the ladder and the wing of the Delta jet, she could hear their yammering, inhuman cry.

Great looping coils of blackness crisscrossed the end of Runway 21 - and then the tracks arched toward the terminal, converging as the balls making them rushed toward Craig Toomy.

I guess they don't get live meat very often, she thought, and suddenly felt like vomiting.

Nick Hopewell slammed the forward door after one final, unbelieving glance and dogged it shut. He began to stagger back down the aisle, swaying from side to side like a drunk as he came. His eyes seemed to fill his whole face. Blood streamed down his chin; he had bitten his lower lips deeply. He put his arms around Laurel and buried his burning face in the hollow where her neck met her shoulder. She put her arms around him and held him tight.

22

In the cockpit, Brian powered up as fast as he dared, and sent the 767 charging along the taxiway at a suicidal rate of speed. The eastern edge of the airport was now black with the invading balls; the end of Runway 21 had completely disappeared and the world beyond it was going. In that direction the white, unmoving sky now arched down over a world of scrawled black lines and fallen trees.

As the plane neared the end of the taxiway, Brian grabbed the microphone and shouted: 'Belt in! Belt in! If you're not belted in, hold on!'

He slowed marginally, then slewed the 767 onto Runway 33. As he did so he saw something which made his mind cringe and wail: huge sections of the world which lay to the east of the runway, huge irregular pieces of *reality itself*, were falling into the ground like freight elevators, leaving big senseless chunks of emptiness behind.

They are eating the world, he thought. *My God, my dear God, they are eating the world.*

Then the entire airfield was turning in front of him and Flight 29 was pointed west again, with Runway 33 lying open and long and deserted before it.

23

Overhead compartments burst open when the 767 swerved onto the runway, spraying carry-on luggage across the main cabin in a deadly hail. Bethany, who hadn't had time to fasten her seatbelt, was hurled into Albert Kaussner's lap. Albert noticed neither his lapful of warm girl nor the attache case that caromed off the curved wall three feet in front of his nose. He saw only the dark, speeding shapes rushing across Runway 21 to the left of them, and the glistening dark tracks they left behind. These tracks converged in a giant well of blackness where the luggage-unloading area had been.

They are being drawn to Mr Toomy, he thought, or to where Mr Toomy was. If he hadn't come out of the terminal, they would have chosen the airplane instead. They would have eaten it - and us inside it - from the wheels up.

Behind him, Bob Jenkins spoke in a trembling, awed voice. 'Now we know, don't we?'

'*What?*' Laurel screamed in an odd, breathless voice she did not recognize as her own. A duffel-bag landed in her lap; Nick raised his head, let go of her, and batted it absently into the aisle. '*What do we know?*'

'Why, what happens to today when it becomes yesterday, what happens to the present when it becomes the past. It waits - dead and empty and deserted. It waits for *them*. It waits for the time-keepers of eternity, always running along behind, cleaning up the mess in the most efficient way possible ... by eating it.'

'Mr Toomy knew about them,' Dinah said in a clear, dreaming voice. 'Mr Toomy says they are the langoliers.' Then the jet engines cycled up to full power and the plane charged down Runway 33.

24

Brian saw two of the balls zip across the runway ahead of him, peeling back the surface of reality in a pair of parallel tracks which gleamed like polished ebony. It was too late to stop. The 767 shuddered like a dog with a chill as it raced over the empty places, but he was able to hold it on the runway. He shoved his throttles forward, burying them, and watched his ground-speed indicator rise toward the commit point.

Even now he could hear those manic chewing, gobbling sounds ... although he did not know if they were in his ears or only his reeling mind. And did not care.

25

Leaning over Laurel to look out the window, Nick saw the Bangor International terminal sliced, diced, chopped, and channelled. It tottered in its various jigsaw pieces and then began to tumble into loony chasms of darkness.

Bethany Simms screamed. A black track was speeding along next to the 767, chewing up the edge of the runway. Suddenly it jagged to the right and disappeared underneath the plane.

There was another terrific bump.

'Did it get us?' Nick shouted. '*Did it get us?*'

No one answered him. Their pale, terrified faces stared out the windows and no one answered him. Trees rushed by in a gray-green blur. In the cockpit, Brian sat tensely forward in his seat, waiting for one of those balls to bounce up in front of the cockpit window and bullet through. None did.

On his board, the last red lights turned green. Brian hauled back on the yoke and the 767 was airborne again.

26

In the main cabin, a black-bearded man with bloodshot eyes staggered forward, blinking owlishly at his fellow travellers. 'Are we almost in Boston yet?' he inquired at large. 'I hope so, because I want to go back to bed. I've got one *bastard* of a headache.'

CHAPTER 9

Goodbye to Bangor. Heading West
Through Days and Nights. Seeing Through
the Eyes of Others. The Endless
Gulf. The Rip. The Warning. Brian's
Decision. The Landing. Shooting Stars Only.

1

The plane banked heavily east, throwing the man with the black beard into a row of empty seats three-quarters of the way up the main cabin. He looked around at all the other empty seats with a wide, frightened gaze, and squeezed his eyes shut. 'Jesus,' he muttered. 'DTs. Fucking DTs. This is the worst they've ever been.' He looked around fearfully. 'The bugs come next ... where's the motherfuckin bugs?'

No bugs, Albert thought, but watt till you see the balls. You're going to love those.

'Buckle yourself in, mate,' Nick said, 'and shut U-'

He broke off, staring down incredulously at the airport ... or where the airport had been. The main buildings were gone, and the National Guard base at the west end was going. Flight 29 overflowed a growing abyss of darkness, an eternal cistern that seemed to have no end.

'Oh dear Jesus, Nick,' Laurel said unsteadily, and suddenly put her hands over her eyes.

As they overflowed Runway 33 at 1,500 feet, Nick saw sixty or a hundred parallel lines racing up the concrete, cutting the runway into long strips that sank into emptiness. The strips reminded him of Craig Toomy:

Rii-ip.

On the other side of the aisle, Bethany pulled down the windowshade beside Albert's seat with a bang.

'Don't you dare open that!' she told him in a scolding, hysterical voice.

'Don't worry,' Albert said, and suddenly remembered that he had left his violin down there. Well ... it was undoubtedly gone now. He abruptly put his hands over his own face.

2

Before Brian began to turn west again, he saw what lay east of Bangor. It was nothing. Nothing at all. A titantic river of blackness lay in a still sweep from horizon to horizon under the white dome of the sky. The trees were gone. the city was gone, the earth itself was gone.

This is what it must be like to fly in outer space, he thought, and he felt his rationality slip a cog, as it had on the trip east. He held onto himself desperately and made himself concentrate on flying the plane.

He brought them up quickly, wanting to be in the clouds, wanting that hellish vision to be blotted out. Then Flight 29 was pointed west again. In the moments before they entered the clouds, he saw the hills and woods and lakes which stretched to the west of the city, saw them being cut ruthlessly apart by thousands of black spiderweb lines. He saw huge swatches of reality go sliding soundlessly into the growing mouth of the abyss, and Brian did something he had never done before while in the cockpit of an airplane.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them again they were in the clouds.

3

There was almost no turbulence this time; as Bob Jenkins had suggested, the weather patterns appeared to be running down like an old clock. Ten minutes after entering the clouds, Flight 29 emerged into the bright-blue world which began at 18,000 feet. The remaining passengers looked around at each other nervously, then at the speakers as Brian came on the intercom.

'We're up,' he said simply. 'You all know what happens now: we go back exactly the way we came, and hope that whatever doorway we came through is still there. If it is, we'll try going through.'

He paused for a moment, then resumed.

'Our return flight is going to take somewhere between four and a half and six hours. I'd like to be more exact, but I can't. Under ordinary circumstances, the flight west usually takes longer than the flight east, because of prevailing wind conditions, but so far as I can tell from my cockpit instruments, there is no wind.' Brian paused for a moment and then added, 'There's nothing moving up here but us.' For a moment the intercom stayed on, as if Brian meant to add something else, and then it clicked off.

4

'What in God's name is going on here?' the man with the black beard asked shakily.

Albert looked at him for a moment and then said, 'I don't think you want to know.'

'Am I in the hospital again?' The man with the black beard blinked at Albert fearfully, and Albert felt sudden sympathy for the man.

'Well, why don't you believe you are, if it will help?'

The man with the black beard continued to stare at him for a moment in dreadful fascination and then announced, 'I'm going back to sleep. Right now.' He reclined his seat and closed his eyes. In less than a minute his chest was moving up and down with deep regularity and he was snoring under his breath.

Albert envied him.

5

Nick gave Laurel a brief hug, then unbuckled his seatbelt and stood up. 'I'm going forward,' he said. 'Want to come?'

Laurel shook her head and pointed across the aisle at Dinah. 'I'll stay with her.'

'There's nothing you can do, you know,' Nick said. 'It's in God's hands now, I'm afraid.'

'I do know that,' she said, 'but I want to stay.'

'All right, Laurel.' He brushed at her hair gently with the palm of his hand. 'It's such a pretty name. You deserve it.'

She glanced up at him and smiled. 'Thank you.'

'We have a dinner date - you haven't forgotten, have you?'

'No,' she said, still smiling. 'I haven't and I won't.'

He bent down and brushed a kiss lightly across her mouth. 'Good,' he said. 'Neither will I.'

He went forward and she pressed her fingers lightly against her mouth, as if to hold his kiss there, where it belonged. Dinner with Nick Hopewell - a dark, mysterious stranger. Maybe with candles and a good bottle of wine. More kisses afterward - real kisses. It all seemed like something which might happen in one of the Harlequin romances she sometimes read. So what? They were pleasant stories, full of sweet and harmless dreams. It didn't hurt to dream a little, did it?

Of course not. But why did she feel the dream was so unlikely to come true?

She unbuckled her own seatbelt, crossed the aisle, and put her hand on the girl's forehead. The hectic heat she had felt before was gone; Dinah's skin was now waxy-cool.

I think she's going, Rudy had said shortly before they started their headlong take-off charge. Now the words recurred to Laurel and rang in her head with sickening validity. Dinah was taking air in shallow sips, her chest barely rising and falling beneath the strap which cinched the tablecloth pad tight over her wound.

Laurel brushed the girl's hair off her forehead with infinite tenderness and thought of that strange moment in the restaurant, when Dinah had reached out and grasped the cuff of Nick's jeans. *Don't you kill him ... we need him.*

Did you save us, Dinah? Did you do something to Mr Toomy that saved us? Did you make him somehow trade his life for ours?

She thought that perhaps something like that had happened ... and reflected that, if it was true, this little girl, blind and badly wounded, had made a dreadful decision inside her darkness.

She leaned forward and kissed each of Dinah's cool, closed lids. 'Hold on,' she whispered. 'Please hold on, Dinah.'

6

Bethany turned to Albert, grasped both of his hands in hers, and asked: 'What happens if the fuel goes bad?'

Albert looked at her seriously and kindly. 'You know the answer to that, Bethany.'

'You can call me Beth, if you want.'

'Okay.'

She fumbled out her cigarettes, looked up at the NO SMOKING light, and put them away again. 'Yeah,' she said. 'I know. We crash. End of story. And do you know what?'

He shook his head, smiling a little.

'If we can't find that hole again, I hope Captain Engle won't even try to land the plane. I hope he just picks out a nice high mountain and crashes us into the top of it. Did you see what happened to that crazy guy? I don't want that to happen to me.'

She shuddered, and Albert put an arm around her. She looked up at him frankly. 'Would you like to kiss me?'

'Yes,' Albert said.

'Well, you better go ahead, then. The later it gets, the later it gets.'

Albert went ahead. It was only the third time in his life that the fastest Hebrew west of the Mississippi had kissed a girl, and it was great. He could spend the whole trip back in a lip-lock with this girl and never worry about a thing.

'Thank you,' she said, and put her head on his shoulder. 'I needed that.' 'Well, if you need it again, just ask,' Albert said. She looked up at him, amused. 'Do you *need* me to ask, Albert?' 'I reckon not,' drawled The Arizona Jew, and went back to work.

7

Nick had stopped on his way to the cockpit to speak to Bob Jenkins - an extremely nasty idea had occurred to him, and he

wanted to ask the writer about it.

'Do you think there could be any of those things up here?'

Bob thought it over for a moment. 'Judging from what we saw back at Bangor, I would think not. But it's hard to tell, isn't it? In a thing like this, all bets are off.'

'Yes. I suppose so. All bets are off.' Nick thought this over for a moment. 'What about this time-rip of yours? Would you like to give odds on us finding it again?'

Bob Jenkins slowly shook his head.

Rudy Warwick spoke up from behind them, startling them both. 'You didn't ask me, but I'll give you my opinion just the same. I put them at one in a thousand.'

Nick thought this over. After a moment a rare, radiant smile burst across his face. 'Not bad odds at all,' he said. 'Not when you consider the alternative.'

8

Less than forty minutes later, the blue sky through which Flight 29 moved began to deepen in color. It cycled slowly to indigo, and then to deep purple. Sitting in the cockpit, monitoring his instruments and wishing for a cup of coffee, Brian thought of an old song: *When the deep purple falls ... over sleepy garden walls ...*

No garden walls up here, but he could see the first ice-chip stars gleaming in the firmament. There was something reassuring and calming about the old constellations appearing, one by one, in their old places. He did not know how they could be the same when so many other things were so badly out of joint, but he was very glad they were.

'It's going faster, isn't it?' Nick said from behind him.

Brian turned in his seat to face him. 'Yes. It is. After awhile the "days" and "nights" will be passing as fast as a camera shutter can click, I think.'

Nick sighed. 'And now we do the hardest thing of all, don't we? We wait to see what happens. And pray a little bit, I suppose.'

'It couldn't hurt.' Brian took a long, measuring look at Nick Hopewell. 'I was on my way to Boston because my ex-wife died in a stupid fire. Dinah was going because a bunch of doctors promised her a new pair of eyes. Bob was going to a convention, Albert to music school, Laurel on vacation. Why were you going to Boston, Nick? 'Fess up. The hour groweth late.'

Nick looked at him thoughtfully for a long time and then laughed. 'Well why not?' he asked, but Brian was not so foolish as to believe this question was directed at him. 'What does a Most Secret classification mean when you've just seen a bunch of killer fuzzballs rolling up the world like an old rug?'

He laughed again.

'The United States hasn't exactly cornered the market on dirty tricks and covert operations,' he told Brian. 'We Limeys have forgotten more nasty mischief than you johnnies ever knew. We've cut capers in India, South Africa, China, and the part of Palestine which became Israel. We certainly got into a pissing contest with the wrong fellows that time, didn't we? Nevertheless, we British are great believers in cloak and dagger, and the fabled MI5 isn't where it ends but only where it begins. I spent eighteen years in the armed services, Brian - the last five of them in Special Operations. Since then I've done various odd jobs, some innocuous, some fabulously nasty.'

It was full dark outside now, and stars gleaming like spangles on a woman's formal evening gown.

'I was in Los Angeles - on vacation, actually - when I was contacted and told to fly to Boston. Extremely short notice, this was, and after four days spent backpacking in the San Gabriels, I was falling-down tired. That's why I happened to be sound asleep when Mr Jenkins's Event happened.

'There's a man in Boston, you see ... or was ... or will be (time-travel plays hell on the old verb tenses, doesn't it?) ... who is a politician of some note. The sort of fellow who moves and shakes with great vigor behind the scenes. This man - I'll call him Mr O'Banion, for the sake of conversation - is very rich, Brian, and he is an enthusiastic supporter of the Irish Republican Army. He has channelled millions of dollars into what some like to call Boston's

favorite charity, and there is a good deal of blood on his hands. Not just British soldiers but children in schoolyards, women in laundromats, and babies blown out of their prams in pieces. He is an idealist of the most dangerous sort: one who never has to view the carnage at first hand, one who has never had to look at a severed leg lying in the gutter and been forced to reconsider his actions in light of that experience.'

'You were supposed to kill this man O'Banion?'

'Not unless I had to,' Nick said calmly. 'He's very wealthy, but that's not the only problem. He's the total politician, you see, and he's got more fingers than the one he uses to stir the pot in Ireland. He has a great many powerful American friends, and some of his friends are our friends ... that's the nature of politics; a cat's cradle woven by men who for the most part belong in rooms with rubber walls. Killing Mr O'Banion would be a great political risk. But he keeps a little bit of fluff on the side. *She* was the one I was supposed to kill.'

'As a warning,' Brian said in a low, fascinated voice.

'Yes. As a warning.'

Almost a full minute passed as the two men sat in the cockpit, looking at each other. The only sound was the sleepy drone of the jet engines. Brian's eyes were shocked and somehow very young. Nick only looked weary.

'If we get out of this,' Brian said at last, 'if we get back, will you carry through with it?'

Nick shook his head. He did this slowly, but with great finality. 'I believe I've had what the Adventist blokes like to call a soul conversion, old mate of mine. No more midnight creeps or extreme-prejudice jobs for Mrs Hopewell's boy Nicholas. If we get out of this - a proposition I find rather shaky just now - I believe I'll retire.'

'And do what?'

Nick looked at him thoughtfully for a moment or two and then said, 'Well ... I suppose I could take flying lessons.'

Brian burst out laughing. After a moment, Mrs Hopewell's boy Nicholas joined him.

Thirty-five minutes later, daylight began to seep back into the main cabin of Flight 29. Three minutes later it might have been mid-morning; fifteen minutes after that it might have been noon.

Laurel looked around and saw that Dinah's sightless eyes were open.

Yet were they *entirely* sightless? There was something in them, something just beyond definition, which made Laurel wonder. She felt a sense of unknown awe creep into her, a feeling which almost touched upon fear.

She reached out and gently grasped one of Dinah's hands. 'Don't try to talk,' she said quietly. 'If you're awake, Dinah, don't try to talk - just listen. We're in the air. We're going back, and you're going to be all right - I promise you that.'

Dinah's hand tightened on hers, and after a moment Laurel realized the little girl was tugging her forward. She leaned over the secured stretcher. Dinah spoke in a tiny voice that seemed to Laurel a perfect scale model of her former voice.

'Don't worry about me, Laurel. I got ... what I wanted.'

'Dinah, you shouldn't -'

The unseeing brown eyes moved toward the sound of Laurel's voice. A little smile touched Dinah's bloody mouth. 'I saw,' that tiny voice, frail as a glass reed, told her. 'I saw through Mr Toomy's eyes. At the beginning, and then again at the end. It was better at the end. At the start, everything looked mean and nasty to him. It was better at the end.'

Laurel looked at her with helpless wonder.

The girl's hand let go of Laurel's and rose waveringly to touch her cheek. 'He wasn't such a bad guy, you know.' She coughed. Small flecks of blood flew from her mouth.

'Please, Dinah,' Laurel said. She had a sudden sensation that she could almost see through the little blind girl, and this brought a feeling of stifling, directionless panic. 'Please don't try to talk anymore.'

Dinah smiled. 'I saw you.' she said. 'You are beautiful, Laurel. *Everything* was beautiful ... even the things that were dead. It was so wonderful to ... you know ... just to see.'

She drew in one of her tiny sips of air, let it out, and simply didn't take the next one. Her sightless eyes now seemed to be looking far beyond Laurel Stevenson.

'Please breathe, Dinah,' Laurel said. She took the girl's hands in hers and began to kiss them repeatedly, as if she could kiss life back into that which was now beyond it. It was not fair for Dinah to die after she had saved them all; no God could demand such a sacrifice, not even for people who had somehow stepped outside of time itself. 'Please breathe, please, please, please breathe.'

But Dinah did not breathe. After a long time, Laurel returned the girl's hands to her lap and looked fixedly into her pale, still face. Laurel waited for her own eyes to fill up with tears, but no tears came. Yet her heart ached with fierce sorrow and her mind beat with its own deep and outraged protest: *Oh, no! Oh, not fair! This is not fair! Take it back, God! Take It back, damn you, take it back, you just take it BACK!*

But God did not take it back. The jet engines throbbed steadily, the sun shone on the bloody sleeve of Dinah's good travelling dress in a bright oblong, and God did not take it back. Laurel looked across the aisle and saw Albert and Bethany kissing. Albert was touching one of the girl's breasts through her tee-shirt, lightly, delicately, almost religiously. They seemed to make a ritual shape, a symbolic representation of life and that stubborn, intangible spark which carries life on in the face of the most dreadful reversals and ludicrous turns of fate. Laurel looked hopefully from them to Dinah ... and God had not taken it back.

God had not taken it back.

Laurel kissed the still slope of Dinah's cheek and then raised her hand to the little girl's face. Her fingers stopped only an inch from her eyelids.

I saw through Mr Toomy's eyes. Everything was beautiful ... even the things that were dead. It was so wonderful to see. 'Yes,' Laurel said. 'I can live with that.' She left Dinah's eyes open.

American Pride 29 flew west through the days and nights, going from light to darkness and light to darkness as if flying through a great, lazily shifting parade of fat clouds. Each cycle came slightly faster than the one before.

A little over three hours into the flight, the clouds below them ceased, and over exactly the same spot where they had begun on the flight east. Brian was willing to bet the front had not moved so much as a single foot. The Great Plains lay below them in a silent roan-colored expanse of land.

'No sign of them over here,' Rudy Warwick said. He did not have to specify what he was talking about.

'No,' Bob Jenkins agreed. 'We seem to have outrun them, either in space or in time.'

'Or in both,' Albert put in.

'Yes - or both.'

But they had not. As Flight 29 crossed the Rockies, they began to see the black lines below them again, thin as threads from this height. They shot up and down the rough, slabbed slopes and drew not-quite-meaningless patterns in the blue-gray carpet of trees. Nick stood at the forward door, looking out of the bullet porthole set into it. This porthole had a queer magnifying effect, and he soon discovered he could see better than he really wanted to. As he watched, two of the black lines split, raced round a jagged, snow-tipped peak, met on the far side, crossed, and raced down the other slope in diverging directions. Behind them the entire top of the mountain fell into itself, leaving something which looked like a volcano with a vast dead caldera at its truncated top.

'Jumping Jiminy Jesus,' Nick muttered, and passed a quivering hand over his brow.

As they crossed the Western Slope toward Utah, the dark began to come down again. The setting sun threw an orange-red glare over a fragmented hellscape that none of them could look at for long; one by one, they followed Bethany's example and pulled their windowshades. Nick went back to his seat on unsteady legs and dropped his forehead into one cold, clutching hand. After a moment or two he turned toward Laurel and she took him wordlessly in her arms.

Brian was forced to look at it. There were no shades in the cockpit. Western Colorado and eastern Utah fell into the pit of eternity piece by jagged piece below him and ahead of him. Mountains, buttes, mesas, and cols one by one ceased to exist as the crisscrossing langoliers cut them adrift from the rotting fabric of this dead past, cut them loose and sent them tumbling into sunless endless gulfs of forever. There was no sound up here, and somehow that was the most horrible thing of all. The land below them disappeared as silently as dust-motes.

Then darkness came like an act of mercy and for a little while he could concentrate on the stars. He clung to them with the fierceness of panic, the only real things left in this horrible world: Orion the hunter; Pegasus, the great shimmering horse of midnight; Cassiopeia in her starry chair.

11

Half an hour later the sun rose again, and Brian felt his sanity give a deep shudder and slide closer to the edge of its own abyss. The world below was gone; utterly and finally gone. The deepening blue sky was a dome over a cyclopean ocean of deepest, purest ebony.

The world had been torn from beneath Flight 29.

Bethany's thought had also crossed Brian's mind; if push came to shove, if worse came to worst, he had thought, he could put the 767 into a dive and crash them into a mountain, ending it for good and all. But now there were no mountains to crash into.

Now there was no *earth* to crash into.

What will happen to us if we can't find the rip again? he wondered. *What will happen if we run out of fuel? Don't try to tell me we'll crash, because I simply don't believe it - you can't crash into nothing. I think we'll simply fall ... and fall ... and fall. For how long? And how far? How far can you fall into nothing?*

Don't think about it.

But how, exactly, did one do that? How did one refuse to think about nothing?

He turned deliberately back to his sheet of calculations. He worked on them, referring frequently to the INS readout, until the light had begun to fade out of the sky again. He now put the elapsed time between sunrise and sunset at about twenty-eight minutes.

He reached for the switch that controlled the cabin intercom and opened the circuit.

'Nick? Can you come up front?'

Nick appeared in the cockpit doorway less than thirty seconds later.

'Have they got their shades pulled back there?' Brian asked him before he could come all the way in.

'You better believe it,' Nick said.

'Very wise of them. I'm going to ask you not to look down yet, if you can help it. I'll *want you* to look out in a few minutes, and once you look out I don't suppose you'll be able to help looking down, but I advise you to put it off as long as possible. It's not ... very nice.'

'Gone, is it?'

'Yes. Everything.'

'The little girl is gone, too. Dinah. Laurel was with her at the end. She's taking it very well. She liked that girl. So did I.'

Brian nodded. He was not surprised - the girl's wound was the sort that demanded immediate treatment in an emergency room, and even then the prognosis would undoubtedly be cloudy - but it still rolled a stone against his heart. He had also liked Dinah, and he believed what Laurel believed - that the girl was somehow more responsible for their continued survival than anyone else. She had done something to Mr Toomy, had used him in some strange way ... and Brian had an idea that, somewhere inside, Toomy would not have minded being used in such a fashion. So, if her death was an omen, it was one of the worst sort.

'She never got her operation,' he said.

'No.'

'But Laurel is okay?'

'More or less.'

'You like her, don't you?'

'Yes,' Nick said. 'I have mates who would laugh at that, but I do like her. She's a bit dewy-eyed, but she's got grit.'

Brian nodded. 'Well, if we get back, I wish you the best of luck.'

'Thanks.' Nick sat down in the co-pilot's seat again. 'I've been thinking about the question you asked me before. About what I'll do when and if we get out of this mess ... besides taking the lovely Laurel to dinner, that is. I suppose I might end up going after Mr O'Banion after all. As I see it, he's not all that much different from our friend Toomy.'

'Dinah asked you to spare Mr Toomy,' Brian pointed out. 'Maybe that's something you should add into the equation.'

Nick nodded. He did this as if his head had grown too heavy for his neck. 'Maybe it is.'

'Listen, Nick. I called you up front because if Bob's time-rip actually exists, we've got to be getting close to the place where we went through it. We're going to man the crow's nest together, you and I. You take the starboard side and right center; I'll take port and left center. If you see anything that looks like a time-rip, sing out.'

Nick gazed at Brian with wide, innocent eyes. 'Are we looking for a thingumabob-type time-rip, or do you think it'll be one of the more or less fuckadelic variety, mate?'

'Very funny.' Brian felt a grin touch his lips in spite of himself. 'I don't have the slightest idea what it's going to look like, or even if we'll be able to see it at all. If we can't, we're going to be in a hell of a jam if it's drifted to one side, or if its altitude has changed. Finding a needle in a haystack would be child's play in comparison.'

'What about radar?'

Brian pointed to the RCA/TL color radar monitor. 'Nothing, as you can see. But that's not surprising. If the original crew had acquired the damned thing on radar, they never would have gone through it in the first place.'

'They wouldn't have gone through it if they'd seen it, either,' Nick pointed out gloomily.

'That's not necessarily true. They might have seen it too late to avoid it. Jetliners move fast, and airplane crews don't spend the entire flight searching the sky for bogies. They don't have to; that's what ground control is for. Thirty or thirty-five minutes into the flight, the crew's major outbound tasks are completed. The bird is up, it's out of LA airspace, the anti-collision honker is on and beeping every

ninety seconds to show it's working. The INS is all programmed - that happens before the bird ever leaves the ground - and it is telling the autopilot just what to do. From the look of the cockpit, the pilot and co-pilot were on their coffee break. They could have been sitting here, facing each other, talking about the last movie they saw or how much they dropped at Hollywood Park. If there had been a flight attendant up front just before The Event took place, there would at least have been one more set of eyes, but we know there wasn't. The male crew had their coffee and Danish; the flight attendants were getting ready to serve drinks to the passengers when it happened.'

'That's an extremely detailed scenario,' Nick said. 'Are you trying to convince me or yourself?'

'At this point, I'll settle for convincing anyone at all.'

Nick smiled and stepped to the starboard cockpit window. His eyes dropped involuntarily downward, toward the place where the ground belonged, and his smile first froze, then dropped off his face. His knees buckled, and he gripped the bulkhead with one hand to steady himself.

'Shit on toast,' he said in a tiny dismayed voice.

'Not very nice, is it?'

Nick looked around at Brian. His eyes seemed to float in his pallid face. 'All my life,' he said, 'I've thought of Australia when I heard people talk about the great bugger-all, but it's not. *That's* the great bugger-all, right down there.'

Brian checked the INS and the charts again, quickly. He had made a small red circle on one of the charts; they were now on the verge of entering the airspace that circle represented. 'Can you do what I asked? If you can't, say so. Pride is a luxury we can't - '

'Of course I can,' Nick murmured. He had torn his eyes away from the huge black socket below the plane and was scanning the sky. 'I only wish I knew what I was looking *for*.'

'I think you'll know it when you see it,' Brian said. He paused and then added, 'If you see it.'

Bob Jenkins sat with his arms folded tightly across his chest, as if he were cold. Part of him *was* cold, but this was not a physical coldness. The chill was coming out of his head.

Something was wrong.

He did not know what it was, but something was wrong. Something was out of place ... or lost ... or forgotten. Either a mistake had been made or was going to be made. The feeling nagged at him like some pain not quite localized enough to be identified. That sense of wrongness would almost crystallize into a thought ... and then it would skitter away again like some small, not-quite-tame animal.

Something wrong.

Or out of place. Or lost.

Or forgotten.

Ahead of him, Albert and Bethany were spooning contentedly. Behind him, Rudy Warwick was sitting with his eyes closed and his lips moving. The beads of a rosary were clamped in one fist. Across the aisle, Laurel Stevenson sat beside Dinah, holding one of her hands and stroking it gently.

Wrong.

Bob eased up the shade beside his seat, peeked out, and slammed it down again. Looking at *that* would not aid rational thought but erase it. What lay below the plane was utter madness.

I must warn them. I have to. They are going forward on my hypothesis, but if my hypothesis is somehow mistaken - and dangerous - then I must warn them.

Warn them of what?

Again it almost came into the light of his focussed thoughts, then slipped away, becoming just a shadow among shadows ... but one with shiny feral eyes.

He abruptly unbuckled his seatbelt and stood up.

Albert looked around. 'Where are you going?'

'Cleveland,' Bob said grumpily, and began to walk down the aisle toward the tail of the aircraft, still trying to track the source of that interior alarm bell.

Brian tore his eyes away from the sky - which was already showing signs of light again - long enough to take a quick glance first at the INS readout and then at the circle on his chart. They were approaching the far side of the circle now. If the time-rip was still here, they should see it soon. If they didn't, he supposed he would have to take over the controls and send them circling back for another pass at a slightly different altitude and on a slightly different heading. It would play hell on their fuel situation, which was already tight, but since the whole thing was probably hopeless anyway, it didn't matter very

'Brian?' Nick's voice was unsteady. 'Brian? I think I see something.'

14

Bob Jenkins reached the rear of the plane, made an about-face, and started slowly back up the aisle again, passing row after row of empty seats. He looked at the objects that lay in them and on the floor in front of them as he passed: purses ... pairs of eyeglasses ... wristwatches ... a pocket-watch ... two worn, crescent-shaped pieces of metal that were probably heel-taps ... dental fillings ... wedding rings ...

Something is wrong.

Yes? Was that really so, or was it only his overworked mind nagging fiercely over nothing? The mental equivalent of a tired muscle which will not stop twitching?

Leave it, he advised himself, but he couldn't.

If something really is amiss, why can't you see it? Didn't you tell the boy that deduction is your meat and drink? Haven't you written forty mystery novels, and weren't a dozen of those actually quite good? Didn't Newgate Callender call The Sleeping Madonna 'a masterpiece of logic' when he

Bob Jenkins came to a dead stop, his eyes widening. They fixed on a portside seat near the front of the cabin. In it, the man with the black beard was out cold again, snoring lustily. Inside Bob's head, the shy animal at last began to creep fearfully into the light. Only it wasn't small, as he had thought. That had been his mistake.

Sometimes you couldn't see things because they were too small, but sometimes you ignored things because they were too big, too obvious.

The Sleeping Madonna.

The sleeping man.

He opened his mouth and tried to scream, but no sound came out. His throat was locked. Terror sat on his chest like an ape. He tried again to scream and managed no more than a breathless squeak.

Sleeping madonna, sleeping man.

They, the survivors, had all been asleep.

Now, with the exception of the bearded man,

none

of them were asleep.

Bob opened his mouth once more, tried once more to scream, and once more nothing came out.

15

'Holy Christ in the morning,' Brian whispered.

The time-rip lay about ninety miles ahead, off to the starboard side of the 767's nose by no more than seven or eight degrees. If it had drifted, it had not drifted much; Brian's guess was that the slight differential was the result of a minor navigational error.

It was a lozenge-shaped hole in reality, but not a black void. It cycled with a dim pink-purple light, like the aurora borealis. Brian could see the stars beyond it, but they were also rippling. A wide white ribbon of vapor was slowly streaming either into or out of the shape which hung in the sky. It looked like some strange, ethereal highway.

We can follow it right in, Brian thought excitedly. *It's better than an ILS beacon!*

'We're in business!' he said, laughed idiotically, and shook his clenched fists in the air.

'It must be two miles across,' Nick whispered. 'My God, Brian, how many other planes do you suppose went through?'

'I don't know,' Brian said, 'but I'll bet you my gun and dog that we're the only one with a shot at getting back.'

He opened the intercom.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we've found what we were looking for.' His voice crackled with triumph and relief. 'I don't know exactly what happens next, or how, or why, but we have sighted what appears to be an extremely large trapdoor in the sky. I'm going to take us straight through the middle of it. We'll find out what's on the other side together. Right now I'd like you all to fasten your seatbelts and -'

That was when Bob Jenkins came pelting madly up the aisle, screaming at the top of his lungs. *'No! No! We'll all die if you go into it! Turn back! You've got to turn back!'*

Brian swung around in his seat and exchanged a puzzled look with Nick.

Nick unbuckled his belt and stood up. 'That's Bob Jenkins,' he said. 'Sounds like he's worked himself up to a good set of nerves. Carry on, Brian. I'll handle him.'

'Okay,' Brian said. 'Just keep him away from me. I'd hate to have him grab me at the wrong second and send us into the edge of that thing.'

He turned off the autopilot and took control of the 767 himself. The floor tilted gently to the right as he banked toward the long, glowing slot ahead of them. It seemed to slide across the sky until it was centered in front of the 767's nose. Now he could hear a sound mixing with the drone of the jet engines - a deep, throbbing noise, like a huge diesel idling. As they approached the river of vapor - it was flowing into the hole, he now saw, not out of it - he began to pick up flashes of color travelling within it: green, blue, violet, red, candy pink. *It's the first real color I've seen in this world,* he thought.

Behind him, Bob Jenkins sprinted through the first-class section, up the narrow aisle which led to the service area ... and right into Nick's waiting arms.

'Easy, mate,' Nick soothed. 'Everything's going to be all right now.'

'No!' Bob struggled wildly, but Nick held him as easily as a man might hold a struggling kitten. 'No, you don't understand! He's got to turn back! He's got to turn back before it's too late!'

Nick pulled the writer away from the cockpit door and back into first class. 'We'll just sit down here and belt up tight, shall we?' he said in that same soothing, chummy voice. 'It may be a trifle bumpy.'

To Brian, Nick's voice was only a faint blur of sound. As he entered the wide flow of vapor streaming into the time-rip, he felt a large and immensely powerful hand seize the plane, dragging it eagerly forward. He found himself thinking of the leak on the flight from Tokyo to LA, and of how fast air rushed out of a hole in a pressurized environment.

It's as if this whole world - or what is left of it - is leaking through that hole, he thought, and then that queer and ominous phrase from his dream recurred again: SHOOTING STARS ONLY.

The rip lay dead ahead of the 767's nose now, growing rapidly. *We're going in,* he thought. *God help us, we're really going in.*

16

Bob continued to struggle as Nick pinned him in one of the first-class seats with one hand and worked to fasten his seatbelt with the other. Bob was a small, skinny man, surely no more than a hundred and forty pounds soaking wet, but panic had animated him and he was making it extremely hard for Nick.

'We're really going to be all right, matey,' Nick said. He finally managed to click Bob's seatbelt shut. 'We were when we came through, weren't we?'

'We were all asleep when we came through, you damned fool!' Bob shrieked into his face. *'Don't you understand? WE WERE ASLEEP! You've got to stop him!'*

Nick froze in the act of reaching for his own belt. What Bob was saying - what he had been trying to say all along - suddenly struck him like a dropped load of bricks. 'Oh dear God,' he whispered. 'Dear God, what were we thinking of?' He leaped out of his seat and dashed for the cockpit. 'Brian, stop! Turn back! *Turn back!*'

17

Brian had been staring into the rip, nearly hypnotized, as they approached. There was no turbulence, but that sense of tremendous power, of air rushing into the hole like a mighty river, had increased. He looked down at his instruments and saw the 767's airspeed was increasing rapidly. Then Nick began to shout, and a moment later the Englishman was behind him, gripping his shoulders, staring at the rip as it swelled in front of the jet's nose, its play of deepening colors racing across his cheeks and brow, making him look like a man staring at a stained-glass window on a sunny day. The steady thrumming sound had become dark thunder.

' Turn back, Brian, you have to turn back!'

Did Nick have a reason for what he was saying, or had Bob's panic been infectious? There was no time to make a decision on any rational basis; only a split-second to consult the silent tickings of instinct.

Brian Engle grabbed the steering yoke and hauled it hard over to port.

18

Nick was thrown across the cockpit and into a bulkhead; there was a sickening crack as his arm broke. In the main cabin, the luggage which had fallen from the overhead compartments when Brian swerved onto the runway at BIA now flew once more, striking the curved walls and thudding off the windows in a vicious hail. The man with the black beard was thrown out of his seat like a Cabbage Patch Kid and had time to utter one bleary squawk before his head collided with the arm of a seat and he fell into the aisle in an untidy tangle of limbs. Bethany screamed and Albert hugged her tight against him. Two rows behind, Rudy Warwick closed his eyes tighter, clutched his rosary harder, and prayed faster as his seat tilted away beneath him.

Now there was turbulence; Flight 29 became a surfboard with wings, rocking and twisting and thumping through the unsteady air. Brian's hands were momentarily thrown off the yoke and then he grabbed it again. At the same time he opened the throttle all the way to the stop and the plane's turbos responded with a deep snarl of

power rarely heard outside of the airline's diagnostic hangars. The turbulence increased; the plane slammed viciously up and down, and from somewhere came the deadly shriek of overstressed metal.

In first class, Bob Jenkins clutched at the arms of his seat, numbly grateful that the Englishman had managed to belt him in. He felt as if he had been strapped to some madman's jet-powered pogo stick. The plane took another great leap, rocked up almost to the vertical on its portside wing, and his false teeth shot from his mouth.

Are we going in? Dear Jesus, are we?

He didn't know. He only knew that the world was a thumping, bucking nightmare ... but he was still in it.

For the time being, at least, he was still in it.

19

The turbulence continued to increase as Brian drove the 767 across the wide stream of vapor feeding into the rip. Ahead of him, the hole continued to swell in front of the plane's nose even as it continued sliding off to starboard. Then, after one particularly vicious jolt, they came out of the rapids and into smoother air. The time-rip disappeared to starboard. They had missed it ... by how little Brian did not like to think.

He continued to bank the plane, but at a less drastic angle. 'Nick!' he shouted without turning around. 'Nick, are you all right?'

Nick got slowly to his feet, holding his right arm against his belly with his left hand. His face was very white and his teeth were set in a grimace of pain. Small trickles of blood ran from his nostrils. 'I've been better, mate. Broke my arm, I think. Not the first time for this poor old fellow, either. We missed it, didn't we?'

'We missed it,' Brian agreed. He continued to bring the plane back in a big, slow circle. 'And in just a minute you're going to tell me why we missed it, when we came all this way to find it. And it better be good, broken arm or no broken arm.'

He reached for the intercom toggle.

20

Laurel opened her eyes as Brian began to speak and discovered that Dinah's head was in her lap. She stroked her hair gently and then readjusted her position on the stretcher.

'This is Captain Engle, folks. I'm sorry about that. It was pretty damned hairy, but we're okay; I've got a green board. Let me repeat that we've found what we were looking for, but - '

He clicked off suddenly. The others waited. Bethany Simms was sobbing against Albert's chest. Behind them, Rudy was still saying the rosary.

21

Brian had broken his transmission when he realized that Bob Jenkins was standing beside him. The writer was shaking, there was a wet patch on his slacks, his mouth had an odd, sunken look Brian hadn't noticed before ... but he seemed in charge of himself. Behind him, Nick sat heavily in the co-pilot's chair, wincing as he did so and still cradling his arm. It had begun to swell.

'What the hell is this all about?' Brian asked Bob sternly. 'A little more turbulence and this bitch would have broken into about ten thousand pieces.'

'Can I talk through that thing?' Bob asked, pointing to the switch marked INTERCOM.

'Yes, but '

'Then let me do it.'

Brian started to protest, then thought better of it. He flicked the switch. 'Go ahead; you're on.' Then he repeated: 'And it better be good.'

'Listen to me, all of you!' Bob shouted.

From behind them came a protesting whine of feedback. 'We'

'Just talk in your normal tone of voice,' Brian said. 'You'll blow their goddam eardrums out.'

Bob made a visible effort to compose himself, then went on in a lower tone of voice. 'We had to turn back, and we did. The captain has made it clear to me that we only just managed to do it. We have been extremely lucky ... and extremely stupid, as well. We forgot the

most elementary thing, you see, although it was right in front of us all the time. When we went through the time-rip in the first place, *everyone on the plane who was awake disappeared.*'

Brian jerked in his seat. He felt as if someone had slugged him. Ahead of the 767's nose, about thirty miles distant, the faintly glowing lozenge shape had appeared again in the sky, looking like some gigantic semi-precious stone. It seemed to mock him.

'We are all awake,' Bob said. (In the main cabin, Albert looked at the man with the black beard lying out cold in the aisle and thought, *With one exception.*) 'Logic suggests that if we try to go through that way, *we will* disappear.' He thought about this and then said, 'That is all.'

Brian flicked the intercom link closed without thinking about it. Behind him, Nick voiced a painful, incredulous laugh.

'That is all? That is bloody *all*? What do we *do* about it?'

Brian looked at him and didn't answer. Neither did Bob Jenkins.

22

Bethany raised her head and looked into Albert's strained, bewildered face. 'We have to go to sleep? How do we do that? I never felt less like sleeping in my whole *life!*'

'I don't know.' He looked hopefully across the aisle at Laurel. She was already shaking her head. She wished she could go to sleep, just go to sleep and make this whole crazy nightmare *gone* - but, like Bethany, she had never felt less like it in her entire life.

23

Bob took a step forward and gazed out through the cockpit window in silent fascination. After a long moment he said in a soft, awed voice: 'So that's what it looks like.'

A line from some rock-and-roll song popped into Brian's head: *You can look but you better not touch.* He glanced down at the LED fuel indicators. What he saw there didn't ease his mind any, and he

raised his eyes helplessly to Nick's. Like the others, he had never felt so wide awake in his life.

'I don't know what we do now.' he said, 'but if we're going to try that hole, it has to be soon. The fuel we've got will carry us for an hour, maybe a little more. After that, forget it. Any ideas?'

Nick lowered his head, still cradling his swelling arm. After a moment or two he looked up again. 'Yes,' he said. 'As a matter of fact, I do. People who fly rarely stick their prescription medicines in their checked baggage - they like to have it with them in case their luggage ends up on the other side of the world and takes a few days to get back to them. If we go through the hand-carry bags, we're sure to find scads of sedatives. We won't even have to take the bags out of the bins. judging from the sounds, most of them are already lying on the floor ... what? What's the matter with it?'

This last was directed at Bob Jenkins, who had begun shaking his head as soon as the phrase 'prescription medicines' popped out of Nick's mouth.

'Do you know anything about prescription sedatives?' he asked Nick.

'A little,' Nick said, but he sounded defensive. 'A little, yeah.'

'Well, I know a lot,' Bob said dryly. 'I've researched them exhaustively - from All-Nite to Xanax. Murder by sleeping potion has always been a great favorite in my field, you understand. Even if you happened to find one of the more potent medications in the very first bag you checked - unlikely in itself you couldn't administer a safe dose which would act quickly enough.'

'Why bloody not?'

'Because it would take at least forty minutes for the stuff to work ... and I strongly doubt it would work on everyone. The natural reaction of minds under stress to such medication is to fight - to try to refuse it. There is absolutely no way to combat such a reaction, Nick ... you might as well try to legislate your own heartbeat. What you'd do, always supposing you found a supply of medication large enough to allow it, would be to administer a series of lethal overdoses and turn the plane into Jonestown. We might all come through, but we'd be dead.'

'Forty minutes,' Nick said. 'Christ. Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?'

'Yes,' Bob said unflinchingly.

Brian looked out at the glowing lozenge shape in the sky. He had put Flight 29 into a circling pattern and the rip was on the verge of disappearing again. It would be back shortly ... but they would be no closer to it.

'I can't believe it,' Nick said heavily. 'To go through the things we've gone through ... to have taken off successfully and come all this way ... to have actually *found* the bloody thing ... and then we find out we can't go through it and back to our own time just because we can't go to *sleep*?'

'We don't have forty minutes, anyway,' Brian said quietly. 'If we waited that long, this plane would crash sixty miles east of the airport.'

'Surely there are other fields - '

'There are, but none big enough to handle an airplane of this size.'

'If we went through and then turned back east again?'

'Vegas. But Vegas is going to be out of reach in ...' Brian glanced at his instruments. ' ... less than eight minutes. I think it has to be LAX. I'll need at least thirty-five minutes to get there. That's cutting it extremely fine even if they clear everything out of our way and vector us straight in. That gives us ...' He looked at the chronometer again. ' ... twenty minutes at most to figure this thing out and get through the hole.'

Bob was looking thoughtfully at Nick. 'What about you?' he asked.

'What do you mean, what about me?'

'I think you're a soldier ... but I don't think you're an ordinary one. Might you be SAS, perhaps?'

Nick's face tightened. 'And if I was that or something like it, mate?'

'Maybe you could put us to sleep,' Bob said. 'Don't they teach you Special Forces men tricks like that?'

Brian's mind flashed back to Nick's first confrontation with Craig Toomy. *Have you ever watched Star Trek?* he had asked Craig. *Marvellous American program ... And if you don't shut your gob at once, you bloody idiot, I'll be happy to demonstrate Mr Spock's famous Vulcan sleeper-hold for you.*

'What about it, Nick?' he said softly. 'If we ever needed the famous Vulcan sleeper-hold, it's now.'

Nick looked unbelievably from Bob to Brian and then back to Bob again. 'Please don't make me laugh, gents - it makes my arm hurt worse.'

'What does that mean?' Bob asked.

'I've got my sedatives all wrong, have I? Well, let me tell you both that you've got it all wrong about me. I am not James Bond. There never *was* a James Bond in the real world. I suppose I might be able to kill you with a neck-chop, Bob, but I'd more likely just leave you paralyzed for life. Might not even knock you out. And then there's this.' Nick held up his rapidly swelling right arm with a little wince. 'My smart hand happens to be attached to my recently re-broken arm. I could perhaps defend myself with my left hand - against an unschooled opponent - but the kind of thing you're talking about? No. No way.'

'You're all forgetting the most important thing of all,' a new voice said.

They turned. Laurel Stevenson, white and haggard, was standing in the cockpit door. She had folded her arms across her breasts as if she was cold and was cupping her elbows in her hands.

'If we're all knocked out, who is going to fly the plane?' she asked. 'Who is going to fly the plane into LA?'

The three men gaped at her wordlessly. Behind them, unnoticed, the large semi-precious stone that was the time-rip glided into view again.

'We're fucked,' Nick said quietly. 'Do you know that? We are absolutely dead-out fucked.' He laughed a little, then winced as his stomach jogged his broken arm.

'Maybe not,' Albert said. He and Bethany had appeared behind Laurel; Albert had his arm around the girl's waist. His hair was plastered against his forehead in sweaty ringlets, but his dark eyes were clear and intent. They were focussed on Brian. 'I think you can put us to sleep,' he said, 'and I think you can land us.'

'What are you talking about?' Brian asked roughly.

Albert replied: 'Pressure. I'm talking about pressure.'

Brian's dream recurred to him then, recurred with such terrible force that he might have been reliving it: Anne with her hand plastered over the crack in the body of the plane, the crack with the words SHOOTING STARS ONLY printed over it in red.

Pressure.

See, darling? It's all taken care of.

'What does he mean, Brian?' Nick asked. 'I can see he's got *something* - your face says so. What is it?'

Brian ignored him. He looked steadily at the seventeen-year-old music student who might just have thought of a way out of the box they were in.

'What about after?' he asked. 'What about after we come through? How do I wake up again so I can land the plane?'

'Will somebody please explain this?' Laurel pleaded. She had gone to Nick, who put his good arm around her waist.

'Albert is suggesting that I use this' - Brian tapped a rheostat on the control board, a rheostat marked CABIN PRESSURE - 'to knock us all out cold.'

'Can you do that, mate? Can you really do that?'

'Yes,' Brian said. 'I've known pilots - charter pilots - who *have* done it, when passengers who've had too much to drink started cutting up and endangering either themselves or the crew. Knocking out a drunk by lowering the air pressure isn't that difficult. To knock out everyone, all I have to do is lower it some more ... to half sea-level pressure, say. It's like ascending to a height of two miles without an oxygen mask. Boom! You're out cold.'

'If you can really do that, why hasn't it been used on terrorists?' Bob asked.

'Because there *are* oxygen masks, right?' Albert asked.

'Yes,' Brian said. 'The cabin crew demonstrates them at the start of every commercial jet-flight - put the gold cup over your mouth and nose and breathe normally, right? They drop automatically when cabin pressure falls below twelve psi. If a hostage pilot tried to knock out a terrorist by lowering the air pressure, all the terrorist would have to do is grab a mask, put it on, and start shooting. On smaller

jets, like the Lear, that isn't the case. If the cabin loses pressure, the passenger has to open the overhead compartment himself.'

Nick looked at the chronometer. Their window was now only fourteen minutes wide.

'I think we better stop talking about it and just do it,' he said. 'Time is getting very short.'

'Not yet,' Brian said, and looked at Albert again. 'I can bring us back in line with the rip, Albert, and start decreasing pressure as we head toward it. I can control the cabin pressure pretty accurately, and I'm pretty sure I can put us all out before we go through. But that leaves Laurel's question: who flies the airplane if we're all knocked out?'

Albert opened his mouth; closed it again and shook his head.

Bob Jenkins spoke up then. His voice was dry and toneless, the voice of a judge pronouncing doom. 'I think you can fly us home, Brian. But someone else will have to die in order for you to do it.'

'Explain,' Nick said crisply.

Bob did so. It didn't take long. By the time he finished, Rudy Warwick had joined the little group standing in the cockpit door.

'Would it work, Brian?' Nick asked.

'Yes,' Brian said absently. 'No reason why not.' He looked at the chronometer again. Eleven minutes now. Eleven minutes to get across to the other side of the rip. It would take almost that long to line the plane up, program the autopilot, and move them along the forty-mile approach. 'But who's going to do it? Do the rest of you draw straws, or what?'

'No need for that,' Nick said. He spoke lightly, almost casually. 'I'll do it.'

'No!' Laurel said. Her eyes were very wide and very dark. 'Why you? Why does it have to be you?'

'Shut up!' Bethany hissed at her. 'If he wants to, let him!'

Albert glanced unhappily at Bethany, at Laurel, and then back at Nick. A voice - not a very strong one - was whispering that *he* should have volunteered, that this was a job for a tough Alamo survivor like The Arizona Jew. But most of him was only aware that he loved life very much ... and did not want it to end just yet. So he opened his mouth and then closed it again without speaking.

'Why you?' Laurel asked again, urgently. 'Why *shouldn't* we draw straws? Why not Bob? Or Rudy? Why not me?'

Nick took her arm. 'Come with me a moment,' he said.

'Nick, there's not much time,' Brian said. He tried to keep his tone of voice even, but he could hear desperation - perhaps even panic - bleeding through.

'I know. Start doing the things you have to do.'

Nick drew Laurel through the door.

25

She resisted for a moment, then came along. He stopped in the small galley alcove and faced her. In that moment, with his face less than four inches from hers, she realized a dismal truth - he was the man she had been hoping to find in Boston. He had been on the plane all the time. There was nothing at all romantic about this discovery; it was horrible.

'I think we might have had something, you and me,' he said. 'Do you think I could be right about that? If you do, say so - there's no time to dance. Absolutely none.'

'Yes,' she said. Her voice was dry, uneven. 'I think that's right.'

'But we don't know. We *can't* know. It all comes back to time, doesn't it? Time ... and sleep ... and not knowing. But I have to be the one, Laurel. I have tried to keep some reasonable account of myself, and all my books are deeply in the red. This is my chance to balance them, and I mean to take it.'

'I don't understand what you mea-'

'No - but I do.' He spoke fast, almost rapping his words. Now he reached out and took her forearm and drew her even closer to him. 'You were on an adventure of some sort, weren't you, Laurel?'

'I don't know what you're - '

He gave her a brisk shake. 'I told you - there's no time to dance! *Were* You on an adventure?'

'... yes.'

'Nick!' Brian called from the cockpit.

Nick looked rapidly in that direction. 'Coming!' he shouted, and then looked back at Laurel. 'I'm going to send you on another one. If you get out of this, that is, and if you agree to go.'

She only looked at him, her lips trembling. She had no idea of what to say. Her mind was tumbling helplessly. His grip on her arm was very tight, but she would not be aware of that until later, when she saw the bruises left by his fingers; at that moment, the grip of his eyes was much stronger.

'Listen. Listen carefully.' He paused and then spoke with peculiar, measured emphasis: 'I was going to quit it. I'd made up my mind.'

'Quit what?' she asked in a small, quivery voice.

Nick shook his head impatiently. 'Doesn't matter. What matters is whether or not you believe me. Do you?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I don't know what you're talking about, but I believe you mean it.'

'Quik!' Brian warned from the cockpit. '*We're heading toward it!*'

He shot a glance toward the cockpit again, his eyes narrow and gleaming. 'Coming just now!' he called. When he looked at her again, Laurel thought she had never in her life been the focus of such ferocious, focussed intensity. 'My father lives in the village of Fluting, south of London,' he said. 'Ask for him in any shop along the High Street. Mr Hopewell. The older ones still call him the gaffer. Go to him and tell him I'd made up my mind to quit it. You'll need to be persistent; he tends to turn away and curse loudly when he hears my name. The old I-have-no-son bit. Can you be persistent?'

'Yes.'

He nodded and smiled grimly. 'Good! Repeat what I've told you, and tell him you believed me. Tell him I tried my best to atone for the day behind the church in Belfast.'

'In Belfast.'

'Right. And if you can't get him to listen any other way, tell him he *must* listen. Because of the daisies. The time I brought the daisies. Can you remember that, as well?'

'Because once you brought him daisies.'

Nick seemed to almost laugh - but she had never seen a face filled with such sadness and bitterness. 'No - not to him, but it'll do. That's your adventure. Will you do it?'

'Yes ... but ...'

'Good. Laurel, thank you.' He put his left hand against the nape of her neck, pulled her face to his, and kissed her. His mouth was cold, and she tasted fear on his breath.

A moment later he was gone.

26

'Are we going to feel like we're ... you know, choking?' Bethany asked. 'Suffocating?'

'No,' Brian said. He had gotten up to see if Nick was coming; now, as Nick reappeared with a very shaken Laurel Stevenson behind him, Brian dropped back into his seat. 'You'll feel a little giddy ... swimmy in the head ... then, nothing.' He glanced at Nick. 'Until we all wake up.'

'Right!' Nick said cheerily. 'And who knows? I may still be right here. Bad pennies have a way of turning up, you know. Don't they, Brian?'

'Anything's possible, I guess,' Brian said. He pushed the throttle forward slightly. The sky was growing bright again. The rip lay dead ahead. 'Sit down, folks. Nick, right up here beside me. I'm going to show you what to do ... and when to do it.'

'One second, please,' Laurel said. She had regained some of her color and self-possession. She stood on tiptoe and planted a kiss on Nick's mouth.

'Thank you,' Nick said gravely.

'You were going to quit it. You'd made up your mind. And if he won't listen, I'm to remind him of the day you brought the daisies. Have I got it right?'

He grinned. 'Letter-perfect, my love. Letter-perfect.' He encircled her with his left arm and kissed her again, long and hard. When he let her go, there was a gentle, thoughtful smile on his mouth. 'That's the one to go on,' he said. 'Right enough.'

27

Three minutes later, Brian opened the intercom. 'I'm starting to decrease pressure now. Check your belts everyone.'

They did so. Albert waited tensely for some sound - the hiss of escaping air, perhaps - but there was only the steady, droning mumble of the jet engines. He felt more wide awake than ever.

'Albert?' Bethany said in a small, scared voice. 'Would you hold me, please?'

'Yes,' Albert said. 'If you'll hold me.'

Behind them, Rudy Warwick was telling his rosary again. Across the aisle, Laurel Stevenson gripped the arms of her seat. She could still feel the warm print of Nick Hopewell's lips on her mouth. She raised her head, looked at the overhead compartment, and began to take deep, slow breaths. She was waiting for the masks to fall ... and ninety seconds or so later, they did.

Remember about the day in Belfast, too, she thought. Behind the church. An act of atonement, he said. An act ...

In the middle of that thought, her mind drifted away.

28

'You know ... what to do?' Brian asked again. He spoke in a dreamy, furry voice. Ahead of them, the time-rip was once more swelling in the cockpit windows, spreading across the sky. It was now lit with dawn, and a fantastic new array of colors coiled, swam, and then streamed away into its queer depths.

'I know,' Nick said. He was standing beside Brian and his words were muffled by the oxygen mask he wore. Above the rubber seal, his eyes were calm and clear. 'No fear, Brian. All's safe as houses. Off to sleep you go. Sweet dreams, and all that.'

Brian was fading now. He could feel himself going ... and yet he hung on, staring at the vast fault in the fabric of reality. It seemed to be swelling toward the cockpit windows, reaching for the plane. It's *so beautiful*, he thought. *God*, it's so beautiful!

He felt that invisible hand seize the plane and draw it forward again. No turning back this time.

'Nick,' he said. It now took a tremendous effort to speak; he felt as if his mouth was a hundred miles away from his brain. He held his hand up. It seemed to stretch away from him at the end of a long taffy arm.

'Go to sleep,' Nick said, taking his hand. 'Don't fight it, unless you want to go with me. It won't be long now.'

'I just wanted to say ... thank you.'

Nick smiled and gave Brian's hand a squeeze. 'You're welcome, mate. It's been a flight to remember. Even without the movie and the free mimosas.'

Brian looked back into the rip. A river of gorgeous colors flowed into it now. They spiralled ... mixed ... and seemed to form words before his dazed, wondering eyes:

SHOOTING STARS ONLY

'Is that ... what we are?' he asked curiously, and now his voice came to him from some distant universe.

The darkness swallowed him.

29

Nick was alone now; the only person awake on Flight 29 was a man who had once gunned down three boys behind a church in Belfast, three boys who had been chucking potatoes painted dark gray to look like grenades. Why had they done such a thing? Had it been some mad sort of dare? He had never found out.

He was not afraid, but an intense loneliness filled him. The feeling wasn't a new one. This was not the first watch he had stood alone, with the lives of others in his hands.

Ahead of him, the rip neared. He dropped his hand to the rheostat which controlled the cabin pressure.

It's gorgeous, he thought. It seemed to him that the colors that now blazed out of the rip were the antithesis of everything which they had experienced in the last few hours; he was looking into a crucible of new life and new motion.

Why shouldn't it be beautiful? This is the place where life - all life, maybe - begins. The place where life is freshly minted every second

of every day; the cradle of creation and the wellspring of time. No langoliers allowed beyond this point.

Colors ran across his cheeks and brows in a fountain-spray of hues: jungle green was overthrown by lava orange; lava orange was replaced by yellow-white tropical sunshine; sunshine was supplanted by the chilly blue of Northern oceans. The roar of the jet engines seemed muted and distant. He looked down and was not surprised to see that Brian Engle's slumped, sleeping form was being consumed by color, his form and features overthrown in an ever-changing kaleidoscope of brightness. He had become a fabulous ghost.

Nor was Nick surprised to see that his own hands and arms were as colorless as clay. *Brian's not the ghost; I am.*

The rip loomed.

Now the sound of the jets was lost entirely in a new sound; the 767 seemed to be rushing through a windtunnel filled with feathers. Suddenly, directly ahead of the airliner's nose, a vast nova of light exploded like a heavenly firework; in it, Nick Hopewell saw colors no man had ever imagined. It did not just fill the time-rip; it filled his mind, his nerves, his muscles, his very bones in a gigantic, coruscating fireflash.

'Oh my God, so BEAUTIFUL!' he cried, and as Flight 29 plunged into the rip, he twisted the cabin-pressure rheostat back up to full.

A split-second later the fillings from Nick's teeth pattered onto the cockpit floor. There was a small thump as the Teflon disc which had been in his knee - souvenir of a conflict marginally more honorable than the one in Northern Ireland - joined them. That was all.

Nick Hopewell had ceased to exist.

30

The first things Brian was aware of were that his shirt was wet and his headache had returned.

He sat up slowly in his seat, wincing at the bolt of pain in his head, and tried to remember who he was, where he was, and why he felt such a vast and urgent need to wake up quickly. What had he been doing that was so important?

The leak, his mind whispered. There's a leak in the main cabin. and if it isn't stabilized, there's going to be big tr-

No, that wasn't right. The leak *had* been stabilized - or had in some mysterious way stabilized itself - and he had landed Flight 7 safely at LAX. Then the man in the green blazer had come, and *It's Anne's funeral! My God, I've overslept!*

His eyes flew open, but he was in neither a motel room nor the spare bedroom at Anne's brother's house in Revere. He was looking through a cockpit window at a sky filled with stars.

Suddenly it came back to him ... everything.

He sat up all the way, too quickly. His head screamed a sickly hungover protest. Blood flew from his nose and splattered on the center control console. He looked down and saw the front of his shirt was soaked with it. There had been a leak, all right. In *him*.

Of course, he thought. Depressurization often does that. I should have warned the passengers ... How many passengers do I have left, by the way?

He couldn't remember. His head was filled with fog.

He looked at his fuel indicators, saw that their situation was rapidly approaching the critical point, and then checked the INS. They were exactly where they should be, descending rapidly toward LA, and at any moment they might wander into someone else's airspace while the someone else was still there.

Someone else had been sharing *his* airspace just before he passed out ... who?

He fumbled, and it came. Nick, of course. Nick Hopewell. Nick was gone. He hadn't been such a bad penny after all, it seemed. But he must have done his job, or Brian wouldn't be awake now.

He got on the radio, fast.

'LAX ground control, this is American Pride Flight - 'He stopped. What flight *were* they? He couldn't remember. The fog was in the way.

'Twenty-nine, aren't we?' a dazed, unsteady voice said from behind him.

'Thank you, Laurel.' Brian didn't turn around. 'Now go back and belt up. I may have to make this plane do some tricks.'

He spoke into his mike again.

'American Pride Flight 29, repeat, two-niner. Mayday, ground control, I am declaring an emergency here. Please clear everything in front of me, I am coming in on heading 85 and I have no fuel. Get a foam truck out and -'

'Oh, quit it,' Laurel said dully from behind him. 'Just quit it.'

Brian wheeled around them, ignoring the fresh bolt of pain through his head and the fresh spray of blood which flew from his nose. 'Sit *down*, goddammit!' he snarled. 'We're coming in unannounced into heavy traffic. If you don't want to break your neck -'

'There's no heavy traffic down there,' Laurel said in the same dull voice. 'No heavy traffic, no foam trucks. Nick died for nothing, and I'll never get a chance to deliver his message. Look for yourself.'

Brian did. And, although they were now over the outlying suburbs of Los Angeles, he saw nothing but darkness.

There was no one down there, it seemed.

No one at all.

Behind him, Laurel Stevenson burst into harsh, raging sobs of terror and frustration.

31

A long white passenger jet cruised slowly above the ground sixteen miles east of Los Angeles International Airport. 767 was printed on its tail in large, proud numerals. Along the fuselage, the words AMERICAN PRIDE were written in letters which had been raked backward to indicate speed. On both sides of the nose was a large red eagle, its wings spangled with blue stars. Like the airliner it decorated, the eagle appeared to be coming in for a landing.

The plane printed no shadow on the deserted grid of streets as it passed above them; dawn was still an hour away. Below it, no car moved, no streetlight glowed. Below it, all was silent and moveless. Ahead of it, no runway lights gleamed.

The plane's belly slid open. The undercarriage dropped down and spread out. The landing gear locked in place.

American Pride Flight 29 slipped down the chute toward LA. It banked slightly to the right as it came; Brian was now able to correct

his course visually, and he did so. They passed over a cluster of airport motels, and for a moment Brian could see the monument that stood near the center of the terminal complex, a graceful tripod with curved legs and a restaurant in its center. They passed over a short strip of dead grass and then concrete runway was unrolling thirty feet below the plane.

There was no time to baby the 767 in this time; Brian's fuel indicators read zeros across and the bird was about to turn into a bitch. He brought it in hard, like a sled filled with bricks. There was a thud that rattled his teeth and started his nose bleeding again. His chest harness locked. Laurel, who was in the co-pilots seat, cried out.

Then he had the flaps up and was applying reverse thrusters at full. The plane began to slow. They were doing a little over a hundred miles an hour when two of the thrusters cut out and the red ENGINE SHUTDOWN lights flashed on. He grabbed for the intercom switch.

'Hang on! We're going in hard! Hang on!'

Thrusters two and four kept running a few moments longer, and then they were gone, too. Flight 29 rushed down the runway in ghastly silence, with only the flaps to slow her now. Brian watched helplessly as the concrete ran away beneath the plane and the crisscross tangle of taxiways loomed. And there, dead ahead, sat the carcass of a Pacific Airways commuter jet.

The 767 was still doing at least sixty-five. Brian horsed it to the right, leaning into the dead steering yoke with every ounce of his strength. The plane responded soupily, and he skated by the parked jet with only six feet to spare. Its windows flashed past like a row of blind eyes.

Then they were rolling toward the United terminal, where at least a dozen planes were parked at extended jetways like nursing infants. The 767's speed was down to just over thirty now.

'*Brace yourselves!*' Brian shouted into the intercom, momentarily forgetting that his own plane was now as dead as the rest of them and the intercom was useless. '*Brace yourselves for a collision! Bra -*

American Pride 29 crashed into Gate 29 of the United Airlines terminal at roughly twenty-nine miles an hour. There was a loud,

hollow bang followed by the sound of crumpling metal and breaking glass. Brian was thrown into his harness again, then snapped back into his seat. He sat there for a moment, stiff, waiting for the explosion ... and then remembered there was nothing left in the tanks to explode.

He flicked all the switches on the control panel off - the panel was dead, but the habit ran deep - and then turned to check on Laurel. She looked at him with dull, apathetic eyes.

'That was about as close as I'd ever want to cut it,' Brian said unsteadily.

'You should have let us crash. Everything we tried ... Dinah ... Nick ... all for nothing. It's just the same here. Just the same.'

Brian unbuckled his harness and got shakily to his feet. He took his handkerchief out of his back pocket and handed it to her. 'Wipe your nose. It's bleeding.'

She took the handkerchief and then only looked at it, as if she had never seen one before in her life.

Brian passed her and plodded slowly into the main cabin. He stood in the doorway, counting noses. His passengers - those few still remaining, that was - seemed all right. Bethany's head was pressed against Albert's chest and she was sobbing hard. Rudy Warwick unbuckled his seatbelt, got up, rapped his head on the overhead bin, and sat down again. He looked at Brian with dazed, uncomprehending eyes. Brian found himself wondering if Rudy was still hungry. He guessed not.

'Let's get off the plane,' Brian said.

Bethany raised her head. 'When do they come?' she asked him hysterically. 'How long will it be before they come this time? Can anyone hear them yet?'

Fresh pain stroked Brian's head and he rocked on his feet, suddenly quite sure he was going to faint.

A steadying arm slipped around his waist and he looked around, surprised. It was Laurel.

'Captain Engle's right,' she said quietly. 'Let's get off the plane. Maybe it's not as bad as it looks.'

Bethany uttered a hysterical bark of laughter. 'How bad *can* it look?' she demanded. 'Just how bad *can* it - '

'Something's different,' Albert said suddenly. He was looking out the window. 'Something's changed. I can't tell what it is ... but it's not the same. He looked first at Bethany, then at Brian and Laurel. 'It's just not the same.'

Brian bent down next to Bob Jenkins and looked out the window. He could see nothing very different from BIA - there were more planes, of course, but they were just as deserted, just as dead - yet he felt that Albert might be onto something, just the same. It was *feeling* more than seeing. Some essential difference which he could not quite grasp. It danced just beyond his reach, as the name of his ex-wife's perfume had done.

It's L'Envoi, darling. It's what I've always worn, don't you remember?

Don't you remember?

'Come on,' he said. 'This time we use the cockpit exit.'

32

Brian opened the trapdoor which lay below the jut of the instrument panel and tried to remember why he hadn't used it to offload his passengers at Bangor International; it was a hell of a lot easier to use than the slide. There didn't seem to *be* a why. He just hadn't thought of it, probably because he was trained to think of the escape slide before anything else in an emergency.

He dropped down into the forward-hold area, ducked below a cluster of electrical cables, and undogged the hatch in the floor of the 767's nose. Albert joined him and helped Bethany down. Brian helped Laurel, and then he and Albert helped Rudy, who moved as if his bones had turned to glass. Rudy was still clutching his rosary tight in one hand. The space below the cockpit was now very cramped, and Bob Jenkins waited for them above, propped on his hands and peering down at them through the trapdoor.

Brian pulled the ladder out of its storage clips, secured it in place, and then, one by one, they descended to the tarmac, Brian first, Bob last.

As Brian's feet touched down, he felt a mad urge to place his hand over his heart and cry out: *I claim this land of rancid milk and sour honey for the survivors of Flight 29 ... at least until the langoliers arrive!*

He said nothing. He only stood there with the others below the loom of the jetliner's nose, feeling a light breeze against one cheek and looking around. In the distance he heard a sound. It was not the chewing, crunching sound of which they had gradually become aware in Bangor - nothing like it - but he couldn't decide exactly what it *did* sound like.

'What's that?' Bethany asked. 'What's that humming? It sounds like electricity.'

'No, it doesn't,' Bob said thoughtfully. 'It sounds like..' He shook his head.

'It doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard before,' Brian said, but he wasn't sure if that was true. Again he was haunted by the sense that something he knew or should know was dancing just beyond his mental grasp.

'It's them, isn't it?' Bethany asked half-hysterically. 'It's them, coming. It's the langoliers Dinah told us about.'

'I don't think so. It doesn't sound the same at all.' But he felt the fear begin in his belly just the same.

'Now what?' Rudy asked. His voice was as harsh as a crow's. 'Do we start all over again?'

'Well, we won't need the conveyor belt, and that's a start,' Brian said. 'The jetway service door is open.' He stepped out from beneath the 767's nose and pointed. The force of their arrival at Gate 29 had knocked the rolling ladder away from the door, but it would be easy enough to slip it back into position. 'Come on.'

They walked toward the ladder.

'Albert?' Brian said. 'Help me with the lad

'Wait,' Bob said.

Brian turned his head and saw Bob looking around with cautious wonder. And the expression in his previously dazed eyes ... was that hope?

'What? What is it, Bob? What do you see?'

'Just another deserted airport. It's what I *feel*.' He raised a hand to his cheek ... then simply held it out in the air, like a man trying to flag a ride.

Brian started to ask him what he meant, and realized that he knew. Hadn't he noticed it himself while they had been standing under the liner's nose? Noticed it and then dismissed it?

There was a breeze blowing against his face. Not much of a breeze, hardly more than a puff, but it *was* a breeze. *The air was in motion.*

'Holy crow,' Albert said. He popped a finger into his mouth, wetting it, and held it up. An unbelieving grin touched his face.

'That isn't all, either,' Laurel said. 'Listen!'

She dashed from where they were standing down toward the 767's wing.

Then she ran back to them again, her hair streaming out behind her. The high heels she was wearing clicked crisply on the concrete.

'Did you hear it?' she asked them. 'Did *you hear* it?'

They had heard. The flat, muffled quality was gone. Now, just listening to Laurel speak, Brian realized that in Bangor they had all sounded as if they had been talking with their heads poked inside bells which had been cast from some dulling metal - brass, or maybe lead.

Bethany raised her hands and rapidly clapped out the backbeat of the old Routers' instrumental, 'Let's Go.' Each clap was as clean and clear as the pop of a track-starter's pistol. A delighted grin broke over her face.

'What does it m - 'Rudy began.

'*The plane!*' Albert shouted in a high-pitched, gleeful voice, and for a moment Brian was absurdly reminded of the little guy on that old TV show, *Fantasy Island*. He almost laughed out loud. 'I know what's different! Look at the plane! *Now it's the same as all the others!*'

They turned and looked. No one said anything for a long moment; perhaps no one was capable of speech. The Delta 727 standing next to the American Pride jetliner in Bangor had looked dull and dingy, somehow less real than the 767. Now all the aircraft - Flight 29 and the United planes lined up along the extended jetways behind it -

looked equally bright, equally new. Even in the dark, their paintwork and trademark logos appeared to gleam.

'What does it mean?' Rudy asked, speaking to Bob. 'What does it mean? If things have really gone back to normal, where's the electricity? Where are the *people*?'

'And what's that noise?' Albert put in.

The sound was already closer, already clearer. It was a humming sound, as Bethany had said, but there was nothing electrical about it. It sounded like wind blowing across an open pipe, or an inhuman choir which was uttering the same open-throated syllable in unison: *aaaaaaa ...*

Bob shook his head. 'I don't know,' he said, turning away. 'Let's push that ladder back into position and go in

Laurel grabbed his shoulder.

'You know something!' she said. Her voice was strained and tense. 'I can see that you do. Let the rest of us in on it, why don't you?'

He hesitated for a moment before shaking his head. 'I'm not prepared to say right now, Laurel. I want to go inside and look around first.'

With that they had to be content. Brian and Albert pushed the ladder back into position. One of the supporting struts had buckled slightly, and Brian held it as they ascended one by one. He himself came last, walking on the side of the ladder away from the buckled strut. The others had waited for him, and they walked up the jetway and into the terminal together.

They found themselves in a large, round room with boarding gates located at intervals along the single curving wall. The rows of seats stood ghostly and deserted, the overhead fluorescents were dark squares, but here Albert thought he could almost *smell* other people ... as if they had all trooped out only seconds before the Flight 29 survivors emerged from the jetway.

From outside, that choral humming continued to swell, approaching like a slow invisible wave: - *aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa*

'Come with me,' Bob Jenkins said, taking effortless charge of the group. 'Quickly, please.'

He set off toward the concourse and the others fell into line behind him, Albert and Bethany walking together with arms linked about

each others' waists. Once off the carpeted surface of the United boarding lounge and in the concourse itself, their heels clicked and echoed, as if there were two dozen of them instead of only six. They passed dim, dark advertising posters on the walls: Watch CNN, Smoke Marlboros, Drive Hertz, Read *Newsweek*, See Disneyland.

And that sound, that open-throated choral humming sound, continued to grow. Outside, Laurel had been convinced the sound had been approaching them from the west. Now it seemed to be right in here with them, as though the singers - if they *were* singers - had already arrived. The sound did not frighten her, exactly, but it made the flesh of her arms and back prickle with awe.

They reached a cafeteria-style restaurant, and Bob led them inside. Without pausing, he went around the counter and took a wrapped pastry from a pile of them on the counter. He tried to tear it open with his teeth ... then realized his teeth were back on the plane. He made a small, disgusted sound and tossed it over the counter to Albert.

'You do it,' he said. His eyes were glowing now. 'Quickly, Albert! Quickly!'

'Quick, Watson, the game's afoot!' Albert said, and laughed crazily. He tore open the cellophane and looked at Bob, who nodded. Albert took out the pastry and bit into it. Cream and raspberry jam squirted out the sides. Albert grinned. 'It's delicious!' he said in a muffled voice, spraying crumbs as he spoke. '*Delicious!*' He offered it to Bethany, who took an even larger bite.

Laurel could smell the raspberry filling, and her stomach made a goinging, boinging sound. She laughed. Suddenly she felt giddy, joyful, almost stoned. The cobwebs from the depressurization experience were entirely gone; her head felt like an upstairs room after a fresh sea breeze had blown in on a hot and horrible muggy afternoon. She thought of Nick, who wasn't here, who had died so the rest of them could be here, and thought that Nick would not have minded her feeling this way.

The choral sound continued to swell, a sound with no direction at all, a sourceless, singing sigh that existed all around them:

- AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Bob Jenkins raced back around the counter, cutting the corner by the cash register so tightly that his feet almost flew out from beneath him and he had to grab the condiments trolley to keep from falling. He stayed up but the stainless-steel trolley fell over with a gorgeous, resounding crash, spraying plastic cutlery and little packets of mustard, ketchup, and relish everywhere.

'Quickly!' he cried. 'We can't be here! It's going to happen soon - at any moment, I believe - and we can't be here when it does! I don't think it's safe!'

'*What* isn't sa - ' Bethany began, but then Albert put his arm around her shoulders and hustled her after Bob, a lunatic tour-guide who had already bolted for the cafeteria door.

They ran out, following him as he dashed for the United boarding lobby again. Now the echoing rattle of their footfalls was almost lost in the powerful hum which filled the deserted terminal, echoing and reechoing in the many throats of its spoked corridors.

Brian could hear that single vast note beginning to break up. It was not shattering, not even really changing, he thought, but *focussing*, the way the sound of the langoliers had focussed as they approached Bangor.

As they re-entered the boarding lounge, he saw an ethereal light begin to skate over the empty chairs, the dark ARRIVALS and DEPARTURES TV monitors and the boarding desks. Red followed blue; yellow followed red; green followed yellow. Some rich and exotic expectation seemed to fill the air. A shiver chased through him; he felt all his body-hair stir and try to stand up. A clear assurance filled him like a morning sunray: *We are on the verge of something - some great and amazing thing.*

'Over here!' Bob shouted. He led them toward the wall beside the jetway through which they had entered. This was a passengers-only area, guarded by a red velvet rope. Bob jumped it as easily as the high-school hurdler he might once have been. 'Against the wall!'

'Up against the wall, motherfuckers!' Albert cried through a spasm of sudden, uncontrollable laughter.

He and the rest joined Bob, pressing against the wall like suspects in a police line-up. In the deserted circular lounge which now lay before them, the colors flared for a moment ... and then began to

fade out. The sound, however, continued to deepen and become more real. Brian thought he could now hear voices in that sound, and footsteps, even a few fussing babies.

'I don't know what it is, but it's *wonderful!*' Laurel cried. She was half-laughing, half-weeping. 'I *love* it!'

'I hope we're safe here,' Bob said. He had to raise his voice to be heard. 'I think we will be. We're out of the main traffic areas.'

'What's going to happen?' Brian asked. 'What do you know?'

'When we went through the time-rip headed cast, we travelled back in time!' Bob shouted. 'We went into the *past!* Perhaps as little as fifteen minutes ... do you remember me telling you that?'

Brian nodded, and Albert's face suddenly lit up.

'*This time it brought us into the future!*' Albert cried. 'That's it, isn't it? *This time the rip brought us into the future!*'

'I believe so, yes!' Bob yelled back. He was grinning helplessly. 'And instead of arriving in a dead world - a world which had moved on without us - we *have arrived in a world waiting to be born!* A world as fresh and new as a rose on the verge of opening! *That* is what is happening now, I believe. *That* is what we hear, and what we sense ... what has filled us with such marvellous, helpless joy. I believe we are about to see and experience something which no living man or woman has ever witnessed before. We have seen the death of the world; now I believe we are going to see it born. I believe that the present is on the verge of catching up to us.'

As the colors had flared and faded, so now the deep, reverberating quality of the sound suddenly dropped. At the same time, the voices which had been within it grew louder, clearer. Laurel realized she could make out words, even whole phrases.

'-have to call her before she decides -'

'-I really don't think the option is a viable-'

'-home and dry if we can just turn this thing over to the parent company -'

That one passed directly before them through the emptiness on the other side of the velvet rope.

Brian Engle felt a kind of ecstasy rise within him, suffusing him in a glow of wonder and happiness. He took Laurel's hand and grinned at her as she clasped it and then squeezed it fiercely. Beside them,

Albert suddenly hugged Bethany, and she began to shower kisses all over his face, laughing as she did it. Bob and Rudy grinned at each other delightedly, like long-lost friends who have met by chance in one of the world's more absurd backwaters.

Overhead, the fluorescent squares in the ceiling began to flash on. They went sequentially, racing out from the center of the room in an expanding circle of light that flowed down the concourse, chasing the night-shadows before it like a flock of black sheep.

Smells suddenly struck Brian with a bang: sweat, perfume, aftershave, cologne, cigarette smoke, leather, soap, industrial cleaner.

For a moment longer the wide circle of the boarding lounge remained deserted, a place haunted by the voices and footsteps of the not-quite-living. And Brian thought: *I am going to see it happen; I am going to see the moving Present lock onto this stationary future and pull it along, the way hooks on moving express trains used to snatch bags of mail from the Postal Service poles standing by the tracks in sleepy little towns down south and out west. I am going to see time itself open like a rose on a summer morning.*

'Brace yourselves,' Bob murmured. 'There may be a jerk.'

A bare second later Brian felt a thud - not just in his feet, but all through his body. At the same instant he felt as if an invisible hand had given him a strong push, directly in the center of his back. He rocked forward and felt Laurel rock forward with him. Albert had to grab Rudy to keep him from falling over. Rudy didn't seem to mind; a huge, goony smile split his face.

'Look!' Laurel gasped. 'Oh, Brian - look!'

He looked ... and felt his breath stop in his throat.

The boarding lounge was full of ghosts.

Ethereal, transparent figures crossed and crisscrossed the large central area: men in business suits toting briefcases, women in smart travelling dresses, teenagers in Levi's and tee-shirts with rock-group logos printed on them. He saw a ghost-father leading two small ghost-children, and through them he could see more ghosts

sitting in the chairs, reading transparent copies of *Cosmopolitan* and *Esquire* and *US News & World Report*. Then color dove into the shapes in a series of cometary flickers, solidifying them, and the echoing voices resolved themselves into the prosaic stereo swarm of real human voices.

Shooting stars, Brian thought wonderingly. *Shooting stars only.*

The two children were the only ones who happened to be looking directly at the survivors of Flight 29 when the change took place; the children were the only ones who saw four men and two women appear in a place where there had only been a wall the second before.

'Daddy!' the little boy exclaimed, tugging his father's right hand.

'Dad!' the little girl demanded, tugging his left.

'What?' he asked, tossing them an impatient glance. 'I'm looking for your mother!'

'New people!' the little girl said, pointing at Brian and his bedraggled quintet of passengers. 'Look at the new people!'

The man glanced at Brian and the others for a moment, and his mouth tightened nervously. It was the blood, Brian supposed. He, Laurel, and Bethany had all suffered nosebleeds. The man tightened his grip on their hands and began to pull them away fast. 'Yes, great. Now help me look for your mother. What a mess *this* turned out to be.'

'But they weren't there *before!*' the little boy protested. 'They -' Then they were gone into the hurrying crowds.

Brian glanced up at the monitors and noted the time as 4: 17 A.M.
Too many people here,

he thought,

and I bet I know why.

As if to confirm this, the overhead speaker blared: '*All eastbound flights out of Los Angeles International Airport continue to be delayed because of unusual weather patterns over the Mojave Desert. We are sorry for this inconvenience, but ask for your patience and understanding while this safety precaution is in force. Repeat: all eastbound flights ...*'

Unusual weather patterns, Brian thought. Oh yeah. Strangest goddam weather patterns ever.

Laurel turned to Brian and looked up into his face. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she made no effort to wipe them away. 'Did you hear her? Did you hear what that little girl said?'

'Yes.'

'Is that what we are, Brian? The new people? Do you think that's what we are?'

'I don't know,' he said, 'but that's what it feels like.'

'That was wonderful,' Albert said. 'My God, that was the most wonderful thing.'

'Totally tubular!' Bethany yelled happily, and then began to clap out 'Let's Go' again.

'What do we do now, Brian?' Bob asked. 'Any ideas?'

Brian glanced around at the choked boarding area and said, 'I think I want to go outside. Breathe some fresh air. And look at the sky.'

'Shouldn't we inform the authorities of what'

'We will,' Brian said. 'But the sky first.'

'And maybe something to eat on the way?' Rudy asked hopefully.

Brian laughed. 'Why not?'

'My watch has stopped,' Bethany said.

Brian looked down at his wrist and saw that his watch had also stopped. All their watches had stopped.

Brian took his off, dropped it indifferently to the floor, and put his arm around Laurel's waist. 'Let's blow this joint,' he said. 'Unless any of you want to wait for the next flight east?'

'Not today,' Laurel said, 'but soon. All the way to England. There's a man I have to see in ...' For one horrible moment the name wouldn't come to her ... and then it did. 'Fluting,' she said. 'Ask anyone along the High Street. The old folks still just call him the gaffer.'

'What are you talking about?' Albert asked.

'Daisies,' she said, and laughed. 'I think I'm talking about daisies. Come on - let's go.'

Bob grinned widely, exposing baby-pink gums. 'As for me, I think that the next time I have to go to Boston, I'll take the train.'

Laurel toed Brian's watch and asked, 'Are you sure you don't want that? It looks expensive.'

Brian grinned, shook his head, and kissed her forehead. The smell of her hair was amazingly sweet. He felt more than good; he felt reborn, every inch of him new and fresh and unmarked by the world. He felt, in fact, that if he spread his arms, he would be able to fly without the aid of engines. 'Not at all,' he said. 'I know what time it is.'

'Oh? And what time is that?'

'It's half past now.'

Albert clapped him on the back.

They left the boarding lounge in a group, weaving their way through the disgruntled clots of delayed passengers. A good many of these looked curiously after them, and not just because some of them appeared to have recently suffered nosebleeds, or because they were laughing their way through so many angry, inconvenienced people.

They looked because the six people seemed somehow brighter than anyone else in the crowded lounge.

More actual.

More there.

Shooting stars only, Brian thought, and suddenly remembered that there was one passenger still back on the plane - the man with the black beard. This is one hangover that guy will never forget, Brian thought, grinning. He swept Laurel into a run. She laughed and hugged him.

The six of them ran down the concourse together toward the escalators and all the outside world beyond.

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**STEPHEN
KING**



**THREE PAST MIDNIGHT:
THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN**

FROM THE BOOK **FOUR PAST MIDNIGHT**

THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN

Stephen King

THIS IS FOR THE STAFF AND PATRONS OF THE PASADENA
PUBLIC LIBRARY.

THREE PAST MIDNIGHT

A NOTE ON “THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN”

On the morning when this story started to happen, I was sitting at the breakfast table with my son Owen. My wife had already gone upstairs to shower and dress. Those two vital seven o'clock divisions had been made: the scrambled eggs and the newspaper. Willard Scott, who visits our house five days out of every seven, was telling us about a lady in Nebraska who had just turned a hundred and four, and I think Owen and I had one whole pair of eyes open between us. A typical weekday morning chez King, in other words.

Owen tore himself away from the sports section just long enough to ask me if I'd be going by the mall that day—there was a book he wanted me to pick up for a school report. I can't remember what it was—it might have been Johnny Tremain or April Morning, Howard Fast's novel of the American Revolution—but it was one of those tomes you can never quite lay your hands on in a bookshop; it's always just out of print or just about to come back into print or some damned thing.

I suggested that Owen try the local library, which is a very good one. I was sure they'd have it. He muttered some reply. I only caught two words of it, but, given my interests, those two words were more than enough to pique my interest. They were “library police.”

I put my half of the newspaper aside, used the MUTE button on the remote control to strangle Willard in the middle of his ecstatic report on the Georgia Peach Festival, and asked Owen to kindly repeat himself.

He was reluctant to do so, but I pressed him. Finally he told me that he didn't like to use the library because he worried about the Library

Police. He knew there were no Library Police, he hastened to add, but it was one of those stories that burrowed down into your subconscious and just sort of lurked there. He had heard it from his Aunt Stephanie when he was seven or eight and much more gullible, and it had been lurking ever since.

I, of course, was delighted, because I had been afraid of the Library Police myself as a kid—the faceless enforcers who would actually come to your house if you didn't bring your overdue books back. That would be bad enough... but what if you couldn't find the books in question when those strange lawmen turned up? What then? What would they do to you? What might they take to make up for the missing volumes? It had been years since I'd thought of the Library Police (although not since childhood; I can clearly remember discussing them with Peter Straub and his son, Ben, six or eight years ago), but now all those old questions, both dreadful and somehow enticing, recurred.

I found myself musing on the Library Police over the next three or four days, and as I mused, I began to glimpse the outlines of the story which follows. This is the way stories usually happen for me, but the musing period usually lasts a lot longer than it did in this case. When I began, the story was titled "The Library Police," and I had no clear idea of where I was going with it. I thought it would probably be a funny story, sort of like the suburban nightmares the late Max Shulman used to bolt together. After all, the idea was funny, wasn't it? I mean, the Library Police! How absurd!

What I realized, however, was something I knew already: the fears of childhood have a hideous persistence. Writing is an act of self-hypnosis, and in that state a kind of total emotional recall often takes place and terrors which should have been long dead start to walk and talk again.

As I worked on this story, that began to happen to me. I knew, going in, that I had loved the library as a kid—why not? It was the only place a relatively poor kid like me could get all the books he wanted—but as I continued to write, I became reacquainted with a deeper

truth: I had also feared it. I feared becoming lost in the dark stacks, I feared being forgotten in a dark corner of the reading room and ending up locked in for the night, I feared the old librarian with the blue hair and the cat's-eye glasses and the almost lipless mouth who would pinch the backs of your hands with her long, pale fingers and hiss "Shhhh!" if you forgot where you were and started to talk too loud. And yes, I feared the Library Police.

What happened with a much longer work, a novel called Christine, began to happen here. About thirty pages in, the humor began to go out of the situation. And about fifty pages in, the whole story took a screaming left turn into the dark places I have travelled so often and which I still know so little about. Eventually I found the guy I was looking for, and managed to raise my head enough to look into his merciless silver eyes. I have tried to bring back a sketch of him for you, Constant Reader, but it may not be very good.

My hands were trembling quite badly when I made it, you see.

CHAPTER ONE

THE STANDIN

1

Everything, Sam Peebles decided later, was the fault of the goddamned acrobat. If the acrobat hadn't gotten drunk at exactly the wrong time, Sam never would have ended up in such trouble.

It is not bad enough, he thought with a perhaps justifiable bitterness, that life is like a narrow beam over an endless chasm, a beam we have to walk blindfolded. It's bad, but not bad enough. Sometimes, we also get pushed.

But that was later. First, even before the Library Policeman, was the drunken acrobat.

2

In Junction City, the last Friday of every month was Speaker's Night at the local Rotarians' Hall. On the last Friday in March of 1990, the Rotarians were scheduled to hear—and to be entertained by—The Amazing Joe, an acrobat with Curry & Trembo's All-Star Circus and Travelling Carnival.

The telephone on Sam Peebles's desk at Junction City Realty and Insurance rang at five past four on Thursday afternoon. Sam picked it up. It was always Sam who picked it up—either Sam in person or Sam on the answering machine, because he was Junction City Realty and Insurance's owner and sole employee. He was not a rich man, but he was a reasonably happy one. He liked to tell people that his first Mercedes was still quite a distance in the future, but he had a Ford which was almost new and owned his own home on Kelton Avenue. "Also, the business keeps me in beer and skittles," he liked to add ... although in truth, he hadn't drunk much beer since college

and wasn't exactly sure what skittles were. He thought they might be pretzels.

"Junction City Realty and In—"

"Sam, this is Craig. The acrobat broke his neck."

"What?"

"You heard me!" Craig Jones cried in deeply aggrieved tones. "The acrobat broke his fucking neck!"

"Oh," Sam said. "Gee." He thought about this for a moment and then asked cautiously, "Is he dead, Craig?"

"No, he's not dead, but he might as well be as far as we're concerned. He's in the hospital over in Cedar Rapids with his' neck dipped in about twenty pounds of plaster. Billy Bright just called me. He said the guy came on drunk as a skunk at the matinee this afternoon, tried to do a back-over flip, and landed outside the center ring on the nape of his neck. Billy said he could hear it way up in the bleachers, where he was sitting. He said it sounded like when you step in a puddle that just iced over."

"Ouch!" Sam exclaimed, wincing.

"I'm not surprised. After all—The Amazing Joe. What kind of name is that for a circus performer? I mean, The Amazing Randix, okay. The Amazing Tortellini, still not bad. But The Amazing Joe? It sounds like a prime example of brain damage in action to me."

"Jesus, that's too bad."

"Fucking shit on toast is what it is. It leaves us without a speaker tomorrow night, good buddy."

Sam began to wish he had left the office promptly at four. Craig would have been stuck with Sam the answering machine, and that would have given Sam the living being a little more time to think. He

felt he would soon need time to think. He also felt that Craig Jones was not going to give him any.

“Yes,” he said, “I guess that’s true enough.” He hoped he sounded philosophical but helpless. “What a shame.”

“It sure is,” Craig said, and then dropped the dime. “But I know you’ll be happy to step in and fill the slot.”

“Me? Craig, you’ve got to be kidding! I can’t even do a somersault, let alone a back-over fi—”

“I thought you could talk about the importance of the independently owned business in small-town life,” Craig Jones pressed on relentlessly. “If that doesn’t do it for you, there’s baseball. Lacking that, you could always drop your pants and wag your wing-wang at the audience. Sam, I am not just the head of the Speakers Committee—that would be bad enough. But since Kenny moved away and Carl quit coming, I am the Speakers Committee. Now, you’ve got to help me. I need a speaker tomorrow night. There are about five guys in the whole damn club I feel I can trust in a pinch, and you’re one of them.”

“But—”

“You’re also the only one who hasn’t filled in already in a situation like this, so you’re elected, buddy-boy.”

“Frank Stephens—”

“—pinch-hit for the guy from the trucking union last year when the grand jury indicted him for fraud and he couldn’t show up. Sam—it’s your turn in the barrel. You can’t let me down, man. You owe me.”

“I run an insurance business!” Sam cried. “When I’m not writing insurance, I sell farms! Mostly to banks! Most people find it boring! The ones who don’t find it boring find it disgusting!”

“None of that matters.” Craig was now moving in for the kill, marching over Sam’s puny objection in grim hobnailed boots. “They’ll all be drunk by the end of dinner and you know it. They won’t remember a goddam word you said come Saturday morning, but in the meantime, I need someone to stand up and talk for half an hour and you’re elected!”

Sam continued to object a little longer, but Craig kept coming down on the imperatives, italicizing them mercilessly. Need. Gotta. Owe.

“All right!” he said at last. “All right, all right! Enough!”

“My man!” Craig exclaimed. His voice was suddenly full of sunshine and rainbows. “Remember, it doesn’t have to be any longer than thirty minutes, plus maybe another ten for questions. If anybody has any questions. And you really can wag your wing-wang if you want to. I doubt that anybody could actually see it, but—”

“Craig,” Sam said, “that’s enough.”

“Oh! Sorry! Shet mah mouf !” Craig, perhaps lightheaded with relief, cackled.

“Listen, why don’t we terminate this discussion?” Sam reached for the roll of Turns he kept in his desk drawer. He suddenly felt he might need quite a few Turns during the next twenty-eight hours or so. “It looks as if I’ve got a speech to write.”

“You got it,” Craig said. “Just remember—dinner at six, speech at seven-thirty. As they used to say on Hawaii Five-O, be there! Aloha!”

“Aloha, Craig,” Sam said, and hung up. He stared at the phone. He felt hot gas rising slowly up through his chest and into his throat. He opened his mouth and uttered a sour burp—the product of a stomach which had been reasonably serene until five minutes ago.

He ate the first of what would prove to be a great many Turns indeed.

3

Instead of going bowling that night as he had planned, Sam Peebles shut himself in his study at home with a yellow legal pad, three sharpened pencils, a package of Kent cigarettes, and a six-pack of Jolt. He unplugged the telephone from the wall, lit a cigarette, and stared at the yellow pad. After five minutes of staring, he wrote this on the top line of the top sheet: SMALL-TOWN BUSINESSES: THE LIFEBLOOD OF AMERICA

He said it out loud and liked the sound of it. Well ... maybe he didn't exactly like it, but he could live with it. He said it louder and liked it better. A little better. It actually wasn't that good; in fact, it probably sucked the big hairy one, but it beat the shit out of "Communism: Threat or Menace." And Craig was right—most of them would be too hung over on Saturday morning to remember what they'd heard on Friday night, anyway.

Marginally encouraged, Sam began to write.

"When I moved to Junction City from the more or less thriving metropolis of Ames in 1984 ..."

4

"... and that is why I feel now, as I did on that bright September morn in 1984, that small businesses are not just the lifeblood of America, but the bright and sparkly lifeblood of the entire Western world."

Sam stopped, crushed out a cigarette in the ashtray on his office desk, and looked hopefully at Naomi Higgins.

"Well? What do you think?"

Naomi was a pretty young woman from Proverbias, a town four miles west of Junction City. She lived in a ramshackle house by the Proverbias River with her ramshackle mother. Most of the Rotarians knew Naomi, and wagers had been offered from time to time on

whether the house or the mother would fall apart first. Sam didn't know if any of these wagers had ever been taken, but if so, their resolution was still pending.

Naomi had graduated from Iowa City Business College, and could actually retrieve whole legible sentences from her shorthand. Since she was the only local woman who possessed such a skill, she was in great demand among Junction City's limited business population. She also had extremely good legs, and that didn't hurt. She worked mornings five days a week, for four men and one woman—two lawyers, one banker, and two realtors. In the afternoons she went back to the ramshackle house, and when she was not caring for her ramshackle mother, she typed up the dictation she had taken.

Sam Peebles engaged Naomi's services each Friday morning from ten until noon, but this morning he had put aside his correspondence—even though some of it badly needed to be answered—and asked Naomi if she would listen to something.

"Sure, I guess so," Naomi had replied. She looked a little worried, as if she thought Sam—whom she had briefly dated—might be planning to propose marriage. When he explained that Craig Jones had drafted him to stand in for the wounded acrobat, and that he wanted her to listen to his speech, she'd relaxed and listened to the whole thing—all twenty-six minutes of it—with flattering attention.

"Don't be afraid to be honest," he added before Naomi could do more than open her mouth.

"It's good," she said. "Pretty interesting."

"No, that's okay—you don't have to spare my feelings. Let it all hang out."

"I am. It's really okay. Besides, by the time you start talking, they'll all be—"

“Yes, they’ll all be hammered, I know.” This prospect had comforted Sam at first, but now it disappointed him a little. Listening to himself read, he’d actually thought the speech was pretty good.

“There is one thing,” Naomi said thoughtfully.

“Oh?”

“It’s kind of ... you know ... dry.”

“Oh,” Sam said. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. He had been up until nearly one o’clock this morning, first writing and then revising.

“But that’s easy to fix,” she assured him. “Just go to the library and get a couple of those books.”

Sam felt a sudden sharp pain in his lower belly and grabbed his roll of Turns. Research for a stupid Rotary Club speech? Library research? That was going a little overboard, wasn’t it? He had never been to the Junction City Library before, and he didn’t see a reason to go there now. Still, Naomi had listened very closely, Naomi was trying to help, and it would be rude not to at least listen to what she had to say.

“What books?”

“You know—books with stuff in them to liven up speeches. They’re like ...” Naomi groped. “Well, you know the hot sauce they give you at China Light, if you want it?”

“Yes—”

“They’re like that. They have jokes. Also, there’s this one book, Best Loved Poems of the American People. You could probably find something in there for the end. Something sort of uplifting.”

“There are poems in this book about the importance of small businesses in American life?” Sam asked doubtfully.

“When you quote poetry, people get uplifted, Naomi said. “Nobody cares what it’s about, Sam, let alone what it’s for.”

“And they really have joke-books especially for speeches?” Sam found this almost impossible to believe, although hearing that the library carried books on such esoterica as small-engine repair and wig-styling wouldn’t have surprised him in the least.

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“When Phil Brakeman was running for the State House, I used to type up speeches for him all the time,” Naomi said. “He had one of those books. I just can’t remember what the name of it was. All I can think of is Jokes for the John, and of course that’s not right.”

“No,” Sam agreed, thinking that a few choice tidbits from Jokes for the John would probably make him a howling success. But he began to see what Naomi was getting at, and the idea appealed to him despite his reluctance to visit the local library after all his years of cheerful neglect. A little spice for the old speech. Dress up your leftovers, turn your meatloaf into a masterpiece. And a library, after all, was just a library. If you didn’t know how to find what you wanted, all you had to do was ask a librarian. Answering questions was one of their jobs, right?

“Anyway, you could leave it just the way it is,” Naomi said. “I mean, they will be drunk.” She looked at Sam kindly but severely and then checked her watch. “You have over an hour left—did you want to do some letters?”

“No, I guess not. Why don’t you type up my speech instead?” He had already decided to spend his lunch hour at the library.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LIBRARY (1)

1

Sam had gone by the Library hundreds of times during his years in Junction City, but this was the first time he had really looked at it, and he discovered a rather amazing thing: he hated the place on sight.

The Junction City Public Library stood on the corner of State Street and Miller Avenue, a square granite box of a building with windows so narrow they looked like loopholes. A slate roof overhung all four sides of the building, and when one approached it from the front, the combination of the narrow windows and the line of shadow created by the roof made the building look like the frowning face of a stone robot. It was a fairly common style of Iowa architecture, common enough so Sam Peebles, who had been selling real estate for nearly twenty years, had given it a name: *Midwestern Ugly*. During spring, summer, and fall, the building's forbidding aspect was softened by the maples which stood around it in a kind of grove, but now, at the end of a hard Iowa winter, the maples were still bare and the Library looked like an oversized crypt.

He didn't like it; it made him uneasy; he didn't know why. It was, after all, just a library, not the dungeons of the Inquisition. Just the same, another acidic burp rose up through his chest as he made his way along the flagstone walk. There was a funny sweet undertaste to the burp that reminded him of something ... something from a long time ago, perhaps. He put a Tum in his mouth, began to crunch it up, and came to an abrupt decision. His speech was good enough as it stood. Not great, but good enough. After all, they were talking Rotary Club here, not the United Nations. It was time to stop playing with it. He was going to go back to the office and do some of the correspondence he had neglected that morning.

He started to turn, then thought: That's dumb. Really dumb. You want to be dumb? Okay. But you agreed to give the goddam speech; why not give a good one?

He stood on the Library walk, frowning and undecided. He liked to make fun of Rotary. Craig did, too. And Frank Stephens. Most of the young business types in Junction City laughed about the meetings. But they rarely missed one, and Sam supposed he knew why: it was a place where connections could be made. A place where a fellow like him could meet some of the not-so-young business types in Junction City. Guys like Elmer Baskin, whose bank had helped float a strip shopping center in Beaverton two years ago. Guys like George Candy—who, it was said, could produce three million dollars in development money with one phone call ... if he chose to make it.

These were small-town fellows, high-school basketball fans, guys who got their hair cut at Jimmy's, guys who wore boxer shorts and strappy tee-shirts to bed instead of pajamas, guys who still drank their beer from the bottle, guys who didn't feel comfortable about a night on the town in Cedar Rapids unless they were turned out in Full Cleveland. They were also Junction City's movers and shakers, and when you came right down to it, wasn't that why Sam kept going on Friday nights? When you came right down to it, wasn't that why Craig had called in such a sweat after the stupid acrobat broke his stupid neck? You wanted to get noticed by the movers and shakers ... but not because you had fucked up. They'll all be drunk, Craig had said, and Naomi had seconded the motion, but it now occurred to Sam that he had never seen Elmer Baskin take anything stronger than coffee. Not once. And he probably wasn't the only one. Some of them might be drunk ... but not all of them. And the ones who weren't might well be the ones who really mattered.

Handle this right, Sam, and you might do yourself some good. It's not impossible.

No. It wasn't. Unlikely, of course, but not impossible. And there was something else, quite aside from the shadow politics which might or might not attend a Friday-night Rotary Club speaker's meeting: he

had always prided himself on doing the best job possible. So it was just a dumb little speech. So what?

Also, it's just a dumb little small-town library. What's the big deal? There aren't even any bushes growing along the sides.

Sam had started up the walk again, but now he stopped with a frown creasing his forehead. That was a strange thought to have; it seemed to have come right out of nowhere. So there were no bushes growing along the sides of the Library-what difference did that make? He didn't know ... but he did know it had an almost magical effect on him. His uncharacteristic hesitation fell away and he began to move forward once more. He climbed the four stone steps and paused for a moment. The place felt deserted, somehow. He grasped the door-handle and thought, I bet it's locked. I bet the place is closed Friday afternoons. There was something strangely comforting in this thought.

But the old-fashioned latch-plate depressed under his thumb, and the heavy door swung noiselessly inward. Sam stepped into a small foyer with a marble floor in checkerboard black and white squares. An easel stood in the center of this antechamber. There was a sign propped on the easel; the message consisted of one word in very large letters.

SILENCE!

it read. NotSILENCE IS GOLDEN

orQUIET, PLEASE

but just that one staring, glaring word:SILENCE!

"You bet," Sam said. He only murmured the words, but the acoustics of the place were very good, and his low murmur was magnified into a grouchy grumble that made him cringe. It actually seemed to bounce back at him from the high ceiling. At that moment he felt as if he was in the fourth grade again, and about to be called to task by

Mrs. Glasters for cutting up rough at exactly the wrong moment. He looked around uneasily, half-expecting an ill-natured librarian to come swooping out of the main room to see who had dared profane the silence.

Stop it, for Christ's sake. You're forty years old. Fourth grade was a long time ago, buddy.

Except it didn't seem like a long time ago. Not in here. In here, fourth grade seemed almost close enough to reach out and touch.

He crossed the marble floor to the left of the easel, unconsciously walking with his weight thrown forward so the heels of his loafers would not click, and entered the main lobby of the Junction City Library.

There were a number of glass globes hanging down from the ceiling (which was at least twenty feet higher than the ceiling of the foyer), but none of them were on. The light was provided by two large, angled skylights. On a sunny day these would have been quite enough to light the room; they might even have rendered it cheery and welcoming. But this Friday was overcast and dreary, and the light was dim. The corners of the lobby were filled with gloomy webs of shadow.

What Sam Peebles felt was a sense of wrongness. It was as if he had done more than step through a door and cross a foyer; he felt as if he had entered another world, one which bore absolutely no resemblance to the small Iowa town that he sometimes liked, sometimes hated, but mostly just took for granted. The air in here seemed heavier than normal air, and did not seem to conduct light as well as normal air did. The silence was thick as a blanket. As cold as snow.

The library was deserted.

Shelves of books stretched above him on every side. Looking up toward the skylights with their crisscrosses of reinforcing wire made

Sam a little dizzy, and he had a momentary illusion: he felt that he was upside down, that he had been hung by his heels over a deep square pit lined with books.

Ladders leaned against the walls here and there, the kind that were mounted on tracks and rolled along the floor on rubber wheels. Two wooden islands broke the lake of space between the place where he stood and the checkout desk on the far side of the large, high room. One was a long oak magazine rack. Periodicals, each encased in a clear plastic cover, hung from this rack on wooden dowels. They looked like the hides of strange animals which had been left to cure in this silent room. A sign mounted on top of the rack commanded :RETURN ALL MAGAZINES TO THEIR PROPER PLACES!

To the left of the magazine rack was a shelf of brand-new novels and nonfiction books. The sign mounted on top of the shelf proclaimed them to be seven-day rentals.

Sam passed down the wide aisle between the magazines and the seven-day bookshelf, his heels rapping and echoing in spite of his effort to move quietly. He found himself wishing he had heeded his original impulse to just turn around and go back to the office. This place was spooky. Although there was a small, hooded microfilm camera alight and humming on the desk, there was no one manning—or womaning—it. A small plaque reading A. LORTZ

stood on the desk, but there was no sign of A. Lortz or anyone else.

Probably taking a dump and checking out the new issue of Library Journal.

Sam felt a crazy desire to open his mouth and yell, “Everything coming out all right, A. Lortz?” It passed quickly. The Junction City Public Library was not the sort of place that encouraged amusing sallies.

Sam’s thoughts suddenly spun back to a little rhyme from his childhood. No more laughing, no more fun; Quaker meeting has

begun. If you show your teeth or tongue, you may pay a forfeit.

If you show your teeth or tongue in here, does A. Lortz make you pay a forfeit? he wondered. He looked around again, let his nerve endings feel the frowning quality of the silence, and thought you could make book on it.

No longer interested in obtaining a joke-book or Best Loved Poems of the American People, but fascinated by the library's suspended, dreamy atmosphere in spite of himself, Sam walked toward a door to the right of the seven-day books. A sign over the door said this was the Children's Library. Had he used the Children's Library when he had been growing up in St. Louis? He thought so, but those memories were hazy, distant, and hard to hold. All the same, approaching the door of the Children's Library gave him an odd and haunting feeling. It was almost like coming home.

The door was closed. On it was a picture of Little Red Riding Hood, looking down at the wolf in Grandma's bed. The wolf was wearing Grandma's nightgown and Grandma's nightcap. It was snarling. Foam dripped from between its bared fangs. An expression of almost exquisite horror had transfixed Little Red Riding Hood's face, and the poster seemed not just to suggest but to actually proclaim that the happy ending of this story—of all fairy tales—was a convenient lie. Parents might believe such guff, Red Riding Hood's ghastly-sick face said, but the little ones knew better, didn't they?

Nice, Sam thought. With a poster like that on the door, I bet lots of kids use the Children's Library. I bet the little ones are especially fond of it.

He opened the door and poked his head in.

His sense of unease left him; he was charmed at once. The poster on the door was all wrong, of course, but what was behind it seemed perfectly right. Of course he had used the library as a child; it only took one look into this scale-model world to refresh those memories. His father had died young; Sam had been an only child raised by a

working mother he rarely saw except on Sundays and holidays. When he could not promote money for a movie after school—and that was often—the library had to do, and the room he saw now brought those days back in a sudden wave of nostalgia that was sweet and painful and obscurely frightening.

It had been a small world, and this was a small world; it had been a well-lighted world, even on the grimmest, rainiest days, and so was this one. No hanging glass globes for this room; there were shadow-banishing fluorescent lights behind frosted panels in the suspended ceiling, and all of them were on. The tops of the tables were only two feet from the floor; the seats of the chairs were even closer. In this world the adults would be the interlopers, the uncomfortable aliens. They would balance the tables on their knees if they tried to sit at them, and they would be apt to crack their skulls bending to drink from the water fountain which was mounted on the far wall.

Here the shelves did not stretch up in an unkind trick of perspective which made one giddy if one looked up too long; the ceiling was low enough to be cozy, but not low enough to make a child feel cramped. Here were no rows of gloomy bindings but books which fairly shouted with raucous primary colors: bright blues, reds, yellows. In this world Dr. Seuss was king, Judy Blume was queen, and all the princes and princesses attended Sweet Valley High. Here Sam felt all that old sense of benevolent after-school welcome, a place where the books did all but beg to be touched, handled, looked at, explored. Yet these feelings had their own dark undertaste.

His clearest sense, however, was one of almost wistful pleasure. On one wall was a photograph of a puppy with large, thoughtful eyes. Written beneath the puppy's anxious-hopeful face was one of the world's great truths: IT IS HARD TO BE GOOD. On the other wall was a drawing of mallards making their way down a riverbank to the reedy verge of the water. MAKE WAY FOR DUCKUNGS! the poster trumpeted.

Sam looked to his left, and the faint smile on his lips first faltered and then died. Here was a poster which showed a large, dark car

speeding away from what he supposed was a school building. A little boy was looking out of the passenger window. His hands were plastered against the glass and his mouth was open in a scream. In the background, a man—only a vague, ominous shape—was hunched over the wheel, driving hell for leather. The words beneath this picture read: NEVER TAKE RIDES FROM STRANGERS!

Sam recognized that this poster and the Little Red Riding Hood picture on the door of the Children's Library both appealed to the same primitive emotions of dread, but he found this one much more disturbing. Of course children shouldn't accept rides from strangers, and of course they had to be taught not to do so, but was this the right way to make the point?

How many kids, he wondered, have had a week's worth of nightmares thanks to that little public-service announcement?

And there was another one, posted right on the front of the checkout desk, that struck a chill as deep as January down Sam's back. It showed a dismayed boy and girl, surely no older than eight, cringing back from a man in a trenchcoat and gray hat. The man looked at least eleven feet tall; his shadow fell on the upturned faces of the children. The brim of his 1940s-style fedora threw its own shadow, and the eyes of the man in the trenchcoat gleamed relentlessly from its black depths. They looked like chips of ice as they studied the children, marking them with the grim gaze of Authority. He was holding out an ID folder with a star pinned to it—an odd sort of star, with at least nine points on it. Maybe as many as a dozen. The message beneath read: AVOID THE LIBRARY POLICE! GOOD BOYS AND GIRLS RETURN THEIR BOOKS ON TIME!

That taste was in his mouth again. That sweet, unpleasant taste. And a queer, frightening thought occurred to him: I have seen this man before. But that was ridiculous, of course. Wasn't it?

Sam thought of how such a poster would have intimidated him as a child—of how much simple, unalloyed pleasure it would have stolen from the safe haven of the library—and felt indignation rise in his

chest. He took a step toward the poster to examine the odd star more closely, taking his roll of Tums out of his pocket at the same time.

He was putting one of them into his mouth when a voice spoke up from behind him. “Well, hello there!”

He jumped and turned around, ready to do battle with the library dragon, now that it had finally disclosed itself.

2

No dragon presented itself. There was only a plump, white-haired woman of about fifty-five, pushing a trolley of books on silent rubber tires. Her white hair fell around her pleasant, unlined face in neat beauty-shop curls.

“I suppose you were looking for me,” she said. “Did Mr. Peckham direct you in here?”

“I didn’t see anybody at all.”

“No? Then he’s gone along home,” she said. “I’m not really surprised, since it’s Friday. Mr. Peckham comes in to dust and read the paper every morning around eleven. He’s the janitor—only part-time, of course. Sometimes he stays until one-one-thirty on most Mondays, because that’s the day when both the dust and the paper are thickest—but you know how thin Friday’s paper is.”

Sam smiled. “I take it you’re the librarian?”

“I am she,” Mrs. Lortz said, and smiled at him. But Sam didn’t think her eyes were smiling; her eyes seemed to be watching him carefully, almost coldly. “And you are ... ?”

“Sam Peebles.”

“Oh yes! Real estate and insurance! That’s your game!”

“Guilty as charged.”

“I’m sorry you found the main section of the library deserted—you must have thought we were closed and someone left the door open by mistake.”

“Actually,” he said, “the idea did cross my mind.”

“From two until seven there are three of us on duty,” said Mrs. Lortz. “Two is when the schools begin to let out, you know—the grammar school at two, the middle school at two-thirty, the high school at two-forty-five. The children are our most faithful clients, and the most welcome, as far as I am concerned. I love the little ones. I used to have an all-day assistant, but last year the Town Council cut our budget by eight hundred dollars and ...” Mrs. Lortz put her hands together and mimed a bird flying away. It was an amusing charming gesture.

So why, Sam wondered, aren’t I charmed or amused?

The posters, he supposed. He was still trying to make Red Riding Hood, the screaming child in the car, and the grim-eyed Library Policeman jibe with this smiling small-town librarian.

She put her left hand out—a small hand, as plump and round as the rest of her—with perfect unstudied confidence. He looked at the third finger and saw it was ringless; she wasn’t Mrs. Lortz after all. The fact of her spinsterhood struck him as utterly typical, utterly small-town. Almost a caricature, really. Sam shook it.

“You haven’t been to our library before, have you, Mr. Peebles?”

“No, I’m afraid not. And please make it Sam.” He did not know if he really wanted to be Sam to this woman or not, but he was a businessman in a small town—a salesman, when you got right down to it—and the offer of his first name was automatic.

“Why, thank you, Sam.”

He waited for her to respond by offering her own first name, but she only looked at him expectantly.

“I’ve gotten myself into a bit of a bind,” he said. “Our scheduled speaker tonight at Rotary Club had an accident, and—”

“Oh, that’s too bad!”

“For me as well as him. I got drafted to take his place.”

“Oh-oh!” Ms. Lortz said. Her tone was alarmed, but her eyes crinkled with amusement. And still Sam did not find himself warming to her, although he was a person who warmed up to other people quickly (if superficially) as a rule; the kind of man who had few close friends but felt compelled nonetheless to start conversations with strangers in elevators.

“I wrote a speech last night and this morning I read it to the young woman who takes dictation and types up my correspondence—”

“Naomi Higgins, I’ll bet.”

“Yes—how did you know that?”

“Naomi is a regular. She borrows a great many romance novels—Jennifer Blake, Rosemary Rogers, Paul Sheldon, people like that.” She lowered her voice and said, “She says they’re for her mother, but actually I think she reads them herself.”

Sam laughed. Naomi did have the dreamy eyes of a closet romance reader.

“Anyway, I know she’s what would be called an office temporary in a big city. I imagine that here in Junction City she’s the whole secretarial pool. It seemed reasonable that she was the young woman of whom you spoke.”

“Yes. She liked my speech—or so she said—but she thought it was a bit dry. She suggested—”

“The Speaker’s Companion, I’ll bet!”

“Well, she couldn’t remember the exact title, but that sure sounds right.” He paused, then asked a little anxiously: “Does it have jokes?”

“Only three hundred pages of them,” she said. She reached out her right hand—it was as innocent of rings as her left—and tugged at his sleeve with it. “Right this way.” She led him toward the door by the sleeve. “I am going to solve all your problems, Sam. I only hope it won’t take a crisis to bring you back to our library. It’s small, but it’s very fine. I think so, anyway, although of course I’m prejudiced.”

They passed through the door into the frowning shadows of the Library’s main room. Ms. Lortz flicked three switches by the door, and the hanging globes lit up, casting a soft yellow glow that warmed and cheered the room considerably.

“It gets so gloomy in here when it’s overcast,” she said in a confidential we’re-in-thereal-Library-now voice. She was still tugging firmly on Sam’s sleeve. “But of course you know how the Town Council complains about the electricity bill in a place like this ... or perhaps you don’t, but I’ll bet you can guess. “

“I can,” Sam agreed, also dropping his voice to a near-whisper.

“But that’s a holiday compared to what they have to say about the heating expenses in the winter.” She rolled her eyes. “Oil is so dear. It’s the fault of those Arabs ... and now look what they are up to—hiring religious hit-men to try and kill writers.”

“It does seem a little harsh,” Sam said, and for some reason he found himself thinking of the poster of the tall man again—the one with the odd star pinned to his ID case, the one whose shadow was falling so ominously over the upturned faces of the children. Falling over them like a stain.

“And of course, I’ve been fussing in the Children’s Library. I lose all track of time when I’m in there.”

“That’s an interesting place,” Sam said. He meant to go on, to ask her about the posters, but Ms. Lortz forestalled him. It was clear to Sam exactly who was in charge of this peculiar little side-trip in an otherwise ordinary day.

“You bet it is! Now, you just give me one minute.” She reached up and put her hands on his shoulders—she had to stand on tiptoe to do it—and for one moment Sam had the absurd idea that she meant to kiss him. Instead she pressed him down onto a wooden bench which ran along the far side of the seven-day bookshelf. “I know right where to find the books you need, Sam. I don’t even have to check the card catalogue.”

“I could get them myself—”

“I’m sure,” she said, “but they’re in the Special Reference section, and I don’t like to let people in there if I can help it. I’m very bossy about that, but I always know where to put my hand right on the things I need ... back there, anyway. People are so messy, they have so little regard for order, you know. Children are the worst, but even adults get up to didos if you let them. Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll be back in two shakes.”

Sam had no intention of protesting further, but he wouldn’t have had time even if he had wanted to. She was gone. He sat on the bench, once more feeling like a fourth-grader ... like a fourth-grader who had done something wrong this time, who had gotten up to didos and so couldn’t go out and play with the other children at recess.

He could hear Ms. Lortz moving about in the room behind the checkout desk, and he looked around thoughtfully. There was nothing to see except books—there was not even one old pensioner reading the paper or leafing through a magazine. It seemed odd. He wouldn’t have expected a small-town library like this to be doing a booming business on a weekday afternoon, but no one at all?

Well, there was Mr. Peckham, he thought, but he finished the paper and went home. Dreadfully thin paper on Friday,

you know. Thin dust, too. And then he realized he only had the word of Ms. Lortz that a Mr. Peckham had ever been here at all.

True enough—but why would she lie?

He didn't know, and doubted very much that she had, but the fact that he was questioning the honesty of a sweet-faced woman he had just met highlighted the central puzzling fact of this meeting: he didn't like her. Sweet face or not, he didn't like her one bit.

It's the posters. You were prepared not to like ANYBODY that would put up posters like that in a children's room. But it doesn't matter, because a side-trip is all it is. Get the books and get out.

He shifted on the bench, looked up, and saw a motto on the wall: If you would know how a man treats his wife and his children, see how he treats his books.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sam didn't care much for that little homily, either. He didn't know exactly why ... except that maybe he thought a man, even a bookworm, might be expected to treat his family a little better than his reading matter. The motto, painted in gold leaf on a length of varnished oak, glared down at him nevertheless, seeming to suggest he better think again.

Before he could, Ms. Lortz returned, lifting a gate in the checkout desk, stepping through it, and lowering it neatly behind her again.

"I think I've got what you need," she said cheerfully. "I hope you'll agree."

She handed him two books. One was *The Speaker's Companion*, edited by Kent Adelman, and the other was *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. The contents of this latter book, according to the jacket (which was, in its turn, protected by a tough plastic overjacket), had not been edited, exactly, but selected by one Hazel

Felleman. "Poems of life!" the jacket promised. "Poems of home and mother! Poems of laughter and whimsy! The poems most frequently asked for by the readers of the New York Times Book Review!" It further advised that Hazel Felleman "has been able to keep her finger on the poetry pulse of the American people."

Sam looked at her with some doubt, and she read his mind effortlessly.

"Yes, I know, they look old-fashioned," she said. "Especially nowadays, when self-help books are all the rage. I imagine if you went to one of the chain bookstores in the Cedar Rapids mall, you could find a dozen books designed to help the beginning public speaker. But none of them would be as good as these, Sam. I really believe these are the best helps there are for men and women who are new to the art of public speaking."

"Amateurs, in other words," Sam said, grinning.

"Well, yes. Take *Best Loved Poems*, for instance. The second section of the book—it begins on page sixty-five, if memory serves—is called 'Inspiration.' You can almost surely find something there which will make a suitable climax to your little talk, Sam. And you're apt to find that your listeners will remember a well-chosen verse even if they forget everything else. Especially if they're a little—"

"Drunk," he said.

"Tight was the word I would have used," she said with gentle reproof, "although I suppose you know them better than I do." But the gaze she shot at him suggested that she was only saying this because she was polite.

She held up *The Speaker's Companion*. The jacket was a cartoonist's drawing of a bunting-draped hall. Small groups of men in old-fashioned evening dress were seated at tables with drinks in front of them. They were all yucking it up. The man behind the podium—also in evening dress and clearly the after-dinner speaker

—was grinning triumphantly down at them. It was clear he was a roaring success.

“There’s a section at the beginning on the theory of after-dinner speeches,” said Ms. Lortz, “but since you don’t strike me as the sort of man who wants to make a career out of this—”

“You’ve got that right, ” Sam agreed fervently.

“—I suggest you go directly to the middle section, which is called ‘Lively Speaking.’ There you will find jokes and stories divided into three categories: ‘Easing Them In,’ ‘Softening Them Up,’ and ‘Finishing Them Off.’ “

Sounds like a manual for gigolos, Sam thought but did not say.

She read his mind again. “A little suggestive, I suppose—but these books were published in a simpler, more innocent time. The late thirties, to be exact.”

“Much more innocent, right,” Sam said, thinking of deserted dust-bowl farms, little girls in flour-sack dresses, and rusty, thrown-together Hoovervilles surrounded by police wielding truncheons.

“But both books still work,” she said, tapping them for emphasis, “and that’s the important thing in business, isn’t it, Sam? Results!”

“Yes ... I guess it is.”

He looked at her thoughtfully, and Ms. Lortz raised her eyebrows—a trifle defensively, perhaps. “A penny for your thoughts,” she said.

“I was thinking that this has been a fairly rare occurrence in my adult life,” he said. “Not unheard-of, nothing like that, but rare. I came in here to get a couple of books to liven up my speech, and you seem to have given me exactly what I came for. How often does something like that happen in a world where you usually can’t even get a couple

of good lambchops at the grocery store when you've got your face fixed for them?"

She smiled. It appeared to be a smile of genuine pleasure ... except Sam noticed once again that her eyes did not smile. He didn't think they had changed expression since he had first come upon her—or she upon him—in the Children's Library. They just went on watching. "I think I've just been paid a compliment!"

"Yes, ma'am. You have."

"I thank you, Sam. I thank you very kindly. They say flattery will get you everywhere, but I'm afraid I'm still going to have to ask you for two dollars."

"You are?"

"That's the charge for issuing an adult library card," she said, "but it's good for three years, and renewal is only fifty cents. Now, is that a deal, or what?"

"It sounds fine to me."

"Then step right this way," she said, and Sam followed her to the checkout desk.

3

She gave him a card to fill out—on it he wrote his name, address, telephone numbers, and place of business.

"I see you live on Kelton Avenue. Nice!"

"Well, I like it."

"The houses are lovely and big—you should be married."

He started a little. "How did you know I wasn't married?"

“The same way you knew I wasn’t,” she said. Her smile had become a trifle sly, a trifle catlike. “Nothing on the third left.”

“Oh,” he said lamely, and smiled. He didn’t think it was his usual sparkly smile, and his cheeks felt warm.

“Two dollars, please.”

He gave her two singles. She went over to a small desk where an aged, skeletal typewriter stood, and typed briefly on a bright-orange card. She brought it back to the checkout desk, signed her name at the bottom with a flourish, and then pushed it across to him.

“Check and make sure all the information’s correct, please.”

Sam did so. “It’s all fine.” Her first name, he noted, was Ardelia. A pretty name, and rather unusual.

She took his new library card back—the first one he’d owned since college, now that he thought about it, and he had used that one precious little—and placed it under the microfilm recorder beside a card she took from the pocket of each book. “You can only keep these out for a week, because they’re from Special Reference. That’s a category I invented myself for books which are in great demand.”

“Helps for the beginning speaker are in great demand?”

“Those, and books on things like plumbing repair, simple magic tricks, social etiquette ... You’d be surprised what books people call for in a pinch. But I know.”

“I’ll bet you do.”

“I’ve been in the business a long, long time, Sam. And they’re not renewable, so be sure to get them back by April sixth.” She raised her head, and the light caught in her eyes. Sam almost dismissed what he saw there as a twinkle ... but that wasn’t what it was. It was

a shine. A flat, hard shine. For just a moment Ardelia Lortz looked as if she had a nickel in each eye.

“Or?” he asked, and his smile suddenly didn’t feel like a smite—it felt like a mask.

“Or else I’ll have to send the Library Policeman after you,” she said.

4

For a moment their gazes locked, and Sam thought he saw the real Ardelia Lortz, and there was nothing charming or soft or spinster-librarian about that woman at all.

This woman might actually be dangerous, he thought, and then dismissed it, a little embarrassed. The gloomy day—and perhaps the pressure of the impending speech—was getting to him. She’s about as dangerous as a canned peach ... and it isn’t the gloomy day or the Rotarians tonight, either. It’s those goddam posters.

He had The Speaker’s Companion and Best Loved Poems of the American People under his arm and they were almost to the door before he realized she was showing him out. He planted his feet firmly and stopped. She looked at him, surprised.

“Can I ask you something, Ms. Lortz?”

“Of course, Sam. That’s what I’m here for—to answer questions.”

“It’s about the Children’s Library,” he said, “and the posters. Some of them surprised me. Shocked me, almost.” He expected that to come out sounding like something a Baptist preacher might say about an issue of Playboy glimpsed beneath the other magazines on a parishioner’s coffee table, but it didn’t come out that way at all. Because, he thought, it’s not just a conventional sentiment. I really was shocked. No almost about it.

“Posters?” she asked, frowning, and then her brow cleared. She laughed. “Oh! You must mean the Library Policeman ... and Simple Simon, of course.”

“Simple Simon?”

“You know the poster that says NEVER TAKE RIDES FROM STRANGERS? That’s what the kids call the little boy in the picture. The one who is yelling. They call him Simple Simon—I suppose they feel contempt for him because he did such a foolish thing. I think that’s very healthy, don’t you?”

“He’s not yelling,” Sam said slowly. “He’s screaming.”

She shrugged. “Yelling, screaming, what’s the difference? We don’t hear much of either in here. The children are very good—very respectful.”

“I’ll bet,” Sam said. They were back in the foyer again now, and he glanced at the sign on the easel, the sign which didn’t say SILENCE IS GOLDEN

or PLEASE TRY TO BE QUIET

but just offered that one inarguable imperative: SILENCE!

“Besides—it’s all a matter of interpretation, isn’t it?”

“I suppose,” Sam said. He felt that he was being maneuvered—and very efficiently—into a place where he would not have a moral leg to stand on, and the field of dialectic would belong to Ardelia Lortz. She gave him the impression that she was used to doing this, and that made him feel stubborn. “But they struck me as extreme, those posters.”

“Did they?” she asked politely. They had halted by the outer door now.

“Yes. Scary.” He gathered himself and said what he really believed. “Not appropriate to a place where small children gather.”

He found he still did not sound prissy or self-righteous, at least to himself, and this was a relief.

She was smiling, and the smile irritated him. “You’re not the first person who ever expressed that opinion, Sam. Childless adults aren’t frequent visitors to the Children’s Library, but they do come in from time to time—uncles, aunts, some single mother’s boyfriend who got stuck with pick-up duty ... or people like you, Sam, who are looking for me.”

People in a pinch, her cool blue-gray eyes said. People who come for help and then, once they HAVE been helped, stay to criticize the way we run things here at the Junction City Public Library. The way I run things at the Junction City Public Library.

“I guess you think I was wrong to put my two cents in,” Sam said good-naturedly. He didn’t feel good-natured, all of a sudden he didn’t feel good-natured at all, but it was another trick of the trade, one he now wrapped around himself like a protective cloak.

“Not at all. It’s just that you don’t understand. We had a poll last summer, Sam—it was part of the annual Summer Reading Program. We call our program Junction City’s Summer Sizzlers, and each child gets one vote for every book he or she reads. It’s one of the strategies we’ve developed over the years to encourage children to read. That is one of our most important responsibilities, you see.”

We know what we’re doing, her steady gaze told him. And I’m being very polite, aren’t I? Considering that you, who have never been here in your life before, have presumed to poke your head in once and start shotgunning criticisms.

Sam began to feel very much in the wrong. That dialectical battlefield did not belong to the Lortz woman yet—at least not entirely—but he recognized the fact that he was in retreat.

“According to the poll, last summer’s favorite movie among the children was *A Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 5*. Their favorite rock group is called Guns n’ Roses—the runner-up was something named Ozzy Osbourne, who, I understand, has a reputation for biting the heads off live animals during his concerts. Their favorite novel was a paperback original called *Swan Song*. It’s a horror novel by a man named Robert McCammon. We can’t keep it in stock, Sam. They read each new copy to rags in weeks. I had a copy put in Vinabind, but of course it was stolen. By one of the bad children.”

Her lips pursed in a thin line.

“Runner-up was a horror novel about incest and infanticide called *Flowers in the Attic*. That one was the champ for five years running. Several of them even mentioned *Peyton Place!*”

She looked at him sternly.

“I myself have never seen any of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies. I have never heard an Ozzy Osbourne record and have no desire to do so, nor to read a novel by Robert McCammon, Stephen King, or V. C. Andrews. Do you see what I’m getting at, Sam?”

“I suppose. You’re saying it wouldn’t be fair to ...” He needed a word, groped for it, and found it. “... to usurp the children’s tastes.”

She smiled radiantly—everything but the eyes, which seemed to have nickels in them again.

“That’s part of it, but that’s not all of it. The posters in the Children’s Library—both the nice, uncontroversial ones and the ones which put you off—came to us from the Iowa Library Association. The ILA is a member of the Midwest Library Association, and that is, in turn, a member of The National Library Association, which gets the majority of its funding from tax money. From John Q. Public—which is to say from me. And you.”

Sam shifted from one foot to the other. He didn't want to spend the afternoon listening to a lecture on How Your Library Works for You, but hadn't he invited it? He supposed so. The only thing he was absolutely sure of was that he was liking Ardelia Lortz less and less all the time.

"The Iowa Library Association sends us a sheet every other month, with reproductions of about forty posters," Ms. Lortz continued relentlessly. "We can pick any five free; extras cost three dollars each. I see you're getting restless, Sam, but you do deserve an explanation, and we are finally reaching the nub of the matter."

"Me? I'm not restless," Sam said restlessly.

She smiled at him, revealing teeth too even to be anything but dentures. "We have a Children's Library Committee," she said. "Who is on it? Why, children, of course! Nine of them. Four high-school students, three middle-school students, and two grammar-school students. Each child has to have an overall B average in his schoolwork to qualify. They pick some of the new books we order, they picked the new drapes and tables when we redecorated last fall ... and, of course, they pick the posters. That is, as one of our younger Committeemen once put it, 'the funnest part.' Now do you understand?"

"Yes," Sam said. "The kids picked out Little Red Riding Hood, and Simple Simon, and the Library Policeman. They like them because they're scary."

"Correct!" she beamed.

Suddenly he'd had enough. It was something about the Library. Not the posters, not the librarian, exactly, but the Library itself. Suddenly the Library was like an aggravating, infuriating splinter jammed deep in one buttock. Whatever it was, it was ... enough.

"Ms. Lortz, do you keep a videotape of A Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 5, in the Children's Library? Or a selection of albums by Guns n'

Roses and Ozzy Osbourne?”

“Sam, you miss the point,” she began patiently.

“What about Peyton Place? Do you keep a copy of that in the Children’s Library just because some of the kids have read it?”

Even as he was speaking, he thought, Does ANYBODY still read that old thing?

“No,” she said, and he saw that an ill-tempered flush was rising in her cheeks. This was not a woman who was used to having her judgments called into question. “But we do keep stories about housebreaking, parental abuse, and burglary. I am speaking, of course, of ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears,’ ‘Hansel and Gretel,’ and ‘Jack and the Beanstalk.’ I expected a man such as yourself to be a little more understanding, Sam.”

A man you helped out in a pinch is what you mean, Sam thought, but what the hell, lady—isn’t that what the town pays you to do?

Then he got hold of himself. He didn’t know exactly what she meant by “a man such as himself,” wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but he did understand that this discussion was on the edge of getting out of hand—of becoming an argument. He had come in here to find a little tenderizer to sprinkle over his speech, not to get in a hassle about the Children’s Library with the head librarian.

“I apologize if I’ve said anything to offend you,” he said, “and I really ought to be going.”

“Yes,” she said. “I think you ought.” Your apology is not accepted, her eyes telegraphed. It is not accepted at all.

“I suppose,” he said, “that I’m a little nervous about my speaking debut. And I was up late last night working on this.” He smiled his old good-natured Sam Peebles smile and hoisted the briefcase.

She stood down—a little—but her eyes were still snapping. “That’s understandable. We are here to serve, and, of course, we’re always interested in constructive criticism from the taxpayers.” She accented the word constructive ever so slightly, to let him know, he supposed, that his had been anything but.

Now that it was over, he had an urge—almost a need—to make it all over, to smooth it down like the coverlet on a well-made bed. And this was also part of the businessman’s habit, he supposed ... or the businessman’s protective coloration. An odd thought occurred to him—that what he should really talk about tonight was his encounter with Ardelia Lortz. It said more about the small-town heart and spirit than his whole written speech. Not all of it was flattering, but it surely wasn’t dry. And it would offer a sound rarely heard during Friday-night Rotary speeches: the unmistakable ring of truth.

“Well, we got a little feisty there for a second or two,” he heard himself saying, and saw his hand go out. “I expect I overstepped my bounds. I hope there are no hard feelings.”

She touched his hand. It was a brief, token touch. Cool, smooth flesh. Unpleasant, somehow. Like shaking hands with an umbrella stand. “None at all,” she said, but her eyes continued to tell a different story.

“Well then ... I’ll be getting along.”

“Yes. Remember—one week on those, Sam.” She lifted a finger. Pointed a well-manicured nail at the books he was holding. And smiled. Sam found something extremely disturbing about that smile, but he could not for the life of him have said exactly what it was. “I wouldn’t want to have to send the Library Cop after you.”

“No,” Sam agreed. “I wouldn’t want that, either.”

“That’s right,” said Ardelia Lortz, still smiling. “You wouldn’t.”

Halfway down the walk, the face of that screaming child (Simple Simon, the kids call him Simple Simon I think that's very healthy, don't you)

recurred to him, and with it came a thought—one simple enough and practical enough to stop him in his tracks. It was this: given a chance to pick such a poster, a jury of kids might very well do so ... but would any Library Association, whether from Iowa, the Midwest, or the country as a whole, actually send one out?

Sam Peebles thought of the pleading hands plastered against the obdurate, imprisoning glass, the screaming, agonized mouth, and suddenly found that more than difficult to believe. He found it impossible to believe.

And Peyton Place. What about that? He guessed that most of the adults who used the Library had forgotten about it. Did he really believe that some of their children—the ones young enough to use the Children's Library—had rediscovered that old relic?

I don't believe that one, either.

He had no wish to incur a second dose of Ardelia Lortz's anger—the first had been enough, and he'd had a feeling her dial hadn't been turned up to anything near full volume—but these thoughts were strong enough to cause him to turn around.

She was gone.

The library doors stood shut, a vertical slot of mouth in that brooding granite face.

Sam stood where he was a moment longer, then hurried down to where his car was parked at the curb.

CHAPTER THREE

SAM'S SPEECH

1

It was a rousing success.

He began with his own adaptations of two anecdotes from the “Easing Them In” section of *The Speaker’s Companion*—one was about a farmer who tried to wholesale his own produce and the other was about selling frozen dinners to Eskimos—and used a third in the middle (which really was pretty arid). He found another good one in the subsection titled “Finishing Them Off,” started to pencil it in, then remembered Ardelia Lortz and *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. You’re apt to find your listeners remember a well-chosen verse even if they forget everything else, she had said, and Sam found a good short poem in the “Inspiration” section, just as she had told him he might.

He looked down on the upturned faces of his fellow Rotarians and said: “I’ve tried to give you some of the reasons why I live and work in a small town like Junction City, and I hope they make at least some sense. If they don’t, I’m in a lot of trouble.”

A rumble of good-natured laughter (and a whiff of mixed Scotch and bourbon) greeted this.

Sam was sweating freely, but he actually felt pretty good, and he had begun to believe he was going to get out of this unscathed. The microphone had produced feedback whine only once, no one had walked out, no one had thrown food, and there had only been a few catcalls—good-natured ones, at that.

“I think a poet named Spencer Michael Free summed up the things I’ve been trying to say better than I ever could. You see, almost

everything we have to sell in our small-town businesses can be sold cheaper in big-city shopping centers and suburban malls. Those places like to boast that you can get just about all the goods and services you'd ever need right there, and park for free in the bargain. And I guess they're almost right. But there is still one thing the small-town business has to offer that the malls and shopping centers don't, and that's the thing Mr. Free talks about in his poem. It isn't a very long one, but it says a lot. It goes like this.

" 'Tis the human touch in this world that counts,

The touch of your hand and mine,

Which means far more to the fainting heart

Than shelter and bread and wine;

For shelter is gone when the night is o'er,

And bread lasts only a day,

But the touch of the hand and the sound of a voice

Sing on in the soul alway."

Sam looked up at them from his text, and for the second time that day was surprised to find that he meant every word he had just said. He found that his heart was suddenly full of happiness and simple gratitude. It was good just to find out you still had a heart, that the ordinary routine of ordinary days hadn't worn it away, but it was even better to find it could still speak through your mouth.

"We small-town businessmen and businesswomen offer that human touch. On the one hand, it isn't much ... but on the other, it's just about everything. I know that it keeps me coming back for more. I want to wish our originally scheduled speaker, The Amazing Joe, a speedy recovery; I want to thank Craig Jones for asking me to sub

for him; and I want to thank all of you for listening so patiently to my boring little talk. So ... thanks very much.”

The applause started even before he finished his last sentence ; it swelled while he gathered up the few pages of text which Naomi had typed and which he had spent the afternoon amending; it rose to a crescendo as he sat down, bemused by the reaction.

Well, it's just the booze, he told himself. They would have applauded you if you'd told them about how you managed to quit smoking after you found Jesus at a Tupperware party.

Then they started to rise to their feet and he thought he must have spoken too long if they were that anxious to get out. But they went on applauding, and then he saw Craig Jones was flapping his hands at him. After a moment, Sam understood. Craig wanted him to stand up and take a bow.

He twirled a forefinger around his ear: You're nuts!

Craig shook his head emphatically and began elevating his hands so energetically that he looked like a revival preacher encouraging the faithful to sing louder.

So Sam stood up and was amazed when they actually cheered him.

After a few moments, Craig approached the lectern. The cheers at last died down when he tapped the microphone a few times, producing a sound like a giant fist wrapped in cotton knocking on a coffin.

“I think we'll all agree,” he said, “that Sam's speech more than made up for the price of the rubber chicken.”

This brought another hearty burst of applause.

Craig turned toward Sam and said, “If I'd known you had that in you, Sammy, I would have booked you in the first place!”

This produced more clapping and whistling. Before it died out, Craig Jones had seized Sam's hand and began pumping it briskly up and down.

"That was great!" Craig said. "Where'd you copy it from, Sam?"

"I didn't," Sam said. His cheeks felt warm, and although he'd only had one gin and tonic—a weak one—before getting up to speak, he felt a little drunk. "It's mine. I got a couple of books from the Library, and they helped."

Other Rotarians were crowding around now; Sam's hand was shaken again and again. He started to feel like the town pump during a summer drought.

"Great!" someone shouted in his ear. Sam turned toward the voice and saw it belonged to Frank Stephens, who had filled in when the trucking-union official was indicted for malfeasance. "We shoulda had it on tape, we coulda sold it to the goddam JayCees! Damn, that was a good talk, Sam!"

"Oughtta take it on the road!" Rudy Pearlman said. His round face was red and sweating. "I darn near cried! Honest to God! Where'd you find that pome?"

"At the Library," Sam said. He still felt dazed ... but his relief at having actually finished in one piece was being supplanted by a kind of cautious delight. He thought he would have to give Naomi a bonus. "It was in a book called—"

But before he could tell Rudy what the book had been called, Bruce Engalls had grasped him by the elbow and was guiding him toward the bar. "Best damned speech I've heard at this foolish club in two years!" Bruce was exclaiming. "Maybe five! Who needs a goddam acrobat, anyway? Let me buy you a drink, Sam. Hell, let me buy you two!"

Before he was able to get away, Sam consumed a total of six drinks, all of them free, and ended his triumphant evening by puking on his own WELCOME mat shortly after Craig Jones let him out in front of his house on Kelton Avenue. When his stomach vapor-locked, Sam had been trying to get his housekey in the lock of his front door—it was a job, because there appeared to be three locks and four keys—and there was just no time to get rid of it in the bushes at the side of the stoop. So when he finally succeeded in getting the door open, he simply picked the WELCOME mat up (carefully, holding it by the sides so the gunk would pool in the middle) and tossed it over the side.

He got a cup of coffee to stay down, but the phone rang twice while he was drinking it. More congratulations. The second call was from Elmer Baskin, who hadn't even been there. He felt a little like Judy Garland in *A Star Is Born*, but it was hard to enjoy the feeling while his stomach was still treading water and his head was beginning to punish him for his overindulgence.

Sam put on the answering machine in the living room to field any further calls, then went upstairs to his bedroom, unplugged the phone by the bed, took two aspirin, stripped, and lay down.

Consciousness began to fade fast—he was tired as well as bombed—but before sleep took him, he had time to think: I owe most of it to Naomi ... and to that unpleasant woman at the Library. Horst. Borscht. Whatever her name was. Maybe I ought to give her a bonus, too.

He heard the telephone start to ring downstairs, and then the answering machine cut in.

Good boy, Sam thought sleepily. Do your duty—I mean, after all, isn't that what I pay you to do?

Then he was in blackness, and knew no more until ten o'clock Saturday morning.

He returned to the land of the living with a sour stomach and a slight headache, but it could have been a lot worse. He was sorry about the WELCOME mat, but glad he'd offloaded at least some of the booze before it could swell his head any worse than it already was. He stood in the shower for ten minutes, making only token washing motions, then dried off, dressed, and went downstairs with a towel draped over his head. The red message light on the telephone answering machine was blinking. The tape only rewound a short way when he pushed the PLAY MESSAGES button; apparently the call he'd heard just as he was drifting off had been the last.

Beep! "Hello, Sam." Sam paused in the act of removing the towel, frowning. It was a woman's voice, and he knew it. Whose? "I heard your speech was a great success. I'm so glad for you."

It was the Lortz woman, he realized.

Now how did she get my number? But that was what the telephone book was for, of course ... and he had written it on his library-card application as well, hadn't he? Yes. For no reason he could rightly tell, a small shiver shook its way up his back.

"Be sure to get your borrowed books back by the sixth of April," she continued, and then, archly: "Remember the Library Policeman."

There was the click of the connection being broken. On Sam's answering machine, the ALL MESSAGES PLAYED lamp lit up.

"You're a bit of a bitch, aren't you, lady?" Sam said to the empty house, and then went into the kitchen to make himself some toast.

When Naomi came in at ten o'clock on the Friday morning a week after Sam's triumphant debut as an after-dinner speaker, Sam handed her a long white envelope with her name written on the front.

“What’s this?” Naomi asked suspiciously, taking off her cloak. It was raining hard outside, a driving, dismal early-spring rain.

“Open it and see.”

She did. It was a thank-you card. Taped inside was a portrait of Andrew Jackson.

“Twenty dollars!” She looked at him more suspiciously than ever. “Why?”

“Because you saved my bacon when you sent me to the Library,” Sam said. “The speech went over very well, Naomi. I guess it wouldn’t be wrong to say I was a big hit. I would have put in fifty, if I’d thought you would take it.”

Now she understood, and was clearly pleased, but she tried to give the money back just the same. “I’m really glad it worked, Sam, but I can’t take th—”

“Yes you can,” he said, “and you will. You’d take a commission if you worked for me as a salesperson, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t, though. I could never sell anything. When I was in the Girl Scouts, my mother was the only person who ever bought cookies from me.”

“Naomi. My dear girl. No—don’t start looking all nervous and cornered. I’m not going to make a pass at you. We went through all of that two years ago.”

“We certainly did,” Naomi agreed, but she still looked nervous and checked to make sure that she had a clear line of retreat to the door, should she need one.

“Do you realize I’ve sold two houses and written almost two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of insurance since that damn speech? Most of it was common group coverage with a high top-off and a low

commission rate, true, but it still adds up to the price of a new car. If you don't take that twenty, I'm going to feel like shit."

"Sam, please!" she said, looking shocked. Naomi was a dedicated Baptist. She and her mother went to a little church in Proverbia which was almost as ramshackle as the house they lived in. He knew; he had been there once. But he was happy to see that she also looked pleased ... and a little more relaxed.

In the summer of 1988, Sam had dated Naomi twice. On the second date, he made a pass. It was as well behaved as a pass can be and still remain a pass, but a pass it was. Much good it had done him; Naomi, it turned out, was a good enough pass deflector to play in the Denver Broncos' defensive backfield. It wasn't that she didn't like him, she explained; it was just that she had decided the two of them could never get along "that way." Sam, bewildered, had asked her why not. Naomi only shook her head. Some things are hard to explain, Sam, but that doesn't make them less true. It could

never work. Believe me, it just couldn't. And that had been all he could get out of her.

"I'm sorry I said the s-word, Naomi," he told her now. He spoke humbly, although he doubted somehow that Naomi was even half as priggish as she liked to sound. "What I mean to say is that if you don't take that twenty, I'll feel like cacapoopie."

She tucked the bill into her purse and then endeavored to look at him with an expression of dignified primness. She almost made it ... but the corners of her lips quivered slightly.

"There. Satisfied?"

"Short of giving you fifty," he said. "Would you take fifty, Omes?"

"No," she said. "And please don't call me Omes. You know I don't like it."

“I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted. Now why don’t we just drop the subject?”

“Okay,” Sam said agreeably.

“I heard several people say your speech was good. Craig Jones just raved about it. Do you really think that’s the reason you’ve done more business?”

“Does a bear—” Sam began, and then retraced his steps. “Yes. I do. Things work that way sometimes. It’s funny, but it’s true. The old sales graph has really spiked this week. It’ll drop back, of course, but I don’t think it’ll drop back all the way. If the new folks like the way I do business—and I like to think they will—there’ll be a carry-over.”

Sam leaned back in his chair, laced his hands together behind his neck, and looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling.

“When Craig Jones called up and put me on the spot, I was ready to shoot him. No joke, Naomi.”

“Yes,” she said. “You looked like a man coming down with a bad case of poison ivy.”

“Did I?” He laughed. “Yeah, I suppose so. It’s funny how things work out sometimes—purest luck. If there is a God, it makes you wonder sometimes if He tightened all the screws in the big machine before He set it going.”

He expected Naomi to scold him for his irreverence (it wouldn’t be the first time), but she didn’t take the gambit today. Instead she said, “You’re luckier than you know, if the books you got at the Library really did help you out. It usually doesn’t open until five o’clock on Fridays. I meant to tell you that, but then I forgot.”

“Oh?”

“You must have found Mr. Price catching up on his paperwork or something.”

“Price?” Sam asked. “Don’t you mean Mr. Peckham? The newspaper-reading janitor?”

Naomi shook her head. “The only Peckham I ever heard of around here was old Eddie Peckham, and he died years ago. I’m talking about Mr. Price. The librarian.” She was looking at Sam as though he were the thickest man on earth ... or at least in Junction City, Iowa. “Tall man? Thin? About fifty?”

“Nope,” Sam said. “I got a lady named Lortz. Short, plump, somewhere around the age when women form lasting attachments to bright-green polyester.”

A rather strange mix of expressions crossed Naomi’s face—surprise was followed by suspicion; suspicion was followed by a species of faintly exasperated amusement. That particular sequence of expressions almost always indicates the same thing: someone is coming to realize that his or her leg is being shaken vigorously. Under more ordinary circumstances Sam might have wondered about that, but he had done a land-office business all week long, and as a result he had a great deal of his own paperwork to catch up on. Half of his mind had already wandered off to examine it.

“Oh,” Naomi said and laughed. “Miss Lortz, was it? That must have been fun.”

“She’s peculiar, all right,” Sam said.

“You bet,” Naomi agreed. “In fact, she’s absolutely—”

If she had finished what she had started to say she probably would have startled Sam Peebles a great deal, but tuck—as he had just pointed out—plays an absurdly important part in human affairs, and luck now intervened.

The telephone rang.

It was Burt Iverson, the spiritual chief of Junction City's small legal tribe. He wanted to talk about a really huge insurance deal—the new medical center, comp-group coverage, still in the planning stages but you know how big this could be, Sam—and by the time Sam got back to Naomi, thoughts of Ms. Lortz had gone entirely out of his mind. He knew how big it could be, all right; it could land him behind the wheel of that Mercedes-Benz after all. And he really didn't like to think just how much of all this good fortune he might be able to trace back to that stupid little speech, if he really wanted to.

Naomi did think her leg was being pulled; she knew perfectly well who Ardelia Lortz was, and thought Sam must, too. After all, the woman had been at the center of the nastiest piece of business to occur in Junction City in the last twenty years ... maybe since World War II, when the Moggins boy had come home from the Pacific all funny in the head and had killed his whole family before sticking the barrel of his service pistol in his right ear and taking care of himself as well. Ira Moggins had done that before Naomi's time; it did not occur to her that l'affaire Ardelia had occurred long before Sam had come to Junction City.

At any rate, she had dismissed the whole thing from her mind and was trying to decide between Stouffer's lasagna and something from Lean Cuisine for supper by the time Sam put the telephone down. He dictated letters steadily until twelve o'clock, then asked Naomi if she would like to step down to McKenna's with him for a spot of lunch. Naomi declined, saying she had to get back to her mother, who had Failed Greatly over the course of the winter. No more was said about Ardelia Lortz.

That day.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MISSING BOOKS

1

Sam wasn't much of a breakfast-eater through the week—a glass of orange juice and an oat-bran muffin did him just fine— but on Saturday mornings (at least on Saturday mornings when he wasn't dealing with a Rotary-inspired hangover) he liked to rise a little late, stroll down to McKenna's on the square, and work his way slowly through an order of steak and eggs while he really read the paper instead of just scanning it between appointments.

He followed this routine the next morning, the seventh of April. The previous day's rain was gone, and the sky was a pale, perfect blue—the very image of early spring. Sam took the long way home following his breakfast, pausing to check out whose tulips and crocuses were in good order and whose were a little late. He arrived back at his own house at ten minutes past ten.

The PLAY MESSAGES lamp on his answering machine was lit. He pushed the button, got out a cigarette, and struck a match.

“Hello, Sam,” Ardelia Lortz's soft and utterly unmistakable voice said, and the match paused six inches shy of Sam's cigarette. “I'm very disappointed in you. Your books are overdue.”

“Ah, shit!” Sam exclaimed.

Something had been nagging at him all week long, the way a word you want will use the tip of your tongue for a trampoline, bouncing just out of reach. The books. The goddam books. The woman would undoubtedly regard him as exactly the sort of Philistine she wanted him to be—him with his gratuitous judgments of which posters belonged in the Children's Library and which ones didn't. The only

real question was whether she had put her tongue-lashing on the answering machine or was saving it until she saw him in person.

He shook out the match and dropped it in the ashtray beside the telephone.

“I explained to you, I believe,” she was going on in her soft and just a little too reasonable voice, “that *The Speaker’s Companion and Best Loved Poems of the American People* are from the Library’s Special Reference section, and cannot be kept out for longer than one week. I expected better things of you, Sam. I really did.”

Sam, to his great exasperation, found he was standing here in his own house with an unlit cigarette between his lips and a guilty flush climbing up his neck and beginning to overrun his cheeks. Once more he had been deposited firmly back in the fourth grade—this time sitting on a stool facing into the corner with a pointed dunce-cap perched firmly on his head.

Speaking as one who is conferring a great favor, Ardelia Lortz went on: “I have decided to give you an extension, however; you have until Monday afternoon to return your borrowed books. Please help me avoid any unpleasantness.” There was a pause. “Remember the Library Policeman, Sam.”

“That one’s getting old, Ardelia-baby,” Sam muttered, but he wasn’t even speaking to the recording. She had hung up after mentioning the Library Policeman, and the machine switched itself quietly off.

2

Sam used a fresh match to light his smoke. He was still exhaling the first drag when a course of action popped into his mind. It might be a trifle cowardly, but it would close his accounts with Ms. Lortz for good. And it also had a certain rough justice to it.

He had given Naomi her just reward, and he would do the same for Ardelia. He sat down at the desk in his study, where he had

composed the famous speech, and drew his note-pad to him. Below the heading (From the Desk of SAMUEL PEEBLES), he scrawled the following note: Dear Ms. Lortz,

I apologize for being late returning your books. This is a sincere apology, because the books were extremely helpful in preparing my speech. Please accept this money in payment of the fine on tardy books. I want you to keep the rest as a token of my thanks.

Sincerely yours

Sam Peebles

Sam read the note over while he fished a paper clip out of his desk drawer. He considered changing "... returning your books" to "... returning the library's books" and decided to leave it as it was. Ardelia Lortz had impressed him very much as the sort of woman who subscribed to the philosophy of l'Etat c'est moi, even if l'etat in this case was just the local library.

He removed a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and used the clip to attach it to the note. He hesitated a moment longer, drumming his fingers restlessly on the edge of the desk.

She's going to look at this as a bribe. She'll probably be offended and mad as hell.

That might be true, but Sam didn't care. He knew what was behind the Lortz woman's arch little call this morning—behind both arch little calls, probably. He had pulled her chain a little too hard about the posters in the Children's Library, and she was getting back at him—or trying to. But this wasn't the fourth grade, he wasn't a scurrying, terrified little kid (not anymore, at least), and he wasn't going to be intimidated. Not by the ill-tempered sign in the library foyer, nor by the librarian's you're-one-whole-day-late-you-bad-boy-you nagging.

"Fuck it!" he said out loud. "If you don't want the goddam money, stick it in the Library Defense Fund, or something."

He laid the note with the twenty paper-clipped to it on the desk. He had no intention of presenting it in person so she could get shirty on him. He would bind the two volumes together with a couple of rubber bands after laying the note and the money into one of them so it stuck out. Then he would simply dump the whole shebang into the book-drop. He had spent six years in Junction City without making Ardelia Lortz's acquaintance; with any luck, it would be six years before he saw her again.

Now all he had to do was find the books.

They were not on his study desk, that was for sure. Sam went out into the dining room and looked on the table. It was where he usually stacked things which needed to be returned. There were two VHS tapes ready to go back to Bruce's Video Stop, an envelope with Paperboy written across the front, two folders with insurance policies in them ... but no Speaker's Companion. No Best Loved Poems of the American People, either.

"Crap," Sam said, and scratched his head. "Where the belt—?"

He went out into the kitchen. Nothing on the kitchen table but the morning paper; he'd put it down there when he came in. He tossed it absently in the cardboard carton by the woodstove as he checked the counter. Nothing on the counter but the box from which he had taken last night's frozen dinner.

He went slowly upstairs to check the rooms on the second story, but he was already starting to get a very bad feeling.

3

By three o'clock that afternoon, the bad feeling was a lot worse. Sam Peebles was, in fact, fuming. After going through the house twice from top to bottom (on the second pass he even checked the cellar), he had gone down to the office, even though he was pretty sure he had brought the two books home with him when he left work late last Monday afternoon. Sure enough, he had found nothing there. And

here he was, most of a beautiful spring Saturday shot in a fruitless search for two library books, no further ahead.

He kept thinking of her arch tone—remember the Library Policeman, Sam—and how happy she would feel if she knew just how far under his skin she had gotten. If there really were Library Police, Sam had no doubt at all that the woman would be happy to sic one on him. The more he thought about it, the madder he got.

He went back into his study. His note to Ardelia Lortz, with the twenty attached, stared at him blandly from the desk.

“Balls!” he cried, and was almost off on another whirlwind search of the house before he caught himself and stopped. That would accomplish nothing.

Suddenly he heard the voice of his long-dead mother. It was soft and sweetly reasonable. When you can’t find a thing, Samuel, tearing around and looking for it usually does no good. Sit down and think things over instead. Use your head and save your feet.

It had been good advice when he was ten; he guessed it was just as good now that he was forty. Sam sat down behind his desk, closed his eyes, and set out to trace the progress of those goddamned library books from the moment Ms. Lortz had handed them to him until ... whenever.

From the Library he had taken them back to the office, stopping at Sam’s House of Pizza on the way for a pepperoni-and-double-mushroom pie, which he had eaten at his desk while he looked through *The Speaker’s Companion* for two things: good jokes and how to use them. He remembered how careful he’d been not to get even the smallest dollop of pizza sauce on the book—which was sort of ironic, considering the fact that he couldn’t find either of them now.

He had spent most of the afternoon on the speech, working in the jokes, then rewriting the whole last part so the poem would fit better. When he went home late Friday afternoon, he’d taken the finished

speech but not the books. He was sure of that. Craig Jones had picked him up when it was time for the Rotary Club dinner, and Craig had dropped him off later on—just in time for Sam to baptize the WELCOME mat.

Saturday morning had been spent nursing his minor but annoying hangover; for the rest of the weekend he had just stayed around the house, reading, watching TV, and—let's face it, gang—basking in his triumph. He hadn't gone near the office all weekend. He was sure of it.

Okay, he thought. Here comes the hard part. Now concentrate. But he didn't need to concentrate all that hard after all, he discovered.

He had started out of the office around quarter to five on Monday afternoon, and then the phone had rung, calling him back. It had been Stu Youngman, wanting him to write a large homeowner's policy. That had been the start of this week's shower of bucks. While he was talking with Stu, his eye had happened on the two library books, still sitting on the corner of his desk. When he left the second time, he'd had his briefcase in one hand and the books in the other. He was positive of that much.

He had intended to return them to the Library that evening, but then Frank Stephens had called, wanting him to come out to dinner with him and his wife and their niece, who was visiting from Omaha (when you were a bachelor in a small town, Sam had discovered, even your casual acquaintances became relentless matchmakers). They had gone to Brady's Ribs, had returned late—around eleven, late for a week-night—and by the time he got home again, he had forgotten all about the library books.

After that, he lost sight of them completely. He hadn't thought of returning them—his unexpectedly brisk business had taken up most of his thinking time—until the Lortz woman's call.

Okay—I probably haven't moved them since then. They must be right where I left them when I got home late Monday afternoon.

For a moment he felt a burst of hope—maybe they were still in the car! Then, just as he was getting up to check, he remembered how he'd shifted his briefcase to the hand holding the books when he'd arrived home on Monday. He'd done that so he could get his housekey out of his right front pocket. He hadn't left them in the car at all.

So what did you do when you got in?

He saw himself unlocking the kitchen door, stepping in, putting his briefcase on a kitchen chair, turning with the books in his hand—

“Oh no,” Sam muttered. The bad feeling returned in a rush.

There was a fair-sized cardboard carton sitting on the shelf by his little kitchen woodstove, the kind of carton you could pick up at the liquor store. It had been there for a couple of years now. People sometimes packed their smaller belongings into such cartons when they were moving house, but the cartons also made great hold-alls. Sam used the one by the stove for newspaper storage. He put each day's paper into the box after he had finished reading it; he had tossed today's paper in only a short time before. And, once every month or so—

“Dirty Dave!” Sam muttered.

He got up from behind his desk and hurried into the kitchen.

4

The box, with Johnnie Walker's monocled ain't-I-hip image on the side, was almost empty. Sam thumbed through the thin sheaf of newspapers, knowing he would find nothing but looking anyway, the way people do when they are so exasperated they half-believe that just wanting a thing badly enough will make it be there. He found the Saturday Gazette—the one he had so recently disposed of—and the Friday paper. No books between or beneath them, of course. Sam stood there for a moment, thinking black thoughts, then went to the

telephone to call Mary Vasser, who cleaned house for him every Thursday morning.

“Hello?” a faintly worried voice answered.

“Hi, Mary. This is Sam Peebles.”

“Sam?” The worry deepened. “Is something wrong?”

Yes! By Monday afternoon the bitch who runs the local Library is going to be after me! Probably with a cross and a number of very long nails!

But of course he couldn't say anything like that, not to Mary; she was one of those unfortunate human beings who have been born under a bad sign and live in their own dark cloud of doomish premonition. The Mary Vassers of the world believe that there are a great many large black safes dangling three stories above a great many sidewalks, held by fraying cables, waiting for a destiny to carry the doom-fated into the drop zone. If not a safe, then a drunk driver; if not a drunk driver, a tidal wave (in Iowa? yes, in Iowa); if not a tidal wave, a meteorite. Mary Vasser was one of those afflicted folks who always want to know if something is wrong when you call them on the phone.

“Nothing,” Sam said. “Nothing wrong at all. I just wondered if you saw Dave on Thursday.” The question wasn't much more than a formality; the papers, after all, were gone, and Dirty Dave was the only Newspaper Fairy in Junction City.

“Yes,” Mary agreed. Sam's hearty assurance that nothing was wrong seemed to have put her wind up even higher. Now barely concealed terror positively vibrated in her voice. “He came to get the papers. Was I wrong to let him? He's been coming for years, and I thought —”

“Not at all,” Sam said with insane cheerfulness. “I just saw they were gone and thought I'd check that—”

“You never checked before.” Her voice caught. “Is he all right? Has something happened to Dave?”

“No,” Sam said. “I mean, I don’t know. I just—” An idea flashed into his mind. “The coupons!” he cried wildly. “I forgot to clip the coupons on Thursday, so—”

“Oh!” she said. “You can have mine, if you want.”

“No, I couldn’t do th—”

“I’ll bring them next Thursday,” she overrode him. “I have thousands.” So many I’ll never get a chance to use them all, her voice implied. After all, somewhere out there a safe is waiting for me to walk under it, or a tree is waiting to fall over in a windstorm and squash me, or in some North Dakota motel a hair-dryer is waiting to fall off the shelf and into the bathtub. I’m living on borrowed time, so what do I need a bunch of fucking Folger’s Crystals coupons for?

“All right,” Sam said. “That would be great. Thanks, Mary, you’re a peach.”

“And you’re sure nothing else is wrong?”

“Not a thing,” Sam replied, speaking more heartily than ever. To himself he sounded like a lunatic top-sergeant urging his few remaining men to mount a final fruitless frontal assault on a fortified machine-gun nest. Come on, men, I think they might be asleep!

“All right,” Mary said doubtfully, and Sam was finally permitted to escape.

He sat down heavily in one of the kitchen chairs and regarded the almost empty Johnnie Walker box with a bitter eye. Dirty Dave had come to collect the newspapers, as he did during the first week of every month, but this time he had unknowingly taken along a little bonus: The Speaker’s Companion and Best Loved Poems of the

American People. And Sam had a very good idea of what they were now.

Pulp. Recycled pulp.

Dirty Dave was one of Junction City's functioning alcoholics. Unable to hold down a steady job, he eked out a living on the discards of others, and in that way he was a fairly useful citizen. He collected returnable bottles, and, like twelve-year-old Keith Jordan, he had a paper route. The only difference was that Keith delivered the Junction City Gazette every day, and Dirty Dave Duncan collected it—from Sam and God knew how many other homeowners in the Kelton Avenue section of town—once a month. Sam had seen him many times, trundling his shopping cart full of green plastic garbage bags across town toward the Recycling Center which stood between the old train depot and the small homeless shelter where Dirty Dave and a dozen or so of his compadres spent most of their nights.

He sat where he was for a moment longer, drumming his fingers on the kitchen table, then got up, pulled on a jacket, and went out to the car.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANGLE STREET(1)

1

The intentions of the sign-maker had undoubtedly been the best, but his spelling had been poor. The sign was nailed to one of the porch uprights of the old house by the railroad tracks, and it read:ANGLE STREET

Since there were no angles on Railroad Avenue that Sam could see—like most Iowa streets and roads, it was as straight as a string—he reckoned the sign-maker had meant Angel Street. Well, so what? Sam thought that, while the road of good intentions might end in hell, the people who tried to fill the potholes along the way deserved at least some credit.

Angle Street was a big building which, Sam guessed, had housed railroad-company offices back in the days when Junction City really had been a railway junction point. Now there were just two sets of working tracks, both going east-west. All the others were rusty and overgrown with weeds. Most of the cross-ties were gone, appropriated for fires by the same homeless people Angle Street was here to serve.

Sam arrived at quarter to five. The sun cast a mournful, failing light over the empty fields which took over here at the edge of town. A seemingly endless freight was rumbling by behind the few buildings which stood out here. A breeze had sprung up, and as he stopped his car and got out, he could hear the rusty squeak of the old JUNCTION CITY sign swinging back and forth above the deserted platform where people had once boarded passenger trains for St. Louis and Chicago—even the old Sunnyland Express, which had made its only Iowa stop in Junction City on its way west to the fabulous kingdoms of Las Vegas and Los Angeles.

The homeless shelter had once been white; now it was a paintless gray. The curtains in the windows were clean but tired and limp. Weeds were trying to grow in the cindery yard. Sam thought they might gain a foothold by June, but right now they were making a bad job of it. A rusty barrel had been placed by the splintery steps leading up to the porch. Opposite the Angle Street sign, nailed to another porch support, was this message: NO DRINKING ALLOWED AT THIS SHELTER! IF YOU HAVE A BOTTLE, IT MUST GO HERE BEFORE YOU ENTER!

His luck was in. Although Saturday night had almost arrived and the ginmills and beerjoints of Junction City awaited, Dirty Dave was here, and he was sober. He was, in fact, sitting on the porch with two other winos. They were engaged in making posters on large rectangles of white cardboard, and enjoying varying degrees of success. The fellow sitting on the floor at the far end of the porch was holding his right wrist with his left hand in an effort to offset a bad case of the shakes. The one in the middle worked with his tongue peeking from the corner of his mouth, and looked like a very old nursery child trying his level best to draw a tree which would earn him a gold star to show Mommy. Dirty Dave, sitting in a splintered rocking chair near the porch steps, was easily in the best shape, but all three of them looked folded, stapled, and mutilated.

“Hello, Dave,” Sam said, mounting the steps.

Dave looked up, squinted, and then offered a tentative smile. All of his remaining teeth were in front. The smile revealed all five of them.

“Mr. Peebles?”

“Yes,” he said. “How you doing, Dave?”

“Oh, purty fair, I guess. Purty fair.” He looked around. “Say, you guys! Say hello to Mr. Peebles! He’s a lawyer!”

The fellow with the tip of his tongue sticking out looked up, nodded briefly, and went back to his poster. A long runner of snot depended

from his left nostril.

“Actually,” Sam said, “real estate’s my game, Dave. Real estate and insur—”

“You got me my Slim Jim?” the man with the shakes asked abruptly. He did not look up at all, but his frown of concentration deepened. Sam could see his poster from where he stood; it was covered with long orange squiggles which vaguely resembled words.

“Pardon?” Sam asked.

“That’s Lukey,” Dave said in a low voice. “He ain’t havin one of his better days, Mr. Peebles.”

“Got me my Slim Jim, got me my Slim Jim, got me my Slim Fuckin Slim Jim?” Lukey chanted without looking up.

“Uh, I’m sorry—” Sam began.

“He ain’t got no Slim Jims!” Dirty Dave yelled. “Shut up and do your poster, Lukey! Sarah wants em by six! She’s comin out special!”

“I’ll get me a fuckin Slim Jim,” Lukey said in a low intense voice. “If I don’t, I guess I’ll eat rat-turds.”

“Don’t mind him, Mr. Peebles,” Dave said. “What’s up?”

“Well, I was just wondering if you might have found a couple of books when you picked up the newspapers last Thursday. I’ve misplaced them, and I thought I’d check. They’re overdue at the Library.”

“You got a quarter?” the man with the tip of his tongue sticking out asked abruptly. “What’s the word? Thunderbird!”

Sam reached automatically into his pocket. Dave reached out and touched his wrist, almost apologetically.

“Don’t give him any money, Mr. Peebles,” he said. “That’s Rudolph. He don’t need no Thunderbird. Him and the Bird don’t agree no more. He just needs a night’s sleep.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said. “I’m tapped, Rudolph.”

“Yeah, you and everybody else,” Rudolph said. As he went back to his poster he muttered: “What’s the price? Fifty twice.”

“I didn’t see any books,” Dirty Dave said. “I’m sorry. I just got the papers, like usual. Missus V. was there, and she can tell you. I didn’t do nothing wrong.” But his rheumy, unhappy eyes said he did not expect Sam to believe this. Unlike Mary, Dirty Dave Duncan did not live in a world where doom lay just up the road or around the corner; his surrounded him. He lived in it with what little dignity he could muster.

“I believe you.” Sam laid a hand on Dave’s shoulder. “I just dumped your box of papers into one of my bags, like always,” Dave said.

“If I had a thousand Slim Jims, I’d eat them all,” Lukey said abruptly. “I would snark those suckers right down! That’s chow! That’s chow! That’s chow-de-dow!”

“I believe you,” Sam repeated, and patted Dave’s horribly bony shoulder. He found himself wondering, God help him, if Dave had fleas. On the heels of this uncharitable thought came another: he wondered if any of the other Rotarians, those hale and hearty fellows with whom he had made such a hit a week ago, had been down to this end of town lately. He wondered if they even knew about Angle Street. And he wondered if Spencer Michael Free had been thinking about such men as Lukey and Rudolph and Dirty Dave when he wrote that it was the human touch in this world that counted—the touch of your hand and mine. Sam felt a sudden burst of shame at the recollection of his speech, so full of innocent boosterism and approval for the simple pleasures of small-town life.

“That’s good,” Dave said. “Then I can come back next month?”

“Sure. You took the papers to the Recycling Center, right?”

“Uh-huh.” Dirty Dave pointed with a finger which ended in a yellow, ragged nail. “Right over there. But they’re closed.”

Sam nodded. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Aw, just passin the time,” Dave said, and turned the poster around so Sam could see it.

It showed a picture of a smiling woman holding a platter of fried chicken, and the first thing that struck Sam was that it was good—really good. Wino or not, Dirty Dave had a natural touch. Above the picture, the following was neatly printed: CHICKEN DINNER AT THE 1ST METHODIST CHURCH

TO BENEFIT “ANGEL STREET” HOMELESS SHELTER

SUNDAY APRIL 15TH

6:00 TO 8:00 P.M.

COME ONE COME ALL

“It’s before the AA meeting,” Dave said, “but you can’t put nothing on the poster about AA. That’s because it’s sort of secret.”

“I know,” Sam said. He paused, then asked: “Do you go to AA? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. I know it’s really none of my business.”

“I go,” Dave said, “but it’s hard, Mr. Peebles. I got more white chips than Carter has got liver pills. I’m good for a month, sometimes two, and once I went sober almost a whole year. But it’s hard.” He shook his head. “Some people can’t never get with the program, they say. I must be one of those. But I keep tryin.”

Sam’s eyes were drawn back to the woman with her platter of chicken. The picture was too detailed to be a cartoon or a sketch, but

it wasn't a painting, either. It was clear that Dirty Dave had done it in a hurry, but he had caught a kindness about the eyes and a faint slant of humor, like one last sunbeam at the close of the day, in the mouth. And the oddest thing was that the woman looked familiar to Sam.

"Is that a real person?" he asked Dave.

Dave's smile widened. He nodded. "That's Sarah. She's a great gal, Mr. Peebles. This place would have closed down five years ago except for her. She finds people to give money just when it seems the taxes will be too much or we won't be able to fix the place up enough to satisfy the building inspectors when they come. She calls the people who give the money angels, but she's the angel. We named the place for Sarah. Of course, Tommy St. John spelled part of it wrong when he made the sign, but he meant well." Dirty Dave fell silent for a moment, looking at his poster. Without looking up, he added: "Tommy's dead now, a course. Died this last winter. His liver busted."

"Oh," Sam said, and then he added lamely, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He's well out of it."

"Chow-de-dow!" Lukey exclaimed, getting up. "Chow-de-dow! Ain't that some fuckin chow-de-dow!" He brought his poster over to Dave. Below the orange squiggles he had drawn a monster woman whose legs ended in sharkfins Sam thought were meant to be shoes. Balanced on one hand was a misshapen plate which appeared to be loaded with blue snakes. Clutched in the other was a cylindrical brown object.

Dave took the poster from Lukey and examined it. "This is good, Lukey."

Lukey's lips peeled back in a gleeful smile. He pointed at the brown thing. "Look, Dave! She got her a Slim Fuckin Slim Jim!"

“She sure does. Purty good. Go on inside and turn on the TV, if you want. Star Trek’s on right away. How you doin, Dolph?”

“I draw better when I’m stewed,” Rudolph said, and gave his poster to Dave. On it was a gigantic chicken leg with stick men and women standing around and looking up at it. “It’s the fantasy approach,” Rudolph said to Sam. He spoke with some truculence.

“I like it,” Sam said. He did, actually. Rudolph’s poster reminded him of a New Yorker cartoon, one of the ones he sometimes couldn’t understand because they were so surreal.

“Good.” Rudolph studied him closely. “You sure you ain’t got a quarter?”

“No,” Sam said.

Rudolph nodded. “In a way, that’s good,” he said. “But in another way, it really shits the bed.” He followed Lukey inside, and soon the Star Trek theme drifted out through the open door. William Shatner told the winos and burnouts of Angle Street that their mission was to boldly go where no man had gone before. Sam guessed that several members of this audience were already there.

“Nobody much comes to the dinners but us guys and some of the AA’s from town,” Dave said, “but it gives us something to do. Lukey hardly talks at all anymore, ‘less he’s drawing.”

“You’re awfully good,” Sam told him. “You really are, Dave. Why don’t you—” He stopped.

“Why don’t I what, Mr. Peebles?” Dave asked gently. “Why don’t I use my right hand to turn a buck? The same reason I don’t get myself a regular job. The day got late while I was doin other things.”

Sam couldn’t think of a thing to say.

“I had a shot at it, though. Do you know I went to the Lorillard School in Des Moines on full scholarship? The best art school in the Midwest. I flunked out my first semester. Booze. It don’t matter. Do you want to come in and have a cup of coffee, Mr. Peebles? Wait around? You could meet Sarah.”

“No, I better get back. I’ve got an errand to run.”

He did, too.

“All right. Are you sure you’re not mad at me?”

“Not a bit.”

Dave stood up. “I guess I’ll go in awhile, then,” he said. “It was a beautiful day, but it’s gettin nippy now. You have a nice night, Mr. Peebles.”

“Okay,” Sam said, although he doubted that he was going to enjoy himself very much this Saturday evening. But his mother had had another saying: the way to make the best of bad medicine is to swallow it just as fast as you can. And that was what he intended to do.

He walked back down the steps of Angle Street, and Dirty Dave Duncan went on inside.

2

Sam got almost all the way back to his car, then detoured in the direction of the Recycling Center. He walked across the weedy, cindery ground slowly, watching the long freight disappear in the direction of Camden and Omaha. The red lamps on the caboose twinkled like dying stars. Freight trains always made him feel lonely for some reason, and now, following his conversation with Dirty Dave, he felt lonelier than ever. On the few occasions when he had met Dave while Dave was collecting his papers, he had seemed a jolly, almost clownish man. Tonight Sam thought he had seen behind

the make-up, and what he had seen made him feel unhappy and helpless. Dave was a lost man, calm but totally lost, using what was clearly a talent of some size to make posters for a church supper.

One approached the Recycling Center through zones of litter—first the yellowing ad supplements which had escaped old copies of the Gazette, then the torn plastic garbage bags, finally an asteroid belt of busted bottles and squashed cans. The shades of the small clapboard building were drawn. The sign hanging in the door simply read CLOSED.

Sam lit a cigarette and started back to his car. He had gone only half a dozen steps when he saw something familiar lying on the ground. He picked it up. It was the bookjacket of Best Loved Poems of the American People. The words PROPERTY OF THE JUNCTION CITY-PUBLIC LIBRARY were stamped across it.

So now he knew for sure. He had set the books on top of the papers in the Johnnie Walker box and then forgotten them. He had put other papers—Tuesday's, Wednesday's, and Thursday's—on top of the books. Then Dirty Dave had come along late Thursday morning and had dumped the whole shebang into his plastic collection bag. The bag had gone into his shopping-cart, the shopping-cart had come here, and this was all that was left—a bookjacket with a muddy sneaker-print tattooed on it.

Sam let the bookjacket flutter out of his fingers and walked slowly back to his car. He had an errand to run, and it was fitting that he should run it at the dinner hour.

It seemed he had some crow to eat.

CHAPTER SIX

THE LIBRARY (II)

11

Halfway to the library, an idea suddenly struck him—it was so obvious he could hardly believe it hadn't occurred to him already. He had lost a couple of library books; he had since discovered they had been destroyed; he would have to pay for them.

And that was all.

It occurred to him that Ardelia Lortz had been more successful in getting him to think like a fourth-grader than he had realized. When a kid lost a book, it was the end of the world; powerless, he cringed beneath the shadow of bureaucracy and waited for the Library Policeman to show up. But there were no Library Police, and Sam, as an adult, knew that perfectly well. There were only town employees like Ms. Lortz, who sometimes got overinflated ideas of their place in the scheme of things, and taxpayers like him, who sometimes forgot they were the dog which wagged the tail, and not the other way around.

I'm going to go in, I'm going to apologize, and then I'm going to ask her to send me a bill for the replacement copies, Sam thought. And that's all. That's the end.

It was so simple it was amazing.

Still feeling a little nervous and a little embarrassed (but much more in control of this teapot tempest), Sam parked across the street from the Library. The carriage lamps which flanked the main entrance were on, casting soft white radiance down the steps and across the building's granite facade. Evening lent the building a kindness and a welcoming air it had definitely been lacking on his first visit—or maybe it was just that spring was clearly on the rise now, something

which had not been the case on the overcast March day when he had first met the resident dragon. The forbidding face of the stone robot was gone. It was just the public library again.

Sam started to get out of the car and then stopped. He had been granted one revelation; now he was suddenly afforded another.

The face of the woman in Dirty Dave's poster came back to him, the woman with the platter of fried chicken. The one Dave had called Sarah. That woman had looked familiar to Sam, and all at once some obscure circuit fired off in his brain and he knew why.

It had been Naomi Higgins.

2

He passed two kids in JCHS jackets on the steps and caught the door before it could swing all the way closed. He stepped into the foyer. The first thing that struck him was the sound. The reading room beyond the marble steps was by no means rowdy, but neither was it the smooth pit of silence which had greeted Sam on Friday noon just over a week ago.

Well, but it's Saturday evening now, he thought. There are kids here, maybe studying for their midterm exams.

But would Ardelia Lortz condone such chatter, muted as it was? The answer seemed to be yes, judging from the sound, but it surely didn't seem in character.

The second thing had to do with that single mute adjuration which had been mounted on the easel. SILENCE!

was gone. In its place was a picture of Thomas Jefferson. Below it was this quotation: "I cannot live without books." —Thomas Jefferson (in a letter to John Adams) June 10th, 1815

Sam studied this for a moment, thinking that it changed the whole flavor in one's mouth as one prepared to enter the library. SILENCE!

induced feelings of trepidation and disquiet (what if one's belly was rumbling, for instance, or if one felt an attack of not necessarily silent flatulence might be imminent?). "I cannot live without books, "

on the other hand, induced feelings of pleasure and anticipation—it made one feel as hungry men and women feel when the food is finally arriving.

Puzzling over how such a small thing could make such an essential difference, Sam entered the Library ... and stopped dead.

3

It was much brighter in the main room than it had been on his first visit, but that was only one of the changes. The ladders which had stretched up to the dim reaches of the upper shelves were gone. There was no need of them, because the ceiling was now only eight or nine feet above the floor instead of thirty or forty. If you wanted to take a book from one of the higher shelves, all you needed was one of the stools which were scattered about. The magazines were placed in an inviting fan on a wide table by the circulation desk. The oak rack from which they had hung like the skins of dead animals was gone. So was the sign reading RETURN ALL MAGAZINES TO THEIR PROPER PLACES!

The shelf of new novels was still there, but the 7-DAY RENTALS sign had been replaced with one which said READ A BEST SELLER—JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT!

People—mostly young people—came and went, talking in low tones. Someone chuckled. It was an easy, unselfconscious sound.

Sam looked up at the ceiling, trying desperately to understand what in hell had happened here. The slanted skylights were gone. The upper reaches of the room had been hidden by a modern suspended

ceiling. The old-fashioned hanging globes had been replaced by panelled fluorescent lighting set into the new ceiling.

A woman on her way up to the main desk with a handful of mystery novels followed Sam's gaze up to the ceiling, saw nothing unusual there, and looked curiously at Sam instead. One of the boys sitting at a long desk to the right of the magazine table nudged his fellows and pointed Sam out. Another tapped his temple and they all snickered.

Sam noticed neither the stares nor the snickers. He was unaware that he was simply standing in the entrance to the main reading room, gawking up at the ceiling with his mouth open. He was trying to get this major change straight in his mind.

Well, they've put in a suspended ceiling since you were here last. So what? It's probably more heat-efficient.

Yes, but the Lortz woman never said anything about changes.

No, but why would she say anything to him? Sam was hardly a library regular, was he?

She should have been upset, though. She struck me as a rock-ribbed traditionalist. She wouldn't like this. Not at all.

That was true, but there was something else, something even more troubling. Putting in a suspended ceiling was a major renovation. Sam didn't see how it could have been accomplished in just a week. And what about the high shelves, and all the books which had been on them? Where had the shelves gone? Where had the books gone?

Other people were looking at Sam now; even one of the library assistants was staring at him from the other side of the circulation desk. Most of the lively, hushed chatter in the big room had stilled.

Sam rubbed his eyes—actually rubbed his eyes—and looked up at the suspended ceiling with its inset fluorescent squares again. It was

still there.

I'm in the wrong library! he thought wildly. That's what it is!

His confused mind first jumped at this idea and then backed away again, like a kitten that has been tricked into pouncing on a shadow. Junction City was fairly large by central Iowa standards, with a population of thirty-five thousand or so, but it was ridiculous to think it could support two libraries. Besides, the location of the building and the configuration of the room were right ... it was just everything else that was wrong.

Sam wondered for just a moment if he might be going insane, and then dismissed the thought. He looked around and noticed for the first time that everyone had stopped what they were doing. They were all looking at him. He felt a momentary, mad urge to say, "Go back to what you were doing—I was just noticing that the whole library is different this week." Instead, he sauntered over to the magazine table and picked up a copy of U.S. News & World Report. He began leafing through it with a show of great interest, and watched out of the corners of his eyes as the people in the room went back to what they had been doing.

When he felt that he could move without attracting undue attention, Sam replaced the magazine on the table and sauntered toward the Children's Library. He felt a little like a spy crossing enemy territory. The sign over the door was exactly the same, gold letters on warm dark oak, but the poster was different. Little Red Riding Hood at the moment of her terrible realization had been replaced by Donald Duck's nephews, Huey, Dewey, and Louie. They were wearing bathing trunks and diving into a swimming pool filled with books. The tag-line beneath read: COME ON IN! THE READING'S FINE!

"What's going on here?" Sam muttered. His heart had begun to beat too fast; he could feel a fine sweat breaking out on his arms and back. If it had been just the poster, he could have assumed that La Lortz had been fired ... but it wasn't just the poster. It was everything.

He opened the door of the Children's Library and peeked inside. He saw the same agreeable small world with its low tables and chairs, the same bright-blue curtains, the same water fountain mounted on the wall. Only now the suspended ceiling in here matched the suspended ceiling in the main reading room, and all the posters had been changed. The screaming child in the black sedan (Simple Simon they call him Simple Simon they feel contempt for him I think that's very healthy, don't you)

was gone, and so was the Library Policeman with his trenchcoat and his strange star of many points. Sam drew back, turned around, and walked slowly to the main circulation desk. He felt as if his whole body had turned to glass.

Two library assistants—a college-age boy and girl—watched him approach. Sam was not too upset himself to see that they looked a trifle nervous.

Be careful. No ... be NORMAL. They already think you're halfway to being nuts.

He suddenly thought of Lukey and a horrible, destructive impulse tried to seize him. He could see himself opening his mouth and yelling at these two nervous young people, demanding at the top of his voice that they give him a few Slim Fucking Slim Jims, because that was chow, that was chow, that was chow-de-dow.

He spoke in a calm, low voice instead.

"Perhaps you could help me. I need to speak to the librarian."

"Gee, I'm sorry," the girl said. "Mr. Price doesn't come in on Saturday nights."

Sam glanced down at the desk. As on his previous trip to the library, there was a small name-plaque standing next to the microfilm recorder, but it no longer said A. LORTZ.

Now it said MR. PRICE.

In his mind he heard Naomi say, Tall man? About fifty? “No,” he said. “Not Mr. Price. Not Mr. Peckham, either. The other one. Ardelia Lortz.”

The boy and girl exchanged a puzzled glance. “No one named Ardelia Lord works here,” the boy said. “You must be thinking of some other library.”

“Not Lord,” Sam told them. His voice seemed to be coming from a great distance. “Lortz.”

“No,” the girl said. “You really must be mistaken, sir.”

They were starting to look cautious again, and although Sam felt like insisting, telling them of course Ardelia Lortz worked here, he had met her only eight days ago, he made himself pull back. And in a way, it all made perfect sense, didn't it? It was perfect sense within a framework of utter lunacy, granted, but that didn't change the fact that the interior logic was intact. Like the posters, the skylights, and the magazine rack, Ardelia Lortz had simply ceased to exist.

Naomi spoke up again inside his head. Oh? Miss Lortz, was it? That must have been fun.

“Naomi recognized the name,” he muttered.

Now the library assistants were looking at him with identical expressions of consternation.

“Pardon me,” Sam said, and tried to smile. It felt crooked on his face. “I'm having one of those days.”

“Yes,” the boy said.

“You bet,” the girl said.

They think I'm crazy, Sam thought, and do you know what? I don't blame them a bit.

"Was there anything else?" the boy asked.

Sam opened his mouth to say no—after which he would beat a hasty retreat—and then changed his mind. He was in for a penny; he might as well go in for a pound.

"How long has Mr. Price been the head librarian?"

The two assistants exchanged another glance. The girl shrugged. "Since we've been here," she said, "but that's not very long, Mr.—?"

"Peebles," Sam said, offering his hand. "Sam Peebles. I'm sorry. My manners seem to have flown away with the rest of my mind."

They both relaxed a little—it was an indefinable thing, but it was there, and it helped Sam do the same. Upset or not, he had managed to hold onto at least some of his not inconsiderable ability to put people at ease. A real-estate-and-insurance salesman who couldn't do that was a fellow who ought to be looking for a new line of work.

"I'm Cynthia Berrigan," she said, giving his hand a tentative shake. "This is Tom Stanford."

"Pleased to meet you," Tom Stanford said. He didn't look entirely sure of this, but he also gave Sam's hand a quick shake.

"Pardon me?" the woman with the mystery novels asked. "Could someone help me, please? I'll be late for my bridge game."

"I'll do it," Tom told Cynthia, and walked down the desk to check out the woman's books.

She said, "Tom and I go to Chapelton Junior College, Mr. Peebles. This is a work-study job. I've been here three semesters now—Mr. Price hired me last spring. Tom came during the summer."

“Mr. Price is the only full-time employee?”

“Uh-huh.” She had lovely brown eyes and now he could see a touch of concern in them. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Sam looked up again. He couldn’t help it. “Has this suspended ceiling been here since you came to work?”

She followed his glance. “Well,” she said, “I didn’t know that was what it’s called, but yes, it’s been this way since I’ve been here.”

“I had an idea there were skylights, you see.”

Cynthia smiled. “Well, sure. I mean, you can see them from the outside, if you go around to the side of the building. And, of course, you can see them from the stacks, but they’re boarded over. The skylights, I mean—not the stacks. I think they’ve been that way for years.”

For years.

“And you’ve never heard of Ardelia Lortz.”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. Sorry.”

“What about the Library Police?” Sam asked impulsively.

She laughed. “Only from my old aunt. She used to tell me the Library Police would get me if I didn’t bring my books back on time. But that was back in Providence, Rhode Island, when I was a little girl. A long time ago.”

Sure, Sam thought. Maybe as long as ten, twelve years ago. Back when dinosaurs walked the earth.

“Well,” he said, “thanks for the information. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

“You didn’t.”

“I think I did, a little. I was just confused for a second.”

“Who is this Ardelia Lortz?” Tom Stanford asked, coming back. “That name rings a bell, but I’ll be darned if I know why.”

“That’s just it. I don’t really know,” Sam said.

“Well, we’re closed tomorrow, but Mr. Price will be in Monday afternoon and Monday evening,” he said. “Maybe he can tell you what you want to know.”

Sam nodded. “I think I’ll come and see him. Meantime, thanks again.”

“We’re here to help if we can,” Tom said. “I only wish we could have helped you more, Mr. Peebles.”

“Me too,” Sam said.

4

He was okay until he got to the car, and then, as he was unlocking the driver’s-side door, all the muscles in his belly and legs seemed to drop dead. He had to support himself with a hand on the roof of his car to keep from falling down while he swung the door open. He did not really get in; he simply collapsed behind the wheel and then sat there, breathing hard and wondering with some alarm if he was going to faint.

What’s going on here? I feel like a character in Rod Serling’s old show. “Submitted for your examination, one Samuel Peebles, ex-resident of Junction City, now selling real estate and whole life in ... the Twilight Zone.”

Yes, that was what it was like. Only watching people cope with inexplicable happenings on TV was sort of fun. Sam was discovering that the inexplicable lost a lot of its charm when you were the one who had to struggle with it.

He looked across the street at the Library, where people came and went beneath the soft glow of the carriage lamps. The old lady with the mystery novels was headed off down the street, presumably bound for her bridge game. A couple of girls were coming down the steps, talking and laughing together, books held to their blooming chests. Everything looked perfectly normal ... and of course it was. The abnormal Library had been the one he had entered a week ago. The only reason the oddities hadn't struck him more forcibly, he supposed, was because his mind had been on that damned speech of his.

Don't think about it, he instructed himself, although he was afraid that this was going to be one of those times when his mind simply wouldn't take instruction. Do a Scarlett O'Hara and think about it tomorrow. Once the sun is up, all this will make a lot more sense.

He put the car in gear and thought about it all the way home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NIGHT TERRORS

1

The first thing he did after letting himself in was to check the answering machine. His heartbeat cranked up a notch when he saw the MESSAGE WAITING lamp was lit.

It'll be her. I don't know who she really is, but I'm beginning to think she won't be happy until she's driven me completely crackers.

Don't listen to it, then, another part of his mind spoke up, and Sam was now so confused he couldn't tell if that was a reasonable idea or not. It seemed reasonable, but it also seemed a little cowardly. In fact—

He realized that he was standing here in a sweat, gnawing his fingernails, and suddenly grunted—a soft, exasperated noise.

From the fourth grade to the mental ward, he thought. Well, I'll be damned if it's going to work that way, hon.

He pushed the button.

“Hi!” a man's whiskey-roughened voice said. “This is Joseph Randowski, Mr. Peebles. My stage name is The Amazing Joe. I just called to thank you for filling in for me at that Kiwanis meeting or whatever it was. I wanted to tell you that I'm feeling a lot better—my neck was only sprained, not broke like they thought at first. I'm sending you a whole bunch of free tickets to the show. Pass em out to your friends. Take care of yourself. Thanks again. Bye.”

The tape stopped. The ALL MESSAGES PLAYED lamp came on. Sam snorted at his case of nerves—if Ardelia Lortz wanted him

jumping at shadows, she was getting exactly what she wanted. He pushed the REWIND button, and a new thought struck him. Rewinding the tape that took his messages was a habit with him, but it meant that the old messages disappeared under the new ones. The Amazing Joe's message would have erased Ardelia's earlier message. His only evidence that the woman actually existed was gone.

But that wasn't true, was it? There was his library card. He had stood in front of that goddamned circulation desk and watched her sign her name on it in large, flourishing letters.

Sam pulled out his wallet and went through it three times before admitting to himself that the library card was gone, too. And he thought he knew why. He vaguely remembered tucking it into the inside pocket of Best Loved Poems of the American People.

For safekeeping.

So he wouldn't lose it.

Great. Just great.

Sam sat down on the couch and put his forehead in his hand. His head was starting to ache.

2

He was heating a can of soup on the stove fifteen minutes later, hoping a little hot food would do something for his head, when he thought of Naomi again—Naomi, who looked so much like the woman in Dirty Dave's poster. The question of whether or not Naomi was leading a secret life of some sort under the name of Sarah had taken a back seat to something that seemed a lot more important, at least right now: Naomi had known who Ardelia Lortz was. But her reaction to the name ... it had been a little odd, hadn't it? It had startled her for a moment or two, and she'd started to make a joke, and then the phone had rung and it had been Burt Iverson, and—

Sam tried to replay the conversation in his mind and was chagrined at how little he remembered. Naomi had said Ardelia was peculiar, all right; he was sure of that, but not much else. It hadn't seemed important then. The important thing then was that his career seemed to have taken a quantum leap forward. And that was still important, but this other thing seemed to dwarf it. In truth, it seemed to dwarf everything. His mind kept going back to that modern no-nonsense suspended ceiling and the short bookcases. He didn't believe he was crazy, not at all, but he was beginning to feel that if he didn't get this thing sorted out, he might go crazy. It was as if he had uncovered a hole in the middle of his head, one so deep you could throw things into it and not hear a splash no matter how big the things you threw were or how long you waited with your ear cocked for the sound. He supposed the feeling would pass—maybe—but in the meantime it was horrible.

He turned the burner under the soup to LO, went into the study, and found Naomi's telephone number. It rang three times and then a cracked, elderly voice said, "Who is it, please?" Sam recognized the voice at once, although he hadn't seen its owner in person for almost two years. It was Naomi's ramshackle mother.

"Hello, Mrs. Higgins," he said. "It's Sam Peebles."

He stopped, waited for her to say Oh, hello, Sam or maybe How are you? but there was only Mrs. Higgins's heavy, emphysemic breathing. Sam had never been one of her favorite people, and it seemed that absence had not made her heart grow fonder.

Since she wasn't going to ask it, Sam decided he might as well. "How are you, Mrs. Higgins?"

"I have my good days and my bad ones."

For a moment Sam was nonplussed. It seemed to be one of those remarks to which there was no adequate reply. I'm sorry to hear that didn't fit, but That's great, Mrs. Higgins! would sound even worse.

He settled for asking if he could speak to Naomi.

“She’s out this evening. I don’t know when she’ll be back.”

“Could you ask her to call me?”

“I’m going to bed. And don’t ask me to leave her a note, either. My arthritis is very bad.”

Sam sighed. “I’ll call tomorrow.”

“We’ll be in church tomorrow morning,” Mrs. Higgins stated in the same flat, unhelpful voice, “and the first Baptist Youth Picnic of the season is tomorrow afternoon. Naomi has promised to help.”

Sam decided to call it off. It was clear that Mrs. Higgins was sticking as close to name, rank, and serial number as she possibly could. He started to say goodbye, then changed his mind. “Mrs. Higgins, does the name Lortz mean anything to you? Ardelia Lortz?”

The heavy wheeze of her respiration stopped in mid-snuffle. For a moment there was total silence on the line and then Mrs. Higgins spoke in a low, vicious voice. “How long are you Godless heathens going to go on throwing that woman in our faces? Do you think it’s funny? Do you think it’s clever?”

“Mrs. Higgins, you don’t understand. I just want to know—”

There was a sharp little click in his ear. It sounded as if Mrs. Higgins had broken a small dry stick over her knee. And then the line went dead.

3

Sam ate his soup, then spent half an hour trying to watch TV. It was no good. His mind kept wandering away. It might start with the woman in Dirty Dave’s poster, or with the muddy footprint on the cover of Best Loved Poems of the American People, or with the missing poster of Little Red Riding Hood. But no matter where it

started, it always ended up in the same place: that completely different ceiling above the main reading room of the Junction City Public Library.

Finally he gave it up and crawled into bed. It had been one of the worst Saturdays he could remember, and might well have been the worst Saturday of his life. The only thing he wanted now was a quick trip into the land of dreamless unconsciousness.

But sleep didn't come.

The horrors came instead.

Chief among them was the idea that he was losing his mind. Sam had never realized just how terrible such an idea could be. He had seen movies where some fellow would go to see a psychiatrist and say "I feel like I'm losing my mind, doc," while dramatically clutching his head, and he supposed he had come to equate the onset of mental instability with an Excedrin headache. It wasn't like that, he discovered as the long hours passed and April 7 gradually became April 8. It was more like reaching down to scratch your balls and finding a large lump there, a lump that was probably a tumor of some kind.

The Library couldn't have changed so radically in just over a week. He couldn't have seen the skylights from the reading room. The girl, Cynthia Berrigan, had said they were boarded over, had been since she had arrived, at least a year ago. So this was some sort of a mental breakdown. Or a brain tumor. Or what about Alzheimer's disease? There was a pleasant thought. He had read someplace—Newsweek, perhaps—that Alzheimer's victims were getting younger and younger. Maybe the whole weird episode was a signal of creeping, premature senility.

An unpleasant billboard began to fill his thoughts, a billboard with three words written on it in greasy letters the color of red licorice. These words were LOSING MY MIND.

He had lived an ordinary life, full of ordinary pleasures and ordinary regrets; a pretty-much-unexamined life. He had never seen his name in lights, true, but he had never had any reason to question his sanity, either. Now he found himself lying in his rumpled bed and wondering if this was how you came untethered from the real, rational world. If this was how it started when you LOST YOUR MIND.

The idea that the angel of Junction City's homeless shelter was Naomi—Naomi going under an alias—was another nutso idea. It just couldn't be ... could it? He even began to question the strong upsurge in his business. Maybe he had hallucinated the whole thing.

Toward midnight, his thoughts turned to Ardelia Lortz, and that was when things really began to get bad. He began to think of how awful it would be if Ardelia Lortz was in his closet, or even under his bed. He saw her grinning happily, secretly, in the dark, wriggling fingers tipped with long, sharp nails, her hair sprayed out all around her face in a weird fright-wig. He imagined how his bones would turn to jelly if she began to whisper to him.

You lost the books, Sam, so it will have to be the Library Policeman ... you lost the books ... you looosssst them ...

At last, around twelve-thirty, Sam couldn't stand it any longer. He sat up and fumbled in the dark for the bedside lamp. And as he did, he was gripped by a new fantasy, one so vivid it was almost a certainty: he was not alone in his bedroom, but his visitor was not Ardelia Lortz. Oh no. His visitor was the Library Policeman from the poster that was no longer in the Children's Library. He was standing here in the dark, a tall, pale man wrapped in a trenchcoat, a man with a bad complexion and a white, jagged scar lying across his left cheek, below his left eye, and over the bridge of his nose. Sam hadn't seen that scar on the face in the poster, but that was only because the artist hadn't wanted to put it in. It was there. Sam knew it was there.

You were wrong about the bushes, the Library Policeman would say in his lightly lisping voice. There are bushes growing along the

sideth. Loth of bushes. And we're going to ecthplore them. We're going to ecthplore them together.

No! Stop it! Just ... STOP it!

As his trembling hand finally found the lamp, a board creaked in the room and he uttered a breathless little scream. His hand clenched, squeezing the switch. The light came on. For a moment he actually thought he saw the tall man, and then he realized it was only a shadow cast on the wall by the bureau.

Sam swung his feet out onto the floor and put his face in his hands for a moment. Then he reached for the pack of Kents on the nightstand.

"You've got to get hold of yourself," he muttered. "What the fuck were you thinking about?"

I don't know, the voice inside responded promptly. Furthermore, I don't want to know. Ever. The bushes were a long time ago. I never have to remember the bushes again. Or the taste. That sweet sweet taste.

He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

The worst thing was this: Next time he might really see the man in the trenchcoat. Or Ardelia. Or Gorgo, High Emperor of Pellucidar. Because if he'd been able to create a hallucination as complete as his visit to the Library and his meeting with Ardelia Lortz, he could hallucinate anything. Once you started thinking about skylights that weren't there, and people who weren't there, and even bushes that weren't there, everything seemed possible. How did you quell a rebellion in your own mind?

He went down to the kitchen, turning on lights as he went, resisting an urge to look over his shoulder and see if anyone was creeping after him. A man with a badge in his hand, for instance. He supposed that what he needed was a sleeping pill, but since he

didn't have any—not even one of the over-the-counter preparations like Sominex—he would just have to improvise. He splashed milk into a saucepan, heated it, poured it into a coffee mug, and then added a healthy shot of brandy. This was something else he had seen in the movies. He took a taste, grimaced, almost poured the evil mixture down the sink, and then looked at the clock on the microwave. Quarter to one in the morning. It was a long time until dawn, a long time to spend imagining Ardelia Lortz and the Library Policeman creeping up the stairs with knives gripped between their teeth.

Or arrows, he thought. Long black arrows. Ardelia and the Library Policeman creeping up the stairs with long black arrows clamped between their teeth. How about that image, friends and neighbors?

Arrows?

Why arrows?

He didn't want to think about it. He was tired of thoughts which came whizzing out of the previously unsuspected darkness inside him like horrid, stinking Frisbees.

I don't want to think about it. I won't think about it.

He finished the brandy-laced milk and went back to bed.

4

He left the bedside lamp on, and that made him feel a little calmer. He actually began to think he might go to sleep at some point before the heat-death of the universe. He pulled the comforter up to his chin, laced his hands behind his head, and looked at the ceiling.

SOME of it must have really happened, he thought. It can't ALL have been a hallucination ... unless this is part of it, and I'm really in one of the rubber rooms up in Cedar Rapids, wrapped in a straitjacket and only imagining I'm lying here in my own bed.

He had delivered the speech. He had used the jokes from *The Speaker's Companion*, and Spencer Michael Free's verse from *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. And since he had neither volume in his own small collection of books, he must have gotten them from the Library. Naomi had known Ardelia Lortz—had known her name, anyway—and so had Naomi's mother. Had she! It was as if he'd set a firecracker off under her easy chair.

I can check around, he thought. If Mrs. Higgins knows the name, other people will, too. Not work-study kids from Chapelton, maybe, but people who've been in Junction City a long time. Frank Stephens, maybe. Or Dirty Dave ...

At this point, Sam finally drifted off. He crossed the almost seamless border between waking and sleeping without knowing it; his thoughts never ceased but began instead to twist themselves into ever more strange and fabulous shapes. The shapes became a dream. And the dream became a nightmare. He was at Angle Street again, and the three alkies were on the porch, laboring over their posters. He asked Dirty Dave what he was doing.

Aw, just passin the time, Dave said, and then, shyly, he turned the poster around so Sam could see it.

It was a picture of Simple Simon. He had been impaled on a spit over an open fire. He was clutching a great bundle of melting red licorice in one hand. His clothes were burning but he was still alive. He was screaming. The words written above this terrible image were: CHILDREN DINNER IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY BUSHES

TO BENEFIT THE LIBRARY POLICE FUND

MIDNITE TO 2 A.M.

COME ONE COME ALL

"THAT'S CHOW-DE-DOW!"

Dave, that's horrible, Sam said in the dream.

Not at all, Dirty Dave replied. The children call him Simple Simon. They love to eat him. I think that's very healthy, don't you?

Look! Rudolph cried. Look, it's Sarah!

Sam looked up and saw Naomi crossing the littered, weedy ground between Angle Street and the Recycling Center. She was moving very slowly, because she was pushing a shopping-cart filled with copies of *The Speaker's Companion* and *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. Behind her, the sun was going down in a sullen furnace glare of red light and a long passenger train was rumbling slowly along the track, headed out into the emptiness of western Iowa. It was at least thirty coaches long, and every car was black. Crepe hung and swung in the windows. It was a funeral train, Sam realized.

Sam turned back to Dirty Dave and said, Her name isn't Sarah. That's Naomi. Naomi Higgins from Proverbia.

Not at all, Dirty Dave said. It's Death coming, Mr. Peebles. Death is a woman.

Lukey began to squeal then. In the extremity of his terror he sounded like a human pig. She got Slim Jims! She got Slim Jims! Oh my God, she got all Slim Fuckin Slim Jims!

Sam turned back to see what Lukey was talking about. The woman was closer, but it was no longer Naomi. It was Ardelia. She was dressed in a trenchcoat the color of a winter storm-cloud. The shopping cart was not full of Slim Jims, as Lukey had said, but thousands of intertwined red licorice whips. While Sam watched, Ardelia snatched up handfuls of them and began to cram them into her mouth. Her teeth were no longer dentures; they were long and discolored. They looked like vampire teeth to Sam, both sharp and horribly strong. Grimacing, she bit down on her mouthful of candy. Bright blood squirted out, spraying a pink cloud in the sunset air and

dribbling down her chin. Severed chunks of licorice tumbled to the weedy earth, still jetting blood.

She raised hands which had become hooked talons.

“Youuuu losst the BOOOOOKS!” she screamed at Sam, and charged at him.

5

Sam came awake in a breathless jerk. He had pulled all the bedclothes loose from their moorings, and was huddled beneath them near the foot of the bed in a sweaty ball. Outside, the first thin light of a new day was peeking under the drawn shade. The bedside clock said it was 5:53 A.M.

He got up, the bedroom air cool and refreshing on his sweaty skin, went into the bathroom, and urinated. His head ached vaguely, either as a result of the early-morning shot of brandy or stress from the dream. He opened the medicine cabinet, took two aspirin, and then shambled back to his bed. He pulled the covers up as best he could, feeling the residue of his nightmare in every damp fold of the sheet. He wouldn't go back to sleep again—he knew that—but he could at least lie here until the nightmare started to dissolve.

As his head touched the pillow, he suddenly realized he knew something else, something as surprising and unexpected as his sudden understanding that the woman in Dirty Dave's poster had been his part-time secretary. This new understanding also had to do with Dirty Dave ... and with Ardelia Lortz.

It was the dream, he thought. That's where I found out.

Sam fell into a deep, natural sleep. There were no more dreams and when he woke up it was almost eleven o'clock. Churchbells were calling the faithful to worship, and outside it was a beautiful day. The sight of all that sunshine lying on all that bright new grass did more than make him feel good; it made him feel almost reborn.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ANGLE STREET (II)

1

He made himself brunch—orange juice, a three-egg omelette loaded with green onions, lots of strong coffee—and thought about going back to Angle Street. He could still remember the moment of illumination he had experienced during his brief period of waking and was perfectly sure that his insight was true, but he wondered if he really wanted to pursue this crazy business any further.

In the bright light of a spring morning, his fears of the previous night seemed both distant and absurd, and he felt a strong temptation—almost a need—to simply let the matter rest. Something had happened to him, he thought, something which had no reasonable, rational explanation. The question was, so what?

He had read about such things, about ghosts and premonitions and possessions, but they held only minimal interest for him. He liked a spooky movie once in awhile, but that was about as far as it went. He was a practical man, and he could see no practical use for paranormal episodes ... if they did indeed occur. He had experienced ... well, call it an event, for want of a better word. Now the event was over. Why not leave it at that?

Because she said she wanted the books back by tomorrow—what about that?

But this seemed to have no power over him now. In spite of the messages she had left on his answering machine, Sam no longer exactly believed in Ardelia Lortz.

What did interest him was his own reaction to what had happened. He found himself remembering a college biology lecture. The instructor had begun by saying that the human body had an

extremely efficient way of dealing with the incursion of alien organisms. Sam remembered the teacher saying that because the bad news—cancer, influenza, sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis—got all the headlines, people tended to believe they were a lot more vulnerable to disease than they really were. “The human body,” the instructor had said, “has its own Green Beret force at its disposal. When the human body is attacked by an outsider, ladies and gentlemen, the response of this force is quick and without mercy. No quarter is given. Without this army of trained killers, each of you would have been dead twenty times over before the end of your first year.”

The prime technique the body employed to rid itself of invaders was isolation. The invaders were first surrounded, cut off from the nutrients they needed to live, then either eaten, beaten, or starved. Now Sam was discovering—or thought he was—that the mind employed exactly the same technique when it was attacked. He could remember many occasions when he had felt he was coming down with a cold only to wake up the next morning feeling fine. The body had done its work. A vicious war had been going on even as he slept, and the invaders had been wiped out to the last man ... or bug. They had been eaten, beaten, or starved.

Last night he had experienced the mental equivalent of an impending cold. This morning the invader, the threat to his clear, rational perceptions, had been surrounded. Cut off from its nutrients. Now it was only a matter of time. And part of him was warning the rest of him that, by investigating this business further, he might be feeding the enemy.

This is how it happens, he thought. This is why the world isn't full of reports of strange happenings and inexplicable phenomena. The mind experiences them ... reels around for a while ... then counterattacks.

But he was curious. That was the thing. And didn't they say that, although curiosity killed the cat, satisfaction brought the beast back?

Who? Who says?

He didn't know ... but he supposed he could find out. At his local library. Sam smiled a little as he took his dishes over to the sink. And discovered he had already made his decision: he would pursue this crazy business just a little further.

Just a little bit.

2

Sam arrived back at Angle Street around twelve-thirty. He was not terribly surprised to see Naomi's old blue Datsun parked in the driveway. Sam parked behind it, got out, and climbed the rickety steps past the sign telling him he'd have to drop any bottles he might have in the trash barrel. He knocked, but there was no answer. He pushed the door open, revealing a wide hall that was barren of furniture ... unless the pay telephone halfway down counted. The wallpaper was clean but faded. Sam saw a place where it had been mended with Scotch tape.

"Hello?"

There was no answer. He went in, feeling like an intruder, and walked down the hall. The first door on the left opened into the common room. Two signs had been thumbtacked to this door. FRIENDS OF BILL ENTER HERE!

read the top one. Below this was another, which seemed at once utterly sensible and exquisitely dumb to Sam. It read: TIME TAKES TIME.

The common room was furnished with mismatched, cast-off chairs and a long sofa which had also been mended with tape—electrician's tape, this time. More slogans had been hung on the wall. There was a coffeemaker on a little table by the TV. Both the TV and the coffeemaker were off.

Sam walked on down the hall past the stairs, feeling more like an intruder than ever. He glanced into the three other rooms which opened off the corridor. Each was furnished with two plain cots, and all were empty. The rooms were scrupulously clean, but they told their tales just the same. One smelled of Musterole. Another smelled unpleasantly of some deep sickness. Either someone has died recently in this room, Sam thought, or someone is going to.

The kitchen, also empty, was at the far end of the hall. It was a big, sunny room with faded linoleum covering the floor in uneven dunes and valleys. A gigantic stove, combination wood and gas, filled an alcove. The sink was old and deep, its enamel discolored with rust stains. The faucets were equipped with old-fashioned propeller handles. An ancient Maytag washing machine and a gas-fired Kenmore drier stood next to the pantry. The air smelled faintly of last night's baked beans. Sam liked the room. It spoke to him of pennies which had been pinched until they screamed, but it also spoke of love and care and some hard-won happiness. It reminded him of his grandmother's kitchen, and that had been a good place. A safe place.

On the old restaurant-sized Amana refrigerator was a magnetized plaque which read: GOD BLESS OUR BOOZELESS HOME.

Sam heard faint voices outside. He crossed the kitchen and looked through one of the windows, which had been raised to admit as much of the warm spring day as the mild breeze could coax in.

The back lawn of Angle Street was showing the first touches of green; at the rear of the property, by a thin belt of just-budding trees, an idle vegetable garden waited for warmer days. To the left, a volleyball net sagged in a gentle arc. To the right were two horseshoe pits, just beginning to sprout a few weeds. It was not a prepossessing back yard—at this time of year, few country yards were—but Sam saw it had been raked at least once since the snow had released its winter grip, and there were no cinders, although he could see the steely shine of the railroad tracks less than fifty feet from the garden. The residents of Angle Street might not have a lot

to take care of, he thought, but they were taking care of what they did have.

About a dozen people were sitting on folding camp chairs in a rough circle between the volleyball net and the horseshoe pits. Sam recognized Naomi, Dave, Lukey, and Rudolph. A moment later he realized he also recognized Burt Iverson, Junction City's most prosperous lawyer, and Elmer Baskin, the banker who hadn't gotten to his Rotary speech but who had called later to congratulate him just the same. The breeze gusted, blowing back the homely checked curtains which hung at the sides of the window through which Sam was looking. It also ruffled Elmer's silver hair. Elmer turned his face up to the sun and smiled. Sam was struck by the simple pleasure he saw, not on Elmer's face but in it. At that moment he was both more and less than a small city's richest banker; he was every man who ever greeted spring after a long, cold winter, happy to still be alive, whole, and free of pain.

Sam felt struck with unreality. It was weird enough that Naomi Higgins should be out here consorting with the un-homed winos of Junction City—and under another name, at that. To find that the town's most respected banker and one of its sharpest legal eagles were also here was a bit of a mind-blower.

A man in ragged green pants and a Cincinnati Bengals sweatshirt raised his hand. Rudolph pointed at him. "My name's John, and I'm an alcoholic," the man in the Bengals sweatshirt said.

Sam backed away from the window quickly. His face felt hot. Now he felt not only like an intruder but a spy. He supposed they usually held their Sunday-noon AA meeting in the common room—the coffeepot suggested it, anyway—but today the weather had been so nice that they had taken their chairs outside. He bet it had been Naomi's idea.

We'll be in church tomorrow morning, Mrs. Higgins had said, and the first Baptist Youth Picnic of the season is tomorrow afternoon. Naomi has promised to help. He wondered if Mrs. Higgins knew her daughter was spending the afternoon with the alkie instead of the

Baptists and supposed she did. He thought he also understood why Naomi had abruptly decided two dates with Sam Peebles was enough. He had thought it was the religion thing at the time, and Naomi hadn't ever tried to suggest it was anything else. But after the first date, which had been a movie, she had agreed to go out with him again. After the second date, any romantic interest she'd had in him ceased. Or seemed to. The second date had been dinner. And he had ordered wine.

Well for Christ's sake—how was I supposed to know she's an alcoholic? Am I a mind-reader?

The answer, of course, was he couldn't have known ... but his face felt hotter, just the same.

Or maybe it's not booze ... or not just booze. Maybe she's got other problems, too.

He also found himself wondering what would happen if Burt Iverson and Elmer Baskin, both powerful men, found out that he knew they belonged to the world's largest secret society. Maybe nothing; he didn't know enough about AA to be sure. He did know two things, however: that the second A stood for Anonymous, and that these were men who could squash his rising business aspirations flat if they chose to do so.

Sam decided to leave as quickly and quietly as he could. To his credit, this decision was not based on personal considerations. The people sitting out there on the back lawn of Angle Street shared a serious problem. He had discovered this by accident; he had no intention of staying—and eavesdropping—on purpose.

As he went back down the hallway again, he saw a pile of cut-up paper resting on top of the pay phone. A stub of pencil had been tacked to the wall on a short length of string beside the phone. On impulse he took a sheet of paper and printed a quick note on it.

Dave,

I stopped by this morning to see you, but nobody was around. I want to talk to you about a woman named Ardelia Lortz. I've got an idea you know who she is, and I'm anxious to find out about her. Will you give me a call this afternoon or this evening, if you get a chance? The number is 555-8699. Thanks very much.

He signed his name at the bottom, folded the sheet in half, and printed Dave's name on the fold. He thought briefly about taking it back down to the kitchen and putting it on the counter, but he didn't want any of them—Naomi most of all—worrying that he might have seen them at their odd but perhaps helpful devotions. He propped it on top of the TV in the common room instead, with Dave's name facing out. He thought about placing a quarter for the telephone beside the note and then didn't. Dave might take that wrong.

He left then, glad to be out in the sun again undiscovered. As he got back into his car, he saw the bumper sticker on Naomi's Datsun.

LET GO AND LET GOD,

it said.

"Better God than Ardelia," Sam muttered, and backed out the driveway to the road.

3

By late afternoon, Sam's broken rest of the night before had begun to tell, and a vast sleepiness stole over him. He turned on the TV, found a Cincinnati-Boston exhibition baseball game wending its slow way into the eighth inning, lay down on the sofa to watch it, and almost immediately dozed off. The telephone rang before the doze had a chance to spiral down into real sleep, and Sam got up to answer it, feeling woozy and disoriented.

"Hello?"

“You don’t want to be talking about that woman,” Dirty Dave said with no preamble whatsoever. His voice was trembling at the far edge of control. “You don’t even want to be thinking about her.”

How long are you Godless heathens going to go on throwing that woman in our faces? Do you think it’s funny? Do you think it’s clever?

All of Sam’s drowsiness was gone in an instant. “Dave, what is it about that woman? Either people react as though she were the devil or they don’t know anything about her. Who is she? What in the hell did she do to freak you out this way?”

There was a long period of silence. Sam waited through it, his heart beating heavily in his chest and throat. He would have thought the connection had been broken if not for the sound of Dave’s broken breathing in his ear.

“Mr. Peebles,” he said at last, “you’ve been a real good help to me over the years. You and some others helped me stay alive when I wasn’t even sure I wanted to myself. But I can’t talk about that bitch. I can’t. And if you know what’s good for you, you won’t talk to anybody else about her, neither.”

“That sounds like a threat.”

“No!” Dave said. He sounded more than surprised; he sounded shocked. “No—I’m just warnin you, Mr. Peebles, same as I’d do if I saw you wanderin around an old well where the weeds were all grown up so you couldn’t see the hole. Don’t talk about her and don’t think about her. Let the dead stay dead.”

Let the dead stay dead.

In a way it didn’t surprise him; everything that had happened (with, perhaps, the exception of the messages left on his answering machine) pointed to the same conclusion: that Ardelia Lortz was no longer among the living. He—Sam Peebles, small-town realtor and

insurance agent—had been speaking to a ghost without even knowing it. Spoken to her? Hell! Had done business with her! He had given her two bucks and she had given him a library card.

So he was not exactly surprised ... but a deep chill began to radiate out along the white highways of his skeleton just the same. He looked down and saw pale knobs of gooseflesh standing out on his arms.

You should have left it alone, part of his mind mourned. Didn't I tell you so?

"When did she die?" Sam asked. His voice sounded dull and listless to his own ears.

"I don't want to talk about it, Mr. Peebles!" Dave sounded nearly frantic now. His voice trembled, skipped into a higher register which was almost falsetto, and splintered there. "Please!"

Leave him alone, Sam cried angrily at himself. Doesn't he have enough problems without this crap to worry about?

Yes. And he could leave Dave alone—there must be other people in town who would talk to him about Ardelia Lortz ... if he could find a way to approach them that wouldn't make them want to call for the men with the butterfly nets, that was. But there was one other thing, a thing perhaps only Dirty Dave Duncan could tell him for sure.

"You drew some posters for the Library once, didn't you? I think I recognized your style from the poster you were doing yesterday on the porch. In fact, I'm almost sure. There was one showing a little boy in a black car. And a man in a trenchcoat—the Library Policeman. Did you—"

Before he could finish, Dave burst out with such a shriek of shame and grief and fear that Sam was silenced.

"Dave? I—"

“Leave it alone!” Dave wept. “I couldn’t help myself, so can’t you just please leave—”

His cries abruptly diminished and there was a rattle as someone took the phone from him.

“Stop it,” Naomi said. She sounded near tears herself, but she also sounded furious. “Can’t you just stop it, you horrible man?”

“Naomi—”

“My name is Sarah when I’m here,” she said slowly, “but I hate you equally under both names, Sam Peebles. I’m never going to set foot in your office again.” Her voice began to rise. “Why couldn’t you leave him alone? Why did you have to rake up all this old shit? Why?”

Unnerved, hardly in control of himself, Sam said: “Why did you send me to the Library? If you didn’t want me to meet her, Naomi, why did you send me to the goddam Library in the first place?”

There was a gasp on the other end of the line.

“Naomi? Can we—”

There was a click as she hung up the telephone.

Connection broken.

4

Sam sat in his study until almost nine-thirty, eating Tums and writing one name after another on the same legal pad he had used when composing the first draft of his speech. He would look at each name for a little while, then cross it off. Six years had seemed like a long time to spend in one place ... at least until tonight. Tonight it seemed like a much shorter period of time—a weekend, say.

Craig Jones, he wrote.

He stared at the name and thought, Craig might know about Ardelia ... but he'd want to know why I was interested.

Did he know Craig well enough to answer that question truthfully? The answer to that question was a firm no. Craig was one of Junction City's younger lawyers, a real wannabe. They'd had a few business lunches ... and there was Rotary Club, of course—and Craig had invited him to his house for dinner once. When they happened to meet on the street they spoke cordially, sometimes about business, more often about the weather. None of that added up to friendship, though, and if Sam meant to spill this nutty business to someone, he wanted it to be a friend, not an associate that called him ole buddy after the second sloe-gin fizz.

He scratched Craig's name off the list.

He'd made two fairly close friends since coming to Junction City, one a physician's assistant with Dr. Melden's practice, the other a city cop. Russ Frame, his PA friend, had jumped to a better-paying family practice in Grand Rapids early in 1989. And since the first of January, Tom Wycliffe had been overseeing the Iowa State Patrol's new Traffic Control Board. He had fallen out of touch with both men since—he was slow making friends, and not good at keeping them, either.

Which left him just where?

Sam didn't know. He did know that Ardelia Lortz's name affected some people in Junction City like a satchel charge. He knew—or believed he knew—that he had met her even though she was dead. He couldn't even tell himself that he had met a relative, or some nutty woman calling herself Ardelia Lortz. Because—

I think I met a ghost. In fact, I think I met a ghost inside of a ghost. I think that the library I entered was the Junction City Library as it was when Ardelia Lortz was alive and in charge of the place. I think that's why it felt so weird and off-kilter. It wasn't like time-travel, or the way

I imagine time-travel would be. It was more like stepping into limbo for a little while. And it was real. I'm sure it was real.

He paused, drumming his fingers on the desk.

Where did she call me from? Do they have telephones in limbo?

He stared at the list of crossed-off names for a long moment, then tore the yellow sheet slowly off the pad. He crumpled it up and tossed it in the wastebasket.

You should have left it alone, part of him continued to mourn.

But he hadn't. So now what?

Call one of the guys you trust. Call Russ Frame or Tom Wycliffe. Just pick up the phone and make a call.

But he didn't want to do that. Not tonight, at least. He recognized this as an irrational, half-superstitious feeling—he had given and gotten a lot of unpleasant information over the phone just lately, or so it seemed—but he was too tired to grapple with it tonight. If he could get a good night's sleep (and he thought he could, if he left the bedside lamp on again), maybe something better, something more concrete, would occur to him tomorrow morning, when he was fresh. Further along, he supposed he would have to try and mend his fences with Naomi Higgins and Dave Duncan—but first he wanted to find out just what kind of fences they were.

If he could.

CHAPTER NINE

THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN (1)

He did sleep well. There were no dreams, and an idea came to him naturally and easily in the shower the next morning, the way ideas sometimes did when your body was rested and your mind hadn't been awake long enough to get cluttered up with a load of shit. The Public Library was not the only place where information was available, and when it was local history—recent local history—you were interested in, it wasn't even the best place.

"The Gazette!" he cried, and stuck his head under the shower nozzle to rinse the soap out of it.

Twenty minutes later he was downstairs, dressed except for his coat and tie, and drinking coffee in his study. The legal pad was once more in front of him, and on it was the start of another list.

1. Ardelia Lortz—who is she? Or who was she?
2. Ardelia Lortz—what did she do?
3. Junction City Public Library—renovated? When? Pictures?

At this point the doorbell rang. Sam glanced at the clock as he got up to answer it. It was going on eight-thirty, time to get to work. He could shoot over to the Gazette office at ten, the time he usually took his coffee break, and check some back issues. Which ones? He was still mulling this over—some would undoubtedly bear fruit quicker than others—as he dug in his pocket for the paperboy's money. The doorbell rang again.

"I'm coming as fast as I can, Keith!" he called, stepping into the kitchen entryway and grabbing the doorknob. "Don't punch a hole in the damn d—"

At that moment he looked up and saw a shape much larger than Keith Jordan's bulking behind the sheer curtain hung across the window in the door. His mind had been preoccupied, more concerned with the day ahead than this Monday-morning ritual of paying the newsboy, but in that instant an icypick of pure terror stabbed its way through his scattered thoughts. He did not have to see the face; even through the sheer he recognized the shape, the set of the body ... and the trenchcoat, of course.

The taste of red licorice, high, sweet, and sickening, flooded his mouth.

He let go of the doorknob, but an instant too late. The latch had clicked back, and the moment it did, the figure standing on the back porch rammed the door open. Sam was thrown backward into the kitchen. He flailed his arms to keep his balance and managed to knock all three coats hanging from the rod in the entryway to the floor.

The Library Policeman stepped in, wrapped in his own pocket of cold air. He stepped in slowly, as if he had all the time in the world, and closed the door behind him. In one hand he held Sam's copy of the Gazette neatly rolled and folded. He raised it like a baton.

"I brought you your paper," the Library Policeman said. His voice was strangely distant, as if it was coming to Sam through a heavy pane of glass. "I was going to pay the boy as well, but he theemed in a hurry to get away. I wonder why."

He advanced toward the kitchen—toward Sam, who was cowering against the counter and staring at the intruder with the huge, shocked eyes of a terrified child, of some poor fourth-grade Simple Simon.

I am imagining this, Sam thought, or I'm having a nightmare—a nightmare so horrible it makes the one I had two nights ago look like a sweet dream.

But it was no nightmare. It was terrifying, but it was no nightmare. Sam had time to hope he had gone crazy after all. Insanity was no day at the beach, but nothing could be as awful as this man-shaped thing which had come into his house, this thing which walked in its own wedge of winter.

Sam's house was old and the ceilings were high, but the Library Policeman had to duck his head in the entry, and even in the kitchen the crown of his gray felt hat almost brushed the ceiling. That meant he was over seven feet tall.

His body was wrapped in a trenchcoat the leaden color of fog at twilight. His skin was paper white. His face was dead, as if he could understand neither kindness nor love nor mercy. His mouth was set in lines of ultimate, passionless authority and Sam thought for one confused moment of how the closed library door had looked, like the slotted mouth in the face of a granite robot. The Library Policeman's eyes appeared to be silver circles which had been punctured by tiny shotgun pellets. They were rimmed with pinkish-red flesh that looked ready to bleed. They were lashless. And the worst thing of all was this: it was a face Sam knew. He did not think this was the first time he had cringed in terror beneath that black gaze, and far back in his mind, Sam heard a voice with the slightest trace of a lisp say: Come with me, son ... I'm a poleethman.

The scar overlaid the geography of that face exactly as it had in Sam's imagination—across the left cheek, below the left eye, across the bridge of the nose. Except for the scar, it was the man in the poster ... or was it? He could no longer be sure.

Come with me, son ... I'm a poleethman.

Sam Peebles, darling of the Junction City Rotary Club, wet his pants. He felt his bladder let go in a warm gush, but that seemed far away and unimportant. What was important was that there was a monster in his kitchen, and the most terrible thing about this monster was that Sam almost knew his face. Sam felt a triple-locked door far back in his mind straining to burst open. He never thought of running. The

idea of flight was beyond his capacity to imagine. He was a child again, a child who has been caught red-handed

(the book isn't *The Speaker's Companion*)

doing some awful bad thing. Instead of running

(the book isn't *Best Loved Poems of the American People*)

he folded slowly over his own wet crotch and collapsed between the two stools which stood at the counter, holding his hands up blindly above his head.

(the book is)

"No," he said in a husky, strengthless voice. "No, please—no, please, please don't do it to me, please, I'll be good, please don't hurt me that way."

He was reduced to this. But it didn't matter; the giant in the fog-colored trenchcoat

(the book is *The Black Arrow* by Robert Louis Stevenson)

now stood directly over him.

Sam dropped his head. It seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. He looked at the floor and prayed incoherently that when he looked up—when he had the strength to look up—the figure would be gone.

"Look at me," the distant, thudding voice instructed. It was the voice of an evil god.

"No," Sam cried in a shrieky, breathless voice, and then burst into helpless tears. It was not just terror, although the terror was real enough, bad enough. Separate from it was a cold deep drift of childish fright and childish shame. Those feelings clung like poison syrup to whatever it was he dared not remember, the thing that had

something to do with a book he had never read: *The Black Arrow*, by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Whack!

Something struck Sam's head and he screamed.

"Look at me!"

"No, please don't make me," Sam begged.

Whack!

He looked up, shielding his streaming eyes with one rubbery arm, just in time to see the Library Policeman's arm come down again.

Whack!

He was hitting Sam with Sam's own rolled-up copy of the *Gazette*, whacking him the way you might a heedless puppy that has piddled on the floor.

"That's better," said the Library Policeman. He grinned, lips parting to reveal the points of sharp teeth, teeth which were almost fangs. He reached into the pocket of his trenchcoat and brought out a leather folder. He flipped it open and revealed the strange star of many points. It glinted in the clean morning light.

Sam was now helpless to look away from that merciless face, those silver eyes with their tiny birdshot pupils. He was slobbering and knew it but was helpless to stop that, either.

"You have two books which belong to you," the Library Policeman said. His voice still seemed to be coming from a distance, or from behind a thick pane of glass. "Mith Lorth is very upset with you, Mr. Peebles."

"I lost them," Sam said, beginning to cry harder. The thought of lying to this man about (*The Black Arrow*)

the books, about anything, was out of the question. He was all authority, all power, all force. He was judge, jury, and executioner.

Where's the janitor? Sam wondered incoherently. Where's the janitor who checks the dials and then goes back into the sane world? The sane world where things like this don't have to happen?

"I ... I ... I ..."

"I don't want to hear your thick excuses," the Library Policeman said. He flipped his leather folder closed and stuffed it into his right pocket. At the same time he reached into his left pocket and drew out a knife with a long, sharp blade. Sam, who had spent three summers earning money for college as a stockboy, recognized it. It was a carton-slitter. There was undoubtedly a knife like that in every library in America. "You have until midnight. Then ..."

He leaned down, extending the knife in one white, corpse-like hand. That freezing envelope of air struck Sam's face, numbed it. He tried to scream and could produce only a glassy whisper of silent air.

The tip of the blade pricked the flesh of his throat. It was like being pricked with an icicle. A single bead of scarlet oozed out and then froze solid, a tiny seed-pearl of blood.

"... then I come again," the Library Policeman said in his odd, lisp-rounded voice. "You better find what you loht, Mr. Peebles."

The knife disappeared back into the pocket. The Library Policeman drew back up to his full height.

"There is another thing," he said. "You have been athking questions, Mr. Peebles. Don't athk any more. Do you underthand me?"

Sam tried to answer and could only utter a deep groan.

The Library Policeman began to bend down, pushing chill air ahead of him the way the flat prow of a barge might push a chunk of river-

ice. "Don't pry into things that don't concern you. Do you understand me?"

"Yes!" Sam screamed. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

"Good. Because I will be watching. And I am not alone."

He turned, his trenchcoat rustling, and recrossed the kitchen toward the entry. He spared not a single backward glance for Sam. He passed through a bright patch of morning sun as he went, and Sam saw a wonderful, terrible thing: the Library Policeman cast no shadow.

He reached the back door. He grasped the knob. Without turning around he said in a low, terrible voice: "If you don't want to see me again, Mr. Peebles, find those books."

He opened the door and went out.

A single frantic thought filled Sam's mind the minute the door closed again and he heard the Library Policeman's feet on the back porch: he had to lock the door.

He got halfway to his feet and then grayness swam over him and he fell forward, unconscious.

CHAPTER TEN

CHRON-O-LODGE-ICK-A-LEE SPEAKING

1

“May I ... help you?” the receptionist asked. The slight pause came as she took a second look at the man who had just approached the desk.

“Yes,” Sam said. “I want to look at some back issues of the Gazette, if that’s possible.”

“Of course it is,” she said. “But—pardon me if I’m out of line—do you feel all right, sir? Your color is very bad.”

“I think I may be coming down with something, at that,” Sam said.

“Spring colds are the worst, aren’t they?” she said, getting up. “Come right through the gate at the end of the counter, Mr.—?”

“Peebles. Sam Peebles.”

She stopped, a chubby woman of perhaps sixty, and cocked her head. She put one red-tipped nail to the corner of her mouth. “You sell insurance, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“I thought I recognized you. Your picture was in the paper last week. Was it some sort of award?”

“No, ma’am,” Sam said, “I gave a speech. At the Rotary Club.” And would give anything to be able to turn back the clock, he thought. I’d tell Craig Jones to go fuck himself.

“Well, that’s wonderful,” she said ... but she spoke as if there might be some doubt about it. “You looked different in the picture.”

Sam came in through the gate.

“I’m Doreen McGill,” the woman said, and put out a plump hand.

Sam shook it and said he was pleased to meet her. It took an effort. He thought that speaking to people—and touching people, especially that—was going to be an effort for quite awhile to come. All of his old ease seemed to be gone.

She led him toward a carpeted flight of stairs and flicked a light-switch. The stairway was narrow, the overhead bulb dim, and Sam felt the horrors begin to crowd in on him at once. They came eagerly, as fans might congregate around a person offering free tickets to some fabulous sold-out show. The Library Policeman could be down there, waiting in the dark. The Library Policeman with his dead white skin and red-rimmed silver eyes and small but hauntingly familiar lisp.

Stop it, he told himself. And if you can’t stop it, then for God’s sake control it. You have to. Because this is your only chance. What will you do if you can’t go down a flight of stairs to a simple office basement? Just cower in your house and wait for midnight?

“That’s the morgue,” Doreen McGill said, pointing. This was clearly a lady who pointed every chance she got. “You only have to—”

“Morgue?” Sam asked, turning toward her. His heart had begun to knock nastily against his ribs. “Morgue?”

Doreen McGill laughed. “Everyone says it just like that. It’s awful, isn’t it? But that’s what they call it. Some silly newspaper tradition, I guess. Don’t worry, Mr. Peebles—there are no bodies down there; just reels and reels of microfilm.”

I wouldn't be so sure, Sam thought, following her down the carpeted stairs. He was very glad she was leading the way.

She flicked on a line of switches at the foot of the stairs. A number of fluorescent lights, embedded in what looked like oversized inverted ice-cube trays, went on. They lit up a large low room carpeted in the same dark blue as the stairs. The room was lined with shelves of small boxes. Along the left wall were four microfilm readers that looked like futuristic hair-driers. They were the same blue as the carpet.

“What I started to say was that you have to sign the book,” Doreen said. She pointed again, this time at a large book chained to a stand by the door. “You also have to write the date, the time you came in, which is”—she checked her wristwatch—” twenty past ten, and the time you leave.”

Sam bent over and signed the book. The name above his was Arthur Meecham. Mr. Meecham had been down here on December 27th, 1989. Over three months ago. This was a well-lighted, well-stocked, efficient room that apparently did very little business.

“It's nice down here, isn't it?” Doreen asked complacently. “That's because the federal government helps subsidize newspaper morgues—or libraries, if you like that word better. I know I do.”

A shadow danced in one of the aisles and Sam's heart began to knock again. But it was only Doreen McGill's shadow; she had bent over to make sure he had entered the correct time of day, and—

—and HE didn't cast a shadow. The Library Policeman. Also ...

He tried to duck the rest and couldn't.

Also, I can't live like this. I can't live with this kind of fear. I'd stick my head in a gas oven if it went on too long. And if it does, I will. It's not just fear of him—that man, or whatever he is. It's the way a person's

mind feels, the way it screams when it feels everything it ever believed in slipping effortlessly away.

Doreen pointed to the right wall, where three large folio volumes stood on a single shelf. “That’s January, February, and March of 1990,” she said. “Every July the paper sends the first six months of the year to Grand Island, Nebraska, to be microfilmed. The same thing when December is over.” She extended the plump hand and pointed a red-tipped nail at the shelves, counting over from the shelf at the right toward the microfilm readers at the left. She appeared to be admiring her fingernail as she did it. “The microfilms go that way, chronologically,” she said. She pronounced the word carefully, producing something mildly exotic: chron-o-lodge-ick-a-lee. “Modern times on your right; ancient days on your left.”

She smiled to show that this was a joke, and perhaps to convey a sense of how wonderful she thought all this was. Chron-o-lodge-ick-a-lee speaking, the smile said, it was all sort of a gas.

“Thank you,” Sam said.

“Don’t mention it. It’s what we’re here for. One of the things, anyway.” She put her nail to the corner of her mouth and gave him her peek-a-boo smile again. “Do you know how to run a microfilm reader, Mr. Peebles?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“All right. If I can help you further, I’ll be right upstairs. Don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Are you—” he began, and then snapped his mouth shut on the rest: —going to leave me here alone?

She raised her eyebrows.

“Nothing,” he said, and watched her go back upstairs. He had to resist a strong urge to pelt up the stairs behind her. Because, cushy

blue carpet or not, this was another Junction City library.

And this one was called the morgue.

2

Sam walked slowly toward the shelves with their weight of square microfilm boxes, unsure of where to begin. He was very glad that the overhead fluorescents were bright enough to banish most of the troubling shadows in the corners.

He hadn't dared ask Doreen McGill if the name Ardelia Lortz rang a bell, or even if she knew roughly when the city Library had last undergone renovations. You have been asking questions, the Library Policeman had said. Don't pry into things that don't concern you. Do you understand?

Yes, he understood. And he supposed he was risking the Library Policeman's wrath by prying anyway ... but he wasn't asking questions, at least not exactly, and these were things that concerned him. They concerned him desperately.

I will be watching. And I am not alone.

Sam looked nervously over his shoulder. Saw nothing. And still found it impossible to move with any decision. He had gotten this far, but he didn't know if he could get any further. He felt more than intimidated, more than frightened. He felt shattered.

"You've got to," he muttered harshly, and wiped at his lips with a shaking hand. "You've just got to."

He made his left foot move forward. He stood that way a moment, legs apart, like a man caught in the act of fording a small stream. Then he made his right foot catch up with his left one. He made his way across to the shelf nearest the bound folios in this hesitant, reluctant fashion. A card on the end of the shelf read: 1987-1989.

That was almost certainly too recent—in fact, the Library renovations must have taken place before the spring of 1984, when he had moved to Junction City. If it had happened since, he would have noticed the workmen, heard people talking about it, and read about it in the Gazette. But, other than guessing that it must have happened in the last fifteen or twenty years (the suspended ceilings had not looked any older than that), he could narrow it down no further. If only he could think more clearly! But he couldn't. What had happened that morning screwed up any normal, rational effort to think the way heavy sunspot activity screwed up radio and TV transmissions. Reality and unreality had come together like vast stones, and Sam Peebles, one tiny, screaming, struggling speck of humanity, had had the bad luck to get caught between them.

He moved two aisles to the left, mostly because he was afraid that if he stopped moving for too long he might freeze up entirely, and walked down the aisle marked 1981-1983.

He picked a box almost at random and took it over to one of the microfilm readers. He snapped it on and tried to concentrate on the spool of microfilm (the spool was also blue, and Sam wondered if there was any reason why everything in this clean, well-lighted place was color coordinated) and nothing else. First you had to mount it on one of the spindles, right; then you had to thread it, check; then you had to secure the leader in the core of the take-up reel, okay. The machine was so simple an eight-year-old could have executed these little tasks, but it took Sam almost five minutes; he had his shaking hands and shocked, wandering mind to deal with. When he finally got the microfilm mounted and scrolled to the first frame, he discovered he had mounted the reel backward. The printed matter was upside down.

He patiently rewound the microfilm, turned it around, and rethreaded it. He discovered he didn't mind this little setback in the least; repeating the operation, one simple step at a time, seemed to calm him. This time the front page of the April 1, 1981, issue of the Junction city Gazette appeared before him, right side up. The

headline bannered the surprise resignation of a town official Sam had never heard of, but his eyes were quickly drawn to a box at the bottom of the page. Inside the box was this message: RICHARD PRICE AND THE ENTIRE STAFF OF

THE JUNCTION CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY

REMIND YOU THAT

APRIL 6TH-13TH IS

NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK

COME AND SEE US!

Did I know that? Sam wondered. Is that why I grabbed this particular box? Did I subconsciously remember that the second week of April is National Library Week?

Come with me, a tenebrous, whispering voice answered. Come with me, son ... I'm a poleethman.

Gooseflesh gripped him; a shudder shook him. Sam pushed both the question and that phantom voice away. After all, it didn't really matter why he had picked the April, 1981, issues of the Gazette; the important thing was that he had, and it was a lucky break.

Might be a lucky break.

He advanced the reel quickly to April 6th, and saw exactly what he had hoped for. Over the Gazette masthead, in red ink, it said: SPECIAL LIBRARY SUPPLEMENT ENCLOSED!

Sam advanced to the supplement. There were two photos on the first page of the supplement. One was of the Library's exterior. The other showed Richard Price, the head librarian, standing at the circulation desk and smiling nervously into the camera. He looked exactly as Naomi Higgins had described him—a tall, bespectacled man of about forty with a narrow little mustache. Sam was more

interested in the background. He could see the suspended ceiling which had so shocked him on his second trip to the Library. So the renovations had been done prior to April of 1981.

The stories were exactly the sort of self-congratulatory puff-pieces he expected—he had been reading the Gazette for six years now and was very familiar with its ain't-we-a-jolly-bunch-of-JayCees editorial slant. There were informative (and rather breathless) items about National Library Week, the Summer Reading Program, the Junction County Bookmobile, and the new fund drive which had just commenced. Sam glanced over these quickly. On the last page of the supplement he found a much more interesting story, one written by Price himself. It was titled THE JUNCTION CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY

One Hundred Years of History

Sam's eagerness did not last long. Ardelia's name wasn't there. He reached for the power switch to rewind the microfilm and then stopped. He saw a mention of the renovation project—it had happened in 1970—and there was something else. Something just a little off-key. Sam began to read the last part of Mr. Price's chatty historical note again, this time more carefully.

With the end of the Great Depression our Library turned the corner. In 1942, the Junction City Town Council voted \$5,000 to repair the extensive water damage the Library sustained during the Flood of '32, and Mrs. Felicia Culpepper took on the job of Head Librarian, donating her time without recompense. She never lost sight of her goal: a completely renovated Library, serving a Town which was rapidly becoming a City.

Mrs. Culpepper stepped down in 1951, giving way to Christopher Lavin, the first Junction City Librarian with a degree in Library Science. Mr. Lavin inaugurated the Culpepper Memorial Fund, which raised over \$15,000 for the acquisition of new books in its first year, and the Junction City Public Library was on its way into the modern age!

Shortly after I became Head Librarian in 1964, I made major renovations my number one goal. The funds needed to achieve this goal were finally raised by the end of 1969, and while both City and Federal money helped in the construction of the splendid building Junction City “bookworms” enjoy today, this project could not have been completed without the help of all those volunteers who later showed up to swing a hammer or run a bench-saw during “Build Your Library Month” in August of 1970!

Other notable projects during the 1970’s and 1980’s included ...

Sam looked up thoughtfully. He believed there was something missing from Richard Price’s careful, droning history of the town Library. No; on second thought, missing was the wrong word. The essay made Sam decide Price was a fussbudget of the first water—probably a nice man, but a fussbudget just the same—and such men did not miss things, especially when they were dealing with subjects which were clearly close to their hearts.

So—not missing. Concealed.

It didn’t quite add up, chron-o-lodge-ick-a-lee speaking. In 1951, a man named Christopher Lavin had succeeded that saint Felicia Culpepper as head librarian. In 1964, Richard Price had become city librarian. Had Price succeeded Lavin? Sam didn’t think so. He thought that at some point during those thirteen blank years, a woman named Ardelia Lortz had succeeded Lavin. Price, Sam thought, had succeeded her. She wasn’t in Mr. Price’s fussbudgety account of the Library because she had done ... something. Sam was no closer to knowing what that something might have been, but he had a better idea of the magnitude. Whatever it was, it had been bad enough for Price to make her an unperson in spite of his very obvious love of detail and continuity.

Murder, Sam thought. It must have been murder. It’s really the only thing bad enough to f—

At that second a hand dropped on Sam’s shoulder.

If he had screamed, he would undoubtedly have terrified the hand's owner almost as much as she had already terrorized him, but Sam was unable to scream. Instead, all the air whooshed out of him and the world went gray again. His chest felt like an accordion being slowly crushed under an elephant's foot. All of his muscles seemed to have turned to macaroni. He did not wet his pants again. That was perhaps the only saving grace.

"Sam?" he heard a voice ask. It seemed to come from quite a distance—somewhere in Kansas, say. "Is that you?"

He swung around, almost falling out of his chair in front of the microfilm reader, and saw Naomi. He tried to get his breath back so he could say something. Nothing but a tired wheeze came out. The room seemed to waver in front of his eyes. The grayness came and went.

Then he saw Naomi take a stumble-step backward, her eyes widening in alarm, her hand going to her mouth. She struck one of the microfilm shelves almost hard enough to knock it over. It rocked, two or three of the boxes tumbled to the carpet with soft thumps, and then it settled back again.

"Omes," he managed at last. His voice came out in a whispery squeak. He remembered once, as a boy in St. Louis, trapping a mouse under his baseball cap. It had made a sound like that as it scurried about, looking for an escape hatch.

"Sam, what's happened to you?" She also sounded like someone who would have been screaming if shock hadn't whipped the breath out of her. We make quite a pair, Sam thought, Abbott and Costello Meet the Monsters.

"What are you doing here?" he said. "You scared the living shit out of me!"

There, he thought. I went and used the s-word again. Called you Omes again, too. Sorry about that. He felt a little better, and thought of getting up, but decided against it. No sense pressing his luck. He was still not entirely sure his heart wasn't going to vapor-lock.

"I went to the office to see you," she said. "Cammy Harrington said she thought she saw you come in here. I wanted to apologize. Maybe. I thought at first you must have played some cruel trick on Dave. He said you'd never do a thing like that, and I started to think that it didn't seem like you. You've always been so nice ..."

"Thanks," Sam said. "I guess."

"... and you seemed so ... so bewildered on the telephone. I asked Dave what it was about, but he wouldn't tell me anything else. All I know is what I heard ... and how he looked when he was talking to you. He looked like he'd seen a ghost."

No, Sam thought of telling her. I was the one who saw the ghost. And this morning I saw something even worse.

"Sam, you have to understand something about Dave ... and about me. Well, I guess you already know about Dave, but I'm—"

"I guess I know," Sam told her. "I said in my note to Dave that I didn't see anyone at Angle Street, but that wasn't the truth. I didn't see anyone at first, but I walked through the downstairs, looking for Dave. I saw you guys out back. So ... I know. But I don't know on purpose, if you see what I mean."

"Yes," she said. "It's all right. But ... Sam ... dear God, what's happened? Your hair ..."

"What about my hair?" he asked her sharply.

She fumbled her purse open with hands that shook slightly and brought out a compact. "Look," she said.

He did, but he already knew what he was going to see.

Since eight-thirty this morning, his hair had gone almost completely white.

4

“I see you found your friend,” Doreen McGill said to Naomi as they climbed back up the stairs. She put a nail to the corner of her mouth and smiled her cute-little-me smile.

“Yes.”

“Did you remember to sign out?”

“Yes,” Naomi said again. Sam hadn’t, but she had done it for both of them.

“And did you return any microfilms you might have used?”

This time Sam said yes. He couldn’t remember if either he or Naomi had returned the one spool of microfilm he had mounted, and he didn’t care. All he wanted was to get out of here.

Doreen was still being coy. Finger tapping the edge of her lower lip, she cocked her head and said to Sam, “You did look different in the newspaper picture. I just can’t put my finger on what it is.”

As they went out the door, Naomi said: “He finally got smart and quit dyeing his hair.”

On the steps outside, Sam exploded with laughter. The force of his bellows doubled him over. It was hysterical laughter, its sound only half a step removed from the sound of screams, but he didn’t care. It felt good. It felt enormously cleansing.

Naomi stood beside him, seeming to be bothered neither by Sam’s laughing fit nor the curious glances they were drawing from passersby on the street. She even lifted one hand and waved to

someone she knew. Sam propped his hands on his upper thighs, still caught in his helpless gale of laughter, and yet there was a part of him sober enough to think: She has seen this sort of reaction before. I wonder where? But he knew the answer even before his mind had finished articulating the question. Naomi was an alcoholic, and she had made working with other alcoholics, helping them, part of her own therapy. She had probably seen a good deal more than a hysterical laughing fit during her time at Angle Street.

She'll slap me, he thought, still howling helplessly at the image of himself at his bathroom mirror, patiently combing Grecian Formula into his locks. She'll slap me, because that's what you do with hysterical people.

Naomi apparently knew better. She only stood patiently beside him in the sunshine, waiting for him to regain control. At last his laughter began to taper off to wild snorts and runaway snickers. His stomach muscles ached and his vision was water-wavery and his cheeks were wet with tears.

"Feel better?" she asked.

"Oh, Naomi—" he began, and then another hee-haw bray of laughter escaped him and galloped off into the sunshiny morning. "You don't know how much better."

"Sure I do," she said. "Come on—we'll take my car."

"Where ..." He hiccupped. "Where are we going?"

"Angel Street," she said, pronouncing it the way the sign-painter had intended it to be pronounced. "I'm very worried about Dave. I went there first this morning, but he wasn't there. I'm afraid he may be out drinking."

"That's nothing new, is it?" he asked, walking beside her down the steps. Her Datsun was parked at the curb, behind Sam's own car.

She glanced at him. It was a brief glance, but a complex one: irritation, resignation, compassion. Sam thought that if you boiled that glance down it would say You don't know what you're talking about, but it's not your fault.

"Dave's been sober almost a year this time, but his general health isn't good. As you say, falling off the wagon isn't anything new for him, but another fall may kill him."

"And that would be my fault." The last of his laughter dried up.

She looked at him, a little surprised. "No," she said. "That would be nobody's fault ... but that doesn't mean I want it to happen. Or that it has to. Come on. We'll take my car. We can talk on the way."

5

"Tell me what happened to you," she said as they headed toward the edge of town. "Tell me everything. It isn't just your hair, Sam; you look ten years older."

"Bullshit," Sam said. He had seen more than his hair in Naomi's compact mirror; he had gotten a better look at himself than he wanted. "More like twenty. And it feels like a hundred."

"What happened? What was it?"

Sam opened his mouth to tell her, thought of how it would sound, then shook his head. "No," he said, "not yet. You're going to tell me something first. You're going to tell me about Ardelia Lortz. You thought I was joking the other day. I didn't realize that then, but I do now. So tell me all about her. Tell me who she was and what she did."

Naomi pulled over to the curb beyond Junction City's old granite firehouse and looked at Sam. Her skin was very pale beneath her light make-up, and her eyes were wide. "You weren't? Sam, are you trying to tell me you weren't joking?"

“That’s right.”

“But Sam ...” She stopped, and for a moment she seemed not to know how she should go on. At last she spoke very softly, as though to a child who has done something he doesn’t know is wrong. “But Sam, Ardelia Lortz is dead. She has been dead for thirty years.”

“I know she’s dead. I mean, I know it now. What I want to know is the rest.”

“Sam, whoever you think you saw—”

“I know who I saw.”

“Tell me what makes you think—”

“First, you tell me.”

She put her car back in gear, checked her rear-view mirror, and began to drive toward Angle Street again. “I don’t know very much,” she said. “I was only five when she died, you see. Most of what I do know comes from overheard gossip. She belonged to The First Baptist Church of Proverbia—she went there, at least—but my mother doesn’t talk about her. Neither do any of the older parishioners. To them it’s like she never existed.”

Sam nodded. “That’s just how Mr. Price treated her in the article he wrote about the Library. The one I was reading when you put your hand on my shoulder and took about twelve more years off my life. It also explains why your mother was so mad at me when I mentioned her name Saturday night.”

Naomi glanced at him, startled. “That’s what you called about?”

Sam nodded.

“Oh, Sam—if you weren’t on Mom’s s-list before, you are now.”

“Oh, I was on before, but I’ve got an idea she’s moved me up.” Sam laughed, then winced. His stomach still hurt from his fit on the steps of the newspaper office, but he was very glad he had had that fit—an hour ago he never would have believed he could have gotten so much of his equilibrium back. In fact, an hour ago he had been quite sure that Sam Peebles and equilibrium were going to remain mutually exclusive concepts for the rest of his life. “Go ahead, Naomi.”

“Most of what I’ve heard I picked up at what AA people call ‘the real meeting,’ ” she said. “That’s when people stand around drinking coffee before and then after, talking about everything under the sun.”

He looked at her curiously. “How long have you been in AA, Naomi?”

“Nine years,” Naomi said evenly. “And it’s been six since I had to take a drink. But I’ve been an alcoholic forever. Drunks aren’t made, Sam. They’re born.”

“Oh,” he said lamely. And then: “Was she in the program? Ardelia Lortz?”

“God, no—but that doesn’t mean there aren’t people in AA who remember her. She showed up in Junction City in 1956 o’57, I think. She went to work for Mr. Lavin in the Public Library. A year or two later, he died very suddenly—it was a heart attack or a stroke, I think—and the town gave the job to the Lortz woman. I’ve heard she was very good at it, but judging by what happened, I’d say the thing she was best at was fooling people.”

“What did she do, Naomi?”

“She killed two children and then herself,” Naomi said simply. “In the summer of 1960. There was a search for the kids. No one thought of looking for them in the Library, because it was supposed to be closed that day. They were found the next day, when the Library was supposed to be open but wasn’t. There are skylights in the Library roof—”

“I know.”

“—but these days you can only see them from the outside, because they changed the Library inside. Lowered the ceiling to conserve heat, or something. Anyway, those skylights had big brass catches on them. You grabbed the catches with a long pole to open the skylights and let in fresh air, I guess. She tied a rope to one of the catches—she must have used one of the track-ladders that ran along the bookcases to do it—and hanged herself from it. She did that after she killed the children.”

“I see.” Sam’s voice was calm, but his heart was beating slowly and very hard. “And how did she ... how did she kill the children?”

“I don’t know. No one’s ever said, and I’ve never asked. I suppose it was horrible.”

“Yes. I suppose it was.”

“Now tell me what happened to you.”

“First I want to see if Dave’s at the shelter.”

Naomi tightened up at once. “I’ll see if Dave’s at the shelter,” she said. “You’re going to sit tight in the car. I’m sorry for you, Sam, and I’m sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion last night. But you won’t upset Dave anymore. I’ll see to that.”

“Naomi, he’s a part of this!”

“That’s impossible,” she said in a brisk this-closes-the-discussion tone of voice.

“Dammit, the whole thing is impossible!”

They were nearing Angle Street now. Ahead of them was a pick-up truck rattling toward the Recycling Center, its bed full of cardboard cartons filled with bottles and cans.

“I don’t think you understand what I told you,” she said. “It doesn’t surprise me; Earth People rarely do. So open your ears, Sam. I’m going to say it in words of one syllable. If Dave drinks, Dave dies. Do you follow that? Does it get through?”

She tossed another glance Sam’s way. This one was so furious it was still smoking around the edges, and even in the depths of his own distress, Sam realized something. Before, even on the two occasions when he had taken Naomi out, he had thought she was pretty. Now he saw she was beautiful.

“What does that mean, Earth People?” he asked her.

“People who don’t have a problem with booze or pills or pot or cough medicine or any of the other things that mess up the human head,” she nearly spat. “People who can afford to moralize and make judgments.”

Ahead of them, the pick-up truck turned off onto the long, rutted driveway leading to the redemption center. Angle Street lay ahead. Sam could see something parked in front of the porch, but it wasn’t a car. It was Dirty Dave’s shopping-cart.

“Stop a minute,” he said.

Naomi did, but she wouldn’t look at him. She stared straight ahead through the windshield. Her jaw was working. There was high color in her cheeks.

“You care about him,” he said, “and I’m glad. Do you also care about me, Sarah? Even though I’m an Earth Person?”

“You have no right to call me Sarah. I can, because it’s part of my name—I was christened Naomi Sarah Higgins. And they can, because they are, in a way, closer to me than blood relatives could ever be. We are blood relatives, in fact—because there’s something in us that makes us the way we are. Something in our blood. You, Sam—you have no right.”

“Maybe I do,” Sam said. “Maybe I’m one of you now. You’ve got booze. This Earth Person has got the Library Police.”

Now she looked at him, and her eyes were wide and wary. “Sam, I don’t underst—”

“Neither do I. All I know is that I need help. I need it desperately. I borrowed two books from a library that doesn’t exist anymore, and now the books don’t exist, either. I lost them. Do you know where they ended up?”

She shook her head.

Sam pointed over to the left, where two men had gotten out of the pick-up’s cab and were starting to unload the cartons of returnables. “There. That’s where they ended up. They’ve been pulped. I’ve got until midnight, Sarah, and then the Library Police are going to pulp me. And I don’t think they’ll even leave my jacket behind.”

6

Sam sat in the passenger seat of Naomi Sarah Higgins’s Datsun for what seemed like a long, long time. Twice his hand went to the door-handle and then fell back. She had relented ... a little. If Dave wanted to talk to him, and if Dave was still in any condition to talk, she would allow it. Otherwise, no soap.

At last the door of Angle Street opened. Naomi and Dave Duncan came out. She had an arm around his waist, his feet were shuffling, and Sam’s heart sank. Then, as they stepped out into the sun, he saw that Dave wasn’t drunk ... or at least not necessarily. Looking at him was, in a weird way, like looking into Naomi’s compact mirror all over again. Dave Duncan looked like a man trying to weather the worst shock of his life ... and not doing a very good job of it.

Sam got out of the car and stood by the door, indecisive.

“Come up on the porch,” Naomi said. Her voice was both resigned and fearful. “I don’t trust him to make it down the steps.”

Sam came up to where they stood. Dave Duncan was probably sixty years old. On Saturday he had looked seventy or seventy-five. That was the booze, Sam supposed. And now, as Iowa turned slowly on the axis of noon, he looked older than all the ages. And that, Sam knew, was his fault. It was the shock of things Dave had assumed were long buried.

I didn’t know, Sam thought, but this, however true it might be, had lost its power to comfort. Except for the burst veins in his nose and cheeks, Dave’s face was the color of very old paper. His eyes were watery and stunned. His lips had a bluish tinge, and little beads of spittle pulsed in the deep pockets at the corners of his mouth.

“I didn’t want him to talk to you,” Naomi said. “I wanted to take him to Dr. Melden, but he refuses to go until he talks to you.”

“Mr. Peebles,” Dave said feebly. “I’m sorry, Mr. Peebles, it’s all my fault, isn’t it? I—”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Sam said. “Come on over here and sit down.”

He and Naomi led Dave to a rocking chair at the corner of the porch and Dave eased himself into it. Sam and Naomi drew up chairs with sagging wicker bottoms and sat on either side of him. They sat without speaking for some little time, looking out across the railroad tracks and into the flat farm country beyond.

“She’s after you, isn’t she?” Dave asked. “That bitch from the far side of hell.”

“She’s sicced someone on me,” Sam said. “Someone who was in one of those posters you drew. He’s a ... I know this sounds crazy, but he’s a Library Policeman. He came to see me this morning. He did ...” Sam touched his hair. “He did this. And this.” He pointed to

the small red dot in the center of his throat. “And he says he isn’t alone.”

Dave was silent for a long time, looking out into the emptiness, looking at the flat horizon which was broken only by tall silos and, to the north, the apocalyptic shape of the Proverbias Feed Company’s grain elevator. “The man you saw isn’t real,” he said at last. “None of them are real. Only her. Only the devil-bitch.”

“Can you tell us, Dave?” Naomi asked gently. “If you can’t, say so. But if it will make it better for you ... easier ... tell us.”

“Dear Sarah,” Dave said. He took her hand and smiled. “I love you—have I ever told you so?”

She shook her head, smiling back. Tears glinted in her eyes like tiny specks of mica. “No. But I’m glad, Dave.”

“I have to tell,” he said. “It isn’t a question of better or easier. It can’t be allowed to go on. Do you know what I remember about my first AA meeting, Sarah?”

She shook her head.

“How they said it was a program of honesty. How they said you had to tell everything, not just to God, but to God and another person. I thought, ‘If that’s what it takes to live a sober life, I’ve had it. They’ll throw me in a plot up on Wayvem Hill in that part of the boneyard they set aside for the drunks and all-time losers who never had a pot to piss in nor a window to throw it out of. Because I could never tell all the things I’ve seen, all the things I’ve done.’ “

“We all think that at first,” she said gently.

“I know. But there can’t be many that’ve seen the things I have, or done what I have. I did the best I could, though. Little by little I did the best I could. I set my house in order. But those things I saw and did back then ... those I never told. Not to any person, not to no

man's God. I found a room in the basement of my heart, and I put those things in that room and then I locked the door."

He looked at Sam, and Sam saw tears rolling slowly and tiredly down the deep wrinkles in Dave's blasted cheeks.

"Yes. I did. And when the door was locked, I nailed boards across it. And when the boards was nailed, I put sheet steel across the boards and riveted it tight. And when the riveting was done, I drew a bureau up against the whole works, and before I called it good and walked away, I piled bricks on top of the bureau. And all these years since, I've spent telling myself I forgot all about Ardelia and her strange ways, about the things she wanted me to do and the things she told me and the promises she made and what she really was. I took a lot of forgetting medicine, but it never did the job. And when I got into AA, that was the one thing that always drove me back. The thing in that room, you know. That thing has a name, Mr. Peebles—its name is Ardelia Lortz. After I was sobered up awhile, I would start having bad dreams. Mostly I dreamed of the posters I did for her—the ones that scared the children so bad—but they weren't the worst dreams."

His voice had fallen to a trembling whisper.

"They weren't the worst ones by a long chalk."

"Maybe you better rest a little," Sam said. He had discovered that no matter how much might depend on what Dave had to say, a part of him didn't want to hear it. A part of him was afraid to hear it.

"Never mind resting," he said. "Doctor says I'm diabetic, my pancreas is a mess, and my liver is falling apart. Pretty soon I'm going on a permanent vacation. I don't know if it'll be heaven or hell for me, but I'm pretty sure the bars and package stores are closed in both places, and thank God for that. But the time for restin isn't now. If I'm ever goin to talk, it has to be now." He looked carefully at Sam. "You know you're in trouble, don't you?"

Sam nodded.

“Yes. But you don’t know just how bad your trouble is. That’s why I have to talk. I think she has to ... has to lie still sometimes. But her time of bein still is over, and she has picked you, Mr. Peebles. That’s why I have to talk. Not that I want to. I went out last night after Sarah was gone and bought myself a jug. I took it down to the switchin yard and sat where I’ve sat many times before, in the weeds and cinders and busted glass. I spun the cap off and held that jug up to my nose and smelled it. You know how that jug wine smells? To me it always smells like the wallpaper in cheap hotel rooms, or like a stream that has flowed its way through a town dump somewhere. But I have always liked that smell just the same, because it smells like sleep, too.

“And all the time I was holdin that jug up, smellin it, I could hear the bitch queen talkin from inside the room where I locked her up. From behind the bricks, the bureau, the sheet steel, the boards and locks. Talkin like someone who’s been buried alive. She was a little muffled, but I could still hear her just fine. I could hear her sayin, ‘That’s right, Dave, that’s the answer, it’s the only answer there is for folks like you, the only one that works, and it will be the only answer you need until answers don’t matter anymore.’

“I tipped that jug up for a good long drink, and then at the last second it smelled like her ... and I remembered her face at the end, all covered with little threads ... and how her mouth changed ... and I threw that jug away. Smashed it on a railroad tie. Because this shit has got to end. I won’t let her take another nip out of this town!”

His voice rose to a trembling but powerful old man’s shout. “This shit has gone on long enough!”

Naomi laid a hand on Dave’s arm. Her face was frightened and full of trouble. “What, Dave? What is it?”

“I want to be sure,” Dave said. “You tell me first, Mr. Peebles. Tell me everything that’s been happening to you, and don’t leave out

nothing.”

“I will,” Sam said, “on one condition.”

Dave smiled faintly. “What condition is that?”

“You have to promise to call me Sam ... and in return, I’ll never call you Dirty Dave again.”

His smile broadened. “You got a deal there, Sam.”

“Good.” He took a deep breath. “Everything was the fault of the goddam acrobat,” he began.

7

It took longer than he had thought it would, but there was an inexpressible relief—a joy, almost—in telling it all, holding nothing back. He told Dave about The Amazing Joe, Craig’s call for help, and Naomi’s suggestion about livening up his material. He told them about how the Library had looked, and about his meeting with Ardelia Lortz. Naomi’s eyes grew wider and wider as he spoke. When he got to the part about the Red Riding Hood poster on the door to the Children’s Library, Dave nodded.

“That’s the only one I didn’t draw,” he said. “She had that one with her. I bet they never found it, either. I bet she still has that one with her. She liked mine, but that one was her favorite.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

Dave only shook his head and told Sam to go on.

He told them about the library card, the books he had borrowed, and the strange little argument they had had on Sam’s way out.

“That’s it,” Dave said flatly. “That’s all it took. You might not believe it, but I know her. You made her mad. Goddam if you didn’t. You made her mad ... and now she’s set her cap for you.”

Sam finished his story as quickly as he could, but his voice slowed and nearly halted when he came to the visit from the Library Policeman in his fog-gray trenchcoat. When Sam finished, he was nearly weeping and his hands had begun to shake again.

“Could I have a glass of water?” he asked Naomi thickly.

“Of course,” she said, and got up to get it. She took two steps, then returned and kissed Sam on the cheek. Her lips were cool and soft. And before she left to get his water, she spoke three blessed words into his ear: “I believe you.”

8

Sam raised the glass to his lips, using both hands to be sure he wouldn't spill it, and drank half of it at a draught. When he put it down he said, “What about you, Dave? Do you believe me?”

“Yeah,” Dave said. He spoke almost absently, as if this were a foregone conclusion. Sam supposed that, to Dave, it was. After all, he had known the mysterious Ardelia Lortz firsthand, and his ravaged, too-old face suggested that theirs had not been a loving relationship.

Dave said nothing else for several moments, but a little of his color had come back. He looked out across the railroad tracks toward the fallow fields. They would be green with sprouting corn in another six or seven weeks, but now they looked barren. His eyes watched a cloud shadow flow across that Midwestern emptiness in the shape of a giant hawk.

At last he seemed to rouse himself and turned to Sam.

“My Library Policeman—the one I drew for her—didn't have no scar,” he said at last.

Sam thought of the stranger's long, white face. The scar had been there, all right—across the cheek, under the eye, over the bridge of

the nose in a thin flowing line.

“So?” he asked. “What does that mean?”

“It don’t mean nothing to me, but I think it must mean somethin to you, Mr.—Sam. I know about the badge ... what you called the star of many points. I found that in a book of heraldry right there in the Junction City Library. It’s called a Maltese Cross. Christian knights wore them in the middle of their chests when they went into battle durin the Crusades. They were supposed to be magical. I was so taken with the shape that I put it into the picture. But ... a scar? No. Not on my Library Policeman. Who was your Library Policeman, Sam?”

“I don’t ... I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sam said slowly, but that voice—faint, mocking, haunting—recurred: Come with me, son ... I’m a poleethman. And his mouth was suddenly full of that taste again. The sugar-slimy taste of red licorice. His tastebuds cramped; his stomach rolled. But it was stupid. Really quite stupid. He had never eaten red licorice in his life. He hated it.

If you’ve never eaten it, how do you know you hate it?

“I really don’t get you,” he said, speaking more strongly.

“You’re getting something,” Naomi said. “You look like someone just kicked you in the stomach.”

Sam glanced at her, annoyed. She looked back at him calmly, and Sam felt his heart rate speed up.

“Let it alone for now,” Dave said, “although you can’t let it alone for long, Sam—not if you want to hold onto any hope of getting out of this. Let me tell you my story. I’ve never told it before, and I’ll never tell it again ... but it’s time.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DAVE'S STORY

1

“I wasn’t always Dirty Dave Duncan,” he began. “In the early fifties I was just plain old Dave Duncan, and people liked me just fine. I was a member of that same Rotary Club you talked to the other night, Sam. Why not? I had my own business, and it made money. I was a sign-painter, and I was a damned good one. I had all the work I could handle in Junction City and Proverbias, but I sometimes did a little work up in Cedar Rapids, as well. Once I painted a Lucky Strike cigarette ad on the right-field wall of the minor-league ballpark all the way to hell and gone in Omaha. I was in great demand, and I deserved to be. I was good. I was just the best sign-painter around these parts.

“I stayed here because serious painting was what I was really interested in, and I thought you could do that anywhere. I didn’t have no formal art education—I tried but I flunked out—and I knew that put me down on the count, so to speak, but I knew that there were artists who made it without all that speed-shit bushwah—Gramma Moses, for one. She didn’t need no driver’s license; she went right to town without one.

“I might even have made it. I sold some canvases, but not many—I didn’t need to, because I wasn’t married and I was doing well with my sign-painting business. Also, I kept most of my pitchers so I could put on shows, the way artists are supposed to. I had some, too. Right here in town at first, then in Cedar Rapids, and then in Des Moines. That one was written up in the Democrat, and they made me sound like the second coming of James Whistler.”

Dave fell silent for a moment, thinking. Then he raised his head and looked out at the empty, fallow fields again.

“In AA, they talk about folks who have one foot in the future and the other in the past and spend their time pissin all over today because of it. But sometimes it’s hard not to wonder what might have happened if you’d done things just a little different.”

He looked almost guiltily at Naomi, who smiled and pressed his hand.

“Because I was good, and I did come close. But I was drinkin heavy, even back then. I didn’t think much of it—hell, I was young, I was strong, and besides, don’t all great artists drink? I thought they did. And I still might have made it—made something, anyway, for awhile—but then Ardelia Lortz came to Junction City.

“And when she came, I was lost.”

He looked at Sam.

“I recognize her from your story, Sam, but that wasn’t how she looked back then. You expected to see an old-lady librarian, and that suited her purpose, so that’s just what you did see. But when she came to Junction City in the summer of ‘57, her hair was ash-blonde, and the only places she was plump was where a woman is supposed to be plump.

“I was living out in Proverbia then, and I used to go to the Baptist Church. I wasn’t much on religion, but there were some fine-looking women there. Your mom was one of em, Sarah.”

Naomi laughed in the way women do when they are told something they cannot quite believe.

“Ardelia caught on with the home folks right away. These days, when the folks from that church talk about her—if they ever do—I bet they say things like ‘I knew from the very start there was somethin funny about that Lortz woman’ or ‘I never trusted the look in that woman’s eye,’ but let me tell you, that wasn’t how it was. They buzzed around her—the women as well as the men—like bees around the first

flower of spring. She got a job as Mr. Lavin's assistant before she was in town a month, but she was teachin the little ones at the Sunday School out there in Proverbias two weeks before that.

"Just what she was teachin em I don't like to think—you can bet your bottom dollar it wasn't the Gospel According to Matthew—but she was teachin em. And everyone swore on how much the little ones loved her. They swore on it, too, but there was a look in their eyes when they said so ... a far-off look, like they wasn't really sure where they were, or even who they were.

"Well, she caught my eye ... and I caught hers. You wouldn't know it from the way I am now, but I was a pretty good-lookin fella in those days. I always had a tan from workin outdoors, I had muscles, my hair was faded almost blonde from the sun, and my belly was as flat as your ironin board, Sarah.

"Ardelia had rented herself a farmhouse about a mile and a half from the church, a tight enough little place, but it needed a coat of paint as bad as a man in the desert needs a drink of water. So after church the second week I noticed her there—I didn't go often and by then it was half-past August—I offered to paint it for her.

"She had the biggest eyes you've ever seen. I guess most people would have called them gray, but when she looked right at you, hard, you would have sworn they were silver. And she looked at me hard that day after church. She was wearin some kind of perfume that I never smelled before and ain't never smelled since. Lavender, I think. I can't think how to describe it, but I know it always made me think of little white flowers that only bloom after the sun has gone down. And I was smitten. Right there and then.

"She was close to me—almost close enough for our bodies to touch. She was wearin this dowdy black dress, the kind of dress an old lady would wear, and a hat with a little net veil, and she was holdin her purse in front of her. All prim and proper. Her eyes weren't prim, though. Nossir. Nor proper. Not a bit.

” ‘I hope you don’t want to put advertisements for bleach and chewing tobacco all over my new house,’ she says.

” ‘No ma’am,’ I says back. ‘I thought just two coats of plain old white. Houses aren’t what I do for a livin, anyway, but with you bein new in town and all, I thought it would be neighborly—’

” ‘Yes indeed,’ she says, and touches my shoulder.”

Dave looked apologetically at Naomi.

“I think I ought to give you a chance to leave, if you want to. Pretty soon I’m gonna start tellin some dirty stuff, Sarah. I’m ashamed of it, but I want to clean the slate of my doins with her.”

She patted his old, chapped hand. “Go ahead,” she told him quietly. “Say it all.”

He fetched in a deep breath and went on again.

“When she touched me, I knew I had to have her or die tryin. Just that one little touch made me feel better—and crazier—than any woman-touch ever made me feel in my whole life. She knew it, too. I could see it in her eyes. It was a sly look. It was a mean look, too, but somethin about that excited me more than anything else.

” ‘It would be neighborly, Dave,’ she says, ‘and I want to be a very good neighbor.’

“So I walked her home. Left all the other young fellows standin at the church door, you might say, fumin and no doubt cursin my name. They didn’t know how lucky they were. None of them.

“My Ford was in the shop and she didn’t have no car, so we were stuck with shank’s mare. I didn’t mind a bit, and she didn’t seem to, neither. We went out the Truman Road, which was still dirt in those days, although they sent a town truck along to oil it every two or three weeks and lay the dust.

“We got about halfway to her place, and she stopped. It was just the two of us, standin in the middle of Truman Road at high noon on a summer’s day, with about a million acres of Sam Orday’s corn on one side and about two million of Bill Humpe’s corn on the other, all of it growin high over our heads and rustlin in that secret way corn has, even when there’s no breeze. My granddad used to say it was the sound of the corn growin. I dunno if that’s the truth or not, but it’s a spooky sound. I can tell you that.

” ‘Look!’ she says, pointin to the right. ‘Do you see it?’

“I looked, but I didn’t see nothing—only corn. I told her so.

” ‘I’ll show you!’ she says, and runs into the corn, Sunday dress and high heels and all. She didn’t even take off that hat with the veil on it.

“I stood there for a few seconds, sorta stunned. Then I heard her laughin. I heard her laughin in the corn. So I ran in after her, partly to see whatever it was she’d seen, but mostly because of that laugh. I was so randy. I can’t begin to tell you.

“I seen her standin way up the row I was in, and then she faded into the next one, still laughin. I started to laugh, too, and went on through myself, not carin that I was bustin down some of Sam Orday’s plants. He’d never miss em, not in all those acres. But when I got through, trailin cornsilk off my shoulders and a green leaf stuck in my tie like some new kind of clip, I stopped laughin in a hurry, because she wasn’t there. Then I heard her on the other side of me. I didn’t have no idea how she could have got back there without me seein her, but she had. So I busted back through just in time to see her runnin into the next row.

“We played hide n seek for half an hour, I guess, and I couldn’t catch her. All I did was get hotter and randier. I’d think she was a row over, in front of me, but I’d get there and hear her two rows over, behind me. Sometimes I’d see her foot, or her leg, and of course she left tracks in the soft dirt, but they weren’t no good, because they seemed to go every which way at once.

“Then, just when I was startin to get mad—I’d sweat through my good shirt, my tie was undone, and my shoes was full of dirt—I come through to a row and seen her hat hangin off a corn-plant with the veil flippin in the little breeze that got down there into the corn.

” ‘Come and get me, Dave!’ she calls. I grabbed her hat and busted through to the next row on a slant. She was gone—I could just see the corn waverin where she’d went through—but both her shoes were there. In the next row I found one of her silk stockings hung over an ear of corn. And still I could hear her laughin. Over on my blind side, she was, and how the bitch got there, God only knows. Not that it mattered to me by then.

“I ripped off my tie and tore after her, around and around and dosey-doe, pantin like a stupid dog that don’t know enough to lie still on a hot day. And I’ll tell you somethin—I broke the corn down everywhere I went. Left a trail of trampled stalks and leaners behind me. But she never busted a one. They’d just waver a bit when she passed, as if there was no more to her than there was to that little summer breeze.

“I found her dress, her slip, and her garter-belt. Then I found her bra and step-ins. I couldn’t hear her laughin no more. There wasn’t no sound but the corn. I stood there in one of the rows, puffin like a leaky boiler, with all her clothes bundled up against my chest. I could smell her perfume in em, and it was drivin me crazy.

” ‘Where are you?’ I yelled, but there wasn’t no answer. Well, I finally lost what little sanity I had left ... and of course, that was just what she wanted. ‘Where the fuck are you?’ I screamed, and her long white arm reached through the corn-plants right beside me and she stroked my neck with one finger. It jumped the shit out of me.

” ‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ she said. ‘What took you so long? Don’t you want to see it?’ She grabbed me and drewed me through the corn, and there she was with her feet planted in the dirt, not a stitch on her, and her eyes as silver as rain on a foggy day.”

Dave took a long drink of water, closed his eyes, and went on.

“We didn’t make love there in the corn—in all the time I knew her, we never made love. But we made somethin. I had Ardelia in just about every way a man can have a woman, and I think I had her in some ways you’d think would be impossible. I can’t remember all the ways, but I can remember her body, how white it was; how her legs looked; how her toes curled and seemed to feel along the shoots of the plants comin out of the dirt; I can remember how she pulled her fingernails back and forth across the skin of my neck and my throat.

“We went on and on and on. I don’t know how many times, but I know I didn’t never get tired. When we started I felt horny enough to rape the Statue of Liberty, and when we finished I felt the same way. I couldn’t get enough of her. It was like the booze, I guess. Wasn’t any way I could ever get enough of her. And she knew it, too.

“But we finally did stop. She put her hands behind her head and wriggled her white shoulders in the black dirt we was layin in and looked up at me with those silvery eyes of hers and she says, ‘Well, Dave? Are we neighbors yet?’

“I told her I wanted to go again and she told me not to push my luck. I tried to climb on just the same, and she pushed me off as easy as a mother pushes a baby off’n her tit when she don’t want to feed it no more. I tried again and she swiped at my face with her nails and split the skin open in two places. That finally damped my boiler down. She was quick as a cat and twice as strong. When she saw I knew playtime was over, she got dressed and led me out of the corn. I went just as meek as Mary’s little lamb.

“We walked the rest of the way to her house. Nobody passed us, and that was probably just as well. My clothes were all covered with dirt and cornsilk, my shirttail was out, my tie was stuffed into my back pocket and flappin along behind me like a tail, and every place that the cloth rubbed I felt raw. Her, though—she looked as smooth and

cool as an ice-cream soda in a drugstore glass. Not a hair out of place, not a speck of dirt on her shoes, not a strand of cornsilk on her skirt.

“We got to the house and while I was lookin it over, tryin to decide how much paint it would take, she brought me a drink in a tall glass. There was a straw in it, and a sprig of mint. I thought it was iced tea until I took a sip. It was straight Scotch.

” ‘Jesus!’ I says, almost chokin.

” ‘Don’t you want it?’ she asks me, smilin in that mockin way she had. ‘Maybe you’d prefer some iced coffee.’

” ‘Oh, I want it,’ I says, but it was more than that. I needed it. I was tryin not to drink in the middle of the day back then, because that’s what alcoholics do. But that was the end of that. For the rest of the time I knew her, I drank pretty near all day, every day. For me, the last two and a half years Ike was President was one long souse.

“While I was paintin her house—and doin everything she’d let me do to her whenever I could—she was settlin in at the Library. Mr. Lavin hired her first crack outta the box, and put her in charge of the Children’s Library. I used to go there every chance I got, which was a lot, since I was self-employed. When Mr. Lavin spoke to me about how much time I was spendin there, I promised to paint the whole inside of the Library for free. Then he let me come and go as much as I wanted. Ardelia told me it would work out just that way, and she was right—as usual.

“I don’t have any connected memories of the time I spent under her spell—and that’s what I was, an enchanted man livin under the spell of a woman who wasn’t really a woman at all. It wasn’t the blackouts that drunks sometimes get; it was wantin to forget things after they were over. So what I have is memories that stand apart from each other but seem to lie in a chain, like those islands in the Pacific Ocean. Archie Pelligos, or whatever they call em.

“I remember she put the poster of Little Red Ridin Hood up on the door to the Children’s Room about a month before Mr. Lavin died, and I remember her takin one little boy by the hand and leadin him over to it. ‘Do you see that little girl?’ Ardelia asked him. ‘Yes,’ he says. ‘Do you know why that Bad Thing is getting ready to eat her?’ Ardelia asks. ‘No,’ the kid says back, his eyes all big and solemn and full of tears. ‘Because he forgot to bring back his library book on time,’ she says. ‘You won’t ever do that, Willy, will you?’ ‘No, never,’ the little boy says, and Ardelia says, ‘You better not.’ And then she led him into the Children’s Room for Story Hour, still holdin him by the hand. That kid—it was Willy Klemmart, who got killed in Vietnam—looked back over his shoulder at where I was, standin on my scaffold with a paintbrush in my hand, and I could read his eyes like they were a newspaper headline. Save me from her, his eyes said. Please, Mr. Duncan. But how could I? I couldn’t even save myself.”

Dave produced a clean but badly wrinkled bandanna from the depths of one back pocket and blew a mighty honk into it.

“Mr. Lavin began by thinkin Ardelia just about walked on water, but he changed his mind after awhile. They got into a hell of a scrap over that Red Ridin Hood poster about a week before he died. He never liked it. Maybe he didn’t have a very good idea of what went on durin Story Hour—I’ll get to that pretty soon—but he wasn’t entirely blind. He saw the way the kids looked at that poster. At last he told her to take it down. That was when the argument started. I didn’t hear it all because I was on the scaffold, high above them, and the acoustics were bad, but I heard enough. He said somethin about scaring the children, or maybe it was scarring the children, and she said somethin back about how it helped her keep ‘the rowdy element’ under control. She called it a teachin tool, just like the hickory stick.

“But he stuck to his guns and she finally had to take it down. That night, at her house, she was like a tiger in the zoo after some kid has spent all day pokin it with a stick. She went back and forth in great big long strides, not a stitch on, her hair flyin out behind her. I was in bed, drunk as a lord. But I remember she turned around and her

eyes had gone from silver to bright red, as if her brains had caught afire, and her mouth looked funny, like it was tryin to pull itself right out of her face, or somethin. It almost scared me sober. I hadn't ever seen nothin like that, and never wanted to see it again.

" 'I'm going to fix him,' she said. 'I'm going to fix that fat old whoremaster, Davey. You wait and see.'

"I told her not to do anything stupid, not to let her temper get the best of her, and a lot of other stuff that didn't stand knee-high to jack shit. She listened to me for awhile and then she ran across the room so fast that ... well, I don't know how to say it. One second she was standin all the way across the room by the door, and the next second she was jumpin on top of me, her eyes red and glaring, her mouth all pooched out of her face like she wanted to kiss me so bad she was stretchin her skin somehow to do it, and I had an idea that instead of just scratchin me this time, she was gonna put her nails into my throat and peel me to the backbone.

"But she didn't. She put her face right down to mine and looked at me. I don't know what she saw—how scared I was, I guess—but it must have made her happy, because she tipped her head back so her hair fell all the way down to my thighs, and she laughed. 'Stop talking, you damned souse,' she said, 'and stick it in me. What else are you good for?'

"So I did. Because stickin it in her—and drinkin—was all I was good for by then. I surely wasn't paintin pitchers anymore, I lost my license after I got clipped for my third OUI—in '58 or early '59, that was—and I was gettin bad reports on some of my jobs. I didn't care much how I did them anymore, you see; all I wanted was her. Talk started to circulate about how Dave Duncan wasn't trustworthy no more ... but the reason they said I wasn't was always the booze. The word of what we were to each other never got around much. She was careful as the devil about that. My reputation went to hell in a handbasket, but she never got so much as a splash of mud on the hem of her skirts.

“I think Mr. Lavin suspected. At first he thought I just had a crush on her and she never so much as knew I was makin calf’s eyes at her from up on my scaffold, but I think that in the end he suspected. But then Mr. Lavin died. They said it was a heart attack, but I know better. We were in the hammock on her back porch that night after it happened, and that night it was her that couldn’t get enough of it. She screwed me until I hollered uncle. Then she lay down next to me and looked at me as content as a cat that’s had its fill of cream, and her eyes had that deep-red glow again. I am not talking about something in my imagination; I could see the reflection of that red glow on the skin of my bare arm. And I could feel it. It was like sittin next to a woodstove that’s been stoked and then damped down. ‘I told you I’d fix him, Davey,’ she says all at once in this mean, teasin voice.

“Me, I was drunk and half killed with fuckin—what she said hardly registered on me. I felt like I was fallin asleep in a pit of quicksand. ‘What’d you do to him?’ I asked, half in a doze.

” ‘I hugged him,’ she said. ‘I give special hugs, Davey—you don’t know about my special hugs, and if you’re lucky, you never will. I got him in the stacks and put my arms around him and showed him what I really looked like. Then he began to cry. That’s how scared he was. He began to cry his special tears, and I kissed them away, and when I was done, he was dead in my arms.’

” ‘His special tears.’ That’s what she called them. And then her face ... it changed. It rippled, like it was underwater. And I seen something ... “

Dave trailed off, looking out into the flatlands, looking at the grain elevator, looking at nothing. His hands had gripped the porch rail. They flexed, loosened, flexed again.

“I don’t remember,” he said at last. “Or maybe I don’t want to remember. Except for two things: it had red eyes with no lids, and there was a lot of loose flesh around its mouth, lyin in folds and flaps, but it wasn’t skin. It looked ... dangerous. Then that flesh around its

mouth started to move somehow and I think I started to scream. Then it was gone. All of it was gone. It was only Ardelia again, peepin up at me and smilin like a pretty, curious cat.

” ‘Don’t worry,’ she says. ‘You don’t have to see, Davey. As long as you do what I tell you, that is. As long as you’re one of the Good Babies. As long as you behave. Tonight I’m very happy, because that old fool is gone at last. The Town Council is going to appoint me in his place, and I’ll run things the way I want.’

“God help us all, then, I thought, but I didn’t say it. You wouldn’t’ve, either, if you’d looked down and seen that thing with those starin red eyeballs curled up next to you in a hammock way out in the country, so far out nobody would hear you screamin even if you did it at the top of your lungs.

“A little while later she went into the house and come back out with two of those tall glasses full of Scotch, and pretty soon I was twenty thousand leagues under the sea again, where nothing mattered.

“She kept the Library closed for a week ... ‘out of respect for Mr. Lavin’ was how she put it, and when she opened up again, Little Red Ridin Hood was back on the door of the Children’s Room. A week or two after that, she told me she wanted me to make some new posters for the Children’s Room.”

He paused, then went on in a lower, slower voice.

“There’s a part of me, even now, that wants to sugarcoat it, make my part in it better than it was. I’d like to tell you that I fought with her, argued, told her I didn’t want nothin to do with scarin a bunch of kids ... but it wouldn’t be true. I went right along with what she wanted me to do. God help me, I did. Partly it was because I was scared of her by then. But mostly it was because I was still besotted with her. And there was something else, too. There was a mean, nasty part of me—I don’t think it’s in everyone, but I think it’s in a lot of us—that liked what she was up to. Liked it.

“Now, you’re wonderin what I did do, and I can’t really tell you all of it. I really don’t remember. Those times is all jumbled up, like the broken toys you send to the Salvation Army just to get the damned things out of the attic.

“I didn’t kill anyone. That’s the only thing I’m sure of. She wanted me to ... and I almost did ... but in the end I drew back. That’s the only reason I’ve been able to go on livin with myself, because in the end I was able to crawl away. She kept part of my soul with her—the best part, maybe—but she never kept all of it.”

He looked at Naomi and Sam thoughtfully. He seemed calmer now, more in control; perhaps even at peace with himself, Sam thought.

“I remember going in one day in the fall of 1959—I think it was ‘59—and her telling me that she wanted me to make a poster for the Children’s Room. She told me exactly what she wanted, and I agreed willingly enough. I didn’t see nothing wrong with it. I thought it was kind of funny, in fact. What she wanted, you see, was a poster that showed a little kid flattened by a steamroller in the middle of the street. Underneath it was supposed to say HASTE MAKES WASTE! GET YOUR LIBRARY BOOKS BACK IN PLENTY OF TIME!

“I thought it was just a joke, like when the coyote is chasing the Road Runner and gets flattened by a freight train or something. So I said sure. She was pleased as Punch. I went into her office and drew the poster. It didn’t take long, because it was just a cartoon.

“I thought she’d like it, but she didn’t. Her brows drew down and her mouth almost disappeared. I’d made a cartoon boy with crosses for eyes, and as a joke I had a word-balloon comin out of the mouth of the guy drivin the steamroller. ‘If you had a stamp, you could mail him like a postcard,’ he was saying.

“She didn’t even crack a smile. ‘No, Davey,’ she says, ‘you don’t understand. This won’t make the children bring their books back on time. This will only make them laugh, and they spend too much time doing that as it is.’

” ‘Well,’ I says, ‘I guess I didn’t understand what you wanted.’

“We were standin behind the circulation desk, so nobody could see us except from the waist up. And she reached down and took my balls in her hand and looked at me with those big silver eyes of hers and said, ‘I want you to make it realistic.’

“It took me a second or two to understand what she really meant. When I did, I couldn’t believe it. ‘Ardelia,’ I says, ‘you don’t understand what you’re sayin. If a kid really did get run over by a steamroller—’

“She gave my balls a squeeze, one that hurt—as if to remind me just how she had me—and said: ‘I understand, all right. Now you understand me. I don’t want them to laugh, Davey; I want them to cry. So why don’t you go on back in there and do it right this time?’

“I went back into her office. I don’t know what I meant to do, but my mind got made up in a hurry. There was a fresh piece of posterboard on the desk, and a tall glass of Scotch with a straw and a sprig of mint in it, and a note from Ardelia that said ‘D.—Use a lot of red this time.’ “

He looked soberly at Sam and Naomi. “But she’d never been in there, you see. Never for a minute.”

3

Naomi brought Dave a fresh glass of water, and when she came back, Sam noticed that her face was very pale and that the corners of her eyes looked red. But she sat down very quietly and motioned for Dave to go on.

“I did what alcoholics do best,” he said. “I drank the drink and did what I was told. A kind of ... of frenzy, I suppose you’d say ... fell over me. I spent two hours at her desk, workin with a box of five-and-dime watercolors, sloppin water and paint all over her desk, not givin a shit what flew where. What I came out with was somethin I don’t

like to remember ... but I do remember. It was a little boy splattered all over Rampole Street with his shoes knocked off and his head all spread out like a pat of butter that's melted in the sun. The man drivin the steamroller was just a silhouette, but he was lookin back, and you could see the grin on his face. That guy showed up again and again in the posters I did for her. He was drivin the car in the poster you mentioned, Sam, the one about never takin rides from strangers.

"My father left my mom about a year after I was born, just left her flat, and I got an idea now that was who I was tryin to draw in all those posters. I used to call him the dark man, and I think it was my dad. I think maybe Ardelia prodded him out of me somehow. And when I took the second one out, she liked it fine. She laughed over it. 'It's perfect, Davey!' she said. 'It'll scare a whole mountain of do-right into the little snotnoses! I'll put it up right away!' She did, too, on the front of the checkout desk in the Children's Room. And when she did, I saw somethin that really chilled my blood. I knew the little boy I'd drawn, you see. It was Willy Klemmart. I'd drawn him without even knowin it, and the expression on what was left of his face was the one I'd seen that day when she took his hand and led him into the Children's Room.

"I was there when the kids came in for Story Hour and saw that poster for the first time. They were scared. Their eyes got big, and one little girl started to cry. And I liked it that they were scared. I thought, 'That'll pound the do-right into em, all right. That'll teach em what'll happen if they cross her, if they don't do what she says.' And part of me thought, You're gettin to think like her, Dave. Pretty soon you'll get to be like her, and then you'll be lost. You'll be lost forever.

"But I went on, just the same. I felt like I had a one-way ticket and I wasn't goin to get off until I rode all the way to the end of the line. Ardelia hired some college kids, but she always put em in the circulation room and the reference room and on the main desk. She kept complete charge of the kids ... they were the easiest to scare, you see. And I think they were the best scares, the ones that fed her

the best. Because that's what she lived on, you know—she fed on their fright. And I made more posters. I can't remember them all, but I remember the Library Policeman. He was in a lot of them. In one—it was called LIBRARY POLICEMEN GO ON VACATION, Too—he was standin on the edge of a stream and fishin. Only what he'd baited his hook with was that little boy the kids called Simple Simon. In another one, he had Simple Simon strapped to the nose of a rocket and was pullin the switch that would send him into outer space. That one said LEARN MORE ABOUT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY AT THE LIBRARY—BUT BE SURE TO DO RIGHT AND GET YOUR BOOKS BACK ON TIME.

“We turned the Children's Room into a house of horrors for the kids who came there,” Dave said. He spoke slowly, and his voice was full of tears. “She and I. We did that to the children. But do you know what? They always came back. They always came back for more. And they never, never told. She saw to that.”

“But the parents!” Naomi exclaimed suddenly, and so sharply that Sam jumped. “Surely when the parents saw—”

“No!” Dave told her. “Their parents never saw nothing. The only scary poster they ever saw was the one of Little Red Ridin Hood and the wolf. Ardelia left that one up all the time, but the others only went up during Story Hour—after school, on Thursday nights, and Saturday mornings. She wasn't a human bein, Sarah. You've got to get that straight in your mind. She was not human. She knew when grownups was comin, and she always got the posters I'd drawn off the walls and other ones—regular posters that said things like READ BOOKS JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT—up before they came.

“I can remember times when I'd be there for Story Hour—in those days I never left her if I could stay close, and I had lots of time to stay close, because I'd quit paintin pictures, all my regular jobs had fell through, and I was livin on the little I'd managed to save up. Before long the money was gone, too, and I had to start sellin things—my TV, my guitar, my truck, finally my house. But that don't matter. What matters is that I was there a lot, and I saw what went on. The

little ones would have their chairs drawn up in a circle with Ardelia sittin in the middle. I'd be in the back of the room, sittin in one of those kid-sized chairs myself, wearing my old paint-spotted duster more often than not, drunk as a skunk, needin a shave, reekin of Scotch. And she'd be readin—readin one of her special Ardelia-stories—and then she'd break off and cock her head to one side, like she was listenin. The kids would stir around and look uneasy. They looked another way, too—like they was wakin out of a deep sleep she'd put em into.

” ‘We’re going to have company,’ she’d say, smiling. ‘Isn’t that special, children? Do I have some Good-Baby volunteers to help me get ready for our Big People company?’ They’d all raise their hands when she said that, because they all wanted to be Good Babies. The posters I’d made showed em what happened to Bad Babies who didn’t do right. Even I’d raise my hand, sittin drunk in the back of the room in my filthy old duster, lookin like the world’s oldest, tiredest kid. And then they’d get up and some would take down my posters and others would take the regular posters out of the bottom drawer of her desk. They’d swap em. Then they’d sit down and she’d switch from whatever horrible thing she’d been tellin em to a story like ‘The Princess and the Pea,’ and sure enough, a few minutes later some mother’d poke her head in and see all the do-right Good Babies listenin to that nice Miss Lortz readin em a story, and they’d smile at whatever kid was theirs, and the kid would smile back, and things would go on.”

“What do you mean, ‘whatever horrible thing she’d been telling them’?” Sam asked. His voice was husky and his mouth felt dry. He had been listening to Dave with a mounting sense of horror and revulsion.

“Fairy tales,” Dave said. “But she’d change em into horror stories. You’d be surprised how little work she had to do on most of em to make the change.”

“I wouldn’t,” Naomi said grimly. “I remember those stories.”

“I’ll bet you do,” he said, “but you never heard em like Ardelia told em. And the kids liked them—part of them liked the stories, and they liked her, because she drew on them and fascinated them the same way she drew on me. Well, not exactly, because there was never the sex thing—at least, I don’t think so—but the darkness in her called to the darkness in them. Do you understand me?”

And Sam, who remembered his dreadful fascination with the story of Bluebeard and the dancing brooms in Fantasia, thought he did understand. Children hated and feared the darkness ... but it drew them, didn’t it? It beckoned to them,

(come with me, son)

didn’t it? It sang to them,

(I’m a poleethman)

didn’t it?

Didn’t it?

“I know what you mean, Dave,” he said.

He nodded. “Have you figured it out yet, Sam? Who your Library Policeman was?”

“I still don’t understand that part,” Sam said, but he thought part of him did. It was as if his mind was some deep, dark body of water and there was a boat sunk at the bottom of it—but not just any boat. No—this was a pirate schooner, full of loot and dead bodies, and now it had begun to shift in the muck which had held it so long. Soon, he feared, this ghostly, glaring wreck would surface again, its blasted masts draped with black seaweed and a skeleton with a million-dollar grin still lashed to the rotting remains of the wheel.

“I think maybe you do,” Dave said, “or that you’re beginning to. And it will have to come out, Sam. Believe me.”

“I still don’t really understand about the stories,” Naomi said.

“One of her favorites, Sarah—and it was a favorite of the children, too; you have to understand that, and believe it—was ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears.’ You know the story, but you don’t know it the way some people in this town—people who are grownups now, bankers and lawyers and big-time farmers with whole fleets of John Deere tractors—know it. Deep in their hearts, it’s the Ardelia Lortz version they keep, you see. It may be that some of them have told those same stories to their own children, never knowing there are other ways to tell them. I don’t like to think that’s so, but in my heart I know it is.

“In Ardelia’s version, Goldilocks is a Bad Baby who won’t do right. She comes into the house of the Three Bears and wrecks it on purpose—pulls down Mamma Bear’s curtains and drags the washin through the mud and tears up all of Papa Bear’s magazines and business papers and uses one of the steak-knives to cut holes in his favorite chair. Then she tears up all their books. That was Ardelia’s favorite part, I think, when Goldilocks spoiled the books. And she don’t eat the porridge, oh no! Not when Ardelia told the story! The way Ardelia told it, Goldilocks got some rat poison off a high shelf and shook it all over the porridge like powdered sugar. She didn’t know anything about who lived in the house, but she wanted to kill them anyway, because that’s the kind of Bad Baby she was.”

“That’s horrible!” Naomi exclaimed. She had lost her composure—really lost it—for the first time. Her hands were pressed over her mouth, and her wide eyes regarded Dave from above them.

“Yes. It was. But it wasn’t the end. Goldilocks was so tired from wreckin the house, you see, that when she went upstairs to tear their bedrooms apart, she fell asleep in Baby Bear’s bed. And when the Three Bears came home and saw her, they fell upon her—that was just how Ardelia used to say it—they fell upon her and ate that wicked Bad Baby alive. They ate her from the feet up, while she screamed and struggled. All except for her head. They saved that, because they knew what she had done to their porridge. They

smelled the poison. 'They could do that, children, because they were bears,' Ardelia used to say, and all the children—Ardelia's Good Babies—would nod their heads, because they saw how that could be. 'They took Goldilocks' head down to the kitchen and boiled it and ate her brains for their breakfast. They all agreed it was very tasty ... and they lived happily ever after.' "

4

There was a thick, almost deathly silence on the porch. Dave reached for his glass of water and almost knocked it off the railing with his trembling fingers. He rescued it at the last moment, held it in both hands, and drank deeply. Then he put it down and said to Sam, "Are you surprised that my boozing got a little bit out of control?"

Sam shook his head.

Dave looked at Naomi and said, "Do you understand now why I was never able to tell this story? Why I put it in that room?"

"Yes," she said in a trembling, sighing voice that was not much more than a whisper. "And I think I understand why the kids never told, either. Some things are just too ... too monstrous."

"For us, maybe," Dave said. "For kids? I don't know, Sarah. I don't think kids know monsters so well at first glance. It's their folks that tell em how to recognize the monsters. And she had somethin else goin for her. You remember me tellin you about how, when she told the kids a parent was comin, they looked like they were wakin up from a deep sleep? They were sleepin, in some funny way. It wasn't hypnosis—at least, I don't think it was—but it was like hypnosis. And when they went home, they didn't remember, in the top part of their minds, anyway, about the stories or the posters. Down underneath, I think they remembered plenty ... just like down underneath Sam knows who his Library Policeman is. I think they still remember today—the bankers and lawyers and big-time farmers who were once Ardelia's Good Babies. I can still see em, wearin pinafores and short pants, sittin in those little chairs, lookin at Ardelia in the middle of the

circle, their eyes so big and round they looked like pie-plates. And I think that when it gets dark and the storms come, or when they are sleepin and the nightmares come, they go back to bein kids. I think the doors open and they see the Three Bears—Ardelia's Three Bears—eatin the brains out of Goldilocks' head with their wooden porridge-spoons, and Baby Bear wearin Goldilocks' scalp on his head like a long golden wig. I think they wake up sweaty, feelin sick and afraid. I think that's what she left this town. I think she left a legacy of secret nightmares.

“But I still haven't got to the worst thing. Those stories, you see—well, sometimes it was the posters, but mostly it was the stories—would scare one of them into a crying fit, or they'd start to faint or pass out or whatever. And when that happened, she'd tell the others, ‘Put your heads down and rest while I take Billy ... or Sandra ... or Tommy ... to the bathroom and make him feel better.’

“They'd all drop their heads at the same instant. It was like they were dead. The first time I seen it happen, I waited about two minutes after she took some little girl out of the room, and then I got up and went over to the circle. I went to Willy Klemmart first.

” ‘Willy!’ I whispered, and poked him in the shoulder. ‘You okay, Will?’

“He never moved, so I poked him harder and said his name again. He still didn't move. I could hear him breathin—kinda snotty and snory, the way kids are so much of the time, always runnin around with colds like they do—but it was still like he was dead. His eyelids were partway open, but I could only see the whites, and this long thread of spit was hangin off his lower lip. I got scared and went to three or four of the others, but wouldn't none of them look up at me or make a sound.”

“You're saying she enchanted them, aren't you?” Sam asked. “That they were like Snow White after she ate the poisoned apple.”

“Yes,” Dave agreed. “That's what they were like. In a different kind of way, that's what I was like, too. Then, just as I was gettin ready to

take hold of Willy Klemmart and shake the shit out of him, I heard her comin back from the bathroom. I ran to my seat so she wouldn't catch me. Because I was more scared of what she might do to me than anything she might have done to them.

“She came in, and that little girl, who'd been as gray as a dirty sheet and half unconscious when Ardelia took her out, looked like somebody had just filled her up with the finest nerve-tonic in the world. She was wide awake, with roses in her cheeks and a sparkle in her eye. Ardelia patted her on the bottom and she ran for her seat. Then Ardelia clapped her hands together and said, ‘All Good Babies lift your heads up! Sonja feels much better, and she wants us to finish the story, don't you, Sonja?’

” ‘Yes, ma'am,’ Sonja pipes up, just as pert as a robin in a birdbath. And their heads all came up. You never would have known that two seconds before that room looked like it was full of dead kids.

“The third or fourth time this happened, I let her get out of the room and then I followed her. I knew she was scarin them on purpose, you see, and I had an idea there was a reason for it. I was scared almost to death myself, but I wanted to see what it was.

“That time it was Willy Klemmart she'd taken down to the bathroom. He'd started havin hysterics during Ardelia's version of ‘Hansel and Gretel.’ I opened the door real easy and quiet, and I seen Ardelia kneelin in front of Willy down by where the washbasin was. He had stopped cryin, but beyond that I couldn't tell anything. Her back was to me, you see, and Willy was so short she blocked him right out of my view, even on her knees. I could see his hands were on the shoulders of the jumper she was wearin, and I could see one sleeve of his red sweater, but that was all. Then I heard somethin—a thick suckin sound, like a straw makes when you've gotten just about all of your milkshake out of the glass. I had an idea then she was ... you know, molestin him, and she was, but not the way I thought.

“I walked in a little further, and slipped over to the right, walkin high up on the toes of my shoes so the heels wouldn't clack. I expected

her to hear me just the same, though ... she had ears like goddam radar dishes, and I kept waitin for her to turn around and pin me with those red eyes of hers. But I couldn't stop. I had to see. And little by little, as I angled over to the right, I began to.

“Willy's face came into my sight over her shoulder, a little piece at a time, like a moon coming out of a 'clipse. At first all I could see of her was her blonde hair—there was masses of it, all in curls and ringlets—but then I began to see her face, as well. And I seen what she was doin. All the strength ran out of my legs just like water down a pipe. There was no way they were goin to see me, not unless I reached up and started hammerin on one of the overhead pipes. Their eyes were closed, but that wasn't the reason. They were lost in what they were doin, you see, and they were both lost in the same place, because they were hooked together.

“Ardelia's face wasn't human anymore. It had run like warm taffy and made itself into this funnel shape that flattened her nose and pulled her eyesockets all long and Chinese to the sides and made her look like some kind of insect ... a fly, maybe, or a bee. Her mouth was gone again. It had turned into that thing I started to see just after she killed Mr. Lavin, the night we were layin in the hammock. It had turned into the narrow part of the funnel. I could see these funny red streaks on it, and at first I thought it was blood, or maybe veins under her skin, and then I realized it was lipstick. She didn't have lips anymore, but that red paint marked where her lips had been.

“She was usin that sucker thing to drink from Willy's eyes.”

Sam looked at Dave, thunderstruck. He wondered for a moment if the man had lost his mind. Ghosts were one thing; this was something else. He didn't have the slightest idea what this was. And yet sincerity and honesty shone on Dave's face like a lamp, and Sam thought: If he's lying, he doesn't know it.

“Dave, are you saying Ardelia Lortz was drinking his tears?” Naomi asked hesitantly.

“Yes ... and no. It was his special tears she was drinkin. Her face was all stretched out to him, it was beatin like a heart, and her features were drawn out flat. She looked like a face you might draw on a shoppin bag to make a Halloween mask.

“What was comin out of the comers of Willy’s eyes was gummy and pink, like bloody snot, or chunks of flesh that have almost liquefied. She sucked it in with that slurpin sound. It was his fear she was drinkin. She had made it real, somehow, and made it so big that it had to come out in those awful tears or kill him.”

“You’re saying that Ardelia was some kind of vampire, aren’t you?” Sam asked.

Dave looked relieved. “Yes. That’s right. When I’ve thought of that day since—when I’ve dared to think of it—I believe that’s just what she was. All those old stories about vampires sinking their teeth into people’s throats and drinkin their blood are wrong. Not by much, but in this business, close is not good enough. They drink, but not from the neck; they grow fat and healthy on what they take from their victims, but what they take isn’t blood. Maybe the stuff they take is redder, bloodier, when the victims are grownups. Maybe she took it from Mr. Lavin. I think she did. But it’s not blood.

“It’s fear.”

5

“I dunno how long I stood there, watchin her, but it couldn’t have been too long—she was never gone much more than five minutes. After awhile, the stuff comin from the corners of Willy’s eyes started to get paler and paler, and there was less and less of it. I could see that ... you know, that thing of hers ... “

“Proboscis,” Naomi said quietly. “I think it must have been a proboscis.”

“Is it? All right. I could see that probos-thing stretchin further and further out, not wanting to miss any, wanting to get every last bit, and I knew she was almost done. And when she was, they’d wake up and she’d see me. And when she did, I thought she’d probably kill me.

“I started to back up, slow, one step at a time. I didn’t think I was going to make it, but at last my butt bumped the bathroom door. I almost screamed when that happened, because I thought she’d got behind me somehow. I was sure of that even though I could see her kneelin there right in front of me.

“I clapped my hand over my mouth to keep the scream in and pushed out through the door. I stood there while it swung shut on the pneumatic hinge. It seemed to take forever. When it was closed, I started for the main door. I was half crazy; all I wanted to do was get out of there and never go back. I wanted to run forever.

“I got down into the foyer, where she’d put up that sign you saw, Sam—the one that just said SILENCE!—and then I caught hold of myself. If she led Willy back to the Children’s Room and saw I was gone, she’d know I’d seen. She’d chase me, and she’d catch me, too. I didn’t even think she’d have to try hard. I kept rememberin that day in the corn, and how she’d run rings all around me and never even worked up a sweat.

“So I turned around and walked back to my seat in the Children’s Room instead. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life, but somehow I managed to do it. My ass wasn’t on the chair two seconds before I heard them coming. And of course Willy was all happy and smilin and full of beans, and so was she. Ardelia looked ready to go three fast rounds with Carmen Basilio and whip him solid.

” ‘All Good Babies lift your heads up!’ she called, and clapped her hands. They all raised their heads and looked at her. ‘Willy feels lots better, and he wants me to finish the story. Don’t you, Willy?’

” ‘Yes, ma’am,’ Willy said. She kissed him and he ran back to his seat. She went on with the story. I sat there and listened. And when that Story Hour was done, I started drinkin. And from then until the end, I never really stopped.”

6

“How did it end?” Sam asked. “What do you know about that?”

“Not as much as I would have known if I hadn’t been so dog-drunk all the time, but more than I wish I knew. That last part of it, I’m not even sure how long it was. About four months, I think, but it might have been six, or even eight. By then I wasn’t even noticin the seasons much. When a drunk like me really starts to slide, Sam, the only weather he notices is inside of a bottle. I know two things, though, and they are really the only two things that matter. Somebody did start to catch onto her, that was one thing. And it was time for her to go back to sleep. To change. That was the other.

“I remember one night at her house—she never came to mine, not once—she said to me, ‘I’m getting sleepy, Dave. All the time now I’m sleepy. Soon it will be time for a long rest. When that time comes, I want you to sleep with me. I’ve grown fond of you, you see.’

“I was drunk, of course, but what she said still gave me a chill. I thought I knew what she was talkin about, but when I asked her, she only laughed.

” ‘No, not that,’ she said, and gave me a scornful, amused kind of look. ‘I’m talking about sleep, not death. But you’ll need to feed with me.’

“That sobered me up in a hurry. She didn’t think I knew what she was talkin about, but I did. I’d seen.

“After that, she began to ask me questions about the kids. About which ones I didn’t like, which ones I thought were sneaky, which ones were too loud, which ones were the brattiest. ‘They’re Bad

Babies, and they don't deserve to live,' she'd say. 'They're rude, they're destructive, they bring their books back with pencil marks in them and ripped pages. Which ones do you think deserve to die, Davey?'

"That was when I knew I had to get away from her, and if killin myself was the only way, I'd have to take that way out. Something was happenin to her, you see. Her hair was gettin dull, and her skin, which had always been perfect, started to show up with blemishes. And there was something else—I could see that thing, that thing her mouth turned into—all the time, just under the surface of her skin. But it was starting to look all wrinkled and dewlapped, and there were strings like cobwebs on it.

"One night while we were in bed she saw me lookin at her hair and said, 'You see the change in me, don't you, Davey?' She patted my face. 'It's all right; it's perfectly natural. It's always this way when I'm getting ready to go to sleep again. I will have to do it soon, and if you mean to come with me, you will have to take one of the children soon. Or two. Or three. The more the merrier!' She laughed in the crazy way she had, and when she looked back at me, her eyes had gone red again. 'In any case, I don't mean to leave you behind. All else aside, it wouldn't be safe. You know that, don't you?'

"I said I did.

" 'So if you don't want to die, Davey, it has to be soon. Very soon. And if you've made up your mind not to, you should tell me now. We can end our time together pleasantly and painlessly, tonight.'

"She leaned over me and I could smell her breath. It was like spoiled dogfood, and I couldn't believe I'd ever kissed the mouth that smell was coming out of, sober or drunk. But there was some part of me—some little part—that must have still wanted to live, because I told her I did want to come with her, but I needed a little more time to get ready. To prepare my mind.

” ‘To drink, you mean,’ she said. ‘You ought to get down on your knees and thank your miserable, unlucky stars for me, Dave Duncan. If not for me, you’d be dead in the gutter in a year, or even less. With me, you can live almost forever.’

“Her mouth stretched out for just a second, stretched out until it touched my cheek. And somehow I managed to keep from screaming.”

Dave looked at them with his deep, haunted eyes. Then he smiled. Sam Peebles never forgot the eldritch quality of that smile; it haunted his dreams ever after.

“But that’s all right,” he said. “Somewhere, down deep inside of me, I have been screaming ever since.”

7

“I’d like to say that in the end I broke her hold over me, but that’d be a lie. It was just happenstance—or what Program people call a higher power. You have to understand that by 1960, I was entirely cut off from the rest of the town. Remember me tellin you that once I was a member of the Rotary Club, Sam? Well, by February of ‘60, those boys wouldn’t have hired me to clean the urinals in their john. As far as Junction City was concerned, I was just another Bad Baby livin the life of a bum. People I’d known all my life would cross the street to get out of my way when they saw me comin. I had the constitution of a brass eagle in those days, but the booze was rustin me out just the same, and what the booze wasn’t takin, Ardelia Lortz was.

“I wondered more’n once if she wouldn’t turn to me for what she needed, but she never did. Maybe I was no good to her that way ... but I don’t really think that was it. I don’t think she loved me—I don’t think Ardelia could love anybody—but I do think she was lonely. I think she’s lived, if you can call what she does living, a very long time, and that she’s had ...”

Dave trailed off. His crooked fingers drummed restlessly on his knees and his eyes sought the grain elevator on the horizon again, as if for comfort.

“Companions seems like the word that comes closest to fittin. I think she’s had companions for some of her long life, but I don’t think she’d had one for a very long time when she came to Junction City. Don’t ask what she said to make me feel that way, because I don’t remember. It’s lost, like so much of the rest. But I’m pretty sure it’s true. And she had me tapped for the job. I’m pretty sure I would have gone with her, too, if she hadn’t been found out.”

“Who found her out, Dave?” Naomi asked, leaning forward. “Who?”

“Deputy Sheriff John Power. In those days, the Homestead County sheriff was Norman Beeman, and Norm’s the best argument I know for why sheriffs should be appointed rather than elected. The voters gave him the job when he got back to Junction City in ‘45 with a suitcase full of medals he’d won when Patton’s army was drivin into Germany. He was a hell of a scrapper, no one could take that away from him, but as county sheriff he wasn’t worth a fart in a windstorm. What he had was the biggest, whitest smile you ever saw, and a load of bullshit two mules wide. And he was a Republican, of course. That’s always been the most important thing in Homestead County. I think Norm would be gettin elected still if he hadn’t dropped dead of a stroke in Hughie’s Barber Shop in the summer of 1963. I remember that real clear; by then Ardelia had been gone awhile and I’d come around a little bit.

“There were two secrets to Norm’s success—other than that big grin and the line of bullshit, I mean. First, he was honest. So far as I know, he never took a dime. Second, he always made sure he had at least one deputy sheriff under him who could think fast and didn’t have no interest in runnin for the top job himself. He always played square with those fellows; every one of them got a rock-solid recommendation when he was ready to move on and move up. Norm took care of his own. I think, if you looked, you’d find there are six or eight town police chiefs and State Police colonels scattered

across the Midwest who spent two or three years here in Junction City, shovelling shit for Norm Beeman.

“Not John Power, though. He’s dead. If you looked up his obituary, it’d say he died of a heart attack, although he wasn’t yet thirty years old and with none of the bad habits that cause people’s tickers to seize up early sometimes. I know the truth—it wasn’t a heart attack killed John any more than it was a heart attack that killed Lavin. She killed him.”

“How do you know that, Dave?” Sam asked.

“I know because there were supposed to be three children killed in the Library on that last day.”

Dave’s voice was still calm, but Sam heard the terror this man had lived with so long running just below the surface like a low-voltage electrical charge. Supposing that even half of what Dave had told them this afternoon was true, then he must have lived these last thirty years with terrors beyond Sam’s capacity to imagine. No wonder he had used a bottle to keep the worst of them at bay.

“Two did die—Patsy Harrigan and Tom Gibson. The third was to be my price of admission to whatever circus it is that Ardelia Lortz is ringmaster of. That third was the one she really wanted, because she was the one who turned the spotlight on Ardelia just when Ardelia most needed to operate in the dark. That third had to be mine, because that one wasn’t allowed to come to the Library anymore, and Ardelia couldn’t be sure of gettin near her. That third Bad Baby was Tansy Power, Deputy Power’s daughter.”

“You aren’t talking about Tansy Ryan, are you?” Naomi asked, and her voice was almost pleading.

“Yeah, I am. Tansy Ryan from the post office, Tansy Ryan who goes to meetins with us, Tansy Ryan who used to be Tansy Power. A lot of the kids who used to come to Ardelia’s Story Hours are in AA around these parts, Sarah—make of it what you will. In the summer of 1960,

I came very close to killin Tansy Power ... and that's not the worst of it. I only wish it were."

8

Naomi excused herself, and after several minutes had dragged by, Sam got up to go after her.

"Let her be," Dave said. "She's a wonderful woman, Sam, but she needs a little time to put herself back in order. You would, too, if you found out that one of the members of the most important group in your life once came close to murderin your closest friend. Let her abide. She'll be back—Sarah's strong."

A few minutes later, she did come back. She had washed her face—the hair at her temples was still wet and slick—and she was carrying a tray with three glasses of iced tea on it.

"Ah, we're getting down to the hard stuff at last, ain't we, dear?" Dave said.

Naomi did her best to return his smile. "You bet. I just couldn't hold out any longer."

Sam thought her effort was better than good; he thought it was noble. All the same, the ice was talking to the glasses in brittle, chattering phrases. Sam rose again and took the tray from her unsteady hands. She looked at him gratefully.

"Now," she said, sitting down. "Finish, Dave. Tell it to the end."

9

"A lot of what's left is stuff she told me," Dave resumed, "because by then I wasn't in a position to see anything that went on first hand. Ardelia told me sometime late in '59 that I wasn't to come around the Public Library anymore. If she saw me in there, she said she'd turn me out, and if I hung around outside, she'd sic the cops on me. She

said I was gettin too seedy, and talk would start if I was seen goin in there anymore.

” ‘Talk about you and me?’ I asked. ‘Ardelia, who’d believe it?’

” ‘Nobody,’ she said. ‘It’s not talk about you and me that concerns me, you idiot.’

” ‘Well then, what does?’

” ‘Talk about you and the children,’ she said. I guess that was the first time I really understood how low I’d fallen. You’ve seen me low in the years since we started goin to the AA meetins together, Sarah, but you’ve never seen me that low. I’m glad, too.

“That left her house. It was the only place I was allowed to see her, and the only time I was allowed to come was long after dark. She told me not to come by the road any closer than the Orday farm. After that I was to cut through the fields. She told me she’d know if I tried to cheat on that, and I believed her—when those silver eyes of hers turned red, Ardelia saw everything. I’d usually show up sometime between eleven o’clock and one in the morning, dependin on how much I’d had to drink, and I was usually frozen almost to the bone. I can’t tell you much about those months, but I can tell you that in 1959 and 1960 the state of Iowa had a damned cold winter. There were lots of nights when I believe a sober man would have frozen to death out there in those cornfields.

“There wasn’t no problem on the night I want to tell you about next, though—it must have been July of 1960 by then, and it was hotter than the hinges of hell. I remember how the moon looked that night, bloated and red, hangin over the fields. It seemed like every dog in Homestead County was yarkin up at that moon.

“Walkin into Ardelia’s house that night was like walkin under the skirt of a cyclone. That week—that whole month, I guess—she’d been slow and sleepy, but not that night. That night she was wide awake, and she was in a fury. I hadn’t seen her that way since the night after

Mr. Lavin told her to take the Little Red Ridin Hood poster down because it was scarin the children. At first she didn't even know I was there. She went back and forth through the downstairs, naked as the day she was born—if she ever was born—with her head down and her hands rolled into fists. She was madder'n a bear with a sore ass. She usually wore her hair up in an old-maidy bun when she was at home, but it was down when I let myself in through the kitchen door and she was walkin so fast it went flyin out behind her. I could hear it makin little crackly sounds, like it was full of static electricity. Her eyes were red as blood and glowin like those railroad lamps they used to put out in the old days when the tracks were blocked someplace up the line, and they seemed to be poppin right out of her face. Her body was oiled with sweat, and bad as I was myself, I could smell her; she stank like a bobcat in heat. I remember I could see big oily drops rollin down her bosom and her belly. Her hips and thighs shone with it. It was one of those still, muggy nights we get out here in the summer sometimes, when the air smells green and sits on your chest like a pile of junk iron, and it seems like there's cornsilk in every breath you pull in. You wish it would thunder and lightnin and pour down a gusher on nights like that, but it never does. You wish the wind would blow, at least, and not just because it would cool you off if it did, but because it would make the sound of the corn a little easier to bear ... the sound of it pushin itself up out of the ground all around you, soundin like an old man with arthritis tryin to get out of bed in the mornin without wakin his wife.

“Then I noticed she was scared as well as mad this time—someone had really looped the fear of God into her. And the change in her was speedin up. Whatever it was that happened to her, it had knocked her into a higher gear. She didn't look older, exactly; she looked less there. Her hair had started to look finer, like a baby's hair. You could see her scalp through it. And her skin looked like it was startin to grow its own skin—this fine, misty webbing over her cheeks, around her nostrils, at the corners of her eyes, between her fingers. Wherever there was a fold in the skin, that was where you could see it best. It fluttered a little as she walked. You want to hear something crazy? When the County Fair comes to town these days, I can't bear

to go near the cotton-candy stands on the midway. You know the machine they make it with? Looks like a doughnut and goes round and round, and the man sticks in a paper cone and winds the pink sugar up on it? That's what Ardelia's skin was starting to look like—those fine strands of spun sugar. I think I know now what I was seein. She was doin what caterpillars do when they go to sleep. She was spinnin a cocoon around herself.

“I stood in the doorway for some time, watchin her go back and forth. She didn't notice me for a long while. She was too busy rollin around in whatever bed of nettles it was she'd stumbled into. Twice she hammered her fist against a wall and smashed all the way through it—paper, plaster, and lath. It sounded like breakin bones, but it didn't seem to do her no hurt at all, and there was no blood. She screamed each time, too, but not with pain. What I heard was the sound of a pissed-off she-cat ... but, like I said, there was fear underneath her anger. And what she screamed was that deputy's name.

” ‘John Power!’ she'd scream, and whack! Right through the wall her fist would go. ‘God damn you, John Power! I'll teach you to stay out of my business! You want to look at me? Fine! But I'll teach you how to do it! I'll teach you, little baby of' mine!’ Then she'd walk on, so fast she was almost runnin, and her bare feet'd come down so hard they shook the whole damn house, it seemed like. She'd be mutterin to herself while she walked. Then her lip would curl, her eyes would glare redder'n ever, and whack! would go her fist, right through the wall and a little puff of plaster dust comin out through the hole. ‘John Power, you don't dare!’ she'd snarl. ‘You don't dare cross me!’

“But you only had to look into her face to know she was afraid he did dare. And if you'd known Deputy Power, you'd have known she was right to be worried. He was smart, and he wasn't afraid of nothing. He was a good deputy and a bad man to cross.

“She got into the kitchen doorway on her fourth or fifth trip through the house, and all at once she saw me. Her eyes glared into mine, and her mouth began to stretch out into that horn shape—only now it was all coated with those spidery, smoky threads—and I thought I

was dead. If she couldn't lay hands on John Power, she'd have me in his place.

"She started toward me and I slid down the kitchen door in a kind of puddle. She saw that and she stopped. The red light went out of her eyes. She changed in the wink of an eye. She looked and spoke as if I'd come into a fancy cocktail party she was throwin instead of walking into her house at midnight to find her rammin around naked and smashin holes in the walls.

" 'Davey!' she says. 'I'm so glad you're here! Have a drink. In fact, have two!'

"She wanted to kill me—I saw it in her eyes—but she needed me, and not just for a companion no more, neither. She needed me to kill Tansy Power. She knew she could take care of the cop, but she wanted him to know his daughter was dead before she did him. For that she needed me.

" 'There isn't much time,' she said. 'Do you know this Deputy Power?'

"I said I ought to. He'd arrested me for public drunkenness half a dozen times.

" 'What do you make of him?' she asked.

" 'He's got a lot of hard bark on him,' I says.

" 'Well, fuck him and fuck you, too!'

"I didn't say nothing to that. It seemed wiser not to.

" 'That goddam squarehead came into the Library this afternoon and asked to see my references. And he kept asking me questions. He wanted to know where I'd been before I came to Junction City, where I went to school, where I grew up. You should have seen the way he

looked at me, Davey—but I'll teach him the right way to look at a lady like me. You see if I don't.'

" 'You don't want to make a mistake with Deputy Power,' I said. 'I don't think he's afraid of anything.'

" 'Yes, he is—he's afraid of me. He just doesn't know it yet,' she said, but I caught the gleam of fear in her eyes again. He had picked the worst possible time to start askin questions, you see—she was gettin ready for her time of sleeping and change, and it weakened her somehow."

"Did Ardelia tell you how he caught on?" Naomi asked.

"It's obvious," Sam said. "His daughter told him."

"No," Dave said. "I didn't ask—I didn't dare, not with her in the mood she was in—but I don't think Tansy told her dad. I don't think she could have—not in so many words, at least. When they left the Children's Room, you see, they'd forget all about what she'd told them ... and done to them in there. And it wasn't just forgetting, either—she put other memories, false memories, into their heads, so they'd go home just as jolly as could be. Most of their parents thought Ardelia was just about the greatest thing that ever happened to the Junction City Library.

"I think it was what she took from Tansy that put her father's wind up, and I think Deputy Power must have done a good deal of investigating before he ever went to see Ardelia at the Library. I don't know what difference he noticed in Tansy, because the kids weren't all pale and listless, like the people who get their blood sucked in the vampire movies, and there weren't any marks on their necks. But she was takin something from them, just the same, and John Power saw it or sensed it."

"Even if he did see something, why did it make him suspicious of Ardelia?" Sam asked.

“I told you his nose was keen. I think he must have asked Tansy some questions—nothing direct, all on the slant, if you see what I mean—and the answers he got must have been just enough to point him in the right direction.. When he came to the Library that day he didn’t know anything ... but he suspected something. Enough to put Ardelia on her mettle. I remember what made her the maddest—and scared her the most—was how he looked at her. ‘I’ll teach you how to look at me,’ she said. Over and over again. I’ve wondered since how long it had been since anyone looked at her with real suspicion ... how long since anyone got into sniffin distance of what she was. I bet it scared her in more ways than one. I bet it made her wonder if she wasn’t finally losin her touch.”

“He might have talked to some of the other children, too,” Naomi said hesitantly. “Compared stories and got answers that didn’t quite jibe. Maybe they even saw her in different ways. The way you and Sam saw her in different ways.”

“It could be—any of those things could be. Whatever it was, he scared her into speedin up her plans.

” ‘I’ll be at the Library all day tomorrow,’ she told me. ‘I’ll make sure plenty of people see me there, too. But you—you’re going to pay a visit to Deputy Power’s house, Davey. You’re going to watch and wait until you see that child alone—I don’t think you’ll have to wait long—and then you’re going to snatch her and take her into the woods. Do whatever you want to her, but you make sure that the last thing you do is cut her throat. Cut her throat and leave her where she’ll be found. I want that bastard to know before I see him.’

“I couldn’t say nothing. It was probably just as well for me that I was tongue-tied, because anything I said she would have taken wrong, and she probably would have ripped my head off. But I only sat at her kitchen table with my drink in my hand, starin at her, and she must have taken my silence for agreement.

“After that we went into the bedroom. It was the last time. I remember thinkin I wouldn’t be able to have it off with her; that a

scared man can't get it up. But it was fine, God help me. Ardelia had that kind of magic, too. We went and went and went, and at some point I either fell asleep or just went unconscious. The next thing I remember was her pushin me out of bed with her bare feet, dumpin me right into a patch of early-morning sun. It was quarter past six, my stomach felt like an acid bath, and my head was throbbin like a swollen gum with an abscess in it.

" 'It's time for you to be about your business,' she said. 'Don't let anybody see you on your way back to town, Davey, and remember what I told you. Get her this morning. Take her into the woods and do for her. Hide until dark. If you're caught before then, there's nothing I can do for you. But if you get here, you'll be safe. I'll make sure today that there'll be a couple of kids at the Library tomorrow, even though it's closed. I've got them picked out already, the two worst little brats in town. We'll go to the Library together ... they'll come ... and when the rest of the fools find us, they'll think we're all dead. But you and I won't be dead, Davey; we'll be free. The joke will be on them, won't it?'

"Then she started to laugh. She sat naked on her bed with me grovelling at her feet, sick as a rat full of poison bait, and she laughed and laughed and laughed. Pretty soon her face started to change into the insect face again, that probos-thing pushin out of her face, almost like one of those Viking horns, and her eyes drawin off to the side. I knew everything in my guts was going to come up in a rush so I beat it out of there and puked into her ivy. Behind me I could hear her laughin ... laughin ... and laughin.

"I was puttin on my clothes by the side of the house when she spoke to me out the window. I didn't see her, but I heard her just fine. 'Don't let me down, Davey,' she said. 'Don't let me down, or I'll kill you. And you won't die fast.'

" 'I won't let you down, Ardelia,' I said, but I didn't turn around to see her hangin out of her bedroom window. I knew I couldn't stand to see her even one more time. I'd come to the end of my string. And still ... part of me wanted to go with her even if it meant goin mad first, and

most of me thought I would go with her. Unless it was her plan to set me up somehow, to leave me holdin the bag for all of it. I wouldn't have put it past her. I wouldn't have put nothin past her.

"I set off through the corn back toward Junction City. Usually those walks would sober me up a little, and I'd sweat out the worst of the hangover. Not that day, though. Twice I had to stop to vomit, and the second time I didn't think I was goin to be able to quit. I finally did, but I could see blood all over the corn I'd stopped to kneel in, and by the time I got back to town, my head was achin worse than ever and my vision was doubled. I thought I was dyin, but I still couldn't stop thinkin about what she'd said: Do whatever you want to her, but you make sure that the last thing you do is cut her throat.

"I didn't want to hurt Tansy Power, but I thought I was goin to, just the same. I wouldn't be able to stand against what Ardelia wanted ... and then I would be damned forever. And the worst thing, I thought, might be if Ardelia was tellin the truth, and I just went on livin ... livin almost forever with that thing on my mind.

"In those days, there was two freight depots at the station, and a loading dock that wasn't much used on the north side of the second one. I crawled under there and fell asleep for a couple of hours. When I woke up, I felt a little better. I knew there wasn't any way I could stop her or myself, so I set out for John Power's house, to find that little girl and snatch her away. I walked right through downtown, not lookin at anyone, and all I kept thinkin over and over was, 'I can make it quick for her—I can do that, at least. I'll snap her neck in a wink and she'll never know a thing.' "

Dave produced his bandanna again and wiped his forehead with a hand which was shaking badly.

"I got as far as the five-and-dime. It's gone now, but in those days it was the last business on O'Kane Street before you got into the residential district again. I had less than four blocks to go, and I thought that when I got to the Power house, I'd see Tansy in the yard. She'd be alone ... and the woods weren't far.

“Only I looked into the five-and-dime show window and what I saw stopped me cold. It was a pile of dead children, all staring eyes, tangled arms, and busted legs. I let out a little scream and clapped my hands against my mouth. I closed my eyes tight. When I looked again, I saw it was a bunch of dolls old Mrs. Seger was gettin ready to make into a display. She saw me and flapped one of em at me—get away, you old drunk. But I didn’t. I kept lookin in at those dolls. I tried to tell myself dolls were all they were; anyone could see that. But when I closed my eyes tight and then opened em again, they were dead bodies again. Mrs. Seger was settin up a bunch of little corpses in the window of the five-and-dime and didn’t even know it. It came to me that someone was tryin to send me a message, and that maybe the message was that it wasn’t too late, even then. Maybe I couldn’t stop Ardelia, but maybe I could. And even if I couldn’t, maybe I could keep from bein dragged into the pit after her.

“That was the first time I really prayed, Sarah. I prayed for strength. I didn’t want to kill Tansy Power, but it was more than that—I wanted to save them all if I could.

“I started back toward the Texaco station a block down—it was where the Piggly Wiggly is now. On the way I stopped and picked a few pebbles out of the gutter. There was a phone booth by the side of the station—and it’s still there today, now that I think of it. I got there and then realized I didn’t have a cent. As a last resort, I felt in the coin return. There was a dime in there. Ever since that morning, when somebody tells me they don’t believe there’s a God, I think of how I felt when I poked my fingers into that coin-return slot and found that tencent piece.

“I thought about calling Mrs. Power, then decided it’d be better to call the Sheriff’s Office. Someone would pass the message on to John Power, and if he was as suspicious as Ardelia seemed to think, he might take the proper steps. I closed the door of the booth and looked up the number—this was back in the days when you could sometimes still find a telephone book in a telephone booth, if you

were lucky—and then, before I dialled it, I stuck the pebbles I'd picked up in my mouth.

“John Power himself answered the phone, and I think now that's why Patsy Harrigan and Tom Gibson died ... why John Power himself died ... and why Ardelia wasn't stopped then and there. I expected the dispatcher, you see—it was Hannah Verrill in those days—and I'd tell her what I had to say, and she'd pass it on to the deputy.

“Instead, I heard this hard don't-fuck-with-me voice say, 'Sheriff's Office, Deputy Power speaking, how can I help you?' I almost swallowed the mouthful of pebbles I had, and for a minute I couldn't say anything.

“He goes 'Damn kids,' and I knew he was gettin ready to hang up.

” ‘Wait!’ I says. The pebbles made it sound like I was talkin through a mouthful of cotton. ‘Don't hang up, Deputy!’

” ‘Who is this?’ he asked.

” ‘Never mind,’ I says back. ‘Get your daughter out of town, if you value her, and whatever you do, don't let her near the Library. It's serious. She's in danger.’

“And then I hung up. Just like that. If Hannah had answered, I think I would have told more. I would have spoken names—Tansy's, Tom's, Patsy's ... and Ardelia's, too. But he scared me—I felt like if I stayed on that line, he'd be able to look right through it and see me on the other end, standin in that booth and stinkin like a bag of used-up peaches.

“I spat the pebbles out into my palm and got out of the booth in a hurry. Her power over me was broken—makin the call had done that much, anyway—but I was in a panic. Did you ever see a bird that's flown into a garage and goes swoopin around, bashin itself against the walls, it's so crazy to get out? That's what I was like. All of a sudden I wasn't worryin about Patsy Harrigan, or Tom Gibson, or

even Tansy Power. I felt like Ardelia was the one who was lookin at me, that Ardelia knew what I'd done, and she'd be after me.

"I wanted to hide—hell, I needed to hide. I started walkin down Main Street, and by the time I got to the end, I was almost runnin. By then Ardelia had gotten all mixed up in my mind with the Library Policeman and the dark man—the one who was drivin the steamroller, and the car with Simple Simon in it. I expected to see all three of them turn onto Main Street in the dark man's old Buick, lookin for me. I got out to the railway depot and crawled under the loadin platform again. I huddled up in there, shiverin and shakin, even cryin a little, waitin for her to show up and do for me. I kept thinkin I'd look up and I'd see her face pokin under the platform's concrete skirt, her eyes all red and glaring, her mouth turnin into that horn thing.

"I crawled all the way to the back, and I found half a jug of wine under a pile of dead leaves and old spiderwebs. I'd stashed it back there God knows when and forgot all about it. I drank the wine in about three long swallows. Then I started to crawl back to the front of that space under the platform, but halfway there I passed out. When I woke up again, I thought at first that no time at all had gone by, because the light and the shadows were just about the same. Only my headache was gone, and my belly was roarin for food."

"You'd slept the clock around, hadn't you?" Naomi guessed.

"No—almost twice around. I'd made my call to the Sheriff's Office around ten o'clock on Monday mornin. When I came to under the loadin platform with that empty jug of wine still in my hand, it was just past seven on Wednesday morning. Only it wasn't sleep, not really. You have to remember that I hadn't been on an all-day drunk or even a week-long toot. I'd been roaring drunk for the best part of two years, and that wasn't all—there was Ardelia, and the Library, and the kids, and Story Hour. It was two years on a merry-go-round in hell. I think the part of my mind that still wanted to live and be sane decided the only thing to do was to pull the plug for awhile and shut down. And when I woke up, it was all over. They hadn't found the

bodies of Patsy Harrigan and Tom Gibson yet, but it was over, just the same. And I knew it even before I poked my head out from under the loadin platform. There was an empty place in me, like an empty socket in your gum after a tooth falls out. Only that empty place was in my mind. And I understood. She was gone. Ardelia was gone.

“I crawled out from under and almost fainted again from hunger. I saw Brian Kelly, who used to be freightmaster back in those days. He was countin sacks of somethin on the other loadin platform and makin marks on a clipboard. I managed to walk over to him. He saw me, and an expression of disgust came over his face. There had been a time when we’d bought each other drinks in The Domino—a roadhouse that burned down long before your time, Sam—but those days were long gone. All he saw was a dirty, filthy drunk with leaves and dirt in his hair, a drunk that stank of piss and Old Duke.

” ‘Get outta here, daddy-0, or I’ll call the cops,’ he says.

“That day was another first for me. One thing about bein a drunk—you’re always breakin new ground. That was the first time I ever begged for money. I asked him if he could spare a quarter so I could get a cuppa joe and some toast at the Route 32 Diner. He dug into his pocket and brought out some change. He didn’t hand it to me; he just tossed it in my general direction. I had to get down in the cinders and grub for it. I don’t think he threw the money to shame me. He just didn’t want to touch me. I don’t blame him, either.

“When he saw I had the money he said, ‘Get in the wind, daddy-0. And if I see you down here again, I will call the cops.’

” ‘You bet,’ I said, and went on my way. He never even knew who I was, and I’m glad.

“About halfway to the diner, I passed one of those newspaper boxes, and I seen that day’s Gazette inside. That was when I realized I’d been out of it two days instead of just one. The date didn’t mean much to me—by then I wasn’t much interested in catendars—but I knew it was Monday morning when Ardelia booted me out of her bed

for the last time and I made that call. Then I saw the headlines. I'd slept through just about the biggest day for news in Junction City's history, it seemed like. SEARCH FOR MISSING CHILDREN CONTINUES, it said on one side. There was pictures of Tom Gibson and Patsy Harrigan. The headline on the other side read COUNTY CORONER SAYS DEPUTY DIED OF HEART ATTACK. Below that one there was a picture of John Power.

"I took one of the papers and left a nickel on top of the pile, which was how it was done back in the days when people still mostly trusted each other. Then I sat down, right there on the curb, and read both stories. The one about the kids was shorter. The thing was, nobody was very worried about em just yet—Sheriff Beeman was treatin it as a runaway case.

"She'd picked the right kids, all right; those two really were brats, and birds of a feather flock together. They was always chummin around. They lived on the same block, and the story said they'd gotten in trouble the week before when Patsy Harrigan's mother caught em smokin cigarettes in the back shed. The Gibson boy had a no-account uncle with a farm in Nebraska, and Norm Beeman was pretty sure that's where they were headed—I told you he wasn't much in the brains department. But how could he know? And he was right about one thing—they weren't the kind of kids who fall down wells or get drowned swimmin in the Proverbial River. But I knew where they were, and I knew Ardelia had beaten the clock again. I knew they'd find all three of them together, and later on that day, they did. I'd saved Tansy Power, and I'd saved myself, but I couldn't find much consolation in that.

"The story about Deputy Power was longer. It was the second one, because Power had been found late Monday afternoon. His death'd been reported in Tuesday's paper, but not the cause. He'd been found slumped behind the wheel of his cruiser about a mile west of the Orday farm. That was a place I knew pretty well, because it was where I usually left the road and went into the corn on my way to Ardelia's.

“I could fill in the blanks pretty well. John Power wasn’t a man to let the grass grow under his feet, and he must have headed out to Ardelia’s house almost as soon as I hung up that pay telephone beside the Texaco station. He might have called his wife first, and told her to keep Tansy in the house until she heard from him. That wasn’t in the paper, of course, but I bet he did.

“When he got there, she must have known that I’d told on her and the game was up. So she killed him. She ... she hugged him to death, the way she did Mr. Lavin. He had a lot of hard bark on him, just like I told her, but a maple tree has hard bark on it, too, and you can still get the sap to run out of it, if you drive your plug in deep enough. I imagine she drove hers plenty deep.

“When he was dead, she must have driven him in his own cruiser out to the place where he was found. Even though that road—Carson Road—wasn’t much travelled back then, it still took a heap of guts to do that. But what else could she do? Call the Sheriff’s Office and tell em John Power’d had a heart attack while he was talkin to her? That would have started up a lot more questions at the very time when she didn’t want nobody thinkin of her at all. And, you know, even Norm Beeman would have been curious about why John Power had been in such a tearin hurry to talk to the city librarian.

“So she drove him out Garson Road almost to the Orday farm, parked his cruiser in the ditch, and then she went back to her own house the same way I always went—through the corn.”

Dave looked from Sam to Naomi and then back to Sam again.

“I’ll bet I know what she did next, too. I’ll bet she started lookin for me.

“I don’t mean she jumped in her car and started drivin around Junction City, pokin her head into all my usual holes; she didn’t have to. Time and time again over those years she would show up where I was when she wanted me, or she would send one of the kids with a folded-over note. Didn’t matter if I was sittin in a pile of boxes behind

the barber shop or fishin out at Grayling's Stream or if I was just drunk behind the freight depot, she knew where I was to be found. That was one of her talents.

"Not that last time, though—the time she wanted to find me most of all—and I think I know why. I told you that I didn't fall asleep or even black out after makin that call; it was more like goin into a coma, or being dead. And when she turned whatever eye she had in her mind outward, lookin for me, it couldn't see me. I don't know how many times that day and that night her eye might have passed right over where I lay, and I don't want to know. I only know if she'd found me, it wouldn't have been any kid with a folded-over note that showed up. It would have been her, and I can't even imagine what she would have done to me for interfering with her plans the way I did.

"She probably would have found me anyway if she'd had more time, but she didn't. Her plans were laid, that was one thing. And then there was the way her change was speedin up. Her time of sleep was comin on, and she couldn't waste time lookin for me. Besides, she must have known she'd have another chance, further up the line. And now her chance has come."

"I don't understand what you mean," Sam said.

"Of course you do," Dave replied. "Who took the books that have put you in this jam? Who sent em to the pulper, along with your newspapers? I did. Don't you think she knows that?"

"Do you think that she still wants you?" Naomi asked.

"Yes, but not the way she did. Now she only wants to kill me." His head turned and his bright, sorrowful eyes gazed into Sam's. "You're the one she wants now."

Sam laughed uneasily. "I'm sure she was a firecracker thirty years ago," he said, "but the lady has aged. She's really not my type."

“I guess you don’t understand after all,” Dave said. “She doesn’t want to fuck you, Sam; she wants to be you.”

10

After a few moments Sam said, “Wait. Just hold on a second.”

“You’ve heard me, but you haven’t taken it to heart the way you need to,” Dave told him. His voice was patient but weary; terribly weary. “So let me tell you a little more.

“After Ardelia killed John Power, she put him far enough away so she wouldn’t be the first one to fall under suspicion. Then she went ahead and opened the Library that afternoon, just like always. Part of it was because a guilty person looks more suspicious if they swerve away from their usual routines, but that wasn’t all of it. Her change was right upon her, and she had to have those children’s lives. Don’t even think about asking me why, because I don’t know. Maybe she’s like a bear that has to stuff itself before it goes into hibernation. All I can be sure of is that she had to make sure there was a Story Hour that Monday afternoon ... and she did.

“Sometime during that Story Hour, when all the kids were sittin around her in the trance she could put em into, she told Tom and Patsy that she wanted em to come to the Library on Tuesday morning, even though the Library was closed Tuesdays and Thursdays in the summer. They did, and she did for em, and then she went to sleep ... that sleep that looks so much like death. And now you come along, Sam, thirty years later. You know me, and Ardelia still owes me a settling up, so that is a start ... but there’s something a lot better than that. You also know about the Library Police.”

“I don’t know how—”

“No, you don’t know how you know, and that makes you even better. Because secrets that are so bad that we even have to hide them from ourselves ... for someone like Ardelia Lortz, those are the best

secrets of all. Plus, look at the bonuses—you're young, you're single, and you have no close friends. That's true, isn't it?"

"I would have said so until today," Sam said after a moment's thought. "I would have said the only good friends I made since I came to Junction City have moved away. But I consider you and Naomi my friends, Dave. I consider you very good friends indeed. The best."

Naomi took Sam's hand and squeezed it briefly.

"I appreciate that," Dave said, "but it doesn't matter, because she intends to do for me and Sarah as well. The more the merrier, as she told me once. She has to take lives to get through her time of change ... and waking up must be a time of change for her, too."

"You're saying that she means to possess Sam somehow, aren't you?" Naomi asked.

"I think I mean a little more than that, Sarah. I think she means to destroy whatever there is inside Sam that makes him Sam—I think she means to clean him out the way a kid cleans out a pumpkin to make a Halloween jack-o-lantern, and then she's going to put him on like you'd put on a suit of new clothes. And after that happens—if it does—he'll go on lookin like a man named Sam Peebles, but he won't be a man anymore, no more than Ardelia Lortz was ever a woman. There's somethin not human, some it hidin inside her skin, and I think I always knew that. It's inside ... but it's forever an outsider. Where did Ardelia Lortz come from? Where did she live before she came to Junction City? I think, if you checked, you'd find that everything she put on the references she showed Mr. Lavin was a lie, and that nobody in town really knew. I think it was John Power's curiosity about that very thing that sealed his fate. But I think there was a real Ardelia Lortz at one time ... in Pass Christian, Mississippi ... or Harrisburg, Pennsylvania ... or Portland, Maine ... and the it took her over and put her on. Now she wants to do it again. If we let that happen, I think that later this year, in some other town, in San Francisco, California ... or Butte, Montana ... or

Kingston, Rhode Island ... a man named Sam Peebles will show up. Most people will like him. Children in particular will like him ... although they may be afraid of him, too, in some way they don't understand and can't talk about.

“And, of course, he will be a librarian.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

BY AIR TO DES MOINES

1

Sam looked at his wristwatch and was astounded to see it was almost 3:00 P.M. Midnight was only nine hours away, and then the tall man with the silver eyes would be back. Or Ardelia Lortz would be back. Or maybe both of them together.

“What do you think I should do, Dave? Go out to the local graveyard and find Ardelia’s body and pound a stake through her heart?”

“A good trick if you could do it,” he replied, “since the lady was cremated.”

“Oh,” Sam said. He settled back into his chair with a little helpless sigh.

Naomi took his hand again. “In any case, you won’t be doing anything alone,” she said firmly. “Dave says she means to do us as well as you, but that’s almost beside the point. Friends stand by when there’s trouble. That’s the point. What else are they for?”

Sam lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Thank you—but I don’t know what you can do. Or me, either. There doesn’t seem to be anything to do. Unless ...” He looked at Dave hopefully. “Unless I ran?”

Dave shook his head. “She—or it—sees. I told you that. I guess you could drive most of the way to Denver before midnight if you really put your foot down and the cops didn’t catch you, but Ardelia Lortz would be right there to greet you when you got out of your car. Or you’d look over in some dark mile and see the Library Policeman sittin next to you on the seat.”

The thought of that—the white face and silver eyes, illuminated only by the green glow of the dashboard lights—made Sam shiver.

“What, then?”

“I think you both know what has to be done first,” Dave said. He drank the last of his iced tea and then set the glass on the porch. “Just think a minute, and you’ll see.”

Then they all looked out toward the grain elevator for awhile. Sam’s mind was a roaring confusion; all he could catch hold of were isolated snatches of Dave Duncan’s story and the voice of the Library Policeman, with his strange little lisp, saying I don’t want to hear your sick ecthcuses ... You have until midnight ... then I come again.

It was on Naomi’s face that light suddenly dawned.

“Of course!” she said. “How stupid! But ...”

She asked Dave a question, and Sam’s own eyes widened in understanding.

“There’s a place in Des Moines, as I recall,” Dave said. “Pell’s. If any place can help, it’ll be them. Why don’t you make a call, Sarah?”

2

When she was gone, Sam said: “Even if they can help, I don’t think we could get there before the close of business hours. I can try, I suppose ...”

“I never expected you’d drive,” Dave said. “No—you and Sarah have to go out to the Proverbias Airport.”

Sam blinked. “I didn’t know there was an airport in Proverbias.”

Dave smiled. “Well ... I guess that is stretchin it a little. There’s a half-mile of packed dirt Stan Soames calls a runway. Stan’s front

parlor is the office of Western Iowa Air Charter. You and Sarah talk to Stan. He's got a little Navajo. He'll take you to Des Moines and have you back by eight o'clock, nine at the latest."

"What if he's not there?"

"Then we'll try to figure out something else. I think he will be, though. The only thing Stan loves more than flyin is farm-in, and come the spring of the year, farmers don't stray far. He'll probably tell you he can't take you because of his garden, come to that—he'll say you shoulda made an appointment a few days in advance so he could get the Carter boy to come over and babysit his back ninety. If he says that, you tell him Dave Duncan sent you, and Dave says it's time to pay for the baseballs. Can you remember that?"

"Yes, but what does it mean?"

"Nothing that concerns this business," Dave said. "He'll take you, that's the important thing. And when he lands you again, never mind comin here. You and Sarah drive straight into town."

Sam felt dread begin to seep into his body. "To the Library."

"That's right."

"Dave, what Naomi said about friends is all very sweet—and maybe even true—but I think I have to take it from here. Neither one of you has to be a part of this. I was the one responsible for stirring her up again—"

Dave reached out and seized Sam's wrist in a grip of surprising strength. "If you really think that, you haven't heard a word I've said. You're not responsible for anything. I carry the deaths of John Power and two little children on my conscience—not to mention the terrors I don't know how many other children may have suffered—but I'm not responsible, either. Not really. I didn't set out to be Ardelia Lortz's companion any more than I set out to be a thirty-year drunk. Both things just happened. But she bears me a grudge, and she will be

back for me, Sam. If I'm not with you when she comes, she'll visit me first. And I won't be the only one she visits. Sarah was right, Sam. She and I don't have to stay close to protect you; the three of us have to stay close to protect each other. Sarah knows about Ardelia, don't you see? If Ardelia don't know that already, she will as soon as she shows up tonight. She plans to go on from Junction City as you, Sam. Do you think she'll leave anybody behind who knows her new identity?"

"But—"

"But nothin," Dave said. "In the end it comes down to a real simple choice, one even an old souse like me can understand: we share this together or we're gonna die at her hands."

He leaned forward.

"If you want to save Sarah from Ardelia, Sam, forget about bein a hero and start rememberin who your Library Policeman was. You have to. Because I don't believe Ardelia can take just anyone. There's only one coincidence in this business, but it's a killer: once you had a Library Policeman, too. And you have to get that memory back."

"I've tried," Sam said, and knew that was a lie. Because every time he turned his mind toward

(come with me, son ... I'm a poleethman)

that voice, it shied away. He tasted red licorice, which he had never eaten and always hated—and that was all.

"You have to try harder," Dave said, "or there's no hope."

Sam drew in a deep breath and let it out. Dave's hand touched the back of his neck, then squeezed it gently.

“It’s the key to this,” Dave said. “You may even find it’s the key to everything that has troubled you in your life. To your loneliness and your sadness.”

Sam looked at him, startled. Dave smiled.

“Oh yes,” he said. “You’re lonely, you’re sad, and you’re closed off from other people. You talk a good game, but you don’t walk what you talk. Up until today I wasn’t nothing to you but Dirty Dave who comes to get your papers once a month, but a man like me sees a lot, Sam. And it takes one to know one.”

“The key to everything,” Sam mused. He wondered if there really were such conveniences, outside of popular novels and movies-of-the-week populated with Brave Psychiatrists and Troubled Patients.

“It’s true,” Dave persisted. “Such things are dreadful in their power, Sam. I don’t blame you for not wantin to search for it. But you can, you know, if you want to. You have that choice.”

“Is that something else you learn in AA, Dave?”

He smiled. “Well, they teach it there,” he said, “but that’s one I guess I always knew.”

Naomi came out onto the porch again. She was smiling and her eyes were sparkling.

“Ain’t she some gorgeous?” Dave asked quietly.

“Yes,” Sam said. “She sure is.” He was clearly aware of two things: that he was falling in love, and that Dave Duncan knew it.

3

“The man took so long checking that I got worried,” she said, “but we’re in luck.”

“Good,” Dave said. “You two are goin out to see Stan Soames, then. Does the Library still close at eight during the school year, Sarah?”

“Yes—I’m pretty sure it does.”

“I’ll be payin a visit there around five o’clock, then. I’ll meet you in back, where the loadin platform is, between eight and nine. Nearer eight would be better—n safer. For Christ’s sake, try not to be late.”

“How will we get in?” Sam asked.

“I’ll take care of that, don’t worry. You just get goin.”

“Maybe we ought to call this guy Soames from here,” Sam said. “Make sure he’s available.”

Dave shook his head. “Won’t do no good. Stan’s wife left him for another man four years ago—claimed he was married to his work, which always makes a good excuse for a woman who’s got a yen to make a change. There aren’t any kids. He’ll be out in his field. Go on, now. Daylight’s wastin.”

Naomi bent over and kissed Dave’s cheek. “Thank you for telling us,” she said.

“I’m glad I did it. It’s made me feel ever so much better.”

Sam started to offer Dave his hand, then thought better of it. He bent over the old man and hugged him.

4

Stan Soames was a tall, rawboned man with angry eyes burning out of a gentle face, a man who already had his summer sunburn although calendar spring had not yet run its first month. Sam and Naomi found him in the field behind his house, just as Dave had told them they would. Seventy yards north of Soames’s idling, mud-splashed Rototiller, Sam could see what looked like a dirt road ... but since there was a small airplane with a tarpaulin thrown over it at

one end and a windsock fluttering from a rusty pole at the other, he assumed it was the Proverbias Airport's single runway.

"Can't do it," Soames said. "I got fifty acres to turn this week and nobody but me to do it. You should have called a couple-three days ahead."

"It's an emergency," Naomi said. "Really, Mr. Soames."

He sighed and spread his arms, as if to encompass his entire farm. "You want to know what an emergency is?" he asked. "What the government's doing to farms like this and people like me. That's a dad-ratted emergency. Look, there's a fellow over in Cedar Rapids who might—"

"We don't have time to go to Cedar Rapids," Sam said. "Dave told us you'd probably say—"

"Dave?" Stan Soames turned to him with more interest than he had heretofore shown. "Dave who?"

"Duncan. He told me to say it's time to pay for the baseballs."

Soames's brows drew down. His hands rolled themselves up into fists, and for just a moment Sam thought the man was going to slug him. Then, abruptly, he laughed and shook his head.

"After all these years, Dave Duncan pops outta the woodwork with his IOU rolled up in his hand! Goddam!"

He began walking toward the Rototiller. He turned his head to them as he did, yelling to make himself heard over the machine's enthusiastic blatting. "Walk on over to the airplane while I put this goddam thing away! Mind the boggy patch just on the edge of the runway, or it'll suck your damned shoes off!"

Soames threw the Rototiller into gear. It was hard to tell with all the noise, but Sam thought he was still laughing. "I thought that drunk

old bastard was gonna die before I could quit evens with him!”

He roared past them toward his barn, leaving Sam and Naomi looking at each other.

“What was that all about?” Naomi asked.

“I don’t know—Dave wouldn’t tell me.” He offered her his arm.
“Madam, will you walk with me?”

She took it. “Thank you, sir.”

They did their best to skirt the mucky place Stan Soames had told them about, but didn’t entirely make it. Naomi’s foot went in to the ankle, and the mud pulled her loafer off when she jerked her foot back. Sam bent down, got it, and then swept Naomi into his arms.

“Sam, no!” she cried, startled into laughter. “You’ll break your back!”

“Nope,” he said. “You’re light.”

She was ... and his head suddenly felt light, too. He carried her up the graded slope of the runway to the airplane and set her on her feet. Naomi’s eyes looked up into his with calmness and a sort of luminous clarity. Without thinking, he bent and kissed her. After a moment, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

When he looked at her again, he was slightly out of breath. Naomi was smiling.

“You can call me Sarah anytime you want to,” she said. Sam laughed and kissed her again.

5

Riding in the Navajo behind Stan Soames was like riding piggyback on a pogo stick. They bounced and jounced on uneasy tides of spring air, and Sam thought once or twice that they might cheat

Ardelia in a way not even that strange creature could have foreseen: by spreading themselves all over an Iowa cornfield.

Stan Soames didn't seem to be worried, however; he bawled out such hoary old ballads as "Sweet Sue" and "The Sidewalks of New York" at the top of his voice as the Navajo lurched toward Des Moines. Naomi was transfixed, peering out of her window at the roads and fields and houses below with her hands cupped to the sides of her face to cut the glare.

At last Sam tapped her on the shoulder. "You act like you've never flown before!" he yelled over the mosquito-drone of the engine.

She turned briefly toward him and grinned like an enraptured schoolgirl. "I haven't!" she said, and returned at once to the view.

"I'll be damned," Sam said, and then tightened his seatbelt as the plane took another of its gigantic, bucking leaps.

6

It was twenty past four when the Navajo skittered down from the sky and landed at County Airport in Des Moines. Soames taxied to the Civil Air Terminal, killed the engine, then opened the door. Sam was a little amused at the twinge of jealousy he felt as Soames put his hands on Naomi's waist to help her down.

"Thank you!" she gasped. Her cheeks were now deeply flushed and her eyes were dancing. "That was wonderful!"

Soames smiled, and suddenly he looked forty instead of sixty. "I've always liked it myself," he said, "and it beats spendin an afternoon abusin my kidneys on that Rototiller ... I have to admit that." He looked from Naomi to Sam. "Can you tell me what this big emergency is? I'll help if I can—I owe Dave a little more'n a puddle-jump from Proverbial to Des Moines and back again."

“We need to go into town,” Sam said. “To a place called Pell’s Book Shop. They’re holding a couple of books for us.”

Stan Soames looked at them, eyes wide. “Come again?”

“Pell’s—”

“I know Pell’s,” he said. “New books out front, old books in the back. Biggest Selection in the Midwest, the ads say. What I’m tryin to get straight is this: you took me away from my garden and got me to fly you all the way across the state to get a couple of books?”

“They’re very important books, Mr. Soames,” Naomi said. She touched one of his rough farmer’s hands. “Right now, they’re just about the most important things in my life ... or Sam’s.”

“Dave’s, too,” Sam said.

“If you told me what was going on,” Soames asked, “would I be apt to understand it?”

“No,” Sam said.

“No,” Naomi agreed, and smiled a little.

Soames blew a deep sigh out of his wide nostrils and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants. “Well, I guess it don’t matter that much, anyway. I’ve owed Dave this one for ten years, and there have been times when it’s weighed on my mind pretty heavy.” He brightened. “And I got to give a pretty young lady her first airplane ride. The only thing prettier than a girl after her first plane ride is a girl after her first—”

He stopped abruptly and scuffed at the tar with his shoes. Naomi looked discreetly off toward the horizon. Just then a fuel truck drove up. Soames walked over quickly and fell into deep conversation with the driver.

Sam said, “You had quite an effect on our fearless pilot.”

“Maybe I did, at that,” she said. “I feel wonderful, Sam. Isn’t that crazy?”

He stroked an errant lock of her hair back into place behind her ear. “It’s been a crazy day. The craziest day I can ever remember.”

But the inside voice spoke then—it drifted up from that deep place where great objects were still in motion—and told him that wasn’t quite true. There was one other that had been just as crazy. More crazy. The day of The Black Arrow and the red licorice.

That strange, stifled panic rose in him again, and he closed his ears to that voice.

If you want to save Sarah from Ardelia, Sam, forget about bein a hero and start rememberin who your Library Policeman was.

I don’t! I can’t! I ... I mustn’t!

You have to get that memory back.

I mustn’t! It’s not allowed!

You have to try harder or there’s no hope.

“I really have to go home now,” Sam Peebles muttered.

Naomi, who had strolled away to look at the Navajo’s wing-flaps, heard him and came back.

“Did you say something?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter.”

“You look very pale.”

“I’m very tense,” he said edgily.

Stan Soames returned. He cocked a thumb at the driver of the fuel truck. "Dawson says I can borrow his car. I'll run you into town."

"We could call a cab—" Sam began.

Naomi was shaking her head. "Time's too short for that," she said. "Thank you very much, Mr. Soames."

"Aw, hell," Soames said, and then flashed her a little-boy grin. "You go on and call me Stan. Let's go. Dawson says there's low pressure movin in from Colorado. I want to get back to Junction City before the rain starts."

7

Pell's was a big barnlike structure on the edge of the Des Moines business district—the very antithesis of the mall-bred chain bookstore. Naomi asked for Mike. She was directed to the customer-service desk, a kiosk which stood like a customs booth between the section which sold new books and the larger one which sold old books.

"My name is Naomi Higgins. I talked to you on the telephone earlier?"

"Ah, yes," Mike said. He rummaged on one of his cluttered shelves and brought out two books. One was *Best Loved Poems of the American People*; the other was *The Speaker's Companion*, edited by Kent Adelman. Sam Peebles had never been so glad to see two books in his life, and he found himself fighting an impulse to snatch them from the clerk's hands and hug them to his chest.

"*Best Loved Poems* is easy," Mike said, "but *The Speaker's Companion* is out of print. I'd guess Pell's is the only bookshop between here and Denver with a copy as nice as this one ... except for library copies, of course."

"They both look great to me," Sam said with deep feeling.

“Is it a gift?”

“Sort of.”

“I can have it gift-wrapped for you, if you like; it would only take a second.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Naomi said.

The combined price of the books was twenty-two dollars and fifty-seven cents.

“I can’t believe it,” Sam said as they left the store and walked toward the place where Stan Soames had parked the borrowed car. He held the bag tightly in one hand. “I can’t believe it’s as simple as just ... just returning the books.”

“Don’t worry,” Naomi said. “It won’t be.”

8

As they drove back to the airport, Sam asked Stan Soames if he could tell them about Dave and the baseballs.

“If it’s personal, that’s okay. I’m just curious.”

Soames glanced at the bag Sam held in his lap. “I’m sorta curious about those, too,” he said. “I’ll make you a deal. The thing with the baseballs happened ten years ago. I’ll tell you about that if you’ll tell me about the books ten years from now.”

“Deal,” Naomi said from the back seat, and then added what Sam himself had been thinking. “If we’re all still around, of course.”

Soames laughed. “Yeah ... I suppose there’s always that possibility, isn’t there?”

Sam nodded. “Lousy things sometimes happen.”

“They sure do. One of em happened to my only boy in 1980. The doctors called it leukemia, but it’s really just what you said—one of those lousy things that sometimes happens.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Naomi said.

“Thanks. Every now and then I start to think I’m over it, and then it gets on my blind side and hits me again. I guess some things take a long time to shake out, and some things don’t ever shake out.”

Some things don’t ever shake out.

Come with me, son ... I’m a poleethman.

I really have to go home now ... is my fine paid?

Sam touched the comer of his mouth with a trembling hand.

“Well, hell, I’d known Dave a long time before it ever happened,” Stan Soames said. They passed a sign which read AIRPORT 3 MI. “We grew up together, went to school together, sowed a mess of wild oats together. The only thing was, I reaped my crop and quit. Dave just went on sowin.”

Soames shook his head.

“Drunk or sober, he was one of the sweetest fellows I ever met. But it got so he was drunk more’n he was sober, and we kinda fell out of touch. It seemed like the worst time for him was in the late fifties. During those years he was drunk all the time. After that he started goin to AA, and he seemed to get a little better ... but he’d always fall off the wagon with a crash.

“I got married in ‘68, and I wanted to ask him to be my best man, but I didn’t dare. As it happened, he turned up sober—that time—but you couldn’t trust him to turn up sober.”

“I know what you mean,” Naomi said quietly.

Stan Soames laughed. “Well, I sort of doubt that—a little sweetie like you wouldn’t know what miseries a dedicated boozehound can get himself into—but take it from me. If I’d asked Dave to stand up for me at the weddin, Laura—that’s my ex—would have shit bricks. But Dave did come, and I saw him a little more frequently after our boy Joe was born in 1970. Dave seemed to have a special feeling for all kids during those years when he was tryin to pull himself out of the bottle.

“The thing Joey loved most was baseball. He was nuts for it—he collected sticker books, chewing-gum cards ... he even pestered me to get a satellite dish so we could watch all the Royals games—the Royals were his favorites—and the Cubs, too, on WGN from Chicago. By the time he was eight, he knew the averages of all the Royals starting players, and the won-lost records of damn near every pitcher in the American League. Dave and I took him to games three or four times. It was a lot like takin a kid on a guided tour of heaven. Dave took him alone twice, when I had to work. Laura had a cow about that—said he’d show up drunk as a skunk, with the boy left behind, wandering the streets of K.C. or sittin in a police station somewhere, waitin for someone to come and get him. But nothing like that ever happened. So far as I know, Dave never took a drink when he was around Joey.

“When Joe got the leukemia, the worst part for him was the doctors tellin him he wouldn’t be able to go to any games that year at least until June and maybe not at all. He was more depressed about that than he was about having cancer. When Dave came to see him, Joe cried about it. Dave hugged him and said, ‘If you can’t go to the games, Joey, that’s okay; I’ll bring the Royals to you.’

“Joe stared up at him and says, ‘You mean in person, Uncle Dave?’ That’s what he called him—Uncle Dave.

“‘I can’t do that,’ Dave said, ‘but I can do somethin almost as good.’ “

Soames drove up to the Civil Air Terminal gate and blew the horn. The gate rumbled back on its track and he drove out to where the

Navajo was parked. He turned off the engine and just sat behind the wheel for a moment, looking down at his hands.

“I always knew Dave was a talented bastard,” he said finally. “What I don’t know is how he did what he did so damned fast. All I can figure is that he must have worked days and nights both, because he was done in ten days—and those suckers were good.

“He knew he had to go fast, though. The doctors had told me and Laura the truth, you see, and I’d told Dave. Joe didn’t have much chance of pulling through. They’d caught onto what was wrong with him too late. It was roaring in his blood like a grassfire.

“About ten days after Dave made that promise, he comes into my son’s hospital room with a paper shopping-bag in each arm. ‘What you got there, Uncle Dave?’ Joe asks, sitting up in bed. He had been pretty low all that day—mostly because he was losin his hair, I think; in those days if a kid didn’t have hair most of the way down his back, he was considered to be pretty low-class-but when Dave came in, he brightened right up.

” ‘The Royals, a course,’ Dave says back. ‘Didn’t I tell you?’

“Then he put those two shopping-bags down on the bed and spilled em out. And you never, ever, in your whole life, saw such an expression on a little boy’s face. It lit up like a Christmas tree ... and ... and shit, I dunno ...”

Stan Soames’s voice had been growing steadily thicker. Now he leaned forward against the steering wheel of Dawson’s Buick so hard that the horn honked. He pulled a large bandanna from his back pocket, wiped his eyes with it, then blew his nose.

Naomi had also leaned forward. She pressed one of her hands against Soames’s cheek. “If this is too hard for you, Mr. Soames—”

“No,” he said, and smiled a little. Sam watched as a tear Stan Soames had missed ran its sparkling, unnoticed course down his

cheek in the late-afternoon sun. “It’s just that it brings him back so. How he was. That hurts, miss, but it feels good, too. Those two feelings are all wrapped up together.”

“I understand,” she said.

“When Dave tipped over those bags, what spilled out was baseballs—over two dozen of them. But they weren’t just baseballs, because there was a face painted on every one, and each one was the face of a player on the 1980 Kansas City Royals baseball team. They weren’t those whatdoyoucallums, caricatures, either. They were as good as the faces Norman Rockwell used to paint for the covers of the Saturday Evening Post. I’ve seen Dave’s work—the work he did before he got drinkin real heavy—and it was good, but none of it was as good as this. There was Willie Aikens and Frank White and U. L. Washington and George Brett ... Willie Wilson and Amos Otis ... Dan Quisenberry, lookin as fierce as a gunslinger in an old Western movie ... Paul Splittorff and Ken Brett ... I can’t remember all the names, but it was the whole damned roster, including Jim Frey, the field manager.

“And sometime between when he finished em and when he gave em to my son, he took em to K.C. and got all the players but one to sign em. The one who didn’t was Darrell Porter, the catcher. He was out with the flu, and he promised to sign the ball with his face on it as soon as he could. He did, too.”

“Wow,” Sam said softly.

“And it was all Dave’s doing—the man I hear people in town laugh about and call Dirty Dave. I tell you, sometimes when I hear people say that and I remember what he did for Joe when Joey was dying of the leukemia, I could—”

Soames didn’t finish, but his hands curled themselves into fists on his broad thighs. And Sam—who had used the name himself until today, and laughed with Craig Jones and Frank Stephens over the

old drunk with his shopping-cart full of newspapers—felt a dull and shameful heat mount into his cheeks.

“That was a wonderful thing to do, wasn’t it?” Naomi asked, and touched Stan Soames’s cheek again. She was crying.

“You shoulda seen his face,” Soames said dreamily. “You wouldn’t have believed how he looked, sittin up in his bed and lookin down at all those faces with their K.C. baseball caps on their round heads. I can’t describe it, but I’ll never forget it.

“You shoulda seen his face.

“Joe got pretty sick before the end, but he didn’t ever get too sick to watch the Royals on TV—or listen to em on the radio—and he kept those balls all over his room. The windowsill by his bed was the special place of honor, though. That’s where he’d line up the nine men who were playin in the game he was watchin or listenin to on the radio. If Frey took out the pitcher, Joe would take that one down from the windowsill and put up the relief pitcher in his place. And when each man batted, Joe would hold that ball in his hands. So—”

Stan Soames broke off abruptly and hid his face in his bandanna. His chest hitched twice, and Sam could see his throat locked against a sob. Then he wiped his eyes again and stuffed the bandanna briskly into his back pocket.

“So now you know why I took you two to Des Moines today, and why I would have taken you to New York to pick up those two books if that’s where you’d needed to go. It wasn’t my treat; it was Dave’s. He’s a special sort of man.”

“I think maybe you are, too,” Sam said.

Soames gave him a smile—a strange, crooked smile—and opened the door of Dawson’s Buick. “Well, thank you,” he said. “Thank you kindly. And now I think we ought to be rolling along if we want to beat the rain. Don’t forget your books, Miss Higgins.”

“I won’t,” Naomi said as she got out with the top of the bag wrapped tightly in one hand. “Believe me, I won’t.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN (II)

1

Twenty minutes after they took off from Des Moines, Naomi tore herself away from the view—she had been tracing Route 79 and marvelling at the toy cars bustling back and forth along it—and turned to Sam. What she saw frightened her. He had fallen asleep with his head resting against one of the windows, but there was no peace on his face; he looked like a man suffering some deep and private pain.

Tears trickled slowly from beneath his closed lids and ran down his face.

She leaned forward to shake him awake and heard him say in a trembling little-boy's voice: "Am I in trouble, sir?"

The Navajo arrowed its way into the clouds now massing over western Iowa and began to buck, but Naomi barely noticed. Her hand paused just above Sam's shoulder for a moment, then withdrew.

Who was YOUR Library Policeman, Sam?

Whoever it was, Naomi thought, he's found him again, I think. I think he's with him now. I'm sorry, Sam ... but I can't wake you. Not now. Right now I think you're where you're supposed to be ... where you have to be. I'm sorry, but dream on. And remember what you dreamed when you wake up. Remember.

Remember.

2

In his dream, Sam Peebles watched as Little Red Riding Hood set off from a gingerbread house with a covered basket over one arm; she was bound for Gramma's house, where the wolf was waiting to eat her from the feet up. It would finish by scalping her and then eating her brains out of her skull with a long wooden spoon.

Except none of that was right, because Little Red Riding Hood was a boy in this dream and the gingerbread house was the two-story duplex in St. Louis where he had lived with his mother after Dad died and there was no food in the covered basket. There was a book in the basket, *The Black Arrow* by Robert Louis Stevenson, and he had read it, every word, and he was not bound for Gramma's house but for the Briggs Avenue Branch of the St. Louis Public Library, and he had to hurry because his book was already four days overdue.

This was a watching dream.

He watched as Little White Walking Sam waited at the corner of Dunbar Street and Johnstown Avenue for the light to change. He watched as he scampered across the street with the book in his hand ... the basket was gone now. He watched as Little White Walking Sam went into the Dunbar Street News and then he was inside, too, smelling the old mingled smells of camphor, candy, and pipe tobacco, watching as Little White Walking Sam approached the counter with a nickel package of Bull's Eye red licorice—his favorite. He watched as the little boy carefully removed the dollar bill his mother had tucked into the card-pocket in the back of *The Black Arrow*. He watched as the clerk took the dollar and returned ninety-five cents ... more than enough to pay the fine. He watched as Little White Walking Sam left the store and paused on the street outside long enough to put the change in his pocket and tear open the package of licorice with his teeth. He watched as Little White Walking Sam went on his way—only three blocks to the Library now—munching the long red whips of candy as he went.

He tried to scream at the boy.

Beware! Beware! The wolf is waiting, little boy! Beware the wolf!
Beware the wolf!

But the boy walked on, eating his red licorice; now he was on Briggs Avenue and the Library, a great pile of red brick, loomed ahead.

At this point Sam—Big White Plane-Riding Sam—tried to pull himself out of the dream. He sensed that Naomi and Stan Soames and the world of real things were just outside this hellish egg of nightmare in which he found himself. He could hear the drone of the Navajo's engine behind the sounds of the dream: the traffic on Briggs Avenue, the brisk brrrinng!-brrrinng! of some kid's bike-bell, the birds squabbling in the rich leaves of the midsummer elms. He closed his dreaming eyes and yearned toward that world outside the shell, the world of real things. And more: he sensed he could reach it, that he could hammer through the shell—

No, Dave said. No, Sam, don't do that. You mustn't do that. If you want to save Sarah from Ardelia, forget about breaking out of this dream. There's only one coincidence in this business, but it's a killer: once you had a Library Policeman, too. And you have to get that memory back.

I don't want to see. I don't want to know. Once was bad enough.

Nothing is as bad as what's waiting for you, Sam. Nothing.

He opened his eyes—not his outer eyes but the inside ones; the dreaming eyes.

Now Little White Walking Sam is on the concrete path which approaches the east side of the Public Library, the concrete path which leads to the Children's Wing. He moves in a kind of portentous slow motion, each step the soft swish of a pendulum in the glass throat of a grandfather clock, and everything is clear: the tiny sparks of mica and quartz gleaming in the concrete walk; the cheerful roses which border the concrete walk; the thick drift of green bushes along the side of the building; the climbing ivy on the red brick wall; the

strange and somehow frightening Latin motto, *Fuimus, non sumus*, carved in a brief semicircle over the green doors with their thick panes of wire-reinforced glass.

And the Library Policeman standing by the steps is clear, too.

He is not pale. He is flushed. There are pimples on his forehead, red and flaring. He is not tall but of medium height with extremely broad shoulders. He is wearing not a trenchcoat but an overcoat, and that's very odd because this is a summer day, a hot St. Louis summer day. His eyes might be silver; Little White Walking Sam cannot see what color they are, because the Library Policeman is wearing little round black glasses—blind man's glasses.

He's not a Library Policeman! He's the wolf! Beware! He's the wolf!
The Library WOLF!

But Little White Walking Sam doesn't hear. Little White Walking Sam isn't afraid. It is, after all, bright daylight, and the city is full of strange—and sometimes amusing—people. He has lived all his life in St. Louis, and he's not afraid of it. That is about to change.

He approaches the man, and as he draws closer he notices the scar: a tiny white thread which starts high on the left cheek, dips beneath the left eye, and peters out on the bridge of the nose.

Hello there, son, the man in the round black glasses says.

Hello, says Little White Walking Sam.

Do you mind telling me thomething about the book you have before you go inthide? the man asks. His voice is soft and polite, not a bit threatening. A faint lisp clips lightly along the top of his speech, turning some of his s-sounds into diphthongs. I work for the Library, you thee.

It's called *The Black Arrow*, Little White Walking Sam says politely, and it's by Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson. He's dead. He died of

toober-clue-rosis. It was very good. There were some great battles.

The boy waits for the man in the little round black glasses to step aside and let him go in, but the man in the little round black glasses does not stand aside. The man only bends down to look at him more closely. Grandpa, what little round black eyes you have.

One other quethion, the man says. Is your book overdue?

Now Little White Walking Sam is more afraid.

Yes ... but only a little. Only four days. It was very long, you see, and I have Little League, and day camp, and—

Come with me, son... I'm a poleethman.

The man in the black glasses and the overcoat extends a hand. For a moment Sam almost runs. But he is a kid; this man is an adult. This man works for the Library. This man is a policeman. Suddenly this man—this scary man with his scar and his round black glasses—is all Authority. One cannot run from Authority; it is everywhere.

Sam timidly approaches the man. He begins to lift his hand—the one holding the package of red licorice, which is now almost empty—and then tries to pull it back at the last second. He is too late. The man seizes it. The package of Bull's Eye licorice falls to the walk. Little White Walking Sam will never eat red licorice again.

The man pulls Sam toward him, reels him in the way a fisherman would reel in a trout. The hand clamped over Sam's is very strong. It hurts. Sam begins to cry. The sun is still out, the grass is still green, but suddenly the whole world seems distant, no more than a cruel mirage in which he was for a little while allowed to believe.

He can smell Sen-Sen on the man's breath. Am I in trouble, sir? he asks, hoping with every fiber of his being that the man will say no.

Yes, the man says. Yes, you are. In a Lot of trouble. And if you want to get out of trouble, son, you have to do ecthactly as I thay. Do you underthand?

Sam cannot reply. He has never been so afraid. He can only look up at the man with wide, streaming eyes.

The man shakes him. Do you underthand or not?

Ye—yes! Sam gasps. He feels an almost irresistible heaviness in his bladder.

Let me tell you exthactly who I am, the man says, breathing little puffs of Sen-Sen into Sam's face. I am the Briggth Avenue Library Cop, and I am in charge of punishing boyth and girlth who bring their books back late.

Little White Walking Sam begins to cry harder. I've got the money! he manages through his sobs. I've got ninety-five cents! You can have it! You can have it all!

He tries to pull the change out of his pocket. At the same moment the Library Cop looks around and his broad face suddenly seems sharp, suddenly the face of a fox or wolf who has successfully broken into the chicken house but now smells danger.

Come on, he says, and jerks Little White Walking Sam off the path and into the thick bushes which grow along the side of the library. When the poleethman tellth you to come, you COME! It is dark in here; dark and mysterious. The air smells of pungent juniper berries. The ground is dark with mulch. Sam is crying very loudly now.

Thut up! the Library Policeman grunts, and gives Sam a hard shake. The bones in Sam's hand grind together painfully. His head wobbles on his neck. They have reached a little clearing in the jungle of bushes now, a cove where the junipers have been smashed flat and the ferns broken off, and Sam understands that this is more than a place the Library Cop knows; it is a place he has made.

Thut up, or the fine will only be the beginning! I'll have to call your mother and tell her what a bad boy you've been! Do you want that?

No! Sam weeps. I'll pay the fine! I'll pay it, mister, but please don't hurt me!

The Library Policeman spins Little White Walking Sam around.

Put your hands up on the wall! Thread your feet! Now! Quick!

Still sobbing, but terrified that his mother may find out he has done something bad enough to merit this sort of treatment, Little White Walking Sam does as the Library Cop tells him. The red bricks are cool, cool in the shade of the bushes which lie against this side of the building in a tangled, untidy heap. He sees a narrow window at ground level. It looks down into the Library's boiler room. Bare bulbs shaded with rounds of tin like Chinese coolie hats hang over the giant boiler; the duct-pipes throw weird octopus-tangles of shadow. He sees a janitor standing at the far wall, his back to the window, reading dials and making notes on a clipboard.

The Library Cop seizes Sam's pants and pulls them down. His underpants come with them. He jerks as the cool air strikes his bum.

Thdeady, the Library Policeman pants. Don't move. Once you pay the fine, son, it's over ... and no one needth to know.

Something heavy and hot presses itself against his bottom. Little White Walking Sam jerks again.

Thdeady, the Library Policeman says. He is panting harder now; Sam feels hot blurts of breath on his left shoulder and smells Sen-Sen. He is lost in terror now, but terror isn't all that he feels: there is shame, as well. He has been dragged into the shadows, is being forced to submit to this grotesque, unknown punishment, because he has been late returning The Black Arrow. If he had only known that fines could run this high—!

The heavy thing jabs into his bottom, thrusting his buttocks apart. A horrible, tearing pain laces upward from Little White Walking Sam's vitals. There has never been pain like this, never in the world.

He drops The Black Arrow and shoves his wrist sideways into his mouth, gagging his own cries.

Thdeady, the Library Wolf pants, and now his hands descend on Sam's shoulders and he is rocking back and forth, in and out, back and forth, in and out. Thdeady ... thdeaady ... oooh!
Thdeeeaaaaaaddyyyy—

Gasping and rocking, the Library Cop pounds what feels like a huge hot bar of steel in and out of Sam's bum; Sam stares with wide eyes into the Library basement, which is in another universe, an orderly universe where gruesome things like this don't ever happen. He watches the janitor nod, tuck his clipboard under his arm, and walk toward the door at the far end of the room. If the janitor turned his head just a little and raised his eyes slightly, he would see a face peering in the window at him, the pallid, wide-eyed face of a little boy with red licorice on his lips. Part of Sam wants the janitor to do just that—to rescue him the way the woodcutter rescued Little Red Riding Hood—but most of him knows the janitor would only turn away, disgusted, at the sight of another bad little boy submitting to his just punishment at the hands of the Briggs Avenue Library Cop.

Thdeadeeeeeeeeeeee! the Library Wolf whisper-screams as the janitor goes out the door and into the rest of his orderly universe without looking around. The Wolf thrusts even further forward and for one agonized second the pain becomes so bad Little White Walking Sam is sure his belly will explode, that whatever it is the Library Cop has stuck up his bottom will simply come raving out the front of him, pushing his guts ahead of it.

The Library Cop collapses against him in a smear of rancid sweat, panting harshly, and Sam slips to his knees under his weight. As he does, the massive object—no longer quite so massive—pulls out of him, but Sam can feel wetness all over his bottom. He is afraid to put

his hands back there. He is afraid that when they come back he will discover he has become Little Red Bleeding Sam.

The Library Cop suddenly grasps Sam's arm and pulls him around to face him. His face is redder than ever, flushed in puffy, hectic bands like warpaint across his cheeks and forehead.

Look at you! the Library Cop says. His face pulls together in a knot of contempt and disgust. Look at you with your panth down and your little dingle out! You liked it, didn't you? You LIKED it!

Sam cannot reply. He can only weep. He pulls his underwear and his pants up together, as they were pulled down. He can feel mulch inside them, prickling his violated bottom, but he doesn't care. He squirms backward from the Library Cop until his back is to the Library's red brick wall. He can feel tough branches of ivy, like the bones of a large, fleshless hand, poking into his back. He doesn't care about this, either. All he cares about is the shame and terror and the sense of worthlessness that now abide in him, and of these three the shame is the greatest. The shame is beyond comprehension.

Dirty boy! the Library Cop spits at him. Dirty little boy!

I really have to go home now, Little White Walking Sam says, and the words come out minced into segments by his hoarse sobs: Is my fine paid?

The Library Cop crawls toward Sam on his hands and knees, his little round black eyes peering into Sam's face like the blind eyes of a mole, and this is somehow the final grotesquerie. Sam thinks, He is going to punish me again, and at this idea something in his mind, some overstressed strut or armature, gives way with a soggy snap he can almost hear. He does not cry or protest; he is now past that. He only looks at the Library Cop with silent apathy.

No, the Library Cop says. I'm letting you go, thatth all. I'm taking pity on you, but if you ever tell anyone ... ever ... I'll come back and do it

again. I'll do it until the fine is paid. And don't you ever let me catch you around here again, son. Do you understand?

Yes, Sam says. Of course he will come back and do it again if Sam tells. He will be in the closet late at night; under the bed; perched in a tree like some gigantic, misshapen crow. When Sam looks up into a troubled sky, he will see the Library Policeman's twisted, contemptuous face in the clouds. He will be anywhere; he will be everywhere.

This thought makes Sam tired, and he closes his eyes against that lunatic mole-face, against everything.

The Library Cop grabs him, shakes him again. Yeth, what? he hisses. Yeth what, son?

Yes, I understand, Sam tells him without opening his eyes.

The Library Policeman withdraws his hand. Good, he says. You better not forget. When bad boys and girls forget, I kill them.

Little White Walking Sam sits against the wall with his eyes closed for a long time, waiting for the Library Cop to begin punishing him again, or to simply kill him. He wants to cry, but there are no tears. It will be years before he cries again, over anything. At last he opens his eyes and sees he is alone in the Library Cop's den in the bushes. The Library Cop is gone. There is only Sam, and his copy of The Black Arrow, lying open on its spine.

Sam begins to crawl toward daylight on his hands and knees. Leaves tickle his sweaty, tear-streaked face, branches scrape his back and spank against his hurt bottom. He takes The Black Arrow with him, but he will not bring it into the Library. He will never go into the Library, any library, ever again: this is the promise he makes to himself as he crawls away from the place of his punishment. He makes another promise, as well: nobody will ever find out about this terrible thing, because he intends to forget it ever happened. He

senses he can do this. He can do it if he tries very, very hard, and he intends to start trying very, very hard right now.

When he reaches the edge of the bushes, he looks out like a small hunted animal. He sees kids crossing the lawn. He doesn't see the Library Cop, but of course this doesn't matter; the Library Cop sees him. From today on, the Library Cop will always be close.

At last the lawn is empty. A small, dishevelled boy, Little White Crawling Sam, wriggles out of the bushes with leaves in his hair and dirt on his face. His untucked shirt billows behind him. His eyes are wide and staring and no longer completely sane. He sidles over to the concrete steps, casts one cringing, terrified look up at the cryptic Latin motto inscribed over the door, and then lays his book down on one of the steps with all the care and terror of an orphan girl leaving her nameless child on some stranger's doorstep. Then Little White Walking Sam becomes Little White Running Sam: he runs across the lawn, he sets the Briggs Avenue Branch of the St. Louis Public Library to his back and runs, but it doesn't matter how fast he runs because he can't outrun the taste of red licorice on his tongue and down his throat, sweet and sugar-slimy, and no matter how fast he runs the Library Wolf of course runs with him, the Library Wolf is just behind his shoulder where he cannot see, and the Library Wolf is whispering Come with me, son ... I'm a poleethman, and he will always whisper that, through all the years he will whisper that, in those dark dreams Sam dares not remember he will whisper that, Sam will always run from that voice screaming Is it paid yet? Is the fine paid yet? Oh dear God please, is MY FINE PAID YET? And the answer which comes back is always the same: It will never be paid, son; it will never be paid.

Never.

Nev—

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE LIBRARY (III)

1

The final approach to the dirt runway which Stan called the Proverbial Airport was bumpy and scary. The Navajo came down, feeling its way through stacks of angry air, and landed with a final jarring thump. When it did, Sam uttered a pinched scream. His eyes flew open.

Naomi had been waiting patiently for something like this. She leaned forward at once, ignoring the seatbelt which cut into her middle, and put her arms around him. She ignored his raised arms and first instinctive drawing away, just as she ignored the first hot and unpleasant outrush of horrified breath. She had comforted a great many drunks in the grip of the d.t.'s; this wasn't much different. She could feel his heart as she pressed against him. It seemed to leap and skitter just below his shirt.

"It's okay. Sam, it's okay—it's just me, and you're back. It was a dream. You're back."

For a moment he continued trying to push himself into his seat. Then he collapsed, limp. His hands came up and hugged her with panicky tightness.

"Naomi," he said in a harsh, choked voice. "Naomi, oh Naomi, oh dear Jesus, what a nightmare I had, what a terrible dream."

Stan had radioed ahead, and someone had come out to turn on the runway landing lights. They were taxiing between them toward the end of the runway now. They had not beaten the rain after all; it drummed hollowly on the body of the plane. Up front, Stan Soames was bellowing out something which might have been "Camptown Races."

“Was it a nightmare?” Naomi asked, drawing back from Sam so she could look into his bloodshot eyes.

“Yes. But it was also true. All true.”

“Was it the Library Policeman, Sam? Your Library Policeman?”

“Yes,” he whispered, and pressed his face into her hair.

“Do you know who he is? Do you know who he is now, Sam?”

After a long, long moment, Sam whispered: “I know.”

2

Stan Soames took a look at Sam’s face as he and Naomi stepped from the plane and was instantly contrite. “Sorry it was so rough. I really thought we’d beat the rain. It’s just that with a headwind—”

“I’ll be okay,” Sam said. He was, in fact, looking better already.

“Yes,” Naomi said. “He’ll be fine. Thank you, Stan. Thank you so much. And Dave thanks you, too.”

“Well, as long as you got what you needed—”

“We did,” Sam assured him. “We really did.”

“Let’s walk around the end of the runway,” Stan told them. “That boggy place’d suck you right in to your waist if you tried the shortcut this evening. Come on into the house. We’ll have coffee. There’s some apple pie, too, I think.”

Sam glanced at his watch. It was quarter past seven.

“We’ll have to take a raincheck, Stan,” he said. “Naomi and I have to get these books into town right away.”

“You ought to at least come in and dry off. You’re gonna be soaked by the time you get to your car.”

Naomi shook her head. “It’s very important.”

“Yeah,” Stan said. “From the look of you two, I’d say it is. Just remember that you promised to tell me the story.”

“We will, too,” Sam said. He glanced at Naomi and saw his own thought reflected in her eyes: If we’re still alive to tell it.

3

Sam drove, resisting an urge to tromp the gas pedal all the way to the floor. He was worried about Dave. Driving off the road and turning Naomi’s car over in the ditch wasn’t a very effective way of showing concern, however, and the rain in which they had landed was now a downpour driven by a freshening wind. The wipers could not keep up with it, even on high, and the headlights petered out after twenty feet. Sam dared drive no more than twenty-five. He glanced at his watch, then looked over at where Naomi sat, with the bookshop bag in her lap.

“I hope we can make it by eight,” he said, “but I don’t know.”

“Just do the best you can, Sam.”

Headlights, wavery as the lights of an undersea diving bell, loomed ahead. Sam slowed to ten miles an hour and squeezed left as a ten-wheeler rumbled by—a half-glimpsed hulk in the rainy darkness.

“Can you talk about it? The dream you had?”

“I could, but I’m not going to,” he said. “Not now. It’s the wrong time.”

Naomi considered this, then nodded her head. “All right.”

“I can tell you this much—Dave was right when he said children made the best meal, and he was right when he said that what she

really lives on is fear.”

They had reached the outskirts of town. A block further on, they drove through their first light-controlled intersection. Through the Datsun’s windshield, the signal was only a bright-green smear dancing in the air above them. A corresponding smear danced across the smooth wet hide of the pavement.

“I need to make one stop before we get to the Library,” Sam said. “The Piggly Wiggly’s on the way, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but if we’re going to meet Dave behind the Library at eight, we really don’t have much time to spare. Like it or not, this is go-slow weather.”

“I know—but this won’t take long.”

“What do you need?”

“I’m not sure,” he said, “but I think I’ll know it when I see it.”

She glanced at him, and for the second time he found himself amazed by the foxlike, fragile quality of her beauty, and unable to understand why he had never seen it before today.

Well, you dated her, didn’t you? You must have seen SOMETHING.

Except he hadn’t. He had dated her because she was pretty, presentable, unattached, and approximately his own age. He had dated her because bachelors in cities which were really just overgrown small towns were supposed to date ... if they were bachelors interested in making a place for themselves in the local business community, that was. If you didn’t date, people ... some people ... might think you were

(a poleethman)

a little bit funny.

I WAS a little funny, he thought. On second thought, I was a toT funny. But whatever I was, I think I'm a little different now. And I am seeing her. There's that. I'm really SEEING her.

For Naomi's part, she was struck by the strained whiteness of his face and the look of tension around his eyes and mouth. He looked strange ... but he no longer looked terrified. Naomi thought: He looks like a man who has been granted the opportunity to return to his worst nightmare ... with some powerful weapon in his hands.

She thought it was a face she might be falling in love with, and this made her deeply uneasy.

"This stop ... it's important, isn't it?"

"I think so, yes."

Five minutes later he stopped in the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly store. Sam was out at once and dashing for the door through the rain.

Halfway there, he stopped. A telephone booth stood at the side of the parking lot—the same booth, undoubtedly, where Dave had made his call to the Junction City Sheriff's Office all those years before. The call made from that booth had not killed Ardelia ... but it had driven her off for a good long while.

Sam stepped into it. The light went on. There was nothing to see; it was just a phone booth with numbers and graffiti scribbled on the steel walls. The telephone book was gone, and Sam remembered Dave saying, This was back in the days when you could sometimes still find a telephone book in a telephone booth, if you were lucky.

Then he glanced at the floor, and saw what he had been looking for. It was a wrapper. He picked it up, smoothed it out, and read what was written there in the dingy overhead light: Bull's Eye Red Licorice.

From behind him, Naomi beat an impatient tattoo on the Datsun's horn. Sam left the booth with the wrapper in his hand, waved to her, and ran into the store through the pouring rain.

4

The Piggly Wiggly clerk looked like a young man who had been cryogenically frozen in 1969 and thawed out just that week. His eyes had the red and slightly glazed look of the veteran dope-smoker. His hair was long and held with a raw-hide Jesus thong. On one pinky he wore a silver ring beaten into the shape of the peace sign. Beneath his Piggly Wiggly tunic was a billowy shirt in an extravagant flower-print. Pinned to the collar was a button which read MY FACE IS LEAVING IN 5 MINUTES

BE ON IT!

Sam doubted if this was a sentiment of which the store manager would have approved ... but it was a rainy night, and the store manager was nowhere in sight. Sam was the only customer in the place, and the clerk watched him with a bemused and uninvolved eye as he went to the candy rack and began to pick up packages of Bull's Eye Red Licorice. Sam took the entire stock—about twenty packages.

“You sure you got enough, dude?” the clerk asked him as Sam approached the counter and laid his trove upon it. “I think there might be another carton or two of the stuff out back in the storeroom. I know how it is when you get a serious case of the munchies.”

“This should do. Ring it up, would you? I'm in a hurry.”

“Yeah, it's a hurry-ass world,” the clerk said. His fingers tripped over the keys of the NCR register with the dreamy slowness of the habitually stoned.

There was a rubber band lying on the counter beside a baseball-card display. Sam picked it up. “Could I have this?”

“Be my guest, dude—consider it a gift from me, the Prince of Piggly Wiggly, to you, the Lord of Licorice, on a rainy Monday evening.”

As Sam slipped the rubber band over his wrist (it hung there like a loose bracelet), a gust of wind strong enough to rattle the windows shook the building. The lights overhead flickered.

“Whoa, dude,” the Prince of Piggly Wiggly said, looking up. “That wasn’t in the forecast. Just showers, they said.” He looked back down at the register. “Fifteen forty-one.”

Sam handed him a twenty with a small, bitter smile. “This stuff was a hell of a lot cheaper when I was a kid.”

“Inflation sucks the big one, all right,” the clerk agreed. He was slowly returning to that soft spot in the ozone where he had been when Sam came in. “You must really like that stuff, man. Me, I stick to good old Mars Bars.”

“Like it?” Sam laughed as he pocketed his change. “I hate it. This is for someone else.” He laughed again. “Call it a present.”

The clerk saw something in Sam’s eyes then, and suddenly took a big, hurried step away from him, almost knocking over a display of Skoal Bandits.

Sam looked at the clerk’s face curiously and decided not to ask for a bag. He gathered up the packages, distributed them at random in the pockets of the sport-coat he had put on a thousand years ago, and left the store. Cellophane crackled busily in his pockets with every stride he took.

5

Naomi had slipped behind the wheel, and she drove the rest of the way to the Library. As she pulled out of the Piggly Wiggly’s lot, Sam took the two books from the Pell’s bag and looked at them ruefully for a moment. All this trouble, he thought. All this trouble over an

outdated book of poems and a self help manual for fledgling public speakers. Except, of course, that wasn't what it was about. It had never been about the books at all.

He stripped the rubber band from his wrist and put it around the books. Then he took out his wallet, removed a five-dollar bill from his dwindling supply of ready cash, and slipped it beneath the elastic.

“What’s that for?”

“The fine. What I owe on these two, and one other from a long time ago—The Black Arrow, by Robert Louis Stevenson. This ends it.”

He put the books on the console between the two bucket seats and took a package of red licorice out of his pocket. He tore it open and that old, sugary smell struck him at once, with the force of a hard slap. From his nose it seemed to go directly into his head, and from his head it plummeted into his stomach, which immediately cramped into a slick, hard fist. For one awful moment he thought he was going to vomit in his own lap. Apparently some things never changed.

Nonetheless, he continued opening packages of red licorice, making a bundle of limber, waxy-textured candy whips. Naomi slowed as the light at the next intersection turned red, then stopped, although Sam could not see another car moving in either direction. Rain and wind lashed at her little car. They were now only four blocks from the Library. “Sam, what on earth are you doing?”

And because he didn't really know what on earth he was doing, he said: “If fear is Ardelia's meat, Naomi, we have to find the other thing—the thing that's the opposite of fear. Because that, whatever it is, will be her poison. So ... what do you think that thing might be?”

“Well, I doubt if it's red licorice.”

He gestured impatiently. “How can you be so sure? Crosses are supposed to kill vampires—the blood-sucking kind—but a cross is only two sticks of wood or metal set at right angles to each other.

Maybe a head of lettuce would work just as well ... if it was turned on.”

The light turned green. “If it was an energized head of lettuce,” Naomi said thoughtfully, driving on.

“Right!” Sam held up half a dozen long red whips. “All I know is that this is what I have. Maybe it’s ludicrous. Probably is. But I don’t care. It’s a by-God symbol of all the things my Library Policeman took away from me—the love, the friendship, the sense of belonging. I’ve felt like an outsider all my life, Naomi, and never knew why. Now I do. This is just another of the things he took away. I used to love this stuff. Now I can barely stand the smell of it. That’s okay; I can deal with that. But I have to know how to turn it on.”

Sam began to roll the licorice whips between his palms, gradually turning them into a sticky ball. He had thought the smell was the worst thing with which the red licorice could test him, but he had been wrong. The texture was worse ... and the dye was coming off on his palms and fingers, turning them a sinister dark red. He went on nevertheless, stopping only to add the contents of another fresh package to the soft mass every thirty seconds or so.

“Maybe I’m looking too hard,” he said. “Maybe it’s plain old bravery that’s the opposite of fear. Courage, if you want a fancier word. Is that it? Is that all? Is bravery the difference between Naomi and Sarah?”

She looked startled. “Are you asking me if quitting drinking was an act of bravery?”

“I don’t know what I’m asking,” he said, “but I think you’re in the right neighborhood, at least. I don’t need to ask about fear; I know what that is. Fear is an emotion which encloses and precludes change. Was it an act of bravery when you gave up drinking?”

“I never really gave it up,” she said. “That isn’t how alcoholics do it. They can’t do it that way. You employ a lot of sideways thinking

instead. One day at a time, easy does it, live and let live, all that. But the center of it is this: you give up believing you can control your drinking. That idea was a myth you told yourself, and that's what you give up. The myth. You tell me—is that bravery?”

“Of course. But it's sure not foxhole bravery.”

“Foxhole bravery,” she said, and laughed. “I like that. But you're right. What I do—what we do—to keep away from the first one ... it's not that kind of bravery. In spite of movies like *The Lost Weekend*, I think what we do is pretty undramatic.”

Sam was remembering the dreadful apathy which had settled over him after he had been raped in the bushes at the side of the Briggs Avenue Branch of the St. Louis Library. Raped by a man who had called himself a policeman. That had been pretty undramatic, too. Just a dirty trick, that was all it had been—a dirty, brainless trick played on a little kid by a man with serious mental problems. Sam supposed that, when you counted up the whole score, he ought to call himself lucky; the Library Cop might have killed him.

Ahead of them, the round white globes which marked the Junction City Public Library glimmered in the rain. Naomi said hesitantly, “I think the real opposite of fear might be honesty. Honesty and belief. How does that sound?”

“Honesty and belief,” he said quietly, tasting the words. He squeezed the sticky ball of red licorice in his right hand. “Not bad, I guess. Anyway, they'll have to do. We're here.”

6

The glimmering green numbers of the car's dashboard clock read 7:57. They had made it before eight after all.

“Maybe we better wait and make sure everybody's gone before we go around back,” she said.

“I think that’s a very good idea.”

They cruised into an empty parking space across the street from the Library’s entrance. The globes shimmered delicately in the rain. The rustle of the trees was a less delicate thing; the wind was still gaining strength. The oaks sounded as if they were dreaming, and all the dreams were bad.

At two minutes past eight, a van with a stuffed Garfield cat and a MOM’S TAXI sign in its rear window pulled up across from them. The horn honked, and the Library’s door—looking less grim even in this light than it had on Sam’s first visit to the Library, less like the mouth in the head of a vast granite robot—opened at once. Three kids, junior-high-schoolers by the look of them, came out and hurried down the steps. As they ran down the walk to MOM’S TAXI, two of them pulled their jackets up to shield their heads from the rain. The van’s side door rumbled open on its track, and the kids piled into it. Sam could hear the faint sound of their laughter, and envied the sound. He thought about how good it must be to come out of a library with laughter in your mouth. He had missed that experience, thanks to the man in the round black glasses.

Honesty, he thought. Honesty and belief. And then he thought again: The fine is paid. The fine is paid, goddammit. He ripped open the last two packages of licorice and began kneading their contents into his sticky, nasty-smelling red ball. He glanced at the rear of MOM’S TAXI as he did so. He could see white exhaust drifting up and tattering in the windy air. Suddenly he began to realize what he was up to here.

“Once, when I was in high school,” he said, “I watched a bunch of kids play a prank on this other kid they didn’t like. In those days, watching was what I did best. They took a wad of modelling clay from the Art Room and stuffed it in the tailpipe of the kid’s Pontiac. You know what happened?”

She glanced at him doubtfully. “No—what?”

“Blew the muffler off in two pieces,” he said. “One on each side of the car. They flew like shrapnel. The muffler was the weak point, you see. I suppose if the gases had backflowed all the way to the engine, they might have blown the cylinders right out of the block.”

“Sam, what are you talking about?”

“Hope,” he said. “I’m talking about hope. I guess the honesty and belief have to come a little later.”

MOM’S TAXI pulled away from the curb, its headlights spearing through the silvery lines of rain.

The green numbers on Naomi’s dashboard clock read 8:06 when the Library’s front door opened again. A man and a woman came out. The man, awkwardly buttoning his overcoat with an umbrella tucked under his arm, was unmistakably Richard Price; Sam knew him at once, even though he had only seen a single photo of the man in an old newspaper. The girl was Cynthia Berrigan, the Library assistant he had spoken to on Saturday night.

Price said something to the girl. Sam thought she laughed. He was suddenly aware that he was sitting bolt upright in the bucket seat of Naomi’s Datsun, every muscle creaking with tension. He tried to make himself relax and discovered he couldn’t do it.

Now why doesn’t that surprise me? he thought.

Price raised his umbrella. The two of them hurried down the walk beneath it, the Berrigan girl tying a plastic rain-kerchief over her hair as they came. They separated at the foot of the walk, Price going to an old Impala the size of a cabin cruiser, the Berrigan girl to a Yugo parked half a block down. Price U-turned in the street (Naomi ducked down a little, startled, as the headlights shone briefly into her own car) and blipped his horn at the Yugo as he passed it. Cynthia Berrigan blipped hers in return, then drove away in the opposite direction.

Now there was only them, the Library, and possibly Ardelia, waiting for them someplace inside.

Along with Sam's old friend the Library Policeman.

7

Naomi drove slowly around the block to Wegman Street. About halfway down on the left, a discreet sign marked a small break in the hedge. It read LIBRARY DELIVERIES ONLY.

A gust of wind strong enough to rock the Datsun on its springs struck them, rattling rain against the windows so hard that it sounded like sand. Somewhere nearby there was a splintering crack as either a large branch or a small tree gave way. This was followed by a thud as whatever it was fell into the street.

"God!" Naomi said in a thin, distressed voice. "I don't like this!"

"I'm not crazy about it myself," Sam agreed, but he had barely heard her. He was thinking about how that modelling clay had looked. How it had looked bulging out of the tailpipe of the kid's car. It had looked like a blister.

Naomi turned in at the sign. They drove up a short lane into a small paved loading/unloading area. A single orange arc-sodium lamp hung over the little square of pavement. It cast a strong, penetrating light, and the moving branches of the oaks which ringed the loading zone danced crazy shadows onto the rear face of the building in its glow. For a moment two of these shadows seemed to coalesce at the foot of the platform, making a shape that was almost manlike: it looked as if someone had been waiting under there, someone who was now crawling out to greet them.

In just a second or two, Sam thought, the orange glare from that overhead light will strike his glasses—his little round black glasses—and he will look through the windshield at me. Not at Naomi; just at me. He'll look at me and he'll say, "Hello, son; I've been waiting for

you. All theeth yearth, I've been waiting for you. Come with me now. Come with me, because I'm a poleethman. "

There was another loud, splintering crack, and a tree-branch dropped to the pavement not three feet from the Datsun's trunk, exploding chunks of bark and rot-infested wood in every direction. If it had landed on top of the car, it would have smashed the roof in like a tomato-soup can.

Naomi screamed.

The wind, still rising, screamed back.

Sam was reaching for her, meaning to put a comforting arm around her, when the door at the rear of the loading platform opened partway and Dave Duncan stepped into the gap. He was holding onto the door to keep the wind from snatching it out of his grasp. To Sam, the old man's face looked far too white and almost grotesquely frightened. He made frantic beckoning gestures with his free hand.

"Naomi, there's Dave."

"Where—? Oh yes, I see him." Her eyes widened. "My God, he looks horrible!"

She began to open her door. The wind gusted, ripped it out of her grasp, and whooshed through the Datsun in a tight little tornado, lifting the licorice wrappers and dancing them around in dizzy circles.

Naomi managed to get one hand down just in time to keep from being struck—and perhaps injured—by the rebound of her own car door. Then she was out, her hair blowing in its own storm about her head, her skirt soaked and painted against her thighs in a moment.

Sam shoved his own door open—the wind was blowing the wrong way for him, and he did literally have to put his shoulder to it—and struggled out. He had time to wonder where in the hell this storm had come from; the Prince of Piggly Wiggly had said there had been no

prediction for such a spectacular capful of wind and rain. Just showers, he'd said.

Ardelia. Maybe it was Ardelia's storm.

As if to confirm this, Dave's voice rose in a momentary lull. "Hurry up! I can smell her goddam perfume everywhere!"

Sam found the idea that the smell of Ardelia's perfume might somehow precede her materialization obscurely terrifying.

He was halfway to the loading-platform steps before he realized that, although he still had the snot-textured ball of red licorice, he had left the books in the car. He turned back, muscled the door open, and got them. As he did, the quality of the light changed—it went from a bright, penetrating orange to white. Sam saw the change on the skin of his hands, and for a moment his eyes seemed to freeze in their sockets. He backed out of the car in a hurry, the books in his hand, and whirled around.

The orange arc-sodium security lamp was gone. It had been replaced by an old-fashioned mercury-vapor streetlight. The trees dancing and groaning around the loading platform in the wind were thicker now; stately old elms predominated, easily overtopping the oaks. The shape of the loading platform had changed, and now tangled runners of ivy climbed the rear wall of the Library—a wall which had been bare just a moment ago.

Welcome to 1960, Sam thought. Welcome to the Ardelia Lortz edition of the Junction City Public Library.

Naomi had gained the platform. She was saying something to Dave. Dave replied, then looked back over his shoulder. His body jerked. At the same moment, Naomi screamed. Sam ran for the steps to the platform, the tail of his coat billowing out behind him. As he climbed the steps, he saw a white hand float out of the darkness and settle on Dave's shoulder. It yanked him back into the Library.

“Grab the door!” Sam screamed. “Naomi, grab the door! Don’t let it lock!”

But in this the wind helped them. It blew the door wide open, striking Naomi’s shoulder and making her stagger backward. Sam reached it in time to catch it on the rebound.

Naomi turned horrified dark eyes on him. “It was the man who came to your house, Sam. The tall man with the silvery eyes. I saw him. He grabbed Dave!”

No time to think about it. “Come on.” He slipped an arm around Naomi’s waist and pulled her forward into the Library. Behind them, the wind dropped and the door slammed shut with a thud.

8

They were in a book-cataloguing area which was dim but not entirely dark. A small table-lamp with a red-fringed shade stood on the librarian’s desk. Beyond this area, which was littered with boxes and packing materials (the latter consisted of crumpled newspapers, Sam saw; this was 1960, and those polyethylene popcorn balls hadn’t been invented yet), the stacks began. Standing in one of the aisles, walled in with books on both sides, was the Library Policeman. He had Dave Duncan in a half-nelson, and was holding him with almost absent ease three inches off the floor.

He looked at Sam and Naomi. His silver eyes glinted, and a crescent grin rose on his white face. It looked like a chrome moon.

“Not a thtep closer,” he said, “or I’ll thnap his neck like a chicken bone. You’ll hear it go.”

Sam considered this, but only for a moment. He could smell lavender sachet, thick and cloying. Outside the building, the wind whined and boomed. The Library Policeman’s shadow danced up the wall, as gaunt as a gantry. He didn’t have a shadow before, Sam realized. What does that mean?

Maybe it meant the Library Policeman was more real now, more here ... because Ardelia and the Library Policeman and the dark man in the old car were really the same person. There was only one, and these were simply the faces it wore, putting them on and taking them off again with the ease of a kid trying on Halloween masks.

“Am I supposed to think you’ll let him live if we stand away from you?” he asked. “Bullshit.”

He began to walk toward the Library Policeman.

An expression which sat oddly on the tall man’s face now appeared. It was surprise. He took a step backward. His trenchcoat flapped around his shins and dragged against the folio volumes which formed the sides of the narrow aisle in which he stood.

“I’m warning you!”

“Warn and be damned,” Sam said. “Your argument isn’t with him. You’ve got a bone to pick with me, don’t you? Okay—let’s pick it.”

“The Librarian has a score to thettle with the old man!” the Policeman said, and took another step backward. Something odd was happening to his face, and it took Sam an instant to see what it was. The silver light in the Library Policeman’s eyes was fading.

“Then let her settle it,” Sam said. “My score is with you, big boy, and it goes back thirty years.”

He passed beyond the pool of radiance thrown by the table lamp.

“All right, then!” the Library Cop snarled. He made a half-turn and threw Dave Duncan down the aisle. Dave flew like a bag of laundry, a single croak of fear and surprise escaping him. He tried to raise one arm as he approached the wall, but it was only a dazed, half-hearted reflex. He collided with the fire-extinguisher mounted by the stairs, and Sam heard the dull crunch of a breaking bone. Dave fell, and the heavy red extinguisher fell off the wall on top of him.

“Dave!” Naomi shrieked, and darted toward him.

“Naomi, no!”

But she paid no attention. The Library Policeman’s grin reappeared; he grabbed Naomi by the arm as she tried to go past and curled her to him. His face came down and was for a moment hidden by the chestnut-colored hair at the nape of her neck. He uttered a strange, muffled cough against her flesh and then began kissing her—or so it appeared. His long white hand dug into her upper arm. Naomi screamed again, and then seemed to slump a little in his grip.

Sam had reached the entrance to the stacks now. He seized the first book his hand touched, yanked it off the shelf, cocked his arm back, and threw it. It flew end over end, the boards spreading, the pages riffing, and struck the Library Policeman on the side of the head. He uttered a cry of rage and surprise and looked up. Naomi tore free of his grasp and staggered sideways into one of the high shelves, flagging her arms for balance. The shelf rocked backward as she rebounded, and then fell with a gigantic, echoing crash. Books flew off shelves where they might have stood undisturbed for years and struck the floor in a rain of slaps that sounded oddly like applause.

Naomi ignored this. She reached Dave and fell on her knees beside him, crying his name over and over. The Library Policeman turned in that direction.

“Your argument isn’t with her, either,” Sam said.

The Library Policeman turned back to him. His silver eyes had been replaced with small black glasses that gave his face a blind, molelike look.

“I should have killed you the firht time,” he said, and began to walk toward Sam. His walk was accompanied by a queer brushing sound. Sam looked down and saw the hem of the Library Cop’s trenchcoat was now brushing the floor. He was growing shorter.

“The fine is paid,” Sam said quietly. The Library Policeman stopped. Sam held up the books with the five-dollar bill beneath the elastic. “The fine is paid and the books are returned. It’s all over, you bitch ... or bastard ... or whatever you are.”

Outside, the wind rose in a long, hollow cry which ran beneath the eaves like glass. The Library Policeman’s tongue crept out and slicked his lips. It was very red, very pointed. Blemishes had begun to appear on his cheeks and forehead. There was a greasy lens of sweat on his skin.

And the smell of lavender sachet was much stronger. “Wrong!” the Library Policeman cried. “Wrong! Those aren’t the bookth you borrowed! I know! That drunk old cockthucker took the bookth you borrowed! They were—”

“—destroyed,” Sam finished. He began to walk again, closing in on the Library Policeman, and the lavender smell grew stronger with every step he took. His heart was racing in his chest. “I know whose idea that was, too. But these are perfectly acceptable replacements. Take them.” His voice rose into a stern shout. “Take them, damn you!”

He held the books out, and the Library Policeman, looking confused and afraid, reached for them.

“No, not like that,” Sam said, raising the books above the white, grasping hand. “Like this.”

He brought the books down in the Library Policeman’s face—brought them down hard. He could not remember ever feeling such sublime satisfaction in his life as that which he felt when *Best Loved Poems of the American People* and *The Speaker’s Companion* struck and broke the Library Policeman’s nose. The round black glasses flew off his face and fell to the floor. Beneath them were black sockets lined with a bed of whitish fluid. Tiny threads floated up from this oozy stuff, and Sam thought about Dave’s story—looked like it was startin to grow its own skin, he had said.

The Library Policeman screamed.

“You can’t!” it screamed. “You can’t hurt me! You’re afraid of me! Besides, you liked it! You LIKED it! YOU DIRTY LITTLE BOY, YOU LIKED IT!”

“Wrong,” Sam said. “I fucking hated it. Now take these books. Take them and get out of here. Because the fine is paid.”

He slammed the books into the Library Policeman’s chest. And, as the Library Policeman’s hands closed on them, Sam hoicked one knee squarely into the Library Policeman’s crotch.

“That’s for all the other kids,” he said. “The ones you fucked and the ones she ate.”

The creature wailed with pain. His flailing hands dropped the books as he bent to cup his groin. His greasy black hair fell over his face, mercifully hiding those blank, thread-choked sockets.

Of course they are blank, Sam had time to think. I never saw the eyes behind the glasses he wore that day... so SHE couldn’t see them, either.

“That doesn’t pay your fine,” Sam said, “but it’s a step in the right direction, isn’t it?”

The Library Policeman’s trenchcoat began to writhe and ripple, as if some unimaginable transformation had begun beneath it. And when he—it—looked up, Sam saw something which drove him back a step in horror and revulsion.

The man who had come half from Dave’s poster and half from Sam’s own mind had become a misshapen dwarf. The dwarf was becoming something else, a dreadful hermaphroditic creature. A sexual storm was happening on its face and beneath the bunching, twitching trenchcoat. Half the hair was still black; the other half was ash-

blonde. One socket was still empty; a savage blue eye glittered hate from the other.

“I want you,” the dwarfish creature hissed. “I want you, and I’ll have you.”

“Try me, Ardelia,” Sam said. “Let’s rock and r—”

He reached for the thing before him, but screamed and withdrew his hand as soon as it snagged in the trenchcoat. It wasn’t a coat at all; it was some sort of dreadful loose skin, and it was like trying to grip a mass of freshly used teabags.

It scuttered up the canted side of the fallen bookshelf and thumped into the shadows on the far side. The smell of lavender sachet was suddenly much stronger.

A brutal laugh drifted up from the shadows.

A woman’s laugh.

“Too late, Sam,” she said. “It’s already too late. The deed is done.”

Ardelia’s back, Sam thought, and from outside there was a tremendous, rending crash. The building shuddered as a tree fell against it, and the lights went out.

9

They were in total darkness only for a second, but it seemed much longer. Ardelia laughed again, and this time her laughter had a strange, hooting quality, like laughter broadcast through a megaphone.

Then a single emergency bulb high up on one wall went on, throwing a pallid sheaf of light over this section of the stacks and flinging shadows everywhere like tangles of black yarn. Sam could hear the light’s battery buzzing noisily. He made his way to where Naomi still

knelt beside Dave, twice almost falling as his feet slid in piles of books which had spilled from the overturned case.

Naomi looked up at him. Her face was white and shocked and streaked with tears. "Sam, I think he's dying."

He knelt beside Dave. The old man's eyes were shut and he was breathing in harsh, almost random gasps. Thin trickles of blood spilled from both nostrils and from one ear. There was a deep, crushed dent in his forehead, just above the right eyebrow. Looking at it made Sam's stomach clench. One of Dave's cheekbones was clearly broken, and the fire-extinguisher's handle was printed on that side of his face in bright lines of blood and bruise. It looked like a tattoo.

"We've got to get him to a hospital, Sam!"

"Do you think she'd let us out of here now?" he asked, and, as if in answer to this question, a huge book—the T volume of The Oxford English Dictionary—came flying at them from beyond the rough circle of light thrown by the emergency unit mounted on the wall. Sam pulled Naomi backward and they both went sprawling in the dusty aisle. Seven pounds of tabasco, tendril, tomcat, and trepan slammed through the space where Naomi's head had been a moment before, hit the wall, and splashed to the floor in an untidy, tented heap.

From the shadows came shrill laughter. Sam rose to his knees in time to see a hunched shape flit down the aisle beyond the fallen bookcase. It's still changing, Sam thought. Into what, God only knows. It buttonhooked to the left and was gone.

"Get her, Sam," Naomi said hoarsely. She gripped one of his hands. "Get her, please get her."

"I'll try," he said. He stepped over Dave's sprawled legs and entered the deeper shadows beyond the overturned bookcase.

The smell freaked him out—the smell of lavender sachet mixed with the dusty aroma of books from all those latter years. That smell, mingled with the freight-train whoop of the wind outside, made him feel like H. G. Wells’s Time Traveller ... and the Library itself, bulking all around him, was his time machine.

He walked slowly down the aisle, squeezing the ball of red licorice nervously in his left hand. Books surrounded him, seemed to frown down at him. They climbed to a height that was twice his own. He could hear the click and squeak of his shoes on the old linoleum.

“Where are you?” he shouted. “If you want me, Ardelia, why don’t you come on and get me? I’m right here!”

No answer. But she would have to come out soon, wouldn’t she? If Dave was right, her change was upon her, and her time was short.

Midnight, he thought. The Library Policeman gave me until midnight, so maybe that’s how long she has. But that’s over three and a half hours away... Dave can’t possibly wait that long.

Then another thought, even less pleasant, occurred: suppose that, while he was mucking around back here in these dark aisles, Ardelia was circling her way back to Naomi and Dave?

He came to the end of the aisle, listened, heard nothing, and slipped over into the next. It was empty. He heard a low whispering sound from above him and looked up just in time to see half a dozen heavy books sliding out from one of the shelves above his head. He lunged backward with a cry as the books fell, striking his thighs, and heard Ardelia’s crazy laughter from the other side of the bookcase.

He could imagine her up there, clinging to the shelves like a spider bloated with poison, and his body seemed to act before his brain could think. He slewed around on his heels like a drunken soldier trying to do an about face and threw his back against the shelf. The

laughter turned to a scream of fear and surprise as the stack tilted under Sam's weight. He heard a meaty thud as the thing hurled itself from its perch. A second later the stack went over.

What happened then was something Sam had not foreseen: the stack he had pushed toppled across the aisle, shedding its books in a waterfall as it went, and struck the next one. The second fell against a third, the third against a fourth, and then they were all falling like dominoes, all the way across this huge, shadowy storage area, crashing and clanging and spilling everything from Marryat's works to *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*. He heard Ardelia scream again and then Sam launched himself at the tilted bookcase he had pushed over. He climbed it like a ladder, kicking books out of his way in search of toe-holds, yanking himself upward with one hand.

He threw himself down on the far side and saw a white, hellishly misshapen creature pulling itself from beneath a jack-straw tumble of atlases and travel volumes. It had blonde hair and blue eyes, but any resemblance to humanity ceased there. Its illusions were gone. The creature was a fat, naked thing with arms and legs that appeared to end in jointed claws. A sac of flesh hung below its neck like a deflated goiter. Thin white fibers stormed around its body. There was something horridly beetlelike about it, and Sam was suddenly screaming inside—silent, atavistic screams which seemed to radiate out along his bones. This is it. God help me, this is it. He felt revulsion, but suddenly his terror was gone; now that he could actually see the thing, it was not so bad.

Then it began to change again, and Sam's feeling of relief faded. It did not have a face, exactly, but below the bulging blue eyes, a horn shape began to extrude itself, pushing out of the horror-show face like a stubby elephant's trunk. The eyes stretched away to either side, becoming first Chinese and then insectile. Sam could hear it sniffing as it stretched toward him.

It was covered with wavering, dusty threads.

Part of him wanted to pull back—was screaming at him to pull back—but most of him wanted to stand his ground. And as the thing's fleshy proboscis touched him, Sam felt its deep power. A sense of lethargy filled him, a feeling that it would be better if he just stood still and let it happen. The wind had become a distant, dreamy howl. It was soothing, in a way, as the sound of the vacuum cleaner had been soothing when he was very small.

“Sam?” Naomi called, but her voice was distant, unimportant. “Sam, are you all right?”

Had he thought he loved her? That was silly. Quite ridiculous, when you thought about it ... when you got right down to it, this was much better.

This creature had ... stories to tell.

Very interesting stories.

The white thing's entire plastic body now yearned toward the proboscis; it fed itself into itself, and the proboscis elongated. The creature became a single tube-shaped thing, the rest of its body hanging as useless and forgotten as that sac below its neck had hung. All its vitality was invested in the horn of flesh, the conduit through which it would suck Sam's vitality and essence into itself.

And it was nice.

The proboscis slipped gently up Sam's legs, pressed briefly against his groin, then rose higher, caressing his belly.

Sam fell on his knees to give it access to his face. He felt his eyes sting briefly and pleasantly as some fluid—not tears, this was thicker than tears—began to ooze from them.

The proboscis closed in on his eyes; he could see a pink petal of flesh opening and closing hungrily inside there. Each time it opened, it revealed a deeper darkness beyond. Then it clenched, forming a

hole in the petal, a tube within a tube, and it slipped with sensual slowness across his lips and cheek toward that sticky outflow. Misshapen dark-blue eyes gazed at him hungrily.

But the fine was paid.

Summoning every last bit of his strength, Sam clamped his right hand over the proboscis. It was hot and noxious. The tiny threads of flesh which covered it stung his palm.

It jerked and tried to draw back. For a moment Sam almost lost it and then he closed his hand in a fist, digging his fingernails into the meat of the thing.

“Here!” he shouted. “Here, I’ve got something for you, bitch! I brought it all the way from East St. Louis!”

He brought his left hand around and slammed the sticky ball of red licorice into the end of the proboscis, plugging it the way the kids in that long-ago parking lot had plugged the tailpipe of Tommy Reed’s Pontiac. It tried to shriek and could produce only a blocked humming sound. Then it tried again to pull itself away from Sam. The ball of red licorice bulged from the end of its convulsing snout like a blood-blisters.

Sam struggled to his knees, still holding the twitching, noisome flesh in his hand, and threw himself on top of the Ardelia-thing. It twisted and pulsed beneath him, trying to throw him off. They rolled over and over in the heaped pile of books. It was dreadfully strong. Once Sam was eye to eye with it, and he was nearly frozen by the hate and panic in that gaze.

Then he felt it begin to swell.

He let go and scrambled backward, gasping. The thing in the book-littered aisle now looked like a grotesque beachball with a trunk, a beachball covered with fine hair which wavered like tendrils of seaweed in a running tide. It rolled over in the aisle, its proboscis

swelling like a firehose which has been tied in a knot. Sam watched, frozen with horror and fascination, as the thing which had called itself Ardelia Lortz strangled on its own fuming guts.

Bright red roadmap lines of blood popped out on its straining hide. Its eyes bulged, now staring at Sam in an expression of dazed surprise. It made one final effort to expel the soft blob of licorice, but its proboscis had been wide open in its anticipation of food, and the licorice stayed put.

Sam saw what was going to happen and threw an arm over his face an instant before it exploded.

Chunks of alien flesh flew in every direction. Ropes of thick blood splattered Sam's arms, chest, and legs. He cried out in mingled revulsion and relief.

An instant later the emergency light winked out, plunging them into darkness again.

11

Once more the interval of darkness was very brief, but it was long enough for Sam to sense the change. He felt it in his head—a clear sensation of things which had been out of joint snapping back into place. When the emergency lights came back on, there were four of them. Their batteries made a low, self-satisfied humming sound instead of a loud buzz, and they were very bright, banishing the shadows to the furthest comers of the room. He did not know if the world of 1960 they had entered when the arc-sodium light became a mercury-vapor lamp had been real or an illusion, but he knew it was gone.

The overturned bookcases were upright again. There was a litter of books in this aisle—a dozen or so—but he might have knocked those off himself in his struggle to get on his feet. And outside, the sound of the storm had fallen from a shout to a mutter. Sam could hear what sounded like a very sedate rain falling on the roof.

The Ardelia-thing was gone. There were no splatters of blood or chunks of flesh on the floor, on the books, or on him.

There was only one sign of her: a single golden earring, glinting up at him.

Sam got shakily to his feet and kicked it away. Then a grayness came over his sight and he swayed on his feet, eyes closed, waiting to see if he would faint or not.

“Sam!” It was Naomi, and she sounded as if she were crying. “Sam, where are you?”

“Here!” He reached up, grabbed a handful of his hair, and pulled it hard. Stupid, probably, but it worked. The wavery grayness didn’t go away entirely, but it retreated. He began moving back toward the cataloguing area, walking in large, careful strides.

The same desk, a graceless block of wood on stubby legs, stood in the cataloguing area, but the lamp with its old-fashioned, tasselled shade had been replaced with a fluorescent bar. The battered typewriter and Rolodex had been replaced by an Apple computer. And, if he had not already been sure of what time he was now in, a glance at the cardboard cartons on the floor would have convinced him: they were full of poppers and plastic bubble-strips.

Naomi was still kneeling beside Dave at the end of the aisle, and when Sam reached her side he saw that the fire-extinguisher (although thirty years had passed, it appeared to be the same one) was firmly mounted on its post again ... but the shape of its handle was still imprinted on Dave’s cheek and forehead.

His eyes were open, and when he saw Sam, he smiled. “Not ... bad,” he whispered. “I bet you ... didn’t know you had it ... in you.”

Sam felt a tremendous, buoyant sense of relief. “No,” he said. “I didn’t.” He bent down and held three fingers in front of Dave’s eyes. “How many fingers do you see?”

“About ... seventy-four,” Dave whispered.

“I’ll call the ambulance,” Naomi said, and started to get up. Dave’s left hand grasped her wrist before she could.

“No. Not yet.” His eyes shifted to Sam. “Bend down. I need to whisper.”

Sam bent over the old man. Dave put a trembling hand on the back of his neck. His lips tickled the cup of Sam’s ear and Sam had to force himself to hold steady—it tickled. “Sam,” he whispered. “She waits. Remember ... she waits.”

“What?” Sam asked. He felt almost totally unstrung. “Dave, what do you mean?”

But Dave’s hand had fallen away. He stared up at Sam, through Sam, his chest rising shallowly and rapidly.

“I’m going,” Naomi said, clearly upset. “There’s a telephone down there on the cataloguing desk.”

“No,” Sam said.

She turned toward him, eyes glaring, mouth pulled back from neat white teeth in a fury. “What do you mean, no? Are you crazy? His skull is fractured, at the very least! He’s—”

“He’s going, Sarah,” Sam said gently. “Very soon. Stay with him. Be his friend.”

She looked down, and this time she saw what Sam had seen. The pupil of Dave’s left eye had drawn down to a pinpoint; the pupil of his right was huge and fixed.

“Dave?” she whispered, frightened. “Dave?”

But Dave was looking at Sam again. “Remember,” he whispered. “She w ...”

His eyes grew still and fixed. His chest rose once more ... dropped ... and did not rise again.

Naomi began to sob. She put his hand against her cheek and closed his eyes. Sam knelt down painfully and put his arm around her waist.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ANGLE STREET (III)

1

That night and the next were sleepless ones for Sam Peebles. He lay awake in his bed, all the second-floor lights turned on, and thought about Dave Duncan's last words: She waits.

Toward dawn of the second night, he began to believe he understood what the old man had been trying to say.

2

Sam thought that Dave would be buried out of the Baptist Church in Proverbia, and was a little surprised to find that he had converted to Catholicism at some point between 1960 and 1990. The services were held at St. Martin's on April 11th, a blustery day that alternated between clouds and cold early-spring sunshine.

Following the graveside service, there was a reception at Angle Street. There were almost seventy people there, wandering through the downstairs rooms or clustered in little groups, by the time Sam arrived. They had all known Dave, and spoke of him with humor, respect, and unflinching love. They drank ginger ale from Styrofoam cups and ate small finger sandwiches. Sam moved from group to group, passing a word with someone he knew from time to time but not stopping to chat. He rarely took his hand from the pocket of his dark coat. He had made a stop at the Piggly Wiggly store on his way from the church, and now there were half a dozen cellophane packages in there, four of them long and thin, two of them rectangular.

Sarah was not here.

He was about to leave when he spotted Lukey and Rudolph sitting together in a corner. There was a cribbage board between them, but they didn't seem to be playing.

"Hello, you guys," Sam said, walking over. "I guess you probably don't remember me—"

"Sure we do," Rudolph said. "Whatcha think we are? Coupla feebz? You're Dave's friend. You came over the day we was making the posters."

"Right!" Lukey said.

"Did you find those books you were lookin for?" Rudolph asked.

"Yes," Sam said, smiling. "I did, eventually."

"Right!" Lukey exclaimed.

Sam brought out the four slender cellophane packages. "I brought you guys something," he said.

Lukey glanced down, and his eyes lit up. "Slim Jims, Dolph!" he said, grinning delightedly. "Look! Sarah's boyfriend brought us all fuckin Slim Jims! Beautiful!"

"Here, gimme those, you old rummy," Rudolph said, and snatched them. "Fuckhead'd eat em all at once and then shit the bed tonight, you know," he told Sam. He stripped one of the Slim Jims and gave it to Lukey. "Here you go, dinkweed. I'll hang onto the rest of em for you."

"You can have one, Dolph. Go ahead."

"You know better, Lukey. Those things burn me at both ends."

Sam ignored this byplay. He was looking hard at Lukey. "Sarah's boyfriend? Where did you hear that?"

Lukey snatched down half a Slim Jim in one bite, then looked up. His expression was both good-humored and sly. He laid a finger against the side of his nose and said, "Word gets around when you're in the Program, Sunny Jim. Oh yes indeed, it do."

"He don't know nothing, mister," Rudolph said, draining his cup of ginger ale. "He's just beating his gums cause he likes the sound."

"That ain't nothin but bullshit!" Lukey cried, taking another giant bite of Slim Jim. "I know because Dave told me! Last night! I had a dream, and Dave was in it, and he told me this fella was Sarah's sweetie!"

"Where is Sarah?" Sam asked. "I thought she'd be here."

"She spoke to me after the benediction," Rudolph said. "Told me you'd know where to find her later on, if you wanted to see her. She said you'd seen her there once already."

"She liked Dave awful much," Lukey said. A sudden tear grew on the rim of one eye and spilled down his cheek. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. "We all did. Dave always tried so goddam hard. It's too bad, you know. It's really too bad." And Lukey suddenly burst into tears.

"Well, let me tell you something," Sam said. He hunkered beside Lukey and handed him his handkerchief. He was near tears himself, and terrified by what he now had to do ... or try to do. "He made it in the end. He died sober. Whatever talk you hear, you hold onto that, because I know it's true. He died sober."

"Amen," Rudolph said reverently.

"Amen," Lukey agreed. He handed Sam his handkerchief. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it, Lukey."

"Say—you don't have any more of those fuckin Slim Jims, do you?"

“Nope,” Sam said, and smiled. “You know what they say, Lukey—one’s too many and a thousand are never enough.”

Rudolph laughed. Lukey smiled ... then laid the tip of his finger against the side of his nose again.

“How about a quarter ... wouldn’t have an extra quarter, wouldja?”

3

Sam’s first thought was that she might have gone back to the Library, but that didn’t fit with what Dolph had said ... he had been at the Library with Sarah once, on the terrible night that already seemed a decade ago, but they had been there together; he hadn’t “seen” her there, the way you saw someone through a window, or—

Then he remembered when he had seen Sarah through a window, right here at Angle Street. She had been part of the group out on the back lawn, doing whatever it was they did to keep themselves sober. He now walked through the kitchen as he had done on that day, saying hello to a few more people. Burt Iverson and Elmer Baskin stood in one of the little groups, drinking ice-cream punch as they listened gravely to an elderly woman Sam didn’t know.

He stepped through the kitchen door and out onto the rear porch. The day had turned gray and blustery again. The backyard was deserted, but Sam thought he saw a flash of pastel color beyond the bushes that marked the yard’s rear boundary.

He walked down the steps and crossed the back lawn, aware that his heart had begun to thud very hard again. His hand stole back into his pocket, and this time came out with the remaining two cellophane packages. They contained Bull’s Eye Red Licorice. He tore them open and began to knead them into a ball, much smaller than the one he’d made in the Datsun on Monday night. The sweet, sugary smell was just as sickening as ever. In the distance he could hear a train coming, and it made him think of his dream—the one where Naomi had turned into Ardelia.

Too late, Sam. It's already too late. The deed is done.

She waits. Remember, Sam—she waits.

There was a lot of truth in dreams, sometimes.

How had she survived the years between? All the years between? They had never asked themselves that question, had they? How did she make the transition from one person to another? They had never asked that one, either. Perhaps the thing which looked like a woman named Ardelia Lortz was, beneath its glammers and illusions, like one of those larvae that spin their cocoons in the fork of a tree, cover them with protective webbing, and then fly away to their place of dying. The larvae in the cocoons lie silent, waiting ... changing ...

She waits.

Sam walked on, still kneading his smelly little ball made of that stuff the Library Policeman—his Library Policeman—had stolen and turned into the stuff of nightmares. The stuff he had somehow changed again, with the help of Naomi and Dave, into the stuff of salvation.

The Library Policeman, curling Naomi against him. Placing his mouth on the nape of her neck, as if to kiss her. And coughing instead.

The bag hanging under the Ardelia-thing's neck. Limp. Spent. Empty.

Please don't let it be too late.

He walked into the thin stand of bushes. Naomi Sarah Higgins was standing on the other side of them, her arms clasped over her bosom. She glanced briefly at him and he was shocked by the pallor of her cheeks and the haggard look in her eyes. Then she looked back at the railroad tracks. The train was closer now. Soon they would see it.

“Hello, Sam.”

“Hello, Sarah.”

Sam put an arm around her waist. She let him, but the shape of her body against his was stiff, inflexible, unyielding. Please don't let it be too late, he thought again, and found himself thinking of Dave.

They had left him there, at the Library, after propping the door to the loading platform open with a rubber wedge. Sam had used a pay phone two blocks away to report the open door. He hung up when the dispatcher asked for his name. So Dave had been found, and of course the verdict had been accidental death, and those people in town who cared enough to assume anything at all would make the expected assumption: one more old sot had gone to that great ginmill in the sky. They would assume he had gone up the lane with a jug, had seen the open door, wandered in, and had fallen against the fire-extinguisher in the dark. End of story. The postmortem results, showing zero alcohol in Dave's blood, would not change the assumptions one bit—probably not even for the police. People just expect a drunk to die like a drunk, Sam thought, even when he's not.

“How have you been, Sarah?” he asked.

She looked at him tiredly. “Not so well, Sam. Not so well at all. I can't sleep ... can't eat ... my mind seems full of the most horrible thoughts ... they don't feel like my thoughts at all ... and I want to drink. That's the worst of it. I want to drink ... and drink ... and drink. The meetings don't help. For the first time in my life, the meetings don't help.”

She closed her eyes and began to cry. The sound was strengthless and dreadfully lost.

“No,” he agreed softly. “They wouldn't. They can't. And I imagine she'd like it if you started drinking again. She's waiting ... but that doesn't mean she isn't hungry.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him. “What ... Sam, what are you talking about?”

“Persistence, I think,” he said. “The persistence of evil. How it waits. How it can be so cunning and so baffling and so powerful.”

He raised his hand slowly and opened it. “Do you recognize this, Sarah?”

She flinched away from the ball of red licorice which lay on his palm. For a moment her eyes were wide and fully awake. They glinted with hate and fear.

And the glints were silver.

“Throw that away!” she whispered. “Throw that damned thing away!” Her hand jerked protectively toward the back of her neck, where her brownish-red hair hung against her shoulders.

“I’m talking to you,” he said steadily. “Not to her but to you. I love you, Sarah.”

She looked at him again, and that look of terrible weariness was back. “Yes,” she said. “Maybe you do. And maybe you should learn not to.”

“I want you to do something for me, Sarah. I want you to turn your back to me. There’s a train coming. I want you to watch that train and not look back at me until I tell you. Can you do that?”

Her upper lip lifted. That expression of hate and fear animated her haggard face again. “No! Leave me alone! Go away!”

“Is that what you want?” he asked. “Is it really? You told Dolph where I could find you, Sarah. Do you really want me to go?”

Her eyes closed again. Her mouth drew down in a trembling bow of anguish. When her eyes opened again, they were full of haunted terror and brimming with tears. “Oh, Sam, help me! Something is wrong and I don’t know what it is or what to do!”

“I know what to do,” he told her. “Trust in me, Sarah, and trust in what you said when we were on our way to the Library Monday night. Honesty and belief. Those things are the opposite of fear. Honesty and belief.”

“It’s hard, though,” she whispered. “Hard to trust. Hard to believe.”

He looked at her steadily.

Naomi’s upper lip lifted suddenly, and her lower lip curled out, turning her mouth momentarily into a shape that was almost like a horn. “Fuck yourself!” she said. “Go on and fuck yourself, Sam Peebles!”

He looked at her steadily.

She raised her hands and pressed them against her temples. “I didn’t mean it. I don’t know why I said it. I ... my head ... Sam, my poor head! It feels like it’s splitting in two.”

The oncoming train whistled as it crossed the Proverbial River and rolled into Junction City. It was the mid-afternoon freight, the one that charged through without stopping on its way to the Omaha stockyards. Sam could see it now.

“There’s not much time, Sarah. It has to be now. Turn around and look at the train. Watch it come.”

“Yes,” she said suddenly. “All right. Do what you want to do, Sam. And if you see ... see it isn’t going to work ... then push me. Push me in front of the train. Then you can tell the others that I jumped ... that it was suicide.” She looked at him pleadingly—deathly-tired eyes staring into his from her exhausted face. “They know I haven’t been feeling myself—the people in the Program. You can’t keep how you feel from them. After awhile that’s just not possible. They’ll believe you if you say I jumped, and they’d be right, because I don’t want to go on like this. But the thing is ... Sam, the thing is, I think that before long I will want to go on.”

“Be quiet,” he said. “We’re not going to talk about suicide. Look at the train, Sarah, and remember I love you.”

She turned toward the train, less than a mile away now and coming fast. Her hands went to the nape of her neck and lifted her hair. Sam bent forward ... and what he was looking for was there, crouched high on the clean white flesh of her neck. He knew that her brain-stem began less than half an inch below that place, and he felt his stomach twist with revulsion.

He bent forward toward the blistery growth. It was covered in a spiderweb skein of crisscrossing white threads, but he could see it beneath, a lump of pinkish jelly that throbbed and pulsed with the beat of her heart.

“Leave me alone!” Ardelia Lortz suddenly screamed from the mouth of the woman Sam had come to love. “Leave me alone, you bastard!” But Sarah’s hands were steady, holding her hair up, giving him access.

“Can you see the numbers on the engine, Sarah?” he murmured.

She moaned.

He drove his thumb into the soft glob of red licorice he held, making a well a little bigger than the parasite which lay on Sarah’s neck. “Read them to me, Sarah. Read me the numbers.”

“Two ... six ... oh Sam, oh my head hurts ... it feels like big hands pulling my brain into two pieces ...”

“Read the numbers, Sarah,” he murmured, and brought the Bull’s Eye licorice down toward that pulsing, obscene growth.

“Five ... nine ... five ...”

He closed the licorice gently over it. He could feel it suddenly, wriggling and squirming under the sugary blanket. What if it breaks?

What if it just breaks open before I can pull it off her? It's all Ardelia's concentrated poison ... what if it breaks before I get it off?

The oncoming train whistled again. The sound buried Sarah's shriek of pain.

"Steady—"

He simultaneously pulled the licorice back and folded it over. He had it; it was caught in the candy, pulsing and throbbing like a tiny sick heart. On the back of Sarah's neck were three tiny dark holes, no bigger than pinpricks.

"It's gone!" she cried. "Sam, it's gone!"

"Not yet," Sam said grimly. The licorice lay on his palm again, and a bubble was pushing up its surface, straining to break through—

The train was roaring past the Junction City depot now, the depot where a man named Brian Kelly had once tossed Dave Duncan four bits and then told him to get in the wind. Less than three hundred yards away and coming fast.

Sam pushed past Sarah and knelt by the tracks.

"Sam, what are you doing?"

"Here you go, Ardelia," he murmured. "Try this." He slapped the pulsing, stretching blob of red licorice down on one of the gleaming steel rails.

In his mind he heard a shriek of unutterable fury and terror. He stood back, watching the thing trapped inside the licorice struggle and push. The candy split open ... he saw a darker red inside trying to push itself out ... and then the 2:20 to Omaha rushed over it in an organized storm of pounding rods and grinding wheels.

The licorice disappeared, and inside of Sam Peebles's mind, that drilling shriek was cut off as if with a knife.

He stepped back and turned to Sarah. She was swaying on her feet, her eyes wide and full of dazed joy. He slipped his arms around her waist and held her as the boxcars and flatcars and tankers thundered past them, blowing their hair back.

They stood like that until the caboose passed, trailing its small red lights off into the west. Then she drew away from him a little ... but not out of the circle of his arms—and looked at him.

“Am I free, Sam? Am I really free of her? It feels like I am, but I can hardly believe it.”

“You’re free,” Sam agreed. “Your fine is paid, too, Sarah. Forever and ever, your fine is paid.”

She brought her face to his and began to cover his lips and cheeks and eyes with small kisses. Her own eyes did not close as she did this; she looked at him gravely all the while.

He took her hands at last and said, “Why don’t we go back inside, and finish paying our respects? Your friends will be wondering where you are.”

“They can be your friends, too, Sam ... if you want them to be.”

He nodded. “I do. I want that a lot.”

“Honesty and belief,” she said, and touched his cheek.

“Those are the words.” He kissed her again, then offered his arm. “Will you walk with me, lady?”

She linked her arm through his. “Anywhere you want, sir. Anywhere at all.”

They walked slowly back across the lawn to Angle Street together, arm in arm.

LOW MEN IN YELLOW COATS

Stephen King

1

A Boy and His Mother. Bobby's Birthday.

The New Roomer. Of Time and Strangers.

Bobby Garfield's father had been one of those fellows who start losing their hair in their twenties and are completely bald by the age of forty-five or so. Randall Garfield was spared this extremity by dying of a heart attack at thirty-six. He was a real-estate agent, and breathed his last on the kitchen floor of someone else's house. The potential buyer was in the living room, trying to call an ambulance on a disconnected phone, when Bobby's dad passed away.

At this time Bobby was three. He had vague memories of a man tickling him and then kissing his cheeks and his forehead. He was pretty sure that man had been his dad. SADLY MISSED, it said on Randall Garfield's gravestone, but his mom never seemed all that sad, and as for Bobby himself ... well, how could you miss a guy you could hardly remember?

Eight years after his father's death, Bobby fell violently in love with the twenty-six-inch Schwinn in the window of the Harwich Western Auto. He hinted to his mother about the Schwinn in every way he knew, and finally pointed it out to her one night when they were walking home from the movies (the show had been *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, which Bobby didn't understand but liked anyway, especially the part where Dorothy McGuire flopped back in a chair and showed off her long legs). As they passed the hardware store, Bobby mentioned casually that the bike in the window would sure make a great eleventh-birthday present for some lucky kid.

'Don't even think about it,' she said. 'I can't afford a bike for your birthday. Your father didn't exactly leave us well off, you know.'

Although Randall had been dead ever since Truman was President and now Eisenhower was almost done with his eight-year cruise, Your father didn't exactly leave us well off was still his mother's most common response to anything Bobby suggested which might entail an expenditure of more than a dollar. Usually the comment was accompanied by a reproachful look, as if the man had run off rather than died.

No bike for his birthday. Bobby pondered this glumly on their walk home, his pleasure at the strange, muddled movie they had seen mostly gone. He didn't argue with his mother, or try to coax her — that would bring on a counterattack, and when Liz Garfield counterattacked she took no prisoners — but he brooded on the lost bike ... and the lost father. Sometimes he almost hated his father. Sometimes all that kept him from doing so was the sense, unanchored but very strong, that his mother wanted him to. As they reached Commonwealth Park and walked along the side of it — two blocks up they would turn left onto Broad Street, where they lived — he went against his usual misgivings and asked a question about Randall Garfield.

'Didn't he leave anything, Mom? Anything at all?' A week or two before, he'd read a Nancy Drew mystery where some poor kid's inheritance had been hidden behind an old clock in an abandoned mansion. Bobby didn't really think his father had left gold coins or rare stamps stashed someplace, but if there was something, maybe they could sell it in Bridgeport. Possibly at one of the hockshops. Bobby didn't know exactly how hocking things worked, but he knew what the shops looked like — they had three gold balls hanging out front. And he was sure the hockshop guys would be happy to help them. Of course it was just a kid's dream, but Carol Gerber up the street had a whole set of dolls her father, who was in the Navy, had sent from overseas. If fathers gave things — which they did — it stood to reason that fathers sometimes left things.

When Bobby asked the question, they were passing one of the streetlamps which ran along this side of Commonwealth Park, and

Bobby saw his mother's mouth change as it always did when he ventured a question about his late father. The change made him think of a purse she had: when you pulled on the drawstrings, the hole at the top got smaller.

'I'll tell you what he left,' she said as they started up Broad Street Hill. Bobby already wished he hadn't asked, but of course it was too late now. Once you got her started, you couldn't get her stopped, that was the thing. 'He left a life insurance policy which lapsed the year before he died. Little did I know that until he was gone and everyone — including the undertaker — wanted their little piece of what I didn't have. He also left a large stack of unpaid bills, which I have now pretty much taken care of — people have been very understanding of my situation, Mr Biderman in particular, and I'll never say they haven't been.'

All this was old stuff, as boring as it was bitter, but then she told Bobby something new.

'Your father,' she said as they approached the apartment house which stood halfway up Broad Street Hill, 'never met an inside straight he didn't like.'

'What's an inside straight, Mom?'

'Never mind. But I'll tell you one thing, Bobby-O: you don't ever want to let me catch you playing cards for money. I've had enough of that to last me a lifetime.'

Bobby wanted to enquire further, but knew better; more questions were apt to set off a tirade. It occurred to him that perhaps the movie, which had been about unhappy husbands and wives, had upset her in some way he could not, as a mere kid, understand. He would ask his friend John Sullivan about inside straights at school on Monday. Bobby thought it was poker, but wasn't completely sure.

'There are places in Bridgeport that take men's money,' she said as they neared the apartment house where they lived. 'Foolish men go

to them. Foolish men make messes, and it's usually the women of the world that have to clean them up later on. Well ... '

Bobby knew what was coming next; it was his mother's all-time favorite.

'Life isn't fair,' said Liz Garfield as she took out her housekey and prepared to unlock the door of 149 Broad Street in the town of Harwich, Connecticut. It was April of 1960, the night breathed spring perfume, and standing beside her was a skinny boy with his dead father's risky red hair. She hardly ever touched his hair; on the infrequent occasions when she caressed him, it was usually his arm or his cheek which she touched.

'Life isn't fair,' she repeated. She opened the door and they went in.

It was true that his mother had not been treated like a princess, and it was certainly too bad that her husband had expired on a linoleum floor in an empty house at the age of thirty-six, but Bobby sometimes thought that things could have been worse. There might have been two kids instead of just one, for instance. Or three. Hell, even four.

Or suppose she had to work some really hard job to support the two of them? Sully's mom worked at the Tip-Top Bakery downtown, and during the weeks when she had to light the ovens, Sully-John and his two older brothers hardly even saw her. Also Bobby had observed the women who came filing out of the Peerless Shoe Company when the three o'clock whistle blew (he himself got out of school at two-thirty), women who all seemed way too skinny or way too fat, women with pale faces and fingers stained a dreadful old-blood color, women with downcast eyes who carried their work-shoes and -pants in Total Grocery shopping bags.

Last fall he'd seen men and women picking apples outside of town when he went to a church fair with Mrs Gerber and Carol and little Ian (who Carol always called Ian-the-Snot). When he asked about them Mrs Gerber said they were migrants, just like some kinds of birds —

always on the move, picking whatever crops had just come ripe. Bobby's mother could have been one of those, but she wasn't.

What she was was Mr Donald Biderman's secretary at Home Town Real Estate, the company Bobby's dad had been working for when he had his heart attack. Bobby guessed she might first have gotten the job because Donald Biderman liked Randall and felt sorry for her — widowed with a son barely out of diapers — but she was good at it and worked hard. Quite often she worked late. Bobby had been with his mother and Mr Biderman together on a couple of occasions — the company picnic was the one he remembered most clearly, but there had also been the time Mr Biderman had driven them to the dentist's in Bridgeport when Bobby had gotten a tooth knocked out during a recess game — and the two grownups had a way of looking at each other. Sometimes Mr Biderman called her on the phone at night, and during those conversations she called him Don. But 'Don' was old and Bobby didn't think about him much.

Bobby wasn't exactly sure what his mom did during her days (and her evenings) at the office, but he bet it beat making shoes or picking apples or lighting the Tip-Top Bakery ovens at four-thirty in the morning. Bobby bet it beat those jobs all to heck and gone. Also, when it came to his mom, if you asked about certain stuff you were asking for trouble. If you asked, for instance, how come she could afford three new dresses from Sears, one of them silk, but not three monthly payments of \$11.50 on the Schwinn in the Western Auto window (it was red and silver, and just looking at it made Bobby's gut cramp with longing). Ask about stuff like that and you were asking for real trouble.

Bobby didn't. He simply set out to earn the price of the bike himself. It would take him until the fall, perhaps even until the winter, and that particular model might be gone from the Western Auto's window by then, but he would keep at it. You had to keep your nose to the grindstone and your shoulder to the wheel. Life wasn't easy, and life wasn't fair.

When Bobby's eleventh birthday rolled around on the last Tuesday of April, his mom gave him a small flat package wrapped in silver paper. Inside was an orange library card. An adult library card. Goodbye Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, and Don Winslow of the Navy. Hello to all the rest of it, stories as full of mysterious muddled passion as *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. Not to mention bloody daggers in tower rooms. (There were mysteries and tower rooms in the stories about Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys, but precious little blood and never any passion.)

'Just remember that Mrs Kelton on the desk is a friend of mine,' Mom said. She spoke in her accustomed dry tone of warning, but she was pleased by his pleasure — she could see it. 'If you try to borrow anything racy like *Peyton Place* or *Kings Row*, I'll find out.'

Bobby smiled. He knew she would.

'If it's that other one, Miss Busybody, and she asks what you're doing with an orange card, you tell her to turn it over. I've put written permission over my signature.'

'Thanks, Mom. This is swell.'

She smiled, bent, and put a quick dry swipe of the lips on his cheek, gone almost before it was there. 'I'm glad you're happy. If I get home early enough, we'll go to the Colony for fried clams and ice cream. You'll have to wait for the weekend for your cake; I don't have time to bake until then. Now put on your coat and get moving, sonnyboy. You'll be late for school.'

They went down the stairs and out onto the porch together. There was a Town Taxi at the curb. A man in a poplin jacket was leaning in the passenger window, paying the driver.

Behind him was a little cluster of luggage and paper bags, the kind with handles.

‘That must be the man who just rented the room on the third floor,’ Liz said. Her mouth had done its shrinking trick again. She stood on the top step of the porch, appraising the man’s narrow fanny, which poked toward them as he finished his business with the taxi driver. ‘I don’t trust people who move their things in paper bags. To me a person’s things in a paper sack just looks slutty?’

‘He has suitcases, too,’ Bobby said, but he didn’t need his mother to point out that the new tenant’s three little cases weren’t such of a much. None matched; all looked as if they had been kicked here from California by someone in a bad mood.

Bobby and his mom walked down the cement path. The Town Taxi pulled away. The man in the poplin jacket turned around. To Bobby, people fell into three broad categories: kids, grownups, and old folks. Old folks were grownups with white hair. The new tenant was of this third sort. His face was thin and tired-looking, not wrinkled (except around his faded blue eyes) but deeply lined. His white hair was baby-fine and receding from a liverspotted brow.

He was tall and stooped-over in a way that made Bobby think of Boris Karloff in the Shock Theater movies they showed Friday nights at 11:30 on WPIX. Beneath the poplin jacket were cheap workingman’s clothes that looked too big for him. On his feet were scuffed cordovan shoes.

‘Hello, folks,’ he said, and smiled with what looked like an effort. ‘My name’s Theodore Brautigan. I guess I’m going to live here awhile.’

He held out his hand to Bobby’s mother, who touched it just briefly. ‘I’m Elizabeth Garfield. This is my son, Robert. You’ll have to pardon us, Mr Brattigan — ‘

‘It’s Brautigan, ma’am, but I’d be happy if you and your boy would just call me Ted.’

‘Yes, well, Robert’s late for school and I’m late for work. Nice to meet you, Mr Brattigan.’

Hurry on, Bobby. Tempus fugit.'

She began walking downhill toward town; Bobby began walking uphill (and at a slower pace) toward Harwich Elementary, on Asher Avenue. Three or four steps into this journey he stopped and looked back. He felt that his mom had been rude to Mr Brautigan, that she had acted stuck-up. Being stuck-up was the worst of vices in his little circle of friends. Carol loathed a stuck-up person; so did Sully-John. Mr Brautigan would probably be halfway up the walk by now, but if he wasn't, Bobby wanted to give him a smile so he'd know at least one member of the Garfield family wasn't stuck-up.

His mother had also stopped and was also looking back. Not because she wanted another look at Mr Brautigan; that idea never crossed Bobby's mind. No, it was her son she had looked back at. She'd known he was going to turn around before Bobby knew it himself, and at this he felt a sudden darkening in his normally bright nature. She sometimes said it would be a snowy day in Sarasota before Bobby could put one over on her, and he supposed she was right about that. How old did you have to be to put one over on your mother, anyway?

Twenty? Thirty? Or did you maybe have to wait until she got old and a little chicken-soupy in the head?

Mr Brautigan hadn't started up the walk. He stood at its sidewalk end with a suitcase in each hand and the third one under his right arm (the three paper bags he had moved onto the grass of 149 Broad), more bent than ever under this weight. He was right between them, like a tollgate or something.

Liz Garfield's eyes flew past him to her son's. Go, they said. Don't say a word. He's new, a man from anywhere or nowhere, and he's arrived here with half his things in shopping bags. Don't say a word, Bobby, just go.

But he wouldn't. Perhaps because he had gotten a library card instead of a bike for his birthday. 'It was nice to meet you, Mr

Brautigan,' Bobby said. 'Hope you like it here. Bye.'

'Have a good day at school, son,' Mr Brautigan said. 'Learn a lot. Your mother's right —

tempus fugit.'

Bobby looked at his mother to see if his small rebellion might be forgiven in light of this equally small flattery, but Mom's mouth was unyielding. She turned and started down the hill without another word. Bobby went on his own way, glad he had spoken to the stranger even if his mother later made him regret it.

As he approached Carol Gerber's house, he took out the orange library card and looked at it. It wasn't a twenty-six-inch Schwinn, but it was still pretty good. Great, actually. A whole world of books to explore, and so what if it had only cost two or three rocks? Didn't they say it was the thought that counted?

Well ... it was what his mom said, anyway.

He turned the card over. Written on the back in her strong hand was this message: 'To whom it may concern: This is my son's library card. He has my permission to take out three books a week from the adult section of the Harwich Public Library.' It was signed Elizabeth Penrose Garfield.

Beneath her name, like a P.S., she had added this: Robert will be responsible for his own overdue fines.

'Birthday boy!' Carol Gerber cried, startling him, and rushed out from behind a tree where she had been lying in wait. She threw her arms around his neck and smacked him hard on the cheek. Bobby blushed, looking around to see if anyone was watching — God, it was hard enough to be friends with a girl without surprise kisses — but it was okay. The usual morning flood of students was moving schoolward along Asher Avenue at the top of the hill, but down here they were alone.

Bobby scrubbed at his cheek.

'Come on, you liked it,' she said, laughing.

'Did not,' said Bobby, although he had.

'What'd you get for your birthday?'

'A library card,' Bobby said, and showed her. 'An adult library card.'

'Cool!' Was that sympathy he saw in her eyes? Probably not. And so what if it was? 'Here.

For you.' She gave him a Hallmark envelope with his name printed on the front. She had also stuck on some hearts and teddy bears.

Bobby opened the envelope with mild trepidation, reminding himself that he could tuck the card deep into the back pocket of his chinos if it was gushy.

It wasn't, though. Maybe a little bit on the baby side (a kid in a Stetson on a horse, HAPPY

BIRTHDAY BUCKEROO in letters that were supposed to look like wood on the inside), but not gushy. Love, Carol was a little gushy, but of course she was a girl, what could you do?

'Thanks.'

'It's sort of a baby card, I know, but the others were even worse,' Carol said matter-of-factly. A little farther up the hill Sully-John was waiting for them, working his Bo-lo Bouncer for all it was worth, going under his right arm, going under his left arm, going behind his back. He didn't try going between his legs anymore; he'd tried it once in the schoolyard and rapped himself a good one in the nuts. Sully had screamed. Bobby and a couple of other kids had laughed until they cried. Carol and three of her girlfriends had rushed over to ask what was wrong, and the boys all said nothing — Sully-John said the same, although he'd been pale and almost crying. Boys are boogers,

Carol had said on that occasion, but Bobby didn't believe she really thought so. She wouldn't have jumped out and given him that kiss if she did, and it had been a good kiss, a smackeroo. Better than the one his mother had given him, actually.

'It's not a baby card,' he said.

'No, but it almost is,' she said. 'I thought about getting you a grownup card, but man, they are gushy.'

'I know,' Bobby said.

'Are you going to be a gushy adult, Bobby?'

'I hope not,' he said. 'Are you?'

'No. I'm going to be like my mom's friend Rionda.'

'Rionda's pretty fat,' Bobby said doubtfully.

'Yeah, but she's cool. I'm going to go for the cool without the fat.'

'There's a new guy moving into our building. The room on the third floor. My mom says it's really hot up there.'

'Yeah? What's he like?' She giggled. 'Is he ushy-gushy?'

'He's old,' Bobby said, then paused to think. 'But he had an interesting face. My mom didn't like him on sight because he had some of his stuff in shopping bags.'

Sully-John joined them. 'Happy birthday, you bastard,' he said, and clapped Bobby on the back. Bastard was Sully-John's current favorite word; Carol's was cool; Bobby was currently between favorite words, although he thought ripshit had a certain ring to it.

'If you swear, I won't walk with you,' Carol said.

‘Okay,’ Sully-John said companionably. Carol was a fluffy blonde who looked like a Bobbsey Twin after some growing up; John Sullivan was tall, black-haired, and green-eyed. A Joe Hardy kind of boy. Bobby Garfield walked between them, his momentary depression forgotten. It was his birthday and he was with his friends and life was good. He tucked Carol’s birthday card into his back pocket and his new library card down deep in his front pocket, where it could not fall out or be stolen. Carol started to skip. Sully-John told her to stop.

‘Why?’ Carol asked. ‘I like to skip.’

‘I like to say bastard, but I don’t if you ask me,’ Sully-John replied reasonably.

Carol looked at Bobby.

‘Skipping — at least without a rope — is a little on the baby side, Carol,’ Bobby said apologetically, then shrugged. ‘But you can if you want. We don’t mind, do we, S-J?’

‘Nope,’ Sully-John said, and got going with the Bo-lo Bouncer again. Back to front, up to down, whap-whap-whap.

Carol didn’t skip. She walked between them and pretended she was Bobby Garfield’s girlfriend, that Bobby had a driver’s license and a Buick and they were going to Bridgeport to see the WKBW Rock and Roll Extravaganza. She thought Bobby was extremely cool. The coolest thing about him was that he didn’t know it.

Bobby got home from school at three o’clock. He could have been there sooner, but picking up returnable bottles was part of his Get-a-Bike-by-Thanksgiving campaign, and he detoured through the brushy area just off Asher Avenue looking for them. He found three Rhenigolds and a Nehi. Not much, but hey, eight cents was eight cents. ‘It all mounts up’ was another of his mom’s sayings.

Bobby washed his hands (a couple of those bottles had been pretty scurgy), got a snack out of the icebox, read a couple of old Superman comics, got another snack out of the icebox, then watched American Bandstand. He called Carol to tell her Bobby Darin was going to be on — she thought Bobby Darin was deeply cool, especially the way he snapped his fingers when he sang ‘Queen of the Hop’ — but she already knew. She was watching with three or four of her numbskull girlfriends; they all giggled pretty much nonstop in the background. The sound made Bobby think of birds in a petshop. On TV, Dick Clark was currently showing how much pimple-grease just one StriDex Medicated Pad could sop up.

Mom called at four o’clock. Mr Biderman needed her to work late, she said. She was sorry, but birthday supper at the Colony was off. There was leftover beef stew in the fridge; he could have that and she would be home by eight to tuck him in. And for heaven’s sake, Bobby, remember to turn off the gas-ring when you’re done with the stove.

Bobby returned to the television feeling disappointed but not really surprised. On Bandstand, Dick was now announcing the Rate-a-Record panel. Bobby thought the guy in the middle looked as if he could use a lifetime supply of StriDex pads.

He reached into his front pocket and drew out the new orange library card. His mood began to brighten again. He didn’t need to sit here in front of the TV with a stack of old comic-books if he didn’t want to. He could go down to the library and break in his new card — his new adult card. Miss Busybody would be on the desk, only her real name was Miss Harrington and Bobby thought she was beautiful. She wore perfume. He could always smell it on her skin and in her hair, faint and sweet, like a good memory. And although Sully-John would be at his trombone lesson right now, after the library Bobby could go up his house, maybe play some pass.

Also, he thought, I can take those bottles to Spicer’s — I’ve got a bike to earn this summer.

All at once, life seemed very full.

Sully's mom invited Bobby to stay for supper, but he told her no thanks, I better get home. He would much have preferred Mrs Sullivan's pot roast and crispy oven potatoes to what was waiting for him back at the apartment, but he knew that one of the first things his mother would do when she got back from the office was check in the fridge and see if the Tupperware with the leftover stew inside was gone. If it wasn't, she would ask Bobby what he'd had for supper. She would be calm about this question, even offhand. If he told her he'd eaten at Sully-John's she would nod, ask him what they'd had and if there had been dessert, also if he'd thanked Mrs Sullivan; she might even sit on the couch with him and share a bowl of ice cream while they watched Sugarfoot on TV. Everything would be fine ... except it wouldn't be. Eventually there would be a payback. It might not come for a day or two, even a week, but it would come. Bobby knew that almost without knowing he knew it. She undoubtedly did have to work late, but eating leftover stew by himself on his birthday was also punishment for talking to the new tenant when he wasn't supposed to. If he tried to duck that punishment, it would mount up just like money in a savings account.

When Bobby came back from Sully-John's it was quarter past six and getting dark. He had two new books to read, a Perry Mason called The Case of the Velvet Claws and a science-fiction novel by Clifford Simak called Ring Around the Sun. Both looked totally ripshit, and Miss Harrington hadn't given him a hard time at all. On the contrary: she told him he was reading above his level and to keep it up.

Walking home from S-J's, Bobby made up a story where he and Miss Harrington were on a cruise-boat that sank. They were the only two survivors, saved from drowning by finding a life preserver marked SS LUSITANIC. They washed up on a little island with palm trees and jungles and a volcano, and as they lay on the beach Miss Harrington was shivering and saying she was cold, so cold, couldn't he please hold her and warm her up, which he of course could and

did, my pleasure, Miss Harrington, and then the natives came out of the jungle and at first they seemed friendly but it turned out they were cannibals who lived on the slopes of the volcano and killed their victims in a clearing ringed with skulls, so things looked bad but just as he and Miss Harrington were pulled toward the cooking pot the volcano started to rumble and —

‘Hello, Robert.’

Bobby looked up, even more startled than he’d been when Carol Gerber raced out from behind the tree to put a birthday smackeroo on his cheek. It was the new man in the house. He was sitting on the top porch step and smoking a cigarette. He had exchanged his old scuffed shoes for a pair of old scuffed slippers and had taken off his poplin jacket — the evening was warm. He looked at home, Bobby thought.

‘Oh, Mr Brautigan. Hi.’

‘I didn’t mean to startle you.’

‘You didn’t — ‘

‘I think I did. You were a thousand miles away. And it’s Ted. Please.’

‘Okay.’ But Bobby didn’t know if he could stick to Ted. Calling a grownup (especially an old grownup) by his first name went against not only his mother’s teaching but his own inclination.

‘Was school good? You learned new things?’

‘Yeah, fine.’ Bobby shifted from foot to foot; swapped his new books from hand to hand.

‘Would you sit with me a minute?’

‘Sure, but I can’t for long. Stuff to do, you know.’ Supper to do, mostly — the leftover stew had grown quite attractive in his mind by now.

‘Absolutely. Things to do and tempus fugit.’

As Bobby sat down next to Mr Brautigan — Ted — on the wide porch step, smelling the aroma of his Chesterfield, he thought he had never seen a man who looked as tired as this one. It couldn’t be the moving in, could it? How worn out could you get when all you had to move in was three little suitcases and three carryhandle shopping bags? Bobby supposed there might be men coming later on with stuff in a truck, but he didn’t really think so. It was just a room — a big one, but still just a single room with a kitchen on one side and everything else on the other. He and Sully-John had gone up there and looked around after old Miss Sidley had her stroke and went to live with her daughter.

‘Tempus fugit means time flies,’ Bobby said. ‘Mom says it a lot. She also says time and tide wait for no man and time heals all wounds.’

‘Your mother is a woman of many sayings, is she?’

‘Yeah,’ Bobby said, and suddenly the idea of all those sayings made him tired. ‘Many sayings.’

‘Ben Jonson called time the old bald cheater,’ Ted Brautigan said, drawing deeply on his cigarette and then exhaling twin streams through his nose. ‘And Boris Pasternak said we are time’s captives, the hostages of eternity.’

Bobby looked at him in fascination, his empty belly temporarily forgotten. He loved the idea of time as an old bald cheater — it was absolutely and completely right, although he couldn’t have said why ... and didn’t that very inability to say why somehow add to the coolness? It was like a thing inside an egg, or a shadow behind pebbled glass.

‘Who’s Ben Jonson?’

‘An Englishman, dead these many years,’ Mr Brautigan said. ‘Self-centered and foolish about money, by all accounts; prone to

flatulence as well. But — ‘

‘What’s that? Flatulence?’

Ted stuck his tongue between his lips and made a brief but very realistic farting sound.

Bobby put his hands to his mouth and giggled into his cupped fingers.

‘Kids think farts are funny,’ Ted Brautigan said, nodding. ‘Yeah. To a man my age, though, they’re just part of life’s increasingly strange business. Ben Jonson said a good many wise things between farts, by the way. Not so many as Dr Johnson — Samuel Johnson, that would be —

but still a good many.’

‘And Boris ... ‘

‘Pasternak. A Russian,’ Mr Brautigan said dismissively. ‘Of no account, I think. May I see your books?’

Bobby handed them over. Mr Brautigan (Ted, he reminded himself, you’re supposed to call him Ted) passed the Perry Mason back after a cursory glance at the tide. The Clifford Simak novel he held longer, at first squinting at the cover through the curls of cigarette smoke that rose past his eyes, then paging through it. He nodded as he did so.

‘I have read this one,’ he said. ‘I had a lot of time to read previous to coming here.’

‘Yeah?’ Bobby kindled. ‘Is it good?’

‘One of his best,’ Mr Brautigan — Ted — replied. He looked sideways at Bobby, one eye open, the other still squinted shut against the smoke. It gave him a look that was at once wise and mysterious, like a not-quite-trustworthy character in a detective

movie. 'But are you sure you can read this? You can't be much more than twelve.'

'I'm eleven,' Bobby said. He was delighted that Ted thought he might be as old as twelve.

'Eleven today. I can read it. I won't be able to understand it all, but if it's a good story, I'll like it.'

'Your birthday!' Ted said, looking impressed. He took a final drag on his cigarette, then flicked it away. It hit the cement walk and fountained sparks. 'Happy birthday dear Robert, happy birthday to you!'

'Thanks. Only I like Bobby a lot better.'

'Bobby, then. Are you going out to celebrate?'

'Nah, my mom's got to work late.'

'Would you like to come up to my little place? I don't have much, but I know how to open a can. Also, I might have a pastry —'

'Thanks, but Mom left me some stuff. I should eat that.'

'I understand.' And, wonder of wonders, he looked as if he actually did. Ted returned Bobby's copy of *Ring Around the Sun*. 'In this book,' he said, 'Mr Simak postulates the idea that there are a number of worlds like ours. Not other planets but other Earths, parallel Earths, in a kind of ring around the sun. A fascinating idea.'

'Yeah,' Bobby said. He knew about parallel worlds from other books. From the comics, as well.

Ted Brautigan was now looking at him in a thoughtful, speculative way.

'What?' Bobby asked, feeling suddenly self-conscious. See something green? his mother might have said.

For a moment he thought Ted wasn't going to answer — he seemed to have fallen into some deep and dazing train of thought. Then he gave himself a little shake and sat up straighter. 'Nothing,' he said. 'I have a little idea. Perhaps you'd like to earn some extra money? Not that I have much, but —'

'Yeah! Gripes, yeah!' There's this bike, he almost went on, then stopped himself. Best keep yourself to yourself was yet another of his mom's sayings. 'I'd do just about anything you wanted!'

Ted Brautigan looked simultaneously alarmed and amused. It seemed to open a door to a different face, somehow, and Bobby could see that, yeah, the old guy had once been a young guy. One with a little sass to him, maybe. 'That's a bad thing to tell a stranger,' he said, 'and although we've progressed to Bobby and Ted — a good start — we're still really strangers to each other.'

'Did either of those Johnson guys say anything about strangers?'

'Not that I recall, but here's something on the subject from the Bible: "For I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner. Spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence ..." Ted trailed off for a moment. The fun had gone out of his face and he looked old again. Then his voice firmed and he finished.' ... before I go hence, and be no more.' Book of Psalms. I can't remember which one.'

'Well,' Bobby said, 'I wouldn't kill or rob anyone, don't worry, but I'd sure like to earn some money.'

'Let me think,' Ted said. 'Let me think a little.'

'Sure. But if you've got chores or something, I'm your guy. Tell you that right now.'

'Chores? Maybe. Although that's not the word I would have chosen.' Ted clasped his bony arms around his even bonier knees and gazed across the lawn at Broad Street. It was growing dark now; Bobby's favorite part of the evening had arrived. The cars that passed had

their parking lights on, and from somewhere on Asher Avenue Mrs Sigsby was calling for her twins to come in and get their supper. At this time of day — and at dawn, as he stood in the bathroom, urinating into the bowl with sunshine falling through the little window and into his half-open eyes — Bobby felt like a dream in someone else's head.

'Where did you live before you came here, Mr ... Ted?'

'A place that wasn't as nice,' he said. 'Nowhere near as nice. How long have you lived here, Bobby?'

'Long as I can remember. Since my dad died, when I was three.'

'And you know everyone on the street? On this block of the street, anyway?'

'Pretty much, yeah.'

'You'd know strangers. Sojourners. Faces of those unknown.'

Bobby smiled and nodded. 'Uh-huh, I think so.'

He waited to see where this would lead next — it was interesting — but apparently this was as far as it went. Ted stood up, slowly and carefully. Bobby could hear little bones creak in his back when he put his hands around there and stretched, grimacing.

'Come on,' he said. 'It's getting chilly. I'll go in with you. Your key or mine?'

Bobby smiled. 'You better start breaking in your own, don't you think?'

Ted — it was getting easier to think of him as Ted — pulled a keyring from his pocket.

The only keys on it were the one which opened the big front door and the one to his room.

Both were shiny and new, the color of bandit gold. Bobby's own two keys were scratched and dull. How old was Ted? he wondered again. Sixty, at least. A sixty-year-old man with only two keys in his pocket. That was weird.

Ted opened the front door and they went into the big dark foyer with its umbrella stand and its old painting of Lewis and Clark looking out across the American West. Bobby went to the door of the Garfield apartment and Ted went to the stairs. He paused there for a moment with his hand on the bannister. 'The Simak book is a great story,' he said. 'Not such great writing, though. Not bad, I don't mean to say that, but take it from me, there is better.'

Bobby waited.

'There are also books full of great writing that don't have very good stories. Read sometimes for the story, Bobby. Don't be like the book-snobs who won't do that. Read sometimes for the words — the language. Don't be like the play-it-safers that won't do that. But when you find a book that has both a good story and good words, treasure that book.'

'Are there many of those, do you think?' Bobby asked.

'More than the book-snobs and play-it-safers think. Many more. Perhaps I'll give you one. A belated birthday present.'

'You don't have to do that.'

'No, but perhaps I will. And do have a happy birthday.'

'Thanks. It's been a great one.' Then Bobby went into the apartment, heated up the stew (remembering to turn off the gas-ring after the stew started to bubble, also remembering to put the pan in the sink to soak), and ate supper by himself, reading Ring Around the Sun with the TV on for company. He hardly heard Chet Huntley and David Brinkley gabbling the evening news. Ted was right about the

book; it was a corker. The words seemed okay to him, too, although he supposed he didn't have a lot of experience just yet.

I'd like to write a story like this, he thought as he finally closed the book and flopped down on the couch to watch Sugarfoot. I wonder if I ever could.

Maybe. Maybe so. Someone had to write stories, after all, just like someone had to fix the pipes when they froze or change the streetlights in Commonwealth Park when they burned out.

An hour or so later, after Bobby had picked up Ring Around the Sun and begun reading again, his mother came in. Her lipstick was a bit smeared at one corner of her mouth and her slip was hanging a little. Bobby thought of pointing this out to her, then remembered how much she disliked it when someone told her it was 'snowing down south.' Besides, what did it matter? Her working day was over and, as she sometimes said, there was no one here but us chickens.

She checked the fridge to make sure the leftover stew was gone, checked the stove to make sure the gas-ring was off, checked the sink to make sure the pot and the Tupperware storage container were both soaking in soapy water. Then she kissed him on the temple, just a brush in passing, and went into her bedroom to change out of her office dress and hose. She seemed distant, preoccupied. She didn't ask if he'd had a happy birthday.

Later on he showed her Carol's card. His mom glanced at it, not really seeing it, pronounced it 'cute,' and handed it back. Then she told him to wash up, brush up, and go to bed. Bobby did so, not mentioning his interesting talk with Ted. In her current mood that was apt to make her angry. The best thing was to let her be distant, let her keep to herself as long as she needed to, give her time to drift back to him. Yet he felt that sad mood settling over him again as he finished brushing his teeth and climbed into bed. Sometimes he felt almost hungry for her, and she didn't know.

He reached out of bed and closed the door, blocking off the sound of some old movie. He turned off the light. And then, just as he was starting to drift off, she came in, sat on the side of his bed, and said she was sorry she'd been so stand-offy tonight, but there had been a lot going on at the office and she was tired. Sometimes it was a madhouse, she said. She stroked a finger across his forehead and then kissed him there, making him shiver. He sat up and hugged her. She stiffened momentarily at his touch, then gave in to it. She even hugged him back briefly. He thought maybe it would now be all right to tell her about Ted. A little, anyway.

'I talked with Mr Brautigan when I came home from the library,' he said.

'Who?'

'The new man on the third floor. He asked me to call him Ted.'

'You won't — I should say nitzy! You don't know him from Adam.'

'He said giving a kid an adult library card was a great present.' Ted had said no such thing, but Bobby had lived with his mother long enough to know what worked and what didn't.

She relaxed a little. 'Did he say where he came from?'

'A place not as nice as here, I think he said.'

'Well, that doesn't tell us much, does it?' Bobby was still hugging her. He could have hugged her for another hour easily, smelling her White Rain shampoo and Aqua-Net hold-spray and the pleasant odor of tobacco on her breath, but she disengaged from him and laid him back down. 'I guess if he's going to be your friend — your adult friend — I'll have to get to know him a little.'

'Well — '

'Maybe I'll like him better when he doesn't have shopping bags scattered all over the lawn.'

For Liz Garfield this was downright placatory, and Bobby was satisfied. The day had come to a very acceptable ending after all. 'Goodnight, birthday boy.'

'Goodnight, Mom.'

She went out and closed the door. Later that night — much later — he thought he heard her crying in her room, but perhaps that was only a dream.

2

Doubts About Ted. Books Are Like Pumps.

Don't Even Think About It. Sully Wins

a Prize. Bobby Gets a Job. Signs of

the Low Men.

During the next few weeks, as the weather warmed toward summer, Ted was usually on the porch smoking when Liz came home from work. Sometimes he was alone and sometimes Bobby was sitting with him, talking about books. Sometimes Carol and Sully-John were there, too, the three kids playing pass on the lawn while Ted smoked and watched them throw. Sometimes other kids came by — Denny Rivers with a taped-up balsa glider to throw, soft-headed Francis Utterson, always pushing along on his scooter with one overdeveloped leg, Angela Avery and Yvonne Loving to ask Carol if she wanted to go over Yvonne's and play dolls or a game called Hospital Nurse — but mostly it was just S-J and Carol, Bobby's special friends. All the kids called Mr Brautigan Ted, but when Bobby explained why it would be better if they called him Mr Brautigan when his mom was around, Ted agreed at once.

As for his mom, she couldn't seem to get Brautigan to come out of her mouth. What emerged was always Brattigan. That might not have been on purpose, however; Bobby was starting to feel a cautious sense of relief about his mother's view of Ted. He had been afraid that she might feel about Ted as she had about Mrs Evers, his second-grade teacher. Mom had disliked Mrs Evers on sight, disliked her deeply, for no reason at all Bobby could see or understand, and hadn't had a good word to say about her all year long — Mrs Evers dressed like a frump, Mrs Evers dyed her hair, Mrs Evers wore too much makeup, Bobby had just better tell Mom if Mrs Evers laid so much as one finger on him, because she looked like the kind of

woman who would like to pinch and poke. All of this following a single parentteacher conference in which Mrs Evers had told Liz that Bobby was doing well in all his subjects. There had been four other parent —teacher conferences that year, and Bobby’s mother had found reasons to duck every single one.

Liz’s opinions of people hardened swiftly; when she wrote BAD under her mental picture of you, she almost always wrote in ink. If Mrs Evers had saved six kids from a burning schoolbus, Liz Garfield might well have sniffed and said they probably owed the pop-eyed old cow two weeks’ worth of milk-money.

Ted made every effort to be nice without actually sucking up to her (people did suck up to his mother, Bobby knew; hell, sometimes he did it himself), and it worked ... but only to a degree. On one occasion Ted and Bobby’s mom had talked for almost ten minutes about how awful it was that the Dodgers had moved to the other side of the country without so much as a faretheewell, but not even both of them being Ebbets Field Dodger fans could strike a real spark between them. They were never going to be pals. Mom didn’t dislike Ted Brautigan the way she had disliked Mrs Evers, but there was still something wrong. Bobby supposed he knew what it was; he had seen it in her eyes on the morning the new tenant had moved in. Liz didn’t trust him.

Nor, it turned out, did Carol Gerber. ‘Sometimes I wonder if he’s on the run from something,’ she said one evening as she and Bobby and S-J walked up the hill toward Asher Avenue.

They had been playing pass for an hour or so, talking off and on with Ted as they did, and were now heading to Moon’s Roadside Happiness for ice cream cones. S-J had thirty cents and was treating. He also had his Bo-lo-Bouncer, which he now took out of his back pocket.

Pretty soon he had it going up and down and all around, whap-whap-whap.

'On the run? Are you kidding?' Bobby was startled by the idea. Yet Carol was sharp about people; even his mother had noticed it. That girl's no beauty, but she doesn't miss much, she'd said one night.

"Stick em up, McGarrigle!" Sully-John cried. He tucked his Bo-lo Bouncer under his arm, dropped into a crouch, and fired an invisible tommygun, yanking down the right side of his mouth so he could make the proper sound to go with it, a kind of eh-eh-eh from deep in his throat. "You'll never take me alive, copper! Blast em, Muggsy! Nobody runs out on Rico!

Ah, jeez, they got me!" S-J clutched his chest, spun around, and fell dead on Mrs Conlan's lawn.

That lady, a grumpy old rhymes-with-witch of seventy-five or so, cried: 'Boy! Touuu, boy!

Get off there! You'll mash my flowers!

There wasn't a flowerbed within ten feet of where Sully-John had fallen, but he leaped up at once. 'Sorry, Mrs Conlan.'

She flapped a hand at him, dismissing his apology without a word, and watched closely as the children went on their way.

'You don't really mean it, do you?' Bobby asked Carol. 'About Ted?'

'No,' she said, 'I guess not. But ... have you ever watched him watch the street?'

'Yeah. It's like he's looking for someone, isn't it?'

'Or looking out for them,' Carol replied.

Sully-John resumed Bo-lo Bouncing. Pretty soon the red rubber ball was blurring back and forth again. Sully paused only when they passed the Asher Empire, where two Brigitte Bardot movies were playing, Adults Only, Must Have Driver's License or Birth Certificate, No Exceptions. One of the pictures was new; the other was that old

standby And God Created Woman, which kept coming back to the Empire like a bad cough. On the posters, Brigitte was dressed in nothing but a towel and a smile.

‘My mom says she’s trashy,’ Carol said.

‘If she’s trash, I’d love to be the trashman,’ S-J said, and wiggled his eyebrows like Groucho.

‘Dojyow think she’s trashy?’ Bobby asked Carol.

‘I’m not sure what that means, even.’

As they passed out from under the marquee (from within her glass ticket-booth beside the doors, Mrs Godlow — known to the neighborhood kids as Mrs Godzilla — watched them suspiciously), Carol looked back over her shoulder at Brigitte Bardot in her towel. Her expression was hard to read. Curiosity? Bobby couldn’t tell. ‘But she’s pretty, isn’t she?’

‘Yeah, I guess.’

‘And you’d have to be brave to let people look at you with nothing on but a towel. That’s what I think, anyway.’

Sully-John had no interest in la femme Brigitte now that she was behind them. ‘Where’d Ted come from, Bobby?’

‘I don’t know. He never talks about that.’

Sully-John nodded as if he expected just that answer, and threw his Bo-lo Bouncer back into gear. Up and down, all around, whap-whap-whap.

In May Bobby’s thoughts began turning to summer vacation. There was really nothing in the world better than what Sully called ‘the Big Vac.’ He would spend long hours goofing with his friends, both on Broad Street and down at Sterling House on the other side of the park —

they had lots of good things to do in the summer at Sterling House, including baseball and weekly trips to Patagonia Beach in West Haven — and he would also have plenty of time for himself. Time to read, of course, but what he really wanted to do with some of that time was find a part-time job. He had a little over seven rocks in a jar marked BIKE FUND, and seven rocks was a start ... but not what you'd call a great start. At this rate Nixon would have been President two years before he was riding to school.

On one of these vacation's-almost-here days, Ted gave him a paperback book. 'Remember I told you that some books have both a good story and good writing?' he asked. 'This is one of that breed. A belated birthday present from a new friend. At least I hope I am your friend.'

'You are. Thanks a lot!' In spite of the enthusiasm in his voice, Bobby took the book a little doubtfully. He was accustomed to pocket books with bright, raucous covers and sexy come-on lines ('She hit the gutter ... AND BOUNCED LOWER!'); this one had neither. The cover was mostly white. In one corner of it was sketched — barely sketched — a group of boys standing in a circle. The name of the book was *Lord of the Flies*. There was no come-on line above the title, not even a discreet one like 'A story you will never forget.' All in all, it had a forbidding, unwelcoming look, suggesting that the story lying beneath the cover would be hard. Bobby had nothing in particular against hard books, as long as they were a part of one's schoolwork. His view about reading for pleasure, however, was that such stories should be easy — that the writer should do everything except move your eyes back and forth for you. If not, how much pleasure could there be in it?

He started to turn the book over. Ted gently put his hand on Bobby's, stopping him. 'Don't,'

he said. 'As a personal favor to me, don't.'

Bobby looked at him, not understanding.

'Come to the book as you would come to an unexplored land. Come without a map.

Explore it and draw your own map.'

'But what if I don't like it?'

Ted shrugged. 'Then don't finish it. A book is like a pump. It gives nothing unless first you give to it. You prime a pump with your own water, you work the handle with your own strength. You do this because you expect to get back more than you give ... eventually. Do you go along with that?'

Bobby nodded.

'How long would you prime a water-pump and flail the handle if nothing came out?'

'Not too long, I guess.'

'This book is two hundred pages, give or take. You read the first ten per cent — twenty pages, that is, I know already your math isn't as good as your reading — and if you don't like it by then, if it isn't giving more than it's taking by then, put it aside.'

'I wish they'd let you do that in school,' Bobby said. He was thinking of a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson which they were supposed to memorize. 'By the rude bridge that arched the flood,' it started. S-J called the poet Ralph Waldo Emerslop.

'School is different.' They were sitting at Ted's kitchen table, looking out over the back yard, where everything was in bloom. On Colony Street, which was the next street over, Mrs O'Hara's dog Bowser barked its endless rooproop-roop into the mild spring air. Ted was smoking a Chesterfield. 'And speaking of school, don't take this book there with you. There are things in it your teacher might not want you to read. There could be a brouhaha.'

'A what?'

'An uproar. And if you get in trouble at school, you get in trouble at home — this I'm sure you don't need me to tell you. And your mother ... ' The hand not holding the cigarette made a little seesawing gesture which Bobby understood at once. Your mother doesn't trust me.

Bobby thought of Carol saying that maybe Ted was on the run from something, and remembered his mother saying Carol didn't miss much.

'What's in it that could get me in trouble?' He looked at Lord of the Flies with new fascination.

'Nothing to froth at the mouth about,' Ted said dryly. He crushed his cigarette out in a tin ashtray, went to his little refrigerator, and took out two bottles of pop. There was no beer or wine in there, just pop and a glass bottle of cream. 'Some talk of putting a spear up a wild pig's ass, I think that's the worst. Still, there is a certain kind of grownup who can only see the trees and never the forest. Read the first twenty pages, Bobby. You'll never look back. This I promise you.'

Ted set the pop down on the table and lifted the caps with his churchkey. Then he lifted his bottle and clinked it against Bobby's. 'To your new friends on the island.'

'What island?'

Ted Brautigan smiled and shot the last cigarette out of a crumpled pack. 'You'll find out,'

he said.

Bobby did find out, and it didn't take him twenty pages to also find out that Lord of the Flies was a hell of a book, maybe the best he'd ever read. Ten pages into it he was captivated; twenty pages and he was lost. He lived on the island with Ralph and Jack and Piggy and

the littluns; he trembled at the Beast that turned out to be a rotting airplane pilot caught in his parachute; he watched first in dismay and then in horror as a bunch of harmless schoolboys descended into savagery, finally setting out to hunt down the only one of their number who had managed to remain halfway human.

He finished the book one Saturday the week before school ended for the year. When noon came and Bobby was still in his room — no friends over to play, no Saturday-morning cartoons, not even Merrie Melodies from ten to eleven — his mom looked in on him and told him to get off his bed, get his nose out of that book, and go on down to the park or something.

‘Where’s Sully?’ she asked.

‘Dalhouse Square. There’s a school band concert.’ Bobby looked at his mother in the doorway and the ordinary stuff around her with dazed, perplexed eyes. The world of the story had become so vivid to him that this real one now seemed false and drab.

‘What about your girlfriend? Take her down to the park with you.’

‘Carol’s not my girlfriend, Mom.’

‘Well, whatever she is. Goodness sakes, Bobby, I wasn’t suggesting the two of you were going to run off and elope.’

‘She and some other girls slept over Angle’s house last night. Carol says when they sleep over they stay up and hen-party practically all night long. I bet they’re still in bed, or eating breakfast for lunch.’

‘Then go to the park by yourself. You’re making me nervous. With the TV off on Saturday morning I keep thinking you’re dead.’ She came into his room and plucked the book out of his hands. Bobby watched with a kind of numb fascination as she thumbed through the pages, reading random snatches here and there. Suppose she spotted the part where the boys talked about sticking their spears up the wild pig’s ass (only they were English and said ‘arse,’ which

sounded even dirtier to Bobby)? What would she make of it? He didn't know. All his life they had lived together, it had been just the two of them for most of it, and he still couldn't predict how she'd react to any given situation.

'Is this the one Brattigan gave you?'

'Yeah.'

'As a birthday present?'

'Yeah.'

'What's it about?'

'Boys marooned on an island. Their ship gets sunk. I think it's supposed to be after World War II or something. The guy who wrote it never says for sure.'

'So it's science fiction.'

'Yeah,' Bobby said. He felt a little giddy. He thought *Lord of the Flies* was about as far from *Ring Around the Sun* as you could get, but his mom hated science fiction, and if anything would stop her potentially dangerous thumbing, that would.

She handed the book back and walked over to his window. 'Bobby?' Not looking back at him, at least not at first. She was wearing an old shirt and her Saturday pants. The bright noonlight shone through the shirt; he could see her sides and noticed for the first time how thin she was, as if she was forgetting to eat or something. 'What, Mom?'

'Has Mr Brattigan given you any other presents?'

'It's Brautigan, Mom.'

She frowned at her reflection in the window ... or more likely it was his reflection she was frowning at. 'Don't correct me, Bobby-O. Has he?'

Bobby considered. A few rootbeers, sometimes a tuna sandwich or a cruller from the bakery where Sully's mom worked, but no presents. Just the book, which was one of the best presents he had ever gotten. 'Jeepers, no, why would he?'

'I don't know. But then, I don't know why a man you just met would give you a birthday present in the first place.' She sighed, folded her arms under her small sharp breasts, and went on looking out Bobby's window. 'He told me he used to work in a state job up in Hartford but now he's retired. Is that what he told you?'

'Something like that.' In fact, Ted had never told Bobby anything about his working life, and asking had never crossed Bobby's mind.

'What kind of state job? What department? Health and Welfare? Transportation? Office of the Comptroller?'

Bobby shook his head. What in heck was a comptroller?

'I bet it was education,' she said meditatively. 'He talks like someone who used to be a teacher. Doesn't he?'

'Sort of, yeah.'

'Does he have hobbies?'

'I don't know.' There was reading, of course; two of the three bags which had so offended his mother were full of paperback books, most of which looked very hard.

The fact that Bobby knew nothing of the new man's pastimes for some reason seemed to ease her mind. She shrugged, and when she spoke again it seemed to be to herself rather than to Bobby. 'Shoot, it's only a book. And a paperback, at that.'

'He said he might have a job for me, but so far he hasn't come up with anything.'

She turned around fast. 'Any job he offers you, any chores he asks you to do, you talk to me about it first. Got that?'

'Sure, got it.' Her intensity surprised him and made him a little uneasy.

'Promise.'

'I promise.'

'Big promise, Bobby.'

He dutifully crossed his heart and said, 'I promise my mother in the name of God.'

That usually finished things, but this time she didn't look satisfied.

'Has he ever ... does he ever ... ' There she stopped, looking uncharacteristically flustered. Kids sometimes looked that way when Mrs Bramwell sent them to the blackboard to pick the nouns and verbs out of a sentence and they couldn't.

'Has he ever what, Mom?'

'Never mind!' she said crossly. 'Get out of here, Bobby, go to the park or Sterling House, I'm tired of looking at you.'

Why'd you come in, then? he thought (but of course did not say). I wasn't bothering you, Mom. I wasn't bothering you.

Bobby tucked Lord of the Flies into his back pocket and headed for the door. He turned back when he got there. She was still at the window, but now she was watching him again.

He never surprised love on her face at such moments; at best he might see a kind of speculation, sometimes (but not always) affectionate.

‘Hey, Mom?’ He was thinking of asking for fifty cents — half a rock. With that he could buy a soda and two hotdogs at the Colony Diner. He loved the Colony’s hotdogs, which came in toasted buns with potato chips and pickle slices on the side.

Her mouth did its tightening trick, and he knew this wasn’t his day for hotdogs. ‘Don’t ask, Bobby, don’t even think about it.’ Don’t even think about it — one of her all-time faves. ‘I have a ton of bills this week, so get those dollar-signs out of your eyes.’

She didn’t have a ton of bills, though, that was the thing. Not this week she didn’t. Bobby had seen both the electric bill and the check for the rent in its envelope marked Mr Monteleone last Wednesday. And she couldn’t claim he would soon need clothes because this was the end of the school-year, not the beginning. The only dough he’d asked for lately was five bucks for Sterling House — quarterly dues — and she had even been chintzy about that, although she knew it covered swimming and Wolves and Lions Baseball, plus the insurance.

If it had been anyone but his mom, he would have thought of this as cheapskate behavior. He couldn’t say anything about it to her, though; talking to her about money almost always turned into an argument, and disputing any part of her view on money matters, even in the most tiny particulars, was apt to send her into ranting hysterics. When she got like that she was scary.

Bobby smiled. ‘It’s okay, Mom.’

She smiled back and then nodded to the jar marked Bike Fund. ‘Borrow a little from there, why don’t you? Treat yourself. I’ll never tell, and you can always put it back later.’

He held onto his smile, but only with an effort. How easily she said that, never thinking of how furious she’d be if Bobby suggested she borrow a little from the electric money, or the phone money, or what she set aside to buy her ‘business clothes,’ just so he could get a couple of hotdogs and maybe a pie a la mode at the Colony. If he

told her breezily that he'd never tell and she could always put it back later. Yeah, sure, and get his face smacked.

By the time he got to Commonwealth Park, Bobby's resentment had faded and the word cheapskate had left his brain. It was a beautiful day and he had a terrific book to finish; how could you be resentful and pissed off with stuff like that going for you? He found a secluded bench and reopened *Lord of the Flies*. He had to finish it today, had to find out what happened.

The last forty pages took him an hour, and during that time he was oblivious to everything around him. When he finally closed the book, he saw he had a lapful of little white flowers.

His hair was full of them, too — he'd been sitting unaware in a storm of apple-blossoms.

He brushed them away, looking toward the playground as he did. Kids were teetering and swinging and batting the tetherball around its pole. Laughing, chasing each other, rolling in the grass. Could kids like that ever wind up going naked and worshipping a rotting pig's head? It was tempting to dismiss such ideas as the imaginings of a grownup who didn't like kids (there were lots who didn't, Bobby knew), but then Bobby glanced into the sandbox and saw a little boy sitting there and wailing as if his heart would break while another, bigger kid sat beside him, unconcernedly playing with the Tonka truck he had yanked out of his friend's hands.

And the book's ending — happy or not? Crazy as such a thing would have seemed a month ago, Bobby couldn't really tell. Never in his life had he read a book where he didn't know if the ending was good or bad, happy or sad. Ted would know, though. He would ask Ted.

Bobby was still on the bench fifteen minutes later when Sully came bopping into the park and saw him. 'Say there, you old bastard!' Sully exclaimed. 'I went by your house and your mom said you were down here, or maybe at Sterling House. Finally finish that book?'

‘Yeah.’

‘Was it good?’

‘Yeah.’

S-J shook his head. ‘I never met a book I really liked, but I’ll take your word for it.’

‘How was the concert?’

Sully shrugged. ‘We blew til everyone went away, so I guess it was good for us, anyway.’

And guess who won the week at Camp Winiwinaia?’ Camp Winnie was the YMCA’s co-ed camp on Lake George, up in the woods north of Storrs. Each year HAC — the Harwich Activities Committee — had a drawing and gave away a week there.

Bobby felt a stab of jealousy. ‘Don’t tell me.’

Sully-John grinned. ‘Yeah, man! Seventy names in the hat, seventy at least, and the one that bald old bastard Mr Coughlin pulled out was John L. Sullivan, Junior, 93 Broad Street.’

My mother just about weewee’d her pants.’

‘When do you go?’

‘Two weeks after school lets out. Mom’s gonna try and get her week off from the bakery at the same time, so she can go see Gramma and Grampy in Wisconsin. She’s gonna take the Big Gray Dog.’ The Big Vac was summer vacation; the Big Shew was Ed Sullivan on Sunday night; the Big Gray Dog was, of course, a Greyhound bus. The local depot was just up the street from the Asher Empire and the Colony Diner.

‘Don’t you wish you could go to Wisconsin with her?’ Bobby asked, feeling a perverse desire to spoil his friend’s happiness at his good

fortune just a little.

‘Sorta, but I’d rather go to camp and shoot arrows.’ He slung an arm around Bobby’s shoulders. ‘I only wish you could come with me, you book-reading bastard.’

That made Bobby feel mean-spirited. He looked down at Lord of the Flies again and knew he would be rereading it soon. Perhaps as early as August, if things got boring (by August they usually did, as hard as that was to believe in May). Then he looked up at Sully-John, smiled, and put his arm around S-J’s shoulders. ‘Well, you’re a lucky duck,’ he said.

‘Just call me Donald,’ Sully-John agreed.

They sat on the bench that way for a little while, arms around each other’s shoulders in those intermittent showers of apple-blossoms, watching the little kids play. Then Sully said he was going to the Saturday matinee at the Empire, and he’d better get moving if he didn’t want to miss the previews.

‘Why don’t you come, Bobborino? The Black Scorpion’s playing. Monsters galore throughout the store.’

‘Can’t, I’m broke,’ Bobby said. This was the truth (if you excluded the seven dollars in the Bike Fund jar, that was) and he didn’t want to go to the movies today anyhow, even though he’d heard a kid at school say The Black Scorpion was really great, the scorpions poked their stingers right through people when they killed them and also mashed Mexico City flat.

What Bobby wanted to do was go back to the house and talk to Ted about Lord of the Flies.

‘Broke,’ Sully said sadly. ‘That’s a sad fact, Jack. I’d pay your way, but I’ve only got thirtyfive cents myself.’

‘Don’t sweat it. Hey — where’s your Bo-lo Bouncer?’

Sully looked sadder than ever. 'Rubber band snapped. Gone to Bolo Heaven, I guess.'

Bobby snickered. Bolo Heaven, that was a pretty funny idea. 'Gonna buy a new one?'

'I doubt it. There's a magic kit in Woolworth's that I want. Sixty different tricks, it says on the box. I wouldn't mind being a magician when I grow up, Bobby, you know it? Travel around with a carnival or a circus, wear a black suit and a top hat. I'd pull rabbits and shit out of the hat.'

'The rabbits would probably shit in your hat,' Bobby said.

Sully grinned. 'But I'd be a cool bastard! Wouldn't I love to be! At anything!' He got up.

'Sure you don't want to come along? You could probably sneak in past Godzilla.'

Hundreds of kids showed up for the Saturday shows at the Empire, which usually consisted of a creature feature, eight or nine cartoons, Previews of Coming Attractions, and the MovieTone News. Mrs Godlow went nuts trying to get them to stand in line and shut up, not understanding that on Saturday afternoon you couldn't get even basically well-behaved kids to act like they were in school. She was also obsessed by the conviction that dozens of kids over twelve were trying to enter at the under-twelve rate; Mrs G. would have demanded a birth certificate for the Saturday matinees as well as the Brigitte Bardot double features, had she been allowed. Lacking the authority to do that, she settled for barking 'WHATYEARABORN?' to any kid over five and a half feet tall. With all that going on you could sometimes sneak past her quite easily, and there was no ticket-ripper on Saturday afternoons. But Bobby didn't want giant scorpions today; he had spent the last week with more realistic monsters, many of whom had probably looked pretty much like him.

'Nah, I think I'll just hang around,' Bobby said.

‘Okay.’ Sully-John scrummed a few apple-blossoms out of his black hair, then looked solemnly at Bobby. ‘Call me a cool bastard, Big Bob.’

‘Sully, you’re one cool bastard.’

‘Yes!’ Sully-John leaped skyward, punching at the air and laughing. ‘Yes I am! A cool bastard today! A great big cool bastard of a magician tomorrow! Pow!’

Bobby collapsed against the back of the bench, legs outstretched, sneakers toed in, laughing hard. S-J was just so funny when he got going.

Sully started away, then turned back. ‘Man, you know what? I saw a couple of weird guys when I came into the park.’

‘What was weird about them?’

Sully-John shook his head, looking puzzled. ‘Don’t know,’ he said. ‘Don’t really know.’

Then he headed off, singing ‘At the Hop’. It was one of his favorites. Bobby liked it, too.

Danny and the Juniors were great.

Bobby opened the paperback Ted had given him (it was now looking exceedingly wellthumbed) and read the last couple of pages again, the part where the adults finally showed up.

He began to ponder it again — happy or sad? — and Sully-John slipped from his mind. It occurred to him later that if S-J had happened to mention that the weird guys he’d seen were wearing yellow coats, some things might have been quite different later on.

‘William Golding wrote an interesting thing about that book, one which I think speaks to your concern about the ending ... want another pop, Bobby?’

Bobby shook his head and said no thanks. He didn't like rootbeer all that much; he mostly drank it out of politeness when he was with Ted. They were sitting at Ted's kitchen table again, Mrs O'Hara's dog was still barking (so far as Bobby could tell, Bowser never stopped barking), and Ted was still smoking Chesterfields. Bobby had peeked in at his mother when he came back from the park, saw she was napping on her bed, and then had hastened up to the third floor to ask Ted about the ending of *Lord of the Flies*.

Ted crossed to the refrigerator ... and then stopped, standing there with his hand on the fridge door, staring off into space. Bobby would realize later that this was his first clear glimpse of something about Ted that wasn't right; that was in fact wrong and going wronger all the time.

'One feels them first in the back of one's eyes,' he said in a conversational tone. He spoke clearly; Bobby heard every word.

'Feels what?'

'One feels them first in the back of one's eyes.' Still staring into space with one hand curled around the handle of the refrigerator, and Bobby began to feel frightened. There seemed to be something in the air, something almost like pollen — it made the hairs inside his nose tingle, made the backs of his hands itch.

Then Ted opened the fridge door and bent in. 'Sure you don't want one?' he asked. 'It's good and cold.'

'No ... no, that's okay.'

Ted came back to the table, and Bobby understood that he had either decided to ignore what had just happened, or didn't remember it. He also understood that Ted was okay now, and that was good enough for Bobby. Grownups were weird, that was all. Sometimes you just had to ignore the stuff they did.

'Tell me what he said about the ending. Mr Golding.'

‘As best as I can remember, it was something like this: “The boys are rescued by the crew of a battlecruiser, and that is very well for them, but who will rescue the crew?”’ Ted poured himself a glass of rootbeer, waited for the foam to subside, then poured a little more. ‘Does that help?’

Bobby turned it over in his mind the way he would a riddle. Hell, it was a riddle. ‘No,’ he said at last. ‘I still don’t understand. They don’t need to be rescued — the crew of the boat, I mean — because they’re not on the island. Also ...’ He thought of the kids in the sandbox, one of them bawling his eyes out while the other played placidly with the stolen toy. ‘The guys on the cruiser are grownups. Grownups don’t need to be rescued.’

‘No?’

‘No.’

‘Never?’

Bobby suddenly thought of his mother and how she was about money. Then he remembered the night he had awakened and thought he heard her crying. He didn’t answer.

‘Consider it,’ Ted said. He drew deeply on his cigarette, then blew out a plume of smoke.

‘Good books are for consideration after, too.’

‘Okay.’

”Lord of the Flies wasn’t much like the Hardy Boys, was it?’

Bobby had a momentary image, very clear, of Frank and Joe Hardy running through the jungle with homemade spears, chanting that they’d kill the pig and stick their spears up her arse. He burst out laughing, and as Ted joined him he knew that he was done with the Hardy Boys, Tom Swift, Rick Brant, and Bomba the Jungle Boy. Lord

of the Flies had finished them off. He was very glad he had an adult library card.

‘No,’ he said, ‘it sure wasn’t.’

‘And good books don’t give up all their secrets at once. Will you remember that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Terrific. Now tell me — would you like to earn a dollar a week from me?’

The change of direction was so abrupt that for a moment Bobby couldn’t follow it. Then he grinned and said, ‘Gripes, yes!’ Figures ran dizzily through his mind; Bobby was good enough at math to figure out a dollar a week added up to at least fifteen bucks by September. Put with what he already had, plus a reasonable harvest of returnable bottles and some summer lawnmowing jobs on the street ... jeepers, he might be riding a Schwinn by Labor Day. ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘We have to be careful about that. Quite careful.’ Ted meditated quietly and for so long Bobby began to be afraid he was going to start talking about feeling stuff in the backs of his eyes again. But when Ted looked up there was none of that strange emptiness in his gaze. His eyes were sharp, if a little rueful. ‘I would never ask a friend of mine — especially a young friend — to lie to his parents, Bobby, but in this case I’m going to ask you to join me in a little misdirection. Do you know what that is?’

‘Sure.’ Bobby thought about Sully and his new ambition to travel around with the circus, wearing a black suit and pulling rabbits out of his hat. ‘It’s what the magician does to fool you.’

‘Doesn’t sound very nice when you put it that way, does it?’

Bobby shook his head. No, take away the spangles and the spotlights and it didn't sound very nice at all.

Ted drank a little rootbeer and wiped foam from his upper lip. 'Your mother, Bobby. She doesn't quite dislike me, I don't think it would be fair to say that ... but I think she almost dislikes me. Do you agree?'

'I guess. When I told her you might have a job for me, she got weird about it. Said I had to tell her about anything you wanted me to do before I could do it.'

Ted Brautigan nodded.

'I think it all comes back to you having some of your stuff in paper bags when you moved in. I know that sounds nuts, but it's all I can figure.'

He thought Ted might laugh, but he only nodded again. 'Perhaps that's all it is. In any case, Bobby, I wouldn't want you to go against your mother's wishes.'

That sounded good but Bobby Garfield didn't entirely believe it. If it was really true, there'd be no need for misdirection.

'Tell your mother that my eyes now grow tired quite easily. It's the truth.' As if to prove it, Ted raised his right hand to his eyes and massaged the corners with his thumb and forefinger.

'Tell her I'd like to hire you to read bits of the newspaper to me each day, and for this I will pay you a dollar a week — what your friend Sully calls a rock?'

Bobby nodded ... but a buck a week for reading about how Kennedy was doing in the primaries and whether or not Floyd Patterson would win in June? With maybe Blondie and Dick Tracy thrown in for good measure? His mom or Mr Biderman down at Home Town Real Estate might believe that, but Bobby didn't.

Ted was still rubbing his eyes, his hand hovering over his narrow nose like a spider.

‘What else?’ Bobby asked. His voice came out sounding strangely flat, like his mom’s voice when he’d promised to pick up his room and she came in at the end of the day to find the job still undone. ‘What’s the real job?’

‘I want you to keep your eyes open, that’s all,’ Ted said.

‘For what?’

‘Low men in yellow coats.’ Ted’s fingers were still working the corners of his eyes. Bobby wished he’d stop; there was something creepy about it. Did he feel something behind them, was that why he kept rubbing and kneading that way? Something that broke his attention, interfered with his normally sane and well-ordered way of thinking?

‘Lo mein?’ It was what his mother ordered on the occasions when they went out to Sing Lu’s on Barnum Avenue. Lo mein in yellow coats made no sense, but it was all he could think of.

Ted laughed, a sunny, genuine laugh that made Bobby aware of just how uneasy he’d been.

‘Low men,’ Ted said. ‘I use “low” in the Dickensian sense, meaning fellows who look rather stupid ... and rather dangerous as well. The sort of men who’d shoot craps in an alley, let’s say, and pass around a bottle of liquor in a paper bag during the game. The sort who lean against telephone poles and whistle at women walking by on the other side of the street while they mop the backs of their necks with handkerchiefs that are never quite clean. Men who think hats with feathers in the brims are sophisticated. Men who look like they know all the right answers to all of life’s stupid questions. I’m not being terribly clear, am I? Is any of this getting through to you, is any of it ringing a bell?’

Yeah, it was. In a way it was like hearing time described as the old bald cheater: a sense that the word or phrase was exactly right even though you couldn't say just why. It reminded him of how Mr Biderman always looked unshaven even when you could still smell sweet aftershave drying on his cheeks, the way you somehow knew Mr Biderman would pick his nose when he was alone in his car or check the coin return of any pay telephone he walked past without even thinking about it.

'I get you,' he said.

'Good. I'd never in a hundred lifetimes ask you to speak to such men, or even approach them. But I would ask you to keep an eye out, make a circuit of the block once a day —

Broad Street, Commonwealth Street, Colony Street, Asher Avenue, then back here to 149 —

and just see what you see.'

It was starting to fit together in Bobby's mind. On his birthday — which had also been Ted's first day at 149 — Ted had asked him if he knew everyone on the street, if he would recognize

(sojourners faces of those unknown)

strangers, if any strangers showed up. Not three weeks later Carol Gerber had made her comment about wondering sometimes if Ted was on the run from something.

'How many guys are there?' he asked.

'Three, five, perhaps more by now.' Ted shrugged. 'You'll know them by their long yellow coats and olive skin ... although that darkish skin is just a disguise.'

'What ... you mean like Man-Tan, or something?'

'I suppose, yes. If they're driving, you'll know them by their cars.'

‘What makes? What models?’ Bobby felt like Barren McGavin on Mike Hammer and warned himself not to get carried away. This wasn’t TV. Still, it was exciting.

Ted was shaking his head. ‘I have no idea. But you’ll know just the same, because their cars will be like their yellow coats and sharp shoes and the greasy perfumed stuff they use to slick back their hair: loud and vulgar.’

‘Low,’ Bobby said — it was not quite a question.

‘Low,’ Ted repeated, and nodded emphatically. He sipped rootbeer, looked away toward the sound of the eternally barking Bowser ... and remained that way for several moments, like a toy with a broken spring or a machine that has run out of gas. ‘They sense me,’ he said.

‘And I sense them, as well. Ah, what a world.’

‘What do they want?’

Ted turned back to him, appearing startled. It was as if he had forgotten Bobby was there . . .

. . . or had forgotten for a moment just who Bobby was. Then he smiled and reached out and put his hand over Bobby’s. It was big and warm and comforting; a man’s hand. At the feel of it Bobby’s half-hearted reservations disappeared.

‘A certain something I happen to have,’ Ted said. ‘Let’s leave it at that.’

‘They’re not cops, are they? Or government guys? Or — ‘

‘Are you asking if I’m one of the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted, or a communist agent like on /

Led Three Lives? A bad guy?’

'I know you're not a bad guy,' Bobby said, but the flush mounting into his cheeks suggested otherwise. Not that what he thought changed much. You could like or even love a bad guy; even Hider had a mother, his own mom liked to say.

'I'm not a bad guy. Never robbed a bank or stole a military secret. I've spent too much of my life reading books and scamped on my share of fines — if there were Library Police, I'm afraid they'd be after me — but I'm not a bad guy like the ones you see on television.'

'The men in yellow coats are, though.'

Ted nodded. 'Bad through and through. And, as I say, dangerous.'

'Have you seen them?'

'Many times, but not here. And the chances are ninety-nine in a hundred that you won't, either. All I ask is that you keep an eye out for them. Could you do that?'

'Yes.'

'Bobby? Is there a problem?'

'No.' Yet something nagged at him for a moment — not a connection, only a momentary sense of groping toward one.

'Are you sure?'

'Uh-huh.'

'All right. Now, here is the question: could you in good conscience — in fair conscience, at least — neglect to mention this part of your duty to your mother?'

'Yes,' Bobby said at once, although he understood doing such a thing would mark a large change in his life ... and would be risky. He was more than a little afraid of his mom, and this fear was only partly

caused by how angry she could get and how long she could bear a grudge. Mostly it grew from an unhappy sense of being loved only a little, and needing to protect what love there was. But he liked Ted ... and he had loved the feeling of Ted's hand lying over his own, the warm roughness of the big palm, the touch of the fingers, thickened almost into knots at the joints. And this wasn't lying, not really. It was leaving out.

'You're really sure?'

If you want to learn to lie, Bobby-0, I suppose leaving things out is as good a place to start as any, an interior voice whispered. Bobby ignored it. 'Yes,' he said, 'really sure. Ted ... are these guys just dangerous to you or to anybody?' He was thinking of his mom, but he was also thinking of himself.

'To me they could be very dangerous indeed. To other people — most other people —

probably not. Do you want to know a funny thing?'

'Sure.'

'The majority of people don't even see them unless they're very, very close. It's almost as if they have the power to cloud men's minds, like The Shadow on that old radio program.'

'Do you mean they're ... well ... ' He supposed supernatural was the word he wasn't quite able to say.

'No, no, not at all.' Waving his question away before it could be fully articulated. Lying in bed that night and sleepless for longer than usual, Bobby thought that Ted had almost been afraid for it to be spoken aloud. 'There are lots of people, quite ordinary ones, we don't see.

The waitress walking home from work with her head down and her restaurant shoes in a paper bag. Old fellows out for their afternoon

walks in the park. Teenage girls with their hair in rollers and their transistor radios playing Peter Tripp's countdown. But children see them.

Children see them all. And Bobby, you are still a child.'

'These guys don't sound exactly easy to miss.'

'The coats, you mean. The shoes. The loud cars. But those are the very things which cause some people — many people, actually — to turn away. To erect little roadblocks between the eye and the brain. In any case, I won't have you taking chances. If you do see the men in the yellow coats, don't approach them. Don't speak to them even if they should speak to you. I can't think why they would, I don't believe they would even see you — just as most people don't really see them — but there are plenty of things I don't know about them. Now tell me what I just said. Repeat it back. It's important.' 'Don't approach them and don't speak to them.'

'Even if they speak to you.' Rather impatiently. 'Even if they speak to me, right. What should I do?' 'Come back here and tell me they're about and where you saw them. Walk until you're certain you're out of their sight, then run. Run like the wind. Run like hell was after you.'

'And what will you do?' Bobby asked, but of course he knew. Maybe he wasn't as sharp as Carol, but he wasn't a complete dodo, either. 'You'll go away, won't you?'

Ted Brautigan shrugged and finished his glass of rootbeer without meeting Bobby's eyes.

'I'll decide when that time comes. If it comes. If I'm lucky, the feelings I've had for the last few days — my sense of these men — will go away.'

'Has that happened before?'

‘Indeed it has. Now why don’t we talk of more pleasant things?’

For the next half an hour they discussed baseball, then music (Bobby was startled to discover Ted not only knew the music of Elvis Presley but actually liked some of it), then Bobby’s hopes and fears concerning the seventh grade in September. All this was pleasant enough, but behind each topic Bobby sensed the lurk of the low men. The low men were here in Ted’s third-floor room like peculiar shadows which cannot quite be seen.

It wasn’t until Bobby was getting ready to leave that Ted raised the subject of them again.

‘There are things you should look for,’ he said. ‘Signs that my ... my old friends are about.’

‘What are they?’

‘On your travels around town, keep an eye out for lost-pet posters on walls, in shop windows, stapled to telephone poles on residential streets. “Lost, a gray tabby cat with black ears, a white bib, and a crooked tail. Call IROquois 7-7661.” “Lost, a small mongrel dog, part beagle, answers to the name of Trixie, loves children, ours want her to come home. Call IROquois 7-0984 or bring to 77 Peabody Street.” That sort of thing.’

‘What are you saying? Jeepers, are you saying they kill people’s pets? Do you think ... ‘

‘I think many of those animals don’t exist at all,’ Ted said. He sounded weary and unhappy.

‘Even when there is a small, poorly reproduced photograph, I think most are pure fiction. I think such posters are a form of communication, although why the men who put them up shouldn’t just go into the Colony Diner and do their communicating over pot roast and mashed potatoes I don’t know.

‘Where does your mother shop, Bobby?’

‘Total Grocery. It’s right next door to Mr Biderman’s real-estate agency.’

‘And do you go with her?’

‘Sometimes.’ When he was younger he met her there every Friday, reading a TV Guide from the magazine rack until she showed up, loving Friday afternoons because it was the start of the weekend, because Mom let him push the cart and he always pretended it was a racing car, because he loved her. But he didn’t tell Ted any of this. It was ancient history. Hell, he’d only been eight.

‘Look on the bulletin board every supermarket puts up by the checkout registers,’ Ted said.

‘On it you’ll see a number of little hand-printed notices that say things like CAR FOR SALE BY

OWNER. Look for any such notices that have been thumbtacked to the board upside down. Is there another supermarket in town?’

‘There’s the A&P, down by the railroad overpass. My mom doesn’t go there. She says the butcher’s always giving her the glad-eye.’

‘Can you check the bulletin board there, as well?’

‘Sure.’

‘Good so far, very good. Now — you know the hopscotch patterns kids are always drawing on the sidewalks?’

Bobby nodded.

‘Look for ones with stars or moons or both chalked near them, usually in chalk of a different color. Look for kite tails hanging from telephone lines. Not the kites themselves, but only the tails. And ... ‘

Ted paused, frowning, thinking. As he took a Chesterfield from the pack on the table and lit it, Bobby thought quite reasonably, quite clearly, and without the slightest shred of fear: He's crazy, y'know. Crazy as a loon.

Yes, of course, how could you doubt it? He only hoped Ted could be careful as well as crazy. Because if his mom heard Ted talking about stuff like this, she'd never let Bobby go near him again. In fact, she'd probably send for the guys with the butterfly nets ... or ask good old Don Biderman to do it for her.

'You know the clock in the town square, Bobby?'

'Yeah, sure.'

'It may begin ringing wrong hours, or between hours. Also, look for reports of minor church vandalism in the paper. My friends dislike churches, but they never do anything too outrageous; they like to keep a — pardon the pun — low profile. There are other signs that they're about, but there's no need to overload you. Personally I believe the posters are the surest clue.'

"If you see Ginger, please bring her home."

'That's exactly r — '

'Bobby?' It was his mom's voice, followed by the ascending scuff of her Saturday sneakers.

'Bobby, are you up there?'

3

A Mother's Power. Bobby Does His Job.

'Does He Touch You?' The Last Day

of School.

Bobby and Ted exchanged a guilty look. Both of them sat back on their respective sides of the table, as if they had been doing something crazy instead of just talking about crazy stuff.

She'll see we've been up to something, Bobby thought with dismay. It's all over my face.

'No,' Ted said to him. 'It is not. That is her power over you, that you believe it. It's a mother's power.'

Bobby stared at him, amazed. Did you read my mind? Did you read my mind just then?

Now his mom was almost to the third-floor landing and there was no time for a reply even if Ted had wanted to make one. But there was no look on his face saying he would have replied if there had been time, either. And Bobby at once began to doubt what he had heard.

Then his mother was in the open doorway, looking from her son to Ted and back to her son again, her eyes assessing. 'So here you are after all,' she said. 'My goodness, Bobby, didn't you hear me calling?'

'You were up here before I got a chance to say boo, Mom.'

She snorted. Her mouth made a small, meaningless smile — her automatic social smile.

Her eyes went back and forth between the two of them, back and forth, looking for something out of place, something she didn't like,

something wrong. 'I didn't hear you come in from outdoors.'

'You were asleep on your bed.'

'How are you today, Mrs Garfield?' Ted asked.

'Fine as paint.' Back and forth went her eyes. Bobby had no idea what she was looking for, but that expression of dismayed guilt must have left his face. If she had seen it, he would know already; would know that she knew.

'Would you like a bottle of pop?' Ted asked. 'I have rootbeer. It's not much, but it's cold.'

'That would be nice,' Liz said. 'Thanks.' She came all the way in and sat down next to Bobby at the kitchen table. She patted him absently on the leg, watching Ted as he opened his little fridge and got out the rootbeer. 'It's not hot up here yet, Mr Brattigan, but I guarantee you it will be in another month. You want to get yourself a fan.'

'There's an idea.' Ted poured rootbeer into a clean glass, then stood in front of the fridge holding the glass up to the light, waiting for the foam to go down. To Bobby he looked like a scientist in a TV commercial, one of those guys obsessed with Brand X and Brand Y and how Roloids consumed fifty-seven times its own weight in excess stomach acid, amazing but true.

'I don't need a full glass, that will be fine,' she said a little impatiently. Ted brought the glass to her, and she raised it to him. 'Here's how.' She took a swallow and grimaced as if it had been rye instead of rootbeer. Then she watched over the top of the glass as Ted sat down, tapped the ash from his smoke, and tucked the stub of the cigarette back into the corner of his mouth.

'You two have gotten thicker than thieves,' she remarked. 'Sitting here at the kitchen table, drinking rootbeer — cozy, thinks I! What've you been talking about today?'

‘The book Mr Brautigan gave me,’ Bobby said. His voice sounded natural and calm, a voice with no secrets behind it. ‘Lord of the Flies. I couldn’t figure out if the ending was happy or sad, so I thought I’d ask him.’

‘Oh? And what did he say?’

‘That it was both. Then he told me to consider it.’

Liz laughed without a great deal of humor. ‘I read mysteries, Mr Brattigan, and save my consideration for real life. But of course I’m not retired.’

‘No,’ Ted said. ‘You are obviously in the very prime of life.’

She gave him her flattery-will-get-you-nowhere look. Bobby knew it well.

‘I also offered Bobby a small job,’ Ted told her. ‘He has agreed to take it ... with your permission, of course.’

Her brow furrowed at the mention of a job, smoothed at the mention of permission. She reached out and briefly touched Bobby’s red hair, a gesture so unusual that Bobby’s eyes widened a little. Her eyes never left Ted’s face as she did it. Not only did she not trust the man, Bobby realized, she was likely never going to trust him. ‘What sort of job did you have in mind?’

‘He wants me to — ‘

‘Hush,’ she said, and still her eyes peered over the top of her glass, never leaving Ted.

‘I’d like him to read me the paper, perhaps in the afternoons,’ Ted said, then explained how his eyes weren’t what they used to be and how he had worse problems every day with the finer print. But he liked to keep up with the news — these were very interesting times, didn’t Mrs Garfield think so? — and he liked to keep up with the

columns, as well, Stewart Alsop and Walter Winchell and such. Winchell was a gossip, of course, but an interesting gossip, didn't Mrs Garfield agree?

Bobby listened, increasingly tense even though he could tell from his mother's face and posture — even from the way she sipped her rootbeer — that she believed what Ted was telling her. That part of it was all right, but what if Ted went blank again? Went blank and started babbling about low men in yellow coats or the tails of kites hanging from telephone wires, all the time gazing off into space?

But nothing like that happened. Ted finished by saying he also liked to know how the Dodgers were doing — Maury Wills, especially — even though they had gone to L. A. He said this with the air of one who is determined to tell the truth even if the truth is a bit shameful. Bobby thought it was a nice touch.

'I suppose that would be fine,' his mother said (almost grudgingly, Bobby thought). 'In fact it sounds like a plum. I wish / could have a plum job like that.'

'I'll bet you're excellent at your job, Mrs Garfield.'

She flashed him her dry flattery-won't-work-with-me expression again. 'You'll have to pay him extra to do the crossword for you,' she said, getting up, and although Bobby didn't understand the remark, he was astonished by the cruelty he sensed in it, embedded like a piece of glass in a marshmallow. It was as if she wanted to make fun of Ted's failing eyesight and his intellect at the same time; as if she wanted to hurt him for being nice to her son.

Bobby was still ashamed at deceiving her and frightened that she would find out, but now he was also glad ... almost viciously glad. She deserved it. 'He's good at the crossword, my Bobby.'

Ted smiled. 'I'm sure he is.'

'Come on downstairs, Bob. It's time to give Mr Brattigan a rest.'

‘But — ‘

‘I think I would like to lie down awhile, Bobby. I’ve a little bit of a headache. I’m glad you liked Lard of the Flies. You can start your job tomorrow, if you like, with the feature section of the Sunday paper. I warn you it’s apt to be a trial by fire.’

‘Okay.’

Mom had reached the little landing outside of Ted’s door. Bobby was behind her. Now she turned back and looked at Ted over Bobby’s head. ‘Why not outside on the porch?’ she asked.

‘The fresh air will be nice for both of you. Better than this stuffy room. And I’ll be able to hear, too, if I’m in the living room.’

Bobby thought some message was passing between them. Not via telepathy, exactly ...

only it was telepathy, in a way. The humdrum sort adults practiced.

‘A fine idea,’ Ted said. ‘The front porch would be lovely. Good afternoon, Bobby. Good afternoon, Mrs Garfield.’

Bobby came very close to saying See ya, Ted and substituted ‘See you, Mr Brautigan’ at the last moment. He moved toward the stairs, smiling vaguely, with the sweaty feeling of someone who has just avoided a nasty accident.

His mother lingered. ‘How long have you been retired, Mr Brattigan? Or do you mind me asking?’

Bobby had almost decided she wasn’t mispronouncing Ted’s name deliberately; now he swung the other way. She was. Of course she was.

‘Three years.’ He crushed his cigarette out in the brimming tin ashtray and immediately lit another.

'Which would make you ... sixty-eight?'

'Sixty-six, actually.' His voice continued mild and open, but Bobby had an idea he didn't much care for these questions. 'I was granted retirement with full benefits two years early.

Medical reasons.'

Don't ask him what's wrong with him, Mom, Bobby moaned inside his own head. Don't you dare.

She didn't. She asked what he'd done in Hartford instead.

'Accounting. I was in the Office of the Comptroller.'

'Bobby and I guessed something to do with education. Accounting! That sounds very responsible.'

Ted smiled. Bobby thought there was something awful about it. 'In twenty years I wore out three adding machines. If that is responsibility, Mrs Garfield, why yes — I was responsible.

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees; the typist puts a record on the gramophone with an automatic hand.'

'I don't follow you.'

'It's my way of saying that it was a lot of years in a job that never seemed to mean much.'

'It might have meant a good deal if you'd had a child to feed, shelter, and raise.' She looked at him with her chin slightly tilted, the look that meant if Ted wanted to discuss this, she was ready. That she would go to the mat with him on the subject if that was his pleasure.

Ted, Bobby was relieved to find, didn't want to go to the mat or anywhere near it. 'I expect you're right, Mrs Garfield. Entirely.'

She gave him a moment more of the lifted chin, asking if he was sure, giving him time to change his mind. When Ted said nothing else, she smiled. It was her victory smile. Bobby loved her, but suddenly he was tired of her as well. Tired of knowing her looks, her sayings, and the adamant cast of her mind.

‘Thank you for the rootbeer, Mr Brattigan. It was very tasty.’ And with that she led her son downstairs. When they got to the second-floor landing she dropped his hand and went the rest of the way ahead of him.

Bobby thought they would discuss his new job further over supper, but they didn’t. His mom seemed far away from him, her eyes distant. He had to ask her twice for a second slice of meatloaf and when later that evening the telephone rang, she jumped up from the couch where they had been watching TV to get it. She jumped for it the way Ricky Nelson did when it rang on the Ozzie and Harriet show. She listened, said something, then came back to the couch and sat down.

‘Who was it?’ Bobby asked.

‘Wrong number,’ Liz said.

In that year of his life Bobby Garfield still waited for sleep with a child’s welcoming confidence: on his back, heels spread to the corners of the bed, hands tucked into the cool under the pillow so his elbows stuck up. On the night after Ted spoke to him about the low men in their yellow coats (and don’t forget their cars, he thought, their big cars with the fancy paintjobs), Bobby lay in this position with the sheet pushed down to his waist.

Moonlight fell on his narrow child’s chest, squared in four by the shadows of the window muntins.

If he had thought about it (he hadn’t), he would have expected Ted’s low men to become more real once he was alone in the dark, with only the tick of his wind-up Big Ben and the murmur of the late TV

news from the other room to keep him company. That was the way it had always been with him — it was easy to laugh at Frankenstein on Shock Theater, to go fake-swoony and cry ‘Ohhh, Frankie!’ when the monster showed up, especially if Sully-John was there for a sleepover. But in the dark, after S-J had started to snore (or worse, if Bobby was alone), Dr Frankenstein’s creature seemed a lot more ... not real, exactly, but ...

possible.

That sense of possibility did not gather around Ted’s low men. If anything, the idea that people would communicate with each other via lost-pet posters seemed even crazier in the dark. But not a dangerous crazy. Bobby didn’t think Ted was really, deeply crazy, anyhow; just a bit too smart for his own good, especially since he had so few things with which to occupy his time. Ted was a little ... well ... cripes, a little what? Bobby couldn’t express it.

If the word eccentric had occurred to him he would have seized it with pleasure and relief.

But ... it seemed like he read my mind. What about that?

Oh, he was wrong, that was all, mistaken about what he thought he’d heard. Or maybe Ted had read his mind, read it with that essentially uninteresting adult ESP, peeling guilt off his face like a wet decal off a piece of glass. God knew his mother could always do that ... at least until today.

But —

But nothing. Ted was a nice guy who knew a lot about books, but he was no mind-reader.

No more than Sully-John Sullivan was a magician, or ever would be.

‘It’s all misdirection,’ Bobby murmured. He slipped his hands out from under his pillow, crossed them at the wrists, wagged them. The

shadow of a dove flew across the moonlight on his chest.

Bobby smiled, closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

The next morning he sat on the front porch and read several pieces aloud from the Harwich Sunday Journal. Ted perched on the porch glider, listening quietly and smoking Chesterfields. Behind him and to his left, the curtains flapped in and out of the open windows of the Garfield front room. Bobby imagined his mom sitting in the chair where the light was best, sewing basket beside her, listening and hemming skirts (hemlines were going down again, she'd told him a week or two before; take them up one year, pick out the stitches the following spring and lower them again, all because a bunch of poofers in New York and London said to, and why she bothered she didn't know). Bobby had no idea if she really was there or not, the open windows and blowing curtains meant nothing by themselves, but he imagined it all the same. When he was a little older it would occur to him that he had always imagined her there — outside doors, in that part of the bleachers where the shadows were too thick to see properly, in the dark at the top of the stairs, he had always imagined she was there.

The sports pieces he read were interesting (Maury Wills was stealing up a storm), the feature articles less so, the opinion columns boring and long and incomprehensible, full of phrases like 'fiscal responsibility' and 'economic indicators of a recessionary nature.' Even so, Bobby didn't mind reading them. He was doing a job, after all, earning dough, and a lot of jobs were boring at least some of the time. 'You have to work for your Wheaties,' his mother sometimes said after Mr Biderman had kept her late. Bobby was proud just to be able to get a phrase like 'economic indicators of a recessionary nature' to come off his tongue. Besides, the other job — the hidden job — arose from Ted's crazy idea that some men were out to get him, and Bobby would have felt weird taking money just for doing that one; would have felt like he was tricking Ted somehow even though it had been Ted's idea in the first place.

That was still part of his job, though, crazy or not, and he began doing it that Sunday afternoon. Bobby walked around the block while his mom was napping, looking for either low men in yellow coats or signs of them. He saw a number of interesting things — over on Colony Street a woman arguing with her husband about something, the two of them standing nose-to-nose like Gorgeous George and Haystacks Calhoun before the start of a rassling match; a little kid on Asher Avenue bashing caps with a smoke-blackened rock; liplocked teenagers outside of Spicer's Variety Store on the corner of Commonwealth and Broad; a panel truck with the interesting slogan YUMMY FOR THE TUMMY written on the side — but he saw no yellow coats or lost-pet announcements on phone poles; not a single kite tail hung from a single telephone wire.

He stopped in at Spicer's for a penny gumball and gleeed the bulletin board, which was dominated by photos of this year's Miss Rhenigold candidates. He saw two cards offering cars for sale by owner, but neither was upside down. There was another one that Said MUST SELL MY BACK YARD POOL, GOOD SHAPE, YOUR KINDS WILL LOVE IT, and that one was crooked, but Bobby didn't guess crooked counted.

On Asher Avenue he saw a whale of a Buick parked at a hydrant, but it was bottle-green, and Bobby didn't think it qualified as loud and vulgar in spite of the portholes up the sides of the hood and the grille, which looked like the sneery mouth of a chrome catfish.

On Monday he continued looking for low men on his way to and from school. He saw nothing ... but Carol Gerber, who was walking with him and S-J, saw him looking. His mother was right, Carol was really sharp.

'Are the commie agents after the plans?' she asked.

'Huh?'

'You keep staring everywhere. Even behind you.'

For a moment Bobby considered telling them what Ted had hired him to do, then decided it would be a bad idea. It might have been a good one if he believed there was really something to look for — three pairs of eyes instead of one, Carol's sharp little peepers included — but he didn't. Carol and Sully-John knew that he had a job reading Ted the paper every day, and that was all right. It was enough. If he told them about the low men, it would feel like making fun, somehow. A betrayal.

'Commie agents?' Sully asked, whirling around. 'Yeah, I see em, I see em!' He drew down his mouth and made the eh-eh-eh noise again (it was his favorite). Then he staggered, dropped his invisible tommygun, clutched his chest. 'They got me! I'm hit bad! Go on without me! Give my love to Rose!'

'I'll give it to my aunt's fat fanny,' Carol said, and elbowed him.

'I'm looking for guys from St Gabe's, that's all,' Bobby said.

This was plausible; boys from St Gabriel the Steadfast Upper and Secondary were always harassing the Harwich Elementary kids as the Elementary kids walked to school — buzzing them on their bikes, shouting that the boys were sissies, that the girls 'put out' ... which Bobby was pretty sure meant tongue-kissing and letting boys touch their titties.

'Nah, those dinkberries don't come along until later,' Sully-John said. 'Right now they're all still home puttin on their crosses and combin their hair back like Bobby Rydell.'

'Don't swear,' Carol said, and elbowed him again.

Sully-John looked wounded. 'Who swore? I didn't swear.'

'Yes you did.'

'I did not, Carol.'

‘Did.’

‘No sir, did not.’

‘Yes sir, did too, you said dinkberries.’

‘That’s not a swear! Dinkberries are berries!’ S-J looked at Bobby for help, but Bobby was looking up at Asher Avenue, where a Cadillac was cruising slowly by. It was big, and he supposed it was a little flashy, but wasn’t any Cadillac? This one was painted a conservative light brown and didn’t look low to him. Besides, the person at the wheel was a woman.

‘Yeah? Show me a picture of a dinkberry in the encyclopedia and maybe I’ll believe you.’

‘I ought to poke you,’ Sully said amiably. ‘Show you who’s boss. Me Tarzan, you Jane.’

‘Me Carol, you Jughead. Here.’ Carol thrust three books — arithmetic, Adventures in Spelling, and The Little House on the Prairie — into S-J’s hands. ‘Carry my books cause you swore.’

Sully-John looked more wounded than ever. ‘Why should I have to carry your stupid books even if I did swear, which I didn’t?’

‘It’s pennants,’ Carol said.

‘What the heck is pennants?’

‘Making up for something you do wrong. If you swear or tell a lie, you have to do pennants. One of the St Gabe’s boys told me. Willie, his name is.’

‘You shouldn’t hang around with them,’ Bobby said. ‘They can be mean.’ He knew this from personal experience. Just after Christmas vacation ended, three St Gabe’s boys had chased him down Broad Street, threatening to beat him up because he had ‘looked at them wrong.’

They would have done it, too, Bobby thought, if the one in the lead hadn't slipped in the slush and gone to his knees. The others had tripped over him, allowing Bobby just time enough to nip in through the big front door of 149 and turn the lock. The St Gabe's boys had hung around outside for a little while, then had gone away after promising Bobby that they would 'see him later.'

'They're not all hoods, some of them are okay,' Carol said. She looked at Sully-John, who was carrying her books, and hid a smile with one hand. You could get S-J to do anything if you talked fast and sounded sure of yourself. It would have been nicer to have Bobby carry her books, but it wouldn't have been any good unless he asked her. Someday he might; she was an optimist. In the meantime it was nice to be walking here between them in the morning sunshine. She stole a glance at Bobby, who was looking down at a hopscotch grid drawn on the sidewalk. He was so cute, and he didn't even know it. Somehow that was the cutest thing of all.

The last week of school passed as it always did, with a maddening, half-crippled slowness.

On those early June days Bobby thought the smell of the paste in the library was almost strong enough to gag a maggot, and geography seemed to last ten thousand years. Who cared how much tin there was in Paraguay?

At recess Carol talked about how she was going to her aunt Cora and uncle Ray's farm in Pennsylvania for a week in July; S-J went on and on about the week of camp he'd won and how he was going to shoot arrows at targets and go out in a canoe every day he was there.

Bobby, in turn, told them about the great Maury Wills, who might set a record for basestealing that would never be broken in their lifetime.

His mom was increasingly preoccupied, jumping each time the telephone rang and then running for it, staying up past the late news (and sometimes, Bobby suspected, until the Nite-Owl Movie was

over), and only picking at her meals. Sometimes she would have long, intense conversations on the phone with her back turned and her voice lowered (as if Bobby wanted to eavesdrop on her conversations, anyway). Sometimes she'd go to the telephone, start to dial it, then drop it back in its cradle and return to the couch.

On one of these occasions Bobby asked her if she had forgotten what number she wanted to call. 'Seems like I've forgotten a lot of things,' she muttered, and then 'Mind your beeswax, Bobby-O.'

He might have noticed more and worried even more than he did — she was getting thin and had picked up the cigarette habit again after almost stopping for two years — if he hadn't had lots of stuff to occupy his own mind and time. The best thing was the adult library card, which seemed like a better gift, a more inspired gift, each time he used it. Bobby felt there were a billion science-fiction novels alone in the adult section that he wanted to read. Take Isaac Asimov, for instance. Under the name of Paul French, Mr Asimov wrote science-fiction novels for kids about a space pilot named Lucky Starr, and they were pretty good. Under his own name he had written other novels, even better ones. At least three of them were about robots. Bobby loved robots, Robby the Robot in Forbidden Planet was one of the all-time great movie characters, in his opinion, totally ripshit, and Mr Asimov's were almost as good.

Bobby thought he would be spending a lot of time with them in the summer ahead. (Sully called this great writer Isaac Ass-Move, but of course Sully was almost totally ignorant about books.)

Going to school he looked for the men in the yellow coats, or signs of them; going to the library after school he did the same. Because school and library were in opposite directions, Bobby felt he was covering a pretty good part of Harwich. He never expected to actually see any low men, of course. After supper, in the long light of evening, he would read the paper to Ted, either on the porch or in Ted's kitchen. Ted had followed Liz Garfield's advice and gotten a fan, and Bobby's mom no longer seemed concerned that Bobby should read to 'Mr Brattigan' out on the porch. Some of this was her

growing preoccupation with her own adult matters, Bobby felt, but perhaps she was also coming to trust Ted a little more. Not that trust was the same as liking. Not that it had come easily, either.

One night while they were on the couch watching Wyatt Earp, his mom turned to Bobby almost fiercely and said, 'Does he ever touch you?'

Bobby understood what she was asking, but not why she was so wound up. 'Well, sure,' he said. 'He claps me on the back sometimes, and once when I was reading the paper to him and screwed up some really long word three times in a row he gave me a Dutch rub, but he doesn't roughhouse or anything. I don't think he's strong enough for stuff like that. Why?'

'Never mind,' she said. 'He's fine, I guess. Got his head in the clouds, no question about it, but he doesn't seem like a ... ' She trailed off, watching the smoke from her Kool cigarette rise in the living-room air. It went up from the coal in a pale gray ribbon and then disappeared, making Bobby think of the way the characters in Mr Simak's Ring Around the Sun followed the spiraling top into other worlds.

At last she turned to him again and said, 'If he ever touches you in a way you don't like, you come and tell me. Right away. You hear?'

'Sure, Mom.' There was something in her look that made him remember once when he'd asked her how a woman knew she was going to have a baby. She bleeds every month, his mom had said. If there's no blood, she knows it's because the blood is going into a baby.

Bobby had wanted to ask where this blood came out when there was no baby being made (he remembered a nosebleed his mom had had once, but no other instances of maternal bleeding).

The look on her face, however, had made him drop the subject. She wore the same look now.

Actually there had been other touches: Ted might run one of his big hands across Bobby's crewcut, kind of patting the bristles; he would sometimes gently catch Bobby's nose between his knuckles and intone Sound it out! If Bobby mispronounced a word; if they spoke at the same moment he would hook one of his little fingers around one of Bobby's little fingers and say Good luck, good will, good fortune, not ill. Soon Bobby was saying it with him, their little fingers locked, their voices as matter-of-fact as people saying pass the peas or how you doing.

Only once did Bobby feel uncomfortable when Ted touched him. Bobby had just finished the last newspaper piece Ted wanted to hear — some columnist blabbing on about how there was nothing wrong with Cuba that good old American free enterprise couldn't fix. Dusk was beginning to streak the sky. Back on Colony Street, Mrs O'Hara's dog Bowser barked on and on, rooproop-roop, the sound lost and somehow dreamy, seeming more like something remembered than something happening at that moment.

'Well,' Bobby said, folding the paper and getting up, 'I think I'll take a walk around the block and see what I see.' He didn't want to come right out and say it, but he wanted Ted to know he was still looking for the low men in the yellow coats.

Ted also got up and approached him. Bobby was saddened to see the fear on Ted's face. He didn't want Ted to believe in the low men too much, didn't want Ted to be too crazy. 'Be back before dark, Bobby. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you.'

'I'll be careful. And I'll be back years before dark.'

Ted dropped to one knee (he was too old to just hunker, Bobby guessed) and took hold of Bobby's shoulders. He drew Bobby forward until their brows were almost bumping. Bobby could smell cigarettes on Ted's breath and ointment on his skin — he rubbed his joints with Musterole because they ached. These days they ached even in warm weather, he said.

Being this close to Ted wasn't scary, but it was sort of awful, just the same. You could see that even if Ted wasn't totally old now, he soon would be. He'd probably be sick, too. His eyes were watery. The corners of his mouth were trembling a little. It was too bad he had to be all alone up here on the third floor, Bobby thought. If he'd had a wife or something, he might never have gotten this bee in his bonnet about the low men. Of course, if he'd had a wife, Bobby might never have read *Lord of the Flies*. A selfish way to think, but he couldn't help it.

'No sign of them, Bobby?'

Bobby shook his head.

'And you feel nothing? Nothing here?' He took his right hand from Bobby's left shoulder and tapped his own temple, where two blue veins nested, pulsing slightly. Bobby shook his head. 'Or here?' Ted pulled down the corner of his right eye. Bobby shook his head again. 'Or here?' Ted touched his stomach. Bobby shook his head a third time.

'Okay,' Ted said, and smiled. He slipped his left hand up to the back of Bobby's neck. His right hand joined it. He looked solemnly into Bobby's eyes and Bobby looked solemnly back.

'You'd tell me if you did, wouldn't you? You wouldn't try to ... oh, I don't know ... to spare my feelings?'

'No,' Bobby said. He liked Ted's hands on the back of his neck and didn't like them at the same time. It was where a guy in a movie might put his hands just before he kissed the girl.

'No, I'd tell, that's my job.'

Ted nodded. He slowly unlaced his hands and let them drop. He got to his feet, using the table for support and grimacing when one knee popped loudly. 'Yes, you'd tell me, you're a good kid. Go on, take

your walk. But stay on the sidewalk, Bobby, and be home before dark.

You have to be careful these days.'

I'll be careful.' He started down the stairs.

'And if you see them — '

'I'll run.'

'Yeah.' In the fading light, Ted's face was grim. 'Like hell was after you.'

So there had been touching, and perhaps his mother's fears had been justified in a way —

perhaps there had been too much touching and some of the wrong sort. Not wrong in whatever way she thought, maybe, but still wrong. Still dangerous.

On the Wednesday before school let out for the summer, Bobby saw a red strip of cloth hanging from somebody's TV antenna over on Colony Street. He couldn't tell for sure, but it looked remarkably like a kite tail. Bobby's feet stopped dead. At the same time his heart accelerated until it was hammering the way it did when he raced Sully-John home from school.

It's a coincidence even if it is a kite tail, he told himself. Just a lousy coincidence. You know that, don't you?

Maybe. Maybe he knew. He had almost come to believe it, anyway, when school let out for the summer on Friday. Bobby walked home by himself that day; Sully-John had volunteered to stay and help put books away in the storeroom and Carol was going over Tina Lebel's for Tina's birthday party. Just before crossing Asher Avenue and starting down Broad Street Hill, he saw a hopscotch grid drawn on

the sidewalk in purple chalk. It looked like this: 'Oh Christ no,' Bobby whispered. 'You gotta be kidding.'

He dropped to one knee like a cavalry scout in a western movie, oblivious of the kids passing by him on their way home — some walking, some on bikes, a couple on roller skates, buck-toothed Francis Utterson on his rusty red scooter, honking laughter at the sky as he paddled along. They were almost as oblivious of him; the Big Vac had just started, and most were dazed by all the possibilities.

'Oh no, oh no, I don't believe it, you gotta be kidding.' He reached out toward the star and the crescent moon — they were drawn in yellow chalk, not purple — almost touched them, then drew his hand back. A piece of red ribbon caught on a TV antenna didn't have to mean anything. When you added this, though, could it still be coincidence? Bobby didn't know. He was only eleven and there were a bazillion things he didn't know. But he was afraid ... afraid that ...

He got to his feet and looked around, half-expecting to see a whole line of long, overbright cars coming down Asher Avenue, rolling slow the way cars did when they were following a hearse to the graveyard, with their headlights on in the middle of the day. Half-expecting to see men in yellow coats standing beneath the marquee of the Asher Empire or out in front of Sukey's Tavern, smoking Camels and watching him.

No cars. No men. Just kids heading home from school. The first ones from St Gabe's, conspicuous in their green uniform pants and skirts, were visible among them.

Bobby turned around and backtracked for three blocks up Asher Avenue, too worried about what he'd seen chalked on the sidewalk to concern himself about bad-tempered St Gabe's boys. There was nothing on the Avenue telephone poles but a few posters advertising Bingo Nite at the St Gabriel Parish Hall and one on the corner of Asher and Tacoma announcing a rock-and-roll show in Hartford starring Clyde McPhatter and Dwayne Eddy, the Man with the Twangy Guitar.

By the time he got to Asher Avenue News, which was almost all the way back to school, Bobby was starting to hope he had overreacted. Still, he went in to look at their bulletin board, then all the way down Broad Street to Spicer's Variety, where he bought another gumball and checked that bulletin board as well. Nothing suspicious on either one. In Spicer's the card advertising the backyard pool was gone, but so what? The guy had probably sold it.

Why else had he put the card up in the first place, for God's sake?

Bobby left and stood on the corner, chewing his gumball and trying to make up his mind what to do next.

Adulthood is accretive by nature, a thing which arrives in ragged stages and uneven overlaps. Bobby Garfield made the first adult decision of his life on the day he finished the sixth grade, concluding it would be wrong to tell Ted about the stuff he had seen ... at least for the time being.

His assumption that the low men didn't exist had been shaken, but Bobby wasn't ready to give it up. Not on the evidence he had so far. Ted would be upset if Bobby told him what he had seen, maybe upset enough to toss his stuff back into his suitcases (plus those carryhandle bags folded up behind his little fridge) and just take off. If there really were bad guys after him, flight would make sense, but Bobby didn't want to lose the only adult friend he'd ever had if there weren't. So he decided to wait and see what, if anything, happened next.

That night Bobby Garfield experienced another aspect of adulthood: he lay awake until well after his Big Ben alarm clock said it was two in the morning, looking up at the ceiling and wondering if he had done the right thing.

4

Ted Goes Blank. Bobby Goes to the Beach.

McQuown. The Winkle.

The day after school ended, Carol Gerber's mom crammed her Ford Estate Wagon with kids and took them to Savin Rock, a seaside amusement park twenty miles from Harwich. Anita Gerber had done this three years running, which made it an ancient tradition to Bobby, S-J, Carol, Carol's little brother, and Carol's girlfriends, Yvonne, Angie, and Tina. Neither Sully-John nor Bobby would have gone anywhere with three girls on his own, but since they were together it was okay. Besides, the lure of Savin Rock was too strong to resist. It would still be too cold to do much more than wade in the ocean, but they could goof on the beach and all the rides would be open — the midway, too. The year before, Sully-John had knocked down three pyramids of wooden milk-bottles with just three baseballs, winning his mother a large pink teddy bear which still held pride of place on top of the Sullivan TV. Today S-J wanted to win it a mate.

For Bobby, just getting away from Harwich for a little while was an attraction. He had seen nothing suspicious since the star and the moon scribbled next to the hopscotch grid, but Ted gave him a bad scare while Bobby was reading him the Saturday newspaper, and hard on the heels of that came an ugly argument with his mother.

The thing with Ted happened while Bobby was reading an opinion piece scoffing at the idea that Mickey Mantle would ever break Babe Ruth's home-run record. He didn't have the stamina or the dedication, the columnist insisted. "Above all, the character of this man is wrong," Bobby read. "The so-called Mick is more interested in night-clubbing than —"

Ted had blanked out again. Bobby knew this, felt it somehow, even before he looked up from the newspaper. Ted was staring emptily out

his window toward Colony Street and the hoarse, monotonous barking of Mrs O'Hara's dog. It was the second time he'd done it this morning, but the first lapse had lasted only a few seconds (Ted bent into the open refrigerator, eyes wide in the frosty light, not moving ... then giving a jerk, a little shake, and reaching for the orange juice). This time he was totally gone. Wigsville, man, as Kookie might have said on 77 Sunset Strip. Bobby rattled the newspaper to see if he could wake him up that way.

Nothing.

'Ted? Are you all r — ' With sudden dawning horror, Bobby realized something was wrong with the pupils of Ted's eyes. They were growing and shrinking in his face as Bobby watched. It was as if Ted were plunging rapidly in and out of some abysmally black place ...

and yet all he was doing was sitting there in the sunshine.

'Ted?'

A cigarette was burning in the ashtray, except it was now nothing but stub and ash.

Looking at it, Bobby realized Ted must have been out for almost the entire article on Mantle.

And that thing his eyes were doing, the pupils swelling and contracting, swelling and contracting ...

He's having an epilepsy attack or something. God, don't they sometimes swallow their tongues when that happens?

Ted's tongue looked to be where it belonged, but his eyes ... his eyes —

'Ted! Ted, wake up!'

Bobby was around to Ted's side of the table before he was even aware he was moving. He grabbed Ted by the shoulders and shook

him. It was like shaking a piece of wood carved to look like a man. Under his cotton pullover shirt Ted's shoulders were hard and scrawny and unyielding.

'Wake up! Wake up!'

'They draw west now.' Ted continued to look out the window with his strange moving eyes. 'That's good. But they may be back. They ... '

Bobby stood with his hands on Ted's shoulders, frightened and awestruck. Ted's pupils expanded and contracted like a heartbeat you could see. 'Ted, what's wrong?'

'I must be very still. I must be a hare in the bush. They may pass by. There will be water if God wills it, and they may pass by. All things serve ... '

'Serve what?' Almost whispering now. 'Serve what, Ted?'

'All things serve the Beam,' Ted said, and suddenly his hands closed over Bobby's. They were very cold, those hands, and for a moment Bobby felt nightmarish, fainting terror. It was like being gripped by a corpse that could only move its hands and the pupils of its dead eyes.

Then Ted was looking at him, and although his eyes were frightened, they were almost normal again. Not dead at all.

'Bobby?'

Bobby pulled his hands free and put them around Ted's neck. He hugged him, and as he did Bobby heard a bell tolling in his head — this was very brief but very clear. He could even hear the pitch of the bell shift, the way the pitch of a train-whistle did if the train was moving fast. It was as if something inside his head were passing at high speed. He heard a rattle of hooves on some hard surface. Wood? No, metal. He smelled dust, dry and thundery in his nose. At the same moment the backs of his eyes began to itch.

‘Shhh!’ Ted’s breath in his ear was as dry as the smell of that dust, and somehow intimate.

His hands were on Bobby’s back, cupping his shoulderblades and holding him still. ‘Not a word! Not a thought. Except ... baseball! Yes, baseball, if you like!’

Bobby thought of Maury Wills getting his lead off first, a walking lead, measuring three steps ... then four ... Wills bent over at the waist, hands dangling, heels raised slightly off the dirt, he can go either way, it depends on what the pitcher does ... and when the pitcher goes to the plate Wills heads for second in an explosion of speed and dust and —

Gone. Everything was gone. No bell ringing in his head, no sound of hooves, no smell of dust. No itching behind his eyes, either. Had that itching really ever been there? Or had he just made it up because Ted’s eyes were scaring him?

‘Bobby,’ Ted said, again directly into Bobby’s ear. The movement of Ted’s lips against his skin made him shiver. Then: ‘Good God, what am I doing?’

He pushed Bobby away, gently but firmly. His face looked dismayed and a little too pale, but his eyes were back to normal, his pupils holding steady. For the moment that was all Bobby cared about. He felt strange, though — muzzy in the head, as if he’d just woken up from a heavy nap. At the same time the world looked amazingly brilliant, every line and shape perfectly defined.

‘Shazam,’ Bobby said, and laughed shakily. ‘What just happened?’

‘Nothing to concern you.’ Ted reached for his cigarette and seemed surprised to see only a tiny smoldering scrap left in the groove where he had set it. He brushed it into the ashtray with his knuckle. ‘T went off again, didn’t I?’

‘Yeah, way off. I was scared. I thought you were having an epilepsy fit or somediing. Your eyes — ‘

‘It’s not epilepsy,’ Ted said. ‘And it’s not dangerous. But if it happens again, it would be best if you didn’t touch me.’

‘Why?’

Ted lit a fresh cigarette. ‘Just because. Will you promise?’

‘Okay. What’s the Beam?’

Ted gazed at him sharply. ‘I spoke of the Beam?’

‘You said “All things serve the Beam.” I think that was it.’

‘Perhaps sometime I’ll tell you, but not today. Today you’re going to the beach, aren’t you?’

Bobby jumped, startled. He looked at Ted’s clock and saw it was almost nine o’clock.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Maybe I ought to start getting ready. I could finish reading you the paper when I get back.’

‘Yes, good. A fine idea. I have some letters to write.’

No you don’t, you just want to get rid of me before I ask any other questions you don’t want to answer.

But if that was what Ted was doing it was all right. As Liz Garfield so often said, Bobby had his own fish to fry. Still, as he reached the door to Ted’s room, the thought of the red scrap of cloth hanging from the TV aerial and the crescent moon and the star next to the hopscotch grid made him turn reluctantly back.

‘Ted, there’s something — ‘

‘The low men, yes, I know.’ Ted smiled. ‘For now don’t trouble yourself about them, Bobby. For now all is well. They aren’t moving this way or even looking this way.’

‘They draw west,’ Bobby said.

Ted looked at him through a scurf of rising cigarette smoke, his blue eyes steady. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘and with luck they’ll stay west. Seattle would be fine with me. Have a good time at the seaside, Bobby.’

‘But I saw — ‘

‘Perhaps you saw only shadows. In any case, this isn’t the time to talk. Just remember what I said — if I should go blank like that again, just sit and wait for it to pass. If I should reach for you, stand back. If I should get up, tell me to sit down. In that state I will do as you say.

It’s like being hypnotized.’

‘Why do you — ‘

‘No more questions, Bobby. Please.’

‘You’re okay? Really okay?’

‘In the pink. Now go. Enjoy your day.’

Bobby hurried downstairs, again struck by how sharp everything seemed to be: the brilliance of the light slanting through the window on the second-floor landing, a ladybug crawling around the lip of an empty milk-bottle outside the door of the Proskys’ apartment, a sweet high humming in his ears that was like the voice of the day — the first Saturday of summer vacation.

Back in the apartment, Bobby grabbed his toy cars and trucks from various stashes under his bed and at the back of his closet. A couple of these — a Matchbox Ford and a blue metal dumptruck Mr Biderman had sent home with his mom a few days after Bobby’s birthday —

were pretty cool, but he had nothing to rival Sully's gasoline tanker or yellow Tonka bulldozer. The 'dozer was especially good to play with in the sand. Bobby was looking forward to at least an hour's serious roadbuilding while the waves broke nearby and his skin pinkened in the bright coastal sunshine. It occurred to him that he hadn't gathered up his trucks like this since sometime last winter, when he and S-J had spent a happy post-blizzard Saturday afternoon making a road-system in the fresh snow down Commonwealth Park. He was old now, eleven, almost too old for stuff like this. There was something sad about that idea, but he didn't have to be sad right now, not if he didn't want to. His toy-truck days might be fast approaching their end, but that end wouldn't be today. Nope, not today.

His mother packed him a lunch for the trip, but she wouldn't give him any money when he asked — not even a nickel for one of the private changing-stalls which lined the ocean side of the midway. And almost before Bobby realized it was happening, they were having what he most dreaded: an argument about money.

'Fifty cents'd be enough,' Bobby said. He heard the baby-whine in his voice, hated it, couldn't stop it. 'Just half a rock. Come on, Mom, what do you say? Be a sport.'

She lit a Kool, striking the match so hard it made a snapping sound, and looked at him through the smoke with her eyes narrowed. 'You're earning your own money now, Bob. Most people pay three cents for the paper and you get paid for reading it. A dollar a week! My God! When I was a girl — '

'Mom, that money's for my bike! You know that.'

She had turned to the mirror, frowning and fussing at the shoulders of her blouse — Mr Biderman had asked her to come in for a few hours even though it was Saturday. Now she turned back, cigarette still clamped between her lips, and bent her frown on him.

'You're still asking me to buy you that bike, aren't you? Still. I told you I couldn't afford it but you're still asking.'

'No, I'm not! I'm not either!' Bobby's eyes were wide with anger and hurt. 'Just a lousy half a rock for the — '

'Half a buck here, two bits there — it all adds up, you know. What you want is for me to buy you that bike by handing you the money for everything else. Then you don't have to give up any of the other things you want.'

'That's not fair!'

He knew what she would say before she said it, even had time to think that he had walked right into that one. 'Life's not fair, Bobby-O.' Turning back to the mirror for one final pluck at the ghost of a slip-strap hovering beneath the right shoulder of her blouse.

'A nickel for the changing-room?' Bobby asked. 'Couldn't you at least — '

'Yes, probably, oh, I imagine,' she said, clipping off each word. She usually put rouge on her cheeks before going to work, but not all the color on her face this morning came out of a powderbox, and Bobby, angry as he was, knew he'd better be careful. If he lost his temper the way she was capable of losing hers, he'd be here in the hot empty apartment all day, forbidden to so much as step out into the hall.

His mother snatched her purse off the table by the end of the couch, butted out her cigarette hard enough to split the filter, then turned and looked at him. 'If I said to you, "Gee, we can't eat this week because I saw a pair of shoes at Hunsicker's that I just had to have," what would you think?'

I'd think you were a liar, Bobby thought. And I'd say if you're so broke, Mom, what about the Sears catalogue on the top shelf of your closet? The one with the dollar bills and the fivedollar bills — even a

ten or two — taped to the underwear pages in the middle? What about the blue pitcher in the kitchen dish cabinet, the one tucked all the way in the back corner behind the gravy boat with the crack in it, the blue pitcher where you put your spare quarters, where you've been putting them ever since my father died? And when the pitcher's full you roll the quarters and take them to the bank and get bills, and the bills go into the catalogue, don't they? The bills get taped to the underwear pages of the wishbook.

But he said none of this, only looked down at his sneakers with his eyes burning.

'I have to make choices,' she said. 'And if you're old enough to work, sonnyboy of mine, you'll have to make them, too. Do you think I like telling you no?'

Not exactly, Bobby thought, looking at his sneakers and biting at his lip, which wanted to loosen up and start letting out a bunch of blubbery baby-sounds. Not exactly, but I don't think you really mind it, either.

'If we were the Gotrocks, I'd give you five dollars to spend at the beach — hell, ten! You wouldn't have to borrow from your bike-jar if you wanted to take your little girlfriend on the Loop-the-Loop — '

She's not my girlfriend! Bobby screamed at his mother inside his head. SHE is NOT MY

LITTLE GIRLFRIEND!

'—or the Indian Railroad. But of course if we were the Gotrocks, you wouldn't need to save for a bike in the first place, would you?' Her voice rising, rising. Whatever had been troubling her over the last few months threatening to come rushing out, foaming like sodapop and biting like acid. 'I don't know if you ever noticed this, but your father didn't exactly leave us well off, and I'm doing the best I can. I feed you, I put clothes on your back, I paid for you to go to Sterling

House this summer and play baseball while I push paper in that hot office.

You got invited to go to the beach with the other kids, I'm very happy for you, but how you finance your day off is your business. If you want to ride the rides, take some of the money you've got in that jar and ride them. If you don't, just play on the beach or stay home. Makes no difference to me. I just want you to stop whining. I hate it when you whine. It's like ... '

She stopped, sighed, opened her purse, took out her cigarettes. 'I hate it when you whine,' she repeated.

It's like your father. That was what she had stopped herself from saying.

'So what's the story, morning-glory?' she asked. 'Are you finished?'

Bobby stood silent, cheeks burning, eyes burning, looking down at his sneakers and focusing all his will on not blubbering. At this point a single choked sob might be enough to get him grounded for the day; she was really mad, only looking for a reason to do it. And blubbering wasn't the only danger. He wanted to scream at her that he'd rather be like his father than like her, a skinflinty old cheapskate like her, not good for even a lousy nickel, and so what if the late not-so-great Randall Garfield hadn't left them well off? Why did she always make it sound like that was his fault? Who had married him?

'You sure, Bobby-O? No more smartass comebacks?' The most dangerous sound of all had come into her voice — a kind of brittle brightness. It sounded like good humor if you didn't know her.

Bobby looked at his sneakers and said nothing. Kept all the blubbering and all the angry words locked in his throat and said nothing. Silence spun out between them. He could smell her cigarette and all of last night's cigarettes behind this one, and those smoked on all the other nights when she didn't so much look at the TV as through it, waiting for the phone to ring.

‘All right, I guess we’ve got ourselves straight,’ she said after giving him fifteen seconds or so to open his mouth and stick his big fat foot in it. ‘Have a nice day, Bobby.’ She went out without kissing him.

Bobby went to the open window (tears were running down his face now, but he hardly noticed them), drew aside the curtain, and watched her head toward Commonwealth, high heels tapping. He took a couple of big, watery breaths and then went into the kitchen. He looked across it at the cupboard where the blue pitcher hid behind the gravy boat. He could take some money out of it, she didn’t keep any exact count of how much was in there and she’d never miss three or four quarters, but he wouldn’t. Spending it would be joyless. He wasn’t sure how he knew that, but he did; had known it even at nine, when he first discovered the pitcher of change hidden there. So, with feelings of regret rather than righteousness, he went into his bedroom and looked at the Bike Fund jar instead.

It occurred to him that she was right — he could take a little of his saved dough to spend at Savin Rock. It might take him an extra month to accumulate the price of the Schwinn, but at least spending this money would feel all right. And there was something else, as well. If he refused to take any money out of the jar, to do anything but hoard it and save it, he’d be like her.

That decided the matter. Bobby fished five dimes out of the Bike Fund, put them in his pocket, put a Kleenex on top of them to keep them from bouncing out if he ran somewhere, then finished collecting his stuff for the beach. Soon he was whistling, and Ted came downstairs to see what he was up to.

‘Are you off, Captain Garfield?’

Bobby nodded. ‘Savin Rock’s a pretty cool place. Rides and stuff, you know?’

‘Indeed I do. Have a good time, Bobby, and don’t fall out of anything.’

Bobby started for the door, then looked back at Ted, who was standing on the bottom step of the stairs in his slippers. 'Why don't you come out and sit on the porch?' Bobby asked. 'It's gonna be hot in the house, I bet.'

Ted smiled. 'Perhaps. But I think I'll stay in.'

'You okay?'

'Fine, Bobby. I'm fine.'

As he crossed to the Gerbers' side of Broad Street, Bobby realized he felt sorry for Ted, hiding up in his hot room for no reason. And it had to be for no reason, didn't it? Sure it did.

Even if there were low men out there, cruising around someplace (in the west, he thought, they draw west), what could they want of an old retired guy like Ted Brautigan?

At first the quarrel with his mother weighed him down a little (Mrs Gerber's pudgy, pretty friend Rionda Hewson accused him of being 'in a brown study,' whatever that was, then began tickling him up the sides and in the armpits until Bobby laughed in self-defense), but after they had been on the beach a little while he began to feel better, more himself.

Although it was still early in the season, Savin Rock was full speed ahead — the merry-goround turning, the Wild Mouse roaring, the little kids screaming, tinny rock and roll pouring from the speakers outside the funhouse, the barkers hollering from their booths. Sully-John didn't get the teddy bear he wanted, knocking over only two of the last three milk-bottles (Rionda claimed some of them had special weights in the bottom to keep them from going over unless you whacked them just right), but the guy in the baseball-toss booth awarded him a pretty neat prize anyway — a goofy-looking anteatr covered with yellow plush. S-J

impulsively gave it to Carol's morn. Anita laughed and hugged him and told him he was the best kid in the world, if he was fifteen years older she'd commit bigamy and marry him.

Sully-John blushed until he was purple.

Bobby tried the ringtoss and missed with all three throws. At the Shooting Gallery he had better luck, breaking two plates and winning a small stuffed bear. He gave it to Ian-the-Snot, who had actually been good for a change — hadn't thrown any tantrums, wet his pants, or tried to sock either Sully or Bobby in the nuts. Ian hugged the bear and looked at Bobby as if Bobby were God.

'It's great and he loves it,' Anita said, 'but don't you want to take it home to your mother?'

'Nah — she's not much on stuff like that. I'd like to win her a bottle of perfume, though.'

He and Sully-John dared each other to go on the Wild Mouse and finally went together, howling deliriously as their car plunged into each dip, simultaneously sure they were going to live forever and die immediately. They went on the Tilt-a-Whirl and the Krazy Kups. Down to his last fifteen cents, Bobby found himself on the Ferris wheel with Carol. Their car stopped at the top, rocking slightly, making him feel funny in his stomach. To his left the Atlantic stepped shoreward in a series of white-topped waves. The beach was just as white, the ocean an impossible shade of deep blue. Sunlight ran across it like silk. Below them was the midway. Rising up from the speakers came the sound of Freddy Cannon: she comes from Tallahassee, she's got a hi-fi chassis.

'Everything down there looks so little,' Carol said. Her voice was also little —

uncharacteristically so.

'Don't be scared, we're safe as can be. The Ferris wheel would be a kiddie-ride if it didn't go so high.'

Carol was in many ways the oldest of the three of them — tough and sure of herself, as on the day she had made S-J carry her books for swearing — but now her face had almost become a baby's face again: round, a little bit pale, dominated by a pair of alarmed blue eyes.

Without thinking Bobby leaned over, put his mouth on hers, and kissed her. When he drew back, her eyes were wider than ever.

'Safe as can be,' he said, and grinned.

'Do it again!' It was her first real kiss, she had gotten it at Savin Rock on the first Saturday of summer vacation, and she hadn't been paying attention. That was what she was thinking, that was why she wanted him to do it again.

'I better not,' Bobby said. Although ... up here who was there to see and call him a sissy?

'I dare you, and don't say dares go first.'

'Will you tell?'

'No, swear to God. Go on, hurry up! Before we go down!'

So he kissed her again. Her lips were smooth and closed, hot with the sun. Then the wheel began to move and he stopped. For just a moment Carol laid her head against his chest.

'Thank you, Bobby,' she said. 'That was nice as could be.'

'I thought so, too.'

They drew apart from each other a little, and when their car stopped and the tattooed attendant swung the safety bar up, Bobby got out and ran without looking back at her to where S-J was standing. Yet

he knew already that kissing Carol at the top of the Ferris wheel was going to be the best part of the day. It was his first real kiss, too, and Bobby never forgot the feel of her lips pressing on his — dry and smooth and warmed by the sun. It was the kiss by which all the others of his life would be judged and found wanting.

Around three o'clock, Mrs Gerber told them to start gathering their things; it was time to go home. Carol gave a token 'Aw, Mom,' and then started picking stuff up. Her girlfriends helped; even Ian helped a little (refusing even as he fetched and carried to let go of the sandmatted bear). Bobby had half-expected Carol to tag after him for the rest of the day, and he had been sure she'd tell her girlfriends about kissing on the Ferris wheel (he would know she had when he saw them in a little knot, giggling with their hands over their mouths, looking at him with their merry knowing eyes), but she had done neither. Several times he had caught her looking at him, though, and several times he had caught himself sneaking glances at her.

He kept remembering her eyes up there. How big and worried they had been. And he had kissed her, just like that. Bingo.

Bobby and Sully toted most of the beachbags. 'Good mules! Giddyap!' Rionda cried, laughing, as they mounted the steps between the beach and the boardwalk. She was lobster red under the cold-cream she had smeared over her face and shoulders, and she moaned to Anita Gerber that she wouldn't sleep a wink that night, that if the sunburn didn't keep her awake, the midway food would.

'Well, you didn't have to eat four wieners and two doughboys,' Mrs Gerber said, sounding more irritated than Bobby had ever heard her — she was tired, he reckoned. He felt a little dazed by the sun himself. His back prickled with sunburn and he had sand in his socks. The beachbags with which he was festooned swung and bounced against each other.

'But amusement park food's so goood,' Rionda protested in a sad voice. Bobby laughed.

He couldn't help it.

They walked slowly along the midway toward the dirt parking lot, paying no attention to the rides now. The barkers looked at them, then looked past them for fresh blood. Folks loaded down and trudging back to the parking lot were, by and large, lost causes.

At the very end of the midway, on the left, was a skinny man wearing baggy blue Bermuda shorts, a strap-style undershirt, and a bowler hat. The bowler was old and faded, but cocked at a rakish angle. Also, there was a plastic sunflower stuck in the brim. He was a funny guy, and the girls finally got their chance to put their hands over their mouths and giggle.

He looked at them with the air of a man who has been giggled at by experts and smiled back. This made Carol and her friends giggle harder. The man in the bowler hat, still smiling, spread his hands above the makeshift table behind which he was standing — a slab of fiberboard on two bright orange sawhorses. On the fiberboard were three redbacked Bicycle cards. He turned them over with quick, graceful gestures. His fingers were long and perfectly white, Bobby saw — not a bit of sun-color on them.

The card in the middle was the queen of hearts. The man in the bowler picked it up, showed it to them, walked it dextrously back and forth between his fingers. 'Find the lady in red, cherchez la femme rouge, that's what it's all about and all you have to do,' he said. 'It's easy as can beezy, easy-Japaneezy, easy as knitting kitten-britches.' He beckoned Yvonne Loving. 'Come on over here, dollface, and show em how it's done.'

Yvonne, still giggling and blushing to the roots of her black hair, shrank back against Rionda and murmured that she had no more money for games, it was all spent.

'Not a problem,' the man in the bowler hat said. 'It's just a demonstration, dollface — I want your mom and her pretty friend to see how easy it is.'

'Neither one's my mom,' Yvonne said, but she stepped forward.

'We really ought to get going if we're going to beat the traffic, Ewie,' Mrs Gerber said.

'No, wait a minute, this is fun,' Rionda said. 'It's three-card monte. Looks easy, just like he says, but if you're not careful you start chasing and go home dead broke.'

The man in the bowler gave her a reproachful look, then a broad and engaging grin. It was the grin of a low man, Bobby thought suddenly. Not one of those Ted was afraid of, but a low man, just the same.

'It's obvious to me,' said the man in the bowler, 'that at some point in your past you have been the victim of a scoundrel. Although how anyone could be cruel enough to mistreat such a beautiful classy dame is beyond my ability to comprehend.'

The beautiful classy dame — five-five or so, two hundred pounds or so, shoulders and face slathered with Pond's — laughed happily. 'Stow the guff and show the child how it works.'

And are you really telling me this is legal?'

The man behind the table tossed his head back and also laughed. 'At the ends of the midway everything's legal until they catch you and throw you out ... as I think you probably know. Now ... what's your name, dollface?'

'Yvonne,' she said in a voice Bobby could barely hear. Beside him, Sully-John was watching with great interest. 'Sometimes folks call me Evvie.'

'Okay, Evvie, look right here, pretty baby. What do you see? Tell me their names — I know you can, a smart kid like you — and point when you tell. Don't be afraid to touch, either. There's nothing crooked here.'

'This one on the end is the jack ... this one on the other end is the king ... and this is the queen. She's in the middle.'

'That's it, dollface. In the cards as in life, there is so often a woman between two men.

That's their power, and in another five or six years you'll find it out for yourself.' His voice had fallen into a low, almost hypnotic chanting. 'Now watch closely and never take your eyes from the cards.' He turned them over so their backs showed. 'Now, dollface, where's the queen?'

Yvonne Loving pointed at the red back in the middle.

'Is she right?' the man in the bowler asked the little party gathered around his table.

'So far,' Rionda said, and laughed so hard her uncorseted belly jiggled under her sundress.

Smiling at her laughter, the low man in the bowler hat flicked one corner of the middle card, showing the red queen. 'One hundred per cent keerect, sweetheart, so far so good. Now watch! Watch close! It's a race between your eye and my hand! Which will win? That's the question of the day!'

He began to scramble the three cards rapidly about on his plank table, chanting as he did so.

'Up and down, all around, in and out, all about, to and fro, watch em go, now they're back, they're side by side, so tell me, dollface, where's she hide?'

As Yvonne studied the three cards, which were indeed once more lined up side by side, Sully leaned close to Bobby's ear and said, 'You don't even have to watch him mix them around. The queen's got a bent corner. Do you see it?'

Bobby nodded, and thought Good girl when Yvonne pointed hesitantly to the card on the far left — the one with the bent corner. The man in the bowler turned it over and revealed the queen of hearts.

‘Good job!’ he said. ‘You’ve a sharp eye, dollface, a sharp eye indeed.’

‘Thank you,’ Yvonne said, blushing and looking almost as happy as Carol had looked when Bobby kissed her.

‘If you’d bet me a dime on that go, I’d be giving you back twenty cents right now,’ the man in the bowler hat said. ‘Why, you ask? Because it’s Saturday, and I call Saturday Twoferday!’

Now would one of you ladies like to risk a dime in a race between your young eyes and my tired old hands? You can tell your husbands — lucky fellas they are to have you, too, may I say — that Mr Herb McQuown, the Monte Man at Savin Rock, paid for your day’s parking.

Or what about a quarter? Point out the queen of hearts and I give you back fifty cents.’

‘Half a rock, yeah!’ Sully-John said. ‘I got a quarter, Mister, and you’re on.’

‘Johnny, it’s gambling,’ Carol’s mother said doubtfully. ‘I don’t really think I should allow — ‘

‘Go on, let the kid learn a lesson,’ Rionda said. ‘Besides, the guy may let him win. Suck the rest of us in.’ She made no effort to lower her voice, but the man in the bowler — Mr McQuown — only looked at her and smiled. Then he returned his attention to S-J.

‘Let’s see your money, kid — come on, pony up.’

Sully-John handed over his quarter. McQuown raised it into the afternoon sunlight for a moment, one eye closed.

‘Yeh, looks like a good ‘un to me,’ he said, and planked it down on the board to the left of the three-card lineup. He looked in both directions — for cops, maybe — then tipped the cynically smiling Rionda a wink before turning his attention back to Sully-John. ‘What’s your name, fella?’

‘John Sullivan.’

McQuown widened his eyes and tipped his bowler to the other side of his head, making the plastic sunflower nod and bend comically. ‘A name of note! You know what I refer to?’

‘Sure. Someday maybe I’ll be a fighter, too,’ S-J said. He hooked a left and then a right at the air over McQuown’s makeshift table. Pow, pow!’

‘Pow-pow indeed,’ said McQuown. ‘And how’s your eyes, Master Sullivan?’

‘Pretty good.’

‘Then get them ready, because the race is on! Yes it is! Your eyes against my hands! Up and down, all around, where’d she go, I don’t know.’ The cards, which had moved much faster this time, slowed to a stop.

Sully started to point, then drew his hand back, frowning. Now there were two cards with little folds in the corner. Sully looked up at McQuown, whose arms were folded across his dingy undershirt. McQuown was smiling. ‘Take your time, son,’ he said. ‘The morning was whizbang, but it’s been a slow afternoon.’

Men who think hats with feathers in the brims are sophisticated, Bobby remembered Ted saying. The sort of men who’d shoot craps in an alley and pass around a bottle of liquor in a paper bag during

the game. McQuown had a funny plastic flower in his hat instead of a feather, and there was no bottle in evidence ... but there was one in his pocket. A little one.

Bobby was sure of it. And toward the end of the day, as business wound down and totally sharp hand-eye coordination became less of a priority to him, McQuown would take more and more frequent nips from it.

Sully pointed to the card on the far right. No, S-J, Bobby thought, and when McQuown turned that card up, it was the king of spades. McQuown turned up the card on the far left and showed the jack of clubs. The queen was back in the middle. 'Sorry, son, a little slow that time, it ain't no crime. Want to try again now that you're warmed up?'

'Gee, I ... that was the last of my dough.' Sully-John looked crestfallen.

Just as well for you, kid,' Rionda said. 'He'd take you for everything you own and leave you standing here in your shortie-shorts.' The girls giggled wildly at this; S-J blushed. Rionda took no notice of either. 'I worked at Revere Beach for quite awhile when I lived in Mass,'

she said. 'Let me show you kids how this works. Want to go for a buck, pal? Or is that too sweet for you?'

'In your presence everything would be sweet,' McQuown said sentimentally, and snatched her dollar the moment it was out of her purse. He held it up to the light, examined it with a cold eye, then set it down to the left of the cards. 'Looks like a good 'un,' he said. 'Let's play, darling. What's your name?'

Pudd'ntane,' Rionda said. 'Ask me again and I'll tell you the same.'

'Ree, don't you think — ' Anita Gerber began.

'I told you, I'm wise to the gaff,' Rionda said. 'Run em, my pal.'

'Without delay,' McQuown agreed, and his hands blurred the three rebacked cards into motion (up and down, all around, to and fro, watch them go), finally settling them in a line of three again. And this time, Bobby observed with amazement, all three cards had those slightly bent corners.

Rionda's little smile had gone. She looked from the short row of cards to McQuown, then down at the cards again, and then at her dollar bill, lying off to one side and fluttering slightly in the little seabreeze that had come up. Finally she looked back at McQuown. 'You suckered me, pally,' she said. 'Didn't you?'

'No,' McQuown said. 'I raced you. Now ... what do you say?'

'I think I say that was a real good dollar that didn't make no trouble and I'm sorry to see it go,' Rionda replied, and pointed to the middle card.

McQuown turned it over, revealed the king, and made Rionda's dollar disappear into his pocket. This time the queen was on the far left. McQuown, a dollar and a quarter richer, smiled at the folks from Harwich. The plastic flower tucked into the brim of his hat nodded to and fro in the salt-smelling air. 'Who's next?' he asked. 'Who wants to race his eye against my hand?'

'I think we're all raced out,' Mrs Gerber said. She gave the man behind the table a thin smile, then put one hand on her daughter's shoulder and the other on her sleepy-eyed son's, turning them away.

'Mrs Gerber?' Bobby asked. For just a moment he considered how his mother, once married to a man who had never met an inside straight he didn't like, would feel if she could see her son standing here at Mr McQuown's slapdash table with that risky Randy Garfield red hair gleaming in the sun. The thought made him smile a little. Bobby knew what an inside straight was now; flushes and full houses, too. He had made inquiries. 'May I try?'

'Oh, Bobby, I really think we've had enough, don't you?'

Bobby reached under the Kleenex he had stuffed into his pocket and brought out his last three nickels. 'All I have is this,' he said, showing first Mrs Gerber and then Mr McQuown. 'Is it enough?'

'Son,' McQuown said, 'I have played this game for pennies and enjoyed it.'

Mrs Gerber looked at Rionda.

'Ah, hell,' Rionda said, and pinched Bobby's cheek. 'It's the price of a haircut, for Christ's sake. Let him lose it and then we'll go home.'

'All right, Bobby,' Mrs Gerber said, and sighed. 'If you have to.'

'Put those nickels down here, Bob, where we can all look at em,' said McQuown. 'They look like good 'uns to me, yes indeed. Are you ready?'

'I think so.'

'Then here we go. Two boys and a girl go into hiding together. The boys are worthless.

Find the girl and double your money.'

The pale dextrous fingers turned the three cards over. McQuown spieled and the cards blurred. Bobby watched them move about the table but made no real effort to track the queen.

That wasn't necessary.

'Now they go, now they slow, now they rest, here's the test.' The three redbacked cards were in a line again. 'Tell me, Bobby, where's she hide?'

'There,' Bobby said, and pointed to the far left.

Sully groaned. 'It's the middle card, you jerk. This time I never took my eye off it.'

McQuown took no notice of Sully. He was looking at Bobby. Bobby looked back at him.

After a moment McQuown reached out and turned over the card Bobby had pointed at. It was the queen of hearts.

'What the heck?' Sully cried.

Carol clapped excitedly and jumped up and down. Rionda Hewson squealed and smacked him on the back. 'You took im to school that time, Bobby! Attaboy!'

McQuown gave Bobby a peculiar, thoughtful smile, then reached into his pocket and brought out a fistful of change. 'Not bad, son. First time I've been beat all day. That I didn't /[^]myself get beat, that is.' He picked out a quarter and a nickel and put them down beside Bobby's fifteen cents. 'Like to let it ride?' He saw Bobby didn't understand. 'Like to go again?'

'May I?' Bobby asked Anita Gerber.

'Wouldn't you rather quit while you're ahead?' she asked, but her eyes were sparkling and she seemed to have forgotten all about beating the traffic home.

'I am going to quit while I'm ahead,' he told her.

McQuown laughed. 'A boasty boy! Won't be able to grow a single chin-whisker for another five years, but he's a boasty boy already. Well then, Boasty Bobby, what do you think? Are we on for the game?'

'Sure,' Bobby said. If Carol or Sully-John had accused him of boasting, he would have protested strongly — all his heroes, from John Wayne to Lucky Starr of the Space Patrol, were modest

fellows, the kind to say 'Shucks' after saving a world or a wagon train. But he felt no need to defend himself to Mr McQuown, who was a low man in blue shorts and maybe a card-cheater as well. Boasting had been the furthest thing from Bobby's mind. He didn't think this was much like his Dad's inside straights, either. Inside straights were all hope and guesswork — 'fool's poker,' according to Charlie Yearman, the Harwich Elementary janitor, who had been happy to tell Bobby everything about the game that S-J and Denny Rivers hadn't known — but there was no guesswork about this.

Mr McQuown looked at him a moment longer; Bobby's calm confidence seemed to trouble him. Then he reached up, adjusted the slant of his bowler, stretched out his arms, and wiggled his fingers like Bugs Bunny before he played the piano at Carnegie Hall in one of the Merrie Melodies. 'Get on your mark, boasty boy. I'm giving you the whole business this time, from the soup to the nuts.'

The cards blurred into a kind of pink film. From behind him Bobby heard Sully-John mutter 'Holy crow!' Carol's friend Tina said 'That's toofasf in an amusing tone of prim disapproval. Bobby again watched the cards move, but only because he felt it was expected of him. Mr McQuown didn't bother with any patter this time, which was sort of a relief.

The cards settled. McQuown looked at Bobby with his eyebrows raised. There was a little smile on his mouth, but he was breathing fast and there were beads of sweat on his upper lip.

Bobby pointed immediately to the card on the right. 'That's her.'

'How do you know that?' Mr McQuown asked, his smile fading. 'How the hell do you know that?'

'I just do,' Bobby said.

Instead of flipping the card, McQuown turned his head slightly and looked down the midway. The smile had been replaced by a petulant expression — downturned lips and a crease between his eyes. Even

the plastic sunflower in his hat seemed displeased, its to-andfro bob now sulky instead of jaunty. 'No one beats that shuffle,' he said. 'No one has ever beaten that shuffle.'

Rionda reached over Bobby's shoulder and flipped the card he had pointed at. It was the queen of hearts. This time all the kids clapped. The sound made the crease between Mr McQuown's eyes deepen.

'The way I figure, you owe old Boasty Bobby here ninety cents,' Rionda said. 'Are you gonna pay?'

'Suppose I don't?' Mr McQuown asked, turning his frown on Rionda. 'What are you going to do, tubbo? Call a cop?'

'Maybe we ought to just go,' Anita Gerber said, sounding nervous.

'Call a cop? Not me,' Rionda said, ignoring Anita. She never took her eyes off McQuown.

'A lousy ninety cents out of your pocket and you look like Baby Huey with a load in his pants. Jesus wept!'

Except, Bobby knew, it wasn't the money. Mr McQuown had lost a lot more than this on occasion. Sometimes when he lost it was a 'hustle'; sometimes it was an 'out.' What he was steamed about now was the shuffle. McQuown hadn't liked a kid beating his shuffle.

'What I'll do,' Rionda continued, 'is tell anybody on the midway who wants to know that you're a cheapskate. Ninety-Cent McQuown, I'll call you. Think that'll help your business?'

'I'd like to give you the business,' Mr McQuown growled, but he reached into his pocket, brought out another dip of change — a bigger one this time — and quickly counted out Bobby's winnings. 'There,' he said. 'Ninety cents. Go buy yourself a martini.'

'I really just guessed, you know,' Bobby said as he swept the coins into his hand and then shoved them into his pocket, where they hung

like a weight. The argument that morning with his mother now seemed exquisitely stupid. He was going home with more money than he had come with, and it meant nothing. Nothing. I'm a good guesser.'

Mr McQuown relaxed. He wouldn't have hurt them in any case — he might be a low man but he wasn't the kind who hurt people; he'd never subject those clever long-fingered hands to the indignity of forming a fist — but Bobby didn't want to leave him unhappy. He wanted what Mr McQuown himself would have called 'an out.'

'Yeah,' McQuown said. 'A good guesser is what you are. Like to try a third guess, Bobby?'

Riches await.'

'We really have to be going,' Mrs Gerber said hastily.

'And if I tried again I'd lose,' Bobby said. 'Thank you, Mr McQuown. It was a good game.'

'Yeah, yeah. Get lost, kid.' Mr McQuown was like all the other midway barkers now, looking farther down the line. Looking for fresh blood.

Going home, Carol and her girlfriends kept looking at him with awe; Sully-John with a kind of puzzled respect. It made Bobby feel uncomfortable. At one point Rionda turned around and regarded him closely. 'You didn't just guess,' she said.

Bobby looked at her cautiously, withholding comment.

'You had a winkle.'

'What's a winkle?'

'My dad wasn't much of a betting man, but every now and then he'd get a hunch about a number. He called it a winkle. Then he'd bet.'

Once he won fifty dollars. Bought us groceries for a whole month. That's what happened to you, isn't it?

'I guess so,' Bobby said. 'Maybe I had a wrinkle.'

When he got home, his mom was sitting on the porch glider with her legs folded under her.

She had changed into her Saturday pants and was looking moodily out at the street. She waved briefly to Carol's mom as she drove away; watched as Anita turned into her own driveway and Bobby trudged up the walk. He knew what his mom was thinking: Mrs Gerber's husband was in the Navy, but at least she had a husband. Also, Anita Gerber had an Estate Wagon. Liz had shank's mare, the bus if she had to go a little farther, or a taxi if she needed to go into Bridgeport.

But Bobby didn't think she was angry at him anymore, and that was good.

'Did you have a nice time at Savin, Bobby?'

'Super time,' he said, and thought: What is it, Mom? You don't care what kind of time I had at the beach. What's really on your mind? But he couldn't tell.

'Good. Listen, kiddo ... I'm sorry we got into an argument this morning. I hate working on Saturdays.' This last came out almost in a spit.

'It's okay, Mom.'

She touched his cheek and shook her head. 'That fair skin of yours! You'll never tan, Bobby-O. Not you. Come on in and I'll put some Baby Oil on that sunburn.'

He followed her inside, took off his shirt, and stood in front of her as she sat on the couch and smeared the fragrant Baby Oil on his back

and arms and neck — even on his cheeks. It felt good, and he thought again how much he loved her, how much he loved to be touched by her. He wondered what she would think if she knew he had kissed Carol on the Ferris wheel.

Would she smile? Bobby didn't think she would smile. And if she knew about McQuown and the cards —

'I haven't seen your pal from upstairs,' she said, recapping the Baby Oil bottle. 'I know he's up there because I can hear the Yankees game on his radio, but wouldn't you think he'd go out on the porch where it's cool?'

'I guess he doesn't feel like it,' Bobby said. 'Mom, are you okay?'

She looked at him, startled. 'Tine, Bobby.' She smiled and Bobby smiled back. It took an effort, because he didn't think his mom was fine at all. In fact he was pretty sure she wasn't.

He just had a wrinkle.

That night Bobby lay on his back with his heels spread to the corners of the bed, eyes open and looking up at the ceiling. His window was open, too, the curtains drifting back and forth in a breath of a breeze, and from some other open window came the sound of The Platters: 'Here, in the afterglow of day, We keep our rendezvous, beneath the blue.' Farther away was the drone of an airplane, the honk of a horn.

Rionda's dad had called it a wrinkle, and once he'd hit the daily number for fifty dollars.

Bobby had agreed with her — a wrinkle, sure, I had a wrinkle — but he couldn't have picked a lottery number to save his soul. The thing was ...

The thing was Mr McQuown knew where the queen ended up every time, and so I knew.

Once Bobby realized that, other things fell into place. Obvious stuff, really, but he'd been having fun, and ... well ... you didn't question what you knew, did you? You might question a wrinkle — a feeling that came to you right out of the blue but you didn't question knowing.

Except how did he know his mother was taping money into the underwear pages of the Sears catalogue on the top shelf of her closet? How did he even know the catalogue was up there? She'd never told him about it. She'd never told him about the blue pitcher where she put her quarters, either, but of course he had known about that for years, he wasn't blind even though he had an idea she sometimes thought he was. But the catalogue? The quarters rolled and changed into bills, the bills then taped into the catalogue? There was no way he could know about a thing like that, but as he lay here in his bed, listening while 'Earth Angel'

replaced 'Twilight Time,' he knew that the catalogue was there. He knew because she knew, and it had crossed the front part of her mind. And on the Ferris wheel he had known Carol wanted him to kiss her again because it had been her first real kiss from a boy and she hadn't been paying enough attention; it had been over before she was completely aware it was happening. But knowing that wasn't knowing the future.

'No, it's just reading minds,' he whispered, and then shivered all over as if his sunburn had turned to ice.

Watch out, Bobby-0 — if you don't watch out you'll wind up as nuts as Ted with his low men.

Far off, in the town square, the clock began bonging the hour of ten. Bobby turned his head and looked at the alarm clock on his desk. Big Ben claimed it was only nine-fifty-two.

All right, so the clock downtown is a little fast or mine is a little slow. Big deal, McNeal.

Go to sleep.

He didn't think he could do that for at least awhile, but it had been quite a day —

arguments with mothers, money won from three-card monte dealers, kisses at the top of the Ferris wheel — and he began to drift in a pleasant fashion.

Maybe she is my girlfriend, Bobby thought. Maybe she's my girlfriend after all.

With the last premature bong of the town square clock still fading in the air, Bobby fell asleep.

5

Bobby Reads the Paper. Brown, with a

White Bib. A Big Chance for Liz.

Camp Broad Street. An Uneasy Week.

Off to Providence.

On Monday, after his mom had gone to work, Bobby went upstairs to read Ted the paper (although his eyes were actually good enough to do it himself, Ted said he had come to enjoy the sound of Bobby's voice and the luxury of being read to while he shaved). Ted stood in his little bathroom with the door open, scraping foam from his face, while Bobby tried him on various headlines from the various sections.

'VIET SKIRMISES INTENSIFY?'

'Before breakfast? Thanks but no thanks.'

'CARTS CORRALLED, LOCAL MAN ARRESTED?'

'First paragraph, Bobby.'

“When police showed up at his Pond Lane residence late yesterday, John T. Anderson of Harwich told them all about his hobby, which he claims is collecting supermarket shopping carts. ‘He was very interesting on the subject,’ said Officer Kirby Malloy of the Harwich P.D., ‘but we weren’t entirely satisfied that he’d come by some of the carts in his collection honestly.’ Turns out Malloy was ‘right with Eversharp.’ Of the more than fifty shopping carts in Mr Anderson’s back yard, at least twenty had been stolen from the Harwich A&P and Total Grocery. There were even a few carts from the IGA market in Stansbury.”

‘Enough,’ Ted said, rinsing his razor under hot water and then raising the blade to his lathered neck. ‘Galumphing small-town humor in response to pathetic acts of compulsive larceny.’

‘I don’t understand you.’

‘Mr Anderson sounds like a man suffering from a neurosis — a mental problem, in other words. Do you think mental problems are funny?’

‘Gee, no. I feel bad for people with loose screws.’

‘I’m glad to hear you say so. I’ve known people whose screws were not just loose but entirely missing. A good many such people, in fact. They are often pathetic, sometimes aweinspiring, and occasionally terrifying, but they are not funny. CARTS CORRALLED, indeed.

What else is there?’

‘STARLET KILLED IN EUROPEAN ROAD ACCIDENT?’

‘Ugh, no.’

‘YANKEES ACQUIRE INFIELDER IN TRADE WITH SENATORS?’

‘Nothing the Yankees do with the Senators interests me.’

‘ALBINI RELISHES UNDERDOG ROLE?’

‘Yes, please read that.’

Ted listened closely as he painstakingly shaved his throat. Bobby himself found the story less than riveting — it wasn’t about Floyd Patterson or Ingemar Johansson, after all (Sully called the Swedish heavyweight ‘Ingie-Baby’) — but he read it carefully, nevertheless. The twelve-rounder between Tommy ‘Hurricane’ Haywood and Eddie Albin was scheduled for Madison Square Garden on Wednesday night of the following week. Both fighters had good records, but age was considered an important, perhaps telling factor: Haywood,

twenty-three to Eddie Albini's thirty-six, and a heavy favorite. The winner might get a shot at the heavyweight title in the fall, probably around the time Richard Nixon won the Presidency (Bobby's mom said that was sure to happen, and a good thing — never mind that Kennedy was a Catholic, he was just too young, and apt to be a hothead).

In the article Albini said he could understand why he was the underdog — he was getting up in years a little and some folks thought he was past it because he'd lost by a TKO to Sugar Boy Masters in his last fight. And sure, he knew that Haywood outreached him and was supposed to be mighty savvy for a younger fellow. But he'd been training hard, Albini said, skipping a lot of rope and sparring with a guy who moved and jabbed like Haywood. The article was full of words like game and determined', Albini was described as being 'full of grit.' Bobby could tell the writer thought Albini was going to get the stuffing knocked out of him and felt sorry for him. Hurricane Haywood hadn't been available to talk to the reporter, but his manager, a fellow named I. Kleindienst (Ted told Bobby how to pronounce the name), said it was likely to be Eddie Albini's last fight. 'He had his day, but his day is over,' I.

Kleindienst said. 'If Eddie goes six, I'm going to send my boy to bed without his supper.'

'Irving Kleindienst's a ka-mai,' Ted said.

'A what?'

'A fool.' Ted was looking out the window toward the sound of Mrs O'Hara's dog. Not totally blank the way he sometimes went blank, but distant.

'You know him?' Bobby asked.

'No, no,' Ted said. He seemed first startled by the idea, then amused. 'Know of him.'

'It sounds to me like this guy Albini's gonna get creamed.'

'You never know. That's what makes it interesting.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing. Go to the comics, Bobby. I want Flash Gordon. And be sure to tell me what Dale Arden's wearing.'

'Why?'

'Because I think she's a real hotsy-totsy,' Ted said, and Bobby burst out laughing. He couldn't help it. Sometimes Ted was a real card.

A day later, on his way back from Sterling House, where he had just filled out the rest of his forms for summer baseball, Bobby came upon a carefully printed poster thumbtacked to an elm in Commonwealth Park.

PLEASE HELP US FIND PHIL!

PHIL is our WELSH CORGI!

PHIL is 7 YRS. OLD!

PHIL is BROWN, with a WHITE BIB!

His EYES are BRIGHT & INTELLIGENT!

The TIPS OF HIS EARS are BLACK!

Will bring you a BALL if you say HURRY UP PHIL!

CALL HOusitonic 5-8337!

(OR)

BRING to 745 Highgate Avenue!

Home of THE SAGAMORE FAMILY!

There was no picture of Phil.

Bobby stood looking at the poster for a fair length of time. Part of him wanted to run home and tell Ted — not only about this but about the star and crescent moon he'd seen chalked beside the hopscotch grid. Another part pointed out that there was all sorts of stuff posted in the park — he could see a sign advertising a concert in the town square posted on another elm right across from where he was standing — and he would be nuts to get Ted going about this.

These two thoughts contended with each other until they felt like two sticks rubbing together and his brain in danger of catching on fire.

I won't think about it, he told himself, stepping back from the poster. And when a voice from deep within his mind — a dangerously adult voice — protested that he was being paid to think about stuff like this, to tell about stuff like this, Bobby told the voice to just shut up.

And the voice did.

When he got home, his mother was sitting on the porch glider again, this time mending the sleeve of a housedress. She looked up and Bobby saw the puffy skin beneath her eyes, the reddened lids. She had a Kleenex folded into one hand.

'Mom — ?'

What's wrong? was how the thought finished ... but finishing it would be unwise. Would likely cause trouble. Bobby had had no recurrence of his brilliant insights on the day of the trip to Savin Rock, but he knew her — the way she looked at him when she was upset, the way the hand with the Kleenex in it tensed, almost becoming a fist, the way she drew in breath and sat up straighter, ready to give you a fight if you wanted to go against her.

‘What?’ she asked him. ‘Got something on your mind besides your hair?’

‘No,’ he said. His voice sounded awkward and oddly shy to his own ears. ‘I was at Sterling House. The lists are up for baseball. I’m a Wolf again this summer.’

She nodded and relaxed a little. ‘I’m sure you’ll make the Lions next year.’ She moved her sewing basket from the glider to the porch floor, then patted the empty place. ‘Sit down here beside me a minute, Bobby. I’ve got something to tell you.’

Bobby sat with a feeling of trepidation — she’d been crying, after all, and she sounded quite grave — but it turned out not to be a big deal, at least as far as he could see.

‘Mr Biderman — Don — has invited me to go with him and Mr Cushman and Mr Dean to a seminar in Providence. It’s a big chance for me.’

‘What’s a seminar?’

‘A sort of conference — people get together to learn about a subject and discuss it. This one is Real Estate in the Sixties. I was very surprised that Don would invite me. Bill Cushman and Curtis Dean, of course I knew they’d be going, they’re agents. But for Don to ask me ...’ She trailed off for a moment, then turned to Bobby and smiled. He thought it was a genuine smile, but it went oddly with her reddened lids. ‘I’ve wanted to become an agent myself for the longest time, and now this, right out of the blue ... it’s a big chance for me, Bobby, and it could mean a big change for us.’

Bobby knew his mom wanted to sell real estate. She had books on the subject and read a little out of them almost every night, often underlining parts. But if it was such a big chance, why had it made her cry?

'Well, that's good,' he said. 'The ginchiest. I hope you learn a lot. When is it?'

'Next week. The four of us leave early Tuesday morning and get back Thursday night around eight o'clock. All the meetings are at the Warwick Hotel, and that's where we'll be staying — Don's booked the rooms. I haven't stayed in a hotel room for twelve years, I guess.

I'm a little nervous.'

Did nervous make you cry? Bobby wondered. Maybe so, if you were a grownup —

especially a female grownup.

'I want you to ask S-J if you can stay with him Tuesday and Wednesday night. I'm sure Mrs Sullivan —'

Bobby shook his head. 'That won't work.'

'Whyever not?' Liz bent a fierce look at him. 'Mrs Sullivan hasn't ever minded you staying over before. You haven't gotten into her bad books somehow, have you?'

'No, Mom. It's just that S-J won a week at Camp Winnie.' The sound of all those W's coming out of his mouth made him feel like smiling, but he held it in. His mother was still looking at him in that fierce way ... and wasn't there a kind of panic in that look? Panic or something like it?

'What's Camp Winnie? What are you talking about?'

Bobby explained about S-J winning the free week at Camp Winiwinaia and how Mrs Sullivan was going to visit her parents in Wisconsin at the same time — plans which had now been finalized, Big Gray Dog and all.

'Damn it, that's just my luck,' his mom said. She almost never swore, said that cursing and what she called 'dirty talk' was the language of

the ignorant. Now she made a fist and struck the arm of the glider. 'God damn it!'

She sat for a moment, thinking. Bobby thought, as well. His only other close friend on the street was Carol, and he doubted his mom would call Anita Gerber and ask if he could stay over there. Carol was a girl, and somehow that made a difference when it came to sleepovers.

One of his mother's friends? The thing was she didn't really have any ... except for Don Biderman (and maybe the other two that were going to the seminar in Providence). Plenty of acquaintances, people she said hi to if they were walking back from the supermarket or going to a Friday-night movie downtown, but no one she could call up and ask to keep her eleven-year-old son for a couple of nights; no relatives, either, at least none that Bobby knew of.

Like people travelling on converging roads, Bobby and his mother gradually drew toward the same point. Bobby got there first, if only by a second or two.

'What about Ted?' he asked, then almost clapped his hand over his mouth. It actually rose out of his lap a little.

His mother watched the hand settle back with a return of her old cynical half-smile, the one she wore when dispensing sayings like You have to eat a peck of dirt before you die and Two men looked out through prison bars, one saw the mud and one saw the stars and of course that all-time favorite, Life's not fair.

'You think I don't know you call him Ted when the two of you are together?' she asked.

'You must think I've been taking stupid-pills, Bobby-O.' She sat and looked out at the street.

A Chrysler New Yorker slid slowly past — finny, fenderskirted, and highlighted with chrome. Bobby watched it go by. The man behind

the wheel was elderly and white-haired and wearing a blue jacket. Bobby thought he was probably all right. Old but not low.

'Maybe it'd work,' Liz said at last. She spoke musingly, more to herself than to her son.

'Let's go talk to Brautigan and see.'

Following her up the stairs to the third floor, Bobby wondered how long she had known how to say Ted's name correctly. A week? A month?

From the start, Dumbo, he thought. From the very first day.

Bobby's initial idea was that Ted could stay in his own room on the third floor while Bobby stayed in the apartment on the first floor; they'd both keep their doors open, and if either of them needed anything, they could call.

'I don't believe the Kilgallens or the Proskys would enjoy you yelling up to Mr Brautigan at three o'clock in the morning that you'd had a nightmare,' Liz said tartly. The Kilgallens and the Proskys had the two small second-floor apartments; Liz and Bobby were friendly with neither of them.

'I won't have any nightmares,' Bobby said, deeply humiliated to be treated like a little kid.

'I mean jeepers.'

'Keep it to yourself,' his mom said. They were sitting at Ted's kitchen table, the two adults smoking, Bobby with a rootbeer in front of him.

'It's just not the right idea,' Ted told him. 'You're a good kid, Bobby, responsible and levelheaded, but eleven's too young to be on your own, I think.'

Bobby found it easier to be called too young by his friend than by his mother. Also he had to admit that it might be spooky to wake up in

one of those little hours after midnight and go to the bathroom knowing he was the only person in the apartment. He could do it, he had no doubt he could do it, but yeah, it would be spooky.

‘What about the couch?’ he asked. ‘It pulls out and makes a bed, doesn’t it?’ They had never used it that way, but Bobby was sure she’d told him once that it did. He was right, and it solved the problem. She probably hadn’t wanted Bobby in her bed (let alone ‘Brattigan’), and she really hadn’t wanted Bobby up here in this hot third-floor room — that he was sure of. He figured she’d been looking so hard for a solution that she’d looked right past the obvious one.

So it was decided that Ted would spend Tuesday and Wednesday nights of the following week on the pull-out couch in the Garfields’ living room. Bobby was excited by the prospect: he would have two days on his own — three, counting Thursday — and there would be someone with him at night, when things could get spooky. Not a babysitter, either, but a grownup friend. It wasn’t the same as Sully-John going to Camp Winnie for a week, but in a way it was. Camp Broad Street, Bobby thought, and almost laughed out loud.

‘We’ll have fun,’ Ted said. ‘I’ll make my famous beans-and-franks casserole.’ He reached over and ruffled Bobby’s crewcut.

‘If you’re going to have beans and franks, it might be wise to bring that down,’ his mom said, and pointed the fingers holding her cigarette at Ted’s fan.

Ted and Bobby laughed. Liz Garfield smiled her cynical half-smile, finished her cigarette, and put it out in Ted’s ashtray. When she did, Bobby again noticed the puffiness of her eyelids.

As Bobby and his mother went back down the stairs, Bobby remembered the poster he had seen in the park — the missing Corgi who would bring you a BALL if you said HURRY UP PHIL.

He should tell Ted about the poster. He should tell Ted about everything. But if he did that and Ted left 149, who would stay with him next week? What would happen to Camp Broad Street, two fellows eating Ted's famous beans-and-franks casserole for supper (maybe in front of the TV, which his mom rarely allowed) and then staying up as late as they wanted?

Bobby made a promise to himself: he would tell Ted everything next Friday, after his mother was back from her conference or seminar or whatever it was. He would make a complete report and Ted could do whatever he needed to do. He might even stick around.

With this decision Bobby's mind cleared amazingly, and when he saw an upside-down FOR

SALE card on the Total Grocery bulletin board two days later — it was for a washer-dryer set — he was able to put it out of his thoughts almost immediately.

That was nevertheless an uneasy week for Bobby Garfield, very uneasy indeed. He saw two more lost-pet posters, one downtown and one out on Asher Avenue, half a mile beyond the Asher Empire (the block he lived on was no longer enough; he found himself going farther and farther afield in his daily scouting trips). And Ted began to have those weird blank periods with greater frequency. They lasted longer when they came, too. Sometimes he spoke when he was in that distant state of mind, and not always in English. When he did speak in English, what he said did not always make sense. Most of the time Bobby thought Ted was one of the sanest, smartest, neatest guys he had ever met. When he went away, though, it was scary. At least his mom didn't know. Bobby didn't think she'd be too cool on the idea of leaving him with a guy who sometimes flipped out and started talking nonsense in English or gibberish in some other language.

After one of these lapses, when Ted did nothing for almost a minute and a half but stare blankly off into space, making no response to

Bobby's increasingly agitated questions, it occurred to Bobby that perhaps Ted wasn't in his own head at all but in some other world — that he had left Earth as surely as those people in Ring Around the Sun who discovered they could follow the spirals on a child's top to just about anywhere.

Ted had been holding a Chesterfield between his fingers when he went blank; the ash grew long and eventually dropped off onto the table. When the coal grew unnervingly close to Ted's bunched knuckles, Bobby pulled it gently free and was putting it out in the overflowing ashtray when Ted finally came back.

'Smoking?' he asked with a frown. 'Hell, Bobby, you're too young to smoke.'

'I was just putting it out for you. I thought ...' Bobby shrugged, suddenly shy.

Ted looked at the first two fingers of his right hand, where there was a permanent yellow nicotine stain. He laughed — a short bark with absolutely no humor in it. 'Thought I was going to burn myself, did you?'

Bobby nodded. 'What do you think about when you go off like that? Where do you go?'

'That's hard to explain,' Ted replied, and then asked Bobby to read him his horoscope.

Thinking about Ted's trances was distracting. Not talking about the things Ted was paying him to look for was even more distracting. As a result, Bobby — ordinarily a pretty good hitter — struck out four times in an afternoon game for the Wolves at Sterling House. He also lost four straight Battleship games to Sully at S-J's house on Friday, when it rained.

‘What the heck’s wrong with you?’ Sully asked. ‘That’s the third time you called out squares you already called out before. Also, I have to practically holler in your ear before you answer me. What’s up?’

‘Nothing.’ That was what he said. Everything. That was what he felt.

Carol also asked Bobby a couple of times that week if he was okay; Mrs Gerber asked if he was ‘off his feed’; Yvonne Loving wanted to know if he had mono, and then giggled until she seemed in danger of exploding.

The only person who didn’t notice Bobby’s odd behavior was his mom. Liz Garfield was increasingly preoccupied with her trip to Providence, talking on the phone in the evenings with Mr Biderman or one of the other two who were going (Bill Cushman was one of them; Bobby couldn’t exactly remember the name of the other guy), laying clothes out on her bed until the spread was almost covered, then shaking her head over them angrily and returning them to the closet, making an appointment to get her hair done and then calling the lady back and asking if she could add a manicure. Bobby wasn’t even sure what a manicure was. He had to ask Ted.

She seemed excited by her preparations, but there was also a kind of grimness to her. She was like a soldier about to storm an enemy beach, or a paratrooper who would soon be jumping out of a plane and landing behind enemy lines. One of her evening telephone conversations seemed to be a whispered argument — Bobby had an idea it was with Mr Biderman, but he wasn’t sure. On Saturday, Bobby came into her bedroom and saw her looking at two new dresses — dressy dresses, one with thin little shoulder straps and one with no straps at all, just a top like a bathing suit. The boxes they had come in lay tumbled on the floor with tissue paper foaming out of them. His mom was standing over the dresses, looking down at them with an expression Bobby had never seen before: big eyes, drawn-together brows, taut white cheeks which flared with spots of rouge. One hand was at her mouth, and he could hear bonelike clittering sounds as she bit at her nails. A Kool smoldered in an ashtray on the

bureau, apparently forgotten. Her big eyes shuttled back and forth between the two dresses.

‘Mom?’ Bobby asked, and she jumped literally jumped into the air. Then she whirled on him, her mouth drawn down in a grimace.

‘Jesus Christ!’ she almost snarled. ‘Don you knock?’ I’m sorry,’ he said, and began to back out of the room. His mother had never said anything about knocking before. ‘Mom, are you all right?’

‘Fine!’ She spied the cigarette, grabbed it, smoked furiously. She exhaled with such force that Bobby almost expected to see smoke come from her ears as well as her nose and mouth.

Td be finer if I could find a cocktail dress that didn’t make me look like Elsie the Cow. Once I was a size six, do you know that? Before I married your father I was a size six. Now look at me! Elsie the Cow! Moby-damn-Dick!’

‘Mom, you’re not big. In fact just lately you look — ‘

‘Get out, Bobby. Please let Mother alone. I have a headache.’ That night he heard her crying again. The following day he saw her carefully packing one of the dresses into her luggage — the one with the thin straps. The other went back into its store-box: GOWNS BY

LUCIE OF BRIDGEPORT was written across the front in elegant maroon script.

On Monday night, Liz invited Ted Brautigan down to have dinner with them. Bobby loved his mother’s meatloaf and usually asked for seconds, but on this occasion he had to work hard to stuff down a single piece. He was terrified that Ted would trance out and his mother would pitch a fit over it.

His fear proved groundless. Ted spoke pleasantly of his childhood in New Jersey and, when Bobby’s mom asked him, of his job in Hartford. To Bobby he seemed less comfortable talking about

accounting than he did reminiscing about sleighing as a kid, but his mom didn't appear to notice. Ted did ask for a second slice of meatloaf.

When the meal was over and the table cleared, Liz gave Ted a list of telephone numbers, including those of Dr Gordon, the Sterling House Summer Rec office, and the Warwick Hotel. 'If there are any problems, I want to hear from you. Okay?'

Ted nodded. 'Okay.'

'Bobby? No big worries?' She put her hand briefly on his forehead, the way she used to do when he complained of feeling feverish.

'Nope. We'll have a blast. Won't we, Mr Brautigan?'

'Oh, call him Ted,' Liz almost snapped. 'If he's going to be sleeping in our living room, I guess I better call him Ted, too. May I?'

'Indeed you may. Let it be Ted from this moment on.'

He smiled. Bobby thought it was a sweet smile, open and friendly. He didn't understand how anyone could resist it. But his mother could and did. Even now, while she was returning Ted's smile, he saw the hand with the Kleenex in it tightening and loosening in its old familiar gesture of anxious displeasure. One of her absolute favorite sayings now came to Bobby's mind: I'd trust him (or her) as far as I could sling a piano.

'And from now on I'm Liz.' She held out a hand across the table and they shook like people meeting for the first time ... except Bobby knew his mother's mind was already made up on the subject of Ted Brautigan. If her back hadn't been against the wall, she never would have trusted Bobby with him. Not in a million years.

She opened her purse and took out a plain white envelope. 'There's ten dollars in here,' she said, handing the envelope to Ted. 'You boys will want to eat out at least one night, I expect — Bobby likes the

Colony Diner, if that's all right with you — and you may want to take in a movie, as well. I don't know what else there might be, but it's best to have a little cushion, don't you think?'

'Always better safe than sorry,' Ted agreed, tucking the envelope carefully into the front pocket of his slacks, 'but I don't expect we'll go through anything like ten dollars in three days. Will we, Bobby?'

'Gee, no, I don't see how we could.'

'Waste not, want not,' Liz said — it was another of her favorites, right up there with the fool and his money soon parted. She plucked a cigarette out of the pack on the table beside the sofa and lit it with a hand which was not quite steady. 'You boys will be fine. Probably have a better time than I will.'

Looking at her ragged, bitten fingernails, Bobby thought, That's for sure.

His mom and the others were going to Providence in Mr Biderman's car, and the next morning at seven o'clock Liz and Bobby Garfield stood on the porch, waiting for it to show up. The air had that early hazy hush that meant the hot days of summer had arrived. From Asher Avenue came the hoot and rumble of heavy going-to-work traffic, but down here on Broad there was only the occasional passing car or delivery truck. Bobby could hear the hisha-hisha of lawn-sprinklers, and, from the other side of the block, the endless roop-rooproop of Bowser. Bowser sounded the same whether it was June or January; to Bobby Garfield, Bowser seemed as changeless as God.

'You don't have to wait out here with me, you know,' Liz said. She was wearing a light coat and smoking a cigarette. She had on a little more makeup than usual, but Bobby thought he could still detect shadows under her eyes — she had passed another restless night.

'I don't mind.'

'I hope it's all right, leaving you with him.'

'I wish you wouldn't worry. Ted's a good guy, Mom.'

She made a little hmphing noise.

There was a twinkle of chrome from the bottom of the hill as Mr Biderman's Mercury (not vulgar, exactly, but a boat of a car all the same) turned onto their street from Commonwealth and came up the hill toward 149.

'There he is, there he is,' his mom said, sounding nervous and excited. She bent down.

'Give me a little smooch, Bobby. I don't want to kiss you and smear my lipstick.'

Bobby put his hand on her arm and lightly kissed her cheek. He smelled her hair, the perfume she was wearing, her face-powder. He would never kiss her with that same unshadowed love again.

She gave him a vague little smile, not looking at him, looking instead at Mr Biderman's boat of a Merc, which swerved gracefully across the street and pulled up at the curb in front of the house. She reached for her two suitcases (two seemed a lot for two days, Bobby thought, although he supposed the fancy dress took up a good deal of space in one of them), but he already had them by the handles.

'Those are too heavy, Bobby — you'll trip on the steps.'

'No,' he said. 'I won't.'

She gave him a distracted look, then waved to Mr Biderman and went toward the car, high heels clacking. Bobby followed, trying not to grimace at the weight of the suitcases ... what had she put in them, clothes or bricks?

He got them down to the sidewalk without having to stop and rest, at least. Mr Biderman was out of the car by then, first putting a casual

kiss on his mother's cheek, then shaking out the key that opened the trunk.

'Howya doin, Sport, howza boy?' Mr Biderman always called Bobby Sport. 'Lug em around back and I'll slide em in. Women always hafta bring the farm, don't they? Well, you know the old saying — can't live with em, can't shoot em outside the state of Montana.' He bared his teeth in a grin that made Bobby think of Jack in Lord of the Flies. 'Want me to take one?'

'I've got em,' Bobby said. He trudged grimly in Mr Biderman's wake, shoulders aching, the back of his neck hot and starting to sweat.

Mr Biderman opened the trunk, plucked the suitcases from Bobby's hands, and slid them in with the rest of the luggage. Behind them, his mom was looking in the back window and talking with the other two men who were going. She laughed at something one of them said.

To Bobby the laugh sounded about as real as a wooden leg.

Mr Biderman closed the trunk and looked down at Bobby. He was a narrow man with a wide face. His cheeks were always flushed. You could see his pink scalp in the tracks left by the teeth of his comb. He wore little round glasses with gold rims. To Bobby his smile looked as real as his mother's laugh had sounded.

'Gonna play some baseball this summer, Sport?' Don Biderman bent his knees a little and cocked an imaginary bat. Bobby thought he looked like a dope.

'Yes, sir. I'm on the Wolves at Sterling House. I was hoping to make the Lions, but ... '

'Good. Good.' Mr Biderman made a big deal of looking at his watch — the wide gold Twist-O-Flex band was dazzling in the early sunshine and then patted Bobby's cheek. Bobby had to make a conscious effort not to cringe from his touch. 'Say, we gotta get this

wagontrain rolling! Shake her easy, Sport. Thanks for the loan of your mother.'

He turned away and escorted Liz around the Mercury to the passenger side. He did this with a hand pressed to her back. Bobby liked that even less than watching the guy smooch her cheek. He glanced at the well-padded, business-suited men in the rear seat — Dean was the other guy's name, he remembered — just in time to see them elbowing each other. Both were grinning.

Something's wrong here, Bobby thought, and as Mr Biderman opened the passenger door for his mother, as she murmured her thanks and slid in, gathering her dress a little so it wouldn't wrinkle, he had an urge to tell her not to go, Rhode Island was too far away, Bridgeport would be too far away, she needed to stay home.

He said nothing, though, only stood on the curb as Mr Biderman closed her door and walked back around to the driver's side. He opened that door, paused, and then did his stupid little batter-up pantomime again. This time he added an asinine fanny-wiggle. What a nimrod, Bobby thought.

'Don't do anything I wouldn't do, Sport,' he said.

'But if you do, name it after me,' Cushman called from the back seat. Bobby didn't know exactly what that meant but it must have been funny because Dean laughed and Mr Biderman tipped him one of those just-between-us-guys winks.

His mother was leaning in his direction. 'You be a good boy, Bobby,' she said. 'I'll be back around eight on Thursday night — no later than ten. You're sure you're fine with that?'

No, I'm not fine with it at all. Don't go off with them, Mom, don't go off with Mr Biderman and those two grinning dopes sitting behind you. Those two nimrods. Please don't.

'Sure he is,' Mr Biderman said. 'He's a sport. Ain't you, Sport?'

'Bobby?' she asked, not looking at Mr Biderman. 'Are you all set?'

'Yeah,' he said. 'I'm a sport.'

Mr Biderman bellowed ferocious laughter — Kill the pig, cut his throat, Bobby thought —

and dropped the Mercury into gear. 'Providence or bust!' he cried, and the car rolled away from the curb, swerving across to the other side of Broad Street and heading up toward Asher. Bobby stood on the sidewalk, waving as the Merc passed Carol's house and Sully-John's. He felt as if he had a bone in his heart. If this was some sort of premonition — a winkle — he never wanted to have another one.

A hand fell on his shoulder. He looked around and saw Ted standing there in his bathrobe and slippers, smoking a cigarette. His hair, which had yet to make its morning acquaintance with the brush, stood up around his ears in comical sprays of white.

'So that was the boss,' he said. 'Mr ... Bidermeyer, is it?'

'Biderman.'

'And how do you like him, Bobby?'

Speaking with a low, bitter clarity, Bobby said, 'I trust him about as far as I could sling a piano.'

6

A Dirty Old Man. Ted's Casserole. A Bad

Dream. Village of the Damned. Down There.

An hour or so after seeing his mother off, Bobby went down to Field B behind Sterling House. There were no real games until afternoon, nothing but three-flies-six-grounders or roily-bat, but even roily-bat was better than nothing. On Field A, to the north, the little kids were futzing away at a game that vaguely resembled baseball; on Field C, to the south, some high-school kids were playing what was almost the real thing.

Shortly after the town square clock had bonged noon and the boys broke to go in search of the hotdog wagon, Bill Pratt asked, 'Who's that weird guy over there?'

He was pointing to a bench in the shade, and although Ted was wearing a trenchcoat, an old fedora hat, and dark glasses, Bobby recognized him at once. He guessed S-J would've, too, if S-J hadn't been at Camp Winnie. Bobby almost raised one hand in a wave, then didn't, because Ted was in disguise. Still, he'd come out to watch his downstairs friend play ball.

Even though it wasn't a real game, Bobby felt an absurdly large lump rise in his throat. His mom had only come to watch him once in the two years he'd been playing — last August, when his team had been in the Tri-Town Championships — and even then she'd left in the fourth inning, before Bobby connected for what proved to be the game-winning triple.

Somebody has to work around here, Bobby-0, she would have replied had he dared reproach her for that. Your father didn't exactly leave us well off, you know. It was true, of course —

she had to work and Ted was retired. Except Ted had to stay clear of the low men in the yellow coats, and that was a full-time job. The fact that they didn't exist wasn't the point. Ted believed they did ... but had come out to see him play just the same.

'Probably some dirty old man wanting to put a suckjob on one of the little kids,' Harry Shaw said. Harry was small and tough, a boy going through life with his chin stuck out a mile. Being with Bill and Harry suddenly made Bobby homesick for Sully-John, who had left on the Camp Winnie bus Monday morning (at the brain-numbing hour of five A.M.). S-J

didn't have much of a temper and he was kind. Sometimes Bobby thought that was the best thing about Sully — he was kind.

From Field C there came the hefty crack of a bat — an authoritative full-contact sound which none of the Field B boys could yet produce. It was followed by savage roars of approval that made Bill, Harry, and Bobby look a little nervously in that direction.

'St Gabe's boys,' Bill said. 'They think they own Field C.'

'Cruddy Catlicks,' Harry said. 'Catlicks are sissies — I could take any one of them.'

'How about fifteen or twenty?' Bill asked, and Harry was silent. Up ahead, glittering like a mirror, was the hotdog wagon. Bobby touched the buck in his pocket. Ted had given it to him out of the envelope his mother had left, then had put the envelope itself behind the toaster, telling Bobby to take what he needed when he needed it. Bobby was almost exalted by this level of trust.

'Look on the bright side,' Bill said. 'Maybe those St Gabe's boys will beat up the dirty old man.'

When they got to the wagon, Bobby bought only one hotdog instead of the two he had been planning on. His appetite seemed to have shrunk. When they got back to Field B, where the Wolves' coaches

had now appeared with the equipment cart, the bench Ted had been sitting on was empty.

‘Come on, come on!’ Coach Terrell called, clapping his hands. ‘Who wants to play some baseball here?’

That night Ted cooked his famous casserole in the Garfields’ oven. It meant more hotdogs, but in the summer of 1960 Bobby Garfield could have eaten hotdogs three times a day and had another at bedtime.

He read stuff to Ted out of the newspaper while Ted put their dinner together. Ted only wanted to hear a couple of paragraphs about the impending Patterson-Johansson rematch, the one everybody was calling the fight of the century, but he wanted to hear every word of the article about tomorrow night’s Albini-Haywood tilt at The Garden in New York. Bobby thought this moderately weird, but he was too happy to even comment on it, let alone complain.

He couldn’t remember ever having spent an evening without his mother, and he missed her, yet he was also relieved to have her gone for a little while. There had been a queer sort of tension running through the apartment for weeks now, maybe even for months. It was like an electrical hum so constant that you got used to it and didn’t realize how much a part of your life it had become until it was gone. That thought brought another of his mother’s sayings to mind.

‘What are you thinking?’ Ted asked as Bobby came over to get the plates.

‘That a change is as good as a rest,’ Bobby replied. ‘It’s something my mom says. I hope she’s having as good a time as I am.’

‘So do I, Bobby,’ Ted said. He bent, opened the oven, checked their dinner. ‘So do I.’

The casserole was terrific, with canned B&M beans — the only kind Bobby really liked —

and exotic spicy hotdogs not from the supermarket but from the butcher just off the town square. (Bobby assumed Ted had bought these while wearing his ‘disguise.’) All this came in a horseradish sauce that zinged in your mouth and then made you feel sort of sweaty in the face. Ted had two helpings; Bobby had three, washing them down with glass after glass of grape Kool-Aid.

Ted blanked out once during the meal, first saying that he could feel them in the backs of his eyeballs, then lapsing either into some foreign language or outright gibberish, but the incident was brief and didn’t cut into Bobby’s appetite in the slightest. The blank-outs were part of Ted, that was all, like his scuffling walk and the nicotine stains between the first two fingers of his right hand.

They cleaned up together, Ted stowing the leftover casserole in the fridge and washing the dishes, Bobby drying and putting things away because he knew where everything went.

‘Interested in taking a ride to Bridgeport with me tomorrow?’ Ted asked as they worked.

‘We could go to the movies — the early matinee — and then I have to do an errand.’

‘Gosh, yeah!’ Bobby said. ‘What do you want to see?’

‘I’m open to suggestions, but I was thinking perhaps Village of the Damned, a British film.

It’s based on a very fine science-fiction novel by John Wyndham. Would that suit?’

At first Bobby was so excited he couldn’t speak. He had seen the ads for Village of the Damned in the newspaper — all those spooky-looking kids with the glowing eyes — but hadn’t thought he would

ever actually get to see it. It sure wasn't the sort of Saturday-matinee movie that would ever play at Harwich on the Square or the Asher Empire. Matinees in those theaters consisted mostly of big-bug monster shows, westerns, or Audie Murphy war movies.

And although his mother usually took him if she went to an evening show, she didn't like science fiction (Liz liked moody love stories like *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*). Also the theaters in Bridgeport weren't like the antiquey old Harwich or the somehow businesslike Empire, with its plain, undecorated marquee. The theaters in Bridgeport were like fairy castles — they had huge screens (swag upon swag of velvety curtains covered them between shows), ceilings where tiny lights twinkled in galactic profusion, brilliant electric wall sconces ... and two balconies.

'Bobby?'

'You bet!' he said at last, thinking he probably wouldn't sleep tonight. 'I'd love it. But aren't you afraid of ... you know ... '

'We'll take a taxi instead of the bus. I can phone for another taxi to take us back home later.

'We'll be fine. I think they're moving away now, anyway. I don't sense them so clearly.'

Yet Ted glanced away when he said this, and to Bobby he looked like a man trying to tell himself a story he can't quite believe. If the increasing frequency of his blank-outs meant anything, Bobby thought, he had good reason to look that way.

Stop it, the low men don't exist, they're no more real than Flash Gordon and Dale Arden.

The things he asked you to look for are just ... just things. Remember that, Bobby-0: just ordinary things.

With dinner cleared away, the two of them sat down to watch Bronco, with Ty Hardin. Not among the best of the so-called 'adult westerns' (Cheyenne and Maverick were the best), but not bad, either. Halfway through the show, Bobby let out a moderately loud fart. Ted's casserole had begun its work. He snuck a sideways glance to make sure Ted wasn't holding his nose and grimacing. Nope, just watching the television, seemingly absorbed.

When a commercial came on (some actress selling refrigerators), Ted asked if Bobby would like a glass of rootbeer. Bobby said okay. 'I thought I might help myself to one of the Alka-Seltzers I saw in the bathroom, Bobby. I may have eaten a bit too much.'

As he got up, Ted let out a long, sonorous fart that sounded like a trombone. Bobby put his hands to his mouth and giggled. Ted gave him a rueful smile and left the room. Bobby's giggling forced out more farts, a little tooting stream of them, and when Ted came back with a fizzy glass of Alka-Seltzer in one hand and a foamy glass of Hires rootbeer in the other, Bobby was laughing so hard that tears streamed down his cheeks and hung off his jawline like raindrops.

'This should help fix us up,' Ted said, and when he bent to hand Bobby his rootbeer, a loud honk came from behind him. 'Goose just flew out of my ass,' he added matter-of-factly, and Bobby laughed so hard that he could no longer sit in his chair. He slithered out of it and lay in a boneless heap on the floor.

'I'll be right back,' Ted told him. 'There's something else we need.'

He left open the door between the apartment and the foyer, so Bobby could hear him going up the stairs. By the time Ted got to the third floor, Bobby had managed to crawl into his chair again. He didn't think he'd ever laughed so hard in his life. He drank some of his rootbeer, then farted again. 'Goose just flew ... flew out ... ' But he couldn't finish. He flopped back in his chair and howled, shaking his head from side to side.

The stairs creaked as Ted came back down. When he reentered the apartment he had his fan, with the electric cord looped neatly around the base, under one arm. 'Your mother was right about this,' he said. When he bent to plug it in, another goose flew out of his ass.

'She usually is,' Bobby said, and that struck them both as funny. They sat in the living room with the fan rotating back and forth, stirring the increasingly fragrant air. Bobby thought if he didn't stop laughing soon his head would pop.

When Bronco was over (by then Bobby had lost all track of the story), he helped Ted pull out the couch. The bed which had been hiding inside it didn't look all that great, but Liz had made it up with some spare sheets and blankets and Ted said it would be fine. Bobby brushed his teeth, then looked out from the door of his bedroom at Ted, who was sitting on the end of the sofa-bed and watching the news.

'Goodnight,' Bobby said.

Ted looked over to him, and for a moment Bobby thought Ted would get up, cross the room, give him a hug and maybe a kiss. Instead of that, he sketched a funny, awkward little salute. 'Sleep well, Bobby.'

'Thanks.'

Bobby closed his bedroom door, turned off the light, got into bed, and spread his heels to the corners of the mattress. As he looked up into the dark he remembered the morning Ted had taken hold of his shoulders, then laced his bunched old hands together behind his neck.

Their faces that day had been almost as close as his and Carol's had been on the Ferris wheel just before they kissed. The day he had argued with his mother. The day he had known about the money taped in the catalogue. Also the day he had won ninety cents from Mr McQuown.

Go buy yourself a martini, Mr McQuown had said.

Had it come from Ted? Had the winkle come from Ted touching him?

‘Yeah,’ Bobby whispered in the dark. ‘Yeah, I think it probably did.’

What if he touches me again that way?

Bobby was still considering this idea when he fell asleep.

He dreamed that people were chasing his mother through the jungle — Jack and Piggy, the littluns, and Don Biderman, Cushman, and Dean. His mother was wearing her new dress from Gowns by Lucie, the black one with the thin straps, only it had been torn in places by thorns and branches. Her stockings were in tatters. They looked like strips of dead skin hanging off her legs. Her eyes were deep sweatholes gleaming with terror. The boys chasing her were naked. Biderman and the other two were wearing their business suits. All of them had alternating streaks of red and white paint on their faces; all were brandishing spears and shouting Kill the pig, slit her throat! Kill the pig, drink her blood! Kill the pig, strew her guts!

He woke in the gray light of dawn, shivering, and got up to use the bathroom. By the time he went back to bed he could no longer remember precisely what he had dreamed. He slept for another two hours, and woke up to the good smells of bacon and eggs. Bright summer sunshine was slanting in his bedroom window and Ted was making breakfast.

Village of the Damned was the last and greatest movie of Bobby Garfield’s childhood; it was the first and greatest movie of what came after childhood — a dark period when he was often bad and always confused, a Bobby Garfield he felt he didn’t really know. The cop who arrested him for the first time had blond hair, and what came to Bobby’s mind as the cop led him away from the mom-n-pop store Bobby had broken into (by then he and his mother were living in a suburb north of Boston) were all those blond kids in Village of the Damned. The cop could have been one of them all grown up.

The movie was playing at the Criterion, the very avatar of those Bridgeport dream-palaces Bobby had been thinking about the night before. It was in black and white, but the contrasts were sharp, not all fuzzy like on the Zenith back in the apartment, and the images were enormous. So were the sounds, especially the shivery theremin music that played when the Midwich children really started to use their power.

Bobby was enthralled by the story, understanding even before the first five minutes were over that it was a real story, the way Lord of the Flies had been a real story. The people seemed like real people, which made the make-believe parts scarier. He guessed that Sully-John would have been bored with it, except for the ending. S-J liked to see giant scorpions crushing Mexico City or Rodan stomping Tokyo; beyond that his interest in what he called 'creature features' was limited. But Sully wasn't here, and for the first time since he'd left, Bobby was glad.

They were in time for the one o'clock matinee, and the theater was almost deserted. Ted (wearing his fedora and with his dark glasses folded into the breast pocket of his shirt) bought a big bag of popcorn, a box of Dots, a Coke for Bobby, and a rootbeer (of course!) for himself. Every now and then he would pass Bobby the popcorn or the candy and Bobby would take some, but he was hardly aware that he was eating, let alone of what he was eating.

The movie began with everyone in the British village of Midwich falling asleep (a man who was driving a tractor at the time of the event was killed; so was a woman who fell facefirst onto a lighted stove burner). The military was notified, and they sent a reconnaissance plane to take a look. The pilot fell asleep as soon as he was over Midwich airspace; the plane crashed. A soldier with a rope around his middle walked ten or twelve paces into the village, then swooned into a deep sleep. When he was dragged back, he awakened as soon as he was hauled over the 'sleep-line' that had been painted across the highway.

Everyone in Midwich woke up eventually, and everything seemed to be all right ... until, a few weeks later, the women in town discovered they were pregnant. Old women, young women, even girls Carol Gerber's age, all pregnant, and the children they gave birth to were those spooky kids from the poster, the ones with the blond hair and the glowing eyes.

Although the movie never said, Bobby figured the Children of the Damned must have been caused by some sort of outer-space phenomenon, like the pod-people in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. In any case, they grew up faster than normal kids, they were super-smart, they could make people do what they wanted ... and they were ruthless. When one father tried to discipline his particular Child of the Damned, all the kids clubbed together and directed their thoughts at the offending grownup (their eyes glowing, that theremin music so pulsing and strange that Bobby's arms broke out in goosebumps as he drank his Coke) until the guy put a shotgun to his head and killed himself (that part wasn't shown, and Bobby was glad).

The hero was George Sanders. His wife gave birth to one of the blond children. S-J would have scoffed at George, called him a 'queer bastard' or a 'golden oldie,' but Bobby found him a welcome change from heroes like Randolph Scott, Richard Carlson, and the inevitable Audie Murphy. George was really sort of ripshit, in a weird English way. In the words of Denny Rivers, old George knew how to lay chilly. He wore special cool ties and combed his hair back tight to his skull. He didn't look as though he could beat up a bunch of saloon baddies or anything, but he was the only guy from Midwich the Children of the Damned would have anything to do with; in fact they drafted him to be their teacher. Bobby couldn't imagine Randolph Scott or Audie Murphy teaching a bunch of super-smart kids from outer space anything.

In the end, George Sanders was also the one who got rid of them. He had discovered he could keep the Children from reading his mind — for a little while, anyway — if he imagined a brick wall in his head,

with all his most secret thoughts behind it. And after everyone had decided the Children must go (you could teach them math, but not why it was bad to punish someone by making him drive over a cliff), Sanders put a time-bomb into his briefcase and took it into the schoolroom. That was the only place where the Children — Bobby understood in some vague way that they were only supernatural versions of Jack Merridew and his hunters in *Lord of the Flies* — were all together.

They sensed that Sanders was hiding something from them. In the movie's final excruciating sequence, you could see bricks flying out of the wall Sanders had constructed in his head, flying faster and faster as the Children of the Damned pried into him, trying to find out what he was concealing. At last they uncovered the image of the bomb in the briefcase —

eight or nine sticks of dynamite wired up to an alarm clock. You saw their creepy golden eyes widen with understanding, but they didn't have time to do anything. The bomb exploded.

Bobby was shocked that the hero died — Randolph Scott never died in the Saturday-matinee movies at the Empire, neither did Audie Murphy or Richard Carlson — but he understood that George Sanders had given his life For the Greater Good of All. He thought he understood something else, as well: Ted's blank-outs.

While Ted and Bobby had been visiting Midwich, the day in southern Connecticut had turned hot and glaring. Bobby didn't like the world much after a really good movie in any case; for a little while it felt like an unfair joke, full of people with dull eyes, small plans, and facial blemishes. He sometimes thought if the world had a plot it would be so much better.

'Brautigan and Garfield hit the bricks!' Ted exclaimed as they stepped from beneath the marquee (a banner reading COME IN IT'S KOOL INSIDE hung from the marquee's front). 'What did you think? Did you enjoy it?'

'It was great,' Bobby said. 'Fantabulous. Thanks for taking me. It was practically the best movie I ever saw. How about when he had the dynamite? Did you think he'd be able to fool them?'

'Well ... I'd read the book, remember. Will you read it, do you think?'

'Yes!' Bobby felt, in fact, a sudden urge to bolt back to Harwich, running the whole distance down the Connecticut Pike and Asher Avenue in the hot sunshine so he could borrow *The Midwich Cuckoos* with his new adult library card at once. 'Did he write any other science-fiction stories?'

'John Wyndham? Oh yes, quite a few. And will no doubt write more. One nice thing about science-fiction and mystery writers is that they rarely dither five years between books. That is the prerogative of serious writers who drink whiskey and have affairs.'

'Are the others as good as the one we just saw?'

'*The Day of the Triffids* is as good. *The Kraken Wakes* is even better.'

'What's a kraken?'

They had reached a streetcorner and were waiting for the light to change. Ted made a spooky, big-eyed face and bent down toward Bobby with his hands on his knees. 'It's a monstah,' he said, doing a pretty good Boris Karloff imitation.

They walked on, talking first about the movie and then about whether or not there really might be life in outer space, and then on to the special cool ties George Sanders had worn in the movie (Ted told him that kind of tie was called an ascot). When Bobby next took notice of their surroundings they had come to a part of Bridgeport he had never been in before —

when he came to the city with his mom, they stuck to downtown, where the big stores were.

The stores here were small and crammed together. None sold what the big department stores did: clothes and appliances and shoes and toys. Bobby saw signs for locksmiths, checkcashing services, used books. ROD'S GUNS, read one sign, wo FAT NOODLE co., read another.

FOTO FINISHING, read a third. Next to wo FAT was a shop selling SPECIAL SOUVENIRS. There was something weirdly like the Savin Rock midway about this street, so much so that Bobby almost expected to see the Monte Man standing on a streetcorner with his makeshift table and his lobsterback playing cards.

Bobby tried to peer through the SPECIAL SOUVENIRS window when they passed, but it was covered by a big bamboo blind. He'd never heard of a store covering their show window during business hours. 'Who'd want a special souvenir of Bridgeport, do you think?'

'Well, I don't think they really sell souvenirs,' Ted said. Td guess they sell items of a sexual nature, few of them strictly legal.'

Bobby had questions about that — a billion or so — but felt it best to be quiet. Outside a pawnshop with three golden balls hanging over the door he paused to look at a dozen straight-razors which had been laid out on velvet with their blades partly open. They'd been arranged in a circle and the result was strange and (to Bobby) beautiful: looking at them was like looking at something removed from a deadly piece of machinery. The razors' handles were much more exotic than the handle of the one Ted used, too. One looked like ivory, another like ruby etched with thin gold lines, a third like crystal.

'If you bought one of those you'd be shaving in style, wouldn't you?' Bobby asked.

He thought Ted would smile, but he didn't. 'When people buy razors like that, they don't shave with them, Bobby.'

'What do you mean?'

Ted wouldn't tell him, but he did buy him a sandwich called a gyro in a Greek delicatessen.

It came in a folded-over piece of homemade bread and was oozing a dubious white sauce which to Bobby looked quite a lot like pimplepus. He forced himself to try it because Ted said they were good. It turned out to be the best sandwich he'd ever eaten, as meaty as a hotdog or a hamburger from the Colony Diner but with an exotic taste that no hamburger or hotdog had ever had. And it was great to be eating on the sidewalk, strolling along with his friend, looking and being looked at.

'What do they call this part of town?' Bobby asked. 'Does it have a name?'

'These days, who knows?' Ted said, and shrugged. 'They used to call it Greektown. Then the Italians came, the Puerto Ricans, and now the Negroes. There's a novelist named David Goodis — the kind the college teachers never read, a genius of the drugstore paperback displays — who calls it "down there." He says every city has a neighborhood like this one, where you can buy sex or marijuana or a parrot that talks dirty, where the men sit talking on stoops like those men across the street, where the women always seem to be yelling for their kids to come in unless they want a whipping, and where the wine always comes in a paper sack.' Ted pointed into the gutter, where the neck of a Thunderbird bottle did indeed poke out of a brown bag. 'It's just down there, that's what David Goodis says, the place where you don't have any use for your last name and you can buy almost anything if you have cash in your pocket.'

Down there, Bobby thought, watching a trio of olive-skinned teenagers in gang jackets watch them as they passed. This is the land of straight-razors and special souvenirs.

The Criterion and Muncie's Department Store had never seemed so far away. And Broad Street? That and all of Harwich could have been in another solar system.

At last they came to a place called The Corner Pocket, Pool and Billiards, Automatic Games, Rhenigold on Tap. There was also one of those banners reading COME IN IT'S KOOL

INSIDE. As Bobby and Ted passed beneath it, a young man in a strappy tee-shirt and a chocolate-colored stingybrim like the kind Frank Sinatra wore came out the door. He had a long, thin case in one hand. That's his pool-cue, Bobby thought with fright and amazement.

He's got his pool-cue in that case like it was a guitar or something.

'Who a hip cat, Daddy-O?' he asked Bobby, then grinned. Bobby grinned back. The kid with the pool-cue case made a gun with his finger and pointed at Bobby. Bobby made a gun with his own finger and pointed it back. The kid nodded as if to say Yeah, okay, you hip, we both hip and crossed the street, snapping the fingers of his free hand and bopping to the music in his head.

Ted looked up the street in one direction, then down in the other. Ahead of them, three Negro children were capering in the spray of a partly opened hydrant. Back the way they had come, two young men — one white, the other maybe Puerto Rican — were taking the hubcaps off an old Ford, working with the rapid seriousness of doctors performing an operation. Ted looked at them, sighed, then looked at Bobby. 'The Pocket's no place for a kid, even in the middle of the day, but I'm not going to leave you out on the street. Come on.' He took Bobby by the hand and led him inside.

7

In the Pocket. The Shirt Right Off

His Back. Outside the William Penn.

The Frence Sex-Kitten.

What struck Bobby first was the smell of beer. It was impacted, as if folks had been drinking in here since the days when the pyramids were still in the planning stages. Next was the sound of a TV, not turned to Bandstand but to one of the late-afternoon soap operas ('Oh John, oh Marsha' shows was what his mother called them), and the click of pool-balls. Only after these things had registered did his eyes chip in their own input, because they'd needed to adjust. The place was very dim.

And it was long, Bobby saw. To their right was an archway, and beyond it a room that appeared almost endless. Most of the pool-tables were covered, but a few stood in brilliant islands of light where men strolled languidly about, pausing every now and then to bend and shoot. Other men, hardly visible, sat in high seats along the wall, watching. One was getting his shoes shined. He looked about a thousand.

Straight ahead was a big room filled with Gottlieb pinball machines: a billion red and orange lights stuttered stomachache colors off a large sign which read IF YOU TILT THE SAME

MACHINE TWICE YOU WILL BE ASKED TO LEAVE. A young man wearing another stingybrim hat — apparently the approved headgear for the bad motorscooters residing down there — was bent over Frontier Patrol, working the flippers frantically. A cigarette hung off his lower lip, the smoke rising past his face and the whorls of his combed-back hair. He was wearing a jacket tied around his waist and turned inside-out.

To the left of the lobby was a bar. It was from here that the sound of the TV and the smell of beer was coming. Three men sat there, each surrounded by empty stools, hunched over pilsener glasses. They didn't look like the happy beer-drinkers you saw in the ads; to Bobby they looked the loneliest people on earth. He wondered why they didn't at least huddle up and talk a little.

Closer by them was a desk. A fat man came rolling through the door behind it, and for a moment Bobby could hear the low sound of a radio playing. The fat man had a cigar in his mouth and was wearing a shirt covered with palm trees. He was snapping his fingers like the cool cat with the pool-cue case, and under his breath he was singing like this: 'Choo-choochow, choo-choo-ka-chow-chow, choo-choo-chow-chowl' Bobby recognized the tune: 'Tequila,' by The Champs.

'Who you, buddy?' the fat man asked Ted. 'I don't know you. And he can't be in here, anyway. Can'tcha read?' He jerked a fat thumb with a dirty nail at another sign, this one posted on the desk: B-21 OR B-GONE!

'You don't know me, but I think you know Jimmy Girardi,' Ted said politely. 'He told me you were the man to see ... if you're Len Files, that is.'

'I'm Len,' the man said. All at once he seemed considerably warmer. He held out a hand so white and pudgy that it looked like the gloves Mickey and Donald and Goofy wore in the cartoons. 'You know Jimmy Gee, huh? Goddam Jimmy Gee! Why, his grampa's back there getting a shine. He gets 'is boats shined a lot these days.' Len Files tipped Ted a wink. Ted smiled and shook the guy's hand.

'That your kid?' Len Files asked, bending over his desk to get a closer look at Bobby.

Bobby could smell Sen-Sen mints and cigars on his breath, sweat on his body. The collar of his shirt was speckled with dandruff.

'He's a friend,' Ted said, and Bobby thought he might actually explode with happiness. 'I didn't want to leave him on the street.'

'Yeah, unless you're willing to have to pay to get im back,' Len Files agreed. 'You remind me of somebody, kid. Now why is that?'

Bobby shook his head, a little frightened to think he looked like anybody Len Files might know.

The fat man barely paid attention to Bobby's head-shake. He had straightened and was looking at Ted again. 'I can't be having kids in here, Mr ... ?'

'Ted Brautigan.' He offered his hand. Len Files shook it.

'You know how it is, Ted. People in a business like mine, the cops keep tabs.'

'Of course. But he'll stand right here — won't you, Bobby?'

'Sure,' Bobby said.

'And our business won't take long. But it's a good little bit of business, Mr Files — '

'Len.'

Len, of course, Bobby thought. Just Len. Because in here was down there.

'As I say, Len, this is a good piece of business I want to do. I think you'll agree.'

'If you know Jimmy Gee, you know I don't do the nickels and dimes,' Len said. 'I leave the nickels and dimes to the niggers. What are we talking here? Patterson-Johansson?'

'Albini-Haywood. At The Garden tomorrow night?'

Len's eyes widened. Then his fat and unshaven cheeks spread in a smile. 'Man oh man oh Manischevitz. We need to explore this.'

'We certainly do.'

Len Files came out from around the desk, took Ted by the arm, and started to lead him toward the poolroom. Then he stopped and swung back. 'Is it Bobby when you're home and got your feet up, pal?'

'Yes, sir.' Yes sir, Bobby Garfield, he would have said anywhere else ... but this was down there and he thought just plain Bobby would suffice.

'Well, Bobby, I know those pinball machines prolly look good to ya, and you prolly got a quarter or two in your pocket, but do what Adam dint and resist the temptation. Can you do that?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I won't be long,' Ted told him, and then allowed Len Files to lead him through the arch and into the poolroom. They walked past the men in the high chairs, and Ted stopped to speak to the one getting his shoes shined. Next to Jimmy Gee's grandfather, Ted Brautigan looked young. The old man peered up and Ted said something; the two men laughed into each other's faces. Jimmy Gee's grandfather had a good strong laugh for an old fellow. Ted reached out both hands and patted his sallow cheeks with gentle affection. That made Jimmy Gee's grandfather laugh again. Then Ted let Len draw him into a curtained alcove past the other men in the other chairs.

Bobby stood by the desk as if rooted, but Len hadn't said anything about not looking around, and so he did — in all directions. The walls were covered with beer signs and calendars that showed girls with most of their clothes off. One was climbing over a fence in the country. Another was getting out of a Packard with most of her skirt in her lap and her garters showing. Behind the desk were more signs, most expressing some negative concept (IF YOU DON'T LIKE

OUR TOWN LOOK FOR A TIMETABLE, DON'T SEND A BOY TO DO A MAN'S JOB, THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A FREE LUNCH, NO CHECKS ACCEPTED, NO CREDIT, CRYING TOWELS

ARE NOT PROVIDED BY THE MANAGEMENT) and a big red button marked POLICE CALL.

Suspended from the ceiling on a loop of dusty wire were Cellophane packages, some marked GINSENG ORIENTAL LOVE ROOT and others SPANISH DELITE. Bobby wondered if they were vitamins of some kind. Why would they sell vitamins in a place like this?

The young guy in the roomful of automatic games whapped the side of Frontier Patrol, stepped back, gave the machine the finger. Then he strolled into the lobby area adjusting his hat. Bobby made his finger into a gun and pointed it at him. The young man looked surprised, then grinned and pointed back as he headed for the door. He loosened the tied arms of his jacket as he went.

'Can't wear no club jacket in here,' he said, noting Bobby's wide-eyed curiosity. 'Can't even show your fuckin colors. Rules of the house.'

'Oh.'

The young guy smiled and raised his hand. Traced in blue ink on the back was a devil's pitchfork. 'But I got the sign, little brother. See it?'

'Heck, yeah.' A tattoo. Bobby was faint with envy. The kid saw it; his smile widened into a grin full of white teeth.

'Fuckin Diablos, 'mano. Best club. Fuckin Diablos rule the streets. All others are pussy.'

'The streets down here.'

'Fuckin right down here, where else is there? Rock on, baby brother. I like you. You got a good look on you. Fuckin crewcut sucks,

though.’ The door opened, there was a gasp of hot air and streetlife noise, and the guy was gone.

A little wicker basket on the desk caught Bobby’s eye. He tilted it so he could see in. It was full of keyrings with plastic fobs — red and blue and green. Bobby picked one out so he could read the gold printing: THE CORNER POCKET BILLIARDS, POOL, AUTO. GAMES.

KENMORE 8-2127.

‘Go on, kid, take it.’

Bobby was so startled he almost knocked the basket of keyrings to the floor. The woman had come through the same door as Len Files, and she was even bigger — almost as big as the circus fat lady — but she was as light on her feet as a ballerina; Bobby looked up and she was just there, looming over him. She was Len’s sister, had to be.

‘I’m sorry,’ Bobby muttered, returning the keyring he’d picked up and pushing the basket back from the edge of the desk with little pats of his fingers. He might have succeeded in pushing it right over the far side if the fat woman hadn’t stopped it with one hand. She was smiling and didn’t look a bit mad, which to Bobby was a tremendous relief.

‘Really, I’m not being sarcastic, you should take one.’ She held out one of the keyrings. It had a green fob. ‘They’re just cheap little things, but they’re free. We give em away for the advertising. Like matches, you know, although I wouldn’t give a pack of matches to a kid.

Don’t smoke, do you?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘That’s making a good start. Stay away from the booze, too. Here. Take. Don’t turn down for free in this world, kid, there isn’t much of it going around.’

Bobby took the keyring with the green fob. ‘Thank you, ma’am. It’s neat.’ He put the keyring in his pocket, knowing he would have to get rid of it — if his mother found such an item, she wouldn’t be happy. She’d have twenty questions, as Sully would say. Maybe even thirty.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Bobby.’

He waited to see if she would ask for his last name and was secretly delighted when she didn’t. ‘I’m Alanna.’ She held out a hand crusted with rings. They twinkled like the pinball lights. ‘You here with your dad?’

‘With my friend,’ Bobby said. ‘I think he’s making a bet on the Haywood-Albini prizefight.’

Alanna looked alarmed and amused at the same time. She leaned forward with one finger to her red lips. She made a Shhh sound at Bobby, and blew out a strong liquory smell with it.

‘Don’t say “bet” in here,’ she cautioned him. ‘This is a billiard parlor. Always remember that and you’ll always be fine.’

‘Okay.’

‘You’re a handsome little devil, Bobby. And you look ...’ She paused. ‘Do I know your father, maybe? Is that possible?’

Bobby shook his head, but doubtfully — he had reminded Len of someone, too. ‘My dad’s dead. He died a long time ago.’ He always added this so people wouldn’t get all gushy.

‘What was his name?’ But before he could say, Alanna Files said it herself — it came out of her painted mouth like a magic word. ‘Was it

Randy? Randy Garrett, Randy Greer, something like that?’

For a moment Bobby was so flabbergasted he couldn’t speak. It felt as if all the breath had been sucked out of his lungs. ‘Randall Garfield. But how ... ‘

She laughed, delighted. Her bosom heaved. ‘Well, mostly your hair. But also the freckles .

. . and this here ski-jump ... ‘ She bent forward and Bobby could see the tops of smooth white breasts that looked as big as waterbarrels. She skidded one finger lightly down his nose.

‘He came in here to play pool?’

‘Nah. Said he wasn’t much of a stick. He’d drink a beer. Also sometimes ... ‘ She made a quick gesture then — dealing from an invisible deck. It made Bobby think of McQuown.

‘Yeah,’ Bobby said. ‘He never met an inside straight he didn’t like, that’s what I heard.’

‘I don’t know about that, but he was a nice guy. He could come in here on a Monday night, when the place is always like a grave, and in half an hour or so he’d have everybody laughing.

He’d play that song by Jo Stafford, I can’t remember the name, and make Lennie turn up the jukebox. A real sweetie, kid, that’s mostly why I remember him; a sweetie with red hair is a rare commodity. He wouldn’t buy a drunk a drink, he had a thing about that, but otherwise he’d give you the shirt right off his back. All you had to do was ask.’

‘But he lost a lot of money, I guess,’ Bobby said. He couldn’t believe he was having this conversation — that he had met someone who had known his father. Yet he supposed a lot of finding out happened like this, completely by accident. You were just going along, minding your own business, and all at once the past sideswiped you.

'Randy?' She looked surprised. 'Nah. He'd come in for a drink maybe three times a week —

you know, if he happened to be in the neighborhood. He was in real estate or insurance or selling or some one of those — '

'Real estate,' Bobby said. 'It was real estate.'

' — and there was an office down here he'd visit. For the industrial properties, I guess, if it was real estate. You sure it wasn't medical supplies?'

'No, real estate.'

‘Funny how your memory works,’ she said. ‘Some things stay clear, but mostly time goes by and green turns blue. All of the suit-n-tie businesses are gone down here now, anyway.’

She shook her head sadly.

Bobby wasn’t interested in how the neighborhood had gone to blazes. ‘But when he did play, he lost. He was always trying to fill inside straights and stuff.’

‘Did your mother tell you that?’

Bobby was silent.

Alanna shrugged. Interesting things happened all up and down her front when she did.

‘Well, that’s between you and her ... and hey, maybe your dad threw his dough around in other places. All I know is that in here he’d just sit in once or twice a month with guys he knew, play until maybe midnight, then go home. If he left a big winner or a big loser, I’d probably remember. I don’t, so he probably broke even most nights he played. Which, by the way, makes him a pretty good poker-player. Better than most back there.’ She rolled her eyes in the direction Ted and her brother had gone.

Bobby looked at her with growing confusion. Your father didn’t exactly leave us well off, his mother liked to say. There was the lapsed life insurance policy, the stack of unpaid bills; Little did I know, his mother had said just this spring, and Bobby was beginning to think that fit him, as well: Little did I know.

‘He was such a good-looking guy, your dad,’ Alanna said, ‘Bob Hope nose and all. I’d guess you got that to look forward to — you favor him. Got a girlfriend?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

Were the unpaid bills a fiction? Was that possible? Had the life insurance policy actually been cashed and socked away, maybe in a bank account instead of between the pages of the Sears catalogue? It was a horrible thought, somehow. Bobby couldn't imagine why his mother would want him to think his dad was

(a low man, a low man with red hair]

a bad guy if he really wasn't, but there was something about the idea that felt ... true. She could get mad, that was the thing about his mother. She could get so mad. And then she might say anything. It was possible that his father — who his mother had never once in Bobby's memory called 'Randy' — had given too many people too many shirts right off his back, and consequently made Liz Garfield mad. Liz Garfield didn't give away shirts, not off her back or from anywhere else. You had to save your shirts in this world, because life wasn't fair.

'What's her name?'

'Liz.' He felt dazed, the way he'd felt coming out of the dark theater into the bright light.

'Like Liz Taylor.' Alanna looked pleased. 'That's a nice name for a girlfriend.'

Bobby laughed, a little embarrassed. 'No, my mother's Liz. My girlfriend's name is Carol.'

'She pretty?'

'A real hosty-tosty,' he said, grinning and wiggling one hand from side to side. He was delighted when Alanna roared with laughter. She reached over the desk, the flesh of her upper arm hanging like some fantastic wad of dough, and pinched his cheek. It hurt a little but he liked it.

'Cute kid! Can I tell you something?'

'Sure, what?'

'Just because a man likes to play a little cards, that doesn't make him Attila the Hun. You know that, don't you?'

Bobby nodded hesitantly, then more firmly.

'Your ma's your ma, I don't say nothing against anybody's ma because I loved my own, but not everybody's ma approves of cards or pool or ... places like this. It's a point of view, but that's all it is. Get the picture?'

'Yes,' Bobby said. He did. He got the picture. He felt very strange, like laughing and crying at the same time. My dad was here, he thought. This seemed, at least for the time being, much more important than any lies his mother might have told about him. My dad was here, he might have stood right where I'm standing now. 'I'm glad I look like him,' he blurted.

Alanna nodded, smiling. 'You coming in here like that, just walking in off the street. What are the odds?'

'I don't know. But thanks for telling me about him. Thanks a lot.'

'He'd play that Jo Stafford song all night, if you'd let him,' Alanna said. 'Now don't you go wandering off.'

'No, ma'am.'

'No, Alanna.'

Bobby grinned. 'Alanna.'

She blew him a kiss as his mother sometimes did, and laughed when Bobby pretended to catch it. Then she went back through the door. Bobby could see what looked like a living room beyond it. There was a big cross on one wall.

He reached into his pocket, hooked a finger through the keyring (it was, he thought, a special souvenir of his visit down there), and imagined himself riding down Broad Street on the Schwinn from the Western Auto. He was heading for the park. He was wearing a chocolate-colored stingybrim hat cocked back on his head. His hair was long and combed in a duck's ass — no more crewcut, later for you, Jack. Tied around his waist was a jacket with his colors on it; riding the back of his hand was a blue tattoo, stamped deep and forever.

Outside Field B Carol would be waiting for him. She'd be watching him ride up, she'd be thinking Oh you crazy boy as he swung the Schwinn around in a tight circle, spraying gravel toward (but not on) her white sneakers. Crazy, yes. A bad motorscooter and a mean go-getter.

Len Files and Ted were coming back now, both of them looking happy. Len, in fact, looked like the cat that ate the canary (as Bobby's mother often said). Ted paused to pass another, briefer, word with the old guy, who nodded and smiled. When Ted and Len got back to the lobby area, Ted started toward the telephone booth just inside the door. Len took his arm and steered him toward the desk instead.

As Ted stepped behind it, Len ruffled Bobby's hair. 'I know who you look like,' he said. 'It come to me while I was in the back room. Your dad was —'

'Garfield. Randy Garfield.' Bobby looked up at Len, who so resembled his sister, and thought how odd and sort of wonderful it was to be linked that way to your own blood kin.

Linked so closely people who didn't even know you could sometimes pick you out of a crowd. 'Did you like him, Mr Files?'

'Who, Randy? Sure, he was a helluva gizmo.' But Len Files seemed a little vague. He hadn't noticed Bobby's father in the same way his sister had, Bobby decided; Len probably wouldn't remember about

the Jo Stafford song or how Randy Garfield would give you the shirt right off his back. He wouldn't give a drunk a drink, though; he wouldn't do that. 'Your pal's all right, too,' Len went on, more enthusiastic now. 'I like the high class and the high class likes me, but I don't get real shooters like him in here often.' He turned to Ted, who was hunting nearsightedly through the phonebook. 'Try Circle Taxi. KEnmore 6-7400.'

'Thanks,' Ted said.

'Don't mention it.' Len brushed past Ted and went through the door behind the desk. Bobby caught another brief glimpse of the living room and the big cross. When the door shut, Ted looked over at Bobby and said: 'You bet five hundred bucks on a prizefight and you don't have to use the pay phone like the rest of the shmucks. Such a deal, huh?'

Bobby felt as if all the wind had been sucked out of him. 'You bet Jive hundred dollars on Hurricane Haywood?'

Ted shook a Chesterfield out of his pack, put it in his mouth, lit it around a grin. 'Good God, no,' he said. 'On Albini.' After he called the cab, Ted took Bobby over to the bar and ordered them both rootbeers. He doesn't know I don't really like rootbeer, Bobby thought. It seemed another piece in the puzzle, somehow — the puzzle of Ted. Len served them himself, saying nothing about how Bobby shouldn't be sitting at the bar, he was a nice kid but just stinking the place up with his under-twenty-oneness; apparently a free phone call wasn't all you got when you bet five hundred dollars on a prizefight. And not even the excitement of the bet could long distract Bobby from a certain dull certainty which stole much of his pleasure in hearing that his father hadn't been such a bad guy, after all. The bet had been made to earn some runout money. Ted was leaving.

The taxi was a Checker with a huge back seat. The driver was deeply involved in the Yankees game on the radio, to the point where he sometimes talked back to the announcers.

'Files and his sister knew your father, didn't they?' It wasn't really a question.

'Yeah. Alanna especially. She thought he was a real nice guy.' Bobby paused. 'But that's not what my mother thinks.'

'I imagine your mother saw a side of him Alanna Files never did,' Ted replied. 'More than one. People are like diamonds in that way, Bobby. They have many sides.'

'But Mom said ... ' It was too complicated. She'd never exactly said anything, really, only sort of suggested stuff. He didn't know how to tell Ted that his mother had sides, too, and some of them made it hard to believe those things she never quite came out and said. And when you got right down to it, how much did he really want to know? His father was dead, after all. His mother wasn't, and he had to live with her ... and he had to love her. He had no one else to love, not even Ted. Because —

'When you going?' Bobby asked in a low voice.

'After your mother gets back.' Ted sighed, glanced out the window, then looked down at his hands, which were folded on one crossed knee. He didn't look at Bobby, not yet.

'Probably Friday morning. I can't collect my money until tomorrow night. I got four to one on Albin; that's two grand. My good pal Lennie will have to phone New York to make the cover.'

They crossed a canal bridge, and down there was back there. Now they were in the part of the city Bobby had travelled with his mother. The men on the street wore coats and ties. The women wore hose instead of bobbysocks. None of them looked like Alanna Files, and Bobby didn't think many of them would smell of liquor if they went 'Shhh,' either. Not at four o'clock in the afternoon.

'I know why you didn't bet on Patterson-Johansson,' Bobby said. 'It's because you don't know who'll win.'

'I think Patterson will this time,' Ted said, 'because this time he's prepared for Johansson. I might flutter two dollars on Floyd Patterson, but five hundred? To bet five hundred you must either know or be crazy.'

'The Albini-Haywood fight is fixed, isn't it?'

Ted nodded. 'I knew when you read that Kleindienst was involved, and I guessed that Albini was supposed to win.'

'You've made other bets on boxing matches where Mr Kleindienst was a manager.'

Ted said nothing for a moment, only looked out the window. On the radio, someone hit a comebacker to Whitey Ford. Ford fielded the ball and threw to Moose Skowron at first. Now there were two down in the top of the eighth. At last Ted said, 'It could have been Haywood.'

It wasn't likely, but it could have been. Then ... did you see the old man back there? The one in the shoeshine chair?'

'Sure, you patted him on the cheeks.'

'That's Arthur Girardi. Files lets him hang around because he used to be connected. That's what Files thinks — used to be. Now he's just some old fellow who comes in to get his shoes shined at ten and then forgets and comes in to get them shined again at three. Files thinks he's just an old fellow who don't know from nothing, as they say. Girardi lets him think whatever he wants to think. If Files said the moon was green cheese, Girardi wouldn't say boo. Old Gee, he comes in for the air conditioning. And he's still connected.'

'Connected to Jimmy Gee.'

'To all sorts of guys.'

'Mr Files didn't know the fight was fixed?'

'No, not for sure. I thought he would.'

'But old Gee knew. And he knew which one's supposed to take the dive.'

'Yes. That was my luck. Hurricane Haywood goes down in the eighth round. Then, next year when the odds are better, the Hurricane gets his payday.'

'Would you have bet if Mr Girardi hadn't been there?'

'No,' Ted replied immediately.

'Then what would you have done for money? When you go away?'

Ted looked depressed at those words — When you go away. He made as if to put an arm around Bobby's shoulders, then stopped himself.

'There's always someone who knows something,' he said.

They were on Asher Avenue now, still in Bridgeport but only a mile or so from the Harwich town line. Knowing what would happen, Bobby reached for Ted's big, nicotinstained hand.

Ted swivelled his knees toward the door, taking his hands with them. 'Better not.'

Bobby didn't need to ask why. People put up signs that said WET PAINT DO NOT TOUCH

because if you put your hand on something newly painted, the stuff would get on your skin.

You could wash it off, or it would wear off by itself in time, but for awhile it would be there.

'Where will you go?'

'I don't know.'

'I feel bad,' Bobby said. He could feel tears prickling at the corners of his eyes. 'If something happens to you, it's my fault. I saw things, the things you told me to look out for, but I didn't say anything. I didn't want you to go. So I told myself you were crazy — not about everything, just about the low men you thought were chasing you — and I didn't say anything. You gave me a job and I muffed it.'

Ted's arm rose again. He lowered it and settled for giving Bobby a quick pat on the leg instead. At Yankee Stadium Tony Kubek had just doubled home two runs. The crowd was going wild.

'But I knew,' Ted said mildly.

Bobby stared at him. 'What? I don't get you.'

'I felt them getting closer. That's why my trances have grown so frequent. Yet I lied to myself, just as you did. For the same reasons, too. Do you think I want to leave you now, Bobby? When your mother is so confused and unhappy? In all honesty I don't care so much for her sake, we don't get along, from the first second we laid eyes on each other we didn't get along, but she is your mother, and — '

'What's wrong with her?' Bobby asked. He remembered to keep his voice low, but he took Ted's arm and shook it. 'Tell me! You know, I know you do! Is it Mr Biderman? Is it something about Mr Biderman?'

Ted looked out the window, brow furrowed, lips drawn down tightly. At last he sighed, pulled out his cigarettes, and lit one. 'Bobby,' he said, 'Mr Biderman is not a nice man. Your mother knows it, but she also knows that sometimes we have to go along with people who are not nice. Go along to get along, she thinks, and she has done this. She's done things over the last year that she's not proud of, but she has been careful. In some ways she has needed to be as careful as I have, and whether I like her or not, I admire her for that.'

'What did she do? What did he make her do?' Something cold moved in Bobby's chest.

'Why did Mr Biderman take her to Providence?'

'For the real-estate conference.'

'Is that all? Is that all?'

'I don't know. She didn't know. Or perhaps she has covered over what she knows and what she fears with what she hopes. I can't say. Sometimes I can — sometimes I know things very directly and clearly. The first moment I saw you I knew that you wanted a bicycle, that getting one was very important to you, and you meant to earn the money for one this summer if you could. I admired your determination.'

'You touched me on purpose, didn't you?'

'Yes indeed. The first time, anyway. I did it to know you a little. But friends don't spy; true friendship is about privacy, too. Besides, when I touch, I pass on a kind of — well, a kind of window. I think you know that. The second time I touched you ... really touching, holding on, you know what I mean ... that was a mistake, but not such an awful one; for a little while you knew more than you should, but it wore off, didn't it? If I'd gone on, though ... touching and touching, the way people do when they're close ... there'd come a point where things would change. Where it wouldn't wear off.' He raised his mostly smoked cigarette and looked at it distastefully. 'The way you smoke one too many of these and you're hooked for life.'

'Is my mother all right now?' Bobby asked, knowing that Ted couldn't tell him that; Ted's gift, whatever it was, didn't stretch that far.

'I don't know. I — '

Ted suddenly stiffened. He was looking out the window at something up ahead. He smashed his cigarette into the armrest ashtray, doing it

hard enough to send sparks scattering across the back of his hand. He didn't seem to feel them. 'Christ,' he said. 'Oh Christ, Bobby, we're in for it.'

Bobby leaned across his lap to look out the window, thinking in the back of his mind about what Ted had just been saying — touching and touching, the way people do when they're close — even as he peered up Asher Avenue.

Ahead was a three-way intersection, Asher Avenue, Bridgeport Avenue, and the Connecticut Pike all coming together at a place known as Puritan Square. Trolley-tracks gleamed in the afternoon sun; delivery trucks honked impatiently as they waited their turns to dart through the crush. A sweating policeman with a whistle in his mouth and white gloves on his hands was directing traffic. Off to the left was the William Penn Grille, a famous restaurant which was supposed to have the best steaks in Connecticut (Mr Biderman had taken the whole office staff there after the agency sold the Waverley Estate, and Bobby's mom had come home with about a dozen William Penn Grille books of matches). Its main claim to fame, his mom had once told Bobby, was that the bar was over the Harwich town line, but the restaurant proper was in Bridgeport.

Parked in front, on the very edge of Puritan Square, was a DeSoto automobile of a purple Bobby had never seen before — had never even suspected. The color was so bright it hurt his eyes to look at it. It hurt his whole head.

Their cars will be like their yellow coats and sharp shoes and the greasy perfumed stuff they use to slick back their hair: hud and vulgar.

The purple car was loaded with swoops and darts of chrome. It had fenderskirts. The hood ornament was huge; Chief DeSoto's head glittered in the hazy light like a fake jewel. The tires were fat whitewalls and the hubcaps were spinners. There was a whip antenna on the back. From its tip there hung a raccoon tail.

'The low men,' Bobby whispered. There was really no question. It was a DeSoto, but at the same time it was like no car he had ever seen in his life, something as alien as an asteroid. As they drew closer to the clogged three-way intersection, Bobby saw the upholstery was a metallic dragonfly-green — the color nearly howled in contrast to the car's purple skin. There was white fur around the steering wheel. 'Holy crow, it's them!'

'You have to take your mind away,' Ted said. He grabbed Bobby by the shoulders (up front the Yankees blared on and on, the driver paying his two fares in the back seat no attention whatsoever, thank God for that much, at least) and shook him once, hard, before letting him go. 'You have to take your mind away, do you understand?'

He did. George Sanders had built a brick wall behind which to hide his thoughts and plans from the Children. Bobby had used Maury Wills once before, but he didn't think baseball was going to cut it this time. What would?

Bobby could see the Asher Empire's marquee jutting out over the sidewalk, three or four blocks beyond Puritan Square, and suddenly he could hear the sound of Sully-John's Bo lo Bouncer: whap-whap-whap. If she's trash, S-J had said, I'd love to be the trashman.

The poster they'd seen that day filled Bobby's mind: Brigitte Bardot (the French sex-kitten was what the papers called her) dressed only in a towel and a smile. She looked a little like the woman getting out of the car on one of the calendars back at The Corner Pocket, the one with most of her skirt in her lap and her garters showing. Brigitte Bardot was prettier, though.

And she was real. She was too old for the likes of Bobby Garfield, of course.

(I'm so young and you're so old, Paul Anka singing from a thousand transistor radios, this my darling I've been told] but she was still beautiful, and a cat could look at a queen, his mother always said that, too: a cat could look at a queen. Bobby saw her more and more

clearly as he settled back against the seat, his eyes taking on that drift, far-off look Ted's eyes got when he had one of his blank-outs; Bobby saw her shower-damp puff of blond hair, the slope of her breasts into the towel, her long thighs, her painted toenails standing over the words Adults Only, Must Have Driver's License or Birth Certificate. He could smell her soap — something light and flowery. He could smell

(Nuit en Paris)

her perfume and he could hear her radio in the next room. It was Freddy Cannon, that bebop summertime avatar of Savin Rock: 'She's dancin to the drag, the cha-cha rag-a-mop, she's stompin to the shag, rocks the bunny hop ... '

He was aware — faintly, far away, in another world farther up along the swirls of the spinning top — that the cab in which they were riding had come to a stop right next to the William Penn Grille, right next to that purple bruise of a DeSoto. Bobby could almost hear the car in his head; if it had had a voice it would have screamed Shoot me, I'm too purple!

Shoot me, I'm too purple! And not far beyond it he could sense them. They were in the restaurant, having an early steak. Both of them ate it the same way, bloody-rare. Before they left they might put up a lost-pet poster in the telephone lounge or leave a hand-printed CAR

FOR SALE BY OWNER card; upside-down, of course. They were in there, low men in yellow coats and white shoes drinking martinis between bites of nearly raw steer, and if they turned their minds out this way ...

Steam was drifting out of the shower. B.B. raised herself on her bare painted toes and opened her towel, turning it into brief wings before letting it fall. And Bobby saw it wasn't Brigitte Bardot at all. It was Carol Gerber. You'd have to be brave to let people look at you with nothing on but a towel, she had said, and now she had let even the

towel fall away. He was seeing her as she would look eight or ten years from now.

Bobby looked at her, helpless to look away, helpless in love, lost in the smells of her soap and her perfume, the sound of her radio (Freddy Cannon had given way to The Platters —

heavenly shades of night are falling]., the sight of her small painted toenails. His heart spun as a top did, with its lines rising and disappearing into other worlds. Other worlds than this.

The taxi began creeping forward. The four-door purple horror parked next to the restaurant (parked in a loading zone, Bobby saw, but what did they care?) began to slide to the rear. The cab jolted to a stop again and the driver cursed mildly as a trolley rushed clang-a-lang through Puritan Square. The low DeSoto was behind them now, but reflections from its chrome filled the cab with erratic dancing minnows of light. And suddenly Bobby felt a savage itching attack the backs of his eyeballs. This was followed by a fall of twisting black threads across his field of vision. He was able to hold onto Carol, but he now seemed to be looking at her through a field of interference.

They sense us ... or they sense something. Please God, get us out of here. Please get us out.

The cabbie saw a hole in the traffic and squirted through it. A moment later they were rolling up Asher Avenue at a good pace. That itching sensation behind Bobby's eyes began to recede. The black threads across his field of interior vision cleared away, and when they did he saw that the naked girl wasn't Carol at all (not anymore, at least), not even Brigitte Bardot, but only the calendar-girl from The Corner Pocket, stripped mother-naked by Bobby's imagination. The music from her radio was gone. The smells of soap and perfume were gone.

The life had gone out of her; she was just a ... a ...

'She's just a picture painted on a brick wall,' Bobby said. He sat up.

'Say what, kid?' the driver asked, and snapped off the radio. The game was over. Mel Alien was selling cigarettes.

'Nothing,' Bobby said.

'Guess youse dozed off, huh? Slow traffic, hot day ... they'll do it every time, just like Hatlo says. Looks like your pal's still out.'

'No,' Ted said, straightening. 'The doctor is in.' He stretched his back and winced when it crackled. 'I did doze a little, though.' He glanced out the back window, but the William Penn Grille was out of sight now. 'The Yankees won, I suppose?'

'Gahdam Injuns, they roont em,' the cabbie said, and laughed. 'Don't see how youse could sleep with the Yankees playing.'

They turned onto Broad Street; two minutes later the cab pulled up in front of 149. Bobby looked at it as if expecting to see a different color paint or perhaps an added wing. He felt like he'd been gone ten years. In a way he supposed he had been — hadn't he seen Carol Gerber all grown up?

I'm going to marry her, Bobby decided as he got out of the cab. Over on Colony Street, Mrs O'Hara's dog barked on and on, as if denying this and all human aspirations: rooproop, rooproop-roop.

Ted bent down to the driver's-side window with his wallet in his hand. He plucked out two singles, considered, then added a third. 'Keep the change.'

'You're a gent,' the cabbie said.

'He's a shooter,' Bobby corrected, and grinned as the cab pulled away.

'Let's get inside,' Ted said. 'It's not safe for me to be out here.'

They went up the porch steps and Bobby used his key to open the door to the foyer. He kept thinking about that weird itching behind his

eyes, and the black threads. The threads had been particularly horrible, as if he'd been on the verge of going blind. 'Did they see us, Ted?

Or sense us, or whatever they do?'

'You know they did ... but I don't think they knew how close we were.' As they went into the Garfield apartment, Ted took off his sunglasses and tucked them into his shirt pocket.

'You must have covered up well. Whooo! Hot in here!'

'What makes you think they didn't know we were close?'

Ted paused in the act of opening a window, giving Bobby a level look back over his shoulder. 'If they'd known, that purple car would have been right behind us when we pulled up here.'

'It wasn't a car,' Bobby said, beginning to open windows himself. It didn't help much; the air that came in, lifting the curtains in listless little flaps, felt almost as hot as the air which had been trapped inside the apartment all day. 'I don't know what it was, but it only looked like a car. And what I felt of them — ' Even in the heat, Bobby shivered.

Ted got his fan, crossed to the window by Liz's shelf of knick-knacks, and set it on the sill.

'They camouflage themselves as best they can, but we still feel them. Even people who don't know what they are often feel them. A little of what's under the camouflage seeps through, and what's underneath is ugly. I hope you never know how ugly.'

Bobby hoped so, too. 'Where do they come from, Ted?'

'A dark place.'

Ted knelt, plugged in his fan, flipped it on. The air it pulled into the room was a little cooler, but not so cool as The Corner Pocket had been, or the Criterion.

'Is it in another world, like in Ring Around the Sun? It is, isn't it?'

Ted was still on his knees by the electrical plug. He looked as if he were praying. To Bobby he also looked exhausted — done almost to death. How could he run from the low men? He didn't look as if he could make it as far as Spicer's Variety Store without stumbling.

'Yes,' he said at last. 'They come from another world. Another where and another when.'

That's all I can tell you. It's not safe for you to know more.'

But Bobby had to ask one other question. 'Did you come from one of those other worlds?'

Ted looked at him solemnly. 'I came from Teaneck.'

Bobby gaped at him for a moment, then began to laugh. Ted, still kneeling by the fan, joined him.

'What did you think of in the cab, Bobby?' Ted asked when they were finally able to stop.

'Where did you go when the trouble started?' He paused. 'What did you see?'

Bobby thought of Carol at twenty with her toenails painted pink, Carol standing naked with the towel at her feet and steam rising around her. Adults Only. Must Have Driver's License. No Exceptions.

'I can't tell,' he said at last. 'Because ... well ... '

'Because some things are private. I understand.' Ted got to his feet. Bobby stepped forward to help him but Ted waved him away.

'Perhaps you'd like to go out and play for a little while,'

he said. 'Later on — around six, shall we say? — I'll put on my dark glasses again and we'll go around the block, have a bite of dinner at the Colony Diner.'

‘But no beans.’

The corners of Ted’s mouth twitched in the ghost of a smile. ‘Absolutely no beans, beans verboten. At ten o’clock I’ll call my friend Len and see how the fight went. Eh?’

‘The low men ... will they be looking for me now, too?’

‘I’d never let you step out the door if I thought that,’ Ted replied, looking surprised. ‘You’re fine, and I’m going to make sure you stay fine. Go on now. Play some catch or ring-a-levio or whatever it is you like. I have some things to do. Only be back by six so I don’t worry.’

‘Okay.’

Bobby went into his room and dumped the four quarters he’d taken to Bridgeport back into the Bike Fund jar. He looked around his room, seeing things with new eyes: the cowboy bedspread, the picture of his mother on one wall and the signed photo — obtained by saving cereal boxtops — of Clayton Moore in his mask on another, his roller skates (one with a broken strap) in the corner, his desk against the wall. The room looked smaller now — not so much a place to come to as a place to leave. He realized he was growing into his orange library card, and some bitter voice inside cried out against it. Cried no, no, no.

8

Bobby Makes a Confession. The Gerber

Baby and the Maltex Baby. Rionda. Ted

Makes a Call. Cry of the Hunters.

In Commonwealth Park the little kids were playing ticky-ball. Field B was empty; on Field C

a few teenagers in orange St Gabriel's tee-shirts were playing scrub. Carol Gerber was sitting on a bench with her jump-rope in her lap, watching them. She saw Bobby coming and began to smile. Then the smile went away.

'Bobby, what's wrong with you?'

Bobby hadn't been precisely aware that anything was wrong with him until Carol said that, but the look of concern on her face brought everything home and undid him. It was the reality of the low men and the fright of the close call they'd had on their way back from Bridgeport; it was his concern over his mother; mostly it was Ted. He knew perfectly well why Ted had shooed him out of the house, and what Ted was doing right now: filling his litde suitcases and those carryhandle paper bags. His friend was going away.

Bobby began to cry. He didn't want to go all ushy-gushy in front of a girl, particularly this girl, but he couldn't help it.

Carol looked stunned for a moment — scared. Then she got off the bench, came to him, and put her arms around him. 'That's all right,' she said. 'That's all right, Bobby, don't cry, everything's all right.'

Almost blinded by tears and crying harder than ever — it was as if there were a violent summer storm going on in his head — Bobby let her lead him into a copse of trees where they would be hidden from

the baseball fields and the main paths. She sat down on the grass, still holding him, brushing one hand through the sweaty bristles of his crewcut. For a little while she said nothing at all, and Bobby was incapable of speaking; he could only sob until his throat ached and his eyeballs throbbed in their sockets.

At last the intervals between sobs became longer. He sat up and wiped his face with his arm, horrified and ashamed of what he felt: not just tears but snot and spit as well. He must have covered her with mung.

Carol didn't seem to care. She touched his wet face. Bobby pulled back from her fingers, uttering another sob, and looked down at the grass. His eyesight, freshly washed by his tears, seemed almost preternaturally keen; he could see every blade and dandelion.

'It's all right,' she said, but Bobby was still too ashamed to look at her.

They sat quietly for a little while and then Carol said, 'Bobby, I'll be your girlfriend, if you want.'

'You are my girlfriend,' Bobby said.

'Then tell me what's wrong.'

And Bobby heard himself telling her everything, starting with the day Ted had moved in and how his mother had taken an instant dislike to him. He told her about the first of Ted's blank-outs, about the low men, about the signs of the low men. When he got to that part, Carol touched him on the arm.

'What?' he asked. 'You don't believe me?' His throat still had that achey too-full feeling it got after a crying fit, but he was getting better. If she didn't believe him, he wouldn't be mad at her. Wouldn't blame her a bit, in fact. It was just an enormous relief to get it off his chest.

'That's okay. I know how crazy it must — '

'I've seen those funny hopscotches all over town,' she said. 'So has Yvonne and Angie. We talked about them. They have little stars and moons drawn next to them. Sometimes comets, too.'

He gaped at her. 'Are you kidding?'

'No. Girls always look at hopscotches, I don't know why. Close your mouth before a bug flies in.'

He closed his mouth.

Carol nodded, satisfied, then took his hand in hers and laced her fingers through his. Bobby was amazed at what a perfect fit all those fingers made. 'Now tell me the rest.'

He did, finishing with the amazing day he'd just put in: the movie, the trip to The Corner Pocket, how Alanna had recognized his father in him, the close call on the way home. He tried to explain how the purple DeSoto hadn't seemed like a real car at all, that it only looked like a car. The closest he could come was to say it had felt alive somehow, like an evil version of the ostrich Dr Dolittle sometimes rode in that series of talking-animal books they'd all gone crazy for in the second grade. The only thing Bobby didn't confess was where he'd hidden his thoughts when the cab passed the William Penn Grille and the backs of his eyes began to itch.

He struggled, then blurted the worst as a coda: he was afraid that his mother going to Providence with Mr Biderman and those other men had been a mistake. A bad mistake.

'Do you think Mr Biderman's sweet on her?' Carol asked. By then they were walking back to the bench where she had left her jump-rope. Bobby picked it up and handed it to her. They began walking out of the park and toward Broad Street.

'Yeah, maybe,' Bobby said glumly. 'Or at least ... ' And here was part of what he was afraid of, although it had no name or real shape; it

was like something ominous covered with a piece of canvas. 'At least she thinks he is.'

'Is he going to ask her to marry him? If he did he'd be your stepdad.'

'God!' Bobby hadn't considered the idea of having Don Biderman as a stepfather, and he wished with all his might that Carol hadn't brought such a thing up. It was an awful thought.

'If she loves him you just better get used to the idea.' Carol spoke in an older-woman, worldly-wise fashion that Bobby could have done without; he guessed she had already spent too much time this summer watching the oh John, oh Marsha shows on TV with her mom.

And in a weird way he wouldn't have cared if his mom loved Mr Biderman and that was all.

It would be wretched, certainly, because Mr Biderman was a creep, but it would have been understandable. More was going on, though. His mother's miserliness about money —her cheapskatiness — was a part of it, and so was whatever had made her start smoking again and caused her to cry in the night sometimes. The difference between his mother's Randall Garfield, the untrustworthy man who left the unpaid bills, and Alanna's Randy Garfield, the nice guy who liked the jukebox turned up loud ... even that might be a part of it. (Had there really been unpaid bills? Had there really been a lapsed insurance policy? Why would his mother lie about such things?) This was stuff he couldn't talk about to Carol. It wasn't reticence; it was that he didn't know how.

They started up the hill. Bobby took one end of her rope and they walked side by side, dragging it between them on the sidewalk. Suddenly Bobby stopped and pointed. 'Look.'

There was a yellow length of kite tail hanging from one of the electrical wires crossing the street farther up. It dangled in a curve that looked sort of like a question mark.

'Yeah, I see it,' Carol said, sounding subdued. They began to walk again. 'He should go today, Bobby.'

'He can't. The fight's tonight. If Albini wins Ted's got to get his dough at the billiard parlor tomorrow night. I think he needs it pretty bad.'

'Sure he does,' Carol said. 'You only have to look at his clothes to see he's almost broke.'

What he bet was probably the last money he had.'

His clothes — that's something only a girl would notice, Bobby thought, and opened his mouth to tell her so. Before he could, someone behind them said, 'Oh looka this. It's the Gerber Baby and the Maltex Baby. Howya doin, babies?'

They looked around. Biking slowly up the hill toward them were three St Gabe's boys in orange shirts. Piled in their bike-baskets was an assortment of baseball gear. One of the boys, a pimply galoot with a silver cross dangling from his neck on a chain, had a baseball bat in a homemade sling on his back. Thinks he's Robin Hood, Bobby thought, but he was scared.

They were big boys, high-school boys, parochial school boys, and if they decided they wanted to put him in the hospital, then to the hospital he would go. Low boys in orange shirts, he thought.

'Hi, Willie,' Carol said to one of them — not the galoot with the bat slung on his back. She sounded calm, even cheery, but Bobby could hear fright fluttering underneath like a bird's wing. 'I watched you play. You made a good catch.'

The one she spoke to had an ugly, half-formed face below a mass of combed-back auburn hair and above a man's body. The Huffy bike beneath him was ridiculously small. Bobby thought he looked like a troll in a fairy-tale. 'What's it to you, Gerber Baby?' he asked.

The three St Gabe's boys pulled up even with them. Then two of them — the one with the dangling cross and the one Carol had called Willie — came a little farther, standing around the forks of their bikes now, walking them. With mounting dismay Bobby realized he and Carol had been surrounded. He could smell a mixture of sweat and Vitalis coming from the boys in the orange shirts.

'Who are you, Maltex Baby?' the third St Gabe's boy asked Bobby. He leaned over the handlebars of his bike for a better look. 'Are you Garfield? You are, ain'tcha? Billy Donahue's still lookin for you from that time last winter. He wants to knock your teeth out. Maybe I ought to knock one or two of em out right here, give im a head start.'

Bobby felt a wretched crawling sensation begin in his stomach — something like snakes in a basket. I won't cry again, he told himself. Whatever happens I won't cry again even if they send me to the hospital. And I'll try to protect her.

Protect her from big kids like this? It was a joke.

'Why are you being so mean, Willie?' Carol asked. She spoke solely to the boy with the auburn hair. 'You're not mean when you're by yourself. Why do you have to be mean now?'

Willie flushed. That, coupled with his dark red hair — much darker than Bobby's — made him look on fire from the neck up. Bobby guessed he didn't like his friends knowing he could act like a human being when they weren't around.

'Shut up, Gerber Baby!' he snarled. 'Why don't you just shut up and kiss your boyfriend while he's still got all his teeth?'

The third boy was wearing a motorcycle belt cinched on the side and ancient Snap-Jack shoes covered with dirt from the baseball field. He was behind Carol. Now he moved in closer, still walking his bike, and grabbed her ponytail with both hands. He pulled it.

'Ow!' Carol almost screamed. She sounded surprised as well as hurt. She pulled away so hard that she almost fell down. Bobby caught her and Willie — who could be nice when he wasn't with his pals, according to Carol — laughed.

'Why'd you do that?' Bobby yelled at the boy in the motorcycle belt, and as the words came out of his mouth it was as if he had heard them a thousand times before. All of this was like a ritual, the stuff that got said before the real yanks and pushes began and the fists began to fly.

He thought of Lord of the Flies again — Ralph running from Jack and the others. At least on Golding's island there had been jungle. He and Carol had nowhere to run.

He says 'Because I felt like it.' That's what comes next.

But before the boy with the side-cinched belt could say it, Robin Hood with the homemade bat-sling on his back said it for him. 'Because he felt like it. Whatcha gonna do about it, Maltex Baby?' He suddenly flicked out one hand, snake-quick, and slapped Bobby across the face. Willie laughed again.

Carol started toward him. 'Willie, please don't — '

Robin Hood reached out, grabbed the front of Carol's shirt, and squeezed. 'Got any titties yet? Nah, not much. You ain't nothing but a Gerber Baby.' He pushed her. Bobby, his head still ringing from the slap, caught her and for the second time kept her from falling down.

'Let's beat this queer up,' the kid in the motorcycle belt said. 'I hate his face.'

They moved in, the wheels of their bikes squeaking solemnly. Then Willie let his drop on its side like a dead pony and reached for Bobby. Bobby raised his fists in a feeble imitation of Floyd Patterson.

'Say, boys, what's going on?' someone asked from behind them.

Willie had drawn one of his own fists back. Still holding it cocked, he looked over his shoulder. So did Robin Hood and the boy with the motorcycle belt. Parked at the curb was an old blue Studebaker with rusty rocker panels and a magnetic Jesus on the dashboard.

Standing in front of it, looking extremely busty in the chest and extremely wide in the hip, was Anita Gerber's friend Rionda. Summer clothes were never going to be her friends (even at eleven Bobby understood this), but at that moment she looked like a goddess in pedal pushers.

'Rionda!' Carol yelled — not crying, but almost. She pushed past Willie and the boy in the motorcycle belt. Neither made any effort to stop her. All three of the St Gabe's boys were staring at Rionda. Bobby found himself looking at Willie's cocked fist. Sometimes Bobby woke up in the morning with his peter just as hard as a rock, standing straight up like a moon rocket or something. As he went into the bathroom to pee, it would soften and wilt. Willie's cocked arm was wilting like that now, the fist at the end of it relaxing back into fingers, and the comparison made Bobby want to smile. He resisted the urge. If they saw him smiling now, they could do nothing. Later, however ... on another day ...

Rionda put her arms around Carol and hugged the girl to her large bosom. She surveyed the boys in the orange shirts and she was smiling. Smiling and making no effort to hide it.

'Willie Shearman, isn't it?'

The formerly cocked-back arm dropped to Willie's side. Muttering, he bent to pick up his bike.

'Richie O'Meara?'

The boy in the motorcycle belt looked at the toes of his dusty Snap-Jacks and also muttered something. His cheeks burned with color.

'One of the O'Meara boys, anyway, there's so damned many of you now I can't keep track.'

Her eyes shifted to Robin Hood. 'And who are you, big boy? Are you a Dedham? You look a little bit like a Dedham.'

Robin Hood looked at his hands. He wore a class ring on one of his fingers and now he began to twist it.

Rionda still had an arm around Carol's shoulders. Carol had one of her own arms as far around Rionda's waist as she could manage. She walked with Rionda, not looking at the boys, as Rionda stepped up from the street onto the little strip of grass between the curb and the sidewalk. She was still looking at Robin Hood. 'You better answer me when I talk to you, sonny. Won't be hard to find your mother if I want to try. All I have to do is ask Father Fitzgerald.'

'Harry Doolin, that's me,' the boy said at last. He was twirling his class ring faster than ever.

'Well, but I was close, wasn't I?' Rionda asked pleasantly, taking another two or three steps forward. They put her on the sidewalk. Carol, afraid to be so close to the boys, tried to hold her back, but Rionda would have none of it. 'Dedhams and Doolins, all married together.

Right back to County Cork, tra-la-tra-lee.'

Not Robin Hood but a kid named Harry Doolin with a stupid homemade bat-sling strapped to his back. Not Marion Brando from *The Wild One* but a kid named Richie O'Meara, who wouldn't have a Harley to go with his motorcycle belt for another five years ... if ever. And Willie Shearman, who didn't dare to be nice to a girl when he was with his friends. All it took to shrink them back to their proper size was one overweight woman in pedal pushers and a shell top, who had ridden to the rescue not on a white stallion but in a 1954 Studebaker. The thought should have comforted Bobby but it didn't. He found himself thinking of what William Golding had said, that the

boys on the island were rescued by the crew of a battlecruiser and good for them ... but who would rescue the crew?

That was stupid, no one ever looked less in need of rescuing than Rionda Hewson did at that moment, but the words still haunted Bobby. What if there were no grownups? Suppose the whole idea of grownups was an illusion? What if their money was really just playground marbles, their business deals no more than baseball-card trades, their wars only games of guns in the park? What if they were all still snotty-nosed kids inside their suits and dresses?

Christ, that couldn't be, could it? It was too horrible to think about.

Rionda was still looking at the St Gabe's boys with her hard and rather dangerous smile.

'You three fellas wouldn't've been picking on kids younger and smaller than yourselves, would you? One of them a girl like your own little sisters?'

They were silent, not even muttering now. They only shuffled their feet.

'I'm sure you weren't, because that would be a cowardly thing to do, now wouldn't it?'

Again she gave them a chance to reply and plenty of time to hear their own silence.

'Willie? Richie? Harry? You weren't picking on them, were you?'

'Course not,' Harry said. Bobby thought that if he spun that ring of his much faster, his finger would probably catch fire.

'If I thought a thing like that,' Rionda said, still smiling her dangerous smile, 'I'd have to go talk to Father Fitzgerald, wouldn't I? And the Father, he'd probably feel he had to talk to your folks, and your fathers'd probably feel obliged to warm your asses for you ... and

you'd deserve it, boys, wouldn't you? For picking on the weak and small.'

Continued silence from the three boys, all now astride their ridiculously undersized bikes again.

'Did they pick on you, Bobby?' Rionda asked.

'No,' Bobby said at once.

Rionda put a finger under Carol's chin and turned her face up. 'Did they pick on you, lovey?'

'No, Rionda.'

Rionda smiled down at her, and although there were tears standing in Carol's eyes, she smiled back.

'Well, boys, I guess you're off the hook,' Rionda said. 'They say you haven't done nothing that'll cause you a single extra uncomfy minute in the confessional. I'd say that you owe them a vote of thanks, don't you?'

Mutter-mutter-mutter from the St Gabe's boys. Please let it go at that, Bobby pleaded silently. Don't make them actually thank us. Don't rub their noses in it.

Perhaps Rionda heard his thought (Bobby now had good reason to believe such things were possible). 'Well,' she said, 'maybe we can skip that part. Get along home, boys. And Harry, when you see Moira Dedham, tell her Rionda says she still goes to the Bingo over in Bridgeport every week, if she ever wants a ride.'

'I will, sure,' Harry said. He mounted his bike and rode away up the hill, eyes still on the sidewalk. Had there been pedestrians coming the other way, he would likely have run them over. His two friends followed him, standing on their pedals to catch up.

Rionda watched them go, her smile slowly fading. 'Shanty Irish,' she said at last, 'just trouble waiting to happen. Bah, good riddance to em. Carol, are you really all right?'

Carol said she really was.

'Bobby?'

'Sure, I'm fine.' It was taking him all the discipline he could manage not to start shaking right in front of her like a bowl of cranberry jelly, but if Carol could keep from falling apart, he guessed he could.

'Get in the car,' Rionda said to Carol. 'I'll give you a lift up to your house. You move along yourself, Bobby — scoot across the street and go inside. Those boys will have forgotten all about you and my Carol-girl by tomorrow, but tonight it might be smart for both of you to stay inside.'

'Okay,' Bobby said, knowing they wouldn't have forgotten by tomorrow, nor by the end of the week, nor by the end of the summer. He and Carol were going to have to watch out for Harry and his friends for a long time. 'Bye, Carol.'

'Bye.'

Bobby trotted across Broad Street. On the other side he stood watching Rionda's old car go up to the apartment house where the Gerbers lived. When Carol got out she looked back down the hill and waved. Bobby waved back, then walked up the porch steps of 149 and went inside.

Ted was sitting in the living room, smoking a cigarette and reading Life magazine. Anita Ekberg was on the cover. Bobby had no doubt that Ted's suitcases and the paper bags were packed, but there was no sign of them; he must have left them upstairs in his room. Bobby was glad. He didn't want to look at them. It was bad enough just knowing they were there.

‘What did you do?’ Ted asked.

‘Not much,’ Bobby said. ‘I think I’ll lie down on my bed and read until supper.’

He went into his room. Stacked on the floor by his bed were three books from the adult section of the Harwich Public Library — Cosmic Engineers, by Clifford D. Simak; The Roman Hat Mystery, by Ellery Queen; and The Inheritors, by William Golding. Bobby chose The Inheritors and lay down with his head at the foot of his bed and his stocking feet on his pillow. There were cave people on the book’s cover, but they were drawn in a way that was almost abstract — you’d never see cave people like that on the cover of a kid’s book. Having an adult library card was very neat... but somehow not as neat as it had seemed at first.

Hawaiian Eye was on at nine o’clock, and Bobby ordinarily would have been mesmerized (his mother claimed that shows like Hawaiian Eye and The Untouchables were too violent for children and ordinarily would not let him watch them), but tonight his mind kept wandering from the story. Less than sixty miles from here Eddie Albin and Hurricane Haywood would be mixing it up; the Gillette Blue Blades Girl, dressed in a blue bathing suit and blue high heels, would be parading around the ring before the start of every round and holding up a sign with a blue number on it. 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 ...

By nine-thirty Bobby couldn’t have picked out the private eye on the TV show, let alone guessed who had murdered the blond socialite. Hurricane Haywood goes down in the eighth round, Ted had told him; Old Gee knew it. But what if something went wrong? He didn’t want Ted to go, but if he had to, Bobby couldn’t bear the thought of him going with an empty wallet. Surely that couldn’t happen, though ... or could it? Bobby had seen a TV show where a fighter was supposed to take a dive and then changed his mind. What if that happened tonight? Taking a dive was bad, it was cheating — no shit, Sherlock, what was your first clue? — but if Hurricane Haywood didn’t cheat, Ted would be in a lot of trouble; ‘hurtin for certain’ was how Sully-John would have put it.

Nine-thirty according to the sunburst clock on the living-room wall. If Bobby's math was right, the crucial eighth round was now underway.

'How do you like *The Inheritors*?'

Bobby was so deep into his own thoughts that Ted's voice made him jump. On TV, Keenan Wynn was standing in front of a bulldozer and saying he'd walk a mile for a Camel.

'It's a lot harder than *Lord of the Flies*,' he said. 'It seems like there are these two little families of cave people wandering around, and one family is smarter. But the other family, the dumb family, they're the heroes. I almost gave up, but now it's getting more interesting. I guess I'll stick with it.'

'The family you meet first, the one with the little girl, they're Neanderthals. The second family — only that one's really a tribe, Golding and his tribes — are Cro-Magnons. The Cro-Magnons are the inheritors. What happens between the two groups satisfies the definition of tragedy: events tending toward an unhappy outcome which cannot be avoided.'

Ted went on, talking about plays by Shakespeare and poems by Poe and novels by a guy named Theodore Dreiser. Ordinarily Bobby would have been interested, but tonight his mind kept going to Madison Square Garden. He could see the ring, lit as savagely as the few working pool-tables in *The Corner Pocket* had been. He could hear the crowd screaming as Haywood poured it on, smacking the surprised Eddie Albin with lefts and rights. Haywood wasn't going to tank the fight; like the boxer in the TV show, he was going to show the other guy a serious world of hurt instead. Bobby could smell sweat and hear the heavy biff and baff of gloves on flesh. Eddie Albin's eyes came up double zeros ... his knees buckled ... the crowd was on its feet, screaming ...

' — the idea of fate as a force which can't be escaped seems to start with the Greeks. There was a playwright named Euripides who — '

'Call,' Bobby said, and although he'd never had a cigarette in his life (by 1964 he would be smoking over a carton a week), his voice sounded as harsh as Ted's did late at night, after a day's worth of Chesterfields.

'Beg your pardon, Bobby?'

'Call Mr Files and see about the fight.' Bobby looked at the sunburst clock. Nine-fortynine.

'If it only went eight, it'll be over now.'

'I agree that the fight is over, but if I call Files so soon he may suspect I knew something.'

Ted said. 'Not from the radio, either — this one isn't on the radio, as we both know. It's better to wait. Safer. Let him believe I am a man of inspired hunches. I'll call at ten, as if I expected the result to be a decision instead of a knockout. And in the meantime, Bobby, don't worry. I tell you it's a stroll on the boardwalk.'

Bobby gave up trying to follow Hawaiian Eye at all; he just sat on the couch and listened to the actors quack. A man shouted at a fat Hawaiian cop. A woman in a white bathing suit ran into the surf. One car chased another while drums throbbed on the soundtrack. The hands on the sunburst clock crawled, struggling toward the ten and the twelve like climbers negotiating the last few hundred feet of Mount Everest. The man who'd murdered the socialite was killed himself as he ran around in a pineapple field and Hawaiian Eye finally ended.

Bobby didn't wait for the previews of next week's show; he snapped off the TV and said, 'Call, okay? Please call.'

'In a moment,' Ted said. 'I think I went one rootbeer over my limit. My holding-tanks seem to have shrunk with age.'

He shuffled into the bathroom. There was an interminable pause, and then the sound of pee splashing into the bowl. 'Aaah!' Ted said. There was considerable satisfaction in his voice.

Bobby could no longer sit. He got up and began pacing around the living room. He was sure that Tommy 'Hurricane' Haywood was right now being photographed in his corner at the Garden, bruised but beaming as the flashbulbs splashed white light over his face. The Gillette Blue Blades Girl would be there with him, her arm around his shoulders, his hand around her waist as Eddie Albin slumped forgotten in his own corner, dazed eyes puffed almost shut, still not completely conscious from the pounding he had taken.

By the time Ted returned, Bobby was in despair. He knew that Albin had lost the fight and his friend had lost his five hundred dollars. Would Ted stay when he found out he was broke?

He might ... but if he did and the low men came ...

Bobby watched, fists clenching and unclenching, as Ted picked up the telephone and dialed.

'Relax, Bobby,' Ted told him. 'It's going to be okay.'

But Bobby couldn't relax. His guts felt full of wires. Ted held the phone to his ear without saying anything for what seemed like forever.

'Why don't they answer?' Bobby whispered fiercely.

'It's only rung twice, Bobby. Why don't you — hello? This is Mr Brautigan calling. Ted Brautigan? Yes, ma'am, from this afternoon.' Incredibly, Ted tipped Bobby a wink. How could he be so cool? Bobby didn't think he himself would have been capable of holding the phone up to his ear if he'd been in Ted's position, let alone winking. 'Yes, ma'am, he is.' Ted turned to Bobby and said, without covering the mouthpiece of the phone, 'Alanna wants to know how is your girlfriend.'

Bobby tried to speak and could only wheeze.

'Bobby says she's fine,' Ted told Alanna, 'pretty as a summer day. May I speak to Len?'

Yes, I can wait. But please tell me about the fight.' There was a pause which seemed to go on forever. Ted was expressionless now. And this time when he turned to Bobby he covered the mouthpiece. 'She says Albini got knocked around pretty good in the first five, held his own in six and seven, then threw a right hook out of nowhere and put Haywood on the canvas in the eighth. Lights out for the Hurricane. What a surprise, eh?'

'Yes,' Bobby said. His lips felt numb. It was true, all of it. By this time Friday night Ted would be gone. With two thousand rocks in your pocket you could do a lot of running from a lot of low men; with two thousand rocks in your pocket you could ride the Big Gray Dog from sea to shining sea.

Bobby went into the bathroom and squirted Ipana on his toothbrush. His terror that Ted had bet on the wrong fighter was gone, but the sadness of approaching loss was still there, and still growing. He never would have guessed that something that hadn't even happened could hurt so much. A week from now I won't remember what was so neat about him. A year from now I'll hardly remember him at all.

Was that true? God, was that true?

No, Bobby thought. No way. I won't let it be.

In the other room Ted was conversing with Len Files. It seemed to be a friendly enough palaver, going just as Ted had expected it would ... and yes, here was Ted saying he'd just played a hunch, a good strong one, the kind you had to bet if you wanted to think of yourself as a sport. Sure, nine-thirty tomorrow night would be fine for the payout, assuming his friend's mother was back by eight; if she was a little late, Len would see him around ten or ten-thirty. Did that suit?

More laughter from Ted, so it seemed that it suited fat Lennie Files right down to the ground.

Bobby put his toothbrush back in the glass on the shelf below the mirror, then reached into his pants pocket. There was something in there his fingers didn't recognize, not a part of the usual pocket-litter. He pulled out the keyring with the green fob, his special souvenir of a part of Bridgeport his mother knew nothing about. The part that was down there. THE CORNER

POCKET, BILLIARDS, POOL, AUTO. GAMES. KENMORE 8-2127.

He probably should have hidden it already (or gotten rid of it entirely), and suddenly an idea came to him. Nothing could have really cheered Bobby Garfield up that night, but this at least came close: he would give the keyring to Carol Gerber, after cautioning her never to tell his mom where she'd gotten it. He knew that Carol had at least two keys she could put on it -

her apartment key and the key to the diary Rionda had given her for her birthday. (Carol was three months older than Bobby, but she never lorded it over him on this account.) Giving her the keyring would be a little like asking her to go steady. He wouldn't have to get all gushy and embarrass himself by saying so, either; Carol would know. It was part of what made her cool.

Bobby laid the keyring on the shelf next to the toothglass, then went into his bedroom to put on his pj's. When he came out, Ted was sitting on the couch, smoking a cigarette and looking at him.

'Bobby, are you all right?'

'I guess so. I guess I have to be, don't I?'

Ted nodded. 'I guess we both have to be.'

'Will I ever see you again?' Bobby asked, pleading in his mind for Ted not to sound like the Lone Ranger, not to start talking any of that

corny we'll meet again pard stuff... because it wasn't stuff, that word was too kind. Shit was what it was. He didn't think Ted had ever lied to him, and he didn't want him to start now that they were near the end.

'I don't know.' Ted studied the coal of his cigarette, and when he looked up, Bobby saw that his eyes were swimming with tears. 'I don't think so.'

Those tears undid Bobby. He ran across the room, wanting to hug Ted, needing to hug him.

He stopped when Ted lifted his arms and crossed them over the chest of his baggy old man's shirt, his expression a kind of horrified surprise.

Bobby stood where he was, his arms still held out to hug. Slowly he lowered them. No hugging, no touching. It was the rule, but the rule was mean. The rule was wrong.

'Will you write?' he asked.

'I will send you postcards,' Ted replied after a moment's thought. 'Not directly to you, though — that might be dangerous for both of us. What shall I do? Any ideas?'

'Send them to Carol,' Bobby said. He didn't even stop to think.

'When did you tell her about the low men, Bobby?' There was no reproach in Ted's voice.

Why would there be? He was going, wasn't he? For all the difference it made, the guy who did the story on the shopping-cart thief could write it up for the paper: **CRAZY OLD MAN RUNS**

FROM INVADING ALIENS. People would read it to each other over their coffee and breakfast cereal and laugh. What had Ted called it

that day? Galumphing small-town humor, hadn't that been it? But if it was so funny, why did it hurt? Why did it hurt so much?

'Today,' he said in a small voice. 'I saw her in the park and everything just kind of ... came out.'

'That can happen,' Ted said gravely. 'I know it well; sometimes the dam just bursts. And perhaps it's for the best. You'll tell her I may want to get in touch with you through her?'

'Yeah.'

Ted tapped a finger against his lips, thinking. Then he nodded. 'At the top, the cards I send will say Dear C. Instead of Dear Carol. At the bottom I'll sign A Friend. That way you'll both know who writes. Okay?'

'Yeah,' Bobby said. 'Cool.' It wasn't cool, none of this was cool, but it would do.

He suddenly lifted his hand, kissed the fingers, and blew across them. Ted, sitting on the couch, smiled, caught the kiss, and put it on his lined cheek. 'You better go to bed now, Bobby. It's been a big day and it's late.'

Bobby went to bed.

At first he thought it was the same dream as before — Biderman, Cushman, and Dean chasing his mom through the jungle of William Golding's island. Then Bobby realized the trees and vines were part of the wallpaper, and that the path under his mother's flying feet was brown carpet. Not a jungle but a hotel corridor. This was his mind's version of the Warwick Hotel.

Mr Biderman and the other two nimrods were still chasing her, though. And now so were the boys from St Gabe's — Willie and Richie and Harry Doolin. All of them were wearing those streaks of red and white paint on their faces. And all of them were wearing

bright yellow doublets upon which was drawn a brilliant red eye: Other than the doublets they were naked. Their privates flopped and bobbed in bushy nests of pubic hair. All save Harry Doolin brandished spears; he had his baseball bat. It had been sharpened to a point on both ends.

'Kill the bitch!' Cushman yelled.

'Drink her blood!' Don Biderman cried, and threw his spear at Liz Garfield just as she darted around a corner. The spear stuck, quivering, into one of the jungle-painted walls.

'Stick it up her dirty cunt!' cried Willie — Willie who could be nice when he wasn't with his friends. The red eye on his chest stared. Below it, his penis also seemed to stare.

Run, Mom! Bobby tried to scream, but no words came out. He had no mouth, no body. He was here and yet he wasn't. He flew beside his mother like her own shadow. He heard her gasping for breath, saw her trembling, terrified mouth and her torn stockings. Her fancy dress was also torn. One of her breasts was scratched and bleeding. One of her eyes was almost closed. She looked as if she had gone a few rounds with Eddie Albin or Hurricane Haywood ... maybe both at the same time.

'Gonna split you open!' Richie hollered.

'Eat you alive!' agreed Curtis Dean (and at top volume). 'Drink your blood, strew your guts!'

His mom looked back at them and her feet (she had lost her shoes somewhere) stuttered against each other. Don't do that, Mom, Bobby moaned. For cripe's sake don't do that.

As if she had heard him, Liz faced forward again and tried to run faster. She passed a poster on the wall:

PLEASE HELP US FIND OUR PET PIG!

LIS is our MASCOT!

LIZ IS 34 YRS. OLD!

She is a BAD-TEMPERED SOW but WE LOVE HER!

Will do what you want if you say 'I PROMISE'

(OR)

'THERE'S MONEY IN IT!' CALL HOusitonic 5-8337

(OR)

BRING to THE WILLIAM PENN GRILLE!

Ask for THE LOW MEN IN THE YELLOW COATS!

Motto: 'WE EAT IT RARE!'

His mom saw the poster, too, and this time when her ankles banged together she did fall.

Get up, Mom! Bobby screamed, but she didn't — perhaps couldn't. She crawled along the brown carpet instead, looking over her shoulder as she went, her hair hanging across her cheeks and forehead in sweaty clumps. The back of her dress had been torn away, and Bobby could see her bare burn — her underpants were gone. Worse, the backs of her thighs were splashed with blood. What had they done to her? Dear God, what had they done to his mother?

Don Biderman came around the corner ahead of her — he had found a shortcut and cut her off. The others were right behind him. Now Mr Biderman's prick was standing straight up the way Bobby's sometimes did in the morning before he got out of bed and went to the bathroom. Only Mr Biderman's prick was huge, it looked like a kraken, a triffid, a monstah, and Bobby thought he understood the blood on his mother's legs. He didn't want to but he thought he did.

Leave her alone! he tried to scream at Mr Biderman. Leave her alone, haven't you done enough?

The scarlet eye on Mr Biderman's yellow doublet suddenly opened wider ... and slithered to one side. Bobby was invisible, his body one world farther down the spinning top from this one ... but the red eye saw him. The red eye saw everything.

'Kill the pig, drink her blood,' Mr Biderman said in a thick, almost unrecognizable voice, and started forward.

'Kill the pig, drink her blood,' Bill Cushman and Curtis Dean chimed in.

'Kill the pig, strew her guts, eat her flesh,' chanted Willie and Richie, falling in behind the nimrods. Like those of the men, their pricks had turned into spears.

'Eat her, drink her, strew her, screw her,' Harry chimed in.

Get up, Mom! Run! Don't let them!

She tried. But even as she struggled from her knees to her feet, Biderman leaped at her.

The others followed, closing in, and as their hands began to tear the tatters of her clothes from her body Bobby thought: I want to get out of here, I want to go back down the top to my own world, make it stop and spin it the other way so I can go back down to my own room in my own world ...

Except it wasn't a top, and even as the images of the dream began to break up and go dark, Bobby knew it. It wasn't a top but a tower, a still spindle upon which all of existence moved and spun. Then it was gone and for a little while there was a merciful nothingness. When he opened his eyes, his bedroom was full of sunshine — summer sunshine on a Thursday morning in the last June of the Eisenhower Presidency.

9

Ugly Thursday.

One thing you could say about Ted Brautigan: he knew how to cook. The breakfast he slid in front of Bobby— lightly scrambled eggs, toast, crisp bacon — was a lot better than anything his mother ever made for breakfast (her specialty was huge, tasteless pancakes which the two of them drowned in Aunt Jemima’s syrup), and as good as anything you could get at the Colony Diner or the Harwich. The only problem was that Bobby didn’t feel like eating. He couldn’t remember the details of his dream, but he knew it had been a nightmare, and that he must have cried at some point while it was going on — when he woke up, his pillow had been damp. Yet the dream wasn’t the only reason he felt flat and depressed this morning; dreams, after all, weren’t real. Ted’s going away would be real. And would be forever.

‘Are you leaving right from The Corner Pocket?’ Bobby asked as Ted sat down across from him with his own plate of eggs and bacon. ‘You are, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, that will be safest.’ He began to eat, but slowly and with no apparent enjoyment. So he was feeling bad, too. Bobby was glad. ‘I’ll say to your mother that my brother in Illinois is ill. That’s all she needs to know.’

‘Are you going to take the Big Gray Dog?’

Ted smiled briefly. ‘Probably the train. I’m quite the wealthy man, remember.’

‘Which train?’

‘It’s better if you don’t know the details, Bobby. What you don’t know you can’t tell. Or be made to tell.’

Bobby considered this briefly, then asked, 'You'll remember the postcards?'

Ted picked up a piece of bacon, then put it down again. 'Postcards, plenty of postcards. I promise. Now don't let's talk about it anymore.'

'What should we talk about, then?'

Ted thought about it, then smiled. His smile was sweet and open; when he smiled, Bobby could see what he must have looked like when he was twenty, and strong.

'Books, of course,' Ted said. 'We'll talk about books.'

It was going to be a crushingly hot day, that was clear by nine o'clock. Bobby helped with the dishes, drying and putting away, and then they sat in the living room, where Ted's fan did its best to circulate the already tired air, and they talked about books ... or rather Ted talked about books. And this morning, without the distraction of the Albini-Haywood fight, Bobby listened hungrily. He didn't understand all of what Ted was saying, but he understood enough to realize that books made their own world, and that the Harwich Public Library wasn't it.

The library was nothing but the doorway to that world.

Ted talked of William Golding and what he called 'dystopian fantasy,' went on to H. G.

Wells's *The Time Machine*, suggesting a link between the Morlocks and the Eloi and Jack and Ralph on Golding's island; he talked about what he called 'literature's only excuses,' which he said were exploring the questions of innocence and experience, good and evil. Near the end of this impromptu lecture he mentioned a novel called *The Exorcist*, which dealt with both these questions ('in the popular context'), and then stopped abruptly. He shook his head as if to clear it.

‘What’s wrong?’ Bobby took a sip of his rootbeer. He still didn’t like it much but it was the only soft drink in the fridge. Besides, it was cold.

‘What am I thinking?’ Ted passed a hand over his brow, as if he’d suddenly developed a headache. ‘That one hasn’t been written yet.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing. I’m rambling. Why don’t you go out for awhile? Stretch your legs? I might lie down for a bit. I didn’t sleep very well last night.’

‘Okay.’ Bobby guessed a little fresh air — even if it was hot fresh air — might do him good. And while it was interesting to listen to Ted talk, he had started to feel as if the apartment walls were closing in on him. It was knowing Ted was going, Bobby supposed.

Now there was a sad little rhyme for you: knowing he was going.

For a moment, as he went back into his room to get his baseball glove, the keyring from The Corner Pocket crossed his mind — he was going to give it to Carol so she’d know they were going steady. Then he remembered Harry Doolin, Richie O’Meara, and Willie Shearman. They were out there someplace, sure they were, and if they caught him by himself they’d probably beat the crap out of him. For the first time in two or three days, Bobby found himself wishing for Sully. Sully was a little kid like him, but he was tough. Doolin and his friends might beat him up, but Sully-John would make them pay for the privilege. S-J was at camp, though, and that was that.

Bobby never considered staying in — he couldn’t hide all summer from the likes of Willie Shearman, that would be buggy — but as he went outside he reminded himself that he had to be careful, had to be on the lookout for them. As long as he saw them coming, there would be no problem.

With the St Gabe’s boys on his mind, Bobby left 149 with no further thought of the keyfob, his special souvenir of down there. It lay on

the bathroom shelf next to the toothglass, right where he had left it the night before.

He tramped all over Harwich, it seemed — from Broad Street to Commonwealth Park (no St Gabe's boys on Field C today; the American Legion team was there, taking batting practice and shagging flies in the hot sun), from the park to the town square, from the town square to the railway station. As he stood in the little newsstand kiosk beneath the railway overpass, looking at paperbacks (Mr Burton, who ran the place, would let you look for awhile as long as you didn't handle what he called 'the moichandise'), the town whistle went off, startling them both.

'Mothera God, what's up widdat?' Mr Burton asked indignantly. He had spilled packs of gum all over the floor and now stooped to pick them up, his gray change-apron hanging down. 'It ain't but quarter past eleven!'

'It's early, all right,' Bobby agreed, and left the newsstand soon after. Browsing had lost its charms for him. He walked out to River Avenue, stopping at the Tip-Top Bakery to buy half a loaf of day-old bread (two cents) and to ask Georgie Sullivan how S-J was.

'He's fine,' S-J's oldest brother said. 'We got a postcard on Tuesday says he misses the fambly and wantsa come home. We get one Wednesday says he's learning how to dive. The one this morning says he's having the time of his life, he wantsa stay forever.' He laughed, a big Irish boy of twenty with big Irish arms and shoulders. 'He may wanta stay forever, but Ma'd miss im like hell if he stayed up there. You gonna feed the ducks with some of that?'

'Yeah, like always.'

'Don't let em nibble your fingers. Those damned river ducks carry diseases. They — '

In the town square the Municipal Building clock began to chime noon, although it was still only quarter of.

‘What’s going on today?’ Georgie asked. ‘First the whistle blows early, now the damned town clock’s off-course.’

‘Maybe it’s the heat,’ Bobby said.

Georgie looked at him doubtfully. ‘Well ... it’s as good an explanation as any.’

Yeah, Bobby thought, going out. And quite a bit safer than some.

Bobby went down to River Avenue, munching his bread as he walked. By the time he found a bench near the Housatonic River, most of the half-loaf had disappeared down his own throat. Ducks came waddling eagerly out of the reeds and Bobby began to scatter the remaining bread for them, amused as always by the greedy way they ran for the chunks and the way they threw their heads back to eat them.

After awhile he began to grow drowsy. He looked out over the river, at the nets of reflected light shimmering on its surface, and grew drowsier still. He had slept the previous night but his sleep hadn’t been restful. Now he dozed off with his hands full of breadcrumbs. The ducks finished with what was on the grass and then drew closer to him, quacking in low, ruminative tones. The clock in the town square bonged the hour of two at twelve-twenty, causing people downtown to shake their heads and ask each other what the world was coming to. Bobby’s doze deepened by degrees, and when a shadow fell over him, he didn’t see or sense it.

‘Hey. Kid.’

The voice was quiet and intense. Bobby sat up with a gasp and a jerk, his hands opening and spilling out the remaining bread. Those snakes began to crawl around in his belly again.

It wasn’t Willie Shearman or Richie O’Meara or Harry Doolin even coming out of a doze he knew that — but Bobby almost wished it had been one of them. Even all three. A beating wasn’t the worst

thing that could happen to you. No, not the worst. Gripes, why did he have to go and fall asleep’?

‘Kid.’

The ducks were stepping on Bobby’s feet, squabbling over the unexpected windfall. Their wings were fluttering against his ankles and his shins, but the feeling was far away, far away.

He could see the shadow of a man’s head on the grass ahead of him. The man was standing behind him.

‘Kid.’

Slowly and creakily, Bobby turned. The man’s coat would be yellow and somewhere on it would be an eye, a staring red eye.

But the man who stood there was wearing a tan summer suit, the jacket pooched out by a little stomach that was starting to grow into a big stomach, and Bobby knew at once it wasn’t one of them after all. There was no itching behind his eyes, no black threads across his field of vision ... but the major thing was that this wasn’t some creature just pretending to be a person; it was a person.

‘What?’ Bobby asked, his voice low and muzzy. He still couldn’t believe he’d gone to sleep like that, blanked out like that. ‘What do you want?’

‘I’ll give you two bucks to let me blow you,’ the man in the tan suit said. He reached into the pocket of his jacket and brought out his wallet. ‘We can go behind that tree over there. No one’ll see us. And you’ll like it.’

‘No,’ Bobby said, getting up. He wasn’t completely sure what the man in the tan suit was talking about, but he had a pretty good idea. The ducks scattered backward, but the bread was too tempting to resist and they returned, pecking and dancing around Bobby’s sneakers. ‘I have to go home now. My mother — ‘

The man came closer, still holding out his wallet. It was as if he'd decided to give the whole thing to Bobby, never mind the two lousy dollars. 'You don't have to do it to me, I'll just do it to you. Come on, what do you say? I'll make it three dollars.' The man's voice was trembling now, jiggling and jaggling up and down the scale, at one moment seeming to laugh, at the next almost to weep. 'You can go to the movies for a month on three dollars.'

'No, really, I — '

'You'll like it, all my boys like it.' He reached out for Bobby and suddenly Bobby thought of Ted taking hold of his shoulders, Ted putting his hands behind his neck, Ted pulling him closer until they were almost close enough to kiss. That wasn't like this ... and yet it was.

Somehow it was.

Without thinking about what he was doing, Bobby bent and grabbed one of the ducks. He lifted it in a surprised squawking flurry of beak and wings and paddling feet, had just a glimpse of one black bead of an eye, and then threw it at the man in the tan suit. The man yelled and put his hands up to shield his face, dropping his wallet.

Bobby ran.

He was passing through the square, headed back home, when he saw a poster on a telephone pole outside the candy store. He walked over to it and read it with silent horror. He couldn't remember his dream of the night before, but something like this had been in it. He was positive.

HAVE YOU SEEN BRAUTIGAN!

He is an OLD MONGREL but WE LOVE HIM!

BRAUTIGAN has WHITE FUR and BLUE EYES!

He is FRIENDLY!

Will EAT SCRAPS FROM YOUR HAND!

We will pay A VERY LARGE REWARD

(\$ \$ \$ \$)

IF YOU HAVE SEEN BRAUTIGAN! CALL HOusitonic 5-8337!

(OR)

BRING BRAUTIGAN to 745 Highgate Avenue!

Home of the SAGAMORE FAMILY!

This isn't a good day, Bobby thought, watching his hand reach out and pull the poster off the telephone pole. Beyond it, hanging from a bulb on the marquee of the Harwich Theater, he saw a dangling blue kite tail. This isn't a good day at all. I never should have gone out of the apartment. In fact, I should have stayed in bed.

HOusitonic 5-8337, just like on the poster about Phil the Welsh Corgi ... except if there was a HOusitonic exchange in Harwich, Bobby had never heard of it. Some of the numbers were on the HARwich exchange. Others were Commonwealth. But HOusitonic? No. Not here, not in Bridgeport, either.

He crumpled the poster up and threw it in the KEEP OUR TOWN CLEAN N GREEN basket on the corner, but on the other side of the street he found another just like it. Farther along he found a third pasted to a corner mailbox. He tore these down, as well. The low men were either closing in or desperate. Maybe both. Ted couldn't go out at all today — Bobby would have to tell him that. And he'd have to be ready to run. He'd tell him that, too.

Bobby cut through the park, almost running himself in his hurry to get home, and he barely heard the small, gasping cry which came from his left as he passed the baseball fields: 'Bobby ... '

He stopped and looked toward the grove of trees where Carol had taken him the day before when he started to bawl. And when the gasping cry came again, he realized it was her.

‘Bobby if it’s you please help me ... ‘

He turned off the cement path and ducked into the copse of trees. What he saw there made him drop his baseball glove on the ground. It was an Alvin Dark model, that glove, and later it was gone. Someone came along and just kified it, he supposed, and so what? As that day wore on, his lousy baseball glove was the very least of his concerns.

Carol sat beneath the same elm tree where she had comforted him. Her knees were drawn up to her chest. Her face was ashy gray. Black shock-circles ringed her eyes, giving her a raccoony look. A thread of blood trickled from one of her nostrils. Her left arm lay across her midriff, pulling her shirt tight against the beginning nubs of what would be breasts in another year or two. She held the elbow of that arm cupped in her right hand.

She was wearing shorts and a smock-type blouse with long sleeves — the kind of thing you just slipped on over your head. Later, Bobby would lay much of the blame for what happened on that stupid shirt of hers. She must have worn it to protect against sunburn; it was the only reason he could think of to wear long sleeves on such a murderously hot day. Had she picked it out herself or had Mrs Gerber forced her into it? And did it matter? Yes, Bobby would think when there was time to think. It mattered, you’re damned right it mattered.

But for now the blouse with its long sleeves was peripheral. The only thing he noticed in that first instant was Carol’s upper left arm. It seemed to have not one shoulder but two.

‘Bobby,’ she said, looking at him, with shining dazed eyes. ‘They hurt me.’

She was in shock, of course. He was in shock himself by then, running on instinct. He tried to pick her up and she screamed in pain — dear God, what a sound.

‘I’ll run and get help,’ he said, lowering her back. ‘You just sit there and try not to move.’

She was shaking her head — carefully, so as not to joggle her arm. Her blue eyes were nearly black with pain and terror. ‘No, Bobby, no, don’t leave me here, what if they come back? What if they come back and hurt me worse?’ Parts of what happened on that long hot Thursday were lost to him, lost in the shockwave, but that part always stood clear: Carol looking up at him and saying What if they come back and hurt me worse?

‘But ... Carol ... ‘

‘I can walk. If you help me, I can walk.’

Bobby put a tentative arm around her waist, hoping she wouldn’t scream again. That had been bad.

Carol got slowly to her feet, using the trunk of the tree to support her back. Her left arm moved a little as she rose. That grotesque double shoulder bulged and flexed. She moaned but didn’t scream, thank God.

‘You better stop,’ Bobby said.

‘No, I want to get out of here. Help me. Oh God, it hurts.’

Once she was all the way up it seemed a little better. They made their way out of the grove with the slow side-by-side solemnity of a couple about to be married. Beyond the shade of the trees the day seemed even hotter than before and blindingly bright. Bobby looked around and saw no one. Somewhere, deeper in the park, a bunch of little kids (probably Sparrows or Robins from Sterling House) were singing a song, but the area around the baseball fields was utterly

deserted: no kids, no mothers wheeling baby carriages, no sign of Officer Raymer, the local cop who would sometimes buy you an ice cream or a bag of peanuts if he was in a good mood. Everyone was inside, hiding from the heat.

Still moving slowly, Bobby with his arm around Carol's waist, they walked along the path which came out on the corner of Commonwealth and Broad. Broad Street Hill was as deserted as the park; the paving shimmered like the air over an incinerator. There wasn't a single pedestrian or moving car in sight.

They stepped onto the sidewalk and Bobby was about to ask if she could make it across the street when Carol said in a high, whispery voice: 'Oh Bobby I'm fainting.'

He looked at her in alarm and saw her eyes roll up to glistening whites. She swayed back and forth like a tree which has been cut almost all the way through. Bobby bent, moving without thinking, catching her around the thighs and the back as her knees unlocked. He had been standing to her right and was able to do this without hurting her left arm any more than it already had been hurt; also, even in her faint Carol kept her right hand cupped over her left elbow, holding the arm mostly steady.

Carol Gerber was Bobby's height, perhaps even a little taller, and close to his weight. He should have been incapable of even staggering up Broad Street with her in his arms, but people in shock are capable of amazing bursts of strength. Bobby carried her, and not at a stagger; under that burning June sun he ran. No one stopped him, no one asked him what was wrong with the little girl, no one offered to help. He could hear cars on Asher Avenue, but this part of the world seemed eerily like Midwich, where everyone had gone to sleep at once.

Taking Carol to her mother never crossed his mind. The Gerber apartment was farther up the hill, but that wasn't the reason. Ted was all Bobby could think of. He had to take her to Ted. Ted would know what to do.

His preternatural strength began to give out as he climbed the steps to the front porch of his building. He staggered, and Carol's grotesque double shoulder bumped against the railing.

She stiffened in his arms and cried out, her half-lidded eyes opening wide.

'Almost there,' he told her in a panting whisper that didn't sound much like his own voice.

'Almost there, I'm sorry I bumped you but we're almost — '

The door opened and Ted came out. He was wearing gray suit pants and a strap-style undershirt. Suspenders hung down to his knees in swinging loops. He looked surprised and concerned but not frightened.

Bobby managed the last porch step and then swayed backward. For one terrible moment he thought he was going to go crashing down, maybe splitting his skull on the cement walk.

Then Ted grabbed him and steadied him.

'Give her to me,' he said.

'Get over on her other side first,' Bobby panted. His arms were twanging like guitar strings and his shoulders seemed to be on fire. 'That's the bad side.'

Ted came around and stood next to Bobby. Carol was looking up at them, her sandy-blond hair hanging down over Bobby's wrist. 'They hurt me,' she whispered to Ted. 'Willie ... I asked him to make them stop but he wouldn't.'

'Don't talk,' Ted said. 'You're going to be all right.'

He took her from Bobby as gently as he could, but they couldn't help joggling her left arm a little. The double shoulder moved under the white smock. Carol moaned, then began to cry.

Fresh blood trickled from her right nostril, one brilliant red drop against her skin. Bobby had a momentary flash from his dream of the night before: the eye. The red eye.

‘Hold the door for me, Bobby.’

Bobby held it wide. Ted carried Carol through the foyer and into the Garfield apartment.

At that same moment Liz Garfield was descending the iron steps leading from the Harwich stop of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad to Main Street, where there was a taxi stand. She moved with the slow deliberation of a chronic invalid. A suitcase dangled from each hand. Mr Burton, proprietor of the newsstand kiosk, happened to be standing in his doorway and having a smoke. He watched Liz reach the bottom of the steps, turn back the veil of her little hat, and gingerly dab at her face with a bit of handkerchief. She winced at each touch. She was wearing makeup, a lot, but the makeup didn't help. The makeup only drew attention to what had happened to her. The veil was better, even though it only covered the upper part of her face, and now she lowered it again. She approached the first of three idling taxis, and the driver got out to help her with her bags.

Burton wondered who had given her the business. He hoped whoever it had been was currently getting his head massaged by big cops with hard hickories. A person who would do something like that to a woman deserved no better. A person who would do something like that to a woman had no business running around loose. That was Burton's opinion.

Bobby thought Ted would put Carol on the couch, but he didn't. There was one straightbacked chair in the living room and that was where he sat, holding her on his lap. He held her the way the Grant's department store Santa Claus held the little kids who came up to him as he sat on his throne.

‘Where else are you hurt? Besides the shoulder?’

'They hit me in the stomach. And on my side.'

'Which side?'

'The right one.'

Ted gently pulled her blouse up on that side. Bobby hissed in air over his lower lip when he saw the bruise which lay diagonally across her ribcage. He recognized the baseball-bat shape of it at once. He knew whose bat it had been: Harry Doolin's, the pimply galoot who saw himself as Robin Hood in whatever stunted landscape passed for his imagination. He and Richie O'Meara and Willie Shearman had come upon her in the park and Harry had worked her over with his ballbat while Richie and Willie held her. All three of them laughing and calling her the Gerber Baby. Maybe it had started as a joke and gotten out of hand. Wasn't that pretty much what had happened in Lord of the Flies? Things had just gotten a little out of hand?

Ted touched Carol's waist; his bunchy fingers spread and then slowly slid up her side. He did this with his head cocked, as if he were listening rather than touching. Maybe he was.

Carol gasped when he reached the bruise.

'Hurt?' Ted asked.

'A little. Not as bad as my sh-shoulder. They broke my arm, didn't they?'

'No, I don't think so,' Ted replied.

'I heard it pop. So did they. That's when they ran.'

'I'm sure you did hear it. Yes indeed.'

Tears were running down her cheeks and her face was still ashy, but Carol seemed calmer now. Ted held her blouse up against her armpit and looked at the bruise. He knows what that shape is just as well as I do, Bobby thought.

'How many were there, Carol?'

Three, Bobby thought.

'Th-three.'

'Three boys?'

She nodded.

'Three boys against one little girl. They must have been afraid of you. They must have thought you were a lion. Are you a lion, Carol?'

'I wish I was,' Carol said. She tried to smile. 'I wish I could have roared and made them go away. They h-h-hurt me.'

'I know they did. I know.' His hand slid down her side and cupped the bat-bruise on her ribcage. 'Breathe in.'

The bruise swelled against Ted's hand; Bobby could see its purple shape between his nicotinstained fingers. 'Does that hurt?'

She shook her head.

'Not to breathe?'

'No.'

'And not when your ribs go against my hand?'

'No. Only sore. What hurts is ...' She glanced quickly at the terrible shape of her double shoulder, then away.

'I know. Poor Carol. Poor darling. We'll get to that. Where else did they hit you? In the stomach, you said?'

'Yes.'

Ted pulled her blouse up in front. There was another bruise, but this one didn't look so deep or so angry. He prodded gently with his fingers, first above her bellybutton and then below it. She said there was no pain like in her shoulder, that her belly was only sore like her ribs were sore.

'They didn't hit you in your back?'

'N-no.'

'In your head or your neck?'

'Huh-uh, just my side and my stomach and then they hit me in the shoulder and there was that pop and they heard it and they ran. I used to think Willie Shearman was nice.' She gave Ted a woeful look.

'Turn your head for me, Carol ... good ... now the other way. It doesn't hurt when you turn it?'

'No.'

'And you're sure they never hit your head.'

'No. I mean yes, I'm sure.'

'Lucky girl.'

Bobby wondered how in the hell Ted could think Carol was lucky. Her left arm didn't look just broken to him; it looked half torn off. He suddenly thought of a roast-chicken Sunday dinner, and the sound the drumstick made when you pulled it loose. His stomach knotted. For a moment he thought he was going to vomit up his breakfast and the day-old bread which had been his only lunch.

No, he told himself. Not now, you can't. Ted's got enough problems without adding you to the list.

‘Bobby?’ Ted’s voice was clear and sharp. He sounded like a guy with more solutions than problems, and what a relief that was. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yeah.’ And he thought it was true. His stomach was starting to settle.

‘Good. You did well to get her up here. Can you do well a little longer?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I need a pair of scissors. Can you find one?’

Bobby went into his mother’s bedroom, opened the top drawer of her dresser, and got out her wicker sewing basket. Inside was a medium-sized pair of shears. He hurried back into the living room with them and showed them to Ted. ‘Are these all right?’

‘Fine,’ he said, taking them. Then, to Carol: ‘I’m going to spoil your blouse, Carol. I’m sorry, but I have to look at your shoulder now and I don’t want to hurt you any more than I can help.’

‘That’s okay,’ she said, and again tried to smile. Bobby was a little in awe of her bravery; if his shoulder had looked like that, he probably would have been blatting like a sheep caught in a barbed-wire fence.

‘You can wear one of Bobby’s shirts home. Can’t she, Bobby?’

‘Sure, I don’t mind a few cooties.’

‘Fun-nee,’ Carol said.

Working carefully, Ted cut the smock up the back and then up the front. With that done he pulled the two pieces off like the shell of an egg. He was very careful on the left side, but Carol uttered a hoarse scream when Ted’s fingers brushed her shoulder. Bobby jumped and his heart, which had been slowing down, began to race again.

'I'm sorry,' Ted murmured. 'Oh my. Look at this.'

Carol's shoulder was ugly, but not as bad as Bobby had feared — perhaps few things were once you were looking right at them. The second shoulder was higher than the normal one, and the skin there was stretched so tight that Bobby didn't understand why it didn't just split open. It had gone a peculiar lilac color, as well.

'How bad is it?' Carol asked. She was looking in the other direction, across the room. Her small face had the pinched, starved look of a UNICEF child. So far as Bobby knew she never looked at her hurt shoulder after that single quick peek. 'I'll be in a cast all summer, won't I?'

'I don't think you're going to be in a cast at all.'

Carol looked up into Ted's face wonderingly.

'It's not broken, child, only dislocated. Someone hit you on the shoulder —'

'Harry Doolin —'

'— and hard enough to knock the top of the bone in your upper left arm out of its socket. I can put it back in, I think. Can you stand one or two moments of quite bad pain if you know things may be all right again afterward?'

'Yes,' she said at once. 'Fix it, Mr Brautigan. Please fix it.'

Bobby looked at him a little doubtfully. 'Can you really do that?'

'Yes. Give me your belt.'

'Huh?'

'Your belt. Give it to me.'

Bobby slipped his belt — a fairly new one he'd gotten for Christmas — out of its loops and handed it to Ted, who took it without ever shifting his eyes from Carol's. 'What's your last name, honey?'

'Gerber. They called me the Gerber Baby, but I'm not a baby.'

'I'm sure you're not. And this is where you prove it.' He got up, settled her in the chair, then knelt before her like a guy in some old movie getting ready to propose. He folded Bobby's belt over twice in his big hands, then poked it at her good hand until she let go of her elbow and closed her fingers over the loops. 'Good. Now put it in your mouth.'

'Put Bobby's belt in my mouth?'

Ted's gaze never left her. He began stroking her unhurt arm from the elbow to the wrist.

His fingers trailed down her forearm ... stopped ... rose and went back to her elbow ...

trailed down her forearm again. It's like he's hypnotizing her, Bobby thought, but there was really no 'like' about it; Ted was hypnotizing her. His pupils had begun to do that weird thing again, growing and shrinking ... growing and shrinking ... growing and shrinking. Their movement and the movement of his fingers were exactly in rhythm. Carol stared into his face, her lips parted.

'Ted ... your eyes ... '

'Yes, yes.' He sounded impatient, not very interested in what his eyes were doing. 'Pain rises, Carol, did you know that?'

'No ... '

Her eyes on his. His fingers on her arm, going down and rising. Going down ... and rising.

His pupils like a slow heartbeat. Bobby could see Carol relaxing in the chair. She was still holding the belt, and when Ted stopped his finger-stroking long enough to touch the back of her hand, she lifted it toward her face with no protest.

‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘pain rises from its source to the brain. When I put your shoulder back in its socket, there will be a lot of pain — but you’ll catch most of it in your mouth as it rises toward your brain. You will bite it with your teeth and hold it against Bobby’s belt so that only a little of it can get into your head, which is where things hurt the most. Do you understand me, Carol?’

‘Yes ... ‘ Her voice had grown distant. She looked very small sitting there in the straightbacked chair, wearing only her shorts and her sneakers. The pupils of Ted’s eyes, Bobby noticed, had grown steady again.

‘Put the belt in your mouth.’

She put it between her lips.

‘Bite when it hurts.’

‘When it hurts.’

‘Catch the pain.’

‘I’ll catch it.’

Ted gave a final stroke of his big forefinger from her elbow to her wrist, then looked at Bobby. ‘Wish me luck,’ he said.

‘Luck,’ Bobby replied fervently.

Distant, dreaming, Carol Gerber said: ‘Bobby threw a duck at a man.’

‘Did he?’ Ted asked. Very, very gently he closed his left hand around Carol’s left wrist.

'Bobby thought the man was a low man.'

Ted glanced at Bobby.

'Not that kind of low man,' Bobby said. 'Just ... oh, never mind.'

'All the same,' Ted said, 'they are very close. The town clock, the town whistle —'

'I heard,' Bobby said grimly.

'I'm not going to wait until your mother comes back tonight —I don't dare. I'll spend the day in a movie or a park or somewhere else. If all else fails there are flophouses in Bridgeport. Carol, are you ready?'

'Ready.'

'When the pain rises, what will you do?'

'Catch it. Bite it into Bobby's belt.'

'Good girl. Ten seconds and you are going to feel a lot better.'

Ted drew in a deep breath. Then he reached out with his right hand until it hovered just above the lilac-colored bulge in Carol's shoulder. 'Here comes the pain, darling. Be brave.'

It wasn't ten seconds; not even five. To Bobby it seemed to happen in an instant. The heel of Ted's right hand pressed directly against that knob rising out of Carol's stretched flesh. At the same time he pulled sharply on her wrist. Carol's jaws flexed as she clamped down on Bobby's belt. Bobby heard a brief creaking sound, like the one his neck sometimes made when it was stiff and he turned his head. And then the bulge in Carol's arm was gone.

'Bingo!' Ted cried. 'Looks good! Carol?'

She opened her mouth. Bobby's belt fell out of it and onto her lap. Bobby saw a line of tiny points embedded in the leather; she had

bitten nearly all the way through.

'It doesn't hurt anymore,' she said wonderingly. She ran her right hand up to where the skin was now turning a darker purple, touched the bruise, winced.

'That'll be sore for a week or so,' Ted warned her. 'And you mustn't throw or lift with that arm for at least two weeks. If you do, it may pop out again.'

'I'll be careful.' Now Carol could look at her arm. She kept touching the bruise with light, testing fingers.

'How much of the pain did you catch?' Ted asked her, and although his face was still grave, Bobby thought he could hear a little smile in his voice.

'Most of it,' she said. 'It hardly hurt at all.' As soon as these words were out, however, she slumped back in the chair. Her eyes were open but unfocused. Carol had fainted for the second time.

Ted told Bobby to wet a cloth and bring it to him. 'Cold water,' he said. 'Wring it out, but not too much.'

Bobby ran into the bathroom, got a facecloth from the shelf by the tub, and wet it in cold water. The bottom half of the bathroom window was frosted glass, but if he had looked out the top half he would have seen his mother's taxi pulling up out front. Bobby didn't look; he was concentrating on his chore. He never thought of the green keyfob, either, although it was lying on the shelf right in front of his eyes.

When Bobby came back into the living room, Ted was sitting in the straightbacked chair with Carol in his lap again. Bobby noticed how tanned her arms had already become compared to the rest of her skin, which was a pure, smooth white (except for where the bruises stood out). She looks like she's wearing nylon stockings on her arms, he thought, a little amused. Her eyes had begun to clear and they

tracked Bobby when he moved toward her, but Carol still didn't look exactly great — her hair was mussed, her face was all sweaty, and there was that drying trickle of blood between her nostril and the corner of her mouth.

Ted took the cloth and began to wipe her cheeks and forehead with it. Bobby knelt by the arm of the chair. Carol sat up a little, raising her face gratefully against the cool and the wet.

Ted wiped away the blood under her nose, then put the facecloth aside on the endtable. He brushed Carol's sweaty hair off her brow. When some of it flopped back, he moved his hand to brush it away again.

Before he could, the door to the porch banged open. Footfalls crossed the foyer. The hand on Carol's damp forehead froze. Bobby's eyes met Ted's and a single thought flowed between them, strong telepathy consisting of a single word: Them.

'No,' Carol said, 'not them, Bobby, it's your m — '

The apartment door opened and Liz stood there with her key in one hand and her hat — the one with the veil on it — in the other. Behind her and beyond the foyer the door to all the hot outside world stood open. Side by side on the porch welcome mat were her two suitcases, where the cab driver had put them.

'Bobby, how many times have I told you to lock this damn — '

She got that far, then stopped. In later years Bobby would replay that moment again and again, seeing more and more of what his mother had seen when she came back from her disastrous trip to Providence: her son kneeling by the chair where the old man she had never liked or really trusted sat with the little girl in his lap. The little girl looked dazed. Her hair was in sweaty clumps. Her blouse had been torn off — it lay in pieces on the floor — and even with her own eyes puffed mostly shut, Liz would have seen Carol's bruises: one on the shoulder, one on the ribs, one on the stomach.

And Carol and Bobby and Ted Brautigam saw her with that same amazed stop-time clarity: the two black eyes (Liz's right eye was really nothing but a glitter deep in a puffball of discolored flesh); the lower lip which was swelled and split in two places and still wearing flecks of dried blood like old ugly lipstick; the nose which lay askew and had grown a misbegotten hook, making it almost into a caricature Witch Hazel nose.

Silence, a moment's considering silence on a hot summer afternoon. Somewhere a car backfired. Somewhere a kid shouted 'Come on, you guys!' And from behind them on Colony Street came the sound Bobby would identify most strongly with his childhood in general and that Thursday in particular: Mrs O'Hara's Bowser barking his way ever deeper into the twentieth century: rooproop, rooproop-roop.

Jack got her, Bobby thought. Jack Merridew and his nimrod friends.

'Oh jeez, what happened?' he asked her, breaking the silence. He didn't want to know; he had to know. He ran to her, starting to cry out of fright but also out of grief: her face, her poor face. She didn't look like his mom at all. She looked like some old woman who belonged not on shady Broad Street but down there, where people drank wine out of bottles in paper sacks and had no last names. 'What did he do? What did that bastard do to you?'

She paid no attention, seemed not to hear him at all. She laid hold of him, though; laid hold of his shoulders hard enough for him to feel her fingers sinking into his flesh, hard enough to hurt. She laid hold and then set him aside without a single look. 'Let her go, you filthy man,'

she said in a low and rusty voice. 'Let her go right now.'

'Mrs Garfield, please don't misunderstand.' Ted lifted Carol off his lap — careful even now to keep his hand well away from her hurt shoulder — and then stood up himself. He shook out the legs of his

pants, a fussy little gesture that was all Ted. 'She was hurt, you see. Bobby found her — '

'BASTARD!' Liz screamed. To her right was a table with a vase on it. She grabbed the vase and threw it at him. Ted ducked, but too slowly to avoid it completely; the bottom of the vase struck the top of his head, skipped like a stone on a pond, hit the wall and shattered.

Carol screamed.

'Mom, no!' Bobby shouted. 'He didn't do anything bad! He didn't do anything bad!'

Liz took no notice. 'How dare you touch her? Have you been touching my son the same way? You have, haven't you? You don't care which flavor they are, just as long as they're _young!'

Ted took a step toward her. The empty loops of his suspenders swung back and forth beside his legs. Bobby could see blooms of blood in the scant hair on top of his head where the vase had clipped him.

'Mrs Garfield, I assure you — '

'Assure this, you dirty bastard!' With the vase gone there was nothing left on the table and so she picked up the table itself and threw it. It struck Ted in the chest and drove him backward; would have floored him if not for the straightbacked chair. Ted flopped into it, looking at her with wide, incredulous eyes. His mouth was trembling.

'Was he helping you?' Liz asked. Her face was dead white. The bruises on it stood out like birthmarks. 'Did you teach my son to help?'

'Mom, he didn't hurt her!' Bobby shouted. He grabbed her around the waist. 'He didn't hurt her, he — '

She picked him up like the vase, like the table, and he would think later she had been as strong as he had been, carrying Carol up the hill from the park. She threw him across the room. Bobby struck the wall. His head snapped back and connected with the sunburst clock, knocking it to the floor and stopping it forever. Black dots flocked across his vision, making him think briefly and confusedly

(coming closing in now the posters have his name on them) of the low men. Then he slid to the floor. He tried to stop himself but his knees wouldn't lock.

Liz looked at him, seemingly without much interest, then back at Ted, who sat in the straightbacked chair with the table in his lap and the legs poking at his face. Blood was dripping down one of his cheeks now, and his hair was more red than white. He tried to speak and what came out instead was a dry and flailing old man's cigarette cough.

'Filthy man. Filthy, filthy man. For two cents I'd pull your pants down and yank that filthy thing right off you.' She turned and looked at her huddled son again, and the expression Bobby now saw in the one eye he could really see — the contempt, the accusation — made him cry harder. She didn't say You too, but he saw it in her eye. Then she turned back to Ted.

'Know what? You're going to jail.' She pointed a finger at him, and even through his tears Bobby saw the nail that had been on it when she left in Mr Biderman's Merc was gone; there was a bloody-ragged weal where it had been. Her voice was mushy, seeming to spread out somehow as it crossed her oversized lower lip. 'I'm going to call the police now. If you're wise you'll sit still while I do it. Just keep your mouth shut and sit still.' Her voice was rising, rising. Her hands, scratched and swelled at the knuckles as well as broken at the nails, curled into fists which she shook at him. 'If you run I'll chase you and carve you up with my longest butcher knife. See if I don't. I'll do it right on the street for everyone to see, and I'll start with the part of you that seems to give you ... you boys ... so much trouble. So sit

still, Brattigan. If you want to live long enough to go to jail, don't you move.'

The phone was on the table by the couch. She went to it. Ted sat with the table in his lap and blood flowing down his cheek. Bobby huddled next to the fallen clock, the one his mother had gotten with trading stamps. Drifting in the window on the breeze of Ted's fan came Bowser's cry: rooproop-roop.

'You don't know what happened here, Mrs Garfield. What happened to you was terrible and you have all my sympathy ... but what happened to you is not what happened to Carol.'

'Shut up.' She wasn't listening, didn't even look in his direction.

Carol ran to Liz, reached out for her, then stopped. Her eyes grew large in her pale face.

Her mouth dropped open. 'They pulled your dress off?' It was half a whisper, half a moan. Liz stopped dialing and turned slowly to look at her. 'Why did they pull your dress off?'

Liz seemed to think about how to answer. She seemed to think hard. 'Shut up,' she said at last. 'Just shut up, okay?'

'Why did they chase you? Who's hitting?' Carol's voice had become uneven. 'Who's hitting?'

'Shut up!' Liz dropped the telephone and put her hands to her ears. Bobby looked at her with growing horror.

Carol turned to him. Fresh tears were rolling down her cheeks. There was knowing in her eyes — knowing. The kind, Bobby thought, that he had felt while Mr McQuown had been trying to fool him.

'They chased her,' Carol said. 'When she tried to leave they chased her and made her come back.'

Bobby knew. They had chased her down a hotel corridor. He had seen it. He couldn't remember where, but he had.

'Make them stop doing it! Make me stop seeing it!' Carol screamed. 'She's hitting them but she can't get away! She's hitting them but she can't get away!'

Ted tipped the table out of his lap and struggled to his feet. His eyes were blazing. 'Hug her, Carol! Hug her tight! That will make it stop!'

Carol threw her good arm around Bobby's mother. Liz staggered backward a step, almost falling when one of her shoes hooked the leg of the sofa. She stayed up but the telephone tumbled to the rug beside one of Bobby's outstretched sneakers, burring harshly.

For a moment things stayed that way — it was as if they were playing Statues and 'it' had just yelled Freeze! It was Carol who moved first, releasing Liz Garneld's waist and stepping back. Her sweaty hair hung in her eyes. Ted went toward her and reached out to put a hand on her shoulder.

'Don't touch her,' Liz said, but she spoke mechanically, without force. Whatever had flashed inside her at the sight of the child on Ted Brautigan's lap had faded a little, at least temporarily. She looked exhausted.

Nonetheless, Ted dropped his hand. 'You're right,' he said.

Liz took a deep breath, held it, let it out. She looked at Bobby, then away. Bobby wished with all his heart that she would put her hand out to him, help him a little, help him get up, just that, but she turned to Carol instead. Bobby got to his feet on his own.

'What happened here?' Liz asked Carol.

Although she was still crying and her words kept hitching as she struggled for breath.

Carol told Bobby's mom about how the three big boys had found her in the park, and how at first it had seemed like just another one of their jokes, a bit meaner than most but still just a joke. Then Harry had really started hitting her while the others held her. The popping sound in her shoulder scared them and they ran away. She told Liz how Bobby had found her five or ten minutes later — she didn't know how long because the pain had been so bad — and carried her up here. And how Ted had fixed her arm, after giving her Bobby's belt to catch the pain with. She bent, picked up the belt, and showed Liz the tiny tooth-marks in it with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. 'I didn't catch all of it, but I caught a lot.'

Liz only glanced at the belt before turning to Ted. 'Why'd you tear her top off, chief?'

'It's not torn!' Bobby cried. He was suddenly furious with her. 'He cut it off so he could look at her shoulder and fix it without hurting her! I brought him the scissors, for cripe's sake!

Why are you so stupid, Mom? Why can't you see — '

She swung without turning, catching Bobby completely by surprise. The back of her open hand connected with the side of his face; her forefinger actually poked into his eyes, sending a zag of pain deep into his head. His tears stopped as if the pump controlling them had suddenly shorted out.

'Don't you call me stupid, Bobby-O,' she said. 'Not on your ever-loving tintype.'

Carol was looking fearfully at the hook-nosed witch who had come back in a taxi wearing Mrs Garfield's clothes. Mrs Garfield who had run and who had fought when she couldn't run anymore. But in the end they had taken what they wanted from her.

'You shouldn't hit Bobby,' Carol said. 'He's not like those men.'

'Is he your boyfriend?' She laughed. 'Yeah? Good for you! But I'll let you in on a secret, sweetheart — he's just like his daddy and your daddy and all the rest of them. Go in the bathroom. I'll clean you up and find something for you to wear. Christ, what a mess!'

Carol looked at her a moment longer, then turned and went into the bathroom. Her bare back looked small and vulnerable. And white. So white in contrast to her brown arms.

'Carol!' Ted called after her. 'Is it better now?' Bobby didn't think he was talking about her arm. Not this time.

'Yes,' she said without turning. 'But I can still hear her, far away. She's screaming.'

'Who's screaming?' Liz asked. Carol didn't answer her. She went into the bathroom and closed the door. Liz looked at it for a moment, as if to make sure Carol wasn't going to pop back out again, then turned to Ted. 'Who's screaming?'

Ted only looked at her warily, as if expecting another ICBM attack at any moment.

Liz began to smile. It was a smile Bobby knew: her I'm-losing-my-temper smile. Was it possible she had any left to lose? With her black eyes, broken nose, and swollen lip, the smile made her look horrid: not his mother but some lunatic.

'Quite the Good Samaritan, aren't you? How many feels did you cop while you were fixing her up? She hasn't got much, but I bet you checked what you could, didn't you? Never miss an opportunity, right? Come on and fess up to your mamma.'

Bobby looked at her with growing despair. Carol had told her everything — all of the truth — and it made no difference. No difference! God!

'There is a dangerous adult in this room,' Ted said, 'but it isn't me.'

She looked first uncomprehending, then incredulous, then furious. 'How dare you? How dare you?'

'He didn't do anything!' Bobby screamed. 'Didn't you hear what Carol said? Didn't you — '

'Shut your mouth,' she said, not looking at him. She looked only at Ted. 'The cops are going to be very interested in you, I think. Don called Hartford on Friday, before ... before. I asked him to. He has friends there. You never worked for the State of Connecticut, not in the office of the Comptroller, not anywhere else. You were in jail, weren't you?'

'In a way I suppose I was,' Ted said. He seemed calmer now in spite of the blood flowing down the side of his face. He took the cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, looked at them, put them back. 'But not the kind you're thinking of.'

And not in this world, Bobby thought.

'What was it for?' she asked. 'Making little girls feel better in the first degree?'

'I have something valuable,' Ted said. He reached up and tapped his temple. The finger he tapped with came away dotted with blood. 'There are others like me. And there are people whose job it is to catch us, keep us, and use us for ... well, use us, leave it at that. I and two others escaped. One was caught, one was killed. Only I remain free. If, that is ... ' He looked around. ' ... you call this freedom.'

'You're crazy. Crazy old Brattigan, nuttier than a holiday fruitcake. I'm calling the police.'

Let them decide if they want to put you back in the jail you broke out of or in Danbury Asylum.' She bent, reached for the spilled phone.

‘No, Mom!’ Bobby said, and reached for her. ‘Don’t — ‘

‘Bobby, no!’ Ted said sharply.

Bobby pulled back, looking first at his mom as she scooped up the phone, then at Ted.

‘Not as she is now,’ Ted told him. ‘As she is now, she can’t stop biting.’

Liz Garfield gave Ted a brilliant, almost unspeakable smile — Good try, you bastard —

and took the receiver off the cradle.

‘What’s happening?’ Carol cried from the bathroom. ‘Can I come out now?’

‘Not yet, darling,’ Ted called back. ‘A little longer.’

Liz poked the telephone’s cutoff buttons up and down. She stopped, listened, seemed satisfied. She began to dial. ‘We’re going to find out who you are,’ she said. She spoke in a strange, confiding tone. ‘That should be pretty interesting. And what you’ve done. That might be even more interesting.’

‘If you call the police, they’ll also find out who you are and what you’ve done,’ Ted said.

She stopped dialing and looked at him. It was a cunning sideways stare Bobby had never seen before. ‘What in God’s name are you talking about?’

‘A foolish woman who should have chosen better. A foolish woman who had seen enough of her boss to know better — who had overheard him and his cronies often enough to know better, to know that any “seminar” they attended mostly had to do with booze and sex-parties.’

Maybe a little reefer, as well. A foolish woman who let her greed overwhelm her good sense — ‘

‘What do you know about being alone?’ she cried. ‘I have a son to raise!’ She looked at Bobby, as if remembering the son she had to raise for the first time in a little while.

‘How much of this do you want him to hear?’ Ted asked.

‘You don’t know anything. You can’t.’

‘I know everything. The question is, how much do you want Bobby to know? How much do you want your neighbors to know? If the police come and take me, they’ll know what I know, that I promise you.’ He paused. His pupils remained steady but his eyes seemed to grow. ‘I know everything. Believe me — don’t put it to the test.’

‘Why would you hurt me that way?’

‘Given a choice I wouldn’t. You have been hurt enough, by yourself as well as by others.

Let me leave, that’s all I’m asking you to do. I was leaving anyway. Let me leave. I did nothing but try to help.’

‘Oh yes,’ she said, and laughed. ‘Help. Her sitting on you practically naked. Help.’

‘I would help you if I — ‘

‘Oh yeah, and I know how.’ She laughed again.

Bobby started to speak and saw Ted’s eyes warning him not to. Behind the bathroom door, water was now running into the sink. Liz lowered her head, thinking. At last she raised it again.

‘All right,’ she said, ‘here’s what I’m going to do. I’ll help Bobby’s little girlfriend get cleaned up. I’ll give her an aspirin and find something

for her to wear home. While I'm doing those things, I'll ask her a few questions. If the answers are the right answers, you can go.

Good riddance to bad rubbish.'

'Mom — '

Liz held up a hand like a traffic cop, silencing him. She was staring at Ted, who was looking back at her.

'I'll walk her home, I'll watch her go through her front door. What she decides to tell her mother is between the two of them. My job is to see her home safe, that's all. When it's done I'll walk down to the park and sit in the shade for a little while. I had a rough night last night.'

She drew in breath and let it out in a dry and rueful sigh. 'Very rough. So I'll go to the park and sit in the shade and think about what comes next. How I'm going to keep him and me out of the poorhouse.

'If I find you still here when I get back from the park, sweetheart, I will call the police ...

and don't you put that to the test. Say whatever you want. None of it's going to matter much to anyone if I say I walked into my apartment a few hours sooner than you expected and found you with your hand inside an eleven-year-old girl's shorts.'

Bobby stared at his mother in silent shock. She didn't see the stare; she was still looking at Ted, her swollen eyes fixed on him intently.

'If, on the other hand, I came back and you're gone, bag and baggage, I won't have to call anyone or say anything. Tout finis.'

I'll go with you! Bobby thought at Ted. I don't care about the low men. I'd rather have a thousand low men in yellow coats looking for me — a million — than have to live with her anymore. I hate her!

'Well?' Liz asked.

'It's a deal. I'll be gone in an hour. Probably less.'

'No!' Bobby cried. When he'd awakened this morning he had been resigned to Ted's going — sad but resigned. Now it hurt all over again. Worse than before, even. 'No!'

'Be quiet,' his mother said, still not looking at him.

'It's the only way, Bobby. You know that.' Ted looked up at Liz. 'Take care of Carol. I'll talk to Bobby.'

'You're in no position to give orders,' Liz said, but she went. As she crossed to the bathroom, Bobby saw she was limping. A heel had broken off one of her shoes, but he didn't think that was the only reason she couldn't walk right. She knocked briefly on the bathroom door and then, without waiting for a response, slipped inside.

Bobby ran across the room, but when he tried to put his arms around Ted, the old man took his hands, squeezed them once briefly, then put them against Bobby's chest and let go.

'Take me with you,' Bobby said fiercely. 'I'll help you look for them. Two sets of eyes are better than one. Take me with you!'

'I can't do that, but you can come with me as far as the kitchen, Bobby. Carol isn't the only one who needs to do some cleaning up.'

Ted rose from the chair and swayed on his feet for a moment. Bobby reached out to steady him and Ted once more pushed his hand gently but firmly away. It hurt. Not as much as his mother's failure to help him up (or even look at him) after she had thrown him against the wall, but enough.

He walked with Ted to the kitchen, not touching him but close enough to grab him if he fell. Ted didn't fall. He looked at the hazy reflection of himself in the window over the sink, sighed, then turned on the water. He wet the dishcloth and began to wipe the blood off

his cheek, checking his window-reflection every now and then for reference.

‘Your mother needs you more now than she ever has before,’ he said. ‘She needs someone she can trust.’

‘She doesn’t trust me. I don’t think she even likes me.’

Ted’s mouth tightened, and Bobby understood he had struck upon some truth Ted had seen in his mother’s mind. Bobby knew she didn’t like him, he knew that, so why were the tears threatening again?

Ted reached out for him, seemed to remember that was a bad idea, and went back to work with the dishcloth instead. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘Perhaps she doesn’t like you. If that’s true, it isn’t because of anything you did. It’s because of what you are.’

‘A boy,’ he said bitterly. ‘A fucking boy.’

‘And your father’s son, don’t forget that. But Bobby ... whether she likes you or not, she loves you. Such a greeting-card that sounds, I know, but it’s true. She loves you and she needs you. You’re what she has. She’s badly hurt right now — ‘

‘Getting hurt was her own fault!’ he burst out. ‘She knew something was wrong! You said so yourself! She’s known for weeks! Months! But she wouldn’t leave that job! She knew and she still went with them to Providence! She went with them anyway!’

‘A lion-tamer knows, but he still goes into the cage. He goes in because that’s where his paycheck is.’

‘She’s got money,’ Bobby almost spat.

‘Not enough, apparently.’

‘She’ll never have enough,’ Bobby said, and knew it was the truth as soon as it was out of his mouth.

'She loves you.'

'I don't care! I don't love her!'

'But you do. You will. You must. It is ka.'

'Ka? What's that?'

'Destiny.' Ted had gotten most of the blood out of his hair. He turned off the water and made one final check of his ghost-image in the window. Beyond it lay all of that hot summer, younger than Ted Brautigan would ever be again. Younger than Bobby would ever be again, for that matter. 'Ka is destiny. Do you care for me, Bobby?'

'You know I do,' Bobby said, beginning to cry again. Lately crying was all he seemed to do. His eyes ached from it. 'Lots and lots.'

'Then try to be your mother's friend. For my sake if not your own. Stay with her and help this hurt of hers to heal. And every now and then I'll send you a postcard.'

They were walking back into the living room again. Bobby was starting to feel a little bit better, but he wished Ted could have put his arm around him. He wished that more than anything.

The bathroom door opened. Carol came out first, looking down at her own feet with uncharacteristic shyness. Her hair had been wetted, combed back, and rubber-banded into a ponytail. She was wearing one of Bobby's mother's old blouses; it was so big it came almost down to her knees, like a dress. You couldn't see her red shorts at all.

'Go out on the porch and wait,' Liz said.

'Okay.'

'You won't go walking home without me, will you?'

'No!' Carol said, and her downcast face filled with alarm.

‘Good. Stand right by my suitcases.’

Carol started out to the foyer, then turned back. ‘Thanks for fixing my arm, Ted. I hope you don’t get in trouble for it. I didn’t want — ‘

‘Go out on the damned porch,’ Liz snapped.

‘ — anyone to get in trouble,’ Carol finished in a tiny voice, almost the whisper of a mouse in a cartoon. Then she went out, Liz’s blouse flapping around her in a way that would have been comical on another day. Liz turned to Bobby and when he got a good look at her, his heart sank. Her fury had been refreshed. A bright red flush had spread over her bruised face and down her neck.

Oh cripes, what now? Bobby thought. Then she held up the green keyfob, and he knew.

‘Where did you get this, Bobby-O?’

‘I ... it ... ‘ But he could think of nothing to say: no fib, no outright lie, not even the truth.

Suddenly Bobby felt very tired. The only thing in the world he wanted to do was creep into his bedroom and hide under the covers of his bed and go to sleep.

‘I gave it to him,’ Ted said mildly. ‘Yesterday.’

‘You took my son to a bookie joint in Bridgeport? A poker-parlor in Bridgeport?’

It doesn’t say bookie joint on the keyfob, Bobby thought. It doesn’t say poker-parlor, either ... because those things are against the law. She knows what goes on there because my father went there. And like father like son. That’s what they say, like father like son.

‘I took him to a movie,’ Ted said. ‘Village of the Damned, at the Criterion. While he was watching, I went to The Corner Pocket to do an errand.’

‘What sort of errand?’

‘I placed a bet on a prizefight.’ For a moment Bobby’s heart sank even lower and he thought, What’s wrong with you? Why didn’t you lie? If you knew how she felt about stuff like that —

But he did know. Of course he did.

‘A bet on a prizefight.’ She nodded. ‘Uh-huh. You left my son alone in a Bridgeport movie theater so you could go make a bet on a prizefight.’ She laughed wildly. ‘Oh well, I suppose I should be grateful, shouldn’t I? You brought him such a nice souvenir. If he decides to ever make a bet himself, or lose his money playing poker like his father did, he’ll know where to go.’

‘I left him for two hours in a movie theater,’ Ted said. ‘You left him with me. He seems to have survived both, hasn’t he?’

Liz looked for a moment as if she had been slapped, then for a moment as if she would cry.

Then her face smoothed out and became expressionless. She curled her fist around the green keyfob and slipped it into her dress pocket. Bobby knew he would never see it again. He didn’t mind. He didn’t want to see it again.

‘Bobby, go in your room,’ she said.

‘No.’

‘Bobby, go in your room!’

‘No! I won’t!’

Standing in a bar of sunlight on the welcome mat by Liz Garfield’s suitcases, floating in Liz Garfield’s old blouse, Carol began to cry at the sound of the raised voices.

‘Go in your room, Bobby,’ Ted said quietly. ‘I have enjoyed meeting you and knowing you.’

‘Knowing you,’ Bobby’s mom said in an angry, insinuating voice, but Bobby didn’t understand her and Ted took no notice of her.

‘Go in your room,’ he repeated.

‘Will you be all right? You know what I mean.’

‘Yes.’ Ted smiled, kissed his fingers, and blew the kiss toward Bobby. Bobby caught it and made a fist around it, holding it tight. ‘I’m going to be just fine.’

Bobby walked slowly toward his bedroom door, his head down and his eyes on the toes of his sneakers. He was almost there when he thought I can’t do this, I can’t let him go like this.

He ran to Ted, threw his arms around him, and covered his face with kisses — forehead, cheeks, chin, lips, the thin and silky lids of his eyes. ‘Ted, I love you!’

Ted gave up and hugged him tight. Bobby could smell a ghost of the lather he shaved with, and the stronger aroma of his Chesterfield cigarettes. They were smells he would carry with him a long time, as he would the memories of Ted’s big hands touching him, stroking his back, cupping the curve of his skull. ‘Bobby, I love you too,’ he said.

‘Oh for Christ’s sake!’ Liz nearly screamed. Bobby turned toward her and what he saw was Don Biderman pushing her into a corner. Somewhere the Benny Goodman Orchestra was playing ‘One O’Clock Jump’ on a hi-fi turned all the way up. Mr Biderman had his hand out as if to slap. Mr Biderman was asking her if she wanted a little more, was that the way she liked it, she could have a little more if that was the way she liked it. Bobby could almost taste her horrified understanding.

'You really didn't know, did you?' he said. 'At least not all of it, all they wanted. They thought you did, but you didn't.'

'Go in your room right now or I'm calling the police and telling them to send a squad-car,'

his mother said. 'I'm not joking, Bobby-O.'

'I know you're not,' Bobby said. He went into his bedroom and closed the door. He thought at first he was all right and then he thought that he was going to throw up, or faint, or do both.

He walked across to his bed on tottery, unstable legs. He only meant to sit on it but he lay back on it crosswise instead, as if all the muscles had gone out of his stomach and back. He tried to lift his feet up but his legs only lay there, the muscles gone from them, too. He had a sudden image of Sully-John in his bathing suit, climbing the ladder of a swimming float, running to the end of the board, diving off. He wished he was with S-J now. Anywhere but here. Anywhere but here. Anywhere at all but here.

When Bobby woke up, the light in his room had grown dim and when he looked at the floor he could barely see the shadow of the tree outside his window. He had been out — asleep or unconscious — for three hours, maybe four. He was covered with sweat and his legs were numb; he had never pulled them up onto the bed.

Now he tried, and the burst of pins and needles which resulted almost made him scream.

He slid onto the floor instead, and the pins and needles ran up his thighs to his crotch. He sat with his knees up around his ears, his back throbbing, his legs buzzing, his head cottony.

Something terrible had happened, but at first he couldn't remember what. As he sat there propped against the bed, looking across at Clayton Moore in his Lone Ranger mask, it began to come back.

Carol's arm dislocated, his mother beaten up and half-crazy as well, shaking that green keyfob in his face, furious with him. And Ted ...

Ted would be gone by now, and that was probably for the best, but how it hurt to think of.

He got to his feet and walked twice around the room. The second time he stopped at the window and looked out, rubbing his hands together at the back of his neck, which was stiff and sweaty. A little way down the street the Sigsby twins, Dina and Dianne, were jumping rope, but the other kids had gone in, either for supper or for the night. A car slid by, showing its parking lights. It was even later than he had at first thought; heavenly shades of night were falling.

He made another circuit of his room, working the tingles out of his legs, feeling like a prisoner pacing his cell. The door had no lock on it — no more than his mom's did but he felt like a jailbird just the same. He was afraid to go out. She hadn't called him for supper, and although he was hungry — a little, anyway — he was afraid to go out. He was afraid of how he might find her ... or of not finding her at all. Suppose she had decided she'd finally had enough of Bobby-O, stupid lying little Bobby-O, his father's son? Even if she was here, and seemingly back to normal ... was there even such a thing as normal? People had terrible things behind their faces sometimes. He knew that now.

When he reached the closed door of his room, he stopped. There was a scrap of paper lying there. He bent and picked it up. There was still plenty of light and he could read it easily.

Dear Bobby—

By the time you read this, I'll be gone ... but I'll take you with me in my thoughts. Please love your mother and remember that she loves you. She was afraid and hurt and ashamed this afternoon, and when we see people that way, we see them at their worst. I have left you something in my room. I will remember my promise.

All my love,

The postcards, that's what he promised. To send me postcards.

Feeling better, Bobby folded up the note Ted had slipped into his room before leaving and opened his bedroom door.

The living room was empty, but it had been set to rights. It looked almost okay if you didn't know there was supposed to be a sunburst clock on the wall beside the TV; now there was just the little screw where it had hung, jutting out and holding nothing.

Bobby realized he could hear his mother snoring in her room. She always snored, but this was a heavy snore, like an old person or a drunk snoring in a movie. That's because they hurt her, Bobby thought, and for a moment he thought of

(Howya doin Sport howza boy)

Mr Biderman and the two nimrods elbowing each other in the back seat and grinning. Kill the pig, cut her throat, Bobby thought. He didn't want to think it but he did.

He tiptoed across the living room as quietly as Jack in the giant's castle, opened the door to the foyer, and went out. He tiptoed up the first flight of stairs (walking on the bannister side, because he'd read in one of the Hardy Boys mysteries that if you walked that way the stairs didn't creak so much), and ran up the second.

Ted's door stood open; the room beyond it was almost empty. The few things of his own he'd put up — a picture of a man fishing at sunset, a picture of Mary Magdalene washing Jesus' feet, a calendar — were gone. The ashtray on the table was empty, but sitting beside it was one of Ted's carryhandle bags. Inside it were four paperback books: *Animal Farm*, *The Night of the Hunter*, *Treasure Island*, and *Of Mice and Men*. Written on the side of the paper bag in Ted's shaky but completely legible handwriting was: Read the Steinbeck first. 'Guys like us,' George says when he tells Lennie the story

Lennie always wants to hear. Who are guys like us? Who were they to Steinbeck? Who are they to you? Ask yourself this.

Bobby took the paperbacks but left the bag — he was afraid that if his mom saw one of Ted's carryhandle bags she would go crazy all over again. He looked in the refrigerator and saw nothing but a bottle of French's mustard and a box of baking soda. He closed the fridge again and looked around. It was as if no one had ever lived here at all. Except —

He went to the ashtray, held it to his nose, and breathed in deeply. The smell of Chesterfields was strong, and it brought Ted back completely, Ted sitting here at his table and talking about Lord of the Flies, Ted standing at his bathroom mirror, shaving with that scary razor of his, listening through the open door as Bobby read him opinion pieces Bobby himself didn't understand.

Ted leaving one final question on the side of a paper bag: Guys like us. Who are guys like us?

Bobby breathed in again, sucking up little flakes of ash and fighting back the urge to sneeze, holding the smell in, fixing it in his memory as best he could, closing his eyes, and in through the window came the endless ineluctable cry of Bowser, now calling down the dark like a dream: rooproop-roop, rooproop-roop.

He put the ashtray down again. The urge to sneeze had passed. I'm going to smoke Chesterfields, he decided. I'm going to smoke them all my life.

He went back downstairs, holding the paperbacks in front of him and walking on the outside of the staircase again as he went from the second floor to the foyer. He slipped into the apartment, tiptoed across the living room (his mother was still snoring, louder than ever), and into his bedroom. He put the books under his bed — deep under. If his mom found them he would say Mr Burton had given them to him. That was a lie, but if he told the truth she'd take the

books away. Besides, lying no longer seemed so bad. Lying might become a necessity. In time it might even become a pleasure.

What next? The rumble in his stomach decided him. A couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were next.

He started for the kitchen, tiptoeing past his mother's partly open bedroom door without even thinking about it, then paused. She was shifting around on her bed. Her snores had become ragged and she was talking in her sleep. It was a low, moaning talk Bobby couldn't make out, but he realized he didn't have to make it out. He could hear her anyway. And he could see stuff. Her thoughts? Her dreams? Whatever it was, it was awful.

He managed three more steps toward the kitchen, then caught a glimpse of something so terrible his breath froze in his throat like ice: HAVE YOU SEEN BRAUTIGAN! He is an OLD

MONGREL but WE LOVE HIM!

'No,' he whispered. 'Oh Mom, no.'

He didn't want to go in there where she was, but his feet turned in that direction anyway.

He went with them like a hostage. He watched his hand reach out, the fingers spread, and push her bedroom door open all the way.

Her bed was still made. She lay on top of the coverlet in her dress, one leg drawn up so her knee almost touched her chest. He could see the top of her stocking and her garter, and that made him think of the lady in the calendar picture at The Corner Pocket, the one getting out of the car with most of her skirt in her lap ... except the lady getting out of the Packard hadn't had ugly bruises above the top of her stocking.

Liz's face was flushed where it wasn't bruised; her hair was matted with sweat; her cheeks were smeary with tears and gooey with

makeup. A board creaked under Bobby's foot as he stepped into the room. She cried out and he froze, sure her eyes would open.

Instead of awakening she rolled away from him toward the wall. Here, in her room, the jumble of thoughts and images coming out of her was no clearer but ranker and more pungent, like sweat pouring off a sick person. Running through everything was the sound of Benny Goodman playing 'One O'Clock Jump' and the taste of blood running down the back of her throat.

Have you seen Brautigan, Bobby thought. He is an old mongrel but we love him. Have you seen ...

She had pulled her shades before lying down and the room was very dark. He took another step, then stopped again by the table with the mirror where she sometimes sat to do her makeup. Her purse was there. Bobby thought of Ted hugging him — the hug Bobby had wanted, needed, so badly. Ted stroking his back, cupping the curve of his skull. When I touch, I pass on a kind of window, Ted had told him while they were coming back from Bridgeport in the cab. And now, standing by his mother's makeup table with his fists clenched, Bobby looked tentatively through that window into his mother's mind.

He caught a glimpse of her coming home on the train, huddling by herself, looking into ten thousand back yards between Providence and Harwich so as few people as possible would see her face; he saw her spying the bright green keyfob on the shelf by the toothglass as Carol slipped into her old blouse; saw her walking Carol home, asking her questions the whole way, one after another, firing them like bullets out of a machine-gun. Carol, too shaken and worn out to dissemble, had answered them all. Bobby saw his mother walking — limping —

down to Commonwealth Park, heard her thinking If only some good could be salvaged from this nightmare, if only some good, anything good —

He saw her sit on a bench in the shade and then get up after awhile, walking toward Spicer's for a headache powder and a Nehi to wash it down with before going back home.

And then, just before leaving the park, Bobby saw her spy something tacked to a tree. These somethings were tacked up all over town; she might have passed a couple on her way to the park, so lost in thought she never noticed.

Once again Bobby felt like a passenger in his own body, no more than that. He watched his hand reach out, saw two fingers (the ones that would bear the yellow smudges of the heavy smoker in another few years) make a scissoring motion and catch what was protruding from the mouth of her purse. Bobby pulled the paper free, unfolded it, and read the first two lines in the faint light from the bedroom doorway:

HAVE YOU SEEN BRAUTIGANI!

He is an OLD MONGREL but WE LOVE HIM!

His eyes skipped halfway down to the lines that had no doubt riveted his mother and driven every other thought from her head:

We will pay A VERY LARGE REWARD

(\$ \$ \$ \$)

Here was the something good she had been wishing for, hoping for, praying for; here was A VERY LARGE REWARD.

And had she hesitated? Had the thought 'Wait a minute, my kid loves that old bastard-ball!'

even crossed her mind?

Nah.

You couldn't hesitate. Because life was full of Don Bidermans, and life wasn't fair.

Bobby left the room on tiptoe with the poster still in his hand, mincing away from her in big soft steps, freezing when a board creaked under his feet, then moving on. Behind him his mom's muttering talk had subsided into low snores again. Bobby made it into the living room and closed her door behind him, holding the knob at full cock until the door was shut tight, not wanting the latch to click. Then he hurried across to the phone, aware only now that he was away from her that his heart was racing and his throat was lined with a taste like old pennies. Any vestige of hunger had vanished.

He picked up the telephone's handset, looked around quickly and narrowly to make sure his mom's door was still shut, then dialed without referring to the poster. The number was burned into his mind: HOusitonic 5-8337.

There was only silence when he finished dialing. That wasn't surprising, either, because there was no HOusitonic exchange in Harwich. And if he felt cold all over (except for his balls and the soles of his feet, which were strangely hot), that was just because he was afraid for Ted. That was all. Just —

There was a stonelike click as Bobby was about to put the handset down. And then a voice said, 'Yeah?'

It's Biderman! Bobby thought wildly. Cripes, it's Biderman!

'Yeah?' the voice said again. No, not Biderman's. Too low for Biderman's. But it was a nimrod voice, no doubt about that, and as his skin temperature continued to plummet toward absolute zero, Bobby knew that the man on the other end of the line had some sort of yellow coat in his wardrobe.

Suddenly his eyes grew hot and the backs of them began itching. Is this the Sagamore Family? was what he'd meant to ask, and if whoever answered the phone said yes, he'd meant to beg them to

leave Ted alone. To tell them he, Bobby Garfield, would do something for them if they'd just leave Ted be — he'd do anything they asked. But now that his chance had arrived he could say nothing. Until this moment he still hadn't completely believed in the low men. Now something was on the other end of the line, something that had nothing in common with life as Bobby Garfield understood it.

'Bobby?' the voice said, and there was a kind of insinuating pleasure in the voice, a sensuous recognition. 'Bobby,' it said again, this time without the question-mark. The flecks began to stream across Bobby's vision; the living room of the apartment suddenly filled with black snow.

'Please ... ' Bobby whispered. He gathered all of his will and forced himself to finish.

'Please let him go.'

'No can do,' the voice from the void told him. 'He belongs to the King. Stay away, Bobby.'

Don't interfere. Ted's our dog. If you don't want to be our dog, too, stay away.'

Click.

Bobby held the telephone to his ear a moment longer, needing to tremble and too cold to do it. The itching behind his eyes began to fade, though, and the threads falling across his vision began to merge into the general murk. At last he took the phone away from the side of his head, started to put it down, then paused. There were dozens of little red circles on the handset's perforated earpiece. It was as if the voice of the thing on the other end had caused the telephone to bleed.

Panting in soft and rapid little whimpers, Bobby put it back in its cradle and went into his room. Don't interfere, the man at the

Sagamore Family number had told him. Ted's our dog.

But Ted wasn't a dog. He was a man, and he was Bobby's friend.

She could have told them where he'll be tonight, Bobby thought. I think Carol knew. If she did, and if she told Mom —

Bobby grabbed the Bike Fund jar. He took all the money out of it and left the apartment.

He considered leaving his mother a note but didn't. She might call HOusitonic 5-8337 again if he did, and tell the nimrod with the low voice what her Bobby-O was doing. That was one reason for not leaving a note. The other was that if he could warn Ted in time, he'd go with him. Now Ted would have to let him come. And if the low men killed him or kidnapped him?

Well, those things were almost the same as running away, weren't they?

Bobby took a final look around the apartment, and as he listened to his mother snore he felt an involuntary tugging at his heart and mind. Ted was right: in spite of everything, he loved her still. If there was ka, then loving her was part of his.

Still, he hoped to never see her again.

'Bye, Mom,' Bobby whispered. A minute later he was running down Broad Street Hill into the deepening gloom, one hand wrapped around the wad of money in his pocket so none of it would bounce out.

10

Down There Again. Corner Boys.

Low Men in Yellow Coats. The Payout.

He called a cab from the pay telephone at Spicer's, and while he waited for his ride he took down a BRAUTIGAN lost-pet poster from the outside bulletin board. He also removed an upside-down file-card advertising a '57 Rambler for sale by the owner. He crumpled them up and threw them in the trash barrel by the door, not even bothering to look back over his shoulder to see if Old Man Spicer, whose foul temper was legendary among the kids on the west side of Harwich, had seen him do it.

The Sigsby twins were down here now, their jump-ropes put aside so they could play hopscotch. Bobby walked over to them and observed the shapes —

— drawn beside the grid. He got down on his knees, and Dina Sigsby, who had been about to toss her stone at the 7, stopped to watch him. Dianne put her grimy fingers over her mouth and giggled. Ignoring them, Bobby used both of his hands to sweep the shapes into chalk blurs. When he was done he stood up and dusted his hands off. The pole-light in Spicer's tiny three-car parking lot came on; Bobby and the girls grew sudden shadows much longer than they were.

'Why'd you do that, stupid old Bobby Garfield?' Dina asked. 'They were pretty.'

'They're bad luck,' Bobby said. 'Why aren't you at home?' Not that he didn't have a good idea; it was flashing in their heads like the beer-signs in Spicer's window.

'Mumma-Daddy havin a fight,' Dianne said. 'She says he got a girlfriend.' She laughed and her sister joined in, but their eyes were frightened. They reminded Bobby of the littluns in Lord of the Flies.

'Go home before it gets all the way dark,' he said.

'Mumma said stay out,' Dina told him.

'Then she's stupid and so is your father. Go on!'

They exchanged a glance and Bobby understood that he had scared them even more. He didn't care. He watched them grab their jump-ropes and go running up the hill. Five minutes later the cab he'd called pulled into the parking area beside the store, its headlights fanning the gravel.

'Huh,' the cabbie said. 'I dunno about taking any little kid to Bridgeport after dark, even if you do got the fare.'

'It's okay,' Bobby said, getting in back. If the cabbie meant to throw him out now, he better have a crowbar in the trunk to do it with. 'My grandfather will meet me.' But not at The Corner Pocket, Bobby had already decided; he wasn't going to pull up to the place in a Checker. Someone might be watching for him. 'At the Wo Fat Noodle Company. That's on Narragansett Avenue.' The Corner Pocket was also on Narragansett. He hadn't remembered the street-name but had found it easily enough in the Yellow Pages after calling the cab.

The driver had started to back out into the street. Now he paused again. 'Nasty Gansett Street? Christ, that's no part of town for a kid. Not even in broad daylight.'

'My grandfather's meeting me,' Bobby repeated. 'He said to tip you half a rock. You know, fifty cents.'

For a moment the cabbie teetered. Bobby tried to think of some other way to persuade him and couldn't think of a thing. Then the cabbie sighed, dropped his flag, and got rolling. As they passed his

building, Bobby looked to see if there were any lights on in their apartment.

There weren't, not yet. He sat back and waited for Harwich to drop behind them.

The cabbie's name was Roy DeLois, it was on his taxi-meter. He didn't say a word on the ride to Bridgeport. He was sad because he'd had to take Pete to the vet and have him put down.

Pete had been fourteen. That was old for a Collie. He had been Roy DeLois's only real friend.

Go on, big boy, eat up, it's on me, Roy DeLois would say when he fed Pete. He said the same thing every night. Roy DeLois was divorced. Sometimes he went to a stripper club in Hartford. Bobby could see ghost-images of the dancers, most of whom wore feathers and long white gloves. The image of Pete was sharper. Roy DeLois had been okay coming back from the vet's, but when he saw Pete's empty dish in the pantry at home, he had broken down crying.

They passed The William Penn Grille. Bright light streamed from every window and the street was lined with cars on both sides for three blocks, but Bobby saw no crazy DeSotos or other cars that felt like thinly disguised living creatures. The backs of his eyes didn't itch; there were no black threads.

The cab crossed the canal bridge and then they were down there. Loud Spanish-sounding music played from apartment houses with fire escapes zig-zagging up the sides like iron lightning. Clusters of young men with gleaming combed-back hair stood on some streetcorners; clusters of laughing girls stood on others. When the Checker stopped at a red light, a brown-skinned man sauntered over, hips seeming to roll like oil in gabardine slacks that hung below the waistband of his bright white underwear shorts, and offered to wash the cabbie's windshield with a filthy rag he held. Roy DeLois shook his head curdy and squirted away the instant the light changed.

‘Goddam spies,’ he said. ‘They should be barred from the country. Ain’t we got enough niggers of our own?’

Narragansett Street looked different at night — slightly scarier, slightly more fabulous as well. Locksmiths ... checkcashing services ... a couple of bars spilling out laughter and jukebox music and guys with beer bottles in their hands ... ROD’S GUNS ... and yes, just beyond Rod’s and next to the shop selling SPECIAL SOUVENIRS, the WO FAT NOODLE co. From here it couldn’t be more than four blocks to The Corner Pocket. It was only eight o’clock.

Bobby was in plenty of time.

When Roy DeLois pulled up to the curb, there was eighty cents on his meter. Add in a fifty-cent tip and you were talking about a big hole in the old Bike Fund, but Bobby didn’t care. He was never going to make a big deal out of money the way she did. If he could warn Ted before the low men could grab him, Bobby would be content to walk forever.

‘I don’t like leaving you off here,’ Roy DeLois said. ‘Where’s your grandpa?’

‘Oh, he’ll be right along,’ Bobby said, striving for a cheerful tone and almost making it. It was really amazing what you could do when your back was against the wall.

He held out the money. For a moment Roy DeLois hesitated instead of taking the dough; thought about driving him back to Spicer’s, but if the kid’s not telling the truth about his grandpa what’s he doing down here? Roy DeLois thought. He’s too young to want to get laid.

I’m fine, Bobby sent back ... and yes, he thought he could do that, too — a little, anyway.

Go on, stop worrying, I’m fine.

Roy DeLois finally took the crumpled dollar and the trio of dimes. 'This is really too much,' he said.

'My grandpa told me to never be stingy like some people are,' Bobby said, getting out of the cab. 'Maybe you ought to get a new dog. You know, a puppy.'

Roy DeLois was maybe fifty, but surprise made him look much younger. 'How ... '

Then Bobby heard him decide he didn't care how. Roy DeLois put his cab in gear and drove away, leaving Bobby in front of the Wo Fat Noodle Company.

He stood there until the cab's taillights disappeared, then began walking slowly in the direction of The Corner Pocket, pausing long enough to look through the dusty window of SPECIAL SOUVENIRS. The bamboo blind was up but the only special souvenir on display was a ceramic ashtray in the shape of a toilet. There was a groove for a cigarette in the seat. PARK

YOUR BUTT was written on the tank. Bobby considered this quite witty but not much of a window display; he had sort of been hoping for items of a sexual nature. Especially now that the sun had gone down.

He walked on, past B'PORT PRINTING and SHOES REPAIRED WHILE u WAIT and SNAPPY KARDS

FOR ALL OKASIONS. Up ahead was another bar, more young men on the corner, and the sound of The Cadillacs: Brrrrr, black slacks, make ya cool, Daddy-0, when ya put em on you're ararin to go. Bobby crossed the street, trotting with his shoulders hunched, his head down, and his hands in his pockets.

Across from the bar was an out-of-business restaurant with a tattered awning still overhanging its soaped windows. Bobby slipped into its shadow and kept going, shrinking back once when someone

shouted and a bottle shattered. When he reached the next corner he re-crossed Nasty Gansett Street on the diagonal, getting back to the side The Corner Pocket was on.

As he went, he tried to tune his mind outward and pick up some sense of Ted, but there was nothing. Bobby wasn't all that surprised. If he had been Ted, he would have gone someplace like the Bridgeport Public Library where he could hang around without being noticed. Maybe after the library closed he'd get a bite to eat, kill a little more time that way.

Eventually he'd call another cab and come to collect his money. Bobby didn't think he was anywhere close yet, but he kept listening for him. He was listening so hard that he walked into a guy without even seeing him.

'Hey, cabrón!' the guy said - laughing, but not in a nice way. Hands grabbed Bobby's shoulders and held him. 'Where was you think you goin, putino?'

Bobby looked up and saw four young guys, what his mom would have called corner boys, standing in front of a place called BODEGA. They were Puerto Ricans, he thought, and all wearing sharp-creased slacks. Black boots with pointed toes poked out from beneath their pants cuffs. They were also wearing blue silk jackets with the word DIABLOS written on the back. The I was a devil's pitchfork. Something seemed familiar about the pitchfork, but Bobby had no time to think about that. He realized with a sinking heart that he had wandered into four members of some gang.

'I'm sorry,' he said in a dry voice. 'Really, I ... 'scuse me.'

He pulled back from the hands holding his shoulders and started around the guy. He made just a single step before one of the others grabbed him. 'Where you goin, tío?' this one asked.

'Where you goin, tío? Mío?'

Bobby pulled free, but the fourth guy pushed him back at the second. The second guy grabbed him again, not so gently this time. It was like being surrounded by Harry and his friends, only worse.

‘You got any money, tío?’ asked the third guy. ‘Cause this a toll-road, you know.’

They all laughed and moved in closer. Bobby could smell their spicy aftershaves, their hair tonics, his own fear. He couldn’t hear their mind-voices, but did he need to? They were probably going to beat him up and steal his money. If he was lucky that was all they’d do ...

but he might not be lucky.

‘Little boy,’ the fourth guy almost sang. He reached out a hand, gripped the bristles of Bobby’s crewcut, and pulled hard enough to make tears well up in Bobby’s eyes. ‘Little muchacho, what you got for money, huh? How much of the good old dinero? You have something and we going to let you go. You have nothing and we going to bust your balls.’

‘Leave him alone, Juan.’

They looked around — Bobby too — and here came a fifth guy, also wearing a Diablos jacket, also wearing slacks with a sharp crease; he had on loafers instead of pointy-toed boots, and Bobby recognized him at once. It was the young man who had been playing the Frontier Patrol game in The Corner Pocket when Ted was making his bet. No wonder that pitchfork shape had looked familiar — it was tattooed on the guy’s hand. His jacket had been tied inside-out around his waist (no club jacket in here, he had told Bobby), but he wore the sign of the Diablos just the same.

Bobby tried to look into the newcomer’s mind and saw only dim shapes. His ability was fading again, as it had on the day Mrs Gerber took them to Savin Rock; shortly after they left McQuown’s stand at the end of the midway, it had been gone. This time the winkle had lasted longer, but it was going now, all right.

'Hey, Dee,' said the boy who had pulled Bobby's hair. 'We just gonna shake this little guy out a little. Make him pay his way across Diablo turf.'

'Not this one,' Dee said. 'I know him. He's my compadre.'

'He look like a pansy uptown boy to me,' said the one who had called Bobby cabrón and putino. 'I teach im a little respect.'

'He don't need no lesson from you,' Dee said. 'You want one from me, Moso?'

Moso stepped back, frowning, and took a cigarette out of his pocket. One of the others snapped him a light, and Dee drew Bobby a little farther down the street.

'What you doing down here, amigo?' he asked, gripping Bobby's shoulder with the tattooed hand. 'You stupid to be down here alone and you fuckin loco to be down here at night alone.'

'I can't help it,' Bobby said. 'I have to find the guy I was with yesterday. His name is Ted.'

He's old and thin and pretty tall. He walks kinda hunched over, like Boris Karloff — you know, the guy in the scary movies?'

'I know Boris Karloff but I don't know no fuckin Ted,' Dee said. 'I don't ever see him. Man, you ought to get outta here.'

'I have to go to The Corner Pocket,' Bobby said.

'I was just there,' Dee said. 'I didn't see no guy like Boris Karloff.'

'It's still too early. I think he'll be there between nine-thirty and ten. I have to be there when he comes, because there's some men after him. They wear yellow coats and white shoes ...

they drive big flashy cars ... one of them's a purple DeSoto, and — '

Dee grabbed him and spun him against the door of a pawnshop so hard that for a moment Bobby thought he had decided to go along with his corner-boy friends after all. Inside the pawnshop an old man with a pair of glasses pushed up on his bald head looked around, annoyed, then back down at the newspaper he was reading.

‘The jefes in the long yellow coats,’ Dee breathed. ‘I seen those guys. Some of the others seen em, too. You don’t want to mess with boys like that, chico. Something wrong with those boys. They don’t look right. Make the bad boys hang around Mallory’s Saloon look like good boys.’

Something in Dee’s expression reminded Bobby of Sully-John, and he remembered S-J

saying he’d seen a couple of weird guys outside Commonwealth Park. When Bobby asked what was weird about them, Sully said he didn’t exactly know. Bobby knew, though. Sully had seen the low men. Even then they had been sniffing around.

‘When did you see them?’ Bobby asked. ‘Today?’

‘Cat, give me a break,’ Dee said. ‘I ain’t been up but two hours, and most of that I been in the bathroom, makin myself pretty for the street. I seen em comin out of The Corner Pocket, a pair of em — day before yesterday, I think. And that place funny lately.’ He thought for a moment, then called, ‘Yo, Juan, get your ass over here.’

The crewcut-puller came trotting over. Dee spoke to him in Spanish. Juan spoke back and Dee responded more briefly, pointing to Bobby. Juan leaned over Bobby, hands on the knees of his sharp pants.

‘You seen ‘ese guys, huh?’

Bobby nodded.

‘One bunch in a big purple DeSoto? One bunch in a Cri’sler? One bunch in an Olds 98?’

Bobby only knew the DeSoto, but he nodded.

‘Those cars ain’t real cars,’ Juan said. He looked sideways at Dee to see if Dee was laughing. Dee wasn’t; he only nodded for Juan to keep going. ‘They something else.’

‘I think they’re alive,’ Bobby said.

Juan’s eyes lit up. ‘Yeah! Like alive! And ‘ose men — ‘

‘What did they look like? I’ve seen one of their cars, but not them.’

Juan tried but couldn’t say, at least not in English. He lapsed into Spanish instead. Dee translated some of it, but in an absent fashion; more and more he was conversing with Juan and ignoring Bobby. The other corner boys - and boys were what they really were, Bobby saw - drew close and added their own contributions. Bobby couldn’t understand their talk, but he thought they were scared, all of them. They were tough enough guys - down here you had to be tough just to make it through the day - but the low men had frightened them all the same. Bobby caught one final clear image: a tall striding figure in a calf-length mustardcolored coat, the kind of coat men sometimes wore in movies like *Gunfight at the OK Corral* and *The Magnificent Seven*.

‘I see four of em comin out of that barber shop with the horse-parlor in the back,’ the one who seemed to be named Filio said. ‘That’s what they do, those guys, go into places and ask questions. Always leave one of their big cars runnin at the curb. You’d think it’d be crazy to do that down here, leave a car runnin at the curb, but who’d steal one of those goddam things?’

No one, Bobby knew. If you tried, the steering wheel might turn into a snake and strangle you; the seat might turn into a quicksand pool and drown you.

‘They come out all in a bunch,’ Filio went on, ‘all wearin ‘ose long yellow coats even though the day’s so hot you could a fried a egg on

the fuckin sidewalk. They was all wearin these nice white shoes — sharp, you know how I always notice what people got on their feet, I get hard for that shit — and I don't think ... I don't think ... ' He paused, gathered himself, and said something to Dee in Spanish.

Bobby asked what he'd said.

'He sayin their shoes wasn' touchin the ground,' Juan replied. His eyes were big. There was no scorn or disbelief in them. 'He sayin they got this big red Cri'sler, and when they go back to it, their fuckin shoes ain't quite touchin the ground.' Juan forked two fingers in front of his mouth, spat through them, then crossed himself.

No one said anything for a moment or two after that, and then Dee bent gravely over Bobby again. 'These are the guys lookin for your frien'?'

'That's right,' Bobby said. 'I have to warn him.'

He had a mad idea that Dee would offer to go with him to The Corner Pocket, and then the rest of the Diablos would join in; they would walk up the street snapping their fingers in unison like the Jets in West Side Story. They would be his friends now, gang guys who happened to have really good hearts.

Of course nothing of the sort happened. What happened was Moso wandered off, back toward the place where Bobby had walked into him. The others followed. Juan paused long enough to say, 'You run into those caballeros and you gonna be one dead putino, tío mío.'

Only Dee was left and Dee said, 'He's right. You ought to go back to your own part of the worP, my frien'. Let your amigo take care of himself.'

'I can't,' Bobby said. And then, with genuine curiosity: 'Could you?'

'Not against ordinary guys, maybe, but these ain't ordinary guys. Was you just lissen?'

‘Yes,’ Bobby said. ‘But.’

‘You crazy, little boy. Poco loco.’

‘I guess so.’ He felt crazy, all right. Poco loco and then some. Crazy as a shithouse mouse, his mother would have said.

Dee started away and Bobby felt his heart cramp. The big boy got to the corner — his buddies were waiting for him on the other side of the street — then wheeled back, made his finger into a gun, and pointed it at Bobby. Bobby grinned and pointed his own back.

‘Vaya con Dios, mi amigo loco,’ Dee said, then sauntered across the street with the collar of his gang jacket turned up against the back of his neck.

Bobby turned the other way and started walking again, detouring around the pools of light cast by fizzing neon signs and trying to keep in the shadows as much as he could.

Across the street from The Corner Pocket was a mortuary — DESPEGNI FUNERAL PARLOR, it said on the green awning. Hanging in the window was a clock whose face was outlined in a chilly circle of blue neon. Below the clock was a sign which read TIME AND TIDE WAIT FOR NO

MAN. According to the clock it was twenty past eight. He was still in time, in plenty of time, and he could see an alley beyond the Pocket where he might wait in relative safety, but Bobby couldn’t just park himself and wait, even though he knew that would be the smart thing to do. If he’d really been smart, he never would have come down here in the first place.

He wasn’t a wise old owl; he was a scared kid who needed help. He doubted if there was any in The Corner Pocket, but maybe he was wrong.

Bobby walked under the banner reading COME IN IT'S KOOL INSIDE. He had never felt less in need of air conditioning in his life; it was a hot night but he was cold all over.

God, if You're there, please help me now. Help me to be brave ... and help me to be lucky.

Bobby opened the door and went in.

The smell of beer was much stronger and much fresher, and the room with the pinball machines in it banged and jangled with lights and noise. Where before only Dee had been playing pinball, there now seemed to be at least two dozen guys, all of them smoking, all of them wearing strap-style undershirts and Frank Sinatra hello-young-lovers hats, all of them with bottles of Bud parked on the glass tops of the Gottlieb machines.

The area by Len Files's desk was brighter than before because there were more lights on in the bar (where every stool was taken) as well as in the pinball room. The poolhall itself, which had been mostly dark on Wednesday, was now lit like an operating theater. There were men at every table bending and circling and making shots in a blue fog of cigarette smoke; the chairs along the walls were all taken. Bobby could see Old Gee with his feet up on the shoeshine posts, and —

'What the fuck are you doing here?'

Bobby turned, startled by the voice and shocked by the sound of that word coming out of a woman's mouth. It was Alanna Files. The door to the living-room area behind the desk was just swinging shut behind her. Tonight she was wearing a white silk blouse that showed her shoulders — pretty shoulders, creamy-white and as round as breasts — and the top of her prodigious bosom. Below the white blouse were the largest pair of red slacks Bobby had ever seen. Yesterday, Alanna had been kind, smiling ... almost laughing at him, in fact, although in a way Bobby hadn't minded. Tonight she looked scared to death.

'I'm sorry ... I know I'm not supposed to be in here, but I need to find my friend Ted and I thought ... thought that ... ' He heard his voice shrinking like a balloon that's been let loose to fly around the room.

Something was horribly wrong. It was like a dream he sometimes had where he was at his desk studying spelling or science or just reading a story and everyone started laughing at him and he realized he had forgotten to put his pants on before coming to school, he was sitting at his desk with everything hanging out for everyone to look at, girls and teachers and just everyone.

The beat of the bells in the gameroom hadn't completely quit, but it had slowed down. The flood of conversation and laughter from the bar had dried up almost entirely. The click of pool and billiard balls had ceased. Bobby looked around, feeling those snakes in his stomach again.

They weren't all looking at him, but most were. Old Gee was staring with eyes that looked like holes burned in dirty paper. And although the window in Bobby's mind was almost opaque now — soaped over — he felt that a lot of the people in here had sort of been expecting him. He doubted if they knew it, and even if they did they wouldn't know why.

They were kind of asleep, like the people of Midwich. The low men had been in. The low men had —

'Get out, Randy,' Alanna said in a dry little whisper. In her distress she had called Bobby by his father's name. 'Get out while you still can.'

Old Gee had slid out of the shoeshine chair. His wrinkled seersucker jacket caught on one of the foot-pedestals and tore as he started forward, but he paid no attention as the silk lining floated down beside his knee like a toy parachute. His eyes looked more like burned holes than ever. 'Get him,' Old Gee said in a wavery voice. 'Get that kid.'

Bobby had seen enough. There was no help here. He scrambled for the door and tore it open. Behind him he had the sense of people starting to move, but slowly. Too slowly.

Bobby Garfield ran out into the night.

He ran almost two full blocks before a stitch in his side forced him to first slow down, then stop. No one was following and that was good, but if Ted went into The Corner Pocket to collect his money he was finished, done, kaput. It wasn't just the low men he had to worry about; now there was Old Gee and the rest of them to worry about, too, and Ted didn't know it. The question was, what could Bobby do about it?

He looked around and saw the storefronts were gone; he'd come to an area of warehouses.

They loomed like giant faces from which most of the features had been erased. There was a smell of fish and sawdust and some vague rotted perfume that might have been old meat.

There was nothing he could do about it. He was just a kid and it was out of his hands.

Bobby realized that, but he also realized he couldn't let Ted walk into The Corner Pocket without at least trying to warn him. There was nothing Hardy Boys-heroic about this, either; he simply couldn't leave without making the effort. And it was his mother who had put him in this position. His own mother.

'I hate you, Mom,' he whispered. He was still cold, but sweat was pouring out of his body; every inch of his skin felt wet. 'I don't care what Don Biderman and those other guys did to you, you're a bitch and I hate you.'

Bobby turned and began to trot back the way he had come, keeping to the shadows. Twice he heard people coming and crouched in

doorways, making himself small until they had passed by. Making himself small was easy. He had never felt smaller in his life.

This time he turned into the alley. There were garbage cans on one side and a stack of cartons on the other, full of returnable bottles that smelled of beer. This cardboard column was half a foot taller than Bobby, and when he stepped behind it he was perfectly concealed from the street. Once during his wait something hot and furry brushed against his ankle and Bobby started to scream. He stifled most of it before it could get out, looked down, and saw a scruffy alleycat looking back up at him with green headlamp eyes.

‘Scat, Pat,’ Bobby whispered, and kicked at it. The cat revealed the needles of its teeth, hissed, then did a slow strut back down the alley, weaving around the clots of refuse and strewn pieces of broken glass, its tail lifted in what looked like disdain. Through the brick wall beside him Bobby could hear the dull throb of The Corner Pocket’s juke. Mickey and Sylvia were singing ‘Love Is Strange.’ It was strange, all right. A big strange pain in the ass.

From his place of concealment Bobby could no longer see the mortuary clock and he’d lost any sense of how much or how little time was passing. Beyond the beer-and-garbage reek of the alley a summer streetlife opera was going on. People shouted out to each other, sometimes laughing, sometimes angry, sometimes — in English, sometimes in one of a dozen other languages. There was a rattle of explosions that made him stiffen — gunshots was his first idea — and then he recognized the sound as firecrackers, probably ladyfingers, and relaxed a little again. Cars blasted by, many of them brightly painted railjobs and jackjobs with chrome pipes and glasspack mufflers. Once there was what sounded like a fistfight with people gathered around yelling encouragement to the scufflers. Once a lady who sounded both drunk and sad went by singing ‘Where the Boys Are’ in a beautiful slurry voice. Once there were police sirens which approached and then faded away again.

Bobby didn’t doze, exactly, but fell into a kind of daydream. He and Ted were living on a farm somewhere, maybe in Florida. They

worked long hours, but Ted could work pretty hard for an old guy, especially now that he had quit smoking and had some of his wind back.

Bobby went to school under another name — Ralph Sullivan — and at night they sat on the porch, eating Ted's cooking and drinking iced tea. Bobby read to him from the newspaper and when they went in to bed they slept deeply and their sleep was peaceful, interrupted by no bad dreams. When they went to the grocery store on Fridays, Bobby would check the bulletin board for lost-pet posters or upside-down file-cards advertising items for sale by owner, but he never found any. The low men had lost Ted's scent. Ted was no longer anyone's dog and they were safe on their farm. Not father and son or grandfather and grandson, but only friends.

Guys like us, Bobby thought drowsily. He was leaning against the brick wall now, his head slipping downward until his chin was almost on his chest. Guys like us, why shouldn't there be a place for guys like us?

Lights splashed down the alley. Each time this had happened Bobby had peered around the stack of cartons. This time he almost didn't — he wanted to close his eyes and think about the farm — but he forced himself to look, and what he saw was the stubby yellow tailfin of a Checker cab, just pulling up in front of The Corner Pocket.

Adrenaline flooded Bobby and turned on lights in his head he hadn't even known about. He dodged around the stack of boxes, spilling the top two off. His foot struck an empty garbage can and knocked it against the wall. He almost stepped on a hissing furry something — the cat again. Bobby kicked it aside and ran out of the alley. As he turned toward The Corner Pocket he slipped on some sort of greasy goo and went down on one knee. He saw the mortuary clock in its cool blue ring: 9:45. The cab was idling at the curb in front of The Corner Pocket's door. Ted Brautigan was standing beneath the banner reading COME IN IT'S

KOOL INSIDE, paying the driver. Bent down to the driver's open window like that, Ted looked more like Boris Karloff than ever.

Across from the cab, parked in front of the mortuary, was a huge Oldsmobile as red as Alanna's pants. It hadn't been there earlier, Bobby was sure of that. Its shape wasn't quite solid. Looking at it didn't just make your eyes want to water; it made your mind want to water.

Ted! Bobby tried to yell, but no yell came out — all he could produce was a strawlike whisper. Why doesn't he feel them? Bobby thought. How come he doesn't know?

Maybe because the low men could block him out somehow. Or maybe the people inside The Corner Pocket were doing the blocking. Old Gee and all the rest. The low men had perhaps turned them into human sponges that could soak up the warning signals Ted usually felt.

More lights splashed the street. As Ted straightened and the Checker pulled away, the purple DeSoto sprang around the corner. The cab had to swerve to avoid it. Beneath the streetlights the DeSoto looked like a huge blood-clot decorated with chrome and glass. Its headlights were moving and shimmering like lights seen underwater ... and then they blinked. They weren't headlights at all. They were eyes.

Ted! Still nothing but that dry whisper came out, and Bobby couldn't seem to get back on his feet. He was no longer sure he even wanted to get back on his feet. A terrible fear, as disorienting as the flu and as debilitating as a cataclysmic case of the squitters, was enveloping him. Passing the blood-clot DeSoto outside the William Penn Grille had been bad; to be caught in its oncoming eyelights was a thousand times worse. No — a million times.

He was aware that he had torn his pants and scraped blood out of his knee, he could hear Little Richard howling from someone's upstairs window, and he could still see the blue circle around the

mortuary clock like a flashbulb afterimage tattooed on the retina, but none of that seemed real. Nasty Gansett Avenue suddenly seemed no more than a badly painted backdrop.

Behind it was some unsuspected reality, and reality was dark.

The DeSoto's grille was moving. Snarling. Those cars ain't real cars, Juan had said. They something else.

They were something else, all right.

'Ted ... ' A little louder this time ... and Ted heard. He turned toward Bobby, eyes widening, and then the DeSoto bounced up over the curb behind him, its blazing unsteady headlights pinning Ted and making his shadow grow as Bobby's and the Sigsby girls'

shadows had grown when the pole-light came on in Spicer's little parking lot.

Ted wheeled back toward the DeSoto, raising one hand to shield his eyes from the glare.

More light swept the street. This time it was a Cadillac coming up from the warehouse district, a snot-green Cadillac that looked at least a mile long, a Cadillac with fins like grins and sides that moved like the lobes of a lung. It thumped up over the curb just behind Bobby, stopping less than a foot from his back. Bobby heard a low panting sound. The Cadillac's motor, he realized, was breathing.

Doors were opening in all three cars. Men were getting out — or things that looked like men at first glance. Bobby counted six, counted eight, stopped counting. Each of them wore a long mustardcolored coat — the kind that was called a duster — and on the right front lapel of each was the staring crimson eye Bobby remembered from his dream. He supposed the red eyes were badges. The creatures wearing them were ... what? Cops? No. A posse, like in a movie? That was a little closer. Vigilantes? Closer still but still not right. They were —

They're regulators. Like in that movie me and S-J saw at the Empire last year, the one with John Payne and Karen Steele.

That was it — oh yes. The regulators in the movie had turned out to be just a bunch of bad guys, but at first you thought they were ghosts or monsters or something. Bobby thought that these regulators really were monsters.

One of them grasped Bobby under the arm. Bobby cried out — the contact was quite the most horrible thing he had ever experienced in his life. It made being thrown against the wall by his mother seem like very small change indeed. The low man's touch was like being grasped by a hot-water bottle that had grown fingers ... only the feel of them kept shifting. It would feel like fingers in his armpit, then like claws. Fingers ... claws. Fingers ... claws.

That unspeakable touch buzzed into his flesh, reaching both up and down. It's Jack's stick, he thought crazily. The one sharpened at both ends.

Bobby was pulled toward Ted, who was surrounded by the others. He stumbled along on legs that were too weak to walk. Had he thought he would be able to warn Ted? That they would run away together down Narragansett Avenue, perhaps even skipping a little, the way Carol used to? That was quite funny, wasn't it?

Incredibly, Ted didn't seem afraid. He stood in the semicircle of low men and the only emotion on his face was concern for Bobby. The thing gripping Bobby — now with a hand, now with loathsome pulsing rubber fingers, now with a clutch of talons — suddenly let him go. Bobby staggered, reeled. One of the others uttered a high, barking cry and pushed him in the middle of the back. Bobby flew forward and Ted caught him.

Sobbing with terror, Bobby pressed his face against Ted's shirt. He could smell the comforting aromas of Ted's cigarettes and shaving soap, but they weren't strong enough to cover the stench that was

coming from the low men — a meaty, garbagey smell — and a higher smell like burning whiskey that was coming from their cars.

Bobby looked up at Ted. 'It was my mother,' he said. 'It was my mother who told.'

'This isn't her fault, no matter what you may think,' Ted replied. 'I simply stayed too long.'

'But was it a nice vacation, Ted?' one of the low men asked. His voice had a gruesome buzz, as if his vocal cords were packed with bugs — locusts or maybe crickets. He could have been the one Bobby spoke to on the phone, the one who'd said Ted was their dog ... but maybe they all sounded the same. If you don't want to be our dog, too, stay away, the one on the phone had said, but he had come down here anyway, and now ... oh now ...

'Wasn't bad,' Ted replied.

'I hope you at least got laid,' another said, 'because you probably won't get another chance.'

Bobby looked around. The low men stood shoulder to shoulder, surrounding them, penning them in their smell of sweat and maggoty meat, blocking off any sight of the street with their yellow coats. They were dark-skinned, deep-eyed, red-lipped (as if they had been eating cherries) ... but they weren't what they looked like. They weren't what they looked like at all.

Their faces wouldn't stay in their faces, for one thing; their cheeks and chins and hair kept trying to spread outside the lines (it was the only way Bobby could interpret what he was seeing). Beneath their dark skins were skins as white as their pointed reet-petite shoes. But their lips are still red, Bobby thought, their lips are always red. As their eyes were always black, not really eyes at all but caves. And they are so tall, he realized. So tall and so thin.

There are no thoughts like our thoughts in their brains, no feelings like our feelings in their hearts.

From across the street there came a thick slobbering grunt. Bobby looked in that direction and saw that one of the Oldsmobile's tires had turned into a blackish-gray tentacle. It reached out, snared a cigarette wrapper, and pulled it back. A moment later the tentacle was a tire again, but the cigarette wrapper was sticking out of it like something half swallowed.

'Ready to come back, hoss?' one of the low men asked Ted. He bent toward him, the folds of his yellow coat rustling stiffly, the red eye on the lapel staring. 'Ready to come back and do your duty?'

'I'll come,' Ted replied, 'but the boy stays here.'

More hands settled on Bobby, and something like a living branch caressed the nape of his neck. It set off that buzzing again, something that was both an alarm and a sickness. It rose into his head and hummed there like a hive. Within that lunatic hum he heard first one bell, tolling rapidly, then many. A world of bells in some terrible black night of hot hurricane winds. He supposed he was sensing wherever the low men had come from, an alien place trillions of miles from Connecticut and his mother. Villages were burning under unknown constellations, people were screaming, and that touch on his neck ... that awful touch ...

Bobby moaned and buried his head against Ted's chest again.

'He wants to be with you,' an unspeakable voice crooned. 'I think we'll bring him, Ted. He has no natural ability as a Breaker, but still ... all things serve the King, you know.' The unspeakable fingers caressed again.

'All things serve the Beam,' Ted said in a dry, correcting voice. His teacher's voice.

‘Not for much longer,’ the low man said, and laughed. The sound of it loosened Bobby’s bowels.

‘Bring him,’ said another voice. It held a note of command. They did all sound sort of alike, but this was the one he had spoken to on the phone; Bobby was sure.

‘No!’ Ted said. His hands tightened on Bobby’s back. ‘He stays here!’

‘Who are you to give us orders?’ the low man in charge asked. ‘How proud you have grown during your little time of freedom, Ted! How haughty! Yet soon you’ll be back in the same room where you have spent so many years, with the others, and if I say the boy comes, then the boy comes.’

‘If you bring him, you’ll have to go on taking what you need from me,’ Ted said. His voice was very quiet but very strong. Bobby hugged him as tight as he could and shut his eyes. He didn’t want to look at the low men, not ever again. The worst thing about them was that their touch was like Ted’s, in a way: it opened a window. But who would want to look through such a window? Who would want to see the tall, red-lipped scissor-shapes as they really were? Who would want to see the owner of that red Eye?

‘You’re a Breaker, Ted. You were made for it, born to it. And if we tell you to break, you’ll break, by God.’

‘You can force me, I’m not so foolish as to think you can’t ... but if you leave him here, I’ll give what I have to you freely. And I have more to give than you could ... well, perhaps you could imagine it.’

‘I want the boy,’ the low man in charge said, but now he sounded thoughtful. Perhaps even doubtful. ‘I want him as a pretty, something to give the King.’

‘I doubt if the Crimson King will thank you for a meaningless pretty if it interferes with his plans,’ Ted said. ‘There is a gunslinger — ‘

‘Gunslinger, pah!’

‘Yet he and his friends have reached the borderland of End-World,’ Ted said, and now he was the one who sounded thoughtful. ‘If I give you what you want instead of forcing you to take it, I may be able to speed things up by fifty years or more. As you say, I’m a Breaker, made for it and born to it. There aren’t many of us. You need every one, and most of all you need me. Because I’m the best.’

‘You flatter yourself ... and you overestimate your importance to the King.’

‘Do I? I wonder. Until the Beams break, the Dark Tower stands — surely I don’t need to remind you of that. Is one boy worth the risk?’

Bobby hadn’t the slightest idea what Ted was talking about and didn’t care. All he knew was that the course of his life was being decided on the sidewalk outside a Bridgeport billiard parlor. He could hear the rustle of the low men’s coats; he could smell them; now that Ted had touched him again he could feel them even more clearly. That horrible itching behind his eyes had begun again, too. In a weird way it harmonized with the buzzing in his head. The black specks drifted across his vision and he was suddenly sure what they meant, what they were for. In Clifford Simak’s book *Ring Around the Sun*, it was a top that took you off into other worlds; you followed the rising spirals. In truth, Bobby suspected, it was the specks that did it. The black specks. They were alive ...

And they were hungry.

‘Let the boy decide,’ the leader of the low men said at last. His living branch of a finger caressed the back of Bobby’s neck again. ‘He loves you so much, Teddy. You’re his te-ka.’

Aren’t you? That means destiny’s friend, Bobby-O. Isn’t that what this old smoky-smelling Teddy-bear is to you? Your destiny’s friend?’

Bobby said nothing, only pressed his cold throbbing face against Ted's shirt. He now repented coming here with all his heart — would have stayed home hiding under his bed if he had known the truth of the low men — but yes, he supposed Ted was his te-ka. He didn't know about stuff like destiny, he was only a kid, but Ted was his friend. Guys like us, Bobby thought miserably. Guys like us.

'So how do you feel now that you see us?' the low man asked. 'Would you like to come with us so you can be close to good old Ted? Perhaps see him on the odd weekend? Discuss literature with your dear old te-ka? Learn to eat what we eat and drink what we drink?' The awful fingers again, caressing. The buzzing in Bobby's head increased. The black specks fattened and now they looked like fingers — beckoning fingers. 'We eat it hot, Bobby,' the low man whispered. 'And drink it hot as well. Hot ... and sweet. Hot ... and sweet.'

'Stop it,' Ted snapped.

'Or would you rather stay with your mother?' the crooning voice went on, ignoring Ted.

'Surely not. Not a boy of your principles. Not a boy who has discovered the joys of friendship and literature. Surely you'll come with this wheezy old ka-mai, won't you? Or will you?

Decide, Bobby. Do it now, and knowing that what you decide is what will bide. Now and forever.'

Bobby had a delirious memory of the lobsterback cards blurring beneath McQuown's long white fingers: Now they go, now they slow, now they rest, here's the test.

I fail, Bobby thought. I fail the test.

'Let me go, mister,' he said miserably. 'Please don't take me with you.'

‘Even if it means your te-ka has to go on without your wonderful and revivifying company?’ The voice was smiling, but Bobby could almost taste the knowing contempt under its cheery surface, and he shivered. With relief, because he understood he was probably going to be let free after all, with shame because he knew what he was doing — crawling, chintzing, chickening out. All the things the good guys in the movies and books he loved never did. But the good guys in the movies and books never had to face anything like the low men in the yellow coats or the horror of the black specks. And what Bobby saw of those things here, outside The Corner Pocket, was not the worst of it either. What if he saw the rest? What if the black specks drew him into a world where he saw the men in the yellow coats as they really were? What if he saw the shapes inside the ones they wore in this world?

‘Yes,’ he said, and began to cry.

‘Yes what?’

‘Even if he has to go without me.’

‘Ah. And even if it means going back to your mother?’

‘Yes.’

‘You perhaps understand your bitch of a mother a little better now, do you?’

‘Yes,’ Bobby said for the third time. By now he was nearly moaning. ‘I guess I do.’

‘That’s enough,’ Ted said. ‘Stop it.’

But the voice wouldn’t. Not yet. ‘You’ve learned how to be a coward, Bobby ... haven’t you?’

‘Yes!’ he cried, still with his face against Ted’s shirt. ‘A baby, a little chickenshit baby, yes yes yes! I don’t care! Just let me go home!’ He

drew in a great long unsteady breath and let it out in a scream. 'I WANT MY MOTHER!' It was the howl of a terrified littlun who has finally glimpsed the beast from the water, the beast from the air.

'All right,' the low man said. 'Since you put it that way. Assuming your Teddy-bear confirms that he'll go to work with a will and not have to be chained to his oar as previously.'

'I promise.' Ted let go of Bobby. Bobby remained as he was, clutching Ted with panicky tightness and pushing his face against Ted's chest, until Ted pushed him gently away.

'Go inside the poolhall, Bobby. Tell Files to give you a ride home. Tell him if he does that, my friends will leave him alone.'

'I'm sorry, Ted. I wanted to come with you. I meant to come with you. But I can't. I'm so sorry.'

'You shouldn't be hard on yourself.' But Ted's look was heavy, as if he knew that from tonight on Bobby would be able to be nothing else.

Two of the yellowcoats grasped Ted's arms. Ted looked at the one standing behind Bobby — the one who had been caressing the nape of Bobby's neck with that horrible sticklike finger. 'They don't need to do that, Cam. I'll walk.'

'Let him go,' Cam said. The low men holding Ted released his arms. Then, for the last time, Cam's finger touched the back of Bobby's neck. Bobby uttered a choked wail. He thought, If he does it again I'll go crazy, I won't be able to help it. I'll start to scream and I won't be able to stop. Even if my head bursts open I'll go on screaming. 'Get inside there, little boy. Do it before I change my mind and take you anyway.'

Bobby stumbled toward The Corner Pocket. The door stood open but empty. He climbed the single step, then turned back. Three of

the low men were clustered around Ted, but Ted was walking toward the blood-clot DeSoto on his own.

‘Ted!’

Ted turned, smiled, started to wave. Then the one called Cam leaped forward, seized him, whirled him, and thrust him into the car. As Cam swung the DeSoto’s back door shut Bobby saw, for just an instant, an incredibly tall, incredibly scrawny being standing inside a long yellow coat, a thing with flesh as white as new snow and lips as red as fresh blood. Deep in its eyesockets were savage points of light and dancing flecks of darkness in pupils which swelled and contracted as Ted’s had done. The red lips peeled back, revealing needly teeth that put the alleycat’s to shame. A black tongue lolled out from between those teeth and wagged an obscene goodbye. Then the creature in the yellow coat sprinted around the hood of the purple DeSoto, thin legs gnashing, thin knees pumping, and plunged in behind the wheel. Across the street the Olds started up, its engine sounding like the roar of an awakening dragon. Perhaps it was a dragon. From its place skewed halfway across the sidewalk, the Cadillac’s engine did the same. Living headlights flooded this part of Narragansett Avenue in a pulsing glare. The DeSoto skidded in a U-turn, one fenderskirt scraping up a brief train of sparks from the street, and for a moment Bobby saw Ted’s face in the DeSoto’s back window.

Bobby raised his hand and waved. He thought Ted raised his own in return but could not be sure. Once more his head filled with a sound like hoofbeats.

He never saw Ted Brautigan again.

‘Bug out, kid,’ Len Files said. His face was cheesy-white, seeming to hang off his skull the way the flesh hung off his sister’s upper arms. Behind him the lights of the Gottlieb machines in the little arcade flashed and flickered with no one to watch them; the cool cats who made an evening specialty of Corner Pocket pinball were clustered behind Len Files like children.

To Len's right were the pool and billiard players, many of them clutching cues like clubs. Old Gee stood off to one side by the cigarette machine. He didn't have a pool-cue; from one gnarled old hand there hung a small automatic pistol. It didn't scare Bobby. After Cam and his yellowcoat friends, he didn't think anything would have the power to scare him right now.

For the time being he was all scared out.

'Put an egg in your shoe and beat it, kid. Now.'

'Better do it, kiddo.' That was Alanna, standing behind the desk. Bobby glanced at her and thought, If I was older I bet I'd give you something. I bet I would. She saw his glance — the quality of his glance — and looked away, flushed and frightened and confused.

Bobby looked back at her brother. 'You want those guys back here?'

Len's hanging face grew even longer. 'You kidding?'

'Okay, then,' Bobby said. 'Give me what I want and I'll go away. You'll never see me again.' He paused. 'Or them.'

'Whatchu want, kid?' Old Gee asked in his wavering voice. Bobby was going to get whatever he asked for; it was flashing in Old Gee's mind like a big bright sign. That mind was as clear now as it had been when it had belonged to Young Gee, cold and calculating and unpleasant, but it seemed innocent after Cam and his regulators. Innocent as ice cream.

'A ride home,' Bobby said. 'That's number one.' Then — speaking to Old Gee rather than Len — he gave them number two.

Len's car was a Buick: big, long, and new. Vulgar but not low. Just a car. The two of them rode to the sound of danceband music from the forties. Len spoke only once during the trip to Harwich. 'Don't you go tuning that to no rock and roll. I have to listen to enough of that shit at work.'

They drove past the Asher Empire, and Bobby saw there was a life-sized cardboard cutout of Brigitte Bardot standing to the left of the ticket booth. He glanced at it without very much interest. He felt too old for B.B. now.

They turned off Asher; the Buick slipped down Broad Street Hill like a whisper behind a cupped hand. Bobby pointed out his building. Now the apartment was lit up, all right; every light was blazing. Bobby looked at the clock on the Buick's dashboard and saw it was almost eleven P.M.

As the Buick pulled to the curb Len Files found his tongue again. 'Who were they, kid?

Who were those gonifs?'

Bobby almost grinned. It reminded him of how, at the end of almost every Lone Ranger episode, someone said Who was that masked man?

'Low men,' he told Len. 'Low men in yellow coats.'

'I wouldn't want to be your pal right now.'

'No,' Bobby said. A shudder shook through him like a gust of wind. 'Me neither. Thanks for the ride.'

'Don't mention it. Just stay the fuck clear of my felts and greens from now on. You're banned for life.'

The Buick — a boat, a Detroit cabin-cruiser, but not low — drew away. Bobby watched as it turned in a driveway across the street and then headed back up the hill past Carol's building.

When it had disappeared around the corner, Bobby looked up at the stars —stacked billions, a spilled bridge of light. Stars and more stars beyond them, spinning in the black.

There is a Tower, he thought. It holds everything together. There are Beams that protect it somehow. There is a Crimson King, and Breakers working to destroy the Beams ... not because the Breakers want to but because it wants them to. The Crimson King.

Was Ted back among the rest of the Breakers yet? Bobby wondered. Back and pulling his oar?

I'm sorry, he thought, starting up the walk to the porch. He remembered sitting there with Ted, reading to him from the newspaper. Just a couple of guys. I wanted to go with you but I couldn't. In the end I couldn't.

He stopped at the bottom of the porch steps, listening for Bowser around on Colony Street.

There was nothing. Bowser had gone to sleep. It was a miracle. Smiling wanly, Bobby got moving again. His mother must have heard the creak of the second porch step —it was pretty loud — because she cried out his name and then there was the sound of her running footsteps.

He was on the porch when the door flew open and she ran out, still dressed in the clothes she had been wearing when she came home from Providence. Her hair hung around her face in wild curls and tangles.

'Bobby!' she cried. 'Bobby, oh Bobby! Thank God! Thank God!'

She swept him up, turning him around and around in a kind of dance, her tears wetting one side of his face.

'I wouldn't take their money,' she babbled. 'They called me back and asked for the address so they could send a check and I said never mind, it was a mistake, I was hurt and upset, I said no, Bobby, I said no, I said I didn't want their money.'

Bobby saw she was lying. Someone had pushed an envelope with her name on it under the foyer door. Not a check, three hundred dollars in cash. Three hundred dollars for the return of their best Breaker; three hundred lousy rocks. They were even bigger cheapskates than she was.

'I said I didn't want it, did you hear me?'

Carrying him into the apartment now. He weighed almost a hundred pounds and was too heavy for her but she carried him anyway. As she babbled on, Bobby realized they wouldn't have the police to contend with, at least; she hadn't called them. Mostly she had just been sitting here, plucking at her wrinkled skirt and praying incoherently that he would come home. She loved him. That beat in her mind like the wings of a bird trapped in a barn. She loved him. It didn't help much ... but it helped a little. Even if it was a trap, it helped a little.

'I said I didn't want it, we didn't need it, they could keep their money. I said ... I told them ... '

'That's good, Mom,' he said. 'That's good. Put me down.'

'Where have you been? Are you all right? Are you hungry?'

He answered her questions back to front. 'I'm hungry, yeah, but I'm fine. I went to Bridgeport. I got this.'

He reached into his pants pocket and brought out the remains of the Bike Fund money. His ones and change were mixed into a messy green wad of tens and twenties and fifties. His mother stared at the money as it rained down on the endtable by the sofa, her good eye growing bigger and bigger until Bobby was afraid it might tumble right out of her face. The other eye remained squinched down in its thundercloud of blue-black flesh. She looked like a battered old pirate gloating over freshly unburied treasure, an image Bobby could have done without ... and one which never entirely left him during the fifteen years between that night and the night of her death. Yet

some new and not particularly pleasant part of him enjoyed that look — how it rendered her old and ugly and comic, a person who was stupid as well as avaricious. That's my ma, he thought in a Jimmy Durante voice. That's my ma. We both gave him up, but I got paid better than you did, Ma, didn't I? Yeah! Hotcha!

'Bobby,' she whispered in a trembly voice. She looked like a pirate and sounded like a winning contestant on that Bill Cullen show, The Price is Right. 'Oh Bobby, so much money!

Where did it come from?'

'Ted's bet,' Bobby said. 'This is the payout.'

'But Ted ... won't he — '

'He won't need it anymore.'

Liz winced as if one of her bruises had suddenly twinged. Then she began sweeping the money together, sorting the bills even as she did so. 'I'm going to get you that bike,' she said.

Her fingers moved with the speed of an experienced three-card monte dealer. No one beats that shuffle, Bobby thought. No one has ever beaten that shuffle. 'First thing in the morning.

Soon as the Western Auto opens. Then we'll — '

'I don't want a bike,' he said. 'Not from that. And not from you.'

She froze with her hands full of money and he felt her rage bloom at once, something red and electrical. 'No thanks from you, are there? I was a fool to ever expect any. God damn you if you're not the spitting image of your father!' She drew back her hand again with the fingers open. The difference this time was that he knew it was coming. She had blindsided him for the last time.

'How would you know?' Bobby asked. 'You've told so many lies about him you don't remember the truth.'

And this was so. He had looked into her and there was almost no Randall Garfield there, only a box with his name on it ... his name and a faded image that could have been almost anyone. This was the box where she kept the things that hurt her. She didn't remember about how he liked that Jo Stafford song; didn't remember (if she had ever known) that Randy Garfield had been a real sweetie who'd give you the shirt right off his back. There was no room for things like that in the box she kept. Bobby thought it must be awful to need a box like that.

'He wouldn't buy a drunk a drink,' he said. 'Did you know that?'

'What are you talking about?'

'You can't make me hate him ... and you can't make me into him.' He turned his right hand into a fist and cocked it by the side of his head. 'I won't be his ghost. Tell yourself as many lies as you want to about the bills he didn't pay and the insurance policy he lost out on and all the inside straights he tried to fill, but don't tell them to me. Not anymore.'

'Don't raise your hand to me, Bobby-O. Don't you ever raise your hand to me.'

In answer he held up his other hand, also fisted. 'Come on. You want to hit me? I'll hit you back. You can have some more. Only this time you'll deserve it. Come on.'

She faltered. He could feel her rage dissipating as fast as it had come, and what replaced it was a terrible blackness. In it, he saw, was fear. Fear of her son, fear that he might hurt her.

Not tonight, no — not with those grimy little-boy fists. But little boys grew up.

And was he so much better than her that he could look down his nose and give her the old la-de-dah? Was he any better? In his mind he heard the unspeakable crooning voice asking if he wanted to go

back home even though it meant Ted would have to go on without him. Yes, Bobby had said. Even if it meant going back to his bitch of a mother? Yes, Bobby had said.

You understand her a little bit better now, do you? Cam had asked, and once again Bobby had said yes.

And when she recognized his step on the porch, there had at first been nothing in her mind but love and relief. Those things had been real.

Bobby unmade his fists. He reached up and took her hand, which was still held back to slap ... although now without much conviction. It resisted at first, but Bobby at last soothed the tension from it. He kissed it. He looked at his mother's battered face and kissed her hand again. He knew her so well and he didn't want to. He longed for the window in his mind to close, longed for the opacity that made love not just possible but necessary. The less you knew, the more you could believe.

'It's just a bike I don't want,' he said. 'Okay? Just a bike.'

'What do you want?' she asked. Her voice was uncertain, dreary. 'What do you want from me, Bobby?'

'Pancakes,' he said. 'Lots.' He tried a smile. 'I am so-ooo hungry.'

She made enough pancakes for both of them and they ate breakfast at midnight, sitting across from each other at the kitchen table. He insisted on helping her with the dishes even though it was going on toward one by then. Why not? he asked her. There was no school the next day, he could sleep as late as he wanted.

As she was letting the water out of the sink and Bobby was putting the last of their silverware away, Bowser began barking over on Colony Street: rooproop-roop into the dark of a new day. Bobby's eyes met his mother's, they laughed, and for a moment knowing was all right.

At first he lay in bed the old way, on his back with his heels spread to the lower corners of the mattress, but the old way no longer felt right. It felt exposed, as if anything that wanted to bag a boy could simply burst out of his closet and unzip his upturned belly with one claw. He rolled over on his side and wondered where Ted was now. He reached out, feeling for something that might be Ted, and there was nothing. Just as there had been nothing earlier, on Nasty Gansett Street. Bobby wished he could cry for Ted, but he couldn't. Not yet.

Outside, crossing the dark like a dream, came the sound of the clock in the town square: one single bong. Bobby looked at the luminous hands of the Big Ben on his desk and saw they were standing at one o'clock. That was good.

'They're gone,' Bobby said. 'The low men are gone.' But he slept on his side with his knees drawn up to his chest. His nights of sleeping wide open on his back were over.

11

Wolves and Lions. Bobby at Bat.

Officer Raymer. Bobby and Carol.

Bad Times. An Envelope.

Sully-John returned from camp with a tan, ten thousand healing mosquito bites, and a million tales to tell ... only Bobby didn't hear many of them. That was the summer the old easy friendship among Bobby and Sully and Carol broke up. The three of them sometimes walked down to Sterling House together, but once they got there they went to different activities.

Carol and her girlfriends were signed up for crafts and softball and badminton, Bobby and Sully for Junior Safaris and baseball.

Sully, whose skills were already maturing, moved up from the Wolves to the Lions. And while all the boys went on the swimming and hiking safaris together, sitting in the back of the battered old Sterling House panel truck with their bathing suits and their lunches in paper sacks, S-J more and more often sat with Ronnie Olmquist and Duke Wendell, boys with whom he had been at camp. They told the same old stories about short-sheeting beds and sending the little kids on snipe hunts until Bobby was bored with them. You'd think Sully had been at camp for ..., fifty years.

On the Fourth of July the Wolves and Lions played their annual head-to-head game. In the decade and a half going back to the end of World War II the Wolves had never won one of these matches, but in the 1960 contest they at least made a game of it — mostly because of Bobby Garfield. He went three-for-three and even without his Alvin Dark glove made a spectacular diving catch in center field. (Getting up and hearing the applause, he wished only briefly for his mother, who hadn't come to the annual holiday outing at Lake

Canton.) Bobby's last hit came during the Wolves' final turn at bat. They were down by two with a runner at second. Bobby drove the ball deep to left field, and as he took off toward first he heard S-J grunt 'Good hit, Bob!' from his catcher's position behind the plate. It was a good hit, but he was the potential tying run and should have stopped at second base. Instead he tried to stretch it. Kids under the age of thirteen were almost never able to get the ball back into the infield accurately, but this time Sully's Camp Winnie friend Duke Wendell threw a bullet from left field to Sully's other Camp Winnie friend, Ronnie Olmquist. Bobby slid but felt Ronnie's glove slap his ankle a split second before his sneaker touched the bag.

'Yerrrrr-ROUT!' cried the umpire, who had raced up from home plate to be on top of the play. On the sidelines, the friends and relatives of the Lions cheered hysterically.

Bobby got up glaring at the ump, a Sterling House counsellor of about twenty with a whistle and a white smear of zinc oxide on his nose. 'I was safe!'

'Sorry, Bob,' the kid said, dropping his ump impersonation and becoming a counsellor again. 'It was a good hit and a great slide but you were out.'

'Was not! You cheater! Why do you want to cheat?'

'Throw im out!' someone's dad called. 'There's no call for guff like that!'

'Go sit down, Bobby,' the counsellor said.

'I was safe! Bobby shouted. 'Safe by a mile!' He pointed at the man who had advised he be tossed from the game. 'Did he pay you to make sure we lost? That fatso there?'

'Quit it, Bobby,' the counsellor said. How stupid he looked with his little beanie hat from some nimrod college fraternity and his whistle! 'I'm warning you.'

Ronnie Olmquist turned away as if disgusted by the argument. Bobby hated him, too.

'You're nothing but a cheater,' Bobby said. He could hold back the tears pricking the corners of his eyes but not the waver in his voice.

'That's the last I'll take,' the counsellor said. 'Go sit down and cool off. You—'

'Cheating cocksucker. That's what you are.'

A woman close to third gasped and turned away.

'That's it,' the counsellor said in a toneless voice. 'Get off the field. Right now.'

Bobby walked halfway down the baseline between third and home, his sneakers scuffing, then turned back. 'By the way, a bird shit on your nose. I guess you're too dumb to figure that out. Better go wipe it off.'

It sounded funny in his head but stupid when it came out and nobody laughed. Sully was straddling home plate, big as a house and serious as a heart attack in his ragtags of catching gear. His mask, mended all over with black tape, dangled from one hand. He looked flushed and angry. He also looked like a kid who would never be a Wolf again. S-J had been to Camp Winnie, had short-sheeted beds, had stayed up late telling ghost stories around a campfire. He would be a Lion forever and Bobby hated him.

'What's wrong with you?' Sully asked as Bobby plodded by. Both benches had fallen silent.

All the kids were looking at him. All the parents were looking at him, too. Looking at him as though he was something disgusting. Bobby guessed he probably was. Just not for the reasons they thought.

Guess what, S-J, maybe you been to Camp Winnie, but I been down there. Way down there.

‘Bobby?’

‘Nothing’s wrong with me,’ he said without looking up. ‘Who cares? I’m moving to Massachusetts. Maybe there’s less twinkydink cheaters there.’

‘Listen, man — ‘

‘Oh, shut up,’ Bobby said without looking at him. He looked at his sneakers instead. Just looked at his sneakers and kept on walking.

Liz Garfield didn’t make friends (I’m a plain brown moth, not a social butterfly,’ she sometimes told Bobby), but during her first couple of years at Home Town Real Estate she had been on good terms with a woman named Myra Calhoun. (In Liz-ese she and Myra saw eye to eye, marched to the same drummer, were tuned to the same wavelength, etc., etc.) In those days Myra had been Don Biderman’s secretary and Liz had been the entire office pool, shuttling between agents, making their appointments and their coffee, typing their correspondence. Myra had left the agency abruptly, without much explanation, in 1955. Liz had moved up to her job as Mr Biderman’s secretary in early 1956.

Liz and Myra had remained in touch, exchanging holiday cards and the occasional letter.

Myra — who was what Liz called ‘a maiden lady’ — had moved to Massachusetts and opened her own little real-estate firm. In late June of 1960 Liz wrote her and asked if she could become a partner — a junior one to start with, of course — in Calhoun Real Estate Solutions. She had some capital she could bring with her; it wasn’t a lot, but neither was thirtyfive hundred dollars a spit in the ocean.

Maybe Miss Calhoun had been through the same wringer his mom had been through, maybe not. What mattered was that she said yes

— she even sent his mom a bouquet of flowers, and Liz was happy for the first time in weeks. Perhaps truly happy for the first time in years. What mattered was they were moving from Harwich to Danvers, Massachusetts.

They were going in August, so Liz would have plenty of time to get her Bobby-O, her newly quiet and often glum Bobby-O, enrolled in a new school.

What also mattered was that Liz Garfield's Bobby-O had a piece of business to take care of before leaving Harwich.

He was too young and small to do what needed doing in a straightforward way. He would have to be careful, and he'd have to be sneaky. Sneaky was all right with Bobby; he no longer had much interest in acting like Audie Murphy or Randolph Scott in the Saturday-matinee movies, and besides, some people needed ambushing, if only to find out what it felt like. The hiding-place he picked was the little copse of trees where Carol had taken him on the day he went all ushy-gushy and started crying; a fitting spot in which to wait for Harry Doolin, old Mr Robin Hood, Robin Hood, riding through the glen.

Harry had gotten a part-time stockboy job at Total Grocery. Bobby had known that for weeks, had seen him there when he went shopping with his mom. Bobby had also seen Harry walking home after his shift ended at three o'clock. Harry was usually with one or more of his friends. Richie O'Meara was his most common sidekick; Willie Shearman seemed to have dropped out of old Robin Hood's life just as Sully had pretty much dropped out of Bobby's.

But whether alone or in company, Harry Doolin always cut across Commonwealth Park on his way home.

Bobby started to drift down there in the afternoons. There was only morning baseball now that it was really hot and by three o'clock Fields A, B, and C were deserted. Sooner or later Harry would walk back from work and past those deserted fields without Richie or any

of his other Merrie Men to keep him company. Meanwhile, Bobby spent the hour between three and four P.M. each day in the copse of trees where he had cried with his head in Carol's lap.

Sometimes he read a book. The one about George and Lennie made him cry again. Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. That was how George saw it.

Guys like us got nothing to look ahead to. Lennie thought the two of them were going to get a farm and raise rabbits, but long before Bobby got to the end of the story he knew there would be no farms and no rabbits for George and Lennie. Why? Because people needed a beast to hunt. They found a Ralph or a Piggy or a big stupid hulk of a Lennie and then they turned into low men. They put on their yellow coats, they sharpened a stick at both ends, and then they went hunting.

But guys like us sometimes get a little of our own back, Bobby thought as he waited for the day when Harry would show up alone. Sometimes we do.

August sixth turned out to be the day. Harry strolled through the park toward the corner of Broad and Commonwealth still wearing his red Total Grocery apron — what a fucking nimrod — and singing 'Mack the Knife' in a voice that could have melted screws. Careful not to rustle the branches of the close-growing trees, Bobby stepped out behind him and closed in, walking softly on the path and not cocking back his baseball bat until he was close enough to be sure. As he raised it he thought of Ted saying Three boys against one little girl. They must have thought you were a lion. But of course Carol wasn't a lion; neither was he. It was Sully who was the Lion and Sully hadn't been there, wasn't here now. The one creeping up behind Harry Doolin wasn't even a Wolf. He was just a hyena, but so what? Did Harry Doolin deserve any better?

Nope, Bobby thought, and swung the bat. It connected with the same satisfying thud he'd felt at Lake Canton when he'd gotten his

third and best hit, the one to deep left. Connecting with the small of Harry Doolin's back was even better.

Harry screamed with pain and surprise and went sprawling. When he rolled over, Bobby brought the bat down on his leg at once, the blow this time landing just below the left knee.

'Owwwuuuu!' Harry screamed. It was most satisfying to hear Harry Doolin scream; close to bliss, in fact. 'Owwwuuu, that hurts! That hurrrts!'

Can't let him get up, Bobby thought, picking his next spot with a cold eye. He's twice as big as me, if I miss once and let him get up, he'll tear me limb from limb. He'll fucking kill me.

Harry was trying to retreat, digging at the gravel path with his sneakers, dragging a groove with his butt, paddling with his elbows. Bobby swung the bat and hit him in the stomach.

Harry lost his air and his elbows and sprawled on his back. His eyes were dazed, filled with sunbright tears. His pimples stood out in big purple and red dots. His mouth — thin and mean on the day Rionda Hewson had rescued them — was now a big loose quiver. 'Owwwuuu, stop, I give, I give, oh Jeezis!'

He doesn't recognize me, Bobby realized. The sun's in his eyes and he doesn't even know who it is.

That wasn't good enough. 'Not satisfactory, boys!' was what the Camp Winnie counsellors said after a bad cabin inspection — Sully had told him that, not that Bobby cared; who gave a shit about cabin inspections and making bead wallets?

But he gave a shit about this, yes indeed, and he leaned close to Harry's agonized face.

'Remember me, Robin Hood?' he asked. 'You remember me, don't you? I'm the Maltex Baby.'

Harry stopped screaming. He stared up at Bobby, finally recognizing him. 'Get ... you ...

' he managed.

'You won't get shit,' Bobby said, and when Harry tried to grab his ankle Bobby kicked him in the ribs.

'Ouuuuuu!' Harry Doolin cried, reverting to his former scripture. What a creep! Nimrod Infants on Parade! That probably hurt me more than it hurt you Bobby thought. Kicking people when you're wearing sneakers is for dumbbells.

Harry rolled over. As he scrambled for his feet Bobby uncoiled a home-run swing and drove the bat squarely across Harry's buttocks. The sound was like a carpet-beater hitting a heavy rug — a wonderful sound! The only thing that could have improved this moment would have been Mr Biderman also sprawled on the path. Bobby knew exactly where he'd like to hit him.

Half a loaf was better than none, though. Or so his mother always said.

'That was for the Gerber Baby,' Bobby said. Harry was lying flat on the path again, sobbing. Snot was running from his nose in thick green streams. With one hand he was feebly trying to rub some feeling back into his numb ass.

Bobby's hands tightened on the taped handle of the bat again. He wanted to lift it and bring it down one final time, not on Harry's shin or Harry's backside but on Harry's head. He wanted to hear the crunch of Harry's skull, and really, wouldn't the world be a better place without him? Little Irish shit. Low little —

Steady on, Bobby, Ted's voice spoke up. Enough is enough, so just steady on. Control yourself.

'Touch her again and I'll kill you,' Bobby said. 'Touch me again and I'll burn your house down. Fucking nimrod.'

He had squatted by Harry to say this last. Now he got up, looked around, and walked away.

By the time he met the Sigsby twins halfway up Broad Street Hill, he was whistling.

In the years which followed, Liz Garfield almost got used to seeing policemen at her door.

The first to show up was Officer Raymer, the fat local cop who would sometimes buy the kids peanuts from the guy in the park. When he rang the doorbell of the ground-floor apartment at 149 Broad Street on the evening of August sixth, Officer Raymer didn't look happy. With him was Harry Doolin, who would not be able to sit in an uncushioned seat for a week or more, and his mother, Mary Doolin. Harry mounted the porch steps like an old man, with his hands planted in the small of his back.

When Liz opened the front door, Bobby was by her side. Mary Doolin pointed at him and cried: 'That's him, that's the boy who beat up my Harry! Arrest him! Do your duty!'

'What's this about, George?' Liz asked.

For a moment Officer Raymer didn't reply. He looked from Bobby (five feet four inches tall, ninety-seven pounds) to Harry (six feet one inch tall, one hundred and seventy-five pounds), instead. His large moist eyes were doubtful.

Harry Doolin was stupid, but not so stupid he couldn't read that look. 'He snuck up on me.

Got me from behind.'

Raymer bent down to Bobby with his chapped, red-knuckled hands on the shiny knees of his uniform pants. 'Harry Doolin here claims you beat im up in the park whilst he was on his way home from work.' Raymer pronounced work as rurrk. Bobby never forgot that. 'Says you hid and then lumped im up widda ballbat before he could even turn around. What do you say, laddie? Is he telling the truth?'

Bobby, not stupid at all, had already considered this scene. He wished he could have told Harry in the park that paid was paid and done was done, that if Harry tattled to anyone about Bobby beating him up, then Bobby would tattle right back — would tell about Harry and his friends hurting Carol, which would look much worse. The trouble with that was that Harry's friends would deny it; it would be Carol's word against Harry's, Richie's, and Willie's. So Bobby had walked away without saying anything, hoping that Harry's humiliation — beat up by a little kid half his size — would keep his mouth shut. It hadn't, and looking at Mrs Doolin's narrow face, pinched paintless lips, and furious eyes, Bobby knew why. She had gotten it out of him, that was all. Nagged it out of him, more than likely.

'I never touched him,' Bobby told Raymer, and met Raymer's gaze firmly with his own as he said it.

Mary Doolin gasped, shocked. Even Harry, to whom lying must have been a way of life by the age of sixteen, looked surprised.

'Oh, the straight-out bare-facedness of it!' Mrs Doolin cried. 'You let me talk to him, Officer! I'll get the truth out of him, see if I don't!'

She started forward. Raymer swept her back with one hand, not rising or even taking his eyes from Bobby.

'Now, lad — why would a galoot the size of Harry Doolin say such a thing about a shrimp the size of you if it wasn't true?'

'Don't you be calling my boy a galoot!' Mrs Doolin shrilled. 'Ain't it enough he's been beat within an inch of his life by this coward? Why — '

'Shut up,' Bobby's mom said. It was the first time she'd spoken since asking Officer Raymer what this was about, and her voice was deadly quiet. 'Let him answer the question.'

'He's still mad at me from last winter, that's why,' Bobby told Raymer. 'He and some other big kids from St Gabe's chased me down the hill. Harry slipped on the ice and fell down and got all wet. He said he'd get me. I guess he thinks this is a good way to do it.'

'You liar!' Harry shouted. 'That wasn't me who chased you, that was Billy Donahue! That — '

He stopped, looked around. He'd put his foot in it somehow; a dim appreciation of the fact was dawning on his face.

'It wasn't me,' Bobby said. He spoke quietly, holding Raymer's eyes. 'If I tried to beat up a kid his size, he'd total me.'

'Liars go to hell!' Mary Doolin shouted.

'Where were you around three-thirty this afternoon, Bobby?' Raymer asked. 'Can you answer me that?'

'Here,' Bobby said.

'Miz Garfield?'

'Oh yes,' she said calmly. 'Right here with me all afternoon. I washed the kitchen floor and Bobby cleaned the baseboards. We're getting ready to move, and I want the place to look nice when we do. Bobby complained a little — as boys will do — but he did his chore. And afterward we had iced tea.'

'Liar!' Mrs Doolin cried. Harry only looked stunned. 'Shocking liar!' She lunged forward again, hands reaching in the general direction of Liz Garfield's neck. Once more Officer Raymer pushed her back without looking at her. A bit more roughly this time.

'You tell me on your oath that he was with you?' Officer Raymer asked Liz.

'On my oath.'

'Bobby, you never touched him? On your oath?'

'On my oath.'

'On your oath before God?'

'On my oath before God.'

'I'm gonna get you, Garfield,' Harry said. 'I'm gonna fix your little red w —'

Raymer swung around so suddenly that if his mother hadn't seized him by one elbow, Harry might have tumbled down the porch steps, reinjuring himself in old places and opening fresh wounds in new ones.

'Shut your ugly stupid pot,' Raymer said, and when Mrs Doolin started to speak, Raymer pointed at her. 'Shut yours as well, Mary Doolin. Maybe if you want to bring beatin charges against someone, you ought to start with yer own damned husband. There'd be more witnesses.'

She gawped at him, furious and ashamed.

Raymer dropped the hand he'd been pointing with, as if it had suddenly gained weight. He gazed from Harry and Mary (neither full of grace) on the porch to Bobby and Liz in the foyer. Then he stepped back from all four, took off his uniform cap, scratched his sweaty head, and put his cap back on. 'Something's rotten in the state of Denmark,' he said at last.

'Someone here's lyin faster'n a hoss can trot.'

‘He—’ ‘You—’ Harry and Bobby spoke together, but Officer George Raymer was interested in hearing from neither.

‘Shut up!’ he roared, loud enough to make an old couple strolling past on the other side of the street turn and look. ‘I’m declarin the case closed. But if there’s any more trouble between the two of you — pointing at the boys — ‘or you?’ — pointing at the mothers — ‘there’s going to be woe for someone. A word to the wise is sufficient, diey say. Harry, will you shake young Robert’s hand and say all’s well? Do the manly thing? ... Ah, I thought not. The world’s a sad goddamned place. Come on, Doolins. I’ll see you home.’

Bobby and his mother watched the three of them go down the steps, Harry’s limp now exaggerated to the point of a sailor’s stagger. At the foot of the walk Mrs Doolin suddenly cuffed him on the back of the neck. ‘Don’t make it worse’n it is, you little shite!’ she said.

Harry did better after that, but he still rolled from starboard to port. To Bobby the boy’s residual limp looked like the goods. Probably was the goods. That last lick, the one across Harry’s ass, had been a grand slam.

Back in the apartment, speaking in that same calm voice, Liz asked: ‘Was he one of the boys that hurt Carol?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can you stay out of his way until we move?’

‘I think so.’

‘Good,’ she said, and then kissed him. She hardly ever kissed him, and it was wonderful when she did.

Less than a week before they moved — the apartment had by then begun to fill up with cardboard boxes and to take on a strange denuded look — Bobby caught up to Carol Gerber in the park. She was walking along by herself for a change. He had seen her out

walking with her girlfriends plenty of times, but that wasn't good enough, wasn't what he wanted. Now she was finally alone, and it wasn't until she looked over her shoulder at him and he saw the fear in her eyes that he knew she had been avoiding him.

'Bobby,' she said. 'How are you?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'Okay, I guess. I haven't seen you around.'

'You haven't come up my house.'

'No,' he said. 'No, I — ' What? How was he supposed to finish? 'I been pretty busy,' he said lamely.

'Oh. Uh-huh.' He could have handled her being cool to him. What he couldn't handle was the fear she was trying to hide. The fear of him. As if he was a dog that might bite her. Bobby had a crazy image of himself dropping down on all fours and starting to go rooproop-roop.

'I'm moving away.'

'Sully told me. But he didn't know exactly where. I guess you guys don't chum like you used to.'

'No,' Bobby said. 'Not like we used to. But here.' He reached into his back pocket and brought out a piece of folded-over paper from a school notebook. Carol looked at it doubtfully, reached for it, then pulled her hand back.

'It's just my address,' he said. 'We're going to Massachusetts. A town named Danvers.'

Bobby held out the folded paper but she still wasn't taking it and he felt like crying. He remembered being at the top of the Ferris wheel with her and how it was like being at the top of the whole lighted world. He remembered a towel opening like wings, feet with tiny painted toes pivoting, and the smell of perfume. 'She's dancin to the drag, the cha-cha rag-a-mop,'

Freddy Cannon sang from the radio in the other room, and it was Carol, it was Carol, it was Carol.

'I thought you might write,' he said. 'I'll probably be homesick, a new town and all.'

Carol took the paper at last and put it into the pocket of her shorts without looking at it.

Probably throw it away when she gets home, Bobby thought, but he didn't care. She had taken it, at least. That would be enough springboard for those times when he needed to take his mind away ... and there didn't have to be any low men in the vicinity for you to need to do that, he had discovered.

'Sully says you're different now.'

Bobby didn't reply.

'Lots of people say that, actually.'

Bobby didn't reply.

'Did you beat Harry Doolin up?' she asked, and gripped Bobby's wrist with a cold hand.

'Did you?'

Bobby slowly nodded his head.

Carol threw her arms around his neck and kissed him so hard their teeth clashed. Their mouths parted with an audible smack. Bobby didn't kiss another girl on the mouth for three years ... and never in his life did he have one kiss him like that.

'Good!' she said in a low fierce voice. It was almost a growl. 'Good!'

Then she ran toward Broad Street, her legs — browned with summer and scabbed by many games and many sidewalks — flashing.

'Carol!' he called after her. 'Carol, wait!'

She ran.

'Carol, I love you!'

She stopped at that ... or maybe it was just that she'd reached Commonwealth Avenue and had to look for traffic. In any case she paused a moment, head lowered, and then looked back.

Her eyes were wide and her lips were parted.

'Carol!'

'I have to go home, I have to make the salad,' she said, and ran away from him. She ran across the street and out of his life without looking back a second time. Perhaps that was just as well.

He and his mom moved to Danvers. Bobby went to Danvers Elementary, made some friends, made even more enemies. The fights started, and not long after, so did the truancies. On the Comments section of his first report card, Mrs Rivers wrote: 'Robert is an extremely bright boy. He is also extremely troubled. Will you come and see me about him, Mrs Garfield?'

Mrs Garfield went, and Mrs Garfield helped as much as she could, but there were too many things about which she could not speak: Providence, a certain lost-pet poster, and how she'd come by the money she'd used to buy into a new business and a new life. The two women agreed that Bobby was suffering from growing pains; that he was missing his old town and old friends as well. He would eventually outlast his troubles. He was too bright and too full of potential not to.

Liz prospered in her new career as a real-estate agent. Bobby did well enough in English (he got an A-Plus on a paper in which he compared Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* to Golding's *Lord of the*

Flies) and did poorly in the rest of his classes. He began to smoke cigarettes.

Carol did write from time to time — hesitant, almost tentative notes in which she talked about school and friends and a weekend trip to New York City with Rionda. Appended to one that arrived in March of 1961 (her letters always came on deckle-edged paper with teddy bears dancing down the sides) was a stark P.S.: I think my mom & dad are going to get a divorce. He signed up for another ‘hitch’ and all she does is cry. Mostly, however, she stuck to brighter things: she was learning to twirl, she had gotten new ice skates on her birthday, she still thought Fabian was cute even if Yvonne and Tina didn’t, she had been to a twist party and danced every dance.

As he opened each of her letters and pulled it out Bobby would think, This is the last. I won’t hear from her again. Kids don’t write letters for long even if they promise they will.

There are too many new things coming along. Time goes by so fast. Too fast. She’ll forget me.

But he would not help her to do so. After each of her letters came he would sit down and write a response. He told her about the house in Brookline his mother sold for twenty-five thousand dollars — six months’ salary at her old job in a single commission. He told her about the A-Plus on his English theme. He told her about his friend Morrie, who was teaching him to play chess. He didn’t tell her that sometimes he and Morrie went on window-breaking expeditions, riding their bikes (Bobby had finally saved up enough to buy one) as fast as they could past the scuzzy old apartment houses on Plymouth Street and throwing rocks out of their baskets as they went. He skipped the story of how he had told Mr Hurley, the assistant principal at Danvers Elementary, to kiss his rosy red ass and how Mr Hurley had responded by slapping him across the face and calling him an insolent, wearisome little boy. He didn’t confide that he had begun shoplifting or that he had been drunk four or five times (once with Morrie, the other times by himself) or that sometimes he walked over to the train tracks and wondered if getting

run over by the South Shore Express would be the quickest way to finish the job. Just a whiff of diesel fuel, a shadow falling over your face, and then blooey. Or maybe not that quick.

Each letter he wrote to Carol ended the same way:

You are sadly missed by

Your friend,

Bobby

Weeks would pass with no mail — not for him — and then there would be another envelope with hearts and teddy bears stuck to the back, another sheet of deckle-edged paper, more stuff about skating and baton twirling and new shoes and how she was still stuck on fractions. Each letter was like one more labored breath from a loved one whose death now seems inevitable. One more breath.

Even Sully-John wrote him a few letters. They stopped early in 1961, but Bobby was amazed and touched that Sully would try at all. In S-J's childishly big handwriting and painful misspellings Bobby could make out the approach of a good-hearted teenage boy who would play sports and lay cheerleaders with equal joy, a boy who would become lost in the thickets of punctuation as easily as he would weave through the defensive lines of opposing football teams. Bobby thought he could even see the man who was waiting for Sully up ahead in the seventies and eighties, waiting for him the way you'd wait for a taxi to arrive: a car salesman who'd eventually own his own dealership. Honest John's, of course; Honest John's Harwich Chevrolet. He'd have a big stomach hanging over his belt and lots of plaques on the wall of his office and he'd coach youth sports and start every peptalk with Listen up, guys and go to church and march in parades and be on the city council and all that. It would be a good life, Bobby reckoned — the farm and the rabbits instead of the stick sharpened at both ends.

Although for Sully the stick turned out to be waiting after all; it was waiting in Dong Ha Province along with the old mamasan, the one who would never completely go away.

Bobby was fourteen when the cop caught him coming out of the convenience store with two sixpacks of beer (Narragansett) and three cartons of cigarettes (Chesterfields, naturally; twenty-one great tobaccos make twenty wonderful smokes). This was the blond Village of the Damned cop.

Bobby told the cop he hadn't broken in, that the back door was open and he'd just walked in, but when the cop shone his flashlight on the

lock it hung askew in the old wood, half gouged out. What about this? the cop asked, and Bobby shrugged. Sitting in the car (the cop let Bobby sit in the front seat with him but wouldn't let him have a butt when Bobby asked), the cop began filling out a form on a clipboard. He asked the sullen, skinny kid beside him what his name was. Ralph, Bobby said. Ralph Garfield. But when they pulled up in front of the house where he now lived with his mom — a whole house, upstairs and downstairs both, times were good -he told the cop he had lied.

'My name's really Jack,' he said.

'Oh yeah?' the blond Village of the Damned cop said.

'Yes,' Bobby said, nodding. 'Jack Merridew Garfield. That's me.'

Carol Gerber's letters stopped coming in 1963, which happened to be the year of Bobby's first school expulsion and also the year of his first visit to Massachusetts Youth Correctional in Bedford. The cause of this visit was possession of five marijuana cigarettes, which Bobby and his friends called joysticks. Bobby was sentenced to ninety days, the last thirty forgiven for good behavior. He read a lot of books. Some of the other kids called him Professor.

Bobby didn't mind.

When he got out of Bedbug Correctional, Officer Grandelle — the Danvers Juvenile Officer — came by and asked if Bobby was ready to straighten up and fly right. Bobby said he was, he had learned his lesson, and for awhile that seemed to be true. Then in the fall of 1964 he beat a boy so badly that the boy had to go to the hospital and there was some question of whether or not he would completely recover. The kid wouldn't give Bobby his guitar, so Bobby beat him up and took it. Bobby was playing the guitar (not very well) in his room when he was arrested. He had told Liz he'd bought the guitar, a Silvertone acoustic, in a pawnshop.

Liz stood weeping in the doorway as Officer Grandelle led Bobby to the police car parked at the curb. 'I'm going to wash my hands of you if you don't stop!' she cried after him. 'I mean it! I do!'

'Wash em,' he said, getting in the back. 'Go ahead, Ma, wash em now and save time.'

Driving downtown, Officer Grandelle said, 'I thought you was gonna straighten up and fly right, Bobby.'

'Me too,' Bobby said. That time he was in Bedbug for six months.

When he got out he cashed in his Trailways ticket and hitched home. When he let himself into the house, his mother didn't come out to greet him. 'You got a letter,' she said from her darkened bedroom. 'It's on your desk.'

Bobby's heart began to bang hard against his ribs as soon as he saw the envelope. The hearts and teddy bears were gone — she was too old for them now — but he recognized Carol's handwriting at once. He picked up the letter and tore it open. Inside was a single sheet of paper — deckle-edged — and another, smaller, envelope. Bobby read Carol's note, the last he ever received from her, quickly.

Dear Bobby,

How are you. I am fine. You got something from your old friend, the one who fixed my arm that time. It came to me because I guess he didn't know where you were. He put a note in asking me to send it along. So I am.

Say hi to your mom.

Carol

No news of her adventures in twirling. No news of how she was doing with math. No news of boyfriends, either, but Bobby guessed she probably had had a few.

He picked up the sealed envelope with hands that were shaky and numb. His heart was pounding harder than ever. On the front, written in soft pencil, was a single word: his name.

It was Ted's handwriting. He knew it at once. Dry-mouthed, unaware that his eyes had filled with tears, Bobby tore open the envelope, which was no bigger than the ones in which children send their first-grade valentines.

What came out first was the sweetest smell Bobby had ever experienced. It made him think of hugging his mother when he was small, the smell of her perfume and deodorant and the stuff she put on her hair; it made him think of how Commonwealth Park smelled in the summer; it made him think of how the Harwich Library stacks had smelled, spicy and dim and somehow explosive. The tears in his eyes overspilled and began to run down his cheeks.

He'd gotten used to feeling old; feeling young again — knowing he could feel young again —

was a terrible disorienting shock.

There was no letter, no note, no writing of any kind. When Bobby tilted the envelope, what showered down on the surface of his desk were rose petals of the deepest, darkest red he had ever seen.

Heart's blood, he thought, exalted without knowing why. All at once, and for the first time in years, he remembered how you could take your mind away, how you could just put it on parole. And even as he thought of it he felt his thoughts lifting. The rose petals gleamed on the scarred surface of his desk like rubies, like secret light spilled from the world's secret heart.

Not just one world, Bobby thought. Not just one. There are other worlds than this, millions of worlds, all turning on the spindle of the Tower.

And then he thought: He got away from them again. He's free again.

The petals left no room for doubt. They were all the yes anyone could ever need; all the you-may, all the you-can, all the it's-true.

Now they go, now they slow, Bobby thought, knowing he had heard those words before, not remembering where or knowing why they had recurred to him now. Not caring, either.

Ted was free. Not in this world and time, this time he had run in the other direction ... but in some world.

Bobby scooped up the petals, each one like a tiny silk coin. He cupped them like palmfuls of blood, then raised them to his face. He could have drowned in their sweet reek. Ted was in them, Ted clear as day with his funny stooped way of walking, his baby-fine white hair, and the yellow nicotine spots tattooed on the first two fingers of his right hand. Ted with his carryhandle shopping bags.

As on the day when he had punished Harry Doolin for hurting Carol, he heard Ted's voice.

Then it had been mostly imagination. This time Bobby thought it was real, something which had been embedded in the rose petals and left for him.

Steady on, Bobby. Enough is enough, so just steady on. Control yourself.

He sat at his desk for a long time with the rose petals pressed to his face. At last, careful not to lose a single one, he put them back into the little envelope and folded down the torn top.

He's free. He's ... somewhere. And he remembered.

'He remembered me,' Bobby said. 'He remembered me.'

He got up, went into the kitchen, and put on the tea kettle. Then he went into his mother's room. She was on her bed, lying there in her slip with her feet up, and he could see she had started to look old. She turned her face away from him when he sat down next to her, a boy now almost as big as a man, but she let him take her hand. He held it and stroked it and waited for the kettle to whistle. After awhile she turned to look at him. 'Oh Bobby,' she said.

'We've made such a mess of things, you and me. What are we going to do?'

'The best we can,' he said, still stroking her hand. He raised it to his lips and kissed the palm where her lifeline and heartline tangled briefly before wandering away from each other again. 'The best we can.'

STEPHEN KING

MILE



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'11/22/63' Teaser

Mile 81

1. PETE SIMMONS ('07 Huffy)

“You can’t come,” his older brother said.

George spoke in a low voice, even though the rest of his friends—a neighborhood group of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds who styled themselves the Rip-Ass Raiders—were up at the end of the block, waiting for him. Not very patiently. “It’s too dangerous.”

Pete said, “I’m not afraid.” He spoke stoutly enough, although he was afraid, a little. George and his friends were headed up to the sandpit behind the bowling alley. There they’d play a game Normie Therriault had invented. Normie was the leader of the Rip-Ass Raiders, and the game was called Paratroops From Hell. There was a rutted track leading up to the edge of the gravel pit, and the game was to ride your bike along it at full speed, yelling “*Raiders rule!*” at the top of your lungs and bailing from the seat of your bike as you went over. The usual drop was ten feet or so, and the approved landing area was soft, but sooner or later someone would land on gravel instead of sand and probably break an arm or an ankle. Even Pete knew that (although he sort of understood why it added to the attraction). Then the parents would find out and that would be the end of Paratroops From Hell. For now, however, the game—played without helmets, of course—continued.

George knew better than to allow his brother to play, however; he was supposed to be taking care of Pete while their parents were at work. If Pete wrecked his Huffy at the gravel pit, George would likely be grounded for a week. If his little brother broke an arm, it would be for a month. And if—God forbid!—it was his neck, George guessed he might be whiling away the hours in his bedroom until he went to college.

Besides, he loved the little cock-knocker.

“Just hang out here,” George said. “We’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“Hang out with *who?*” Pete asked morosely. It was spring vacation, and all of *his* friends, the ones his mother would have called “age appropriate,” seemed to be somewhere else. A couple of

them had gone to Disney World in Orlando, and when Pete thought of this, his heart filled with envy and jealousy—a vile brew, but strangely tasty.

“Just hang out,” George said. “Go to the store, or something.” He scrounged in his pocket and came out with two crumpled Washingtons. “Here’s a couple of bucks.”

Pete looked at them. “Jeez, I’ll buy a Corvette. Maybe two.”

“Hurry up, Simmons, or we’ll go withoutcha!” Normie yelled.

“Coming!” George shouted back. Then, low, to Pete: “Take the money and don’t be a boogersnot.”

Pete took the money. “I even brought my magnifying glass,” he said. “I was gonna show em—”

“They’ve all seen that baby trick a thousand times,” George said, but when he saw the corners of Pete’s mouth tuck down, he tried to soften the blow. “Besides, look at the sky, numbo. You can’t start fires with a magnifying glass on a cloudy day. Hang out. We’ll play computer Battleship or something when I come back.”

“Okay, chickshit, seeya later!” Normie yelled.

“I gotta go,” George said. “Do me a favor and don’t get in trouble. Stay in the neighborhood.”

“You’ll probably break your spine and be fuckin’ paralyzed for life,” Pete said . . . then hastily spat between his forked fingers to take the curse off. “*Good luck!*” he shouted after his brother. “*Jump the farthest!*”

George waved one hand in acknowledgment, but didn’t look back. He stood on the pedals of his own bike, a big old Schwinn that Pete admired but couldn’t ride (he’d tried once and wiped out halfway down the driveway). Pete watched him put on speed as he raced up this block of suburban houses in Auburn, catching up with his homies.

Then Pete was alone.

He took his magnifying glass out of his saddlebag and held it over his forearm, but there was no spot of light and no heat. He looked glumly up at the low-hanging clouds and put the glass back. It was a good one, a Richforth. He’d gotten it last Christmas, to help with his ant-farm science project.

“It’ll wind up in the garage, gathering dust,” his father had said, but although the ant-farm project had concluded in February (Pete and his partner, Tammy Witham, had gotten an A), Pete hadn’t tired of the magnifying glass yet. He particularly enjoyed charring holes in pieces of paper in the backyard.

But not today. Today, the afternoon stretched ahead like a desert. He could go home and watch TV, but his father had put a block on all the interesting channels when he discovered George had been DVR-ing *Boardwalk Empire*, which was full of gangsters and bare titties. There was a similar block on Pete’s computer, and he hadn’t figured a workaround yet, although he would; it was only a matter of time.

So?

“So what,” he said in a low voice, and began to pedal slowly toward the end of Murphy Street. “So . . . fucking . . . what.”

Too little to play Paratroops From Hell, because it was too dangerous. How sucky. He wished he could think of something that would show George and Normie and all of the Raiders that even little kids could face dan—

Then it came to him. He could explore the abandoned rest area. Pete didn’t think the big kids knew about it, because it was a kid Pete’s own age, Craig Gagnon, who had told him about it. He said he’d been up there with a couple of other kids, ten-year-olds, last fall. Of course the whole thing might have been a lie, but Pete didn’t think so. Craig had given too many details, and he wasn’t a particularly imaginative boy.

With a destination in mind, Pete began to pedal faster. At the end of Murphy Street he banked left onto Hyacinth. There was no one on the sidewalk, and no cars. He heard the whine of a vacuum cleaner from the Rossignols’, but otherwise everyone might have been sleeping or dead. Pete supposed they were actually at work, like his own parents.

He swept right onto Rosewood Terrace, passing the yellow sign reading DEAD END. There were only a dozen or so houses on Rosewood. At the end of the street was a chain-link fence. Beyond it was a thick tangle of shrubbery and scraggly second-growth trees. As Pete drew closer to the chain-link (and the totally unnecessary

sign mounted on it reading NOT A THROUGH STREET), he stopped pedaling and coasted.

He understood—vaguely—that although he thought of George and his Raider pals as Big Kids (and certainly that was how the Raiders thought of themselves), they weren't *really* Big Kids. The true Big Kids were badass teenagers who had driver's licenses and girlfriends. True Big Kids went to high school. They liked to drink, smoke pot, listen to heavy metal or hip-hop, and suck major face with their girlfriends.

Hence, the abandoned rest area.

Pete got off his Huffy and looked around to see if he was being observed. There was nobody. Even the annoying Crosskill twins, who liked to jump rope (in tandem) all over the neighborhood when there was no school, were not in evidence. A bald-ass miracle, in Pete's opinion.

Not too far away, Pete could hear the steady *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* of cars on I-95, headed south to Portland or north to Augusta.

Even if Craig was telling the truth, they probably fixed the fence, Pete thought. *That's the way today's going.*

But when he bent close, he could see that although the fence *looked* whole, it really wasn't. Someone (probably a Big Kid who had long since joined the ranks of Young Adults) had clipped the links in a straight line from top to bottom. Pete took another look around, then laced his hands in the metal diamonds and pushed. He expected resistance, but there was none. The cut piece of chain-link swung open like a farmyard gate. The Really Big Kids had been using it, all right. Booya.

It stood to reason, when you thought about it. Maybe they had drivers' licenses, but the entrance and exit to the Mile 81 rest area were now blocked off by those big orange barrels the highway crews used. Grass was growing up through the crumbling pavement in the deserted parking lot. Pete had seen this for himself thousands of times, because the school bus used I-95 to go the three exits from Laurelwood, where he got picked up, to Sabattus Street, home to Auburn Elementary School No. 3.

He could remember when the rest area had still been open. There had been a gas station, a Burger King, a TCBY, and a Sbarro's. Then it got closed down. Pete's dad said there were too many of those rest areas on the turnpike, and the state couldn't afford to keep them all open.

Pete rolled his bike through the gap in the chain-link, then carefully pushed the makeshift gate back until the diamond shapes matched up and the fence looked whole again. He walked toward the wall of bushes, being careful not to run the Huffy's tires over any broken glass (there was a lot of it on this side of the fence). He began looking for what he knew must be here; the cut fence said it had to be.

And there it was, marked by stamped cigarette butts and a few discarded beer and soda bottles: a path leading deeper into the undergrowth. Still pushing his bike, Pete followed it. The high bushes swallowed him up. Behind him, Rosewood Terrace dreamed through another overcast spring day.

It was as if Pete Simmons had never been there at all.

The path between the chain-link fence and the Mile 81 rest area was, by Pete's estimation, about half a mile long, and there were Big Kid signposts all along the way: half a dozen small brown bottles (two with snot-caked coke spoons still attached), empty snack bags, a pair of lace-trimmed panties hanging from a thornbush (it looked to Pete like they'd been there for a while, like maybe fifty years), and—jackpot!—a half-full bottle of Popov vodka with the screw cap still on. After some interior debate, Pete put this into his saddlebag along with his magnifying glass, the latest issue of *American Vampire*, and a few Double Stuf Oreos in a baggie.

He pushed his bike across a sluggish little stream, and bingo-boingo, here he was at the back of the rest area. There was another chain-link fence, but this one was also cut, and Pete slipped right through. The path continued through high grass to the back parking lot. Where, he supposed, the delivery trucks used to pull up. Close to the building he could see darker rectangles on the pavement where the Dumpsters had been. Pete lowered the kickstand of his Huffy and parked it on one of these.

His heart was thumping as he thought about what came next. *Breaking and entering, sugarbear. You could go to jail for that.* But was it breaking and entering if he found an open door, or a loose board over one of the windows? He supposed it would still be entering, but was entering all by itself a crime?

In his heart he knew it was, but he guessed that without the breaking part, it wouldn't mean jail time. And after all, hadn't he come here to take a risk? Something he could brag about later to Normie and George and the other Rip-Ass Raiders?

And okay, he was scared, but at least he wasn't bored anymore.

He tried the door with the fading EMPLOYEES ONLY sign on it, and found it not only locked but *seriously* locked—no give at all. There were two windows beside it, but he could tell just by looking that they were boarded down tight. Then he remembered the chain-link fence that looked whole but wasn't, and tested the boards anyway. No good. In a way, it was a relief. He could be off the hook if he wanted to be.

Only . . . the Really Big Kids *did* go in there. He was sure of it. So how did they do it? From the front? In full view of the turnpike? Maybe so, if they came at night, but Pete had no intention of checking it out in broad daylight. Not when any passing motorist with a cell phone could dial 911 and say, "Just thought you might like to know that there's a little kid playing Freddy Fuckaround at the Mile 81 rest area. You know, where the Burger King used to be?"

I'd rather break my arm playing Paratroops From Hell than have to call my folks from the Gray State Police Barracks. In fact, I'd rather break both arms and get my dick caught in the zipper.

Well, maybe not that.

He wandered toward the loading dock, and there, once again: jackpot. There were dozens of stamped-out cigarette butts at the foot of the concrete island, plus a few more of those tiny brown bottles surrounding their king: a dark green NyQuil bottle. The surface of the dock, where the big semis backed up to unload, was eye-high to Pete, but the cement was crumbling and there were plenty of footholds for an agile kid in Chuck Taylor High-Tops. Pete raised his arms over his head, snagged fingerholds in the dock's pitted surface . . . and the rest, as they say, is history.

On the dock, in faded red, someone had sprayed EDWARD LITTLE ROCKS, RED EDDIES RULE. *Not true*, Pete thought. *Rip-Ass Raiders rule*. Then he looked around from his current high perch, grinned, and said, “Actually, *I* rule.” And standing up here above the empty back lot of the rest area, he felt that he did. For the time being, anyway.

He climbed back down—just to make sure it was no problem—and then remembered the stuff in his saddlebag. Supplies, in case he decided to spend the afternoon here, exploring and shit. He debated what to bring, then decided to unstrap the saddlebag and take everything. Even the magnifying glass might come in handy. A vague fantasy began to form in his brain: boy detective discovers a murder victim in a deserted rest area, and solves the crime before the police even know a crime has been committed. He could see himself explaining to the drop-jawed Raiders that it had actually been pretty easy. Elementary, my dear fucksticks.

Bullshit, of course, but it would be fun to pretend.

He lifted his bag onto the loading dock (being especially careful on account of the half-full vodka bottle), then climbed back up. The corrugated metal door leading inside was at least twelve feet high and secured at the bottom with not one but two humongous padlocks, but there was a human-sized door set into it. Pete tried the knob. It wouldn't turn, nor would the human-sized door open when he pushed and pulled, but there was some give. Quite a lot, actually. He looked down and saw that a wooden wedge had been pushed under the bottom of the door; a totally dope precaution if he'd ever seen one. On the other hand, what more could you expect from kids who were stoned on coke and cough syrup?

Pete pulled the wedge, and this time when he tried the inset door, it creaked open.

The big front windows of what had been the Burger King were covered with chickenwire instead of boards, so Pete had no trouble seeing what there was to see. All the eating tables and booths were gone from the restaurant part, and the kitchen part was just a dim hole with some wires sticking out of the walls and some of the ceiling tiles hanging down, but the place was not exactly unfurnished.

In the center, surrounded by folding chairs, two old card tables had been pushed together. On this doublewide surface were half a dozen filthy tin ashtrays, several decks of greasy Bicycle cards, and a caddy of poker chips. The walls were decorated with twenty or thirty magazine gatefolds. Pete inspected these with great interest. He knew about pussies, had glimpsed more than a few on HBO and CinemaSpank (before his folks got wise and blocked the premium cable channels), but these were *shaved* pussies. Pete wasn't sure what the big deal was—to him they looked sort of oogy—but he supposed he might get with the program when he was older. Besides, the bare titties made up for it. Bare titties were fuckin awesome.

In the corner three filthy mattresses had been pushed together like the card tables, but Pete was old enough to know it wasn't poker that was played here.

“Let me see your pussy!” he commanded one of the *Hustler* girls on the wall, and giggled. Then he said, “Let me see your *shaved* pussy!” and giggled harder. He sort of wished Craig Gagnon was here, even though Craig was a dweeb. They could have laughed about the shaved pussies together.

He began to wander around, still snorting small carbonated bubbles of laughter. It was dank in the rest area, but not actually cold. The smell was the worst part, a combination of cigarette smoke, pot smoke, old booze, and creeping rot in the walls. Pete thought he could also smell rotting meat. Probably from sandwiches purchased at Rosselli's or Subway.

Mounted on the wall beside the counter where people once ordered Whoppers and Whalers, Pete discovered another poster. This one was Justin Bieber. Justin's teeth had been blacked out, and someone had added a Notzi swat-sticker tattoo to one cheek. Red-ink devil horns sprouted from Justin's moptop. There were darts sticking out of his face. Magic Markered on the wall above the poster was MOUTH 15 PTS, NOSE 25 PTS, EYES 30 PTS ITCH.

Pete pulled out the darts and backed across the big empty room until he came to a black mark on the floor. Printed here was BEEBER LINE. Pete stood behind it and shot the six darts ten or

twelve times. On his last try, he got 125 points. He thought that was pretty good. He imagined George and Normie Therriault applauding.

He went over to one of the mesh-covered windows, staring out at the empty concrete islands where the gas pumps used to be, and the traffic beyond. Light traffic. He supposed that when summer came it would once more be bumper to bumper with tourists and summer people, unless his dad was right and the price of gas went to seven bucks a gallon and everybody stayed home.

Now what? He'd played darts, he'd looked at enough shaved pussies to last him . . . well, maybe not a lifetime but at least a few months, there were no murders to solve, so now what?

Vodka, he decided. That was what came next. He'd try a few sips just to prove he could, and so future brags would have that vital ring of truth. Then, he supposed, he would pack up his shit and go back to Murphy Street. He would do his best to make his adventure sound interesting—thrilling, even—but in truth, this place wasn't such of a much. Just a place where the Really Big Kids could come to play cards and make out with girls and not get wet when it rained.

But booze . . . that was *something*.

He took his saddlebag over to the mattresses and sat down (being careful to avoid the stains, of which there were many). He took out the vodka bottle and studied it with a certain grim fascination. At ten-going-on-eleven, he had no particular longing to sample adult pleasures. The year before he had hawked one of his grandfather's cigarettes and smoked it behind the 7-Eleven. Smoked half of it, anyway. Then he had leaned over and spewed his lunch between his sneakers. He had obtained an interesting but not very valuable piece of information that day: beans and franks didn't look great when they went into your mouth, but at least they tasted good. When they came back out, they looked fucking horrible and tasted worse.

His body's instant and emphatic rejection of that American Spirit suggested to him that booze would be no better, and probably worse. But if he didn't drink at least some, any brag would be a lie. And his brother George had lie-radar, at least when it came to Pete.

I'll probably puke again, he thought, then said: "Good news is I won't be the first in *this* dump."

That made him laugh again. He was still smiling when he unscrewed the cap and held the mouth of the bottle to his nose. Some smell, but not much. Maybe it was water instead of vodka, and the smell was just a leftover. He raised the mouth of the bottle to his mouth, sort of hoping that was true and sort of hoping it wasn't. He didn't expect much, and he certainly didn't want to get drunk and maybe break his neck trying to climb back down from the loading dock, but he was curious. His parents *loved* this stuff.

"Dares go first," he said for no reason at all, and took a small sip.

It wasn't water, that was for sure. It tasted like hot, light oil. He swallowed mostly in surprise. The vodka trailed heat down his throat, then exploded in his stomach.

"Holy Jeezum!" Pete yelled.

Tears sprang into his eyes. He held the bottle out at arm's length, as if it had bitten him. But the heat in his stomach was already subsiding, and he felt pretty much okay. Not drunk, and not like he was going to puke, either. He tried another little sip, now that he knew what to expect. Heat in the mouth . . . heat in the throat . . . and then, boom in the stomach.

Actually not bad. Now he felt a tingling in his arms and hands. Maybe his neck, too. Not the pins-and-needles sensation you got when a limb went to sleep, but more like something was waking up.

Pete raised the bottle to his lips again, then lowered it. There was more to worry about than falling off the loading dock or crashing his bike on the way home (he wondered briefly if you could get arrested for drunk biking and supposed you could). Having a few swigs of vodka so you could brag on it was one thing, but if he drank enough to get loaded, his mother and father would know when they came home. It would only take one look. Trying to act sober wouldn't help. They drank, their friends drank, and sometimes they drank too much. They would know the signs.

Also, there was the dreaded HANGOVER to consider. Pete and George had seen their mom and dad dragging around the house with red eyes and pale faces on a good many Saturday and Sunday mornings. They took vitamin pills, they told you to turn the TV down, and music was absolutely verboten. The HANGOVER looked like the absolute opposite of fun.

Still, maybe one more sip might not hurt.

Pete took a slightly larger swallow and shouted, “*Zoom, we have liftoff!*” This made him laugh. He felt a little light-headed, but it was a totally pleasant feeling. Smoking he didn’t get. Drinking, he guessed he did.

He got up, staggered a little, caught his balance, and laughed some more. “Jump into that fucking sandpit all you want, sugarbears,” he told the empty restaurant. “I’m fuckin stinko, and fuckin stinko is better.” This was *very* funny, and he laughed hard.

Am I really stinko? On just three sips?

He didn’t think so, but he was definitely high. No more. Enough was enough. “Drink responsibly,” he told the empty restaurant, and snorted.

He’d hang out here for a while and wait for it to wear off. An hour should do it, maybe two. Until three o’clock, say. He didn’t have a wristwatch, but he’d be able to tell three o’clock from the chimes of St. Joseph’s, which was only a mile or so away. Then he’d leave, first hiding the vodka (for possible further research) and putting the wedge back under the door. His first stop when he got back to the neighborhood was going to be the 7-Eleven, where he’d buy some of that really strong Teaberry gum to take the smell of the booze off his breath. He’d heard kids say vodka was the thing to steal out of your parents’ liquor cabinet because it *had* no smell, but Pete was now a wiser child than he’d been an hour ago.

“Besides,” he told the hollowed-out restaurant in a lecturely tone, “I bet my eyes are red, just like Dad’s when he has too many mantinis.” He paused. That wasn’t quite right, but what the fuck.

He gathered up the darts, went back to the Beeber Line, and shot them. He missed Justin with all but one, and this struck Pete as the most hilarious thing of all. As he gathered them up, he sang a few lines of “Baby,” Justin’s big hit from last year. He wondered if Justin could have a hit with a song called “My Baby Shaves Her Pussy,” and this struck him so funny that he laughed until he had to bend over with his hands on his knees.

When the laughter passed, he wiped double snot-hangers from his nose, flicked them onto the floor (*there goes your Good Restaurant rating*, he thought, *sorry, Burger King*), and then trudged

back to the Beeber Line. He had even worse luck the second time. He wasn't seeing double or anything, he just couldn't nail the Beeb.

Also, he felt a little sick, after all. Not much, but he was glad he hadn't tried a fourth sip. "I would have popped my Popov," he said. He laughed, then uttered a ringing belch that burned coming up. *Blick*. He left the darts where they were and went back to the mattresses. He thought of using his magnifying glass to see if anything really small was crawling there, and decided he didn't want to know. He thought about eating some of his Oreos, but was afraid of what they might do to his stomach. It felt, let's face it, a little tender.

He lay down and laced his hands behind his head. He had heard that when you got really drunk, everything started spinning around. Nothing like that was happening to him, but he wouldn't mind a little nap. Sleeping it off kind of thing.

"But not too long."

No, not too long. That would be bad. If he wasn't home when his folks came home, and if they couldn't find him, he would be in trouble. Probably George would be, too, for going off without him. The question was, could he wake himself up when the St. Joseph's chimes struck?

Pete realized, in those last few seconds of consciousness, that he'd just have to hope so. Because he was going.

He closed his eyes.

And slept in the deserted restaurant.

Outside, in the southbound travel lane of I-95, a station wagon of indeterminate make and vintage appeared. It was traveling well below the posted minimum turnpike speed. A fast-moving semi came up behind it and veered into the passing lane, blating its air horn.

The station wagon, almost coasting now, veered into the entrance lane of the rest area, ignoring the big sign reading CLOSED NO SERVICES NEXT GAS AND FOOD 27 MI. It struck four of the orange barrels blocking the lane, sent them rolling, and came to a stop about seventy yards from the abandoned restaurant building. The driver's side door opened, but nobody got out. There were no hey-stupid-your-door's-open chimes. It just hung silently ajar.

If Pete Simmons had been watching instead of snoozing, he wouldn't have been able to see the driver. The station wagon was splattered with mud, and the windshield was smeared with it. Which was strange, because there had been no rain in northern New England for over a week, and the turnpike was perfectly dry.

The car sat there a little distance up the entrance ramp, under a cloudy April sky. The barrels it had knocked over came to a stop. The driver's door hung open like an invitation.

2. DOUG CLAYTON ('09 Prius)

Doug Clayton was an insurance man from Bangor, bound for Portland, where he had a reservation at the Sheraton Hotel. He expected to be there by two o'clock at the latest. That would leave plenty of time for an afternoon nap (a luxury he could rarely afford) before searching out dinner on Congress Street. Tomorrow he would present himself at the Portland Conference Center bright and early, take a nametag, and join four hundred other agents in a conference called Fire, Storm, and Flood: Insuring for Disaster in the Twenty-First Century. As he passed the Mile 82 marker, Doug was closing in on his own personal disaster, but it was nothing the Portland conference would cover.

His briefcase and suitcase were in the backseat. Lying in the passenger bucket was a Bible (King James version; Doug would have no other). Doug was one of four lay preachers at the Church of the Holy Redeemer, and when it was his turn to preach, he liked to call his Bible "the ultimate insurance manual."

Doug had taken Jesus Christ as his personal savior after ten years of drinking that spanned his late teens and most of his twenties. This decadelong spree ended with a wrecked car and thirty days in the Penobscot County Jail. He had gotten down on his knees in that smelly, coffin-sized cell on his first night there, and he'd gotten down on them every night since.

"Help me get better," he had prayed that first time, and every time since. It was a simple prayer that had been answered first twofold, then tenfold, then a hundredfold. He thought that, in another few years, he would be up to a thousandfold. And the best thing? Heaven was waiting at the end of it all.

His Bible was well-thumbed, because he read it every day. He loved all the stories in it, but the one he loved the best—the one he meditated on most often—was the parable of the Good Samaritan. He had preached on that passage from the Gospel of Luke several times, and the Redeemer congregation had always been generous with their praise afterward, God bless them.

Doug supposed it was because the story was so *personal* to him. A priest had passed by the robbed and beaten traveler lying at the side of the road; so had a Levite. Then who comes along? A nasty, Jew-hating Samaritan. But that's the one who helps, nasty Jew-hater or not. He cleanses the traveler's cuts and scrapes, then binds them up. He loads the traveler on his donkey, and fronts him a room at the nearest inn.

"So which of these three do you think was a neighbor to him who fell among thieves?" Jesus inquires of the hotshot young lawyer who asked him about the requirements for eternal life. And the hotshot, clearly not stupid, replies: "The one who shewed mercy."

If Doug Clayton had a horror of anything, it was of being like the Levite in that story. Of refusing to help when help was needed. Of passing by on the other side. So when he saw the muddy station wagon parked a little way up the entrance ramp of the deserted rest area—the downed orange barrier-barrels in front of it, the driver's door hanging ajar—he hesitated only a moment before flicking on his turn signal and pulling in.

He parked behind the wagon, put on his four-ways, and started to get out. Then he noticed that there appeared to be no license plate on the back of the station wagon . . . although there was so much damn mud it was hard to tell for sure. Doug took his cell phone out of the Prius's center console and made sure it was on. Being a good Samaritan was one thing; approaching a plateless dog of a car without caution was just plain stupid.

He walked toward the wagon with the phone clasped loosely in his left hand. Nope, no plate, he was right about that. He tried to peer through the back window and could see nothing. Too much mud. He walked toward the driver's side door, then paused, looking at the car as a whole, frowning. Was it a Ford or a Chevy? Darned if he could tell, and that was strange, because he had to've insured thousands of station wagons in his career.

Customized? he asked himself. Well, maybe . . . but who would bother to customize a station wagon into something so *anonymous*?

"Hi, hello? Everything okay?"

He walked toward the door, squeezing the phone a little tighter without being aware of it. He found himself thinking of some movie

that had scared heck out of him as a kid, some haunted house thing. A bunch of teenagers had approached the old deserted house, and when one of them saw the door standing ajar, he'd whispered "Look, it's open!" to his buddies. You wanted to tell them not to go in there, but of course they had.

That's stupid. If there's someone in that car, he could be hurt.

Of course the guy might have gone up to the restaurant, maybe looking for a pay phone, but if he was *really* hurt—

"Hello?"

Doug reached for the door handle, then thought better of it and stooped to peer through the opening. What he saw was dismaying. The bench seat was covered with mud; so were the dashboard and the steering wheel. Dark goo dripped from the old-fashioned knobs of the radio, and on the wheel were prints that didn't look exactly as if hands had made them. The palm prints were awfully big, for one thing, but the finger marks were as narrow as pencils.

"Is someone in there?" He shifted his cell phone to his right hand and took hold of the driver's door with his left, meaning to swing it wide so he could look into the backseat. "Is someone hur—"

There was a moment to register an ungodly stink, and then his left hand exploded into pain so great it seemed to leap through his entire body, trailing fire and filling all his hollow spaces with agony. Doug didn't, couldn't, scream. His throat locked shut with the sudden shock of it. He looked down and saw that the door handle appeared to have impaled the pad of his palm.

His fingers were barely there. He could see only the stubs of them, just below the last knuckles where the back of his hand started. The rest had somehow been swallowed by the door. As Doug watched, the third finger broke. His wedding ring fell off and clinked to the pavement.

He could feel something, oh dear God and dear Jesus, something like teeth. They were chewing. The car was eating his hand.

Doug tried to pull back. Blood flew, some against the muddy door, some splattering his slacks. The drops that hit the door disappeared immediately, with a faint sucking sound: *slorp*. For a moment he almost got away. He could see glistening fingerbones from which the flesh had been sucked, and he had a brief, nightmarish image of

chewing on one of the Colonel's chicken wings. *Get it all before you put that down*, his mother used to say, *the meat's sweetest closest to the bone*.

Then he was yanked forward again. The driver's door opened to welcome him: *hello, Doug, come on in*. His head connected with the top of the door, and he felt a line of coldness across his brow that turned hot as the station wagon's roofline sliced through his skin.

He made one more effort to get away, dropping his cell phone and pushing at the rear window. The window yielded instead of supporting, then enveloped his hand. He rolled his eyes and saw what had looked like glass now rippling like a pond in a breeze. And why was it rippling? Because it was chewing. Because it was chowing down.

This is what I get for being a good Sam—

Then the top of the driver's door sawed through his skull and slipped smoothly into the brain behind it. Doug Clayton heard a large bright *SNAP*, like a pine knot exploding in a hot fire. Then darkness descended.

A southbound delivery driver glanced over and saw a little green car with its flashers on parked behind a mud-coated station wagon. A man—presumably he belonged to the little green car—appeared to be leaning in the station wagon's door, talking to the driver. *Breakdown*, the delivery driver thought, and returned his attention to the road. No good Samaritan he.

Doug Clayton was jerked inside as if hands—ones with big palms and pencil-thin fingers—had seized his shirt and pulled him. The station wagon lost its shape and puckered inward, like a mouth tasting something exceptionally sour . . . or exceptionally sweet. From within came a series of overlapping crunches—the sound of a man stamping through dead branches in heavy boots. The wagon stayed puckered for ten seconds or so, looked more like a lumpy clenched fist than a car. Then, with a *pouck* sound like a tennis ball being smartly struck by a racquet, it popped back into its station wagon shape.

The sun peeked briefly through the clouds, reflecting off the dropped cell phone and making a brief hot circle of light on Doug's wedding ring. Then it dived back into the cloud cover.

Behind the wagon, the Prius blinked its four-ways. They made a low clocklike sound: *Tick . . . tick . . . tick.*

A few cars went past, but not many. The two workweeks surrounding Easter are the slowest time of year on the nation's turnpikes, and afternoon is the second-slowest time of the day; only the hours between midnight and 5 AM are slower.

Tick . . . tick . . . tick.

In the abandoned restaurant, Pete Simmons slept on.

3. JULIANNE VERNON ('05 Dodge Ram)

Julie Vernon didn't need King James to teach her how to be a good Samaritan. She had grown up in the small town of Readfield, Maine (population 2,400), where neighboring was a way of life, and strangers were also neighbors. Nobody had told her this in so many words; she had learned from her mother, father, and big brothers. They had little to say about such issues, but teaching by example is always the most powerful teaching of all. If you saw a guy lying by the side of the road, it didn't matter if he was a Samaritan or a Martian. You stopped to help.

Nor had she ever worried much about being robbed, raped, or murdered by someone who was only pretending to need help. Julie was the sort of woman who would supposedly make a good wife because—in the parlance of the old Maine Yankees, of whom there are still a few—“She'll give ya warmth in the winter and shade in the summer.” When asked for her weight by the school nurse when she was in the fifth grade, Julie had replied proudly, “My dad says I'd dress out around one-seventy. Little less if skinned.”

Now, at thirty-five, she would have dressed out closer to two-eighty, and had no interest in making any man a good wife. She was as gay as old Dad's hatband, and proud of it. On the back of her Ram truck were two bumper stickers. One read SUPPORT GENDER EQUALITY. The other, a bright pink, opined that GAY IS A **HAPPY WORD!**

The stickers didn't show now because she was hauling what she referred to as the “hoss-trailah.” She had bought a two-year-old Spanish jennet mare in the town of Clinton, and was now on her way back to Readfield, where she lived on a farm with her partner just two miles down the road from the house where she'd grown up.

She was thinking, as she often did, of her five years of touring with The Twinkles, a female mud-wrestling team. Those years had been both bad and good. Bad because The Twinkles were generally regarded as freakshow entertainment (which she supposed they sort of were), good because she had seen so much of the world. Mostly

the American world, it was true, but The Twinkles had once spent three months in England, France, and Germany, where they had been treated with a kindness and respect that was almost eerie. Like young ladies, in other words.

She still had her passport, and had renewed it last year, although she guessed she might never go abroad again. Mostly that was all right. Mostly she was happy on the farm with Amelia and their motley menagerie of livestock, but she sometimes missed those days of touring—the one-night stands, the matches under the lights, the rough camaraderie of the other girls. Sometimes she even missed the push-and-bump with the audience.

“Grab her by the cunt, she’s a dyke, she likes that!” some shitbrained yokel had yelled one night—in Tulsa that had been, if she remembered right.

She and Melissa, the girl she’d been grappling with in the Mudbowl, had looked at each other, nodded to each other, and stood up facing the section of the audience from which the yell had come. They stood there wearing nothing but their sopping bikini briefs, mud dripping from their hair and breasts, and had flipped the bird at the heckler in unison. The audience had broken into spontaneous applause . . . which became a standing O when first Julianne, then Melissa, turned, bent, dropped trou, and shot the asshole a double moon.

She had grown up knowing you cared for the one who had fallen and couldn’t get up. She had also grown up knowing you ate no shit—not about your hosses, your size, your line of work, or your sexual preferences. Once you started eating shit, it had a way of becoming your regular diet.

The CD she was listening to came to an end, and she was just about to poke the eject button when she saw a car ahead, parked a little way up the ramp leading to the abandoned Mile 81 service stop. Its four-way flashers were on. There was another car in front of it, a muddy old beat-to-shit station wagon. Probably a Ford or a Chevrolet, it was hard to tell which.

Julie didn’t make a decision, because there was no decision to be made. She flipped her blinker, saw there would be no room for her on the ramp, not with the trailer in tow, and got as far over in the

breakdown lane as she could without hooking her wheels in the soft ground beyond. The last thing she wanted to do was overturn the horse for which she had just paid eighteen hundred dollars.

This was probably nothing, but it didn't hurt to check. You could never tell when some woman had all at once decided to have herself a baby on the interstate, or when some guy who stopped to help got excited and fainted. Julie put on her own four-ways, but they wouldn't show much, not with the hoss-trailer in the way.

She got out, looked toward the two cars, and saw not a soul. Maybe someone had picked the drivers up, but more likely they'd gone up to the restaurant. Julie doubted if they'd find much there; it had been closed down since the previous September. Julie herself had often stopped at Mile 81 for a TCBY cone, but these days made her snack-stop twenty miles north, at Damon's in Augusta.

She went around to the trailer and her new horse—DeeDee by name—poked her nose out. Julie stroked it. "Soo, baby, soo. This'll just take a minute."

She opened the doors so she could get at the locker built into the trailer's left side. DeeDee decided this would be a fine time to exit the vehicle, but Julie restrained her with one beefy shoulder, once again murmuring "Soo, baby, soo."

She unlatched the locker. Inside, sitting on top of the tools, were a few road flares and two fluorescent-pink mini traffic cones. Julie hooked her fingers into the hollow tops of the cones (no need for flares on an afternoon that was slowly beginning to brighten). She closed the locker and latched it, not wanting DeeDee to step a hoof in and maybe hurt herself. Then she closed the back doors. DeeDee once more poked her head out. Julie didn't really believe a horse could look anxious, but DeeDee sort of did.

"Not long," she said, then placed the traffic cones behind the trailer and headed for the two cars.

The Prius was empty but unlocked. Julie didn't particularly care for that, given the fact that there was a suitcase and a fairly expensive-looking briefcase in the backseat. The driver's door of the old station wagon was hanging open. Julie started toward it, then stopped, frowning. Lying on the pavement beside the open door was a cell phone and what just about had to be a wedding ring. There

was a big crack zigzagging up the phone's casing, as if it had been dropped. And on the little glass window where the numbers appeared—was that a drop of blood?

Probably not, probably just mud—the wagon was covered with it—but Julie liked this less and less. She had taken DeeDee for a good canter before loading her, and hadn't changed out of her no-nonsense split riding skirt for the trip home. Now she took her own cell phone out of the righthand pocket and debated punching in 911.

No, she decided, not yet. But if the mud-splattered wagon was as empty as the little green car, or if that dime-sized spot on the dropped phone really was blood, she'd do it. And wait right here for the State Police cruiser to come instead of walking up to that deserted building. She was brave, and she was kindhearted, but she was not stupid.

She bent to examine the ring and the dropped phone. The slight flare of her riding skirt brushed against the muddy flank of the station wagon, and appeared to melt into it. Julie was jerked to the right, and hard. One hefty buttock slammed against the side of the wagon. The surface yielded, then enveloped two layers of cloth and the meat beneath. The pain was immediate and enormous. She screamed, dropped her phone, and tried to shove herself away, almost as if the car were one of her old mud-wrestling opponents. Her right hand and forearm disappeared through the yielding membrane that looked like a window. What appeared on the other side, vaguely visible through the scrim of mud, wasn't the hefty arm of a large and healthy horsewoman but a starving bone with flesh hanging from it in tatters.

The station wagon began to pucker.

A car passed southbound, then another. Thanks to the trailer, they didn't see the woman who was now half in and half out of the deformed station wagon, like Brer Rabbit stuck in the tarbaby. Nor did they hear her screams. One driver was listening to Toby Keith, the other to Led Zeppelin. Both had his particular brand of music turned up loud. In the restaurant, Pete Simmons heard her, but only from a great distance, like a fading echo. His eyelids fluttered. Then the screams stopped.

Pete rolled over on the filthy mattress and went back to sleep.

The thing that looked like a car ate Julianne Vernon clothes, boots, and all. The only thing it missed was her phone, which now lay beside Doug Clayton's. Then it popped back into its station wagon shape with that same racquet-hitting-ball sound.

In the horse-trailer, DeeDee nickered and stamped an impatient foot. She was hungry.

4. THE LUSSIER FAMILY ('11 Expedition)

Six-year-old Rachel Lussier shouted, “Look, Mommy! Look, Daddy! It’s the horse-lady! See her trailer? See it?”

Carla wasn’t surprised Rache was the first one to spot the trailer, even though she was sitting in the backseat. Rache had the sharpest eyes in the family; no one else even came close. X-ray vision, her father sometimes said. It was one of those jokes that isn’t quite a joke.

Johnny, Carla, and four-year-old Blake all wore glasses; everyone on both sides of their family wore glasses; even Bingo, the family dog, probably needed them. Bing was apt to run into the screen door when he wanted to go out. Only Rache had escaped the curse of myopia. The last time she’d been to the optometrist, she’d read the whole damn eye chart, bottom line and all. Dr. Stratton had been amazed. “She could qualify for jet fighter training,” he told Johnny and Carla.

Johnny said, “Maybe someday she will. She’s certainly got a killer instinct when it comes to her little brother.”

Carla had thrown him an elbow for that, but it was true. She had heard there was less sibling rivalry when the sibs were of different sexes. If so, Rachel and Blake were the exception that proved the rule. Carla sometimes thought the most common two words she heard these days were *started it*. Only the gender of the pronoun opening the sentence varied.

The two of them had been pretty good for the first hundred miles of this trip, partially because visiting with Johnny’s parents always put them in a good mood and mostly because Carla had been careful to fill up the no-man’s-land between Rachel’s booster seat and Blake’s car seat with toys and coloring books. But after their snack-and-pee stop in Augusta, the squabbling had begun again. Probably because of the ice cream cones. Giving kids sugar on a long car trip was like squirting gasoline on a campfire, Carla knew this, but you couldn’t refuse them *everything*.

In desperation, Carla had started a game of Plastic Fantastic, serving as judge and awarding points for lawn gnomes, wishing wells, statues of the Blessed Virgin, etc. The problem was the turnpike, where there were lots of trees but very few vulgar roadside displays. Her sharp-eyed six-year-old daughter and her sharp-tongued four-year-old boy were beginning to renew old grudges when Rachel saw the horse-trailer pulled over just a little shy of the old Mile 81 rest stop.

“Want to pet the horsie again!” Blake shouted. He began thrashing in his car seat, the world’s smallest break-dancer. His legs were now just long enough to kick the back of the driver’s seat, which Johnny found *très* annoying.

Somebody tell me again why I wanted to have kids, he thought. Somebody remind me just what I was thinking. I know it made sense at the time.

“Blakie, don’t kick Daddy’s seat,” Johnny said.

“Want to pet the *horrrrsie!*” Blake yelled. And fetched the back of the driver’s seat an especially good one.

“You are such a babykins,” Rachel said, safe from brother-kicks on her side of the backseat DMZ. She spoke in her most indulgent big-girl tone, the one always guaranteed to infuriate Blakie.

“I AM AIN’T A BABYKINS!”

“Blakie,” Johnny began, “if you don’t stop kicking Daddy’s seat, Daddy will have to take his trusty butcher knife and amputate Blakie’s little feetsies at the ank—”

“She’s broken down,” Carla said. “See the traffic cones? Pull over.”

“Hon, that’d mean the breakdown lane. Not such a good idea.”

“No, just swing around and park beside those other two cars. On the ramp. There’s room and you won’t be blocking anything because the rest area’s closed.”

“If it’s okay with you, I’d like to get back to Falmouth before d—”

“Pull over.” Carla heard herself using the DEFCON-1 tone that brooked no refusal, even though she knew it was a bad idea; how many times lately had she heard Rache using that exact same tone on Blake? Using it until the little guy broke down in tears?

Switching off the she-who-must-be-obeyed voice and speaking more softly, Carla said, "That woman was nice to the kids."

They had pulled into Damon's next to the horse-trailer when they stopped for ice cream. The horse-lady (nearly as big as a horse herself) was leaning against the trailer, eating an ice cream cone of her own and feeding something to a very handsome beastie. To Carla the treat looked like a Kashi granola bar.

Johnny had one kid by each hand and tried to walk them past, but Blake was having none of that. "Can I pet your horse?" he asked.

"Cost you a quarter," the big lady in the brown riding skirt had said, and then grinned at Blake's crestfallen expression. "Nah, I'm only kiddin. Here, hold this." She thrust her drippy ice cream cone at Blake, who was too surprised to do anything but take it. Then she lifted him up to where he could pet the horse's nose. DeeDee regarded the wide-eyed child calmly, sniffed at the horse-lady's dripping cone, decided it wasn't what she wanted, and allowed her nose to be stroked.

"Whoa, soft!" Blake said. Carla had never heard him speak with such simple awe. *Why haven't we ever taken these kids to a petting zoo?* she wondered, and immediately put it down on her mental to-do list.

"Me, me, me!" Rachel bugled, dancing around impatiently.

The big lady set Blake down. "Lick that ice cream while I lift your sister," she told him, "but don't get cooties on it, okay?"

Carla thought of telling Blake that eating after people, especially strange people, was not okay. Then she saw Johnny's bemused grin and thought what the hell. You sent your kids to schools that were basically germ factories. You drove them for hundreds of miles on the turnpike, where any drunk maniac or texting teenager could cross the median strip and wipe them out. Then you forbade them a lick on a partially used ice cream? That was taking the car seat and bike-helmet mentality a little too far, maybe.

The horse-lady lifted Rachel so Rachel could pet the horse's nose. "Wowie! Nice!" Rachel said. "What's her name?"

"DeeDee."

"Great name! I love you, DeeDee!"

“I love you, too, DeeDee,” the horse-lady said, and put a big old smackeroo on DeeDee’s nose. That made them all laugh.

“Mom, can we have a horse?”

“Yes!” Carla said warmly. “When you’re twenty-six!”

This made Rachel put on her mad-face (puckered brow, puffed cheeks, lips down to a stitch), but when the horse-lady laughed, Rache gave up and laughed, too.

The big woman bent down to Blakie, her hands on knees covered by her riding skirt. “Can I have my ice cream cone back, young fella?”

Blake held it out. When she took it, he began to lick his fingers, which were covered with melting pistachio.

“Thank you,” Carla told the horse-lady. “That was very kind of you.” Then, to Blake, “Let’s get you inside and cleaned up. After that you can have ice cream.”

“I want what she’s having,” Blake said, and that made the horse-lady laugh some more.

Johnny insisted that they eat their cones in a booth, because he didn’t want them decorating the Expedition with pistachio ice cream. When they finished and went out, the horse-lady was gone.

Just one of those people you meet—occasionally nasty, more often nice, sometimes even terrific—along the road and never see again.

Only here she was, or at least here her truck was, parked in the breakdown lane with traffic cones neatly placed behind her trailer. And Carla was right, the horse-lady *had* been nice to the kids. So thinking, Johnny Lussier made the worst—and last—decision of his life.

He flipped his blinker and pulled onto the ramp as Carla had suggested, parking ahead of Doug Clayton’s Prius, which was still flashing its four-ways, and beside the muddy station wagon. He put the transmission in park but left the engine running.

“I want to pet the horsie,” Blake said.

“I also want to pet the horsie,” Rachel said in the haughty lady-of-the-manor tone of voice she had picked up God knew where. It drove Carla crazy, but she refused to say anything. If she did, Rache would use it all the more.

“Not without the lady’s permission,” Johnny said. “You kids sit right where you are for now. You too, Carla.”

“Yes, *master*,” Carla said in the zombie voice that always made the kids laugh.

“Very funny, Easter bunny.”

“The cab of her truck’s empty,” Carla said. “They *all* look empty. Do you think there was an accident?”

“Don’t know, but nothing looks dinged up. Hang on a minute.”

Johnny Lussier got out, went around the back of the Expedition he would never finish paying for, and walked to the cab of the Dodge Ram. Carla hadn’t seen the horse-lady, but he wanted to make sure she wasn’t lying on the seat, maybe trying to live through a heart attack. (A lifelong jogger, Johnny secretly believed a heart attack was waiting by age forty-five at the latest for anyone who weighed even five pounds over the target weight prescribed by Medicine.Net.)

She wasn’t sprawled on the seat (*of course not, a woman that big Carla would have seen even lying down*), and she wasn’t in the trailer, either. Only the horse, who poked her head out and sniffed Johnny’s face.

“Hello there . . .” For a moment the name didn’t come, then it did. “. . . DeeDee. How’s the old feedbag hanging?”

He patted her nose, then headed back up the ramp to investigate the other two vehicles. He saw there *had* been an accident of sorts, albeit a very tiny one. The station wagon had knocked over a few of the orange barrels blocking the ramp.

Carla rolled down her window, a thing neither of the kids in back could do because of the lockout feature. “Any sign of her?”

“Nope.”

“Any sign of *anyone*?”

“Carl, give me a ch—” He saw the cell phones and the wedding ring lying beside the partially open door of the station wagon.

“What?” Carla craned to see.

“Just a sec.” The thought of telling her to lock the doors crossed his mind, but he dismissed it. They were on I-95 in broad daylight, for God’s sake. Cars passing every twenty or thirty seconds, sometimes two or three in a line.

He bent down and picked up the phones, one in each hand. He turned to Carla, and thus did not see the car door opening wider, like a mouth.

“Carla, I think there’s blood on this one.” He held up Doug Clayton’s cracked phone.

“Mom?” Rachel asked. “Who’s in that dirty car? The door’s opening.”

“Come back,” Carla said. Her mouth was suddenly dust-dry. She wanted to yell it, but there seemed to be a stone on her chest. It was invisible but very large. “Someone’s in that car!”

Instead of coming back, Johnny turned and bent to look inside. When he did, the door swung shut on his head. There was a terrible thudding noise. The stone on Carla’s chest was suddenly gone. She drew in breath and screamed out her husband’s name.

“*What’s wrong with Daddy?*” Rachel cried. Her voice was high and as thin as a reed. “*What’s wrong with Daddy?*”

“*Daddy!*” Blake yelled. He had been inventorying his newest Transformers and now looked around wildly to see where the daddy in question might be.

Carla didn’t think. Her husband’s body was there, but his head was in the dirty station wagon. He was still alive, though; his arms and legs were flailing. She was out of the Expedition with no memory of opening the door. Her own body seemed to be acting on its own, her stunned brain just along for the ride.

“*Mommy, no!*” Rachel screamed.

“*Mommy, NO!*” Blake had no idea of what was going on, but he knew it was bad. He began to cry and struggle in his car seat’s webwork of straps.

Carla grabbed Johnny around the waist and pulled with the crazy superstrength of adrenaline. The door of the station wagon came partway open and blood ran over the footing in a little waterfall. For one awful moment she saw her husband’s head, lying on the station wagon’s muddy seat and cocked crazily to one side. Even though he was still trembling in her arms, she understood (in one of those lightning-flashes of clarity that can come even during a perfect storm of panic) that it was how hanging victims looked when they were cut down. Because their necks were broken. In that brief, searing

moment—that shutterflash glimpse—she thought he looked stupid and surprised and ugly, all the essential Johnny out of him, and knew he was already dead, trembling or not. It was how a kid looked after hitting the rocks instead of the water when he dived. How a woman who had been impaled by her steering wheel looked after her car slammed into a bridge abutment. It was how you looked when disfiguring death came at you out of nowhere.

The car door slammed viciously shut. Carla still had her arms wrapped around her husband's waist, and when she was yanked forward, she had another lightning-flash of clarity.

It's the car, you have to stay away from the car!

She let go of Johnny's midsection just a moment too late. A sheaf of her hair fell against the door and was sucked in. The top of her head smacked against the car before she could tear free. Suddenly the top of her head was burning as the thing ate into her scalp.

Run! she tried to scream at her often troublesome but undeniably bright daughter. *Run and take Blakie with you!*

But before she could even begin to articulate the thought, her mouth was gone.

Only Rachel saw the station wagon slam shut on her daddy's head like a Venus flytrap on a bug, but both of them saw their mother somehow pulled through the muddy door as if it were a curtain. They saw one of her mocs come off, they got a flash of her pink toenails, and then she was gone. A moment later, the white car lost its shape and clenched itself like a fist. Through their mother's open window, they heard a crunching sound.

"Wha' that?" Blakie screamed. His eyes were streaming tears and his lower lip was lathered with snot. *"Wha' that, Rachie, wha' that, wha' that?"*

Their bones, Rachel thought. She was only six years old, and not allowed to go to PG-13 movies or watch them on TV (let alone R; her mother said R stood for *Raunchy*), but she knew that was the sound of their bones breaking.

The car wasn't a car. It was some kind of monster.

"Where mommy-n-daddy?" Blakie asked, turning his large eyes—now made even larger by his tears—on her. *"Where mommy-n-daddy, Rachie?"*

He sounds like he's two again, Rachel thought, and for maybe the first time in her life, she felt something other than irritation (or, when extremely tried by his behavior, outright hate) for her baby brother. She didn't think this new feeling was love. She thought it was something even bigger. Her mom hadn't been able to say anything in the end, but if she'd had time, Rachel knew what it would have been: *take care of Blakie*.

He was thrashing in his car seat. He knew how to undo the straps, but in his panic had forgotten how.

Rachel opened her seat belt, slid out of her booster seat, and tried to do it for him. One of his flailing hands caught her cheek and administered a ringing slap. Under normal circumstances that would have earned him a hard punch on the shoulder (and a time-out in her room, where she would have sat staring at the wall in a boiling fugue of fury), but now she just grabbed his hand and held it down.

"Stop it! Let me help you! I can get you out, but not if you do that!"

He stopped thrashing, but kept on crying. "Where Daddy? Where Mommy? I want Mommy!"

I want her too, asshole, Rachel thought, and undid the car seat straps. "We're going to get out now, and we're going to . . ."

What? They were going to what? Go up to the restaurant? It was closed, that was why there were orange barrels. That was why the gas pumps in front of the gas station part were gone and there was grass poking out of the empty parking lot.

"We're going to get away from here," she finished.

She got out of the car and went around to Blakie's side. She opened his door but he just looked at her, eyes brimming. "I can't get out, Rachie, I'll fall."

Don't be such a scaredy-baby, she almost said, then didn't. This wasn't the time for that. He was upset enough. She opened her arms and said, "Slide. I'll catch you."

He looked at her doubtfully, then slid. Rachel did catch him, but he was heavier than he looked, and they both went sprawling. She got the worst of it because she was on the bottom, but Blakie bumped his head and scraped one hand and began to bawl loudly, this time in pain instead of fear.

“Stop it,” she said, and wriggled out from under him. “Put on your man-pants, Blakie.”

“H-Huh?”

She didn’t answer. She was looking at the two phones lying beside the terrible station wagon. One of them looked broken, but the other—

Rachel edged toward it on her hands and knees, never taking her eyes off the car into which their father and mother had disappeared with terrifying suddenness. As she was reaching toward the good phone, Blakie walked past her toward the station wagon, holding out his scraped hand.

“Mom? Mommy? Come out! I hurted myself. You have to come out n kiss it bet—”

“*Stop right where you are, Blake Lussier.*”

Carla would have been proud; it was her she-who-must-be-obeyed voice at its most forbidding. And it worked. Blake stopped four feet from the side of the station wagon.

“But I want *Mommy!* I want *Mommy*, Rachie!”

She grabbed his hand and pulled him away from the car. “Not now. Help me work this thing.” She knew perfectly well how to work the phone, but she had to distract him.

“Gimme, I can do it! Gimme, Rache!”

She passed it over, and while he examined the buttons, she got up, took him by the back of his Wolverine tee-shirt, and pulled him back three steps. Blake hardly noticed. He found the power button of Julie Vernon’s cell phone and pushed it. The phone beeped. Rachel took it from him, and for once in his dopey little-kid life, Blakie didn’t protest.

She had listened carefully when McGruff the Crime Dog came to talk to them at school (although she knew perfectly well it was only a guy in a McGruff suit), and she did not hesitate now. She punched in 911 and put the phone to her ear. It rang once, then was picked up.

“Hello? My name is Rachel Ann Lussier, and—”

“This call is being recorded,” a man’s voice overrode her. “If you wish to report an emergency, push one. If you wish to report adverse road conditions, push two. If you wish to report a stranded motorist —”

“Rache? Rachie? Where Mommy? Where Da—”

“*Shhh!*” Rachel said sternly, and pushed 1. It was hard to do. Her hand was trembling and her eyes were all blurry. She realized she was crying. When had she started crying? She couldn’t remember.

“Hello, this is nine-one-one,” a woman said.

“Are you real or another recording?” Rachel asked.

“I’m real,” the woman said, sounding a little amused. “Do you have an emergency?”

“Yes. A bad car ate up our mother and our daddy. It’s at the—”

“Quit while you’re ahead,” the 911 woman advised. She sounded more amused than ever. “How old are you, kiddo?”

“I’m six and a half. My name is Rachel Ann Lussier, and a car, a bad car—”

“Listen, Rachel Ann or whoever you are, I can trace this call. Did you know that? I bet you didn’t. Now just hang up and I won’t have to send a policeman to your house to paddle your—”

“*They’re dead, you stupid phone person!*” Rachel shouted into the phone, and at the d-word, Blakie began to cry again.

The 911 woman didn’t say anything for a moment. Then, in a voice no longer amused: “Where are you, Rachel Ann?”

“At the empty restaurant! The one with the orange barrels!”

Blakie sat down and put his arms over his face. That hurt Rachel in a way she had never been hurt before. It hurt her deep in her heart.

“That’s not enough information,” the 911 lady said. “Can you be a little more specific, Rachel Ann?”

Rachel didn’t know what *specific* meant, but she knew what she was seeing: the back tire of the station wagon, the one closest to them, was melting a little. A tentacle of what looked like liquid rubber was moving slowly across the pavement toward Blakie.

“I have to go,” Rachel said. “We have to get away from the bad car.”

She dragged Blake to his feet, staring at the melting tire. The tentacle of rubber started to go back where it had come from (*because it knows we’re out of reach*, she thought), and the tire started to look like a tire again, but that wasn’t good enough for

Rachel. She kept dragging Blake down the ramp and toward the turnpike.

“Where we goin, Rachie?”

I don't know.

“Away from that car.”

“I want my Transformers!”

“Not now, later.” She kept a tight hold on Blake and kept backing, down toward the turnpike where the occasional traffic was whizzing by at seventy and eighty miles an hour.

Nothing is as piercing as a child's scream; it's one of nature's more efficient survival mechanisms. Pete Simmons's sleep had already thinned to little more than a doze, and when Rachel screamed at the 911 lady, he heard it and finally woke up all the way.

He sat up, winced, and put a hand to his head. It ached, and he knew what that sort of ache was: the dreaded HANGOVER. His tongue tasted furry, and his stomach was blick. Not I'm-gonna-hurl blick, but blick, just the same.

Thank God I didn't drink any more, he thought, and got to his feet. He went to one of the mesh-covered windows to see who was yelling. He didn't like what he saw. Some of the orange barrels blocking the entrance ramp to the rest area had been knocked over, and there were *cars* down there. Quite a few of them.

Then he saw a couple of kids—a little girl in pink pants and a little boy wearing shorts and a tee-shirt. He caught just a glimpse of them, enough to tell that they were backing away—as if something had scared them—and then they disappeared behind what looked to Pete like a horse-trailer.

Something was wrong. There had been an accident or something, although nothing down there *looked* like an accident. His first impulse was to get away from here in a hurry, before he got caught up in whatever had happened. He grabbed his saddlebag and started toward the kitchen and the loading dock beyond. Then he stopped. There were kids out there. *Little* kids. Way too little to be close to a fast road like I-95 on their own, and he hadn't seen any adults.

Gotta be grownups, didn't you see all those cars?

Yes, he'd seen the cars, and a truck hooked up to a horse-trailer, but no grownups.

I have to go out there. Even if I get in trouble, I have to make sure those stupid kids don't get smeared all over the turnpike.

Pete hurried to the Burger King's front door, found it locked, and asked himself what would have been Normie Therriault's question: *Hey afterbirth, did your mother have any kids that lived?*

Pete turned and pelted for the loading dock. Running made his headache worse, but he ignored it. He placed his saddlebag at the edge of the concrete platform, lowered himself, and dropped. He landed stupid, banged his tailbone, and ignored that, too. He got up, and flashed a longing look toward the woods. He *could* just disappear. Doing so might save him oh so much grief down the line. The idea was miserably tempting. This wasn't like the movies, where the good guy always made the right decision without thinking. If somebody smelled vodka on his breath—

"Jesus," he said. "Oh, Jesus-jumped-up-Rice-Krispies-*Christ*."

Why had he ever come here?

Holding Blakie firmly by the hand, Rachel walked him all the way to the end of the ramp. Just as they got there, a double-box semi blasted by at seventy-five miles an hour. The wind blew their hair back, rippled their clothes, and almost knocked Blakie over.

"Rachie, I'm scared! We're not supposed to go in the road!"

Tell me something I don't know, Rachel thought.

At home they weren't supposed to go any farther than the end of the driveway, and there was hardly any traffic on Beeman Lane in Falmouth. The traffic on the turnpike was far from constant, but the cars that *did* come along were going superfast. Besides, where was there to go? They might be able to walk in the breakdown lane, but it would be horribly risky. And there were no exits here, only woods. They could go back to the restaurant, but they would have to walk past the bad car if they did.

A red sports car swept past, the guy behind the wheel blaring his horn in a constant *WAAAAAAA* that made her want to cover her ears.

Blake was tugging her, and Rachel let herself be tugged. At one side of the ramp were guardrail posts. Blakie sat down on one of the

thick cables running between them and covered his eyes with his chubby hands. Rachel sat next to him. She didn't know what else to do.

5. JIMMY GOLDING ('11 Crown Victoria)

A child's scream may be one of Mother Nature's more efficient survival mechanisms, but one of mankind's—at least when it comes to automotive traffic on roads with high speed limits—is the parked State Police cruiser, especially if the black bulb of the radar detector is facing the oncoming traffic. Drivers doing seventy ease back to sixty-five; drivers doing eighty step on the brake and begin mentally figuring out how many points they'll lose off their licenses if the blue lights go on behind them. (It's a salutary effect that wears off quickly; ten or fifteen miles farther up or down the line, the stampededers are once again stampeding.)

The beauty of the parked cruiser, at least in Maine State Trooper Jimmy Golding's opinion, was that you didn't really need to *do* anything. You just pulled over and let nature (*human* nature, in this case) take its guilty course. On this overcast April afternoon, his Simmons SpeedCheck radar gun wasn't even on, and the traffic passing southbound on I-95 was just a background drone. All his attention was on the iPad propped against the lower arc of the steering wheel.

He was playing a Scrabble-like game called Words With Friends, his Internet connection provided by AT&T. His opponent was an old barracks-mate named Nick Avery, now with the Oklahoma State Patrol. Jimmy couldn't imagine why anyone would trade Maine for Oklahoma, seemed like a bad decision to him, but there could be no doubt that Nick was an *excellent* Words With Friends player. He beat Jimmy nine games out of every ten, and was leading in this one. But Nick's current lead was unusually small, and all the letters were out of the electronic draw-bag. If he, Jimmy, could play the four letters he had left, he would win a hard-earned victory. Currently he was fixated on FIX. The four letters he had left were A, E, S, and another F. If he could somehow modify FIX, he would not only win, he would kick his old pal's ass. But it didn't look hopeful.

He was examining the rest of the board, where the prospects seemed even less fruitful, when his radio gave two high-pitched

tones. It was an all-units alert from 911 in Westbrook. Jimmy tossed his iPad aside and turned up the gain.

“All units, attention. Who’s close to the Mile Eighty-one rest area? Anyone?”

Jimmy pulled his mike. “Nine-one-one Dispatch, this is Seventeen. I’m currently at Mile Eighty-Five, just south of the Lisbon-Sabattus exit.”

The woman Rachel Lussier thought of as the 911 lady didn’t bother to ask if anyone else was closer; in one of the new Crown Vic cruisers, Jimmy was just three minutes away, maybe less.

“Seventeen, I got a call three minutes ago from a little girl who says her parents are dead, and since then I’ve had multiple calls from people who say there are two unaccompanied little kids at the edge of that rest area.”

He didn’t bother to ask why none of those multiple callers had stopped. He had seen it before. Sometimes it was a fear of legal entanglements. More often it was just a case of don’t-give-a-shit. There was a lot of that going around. Still . . . *kids*. Jesus.

“Nine-one-one, I’m on this. Seventeen out.”

Jimmy lit his blues, checked his rearview to make sure he had the road, and then peeled out of the gravel pass-through with its sign reading NO U-TURN, OFFICIAL VEHICLES ONLY. The Crown Vic’s V-8 surged; the digital speedometer blurred up to 92, where it hung. Trees reeled giddily past on both sides of the road. He came up on a lumbering old Buick that stubbornly refused to pull over and swept around it. When he pulled back into the travel lane, Jimmy saw the rest area. And something else. Two little kids—a boy in shorts, a girl in pink pants—sitting on the guardrail cables beside the entrance ramp. They looked like the world’s smallest vagrants, and Jimmy’s heart went out to them. He had kids of his own.

They stood up when they saw the flashing lights, and for one terrible second Jimmy thought the little boy was going to step in front of his cruiser. God bless the little girl, who grabbed him by the arm and reeled him in.

Jimmy decelerated hard enough to activate the ABS system. His citation book, logbook, and iPad went cascading off the seat onto the floor. The Vic’s front end drifted a little, but he brought it back and

parked blocking the ramp, where several other cars were already parked. What was going on here?

The sun came out then, and a word completely unrelated to the current situation flashed through Trooper Jimmy Golding's mind: *AFFIXES. I can make AFFIXES, and go out clean.*

The little girl was running toward the driver's side of the cruiser, dragging her weeping, stumbling kid brother with her. Her face, white and terrified, looked years older than it should have, and there was a big wet patch on the little boy's shorts.

Jimmy got out, being careful not to hit them with his door. He dropped on one knee to get on their level and they rushed into his arms, almost knocking him over. "Whoa, whoa, take it easy, you're all ri—"

"The bad car ate Mommy and Daddy," the little boy said, and pointed. "The bad car right there. It ate them all up like the big bad woof ate Riddle Red Riding Hoop. You have to get them back!"

It was impossible to tell which vehicle the chubby finger was pointing at. Jimmy saw four: a station wagon that looked like it had been rode hard along nine miles of woods road, a spandy-clean Prius, a Dodge Ram hauling a horse-trailer, and a Ford Expedition.

"Little girl, what's your name? I'm Trooper Jimmy."

"Rachel Lussier," she said. "This is Blakie. He's my little brother. We live at Nineteen Fresh Winds Way, Falmouth, Maine, 04105. Don't go near it, Trooper Jimmy. It looks like a car, but it's not. It eats people."

"Which car are we talking about, Rachel?"

"That one in front, next to my daddy's. The muddy one."

"The muddy car ate Daddy and Mommy!" the little boy—Blakie—proclaimed. "You get them back, you're a policeman, you got a gun!"

Still on one knee, Jimmy held the children in his arms and eyeballed the muddy station wagon. The sun went back in; their shadows disappeared. On the turnpike, traffic swished past, but slower now, mindful of those flashing blue lights.

No one in the Expedition, the Prius, or the truck. He was guessing there was no one in the horse-trailer, either, unless they were hunkered down, and in that case the horse would probably seem a lot more nervous than it did. The only vehicle he couldn't see into

was the one these kids claimed had eaten their parents. Jimmy didn't like the way the mud was smeared on all its windows. It looked like *deliberate* mud, somehow. He didn't like the cracked cell phone lying by the driver's door, either. Or the ring beside it. The ring was downright creepy.

Like the rest of this isn't.

The driver's door suddenly creaked partway open, upping the Creepy Quotient a bit more. Jimmy tensed and put his hand on the butt of his Glock, but no one came out. The door just hung there, six inches ajar.

"That's how it tries to get you to come in," the little girl said in a voice that was little more than a whisper. "It's a *monster* car."

Jimmy Golding hadn't believed in monster cars since he saw that movie *Christine* as a kid, but he believed that sometimes monsters could lurk *in* cars. And someone was in this one. How else had the door opened? It could be one of the kids' parents, hurt and unable to cry out. It could also be a man lying down on the seat, so he wouldn't make a shape visible through the mud-smeared rear window. Maybe a man with a gun.

"Who's in the station wagon?" Jimmy called. "I'm a state trooper, and I need you to announce yourself."

No one announced himself.

"Come out. Hands first, and I want to see them empty."

The only thing that came out was the sun, printing the door's shadow on the pavement for a second or two before ducking back into the clouds. Then there was only the hanging door.

"Come with me, kids," Jimmy said, and shepherded them to his cruiser. He opened the back door. They looked at the backseat with its litter of paperwork, Jimmy's fleece-lined jacket (which he didn't need today), and the shotgun clipped and locked to the back of the bench seat. Especially that.

"Mommy-n-daddy say never get into a stranger's car," the boy named Blakie said. "They say it at school, too. Stranger-danger."

"He's a policeman with a policeman's car," Rachel said. "It's okay. Get in. And if you touch that gun, I'll smack you."

"Good advice on the gun, but it's secured and the trigger lock's on," Jimmy said.

Blakie got in, and peered over the seat. “Hey, you got a iPad!”

“Shut up,” Rachel said. She started to get in, then looked at Jimmy Golding with tired, horrified eyes. “Don’t touch it. It’s *sticky*.”

Jimmy almost smiled. He had a daughter only a year or so younger than this little girl, and she might have said the same thing. He guessed little girls divided naturally into two groups, tomboys and dirt-haters. Like his Ellen, this one was a dirt-hater.

It was with this soon-to-be fatal misconception of what Rachel Lussier meant by *sticky* that he closed them in the backseat of Unit 17. He leaned in the front window of the cruiser and snared his mike. He never took his eyes from the hanging front door of the station wagon, and so did not see the little boy standing next to the rest area restaurant, holding an imitation-leather saddlebag against his chest like a small blue baby. A moment later the sun peeked out again, and Pete Simmons was swallowed up by the restaurant’s shadow.

Jimmy called in to the Gray barracks.

“Seventeen, come back.”

“I’m at the old Mile 81 rest area. I have four abandoned vehicles, one abandoned horse, and two abandoned children. One of the vehicles is a station wagon. The kids say . . . ” He paused, then thought *what the hell*. “The kids say it ate their parents.”

“Come back?”

“I think they mean someone inside grabbed them. I want you to send all available units over here, copy?”

“Copy all available units, but it’ll be ten minutes before the first one gets there. That’s Unit Twelve. He’s Code Seventy-three in Waterville.”

Al Andrews, no doubt chowing down at Bob’s Burgers and talking politics. “Copy that.”

“Give me MML on the wagon, Seventeen, and I’ll run it.”

“Negative on all three. No plate. As far as make and model, the thing’s so covered with mud I can’t tell. It’s American, though.” *I think*. “Probably a Ford or a Chevy. The kids are in my cruiser. Names are Rachel and Blakie Lussier. Fresh Winds Way, Falmouth. I forget the street number.”

“*Nineteen!*” Rachel and Blakie shouted together.

“They say—”

“I got it, Seventeen. And which car did they come in?”

“*Daddy’s Expundition!*” Blakie cried, happy to be of help.

“Ford Expedition,” Jimmy said. “Plate number three-seven-seven-two-I-Y. I’m going to approach that station wagon.”

“Copy. Be careful there, Jimmy.”

“Copy that. Oh, and will you reach out to nine-one-one dispatch and tell her the kids are all right?”

“Is that you talking or Peter Townshend?”

Very funny. “Seventeen, I’m sixty-two.”

He started to replace the mike, then handed it to Rachel. “If anything happens—anything *bad*—you push that button on the side and yell ‘Thirty.’ That means officer needs help. Have you got it?”

“Yes, but you shouldn’t go near that car, Trooper Jimmy. It *bites* and it *eats* and it’s *sticky*.”

Blakie, who, in his wonder at being in an actual police car, had temporarily forgotten what had befallen his parents, now remembered and began to cry again. “I want mommy-n-daddy!”

In spite of the weirdness and potential danger of the situation, Rachel Lussier’s eye-rolling *you see what I have to deal with* expression almost made Jimmy laugh. How many times had he seen that exact same expression on the face of five-year-old Ellen Golding?

“Listen, Rachel,” Jimmy said, “I know you’re scared, but you’re safe in here, and I have to do my job. If your parents are in that car, we don’t want them hurt, do we?”

“**GO GET MOMMY-N-DADDY, TROOPER JIMMY!**” Blakie trumpeted. “**WE DON’T WANT THEM HURRRT!**”

Jimmy saw hope spark in the girl’s eyes, but not as much as he might have expected. Like Agent Mulder on the old *X-Files* show, she wanted to believe . . . but like Mulder’s partner, Agent Scully, she didn’t. What had these kids seen?

“Be careful, Trooper Jimmy.” She raised one finger. It was a schoolteacherly gesture made even more endearing by a slight tremble. “Don’t touch it.”

As Jimmy approached the station wagon, he drew his Glock service automatic but left the safety on. For the time being. Standing slightly south of the hanging door, he once again invited anyone

inside to exit the vehicle, open and empty hands foremost. No one came out. He reached for the door, then remembered the little girl's parting admonition, and hesitated. He reached out with the barrel of his gun to swing the door open. Only, the door didn't open, and the barrel of the pistol stuck fast. The thing was a glue-pot.

He was jerked forward, as if a powerful hand had gripped the Glock's barrel and yanked. There was a second when he could have let go, but such an idea never even surfaced in his mind. One of the first things they taught you at the Academy after weapons issue was that you never let go of your sidearm. *Never.*

So he held on, and the car that had already eaten his gun now ate his hand. And his arm. The sun came out again, casting his diminishing shadow on the pavement. Somewhere, children were screaming.

The station wagon AFFIXES itself to the Trooper, he thought. Now I know what she meant by stick—

Then the pain bloomed large and all thought ceased. There was time for one scream. Only one.

6. THE KIDS ('10 Richforth)

From where he was standing, seventy yards away, Pete saw it all. He saw the state trooper reach out with the barrel of his gun to open the station wagon's door the rest of the way; he saw the barrel disappear *into* the door as if the whole car were nothing but an optical illusion; he saw the trooper jerk forward, his big gray hat tumbling from his head. Then the trooper was yanked through the door and only his hat was left, lying next to somebody's cell phone. There was a pause, and then the car pulled into itself, like fingers into a fist. Next came the tennis-racquet-on-ball sound—*pouck!*—and the muddy clenched fist became a car again.

The little boy began to wail; the little girl was for some reason screaming "*thirty*" over and over again, like she thought it was a magic word J. K. Rowling had somehow left out of her Harry Potter books.

The back door of the police car opened. The kids got out. Both of them were crying their asses off, and Pete didn't blame them. If he hadn't been so stunned by what he'd just seen, he'd probably be crying himself. A nutty thought came to him: another swig or two of that vodka might improve this situation. It would help him be less afraid, and if he was less afraid, he might be able to figure out what the fuck he should do.

Meanwhile the kids were backing away again. Pete had an idea they might panic and take to their heels at any second. He couldn't let them do that; they'd run right into the road and get splatted by turnpike traffic.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Hey, you kids!"

When they turned to look at him—big, buggy eyes in pale faces—he waved and started walking toward them. As he did, the sun came out again, this time with authority.

The little boy started forward. The girl jerked him back. At first Pete thought she was afraid of him, then realized it was the car she was afraid of.

He made a circling gesture with his hand. "Walk around it! Walk around and come over here!"

They slipped through the guardrails on the left side of the ramp, giving the station wagon the widest berth possible, then cut across the parking lot. When they got to Pete, the little girl let go of her brother, sat down, and put her face in her hands. She had braids her mom had probably fixed for her. Looking at them and knowing the kid's mother would never fix them for her again made Pete feel horrible.

The little boy looked up solemnly. "It ate mommy-n- daddy. It ate the horse-lady and Trooper Jimmy, too. It's going to eat everyone, I guess. It's going to eat the *world*."

If Pete Simmons had been twenty, he might have asked a lot of bullshit questions that didn't matter. Because he was only half that age, and able to accept what he had just seen, he asked something simpler and more pertinent. "Hey, little girl. Are more police coming? Is that why you were yelling 'Thirty'?"

She dropped her hands and looked up at him. Her eyes were raw and red. "Yes, but Blakie's right. It will eat them, too. I told Trooper Jimmy, but he didn't believe me."

Pete believed her, because he had *seen*. But she was right. The police wouldn't believe. They would eventually, they'd have to, but maybe not before the monster car ate a bunch more of them.

"I think it's from space," he said. "Like on *Doctor Who*."

"Mommy-n-daddy won't let us watch that," the little boy told him. "They say it's too scary. But this is scarier."

"It's alive." Pete spoke more to himself than to them.

"Duh," Rachel said, and gave a long, miserable snuffle.

The sun ducked briefly behind one of the unraveling clouds. When it came out again, an idea came with it. Pete had been hoping to show Normie Therriault and the rest of the Rip-Ass Raiders something that would amaze them enough to let him be part of their gang. Then George had given him a big-brother reality check: *They've all seen that baby trick a thousand times*.

Maybe so, but maybe that thing down there *hadn't* seen it a thousand times. Or even once. Maybe they didn't have magnifying

glasses where it came from. Or sun, for that matter. He remembered a *Doctor Who* episode about a planet where it was dark all the time.

He could hear a siren in the distance. A cop was coming. A cop who wouldn't believe anything little kids said, because as far as grownups were concerned, little kids were all full of shit.

"You guys stay here. I'm going to try something."

"No!" The little girl grasped his wrist with fingers that felt like claws. "It'll eat you, too!"

"I don't think it can move around," Pete told her, disengaging his hand. She had left a couple of bleeding scratches, but he wasn't mad and he didn't blame her. He probably would have done the same, if it had been his parents. "I think it's stuck in one place."

"It can *reach*," she said. "It can reach with its tires. They melt."

"I'll watch out," Pete said, "but I have to try this. Because you're right. Those cops will come, and it will eat them, too. Stay put."

He walked toward the station wagon. When he was close (but not *too* close), he unzipped the saddlebag. *I have to try this*, he had told the kids, but the truth was a little balder: he *wanted* to try this. It would be like a science experiment. That would probably sound bizarre if he told someone, but he didn't have to tell. He just had to do it. Very . . . very . . . carefully.

He was sweating. With the sun out, the day had turned warm, but that wasn't the only reason, and he knew it. He looked up, squinting at the brightness. *Don't you go back behind a cloud. Don't you dare. I need you.*

He took his Richforth magnifying glass out of the saddlebag, and bent to put the saddlebag on the pavement. The joints of his knees cracked, and the station wagon's door swung open a few inches.

It knows I'm here. I don't know if it can see me, but it heard me just now. And maybe it smells me.

He took another step. Now he was close enough to touch the side of the station wagon. If he was fool enough to do so, that was.

"*Watch out!*" the little girl called. She and her brother were both standing now, their arms around each other. "*Watch out for it!*"

Carefully—like a kid reaching into a cage with a lion inside—Pete extended the magnifying glass. A circle of light appeared on the side

of the station wagon, but it was too big. Too *soft*. He moved the glass closer.

“*The tire!*” the little boy screamed. “*Watch out for the TII-YIII-IRE!*”

Pete looked down and saw one of the tires melting. A tentacle was oozing across the pavement toward his sneaker. He couldn't back away without giving up his experiment, so he raised his foot and stood stork. The tentacle immediately changed direction and headed for his other foot.

Not much time.

He moved the magnifying glass closer. The circle of light shrank to a brilliant white dot. For a moment nothing happened. Then tendrils of smoke began to drift up. The muddy white surface beneath the dot turned black.

From inside the station wagon there came an inhuman growling sound. Pete had to fight every instinct in his brain and body to keep from running. His lips parted, revealing teeth locked together in a desperate snarl. He held the Richforth steady, counting off seconds in his head. He'd reached seven when the growl rose to a glassy shriek that threatened to split his head. Behind him, Rachel and Blake had let go of each other so they could cover their ears.

At the foot of the rest area entrance ramp, Al Andrews brought Unit 12 to a sliding stop. He got out, wincing at that terrible shrieking sound. *It was like an air-raid siren broadcast through a heavy metal band's amplifiers*, he would say later. He saw a kid holding something out so it almost touched the surface of a muddy old Ford or Chevy station wagon. The boy was wincing in pain, determination, or both.

The smoking black spot on the flank of the station wagon began to spread. The white smoke curling up from it began to thicken. It turned gray, then black. What happened next happened fast. Pete saw tiny blue flames pop into being around the black spot. They spread, seeming to dance *above* the surface of the car-thing. It was the way charcoal briquettes looked in their backyard barbecue after their father doused them with lighter fluid and then tossed in a match.

The gooey tentacle, which had almost reached the sneakered foot still standing on the pavement, snapped back. The car yanked in

upon itself again, but this time the spreading blue flames stood out all around it in a corona. It pulled in tighter and still tighter, becoming a fiery ball. Then, as Pete and the Lussier kids and Trooper Andrews watched, it shot up into the blue spring sky. For a moment longer it was there, glowing like a cinder, and then it was gone. Pete found himself thinking of the cold darkness above the envelope of the earth's atmosphere—those endless leagues where anything might live and lurk.

I didn't kill it, I just drove it away. It had to go so it could put itself out, like a burning stick in a bucket of water.

Trooper Andrews was staring up into the sky, dumbfounded. One of his brain's few working circuits was wondering how he was supposed to write up a report on what he had just seen.

There were more approaching sirens in the distance.

Pete walked back to the two little kids with his saddlebag in one hand and his Richforth magnifying glass in the other. He sort of wished George and Normie were here, but so what if they weren't? He'd had quite an afternoon for himself without those guys, and he didn't care if he got grounded or not. This made jumping bikes off the edge of a stupid sandpit look tame.

You know what? I fuckin rock.

He might have laughed if the little kids hadn't been looking at him. They had just seen their parents eaten by some kind of alien—eaten *alive*—and showing happiness would be totally wrong.

The little boy held out his chubby arms, and Pete picked him up. He didn't laugh when the kid kissed his cheek, but he smiled. "Fanks," Blakie said. "You're a good kid."

Pete set him down. The little girl also kissed him, which was sort of nice, although it would have been nicer if she'd been a babe.

The trooper was running toward them now, and that made Pete think of something. He bent to the little girl and huffed into her face.

"Do you smell anything?"

Rachel Lussier looked at him wisely for a moment. "You'll be okay," she said, and actually smiled. It was only a small one, but better than no smile at all. "Just don't breathe on him. And maybe get some mints or something before you go home."

"I was thinking Teaberry gum," Pete said.

“Yeah,” Rachel said. “That’ll work.”

For Nye Willden and Doug Allen, who bought my first stories.

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1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
SimonandSchuster.com

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First Scribner ebook edition September 2011

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4516-6560-4

Turn the page for a preview of Stephen King's new
novel

11/22/63

Lee Harvey Oswald lived on Mercedes Street in Fort Worth, Texas, with his wife, Marina, and their daughter, June, for a few months in the late summer, early fall of 1962. Jake Epping, the protagonist of Stephen King's new novel 11/22/63, moves in across the street to monitor Oswald's movements, intending to prevent him from assassinating JFK. Jake has fallen in love with Sadie Dunhill, a high school librarian in Jodie, a small town not far from Dallas.

Living on Mercedes Street was not an uplifting experience.

Days weren't so bad. They resounded with the shouts of children recently released from school, all dressed in too-big hand-me-downs; housewives kvetching at mailboxes or backyard clotheslines; teenagers driving rusty beaters with glasspack mufflers and radios blaring K-Life. The hours between 2:00 and 6:00 A.M. weren't so bad, either. Then a kind of stunned silence fell over the street as colicky babies finally slept in their cribs (or dresser drawers) and their daddies snored toward another day of hourly wages in the shops, factories, or outlying farms.

Between four and six in the afternoon, however, the street was a jangle of mommas screaming at kids to get the hell in and do their chores and poppas arriving home to scream at their wives, probably because they had no one else to scream at. Many of the wives gave back as good as they got. The drunkadaddies started to roll in around eight, and things really got noisy around eleven, when either the bars closed or the money ran out. Then I heard slamming doors, breaking glass, and screams of pain as some loaded drunkadaddy tuned up on the wife, the kiddies, or both. Often red lights would strobe in through my drawn curtains as the cops arrived. A couple of times there were gunshots, maybe fired at the sky, maybe not. And one early morning, when I went out to get the paper, I saw a woman with dried blood crusting the lower half of her face. She was sitting on the curb in front of a house four down from mine, drinking a can of Lone Star. I almost went down to check on her, even though I knew how unwise it would be to get involved with the life of this low-

bottom working neighborhood. Then she saw me looking at her and hoisted her middle finger. I went back inside.

There was no Welcome Wagon, and no women named Muffy or Buffy trotting off to Junior League meetings. What there was on Mercedes Street was plenty of time to think. Time to miss my friends in Jodie. Time to miss the work that had kept my mind off what I had come here to do. Time to realize the teaching had done a lot more than pass the time; it had satisfied my mind the way work does when you care about it, when you feel like you might actually be making a difference.

There was even time to feel bad about my formerly spiffy convertible. Besides the nonfunctional radio and the wheezy valves, it now blatted and backfired through a rusty tailpipe and there was a crack in the windshield caused by a rock that had bounced off the back of a lumbering asphalt truck. I'd stopped washing it, and now—sad to say—it fit in perfectly with the other busted-up transpo on Mercedes Street.

Mostly there was time to think about Sadie.

You're breaking that young woman's heart, Ellie Dockerty had said, and mine wasn't doing so well, either. The idea of spilling everything to Sadie came to me one night as I lay awake listening to a drunken argument next door: *you did, I didn't, you did, I didn't, fuck you*. I rejected the idea, but it came back the following night, rejuvenated. I could see myself sitting with her at her kitchen table, drinking coffee in the strong afternoon sunlight that slanted through the window over the sink. Speaking calmly. Telling her my real name was Jacob Epping, I wouldn't actually be born for another fourteen years, I had come from the year 2011 via a fissure in time that my late friend Al Templeton called the rabbit-hole.

How would I convince her of such a thing? By telling her that a certain American defector who had changed his mind about Russia was shortly going to move in across the street from where I now lived, along with his Russian wife and their baby girl? By telling her that the Dallas Texans—not yet the Cowboys, not yet America's Team—were going to beat the Houston Oilers 20–17 this fall, in double overtime? Ridiculous. But what else did I know about the

immediate future? Not much, because I'd had no time to study up. I knew a fair amount about Oswald, but that was all.

She'd think I was crazy. I could sing her lyrics from another dozen pop songs that hadn't been recorded yet, and she'd still think I was crazy. She'd accuse me of making them up myself—wasn't I a writer, after all? And suppose she *did* believe it? Did I want to drag her into the shark's mouth with me? Wasn't it bad enough that she'd be coming back to Jodie in August, and that if John Clayton was an echo of Frank Dunning, he might come looking for her?

"All right, get out then!" a woman screamed from the street, and a car accelerated away in the direction of Winscott Road. A wedge of light probed briefly through a crack in my drawn curtains and flashed across the ceiling.

"COCKSUCKER!" she yelled after it, to which a male voice, a little more distant, yelled back: "You can suck mine, lady, maybe it'll calm you down."

That was life on Mercedes Street in the summer of '62.

Leave her out of it. That was the voice of reason. *It's just too dangerous. Maybe at some point she can be a part of your life again—a life in Jodie, even—but not now.*

Only there was never going to be a life for me in Jodie. Given what Ellen now knew about my past, teaching at the high school was a fool's dream. And what else was I going to do? Pour concrete?

One morning I put on the coffeepot and went for the paper on the stoop. When I opened the front door, I saw that both of the Sunliner's rear tires were flat. Some bored out-too-late kid had slashed them with a knife. That was also life on Mercedes Street in the summer of '62.

ON THURSDAY, THE FOURTEENTH OF JUNE, I dressed in jeans, a blue workshirt, and an old leather vest I'd picked up at a secondhand store on Camp Bowie Road. Then I spent the morning pacing through my house. I had no television, but I listened to the radio. According to the news, President Kennedy was planning a state trip to Mexico later in the month. The weather report called for fair skies and warm temperatures. The DJ yammered awhile, then played

“Palisades Park.” The screams and roller-coaster sound effects on the record clawed at my head.

At last I could stand it no longer. I was going to be early, but I didn’t care. I got into the Sunliner—which now sported two retread blackwalls to go with the whitewalls on the front—and drove the forty-odd miles to Love Field in northwest Dallas. There was no short-term or long-term parking, just parking. It cost seventy-five cents a day. I clapped my old summer straw on my head and trudged approximately half a mile to the terminal building. A couple of Dallas cops stood at the curb drinking coffee, but there were no security guards inside and no metal detectors to walk through. Passengers simply showed their tickets to a guy standing by the door, then walked across the hot tarmac to planes belonging to one of five carriers: American, Delta, TWA, Frontier, and Texas Airways.

I checked the chalkboard mounted on the wall behind the Delta counter. It said that Flight 194 was on time. When I asked the clerk to make sure, she smiled and told me it had just left Atlanta. “But you’re awfully early.”

“I can’t help it,” I said. “I’ll probably be early to my own funeral.”

She laughed and wished me a nice day. I bought a *Time* and walked across to the restaurant, where I ordered the Cloud 9 Chef’s Salad. It was huge and I was too nervous to be hungry—it’s not every day that a man gets to see the person who’s going to change world history—but it gave me something to pick at while I waited for the plane carrying the Oswald family to arrive.

I was in a booth with a good view of the main terminal. It wasn’t very crowded, and a young woman in a dark blue traveling suit caught my eye. Her hair was twisted into a neat bun. She had a suitcase in each hand. A Negro porter approached her. She shook her head, smiling, then banged her arm on the side of the Traveler’s Aid booth as she passed it. She dropped one of her suitcases, rubbed her elbow, then picked up the case again and forged onward.

Sadie leaving to start her six-week residency in Reno.

Was I surprised? Not at all. It was that convergence thing again. I’d grown used to it. Was I almost overwhelmed by an impulse to run out of the restaurant and catch up to her before it was too late? Of course I was.

For a moment it seemed more than possible, it seemed necessary. I would tell her fate (rather than some weird time-travel harmonic) had brought us together at the airport. Stuff like that worked in the movies, didn't it? I'd ask her to wait while I bought my own ticket to Reno, and tell her that once we were there, I'd explain everything. And after the obligatory six weeks, we could buy a drink for the judge who had granted her divorce before he married us.

I actually started to get up. As I did, I happened to look at the cover of the *Time* I'd bought at the newsstand. Jacqueline Kennedy was on the cover. She was smiling, radiant, wearing a sleeveless dress with a V-neck. THE PRESIDENT'S LADY DRESSES FOR SUMMER, the caption read. As I looked at the photo, the color drained away to black and white and the expression changed from a happy smile to a vacant stare. Now she was standing next to Lyndon Johnson on *Air Force One*, and no longer wearing the pretty (and slightly sexy) summer dress. A blood-spattered wool suit had taken its place. I remembered reading—not in Al's notes, somewhere else—that not long after Mrs. Kennedy's husband had been pronounced dead, Lady Bird Johnson had moved to embrace her in the hospital corridor and had seen a glob of the dead president's brains on that suit.

A head-shot president. And all the dead who would come after, standing behind him in a ghostly file that stretched away into infinity.

I sat back down again and watched Sadie carry her suitcases toward the Frontier Airlines counter. The bags were obviously heavy but she carried them con brio, her back straight, her low heels clicking briskly. The clerk checked them and put them on a baggage trolley. He and Sadie conferred; she passed him the ticket she had bought through a travel agency two months ago, and the clerk scribbled something on it. She took it back and turned for the gate. I lowered my head to make sure she wouldn't see me. When I looked up again, she was gone.

FORTY LONG, LONG MINUTES LATER, a man, a woman, and two small children—a boy and a girl—passed the restaurant. The boy was holding his father's hand and chattering away. The father was

looking down at him, nodding and smiling. The father was Robert Oswald.

The loudspeaker blared, "Delta's flight 194 is now arriving from Newark and Atlanta Municipal Airport. Passengers can be met at Gate 4. Delta Flight 194, now arriving."

Robert's wife—Vada, according to Al's notes—swept the little girl into her arms and hurried along faster. There was no sign of Marguerite.

I picked at my salad, chewing without tasting. My heart was beating hard.

I could hear the approaching roar of engines and saw the white nose of a DC-8 as it pulled up to the gate. Greeters piled up around the door. A waitress tapped me on the shoulder and I almost screamed.

"Sorry, sir," she said in a Texas accent that was thick enough to cut. "Jes wanted to ask if I could get y'all anything else."

"No," I said. "I'm fine."

"Well, that's good."

The first passengers began cutting across the terminal. They were all men wearing suits and prosperous haircuts. Of course. The first passengers to deplane were always from first class.

"Sure I can't get you a piece of peach pah? It's fresh today."

"No thanks."

"You sure, hon?"

Now the coach class passengers came in a flood, all of them festooned with carry-on bags. I heard a woman squeal. Was that Vada, greeting her brother-in-law?

"I'm sure," I said, and picked up my magazine.

She took the hint. I sat stirring the remains of my salad into an orange soup of French dressing and watched. Here came a man and woman with a baby, but the kid was almost a toddler, too old to be June. The passengers passed the restaurant, chattering with the friends and relatives who had come to pick them up. I saw a young man in an Army uniform pat his girlfriend's bottom. She laughed, slapped his hand, then stood on tiptoe to kiss him.

For five minutes or so the terminal was almost full. Then the crowd began to thin out. There was no sign of the Oswalds. A wild

certainty came to me: they weren't on the plane. I hadn't just traveled back in time, I had bounced into some sort of parallel universe. Maybe the Yellow Card Man had been meant to stop something like that from happening, but the Yellow Card Man was dead, and I was off the hook. No Oswald? Fine, no mission. Kennedy was going to die in some other version of America, but not in this one. I could catch up with Sadie and live happily ever after.

The thought had no more than crossed my mind when I saw my target for the first time. Robert and Lee were side by side, talking animatedly. Lee was swinging what was either an oversized attaché case or a small satchel. Robert had a pink suitcase with rounded corners that looked like something out of Barbie's closet. Vada and Marina came along behind. Vada had taken one of two patchwork cloth bags; Marina had the other slung over her shoulder. She was also carrying June, now four months old, in her arms and laboring to keep up. Robert and Vada's two kids flanked her, looking at her with open curiosity.

Vada called to the men and they stopped almost in front of the restaurant. Robert grinned and took Marina's carry-bag. Lee's expression was . . . amused? Knowing? Maybe both. The tiniest suggestion of a smile dimpled the corners of his mouth. His nondescript hair was neatly combed. He was, in fact, the perfect A. J. Squared Away in his pressed white shirt, khakis, and shined shoes. He didn't look like a man who had just completed a journey halfway around the world; there wasn't a wrinkle on him and not a trace of beard-shadow on his cheeks. He was just twenty-two years old, and looked younger—like one of the teenagers in my last American Lit class.

So did Marina, who wouldn't be old enough to buy a legal drink for another month. She was exhausted, bewildered, and staring at everything. She was also beautiful, with clouds of dark hair and upturned, somehow rueful blue eyes.

June's arms and legs were swaddled in cloth diapers. Even her neck was wrapped in something, and although she wasn't crying, her face was red and sweaty. Lee took the baby. Marina smiled her gratitude, and when her lips parted, I saw that one of her teeth was

missing. The others were discolored, one of them almost black. The contrast with her creamy skin and gorgeous eyes was jarring.

Oswald leaned close to her and said something that wiped the smile off her face. She looked up at him warily. He said something else, poking her shoulder with one finger as he did so. I remembered Al's story, and wondered if Oswald was saying the same thing to his wife now: *pokhoda, cyka*—walk, bitch.

But no. It was the swaddling that had upset him. He tore it away—first from the arms, then the legs—and flung the diapers at Marina, who caught them clumsily. Then she looked around to see if they were being watched.

Vada came back and touched Lee's arm. He paid no attention to her, just unwrapped the makeshift cotton scarf from around baby June's neck and flung *that* at Marina. It fell to the terminal floor. She bent and picked it up without speaking.

Robert joined them and gave his brother a friendly punch on the shoulder. The terminal had almost entirely cleared out now—the last of the deplaning passengers had passed the Oswald family—and I heard what he said clearly. "Give her a break, she just got here. She doesn't even know where here is yet."

"Look at this kid," Lee said, and raised June for inspection. At that, she finally began to cry. "She's got her wrapped up like a damn Egyptian mummy. Because that's the way they do it back home. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. *Saryj baba!* Old woman." He turned back to Marina with the bawling baby in his arms. She looked at him fearfully. "*Saryj baba!*"

She tried to smile, the way people do when they know the joke is on them, but not why. I thought fleetingly of Lennie, in *Of Mice and Men*. Then a grin, cocky and a little sideways, lit Oswald's face. It made him almost handsome. He kissed his wife gently, first on one cheek, then the other.

"USA!" he said, and kissed her again. "USA, Rina! Land of the free and home of the turds!"

Her smile became radiant. He began to speak to her in Russian, handing back the baby as he did so. He put his arm around her waist as she soothed June. She was still smiling as they left my field of

vision, and shifted the baby to her shoulder so she could take his hand.

I WENT HOME—IF I COULD CALL Mercedes Street home—and tried to take a nap. I couldn't get under, so I lay there with my hands behind my head, listening to the uneasy street noises and speaking with Al Templeton. This was a thing I found myself doing quite often, now that I was on my own. For a dead man, he always had a lot to say.

"I was stupid to come to Fort Worth," I told him. "If I try to hook up that bug to the tape recorder, someone's apt to see me. Oswald himself might see me, and that would change everything. He's already paranoid, you said so in your notes. He knew the KGB and MVD were watching him in Minsk, and he's going to be afraid that the FBI and the CIA are watching him here. And the FBI actually *will* be, at least some of the time."

"Yes, you'll have to be careful," Al agreed. "It won't be easy, but I trust you, buddy. It's why I called you in the first place."

"I don't even want to get near him. Just seeing him in the airport gave me a class-A case of the willies."

"I know you don't, but you'll have to. As someone who spent damn near his whole life cooking meals, I can tell you that no omelet was ever made without breaking eggs. And it would be a mistake to overestimate this guy. He's no super-criminal. Also, he's going to be distracted, mostly by his batshit mother. How good is he going to be at anything for awhile except shouting at his wife and knocking her around when he gets too pissed off for shouting to be enough?"

"I think he cares for her, Al. At least a little, and maybe a lot. In spite of the shouting."

"Yeah, and it's guys like him who are most likely to fuck up their women. Look at Frank Dunning. You just take care of your business, buddy."

"And what am I going to get if I do manage to hook up that bug? Tape recordings of arguments? Arguments in *Russian*? *That'll* be a big help."

"You don't need to decode the man's family life. It's George de Mohrenschildt you need to find out about. You have to make sure de

Mohrenschildt isn't involved in the attempt on General Walker. Once you accomplish that, the window of uncertainty closes. And look on the bright side. If Oswald catches you spying on him, his future actions might change in a *good* way. He might not try for Kennedy after all."

"Do you really believe that?"

"No. Actually I don't."

"Neither do I. The past is obdurate. It doesn't want to be changed."

He said, "Buddy, now you're cooking . . ."

"With gas," I heard myself muttering. "Now I'm cooking with gas."

I opened my eyes. I had fallen asleep after all. Late light was coming in through the drawn curtains. Somewhere not far away, on Davenport Street in Fort Worth, the Oswald brothers and their wives would be sitting down to dinner—Lee's first meal back on his old stomping grounds.

Outside my own little bit of Fort Worth, I could hear a skip-rope chant. It sounded very familiar. I got up, went through my dim living room (furnished with two thrift-shop easy chairs but nothing else), and twitched back one of the drapes an inch or so. Those drapes had been my very first installation. I wanted to see; I didn't want to be seen.

2703 was still deserted, with the FOR RENT sign double-tacked to the railing of the rickety porch, but the lawn wasn't deserted. There, two girls were twirling a jump rope while a third stutter-stepped in and out. Of course they weren't the girls I'd seen on Kossuth Street in Derry—these three, dressed in patched and faded jeans instead of crisp new shorts, looked runty and underfed—but the chant was the same, only now with Texas accents.

"Charlie Chaplin went to *France!* Just to watch the ladies *dance!* Salute to the *Cap'un!* Salute to the *Queen!* My old man drives a subma-rine!"

The skip-rope girl caught her foot and went tumbling into the crabgrass that served as 2703's front lawn. The other girls piled on top of her and all three of them rolled in the dirt. Then they got to their feet and went pelting away.

I watched them go, thinking *I saw them but they didn't see me. That's something. That's a start. But Al, where's my finish?*

De Mohrenschildt was the key to the whole deal, the only thing keeping me from killing Oswald as soon as he moved in across the street. George de Mohrenschildt, a petroleum geologist who speculated in oil leases. A man who lived the playboy lifestyle, mostly thanks to his wife's money. Like Marina, he was a Russian exile, but unlike her, from a noble family—he was, in fact, *Baron* de Mohrenschildt. The man who was going to become Lee Oswald's only friend during the few months of life Oswald had left. The man who was going to suggest to Oswald that the world would be much better off without a certain racist right-wing ex-General. If de Mohrenschildt turned out to be part of Oswald's attempt to kill Edwin Walker, my situation would be vastly complicated; all the nutty conspiracy theories would then be in play. Al, however, believed all the Russian geologist had done (or *would* do; as I've said, living in the past is confusing) was egg on a man who was already obsessed with fame and mentally unstable.

Al had written in his notes: *If Oswald was on his own on the night of April 10th, 1963, chances that there was another gunman involved in the Kennedy assassination seven months later drop to almost zero.*

Below this, in capital letters, he had added his final verdict: **GOOD ENOUGH TO TAKE THE SON OF A BITCH OUT.**

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SIGNET

Published by New American Library, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.) Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110 017, India Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0745, Auckland, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.) Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Published by Signet, an imprint of New American Library, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. "The Mist" first appeared in *Dark Forces*, edited by Kirby McCauley. "The Mist" also appeared in *Skeleton Crew*.

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ISBN: 978-1-1012-1166-3



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I

The Coming of the Storm.

This is what happened. On the night that the worst heat wave in northern New England history finally broke—the night of July 19—the entire western Maine region was lashed with the most vicious thunderstorms I have ever seen.

We lived on Long Lake, and we saw the first of the storms beating its way across the water toward us just before dark. For an hour before, the air had been utterly still. The American flag that my father put up on our boathouse in 1936 lay limp against its pole. Not even its hem fluttered. The heat was like a solid thing, and it seemed as deep as sullen quarry-water. That afternoon the three of us had gone swimming, but the water was no relief unless you went out deep. Neither Steffy nor I wanted to go deep because Billy couldn't. Billy is five.

We ate a cold supper at five-thirty, picking listlessly at ham sandwiches and potato salad out on the deck that faces the lake. Nobody seemed to want anything but Pepsi, which was in a steel bucket of ice cubes.

After supper Billy went out back to play on his monkey bars for a while. Steff and I sat without talking much, smoking and looking

across the sullen flat mirror of the lake to Harrison on the far side. A few powerboats droned back and forth. The evergreens over there looked dusty and beaten. In the west, great purple thunderheads were slowly building up, massing like an army. Lightning flashed inside them. Next door, Brent Norton's radio, tuned to that classical-music station that broadcasts from the top of Mount Washington, sent out a loud bray of static each time the lightning flashed. Norton was a lawyer from New Jersey and his place on Long Lake was only a summer cottage with no furnace or insulation. Two years before, we had a boundary dispute that finally wound up in county court. I won. Norton claimed I won because he was an out-of-towner. There was no love lost between us.

Steff sighed and fanned the top of her breasts with the edge of her halter. I doubted if it cooled her off much but it improved the view a lot.

"I don't want to scare you," I said, "but there's a bad storm on the way, I think."

She looked at me doubtfully. "There were thunderheads last night and the night before, David. They just broke up."

"They won't do that tonight."

"No?"

"If it gets bad enough, we're going to go downstairs."

"How bad do you think it can get?"

My dad was the first to build a year-round home on this side of the lake. When he was hardly more than a kid, he and his brothers put up a summer place where the house now stood, and in 1938 a summer storm knocked it flat, stone walls and all. Only the boathouse escaped. A year later he started the big house. It's the trees that do the damage in a bad blow. They get old, and the wind

knocks them over. It's mother nature's way of cleaning house periodically.

"I don't really know," I said, truthfully enough. I had only heard stories about the great storm of thirty-eight. "But the wind can come off the lake like an express train."

Billy came back a while later, complaining that the monkey bars were no fun because he was "all sweated up." I ruffled his hair and gave him another Pepsi. More work for the dentist.

The thunderheads were getting closer, pushing away the blue. There was no doubt now that a storm was coming. Norton had turned off his radio. Billy sat between his mother and me, watching the sky, fascinated. Thunder boomed, rolling slowly across the lake and then echoing back again. The clouds twisted and rolled, now black, now purple, now veined, now black again. They gradually overspread the lake, and I could see a delicate caul of rain extending down from them. It was still a distance away. As we watched, it was probably raining on Bolster's Mills, or maybe even Norway.

The air began to move, jerkily at first, lifting the flag and then dropping it again. It began to freshen and grew steady, first cooling the perspiration on our bodies and then seeming to freeze it.

That was when I saw the silver veil rolling across the lake. It blotted out Harrison in seconds and then came straight at us. The powerboats had vacated the scene.

Billy stood up from his chair, which was a miniature replica of our director's chairs, complete with his name printed on the back. "Daddy! Look!"

"Let's go in," I said. I stood up and put my arm around his shoulders.

"But do you see it? Dad, what is it?"

“A water-cyclone. Let’s go in.”

Steff threw a quick, startled glance at my face and then said, “Come on, Billy. Do what your father says.”

We went in through the sliding glass doors that give on the living room. I slid the door shut on its track and paused for another look out. The silver veil was three-quarters of the way across the lake. It had resolved itself into a crazily spinning teacup between the lowering black sky and the surface of the water, which had gone the color of lead streaked with white chrome. The lake had begun to look eerily like the ocean, with high waves rolling in and sending spume up from the docks and breakwaters. Out in the middle, big whitecaps were tossing their heads back and forth.

Watching the water-cyclone was hypnotic. It was nearly on top of us when lightning flashed so brightly that it printed everything on my eyes in negative for thirty seconds afterward. The telephone gave out a startled *ting!* and I turned to see my wife and son standing directly in front of the big picture window that gives us a panoramic view of the lake to the northwest.

One of those terrible visions came to me—I think they are reserved exclusively for husbands and fathers—of the picture window blowing in with a low, hard coughing sound and sending jagged arrows of glass into my wife’s bare stomach, into my boy’s face and neck. The horrors of the Inquisition are nothing compared to the fates your mind can imagine for your loved ones.

I grabbed them both hard and jerked them away. “What the hell are you doing? Get away from there!”

Steff gave me a startled glance. Billy only looked at me as if he had been partially awakened from a deep dream. I led them into the kitchen and hit the light switch. The phone ting-a-linged again.

Then the wind came. It was as if the house had taken off like a 747. It was a high, breathless whistling, sometimes deepening to a

bass roar before glissading up to a whooping scream.

“Go downstairs,” I told Steff, and now I had to shout to make myself heard. Directly over the house thunder whacked mammoth planks together and Billy shrank against my leg.

“You come too!” Steff yelled back.

I nodded and made shooing gestures. I had to pry Billy off my leg. “Go with your mother. I want to get some candles in case the lights go off.”

He went with her, and I started opening cabinets. Candles are funny things, you know. You lay them by every spring, knowing that a summer storm may knock out the power. And when the time comes, they hide.

I was pawing through the fourth cabinet, past the half-ounce of grass that Steff and I bought four years ago and had still not smoked much of, past Billy’s wind-up set of chattering teeth from the Auburn Novelty Shop, past the drifts of photos Steffy kept forgetting to glue in our album. I looked under a Sears catalogue and behind a Kewpie doll from Taiwan that I had won at the Fryeburg Fair knocking over wooden milk bottles with tennis balls.

I found the candles behind the Kewpie doll with its glazed dead man’s eyes. They were still wrapped in their cellophane. As my hand closed around them the lights went out and the only electricity was the stuff in the sky. The dining room was lit in a series of shutterflashes that were white and purple. Downstairs I heard Billy start to cry and the low murmur of Steff soothing him.

I had to have one more look at the storm.

The water-cyclone had either passed us or broken up when it reached the shoreline, but I still couldn’t see twenty yards out onto the lake. The water was in complete turmoil. I saw someone’s dock

—the Jassers’, maybe—hurry by with its main supports alternately turned up to the sky and buried in the churning water.

I went downstairs. Billy ran to me and clung to my legs. I lifted him up and gave him a hug. Then I lit the candles. We sat in the guest room down the hall from my little studio and looked at each other’s faces in the flickering yellow glow and listened to the storm roar and bash at our house. About twenty minutes later we heard a ripping, rending crash as one of the big pines went down nearby. Then there was a lull.

“Is it over?” Steff asked.

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe only for a while.”

We went upstairs, each of us carrying a candle, like monks going to vespers. Billy carried his proudly and carefully. Carrying a candle, carrying the *fire*, was a very big deal for him. It helped him forget about being afraid.

It was too dark to see what damage had been done around the house. It was past Billy’s bedtime, but neither of us suggested putting him in. We sat in the living room, listened to the wind, and looked at the lightning.

About an hour later it began to crank up again. For three weeks the temperature had been over ninety, and on six of those twenty-one days the National Weather Service station at the Portland Jetport had reported temperatures of over one hundred degrees. Queer weather. Coupled with the grueling winter we had come through and the late spring, some people had dragged out that old chestnut about the long-range results of the fifties A-bomb tests again. That, and of course, the end of the world. The oldest chestnut of them all.

The second squall wasn’t so hard, but we heard the crash of several trees weakened by the first onslaught. As the wind began to

die down again, one thudded heavily on the roof, like a fist dropped on a coffin lid. Billy jumped and looked apprehensively upward.

“It’ll hold, champ,” I said.

Billy smiled nervously.

Around ten o’clock the last squall came. It was bad. The wind howled almost as loudly as it had the first time, and lightning seemed to be flashing all around us. More trees fell, and there was a splintering crash down by the water that made Steff utter a low cry. Billy had gone to sleep on her lap.

“David, what was that?”

“I think it was the boathouse.”

“Oh. Oh, Jesus.”

“Steffy, I want us to go downstairs again.” I took Billy in my arms and stood up with him. Steff’s eyes were big and frightened.

“David, are we going to be all right?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

We went downstairs. Ten minutes later, as the final squall peaked, there was a splintering crash from upstairs—the picture window. So maybe my vision earlier hadn’t been so crazy after all. Steff, who had been dozing, woke up with a little shriek, and Billy stirred uneasily in the guest bed.

“The rain will come in,” she said. “It’ll ruin the furniture.”

“If it does, it does. It’s insured.”

“That doesn’t make it any better,” she said in an upset, scolding voice. “Your mother’s dresser...our news of a...the color TV...”

“Shhh,” I said. “Go to sleep.”

“I can’t,” she said, and five minutes later she had.

I stayed awake for another half hour with one lit candle for company, listening to the thunder walk and talk outside. I had a feeling that there were going to be a lot of people from the lakefront communities calling their insurance agents in the morning, a lot of chainsaws burring as cottage owners cut up the trees that had fallen on their roofs and battered through their windows, and a lot of orange CMP trucks on the road.

The storm was fading now, with no sign of a new squall coming in. I went back upstairs, leaving Steff and Billy on the bed, and looked into the living room. The sliding glass door had held. But where the picture window had been there was now a jagged hole stuffed with birch leaves. It was the top of the old tree that had stood by our outside basement access for as long as I could remember. Looking at its top, now visiting in our living room, I could understand what Steff had meant by saying insurance didn’t make it any better. I had loved that tree. It had been a hard campaigner of many winters, the one tree on the lakeside of the house that was exempt from my own chainsaw. Big chunks of glass on the rug reflected my candle-flame over and over. I reminded myself to warn Steff and Billy. They would want to wear their slippers in here. Both of them liked to slop around barefoot in the morning.

I went downstairs again. All three of us slept together in the guest bed, Billy between Steff and me. I had a dream that I saw God walking across Harrison on the far side of the lake, a God so gigantic that above the waist He was lost in a clear blue sky. In the dream I could hear the rending crack and splinter of breaking trees as God stamped the woods into the shape of His footsteps. He was circling the lake, coming toward the Bridgton side, toward us, and all the houses and cottages and summer places were bursting into purple-

white flame like lightning, and soon the smoke covered everything.
The smoke covered everything like a mist.

II

After the Storm. Norton. A Trip to Town.

“Jeee-pers,” Billy said.

He was standing by the fence that separates our property from Norton’s and looking down our driveway. The driveway runs a quarter of a mile to a camp road, which, in its turn, runs about three-quarters of a mile to a stretch of two-lane blacktop, called Kansas Road. From Kansas Road you can go anywhere you want, as long as it’s Bridgton.

I saw what Billy was looking at and my heart went cold.

“Don’t go any closer, champ. Right there is close enough.”

Billy didn’t argue.

The morning was bright and as clear as a bell. The sky, which had been a mushy, hazy color during the heat wave, had regained a deep, crisp blue that was nearly autumnal. There was a light breeze, making cheerful sun-dapples move back and forth in the driveway. Not far from where Billy was standing there was a steady hissing noise, and in the grass there was what you might at first have taken for a writhing bundle of snakes. The power lines leading to our house had fallen in an untidy tangle about twenty feet away and lay in a

burned patch of grass. They were twisting lazily and spitting. If the trees and grass hadn't been so completely damped down by the torrential rains, the house might have gone up. As it was, there was only that black patch where the wires had touched directly.

"Could that lectercute a person, Daddy?"

"Yeah. It could."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"Nothing. Wait for the CMP."

"When will they come?"

"I don't know." Five-year-olds have as many questions as Hallmark has cards. "I imagine they're pretty busy this morning. Want to take a walk up to the end of the driveway with me?"

He started to come and then stopped, eyeing the wires nervously. One of them humped up and turned over lazily, as if beckoning.

"Daddy, can lectricity shoot through the ground?"

A fair question. "Yes, but don't worry. Electricity wants the ground, not you, Billy. You'll be all right if you stay away from the wires."

"Wants the ground," he muttered, and then came to me. We walked up the driveway holding hands.

It was worse than I had imagined. Trees had fallen across the drive in four different places, one of them small, two of them middling, and one old baby that must have been five feet through the middle. Moss was crusted onto it like a moldy corset.

Branches, some half-stripped of their leaves, lay everywhere in jackstraw profusion. Billy and I walked up to the camp road, tossing the smaller branches off into the woods on either side. It reminded

me of a summer's day that had been maybe twenty-five years before; I couldn't have been much older than Billy was now. All my uncles had been here, and they had spent the day in the woods with axes and hatchets and Darcy poles, cutting brush. Later that afternoon they had all sat down to the trestle picnic table my dad and mom used to have and there had been a monster meal of hot dogs and hamburgers and potato salad. The 'Gansett beer had flowed like water and my uncle Reuben took a dive into the lake with all his clothes on, even his deck-shoes. In those days there were still deer in these woods.

"Daddy, can I go down to the lake?"

He was tired of throwing branches, and the thing to do with a little boy when he's tired is to let him go do something else. "Sure."

We walked back to the house together and then Billy cut right, going around the house and giving the downed wires a large berth. I went left, into the garage, to get my McCullough. As I had suspected, I could already hear the unpleasant song of the chainsaw up and down the lake.

I topped up the tank, took off my shirt, and was starting back up the driveway when Steff came out. She eyed the downed trees lying across the driveway nervously.

"How bad is it?"

"I can cut it up. How bad is it in there?"

"Well, I got the glass cleaned up, but you're going to have to do something about that tree, David. We can't have a tree in the living room."

"No," I said. "I guess we can't."

We looked at each other in the morning sunlight and got to giggling. I set the McCullough down on the cement areaway, and

kissed her, holding her buttocks firmly.

“Don’t,” she murmured. “Billy’s—”

He came tearing around the corner of the house just then. “Dad! Daddy! Y’oughta see the—”

Steffy saw the live wires and screamed for him to watch out. Billy, who was a good distance away from them, pulled up short and stared at his mother as if she had gone mad.

“I’m okay, Mom,” he said in the careful tone of voice you use to placate the very old and senile. He walked toward us, showing us how all right he was, and Steff began to tremble in my arms.

“It’s all right,” I said in her ear. “He knows about them.”

“Yes, but people get killed,” she said. “They have ads all the time on television about live wires, people get—Billy, I want you to come in the house right now!”

“Aw, come on, Mom! I wanna show Dad the boathouse!” He was almost bug-eyed with excitement and disappointment. He had gotten a taste of poststorm apocalypse and wanted to share it.

“You go in right now! Those wires are dangerous and—”

“Dad said they want the ground, not me—”

“Billy, don’t you argue with me!”

“I’ll come down and look, champ. Go on down yourself.” I could feel Steff tensing against me. “Go around the other side, kiddo.”

“Yeah! Okay!”

He tore past us, taking the stone steps that led around the west end of the house two by two. He disappeared with his shirttail flying,

trailing back one word—“Wow!”—as he spotted some other piece of destruction.

“He knows about the wires, Steffy.” I took her gently by the shoulders. “He’s scared of them. That’s good. It makes him safe.”

One tear tracked down her cheek. “David, I’m scared.”

“Come on! It’s over.”

“Is it? Last winter...and the late spring...they called it a black spring in town...they said there hadn’t been one in these parts since 1888—”

“They” undoubtedly meant Mrs. Carmody, who kept the Bridgton Antiquary, a junk shop that Steff liked to rummage around in sometimes. Billy loved to go with her. In one of the shadowy, dusty back rooms, stuffed owls with gold-ringed eyes spread their wings forever as their feet endlessly grasped varnished logs; stuffed raccoons stood in a trio around a “stream” that was a long fragment of dusty mirror; and one moth-eaten wolf, which was foaming sawdust instead of saliva around his muzzle, snarled a creepy eternal snarl. Mrs. Carmody claimed the wolf was shot by her father as it came to drink from Stevens Brook one September afternoon in 1901.

The expeditions to Mrs. Carmody’s Antiquary shop worked well for my wife and son. She was into carnival glass and he was into death in the name of taxidermy. But I thought that the old woman exercised a rather unpleasant hold over Steff’s mind, which was in all other ways practical and hardheaded. She had found Steff’s vulnerable spot, a mental Achilles’ heel. Nor was Steff the only one in town who was fascinated by Mrs. Carmody’s gothic pronouncements and folk remedies (which were always prescribed in God’s name).

Stump-water would take off bruises if your husband was the sort who got a bit too free with his fists after three drinks. You could tell

what kind of a winter was coming by counting the rings on the caterpillars in June or by measuring the thickness of August honeycomb. And now, good God protect and preserve us, THE BLACK SPRING OF 1888 (add your own exclamation points, as many as you think it deserves). I had also heard the story. It's one they like to pass around up here—if the spring is cold enough, the ice on the lakes will eventually turn as black as a rotted tooth. It's rare, but hardly a once-in-a-century occurrence. They like to pass it around, but I doubt that many could pass it around with as much conviction as Mrs. Carmody.

“We had a hard winter and a late spring,” I said. “Now we're having a hot summer. And we had a storm but it's over. You're not acting like yourself, Stephanie.”

“That wasn't an ordinary storm,” she said in that same husky voice.

“No,” I said. “I'll go along with you there.”

I had heard the Black Spring story from Bill Giosti, who owned and operated—after a fashion—Giosti's Mobil in Casco Village. Bill ran the place with his three tosspot sons (with occasional help from his four tosspot grandsons...when they could take time off from tinkering with their snowmobiles and dirt-bikes). Bill was seventy, looked eighty, and could still drink like twenty-three when the mood was on him. Billy and I had taken the Scout in for a fill-up the day after a surprise mid-May storm dropped nearly a foot of wet, heavy snow on the region, covering the new grass and flowers. Giosti had been in his cups for fair, and happy to pass along the Black Spring story, along with his own original twist. But we get snow in May sometimes; it comes and it's gone two days later. It's no big deal.

Steff was glancing doubtfully at the downed wires again. “When will the power company come?”

“Just as soon as they can. It won't be long. I just don't want you to worry about Billy. His head's on pretty straight. He forgets to pick

up his clothes, but he isn't going to go and step on a bunch of live lines. He's got a good, healthy dose of self-interest." I touched a corner of her mouth and it obliged by turning up in the beginning of a smile. "Better?"

"You always make it seem better," she said, and that made me feel good.

From the lakeside of the house Billy was yelling for us to come and see.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go look at the damage."

She snorted ruefully. "If I want to look at damage, I can go sit in my living room."

"Make a little kid happy, then."

We walked down the stone steps, hand in hand. We had just reached the first turn in them when Billy came from the other direction at speed, almost knocking us over.

"Take it easy," Steff said, frowning a little. Maybe, in her mind, she was seeing him skidding into that deadly nest of live wires instead of the two of us.

"You gotta come see!" Billy panted. "The boathouse is all bashed! There's a dock on the rocks...and trees in the boat cove...Jesus *Christ!*"

"Billy Drayton!" Steff thundered.

"Sorry, Ma—but you gotta—wow!" He was gone again.

"Having spoken, the doomsayer departs," I said, and that made Steff giggle again. "Listen, after I cut up those trees across the driveway, I'll go by the Central Maine Power office on Portland Road. Tell them what we got. Okay?"

“Okay,” she said gratefully. “When do you think you can go?”

Except for the big tree—the one with the moldy corset of moss—it would have been an hour’s work. With the big one added in, I didn’t think the job would be done until eleven or so.

“I’ll give you lunch here, then. But you’ll have to get some things at the market for me...we’re almost out of milk and butter. Also... well, I’ll have to make you a list.”

Give a woman a disaster and she turns squirrel. I gave her a hug and nodded. We went on around the house. It didn’t take more than a glance to understand why Billy had been a little overwhelmed.

“Lordy,” Steff said in a faint voice.

From where we stood we had enough elevation to be able to see almost a quarter of a mile of shoreline—the Bibber property to our left, our own, and Brent Norton’s to our right.

The huge old pine that had guarded our boat cove had been sheared off halfway up. What was left looked like a brutally sharpened pencil, and the inside of the tree seemed a glistening and defenseless white against the age-and-weather-darkened outer bark. A hundred feet of tree, the old pine’s top half, lay partly submerged in our shallow cove. It occurred to me that we were very lucky our little Star-Cruiser wasn’t sunk underneath it. The week before, it had developed engine trouble and it was still at the Naples marina, patiently waiting its turn.

On the other side of our little piece of shorefront, the boathouse my father had built—the boathouse that had once housed a sixty-foot Chris-Craft when the Drayton family fortunes had been at a higher mark than they were today—lay under another big tree. It was the one that had stood on Norton’s side of the property line, I saw. That raised the first flush of anger. The tree had been dead for five years and he should have long since had it taken down. Now it was three-quarters of the way down; our boathouse was propping it up.

The roof had taken on a drunken, swaybacked look. The wind had swirled shingles from the hole the tree had made all over the point of land the boathouse stood on. Billy's description, "bashed," was as good as any.

"That's Norton's tree!" Steff said. And she said it with such hurt indignation that I had to smile in spite of the pain I felt. The flagpole was lying in the water and Old Glory floated soggily beside it in a tangle of lanyard. And I could imagine Norton's response: Sue me.

Billy was on the rock breakwater, examining the dock that had washed up on the stones. It was painted in jaunty blue and yellow stripes. He looked back over his shoulder at us and yelled gleefully, "It's the Marlins', isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," I said. "Wade in and fish the flag out, would you, Big Bill?"

"Sure!"

To the right of the breakwater was a small sandy beach. In 1941, before Pearl Harbor paid off the Great Depression in blood, my dad hired a man to truck in that fine beach sand—six dumptrucks full—and to spread it out to a depth that is about nipple-high on me, say five feet. The workman charged eighty bucks for the job, and the sand has never moved. Just as well, you know, you can't put a sandy beach in on your land now. Now that the sewerage runoff from the booming cottage-building industry has killed most of the fish and made the rest of them unsafe to eat, the EPA has forbidden installing sand beaches. They might upset the ecology of the lake, you see, and it is presently against the law for anyone except land developers to do that.

Billy went for the flag—then stopped. At the same moment I felt Steff go rigid against me, and I saw it myself. The Harrison side of the lake was gone. It had been buried under a line of bright white mist, like a fair-weather cloud fallen to earth.

My dream of the night before recurred, and when Steff asked me what it was, the word that nearly jumped first from my mouth was *God*.

“David?”

You couldn't see even a hint of the shoreline over there, but years of looking at Long Lake made me believe that the shoreline wasn't hidden by much; only yards, maybe. The edge of the mist was nearly ruler-straight.

“What is it, Dad?” Billy yelled. He was in the water up to his knees, groping for the soggy flag.

“Fogbank,” I said.

“On the *lake*?” Steff asked doubtfully, and I could see Mrs. Carmody's influence in her eyes. Damn the woman. My own moment of unease was passing. Dreams, after all, are insubstantial things, like mist itself.

“Sure. You've seen fog on the lake before.”

“Never like that. That looks more like a cloud.”

“It's the brightness of the sun,” I said. “It's the same way clouds look from an airplane when you fly over them.”

“What would do it? We only get fog in damp weather.”

“No, we've got it right now,” I said. “Harrison does, anyway. It's a little leftover from the storm, that's all. Two fronts meeting. Something along that line.”

“David, are you sure?”

I laughed and hauled my arm around her neck. “No, actually, I'm bullshitting like crazy. If I was sure, I'd be doing the weather on the six-o'clock news. Go on and make your shopping list.”

She gave me one more doubtful glance, looked at the fogbank for a moment or two with the flat of her hand held up to shade her eyes, and then shook her head. "Weird," she said, and walked away.

For Billy, the mist had lost its novelty. He had fished the flag and a tangle of lanyard out of the water. We spread it on the lawn to dry.

"I heard it was wrong to ever let the flag touch the ground, Daddy," he said in a businesslike, let's-get-this-out-of-the-way tone.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Victor McAllister says they lectercute people for it."

"Well, you tell Vic he's full of what makes the grass grow green."

"Horseshit, right?" Billy is a bright boy, but oddly humorless. To the champ, everything is serious business. I'm hoping that he'll live long enough to learn that in this world that is a very dangerous attitude.

"Yeah, right, but don't tell your mother I said so. When the flag's dry, we'll put it away. We'll even fold it into a cocked hat, so we'll be on safe ground there."

"Daddy, will we fix the boathouse roof and get a new flagpole?" For the first time he looked anxious. He'd maybe had enough destruction for a while.

I clapped him on the shoulder. "You're damn tooting."

"Can I go over to the Bibbers' and see what happened there?"

"Just for a couple of minutes. They'll be cleaning up, too, and sometimes that makes people feel a little ugly." The way I presently felt about Norton.

"Okay. Bye!" He was off.

“Stay out of their way, champ. And, Billy?”

He glanced back.

“Remember about the live wires. If you see more, steer clear of them.”

“Sure, Dad.”

I stood there for a moment, first surveying the damage, then glancing out at the mist again. It seemed closer, but it was very hard to tell for sure. If it was closer, it was defying all the laws of nature, because the wind—a very gentle breeze—was against it. That, of course, was patently impossible. It was very, very white. The only thing I can compare it to would be fresh-fallen snow lying in dazzling contrast to the deep blue brilliance of the winter sky. But snow reflects hundreds and hundreds of diamond points in the sun, and this peculiar fogbank, although bright and clean-looking, did not sparkle. In spite of what Steff had said, mist isn't uncommon on clear days, but when there's a lot of it, the suspended moisture almost always causes a rainbow. But there was no rainbow here.

The unease was back, tugging at me, but before it could deepen, I heard a low mechanical sound—*whut-whut-whut!*—followed by a barely audible “Shit!” The mechanical sound was repeated, but this time there was no oath. The third time the chuffing sound was followed by “Mother-fuck!” in that same low I'm-all-by-myself-but-boy-am-I-pissed tone.

Whut-whut-whut-whut—

—Silence—

—then: “You cunt.”

I began to grin. Sound carries well out here, and all the buzzing chainsaws were fairly distant. Distant enough for me to recognize the

not-so-dulcet tones of my next-door neighbor, the renowned lawyer and lakefront-property-owner, Brenton Norton.

I moved down a little closer to the water, pretending to stroll toward the dock beached on our breakwater. Now I could see Norton. He was in the clearing beside his screened-in porch, standing on a carpet of old pine needles and dressed in paint-spotted jeans and a white strappy T-shirt. His forty-dollar haircut was in disarray and sweat poured down his face. He was down on one knee, laboring over his own chainsaw. It was much bigger and fancier than my little \$79.95 Value House job. It seemed to have everything, in fact, but a starter button. He was yanking a cord, producing the listless *whut-whut-whut* sounds and nothing more. I was gladdened in my heart to see that a yellow birch had fallen across his picnic table and smashed it in two.

Norton gave a tremendous yank on the starter cord.

Whut-whut-whutwhutwhut-WHAT!WHAT!WHAT!...WHAT!...Whut.

Almost had it there for a minute, fella.

Another Herculean tug.

Whut-whut-whut.

“Cocksucker,” Norton whispered fiercely, and bared his teeth at his fancy chainsaw.

I went back around the house, feeling really good for the first time since I got up. My own saw started on the first tug, and I went to work.

Around ten o'clock there was a tap on my shoulder. It was Billy with a can of beer in one hand and Steff's list in the other. I stuffed the list in the back pocket of my jeans and took the beer, which was not exactly frosty-cold but at least cool. I chugged almost half of it at

once—rarely does a beer taste that good—and tipped the can in salute at Billy. “Thanks, champ.”

“Can I have some?”

I let him have a swallow. He grimaced and handed the can back. I offed the rest and just caught myself as I started to crunch it up in the middle. The deposit law on bottles and cans has been in effect for over three years, but old ways die hard.

“She wrote something across the bottom of the list, but I can’t read her writing,” Billy said.

I took out the list again. “I can’t get WOXO on the radio,” Steff’s note read. “Do you think the storm knocked them off the air?”

WOXO is the local automated FM rock outlet. It broadcast from Norway, about twenty miles north, and was all that our old and feeble FM receiver would haul in.

“Tell her probably,” I said, after reading the question over to him. “Ask her if she can get Portland on the AM band.”

“Okay, Daddy, can I come when you go to town?”

“Sure. You and Mommy both, if you want.”

“Okay.” He ran back to the house with the empty can.

I had worked my way up to the big tree. I made my first cut, sawed through, then turned the saw off for a few moments to let it cool down—the tree was really too big for it, but I thought it would be all right if I didn’t rush it. I wondered if the dirt road leading up to Kansas Road was clear of falls, and just as I was wondering, an orange CMP truck lumbered past, probably on its way to the far end of our little road. So that was all right. The road was clear and the power guys would be here by noon to take care of the live lines.

I cut a big chunk off the tree, dragged it to the side of the driveway, and tumbled it over the edge. It rolled down the slope and into the underbrush that had crept back since the long-ago day when my dad and his brothers—all of them artists; we have always been an artistic family, the Draytons—had cleared it away.

I wiped sweat off my face with my arm and wished for another beer; one really only sets your mouth. I picked up the chainsaw and thought about WOXO being off the air. That was the direction that funny fogbank had come from. And it was the direction Shaymore (pronounced *Shammore* by the locals) lay in. Shaymore was where the Arrowhead Project was.

That was old Bill Giosti's theory about the so-called Black Spring: the Arrowhead Project. In the western part of Shaymore, not far from where the town borders on Stoneham, there was a small government preserve surrounded with wire. There were sentries and closed-circuit television cameras and God knew what else. Or so I had heard; I'd never actually seen it, although the Old Shaymore Road runs along the eastern side of the government land for a mile or so.

No one knew for sure where the name Arrowhead Project came from and no one could tell you for one hundred percent sure that that really was the name of the project—if there was a project. Bill Giosti said there was, but when you asked him how and where he came by his information, he got vague. His niece, he said, worked for the Continental Phone Company, and she had heard things. It got like that.

"Atomic things," Bill said that day, leaning in the Scout's window and blowing a healthy draft of Pabst into my face. "That's what they're fooling around with up there. Shooting atoms into the air and all that."

"Mr. Giosti, the air's full of atoms," Billy had said. "That's what Mrs. Neary says. Mrs. Neary says everything's full of atoms."

Bill Giosti gave my son Bill a long, bloodshot glance that finally deflated him. “These are *different* atoms, son.”

“Oh, yeah,” Billy muttered, giving in.

Dick Muehler, our insurance agent, said the Arrowhead Project was an agricultural station the government was running, no more or less. “Bigger tomatoes with a longer growing season,” Dick said sagely, and then went back to showing me how I could help my family most efficiently by dying young. Janine Lawless, our postlady, said it was a geological survey having something to do with shale oil. She knew for a fact, because her husband’s brother worked for a man who had—

Mrs. Carmody, now...she probably leaned more to Bill Giosti’s view of the matter. Not just atoms, but *different* atoms.

I cut two more chunks off the big tree and dropped them over the side before Billy came back with a fresh beer in one hand and a note from Steff in the other. If there’s anything Big Bill likes to do more than run messages, I don’t know what it could be.

“Thanks,” I said, taking them both.

“Can I have a swallow?”

“Just one. You took two last time. Can’t have you running around drunk at ten in the morning.”

“Quarter past,” he said, and smiled shyly over the top of the can. I smiled back—not that it was such a great joke, you know, but Billy makes them so rarely—and then read the note.

“Got JBQ on the radio,” Steffy had written. “Don’t get drunk before you go to town. You can have one more, but that’s it before lunch. Do you think you can get up our road okay?”

I handed him the note back and took my beer. “Tell her the road’s okay because a power truck just went by. They’ll be working their way up here.”

“Okay.”

“Champ?”

“What, Dad?”

“Tell her everything’s okay.”

He smiled again, maybe telling himself first. “Okay.”

He ran back and I watched him go, legs pumping, soles of his zori showing. I love him. It’s his face and sometimes the way his eyes turn up to mine that make me feel as if things are really okay. It’s a lie, of course—things are not okay and never have been—but my kid makes me believe the lie.

I drank some beer, set the can down carefully on a rock, and got the chainsaw going again. About twenty minutes later I felt a light tap on my shoulder and turned, expecting to see Billy again. Instead it was Brent Norton. I turned off the chainsaw.

He didn’t look the way Norton usually looks. He looked hot and tired and unhappy and a little bewildered.

“Hi, Brent,” I said. Our last words had been hard ones, and I was a little unsure how to proceed. I had a funny feeling that he had been standing behind me for the last five minutes or so, clearing his throat decorously under the chainsaw’s aggressive roar. I hadn’t gotten a really good look at him this summer. He had lost weight, but it didn’t look good. It should have, because he had been carrying around an extra twenty pounds, but it didn’t. His wife had died the previous November. Cancer. Aggie Bibber told Steffy that. Aggie was our resident necrologist. Every neighborhood has one. From the casual way Norton had of ragging his wife and belittling her (doing it with the

contemptuous ease of a veteran matador inserting *banderillas* in an old bull's lumbering body), I would have guessed he'd be glad to have her gone. If asked, I might even have speculated that he'd show up this summer with a girl twenty years younger than he was on his arm and a silly my-cock-has-died-and-gone-to-heaven grin on his face. But instead of the silly grin there was only a new batch of age lines, and the weight had come off in all the wrong places, leaving sags and folds and dewlaps that told their own story. For one passing moment I wanted only to lead Norton to a patch of sun and sit him beside one of the fallen trees with my can of beer in his hand, and do a charcoal sketch of him.

"Hi, Dave," he said, after a long moment of awkward silence—a silence that was made even louder by the absence of the chainsaw's racket and roar. He stopped, then blurted: "That tree. That damn tree. I'm sorry. You were right."

I shrugged.

He said, "Another tree fell on my car."

"I'm sorry to h—" I began, and then a horrid suspicion dawned. "It wasn't the T-Bird, was it?"

"Yeah. It was."

Norton had a 1960 Thunderbird in mint condition, only thirty thousand miles. It was a deep midnight blue inside and out. He drove it only summers, and then only rarely. He loved that Bird the way some men love electric trains or model ships or target-shooting pistols.

"That's a bitch," I said, and meant it.

He shook his head slowly. "I almost didn't bring it up. Almost brought the station wagon, you know. Then I said what the hell. I drove it up and a big old rotten pine fell on it. The roof of it's all bashed in. And I thought I'd cut it up...the tree, I mean...but I can't

get my chainsaw to fire up...I paid two hundred dollars for that sucker...and...and..."

His throat began to emit little clicking sounds. His mouth worked as if he were toothless and chewing dates. For one helpless second I thought he was going to just stand there and bawl like a kid on a sandlot. Then he got himself under some halfway kind of control, shrugged, and turned away as if to look at the chunks of wood I had cut up.

"Well, we can look at your saw," I said. "Your T-Bird insured?"

"Yeah," he said, "like your boathouse."

I saw what he meant, and remembered again what Steff had said about insurance.

"Listen, Dave, I wondered if I could borrow your Saab and take a run up to town. I thought I'd get some bread and cold cuts and beer. A lot of beer."

"Billy and I are going up in the Scout," I said. "Come with us if you want. That is, if you'll give me a hand dragging the rest of this tree off to one side."

"Happy to."

He grabbed one end but couldn't quite lift it up. I had to do most of the work. Between the two of us we were able to tumble it into the underbrush. Norton was puffing and panting, his cheeks nearly purple. After all the yanking he had done on that chainsaw starter pull, I was a little worried about his ticker.

"Okay?" I asked, and he nodded, still breathing fast. "Come on back to the house, then. I can fix you up with a beer."

"Thank you," he said. "How is Stephanie?" He was regaining some of the old smooth pomposity that I disliked.

“Very well, thanks.”

“And your son?”

“He’s fine, too.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Steff came out, and a moment’s surprise passed over her face when she saw who was with me. Norton smiled and his eyes crawled over her tight T-shirt. He hadn’t changed that much after all.

“Hello, Brent,” she said cautiously. Billy poked his head out from under her arm.

“Hello, Stephanie. Hi, Billy.”

“Brent’s T-Bird took a pretty good rap in the storm,” I told her. “Stove in the roof, he says.”

“Oh, no!”

Norton told it again while he drank one of our beers. I was sipping a third, but I had no kind of buzz on; apparently I had sweat the beer out as rapidly as I drank it.

“He’s going to come to town with Billy and me.”

“Well, I won’t expect you for a while. You may have to go to the Shop-and-Save in Norway.”

“Oh? Why?”

“Well, if the power’s off in Bridgton—”

“Mom says all the cash registers and things run on electricity,” Billy supplied.

It was a good point.

“Have you still got the list?”

I patted my hip pocket.

Her eyes shifted to Norton. “I’m very sorry about Carla, Brent. We all were.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you very much.”

There was another moment of awkward silence which Billy broke. “Can we go now, Daddy?” He had changed to jeans and sneakers.

“Yeah, I guess so. You ready, Brent?”

“Give me another beer for the road and I will be.”

Steffy’s brow creased. She had never approved of the one-for-the-road philosophy, or of men who drive with a can of Bud leaning against their crotches. I gave her a bare nod and she shrugged. I didn’t want to reopen things with Norton now. She got him a beer.

“Thanks,” he said to Steffy, not really thanking her but only mouthing a word. It was the way you thank a waitress in a restaurant. He turned back to me. “Lead on, Macduff.”

“Be right with you,” I said, and went into the living room.

Norton followed, and exclaimed over the birch, but I wasn’t interested in that or in the cost of replacing the window just then. I was looking at the lake through the sliding glass panel that gave on our deck. The breeze had freshened a little and the day had warmed up five degrees or so while I was cutting wood. I thought the odd mist we’d noticed earlier would surely have broken up, but it hadn’t. It was closer, too. Halfway across the lake now.

“I noticed that earlier,” Norton said, pontificating. “Some kind of temperature inversion, that’s my guess.”

I didn't like it. I felt very strongly that I had never seen a mist exactly like this one. Part of it was the unnerving straight edge of its leading front. Nothing in nature is that even; man is the inventor of straight edges. Part of it was that pure, dazzling whiteness, with no variation but also without the sparkle of moisture. It was only half a mile or so off now, and the contrast between it and the blues of the lake and sky was more striking than ever.

"Come on, Dad!" Billy was tugging at my pants.

We all went back to the kitchen. Brent Norton spared one final glance at the tree that had crashed into our living room.

"Too bad it wasn't an apple tree, huh?" Billy remarked brightly. "That's what my mom said. Pretty funny, don't you think?"

"Your mother's a real card, Billy," Norton said. He ruffled Billy's hair in a perfunctory way and his eyes went to the front of Steff's T-shirt again. No, he was not a man I was ever going to be able to really like.

"Listen, why don't you come with us, Steff?" I asked. For no concrete reason I suddenly wanted her to come along.

"No, I think I'll stay here and pull some weeds in the garden," she said. Her eyes shifted toward Norton and then back to me. "This morning it seems like I'm the only thing around here that doesn't run on electricity."

Norton laughed too heartily.

I was getting her message, but tried one more time. "You sure?"

"Sure," she said firmly. "The old bend-and-stretch will do me good."

"Well, don't get too much sun."

“I’ll put on my straw hat. We’ll have sandwiches when you get back.”

“Good.”

She turned her face up to be kissed. “Be careful. There might be blowdowns on Kansas Road too, you know.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“You be careful, too,” she told Billy, and kissed his cheek.

“Right, Mom.” He banged out of the door and the screen cracked shut behind him.

Norton and I walked out after him. “Why don’t we go over to your place and cut the tree off your Bird?” I asked him. All of a sudden I could think of lots of reasons to delay leaving for town.

“I don’t even want to look at it until after lunch and a few more of these,” Norton said, holding up his beer can. “The damage has been done, Dave old buddy.”

I didn’t like him calling me buddy, either.

We all got into the front seat of the Scout (in the far corner of the garage my scarred Fisher plow blade sat glimmering yellow, like the ghost of Christmas yet-to-come) and I backed out, crunching over a litter of storm-blown twigs. Steff was standing on the cement path which leads to the vegetable patch at the extreme west end of our property. She had a pair of clippers in one gloved hand and the weeding claw in the other. She had put on her old floppy sunhat, and it cast a band of shadow over her face. I tapped the horn twice, lightly, and she raised the hand holding the clippers in answer. We pulled out. I haven’t seen my wife since then.

We had to stop once on our way up to Kansas Road. Since the power truck had driven through, a pretty fair-sized pine had dropped across the road. Norton and I got out and moved it enough so I could inch the Scout by, getting our hands all pitchy in the process. Billy wanted to help but I waved him back. I was afraid he might get poked in the eye. Old trees have always reminded me of the Ents in Tolkien's wonderful Rings saga, only Ents that have gone bad. Old trees want to hurt you. It doesn't matter if you're snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, or just taking a walk in the woods. Old trees want to hurt you, and I think they'd kill you if they could.

Kansas Road itself was clear, but in several places we saw more lines down. About a quarter-mile past the Vicki-Linn Campground there was a power pole lying full-length in the ditch, heavy wires snarled around its top like wild hair.

"That was some storm," Norton said in his mellifluous, courtroom-trained voice; but he didn't seem to be pontificating now, only solemn.

"Yeah, it was."

"Look, Dad!"

He was pointing at the remains of the Ellitches' barn. For twelve years it had been sagging tiredly in Tommy Ellitch's back field, up to its hips in sunflowers, goldenrod, and Lolly-come-see-me. Every fall I would think it could not last through another winter. And every spring it would still be there. But it wasn't anymore. All that remained was a splintered wreckage and a roof that had been mostly stripped of shingles. Its number had come up. And for some reason that echoed solemnly, even ominously, inside me. The storm had come and smashed it flat.

Norton drained his beer, crushed the can in one hand, and dropped it indifferently to the floor of the Scout. Billy opened his mouth to say something and then closed it again—good boy. Norton came from New Jersey, where there was no bottle-and-can law; I

guess he could be forgiven for squashing my nickel when I could barely remember not to do it myself.

Billy started fooling with the radio, and I asked him to see if WOXO was back on the air. He dialed up to FM 92 and got nothing but a blank hum. He looked at me and shrugged. I thought for a moment. What other stations were on the far side of that peculiar fog front?

“Try WBLM,” I said.

He dialed down to the other end, passing WJBQ-FM and WIGY-FM on the way. They were there, doing business as usual...but WBLM, Maine’s premier progressive-rock station, was off the air.

“Funny,” I said.

“What’s that?” Norton asked.

“Nothing. Just thinking out loud.”

Billy had tuned back to the musical cereal on WJBQ. Pretty soon we got to town.

The Norge Washateria in the shopping center was closed, it being impossible to run a coin-op laundry without electricity, but both the Bridgton Pharmacy and the Federal Foods Supermarket were open. The parking lot was pretty full, and as always in the middle of the summer, a lot of the cars had out-of-state plates. Little knots of people stood here and there in the sun, noodling about the storm, women with women, men with men.

I saw Mrs. Carmody, she of the stuffed animals and the stump-water lore. She sailed into the supermarket decked out in an amazing canary yellow pantsuit. A purse that looked the size of a small Samsonite suitcase was slung over one forearm. Then an idiot on a Yamaha roared past me, missing my front bumper by a few

scant inches. He wore a denim jacket, mirror sunglasses, and no helmet.

“Look at that stupid shit,” Norton growled.

I circled the parking lot once, looking for a good space. There were none. I was just resigning myself to a long walk from the far end of the lot when I got lucky. A lime green Cadillac the size of a small cabin cruiser was easing out of a slot in the rank closest to the market’s doors. The moment it was gone, I slid into the space.

I gave Billy Steff’s shopping list. He was five, but he could read printing. “Get a cart and get started. I want to give your mother a jingle. Mr. Norton will help you. And I’ll be right along.”

We got out and Billy immediately grabbed Mr. Norton’s hand. He’d been taught not to cross the parking lot without holding an adult’s hand when he was younger and hadn’t yet lost the habit. Norton looked surprised for a moment, and then smiled a little. I could almost forgive him for feeling Steff up with his eyes. The two of them went into the market.

I strolled over to the pay phone, which was on the wall between the drugstore and the Norge. A sweltering woman in a purple sunsuit was jogging the cutoff switch up and down. I stood behind her with my hands in my pockets, wondering why I felt so uneasy about Steff, and why the unease should be all wrapped up with that line of white but unsparkling fog, the radio stations that were off the air...and the Arrowhead Project.

The woman in the purple sunsuit had a sunburn and freckles on her fat shoulders. She looked like a sweaty orange baby. She slammed the phone back down in its cradle, turned toward the drugstore and saw me there.

“Save your dime,” she said. “Just dah-dah-dah.” She walked grumpily away.

I almost slapped my forehead. The phone lines were down someplace, of course. Some of them were underground, but nowhere near all of them. I tried the phone anyway. The pay phones in the area are what Steff calls Paranoid Pay Phones. Instead of putting your dime right in, you get a dial tone and make your call. When someone answers, there's an automatic cutoff and you have to shove your dime in before your party hangs up. They're irritating, but that day it did save me my dime. There was no dial tone. As the lady had said, it was just dah-dah-dah.

I hung up and walked slowly toward the market, just in time to see an amusing little incident. An elderly couple walked toward the IN door, chatting together. And still chatting, they walked right into it. They stopped talking in a jangle and the woman squawked her surprise. They stared at each other comically. Then they laughed, and the old guy pushed the door open for his wife with some effort—those electric-eye doors are heavy—and they went in. When the electricity goes off, it catches you in a hundred different ways.

I pushed the door open myself and noticed the lack of air-conditioning first thing. Usually in the summer they have it cranked up high enough to give you frostbite if you stay in the market more than an hour at a stretch.

Like most modern markets, the Federal was constructed like a Skinner box—modern marketing techniques turn all customers into white rats. The stuff you really needed, staples, like bread, milk, meat, beer, and frozen dinners, was all on the far side of the store. To get there you had to walk past all the impulse items known to modern man—everything from Cricket lighters to rubber dog bones.

Beyond the IN door is the fruit-and-vegetable aisle. I looked up it, but there was no sign of Norton or my son. The old lady who had run into the door was examining the grapefruits. Her husband had produced a net sack to store purchases in.

I walked up the aisle and went left. I found them in the third aisle, Billy mulling over the ranks of Jello-O packages and instant

puddings. Norton was standing directly behind him, peering at Steff's list. I had to grin a little at his nonplussed expression.

I threaded my way down to them, past half-loaded carriages (Steff hadn't been the only one struck by the squirreling impulse, apparently) and browsing shoppers. Norton took two cans of pie filling down from the top shelf and put them in the cart.

"How are you doing?" I asked, and Norton looked around with unmistakable relief.

"All right, aren't we, Billy?"

"Sure," Billy said, and couldn't resist adding in a rather smug tone: "But there's lots of stuff Mr. Norton can't read either, Dad."

"Let me see." I took the list.

Norton had made a neat, lawyerly check beside each of the items he and Billy had picked up—half a dozen or so, including the milk and a six-pack of Coke. There were maybe ten other things that she wanted.

"We ought to go back to the fruits and vegetables," I said. "She wants some tomatoes and cucumbers."

Billy started to turn the cart around and Norton said, "You ought to go have a look at the checkout, Dave."

I went and had a look. It was the sort of thing you sometimes see photos of in the paper on a slow newsday, with a humorous caption beneath. Only two lanes were open, and the double line of people waiting to check their purchases out stretched past the mostly denuded bread racks, then made a jig to the right and went out of sight along the frozen-food coolers. All of the new computerized NCRs were hooded. At each of the two open positions, a harried-looking girl was totting up purchases on a battery-powered pocket calculator. Standing with each girl was one of the Federal's two

managers, Bud Brown and Ollie Weeks. I liked Ollie but didn't care much for Bud Brown, who seemed to fancy himself the Charles de Gaulle of the supermarket world.

As each girl finished checking her order, Bud or Ollie would paperclip a chit to the customer's cash or check and toss it into the box he was using as a cash repository. They all looked hot and tired.

"Hope you brought a good book," Norton said, joining me. "We're going to be in line for a while."

I thought of Steff again, at home alone, and had another flash of unease. "You go on and get your stuff," I said. "Billy and I can handle the rest of this."

"Want me to grab a few more beers for you too?"

I thought about it, but in spite of the rapprochement, I didn't want to spend the afternoon with Brent Norton getting drunk. Not with the mess things were in around the house.

"Sorry," I said. "I've got to take a raincheck, Brent."

I thought his face stiffened a little. "Okay," he said shortly, and walked off. I watched him go, and then Billy was tugging at my shirt.

"Did you talk to Mommy?"

"Nope. The phone wasn't working. Those lines are down too, I guess."

"Are you worried about her?"

"No," I said, lying. I was worried, all right, but had no idea why I should be. "No, of course I'm not. Are you?"

"No-ooo..." But he was. His face had a pinched look. We should have gone back then. But even then it might have been too late.



The Coming of the Mist.

We worked our way back to the fruits and vegetables like salmon fighting their way upstream. I saw some familiar faces—Mike Hatlen, one of our selectmen, Mrs. Reppler from the grammar school (she who had terrified generations of third-graders was currently sneering at the cantaloupes), Mrs. Turman, who sometimes sat Billy when Steff and I went out—but mostly they were summer people stocking up on no-cook items and joshing each other about “roughing it.” The cold cuts had been picked over as thoroughly as the dimebook tray at a rummage sale; there was nothing left but a few packages of bologna, some macaroni loaf, and one lonely, phallic kielbasa sausage.

I got tomatoes, cukes, and a jar of mayonnaise. She wanted bacon, but all the bacon was gone. I picked up some of the bologna as a substitute, although I’ve never been able to eat the stuff with any real enthusiasm since the FDA reported that each package contained a small amount of insect filth—a little something extra for your money.

“Look,” Billy said as we rounded the corner into the fourth aisle. “There’s some army guys.”

There were two of them, their dun uniforms standing out against the much brighter background of summer clothes and sportswear. We had gotten used to seeing a scattering of army personnel with the Arrowhead Project only thirty miles or so away. These two looked hardly old enough to shave yet.

I glanced back down at Steff's list and saw that we had everything...no, almost but not quite. At the bottom, as an afterthought, she had scribbled: *Bottle of Lancers?* That sounded good to me. A couple of glasses of wine tonight after Billy had sacked out, then maybe a long slow bout of lovemaking before sleep.

I left the cart and worked my way down to the wine and got a bottle. As I walked back I passed the big double doors leading to the storage area and heard the steady roar of a good-sized generator.

I decided it was probably just big enough to keep the cold cases cold, but not large enough to power the doors and cash registers and all the other electrical equipment. It sounded like a motorcycle back there.

Norton appeared just as we got into line, balancing two six-packs of Schlitz Light, a loaf of bread, and the kielbasa I had spotted a few minutes earlier. He got in line with Billy and me. It seemed very warm in the market with the air-conditioning off, and I wondered why none of the stockboys had at least chocked the doors open. I had seen Buddy Eagleton in his red apron two aisles back, doing nothing and piling it up. The generator roared monotonously. I had the beginnings of a headache.

"Put your stuff in here before you drop something," I said.

"Thanks."

The lines were up past the frozen food now; people had to cut through to get what they wanted and there was much excuse-me-ing and pardon-me-ing. "This is going to be a cunt," Norton said

morosely, and I frowned a little. That sort of language is rougher than I'd like Billy to hear.

The generator's roar muted a little as the line shuffled forward. Norton and I made desultory conversation, skirting around the ugly property dispute that had landed us in district court and sticking with things like the Red Sox chances and the weather. At last we exhausted our little store of small talk and fell silent. Billy fidgeted beside me. The line crawled along. Now we had frozen dinners on our right and the more expensive wines and champagnes on our left. As the line progressed down to the cheaper wines, I toyed briefly with the idea of picking up a bottle of Ripple, the wine of my flaming youth. I didn't do it. My youth never flamed that much anyway.

"Jeez, why can't they hurry up, Dad?" Billy asked. That pinched look was still on his face, and suddenly, briefly, the mist of disquiet that had settled over me rifted, and something terrible peered through from the other side—the bright and metallic face of terror. Then it passed.

"Keep cool, champ," I said.

We had made it up to the bread racks—to the point where the double line bent to the left. We could see the checkout lanes now, the two that were open and the other four, deserted, each with a little sign on the stationary conveyor belt, signs that read PLEASE CHOOSE ANOTHER LANE and WINSTON. Beyond the lanes was the big sectioned plate-glass window which gave a view of the parking lot and the intersection of Routes 117 and 302 beyond. The view was partially obscured by the white-paper backs of signs advertising current specials and the latest giveaway, which happened to be a set of books called *The Mother Nature Encyclopedia*. We were in the line that would eventually lead us to the checkout where Bud Brown was standing. There were still maybe thirty people in front of us. The easiest one to pick out was Mrs. Carmody in her blazing yellow pantsuit. She looked like an advertisement for yellow fever.

Suddenly a shrieking noise began in the distance. It quickly built up in volume and resolved itself into the crazy warble of a police siren. A horn blared at the intersection and there was a shriek of brakes and burning rubber. I couldn't see—the angle was all wrong—but the siren reached its loudest as it approached the market and then began to fade as the police car went past. A few people broke out of line to look, but not many. They had waited too long to chance losing their places.

Norton went; his stuff was tucked into my cart. After a few moments he came back and got into line again. "Local fuzz," he said.

Then the town fire whistle began to wail, slowly cranking up to a shriek of its own, falling off, then rising again. Billy grabbed my hand—clutched it. "What is it, Daddy?" he asked, and then, immediately: "Is Mommy all right?"

"Must be a fire on the Kansas Road," Norton said. "Those damned live lines from the storm. The fire trucks will go through in a minute."

That gave my disquiet something to crystallize on. There were live lines down in *our* yard.

Bud Brown said something to the checker he was supervising; she had been craning around to see what was happening. She flushed and began to run her calculator again.

I didn't want to be in this line. All of a sudden I very badly didn't want to be in it. But it was moving again, and it seemed foolish to leave now. We had gotten down by the cartons of cigarettes.

Someone pushed through the IN door, some teenager. I think it was the kid we almost hit coming in, the one on the Yamaha with no helmet. "The fog!" he yelled. "Y'oughta see the fog! It's rolling right up Kansas Road!" People looked around at him. He was panting, as if he had run a long distance. Nobody said anything. "Well, y'oughta see it," he repeated, sounding defensive this time. People eyed him

and some of them shuffled, but no one wanted to lose his or her place in line. A few people who hadn't reached the lines yet left their carts and strolled through the empty checkout lanes to see if they could see what he was talking about. A big guy in a summer hat with a paisley band (the kind of hat you almost never see except in beer commercials with backyard barbecues as their settings) yanked open the OUT door and several people—ten, maybe a dozen—went out with him. The kid went along.

“Don't let out all the air-conditioning,” one of the army kids cracked, and there were a few chuckles. I wasn't chuckling. I had seen the mist coming across the lake.

“Billy, why don't you go have a look?” Norton said.

“No,” I said at once, for no concrete reason.

The line moved forward again. People craned their necks, looking for the fog the kid had mentioned, but there was nothing on view except bright blue sky. I heard someone say that the kid must have been joking. Someone else responded that he had seen a funny line of mist on Long Lake not an hour ago. The first whistle whooped and screamed. I didn't like it. It sounded like big-league doom blowing that way.

More people went out. A few even left their places in line, which speeded up the proceedings a bit. Then grizzled old John Lee Frovin, who works as a mechanic at the Texaco station, came ducking in and yelled: “Hey! Anybody got a camera?” He looked around, then ducked back out again.

That caused something of a rush. If it was worth taking a picture of, it was worth seeing.

Suddenly Mrs. Carmody cried in her rusty but powerful old voice, “Don't go out there!”

People turned around to look at her. The orderly shape of the lines had grown fuzzy as people left to get a look at the mist, or as they drew away from Mrs. Carmody, or as they milled around, seeking out their friends. A pretty young woman in a cranberry-colored sweatshirt and dark green slacks was looking at Mrs. Carmody in a thoughtful, evaluating way. A few opportunists were taking advantage of whatever the situation was to move up a couple of places. The checker beside Bud Brown looked over her shoulder again, and Brown tapped her shoulder with a long finger. “Keep your mind on what you’re doing, Sally.”

“Don’t go out there!” Mrs. Carmody yelled. “It’s death! I feel that it’s death out there!”

Bud and Ollie Weeks, who both knew her, just looked impatient and irritated, but any summer people around her stepped smartly away, never minding their places in line. The bag-ladies in big cities seem to have the same effect on people, as if they were carriers of some contagious disease. Who knows? Maybe they are.

Things began to happen at an accelerating, confusing pace then. A man staggered into the market, shoving the IN door open. His nose was bleeding. “Something in the fog!” he screamed, and Billy shrank against me—whether because of the man’s bloody nose or what he was saying, I don’t know. “Something in the fog! Something in the fog took John Lee! Something—” He staggered back against a display of lawn food stacked by the window and sat down there. *“Something in the fog took John Lee and I heard him screaming!”*

The situation changed. Made nervous by the storm, by the police siren and the fire whistle, by the subtle dislocation any power outage causes in the American psyche, and by the steadily mounting atmosphere of unease as things somehow... somehow *changed* (I don’t know how to put it any better than that), people began to move in a body.

They didn’t bolt. If I told you that, I would be giving you entirely the wrong impression. It wasn’t exactly a panic. They didn’t run—or

at least, most of them didn't. But they went. Some of them just went to the big show window on the far side of the checkout lanes to look out. Others went out the IN door, some still carrying their intended purchases. Bud Brown, harried and officious, began yelling: "Hey! You haven't paid for that! Hey, you! Come back here with those hot-dog rolls!"

Someone laughed at him, a crazy, yodeling sound that made other people smile. Even as they smiled they looked bewildered, confused, and nervous. Then someone else laughed and Brown flushed. He grabbed a box of mushrooms away from a lady who was crowding past him to look out the window—the segments of glass were lined with people now; they were like the folks you see looking through loopholes into a building site—and the lady screamed, "Give me back my mushies!" This bizarre term of affection caused two men standing nearby to break into crazy laughter—and there was something of the old English Bedlam about all of it, now. Mrs. Carmody trumpeted again not to go out there. The fire whistle whooped breathlessly, a strong old woman who had scared up a prowler in the house. And Billy burst into tears.

"Daddy, what's that bloody man? Why is that bloody man?"

"It's okay, Big Bill, it's his nose, he's okay."

"What did he mean, something in the fog?" Norton asked. He was frowning ponderously, which was probably Norton's way of looking confused.

"Daddy, I'm scared," Billy said through his tears. "Can we please go home?"

Someone bumped past me roughly, jolting me off my feet, and I picked Billy up. I was getting scared, too. The confusion was mounting. Sally, the checker by Bud Brown, started away and he grabbed her back by the collar of her red smock. It ripped. She slap-clawed out at him, her face twisting. "*Get your fucking hands off me!*" she screamed.

“Oh, shut up, you little bitch,” Brown said, but he sounded totally astounded.

He reached for her again and Ollie Weeks said sharply: “Bud! Cool it!”

Someone else screamed. It hadn’t been a panic before—not quite—but it was getting to be one. People streamed out of both doors. There was a crash of breaking glass and Coke fizzed suddenly across the floor.

“What the Christ *is* this?” Norton exclaimed.

That was when it started getting dark...but no, that’s not exactly right. My thought at the time was not that it was getting dark but that the lights in the market had gone out. I looked up at the fluorescents in a quick reflex action, and I wasn’t alone. And at first, until I remembered the power failure, it seemed that was it, that was what had changed the quality of the light. Then I remembered they had been out all the time we had been in the market and things hadn’t seemed dark before. Then I knew, even before the people at the window started to yell and point.

The mist was coming.

It came from the Kansas Road entrance to the parking lot, and even this close it looked no different than it had when we first noticed it on the far side of the lake. It was white and bright but nonreflecting. It was moving fast, and it had blotted out most of the sun. Where the sun had been there was now a silver coin in the sky, like a full moon in winter seen through a thin scud of cloud.

It came with lazy speed. Watching it reminded me somehow of last evening’s waterspout. There are big forces in nature that you hardly ever see—earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes—I haven’t seen them all but I’ve seen enough to guess that they all move with

that lazy, hypnotizing speed. They hold you spellbound, the way Billy and Steffy had been in front of the picture window last night.

It rolled impartially across the two-lane blacktop and erased it from view. The McKeons' nice restored Dutch Colonial was swallowed whole. For a moment the second floor of the ramshackle apartment building next door jutted out of the whiteness, and then it went too. The KEEP RIGHT sign at the entrance and exit points to the Federal's parking lot disappeared, the black letters on the sign seeming to float for a moment in limbo after the sign's dirty white background was gone. The cars in the parking lot began to disappear next.

"What the Christ *is* this?" Norton asked again, and there was a catch in his voice.

It came on, eating up the blue sky and the fresh black hottop with equal ease. Even twenty feet away the line of demarcation was perfectly clear. I had the nutty feeling that I was watching some extra-good piece of visual effects, something dreamed up by Willys O'Brian or Douglas Trumbull. It happened so quickly. The blue sky disappeared to a wide swipe, then to a stripe, then to a pencil line. Then it was gone. Blank white pressed against the glass of the wide show window. I could see as far as the litter barrel that stood maybe four feet away, but not much farther. I could see the front bumper of my Scout, but that was all.

A woman screamed, very loud and long. Billy pressed himself more tightly against me. His body was trembling like a loose bundle of wires with high voltage running through them.

A man yelled and bolted through one of the deserted lanes toward the door. I think that was what finally started the stampede. People rushed pell-mell into the fog.

"*Hey!*" Brown roared. I don't know if he was angry, scared, or both. His face was nearly purple. Veins stood out on his neck,

looking almost as thick as battery cables. *“Hey, you people, you can’t take that stuff. Get back here with that stuff, you’re shoplifting!”*

They kept going, but some of them tossed their stuff aside. Some were laughing and excited, but they were a minority. They poured out into the fog, and none of us who stayed ever saw them again. There was a faint, acrid smell drifting in through the open door. People began to jam up there. Some pushing and shoving started. I was getting an ache in my shoulders from holding Billy. He was good-sized; Steff sometimes called him her young heifer.

Norton started to wander off, his face preoccupied and rather bemused. He was heading for the door.

I switched Billy to the other arm so I could grab Norton’s arm before he drifted out of reach. “No, man, I wouldn’t,” I said.

He turned back. “What?”

“Better wait and see.”

“See what?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You don’t think—” he began, and a shriek came out of the fog.

Norton shut up. The tight jam at the OUT door loosened and then reversed itself. The babble of excited conversation, shouts and calls, subsided. The faces of the people by the door suddenly looked flat and pale and two dimensional.

The shriek went on and on, competing with the fire whistle. It seemed impossible that any human pair of lungs could have enough air in them to sustain such a shriek. Norton muttered, “Oh my God,” and ran his hands through his hair.

The shriek ended abruptly. It did not dwindle; it was cut off. One more man went outside, a beefy guy in chino workpants. I think he

was set on rescuing the shrieker. For a moment he was out there, visible through the glass and the mist, like a figure seen through milk scum on a tumbler. Then (and as far as I know, I was the only one to see this) something beyond him appeared to move, a gray shadow in all that white. And it seemed to me that instead of running into the fog, the man in the chino pants was *jerked* into it, his hands flailing upward as if in surprise.

For a moment there was total silence in the market.

A constellation of moons suddenly glowed into being outside. The parking-lot sodium lights, undoubtedly supplied by underground electrical cables, had just gone on.

“Don’t go out there,” Mrs. Carmody said in her best gore-crow voice. “It’s death to go out there.”

All at once, no one seemed disposed to argue or laugh.

Another scream came from outside, this one muffled and rather distant-sounding. Billy tensed against me again.

“David, what’s going on?” Ollie Weeks asked. He had left his position. There were big beads of sweat on his round, smooth face. “What is this?”

“I’ll be goddamned if I have any idea,” I said. Ollie looked badly scared. He was a bachelor who lived in a nice little house up by Highland Lake and who liked to drink in the bar at Pleasant Mountain. On the pudgy little finger of his left hand was a star-sapphire ring. The February before, he won some money in the state lottery. He bought the ring out of his winnings. I always had the idea that Ollie was a little afraid of girls.

“I don’t dig this,” he said.

“No. Billy, I have to put you down. I’ll hold your hand, but you’re breaking my arms, okay?”

“Mommy,” he whispered.

“She’s okay,” I told him. It was something to say.

The old geezer who runs the secondhand shop near Jon’s Restaurant walked past us, bundled into the old collegiate letter-sweater he wears year-round. He said loudly: “It’s one of those pollution clouds. The mills at Rumford and South Paris. Chemicals.” With that, he made off up the Aisle 4, past the patent medicines and toilet paper.

“Let’s get out of here, David,” Norton said with no conviction at all. “What do you say we—”

There was a thud. An odd, twisting thud that I felt mostly in my feet, as if the entire building had suddenly dropped three feet. Several people cried out in fear and surprise. There was a musical jingle of bottles leaning off their shelves and destroying themselves upon the tile floor. A chunk of glass shaped like a pie wedge fell out of one of the segments of the wide front window, and I saw that the wooden frames banding the heavy sections of glass had buckled and splintered in some places.

The fire whistle stopped in midwhoop.

The quiet that followed was the bated silence of people waiting for something else, something more. I was shocked and numb, and my mind made a strange cross-patch connection with the past. Back when Bridgton was little more than a crossroads, my dad would take me in with him and stand talking at the counter while I looked through the glass at the penny candy and two-cent chews. It was January thaw. No sound but the drip of meltwater falling from the galvanized tin gutters to the rain barrels on either side of the store. Me looking at the jawbreakers and buttons and pinwheels. The mystic yellow globes of light overhead showing up the monstrous, projected shadows of last summer’s battalion of dead flies. A little boy named David Drayton with his father, the famous artist Andrew Drayton, whose painting *Christine Standing Alone* hung in the White

House. A little boy named David Drayton looking at the candy and the Davy Crockett bubblegum cards and vaguely needing to go pee. And outside, the pressing, billowing yellow fog of January thaw.

The memory passed, but very slowly.

“You people!” Norton bellowed. “All you people, listen to me!”

They looked around. Norton was holding up both hands, the fingers splayed like a political candidate accepting accolades.

“It may be dangerous to go outside!” Norton yelled.

“Why?” a woman screamed back. “My kids’re at home! I got to get back to my kids!”

“It’s death to go out there!” Mrs. Carmody came back smartly. She was standing by the twenty-five-pound sacks of fertilizer stacked below the window, and her face seemed to bulge somehow, as if she were swelling.

A teenager gave her a sudden hard push and she sat down on the bags with a surprised grunt. “Stop saying that, you old bag! Stop rappin’ that crazy bullshit!”

“Please!” Norton yelled. “If we just wait a few moments until it blows over and we can see—”

A babble of conflicting shouts greeted this.

“He’s right,” I said, shouting to be heard over the noise. “Let’s just try to keep cool.”

“I think that was an earthquake,” a bespectacled man said. His voice was soft. In one hand he held a package of hamburger and a bag of buns. The other hand was holding the hand of a little girl, maybe a year younger than Billy. “I really think that was an earthquake.”

“They had one over in Naples four years ago,” a fat local man said.

“That was in Casco,” his wife contradicted immediately. She spoke in the unmistakable tones of a veteran contradictor.

“Naples,” the fat local man said, but with less assurance.

“Casco,” his wife said firmly, and he gave up.

Somewhere a can that had been jostled to the very edge of its shelf by the thump, earthquake, whatever it had been, fell off with a delayed clatter. Billy burst into tears. “I want to go *home!* I want my MOTHER!”

“Can’t you shut that kid up?” Bud Brown asked. His eyes were darting rapidly but aimlessly from place to place.

“Would you like a shot in the teeth, motormouth?” I asked him.

“Come on, Dave, that’s not helping,” Norton said distractedly.

“I’m sorry,” the woman who had screamed earlier said. “I’m sorry, but I can’t stay here. I’ve got to get home and see to my kids.”

She looked around at us, a blond woman with a tired, pretty face.

“Wanda’s looking after little Victor, you see. Wanda’s only eight and sometimes she forgets...forgets she’s supposed to be...well, watching him, you know. And little Victor...he likes to turn on the stove burners to see the little red light come on...he likes that light...and sometimes he pulls out the plugs...little Victor does...and Wanda gets...bored watching him after a while...she’s just eight...” She stopped talking and just looked at us. I imagine that we must have looked like nothing but a bank of merciless eyes to her right then, not human beings at all, just eyes. “*Isn’t anyone going to help me?*” she screamed. Her lips began to tremble. “Won’t...won’t anybody here see a lady home?”

No one replied. People shuffled their feet. She looked from face to face with her own broken face. The fat local man took a hesitant half-step forward and his wife jerked him back with one quick tug, her hand clapped over his wrist like a manacle.

“You?” the blond woman asked Ollie. He shook his head. “You?” she said to Bud. He put his hand over the Texas Instruments calculator on the counter and made no reply. “You?” she said to Norton, and Norton began to say something in his big lawyer’s voice, something about how no one should go off half-cocked, and...and she dismissed him and Norton just trailed off.

“You?” she said to me, and I picked Billy up again and held him in my arms like a shield to ward off her terrible broken face.

“I hope you all rot in hell,” she said. She didn’t scream it. Her voice was dead tired. She went to the OUT door and pulled it open, using both hands. I wanted to say something to her, call her back, but my mouth was too dry.

“Aw, lady, listen—” the teenage kid who had shouted at Mrs. Carmody began. He held her arm. She looked down at his hand and he let her go, shamefaced. She slipped out into the fog. We watched her go and no one said anything. We watched the fog overlay her and make her insubstantial, not a human being anymore but a pencil-ink sketch of a human being done on the world’s whitest paper, and no one said anything. For a moment it was like the letters of the KEEP RIGHT sign that had seemed to float on nothingness; her arms and legs and pallid blond hair were all gone and only the misty remnants of her red summer dress remained, seeming to dance in white limbo. Then her dress was gone, too, and no one said anything.

IV

**The Storage Area. Problems with the Generators. What
Happened to the Bag-Boy.**

Billy began to act hysterical and tantrummy, screaming for his mother in a hoarse, demanding way through his tears, instantly regressing to the age of two. Snot was lathered on his upper lip. I led him away, walking down one of the middle aisles with my arm around his shoulders, trying to soothe him. I took him back by the long white meat cabinet that ran the length of the store at the back. Mr. McVey, the butcher, was still there. We nodded at each other, the best we could do under the circumstances.

I sat down on the floor and took Billy on my lap and held his face against my chest and rocked him and talked to him. I told him all the lies parents keep in reserve for bad situations, the ones that sound so damn plausible to a child, and I told them in a tone of perfect conviction.

“That’s not regular fog,” Billy said. He looked up at me, his eyes dark-circled and tear-streaked. “It isn’t, is it, Daddy?”

“No, I don’t think so.” I didn’t want to lie about that.

Kids don’t fight shock the way adults do; they go with it, maybe because kids are in a semipermanent state of shock until they’re

thirteen or so. Billy started to doze off. I held him, thinking he might snap awake again, but his doze deepened into a real sleep. Maybe he had been awake part of the night before, when we had slept three-in-a-bed for the first time since Billy was an infant. And maybe—I felt a cold eddy slip through me at the thought—maybe he had sensed something coming.

When I was sure he was solidly out, I laid him on the floor and went looking for something to cover him up with. Most of the people were still up front, looking out into the thick blanket of mist. Norton had gathered a little crowd of listeners, and was busy spellbinding—or trying to. Bud Brown stood rigidly at his post, but Ollie Weeks had left his.

There were a few people in the aisles, wandering like ghosts, their faces greasy with shock. I went into the storage area through the big double doors between the meat cabinet and the beer cooler.

The generator roared steadily behind its plywood partition, but something had gone wrong. I could smell diesel fumes, and they were much too strong. I walked toward the partition, taking shallow breaths. At last I unbuttoned my shirt and put part of it over my mouth and nose.

The storage area was long and narrow, feebly lit by two sets of emergency lights. Cartons were stacked everywhere—bleach on one side, cases of soft drinks on the far side of the partition, stacked cases of Beef-aroni and catsup. One of those had fallen over and the cardboard carton appeared to be bleeding.

I unlatched the door in the generator partition and stepped through. The machine was obscured in drifting, oily clouds of blue smoke. The exhaust pipe ran out through a hole in the wall. Something must have blocked off the outside end of the pipe. There was a simple on/off switch and I flipped it. The generator hitched, belched, coughed, and died. Then it ran down in a diminishing series of popping sounds that reminded me of Norton's stubborn chainsaw.

The emergency lights faded out and I was left in darkness. I got scared very quickly, and I got disoriented. My breathing sounded like a low wind rattling in straw. I bumped my nose on the flimsy plywood door going out and my heart lurched. There were windows in the double doors, but for some reason they had been painted black, and the darkness was nearly total. I got off course and ran into a stack of the bleach cartons. They tumbled and fell. One came close enough to my head to make me step backward, and I tripped over another carton that had landed behind me. I fell down, thumping my head hard enough to see bright stars in the darkness. Good show.

I lay there cursing myself and rubbing my head, telling myself to just take it easy, just get up and get out of here, get back to Billy, telling myself nothing soft and slimy was going to close over my ankle or slip into one groping hand. I told myself not to lose control, or I would end up blundering around back here in a panic, knocking things over and creating a mad obstacle course for myself.

I stood up carefully, looking for a pencil line of light between the double doors. I found it, a faint but unmistakable scratch on the darkness. I started toward it, and then stopped.

There was a sound. A soft sliding sound. It stopped, then started again with a stealthy little bump. Everything inside me went loose. I regressed magically to four years of age. That sound wasn't coming from the market. It was coming from behind me. From outside. Where the mist was. Something that was slipping and sliding and scraping over the cinderblocks. And, maybe, looking for a way in.

Or maybe it was already in, and it was looking for me. Maybe in a moment I would feel whatever was making that sound on my shoe. Or on my neck.

It came again. I was positive it was outside. But that didn't make it any better. I told my legs to go and they refused the order. Then the quality of the noise changed. Something *rasped* across the darkness and my heart leaped in my chest and I lunged at that thin

vertical line of light. I hit the doors straight-arm and burst through into the market.

Three or four people were right outside the double doors—Ollie Weeks was one of them—and they all jumped back in surprise. Ollie grabbed at his chest. “David!” he said in a pinched voice. “Jesus Christ, you want to take ten years off my—” He saw my face. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Did you hear it?” I asked. My voice sounded strange in my own ears, high and squeaking. “Did any of you hear it?”

They hadn’t heard anything, of course. They had come up to see why the generator had gone off. As Ollie told me that, one of the bag-boys bustled up with an armload of flashlights. He looked from Ollie to me curiously.

“I turned the generator off,” I said, and explained why.

“What did you hear?” one of the other men asked. He worked for the town road department; his name was Jim something.

“I don’t know. A scraping noise. Slithery. I don’t want to hear it again.”

“Nerves,” the other fellow with Ollie said.

No. It was not nerves.

“Did you hear it before the lights went out?”

“No, only after. But...” But nothing. I could see the way they were looking at me. They didn’t want any more bad news, anything else frightening or off-kilter. There was enough of that already. Only Ollie looked as if he believed me.

“Let’s go in and start her up again,” the bag-boy said, handing out the flashlights. Ollie took his doubtfully. The bag-boy offered me one, a slightly contemptuous shine in his eyes. He was maybe eighteen.

After a moment's thought, I took the light. I still needed something to cover Billy with.

Ollie opened the doors and chocked them, letting in some light. The bleach cartons lay scattered around the half-open door in the plywood partition.

The fellow named Jim sniffed and said, "Smells pretty rank, all right. Guess you was right to shut her down."

The flashlight beams bobbed and danced across cartons of canned goods, toilet paper, dog food. The beams were smoky in the drifting fumes the blocked exhaust had turned back into the storage area. The bag-boy trained his light briefly on the wide loading door at the extreme right.

The two men and Ollie went inside the generator compartment. Their lights flashed uneasily back and forth, reminding me of something out of a boys' adventure story—and I illustrated a series of them while I was still in college. Pirates burying their bloody gold at midnight, or maybe the mad doctor and his assistant snatching a body. Shadows, made twisted and monstrous by the shifting, conflicting flashlight beams, bobbed on the walls. The generator ticked irregularly as it cooled.

The bag-boy was walking toward the loading door, flashing his light ahead of him. "I wouldn't go over there," I said.

"No, I know *you* wouldn't."

"Try it now, Ollie," one of the men said. The generator wheezed, then roared.

"Jesus! Shut her down! Holy crow, don't that *stink!*"

The generator died again.

The bag-boy walked back from the loading door just as they came out. “Something’s plugged that exhaust, all right,” one of the men said.

“I’ll tell you what,” the bag-boy said. His eyes were shining in the glow of the flashlights, and there was a devil-may-care expression on his face that I had sketched too many times as part of the frontispieces for my boys’ adventure series. “Get it running long enough for me to raise the loading door back there. I’ll go around and clear away whatever it is.”

“Norm, I don’t think that’s a very good idea,” Ollie said doubtfully.

“Is it an electric door?” the one called Jim asked.

“Sure,” Ollie said. “But I just don’t think it would be wise for—”

“That’s okay,” the other guy said. He tipped his baseball cap back on his head. “I’ll do it.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Ollie began again. “I really don’t think anyone should—”

“Don’t worry,” he said indulgently to Ollie, dismissing him.

Norm, the bag-boy, was indignant. “Listen, it was my idea,” he said.

All at once, by some magic, they had gotten around to arguing about who was going to do it instead of whether or not it should be done at all. But of course, none of them had heard that nasty slithering sound. “Stop it!” I said loudly.

They looked around at me.

“You don’t seem to understand, or you’re trying as hard as you can *not* to understand. This is no ordinary fog. Nobody has come into the market since it hit. If you open that loading door and something comes in—”

“Something like what?” Norm said with perfect eighteen-year-old macho contempt.

“Whatever made the noise I heard.”

“Mr. Drayton,” Jim said. “Pardon me, but I’m not convinced you heard anything. I know you’re a big-shot artist with connections in New York and Hollywood and all, but that doesn’t make you any different from anyone else, in my book. Way I figure, you got in here in the dark and maybe you just...got a little confused.”

“Maybe I did,” I said. “And maybe if you want to start screwing around outside, you ought to start by making sure that lady got home safe to her kids.” His attitude—and that of his buddy and of Norm the bag-boy—was making me mad and scaring me more at the same time. They had the sort of light in their eyes that some men get when they go shooting rats at the town dump.

“Hey,” Jim’s buddy said. “When any of us here want your advice, we’ll ask for it.”

Hesitantly, Ollie said: “The generator really isn’t that important, you know. The food in the cold cases will keep for twelve hours or more with absolutely no—”

“Okay, kid, you’re it,” Jim said brusquely. “I’ll start the motor, you raise the door so that the place doesn’t stink up too bad. Me and Myron will be standing by the exhaust outflow. Give us a yell when it’s clear.”

“Sure,” Norm said, and hustled excitedly away.

“This is crazy,” I said. “You let that lady go by herself—”

“I didn’t notice you breaking your ass to escort her,” Jim’s buddy Myron said. A dull, brick-colored flush was creeping out of his collar.

“—but you’re going to let this kid risk his life over a generator that doesn’t even matter?”

“Why don’t you just shut the fuck up!” Norm yelled.

“Listen, Mr. Drayton,” Jim said, and smiled at me coldly. “I’ll tell you what. If you’ve got anything else to say, I think you better count your teeth first, because I’m tired of listening to your bullshit.”

Ollie looked at me, plainly frightened. I shrugged. They were crazy, that was all. Their sense of proportion was temporarily gone. Out there they had been confused and scared. In here was a straightforward mechanical problem: a balky generator. It was possible to solve this problem. Solving the problem would help make them feel less confused and helpless. Therefore they would solve it.

Jim and his friend Myron decided I knew when I was licked and went back into the generator compartment. “Ready, Norm?” Jim asked.

Norm nodded, then realized they couldn’t hear a nod. “Yeah,” he said.

“Norm,” I said. “Don’t be a fool.”

“It’s a mistake,” Ollie added.

He looked at us, and suddenly his face was much younger than eighteen. It was the face of a boy. His Adam’s apple bobbed convulsively, and I saw that he was scared green. He opened his mouth to say something—I think he was going to call it off—and then the generator roared into life again, and when it was running smoothly, Norm lunged at the button to the right of the door and it began to rattle upward on its dual steel tracks. The emergency lights had come back on when the generator started. Now they dimmed down as the motor which lifted the door sucked away the juice.

The shadows ran backward and melted. The storage area began to fill with the mellow white light of an overcast late-winter day. I noticed that odd, acrid smell again.

The loading door went up two feet, then four. Beyond I could see a square cement platform outlined around the edges with a yellow stripe. The yellow faded and washed out in just three feet. The fog was incredibly thick.

“Ho up!” Norm yelled.

Tendrils of mist, as white and fine as floating lace, eddied inside. The air was cold. It had been noticeably cool all morning long, especially after the sticky heat of the last three weeks, but it had been a summery coolness. This was *cold*. It was like March. I shivered. And I thought of Steff.

The generator died. Jim came out just as Norm ducked under the door. He saw it. So did I. So did Ollie.

A tentacle came over the far lip of the concrete loading platform and grabbed Norm around the calf. My mouth dropped wide open. Ollie made a very short glottal sound of surprise—*uk!* The tentacle tapered from a thickness of a foot—the size of a grass snake—at the point where it had wrapped itself around Norm’s lower leg to a thickness of maybe four or five feet where it disappeared into the mist. It was slate gray on top, shading to a fleshy pink underneath. And there were rows of suckers on the underside. They were moving and writhing like hundreds of small, puckering mouths.

Norm looked down. He saw what had him. His eyes bulged. *“Get it off me! Hey, get it off me! Christ Jesus, get this frigging thing off me!”*

“Oh my God,” Jim whimpered.

Norm grabbed the bottom edge of the loading door and yanked himself back in. The tentacle seemed to bulge, the way your arm will

when you flex it. Norm was yanked back against the corrugated steel door—his head clanged against it. The tentacle bulged more, and Norm’s legs and torso began to slip back out. The bottom edge of the loading door scraped the shirttail out of his pants. He yanked savagely and pulled himself back in like a man doing a chin-up.

“Help me,” he was sobbing. “Help me, you guys, please, please.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Myron said. He had come out of the generator compartment to see what was going on.

I was the closest, and I grabbed Norm around the waist and yanked as hard as I could, rocking back on my heels. For a moment we moved backward, but only for a moment. It was like stretching a rubber band or pulling taffy. The tentacle yielded but gave up its basic grip not at all. Then three more tentacles floated out of the mist toward us. One curled around Norm’s flapping red Federal apron and tore it away. It disappeared back into the mist with the red cloth curled in its grip and I thought of something my mother used to say when my brother and I would beg for something she didn’t want us to have—candy, a comic book, some toy. “You need that like a hen needs a flag,” she’d say. I thought of that, and I thought of that tentacle waving Norm’s red apron around, and I got laughing. I got laughing, except my laughter and Norm’s screams sounded about the same. Maybe no one even knew I was laughing except me.

The other two tentacles slithered aimlessly back and forth on the loading platform for a moment, making those low scraping sounds I had heard earlier. Then one of them slapped against Norm’s left hip and slipped around it. I felt it touch my arm. It was warm and pulsing and smooth. I think now that if it had gripped me with those suckers, I would have gone out into the mist too. But it didn’t. It grabbed Norm. And the third tentacle ringleted his other ankle.

Now he was being pulled away from me. “Help me!” I shouted. “Ollie! Someone! Give me a hand here!”

But they didn't come. I don't know what they were doing, but they didn't come.

I looked down and saw the tentacle around Norm's waist working into his skin. The suckers were *eating* him where his shirt had pulled out of his pants. Blood, as red as his missing apron, began to seep out of the trench the pulsing tentacle had made for itself.

I banged my head on the lower edge of the partly raised door.

Norm's legs were outside again. One of his loafers had fallen off. A new tentacle came out of the mist, wrapped its tip firmly around the shoe, and made off with it. Norm's fingers clutched at the door's lower edge. He had it in a death grip. His fingers were livid. He was not screaming anymore; he was beyond that. His head whipped back and forth in an endless gesture of negation, and his long black hair flew wildly.

I looked over his shoulder and saw more tentacles coming, dozens of them, a forest of them. Most were small but a few were gigantic, as thick as the moss-corseted tree that had been lying across our driveway that morning. The big ones had candy pink suckers that seemed the size of manhole covers. One of these big ones struck the concrete loading platform with a loud and rolling *thrrrrap!* sound and moved sluggishly toward us like a great blind earthworm. I gave one gigantic tug, and the tentacle holding Norm's right calf slipped a little. That was all. But before it reestablished its grip, I saw that the thing was eating him away.

One of the tentacles brushed delicately past my cheek and then wavered in the air, as if debating. I thought of Billy then. Billy was lying asleep in the market by Mr. McVey's long white meat cooler. I had come in here to find something to cover him up with. If one of those things got hold of me, there would be no one to watch out for him—except maybe Norton.

So I let go of Norm and dropped to my hands and knees.

I was half in and half out, directly under the raised door. A tentacle passed by on my left, seeming to walk on its suckers. It attached itself to one of Norm's bulging upper arms, paused for a second, and then slid around it in coils.

Now Norm looked like something out of a madman's dream of snake charming. Tentacles twisted over him uneasily almost everywhere...and they were all around me, as well. I made a clumsy leapfrog jump back inside, landed on my shoulder, and rolled. Jim, Ollie and Myron were still there. They stood like a tableau of waxworks in Madame Tussaud's, their faces pale, their eyes too bright. Jim and Myron flanked the door to the generator compartment.

"Start the generator!" I yelled at them.

Neither moved. They were staring with a drugged, thanatotic avidity at the loading bay.

I groped on the floor, picked up the first thing that came to hand—a box of Snowy bleach—and chucked it at Jim. It hit him in the gut, just above the belt buckle. He grunted and grabbed at himself. His eyes flickered back into some semblance of normality.

"Go start that fucking generator!" I screamed so loudly it hurt my throat.

He didn't move; instead he began to defend himself, apparently having decided that, with Norm being eaten alive by some insane horror from the mist, the time had come for rebuttals.

"I'm sorry," he whined. "I didn't know, how the hell was I supposed to know? You said you heard something but I didn't know what you meant, you should have said what you meant better. I thought, I dunno, maybe a bird, or something—"

So then Ollie moved, bunting him aside with one thick shoulder and blundering into the generator room. Jim stumbled over one of

the bleach cartons and fell down, just as I had done in the dark. "I'm sorry," he said again. His red hair had tumbled over his brow. His cheeks were cheese white. His eyes were those of a horrified little boy. Seconds later the generator coughed and rumbled into life.

I turned back to the loading door. Norm was almost gone, yet he clung grimly with one hand. His body boiled with tentacles, and blood pattered serenely down on the concrete in dime-size droplets. His head whipped back and forth and his eyes bulged with terror as they stared off into the mist.

Other tentacles now crept and crawled over the floor inside. There were too many near the button that controlled the loading door to even think of approaching it. One of them closed around a half-liter bottle of Pepsi and carried it off. Another slipped around a cardboard carton and squeezed. The carton ruptured and rolls of toilet paper, two-packs of Delsey wrapped in cellophane, geysered upward, came down, and rolled everywhere. Tentacles seized them eagerly.

One of the big ones slipped in. Its tip rose from the floor and it seemed to sniff the air. It began to advance toward Myron and he stepped mincingly away from it, his eyes rolling madly in their sockets. A high-pitched little moan escaped his slack lips.

I looked around for something, anything at all long enough to reach over the questing tentacles and punch the SHUT button on the wall. I saw a janitor's push broom leaning against a stack-up of beer cases and grabbed it.

Norm's good hand was ripped loose. He thudded down onto the concrete loading platform and scrabbled madly for a grip with his one free hand. His eyes met mine for a moment. They were hellishly bright and aware. He knew what was happening to him. Then he was pulled, bumping and rolling, into the mist. There was another scream, choked off. Norm was gone.

I pushed the tip of the broom handle onto the button and the motor whined. The door began to slide back down. It touched the thickest of the tentacles first, the one that had been investigating in Myron's direction. It indented its hide—skin, whatever—and then pierced it. A black goo began to spurt from it. It writhed madly, whipping across the concrete storage-area floor like an obscene bullwhip, and then it seemed to flatten out. A moment later it was gone. The others began to withdraw.

One of them had a five-pound bag of Gaines dog food, and it wouldn't let go. The descending door cut it in two before thumping home in its grooved slot. The severed chunk of tentacle squeezed convulsively tighter, splitting the bag open and sending brown nuggets of dog food everywhere. Then it began to flop on the floor like a fish out of water, curling and uncurling, but ever more slowly, until it lay still. I prodded it with the tip of the broom. The piece of tentacle, maybe three feet long, closed on it savagely for a moment, then loosened and lay limp again in the confused litter of toilet paper, dog food, and bleach cartons.

There was no sound except the roar of the generator and Ollie, crying inside the plywood compartment. I could see him sitting on a stool in there with his face clutched in his hands.

Then I became aware of another sound. The soft, slithery sound I had heard in the dark. Only now the sound was multiplied tenfold. It was the sound of tentacles squirming over the outside of the loading door, trying to find a way in.

Myron took a couple of steps toward me. "Look," he said. "You got to understand—"

I looped a fist at his face. He was too surprised to even try to block it. It landed just below his nose and mashed his upper lip into his teeth. Blood flowed into his mouth.

"You got him killed!" I shouted. "Did you get a good look at it? Did you get a good look at what you did?"

I started to pummel him, throwing wild rights and lefts, not punching the way I had been taught in my college boxing classes but only hitting out. He stepped back, shaking some of them off, taking others with a numbness that seemed like a kind of resignation or penance. That made me angrier. I bloodied his nose. I raised a mouse under one of his eyes that was going to black just beautifully. I clipped him a hard one on the chin. After that one, his eyes went cloudy and semi-vacant.

“Look,” he kept saying, “look, look,” and then I punched him low in the stomach and the air went out of him and he didn’t say “look, look” anymore. I don’t know how long I would have gone on punching him, but someone grabbed my arms. I jerked free and turned around. I was hoping it was Jim. I wanted to punch Jim out, too.

But it wasn’t Jim. It was Ollie, his round face dead pale, except for the dark circles around his eyes—eyes that were still shiny from his tears. “Don’t, David,” he said. “Don’t hit him anymore. It doesn’t solve anything.”

Jim was standing off to one side, his face a bewildered blank. I kicked a carton of something at him. It struck one of his Dingo boots and bounced away.

“You and your buddy are a couple of stupid assholes,” I said.

“Come on, David,” Ollie said unhappily. “Quit it.”

“You two assholes got that kid killed.”

Jim looked down at his Dingo boots. Myron sat on the floor and held his beer belly. I was breathing hard. The blood was roaring in my ears and I was trembling all over. I sat down on a couple of cartons and put my head down between my knees and gripped my legs hard just above the ankles. I sat that way for a while with my hair in my face, waiting to see if I was going to black out or puke or what.

After a bit the feeling began to pass and I looked up at Ollie. His pinky ring flashed subdued fire in the glow of the emergency lights.

“Okay,” I said dully. “I’m done.”

“Good,” Ollie said. “We’ve got to think what to do next.”

The storage area was beginning to stink of exhaust again. “Shut the generator down. That’s the first thing.”

“Yeah, let’s get out of here,” Myron said. His eyes appealed to me. “I’m sorry about the kid. But you got to understand—”

“I don’t got to understand anything. You and your buddy go back into the market, but you wait right there by the beer cooler. And don’t say a word to anybody. Not yet.”

They went willingly enough, huddling together as they passed through the swinging doors. Ollie killed the generator, and just as the lights started to fail, I saw a quilted rug—the sort of thing movers use to pad breakable things—flopped over a stack of returnable soda bottles. I reached up and grabbed it for Billy.

There was the shuffling, blundering sound of Ollie coming out of the generator compartment. Like a great many overweight men, his breathing had a slightly heavy wheezing sound.

“David?” His voice wavered a little. “You still here?”

“Right here, Ollie. You want to watch out for all those bleach cartons.”

“Yeah.”

I guided him with my voice and in thirty seconds or so he reached out of the dark and gripped my shoulder. He gave a long, trembling sigh.

“Christ, let’s get out of here.” I could smell the Roloids he always chewed on his breath. “This dark is...is bad.”

“It is,” I said. “But hang tight a minute, Ollie. I wanted to talk to you and I didn’t want those other two fuckheads listening.”

“Dave...they didn’t twist Norm’s arm. You ought to remember that.”

“Norm was a kid, and they weren’t. But never mind, that’s over. We’ve got to tell them, Ollie. The people in the market.”

“If they panic—” Ollie’s voice was doubtful.

“Maybe they will and maybe they won’t. But it will make them think twice about going out, which is what most of them want to do. Why shouldn’t they? Most of them will have people they left at home. I do myself. We have to make them understand what they’re risking if they go out there.”

His hand was gripping my arm hard. “All right,” he said. “Yes, I just keep asking myself...all those tentacles...like a squid or something...David, what were they hooked to? *What were those tentacles hooked to?*”

“I don’t know. But I don’t want those two telling people on their own. That *would* start a panic. Let’s go.”

I looked around, and after a moment or two located the thin line of vertical light between the swing doors. We started to shuffle toward it, wary of scattered cartons, one of Ollie’s pudgy hands clamped over my forearm. It occurred to me that all of us had lost our flashlights.

As we reached the doors, Ollie said flatly: “What we saw...it’s impossible, David. You know that, don’t you? Even if a van from the Boston Seaquarium drove out back and dumped out one of those

gigantic squids like in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, it would die. *It would just die.*”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s right.”

“So what happened? Huh? What happened? What is that damned mist?”

“Ollie, I don’t know.”

We went out.

V

**An Argument with Norton. A Discussion Near the Beer Cooler.
Verification.**

Jim and his good buddy Myron were just outside the doors, each with a Budweiser in his fist. I looked at Billy, saw he was still asleep, and covered him with the ruglike mover's pad. He moved a little, muttered something, and then lay still again. I looked at my watch. It was 12:15 P.M. That seemed utterly impossible; it felt as if at least five hours had passed since I had first gone in there to look for something to cover him with. But the whole thing, from first to last, had taken only about thirty-five minutes.

I went back to where Ollie stood with Jim and Myron. Ollie had taken a beer and he offered me one. I took it and gulped down half the can at once, as I had that morning cutting wood. It bucked me up a little.

Jim was Jim Grondin. Myron's last name was LaFleur—that had its comic side, all right. Myron the flower had drying blood on his lips, chin, and cheek. The eye with the mouse under it was already swelling up. The girl in the cranberry-colored sweatshirt walked by aimlessly and gave Myron a cautious look. I could have told her that Myron was only dangerous to teenage boys intent on proving their manhood, but saved my breath. After all, Ollie was right—they *had* only been doing what they thought was best, although in a blind,

fearful way rather than in any real common interest. And now I needed them to do what I thought was best. I didn't think that would be a problem. They had both had the stuffing knocked out of them. Neither—especially Myron the flower—was going to be good for anything for some time to come. Something that had been in their eyes when they were fixing to send Norm out to unplug the exhaust vent had gone now. Their peckers were no longer up.

“We're going to have to tell these people something,” I said.

Jim opened his mouth to protest.

“Ollie and I will leave out any part you and Myron had in sending Norm out there if you'll back up what he and I say about...well, about what got him.”

“Sure,” Jim said, pitifully eager. “Sure, if we don't tell, people might go out there...like that woman...that woman who...” He wiped his hand across his mouth and then drank more beer quickly. “Christ, what a mess.”

“David,” Ollie said. “What—” He stopped, then made himself go on. “What if they get in? The tentacles?”

“How could they?” Jim asked. “You guys shut the door.”

“Sure,” Ollie said. “But the whole front wall of this place is plate glass.”

An elevator shot my stomach down about twenty floors. I had known that, but had somehow been successfully ignoring it. I looked over at where Billy lay asleep. I thought of those tentacles swarming over Norm. I thought about that happening to Billy.

“Plate glass,” Myron LaFleur whispered. “Jesus Christ in a chariot-driven sidecar.”

I left the three of them standing by the cooler, each working a second can of beer, and went looking for Brent Norton. I found him in sober-sided conversation with Bud Brown at Register 2. The pair of them—Norton with his styled gray hair and his elderly-stud good looks, Brown with his dour New England phiz—looked like something out of a *New Yorker* cartoon.

As many as two dozen people milled restlessly in the space between the end of the checkout lanes and the long show window. A lot of them were lined up at the glass, looking out into the mist. I was again reminded of the people that congregate at a building site.

Mrs. Carmody was seated on the stationary conveyor belt of one of the checkout lanes, smoking a Parliament in a One Step at a Time filter. Her eyes measured me, found me wanting, and passed on. She looked as if she might be dreaming awake.

“Brent,” I said.

“David! Where did you get off to?”

“That’s what I’d like to talk to you about.”

“There are people back at the cooler drinking beer,” Brown said grimly. He sounded like a man announcing that X-rated movies had been shown at the deacons’ party. “I can see them in the security mirror. This has simply got to stop.”

“Brent?”

“Excuse me for a minute, would you, Mr. Brown?”

“Certainly.” He folded his arms across his chest and stared grimly up into the convex mirror. “It *is* going to stop, I can promise you that.”

Norton and I headed toward the beer cooler in the far corner of the store, walking past the housewares and notions. I glanced back over my shoulder, noticing uneasily how the wooden beams framing

the tall, rectangular sections of glass had buckled and twisted and splintered. And one of the windows wasn't even whole, I remembered. A pie-shaped chunk of glass had fallen out of the upper corner at the instant of that queer thump. Perhaps we could stuff it with cloth or something—maybe a bunch of those \$3.59 ladies' tops I had noticed near the wine—

My thoughts broke off abruptly, and I had to put the back of my hand over my mouth, as if stifling a burp. What I was really stifling was the rancid flood of horrified giggles that wanted to escape me at the thought of stuffing a bunch of shirts into a hole to keep out those tentacles that had carried Norm away. I had seen one of those tentacles—a small one—squeeze a bag of dog food until it simply ruptured.

“David? Are you okay?”

“Huh?”

“Your face—you looked like you just had a good idea or a bloody awful one.”

Something hit me then. “Brent, what happened to that man who came in raving about something in the mist getting John Lee Frovin?”

“The guy with the nosebleed?”

“Yes, him.”

“He passed out and Mr. Brown brought him around with some smelling salts from the first-aid kit. Why?”

“Did he say anything else when he woke up?”

“He started in on that hallucination. Mr. Brown conducted him up to the office. He was frightening some of the women. He seemed happy enough to go. Something about the glass. When Mr. Brown

said there was only one small window in the manager's office, and that that one was reinforced with wire, he seemed happy enough to go. I presume he's still there."

"What he was talking about is no hallucination."

"No, of course it isn't."

"And that thud we felt?"

"No, but, David—"

He's scared, I kept reminding myself. Don't blow up at him, you've treated yourself to one blowup this morning and that's enough. Don't blow up at him just because this is the way he was during that stupid property-line dispute...first patronizing, then sarcastic, and finally, when it became clear he was going to lose, ugly. Don't blow up at him because you're going to need him. He may not be able to start his own chainsaw, but he looks like the father figure of the Western world, and if he tells people not to panic, they won't. So don't blow up at him.

"You see those double doors up there beyond the beer cooler?"

He looked, frowning. "Isn't one of those men drinking beer the other assistant manager? Weeks? If Brown sees that, I can promise you that man will be looking for a job very soon."

"Brent, will you listen to me?"

He glanced back at me absently. "What were you saying, Dave? I'm sorry."

Not as sorry as he was going to be. "Do you see those doors?"

"Yes, of course I do. What about them?"

"They give on the storage area that runs all the way along the west face of the building. Billy fell asleep and I went back there to

see if I could find something to cover him up with...”

I told him everything, only leaving out the argument about whether or not Norm should have gone out at all. I told him what had come in...and finally, what had gone out, screaming. Brent Norton refused to believe it. No—he refused to even entertain it. I took him over to Jim, Ollie, and Myron. All three of them verified the story, although Jim and Myron the flower were well on their way to getting drunk.

Again, Norton refused to believe or even to entertain it. He simply balked. “No,” he said. “No, no, no. Forgive me, gentlemen, but it’s completely ridiculous. Either you’re having me on”—he patronized us with his gleaming smile to show that he could take a joke as well as the next fellow—“or you’re suffering from some form of group hypnosis.”

My temper rose again, and I controlled it—with difficulty. I don’t think that I’m ordinarily a quick-tempered man, but these weren’t ordinary circumstances. I had Billy to think about, and what was happening—or what had already happened—to Stephanie. Those things were constantly gnawing at the back of my mind.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s go back there. There’s a chunk of tentacle on the floor. The door cut it off when it came down. And you can *hear* them. They’re rustling all over that door. It sounds like the wind in ivy.”

“No,” he said calmly.

“What?” I really did believe I had misheard him. “What did you say?”

“I said no, I’m not going back there. The joke has gone far enough.”

“Brent, I swear to you it’s no joke.”

“Of course it is,” he snapped. His eyes ran over Jim, Myron, rested briefly on Ollie Weeks—who held his glance with calm impassivity—and at last came back to me. “It’s what you locals probably call ‘a real belly-buster.’ Right, David?”

“Brent...look—”

“No, you look!” His voice began to rise toward a courtroom shout. It carried very, very well, and several of the people who were wandering around, edgy and aimless, looked over to see what was going on. Norton jabbed his finger at me as he spoke. “It’s a joke. It’s a banana skin and I’m the guy that’s supposed to slip on it. None of you people are exactly crazy about out-of-towners, am I right? You all pretty much stick together. The way it happened when I hauled you into court to get what was rightfully mine. You won that one, all right. Why not? Your father was the famous artist, and it’s your town. I only pay my taxes and spend my money here!”

He was no longer performing, hectoring us with the trained courtroom shout; he was nearly screaming and on the verge of losing all control. Ollie Weeks turned and walked away, clutching his beer. Myron and his friend Jim were staring at Norton with frank amazement.

“Am I supposed to go back there and look at some ninety-eight-cent rubber-joke novelty while these two hicks stand around and laugh their asses off?”

“Hey, you want to watch who you’re calling a hick,” Myron said.

“I’m *glad* that tree fell on your boathouse, if you want to know the truth. *Glad.*” Norton was grinning savagely at me. “Stove it in pretty well, didn’t it? Fantastic. Now get out of my way.”

He tried to push past me. I grabbed him by the arm and threw him against the beer cooler. A woman cawed in surprise. Two six-packs of Bud fell over.

“You dig out your ears and listen, Brent. There are lives at stake here. My kid’s is not the least of them. So you listen, or I swear I’ll knock the shit out of you.”

“Go ahead,” Norton said, still grinning with a kind of insane palsied bravado. His eyes, bloodshot and wide, bulged from their sockets. “Show everyone how big and brave you are, beating up a man with a heart condition who is old enough to be your father.”

“Sock him anyway!” Jim exclaimed. “Fuck his heart condition. I don’t even think a cheap New York shyster like him has got a heart.”

“You keep out of it,” I said to Jim, and then put my face down to Norton’s. I was kissing distance, if that had been what I had in mind. The cooler was off, but it was still radiating a chill. “Stop throwing up sand. You know damn well I’m telling the truth.”

“I know...no...such thing,” he panted.

“If it was another time and place, I’d let you get away with it. I don’t care how scared you are, and I’m not keeping score. I’m scared, too. But I need you, goddammit! Does that get through? I need you!”

“Let me *go!*”

I grabbed him by the shirt and shook him. “Don’t you understand anything? People are going to start leaving and walk right into that thing out there! For Christ’s sake, don’t you understand?”

“*Let me go!*”

“Not until you come back there with me and see for yourself.”

“I told you, *no!* It’s all a trick, a joke. I’m not as stupid as you take me for—”

“Then I’ll haul you back there myself.”

I grabbed him by the shoulder and the scruff of his neck. The seam of his shirt under one arm tore with a soft purring sound. I dragged him toward the double doors. Norton let out a wretched scream. A knot of people, fifteen or eighteen, had gathered, but they kept their distance. None showed any signs of wanting to interfere.

“Help me!” Norton cried. His eyes bulged behind his glasses. His styled hair had gone awry again, sticking up in the same two little tufts behind his ears. People shuffled their feet and watched.

“What are you screaming for?” I said in his ear. “It’s just a joke, right? That’s why I took you to town when you asked to come and why I trusted you to cross Billy in the parking lot—because I had this handy fog all manufactured, I rented a fog machine from Hollywood, it cost me fifteen thousand dollars and another eight thousand dollars to ship it, all so I could play a joke on you. Stop bullshitting yourself and open your eyes!”

“*Let...me...go!*” Norton bawled. We were almost at the doors.

“Here, here! What is this? What are you doing?”

It was Brown. He hustled and elbowed his way through the crowd of watchers.

“Make him let me go,” Norton said hoarsely. “He’s crazy.”

“No. He’s not crazy. I wish he were, but he isn’t.” That was Ollie, and I could have blessed him. He came around the aisle behind us and stood there facing Brown.

Brown’s eyes dropped to the beer Ollie was holding. “You’re *drinking!*” he said, and his voice was surprised but not totally devoid of pleasure. “You’ll lose your job for this.”

“Come on, Bud,” I said, letting Norton go. “This is no ordinary situation.”

“Regulations don’t change,” Brown said smugly. “I’ll see that the company hears of it. That’s my responsibility.”

Norton, meanwhile, had skittered away and stood at some distance, trying to straighten his shirt and smooth back his hair. His eyes darted between Brown and me nervously.

“*Hey!*” Ollie cried suddenly, raising his voice and producing a bass thunder I never would have suspected from this large but soft and unassuming man. “*Hey! Everybody in the store! You want to come up back and hear this! It concerns all of you!*” He looked at me levelly, ignoring Brown altogether. “Am I doing all right?”

“Fine.”

People began to gather. The original knot of spectators to my argument with Norton doubled, then trebled.

“There’s something you all had better know—” Ollie began.

“You put that beer down right now,” Brown said.

“You shut up right now,” I said, and took a step toward him.

Brown took a compensatory step back. “I don’t know what some of you think you are doing,” he said, “but I can tell you it’s going to be reported to the Federal Foods Company! All of it! And I want you to understand—*there may be charges!*” His lips drew nervously back from his yellowed teeth, and I could feel sympathy for him. Just trying to cope; that was all he was doing. As Norton was by imposing a mental gag order on himself. Myron and Jim had tried by turning the whole thing into a macho charade—if the generator could be fixed, the mist would blow over. This was Brown’s way. He was... Protecting the Store.

“Then you go ahead and take down the names,” I said. “But please don’t talk.”

“I’ll take down plenty of names,” he responded. “Yours will be head on the list, you...you *bohemian*.”

“Mr. David Drayton has got something to tell you,” Ollie said, “and I think you had better all listen up, in case you were planning on going home.”

So I told them what had happened, pretty much as I told Norton. There was some laughter at first, then a deepening uneasiness as I finished.

“It’s a lie, you know,” Norton said. His voice tried for hard emphasis and overshot into stridency. This was the man I’d told first, hoping to enlist his credibility. What a balls-up.

“Of course it’s a lie,” Brown agreed. “It’s lunacy. Where do you suppose those tentacles came from, Mr. Drayton?”

“I don’t know, and at this point, that’s not even a very important question. They’re here. There’s—”

“I suspect they came out of a few of those beer cans. That’s what I suspect.” This got some appreciative laughter. It was silenced by the strong, rusty-hinge voice of Mrs. Carmody.

“Death!” she cried, and those who had been laughing quickly sobered.

She marched into the center of the rough circle that had formed, her canary pants seeming to give off a light of their own, her huge purse swinging against one elephantine thigh. Her black eyes glanced arrogantly around, as sharp and balefully sparkling as a magpie’s. Two good-looking girls of about sixteen with CAMP WOODLANDS written on the back of their white rayon shirts shrank away from her.

“You listen but you don’t hear! You hear but you don’t believe! Which one of you wants to go outside and see for himself?” Her eyes swept them, and then fell on me. “And just what do you propose to

do about it, Mr. David Drayton? What do you think you can do about it?”

She grinned, skull-like above her canary outfit.

“It’s the end, I tell you. The end of everything. It’s the Last Times. The moving finger has writ, not in fire, but in lines of mist. The earth has opened and spewed forth its abominations—”

“Can’t you make her shut up?” one of the teenage girls burst out. She was beginning to cry. “She’s scaring me!”

“Are you scared, dearie?” Mrs. Carmody asked, and turned on her. “You aren’t scared now, no. But when the foul creatures the Imp has loosed upon the face of the earth come for you—”

“That’s enough now, Mrs. Carmody,” Ollie said, taking her arm. “That’s just fine.”

“You let go of me! It’s the end, I tell you! It’s death! Death!”

“It’s a pile of shit,” a man in a fishing hat and glasses said disgustedly.

“No, sir,” Myron spoke up. “I know it sounds like something out of a dope-dream, but it’s the flat-out truth. I saw it myself.”

“I did, too,” Jim said.

“And me,” Ollie chipped in. He had succeeded in quieting Mrs. Carmody, at least for the time being. But she stood close by, clutching her big purse and grinning her crazy grin. No one wanted to stand too close to her—they muttered among themselves, not liking the corroboration. Several of them looked back at the big plate-glass windows in an uneasy, speculative way. I was glad to see it.

“Lies,” Norton said. “You people all lie each other up. That’s all.”

“What you’re suggesting is totally beyond belief,” Brown said.

“We don’t have to stand here chewing it over,” I told him. “Come back into the storage area with me. Take a look. And a listen.”

“Customers are not allowed in the—”

“Bud,” Ollie said, “go with him. Let’s settle this.”

“All right,” Brown said. “Mr. Drayton? Let’s get this foolishness over with.”

We pushed through the double doors into the darkness.

The sound was unpleasant—perhaps evil.

Brown felt it, too, for all his hardheaded Yankee manner; his hand clutched my arm immediately, his breath caught for a moment and then resumed more harshly.

It was a low whispering sound from the direction of the loading door—an almost caressing sound. I swept around gently with one foot and finally struck one of the flashlights. I bent down, got it, and turned it on. Brown’s face was tightly drawn, and he hadn’t even seen them—he was only hearing them. But I had seen, and I could imagine them twisting and climbing over the corrugated steel surface of the door like living vines.

“What do you think now? Totally beyond belief?”

Brown licked his lips and looked at the littered confusion of boxes and bags. “They did this?”

“Some of it. Most of it. Come over here.”

He came—reluctantly. I spotted the flashlight on the shriveled and curled section of tentacle, still lying by the push broom. Brown bent toward it.

“Don’t touch that,” I said. “It may still be alive.”

He straightened up quickly. I picked up the broom by the bristles and prodded the tentacle. The third or fourth poke caused it to unclench sluggishly and reveal two whole suckers and a ragged segment of a third. Then the fragment coiled again with muscular speed and lay still. Brown made a gagging, disgusted sound.

“Seen enough?”

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

We followed the bobbing light back to the double doors and pushed through them. All the faces turned toward us, and the hum of conversation died. Norton’s face was like old cheese. Mrs. Carmody’s black eyes glinted. Ollie was drinking beer; his face was still running with trickles of perspiration, although it had gotten rather chilly in the market. The two girls with CAMP WOODLANDS on their shirts were huddled together like young horses before a thunderstorm. Eyes. So many eyes. I could paint them, I thought with a chill. No faces, only eyes in the gloom. I could paint them but no one would believe they were real.

Bud Brown folded his long-fingered hands primly in front of him. “People,” he said. “It appears we have a problem of some magnitude here.”

VI

**Further Discussion. Mrs. Carmody. Fortifications. What
Happened to the Flat-Earth Society.**

The next four hours passed in a kind of dream. There was a long and semihysterical discussion following Brown's confirmation, or maybe the discussion wasn't as long as it seemed; maybe it was just the grim necessity of people chewing over the same information, trying to see it from every possible point of view, working it the way a dog works a bone, trying to get at the marrow. It was a slow coming to belief. You can see the same thing at any New England town meeting in March.

There was the Flat-Earth Society, headed by Norton. They were a vocal minority of about ten who believed none of it. Norton pointed out over and over again that there were only four witnesses to the bag-boy being carried off by what he called the Tentacles from Planet X (it was good for a laugh the first time, but it wore thin quickly; Norton, in his increasing agitation, seemed not to notice). He added that he personally did not trust one of the four. He further pointed out that fifty percent of the witnesses were now hopelessly inebriated. That was unquestionably true. Jim and Myron LaFleur, with the entire beer cooler and wine rack at their disposal, were abysmally shitfaced. Considering what had happened to Norm, and their part in it, I didn't blame them. They would sober off all too soon.

Ollie continued to drink steadily, ignoring Brown's protests. After a while Brown gave up, contenting himself with an occasional baleful threat about the Company. He didn't seem to realize that Federal Foods, Inc., with its stores in Bridgton, North Windham, and Portland, might not even exist anymore. For all we knew, the Eastern Seaboard might no longer exist. Ollie drank steadily, but didn't get drunk. He was sweating it out as rapidly as he could put it in.

At last, as the discussion with the Flat-Earthers was becoming acrimonious, Ollie spoke up. "If you don't believe it, Mr. Norton, that's fine. I'll tell you what to do. You go on out that front door and walk around to the back. There's a great big pile of returnable beer and soda bottles there. Norm and Buddy and I put them out this morning. You bring back a couple of those bottles so we know you really went back there. You do that and I'll personally take my shirt off and eat it."

Norton began to bluster.

Ollie cut him off in that same soft, even voice. "I tell you, you're not doing anything but damage talking the way you are. There's people here that want to go home and make sure their families are okay. My sister and her year-old daughter are at home in Naples right now. I'd like to check on them, sure. But if people start believing you and try to go home, what happened to Norm is going to happen to them."

He didn't convince Norton, but he convinced some of the leaners and fence sitters—it wasn't what he said so much as it was his eyes, his haunted eyes. I think Norton's sanity hinged on not being convinced, or that he thought it did. But he didn't take Ollie up on his offer to bring back a sampling of returnables from out back. None of them did. They weren't ready to go out, at least not yet. He and his little group of Flat-Earthers (reduced by one or two now) went as far away from the rest of us as they could get, over by the prepared-meats case. One of them kicked my sleeping son in the leg as he went past, waking him up.

I went over, and Billy clung to my neck. When I tried to put him down, he clung tighter and said, “Don’t do that, Daddy. Please.”

I found a shopping cart and put him in the baby seat. He looked very big in there. It would have been comical except for his pale face, the dark hair brushed across his forehead just above his eyebrows, his woeful eyes. He probably hadn’t been up in the baby seat of the shopping cart for as long as two years. These little things slide by you, you don’t realize at first, and when what has changed finally comes to you, it’s always a nasty shock.

Meanwhile, with the Flat-Earthers having withdrawn, the argument had found another lightning rod—this time it was Mrs. Carmody, and understandably enough, she stood alone.

In the faded, dismal light she was witchlike in her blazing canary pants, her bright rayon blouse, her armloads of clacking junk jewelry—copper, tortoise-shell, adamantite—and her thyroidal purse. Her parchment face was grooved with strong vertical lines. Her frizzy gray hair was yanked flat with three horn combs and twisted in the back. Her mouth was a line of knotted rope.

“There is no defense against the will of God. This has been coming. I have seen the signs. There are those here that I have told, but there are none so blind as those who will not see.”

“Well, what are you saying? What are you proposing?” Mike Hatlen broke in impatiently. He was a town selectman, although he didn’t look the part now, in his yachtsman’s cap and saggy-seated Bermudas. He was sipping at a beer; a great many men were doing it now. Bud Brown had given up protesting, but he was indeed taking names—keeping a rough tab on everyone he could.

“Proposing?” Mrs. Carmody echoed, wheeling toward Hatlen. “Proposing? Why, I am proposing that you prepare to meet your God, Michael Hatlen.” She gazed around at all of us. “Prepare to meet your God!”

“Prepare to meet shit,” Myron LaFleur said in a drunken snarl from the beer cooler. “Old woman, I believe your tongue must be hung in the middle so it can run on both ends.”

There was a rumble of agreement. Billy looked around nervously, and I slipped an arm around his shoulders.

“I’ll have my say!” she cried. Her upper lip curled back, revealing snaggle teeth that were yellow with nicotine. I thought of the dusty stuffed animals in her shop, drinking eternally at the mirror that served as their creek. “Doubters will doubt to the end! Yet a monstrosity did drag that poor boy away! Things in the mist! Every abomination out of a bad dream! Eyeless freaks! Pallid horrors! Do you doubt? Then go on out! Go on out and say howdy-do!”

“Mrs. Carmody, you’ll have to stop,” I said. “You’re scaring my boy.”

The man with the little girl echoed the sentiment. She, all plump legs and scabby knees, had hidden her face against her father’s stomach and put her hands over her ears. Big Bill wasn’t crying, but he was close.

“There’s only one chance,” Mrs. Carmody said.

“What’s that, ma’am?” Mike Hatlen asked politely.

“A sacrifice,” Mrs. Carmody said—she seemed to grin in the gloom. “A blood sacrifice.”

Blood sacrifice—the words hung there, slowly turning. Even now, when I know better, I tell myself that then what she meant was someone’s pet dog—there were a couple of them trotting around the market in spite of the regulations against them. Even now I tell myself that. She looked like some crazed remnant of New England Puritanism in the gloom...but I suspect that something deeper and darker than mere Puritanism motivated her. Puritanism had its own dark grandfather, old Adam with bloody hands.

She opened her mouth to say something more, and a small, neat man in red pants and a natty sport shirt struck her openhanded across the face. His hair was parted with ruler evenness on the left. He wore glasses. He also wore the unmistakable look of the summer tourist.

“You shut up that bad talk,” he said softly and tonelessly.

Mrs. Carmody put her hand to her mouth and then held it out to us, a wordless accusation. There was blood on the palm. But her black eyes seemed to dance with mad glee.

“You had it coming!” a woman cried out. “I would have done it myself!”

“They’ll get hold of you,” Mrs. Carmody said, showing us her bloody palm. The trickle of blood was now running down one of the wrinkles from her mouth to her chin like a droplet of rain down a gutter. “Not today, maybe. Tonight. Tonight when the dark comes. They’ll come with the night and take someone else. With the night they’ll come. You’ll hear them coming, creeping and crawling. And when they come, you’ll beg for Mother Carmody to show you what to do.”

The man in the red pants raised his hand slowly.

“You come on and hit me,” she whispered, and grinned her bloody grin at him. His hand wavered. “Hit me if you dare.” His hand dropped. Mrs. Carmody walked away by herself. Then Billy did begin to cry, hiding his face against me as the little girl had done with her father.

“I want to go home,” he said. “I want to see my mommy.”

I comforted him as best I could. Which probably wasn’t very well.

The talk finally turned into less frightening and destructive channels. The plate-glass windows, the market's obvious weak point, were mentioned. Mike Hatlen asked what other entrances there were, and Ollie and Brown quickly ticked them off—two loading doors in addition to the one Norm had opened. The main IN/OUT doors. The window in the manager's office (thick, reinforced glass, securely locked).

Talking about these things had a paradoxical effect. It made the danger seem more real but at the same time made us feel better. Even Billy felt it. He asked if he could go get a candy bar. I told him it would be all right so long as he didn't go near the big windows.

When he was out of earshot, a man near Mike Hatlen said, "Okay, what are we going to do about those windows? The old lady may be as crazy as a bedbug, but she could be right about something moving in after dark."

"Maybe the fog will blow over by then," a woman said.

"Maybe," the man said. "And maybe not."

"Any ideas?" I asked Bud and Ollie.

"Hold on a sec," the man near Hatlen said. "I'm Dan Miller. From Lynn, Mass. You don't know me, no reason why you should, but I got a place on Highland Lake. Bought it just this year. Got held up for it, is more like it, but I had to have it." There were a few chuckles. "Anyway, I saw a whole pile of fertilizer and lawn-food bags down there. Twenty-five-pound sacks, most of them. We could put them up like sandbags. Leave loopholes to look out through...."

Now more people were nodding and talking excitedly. I almost said something, then held it back. Miller was right. Putting those bags up could do no harm, and might do some good. But my mind went back to that tentacle squeezing the dog-food bag. I thought that one of the bigger tentacles could probably do the same for a twenty-

five-pound bag of Green Acres lawn food or Vigoro. But a sermon on that wouldn't get us out or improve anyone's mood.

People began to break up, talking about getting it done, and Miller yelled: "Hold it! Hold it! Let's thrash this out while we're all together!"

They came back, a loose congregation of fifty or sixty people in the corner formed by the beer cooler, the storage doors, and the left end of the meat case, where Mr. McVey always seems to put the things no one wants, like sweetbreads and Scotch eggs and sheep's brains and head cheese. Billy wove his way through them with a five-year-old's unconscious agility in a world of giants and held up a Hershey bar. "Want this, Daddy?"

"Thanks." I took it. It tasted sweet and good.

"This is probably a stupid question," Miller resumed, "but we ought to fill in the blanks. Anyone got any firearms?"

There was a pause. People looked around at each other and shrugged. An old man with grizzled white hair who introduced himself as Ambrose Cornell said he had a shotgun in the trunk of his car. "I'll try for it, if you want."

Ollie said, "Right now I don't think that would be a good idea, Mr. Cornell."

Cornell grunted. "Right now, neither do I, son. But I thought I ought to make the offer."

"Well, I didn't really think so," Dan Miller said. "But I thought—"

"Wait, hold it a minute," a woman said. It was the lady in the cranberry-colored sweatshirt and the dark green slacks. She had sandy-blond hair and a good figure. A very pretty young woman. She opened her purse and from it she produced a medium-sized pistol. The crowd made an *ahhhh*-ing sound, as if they had just seen a

magician do a particularly fine trick. The woman, who had been blushing, blushed that much the harder. She rooted in her purse again and brought out a box of Smith & Wesson ammunition.

“I’m Amanda Dumfries,” she said to Miller. “This gun...my husband’s idea. He thought I should have it for protection. I’ve carried it unloaded for two years.”

“Is your husband here, ma’am?”

“No, he’s in New York. On business. He’s gone on business a lot. That’s why he wanted me to carry the gun.”

“Well,” Miller said, “if you can use it, you ought to keep it. What is it, a thirty-eight?”

“Yes. And I’ve never fired it in my life except on a target range once.”

Miller took the gun, fumbled around, and got the cylinder to open after a few moments. He checked to make sure it was not loaded. “Okay,” he said. “We got a gun. Who shoots good? I sure don’t.”

People glanced at each other. No one said anything at first. Then, reluctantly, Ollie said: “I target-shoot quite a lot. I have a Colt .45 and a Llama .25.”

“You?” Brown said. “Huh. You’ll be too drunk to see by dark.”

Ollie said very clearly, “Why don’t you just shut up and write down your names?”

Brown goggled at him. Opened his mouth. Then decided, wisely, I think, to shut it again.

“It’s yours,” Miller said, blinking a little at the exchange. He handed it over and Ollie checked it again, more professionally. He put the gun into his right-front pants pocket and slipped the cartridge box into his breast pocket, where it made a bulge like a pack of

cigarettes. Then he leaned back against the cooler, round face still trickling sweat, and cracked a fresh beer. The sensation that I was seeing a totally unsuspected Ollie Weeks persisted.

“Thank you, Mrs. Dumfries,” Miller said.

“Don’t mention it,” she said, and I thought fleetingly that if I were her husband and proprietor of those green eyes and that full figure, I might not travel so much. Giving your wife a gun could be seen as a ludicrously symbolic act.

“This may be silly, too,” Miller said, turning back to Brown with his clipboard and Ollie with his beer, “but there aren’t anything like flamethrowers in the place, are there?”

“Ohhh, *shit*,” Buddy Eagleton said, and then went as red as Amanda Dumfries had done.

“What is it?” Mike Hatlen asked.

“Well...until last week we had a whole case of those little blowtorches. The kind you use around your house to solder leaky pipes or mend your exhaust systems or whatever. You remember those, Mr. Brown?”

Brown nodded, looking sour.

“Sold out?” Miller asked.

“No, they didn’t go at all. We only sold three or four and sent the rest of the case back. What a pisser. I mean...what a shame.” Blushing so deeply he was almost purple, Buddy Eagleton retired into the background again.

We had matches, of course, and salt (someone said vaguely that he had heard salt was the thing to put on bloodsuckers and things like that); and all kinds of O’Cedar mops and long-handled brooms. Most of the people continued to look heartened, and Jim and Myron

were too blotzo to sound a dissenting note, but I met Ollie's eyes and saw a calm hopelessness in them that was worse than fear. He and I had seen the tentacles. The idea of throwing salt on them or trying to fend them off with the handles of O'Cedar mops was funny, in a ghastly way.

"Mike," Miller said, "why don't you crew this little adventure? I want to talk to Ollie and Dave here for a minute."

"Glad to." Hatlen clapped Dan Miller on the shoulder. "Somebody had to take charge, and you did it good. Welcome to town."

"Does this mean I get a kickback on my taxes?" Miller asked. He was a banty little guy with red hair that was receding. He looked like the sort of guy you can't help liking on short notice and—just maybe—the kind of guy you can't help not liking after he's been around for a while. The kind of guy who knows how to do everything better than you do.

"No way," Hatlen said, laughing.

Hatlen walked off. Miller glanced down at my son.

"Don't worry about Billy," I said.

"Man, I've never been so worried in my whole life," Miller said.

"No," Ollie agreed, and dropped an empty into the beer cooler. He got a fresh one and opened it. There was a soft hiss of escaping gas.

"I got a look at the way you two glanced at each other," Miller said.

I finished my Hershey bar and got a beer to wash it down with.

"Tell you what I think," Miller said. "We ought to get half a dozen people to wrap some of those mop handles with cloth and then tie them down with twine. Then I think we ought to get a couple of those

cans of charcoal lighter fluid all ready. If we cut the tops right off the cans, we could have some torches pretty quick,”

I nodded. That was good. Almost surely not good enough—not if you had seen Norm dragged out—but it was better than salt.

“That would give them something to think about, at least,” Ollie said.

Miller’s lips pressed together. “That bad, huh?” he said.

“That bad,” Ollie agreed, and worked his beer.

By four-thirty that afternoon the sacks of fertilizer and lawn food were in place and the big windows were blocked off except for narrow loopholes. A watchman had been placed at each of these, and beside each watchman was a tin of charcoal lighter fluid with the top cut off and a supply of mop-handle torches. There were five loopholes, and Dan Miller had arranged a rotation of sentries for each one. When four-thirty came around, I was sitting on a pile of bags at one of the loopholes, Billy at my side. We were looking out into the mist.

Just beyond the window was a red bench where people sometimes waited for their rides with their groceries beside them. Beyond that was the parking lot. The mist swirled slowly, thick and heavy. There was moisture in it, but how dull it seemed, and gloomy. Just looking at it made me feel gutless and lost.

“Daddy, do you know what’s happening?” Billy asked.

“No, hon,” I said.

He fell silent for a bit, looking at his hands, which lay limply in the lap of his Tuffskin jeans. “Why doesn’t somebody come and rescue us?” he asked finally. “The State Police or the FBI or someone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think Mom’s okay?”

“Billy, I just don’t know,” I said, and put an arm around him.

“I want her awful bad,” Billy said, struggling with tears. “I’m sorry about the times I was bad to her.”

“Billy,” I said, and had to stop. I could taste salt in my throat, and my voice wanted to tremble.

“Will it be over?” Billy asked. “Daddy? Will it?”

“I don’t know,” I said, and he put his face in the hollow of my shoulder and I held the back of his head, felt the delicate curve of his skull just under the thick growth of his hair. I found myself remembering the evening of my wedding day. Watching Steff take off the simple brown dress she had changed into after the ceremony. She had had a big purple bruise on one hip from running into the side of a door the day before. I remembered looking at the bruise and thinking, *When she got that, she was still Stephanie Stepanek*, and feeling something like wonder. Then we had made love, and outside it was spitting snow from a dull gray December sky.

Billy was crying.

“Shh, Billy, shh,” I said, rocking his head against me, but he went on crying. It was the sort of crying that only mothers know how to fix right.

Premature night came inside the Federal Foods. Miller and Hatlen and Bud Brown handed out flashlights, the whole stock, about twenty. Norton clamored loudly for them on behalf of his group, and received two. The lights bobbed here and there in the aisles like uneasy phantoms.

I held Billy against me and looked out through the loophole. The milky, translucent quality of the light out there hadn't changed much; it was putting up the bags that had made the market so dark. Several times I thought I saw something, but it was only jumpiness. One of the others raised a hesitant false alarm.

Billy saw Mrs. Turman again, and went to her eagerly, even though she hadn't been over to sit for him all summer. She had one of the flashlights and handed it over to him amiably enough. Soon he was trying to write his name in light on the blank glass faces of the frozen-food cases. She seemed as happy to see him as he was to see her, and in a little while they came over. Hattie Turman was a tall, thin woman with lovely red hair just beginning to streak gray. A pair of glasses hung from an ornamental chain—the sort, I believe, it is illegal for anyone except middle-aged women to wear—on her breast.

“Is Stephanie here, David?” she asked.

“No. At home.”

She nodded. “Alan, too. How long are you on watch here?”

“Until six.”

“Have you seen anything?”

“No. Just the mist.”

“I'll keep Billy until six, if you like.”

“Would you like that, Billy?”

“Yes, please,” he said, swinging the flashlight above his head in slow arcs and watching it play across the ceiling.

“God will keep your Steffy, and Alan, too,” Mrs. Turman said, and led Billy away by the hand. She spoke with serene sureness, but there was no conviction in her eyes.

Around five-thirty the sounds of excited argument rose near the back of the store. Someone jeered at something someone else had said, and someone—it was Buddy Eagleton, I think—shouted, “You’re crazy if you go out there!”

Several of the flashlight beams pooled together at the center of the controversy, and they moved toward the front of the store. Mrs. Carmody’s shrieking, derisive laugh split the gloom, as abrasive as fingers drawn down a slate blackboard.

Above the babble of voices came the boom of Norton’s courtroom tenor: “Let us pass, please! Let us pass!”

The man at the loophole next to mine left his place to see what the shouting was about. I decided to stay where I was. Whatever the concatenation was, it was coming my way.

“Please,” Mike Hatlen was saying. “Please, let’s talk this thing through.”

“There is nothing to talk about,” Norton proclaimed. Now his face swam out of the gloom. It was determined and haggard and wholly wretched. He was holding one of the two flashlights allocated to the Flat-Earthers. The corkscrewed tufts of hair still stuck up behind his ears like a cuckold’s horns. He was at the head of an extremely small procession—five of the original nine or ten. “We are going out,” he said.

“Don’t stick to this craziness,” Miller said. “Mike’s right. We can talk it over, can’t we? Mr. McVey is going to barbecue some chicken over the gas grill, we can all sit down and eat and just—”

He got in Norton’s way and Norton gave him a push. Miller didn’t like it. His face flushed and then set in a hard expression. “Do what you want, then,” he said. “But you’re as good as murdering these other people.”

With all the evenness of great resolve or unbreakable obsession, Norton said: “We’ll send help back for you.”

One of his followers murmured agreement, but another quietly slipped away. Now there was Norton and four others. Maybe that wasn’t so bad. Christ Himself could only find twelve.

“Listen,” Mike Hatlen said. “Mr. Norton—Brent—at least stay for the chicken. Get some hot food inside you.”

“And give you a chance to go on talking? I’ve been in too many courtrooms to fall for that. You’ve psyched out half a dozen of my people already.”

“Your people?” Hatlen almost groaned it. “*Your* people? Good Christ, what kind of talk is that? They’re *people*, that’s all. This is no game, and it’s surely not a courtroom. There are, for want of a better word, there are *things* out there, and what’s the sense of getting yourself killed?”

“Things, you say,” Norton said, sounding superficially amused. “Where? Your people have been on watch for a couple of hours now. Who’s seen one?”

“Well, out back. In the—”

“No, no, no,” Norton said, shaking his head. “That ground has been covered and covered. We’re going out—”

“No,” someone whispered, and it echoed and spread, sounding like the rustle of dead leaves at dusk of an October evening. *No, no, no...*

“Will you restrain us?” a shrill voice asked. This was one of Norton’s “people,” to use his word—an elderly lady wearing bifocals. “Will you restrain us?”

The soft babble of negatives died away.

“No,” Mike said. “No, I don’t think anyone will restrain you.”

I whispered in Billy’s ear. He looked at me, startled and questioning. “Go on, now,” I said. “Be quick.”

He went.

Norton ran his hands through his hair, a gesture as calculated as any ever made by a Broadway actor. I had liked him better pulling the cord of his chainsaw fruitlessly, cussing and thinking himself unobserved. I could not tell then and do not know any better now if he believed in what he was doing or not. I think, down deep, that he knew what was going to happen. I think that the logic he had paid lip service to all his life turned on him at the end like a tiger that has gone bad and mean.

He looked around restlessly, seeming to wish that there was more to say. Then he led his four followers through one of the checkout lanes. In addition to the elderly woman, there was a chubby boy of about twenty, a young girl, and a man in blue jeans wearing a golf cap tipped back on his head.

Norton’s eyes caught mine, widened a little, and then started to swing away.

“Brent, wait a minute,” I said.

“I don’t want to discuss it any further. Certainly not with you.”

“I know you don’t. I just want to ask a favor.” I looked around and saw Billy coming back toward the checkouts at a run.

“What’s that?” Norton asked suspiciously as Billy came up and handed me a package done up in cellophane.

“Clothesline,” I said. I was vaguely aware that everyone in the market was watching us now, loosely strung out on the other side of

the cash registers and checkout lanes. "It's the big package. Three hundred feet."

"So?"

"I wondered if you'd tie one end around your waist before you go out. I'll let it out. When you feel it come up tight, just tie it around something. It doesn't matter what. A car door handle would do."

"What in God's name for?"

"It will tell me you got at least three hundred feet," I said.

Something in his eyes flickered...but only momentarily. "No," he said.

I shrugged. "Okay. Good luck, anyhow."

Abruptly the man in the golf cap said, "I'll do it, mister. No reason not to."

Norton swung on him, as if to say something sharp, and the man in the golf cap studied him calmly. There was nothing flickering in *his* eyes. He had made his decision and there was simply no doubt in him. Norton saw it too and said nothing.

"Thanks," I said.

I slit the wrapping with my pocketknife and the clothesline accordioned out in stiff loops. I found one loose end and tied it around Golf Cap's waist in a loose granny. He immediately untied it and cinched it tighter with a good quick sheet-bend knot. There was not a sound in the market. Norton shifted uneasily from foot to foot.

"You want to take my knife?" I asked the man in the golf cap.

"I got one." He looked at me with that same calm contempt. "You just see to paying out your line. If it binds up, I'll chuck her."

“Are we all ready?” Norton asked, too loud. The chubby boy jumped as if he had been goosed. Getting no response, Norton turned to go.

“Brent,” I said, and held out my hand. “Good luck, man.”

He studied my hand as if it were some dubious foreign object. “We’ll send back help,” he said finally, and pushed through the OUT door. That thin, acrid smell came in again. The others followed him out.

Mike Hatlen came down and stood beside me. Norton’s party of five stood in the milky, slow-moving fog. Norton said something and I should have heard it, but the mist seemed to have an odd damping effect. I heard nothing but the sound of his voice and two or three isolated syllables, like the voice on the radio heard from some distance. They moved off.

Hatlen held the door a little way open. I paid out the clothesline, keeping as much slack in it as I could, mindful of the man’s promise to chuck the rope if it bound him up. There was still not a sound. Billy stood beside me, motionless but seeming to thrum with his own inner current.

Again there was that weird feeling that the five of them did not so much disappear into the fog as become invisible. For a moment their clothes seemed to stand alone, and then they were gone. You were not really impressed with the unnatural density of the mist until you saw people swallowed up in a space of seconds.

I paid the line out. A quarter of it went, then a half. It stopped going out for a moment. It went from a live thing to a dead one in my hands. I held my breath. Then it started to go out again. I paid it through my fingers, and suddenly remembered my father taking me to see the Gregory Peck film of *Moby-Dick* at the Brookside. I think I smiled a little.

Three-quarters of the line was gone now. I could see the end of it lying beside one of Billy's feet. Then the rope stopped moving through my hands again. It lay motionless for perhaps five seconds, and then another five feet jerked out. Then it suddenly whipsawed violently to the left, twanging off the edge of the OUT door.

Twenty feet of rope suddenly paid out, making a thin heat across my left palm. And from out of the mist there came a high, wavering scream. It was impossible to tell the sex of the screamer.

The rope whipsawed in my hands again. And again. It skated across the space in the doorway to the right, then back to the left. A few more feet paid out, and then there was a ululating howl from out there that brought an answering moan from my son. Hatlen stood aghast. His eyes were huge. One corner of his mouth turned down, trembling.

The howl was abruptly cut off. There was no sound at all for what seemed to be forever. Then the old lady cried out—this time there could be no doubt about who it was. "*Git it offa me!*" she screamed. "*Oh my Lord my Lord get it—*"

Then her voice was cut off, too.

Almost all of the rope abruptly ran out through my loosely closed fist, giving me a hotter burn this time. Then it went completely slack, and a sound came out of the mist—a thick, loud grunt—that made all the spit in my mouth dry up.

It was like no sound I've ever heard, but the closest approximation might be a movie set in the African veld or a South American swamp. It was the sound of a big animal. It came again, low and tearing and savage. Once more...and then it subsided to a series of low mutterings. Then it was completely gone.

"Close the door," Amanda Dumfries said in a trembling voice. "Please."

“In a minute,” I said, and began to yank the line back in.

It came out of the mist and piled up around my feet in untidy loops and snarls. About three feet from the end, the new white clothesline went barn-red.

“Death!” Mrs. Carmody screamed. “Death to go out there! Now do you see?”

The end of the clothesline was a chewed and frayed tangle of fiber and little puffs of cotton. The little puffs were dewed with minute drops of blood.

No one contradicted Mrs. Carmody.

Mike Hatlen let the door swing shut.

VII

The First Night.

Mr. McVey had worked in Bridgton cutting meat ever since I was twelve or thirteen, and I had no idea what his first name was or his age might be. He had set up a gas grill under one of the small exhaust fans—the fans were still now, but presumably they still gave some ventilation—and by 6:30 P.M. the smell of cooking chicken filled the market. Bud Brown didn't object. It might have been shock, but more likely he had recognized the fact that his fresh meat and poultry wasn't getting any fresher. The chicken smelled good, but not many people wanted to eat. Mr. McVey, small and spare and neat in his whites, cooked the chicken nevertheless and laid the pieces two by two on paper plates and lined them up cafeteria-style on top of the meat counter.

Mrs. Turman brought Billy and me each a plate, garnished with helpings of deli potato salad. I ate as best I could, but Billy would not even pick at his.

“You got to eat, big guy,” I said.

“I'm not hungry,” he said, putting the plate aside.

“You can't get big and strong if you don't—”

Mrs. Turman, sitting slightly behind Billy, shook her head at me.

“Okay,” I said. “Go get a peach and eat it, at least. ’Kay?”

“What if Mr. Brown says something?”

“If he says something, you come back and tell me.”

“Okay, Dad.”

He walked away slowly. He seemed to have shrunk somehow. It hurt my heart to see him walk that way. Mr. McVey went on cooking chicken, apparently not minding that only a few people were eating it, happy in the act of cooking. As I think I have said, there are all ways of handling a thing like this. You wouldn’t think it would be so, but it is. The mind is a monkey.

Mrs. Turman and I sat halfway up the patent-medicines aisle. People were sitting in little groups all over the store. No one except Mrs. Carmody was sitting alone; even Myron and his buddy Jim were together—they were both passed out by the beer cooler.

Six new men were watching the loopholes. One of them was Ollie, gnawing a leg of chicken and drinking a beer. The mop-handle torches leaned beside each of the watchposts, a can of charcoal lighter fluid next to each...but I don’t think anyone really believed in the torches the way they had before. Not after that low and terribly vital grunting sound, not after the chewed and blood-soaked clothesline. If whatever was out there decided it wanted us, it was going to have us. It, or they.

“How bad will it be tonight?” Mrs. Turman asked. Her voice was calm, but her eyes were sick and scared.

“Hattie, I just don’t know.”

“You let me keep Billy as much as you can. I’m...Davey, I think I’m in mortal terror.” She uttered a dry laugh. “Yes, I believe that’s

what it is. But if I have Billy, I'll be all right. I'll be all right for him."

Her eyes were glistening. I leaned over and patted her shoulder.

"I'm so worried about Alan," she said. "He's dead, Davey. In my heart, I'm sure he's dead."

"No, Hattie. You don't know any such thing."

"But I feel it's true. Don't you feel anything about Stephanie? Don't you at least have a...a feeling?"

"No," I said, lying through my teeth.

A strangled sound came from her throat and she clapped a hand to her mouth. Her glasses reflected back the dim, murky light.

"Billy's coming back," I murmured.

He was eating a peach. Hattie Turman patted the floor beside her and said that when he was done she would show him how to make a little man out of the peach pit and some thread. Billy smiled at her wanly, and Mrs. Turman smiled back.

At 8:00 P.M. six new men went on at the loopholes and Ollie came over to where I was sitting. "Where's Billy?"

"With Mrs. Turman, up back," I said. "They're doing crafts. They've run through peach-pit men and shopping-bag masks and apple dolls and now Mr. McVey is showing him how to make pipe-cleaner men."

Ollie took a long drink of beer and said, "Things are moving around out there."

I looked at him sharply. He looked back levelly.

“I’m not drunk,” he said. “I’ve been trying but haven’t been able to make it. I wish I could, David.”

“What do you mean, things are moving around out there?”

“I can’t say for sure. I asked Walter, and he said he had the same feeling, that parts of the mist would go darker for a minute—sometimes just a little smudge, sometimes a big dark place, like a bruise. Then it would fade back to gray. And the stuff is swirling around. Even Arnie Simms said he felt like something was going on out there, and Arnie’s almost as blind as a bat.”

“What about the others?”

“They’re all out-of-staters, strangers to me,” Ollie said. “I didn’t ask any of them.”

“How sure are you that you weren’t just seeing things?”

“Sure,” he said. He nodded toward Mrs. Carmody, who was sitting by herself at the end of the aisle. None of it had hurt her appetite any; there was a graveyard of chicken bones on her plate. She was drinking either blood or V-8 juice. “I think she was right about one thing,” Ollie said. “We’ll find out. When it gets dark, we’ll find out.”

But we didn’t have to wait until dark. When it came, Billy saw very little of it, because Mrs. Turman kept him up back. Ollie was still sitting with me when one of the men up front gave out a shriek and staggered back from his post, pinwheeling his arms. It was approaching eight-thirty; outside the pearl-white mist had darkened to the dull slaty color of a November twilight.

Something had landed on the glass outside one of the loopholes.

“*Oh my Jesus!*” the man who had been watching there screamed. “*Let me out! Let me out of this!*”

He tore around in a rambling circle, his eyes starting from his face, a thin lick of saliva at one corner of his mouth glimmering in the deepening shadows. Then he took off straight up the far aisle past the frozen-food cases.

There were answering cries. Some people ran toward the front to see what had happened. Many others retreated toward the back, not caring and not wanting to see whatever was crawling on the glass out there.

I started down toward the loophole, Ollie by my side. His hand was in the pocket that held Mrs. Dumfries' gun. Now one of the other watchers let out a cry—not so much of fear as disgust.

Ollie and I slipped through one of the checkout lanes. Now I could see what had frightened the guy from his post. I couldn't tell what it was, but I could see it. It looked like one of the minor creatures in a Bosch painting—one of his hellacious murals. There was something almost horribly comic about it, too, because it also looked a little like one of those strange creations of vinyl and plastic you can buy for \$1.89 to spring on your friends...in fact, exactly the sort of thing Norton had accused me of planting in the storage area.

It was maybe two feet long, segmented, the pinkish color of burned flesh that has healed over. Bulbous eyes peered in two different directions at once from the ends of short, limber stalks. It clung to the window on fat sucker-pads. From the opposite end there protruded something that was either a sexual organ or a stinger. And from its back there sprouted oversized, membranous wings, like the wings of a housefly. They were moving very slowly as Ollie and I approached the glass.

At the loophole to the left of us, where the man had made the disgusted cawing sound, three of the things were crawling on the glass. They moved sluggishly across it, leaving sticky snail trails behind them. Their eyes—if that is what they were—joggled on the end of the finger-thick stalks. The biggest was maybe four feet long. At times they crawled right over each other.

“Look at those goddamn things,” Tom Smalley said in a sickened voice. He was standing at the loophole on our right. I didn’t reply. The bugs were all over the loopholes now, which meant they were probably crawling all over the building...like maggots on a piece of meat. It wasn’t a pleasant image, and I could feel what chicken I had managed to eat now wanting to come up.

Someone was sobbing. Mrs. Carmody was screaming about abominations from within the earth. Someone told her gruffly that she’d shut up if she knew what was good for her. Same old shit.

Ollie took Mrs. Dumfries’ gun from his pocket and I grabbed his arm. “Don’t be crazy.”

He shook free. “I know what I’m doing,” he said.

He tapped the barrel of the gun on the window, his face set in a nearly masklike expression of distaste. The speed of the creatures’ wings increased until they were only a blur—if you hadn’t known, you might have believed they weren’t winged creatures at all. Then they simply flew away.

Some of the others saw what Ollie had done and got the idea. They used the mop handles to tap on the windows. The things flew away, but came right back. Apparently they had no more brains than your average housefly, either. The near-panic dissolved in a babble of conversation. I heard someone asking someone else what he thought those things would do if they landed on you. That was a question I had no interest in seeing answered.

The tapping on the windows began to die away. Ollie turned toward me and started to say something, but before he could do more than open his mouth, something came out of the fog and snatched one of the crawling things off the glass. I think I screamed. I’m not sure.

It was a flying thing. Beyond that I could not have said for sure. The fog appeared to darken in exactly the way Ollie had described,

only the dark smutch didn't fade away; it solidified into something with flapping, leathery wings, an albino white body, and reddish eyes. It thudded into the glass hard enough to make it shiver. Its beak opened. It scooped the pink thing in and was gone. The whole incident took no more than five seconds. I had a bare final impression of the pink thing wiggling and flapping as it went down the hatch, the way a small fish will wiggle and flap in the beak of a seagull.

Now there was another thud, and yet another. People began screaming again, and there was a stampede toward the back of the store. Then there was a more piercing scream, one of pain, and Ollie said, "Oh my God, that old lady fell down and they just ran over her."

He ran back through the checkout aisle. I turned to follow, and then I saw something that stopped me dead where I was standing.

High up and to my right, one of the lawn-food bags was sliding slowly backward. Tom Smalley was right under it, staring out into the mist through his loophole.

Another of the pink bugs landed on the thick plate glass of the loophole where Ollie and I had been standing. One of the flying things swooped down and grabbed it. The old woman who had been trampled went on screaming in a shrill, cracked voice.

That bag. That sliding bag.

"Smalley!" I shouted. "Look out! Heads up!"

In the general confusion, he never heard me. The bag teetered, then fell. It struck him squarely on the head. He went down hard, catching his jaw on the shelf that ran below the show window.

One of the albino flying things was squirming its way through the jagged hole in the glass. I could hear the soft scraping sound that it made, now that some of the screaming had stopped. Its red eyes glittered in its triangular head, which was slightly cocked to one side.

A heavy, hooked beak opened and closed rapaciously. It looked a bit like the paintings of pterodactyls you may have seen in the dinosaur books, more like something out of a lunatic's nightmare.

I grabbed one of the torches and slam-dunked it into a can of charcoal lighter fluid, tipping it over and spilling a pool of the stuff across the floor.

The flying creature paused on top of the lawn-food bags, glaring around, shifting slowly and malignantly from one taloned foot to the other. It was a stupid creature, I am quite sure of that. Twice it tried to spread its wings, which struck the walls and then folded themselves over its hunched back like the wings of a griffin. The third time it tried, it lost its balance and fell clumsily from its perch, still trying to spread its wings. It landed on Tom Smalley's back. One flex of its claws and Tom's shirt ripped wide open. Blood began to flow.

I was there, less than three feet away. My torch was dripping lighter fluid. I was emotionally pumped up to kill it if I could...and then realized I had no matches to light it with. I had used the last one lighting a cigar for Mr. McVey an hour ago.

The place was in pandemonium now. People had seen the thing roosting on Smalley's back, something no one in the world had seen before. It darted its head forward at a questing angle, and tore a chunk of meat from the back of Smalley's neck.

I was getting ready to use the torch as a bludgeon when the cloth-wrapped head of it suddenly blazed alight. Dan Miller was there, holding a Zippo lighter with a Marine emblem on it. His face was as harsh as a rock with horror and fury.

"Kill it," he said hoarsely. "Kill it if you can." Standing beside him was Ollie. He had Mrs. Dumfries' .38 in his hand, but he had no clear shot.

The thing spread its wings and flapped them once—apparently not to fly away but to secure a better hold on its prey—and then its

leathery-white, membranous wings enfolded poor Smalley's entire upper body. Then the sounds came—mortal tearing sounds that I cannot bear to describe in any detail.

All of this happened in bare seconds. Then I thrust my torch at the thing. There was the sensation of striking something with no more real substance than a box kite. The next moment the entire creature was blazing. It made a screeching sound and its wings spread; its head jerked and its reddish eyes rolled with what I most sincerely hope was great agony. It took off with a sound like linen bedsheets flapping on a clothesline in a stiff spring breeze. It uttered that rusty shrieking sound again.

Heads turned up to follow its flaming, dying course. I think that nothing in the entire business stands in my memory so strongly as that bird-thing blazing a zigzagging course above the aisles of the Federal Supermarket, dropping charred and smoking bits of itself here and there. It finally crashed into the spaghetti sauces, splattering Ragú and Prince and Prima Salsa everywhere like gouts of blood. It was little more than ash and bone. The smell of its burning was high and sickening. And underlying it like a counterpoint was the thin and acrid stench of the mist, eddying in through the broken place in the glass.

For a moment there was utter silence. We were united in the black wonder of that brightly flaming deathflight. Then someone howled. Others screamed. And from somewhere in the back I could hear my son crying.

A hand grabbed me. It was Bud Brown. His eyes were bulging from their sockets. His lips were drawn back from his false teeth in a snarl. "One of those other things," he said, and pointed.

One of the bugs had come in through the hole and it now perched on a lawn-food bag, housefly wings buzzing—you could hear them; it sounded like a cheap department-store electric fan—eyes bulging from their stalks. Its pink and noxiously plump body was aspirating rapidly.

I moved toward it. My torch was guttering but not yet out. But Mrs. Reppler, the third-grade teacher, beat me to it. She was maybe fifty-five, maybe sixty, rope-thin. Her body had a tough, dried-out look that always makes me think of beef jerky.

She had a can of Raid in each hand like some crazy gunslinger in an existential comedy. She uttered a snarl of anger that would have done credit to a caveman splitting the skull of an enemy. Holding the pressure cans out at the full length of each arm, she pressed the buttons. A thick spray of insect-killer coated the thing. It went into throes of agony, twisting and turning crazily and at last falling from the bags, bouncing off the body of Tom Smalley—who was dead beyond any doubt or question—and finally landing on the floor. Its wings buzzed madly, but they weren't taking it anywhere; they were too heavily coated with Raid. A few moments later the wings slowed, then stopped. It was dead.

You could hear people crying now. And moaning. The old lady who had been trampled was moaning. And you could hear laughter. The laughter of the damned. Mrs. Reppler stood over her kill, her thin chest rising and falling rapidly.

Hatlen and Miller had found one of those dollies that the stockboys use to trundle cases of things around the store, and together they heaved it atop the lawn-food bags, blocking off the wedge-shaped hole in the glass. As a temporary measure, it was a good one.

Amanda Dumfries came forward like a sleepwalker. In one hand she held a plastic floor bucket. In the other she held a whisk broom, still done up in its see-through wrapping. She bent, her eyes still wide and blank, and swept the dead pink thing—bug, slug, whatever it was—into the bucket. You could hear the crackle of the wrapping on the whisk broom as it brushed the floor. She walked over to the OUT door. There were none of the bugs on it. She opened it a little way and threw the bucket out. It landed on its side and rolled back and forth in ever-decreasing arcs. One of the pink things buzzed out of the night, landed on the floor pail, and began to crawl over it.

Amanda burst into tears. I walked over and put an arm around her shoulders.

At one-thirty the following morning I was sitting with my back against the white enamel side of the meat counter in a semidoze. Billy's head was in my lap. He was solidly asleep. Not far away Amanda Dumfries was sleeping with her head pillowed on someone's jacket.

Not long after the flaming death of the bird-thing, Ollie and I had gone back out to the storage area and had gathered up half a dozen of the pads such as the one I'd covered Billy with earlier. Several people were sleeping on these. We had also brought back several heavy crates of oranges and pears, and four of us working together had been able to swing them to the tops of the lawn-food bags in front of the hole in the glass. The bird-creatures would have a tough time shifting one of those crates; they weighed about ninety pounds each.

But the birds and the buglike things the birds ate weren't the only things out there. There was the tentacled thing that had taken Norm. There was the frayed clothesline to think about. There was the unseen thing that had uttered that low, guttural roar to think about. We had heard sounds like it since—sometimes quite distant—but how far was "distant" through the damping effect of the mist? And sometimes they were close enough to shake the building and make it seem as if the ventricles of your heart had suddenly been loaded up with ice water.

Billy started in my lap and moaned. I brushed his hair and he moaned more loudly. Then he seemed to find sleep's less dangerous waters again. My own doze was broken and I was staring wide awake again. Since dark, I had only managed to sleep about ninety minutes, and that had been dream-haunted. In one of the dream fragments it had been the night before again. Billy and Steffy were standing in front of the picture window, looking out at the black and slate gray waters, out at the silver spinning waterspout that heralded

the storm. I tried to get to them, knowing that a strong enough wind could break the window and throw deadly glass darts all the way across the living room. But no matter how I ran, I seemed to get no closer to them. And then a bird rose out of the waterspout, a gigantic scarlet *oiseau de mort* whose prehistoric wingspan darkened the entire lake from west to east. Its beak opened, revealing a maw the size of the Holland Tunnel. And as the bird came to gobble up my wife and son, a low, sinister voice began to whisper over and over again: *The Arrowhead Project...the Arrowhead Project...the Arrowhead Project...*

Not that Billy and I were the only ones sleeping poorly. Others screamed in their sleep, and some went on screaming after they woke up. The beer was disappearing from the cooler at a great rate. Buddy Eagleton had restocked it once from out back with no comment. Mike Hatlen told me the Sominex was gone. Not depleted but totally wiped out. He guessed that some people might have taken six or eight bottles.

“There’s some Nytol left,” he said. “You want a bottle, David?” I shook my head and thanked him.

And in the last aisle down by Register 5, we had our winos. There were about seven of them, all out-of-staters except for Lou Tattinger, who ran the Pine Tree Car Wash. Lou didn’t need any excuse to sniff the cork, as the saying was. The wino brigade was pretty well anesthetized.

Oh yes—there were also six or seven people who had gone crazy.

Crazy isn’t the best word; perhaps I just can’t think of the proper one. But there were these people who had lapsed into a complete stupor without benefit of beer, wine, or pills. They stared at you with blank and shiny doorknob eyes. The hard cement of reality had come apart in some unimaginable earthquake, and these poor devils had fallen through. In time, some of them might come back. If there was time.

The rest of us had made our own mental compromises, and in some cases I suppose they were fairly odd. Mrs. Reppler, for instance, was convinced the whole thing was a dream—or so she said. And she spoke with some conviction.

I looked over at Amanda. I was developing an uncomfortably strong feeling for her—uncomfortable but not exactly unpleasant. Her eyes were an incredible brilliant green...for a while I had kept an eye on her to see if she was going to take out a pair of contact lenses, but apparently the color was true. I wanted to make love to her. My wife was at home, maybe alive, more probably dead, alone either way, and I loved her; I wanted to get Billy and me back to her more than anything, but I also wanted to screw this lady named Amanda Dumfries. I tried to tell myself it was just the situation we were in, and maybe it was, but that didn't change the wanting.

I dozed in and out, then jerked awake more fully around three. Amanda had shifted into a sort of fetal position, her knees pulled up toward her chest, hands clasped between her thighs. She seemed to be sleeping deeply. Her sweatshirt had pulled up slightly on one side, showing clean white skin. I looked at it and began to get an extremely useless and uncomfortable erection.

I tried to divert my mind to a new track and got thinking about how I had wanted to paint Brent Norton yesterday. No, nothing as important as a painting, but...just sit him on a log with my beer in his hand and sketch his sweaty, tired face and the two wings of his carefully processed hair sticking up untidily in the back. It could have been a good picture. It took me twenty years of living with my father to accept the idea that being good could be good enough.

You know what talent is? The curse of expectation. As a kid you have to deal with that, beat it somehow. If you can write, you think God put you on earth to blow Shakespeare away. Or if you can paint, maybe you think—I did—that God put you on earth to blow your father away.

It turned out I wasn't as good as he was. I kept trying to be for longer than I should have, maybe. I had a show in New York and it did poorly—the art critics beat me over the head with my father. A year later I was supporting myself and Steff with the commercial stuff. She was pregnant and I sat down and talked to myself about it. The result of that conversation was a belief that serious art was always going to be a hobby for me, no more.

I did Golden Girl Shampoo ads—the one where the Girl is standing astride her bike, the one where she's playing Frisbee on the beach, the one where she's standing on the balcony of her apartment with a drink in her hand. I've done short-story illustrations for most of the big slicks, but I broke into that field doing fast illustrations for the stories in the sleazier men's magazines. I've done some movie posters. The money comes in. We keep our heads nicely above water.

I had one final show in Bridgton, just last summer. I showed nine canvases that I had painted in five years, and I sold six of them. The one I absolutely would not sell showed the Federal market, by some queer coincidence. The perspective was from the far end of the parking lot. In my picture, the parking lot was empty except for a line of Campbell's Beans and Franks cans, each one larger than the last as they marched toward the viewer's eye. The last one appeared to be about eight feet tall. The picture was titled *Beans and False Perspective*. A man from California who was a top exec in some company that makes tennis balls and rackets and who knows what other sports equipment seemed to want that picture very badly, and would not take no for an answer in spite of the NFS card tucked into the bottom left-hand corner of the spare wooden frame. He began at six hundred dollars and worked his way up to four thousand. He said he wanted it for his study. I would not let him have it, and he went away sorely puzzled. Even so, he didn't quite give up; he left his card in case I changed my mind.

I could have used the money—that was the year we put the addition on the house and bought the four-wheel-drive—but I just

couldn't sell it. I couldn't sell it because I felt it was the best painting I had ever done and I wanted it to look at after someone would ask me, with totally unconscious cruelty, when I was going to do something serious.

Then I happened to show it to Ollie Weeks one day last fall. He asked me if he could photograph it and run it as an ad one week, and that was the end of my own false perspective. Ollie had recognized my painting for what it was, and by doing so, he forced me to recognize it, too. A perfectly good piece of slick commercial art. No more. And, thank God, no less.

I let him do it, and then I called the exec at his home in San Luis Obispo and told him he could have the painting for twenty-five hundred if he still wanted it. He did, and I shipped it UPS to the coast. And since then that voice of disappointed expectation—that cheated child's voice that can never be satisfied with such a mild superlative as good—has fallen pretty much silent. And except for a few rumbles—like the sounds of those unseen creatures somewhere out in the foggy night—it has been pretty much silent ever since. Maybe you can tell me—why should the silencing of that childish, demanding voice seem so much like dying?

Around four o'clock Billy woke up—partially, at least—and looked around with bleary, uncomprehending eyes. "Are we still here?"

"Yeah, honey," I said. "We are."

He started to cry with a weak helplessness that was horrible. Amanda woke up and looked at us.

"Hey, kid," she said, and pulled him gently to her. "Everything is going to look a little better come morning."

"No," Billy said. "No it won't. It won't. It won't."

“Shh,” she said. Her eyes met mine over his head. “Shh, it’s past your bedtime.”

“I want my *mother!*”

“Yeah, you do,” Amanda said. “Of course you do.”

Billy squirmed around in her lap until he could look at me. Which he did for some time. And then slept again.

“Thanks,” I said. “He needed you.”

“He doesn’t even know me.”

“That doesn’t change it.”

“So what do you think?” she asked. Her green eyes held mine steadily. “What do you really think?”

“Ask me in the morning.”

“I’m asking you now.”

I opened my mouth to answer and then Ollie Weeks materialized out of the gloom like something from a horror tale. He had a flashlight with one of the ladies’ blouses over the lens, and he was pointing it toward the ceiling. It made strange shadows on his haggard face. “David,” he whispered.

Amanda looked at him, first startled, then scared again.

“Ollie, what is it?” I asked.

“David,” he whispered again. Then: “Come on. Please.”

“I don’t want to leave Billy. He just went to sleep.”

“I’ll be with him,” Amanda said. “You better go.” Then, in a lower voice: “Jesus, this is never going to end.”

VIII

**What Happened to the Soldiers. With Amanda. A Conversation
with Dan Miller.**

I went with Ollie. He was headed for the storage area. As we passed the cooler, he grabbed a beer.

“Ollie, what is it?”

“I want you to see it.”

He pushed through the double doors. They slipped shut behind us with a little backwash of air. It was cold. I didn't like this place, not after what had happened to Norm. A part of my mind insisted on reminding me that there was still a small scrap of dead tentacle lying around someplace.

Ollie let the blouse drop from the lens of his light. He trained it overhead. At first I had an idea that someone had hung a couple of mannequins from one of the heating pipes below the ceiling. That they had hung them on piano wire or something, a kid's Halloween trick.

Then I noticed the feet, dangling about seven inches off the cement floor. There were two piles of kicked-over cartons. I looked up at the faces and a scream began to rise in my throat because they were not the faces of department-store dummies. Both heads

were cocked to the side, as if appreciating some horribly funny joke, a joke that had made them laugh until they turned purple.

Their shadows. Their shadows thrown long on the wall behind them. Their tongues. Their protruding tongues.

They were both wearing uniforms. They were the kids I had noticed earlier and had lost track of along the way. The army brats from—

The scream. I could hear it starting in my throat as a moan, rising like a police siren, and then Ollie gripped my arm just above the elbow. “Don’t scream, David. No one knows about this but you and me. And that’s how I want to keep it.”

Somehow I bit it back.

“Those army kids,” I managed.

“From the Arrowhead Project,” Ollie said. “Sure.” Something cold was thrust into my hand. The beer can. “Drink this. You need it.”

I drained the can completely dry.

Ollie said, “I came back to see if we had any extra cartridges for that gas grill Mr. McVey has been using. I saw these guys. The way I figure, they must have gotten the nooses ready and stood on top of those two piles of cartons. They must have tied their hands for each other and then balanced each other while they stepped through the length of rope between their wrists. So...so that their hands would be behind them, you know. Then—this is the way I figure—they stuck their heads into the nooses and pulled them tight by jerking their heads to one side. Maybe one of them counted to three and they jumped together. I don’t know.”

“It couldn’t be done,” I said through a dry mouth. But their hands were tied behind them, all right. I couldn’t seem to take my eyes away from that.

“It could. If they wanted to bad enough, David, they could.”

“But why?”

“I think you know why. Not any of the tourists, the summer people—like that guy Miller—but there are people from around here who could make a pretty decent guess.”

“The Arrowhead Project?”

Ollie said, “I stand by one of those registers all day long and I hear a lot. All this spring I’ve been hearing things about that damned Arrowhead thing, none of it good. The black ice on the lakes—”

I thought of Bill Giosti leaning in my window, blowing warm alcohol in my face. Not just atoms, but *different* atoms. Now these bodies hanging from that overhead pipe. The cocked heads. The dangling shoes. The tongues protruding like summer sausages.

I realized with fresh horror that new doors of perception were opening up inside. New? Not so. Old doors of perception. The perception of a child who has not yet learned to protect itself by developing the tunnel vision that keeps out ninety percent of the universe. Children see everything their eyes happen upon, hear everything in their ears’ range. But if life is the rise of consciousness (as a crewel-work sampler my wife made in high school proclaims), then it is also the reduction of input.

Terror is the widening of perspective and perception. The horror was in knowing I was swimming down to a place most of us leave when we get out of diapers and into training pants. I could see it on Ollie’s face, too. When rationality begins to break down, the circuits of the human brain can overload. Axons grow bright and feverish. Hallucinations turn real: the quicksilver puddle at the point where perspective makes parallel lines seem to intersect is really there; the dead walk and talk; a rose begins to sing.

“I’ve heard stuff from maybe two dozen people,” Ollie said. “Justine Robards. Nick Tochai. Ben Michaelson. You can’t keep secrets in small towns. Things get out. Sometimes it’s like a spring—it just bubbles up out of the earth and no one has an idea where it came from. You overhear something at the library and pass it on, or at the marina in Harrison, Christ knows where else, or why. But all spring and summer I’ve been hearing Arrowhead Project, Arrowhead Project.”

“But these two,” I said. “Christ, Ollie, they’re just kids.”

“There were kids in Nam who used to take ears. I was there. I saw it.”

“But...what would drive them to do this?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they knew something. Maybe they only suspected. They must have known people in here would start asking them questions eventually. If there is an eventually.”

“If you’re right,” I said, “it must be something really bad.”

“That storm,” Ollie said in his soft, level voice. “Maybe it knocked something loose up there. Maybe there was an accident. They could have been fooling around with anything. Some people claim they were messing with high-intensity lasers and masers. Sometimes I hear fusion power. And suppose...suppose they ripped a hole straight through into another dimension?”

“That’s hogwash,” I said.

“Are they?” Ollie asked, and pointed at the bodies.

“No. The question now is: What do we do?”

“I think we ought to cut them down and hide them,” he said promptly. “Put them under a pile of stuff people won’t want—dog food, dish detergent, stuff like that. If this gets out, it will only make

things worse. That's why I came to you, David. I felt you are the only one I could really trust."

I muttered, "It's like the Nazi war criminals killing themselves in their cells after the war was lost."

"Yeah. I had that same thought."

We fell silent, and suddenly those soft shuffling noises began outside the steel loading door again—the sound of the tentacles feeling softly across it. We drew together. My flesh was crawling.

"Okay," I said.

"We'll make it as quick as we can," Ollie said. His sapphire ring glowed mutely as he moved his flashlight. "I want to get out of here fast."

I looked up at the ropes. They had used the same sort of clothesline the man in the golf cap had allowed me to tie around his waist. The nooses had sunk into the puffed flesh of their necks, and I wondered again what it could have been to make both of them go through with it. I knew what Ollie meant by saying that if the news of the double suicide got out, it would make things worse. For me it already had—and I wouldn't have believed that possible.

There was a snicking sound. Ollie had opened his knife, a good heavy job made for slitting open cartons. And, of course, cutting rope.

"You or me?" he asked.

I swallowed. "One each."

We did it.

When I got back, Amanda was gone and Mrs. Turman was with Billy. They were both sleeping. I walked down one of the aisles and a

voice said: “Mr. Drayton. David.” It was Amanda, standing by the stairs to the manager’s office, her eyes like emeralds. “What was it?”

“Nothing,” I said.

She came over to me. I could smell faint perfume. And oh how I wanted her. “You liar,” she said.

“It was nothing. A false alarm.”

“If that’s how you want it.” She took my hand. “I’ve just been up to the office. It’s empty and there’s a lock on the door.” Her face was perfectly calm, but her eyes were lambent, almost feral, and a pulse beat steadily in her throat.

“I don’t—”

“I saw the way you looked at me,” she said. “If we need to talk about it, it’s no good. The Turman woman is with your son.”

“Yes.” It came to me that this was a way—maybe not the best one, but a way, nevertheless—to take the curse off what Ollie and I had just done. Not the best way, just the only way.

We went up the narrow flight of stairs and into the office. It was empty, as she had said. And there was a lock on the door. I turned it. In the darkness she was nothing but a shape. I put my arms out, touched her, and pulled her to me. She was trembling. We went down on the floor, first kneeling, kissing, and I cupped one firm breast and could feel the quick thudding of her heart through her sweatshirt. I thought of Steffy telling Billy not to touch the live wires. I thought of the bruise that had been on her hip when she took off the brown dress on our wedding night. I thought of the first time I had seen her, biking across the mall of the University of Maine at Orono, me bound for one of Vincent Hartgen’s classes with my portfolio under my arm. And my erection was enormous.

We lay down then, and she said, “Love me, David. Make me warm.” When she came, she dug into my back with her nails and called me by a name that wasn’t mine. I didn’t mind. It made us about even.

When we came down, some sort of creeping dawn had begun. The blackness outside the loopholes went reluctantly to dull gray, then to chrome, then to the bright, featureless, and unsparkling white of a drive-in movie screen. Mike Hatlen was asleep in a folding chair he had scrounged somewhere. Dan Miller sat on the floor a little distance away, eating a Hostess donut. The kind that’s powdered with white sugar.

“Sit down, Mr. Drayton,” he invited.

I looked around for Amanda, but she was already halfway up the aisle. She didn’t look back. Our act of love in the dark already seemed something out of a fantasy, impossible to believe even in this weird daylight. I sat down.

“Have a donut.” He held the box out.

I shook my head. “All that white sugar is death. Worse than cigarettes.”

That made him laugh a little bit. “In that case, have two.”

I was surprised to find a little laughter left inside me—he had surprised it out, and I liked him for it. I did take two of his donuts. They tasted pretty good. I chased them with a cigarette, although it is not normally my habit to smoke in the mornings.

“I ought to get back to my kid,” I said. “He’ll be waking up.”

Miller nodded. “Those pink bugs,” he said. “They’re all gone. So are the birds. Hank Vannerman said the last one hit the windows around four. Apparently the...the wildlife...is a lot more active when it’s dark.”

“You don’t want to tell Brent Norton that,” I said. “Or Norm.”

He nodded again and didn’t say anything for a long time. Then he lit a cigarette of his own and looked at me. “We can’t stay here, Drayton,” he said.

“There’s food. Plenty to drink.”

“The supplies don’t have anything to do with it, and you know it. What do we do if one of the big beasties out there decides to break in instead of just going bump in the night? Do we try to drive it off with broom handles and charcoal lighter fluid?”

Of course he was right. Perhaps the mist was protecting us in a way. Hiding us. But maybe it wouldn’t hide us for long, and there was more to it than that. We had been in the Federal for eighteen hours, more or less, and I could feel a kind of lethargy spreading over me, not much different from the lethargy I’ve felt on one or two occasions when I’ve tried to swim too far. There was an urge to play it safe, to just stay put, to take care of Billy (*and maybe to bang Amanda Dumfries in the middle of the night*, a voice murmured), to see if the mist wouldn’t just lift, leaving everything as it had been.

I could see it on the other faces as well, and it suddenly occurred to me that there were people now in the Federal who probably wouldn’t leave under any circumstance. The very thought of going out the door after all that had happened would freeze them.

Miller had been watching these thoughts cross my face, maybe. He said, “There were about eighty people in here when that damn fog came. From that number you subtract the bag-boy, Norton, and the four people that went out with him, and that man Smalley. That leaves seventy-three.”

And subtracting the two soldiers, now resting under a stack of Purina Puppy Chow bags, it made seventy-one.

“Then you subtract the people who have just opted out,” he went on. “There are ten or twelve of those. Say ten. That leaves about sixty-three. *But—*” He raised one sugar-powdered finger. “Of those sixty-three, we’ve got twenty or so that just won’t leave. You’d have to drag them out kicking and screaming.”

“Which all goes to prove what?”

“That we’ve got to get out, that’s all. And I’m going. Around noon, I think. I’m planning to take as many people as will come. I’d like you and your boy to come along.”

“After what happened to Norton?”

“Norton went like a lamb to the slaughter. That doesn’t mean I have to, or the people who come with me.”

“How can you prevent it? We have exactly one gun.”

“And lucky to have that. But if we could make it across the intersection, maybe we could get down to the Sportsman’s Exchange on Main Street. They’ve got more guns there than you could shake a stick at.”

“That’s one ‘if’ and one ‘maybe’ too many.”

“Drayton,” he said, “it’s an iffy situation.”

That rolled very smoothly off his tongue, but he didn’t have a little boy to watch out for.

“Look, let it pass for now, okay? I didn’t get much sleep last night, but I got a chance to think over a few things. Want to hear them?”

“Sure.”

He stood up and stretched. “Take a walk over to the window with me.”

We went through the checkout lane nearest the bread racks and stood at one of the loopholes. The man who was keeping watch there said, "The bugs are gone."

Miller slapped him on the back. "Go get yourself a coffee—and, fella, I'll keep an eye out."

"Okay. Thanks."

He walked away, and Miller and I stepped up to his loophole. "So tell me what you see out there," he said.

I looked. The litter barrel had been knocked over in the night, probably by one of the swooping bird-things, spilling a trash of papers, cans, and paper shake cups from the Dairy Queen down the road all over the hottop. Beyond that I could see the rank of cars closest to the market fading into whiteness. That was all I could see, and I told him so.

"That blue Chevy pickup is mine," he said. He pointed and I could see just a hint of blue in the mist. "But if you think back to when you pulled in yesterday, you'll remember that the parking lot was pretty jammed, right?"

I glanced back at my Scout and remembered I had only gotten the space close to the market because someone else had been pulling out. I nodded.

Miller said, "Now couple something else with that fact, Drayton. Norton and his four...what did you call them?"

"Flat-Earthers."

"Yeah, that's good. Just what they were. They go out, right? Almost the full length of that clothesline. Then we heard those roaring noises, like there was a goddamn herd of elephants out there. Right?"

“It didn’t sound like elephants,” I said. “It sounded like—” *Like something from the primordial ooze* was the phrase that came to mind, but I didn’t want to say that to Miller, not after he had clapped that guy on the back and told him to go get a coffee-and like the coach jerking a player from the big game. I might have said it to Ollie, but not to Miller. “I don’t know what it sounded like,” I finished lamely.

“But it sounded *big*.”

“Yeah.” It had sounded pretty goddamn big.

“So how come we didn’t hear cars getting bashed around? Screeching metal? Breaking glass?”

“Well, because—” I stopped. He had me. “I don’t know.”

Miller said, “No way they were out of the parking lot when whatever-it-was hit them. I’ll tell you what I think. I think we didn’t hear any cars getting around because a lot of them might be gone. Just...gone. Fallen into the earth, vaporized, you name it. Strong enough to splinter these beams and twist them out of shape and knock stuff off the shelves. And the town whistle stopped at the same time.”

I was trying to visualize half the parking lot gone. Trying to visualize walking out there and just coming to a brand-new drop in the land where the hottop with its neat yellow-lined parking slots left off. A drop, a slope...or maybe an out-and-out precipice falling away into the featureless white mist...

After a couple of seconds I said, “If you’re right, how far do you think you’re going to get in your pickup?”

“I wasn’t thinking of my truck. I was thinking of your four-wheel-drive.”

That was something to chew over, but not now. “What else is on your mind?”

Miller was eager to go on. “The pharmacy next door, that’s on my mind. What about that?”

I opened my mouth to say I didn’t have the slightest idea what he was talking about, and then shut it with a snap. The Bridgton Pharmacy had been doing business when we drove in yesterday. Not the Laundromat, but the drugstore had been wide open, the doors chocked with rubber doorstops to let in a little cool air—the power outage had killed their air-conditioning, of course. The door to the pharmacy could be no more than twenty feet from the door of the Federal market. So why—

“Why haven’t any of those people turned up over here?” Miller asked for me. “It’s been eighteen hours. Aren’t they hungry? They’re sure not over there eating Dristan and Stayfree Mini-pads.”

“There’s food,” I said. “They’re always selling food items on special. Sometimes it’s animal crackers, sometimes it’s those toaster pastries, all sorts of things. Plus the candy rack.”

“I just don’t believe they’d stick with stuff like that when there’s all kinds of stuff over here.”

“What are you getting at?”

“What I’m getting at is that I want to get out but I don’t want to be dinner for some refugee from a grade-B horror picture. Four or five of us could go next door and check out the situation in the drugstore. As sort of a trial balloon.”

“That’s everything?”

“No, there’s one other thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Her,” Miller said simply, and jerked his thumb toward one of the middle aisles. “That crazy cunt. That witch.”

It was Mrs. Carmody he had jerked his thumb at. She was no longer alone; two women had joined her. From their bright clothes I guessed they were probably tourists or summer people, ladies who had maybe left their families to “just run into town and get a few things” and were now eaten up with worry over their husbands and kids. Ladies eager to grasp at almost any straw. Maybe even the black comfort of a Mrs. Carmody.

Her pantsuit shone out with its same baleful resplendence. She was talking, gesturing, her face hard and grim. The two ladies in their bright clothes (but not as bright as Mrs. Carmody’s pantsuit, no, and her gigantic satchel of a purse was still tucked firmly under one doughy arm) were listening raptly.

“She’s another reason I want to get out, Drayton. By tonight she’ll have six people sitting with her. If those pink bugs and the birds come back tonight, she’ll have a whole congregation sitting with her by tomorrow morning. Then we can start worrying about who she’ll tell them to sacrifice to make it all better. Maybe me, or you, or that guy Hatlen. Maybe your kid.”

“That’s idiocy,” I said. But was it? The cold chill crawling up my back said not necessarily. Mrs. Carmody’s mouth moved and moved. The eyes of the tourist ladies were fixed on her wrinkled lips. Was it idiocy? I thought of the dusty stuffed animals drinking at their looking-glass stream. Mrs. Carmody had power. Even Steff, normally hardheaded and straight-from-the-shoulder, invoked the old lady’s name with unease.

That crazy cunt, Miller had called her. *That witch*.

“The people in this market are going through a section-eight experience for sure,” Miller said. He gestured at the red-painted beams framing the show-window segments...twisted and splintered and buckled out of shape. “Their minds probably feel like those

beams look. Mine sure as shit does. I spent half of last night thinking I must have flipped out of my gourd, that I was probably in a straitjacket in Danvers, raving my head off about bugs and dinosaur birds and tentacles and that it would all go away just as soon as the nice orderly came along and shot a wad of Thorazine into my arm.” His small face was strained and white. He looked at Mrs. Carmody and then back at me. “I tell you it might happen. As people get flakier, she’s going to look better and better to some of them. And I don’t want to be around if that happens.”

Mrs. Carmody’s lips, moving and moving. Her tongue dancing around her old lady’s snaggle teeth. She did look like a witch. Put her in a pointy black hat and she would be perfect. What was she saying to her two captured birds in their bright summer plumage?

Arrowhead Project? Black Spring? Abominations from the cellars of the earth? Human sacrifice?

Bullshit.

All the same—

“So what do you say?”

“I’ll go this far,” I answered him. “We’ll try going over to the drug. You, me, Ollie if he wants to go, one or two others. Then we’ll talk it over again.” Even that gave me the feeling of walking out over an impossible drop on a narrow beam. I wasn’t going to help Billy by killing myself. On the other hand, I wasn’t going to help him by just sitting on my ass, either. Twenty feet to the drugstore. That wasn’t so bad.

“When?” he asked.

“Give me an hour.”

“Sure,” he said.

IX

The Expedition to the Pharmacy.

I told Mrs. Turman, and I told Amanda, and then I told Billy. He seemed better this morning; he had eaten two donuts and a bowl of Special K for breakfast. Afterward I raced him up and down two of the aisles and even got him giggling a little. Kids are so adaptable that they can scare the living shit right out of you. He was too pale, the flesh under his eyes was still puffed from the tears he had cried in the night, and his face had a horribly *used* look. In a way it had become like an old man's face, as if too much emotional voltage had been running behind it for too long. But he was still alive and still able to laugh...at least until he remembered where he was and what was happening.

After the windsprints we sat down with Amanda and Hattie Turman and drank Gatorade from paper cups and I told him I was going over to the drugstore with a few other people.

"I don't want you to," he said immediately, his face clouding.

"It'll be all right, Big Bill. I'll bring you a *Spider-Man* comic book."

"I want you to stay *here*." Now his face was not just cloudy; it was thundery. I took his hand. He pulled it away. I took it again.

“Billy, we have to get out of here sooner or later. You see that, don’t you?”

“When the fog goes away...” But he spoke with no conviction at all. He drank his Gatorade slowly and without relish.

“Billy, it’s been almost one whole day now.”

“I want Mommy.”

“Well, maybe this is the first step on the way to getting back to her.”

Mrs. Turman said, “Don’t build the boy’s hopes up, David.”

“What the hell,” I snapped at her, “the kid’s got to hope for something.”

She dropped her eyes. “Yes. I suppose he does.”

Billy took no notice of this. “Daddy...Daddy, there are things out there. *Things.*”

“Yes, we know that. But a lot of them—not all, but a lot—don’t seem to come out until it’s nighttime.”

“They’ll wait,” he said. His eyes were huge, centered on mine. “They’ll wait in the fog...and when you can’t get back inside, they’ll come to eat you up. Like in the fairy stories.” He hugged me with fierce, panicky tightness. “Daddy, please don’t go.”

I pried his arms loose as gently as I could and told him that I had to. “But I’ll be back, Billy.”

“All right,” he said huskily, but he wouldn’t look at me anymore. He didn’t believe I would be back. It was on his face, which was no longer thundery but woeful and grieving. I wondered again if I could be doing the right thing, putting myself at risk. Then I happened to glance down the middle aisle and saw Mrs. Carmody there. She had

gained a third listener, a man with a grizzled cheek and a mean and rolling bloodshot eye. His haggard brow and shaking hands almost screamed the word hangover. It was none other than your friend and his, Myron LaFleur. The fellow who had felt no compunction at all about sending a boy out to do a man's job.

That crazy cunt. That witch.

I kissed Billy and hugged him hard. Then I walked down to the front of the store—but not down the housewares aisle. I didn't want to fall under her eye.

Three-quarters of the way down, Amanda caught up with me. "Do you really have to do this?" she asked.

"Yes, I think so."

"Forgive me if I say it sounds like so much macho bullshit to me." There were spots of color high on her cheeks and her eyes were greener than ever. She was highly—no, royally—pissed.

I took her arm and recapped my discussion with Dan Miller. The riddle of the cars and the fact that no one from the pharmacy had joined us didn't move her much. The business about Mrs. Carmody did.

"He could be right," she said.

"Do you really believe that?"

"I don't know. There's a poisonous feel to that woman. And if people are frightened badly enough for long enough, they'll turn to anyone that promises a solution."

"But human sacrifice, Amanda?"

"The Aztecs were into it," she said evenly. "Listen, David. You come back. If anything happens...*anything*...you come back. Cut

and run if you have to. Not for me, what happened last night was nice, but that was last night. Come back for your boy.”

“Yes. I will.”

“I wonder,” she said, and now she looked like Billy, haggard and old. It occurred to me that most of us looked that way. But not Mrs. Carmody. Mrs. Carmody looked younger somehow, and more vital. As if she had come into her own. As if...as if she were thriving on it.

We didn't get going until 9:30 A.M. Seven of us went: Ollie, Dan Miller, Mike Hatlen, Myron LaFleur's erstwhile buddy Jim (also hungover, but seemingly determined to find some way to atone), Buddy Eagleton, myself. The seventh was Hilda Reppler. Miller and Hatlen tried halfheartedly to talk her out of coming. She would have none of it. I didn't even try. I suspected she might be more competent than any of us, except maybe for Ollie. She was carrying a small canvas shopping basket, and it was loaded with an arsenal of Raid and Black Flag spray cans, all of them uncapped and ready for action. In her free hand she held a Spaulding Jimmy Connors tennis racket from a display of sporting goods in Aisle 2.

“What you gonna do with that, Mrs. Reppler?” Jim asked.

“I don't know,” she said. She had a low, raspy, competent voice. “But it feels right in my hand.” She looked him over closely, and her eye was cold. “Jim Grondin, isn't it? Didn't I have you in school?”

Jim's lips stretched in an uneasy egg-suck grin. “Yes'm. Me and my sister Pauline.”

“Too much to drink last night?”

Jim, who towered over her and probably outweighed her by one hundred pounds, blushed to the roots of his American Legion crewcut. “Aw, no—”

She turned away curtly, cutting him off. "I think we're ready," she said.

All of us had something, although you would have called it an odd assortment of weapons. Ollie had Amanda's gun, Buddy Eagleton had a steel pinchbar from out back somewhere. I had a broom handle.

"Okay," Dan Miller said, raising his voice a bit. "You folks want to listen up a minute?"

A dozen people had drifted down toward the OUT door to see what was going on. They were loosely knotted, and to their right stood Mrs. Carmody and her new friends.

"We're going over to the drugstore to see what the situation is there. Hopefully, we'll be able to bring something back to aid Mrs. Clapham." She was the lady who had been trampled yesterday, when the bugs came. One of her legs had been broken and she was in a great deal of pain.

Miller looked us over. "We're not going to take any chances," he said. "At the first sign of anything threatening, we're going to pop back into the market—"

"And bring all the fiends of hell down on our heads!" Mrs. Carmody cried.

"She's right!" one of the summer ladies seconded. "You'll make them notice us! You'll make them come! Why can't you just leave well enough alone?"

There was a murmur of agreement from some of the people who had gathered to watch us go.

I said, "Lady, is this what you call well enough?"

She dropped her eyes, confused.

Mrs. Carmody marched a step forward. Her eyes were blazing. “You’ll die out there, David Drayton! Do you want to make your son an orphan?” She raised her eyes and raked all of us with them. Buddy Eagleton dropped his eyes and simultaneously raised the pinchbar, as if to ward her off.

“All of you will die out there! Haven’t you realized that the end of the world has come? The Fiend has been let loose! Star Wormwood blazes and each one of you that steps out that door will be torn apart! And they’ll come for those of us who are left, just as this good woman said! Are you people going to let that happen?” She was appealing to the onlookers now, and a little mutter ran through them. “After what happened to the unbelievers yesterday? It’s death! *It’s death! It’s—*”

A can of peas flew across two of the checkout lanes suddenly and struck Mrs. Carmody on the right breast. She staggered backward with a startled squawk.

Amanda stood forward. “Shut up,” she said. “Shut up, you miserable buzzard.”

“She serves the Foul One!” Mrs. Carmody screamed. A jittery smile hung on her face. “Who did you sleep with last night, missus? Who did you lie down with last night? Mother Carmody sees, oh yes, Mother Carmody sees what others miss.”

But the moment’s spell she had created was broken, and Amanda’s eyes never wavered.

“Are we going or are we going to stand here all day?” Mrs. Repler asked.

And we went. God help us, we went.

Dan Miller was in the lead. Ollie came second, I was last, with Mrs. Repler in front of me. I was as scared as I’ve ever been, I

think, and the hand wrapped around my broom handle was sweaty-slick.

There was that thin, acrid, and unnatural smell of the mist. By the time I got out the door, Miller and Ollie had already faded into it, and Hatlen, who was third, was nearly out of sight.

Only twenty feet, I kept telling myself. *Only twenty feet.*

Mrs. Reppler walked slowly and firmly ahead of me, her tennis racket swinging lightly from her right hand. To our left was a red cinderblock wall. To our right the first rank of cars, looming out of the mist like ghost ships. Another trash barrel materialized out of the whiteness, and beyond that was a bench where people sometimes sat to wait their turn at the pay phone. *Only twenty feet, Miller's probably there by now, twenty feet is only ten or twelve paces, so—*

“Oh my God!” Miller screamed. “Oh dear sweet God, look at this!”

Miller had gotten there, all right.

Buddy Eagleton was ahead of Mrs. Reppler and he turned to run, his eyes wide and stary. She batted him lightly in the chest with her tennis racket. “Where do you think *you're* going?” she asked in her tough, slightly raspy voice, and that was all the panic there was.

The rest of us drew up to Miller. I took one glance back over my shoulder and saw that the Federal had been swallowed by the mist. The red cinderblock wall faded to a thin wash pink and then disappeared utterly, probably five feet on the Bridgton Pharmacy side of the OUT door. I felt more isolated, more simply alone, than ever in my life. It was as if I had lost the womb.

The pharmacy had been the scene of a slaughter.

Miller and I, of course, were very close to it—almost on top of it. All the things in the mist operated primarily by sense of smell. It stood to reason. Sight would have been almost completely useless

to them. Hearing a little better, but as I've said, the mist had a way of screwing up the acoustics, making things that were close sound distant and—sometimes—things that were far away sound close. The things in the mist followed their truest sense. They followed their noses.

Those of us in the market had been saved by the power outage as much as by anything else. The electric-eye doors wouldn't operate. In a sense, the market had been sealed up when the mist came. But the pharmacy doors...they had been chocked open. The power failure had killed their air-conditioning and they had opened the doors to let in the breeze. Only something else had come in as well.

A man in a maroon T-shirt lay facedown in the doorway. Or at first I thought his T-shirt was maroon; then I saw a few white patches at the bottom and understood that once it had been all white. The maroon was dried blood. And there was something else wrong with him. I puzzled it over in my mind. Even when Buddy Eagleton turned around and was noisily sick, it didn't come immediately. I guess when something that...that *final* happens to someone, your mind rejects it at first...unless maybe you're in a war.

His head was gone, that's what it was. His legs were splayed out inside the pharmacy doors, and his head should have been hanging over the low step. But his head just wasn't.

Jim Grondin had had enough. He turned away, his hands over his mouth, his bloodshot eyes gazing madly into mine. Then he stumbled-staggered back toward the market.

The others took no notice. Miller had stepped inside. Mike Hatlen followed. Mrs. Reppler stationed herself at one side of the double doors with her tennis racket. Ollie stood on the other side with Amanda's gun drawn and pointing at the pavement.

He said quietly, "I seem to be running out of hope, David."

Buddy Eagleton was leaning weakly against the pay-phone stall like someone who has just gotten bad news from home. His broad shoulders shook with the force of his sobs.

“Don’t count us out yet,” I said to Ollie. I stepped up to the door. I didn’t want to go inside, but I had promised my son a comic book.

The Bridgton Pharmacy was a crazy shambles. Paperbacks and magazines were everywhere. There was a *Spider-Man* comic and an *Incredible Hulk* almost at my feet, and without thinking, I picked them up and jammed them into my back pocket for Billy. Bottles and boxes lay in the aisles. A hand hung over one of the racks.

Unreality washed over me. The wreckage...the *carnage*—that was bad enough. But the place also looked like it had been the scene of some crazy party. It was hung and festooned with what I at first took to be streamers. But they weren’t broad and flat; they were more like very thick strings or very thin cables. It struck me that they were almost the same bright white as the mist itself, and a cold chill sketched its way up my back like frost. Not crepe. What? Magazines and books hung dangling in the air from some of them.

Mike Hatlen was prodding a strange black thing with one foot. It was long and bristly. “What the fuck is this?” he asked no one in particular.

And suddenly I knew. I knew what had killed all those unlucky enough to be in the pharmacy when the mist came. The people who had been unlucky enough to get smelled out. *Out*—

“Out,” I said. My throat was completely dry, and the word came out like a lint-covered bullet. “Get out of here.”

Ollie looked at me. “David...?”

“They’re spiderwebs,” I said. And then two screams came out of the mist. The first of fear, maybe. The second of pain. It was Jim. If there were dues to be paid, he was paying them.

“Get out!” I shouted at Mike and Dan Miller.

Then something looped out of the mist. It was impossible to see it against that white background, but I could hear it. It sounded like a bullwhip that had been halfheartedly flicked. And I could see it when it twisted around the thigh of Buddy Eagleton’s jeans.

He screamed and grabbed for the first thing handy, which happened to be the telephone. The handset flew the length of its cord and then swung back and forth. “*Oh Jesus that HURTS!*” Buddy screamed.

Ollie grabbed for him, and I saw what was happening. At the same instant I understood why the head of the man in the doorway was missing. The thin white cable that had twisted around Buddy’s leg like a silk rope *was sinking into his flesh*. That leg of his jeans had been neatly cut off and was sliding down his leg. A neat, circular incision in his flesh was brimming blood as the cable went deeper.

Ollie pulled him hard. There was a thin snapping sound and Buddy was free. His lips had gone blue with shock.

Mike and Dan were coming, but too slowly. Then Dan ran into several hanging threads and got stuck, exactly like a bug on flypaper. He freed himself with a tremendous jerk, leaving a flap of his shirt hanging from the webbing.

Suddenly the air was full of those languorous bullwhip cracks, and the thin white cables were drifting down all around us. They were coated with the same corrosive substance. I dodged two of them, more by luck than by skill. One landed at my feet and I could hear a faint hiss of bubbling hottop. Another floated out of the air and Mrs. Reppler calmly swung her tennis racket at it. The thread stuck fast, and I heard a high-pitched *twing! twing! twing!* as the corrosive ate through the racket’s strings and snapped them. It sounded like someone rapidly plucking the strings of a violin. A moment later a thread wrapped around the upper handle of the racket and it was jerked into the mist.

“Get back!” Ollie screamed.

We got moving. Ollie had an arm around Buddy. Dan Miller and Mike Hatlen were on each side of Mrs. Reppler. The white strands of web continued to drift out of the fog, impossible to see unless your eye could pick them out against the red cinderblock background.

One of them wrapped around Mike Hatlen’s left arm. Another whipped around his neck in a series of quick winding-up snaps. His jugular went in a jetting, jumping explosion and he was dragged away, head lolling. One of his Bass loafers fell off and lay there on its side.

Buddy suddenly slumped forward, almost dragging Ollie to his knees. “He’s passed out, David. Help me.”

I grabbed Buddy around the waist and we pulled him along in a clumsy, stumbling fashion. Even in unconsciousness, Buddy kept his grip on his steel pinchbar. The leg that the strand of web had wrapped around hung away from his body at a terrible angle.

Mrs. Reppler had turned around. “Ware!” she screamed in her rusty voice. “Ware behind you!”

As I started to turn, one of the web-strands floated down on top of Dan Miller’s head. His hands beat at it, tore at it.

One of the spiders had come out of the mist from behind us. It was the size of a big dog. It was black with yellow piping. *Racing stripes*, I thought crazily. Its eyes were reddish-purple, like pomegranates. It strutted busily toward us on what might have been as many as twelve or fourteen many-jointed legs—it was no ordinary earthly spider blown up to horror-movie size; it was something totally different, perhaps not really a spider at all. Seeing it, Mike Hatlen would have understood what that bristly black thing he had been prodding at in the pharmacy really was.

It closed in on us, spinning its webbing from an oval-shaped orifice on its upper belly. The strands floated out toward us in what was nearly a fan shape. Looking at this nightmare, so like the death-black spiders brooding over their dead flies and bugs in the shadows of our boathouse, I felt my mind trying to tear completely loose from its moorings. I believe now that it was only the thought of Billy that allowed me to keep any semblance of sanity. I was making some sound. Laughing. Crying. Screaming. I don't know.

But Ollie Weeks was like a rock. He raised Amanda's pistol as calmly as a man on a target range and emptied it in spaced shots into the creature at point-blank range. Whatever hell it came from, it wasn't invulnerable. A black ichor splattered from its body and it made a terrible mewling sound, so low it was more felt than heard, like a bass note from a synthesizer. Then it scuttered back into the mist and was gone. It might have been a phantasm from a horrible drug-dream...except for the puddles of sticky black stuff it had left behind.

There was a clang as Buddy finally dropped his steel pinchbar.

"He's dead," Ollie said. "Let him go, David. The fucking thing got his femoral artery, he's dead. Let's get the Christ out of here." His face was once more running with sweat and his eyes bulged from his big round face. One of the web-strands floated easily down on the back of his hand and Ollie swung his arm, snapping it. The strand left a bloody weal.

Mrs. Reppler screamed "Ware!" again, and we turned toward her. Another of them had come out of the mist and had wrapped its legs around Dan Miller in a mad lover's embrace. He was striking at it with his fists. As I bent and picked up Buddy's pinchbar, the spider began to wrap Dan in its deadly thread, and his struggles became a grisly, jittering death dance.

Mrs. Reppler walked toward the spider with a can of Black Flag insect repellent held outstretched in one hand. The spider's legs reached for her. She depressed the button and a cloud of the stuff

jetted into one of its sparkling jewellike eyes. That low-pitched mewling sound came again. The spider seemed to shudder all over and then it began to lurch backward, hairy legs scratching at the pavement. It dragged Dan's body, bumping and rolling, behind it. Mrs. Reppler threw the can of bug spray at it. It bounced off the spider's body and clattered to the hottop. The spider struck the side of a small sports car hard enough to make it rock on its springs, and then it was gone.

I got to Mrs. Reppler, who was swaying on her feet and dead pale. I put an arm around her. "Thank you, young man," she said. "I feel a bit faint."

"That's okay," I said hoarsely.

"I would have saved him if I could."

"I know that."

Ollie joined us. We ran for the market doors, the threads falling all around us. One lit on Mrs. Reppler's marketing basket and sank into the canvas side. She tussled grimly for what was hers, dragging back on the strap with both hands, but she lost it. It went bumping off into the mist, end over end.

As we reached the IN door, a smaller spider, no bigger than a cocker spaniel puppy, raced out of the fog along the side of the building. It was producing no webbing; perhaps it wasn't mature enough to do so.

As Ollie leaned one beefy shoulder against the door so Mrs. Reppler could go through, I heaved the steel bar at the thing like a javelin and impaled it. It writhed madly, legs scratching at the air, and its red eyes seemed to find mine, and mark me...

"David!" Ollie was still holding the door.

I ran in. He followed me.

Pallid, frightened faces stared at us. Seven of us had gone out. Three of us had come back. Ollie leaned against the heavy glass door, barrel chest heaving. He began to reload Amanda's gun. His white assistant manager's shirt was plastered to his body, and large gray sweat-stains had crept out from under his arms.

"What?" someone asked in a low, hoarse voice.

"Spiders," Mrs. Reppler answered grimly. "The dirty bastards snatched my market basket."

Then Billy hurled his way into my arms, crying. I held on to him. Tight.

X

**The Spell of Mrs. Carmody. The Second Night in the Market. The
Final Confrontation.**

It was my turn to sleep, and for four hours I remember nothing at all. Amanda told me I talked a lot, and screamed once or twice, but I remember no dreams. When I woke up it was afternoon. I was terribly thirsty. Some of the milk had gone over, but some of it was still okay. I drank a quart.

Amanda came over to where Billy, Mrs. Turman, and I were. The old man who had offered to make a try for the shotgun in the trunk of his car was with her—Cornell, I remembered. Ambrose Cornell.

“How are you, son?” he asked.

“All right.” But I was still thirsty and my head ached. Most of all, I was scared. I slipped an arm around Billy and looked from Cornell to Amanda. “What’s up?”

Amanda said, “Mr. Cornell is worried about that Mrs. Carmody. So am I.”

“Billy, why don’t you take a walk over here with me?” Hattie asked.

“I don’t want to,” Billy said.

“Go on, Big Bill,” I told him, and he went—reluctantly.

“Now what about Mrs. Carmody?” I asked.

“She’s stirrin’ things up,” Cornell said. He looked at me with an old man’s grimness. “I think we got to put a stop to it. Just about any way we can.”

Amanda said, “There are almost a dozen people with her now. It’s like some crazy kind of a church service.”

I remembered talking with a writer friend who lived in Otisfield and supported his wife and two kids by raising chickens and turning out one paperback original a year—spy stories. We had gotten talking about the bulge in popularity of books concerning themselves with the supernatural. Gault pointed out that in the forties *Weird Tales* had only been able to pay a pittance, and that in the fifties it went broke. When the machines fail, he had said (while his wife candled eggs and roosters crowed querulously outside), when the technologies fail, when the conventional religious systems fail, people have got to have something. Even a zombie lurching through the night can seem pretty cheerful compared to the existential comedy/horror of the ozone layer dissolving under the combined assault of a million fluorocarbon spray cans of deodorant.

We had been trapped here for twenty-six hours and we hadn’t been able to do diddlyshit. Our one expedition outside had resulted in fifty-seven percent losses. It wasn’t so surprising that Mrs. Carmody had turned into a growth stock, maybe.

“Has she really got a dozen people?” I asked.

“Well, only eight,” Cornell said. “But she never shuts up! It’s like those ten-hour speeches Castro used to make. It’s a goddamn filibuster.”

Eight people. Not that many, not even enough to fill up a jury box. But I understood the worry on their faces. It was enough to make

them the single largest political force in the market, especially now that Dan and Mike were gone. The thought that the biggest single group in our closed system was listening to her rant on about the pits of hell and the seven vials being opened made me feel pretty damn claustrophobic.

“She’s started talking about human sacrifice again,” Amanda said. “Bud Brown came over and told her to stop talking that drivel in his store. And two of the men that are with her—one of them was that man Myron LaFleur—told him he was the one who better shut up because it was still a free country. He wouldn’t shut up and there was a...well, a shoving match, I guess you’d say.”

“Brown got a bloody nose,” Cornell said. “They mean business.”

I said, “Surely not to the point of actually killing someone.”

Cornell said softly, “I don’t know how far they’ll go if that mist doesn’t let up. But I don’t want to find out. I intend to get out of here.”

“Easier said than done.” But something had begun to tick over in my mind. *Scent*. That was the key. We had been left pretty much alone in the market. The bugs might have been attracted to the light, as more ordinary bugs were. The birds had simply followed their food supply. But the bigger things had left us alone unless we unbuttoned for some reason. The slaughter in the Bridgton Pharmacy had occurred because the doors had been left chocked open—I was sure of that. The thing or things that had gotten Norton and his party had sounded as big as a house, but it or they hadn’t come near the market. And that meant that maybe...

Suddenly I wanted to talk to Ollie Weeks. I needed to talk to him.

“I intend to get out or die trying,” Cornell said. “I got no plans to spend the rest of the summer in here.”

“There have been four suicides,” Amanda said suddenly.

“What?” The first thing to cross my mind, in a semigUILTY flash, was that the bodies of the soldiers had been discovered.

“Pills,” Cornell said shortly. “Me and two or three other guys carried the bodies out back.”

I had to stifle a shrill laugh. We had a regular morgue going back there.

“It’s thinning out,” Cornell said. “I want to get gone.”

“You won’t make it to your car. Believe me.”

“Not even to that first rank? That’s closer than the drugstore.”

I didn’t answer him. Not then.

About an hour later I found Ollie holding up the beer cooler and drinking a Busch. His face was impassive but he also seemed to be watching Mrs. Carmody. She was tireless, apparently. And she was indeed discussing human sacrifice again, only now no one was telling her to shut up. Some of the people who had told her to shut up yesterday were either with her today or at least willing to listen—and the others were outnumbered.

“She could have them talked around to it by tomorrow morning,” Ollie remarked. “Maybe not...but if she did, who do you think she’d single out for the honor?”

Bud Brown had crossed her. So had Amanda. There was the man who had struck her. And then, of course, there was me.

“Ollie,” I said, “I think maybe half a dozen of us could get out of here. I don’t know how far we’d get, but I think we could at least get out.”

“How?”

I laid it out for him. It was simple enough. If we dashed across to my Scout and piled in, they would get no human scent. At least not with the windows rolled up.

“But suppose they’re attracted to some other scent?” Ollie asked. “Exhaust, for instance?”

“Then we’d be cooked,” I agreed.

“Motion,” he said. “The motion of a car through fog might also draw them, David.”

“I don’t think so. Not without the scent of prey. I really believe that’s the key to getting away.”

“But you don’t know.”

“No, not for sure.”

“Where would you want to go?”

“First? Home. To get my wife.”

“David—”

“All right. To check. To be *sure*.”

“The things out there could be everyplace, David. They could get you the minute you stepped out of your Scout into your dooryard.”

“If that happened, the Scout would be yours. All I’d ask would be that you take care of Billy as well as you could for as long as you could.”

Ollie finished his Busch and dropped the can back into the cooler, where it clattered among the empties. The butt of the gun Amanda’s husband had given her protruded from his pocket.

“South?” he asked, meeting my eyes.

“Yeah, I would,” I said. “Go south and try to get out of the mist. Try like hell.”

“How much gas you got?”

“Almost full.”

“Have you thought that it might be impossible to get out?”

I had. Suppose what they had been fooling with at the Arrowhead Project had pulled this entire region into another dimension as easily as you or I would turn a sock inside out? “It had crossed my mind,” I said, “but the alternative seems to be waiting around to see who Mrs. Carmody taps for the place of honor.”

“Were you thinking about today?”

“No, it’s afternoon already and those things get active at night. I was thinking about tomorrow, very early.”

“Who would you want to take?”

“Me and you and Billy. Hattie Turman. Amanda Dumfries. That old guy Cornell and Mrs. Reppler. Maybe Bud Brown, too. That’s eight, but Billy can sit on someone’s lap and we can all squash together.”

He thought it over. “All right,” he said finally. “We’ll try. Have you mentioned this to anyone else?”

“No, not yet.”

“My advice would be not to, not until about four tomorrow morning. I’ll put a couple of bags of groceries under the checkout nearest the door. If we’re lucky we can squeak out before anyone knows what’s happening.” His eyes drifted to Mrs. Carmody again. “If she knew, she might try to stop us.”

“You think so?”

Ollie got another beer. "I think so," he said.

That afternoon—yesterday afternoon—passed in a kind of slow motion. Darkness crept in, turning the fog to that dull chrome color again. What world was left outside slowly dissolved to black by eight-thirty.

The pink bugs returned, then the bird-things, swooping into the windows and scooping them up. Something roared occasionally from the dark, and once, shortly before midnight, there was a long, drawn-out *Aaaaa-roooooo!* that caused people to turn toward the blackness with frightened, searching faces. It was the sort of sound you'd imagine a bull alligator might make in a swamp.

It went pretty much as Miller had predicted. By the small hours, Mrs. Carmody had gained another half a dozen souls. Mr. McVey the butcher was among them, standing with his arms folded, watching her.

She was totally wound up. She seemed to need no sleep. Her sermon, a steady stream of horrors out of Doré, Bosch, and Jonathan Edwards, went on and on, building toward some climax. Her group began to murmur with her, to rock back and forth unconsciously, like true believers at a tent revival. Their eyes were shiny and blank. They were under her spell.

Around 3:00 A.M. (the sermon went on relentlessly, and the people who were not interested had retreated to the back to try to get some sleep), I saw Ollie put a bag of groceries on a shelf under the checkout nearest the OUT door. Half an hour later he put another bag beside it. No one appeared to notice him but me. Billy, Amanda, and Mrs. Turman slept together by the denuded cold-cuts section. I joined them and fell into an uneasy doze.

At four-fifteen by my wristwatch, Ollie shook me awake. Cornell was with him, his eyes gleaming brightly from behind his spectacles.

“It’s time, David,” Ollie said.

A nervous cramp hit my belly and then passed. I shook Amanda awake. The question of what might happen with both Amanda and Stephanie in the car together passed into my mind, and then passed right out again. Today it would be best to take things just as they came.

Those remarkable green eyes opened and looked into mine. “David?”

“We’re going to take a stab at getting out of here. Do you want to come?”

“What are you talking about?”

I started to explain, then woke up Mrs. Turman so I would only have to go through it the once.

“Your theory about scent,” Amanda said. “It’s really only an educated guess at this point, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Hattie said. Her face was white and in spite of the sleep she’d gotten there were large discolored patches under her eyes. “I would do anything—take any chances—just to see the sun again.”

Just to see the sun again. A little shiver coursed through me. She had put her finger on a spot that was very close to the center of my own fears, on the sense of almost foregone doom that had gripped me since I had seen Norm dragged out through the loading door. You could only see the sun through the mist as a little silver coin. It was like being on Venus.

It wasn’t so much the monstrous creatures that lurked in the mist; my shot with the pinchbar had shown me they were no Lovecraftian

horrors with immortal life but only organic creatures with their own vulnerabilities. It was the mist itself that sapped the strength and robbed the will. *Just to see the sun again.* She was right. That alone would be worth going through a lot of hell.

I smiled at Hattie and she smiled tentatively back.

“Yes,” Amanda said. “Me too.”

I began to shake Billy awake as gently as I could.

“I’m with you,” Mrs. Reppler said briefly.

We were all together by the meat counter, all but Bud Brown. He had thanked us for the invitation and then declined it. He would not leave his place in the market, he said, but added in a remarkably gentle tone of voice that he didn’t blame Ollie for doing so.

An unpleasant, sweetish aroma was beginning to drift up from the white enamel case now, a smell that reminded me of the time our freezer went on the fritz while we were spending a week on the Cape. Perhaps, I thought, it was the smell of spoiling meat that had driven Mr. McVey over to Mrs. Carmody’s team.

“—expiation! It’s expiation we want to think about now! We have been scourged with whips and scorpions! We have been punished for delving into secrets forbidden by God of old! We have seen the lips of the earth open! We have seen the obscenities of nightmare! The rock will not hide them, the dead tree gives no shelter! And how will it end? What will stop it?”

“Expiation!” shouted good old Myron LaFleur.

“Expiation...expiation...” They whispered it uncertainly.

“Let me hear you say it like you mean it!” Mrs. Carmody shouted. The veins stood out on her neck in bulging cords. Her voice was

cracking and hoarse now, but still full of power. And it occurred to me that it was the mist that had given her that power—the power to cloud men’s minds, to make a particularly apt pun—just as it had taken away the sun’s power from the rest of us. Before, she had been nothing but a mildly eccentric old woman with an antiques store in a town that was lousy with antiques stores. Nothing but an old woman with a few stuffed animals in the back room and a reputation for

(that witch...that cunt)

folk medicine. It was said she could find water with an applewood stick, that she could charm warts, and sell you a cream that would fade freckles to shadows of their former selves. I had even heard—was it from old Bill Giosti?—that Mrs. Carmody could be seen (in total confidence) about your love life; that if you were having the bedroom miseries, she could give you a drink that would put the ram back in your rod.

“EXPIATION!” they all cried together.

“Expiation, that’s right!” she shouted deliriously. “It’s expiation gonna clear away this fog! Expiation gonna clear off these monsters and abominations! Expiation gonna drop the scales of mist from our eyes and let us see!” Her voice dropped a notch. “And what does the Bible say expiation is? What is the only cleanser for sin in the Eye and Mind of God?”

“Blood.”

This time the chill shuddered up through my entire body, cresting at the nape of my neck and making the hairs there stiffen. Mr. McVey had spoken that word, Mr. McVey the butcher who had been cutting meat in Bridgton ever since I was a kid holding my father’s talented hand. Mr. McVey taking orders and cutting meat in his stained whites. Mr. McVey, whose acquaintanceship with the knife was long—yes, and with the saw and cleaver as well. Mr. McVey who would

understand better than anyone else that the cleanser of the soul flows from the wounds of the body.

“Blood...” they whispered.

“Daddy, I’m scared,” Billy said. He was clutching my hand tightly, his small face strained and pale.

“Ollie,” I said, “why don’t we get out of this loony bin?”

“Right on,” he said. “Let’s go.”

We started down the second aisle in a loose group—Ollie, Amanda, Cornell, Mrs. Turman, Mrs. Reppler, Billy, and I. It was a quarter to five in the morning and the mist was beginning to lighten again.

“You and Cornell take the grocery bags,” Ollie said to me.

“Okay.”

“I’ll go first. Your Scout is a four-door, is it?”

“Yeah. It is.”

“Okay, I’ll open the driver’s door and the back door on the same side. Mrs. Dumfries, can you carry Billy?”

She picked him up in her arms.

“Am I too heavy?” Billy asked.

“No, hon.”

“Good.”

“You and Billy get in front,” Ollie went on. “Shove way over. Mrs. Turman in front, in the middle. David, you behind the wheel. The rest of us will—”

“Where did you think you were going?”

It was Mrs. Carmody.

She stood at the head of the checkout line where Ollie had hidden the bags of groceries. Her pantsuit was a yellow scream in the gloom. Her hair frizzed out wildly in all directions, reminding me momentarily of Elsa Lanchester in *The Bride of Frankenstein*. Her eyes blazed. Ten or fifteen people stood behind her, blocking the IN and OUT doors. They had the look of people who had been in car accidents, or who had seen a UFO land, or who had seen a tree pull its roots up and walk.

Billy cringed against Amanda and buried his face against her neck.

“Going out now, Mrs. Carmody,” Ollie said. His voice was curiously gentle. “Stand away, please.”

“You can’t go out. That way is death. Don’t you know that by now?”

“No one has interfered with you,” I said. “All we want is the same privilege.”

She bent and found the bags of groceries unerringly. She must have known what we were planning all along. She pulled them out from the shelf where Ollie had placed them. One ripped open, spilling cans across the floor. She threw the other and it smashed open with the sound of breaking glass. Soda ran fizzing every which way and sprayed off the chrome facing of the next checkout lane.

“These are the sort of people who brought it on!” she shouted. “People who will not bend to the will of the Almighty! Sinners in pride, haughty they are, and stiff-necked! It is from their number that the sacrifice must come! *From their number the blood of expiation!*”

A rising rumble of agreement spurred her on. She was in a frenzy now. Spittle flew from her lips as she screamed at the people crowding up behind her: *“It’s the boy we want! Grab him! Take him! It’s the boy we want!”*

They surged forward, Myron LaFleur in the lead, his eyes blankly joyous. Mr. McVey was directly behind him, his face blank and stolid.

Amanda faltered backward, holding Billy more tightly. His arms were wrapped around her neck. She looked at me, terrified. “David, what do I—”

“Get them both!” Mrs. Carmody screamed. *“Get his whore, too!”*

She was an apocalypse of yellow and dark joy. Her purse was still over her arm. She began to jump up and down. *“Get the boy, get the whore, get them both, get them all, get—”*

A single sharp report rang out.

Everything froze, as if we were a classroom full of unruly children and the teacher had just stepped back in and shut the door sharply. Myron LaFleur and Mr. McVey stopped where they were, about ten paces away. Myron looked back uncertainly at the butcher. He didn’t look back or even seem to realize that LaFleur was there. Mr. McVey had a look I had seen on too many other faces in the last two days. He had gone over. His mind had snapped.

Myron backed up, staring at Ollie Weeks with widening, fearful eyes. His backing-up became a run. He turned the corner of the aisle, skidded on a can, fell down, scrambled up again, and was gone.

Ollie stood in the classic target shooter’s position, Amanda’s gun clasped in both hands. Mrs. Carmody still stood at the head of the checkout lane. Both of her liver-spotted hands were clasped over her stomach. Blood poured out between her fingers and splashed her yellow slacks.

Her mouth opened and closed. Once. Twice. She was trying to talk. At last she made it.

“You will all die out there,” she said, and then she pitched slowly forward. Her purse slithered off her arm, struck the floor, and spilled its contents. A paper-wrapped tube rolled across the distance between us and struck one of my shoes. Without thinking, I bent over and picked it up. It was a half-used package of Roloids. I threw it down again. I didn’t want to touch anything that belonged to her.

The “congregation” was backing away, spreading out, their focus broken. None of them took their eyes from the fallen figure and the dark blood spreading out from beneath her body. “You murdered her!” someone cried out in fear and anger. But no one pointed out that she had been planning something similar for my son.

Ollie was still frozen in his shooter’s position, but now his mouth was trembling. I touched him gently. “Ollie, let’s go. And thank you.”

“I killed her,” he said hoarsely. “Damn if I didn’t kill her.”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s why I thanked you. Now let’s go.”

We began to move again.

With no grocery bags to carry—thanks to Mrs. Carmody—I was able to take Billy. We paused for a moment at the door, and Ollie said in a low, strained voice, “I wouldn’t have shot her, David. Not if there had been any other way.”

“Yeah.”

“You believe it?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Then let’s go.”

We went out.

XI

The End.

Ollie moved fast, the pistol in his right hand. Before Billy and I were more than out the door he was at my Scout, an insubstantial Ollie, like a ghost in a television movie. He opened the driver's door. Then the back door. Then something came out of the mist and cut him nearly in half.

I never got a good look at it, and for that I think I'm grateful. It appeared to be red, the angry color of a cooked lobster. It had claws. It was making a low grunting sound, not much different from the sound we had heard after Norton and his little band of Flat-Earthers went out.

Ollie got off one shot, and then the thing's claws scissored forward and Ollie's body seemed to unhinge in a terrible glut of blood. Amanda's gun fell out of his hand, struck the pavement, and discharged. I caught a nightmare glimpse of huge black lusterless eyes, the size of giant handfuls of sea grapes, and then the thing lurched back into the mist with what remained of Ollie Weeks in its grip. A long, multisegmented scorpion's body dragged harshly on the paving.

There was an instant of choices. Maybe there always is, no matter how short. Half of me wanted to run back into the market with Billy hugged to my chest. The other half was racing for the Scout, throwing Billy inside, lunging after him. Then Amanda screamed. It was a high, rising sound that seemed to spiral up and up until it was nearly ultrasonic. Billy cringed against me, digging his face against my chest.

One of the spiders had Hattie Turman. It was big. It had knocked her down. Her dress had pulled up over her scrawny knees as it crouched over her, its bristly, spiny legs caressing her shoulders. It began to spin its web.

Mrs. Carmody was right, I thought. We're going to die out here, we are really going to die out here.

"Amanda!" I yelled.

No response. She was totally gone. The spider straddled what remained of Billy's babysitter, who had enjoyed jigsaw puzzles and those damned Double-Crostics that no normal person can do without going nuts. Its threads crisscrossed her body, the white strands already turning red as the acid coating sank into her.

Cornell was backing slowly toward the market, his eyes as big as dinner plates behind his specs. Abruptly he turned and ran. He clawed the IN door open and ran inside.

The split in my mind closed as Mrs. Reppler stepped briskly forward and slapped Amanda, first forehand, then backhand. Amanda stopped screaming. I went to her, spun her around to face the Scout, and screamed "GO!" into her face.

She went. Mrs. Reppler brushed past me. She pushed Amanda into the Scout's backseat, got in after her, and slammed the door shut.

I yanked Billy loose and threw him in. As I climbed in myself, one of those spider threads drifted down and lit on my ankle. It burned the way a fishing line pulled rapidly through your closed fist will burn. And it was strong. I gave my foot a hard yank and it broke. I slipped in behind the wheel.

“Shut it, oh shut the door, dear God!” Amanda screamed.

I shut the door. A bare instant later, one of the spiders thumped softly against it. I was only inches from its red, viciously stupid eyes. Its legs, each as thick as my wrist, slipped back and forth across the square bonnet. Amanda screamed ceaselessly, like a firebell.

“Woman, shut your head,” Mrs. Reppler told her.

The spider gave up. It could not smell us, ergo we were no longer there. It strutted back into the mist on its unsettling number of legs, became a phantasm, and then was gone.

I looked out the window to make sure it was gone and then opened the door.

“What are you doing?” Amanda screamed, but I knew what I was doing. I like to think Ollie would have done exactly the same thing. I half-stepped, half-leaned out, and got the gun. Something came rapidly toward me, but I never saw it. I pulled back in and slammed the door shut.

Amanda began to sob. Mrs. Reppler put an arm around her and comforted her briskly.

Billy said, “Are we going home, Daddy?”

“Big Bill, we’re gonna try.”

“Okay,” he said quietly.

I checked the gun and then put it into the glove compartment. Ollie had reloaded it after the expedition to the drugstore. The rest of

the shells had disappeared with him, but that was all right. He had fired at Mrs. Carmody, he had fired once at the clawed thing, and the gun had discharged once when it hit the ground. There were four of us in the Scout, but if push came right down to shove, I'd find some other way out for myself.

I had a terrible moment when I couldn't find my key ring. I checked all my pockets, came up empty, and then checked them all again, forcing myself to go slowly and calmly. They were in my jeans pocket; they had gotten down under the coins, as keys sometimes will. The Scout started easily. At the confident roar of the engine, Amanda burst into fresh tears.

I sat there, letting it idle, waiting to see what was going to be drawn by the sound of the engine or the smell of the exhaust. Five minutes, the longest five of my life, drifted by. Nothing happened.

"Are we going to sit here or are we going to go?" Mrs. Reppler asked at last.

"Go," I said. I backed out of the slot and put on the low beams.

Some urge—probably a base one—made me cruise past the Federal market as close as I could get. The Scout's right bumper bunted the trash barrel to one side. It was impossible to see in except through the loopholes—all those fertilizer and lawn-food bags made the place look as if it were in the throes of some mad garden sale—but at each loophole there were two or three pale faces, staring out at us.

Then I swung to the left, and the mist closed impenetrably behind us. And what has become of those people I do not know.

I drove back down Kansas Road at five miles an hour, feeling my way. Even with the Scout's headlights and running lights on, it was impossible to see more than seven or ten feet ahead.

The earth had been through some terrible contortion; Miller had been right about that. In places the road was merely cracked, but in others the ground itself seemed to have caved in, tilting up great slabs of paving. I was able to get over with the help of the four-wheel drive. Thank God for that. But I was terribly afraid that we would soon come to an obstacle that even the four-wheel drive couldn't get us over.

It took me forty minutes to make a drive that usually only took seven or eight. At last the sign that marked our private road loomed out of the mist. Billy, roused at a quarter of five, had fallen solidly asleep inside this car that he knew so well it must have seemed like home to him.

Amanda looked at the road nervously. "Are you really going down there?"

"I'm going to try," I said.

But it was impossible. The storm that had whipped through had loosened a lot of trees, and that weird, twisting drop had finished the job of tumbling them. I was able to crunch over the first two; they were fairly small. Then I came to a hoary old pine lying across the road like an outlaw's barricade. It was still almost a quarter of a mile to the house. Billy slept on beside me, and I put the Scout in Park, put my hands over my eyes, and tried to think what to do next.

Now, as I sit in the Howard Johnson's near Exit 3 of the Maine Turnpike, writing all of this down on HoJo stationery, I suspect that Mrs. Reppler, that tough and capable old broad, could have laid out the essential futility of the situation in a few quick strokes. But she had the kindness to let me think it through for myself.

I couldn't get out. I couldn't leave them. I couldn't even kid myself that all the horror-movie monsters were back at the Federal; when I cracked the window I could hear them in the woods, crashing and blundering around on the steep fall of land they call the Ledges

around these parts. The moisture drip-drip-dripped from the overhanging leaves. Overhead the mist darkened momentarily as some nightmarish and half-seen living kite overflowed us.

I tried to tell myself—then and now—that if she was very quick, if she buttoned up the house with herself inside, that she had enough food for ten days to two weeks. It only works a little bit. What keeps getting in the way is my last memory of her, wearing her floppy sunhat and gardening gloves, on her way to our little vegetable patch with the mist rolling inexorably across the lake behind her.

It is Billy I have to think about now. Billy, I tell myself. Big Bill, Big Bill...I should write it maybe a hundred times on this sheet of paper, like a child condemned to write *I will not throw spitballs in school* as the sunny three-o'clock stillness spills through the windows and the teacher corrects homework papers at her desk and the only sound is her pen, while somewhere, far away, kids pick up teams for scratch baseball.

Anyway, at last I did the only thing I could do. I reversed the Scout carefully back to Kansas Road. Then I cried.

Amanda touched my shoulder timidly. "David, I'm so sorry," she said.

"Yeah," I said, trying to stop the tears and not having much luck. "Yeah, so am I."

I drove to Route 302 and turned left, toward Portland. This road was also cracked and blasted in places, but was, on the whole, more passable than Kansas Road had been. I was worried about the bridges. The face of Maine is cut with running water, and there are bridges everywhere, big and small. But the Naples Causeway was intact, and from there it was plain—if slow—sailing all the way to Portland.

The mist held thick. Once I had to stop, thinking that trees were lying across the road. Then the trees began to move and undulate and I understood they were more tentacles. I stopped, and after a while they drew back. Once a great green thing with an iridescent green body and long transparent wings landed on the hood. It looked like a grossly misshapen dragonfly. It hovered there for a moment, then took wing again and was gone.

Billy woke up about two hours after we had left Kansas Road behind and asked if we had gotten Mommy yet. I told him I hadn't been able to get down our road because of fallen trees.

"Is she all right, Dad?"

"Billy, I don't know. But we'll come back and see."

He didn't cry. He dozed off again instead. I would have rather had his tears. He was sleeping too damn much and I didn't like it.

I began to get a tension headache. It was driving through the fog at a steady five or ten miles an hour that did it, the tension of knowing that anything might come out of it, anything at all—a washout, a landspill, or Ghidra the Three-headed Monster. I think I prayed. I prayed to God that Stephanie was alive and that He wouldn't take my adultery out on her. I prayed to God to let me get Billy to safety because he had been through so much.

Most people had pulled to the side of the road when the mist came, and by noon we were in North Windham. I tried the River Road, but about four miles down, a bridge spanning a small and noisy stream had fallen into the water. I had to reverse for nearly a mile before I found a spot wide enough to turn around. We went to Portland by Route 302 after all.

When we got there, I drove the cutoff to the turnpike. The neat line of tollbooths guarding the access had been turned into vacant-eyed skeletons of smashed Pola-Glas. All of them were empty. In the sliding glass doorway of one was a torn jacket with Maine Turnpike

Authority patches on the sleeves. It was drenched with tacky, drying blood. We had not seen a single living person since leaving the Federal.

Mrs. Reppler said, "David, try your radio."

I slapped my forehead in frustration and anger at myself, wondering how I could have been stupid enough to forget the Scout's AM/FM for so long.

"Don't do that," Mrs. Reppler said curtly. "You can't think of everything. If you try, you will go mad and be of no use at all."

I got nothing but a shriek of static all the way across the AM band, and the FM yielded nothing but a smooth and ominous silence.

"Does that mean everything's off the air?" Amanda asked. I knew what she was thinking, maybe. We were far enough south now so that we should have been picking up a selection of strong Boston stations—WRKO, WBZ, WMEX. But if Boston had gone—

"It doesn't mean anything for sure," I said. "That static on the AM band is pure interference. The mist is having a damping effect on radio signals, too."

"Are you sure that's all it is?"

"Yes," I said, not sure at all.

We went south. The mileposts rolled past, counting down from about forty. When we reached Mile 1, we would be at the New Hampshire border. Going on the turnpike was slower; a lot of the drivers hadn't wanted to give up, and there had been rear-end collisions in several places. Several times I had to use the median strip.

At about twenty past one—I was beginning to feel hungry—Billy clutched my arm. “Daddy, what’s that? *What’s that!*”

A shadow loomed out of the mist, staining it dark. It was as tall as a cliff and coming right at us. I jammed on the brakes. Amanda, who had been catnapping, was thrown forward.

Something came; again, that is all I can say for sure. It may have been the fact that the mist only allowed us to glimpse things briefly, but I think it just as likely that there are certain things that your brain simply disallows. There are things of such darkness and horror—just, I suppose, as there are things of such great beauty—that they will not fit through the puny human doors of perception.

It was six-legged, I know that; its skin was slaty gray that mottled to dark brown in places. Those brown patches reminded me absurdly of the liver spots on Mrs. Carmody’s hands. Its skin was deeply wrinkled and grooved, and clinging to it were scores, hundreds, of those pinkish “bugs” with the stalk-eyes. I don’t know how big it actually was, but it passed directly over us. One of its gray, wrinkled legs smashed down right beside my window, and Mrs. Reppler said later she could not see the underside of its body, although she craned her neck up to look. She saw only two Cyclopean legs going up and up into the mist like living towers until they were lost to sight.

For the moment it was over the Scout I had an impression of something so big that it might have made a blue whale look the size of a trout—in other words, something so big that it defied the imagination. Then it was gone, sending a seismological series of thuds back. It left tracks in the cement of the Interstate, tracks so deep I could not see the bottoms. Each single track was nearly big enough to drop the Scout into.

For a moment no one spoke. There was no sound but our breathing and the diminishing thud of that great Thing’s passage.

Then Billy said, “Was it a dinosaur, Dad? Like the bird that got into the market?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think there was ever an animal that big, Billy. At least not on earth.”

I thought of the Arrowhead Project and wondered again what crazy damned thing they could have been doing up there.

“Can we go on?” Amanda asked timidly. “It might come back.”

Yes, and there might be more up ahead. But there was no point in saying so. We had to go somewhere. I drove on, weaving in and out between those terrible tracks until they veered off the road.

That is what happened. Or nearly all—there is one final thing I’ll get to in a moment. But you mustn’t expect some neat conclusion. There is no *And they escaped from the mist into the good sunshine of a new day*; or *When we awoke the National Guard had finally arrived*; or even that great old standby: *It was all a dream*.

It is, I suppose, what my father always frowningly called “an Alfred Hitchcock ending,” by which he meant a conclusion in ambiguity that allowed the reader or viewer to make up his own mind about how things ended. My father had nothing but contempt for such stories, saying they were “cheap shots.”

We got to this Howard Johnson’s near Exit 3 as dusk began to close in, making driving a suicidal risk. Before that, we took a chance on the bridge that spans the Saco River. It looked badly twisted out of shape, but in the mist it was impossible to tell if it was whole or not. That particular game we won.

But there’s tomorrow to think of, isn’t there?

As I write this, it is a quarter to one in the morning, July the twenty-third. The storm that seemed to signal the beginning of it all

was only four days ago. Billy is sleeping in the lobby on a mattress that I dragged out for him. Amanda and Mrs. Reppler are close by. I am writing by the light of a big Delco flashlight, and outside the pink bugs are ticking and thumping off the glass. Every now and then there is a louder thud as one of the birds takes one off.

The Scout has enough gas to take us maybe another ninety miles. The alternative is to try to gas up here; there is an Exxon out on the service island, and although the power is off, I believe I could siphon some up from the tank. But—

But it means being outside.

If we can get gas—here or further along—we'll keep going. I have a destination in mind now, you see. It's that last thing I wanted to tell you about.

I couldn't be sure. That is the thing, the damned thing. It might have been my imagination, nothing but wish fulfillment. And even if not, it is such a long chance. How many miles? How many bridges? How many things that would love to tear up my son and eat him even as he screamed in terror and agony?

The chances are so good that it was nothing but a daydream that I haven't told the others...at least, not yet.

In the manager's apartment I found a large battery-operated multiband radio. From the back of it, a flat antenna wire led out through the window. I turned it on, switched over to BAT., fiddled with the tuning dial, with the SQUELCH knob, and still got nothing but static or dead silence.

And then, at the far end of the AM band, just as I was reaching for the knob to turn it off, I thought I heard, or dreamed I heard, one single word.

There was no more. I listened for an hour, but there was no more. If there was that one word, it came through some minute shift

in the damp mist, an infinitesimal break that immediately closed again.

One word.

I've got to get some sleep...if I can sleep and not be haunted until daybreak by the faces of Ollie Weeks and Mrs. Carmody and Norm the bag-boy...and by Steff's face, half-shadowed by the wide brim of her sunhat.

There is a restaurant here, a typical HoJo restaurant with a dining room and a long, horseshoe-shaped lunch counter. I am going to leave these pages on the counter and perhaps someday someone will find them and read them.

One word.

If I only really heard it. If only.

I'm going to bed now. But first I'm going to kiss my son and whisper two words in his ear. Against the dreams that may come, you know.

Two words that sound a bit alike.

One of them is Hartford.

The other is hope.



stephen
KING

Morality

MORALITY

Stephen King

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How was school?” she asked.

“Fine.”

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

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

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

“Nora?”

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

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

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

“Tell me what's going on.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Eight months at least."

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

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

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

"Nora, what's this about?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chad smiled at that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is it you want me to do?"

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

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

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

"Give me a drag, I said."

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

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

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

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

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

"If what?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Right back atcha,” he said.

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

“Are you seriously—”

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

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

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

“Our coverage is okay.”

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

keep thinking about. Sure!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you blaming me for—”

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

“You’re not going to.”

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

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

“No.”

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

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

"Charlie Green has one."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He said nothing to this.

“You’re crazy, you know.”

He still said nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At last she looked up and gave her answer.

“Excellent,” he said.

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

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

“Nor, c’mon—”

“Have you got cab fare?”

“Yes.”

“And a bag to put the videocam in?”

“Yes, of course.”

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

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

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

“Of course I remember it!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Nora got up from the bench.

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

2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He’s fine,” Chad said.

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

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

“I never—”

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

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

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

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

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

“See?” he asked her. “He’s fi—”

“Run it again.”

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

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

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

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

“Okay—”

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

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

“Hit me,” she said.

He slapped her. He was beyond rationality.

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

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

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

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

“After I see the video.”

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

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

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

“The money.”

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

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

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

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

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

"No."

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

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

"I ran into a door," she said.

"I see."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She had no idea how to answer this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I miss you, Nora."

She said nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, I’m Mrs. Callahan.”

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

“Of course, but I haven’t seen—”

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

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

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

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

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

He smiled. “You do that,” he said.

That night, in bed.

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

“No.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m a writer,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you really think so?"

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

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

That night, in bed. Their last Brooklyn night.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," he said.

"What do you mean, no? Why?"

"Because I know what you think of."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How much?"

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

"How much?"

"Forty thousand dollars." Dollarsh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Pigs will whistle.”

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

“You’re drunk. Go to bed.”

“You poison bitch.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

STEPHEN KING'S

N

MARVEL
LIMITED SERIES
1 of 4

MARC GUGGENHEIM · ALEX MALEEV

N.

Stephen King

1. The Letter

May 28, 2008

Dear Charlie,

It seems both strange and perfectly natural to call you that, although when I last saw you I was nearly half the age I am now. I was sixteen and had a terrible crush on you. (Did you know? Of course you did.) Now I'm a happily married woman with a little boy, and I see you all the time on CNN, talking about Things Medical. You are as handsome now (well, almost!) as you were "back in the day," when the three of us used to go fishing and to movies at The Railroad in Freeport.

Those summers seem like a long time ago — you and Johnny inseparable, me tagging along whenever you'd let me. Which was probably more often than I deserved! Yet your note of condolence brought it all back to me, and how I cried. Not just for Johnny, but for all three of us. And, I suppose, for how simple and uncomplicated life seemed. How golden we were!

You saw his obituary, of course. "Accidental death" can cover such a multitude of sins, can't it? In the news story, Johnny's death was reported as the result of a fall, and of course he did fall — at a spot we all knew well, one he had asked me about only last Christmas — but it was no accident. There was a good deal of sedative in his bloodstream. Not nearly enough to kill him, but according to the coroner it could have been enough to disorient him, especially if he was looking over the railing. Hence, "accidental death."

But I know it was suicide.

There was no note at home or on his body, but that might have been Johnny's idea of a kindness. And you, as a doctor yourself, will know that psychiatrists have an extremely high rate of suicide. It's as if the patients' woes are a kind of acid, eating away at the psychic

defenses of their therapists. In the majority of cases, those defenses are thick enough to remain intact. In Johnny's? I think not thanks to one unusual patient. And he wasn't sleeping much during the last two or three months of his life; such terrible dark circles under his eyes! Also, he was canceling appointments right & left. Going on long drives. He would not say where, but I think I may know.

That brings me to the enclosure, which I hope you will look at when you finish this letter. I know you are busy, but — if it will help! — think of me as the love-struck girl I was, with my hair tied back in a ponytail that was always coming loose, forever tagging along!

Although Johnny was on his own, he had formed a loose affiliation with two other “shrinks” in the last four years of his life. His current case files (not many, due to his cutting back) went to one of these Drs. following his death. Those files were in his office. But when I was cleaning out his study at home, I came upon the little manuscript I have enclosed. They are case notes for a patient he calls “N.,” but I have seen his more formal case notes on a few occasions (not to snoop, but only because a folder happened to be open on his desk), and I know this is not like those. For one thing, they weren't done in his office, because there is no heading, as on the other case notes I have seen, and there is no red CONFIDENTIAL stamp at the bottom. Also, you will notice a faint vertical line on the pages. His home printer does this.

But there was something else, which you will see when you unwrap the box. He has printed two words on the cover in thick black strokes: BURN THIS. I almost did, without looking inside. I thought, God help me, it might be his private stash of drugs or print-outs of some weird strain of Internet pornography. In the end, daughter of Pandora that I am, my curiosity got the best of me. I wish it hadn't.

Charlie, I have an idea my brother may have been planning a book, something popular in the style of Oliver Sacks. Judging by this piece of manuscript, it was obsessive-compulsive behavior he was initially focused on, and when I add in his suicide (if it was suicide!), I

wonder if his interest didn't spring from that old adage "Physician, Heal Thyself!"

In any case, I found the account of N., and my brother's increasingly fragmentary notes, disturbing. How disturbing? Enough so I'm forwarding the manuscript — which I have not copied, by the way, this is the only one — to a friend he hadn't seen in ten years and I haven't seen in fourteen. Originally I thought, "Perhaps this could be published. It could serve as a kind of living memorial to my brother."

But I no longer think that. The thing is, the manuscript seems alive, and not in a good way. I know the places that are mentioned, you see (I'll bet you know some of them, too — the field N. speaks of, as Johnny notes, must have been close to where we went to school as children), and since reading the pages, I feel a strong desire to see if I can find it. Not in spite of the manuscript's disturbing nature but because of it — and if that isn't obsessional, what is?!?

I don't think finding it would be a good idea.

But Johnny's death haunts me, and not just because he was my brother. So does the enclosed manuscript. Would you read it? Read it and tell me what you think? Thank you, Charlie. I hope this isn't too much of an intrusion. And if you should decide to honor Johnny's request and burn it, you would never hear a murmur of protest from me.

Fondly,

From Johnny Bonsaint's "little sis,"

Sheila Bonsaint LeClaire

964 Lisbon Street

Lewiston, Maine 04240

PS — Oy, such a crush I had on you!

2. The Case Notes

June 1, 2007

N. is 48 years old, a partner in a large Portland accounting firm, divorced, the father of two daughters. One is doing postgraduate work in California, the other is a junior at a college here in Maine. He describes his current relationship with his ex-wife as “distant but amicable.”

He says, “I know I look older than 48. It’s because I haven’t been sleeping. I’ve tried Ambien and the other one, the green moth one, but they only make me feel groggy.”

When I ask how long he’s been suffering from insomnia, he needs no time to think it over.

“Ten months.”

I ask him if it’s the insomnia that brought him to me. He smiles up at the ceiling. Most patients choose the chair, at least on their first visit — one woman told me that lying on the couch would make her feel like “a joke neurotic in a New Yorker cartoon” — but N. has gone directly to the couch. He lies there with his hands laced tightly together on his chest.

“I think we both know better than that, Dr. Bonsaint,” he says.

I ask him what he means.

“If I only wanted to get rid of the bags under my eyes, I’d either see a plastic surgeon or go to my family doctor — who recommended you, by the way, he says you’re very good — and ask for something stronger than Ambien or the green moth pills. There must be stronger stuff, right?”

I say nothing to this.

“As I understand it, insomnia’s always a symptom of something else.”

I tell him that isn’t always so, but in most cases it is. And, I add, if there is another problem, insomnia is rarely the only symptom.

“Oh, I have others,” he says. “Tons. For instance, look at my shoes.”

I look at his shoes. They are lace-up brogans. The left one is tied at the top, but the right has been tied at the bottom. I tell him that’s very interesting.

“Yes,” he says. “When I was in high school, it was the fashion of girls to tie their sneakers at the bottom if they were going steady. Or if there was a boy they liked and they wanted to go steady.”

I ask him if he’s going steady, thinking this may break the tension I see in his posture — the knuckles of his laced-together hands are white, as if he fears they might fly away unless he exerts a certain amount of pressure to keep them where they are — but he doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t even smile.

“I’m a little past the going-steady stage of life,” he says, “but there is something I want.”

He considers.

“I tried tying both of my shoes at the bottom. It didn’t help. But one up and one down — that actually seems to do some good.” He frees his right hand from the deathgrip his left has on it and holds it up with the thumb and forefinger almost touching. “About this much.”

I ask him what he wants.

“For my mind to be right again. But trying to cure one’s mind by tying one’s shoelaces according to some high school code of communication slightly adjusted to fit the current situation that’s crazy, wouldn’t you say? And crazy people should seek help. If they

have any sanity left at all — which I flatter myself I do — they know that. So here I am.”

He slides his hands together again and looks at me with defiance and fright. Also, I think, with some relief. He’s lain awake trying to imagine what it will be like to tell a psychiatrist that he fears for his sanity, and when he did it, I neither ran shrieking from the room nor called for the men in the white coats. Some patients imagine I have a posse of such white-coated men in the very next room, equipped with butterfly nets and straitjackets.

I ask him to give me some instances of his current mental wrongness, and he shrugs.

“The usual OCD shit. You’ve heard it all a hundred times before. It’s the underlying cause I came here to deal with. What happened in August of last year. I thought maybe you could hypnotize me and make me forget it.” He looks at me hopefully.

I tell him that, while nothing is impossible, hypnotism works better when it’s employed as an aid to memory rather than as a block.

“Ah,” he says. “I didn’t know that. Shit.” He looks up at the ceiling again. The muscles in the side of his face are working, and I think he has something more to say. “It could be dangerous, you know.” He stops, but this is only a pause; the muscles along his jaw are still flexing and relaxing. “What’s wrong with me could be very dangerous.” Another pause. “To me.” Another pause. “Possibly to others.”

Every therapy session is a series of choices; branching roads with no signposts. Here I could ask him what it is — the dangerous thing — but I elect not to. Instead I ask him what sort of OCD shit he’s talking about. Other than the one-up, one-down tying thing, which is a pretty damn good example. (I do not say this.)

“You know it all,” he says, and gives me a sly look that makes me a bit uncomfortable. I don’t show it; he isn’t the first patient who has

made me uncomfortable. Psychiatrists are spelunkers, really, and any spelunker will tell you that caves are full of bats and bugs. Not nice, but most are essentially harmless.

I ask him to humor me. And to remember that we are still just getting to know each other.

“Not going steady just yet, eh?”

No, I tell him, not quite yet.

“Well, we better be soon,” he says, “because I’m at Condition Orange here, Dr. Bonsaint. Edging into Condition Red.”

I ask him if he counts things.

“Of course I do,” he says. “The number of clues in the New York Times crossword puzzles and on Sundays I count twice, because those puzzles are bigger and double-checking seems in order. Necessary, in fact. My own footsteps. Number of telephone rings when I call someone. I eat at the Colonial Diner on most workdays, it’s three blocks from the office, and on my way there I’ll count black shoes. On my way back, I’ll count brown ones. I tried red once, but that was ridiculous. Only women wear red shoes, and not many, at that. Not in the daytime. I only counted three pair, so I went back to the Colonial and started again, only the second time I counted brown shoes.”

I ask him if he has to count a certain number of shoes in order to achieve satisfaction.

“Thirty’s good,” he says. “Fifteen pair. Most days, that’s no problem.”

And why is it necessary to reach a certain number?

He considers, then looks at me. “If I say ‘you know,’ will you just ask me to explain what it is you’re supposed to know? I mean, you’ve dealt with OCD before and I’ve researched it — exhaustively — both

in my own head and on the Internet, so can't we just cut to the chase?"

I say that most counters feel that reaching a certain total, known as "the goal number," is necessary to maintain order. To keep the world spinning on its axis, so to speak.

He nods, satisfied, and the floodgates break.

"One day, when I was counting my way back to the office, I passed a man with one leg cut off at the knee. He was on crutches, with a sock on his stump. If he'd been wearing a black shoe, it would have been no problem. Because I was on my way back, you see. But it was brown. That threw me off for the whole day, and that night I couldn't sleep at all. Because odd numbers are bad." He taps the side of his head. "At least up here they are. There's a rational part of my mind that knows it's all bullshit, but there's another part that knows it absolutely isn't, and that part rules. You'd think that when nothing bad happened — in fact something good happened that day, an IRS audit we were worried about was canceled for absolutely no reason — the spell would break, but it didn't. I'd counted thirty-seven brown shoes instead of thirty-eight, and when the world didn't end, that irrational part of my mind said it was because I not only got above thirty, I got well above thirty.

"When I load the dishwasher, I count plates. If there's an even number above ten in there, all is well. If not, I add the correct number of clean ones to make it right. Same with forks and spoons. There has to be at least twelve pieces in the little plastic caddy at the front of the dishwasher. Which, since I live alone now, usually means adding clean ones."

What about knives, I ask, and he shakes his head at once.

"Never knives. Not in the dishwasher."

When I ask why not, he says he doesn't know. Then, after a pause, he gives me a guilty sideways look. "I always wash the knives by

hand, in the sink.”

Knives in the silverware caddy would disturb the order of the world, I suggest.

“No!” he exclaims. “You understand, Dr. Bonsaint, but you don’t understand completely.”

Then you have to help me, I say.

“The order of the world is already disturbed. I disturbed it last summer, when I went to Ackerman’s Field. Only I didn’t understand. Not then.”

But you do now? I ask.

“Yes. Not everything, but enough.”

I ask him if he is trying to fix things or only trying to keep the situation from getting worse.

A look of unutterable relief fills his face, relaxing all the muscles there. Something that has been crying out for articulation has finally been spoken aloud. These are the moments I live for. It’s not a cure, far from it, but for the time being N. has gotten some relief. I doubt if he expected it. Most patients do not.

“I can’t fix it,” he whispers. “But I can keep things from getting worse. Yes. I have been.”

Again I have come to one of those branching points. I could ask him what happened last summer — last August, I presume — in Ackerman’s Field, but it is probably still too early. Better to loosen the roots of this infected tooth a little more first. And I really doubt that the source of the infection can be so recent. More likely, whatever happened to him last summer was only a kind of firing pin.

I ask him to tell me about his other symptoms.

He laughs. “That would take all day, and we only have ” He glances at his wrist. ” twenty-two minutes left. Twenty-two is a good number, by the way.”

Because it’s even? I ask.

His nod suggests I am wasting time with the obvious.

“My my symptoms, as you call them come in clusters.” Now he’s looking up at the ceiling. “There are three of these clusters. They poke out of me the sane part of me like rocks rocks, you know oh God, dear God like the fucking rocks in that fucking field “

Tears are coursing down his cheeks. At first he doesn’t seem to notice, only lies on the couch with his fingers laced together, looking up at the ceiling. But then he reaches for the table beside him, where sits what Sandy, my receptionist, calls The Eternal Box of Kleenex. He takes two, wipes his cheeks, then crumples the tissue. It disappears into the lace of his fingers.

“There are three clusters,” he resumes, speaking in a voice that isn’t quite steady. “Counting is the first. It’s important, but not so important as touching. There are certain things I need to touch. Stove-burners, for instance. Before leaving the house in the morning or going to bed at night. I might be able to see they’re off — all the dials pointing straight up, all the burners dark — but I still have to touch them to be absolutely sure. And the front of the oven door, of course. Then I started touching the light switches before leaving the house or the office. Just a quick double-tap. Before I get into my car, I have to tap four times on the roof. And six times when I get to where I’m going. Four’s a good number, and six is an okay number, but ten ten is like ” I can see one tear-track he’s missed, running a zigzag course from the corner of his right eye to the lobe of his ear.

Like going steady with the girl of your dreams? I suggest.

He smiles. He has a lovely, weary smile — a smile that’s finding it increasingly hard to get up in the morning.

“That’s right,” he says. “And she’s got her sneaker laces tied at the bottom so everyone knows it.”

You touch other things? I ask, knowing the answer to this. I have seen many cases like N. during the five years I’ve been in practice. I sometimes picture these unfortunates as men and women being pecked to death by predatory birds. The birds are invisible — at least until a psychiatrist who is good, or lucky, or both, sprays them with his version of Luminol and shines the right light on them — but they are nevertheless very real. The wonder is that so many OCDs manage to live productive lives, just the same. They work, they eat (often not enough or too much, it’s true), they go to movies, they make love to their girlfriends and boyfriends, their wives and husbands and all the time those birds are there, clinging to them and pecking away little bits of flesh.

“I touch many things,” he says, and again favors the ceiling with his weary, charming smile. “You name it, I touch it.”

So counting is important, I say, but touching is more important. What is above touching?

“Placing,” he says, and suddenly begins to shiver all over, like a dog that’s been left out in a cold rain. “Oh God.”

He suddenly sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the couch. On the table beside him there is a vase of flowers in addition to The Eternal Box of Kleenex. Moving very quickly, he shifts the box and the vase so they are diagonal to each other. Then he takes two of the tulips from the vase and lays them stem to stem so that one blossom touches the Kleenex box and the other the vase.

“That makes it safe,” he says. He hesitates, then nods as if he’s confirmed in his mind that what he’s thinking is the right thing. “It preserves the world.” He hesitates again. “For now.”

I glance down at my watch. Time is up, and we’ve done quite enough for one day.

“Next week,” I say. “Same bat-time, same bat-station.” Sometimes I turn this little joke into a question, but not with N. He needs to come back, and knows it.

“No magical cure, huh?” he asks. This time the smile is almost too sad to look at.

I tell him that he may feel better. (This sort of positive suggestion never hurts, as all psychiatrists know.) Then I tell him to throw away his Ambien and “the green moth pills” — Lunesta, I assume. If they don’t work at night, all they can do is cause trouble for him during his waking hours. Falling asleep on the 295 Connector won’t solve any of his problems.

“No,” he says. “I suppose not. Doc, we never discussed the root cause. I know what it is — “

Next week we may get to that, I tell him. In the meantime, I want him to keep a chart divided into three sections: counting, touching, and placing. Will he do that?

“Yes,” he says.

I ask him, almost casually, if he feels suicidal.

“The thought has crossed my mind, but I have a great deal to do.”

This is an interesting and rather troubling response.

I give him my card and tell him to call — day or night — if the idea of suicide begins to seem more attractive. He says he will. But then, almost all of them promise.

“In the meantime,” I say at the door, putting my hand on his shoulder, “keep going steady with life.”

He looks at me, pale and not smiling now, a man being pecked to pieces by invisible birds. “Have you ever read ‘The Great God Pan,’ by Arthur Machen?”

I shake my head.

“It’s the most terrifying story ever written,” he says. “In it, one of the characters says ‘lust always prevails.’ But lust isn’t what he means. What he means is compulsion.”

Paxil? Perhaps Prozac. But neither until I get a better fix on this interesting patient.

June 7, 2007

June 14, 2007

June 28, 2007

N. brings his “homework” to our next session, as I fully expected he would. There are many things in this world you can’t depend on, and many people you can’t trust, but OCDs, unless they are dying, almost always complete their tasks.

In a way his charts are comical; in another way, sad; in another, frankly horrible. He is an accountant, after all, and I assume he’s used one of his accounting programs to create the contents of the folder he hands me before proceeding to the couch. They are spreadsheets. Only instead of investments and income-flow, these charts detail the complex terrain of N.’s obsessions. The top two sheets are headed COUNTING; the next two TOUCHING; the final six PLACING. Thumbing through them, I’m hard put to understand how he finds time for any other activities. Yet OCDs almost always find a way. The idea of invisible birds recurs to me; I see them roosting all over N., pecking away his flesh in bloody nibbles.

When I look up, he’s on the couch, once more with his hands laced together tightly on his chest. And he’s rearranged the vase and the tissue-box so they are again connected on a diagonal. The flowers are white lilies today. Seeing them that way, laid out on the table, makes me think of funerals.

“Please don’t ask me to put them back,” he says, apologetic but firm. “I’ll leave before I do that.”

I tell him I have no intention of asking him to put them back. I hold up the spreadsheets and compliment him on how professional they look. He shrugs. I then ask him if they represent an overview or if they only cover the last week.

“Just the last week,” he says. As if the matter is of no interest to him. I suppose it is not. A man being pecked to death by birds can have little interest in last year’s insults and injuries, or even last week’s; he’s got today on his mind. And, God help him, the future.

“There must be two or three thousand items here,” I say.

“Call them events. That’s what I call them. There are six hundred and four counting events, eight hundred and seventy-eight touching events, and twenty-two hundred and forty-six placing events. All even numbers, you’ll notice. They add up to thirty-seven hundred and twenty-eight, also an even number. If you add the individual numbers in that total — 3728 — you come out with twenty, also even. A good number.” He nods, as if confirming this to himself. “Divide 3728 by two and you come out with eighteen-hundred and sixty-four. 1864 adds up to nineteen, a powerful odd number. Powerful and bad.” He actually shivers a little.

“You must be very tired,” I say.

To this he makes no verbal reply, nor does he nod, but he answers, all the same. Tears trickle down his cheeks toward his ears. I am reluctant to add to his burden, but I recognize one fact: if we don’t begin this work soon — “no ditzing around,” as Sister Sheila would say — he won’t be capable of the work at all. I can already see a deterioration in his appearance (wrinkled shirt, indifferent shave, hair badly in need of a trim), and if I asked his colleagues about him, I would almost surely see those quick exchanged glances that tell so much. The spreadsheets are amazing in their way, but N. is clearly running out of strength. It seems to me that there is no choice but to

fly directly to the heart of the matter, and until that heart is reached, there will be no Paxil or Prozac or anything else.

I ask if he is ready to tell me what happened last August.

“Yes,” he says. “It’s what I came to do.” He takes some tissues from the Eternal Box and wipes his cheeks. Wearily. “But Doc are you sure?”

I have never had a patient ask me that, or speak to me in quite that tone of reluctant sympathy. But I tell him yes, I’m sure. My job is to help him, but in order for me to do that, he must be willing to help himself.

“Even if it puts you at risk of winding up like I am now? Because it could happen. I’m lost, but I think — I hope — that I haven’t gotten to the drowning-man state, so panicky I’d be willing to pull down anyone who was trying to save me.”

I tell him I don’t quite understand.

“I’m here because all this may be in my head,” he says, and knocks his knuckles against his temple, as if he wants to make sure I know where his head is at. “But it might not be. I can’t really tell. That’s what I mean when I say I’m lost. And if it’s not mental — if what I saw and sensed in Ackerman’s Field is real — then I’m carrying a kind of infection. Which I could pass on to you.”

Ackerman’s Field. I make a note of it, although everything will be on the tapes. When we were children, my sister and I went to Ackerman School, in the little town of Harlow, on the banks of the Androscoggin. Which is not far from here; thirty miles at most.

I tell him I’ll take my chances, and say that in the end — more positive reinforcement — I’m sure we’ll both be fine.

He utters a hollow, lonely laugh. “Wouldn’t that be nice,” he says.

“Tell me about Ackerman’s Field.”

He sighs and says, “It’s in Motton. On the east side of the Androscoggin.”

Motton. One town over from Chester’s Mill. Our mother used to buy milk and eggs at Boy Hill Farm in Motton. N. is talking about a place that cannot be more than seven miles from the farmhouse where I grew up. I almost say, I knew it!

I don’t, but he looks over at me sharply, almost as if he caught my thought. Perhaps he did. I don’t believe in ESP, but I don’t entirely discount it, either.

“Don’t ever go there, Doc,” he says. “Don’t even look for it. Promise me.”

I give my promise. In fact, I haven’t been back to that broken-down part of Maine in over fifteen years. It’s close in miles, distant in desire. Thomas Wolfe made a characteristically sweeping statement when he titled his magnum opus *You Can’t Go Home Again*; it’s not true for everyone (Sister Sheila often goes back; she’s still close to several of her childhood friends), but it’s true for me. Although I suppose I’d title my own book *I Won’t Go Home Again*. What I remember are bullies with harelips dominating the playground, empty houses with staring glassless windows, junked-out cars, and skies that always seemed white and cold and full of fleeing crows.

“All right,” N. says, and bares his teeth for a moment at the ceiling. Not in aggression; it is, I’m quite sure, the expression of a man preparing to do a piece of heavy lifting that will leave him aching the next day. “I don’t know if I can express it very well, but I’ll do my best. The important thing to remember is that up til that day in August, the closest thing to OCD behavior I exhibited was popping back into the bathroom before going to work to make sure I’d gotten all the nose hairs.”

Maybe this is true; more likely it isn't. I don't pursue the subject. Instead, I ask him to tell me what happened that day. And he does.

For the next three sessions, he does. At the second of those sessions — June 15th — he brings me a calendar. It is, as the saying goes, Exhibit A.

3. N.'s Story

I'm an accountant by trade, a photographer by inclination. After my divorce — and the children growing up, which is a divorce of a different kind, and almost as painful — I spent most of my weekends rambling around, taking landscape shots with my Nikon. It's a film camera, not a digital. Toward the end of every year, I took the twelve best pix and turned them into a calendar. I had them printed at a little place in Freeport called The Windhover Press. It's pricey, but they do good work. I gave the calendars to my friends and business associates for Christmas. A few clients, too, but not many — clients who bill five or six figures usually appreciate something that's silver-plated. Myself, I prefer a good landscape photo every time. I have no pictures of Ackerman's Field. I took some, but they never came out. Later on I borrowed a digital camera. Not only did the pictures not come out, I fried the camera's insides. I had to buy a new one for the guy I borrowed it from. Which was all right. By then I think I would have destroyed any pictures I took of that place, anyway. If it allowed me, that is.

[I ask him what he means by "it." N. ignores the question as if he hasn't heard it.]

I've taken pictures all over Maine and New Hampshire, but tend to stick pretty much to my own patch. I live in Castle Rock — up on the View, actually — but I grew up in Harlow, like you. And don't look so surprised, Doc, I Googled you after my GP suggested you — everybody Googles everybody these days, don't they?

Anyway, that part of central Maine is where I've done my best work: Harlow, Motton, Chester's Mill, St. Ives, Castle-St.-Ives, Canton, Lisbon Falls. All along the banks of the mighty Androscoggin, in other words. Those pictures look more real, somehow. The '05 calendar's a good example. I'll bring you one and you can decide for yourself. January through April and September through December were all taken close to home. May through August are let's see Old

Orchard Beach Pemnaquid Point, the lighthouse, of course Harrison State Park and Thunder Hole in Bar Harbor. I thought I was really getting something at Thunder Hole, I was excited, but when I saw the proofs, reality came crashing back down. It was just another tourist-snap. Good composition, but so what, right? You can find good composition in any shitshop tourist calendar.

Want my opinion, just as an amateur? I think photography's a much artier art than most people believe. It's logical to think that, if you've got an eye for composition — plus a few technical skills you can learn in any photography class — one pretty place should photograph as well as any other, especially if you're just into landscapes. Harlow, Maine or Sarasota, Florida, just make sure you've got the right filter, then point and shoot. Only it's not like that. Place matters in photography just like it does in painting or writing stories or poetry. I don't know why it does, but

[There is a long pause.]

Actually I do. Because an artist, even an amateur one like me, puts his soul into the things he creates. For some people — ones with the vagabond spirit, I imagine — the soul is portable. But for me, it never seemed to travel even as far as Bar Harbor. The snaps I've taken along the Androscoggin, though those speak to me. And they do to others, too. The guy I do business with at Windhover said I could probably get a book deal out of New York, end up getting paid for my calendars rather than paying for them myself, but that never interested me. It seemed a little too I don't know public? Pretentious? I don't know, something like that. The calendars are little things, just between friends. Besides, I've got a job. I'm happy crunching numbers. But my life sure would have been dimmer without my hobby. I was happy just knowing a few friends had my calendars hung in their kitchens or living rooms. Even in their damn mudrooms. The irony is I haven't taken many pictures since the ones I took in Ackerman's Field. I think that part of my life may be over, and it leaves a hole. One that whistles in the middle of the night, as if there

was a wind way down inside. A wind trying to fill up what's no longer there. Sometimes I think life is a sad, bad business, Doc. I really do.

On one of my rambles last August, I came to a dirt road in Motton that I didn't remember ever seeing before. I'd just been riding, listening to tunes on the radio, and I'd lost track of the river, but I knew it couldn't be far, because it has a smell. It's kind of dank and fresh at the same time. You know what I'm talking about, I'm sure. It's an old smell. Anyway, I turned up that road.

It was bumpy, almost washed out in a couple of places. Also, it was getting late. It must have been around seven in the evening, and I hadn't stopped anywhere for supper. I was hungry. I almost turned around, but then the road smoothed out and started going uphill instead of down. That smell was stronger, too. When I turned off the radio, I could hear the river as well as smell it — not loud, not close, but it was there.

Then I came to a tree down across the road, and I almost went back. I could have, even though there was no place to turn around. I was only a mile or so in from Route 117, and I could have backed out in five minutes. I think now that something, some force that exists on the bright side of our lives, was giving me that opportunity. I think the last year would have been a lot different if I'd just thrown the transmission in reverse. But I didn't. Because that smell it's always reminded me of childhood. Also, I could see a lot more sky at the crest of the hill. The trees — some pine, mostly junk birch — drew back up there, and I thought, "There's a field." It occurred to me that if there was, it probably looked down on the river. It also occurred to me that there might be a good spot to turn around up there, but that was very secondary to the idea that I might be able to take a picture of the Androscoggin at sunset. I don't know if you remember that we had some spectacular sunsets last August, but we did.

So I got out and moved the tree. It was one of those junk birches, so rotted it almost came apart in my hands. But when I got back into my car, I still almost went back instead of forward. There really is a force on the bright side of things; I believe that. But it seemed like the

sound of the river was clearer with the tree out of the way — stupid, I know, but it really seemed that way — so I threw the transmission into low and drove my little Toyota 4Runner the rest of the way up.

I passed a little sign tacked to a tree. ACKERMAN'S FIELD, NO HUNTING, KEEP OUT, it said. Then the trees drew back, first on the left, then on the right, and there it was. It took my breath away. I barely remember turning off the car and getting out, and I don't remember grabbing my camera, but I must have, because I had it in my hand when I got to the edge of the field, with the strap and lens-bag knocking against my leg. I was struck to my heart and through my heart, knocked clean out of my ordinary life.

Reality is a mystery, Dr. Bonsaint, and the everyday texture of things is the cloth we draw over it to mask its brightness and darkness. I think we cover the faces of corpses for the same reason. We see the faces of the dead as a kind of gate. It's shut against us but we know it won't always be shut. Someday it will swing open for each of us, and each of us will go through.

But there are places where the cloth gets ragged and reality is thin. The face beneath peeps through but not the face of a corpse. It would almost be better if it was. Ackerman's Field is one of those places, and no damn wonder whoever owns it put up a KEEP OUT sign.

The day was fading. The sun was a ball of red gas, flattened at the top and bottom, sitting above the western horizon. The river was a long, bloody snake in its reflected glow, eight or ten miles distant, but the sound of it carrying to me on the still evening air. Blue-gray woods rose behind it in a series of ridges to the far horizon. I couldn't see a single house or road. Not a bird sang. It was as if I'd been tumbled back four hundred years in time. Or four million. The first white streamers of groundmist were rising out of the hay — which was high. Nobody had been in there to cut it, although that was a big field, and good graze. The mist came out of the darkening green like breath. As if the earth itself was alive.

I think I staggered a little. It wasn't the beauty, although it was beautiful; it was how everything that lay before me seemed thin, almost to the point of hallucination. And then I saw those damned rocks rising out of the uncut hay.

There were seven, or so I thought — the tallest two about five feet high, the shortest only three or so, the rest in between. I remember walking down to the closest of them, but it's like remembering a dream after it starts to decompose in the morning light — you know how they do that? Of course you do, dreams must be a big part of your workday. Only this was no dream. I could hear the hay whickering against my pants, could feel the khaki getting damp from the mist and starting to stick to my skin below the knees. Every now and then a bush — clumps of sumac were growing here and there — would pull my lens-bag back and then drop it again so it would thump harder than usual against my thigh.

I got to the nearest of the rocks and stopped. It was one of the five-footers. At first I thought there were faces carved in it — not human faces, either; the faces of beasts and monsters — but then I shifted my position a little and saw it was just a trick of the evening light, which thickens shadows and makes them look like well, like anything. In fact, after I stood in my new position for awhile, I saw new faces. Some of these looked human, but they were just as horrible. More horrible, really, because human is always more horrible, don't you think? Because we know human, we understand human. Or think we do. And these looked like they were either screaming or laughing. Maybe both at the same time.

I thought it was the quiet screwing with my imagination, and the isolation, and the bigness of it — how much of the world I could see laid out in front of me. And how time seemed to be holding its breath. As if everything would stay the way it was forever, with sunset not more than forty minutes away and the sun sitting red over the horizon and that faded clarity in the air. I thought it was those things that were making me see faces where there was nothing but coincidence. I think differently now, but now it's too late.

I snapped some pictures. Five, I think. A bad number, although I didn't know that yet. Then I stood back, wanting to get all seven of them in one picture, and when I framed the shot, I saw that there were really eight, standing in a kind of rough ring. You could tell — when you really looked, you could — that they were part of some underlying geological formation that had either poked out of the ground eons ago, or had maybe been exposed more recently by flooding (the field had a fairly steep downward slope, so I thought that was very possible), but they also looked planned, like stones in a Druid's circle. There was no carving in them, though. Except for what the elements had done. I know, because I went back in daylight and made sure of it. Chips and folds in the stone. No more than that.

I took another four shots — which makes a total of nine, another bad number, although slightly better than five — and when I lowered the camera and looked again with my naked eye, I saw the faces, leering and grinning and grunting. Some human, some bestial. And I counted seven stones.

But when I looked into the viewfinder again, there were eight.

I started to feel dizzy and scared. I wanted to be out of there before full dark came — away from that field and back on Route 117, with loud rock and roll on the radio. But I couldn't just leave. Something deep inside me — as deep as the instinct that keeps us drawing in breaths and letting them out — insisted on that. I felt that if I left, something terrible would happen, and perhaps not just to me. That sense of thinness swept over me again, as if the world was fragile at this particular place, and one person would be enough to cause an unimaginable cataclysm. If he weren't very, very careful.

That's when my OCD shit started. I went from stone to stone, touching each one, counting each one, and marking each in its place. I wanted to be gone — desperately wanted to be gone — but I did it and I didn't skimp the job. Because I had to. I knew that the way I know I have to keep breathing if I want to stay alive. By the time I got back to where I'd started, I was trembling and wet with sweat as well as mist and dew. Because touching those stones it

wasn't nice. It caused ideas. And raised images. Ugly ones. One was of chopping up my ex-wife with an axe and laughing while she screamed and raised her bloody hands to ward off the blows.

But there were eight. Eight stones in Ackerman's Field. A good number. A safe number. I knew that. And it no longer mattered if I looked at them through the camera's viewfinder or with my naked eyes; after touching them, they were fixed. It was getting darker, the sun was halfway over the horizon (I must have spent twenty minutes or more going around that rough circle, which was maybe forty yards across), but I could see well enough — the air was weirdly clear. I still felt afraid — there was something wrong there, everything screamed it, the very silence of the birds screamed it — but I felt relieved, too. The wrong had been put at least partly right by touching the stones and looking at them again. Getting their places in the field set into my mind. That was as important as the touching.

[A pause to think.]

No, more important. Because it's how we see the world that keeps the darkness beyond the world at bay. Keeps it from pouring through and drowning us. I think all of us might know that, way down deep. So I turned to go, and I was most of the way back to my car — I might even have been touching the doorhandle — when something turned me around again. And that was when I saw.

[He is silent for a long time. I notice he is trembling. He has broken out in a sweat. It gleams on his forehead like dew.]

There was something in the middle of the stones. In the middle of the circle they made, either by chance or design. It was black, like the sky in the east, and green like the hay. It was turning very slowly, but it never took its eyes off me. It did have eyes. Sick pink ones. I knew — my rational mind knew — that it was just light in the sky I was seeing, but at the same time I knew it was something more. That something was using that light. Something was using the sunset to see with, and what it was seeing was me.

[He's crying again. I don't offer him the Kleenex, because I don't want to break the spell. Although I'm not sure I could have offered them in any case, because he's cast a spell over me, too. What he's articulating is a delusion, and part of him knows it — "shadows that looked like faces," *etc.* — but it's very strong, and strong delusions travel like cold germs on a sneeze.]

I must have kept backing up. I don't remember doing it; I just remember thinking that I was looking at the head of some grotesque monster from the outer darkness. And thinking that where there was one, there would be more. Eight stones would keep them captive — barely — but if there were only seven, they'd come flooding through from the darkness on the other side of reality and overwhelm the world. For all I knew, I was looking at the least and smallest of them. For all I knew, that flattened snakehead with the pink eyes and what looked like great long quills growing out of its snout was only a baby.

It saw me looking.

The fucking thing grinned at me, and its teeth were heads. Living human heads.

Then I stepped on a dead branch. It snapped with a sound like a firecracker, and the paralysis broke. I don't think it's impossible that that thing floating inside the circle of stones was hypnotizing me, the way a snake is supposed to be able to do with a bird.

I turned and ran. My lens-bag kept smacking my leg, and each smack seemed to be saying Wake up! Wake up! Get out! Get out! I pulled open the door of my 4Runner, and I heard the little bell ding, the one that means you left your key in the ignition. I thought of some old movie where William Powell and Myrna Loy are at the desk of a fancy hotel and Powell rings the bell for service. Funny what goes through your mind at moments like that, isn't it? There's a gate in our heads, too — that's what I think. One that keeps the insanity in all of us from flooding our intellects. And at critical moments, it swings open and all kinds of weird shit comes flooding through.

I started the engine. I turned on the radio, turned it up loud, and rock music came roaring out of the speakers. It was The Who, I remember that. And I remember popping on the headlights. When I did, those stones seemed to jump toward me. I almost screamed. But there were eight, I counted them, and eight is safe.

[There's another long pause here. Almost a full minute.]

The next thing I remember, I was back on Route 117. I don't know how I got there, if I turned around or backed out. I don't know how long it took me, but The Who song was over and I was listening to The Doors. God help me, it was "Break On Through to the Other Side." I turned the radio off.

I don't think I can tell you any more, Doc, not today. I'm exhausted.

[And he looks it.]

[Next Session]

I thought the effect the place had had on me would dissipate on the drive home — just a bad moment out in the woods, right? — and surely by the time I was in my own living room, with the lights and TV on, I'd be okay again. But I wasn't. If anything, that feeling of dislocation — of having touched some other universe that was inimical to ours — seemed to be stronger. The conviction remained that I'd seen a face — worse, the suggestion of some huge reptilian body — in that circle of stones. I felt infected. Infected by the thoughts in my own head. I felt dangerous, too — as if I could summon that thing just by thinking about it too much. And it wouldn't be alone. That whole other cosmos would come spilling through, like vomit through the bottom of a wet paper bag.

I went around and locked all the doors. Then I was sure that I'd forgotten a couple, so I went around and checked them all again. This time I counted: front door, back door, pantry door, bulkhead door, garage overhead door, back garage door. That was six, and it came to me that six was a good number. Like eight is a good

number. They're friendly numbers. Warm. Not cold, like five or you know, seven. I relaxed a little, but I still went around one last time. Still six. "Six is a fix," I remember saying. After that I thought I'd be able to sleep, but I couldn't. Not even with an Ambien. I kept seeing the setting sun on the Androscoggin, turning it into a red snake. The mist coming out of the hay like tongues. And the thing in the stones. That most of all.

I got up and counted all the books in my bedroom bookcase. There were ninety-three. That's a bad number, and not just because it's odd. Divide ninety-three by three and you come out with thirty-one: thirteen backwards. So I got a book from the little bookcase in the hall. But ninety-four is only a little better, because nine and four add up to thirteen. There are thirteens everywhere in this world of ours, Doc. You don't know. Anyway, I added six more books to the bedroom case. I had to cram, but I got them in. A hundred is okay. Fine, in fact.

I was heading back to bed, then started wondering about the hall bookcase. If I'd, you know, robbed Peter to pay Paul. So I counted those, and that was all right: fifty-six. The numbers add to eleven, which is odd but not the worst odd, and fifty-six divides to twenty-eight — a good number. After that I could sleep. I think I had bad dreams, but I don't remember them.

Days went by, and my mind kept going back to Ackerman's Field. It was like a shadow had fallen over my life. I was counting lots of things by then, and touching things — to make sure I understood their places in the world, the real world, my world — and I'd started to place things, too. Always even numbers of things, and usually in a circle or on a diagonal line. Because circles and diagonals keep things out.

Usually, that is. And never permanently. One small accident and fourteen becomes thirteen, or eight becomes seven.

In early September, my younger daughter visited and commented on how tired I looked. She wanted to know if I was overworking. She

also noticed that all the living-room knickknacks — stuff her mom hadn't taken after the divorce — had been placed in what she called "crop circles." She said, "You're getting a little wiggy in your old age, aren't you, Dad?" And that was when I decided I had to go back to Ackerman's Field, this time in full daylight. I thought if I saw it in daylight, saw just a few meaningless rocks standing around in an uncut hayfield, I'd realize how foolish the whole thing was, and my obsessions would blow away like a dandelion puff in a strong breeze. I wanted that. Because counting, touching, and placing — those things are a lot of work. A lot of responsibility.

On my way, I stopped at the place where I got my pictures developed and saw the ones I'd taken that evening in Ackerman's Field hadn't come out. They were just gray squares, as if they'd been fogged by some strong radiation. That gave me pause, but it didn't stop me. I borrowed a digital camera from one of the guys at the photo shop — that's the one I fried — and drove out to Motton again, and fast. You want to hear something stupid? I felt like a man with a bad case of poison ivy going to the drugstore for a bottle of Calamine Lotion. Because that was what it was like — an itch. Counting and touching and placing could scratch it, but scratching affords only temporary relief at best. It's more likely to spread whatever's causing the itch. What I wanted was a cure. Going back to Ackerman's Field wasn't it, but I didn't know that, did I? Like the man said, we learn by doing. And we learn even more by trying and failing.

It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. The leaves were still green, but the air had that brilliant clarity you only get when the seasons change. My ex-wife used to say that early fall days like that are our reward for putting up with the tourists and summer people for three months, standing in line while they use their credit cards to buy beer. I felt good, I remember that. I felt certain I was going to put all the crazy shit to rest. I was listening to a greatest-hits compilation by Queen and thinking how fine Freddie Mercury sounded, how pure. I sang along. I drove over the Androscoggin in Harlow — the water on either side of the old Bale Road Bridge bright enough to knock your eyes out — and I saw a fish jump. It made me laugh out loud. I

hadn't laughed like that since the evening in Ackerman's Field, and it sounded so good I did it again.

Then up over Boy Hill — I bet you know where that is — and past the Serenity Ridge Cemetery. I've taken some good photos in there, although I never put one in a calendar. I came to the dirt byroad not five minutes later. I started to turn in, then jammed on the brakes. Just in time, too. If I'd been any slower, I would have ripped my 4Runner's grille in two. There was a chain across the road, and a new sign hanging from it: ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING.

Now I could have told myself it was just a coincidence, that the person who owned those woods and that field — not necessarily a guy named Ackerman, but maybe — put up that chain and that sign every fall, to discourage hunters. But deer season doesn't start until November first. Even bird season doesn't start til October. I think someone watches that field. With binocs, maybe, but maybe with some less normal form of sight. Someone knew I'd been there, and that I might be back.

"Leave it alone, then!" I told myself. "Unless you want to risk getting arrested for trespassing, maybe get your picture in the Castle Rock Call. That would be good for business, wouldn't it?"

But there was no way I was going to stop, not if there was a chance I could go up to that field, see nothing, and consequently feel better. Because — dig this — at the same time I was telling myself that if someone wanted me off his property I ought to respect that person's wishes, I was counting the letters in that sign and coming out with twenty-three, which is a terrible number, far worse than thirteen. I knew it was crazy to think that way, but I was thinking that way, and some part of me knew it wasn't a bit crazy.

I stashed my 4Runner in the Serenity Ridge parking lot, then walked back to the dirt road with the borrowed camera slung over my shoulder in its little zippered case. I went around the chain — it was easy — and walked up the road to the field. Turned out I would've had to walk even if the chain hadn't been there, because there were

half a dozen trees lying across the road this time, and not just trashwood birches. Five were good-sized pines, and the last one was a mature oak. They hadn't just fallen over, either; those babies had been dropped with a chainsaw. They didn't even slow me down. I climbed over the pines and detoured around the oak. Then I was on the hill climbing to the field. I barely gave the other sign — ACKERMAN'S FIELD, NO HUNTING, KEEP OUT — a glance. I could see the trees drawing back at the crest of the hill, I could see dusty beams of sun shining between the ones nearest the top, and I could see acres and acres of blue sky up there, looking jolly and optimistic. It was midday. There would be no giant riversnake bleeding in the distance, only the Androscoggin I grew up with and have always loved — blue and beautiful, the way ordinary things can be when we see them at their best. I broke into a run. My feeling of crazy optimism lasted all the way to the top, but the minute I saw those stones standing there like fangs, my good feelings fell away. What replaced them was dread and horror.

There were seven stones again. Just seven. And in the middle of them — I don't know just how to explain this so you'll understand — there was a faded place. It wasn't like a shadow, exactly, but more like you know how the blue will fade out of your favorite jeans over time? Especially at stress-points like the knees? It was like that. The color of the hay was washed to a greasy lime color, and instead of blue, the sky above that circle of stones looked grayish. I felt that if I walked in there — and part of me wanted to — I could punch out with one fist and tear right through the fabric of reality. And if I did, something would grab me. Something on the other side. I was sure of it.

Still, something in me wanted to do it. It wanted to I don't know quit the foreplay and get right to the fucking.

I could see — or thought I could, I'm still not sure about this part — the place where the eighth stone belonged, and I could see that that fadedness bulging toward it, trying to get through where the protection of the stones was thin. I was terrified! Because if it got out,

every unnamable thing on the other side would be born into our world. The sky would turn black, and it would be full of new stars and insane constellations.

I unslung the camera, but dropped it on the ground when I tried to unzip the bag it was in. My hands were shaking as if I was having some kind of seizure. I picked up the camera case and unzipped it, and when I looked at the stones again, I saw that the space inside them wasn't just faded anymore. It was turning black. And I could see eyes again. Peering out of the darkness. This time they were yellow, with narrow black pupils. Like cat's eyes. Or snake eyes.

I tried to lift the camera, but I dropped it again. And when I reached for it, the hay closed over it, and I had to tug it free. No, I had to rip it free. I was on my knees by then, yanking on the strap with both hands. And a breeze started to blow out of the gap where the eighth stone should have been. It blew the hair off my forehead. It stank. It smelled of carrion. I raised the camera to my face, but at first I could see nothing. I thought, It's blinded the camera, it's somehow blinded the camera, and then I remembered it was a digital Nikon, and you have to turn it on. I did that — I heard the beep — but I still could see nothing.

The breeze was a wind by then. It sent the hay rippling down the length of the field in big waves of shadow. The smell was worse. And the day was darkening. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, it was pure blue, but the day was darkening, just the same. As if some great invisible planet was eclipsing the sun.

Something spoke. Not English. Something that sounded like "Cthun, cthun, deeyanna, deyanna." But then Christ, then it said my name. It said, "Cthun, N., deeyanna, N." I think I screamed, but I'm not sure, because by then the wind had become a gale that was roaring in my ears. I should have screamed. I had every right to scream. Because it knew my name! That grotesque, unnamable thing knew my name. And then the camera do you know what I realized?

[I ask him if he left the lens cap on, and he utters a shrill laugh that runs up my nerves and makes me think of rats scampering over broken glass.]

Yes! Right! The lens cap! The fucking lens cap! I tore it off and raised the camera to my eye — it's a wonder I didn't drop it again, my hands were shaking so badly, and the hay never would have let it go again, no, never, because the second time it would have been ready. But I didn't drop it, and I could see through the viewfinder, and there were eight stones. Eight. Eight keeps things straight. That darkness was still swirling in the middle, but it was retreating. And the wind blowing around me was diminishing.

I lowered the camera and there were seven. Something was bulging out of the darkness, something I can't describe to you. I can see it — I see it in my dreams — but there are no words for that kind of blasphemy. A pulsing leather helmet, that's as close as I can get. One with yellow goggles on each side. Only the goggles I think they were eyes, and I know they were looking at me.

I raised the camera again, and saw eight stones. I snapped off six or eight shots as if to mark them, to fix them in place forever, but of course that didn't work, I only fried the camera. Lenses can see those stones, Doc — I'm pretty sure a person could see them in a mirror, too, maybe even through a plain pane of glass — but they can't record them. The only thing that can record them, hold them in place, is the human mind, the human memory. And even that's undependable, as I've found out. Counting, touching, and placing works for awhile — it's ironic to think that behaviors we consider neurotic are actually holding the world in place — but sooner or later whatever protection they offer decays. And it's so much work.

So damn much work.

I wonder if we could be done for today. I know it's early, but I'm very tired.

[I tell him I will prescribe a sedative, if he wants — mild, but more reliable than Ambien or Lunesta. It will work if he doesn't overdo it. He gives me a grateful smile.]

That would be good, very good. But can I ask you a favor?

[I tell him that of course he can.]

Prescribe either twenty, forty, or sixty. Those are all good numbers.

[Next Session]

[I tell him he looks better, although this is far from true. What he looks like is a man who will be institutionalized soon, if he doesn't find a way to get back to his personal Highway 117. Turn around or back up, it doesn't matter which, but he has to get away from that field. So do I, actually. I've been dreaming about N.'s field, which I'm sure I could find if I wanted to. Not that I do — that would be too much like sharing my patient's delusion — but I'm sure I could find it. One night this weekend (while I was having trouble finding sleep myself), it occurred to me that I must have driven past it, not just once but hundreds of times. Because I've been over the Bale Road Bridge hundreds of times, and past Serenity Ridge Cemetery thousands of times; that was on the school-bus route to James Lowell Elementary, where Sheila and I went. So sure, I could find it. If I wanted to. If it exists.]

[I ask if the prescription helps, if he's been sleeping. The dark circles under his eyes tell me he hasn't been, but I'm curious to hear how he responds.]

Much better. Thanks. And the OCD's a little better, too.

[As he says this, his hands — more prone to tell the truth — are stealthily placing the vase and the Kleenex box at opposing corners of the table by the couch. Today Sandy has put out roses. He arranges them so they link the box and the vase. I ask him what

happened after he went up to Ackerman's Field with the borrowed camera. He shrugs.]

Nothing. Except of course I paid for the photo-shop guy's Nikon. Pretty soon it really was hunting season, and those woods get dangerous, even if you're wearing blaze orange from head to toe. Although I somehow doubt if there are many deer in that area; I imagine they steer clear.

The OCD shit smoothed out, and I started sleeping through the night again.

Well some of the nights. There were dreams, of course. In the dreams I was always in that field, trying to pull the camera out of the hay, but the hay wouldn't let go. The blackness spilled out of the circle like oil, and when I looked up I saw the sky had cracked open from east to west and a terrible black light was pouring out light that was alive. And hungry. That's when I'd wake up, drenched with sweat. Sometimes screaming.

Then, in early December, I got a letter at the office. It was marked PERSONAL with a small object inside. I tore it open and what fell out onto my desk was a little key with a tag on it. The tag said A.F. I knew what it was, and what it meant. If there'd been a letter, it would have said, "I tried to keep you out. It's not my fault, and maybe not yours, but either way this key, and all it opens, is yours now. Take good care of it."

That weekend I drove back out to Motton, but I didn't bother parking in the lot at Serenity Ridge. I didn't need to anymore, you see. The Christmas decorations were up in Portland and the other small towns I passed along the way. It was bitterly cold, but there wasn't any snow yet. You know how it's always colder just before the snow comes? That's how it was that day. But the sky was overcast, and the snow did come, a blizzard that very night. It was a big one. Do you remember?

[I tell him I do. I have reason to remember (although I don't tell him this). Sheila and I were snowed in at the home place, where we'd gone to check on some repair work. We got squiffy and danced to old Beatles and Rolling Stones records. It was pleasant.]

The chain was still across the road, but the A.F. key fit the lock. And the downed trees had been hauled to one side. As I'd known they would be. It was no good blocking the road anymore, because that field is now my field, those stones are now my stones, and whatever it is they're keeping in is my responsibility.

[I ask him if he was frightened, sure the answer must be yes. But N. surprises me.]

Not much, no. Because the place was different. I knew it even from the end of the road, where it T's into 117. I could feel it. And I could hear crows cawing as I opened the lock with my new key. Ordinarily I think that's an ugly sound, but that day it sounded very sweet. At the risk of sounding pretentious, it sounded like redemption.

I knew there'd be eight stones in Ackerman's Field, and I was right. I knew they wouldn't look so much like a circle, and I was right about that, too; they looked like random outcroppings again, part of the underlying bedrock that had been exposed by a tectonic shift, or a withdrawing glacier eighty thousand years ago, or a flood of more recent vintage.

I understood other things, too. One was that I had activated the place just by looking at it. Human eyes take away the eighth stone. A camera lens will put it back, but won't lock it in place. I had to keep renewing the protection with symbolic acts.

[He pauses, thinking, and when he speaks again he seems to have changed the subject.]

Did you know that Stonehenge may have been a combination clock and calendar?

[I tell him I've read this somewhere.]

The people who built that place, and others like it, must have known they could tell time with no more than a sundial, and as for the calendar — we know that prehistoric people in Europe and Asia told the days simply by making marks on sheltered rock walls. So what does that make Stonehenge, if it is a gigantic clock/calendar? A monument to OCD behavior, that's what I think — a gigantic neurosis standing in a Salisbury field.

Unless it's protecting something as well as keeping track of hours and months. Locking out an insane universe that happens to lie right next door to ours. I have days — many of them, especially last winter, when I felt pretty much like my old self again — when I'm sure that's bullshit, that everything I thought I saw in Ackerman's Field was in my own head. That all this OCD crap is just a mental stutter.

Then I have other days — they started again this spring — when I'm sure it's all true: I activated something. And in so doing, I became the latest baton carrier in a long, long line of them, maybe going all the way back to prehistoric times. I know that sounds crazy — why else would I be telling it to a psychiatrist? — and I have whole days when I'm sure it is crazy even when I'm counting things, going around my house at night touching light switches and stove burners, I'm sure it's all just you know bad chemicals in my head that a few of the right pills will fix.

I especially thought that last winter, when things were good. Or at least better. Then, in April of this year, things started getting bad again. I was counting more, touching more, and placing just about everything that wasn't nailed down in circles or diagonals. My daughter — the one who's going to school near here — again expressed concerns about how I looked and how jumpy I seemed. She asked if it was the divorce, and when I said it wasn't, she looked as if she didn't believe me. She asked if I'd consider "seeing someone," and by God, here I am.

I started having nightmares again. One night in early May I woke on my bedroom floor, screaming. In my dream I'd seen a huge gray-black monstrosity, a winged gargoyle-thing with a leathery head like a helmet. It was standing in the ruins of Portland, a thing a mile high at least — I could see wisps of cloud floating around its plated arms. There were screaming people struggling in its taloned fists. And I knew — knew — it had escaped from the standing stones in Ackerman's Field, that it was only the first and least of the abominations to be released from that other world, and it was my fault. Because I had failed in my responsibilities.

I stumbled through the house, putting things in circles and then counting them to make sure the circles contained only even numbers, and it came to me that I wasn't too late, that it had only started to come awake.

[I ask him what he means by "it."]

The force! Remember Star Wars? "Use the force, Luke"?

[He laughs wildly.]

Except this is a case of don't use the force! Stop the force! Imprison the force! The chaotic something that keeps driving at that thin place — and all the thin places of the world, I imagine. Sometimes I think there's a whole chain of ruined universes behind that force, stretching back untold eons in time like monstrous footprints

[He says something under his breath that I don't catch. I ask him to repeat, but he shakes his head.]

Hand me your pad, Doc. I'll write it. If what I'm telling you is true and not just in my fucked-up head, it's not safe to say the name aloud.

[He prints CTHUN in large capital letters. He shows it to me, and when I nod, he tears the sheet to shreds, counts the shreds — to make sure the number is even, I suppose — and then deposits them in the wastebasket near the couch.]

The key, the one I got in the mail, was in my home safe. I got it out and drove back to Motton — over the bridge, past the cemetery, up that damned dirt track. I didn't think about it, because it wasn't the sort of decision you have to consider. It would be like sitting down to consider whether or not you should put out the drapes in your living room if you came in and saw them on fire. No — I just went.

But I took my camera. You better believe that.

My nightmare woke me at five or so, and it was still early morning when I got to Ackerman's Field. The Androscoggin was beautiful — it looked like a long silver mirror instead of a snake, with fine tendrils of mist rising from its surface and then spreading above it in a, I don't know, temperature inversion, or something. That spreading cloud exactly mimicked the river's bends and turns, so it looked like a ghost-river in the sky.

The hay was growing up in the field again, and most of the sumac bushes were turning green, but I saw a scary thing. And no matter how much of this other stuff is in my head (and I'm perfectly willing to acknowledge it might be), this was real. I've got pictures that show it. They're foggy, but in a couple you can see the mutations in the sumac bushes closest to the stones. The leaves are black instead of green, and the branches are twisted they seem to make letters, and the letters seem to spell you know its name.

[He gestures to the wastebasket where the shreds of paper lie.]

The darkness was back inside the stones — there were only seven, of course, that's why I'd been drawn out there — but I saw no eyes. Thank God, I was still in time. There was just the darkness, turning and turning, seeming to mock the beauty of that silent spring morning, seeming to exult in the fragility of our world. I could see the Androscoggin through it, but the darkness — it was almost Biblical, a pillar of smoke — turned the river to a filthy gray smear.

I raised my camera — I had the strap around my neck, so even if I dropped it, it wouldn't fall into the clutch of the hay — and looked

through the viewfinder. Eight stones. I lowered it and there were seven again. Looked through the viewfinder and saw eight. The second time I lowered the camera, it stayed eight. But that wasn't enough, and I knew it. I knew what I had to do.

Forcing myself to go down to that ring of stones was the hardest thing I've ever done. The sound of the hay brushing against the cuffs of my pants was like a voice — low, harsh, protesting. Warning me to keep away. The air began to taste diseased. Full of cancer and things that are maybe even worse, germs that don't exist in our world. My skin began to thrum, and I had an idea — truth is, I still have this idea — that if I stepped between two of those stones and into the circle, my flesh would liquefy and go dripping off my bones. I could hear the wind that sometimes blows out of there, turning in its own private cyclone. And I knew it was coming. The thing with the helmet-head.

[He gestures again to the scraps in the wastebasket.]

It was coming, and if I saw it this close up, it would drive me mad. I'd end my life inside that circle, taking pictures that would show nothing but clouds of gray. But something drove me onward. And when I got there, I

[N. stands up and walks slowly around the couch in a deliberate circle. His steps — both grave and prancing, like the steps of a child playing ring-a-rosie — are somehow awful. As he circles, he reaches out to touch stones I cannot see. One two three four five six seven eight. Because eight keeps things straight. Then he stops and looks at me. I have had patients in crisis — many — but I have never seen such a haunted stare. I see horror, but not insanity; I see clarity rather than confusion. It must all be a delusion, of course, but there can be no doubt that he understands it completely.

[I say, "When you got there, you touched them."]

Yes, I touched them, one after the other. And I can't say I felt the world grow safer — more solid, more there — with every stone I

touched, because that wouldn't be true. It was every two stones. Just the even numbers, do you see? That turning darkness began to recede with each pair, and by the time I got to eight, it was gone. The hay inside the stones was yellow and dead, but the darkness was gone. And somewhere — far off — I heard a bird sing.

I stepped back. The sun was fully up by then, and the ghost-river over the real one had entirely disappeared. The stones looked like stones again. Eight granite outcroppings in a field, not even a circle, unless you worked to imagine one. And I felt myself divide. One part of my mind knew the whole thing was just a product of my imagination, and that my imagination had some kind of disease. The other part knew it was all true. That part even understood why things had gotten better for awhile.

It's the solstice, do you see? You see the same patterns repeated all over the world — not just at Stonehenge, but in South America and Africa, even the Arctic! You see it in the American midwest — my daughter even saw it, and she knows nothing about this! Crop circles, she said! It is a calendar — Stonehenge and all the others, marking not just days and months but times of greater and lesser danger.

That split in my mind was tearing me apart. Is tearing me apart. I've been out there a dozen more times since that day, and on the twenty-first — the day of the appointment with you I had to cancel, do you remember?

[I tell him I do, of course I do.]

I spent that whole day in Ackerman's Field, watching and counting. Because the twenty-first was the summer solstice. The day of highest danger. Just as the winter solstice in December is the day when the danger is lowest. It was last year, it will be again this year, it has been every year since the beginning of time. And in the months ahead — until fall, at least — I've got my work cut out for me. The twenty-first I can't tell you how awful it was out there. The way that eighth stone kept shimmering out of existence. How hard it was

to concentrate it back into the world. The way the darkness would gather and recede gather and recede like the tide. Once I dozed off and when I looked up there was an inhuman eye — a hideous three-lobed eye — looking back at me. I screamed, but I didn't run. Because the world was depending on me. Depending on me and not even knowing it. Instead of running, I raised my camera and looked through the viewfinder. Eight stones. No eye. But after that I stayed awake.

Finally the circle steadied, and I knew I could go. At least for that day. By then the sun was setting again, as it had on the first evening; a ball of fire sitting on the horizon, turning the Androscoggin into a bleeding snake.

And Doc — whether it's real or just a delusion, the work is just as hard. And the responsibility! I'm so tired. Talk about having the weight of the world on your shoulders

[He's back on the couch again. He is a big man, but now he looks small and shriveled. Then he smiles.]

At least I'll get a break come winter. If I make it that far. And you know what? I think we've finished, you and I. As they used to say on the radio, "This concludes today's program." Although who knows? You may see me again. Or at least hear from me.

[I tell him on the contrary, we have a lot more work to do. I tell him he is carrying a weight; an invisible eight-hundred-pound gorilla on his back, and that together we can persuade it to climb down. I say we can do it, but it will take time. I say all these things, and I write him two prescriptions, but in my heart I fear that he means it; he's done. He takes the prescriptions, but he's done. Perhaps only with me; perhaps with life itself.]

Thank you, Doc. For everything. For listening. And those?

[He points to the table beside the couch, with its careful arrangement.]

I wouldn't move them, if I were you.

[I give him an appointment card, and he tucks it carefully away in his pocket. And when he pats the pocket with his hand to make sure it's safe, I think perhaps I am wrong, and I will actually see him on July 5th. I have been wrong before. I have come to like N., and I don't want him to step into that ring of stones for good. It only exists in his mind, but that doesn't mean it's not real.]

[Final Session Ends]

4. Dr. Bonsaint's Manuscript (Fragmentary)

July 5, 2007

I called his home phone number when I saw the obituary. Got C., the daughter who goes to school here in Maine. She was remarkably composed, saying that in her heart she was not surprised. She told me she was the first to arrive at N.'s Portland home (her summer job is in Camden, not that far distant), but I could hear others in the house. That's good. The family exists for many reasons, but its most basic function may be to draw together when a member dies, and that is particularly important when the death is violent and unexpected — murder or suicide.

She knew who I was. Talked freely. Yes, it was suicide. His car. The garage. Towels laid along the bottoms of the doors, and I am sure an even number of them. Ten or twenty; both good numbers, according to N. Thirty not so good, but do people — especially men living on their own — have as many as thirty towels in their homes? I'm pretty sure they don't. I know I don't.

There will be an inquest, she said. They will find drugs — the very ones I prescribed, I have no doubt — in his system, but probably not in lethal amounts. Not that it matters, I suppose; N. is just as dead, no matter what the cause.

She asked me if I would come to the funeral. I was touched. To the point of tears, in fact. I said I would, if the family would have me. Sounding surprised, she said of course they would why not?

"Because in the end I couldn't help him," I said.

"You tried," she said. "That's the important thing." And I felt the stinging in my eyes again. Her kindness.

Before hanging up, I asked her if he left a note. She said yes. Three words. Am so tired.

He should have added his name. That would have made four.

July 7, 2007

At both the church and cemetery, N.'s people — especially C. — took me in and made me welcome. The miracle of family, which can open its circle even at such critical times. Even to take in a stranger. There were close to a hundred people, many from the extended family of his professional life. I wept at the graveside. Am neither surprised nor ashamed: identification between analyst and patient can be a powerful thing. C. took my hand, hugged me, and thanked me for trying to help her father. I told her she was welcome, but I felt like an imposter, a failure.

Beautiful summer day. What mockery.

Tonight I have been playing the tapes of our sessions. I think I will transcribe them. There is surely at least an article in N.'s story — a small addition to the literature of obsessive-compulsive disorder — and perhaps something larger. A book. Yet I am hesitant. What holds me back is knowing I'd have to visit that field, and compare N.'s fantasy to the reality. His world to mine. That the field exists I am quite sure. And the stones? Yes, probably there are stones. With no meaning beyond those his compulsions lent them.

Beautiful red sunset this evening.

July 17, 2007

I took the day off and went out to Motton. It has been on my mind, and in the end I saw no reason not to go. I was “dither-dathering,” our mother would have said. If I intend to write up N.'s case, such dither-dathering must stop. No excuses. With markers from my childhood to guide me — the Bale Road Bridge (which Sheila and I used to call, for reasons I can no longer remember, the Fail Road Bridge), Boy Hill, and especially the Serenity Ridge Cemetery — I thought I would find N.'s road without too much trouble, and I did.

There could be little question, because it was the only dirt track with a chain across it and a NO TRESPASSING sign.

I parked in the cemetery lot, as N. had done before me. Although it was a bright hot summer midday, I could hear only a few birds singing, and those very distant. No cars passed on Route 117, only one overloaded pulp-truck that went droning past at seventy miles an hour, blowing my hair back from my forehead in a blast of hot air and oily exhaust. After that it was just me. I thought of childhood walks taken to the Fail Road Bridge with my little Zebco fishing rod propped on my shoulder like a soldier's carbine. I was never afraid then, and told myself I wasn't afraid on this day.

But I was. Nor do I count that fear as completely irrational. Back-trailing a patient's mental illness to its source is never comfortable.

I stood at the chain, asking myself if I really wanted to do this — if I wanted to trespass, not just on land that wasn't mine, but on an obsessive-compulsive fantasy that had very likely killed its possessor. (Or — this is probably closer — its possessor.) The choice didn't seem as clear as it had in the morning, when I put on my jeans and old red hiking boots. This morning it seemed simple: "Go out and compare the reality to N.'s fantasy, or give up the idea of the article (or book)." But what is reality? Who am I to insist that the world perceived by Dr. B.'s senses is more "real" than that which was perceived by those of the late Accountant N.?

The answer to that seemed clear enough: Dr. B. is a man who has not committed suicide, a man who does not count, touch, or place, a man who believes that numbers, whether odd or even, are just numbers. Dr. B. is a man who is able to cope with the world. Ultimately, Accountant N. was not. Therefore, Dr. B.'s perception of reality is more viable than Accountant N.'s.

But once I was there, and sensed the quiet power of the place (even at the foot of the road, while still outside the chain), it occurred to me that the choice was really much simpler: walk up that deserted road to Ackerman's Field or turn around and walk back down the blacktop

to my car. Drive away. Forget the possible book, forget the rather more probable article. Forget N. and get on with my own life.

Except. Except.

Driving away might (I only say might) mean that on some level, one deep in my subconscious, where all the old superstitions still live (going hand in hand with all the old red urges), I had accepted N.'s belief that Ackerman's Field contains a thin place protected by magic ringstones, and that if I were to go there, I might re-activate some terrible process, some terrible struggle, which N. felt his suicide could halt (at least temporarily). It would mean I had accepted (in that same deep part of me where we are all nearly as similar as ants toiling in an underground nest) the idea that I was to be the next guardian. That I had been called. And if I gave in to such notions

"My life would never be the same." I said that aloud. "I could never look at the world in the same way."

All at once the business seemed very serious. Sometimes we drift, do we not? Into places where the choices are no longer simple, and the consequences of picking the wrong option become grave. Perhaps life-or sanity-threatening.

Or what if they aren't choices at all? What if they only look like choices?

I pushed the idea aside and squeezed past one of the posts holding the chains. I have been called a witch-doctor both by patients and (jokingly, I assume) by my peers, but I had no wish to think of myself that way; to look at myself in the shaving-mirror and think, There is a man who was influenced at a critical moment not by his own thought-processes but by a dead patient's delusion.

There were no trees across the road, but I saw several — birches and pines, mostly — lying in the ditch on the uphill side. They might have fallen this year and been dragged aside, or last year, or the year before. It was impossible for me to tell. I'm no woodsman.

I came to a rising hill and saw the woods pull away on either side, opening a vast stretch of hot summer sky. It was like walking into N.'s head. I stopped halfway up the hill, not because I was out of breath, but to ask myself one final time if this was what I wanted. Then I continued on.

I wish I hadn't.

The field was there, and the view opening to the west was every bit as spectacular as N. had suggested — breathtaking, really. Even with the sun high and yellow instead of sitting red above the horizon. The stones were there, too, about forty yards down the slope. And yes, they do suggest circularity, although they are in no sense the sort of circle one sees at Stonehenge. I counted them. There were eight, just as N. said.

(Except when he said there were seven.)

The grass inside that rough grouping did look a bit patchy and yellow compared to the thigh-high greenery in the rest of the field (it stretches down to a wide acreage of mixed oaks, firs, and birches), but it was by no means dead. What caught my attention closer by was a little cluster of sumac bushes. Those weren't dead, either — at least I don't think so, but the leaves were black instead of green-streaked-with-red, and they had no shape. They were ill-formed things, somehow hard to look at. They offended the order the eye expected. I can't put it any better than that.

About ten yards down from where I stood, I saw something white caught in one of those bushes. I walked toward it, saw it was an envelope, and knew N. had left it for me. If not on the day of his suicide, then not long before. I felt a terrible sinking in my stomach. A clear sense that in deciding to come here (if I did decide), I had made the wrong choice. That I had been certain to make the wrong choice, in fact, having been educated to trust my intellect over my instincts.

Rubbish. I know I shouldn't be thinking this way.

Of course (here's a point!), N. knew, too, and went on thinking that way just the same. No doubt counting the towels even as he prepared for his own

To make sure it was an even number.

Shit. The mind gets up to funny tricks, doesn't it? Shadows grow faces.

The envelope was wrapped in a clear plastic Baggie to keep it dry. The printing on the front was perfectly firm, perfectly clear: DR. JOHN BONSAINT.

I took it out of the Baggie, then looked down the slope at the stones again. Still eight. Of course there were. But not a bird sang, not a cricket creaked. The day held its breath. Every shadow was carved. I know now what N. meant about feeling cast back in time.

There was something in the envelope; I could feel it sliding back and forth, and my fingers knew it for what it was even before I tore off the end of the envelope and dumped it into the palm of my hand. A key.

Also a note. Just two words. Sorry, Doc. And his name, of course. First name only. That makes three words, in all. Not a good number. At least according to N.

I put the key in my pocket and stood beside a sumac bush that didn't look like a sumac bush — black leaves, branches twisted until they almost looked like runes, or letters

Not CTHUN!

and decided, Time to leave. That's enough. If something has mutated the bushes, some environmental condition that's poisoned the ground, so be it. The bushes are not the important part of this landscape; the stones are the important part. There are eight. You have tested the world and found it as you hoped it would be, as you knew it would be, as it always was. If this field seems too quiet —

fraught, somehow — that is undoubtedly the lingering effect of N.'s story on your own mind. Not to mention his suicide. Now go back to your life. Never mind the silence, or the sense — in your mind like a thundercloud — that something is lurking in that silence. Go back to your life, Dr. B.

Go back while you still can.

I returned to the end of the road. The high green hay whickering against my jeans like a low, gasping voice. The sun beating on my neck and shoulders.

I felt an urge to turn and look again. Strong urge. I fought it and lost.

When I turned around I saw seven stones. Not eight, but seven. I counted them twice to make sure. And it did seem darker inside the stones, as if a cloud had passed over the sun. One so small it made shade only in that place. Only it didn't look like a shadow. It looked like a particular darkness, one that was moving over the yellow, matted grass, circling in on itself and then belling out again toward the gap where, I was sure (almost sure; that's the hell of it) an eighth stone had been standing when I arrived.

I thought, I have no camera to look through and make it come back.

I thought, I have to make this stop while I can still tell myself nothing is happening. Right or wrong, I was less concerned with the fate of the world than with losing hold of my own perceptions; losing hold of my idea of the world. I did not believe in N.'s delusion for even a moment, but that darkness

I didn't want it to get a foothold, do you see? Not even a toehold.

I had put the key back into the torn envelope and tucked the envelope into my hip pocket, but I was still holding the Baggie. Without really thinking about what I was doing, I raised it in front of my eyes and looked at the stones through it. They were a little distorted, a little bleary even when I pulled the plastic tight, but still

clear enough. There were eight again, right enough, and that perceived darkness

That funnel

Or tunnel

was gone. (Of course it was never there to begin with.) I lowered the Baggie — not without some trepidation, I admit it — and looked at the stones dead-on. Eight. Solid as the foundation of the Taj Mahal. Eight.

I walked back down the road, successfully fighting the compulsion to take one more look. Why look again? Eight is eight. Let's get that straight. (My little joke.)

I have decided against the article. Best to put the whole business of N. behind me. The important thing is that I actually went there, and faced — I am quite sure this is true — the insanity that is in all of us, the Dr. B.'s of the world as well as the N.'s. What did they call it in WWI? "Going to see the elephant." I went to see the elephant, but that does not mean I have to draw the elephant. Or in my case write a description of the elephant.

And if I thought I saw more? If for a few seconds

Well, yes. But wait. That only shows the strength of the delusion that captured poor N. Explains his suicide in a way no note can. Yet some things are best left alone. This is probably just such a case. That darkness

That funnel-tunnel, that perceived —

In any case, I'm done with N. No book, no article. "Turn the page." The key undoubtedly opens the lock on the chain at the end of the road, but I'll never use it. I threw it away.

"And so to bed," as the late great Sammy Pepys used to say.

Red sun tonight, sailor's delight shining over that field. Mist rising from the hay? Perhaps. From the green hay. Not the yellow.

The Androscoggin will be red tonight, a long snake bleeding in a dead birth canal. (Fancy!) I would like to see that. For whatever reason. I admit it.

This is just tiredness. It will be gone tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning I may even want to reconsider the article. Or the book. But not tonight.

And so to bed.

July 18, 2007

Fished the key out of the trash this morning and put it in my desk drawer. Throwing it away seems too much like admitting something might be. You know.

Well. And anyway: it's just a key.

July 27, 2007

All right, yes, I admit it. I have been counting a few things and making sure there are even numbers around me. Paper clips. Pencils in the jar. Things of that nature. Doing this is strangely soothing. I have caught N.'s cold for sure. (My little joke, but not a joke.)

My mentor-psychiatrist is Dr. J. in Augusta, now Chief of Staff at Serenity Hill. I called him and we had a general discussion — which I framed as research for a paper I might deliver this winter at the Chicago convention — a lie, of course, but sometimes, you know, it's easier to — about the transitive nature of OCD symptoms, from patient to analyst. J. confirmed my own researches. The phenomena isn't common, but it's not a complete rarity, either.

He said, "This doesn't have any personal concern for you, Johnny, does it?"

Keen. Perceptive. Always was. And has lots of info about yours truly!

"No," I said. "I've just gotten interested in the subject. In fact, it's become something of a compulsion."

We ended the conversation laughing and then I went to the coffee table and counted the books there. Six. That's good. Six is a fix. (N.'s little rhyme.) I checked my desk to make sure the key was there and of course it is, where else would it be? One key. Is one good or bad? "The cheese stands alone," you know. Probably not germane, but something to think about!

I started out of the room, then remembered there were magazines on the coffee table as well as books and counted those, as well. Seven! I took the People with Brad Pitt on the cover and threw it in the trash.

Look, if it makes me feel better, what harm? And it was only Brad Pitt!

And if this gets worse, I will come clean with J. This is a promise I make to myself.

I think a Neurontin scrip might help. Although it's an anti-seizure medication, strictly speaking, in cases like mine it's been known to help. Of course

August 3, 2007

Who am I kidding? There are no cases like this, and Neurontin doesn't help. Tits on a bull.

But counting helps. Strangely soothing. And something else. The key was on the wrong side of the drawer I put it in! That was intuition but intuition is not to be SNEEZED AT. I moved it. Better. Then put

another key (safe-deposit box) on the other side. Seems to balance it. Six is a fix but two is true (joke). Good sleep last night.

Well, no. Nightmares. The Androscoggin at sunset. A red wound. A birth canal. But dead.

August 10, 2007

Something is wrong out there. The eighth stone is weakening. There is no sense telling myself this isn't so, because every nerve in my body — every cell in my skin!! — proclaims it's true. Counting books (and shoes, yes, that's true, N.'s intuition and not to be "sneezed at") helps, but does not fix THE BASIC PROBLEM. Not even Placing Diagonals helps too much, although it certainly

Toast crumbs on the kitchen counter, for instance. You line them up with the blade of a knife. Line of sugar on the table, HA! But who knows how many crumbs? How many grains of sugar? Too many to count!!

This must end. I'm going out there.

I will take a camera.

August 11, 2007

The darkness. Dear Christ. It was almost complete. And something else.

The darkness had an eye.

August 12

Did I see anything? Actually?

I don't know. I think I did, but I don't know.

There are 23 words in this entry.

26 is better.

August 19

I picked up the phone to call J., tell him what's going on with me, then put it down. What would I tell him? Besides: 1-207-555-1863=11. A bad number.

Valium helps more than Neurontin. I think. As long as I don't overdue it

Sept 16

Back from Motown. Covered with sweat. Shaking. But eight again. I fixed it. !! Fixed it! IT! Thank God. But

But!

I cannot live my life this way.

No, but — I WAS JUST IN TIME. IT WAS ON THE VERGE OF GETTING OUT. The protections only hold so long and then a house-call is necessary! (My little joke.)

I saw the 3-lobed eye N. spoke of. It belongs to nothing from this world or this universe.

It is trying to eat its way thru.

Except I don't accept this. I let N.'s obsession get a finger in my psyche (it's playing stinkyfinger with me if you get my little joke) and it has continued to widen the gap, slipping in a second finger, a third, a whole pulling hand. Opening me up. Opening up my

But!

I saw with my own eyes. There is a world behind this world, filled with monsters

Gods

HATEFUL GODS!

One thing. If I kill myself, what? If it's not real, the torment still ends. If it is real, the eighth stone out there solidifies again. At least until someone else — the next "CARETAKER" — goes heedlessly prospecting up that road and sees

Makes suicide almost look good!

October 9, 2007

Better lately. My ideas seem more my own. And when I last went out to Ackerman's Field (2 days ago), my worries were all for naught. There were 8 stones there. I looked at them — solid as houses — and saw a crow in the sky. It swerved to avoid the airspace over the stones, "ziss is true," (joke) but it was there. And as I stood at the end of the road with my camera hung over my neck (nix pix in Motton stix, those stones don't photograph, N. was right about that much, anyway; possibly radon??), I wondered how I ever could have thought there were only 7. I admit that I counted my steps back to my car (and then paced around a little when an odd number brought me to the driver's door), but these things do not let go all at once. They are CRAMPS in the MIND! Yet maybe

Do I dare hope I'm getting better?

October 10, 2007

Of course there is another possibility, loath as I am to admit it: that N. was right about the solstices. We are moving away from one and toward the other now. Summer gone; winter ahead. Which, if true, is good news only in the short term. If I should have to deal with such wracking mental spasms next spring and the spring after that

I couldn't, that's all.

How that eye haunts me. Floating in the gathering darkness.

Other things behind it

CTHUN!

November 16, 2007

Eight. Always were. I'm sure now. Today the field was silent, the hay dead, the trees at the foot of the slope bare, the Androscoggin gray steel beneath an iron sky. The world waiting for snow.

And my God, best of all: a bird roosting on one of those stones!

A BIRD!

Realized only when I was driving back to Lewiston that I didn't bother counting my steps when going back to the car.

Here is the truth. What must be the truth. I caught a cold from one of my patients, but now I'm getting better. Cough gone, sniffles drying up.

The little joke was on me all along.

December 25, 2007

I shared Christmas dinner and the ritual exchange of presents with Sheila and her family. When Don took Seth to the candlelight ritual at the church (I'm sure the good Methodists would be shocked if they knew the pagan roots of such rites), Sheila squeezed my hand and said, "You're back. That's good. I was worried."

Well, you can't fool your own flesh and blood, it seems. Dr. J. may only have suspected something was wrong, but Sheila knew. Dear Sheila.

"I had a sort of crisis this summer and fall," I said. "A crisis of the spirit, you might call it."

Although it was more a crisis of the psyche. When a man begins to think the only purpose served by his perceptions is to mask the knowledge of terrible other worlds — that is a crisis of the psyche.

Sheila, always practical, said: “As long as it wasn’t cancer, Johnny. That’s what I was afraid of.”

Dear Sheila! I laughed and hugged her.

Later on, while we were doing a final polish on the kitchen (and sipping eggnog), I asked her if she remembered why we used to call the Bale Road Bridge the Fail Road Bridge. She cocked her head and laughed.

“It was your old friend who thought that up. The one I had such a crush on.”

“Charlie Keen,” I said. “I haven’t seen him in a dog’s age. Except on TV. The poor man’s Sanjay Gupta.”

She whacked my arm. “Jealousy doesn’t become you, dear. Anyway, we were fishing from the bridge one day — you know, with those little poles we all had — and Charlie peered over the side and said, ‘You know, anyone who fell off this thing could not fail to kill themselves.’ It just struck us funny, and we laughed like maniacs. You don’t remember that?”

But then I did. Bale Road Bridge became Fail Road Bridge from that day on. And what old Charlie said was true enough. Bale Stream is very shallow at that point. Of course it flows into the Androscoggin (probably you can see the merging-point from Ackerman’s Field, although I never noticed), which is a lot deeper. And the Androscoggin flows to the sea. World leads onto world, doesn’t it? Each deeper than the last; this is a design all the earth proclaims.

Don and Seth came back in, Sheila’s big guy and her little guy, all dusted with snow. We had a group hug, very New Age, and then I

drove home listening to Christmas carols. Really happy for the first time in ever so long.

I believe these notes this diary this chronicle of madness avoided (perhaps by bare inches, I think I really did almost “go over the bridge”) can end now.

Thank God, and merry Christmas to me.

April 1, 2008

It's April Fool's, and the fool is me. I woke from a dream of Ackerman's Field.

In it the sky was blue, the river was a darker blue in its valley, the snow was melting, the first green grass was poking through the remaining ribbons of white, and once more there were only seven stones. Once more there was darkness in the circle. Only a smudge for now, but it will deepen unless I take care of it.

I counted books after waking (sixty-four, a good number, even and divisible all the way down to 1 — think about it), and when that didn't turn the trick I spilled coffee onto the kitchen counter and made a diagonal. That fixed things — for now — but I will have to go out there and make another “house call.” Must not dither-dather.

Because it's starting again.

The snow is almost gone, the summer solstice is approaching (still over the horizon but approaching), and it has started again.

I feel

God help me, I feel like a cancer patient who has been in remission and wakes one morning to discover a big fat lump in his armpit.

I can't do this.

I must do this.

[Later]

There was still snow on the road, but I got up to “AF” all right. Left my car in the cemetery parking lot and walked. There were indeed only seven stones, as in my dream. Looked thru the viewfinder of my camera. 8 again. 8 is fate and keeps the world strait. Good deal.

For the world!

Not such a good deal for Dr. Bonsaint.

That this should be happening again; my mind groans at the prospect.

Please God don't let it be happening again.

April 6, 2008

Took longer today to make 7 into 8, and I know I have much “long distance” work ahead of me, *i.e.* counting things and making diagonals and — not placing, N. was wrong about that — it's balancing that needs to be done. It's simbolic, like the break and whine in communion.

I'm tired, though. And the solstitch is so far away.

Its still gathering its power and the solstit is so far away.

I wish N. had dyed before coming into my office. That selfish bastyard.

May 2, 2008

I thought it would kill me this time. Or break my mind. Is my mind broken? My God how can I tell? There is no God, there can be no God in the face of that darkness, and the EYE that peers from it. And something else.

THE THING WITH THE HELMET HEAD. BORN OUT OF LIVING UNSANE DARKNESS.

There was chanting. Chanting from deep inside the ringstones, deep inside the darkness. But I made 7 into 8 once again, although it took a long long long lung long time. Many loox thru the vufinder, also making circles and counting paces, widening the circle to 64 paces and that did it, thank god. "The widening gyre" — Yeets! Then I looked up. Looked around. And saw its name woven into every sumac bush and every tree at the foot of that hellish field: Cthun, Cthun, Cthun, Cthun. I looked into the sky for releef and saw the clods spelling it out as they traversed the blue: CTHUN in the sky. Looked at the river and saw its curves spell out a giant C. C for Cthun.

How can I be responsible for the world? How can this be?

Its not fare!!!!!!!

May 4, 2008

If I can close the door by killing myself

And the peace, even if it is only the peece of oblitsion

I am going out there again, but this time not all the way. Just to the Fail Road Bridge. The water there is shallow, the bed lined with rocks.

The drop must be 30 feet.

Not the best number but still

Anyone who falls off that thing cannot fail to

Cannot fail

I cant stop thinking about that hideous 3-lobe eye

The thing with the helmet head

The screaming faces in the stones

CTHUN!

[Dr. Bonsaint's manuscript ends here.]

5. The Second Letter

June 8, 2008

Dear Charlie,

I haven't heard from you about Johnny's manuscript, and that is good. Please ignore my last letter, and if you still have the pages, burn them. That was Johnny's request, and I should have honored it myself.

I told myself I was only going out as far as the Fail Road Bridge — to see the place where we all had so many happy times as kids, the place where he ended his life when the happy times ran out. I told myself it might bring closure (that's the word Johnny would have used). But of course the mind under my mind — where, I'm sure Johnny would claim, we are all pretty much alike — knew better. Why else did I take the key?

Because it was there, in his study. Not in the same drawer where I found the manuscript, but in the top one — the one above the kneehole. With another key to "balance it," just as he said.

Would I have sent you the key with the manuscript, if I'd found them both in the same place? I don't know. I don't. But I'm glad, on the whole, at the way things turned out. Because you might've been tempted to go out there. Simple curiosity might have drawn you, or possibly something else. Something stronger.

Or possibly that's so much bullshit. Possibly I only took the key and went out to Motton and found that road because I am what I said I was in my first letter: a daughter of Pandora. How can I tell for sure? N. couldn't. Neither could my brother, not even at the very end, and as he used to say, "I'm a professional, don't try this at home."

In any case, don't worry about me. I'm fine. And even if I'm not, I can do the math. Sheila LeClaire has 1 husband and 1 child. Charlie

Keen — according to what I read in Wikipedia — has 1 wife and 3 children. Hence, you have more to lose. And besides, maybe I never got over that crush I had on you.

Under no circumstances come back here. Keep doing your reports on obesity and prescription drug abuse and heart attacks in men under 50 and things like that. Normal things like that.

And if you haven't read that manuscript (I can hope for this, but doubt it; I'm sure Pandora also had sons), ignore that, too. Put all this down to a woman hysterical over the unexpected loss of her brother.

There's nothing out there.

Just some rocks.

I saw with my own eyes.

I swear there's nothing out there, so stay away.

6. The Newspaper Article

[From the Chester's Mill Democrat: June 1, 2008]

WOMAN JUMPS FROM BRIDGE, MIMICS BROTHER'S SUICIDE

By Julia Shumway

MOTTON — After prominent psychiatrist John Bonsaint committed suicide by jumping from the Bale River Bridge in this little central Maine town a little over a month ago, friends said that his sister, Sheila LeClaire, was confused and depressed. Her husband, Donald LeClaire, said she was “totally devastated.” No one, he went on, thought she was contemplating suicide.

But she was.

“Although there was no note,” County Coroner Richard Chapman said, “all the signs are there. Her car was parked neatly and considerately off the road on the Harlow side of the bridge. It had been locked, and her purse was on the passenger seat, with her driver’s license laid on top.” He went on to say that LeClaire’s shoes were found on the railing itself, placed carefully side by side. Chapman said only an inquest would show if she drowned or died on impact.

In addition to her husband, Sheila LeClaire leaves a seven-year-old son. Services have not yet been set.

7. The E-Mail

keen1981

3:44 PM

June 5 '08

Chrissy —

Please cancel all appointments for the next week. I know this is short notice, and I know how much flak you are going to catch, but it cannot be helped. There is a matter I have to tend to back home in Maine. Two old friends, brother and sister, have committed suicide under peculiar circumstances and in the same f — king place! Given the extremely odd manuscript the sister sent me before copying (apparently copying) her brother's suicide, I believe this bears investigation. The brother, John Bonsaint, was my best friend when I was growing up; we saved each other from more than a few schoolyard beatings!

Hayden can do the blood-sugar story. I know he thinks he can't, but he can. And even if he can't, I have to go. Johnny and Sheila were close to family.

And besides: I don't mean to be a Philistine about it, but there might be a story in this. On obsessive-compulsive disorder. Not as big a blip on the radar as cancer, maybe, but sufferers will tell you it's still some mighty scary shit.

Thanx, Chrissy —

Charlie

THE

BY
STEPHEN KING



THE PLANT

Stephen King

PART I

January 4, 1981

Zenith House, Publishers
490 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10017

Gentlemen:

I have written a book that you might want to publish. It is very good. It is all scary and all *true*. It is called *True Tales of Demon Infestations*. I know all the things in it from first hand. Contents include stories from "The World of Voodoo," "The World of the Aether," and "The World of the Living Dead." I include recipes for some potions as well, but these could be "censored" if you felt they were too dangerous although for most people they won't work at all and in a chapter called "The World of Spells" I explain why.

I am offering this book for publication *now*. I am willing to sell *all rights* (except for movie rights; I will direct the film myself). There are photos if you want them. If you are interested in this book (no other publisher has seen it, I am sending it to you because you are the publishers of *Bloody Houses*, which was quite good), please answer with the "SASE" I have enclosed. I will send the manuscript with return postage in case you don't like it (or don't understand it). Please respond as soon as possible. I think "multiple submissions" are unethical, but I want to sell *True Tales of Demon Infestations* as soon as possible. In this book there is some "scary s**t!" If you know what I mean.

Yours sincerely,

Carlos Detweiller
147 E. 14th St., Apt. E
Central Falls, R.I. 40222

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger

f r o m: John

r e: Submissions / January 11-15th, 1981

A new year, and the slush in the slush pile grows ever deeper. I don't know how the rest of your toiling editorial minions are doing, but I continue to roll the existential rock of America's unpublished aspiring—at least my share of it. All of which is only to say that I read my share of crud this week (and no, I haven't been smoking what W. C. Fields called "the illicit sponduix," either—I'm just having a prolix day).

With your concurrence, I'm returning 15 book-length manuscripts which arrived unsolicited (see Returns, next page), 7 "outlines and sample chapters" and 4 unidentifiable blobs that look a bit like typescripts. One of them is a book of something called "gay event poetry" called Suck My Big Black Cock, and another, called L'il Lolita, is about a man in love with a first grader. I think. It's written in pencil and it's hard to tell for sure.

Also with your concurrence, I'm asking to see outline and sample chapters on 5 books, including the new bodice-ripper from that bad-tempered librarian in Minnesota (the authors never snoop in your files, do they, boss? Ordinarily it would be a flat submission, but the poor performance of His Flaming Kisses cannot be justified even by our horrible distribution set-up— any word on what's happening with United News Dealers, by the way?). Synopsis for your files (below).

Last, and probably least, I'm appending an odd little query letter from one Carlos Detweiller of Central Falls, Rhode Island. If I were back at Brown University, happily majoring in English, planning to write great novels, and laboring under the misapprehension that

everyone who publishes must be brilliant or at least "real smart," I'd throw Mr. Detweiller's letter out at once. (Carlos Detweiller? I ask myself even now, as I rattle the keys of this ancient Royal—can that be a real name? Surely not!) Probably I'd use tongs to handle it, just in case the man's obvious dyslexia was catching.

But two years at Zenith House have changed me, Roger. The scales have fallen from my eyes. You don't really get heavyweights like Milton, Shakespeare, Lawrence, and Faulkner in perspective until you've lunched at Burger Heaven with the author of *Rats from Hell* or helped the creator of *Gash Me, My Darling* through her current writer's block. You come to realize that the great edifice of literature has one fuck of a lot more subbasements than you expected when you sneaked your first stroke-book up to your bedroom under your shirt (no I have not been smoking dope!).

So okay. This guy writes like a moderately bright third-grader (all declarative sentences—his letter has the panache of a heavysset guy walking downstairs in construction boots), but so does Olive Barker, and considering our creaky distribution system, her *Windhover* series has done quite well. The sentence in the first paragraph which says he knows all of these things "from first hand" suggests he's a ding-dong. You know that. His assertion that he's going to direct the movie suggests that he's a ding-dong with delusions of grandeur. I think we both know that. Further, I'd stake my last pair of skivvies (I'm wearing them, and mighty gray they are!) that, despite his disclaimer, every publisher in New York has seen *True Tales of Demon Infestations*. Loyalty to one's company can go only so far, chum; not even a moderately bright third-grader would start at Zenith House. I'd guess this letter has been patiently retyped and sent out by the indefatigable (and probably obsessed) Mr. Detweiller at least forty times, starting with Farrar, Straus & Giroux, or maybe even Alfred A. Knopf.

But I think there's a possibility—albeit an extremely thin one—that Mr. Detweiller may have researched enough material to actually make a book. It would have to be rewritten, of course—his query letter makes that abundantly clear—and the title sucks, but we have several writers on our books who would be more than happy to do a little ghost-writing and pick up a quick \$600. (I saw you wince—make

that \$400. Probably the indefatigable Olive Barker is the best of them. Also, I think Olive has a thing for Valium. Junkies work harder than normal people, boss, as I think you know. At least until they die, and Olive's tough. She doesn't look too good since her stroke—I hate the way the left side of her face just hangs there—but she is tough.)

As I say, the chances are thin, and it's always a trifle risky to encourage an obvious crazy, because it is so difficult to get rid of them (remember General Heckslar and his book *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers*? For a while I thought the man might be genuinely dangerous, and of course he was a large part of the reason poor old Bill Hammer quit). But actually, *Bloody Houses* did do pretty well, and the whole thing—blurry photos and all— came out of the New York Public Library. So you tell me: do we add ole Carlos to Returns or do we invite him to submit an outline and sample of chapters? Speak quickly, O great leader, for the fate of the universe hangs in the balance.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton

DATE: 1/15/81

MESSAGE: Dear Christ, Johnny! Do you *ever* shut up? That memo was *three pages long!* If you *weren't* stoned, you have no excuse. Reject the damn query letter, tell this Carlos What's-His-Face to send his manuscript, buy him a pony, whatever you want. But save me the mother-fucking thesis. I don't get them from Herb, Sandra, or Bill, and I don't want them from you. "Shovel the shit and shut up," how does that strike you as a motto?

Roger

P.S. Harlow Enders called again today—we're going to keep on drawing paychecks for another year at least, it seems. After that, who knows? He says there's going to be an "assessment of position" in June, and "a total review of Zenith's overall position in the market" next January—I construe those two fulsome phrases to mean we could be for sale next January unless our market position improves, and given our current distribution system, I don't see how it can. My head aches. I think I may have a brain tumor. Please don't send me any more long memos.

r.

P.P.S. *L'il Lolita* is actually a pretty good title, don't you think? We could commission it. I'm thinking maybe Mort Yeager, he's got a touch for that sort of thing. Remember *Teenage Lingerie Show*? The

girl in *L'il Lolita* could be eleven, I think—wasn't the original Lolita twelve?

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger
f r o m: John
r e: Possible brain tumor

Sounds more like a tension headache to me. Take four Quaaludes and call me in the morning. By the way, Mort Yeager's in jail. Receiving stolen property, I think.
John

from the office of the editor-in- chief

T O : John Kenton DATE: 1/16/81

MESSAGE: Don't you have any work to do?

Roger

interofficememo

t o: Roger

f r o m: John r e: Merciless huckstering by insensitive superior

Yes, I'll write a letter to Carlos Detweiller, next year's National Book Award winner.

John

p.s.—Don't bother to thank me.

January 16, 1981

Mr. Carlos Detweiller
147 E. 14th Street, Apt. E
Central Falls, Rhode Island 40222

Dear Mr. Detweiller,

Thank you for your interesting letter of January 4th, with its brief but intriguing description of your book, True Tales of Demon Infestations. I would welcome a fuller synopsis of the book, and invite you to submit sample chapters (I would prefer chapters 1–3) with your synopsis. Both the synopsis and the sample chapters should be typed and double-spaced, on good quality white bond paper (not the erasable type; on erasable bond, whole chapters have a way of simply disappearing in the mail).

As you may know, Zenith is a small paperback house, and our lists currently match our size. Because we publish only originals, we look at a great many proposals; because we are small, the proposals we look at are, in most cases, returned because they do not seem to fit our current needs. All of which is my way of cautioning you not to construe this letter as a covenant to publish your book, because that is most definitely not the case. I would suggest you mail off the synopsis and sample chapters with the idea that we will ultimately reject your book. Then you will be prepared for the worst...or pleasantly surprised if we should find it is right for Zenith Books.

Finally, here are the standard caveats upon which our legal department (and the legal departments, so far as I know, of all publishing houses) insist: you must enclose adequate postage to ensure the return of your manuscript (but please do not send cash to cover postage), you should realize that Zenith House accepts no responsibility for the safe return of your manuscript, although we'll take all reasonable care, and that, as I said above, our agreement to look is in no way a covenant to publish.

I look forward to hearing from you, and hope this finds you well.

to: Roger

f r o m: John r e: upon further study...

Sincerely yours,

John Kenton

Associate Editor

Zenith House, Publishers

490 Park Avenue South New York, New York 10017

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

...I agree. I do write too much. Appended to this is a copy of my letter to Detweiller. Looks like a synopsis of The Naked and the Dead, doesn't it?

John

January 21, 1981

Mr. John Kenton, Editor
Zenith House, Publishers
490 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Kenton,

Thank you for your letter of January 16th, in which I am of receipt of. I am sending off the entire manuscript of *True Tales of Demon Infestations* tomorrow. My money is low today, but my boss, Mrs. Barfield, owes me about five dollars from playing the lottery. Boy, she's a real sucker for those little cards you scratch off!

I would send you a "sinopsis proposal," as you say, but there is no sense of doing that when you can read it for yourself. As Mr. Keen in my building says, "Why describe a guest when you can see that guest." Mr. Keen does not really have any deep wisdom but he says something witty like that from time to time. I tried on one occasion to instruct him (Mr. Keen) in the "deeper mysteries" and he only said, "Each to his own, Carlos." I think you will probably agree that this is a silly comment which only *sounds* witty.

Because we don't have to worry about the "sinopsis proposal," I will spend my letter telling you something about me. I am twenty-three (although everyone says I look older). I work at the Central Falls House of Flowers for Mrs. Tina Barfield, who knew my mother when my mother was still alive. I was born on March 24th, which makes me an Aries. Aries people, as you know, are very psychic, but *wild*. Luckily for me, I am on the "cusp" of Pisces, which gives me the control I need to deal with the psychic universe. I have tried to explain all this to Mr. Keen, but he only says, "There's something *fishy* about you, Carlos," he is always joking like that and sometimes he can be very irritating.

But enough about me.

I have worked on *True Tales of Demon Infestations* for seven years (since age 16). Much of the information in it I got from the "OUIJA" board. I used to do the "OUIJA" with my mother, Mrs. Barfield, Don Barfield (he is now dead), and sometimes a friend of mine named Herb Hagstrom (also now dead, poor lad). Once in

awhile others would join our little "circle" as well. Back in our Pawtucket days, my mother and I were quite "social!"

Some of the things we found out from "OUIJA" that are described in "blood-curdling detail" in *True Tales of Demon Infestations*: 1. The disappearance of Amelia Earhart was actually the work of *demons*! 2. Demonic forces at work on H.M.S. *Titanic*. 3. The "tulpa" that infested Richard Nixon. 4. There will be a President from ARKANSAS! 5. More.

Of course this is not "all." "Don't cool me off, I'm just gettin' warmed up," as Mr. Keen says. In many ways *True Tales of Demon Infestations* is like *The Necronomicon*, except that book was fictional (made up by H. P. Lovecraft, who also came from Rhode Island) and mine is *true*. I have amazing stories of black magic "covens" I have attended, by taking a potion and flying to these covens through the aether (I have recently been to covens in Omaha, Neb., Flagstaff, Ariz., and Fall River, Mass., without ever leaving "the comfort of my own home"). You are probably asking yourself, "Carlos, does this mean you are a student of the 'black Arts'?" Yes, but don't worry! After all, you are my "connection" to getting my book published, right?

As I told you in my last letter, there is also a chapter, "TheWorld of Spells," which most people will find very interesting. Working in a greenhouse and flower-shop has been especially good for working spells, as most require *fresh* herbs and plants. I am very good with plants, Mrs. Barfield would even tell you that, and I am now growing some very "strange" ones in the back of the greenhouse. It is probably too late to put them in this book, but as Mr. Keen sometimes tells me, "Carlos, the time to think about tomorrow is yesterday." Maybe we could do a follow-up, *Strange Plants*. Let me have your thinking on this.

I will close now. Let me know when you get the manuscript (a postcard will do), and fill me in as soon as possible on royalty rates, etc. I can come to N.Y.C. any Wednesday on the train or Greyhound Bus if you want to have a "publishing luncheon" or come here and I will introduce you to Mrs. Barfield and Mr. Keen. I also have more photographs than the ones I am sending. I am happy to have you publish *True Tales of Demon Infestations*.

Your new author,

Carlos Detweiler
147 E. 14th St., Apt. E
Central Falls, R.I. 40222

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger

f r o m: John

r e: True Tales of Demon Infestations, by Carlos Detweiller

I just received a letter from Detweiller in regard to his book. I think that, in inviting him to submit, I made the biggest mistake of my editorial career. Oooh, my skin is starting to hurt...

from the office of the editor-in- chief

T O: John Kenton DATE: 1/23/81

You made your bed. Now lie in it. After all, we can always get it ghost-written, right? Hee-hee.

Roger

January 25, 1981

Dear Ruth,

I feel almost as if I am in the middle of a goddam archetype—segments of the Sunday New York Times on the floor, an old Simon and Garfunkel album on the stereo, a Bloody Mary near at hand. Rain tapping on the glass, making it all the more cozy. Am I trying to make you homesick? Well... maybe a little. After all, the only thing the scene lacks is you, and you're probably paddling out beyond the line of breakers on a surfboard as I write these words (and wearing a bikini more non than existent).

Actually, I know you're working hard (probably not too hard) and I have every confidence that the PhD will be a world-beater. It's just that last week was a real horror show for me and I'm afraid there may be worse to come. Among other things, Roger accused me of prolixity (well, actually that was the week before, but you know what I mean), and I think I feel a real prolixity attack coming on. Try to bear with me, okay?

Basically, the problem is Carlos Detweiller (with a name like that he couldn't be anything but a problem, right?) He's going to be a short-term problem, is old Carlos, like poison ivy or a mouth sore, but as with those two things, knowing the problem is short-term doesn't ease the pain at all—it only keeps you from going insane.

Roger's right—I do tend toward prolixity, That's not the same as logorrhea, though. I'll try to avoid that.

The facts, then. As you know, every week we get thirty or forty "over the transom" submissions. An "over the transom" is anything addressed to "Gentlemen," "Dear Sir," or "To Whom It May Concern"—an unsolicited manuscript, in other words. Well...they're

not all manuscripts; at least half of them are what us hip publishing guys call "query letters" (getting tired of all these quotation marks yet? You should read Carlos's last letter—it would put you off them for life).

Anyway, they should all be query letters if this mudball lived up to its advance billing and really was the best of all possible worlds. Like 99% of the other publishers in New York, we no longer read unsolicited manuscripts—at least, that's our official policy. It says so in *Writer's Market*, *Writer's Yearbook*, *The Freelance*, and *The Pen Newsletter*. But apparently a lot of the aspiring Wolfes and Hemingways out there either don't read those things, don't believe them when they do read them, or simply ignore them—pick what sounds best to you.

In most cases we at least look at the slush, if it's typewritten (please don't breathe a word of this or we'll be inundated with manuscripts and Roger will probably shoot me—he's close now, I think). After all, *Ordinary People* came in over the transom and was first read by some editorial assistant who just happened to recognize that it was a hell of a story. But that, of course, was a million-to-one shot. I've never seen an unsolicited manuscript that looked like any more than the work of a bright fifth-grader. Of course Zenith House is hardly Alfred A. Knopf (our lead title for February is *Scorpions from Hell*, by Anthony L. K. LaScorbia, his follow-up to *Rats from Hell*), but still...you hope...

Detweiller, at least, followed protocol and sent a query letter. Herb Porter, Sandra Jackson, Bill Gelb, and I divvy those that came in the week before each Monday, and I had the misfortune to get this one. After reading it and mulling it over in my mind for all of twenty-five minutes (long enough to write Roger a long-winded memo on the subject that, under the circumstances, I'm probably never going to live down), I wrote Detweiller a letter asking him to submit a few sample chapters and an outline of the rest. And last Friday I got a letter that...well, short of sending it to you, I'm not sure how to describe it. He seems to be a twenty-three-year-old florist's assistant from Central Falls with a mother fixation and the conviction that he's attended witch's sabbats all over America while high on nutmeg, or something. I keep envisioning covens in Motel Six parking lots.

I thought ole Carlos's True Tales of Demon Infestations (I have gotten to the point where the title alone has the power to make me blanch and shudder in my shoes) might be some kid's adolescent research hobby— something that could be cut down and juiced up and sold to the Amityville Horror audience. His original letter was short, you see, and so full of these punchy little sentences—subject-predicate, subject-predicate, wham-bamthank-you-ma'am—that one could believe that. And while I was never under any illusions that the man was a writer, I made an assumption of marginal literacy that turns out to be totally unfounded. In fact, just looking back at the original Detweiller letter makes me wonder how I ever could have scribbled the word This has a certain half-baked charm in the margin... and yet I see I did.

So what? You're saying. Big deal. Give the schmuck's manuscript a token look when it comes in and then send it back with a form letter— "Zenith House regrets," etc. That's right...but it's wrong, too. It's wrong because guys like Carlos Detweiller turn out all too often to be like a bad case of head-lice—easy to get, the very devil to get rid of. The worst of it is, I mentioned this very fact to Roger in my original overlong memo about the book, recalling General Hecksler and his Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers— you must remember me telling you how the General bombarded us with registered letters and phone calls after we rejected the book (you may not know, however, about the Mailgram Herb Porter got from him—in it Hecksler referred to Herb as "the designated Jew," a reference none of us has figured out to this day). It got steadily more abusive, and just before his sister had him committed to an asylum up-state, Sandra Jackson confessed to me that she was getting scared to go home alone— said she was afraid the General might jump out of a darkened doorway with a knife in one hand and a bouquet of psychic posies in the other. She said the hell of it was that none of us even knew what he looked like—we'd have needed a writing sample instead of a mug-shot to identify him.

And of course it all sounds funny now, but it wasn't funny when it happened—it was only after his sister wrote to us that we found out we were actually one of his lesser obsessions, and of course he did turn out to be dangerous; just ask the Albany bus driver he stabbed.

I knew all that—even mentioned it to Roger—and still blithely went ahead and invited Detweiler to submit.

Of course, the other thing (and knowing me as you do, you've probably already guessed it) is simpler—it upsets me to have goofed in such grand style. If a gonzo illiterate like Carlos Detweiler could fool me this badly (I did think his book would have to be ghosted, true, but that is still no excuse), how much good stuff am I missing? Please don't laugh; I'm serious. Roger is always ragging me about my "lit'ry aspirations," and I suppose he has a right to (no progress on the novel this week if you're interested—this Detweiler thing has depressed me too much), considering where the erstwhile head of the Brown University Milton Society ended up (he ended up encouraging Anthony LaScorbia to get right to work on his newest epic, *Wasps from Hell*, for one thing). But I think I would happily accept six months of hectoring letters from the obviously mad Carlos Detweiler, complete with veiled threats becoming a little less veiled with each missive, if I could only be assured that I hadn't let something good slip by because of a totally deadened critical response.

I don't know if this is more or less gloomy, but Roger mentioned in one of his Famous Memos that the Apex Corporation is going to give Zenith at least one more year to stop impersonating a dead dog and start showing some sales pizzazz. He got the news from Harlow Enders, Apex's chief New York comptroller, so presumably it's accurate. I guess it's good news when you consider that not everyone in publishing has got an office to go to these days, not even with a company whose biggest steady seller is the *Macho Man* series and whose biggest in-house problem isn't spies making copies of manuscripts so that the movie studios can get an early look, but cockroaches in the water-cooler. It's maybe not so good when you think of how little money we have to spend (maybe you deserve to get the Carlos Detweillers of the world when the most you can offer as an advance against royalties is \$1,800) and how shitty our distribution is. But no one at Apex understands books or book marketing—I doubt if anyone there even knows why they picked up Zenith House last year in the first place, except that it happened to be for sale cheap. The chances that we can improve our position

(2% of the paperback market, fifteenth in a field of fifteen) over the next year aren't very high. Maybe we'll end up getting married in California after all, huh, babe?

Well, enough doom and gloom—I'll mail this off and hopefully get back to work on my book tomorrow—and the next letter I write will be of the "chatty, newsy" variety. Shall I ask ole Carlos to send you flowers from Central Falls?

Forget I asked that.

My love,

John

p.s.—And tell your roommate that I don't believe manufacturing "the world's largest edible Frisbee" has any merit whatsoever, Guinness Book of Records or not. Why not ask her if she has any interest in trying for the world's record of sitting in a spaghetti-filled bathtub? First one to shatter it wins an all-expense-paid trip to Central Falls, Rhode Island...

J.

interofficememo

t o: Roger

f r o m: John

r e: True Tales of Demon Infestations, by Carlos Detweiller

Detweiller's manuscript came this morning, wrapped in shopping bags, secured with twine (much of it broken), and apparently typed by someone with terrible motor control problems. It is every bit as bad as I feared—abysmal, beyond hope.

That could and should be the end, but some of the photos he enclosed are intensely disturbing, Roger—and this is no joke, so please don't treat it as one. They are a weird conglomeration of black-and-white glossies (made with a Nikon, I would guess), color slides (ditto Nikon), and Polaroid SX-70 shots. Most of them are ridiculous—middle-aged men and women either got up in black bathrobes with cabalistic designs sewn on them or middleaged men and women in nothing at all, displaying skinny shanks, dangling breasts, and pot bellies. They look exactly like what you'd guess the folks of Central Falls would imagine a Black Mass should look like (in some of them there is a much younger man who is probably Detweiller himself—this young man is always shot from the rear or with his face in deep shadow), and the locale appears, in most cases, to be a greenhouse—associated with the florist's where Detweiller told me he works, I imagine.

There's one packet of six photos labelled "The Sakred Seance" which show plasmic manifestations so obviously faked it's pitiful (what appears to be a balloon frosted with Day-Glo paint is floating from the medium's fingertips). A third packet of photos (all SX-70 shots) are textbook-style "exhibit" shots of various plants which purport to be deadly nightshade, belladonna, virgin's hair, etc.

(impossible for me to tell if the labels are accurate—I can't tell a maple tree from a ponderosa pine without help; Ruth would probably know).

Okay, the disturbing part. Some of the photos (four, to be completely accurate) in the "Black Mass" scenes purport to show a human sacrifice—and it looks to me as if maybe they really did kill someone. The first photo shows an old man with an extremely realistic expression of terror on his face lying spread-eagled on a table in the greenhouse I mentioned. Several people in hokey robes are holding him down. The young man I presume to be Carlos Detweiller is standing on the left, naked, with what looks like a Bowie knife. The second shows the knife plunging into the old fellow's chest; in the third, the man I presume to be Detweiller is reaching into the chest cavity; in the last he is holding up a dripping thing for the others to look at. The dripping thing looks very much like a human heart.

The pictures could be complete hokum, and I'd be the first to admit it—a half-decent special effects man could cobble up something like this, I suppose, especially in stills...but the efforts to mislead in the other photos are so painfully obvious that I wonder if that can be.

Just glancing at them is enough to make me want to whoops my cookies, Roger—what if we've stumbled onto a bunch of people who are really practicing human sacrifice? Mass murder, perhaps? I'm nauseated, but right now I'm more scared than anything else. I could have told you all of this in person, of course, but it seemed important to get this down in writing, just in case it does turn out to be a legal matter. Christ, I wish I'd never even heard of Carlos Fucking Detweiller.

Come down and take a look at these as soon as you possibly can, okay? I just don't know if I should pick up the phone and call the police in Central Falls or not.

John

PART II

January 30, 1981

Dear Ruth,

Yes, it was good to talk to you last night, too. Even when you're on the other side of the country, I don't know what I'd do without you. I think this has been just about the worst month of my life, and without you to talk to and your warm support, I don't know how I could have gotten through it. The initial terror and revulsion of those pictures was bad, but I've discovered I can deal with terror—and Roger may be locked in his impersonation of some crusty editor in a Damon Runyon story (or maybe it's that Ben Hecht play I'm thinking of), but the funny thing is, he really does have a heart of gold. When all that shit came down, he was like a rock—his support never wavered.

Terror is bad, but the feeling that you've been a horse's ass is a lot worse, I've found. When you're afraid, you can fall back on your bravery. When you're humiliated, I guess you just have to call up your fiancée long distance and bawl on her shoulder. All I'm saying, I guess, is thanks—thanks for being there and thanks for not laughing...or calling me a hysterical old woman jumping at shadows.

I had one final phone-call last night after I'd talked to you—from Chief Barton Iverson of the Central Falls P.D. He was also remarkably forgiving, but before I give you the final gist of it, let me try to clarify the whole sequence of events following my reception of the Detweiller manuscript last Wednesday. Your confusion was justifiable—I think I can be a little clearer now that I've had a night's sleep (and without Ma Bell in my ear, chipping off the dollars from my malnourished paycheck!).

As I think I told you, Roger's reaction to the "Sacrifice Photos" was even stronger and more immediate than mine. He came down

to my office as if he had rockets in his heels, leaving two distributors waiting in his outer office (and, as I believe Flannery O'Connor once pointed out, a good distributor is hard to find), and when I showed him the pictures, he turned pale, put his hand over his mouth, and made some extremely unlovely gagging sounds so I guess you'd have to say I was more right than wrong about the quality of the photos (considering the subject matter, "quality" is a strange word to use, but it's the only one that seems to fit).

He took a minute or two to think, then told me I'd better call the police in Central Falls—but not to say anything to anybody else.

"They could still be fakes," he said, "but it's best not to take any chances. Put 'em in an envelope and don't touch them anymore. There could be fingerprints."

"They don't look like fakes," I said. "Do they?"

"No."

He went back to the distributors and I called the cops in Central Falls—my first conversation with Iverson. He listened to the whole story and then took my telephone number. He said he'd call me back in five minutes, but he didn't tell me why.

He was actually back in about three minutes. He told me to take the photographs to the 31st Precinct at 140 Park Avenue South, and that the New York Police would wire the "Sacrifice Photos" to Central Falls.

"We should have them by three this afternoon," he said. "Maybe even sooner."

I asked him what he intended to do until then.

"Not much," he said. "I'm going to send a plainsclothesman around to this House of Flowers and try to ascertain whether or not Detweiller is still working there. I hope to do that without arousing any suspicions. Until I see the pictures, Mr. Kenton, that's really all I can do."

I had to bite my tongue to keep from telling him that I thought there was a lot more he could do. I didn't want to be dismissed as a typical pushy New Yorker, and I didn't want to have this fellow exasperated with me from the jump. And I reminded myself that Iverson hadn't seen the pictures. Under the circumstances I guess

he was going as fast as he could on the basis of a call from a stranger—a stranger who might be a crank.

I got him to promise he'd call me back as soon as he got the photographs, and then I took them down to the 31st Precinct myself. They were expecting me; a Sergeant Tyndale met me in the reception area and took the envelope of photographs. He also made me promise I'd stay at the office until I'd heard from them.

"The Central Falls Chief of Police—"

"Not him," Tyndale said, as if I was talking about a trained monkey. "Us."

All the movies and novels are right, babe—it doesn't take long before you start feeling like a criminal yourself. You expect somebody to turn a bright light in your face, hook one leg over a beat-up old desk, lean down, blow cigarette smoke in your face, and say "Okay, Carmody, where did you put the bodies?" I can laugh about it now, but I sure wasn't laughing then.

I wanted Tyndale to take a look at the photos and tell me what he thought of them—whether or not they were authentic—but he just shooed me out with another reminder to "stick close," as he put it. It had started to rain and I couldn't get a cab and by the time I'd walked the seven blocks back to Zenith House I was soaked. I had also eaten half a roll of Tums.

Roger was in my office. I asked him if the distributors were gone, and he flapped a hand in their direction. "Sent one back to Queens and one back to Brooklyn," he said. "Inspired. They'll sell another fifty copies of Ants from Hell between them. Schmucks." He lit a cigarette. "What did the cops say?"

I told him what Tyndale had told me.

"Ominous," he said. "Very fooking ominous."

"They looked real to you, didn't they?"

He considered, then nodded. "Real as rain."

"Good."

"What do you mean, good? There's nothing good about any of this."

"I only meant—"

"Yeah, I know what you meant." He got up, shook the legs of his pants the way he always does, and told me to call if I heard from anybody. "And don't say anything to anyone else."

"Herb's looked in here a couple of times," I said. "I think he thinks you're going to fire me."

"The idea has some merit. If he asks you right out—"

"Lie."

"Right."

"Always a pleasure to lie to Herb Porter."

He stopped again at the door, started to say something, and then Riddley, the mailroom kid, came by pushing a basket of rejected manuscripts.

"You been in there most de mawnin, Mist' Adler," he said. "Is you gwine t'fire Mist' Kenton?"

"Get out of here, Riddley," Roger said, "and if you don't stop insulting your entire race with that disgusting Rastus accent I'll fire you."

"Yassuh, Mist' Adler!" Riddley said, and got his mail basket rolling again. "I'se goan! I'se goan!"

Roger looked at me and rolled his eyes despairingly. "As soon as you hear," he repeated, and went out.

I heard from Chief Iverson early that afternoon. Their man had ascertained that Detweiller was at the House of Flowers, business as usual. He said that the House of Flowers is a neat long frame building on a street that's "going downhill" (Iverson's phrase). His man went in, got two red roses, and walked out again. Mrs. Tina Barfield, the proprietor of record according to the papers on file at City Hall, waited on him. The fellow who actually got the flowers, cut them, and wrapped them, was wearing a name tag with the word CARLOS on it. Iverson's man described him as about twenty-five, dark, not bad looking, but portly. The man said he seemed very intense; didn't smile much.

There's an exceptionally long greenhouse behind the shop. Iverson's man commented on it and Mrs. Barfield told him it was as deep as the block; she said they called it "the little jungle."

I asked Iverson if he'd gotten the wirephotos yet. He said he hadn't, but wanted to confirm for me that Detweiller was there. Just knowing he was brought me some relief—I don't mind telling you that, Ruth.

So here's Act III, Scene I, and the plot sickens, as us guys in the prosebiz like to say. I got a call from Sergeant Tyndale, at the 31st Precinct. He told me that Central Falls had gotten the pictures, that Iverson had taken one look, and had ordered Carlos Detweiller brought in for questioning. Tyndale wanted me down at the 31st right away to make a statement. I was to bring the Demon Infestations manuscript with me, and all my Detweiller correspondence. I told him I would be happy to come down to the 31st as soon as I talked to Iverson again; in fact, I'd be willing to catch The Pilgrim at Penn Station and train right up there to—

"Please don't call anyone," Tyndale said, "and don't go anywhere — anywhere, Mr. Kenton—until you've beat your feet down here and make a statement."

I'd spent the day feeling upset and on edge. My nervous condition was getting worse rather than better, and I suppose I snapped at the guy. "You sound as though I'm the one under suspicion."

"No," he said. "No, Mr. Kenton." A pause. "Not as of now." Another pause. "But he did send you the pictures, didn't he?"

For a moment I was so flabbergasted I could only flap my mouth like a fish. Then I said, "But I explained that."

"Yes, you did. Now come down here and explain it for the record, please." Tyndale hung up, leaving me feeling both angry and sort of existential—but I'd be lying, Ruth, if I didn't tell you that mostly what I felt was scared—I'd gotten in far over my head, and it hadn't taken long at all.

I popped into Roger's office, told him what was going on as quickly and sanely as I could, and then headed for the elevator. Riddley came out of the mailroom wheeling his Dandux cart—empty, this time.

"Is you in trouble wid de law, Mist Kenton?" he whispered hoarsely as I went past him—I tell you, Ruth, it did nothing at all to improve my peace of mind.

"No!" I said, so loudly that two people going up the hall looked around at me.

"Cause if you is, my cousin Eddie is sho one fine lawyer. Yassuh!"

"Riddley," I said, "where did you go to college?"

"Co'nell, Mist Kenton, and it sho was fine!" Riddley grinned, showing teeth as white as piano keys (and just as numerous, one is tempted to believe).

"If you went to Cornell," I said, "why in God's name do you talk that way?"

"What way is dat, Mist Kenton?"

"Never mind," I said, glancing at my watch. "It's always fine to have one of these philosophical discussions with you, Riddley, but I've got an appointment and I ought to run."

"Yassuh!" He said, flashing that obscene grin again. "And if you want my cousin Eddie's phone numbah—"

But by then I had escaped into the hall. It's always a relief to get free of Riddley. I suppose it's terrible to say this, but I wish Roger would fire him—I look at that big piano-key grin and, God help me, I wonder if Riddley hasn't made a pact to drink white man's blood when the fire comes next time. Along with his cousin, Eddie, of course.

Well, forget all that—I've been tickling the typewriter keys for over an hour and a half, and this is starting to look like a novelette. I had better scamp through the rest. So...Act III, Scene II.

I arrived at the police station late and soaking wet all over again—no cabs and the rain had become a good steady downpour. Only a January rain in New York City can be that cold (California looks better to me every day, Ruth!).

Tyndale took a look at me, offered a thin smile with no noticeable humor in it, and said: "Central Falls just released your author. No cabs out there, huh? Never are when it rains."

"They let Detweiller go?" I asked incredulously. "And he's not our author. I wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot-plague-pole."

"Well, whatever he is, the whole thing's nothing but a tempest in a teapot," he said, handing me what may have been the vilest cup of coffee I have ever drunk in my life.

He took me into a vacant office, which was something of a mercy—that sense that the others in the squadroom were sneaking peeks at the prematurely balding editor in the drippy tweeds was probably paranoid, but it was pretty strong just the same.

To make a long story even longer, about forty-five minutes after the wirephotos had arrived, and about fifteen minutes after Detweiller had arrived (not handcuffed, but flanked by two burly men in blue-suits), the plainclothesman who had been dispatched to the House of Flowers after my original call arrived. He had been on the other side of town all afternoon.

They had left Detweiller alone in a small interrogation room, Tyndale told me, to soften him up—to get him thinking all sorts of nasty thoughts. The plainclothesman who had verified the fact that Detweiller was indeed still working at the House of Flowers was looking at the "Sacrifice Photos" when Chief Iverson came out of his office and headed for the interrogation room where Detweiller was being kept.

"Jesus," the plainclothesman said to Iverson, "these look almost real, don't they?"

Iverson stopped. "Do you have any reason to believe they aren't?" he asked.

"Well, when I went into that flower-shop this morning to check on that guy Detweiller, this dude getting the informal heart-surgery was sitting off to one side behind the counter, playing solitaire and watching Ryan's Hope on TV."

"Are you sure of that?" Iverson demanded.

The plainclothesman tapped the first of the "Sacrifice Photos," where the face of the "victim" was clearly shown. "No mistake," he said. "This guy."

"Well why in God's name didn't you say he was there?" Iverson demanded, no doubt with visions of Detweiller bringing charges of false and malicious detainment beginning to dance dolefully in his head.

"Because no one asked me about this guy," the detective said, reasonably enough. "I was supposed to verify Detweiller, which I did. If somebody had asked me to verify this guy, I would have. No one did. See you." And he walked away, leaving Iverson holding the bag.

So that was that.

I looked at Tyndale.

Tyndale looked back at me.

After a moment or two he softened. "For whatever it's worth, Mr. Kenton, that particular photo did look real...real as hell. But so do the effects in some of these horror movies. There's one guy—Tom Savini—and the effects he does—"

"So they let him go." A dread was surfacing inside my head like one of those little Russian submarines the Swedes are never quite able to trap.

"For whatever else it's worth, your ass is covered with three sets of skivvies and four sets of pants, the middle two sets iron-clad," Tyndale said, and then added, with a sobriety that was positively Alexander Haigian: "I'm speaking legally-wise, you understand. You acted in good faith, as a citizen. If the guy could prove malice, that would be one thing...but hell, you didn't even know him."

The submarine came up a little more. Because I felt right then like I was starting to know him, Ruth, and my feelings about Carlos Detweiller were not then and are not now anything I would describe as jolly or benign.

"Besides, it's never the informant they want to sue for false arrest anyway—it's the cop who came and read them their rights and then took them downtown in a car with no doorhandles in the back doors."

Informant. That was the source of the dread. The submarine was all the way up, floating on the surface like a dead fish in the moonlight. Informant. I didn't know Carlos Detweiller from a psychic begonia...but he knew something about me. Not that I was the head of the Brown University literary society, or that I'm prematurely balding, or that I'm engaged to marry a pretty miss from Pasadena named Ruth Tanaka...not any of those things (and please God, not my home address, never my home address), but he knows I'm the editor who had him taken into custody for a murder he did not commit.

"Do you know," I asked him, "if Iverson or anyone else at the Central Falls Police Department mentioned me to him by name?"

Tyndale lit a cigarette. "No," he said, "but I'm pretty sure no one there did."

"Why not?"

"It would have been unprofessional. When you're building a case—even one that dies as fast as this one did—every name the perp

doesn't know or even might not know becomes a poker chip."

Any relief I might have felt was short-lived.

"But the guy would have to be pretty dumb not to know. Unless, that is, he mailed the photos to every publisher in New York. Think he might have done that?"

"No," I said dismally. "No other publisher in New York would have responded to his query letter in the first place."

"I see."

Tyndale was up, clearing away the styrofoam coffee cups, making those end-of-the-party gestures that meant he was hoping I'd put an egg in my shoe and beat it.

"One more question and I'll get out of your hair," I said. "The other photos were obvious fakes. Pitiful. How come they look so bad and these other fakes look so damn good?"

"Maybe Detweiller himself set up the 'Sakred Seance' photos and someone else—Central Fall's answer to Tom Savini, say—made up the 'sacrifice victim.' Or maybe Detweiller did them all and purposely made the other ones look bad so you'd take these more seriously."

"Why would he do that?"

"So you'd stub your toe just the way you have, maybe. Maybe that's how he gets off."

"But he got arrested in the process!"

He looked at me, almost pityingly. "Here's a guy who's in a bar, Mr. Kenton, and he's got these cigarette loads. So just for a joke, he loads up one of his buddy's cigarettes while his buddy's in the john or picking out some tunes on the juke. Seems to him like the funniest idea in the world at the time, even though the buddy's sense of humor only begins when a load explodes in someone else's cigarette, and the guy doing the loading now should know it. So the buddy comes back, and pretty soon he gets to the loaded pill. Takes two puffs and ka-bang! Tobacco all over his face, powderburns on his fingers, and he spills his beer in his lap. And his buddy—his previous buddy—is sitting there on the next stool, just about laughing himself into a hemorrhage. Do you see all that?"

"Yes," I said reluctantly, because I did.

"Now the guy loading the cigarette was not a feeb, although I got to say that in my own personal estimation a guy who thinks loading

another guy's cigarette is funny is a little bit deficient in the sensa-yuma department. But even if his sensa-yuma starts with some guy getting the shit scared out of him and spilling his beer all over his balls, you'd think a guy who wasn't a feeb would be at least interested enough in keeping his teeth inside his head not to do it. Yet they do. They do it all the fucking time. Now, being a literary man —"

(He obviously didn't know about Gash Me, My Darling, Ants from Hell, and the forthcoming Flies from Hell, Ruth)

"—can you tell me why he goes ahead, and ends up picking his teeth up offa the bar on account of he might be able to hawk the fillings?"

"Because he has no sense of futurity," I said dismally, and for the first time, Ruth, I felt as if I could really see Carlos Detweiller.

"Huh? I don't know that word."

"He doesn't know—isn't able to see ahead to the outcome."

"Yeah, you're a literary man, all right. I couldn't have said it that good in a thousand years."

"And that's my answer?"

"That's your answer." He clapped me on the shoulder and led me toward the door. "Go home, Mr. Kenton. Have a drink, a shower, and then another drink. Watch some TV. Get a night's sleep. You did your duty as a citizen, for Christ's sake. Most people would have just tossed those pictures aside...or saved them for their scrapbooks. That sounds weird, but I'm a police-type guy, not a literary-type guy, and I know that some people do that, too. Go home. Forget it. And content yourself with this—if the guy's book is as bad as you said, you just sent him one hell of a rejection slip."

So I did just what he said, m'darling—went home, had a drink, had a shower, had a meal, had another drink, watched TV, went to bed. Then after about three hours in the rack with no sleep—I kept seeing that picture, with the slit in the chest and the dripping heart—I got up, had about three more drinks, watched a John Wayne movie called Wake of the Red Witch on TV (John Wayne looks a lot better in a GI helmet than he does in a diving helmet, I want to tell you), went to bed again, and woke up with a hangover.

It's been a couple of days since all of this went down, and I think — think—that things are beginning to return to normal, both at Zenith House and inside my head. I think (think) it's over—but it's going to be one of those Incidents that haunt me all my life, I guess, like the dreams I used to have as a kid in which I stood up to salute the flag and my pants fell down. Or, even better, there was the time Bill Gelb, my illustrious co-editor at Zenith, told me about. He said he told this joke to a guy at a cocktail party: How do you stop five black guys from raping a white chick? Answer: give them a bas ketball. "I thought the guy I told it to just had a good tan until he threw his drink in my face and walked away," Bill said. That's the kind of story I could never tell on myself, which may be one of the reasons I haven't lost all of my respect for Bill, although he's a bigoted, lazy, horse's ass. All of which is to say I feel sort of like a horse's ass...but at least it's over. If all of this seems to make me a hysteric—someone who would eagerly testify at the Salem witch-trials—please write and break our engagement soonest...because if that's the case, I wouldn't marry me either.

As for me, I'm sort of clinging to what Tyndale said—that I acted in good faith as a citizen. The one thing I'll not do is send you the photos, which were returned to me today. They might give you the sort of dreams I've been having—and those dreams are definitely ungood. I've come to the conclusion that all special effects wizards must be frustrated surgeons. In fact, if Roger gives me the okay, I'm going to burn them.

I love you, Ruth.

Your adoring horse's ass,
John

from the office of the editor-in- chief

TO: John Kenton DATE: 2/2/81

MESSAGE: Go ahead and burn them. I never want to hear about Carlos Detweiller again.

Listen, John—a little excitement's fine, but if we don't start some action here at Zenith, we're all going to be looking for jobs. I've heard that Apex may be hunting buyers. Which is like looking for dodo birds or pterodactyls. We've *got* to have a book or books that will make some noise by this summer, and that means we better start looking yesterday. Start shaking the trees, okay?

Roger

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger
f r o m: John
r e: Tree-shaking

What trees? Zenith House exists on the Great Plains of American publishing, and you damned well know it.

John

from the office of the editor-in- chief

TO: John Kenton DATE: 2/3/81

MESSAGE: Find a tree or find a job. That's all there is, sweets.

Roger

February 4, 1981 Mr. John "Judas Priest" Kenton
Zenith Asshole-House, Publishers of Kaka
490 Avenue of Dog-Shit NewYork, New York 10017

Dear Judas,

This is the thanks I get for giving you my book. Okay, I understand. I should have known what to expect. You think you are SO SMART. Okay. I understand. You are really nothing but a dirty betraying bastard. How much have you stolen. Plenty, I would guess. You think you are SO SMART but you are nothing but a "Warped Plank" in "the GREAT FLOOR OF THE UNIVERSE." There are ways to deal with GUYS LIKE YOU. You probably think I am going to come and get you. But I am not. I would not "dirty my hands with your dirt," as Mr. Keen used to say. But I can fix you if I want. And I want! I WANT!!!!

Meantime you have spoiled everything here so I suppose you are satisfied. That doesn't matter. I have gone West. I would say "fuck you" but who would. Not me. I wouldn't even if I was a girl and you were Richard Gear. I wouldn't if you was some really neat girl with a good build.

Well I am going away but my material is copyright and I just hope you know what copyright is even if you don't know "shit" from "shoe-polish." So you just put that in your pipe and smoke it all the day long Mr. Judas Kenton. Goodbye.

I hate you,
Carlos Detweiller
In Transit
U.S. of A.

February 7, 1981

Dear Ruth,

I had sort of expected a "fuck-you" letter from Carlos Detweiller—it was in the back of my mind, anyway—and I got a dilly just the other day. I employed Zenith House's creaky pre-World War I Xerox machine to make a copy, and have enclosed it with this letter. In his anger he is almost lyrical—I especially like the line about me being a warped plank in the floor of the universe...a phrase even Carlyle might admire. He misspelled Richard Gere's name, but maybe that was artistic license. On the whole, I'd say I feel relieved—it's over, at least. The guy has struck out for the Great American West, undoubtedly with his rose-cutting shears slung low on one hip (on one rose-hip? oh, forget it).

"Yeah, but is he really gone?" you ask. The answer is, yes he is.

I got the letter yesterday and rang up Barton Iverson of the Central Falls Police almost at once (after getting Roger's grudging approval for the long distance, I might add). I thought Iverson would go along with my request to check matters out, and he did. Seems he too thought the "sacrifice photos" were too real for comfort, and the latest Detweiller communication does have a rather threatening tone. He sent a man named Riley—the same man who went before, I think—to check out Carlos, and he (Iverson, not Riley) called me back in ninety minutes. It seems that Detweiller served his notice almost right after being released from custody, and the Barfield woman has even advertised for a new florist's assistant in the local newspapers.

One mildly interesting thing: Riley checked on the guy in the "sacrifice photos," and came up with a name I know: It was Mr. Norville Keen, the same guy, I'm pretty sure, that Detweiller mentioned in his first two letters ("Why describe a guest when you can see that guest," and other pearls of wisdom). The cop asked her a few questions about the staging of those photos, and the Barfield

woman clammed up, ka-bang, just like that. Asked him if it was an official investigation, or what. It isn't, of course, so that was that...and in my mind, the whole subject is closed. Iverson told me that Riley can't "make" the Barfield woman from any of the photos, so there was no handle to question her further...not that anyone there in Central Falls really wants to, I think. Iverson was very frank with me. "Let sleeping weirdos lay," was what he actually said, and I agree two hundred per cent.

If the new Anthony LaScorbia novel turns out to be Plants from Hell, though, I'm quitting.

I'll write you a more normal letter later in the week, I hope, but I thought you'd want to know how it all turned out. Meanwhile, I'm back to spending my nights on my novel and my days looking for a bestseller we can buy for \$2,500. As I believe President Lincoln once said, "Good fucking luck, turkey."

Meantime, thanks for your phone call, and your last missive. And in answer to your question, yeah, I'm also H*O*R*N*Y.

My love,
John

February 19, 1981

Dear Mr. Kenton,

You don't know me, but I sort of know you. My name is Roberta Solrac, and I am an avid reader of Anthony LaScorbia's series of novels. Like Mr. LaScorbia, I feel that ecology is about to revolt!!! Anyway, I wrote Mr. LaScorbia a "fan letter" last month and he answered me! I was very excited and honored, so I sent him a dozen roses. He said he was excited and honored (to get the roses) as no one had ever sent him flowers before.

Anyway, in our correspondence, he mentioned your name and said you were responsible for his literary triumphs. I can't send you roses as I am "broke," but I am sending you a small plant for your office, via UPS. It is supposed to bring good luck.

Hope this finds you well, and keep up the good work!!!

Yours most sincerely, Roberta Solrac

interofficememo

t o: Roger
f r o m: John
r e: Ongoing insanity

Take a look at the enclosed letter, Roger. Then spell "Solrac" backwards. I think I really am going crazy. What did I do to deserve this guy?

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton DATE: 2/23/81

MESSAGE: Maybe you're jumping at shadows. If not, what do you want to do about it? Re-open things with the Central Falls P.D.? Assuming this is Detweiller—and I admit the last name soars into the outer limits of the coincidental and the style bears a certain similarity, although it's obviously a different typewriter—it's just, if I may wax alliterative, a harmless helping of little-kid harassment. My advice is forget it. If "Roberta Solrac" sends you a plant in the mail, dump it down the incinerator chute. It's probably poison ivy. You're letting this get on your nerves, John. I tell you this seriously: *Forget it.*

Roger

interofficememo

t o: Roger
f r o m: John
r e: "Roberta Solrac"

Poison ivy, my ass. The guy worked in a greenhouse. It's probably deadly nightshade, or belladonna, or something like that.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton DATE: 2/23/81

MESSAGE: I thought about shagging my butt down the hall to talk to you, but I'm expecting a call from Harlow "The Axeman Cometh" Enders in a few minutes, and don't want to be out of my office. But maybe it's better that I write this down anyway, because you don't seem to really believe anything unless it's in print.

John, let this go. The Detweiller thing is over. I know the whole business knocked you for a loop—hell, it did me, too—but you've got to let it go. We have got some serious problems here in-house, just in case you didn't know it. There's going to be a re-evaluation of what we're up to in June, and what were up to is not much. This means we could all be out on our asses in September. Our "year of grace" has begun to shrink. Quit worrying about Detweiller and for Christ's sake find something I can publish that will make money.

I can't make myself clearer. I love you, John, but let this go and get back to work, or I'm going to have to make some hard choices.

Roger

interofficememo

t o: Riddley

f r o m: John Kenton r e: Possible incoming package

I have an idea that I may be receiving a U P S package from somewhere in the midwest during the next week to ten days. The sender's name is Roberta Solrac. If you see such a package, make sure I don't. In other words, dump it immediately down the nearest incinerator chute. I suspect you know most of what there is to know about the Detweiller business. This may be associated with that, and the contents of the package could be dangerous. Unlikely, but in the realm of possibility.

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

to: John Kenton from: Riddley
re: Possible incoming package

Thanking you,

John Kenton

Yassuh, Mist Kenton!

Riddley / Mail Room

from

THE SAKRED BOOK OF CARLOS

SAKRED MONTH OF FEBBA (Entry #64)

*I know how to get him. I have set things in
motion, praise Abbalah. Praise Green Demeter. I'll
get
them all. Green Green " must be seen." Ha! You Ju d
a s!
Little do you know! But I know! All about your
girlfriend,
too—only girlfriend is now girlFIEND, little do you
know
what she is up to! T h e re is another mule kicking in
your
stall, Mr. Judas Big-Shot Editor! OUIJA says this mu l
e 's
name is GARY! In my dreams I have seen them and*

G A RY is HAIRY! Not like you, you wimpy little

*J U DAS! Soon I'm sending you a present! Ever yone
pros*

*p e rs! Ever y Judas safe in the arms of Abbalah!
Come*

Abbalah! COME GREAT DEM E T E R !

COME GREEN!

PART III



February 25

Dear Ruth,

I've got a case of the mean reds, so I thought I'd pass some of them on— see the enclosed Xeroxes, concluding with a typically impudent communication from Riddley, he of the coal-black skin and three hundred huge white teeth.

You'll notice that Roger kicked my ass good and hard—not much like Roger, and doubly sobering for that very reason. I don't think one has to be very paranoid to see that he's talking about the possibility of firing me. If I'd talked this out with him over martinis at Flaherty's after work, I doubt very much if he would have come down so hard, and of course I had no idea he was waiting on a call from Enders. I undoubtedly deserved the ass-kicking I got—I haven't really been doing my job—but he has no idea of the scare that letter threw into me when I realized it was Detweiller again. I'm too goddam thin-skinned for my own good, that's what Roger thinks...but Detweiller is scary for other, less easily grasped reasons. Being the idée that's gotten fixe in some crazy's head has got to be one of the most uncomfortable feelings in the world—if I knew Jody Foster, I think I'd give her a jingle and tell her I know exactly how she feels. There's an almost palpable texture of slime about Detweiller's communications,

and oh boy, oh yeah, I wish I could get him out of my head, but I still have nightmares about those pictures.

Anyway, I have taken care of matters as well as I can, and no, I have no intention of calling Central Falls. We have an editorial meeting tomorrow. I'll try to the best of my limited abilities to get back on the beam...except at Zenith House the beam is so narrow it almost doesn't exist.

I love you, I miss you, I long for your return. Maybe you being gone is part of the problem. Not to make you feel guilty.

All my love,

John

From the journals of Riddley Walker

2/23/81

Like a stone thrown into a large and stagnant pond' the Detweiller affair has caused any number of ripples at my place of employment. I thought that all of them had gone by; yet this afternoon one more rolled past' and who is to say even that one will be the last?

I have included a Xerox of an exceedingly curious memo I received from Kenton at 2:35 P.M. plus my own reply (the memo came just after Gelb left'in something of a huff; why he should have been in a huff eludes me since today he brought his own dice and I did him the courtesy of not even checking them' but Ah g'iss Ah woan *nevuh* understand dese white folks). I think I have covered the Detweiller affair to a nicety in these pages' but I should add that it never surprised me in the least that Kenton was the one to bring Detweiller' the rogue comet' into the erratic (and' I fear' degenerating) orbit of Zenith House. He is brighter than Sandra Jackson; brighter than that

crap-shooting' Ivy League tie-wearing devil William Gelb; *far* brighter than Herbert Porter (Porter' as previously noted' is not above wandering into Ms. Jackson's office after she has left for the day and sniffing the seat of her office chair—a strange man' but be it not for me to judge)' and the only one of the staff who *might* be capable of recognizing a commercial book if it came within his purview. Right now he is eaten up with guilt and embarrassment over *l'affaire Detweiller*, and can see only that he made a rather comic *faux pas*. He would be incapable of seeing that his decision to even *look* at the Detweiller book demonstrated that his editorial ears are still open' and still attuned to that sweetest of all tones—the celestial notes of Sweda cash registers in drugstores and book emporia ringing up sales' even if it was pointed out to him.

Incapable of seeing that it proves he's still trying.
The others have given up.

Anyway' here is this enchanting memo—between its lines I hear a man whose nerve is temporarily shot' a man who *might* be capable of facing a lion but who now cannot even look at a mouse; a man who is'in consequence' shrieking "Eeeek! Get rid of it! Get rid of it!" and swatting at it with the handiest broom' which in *dis* case jus happen t'be Riddley' who dus' de awfishes an wipe de windows an delivah de mail.

Yassuh' Mist Kenton' I git rid of it fo you! I sholy goan get rid of dat hoodoo Solrac woman's package if she sen one!

Maybe.

On the other hand' maybe John Kenton should have to face up to the consequences of his own actions—swat his own mouse. After all' if you don't swat your own' maybe you never really know what a harmless little thing a mouse is...and is it not possible that Kenton's useful days as an editor may be over if he cannot stare down such occasional crazies as Carlos "Roberta" Detweiller?

I shall ponder the matter. I think there is a very good chance no package will come' but I'll ponder it all the same.

2/27/81

Something from the mysterious "Roberta Solrac" actually came today! I didn't know whether to be amused or disgusted by my own reaction' which was staring'elemental gut-terror followed by an almost insane urge to put the thing down the incinerator' exactly as Kenton's note had instructed. The *physicality* of my reaction as soon as my eye fell on the return address and connected the name there

with Kenton's memo was striking. I had a sudden spasm of shudders. Goosebumps raced up my back. I heard a clear' ringing tone in my ears' and I could feel the hair stiffening on my head.

This symphony of physiological atavism lasted no more than five seconds and then it subsided—but it left me as shaken as a sudden deep lance of pain in the area of the heart. Floyd would sneer and call it "a nigger reaction" but it was no such thing. It was a *human* reaction. Not to the thing itself—the contents of the package were something of an anticlimax after all the sound and fury—but' I am convinced' to the hands which placed the lid on the small white cardboard box in which the plant came; the hands which tied twine around that box and then cut a brown paper shopping bag in which to wrap the box for mailing' the hands which taped and labelled and carried. Detweiller's hands.

Am I speaking of telepathy? Yes...and no. It might be fairer to say that I am speaking of a kind of passive psychokinesis. Dogs shy away from people with cancer; they smell it on them. So' at least' claims my dear old Aunt Olympia. In the same way I smelled Detweiller all over that box'and now I understand Kenton's upset better and have a good deal more sympathy for him. I think Carlos Detweiller must be dangerously insane...but the plant itself is no deadly

nightshade or belladonna or Adder Toadstool (although it may have been any or all of those things in Detweiller's feverish mind' I suppose). It's only a very small and very tired-looking common ivy in a red clay pot.

If not for the "nigger reaction" (Floyd Walker)—or the "human reaction" (his brother Riddley)—I might really have dumped the thing...but after that fit of the shakes'it seemed to me I had to go through with opening the package or deem myself less a man. I did so' in spite of any number of gruesome images—high explosive rigged to special pressure-tapes' noxious floods of black widow spiders' a litter of baby copperheads. And there it was' just a small ivy-plant with yellow-edged leaves (four of them) nodding from one tired' sagging stem. The soil itself is waxy brown. It smells swampy and unpleasant.

There was a little plastic sign stuck in the earth which read:

HI!
MYNAMEISZENITH
IAMAGIFTTOJOHN
FROMROBERTA

It was that flash of fear which drove me to open the package. Similarly' it's that same flash which has decided me against making sure that Kenton gets it

after all' which would have been easy enough to do ("Dat plant' Mist Kenton? Oh' *drat!* I g'iss I fo'got whatchoo said. I am de mos f '*gitten'est* man!"). Let the ripples end; let him forget Detweiller' if that's what he wants. I've put Zenith the Common Ivy on a shelf in my janitorial-cum-mailroom cubicle—a shelf well above Kenton's eye-level (not that he stops in much anyway' unlike Gelb with his dice fixation). I'll keep it until it dies' and then I really *will* dump it down the incinerator chute. That will be the end of Detweiller fo *sho*.

Got fifty pages done on the novel over the weekend. Gelb now owes me \$75.40.

From *The New York Post*, page 1, March 4, 1981:

INSANE GENERAL ESCAPES OAK COVE ASYLUM, KILLS THREE!!

(Special to the *Post*) Major General (ret.) Anthony R. Hecksler, known to the commandos and partisans who followed him across France during World War II as "Iron-Guts" Hecksler, escaped from Oak Cove Asylum late last night, stabbing two orderlies and a nurse to death in his bid for freedom. General Hecksler was remanded to Oak Cove in the small upstate town of Cutlersville twenty-seven months ago, following his acquittal, by reason of insanity, on charges of assault with a deadly weapon and assault with intent to kill. His victim was Albany bus driver Herman T. Schneur, whom Hecksler claimed in a signed statement to be "one of the twelve North American foremen of the antichrist."

The Oak Cove dead have been identified as Norman Ableson, twenty-six; John Piet, forty; and Alicia Penbroke, thirty-four. State Police Lieutenant Arthur P. Ford was surprisingly gloomy when asked if he expected to recapture General Hecksler quickly. "We hope for a quick arrest, naturally," he said, "but this is a man who trained guerilla units in World War II and in Korea, and who was consulted on more than one occasion by General Westmoreland in Viet Nam. He's seventy-two now, but still strong and amazingly agile, as his escape from Oak Cove shows." Ford indicated he was referring to Hecksler's probable method of escape—a leap from a second floor window in the Oak Cove Administration Wing to the garden below (see photographs on pages 2, 3, and Center Section). Ford went on to caution everyone within the immediate area to be on the lookout for the mad General, whom he described as "extremely clever, extremely dangerous, and extremely paranoid."

In a brief press interview, Ellen K. Moors, the doctor in charge of Hecksler's case, agreed. "He had a great many enemies," she said, "or so he imagined. His paranoid delusions were extremely complex, but he never lost track of the score. He was, in his way, a model inmate...but he never lost track of the score."

A source close to the investigation says Hecksler may have stabbed Ableson, Piet, and Pembroke to death with a pair of barber's shears. The source told the *Post* that there was no outcry; all three were stabbed in the throat, commando-style.

(Related story p. 12)

PART IV

From the journals of Riddley Walker

3/25/81

What a difference a day makes!

Yesterday Herb Porter was his usual self—fat' slovenly' smoking a cigar as he stood by the water-cooler' explaining to Kenton and Gelb how the great train of the world would run if he' Herbert Porter' were the engineer. The man is a walking *Reader's Digest* of rabbit-punch solutions' a compendium of declarative answers which are delivered amid the effluvium of cigar smoke and exquisitely bad breath. Close the borders and keep out the spies and wetbacks! End abortion on demand! Build more prisons! Upgrade possession of marijuana to a felony once again! Sell biochemical stocks! Buy cable-TV issues!

He is' in his way—or was' until today—a wonderful man: rounded and perfect in his assurances' plated with prejudices' caprisoned about with cant' and possessed of just enough native wit to hold a job in a place like this' Porter is an evocation of the Great American Median. Even his occasional surreptitious expeditions into Sandra Jackson's office to sniff the

seat of her chair please me—an endearing little loophole in the walking castle of complacency that is Massa Po'tuh.

Oh' but today! What a different Herbert Porter crept into my janitorial cubbyhole today! The complacent'ruddy face had become pallid and trembling. The blue eyes shifted so regularly from side to side that Porter looked like a man watching a tennis match even when he was trying to stare right at me. His lips were so shiny with spittle that they looked almost varnished. And while he was of course still fat' he also looked as if he had somehow lost his surface tension—as if the essential Herb Porter had shrunk away from the borders of his skin' leaving that skin to sag in places where it had been previously stretched smooth.

"He's out" Porter whispered.

"Who's dat' Mist Po'tuh?" I asked. I was genuinely curious; I could not imagine what mighty sling or engine could have breached such a gap in Castle Herbert. Although I suppose I should have guessed.

He proffered me the paper—the *Post*, of course. He's the only one around here who reads it. Kenton and Wade read the *Times*, Gelb and Jackson *bring* the *Times* but secretly read the *Daily News* (the hand that rocks the cradle may rule the world' but de han which empty de white folks' wastebaskets know de

secrets of de worl)' but the *Post* was made for fellows such as Herb Porter. He plays Wingo religiously and says if he ever wins a bundle he is going to buy a Winnebago' paint the word

W I N G O B A G O on the side' and tour the country. I took it' opened it' and read the headline. "The General's escaped"" he whispered. His eyes stopped bouncing back and forth for a moment and he stared at me in dismay and utter horror. "It's as if that damned Detweiller cursed us. The General's escaped *and I rejected his book!*"

"Now' now' Mist Po'tuh"" I said. "Ain't no need to take on so. Man lak dis prob'ly got fo-five dozen scores to settle befo he git to you."

"But I could be number one"" he whispered. "After all' I rejected his goddam *book.*"

It was true'and it is ironic how two such fundamentally different men as Kenton and Porter have managed to get themselves into exactly the same situation this late winter—each the target of a rejected author (Detweiller's rejection a bit more dramatic than that of the Major-General' granted' but that was indubitably Detweiller's own fault) who just happens to be insane. The difference—I know it'even if no one else does (and I believe Roger Wade might)—is that' while Kenton thought there might actually be the germ of a book in Detweiller's

obsession'Porter knew better concerning the General's. But Porter is one of those men who has read omnivorously—and vicariously—about World War II' that Picke t t ' s Charge of western man (western *white* man) in the 20th century' and he knew who Hecksler was...in a war filled with military celebrities Hecksler was' granted' of the Hollywood Squares type (if you see what I mean)'but to Porter he was *somebody*. So he asked to see the completed manuscript of *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers* in spite of the abysmal outline' thereby encouraging a man who was' by the quality and content of his own written words' a palpable psychotic. I felt that the result and his present terror' although unforeseen' were partly his own fault.

I allowed as how it was true that he could be number one on the General's hit list (if indeed the poor madman is doing anything other than cowering in drainage ditches or scouring alley garbage cans for offal at this point)' but reiterated that I thought it unlikely. I added that he might well be caught before he could get within fifty miles of New York City even if he had decided to come after Porter' and finished by telling him that many psychotics released suddenly into an uncontrolled environment took their own lives...although I did not say so in exactly those words.

Po r ter re ga rded me suspiciously for a moment and then said' "Riddley—don't take offense at this—"

"Nawsah!"

"Have you *really* been to college?"

"*Yassah!*"

"And you took psychology courses?"

"Yassah' I sho did."

"*Abnormal* psychology?"

"Yassah' and I'se pow'ful familier wid de suicidal syndrome associated wid de paranoid-psychotic personality! Why' dat Gen'l Hecksler could be slittin' his wrists or garglin' wid a lightbulb even while we's heah talkin' Mist Po'tuh!"

He looked at me for a long time and then said'"If you've been to college' Riddley' why do you talk that way?"

"What way is dat' Mist Po-tuh?"

He regarded me for a moment longer and then said' "Never mind."

He leaned close—close enough so I could smell cheap cigars' hair tonic' and the graywater stench of fear. "Can you get me a gun?"

For a moment I was literally without a response—which is like saying (Floyd would' anyway) that China was for a moment without manpower. I had an idea that he had changed the subject completely' and that what I had heard as *Can you get me a gun?* had

actually been *Can you get me some fun*, as in ho. Definition of a ho: dahk-skin woman who do it fo money on account of de food-stamps is gone and de las fix be cookin in de spoon. My response was to either fall down' shrieking wildly with laughter' or to throttle him until his face was as purple as his tie. Then' belatedly' I began to understand he really *had* said gun...but in the meantime he had taken the overload in my mental switchboard for refusal. His face fell.

"You're sure?" he asked. "I thought that up there in Harlem—"

"Ah lives in Dobbs Ferry' Mist' Po'tuh!"

He merely waved this aside' as if we both knew my Dobbs Ferry address was just a convenient fiction I maintained—that I might even actually go there after work' but of course was drawn back to the velvety reaches beyond 110th as soon as the sun went down.

"Ah g'iss I could git you a gun' Mist' Po'tuh' suh"" I said' "but it wouldn't be no better or wuss'n one you could git yo'sef—a .32...maybe a .38..." I winked at him. "And a gun you buy under de countuh in a bah' cain't never tell it ain't goan blow up in yo face fust time you pulls de triggah!"

"I don't want anything like that' anyway"" Porter said morosely. "I want something with a laser sight.

And exploding bullets. Did you ever see *Day of the Jackal*, Riddley?"

"Yassah' and it sho was fine!"

"When he shot the watermelon...*plowch!*" Porter tossed his arms wide to indicate how the watermelon had exploded when the assassin tried an exploding bullet on it in *The Day of the Jackal'* and one of his hands struck the ivy sent to Kenton by the mysterious Roberta Solrac. I had all but forgotten it' although it's been less than two weeks since I put it up there.

I tried to assure Porter again that he was probably far from the top of Hecksler's perhaps infinite list of pet paranoias' and that the man was' after all' seventy-two.

"You don't know some of the stuff he did in Big Two" Porter said' his eyes beginning to move hauntedly from side to side again. "If those guys who hired the Jackal had hired Hecksler instead' DeGaulle never would have died in the rack."

He wandered off then' and I was glad to see him go. The smell of cigars was beginning to make me feel mildly ill. I took down Zenith the Common Ivy and looked at him (it is ridiculous to assign a male pronoun to an ivy' and yet I did it automatically—I' who usually write with the shrewish care of a French *petit bourgeoisie* housewife picking over fruit in the

marketplace). I began this entry by saying what a difference a day makes. In the case of Zenith the Common Ivy' what a difference *five* days has made. The sagging stem has straightened and thickened' the four yellowish leaves have become almost wholly green' and two new ones have begun to unfurl. All of this with absolutely no help from me at all. I watered it and noticed two other things about my good old buddy Zenith—first' it's even put out its first tendril—it barely reaches to the lip of the cheap plastic pot'but it's there—and second'that swampy' unpleasant smell seems to have disappeared. In fact both the plant and the soil in which he is potted smell quite sweet.

Perhaps it's a psychic ivy. If General Hecksler shows up here at good old 490 Park' I must be sure to ask him' hee-hee!

Got twenty pages done on the novel this week—not much' but think (hope!) I am approaching the halfway point.

Gelb' who had a modest run of luck yesterday' tried to push it today—this was about an hour before Porter hopped in' looking for armaments. Gelb now owes me \$81.50.

March 8, 1981

Dear Ruth,

Just lately you've been harder to reach on the phone than the President of the United States—I swear to God I'm getting to hate your answering machine! I must confess that tonight—the third night of "Hi, this is Ruth and I can't come to the phone right now, but..."—I got a little nervous and called the other number you gave me—the super. If he hadn't told me he'd seen you going out around five with a big load of books under your arm, I think I might have asked him to check and make sure you were okay. I know, I know, it's just the time difference, but things have gotten so paranoid here lately that you wouldn't believe it. Paranoid? Weird is a better word, maybe. We'll probably talk before you receive this, making ninety per cent of this letter obsolete (unless I send it Federal Express, which makes long distance look like an austerity measure), but if I don't narrate it by some means or other I think I may explode. I understand from Herb Porter, who is nearly apoplectic (a condition I sympathize with more than I would heretofore have believed, following l'affair Detweiller), that General Hecksler's escape and the murders which attended it have made the national news the last two nights, but I assume you haven't seen it—or didn't make the connection—or I would have heard from you via Ma Tinkerbell ere now (prolix as ever, you see—would that I could be as succinct as Zenith's faithful custodian Riddley!). If you haven't heard, the enclosed Post clipping (I didn't bother to include the centerfold photo of the asylum with the obligatory dotted line marking the dotty General's likely route of escape and the obligatory X's marking the locations of his victims) will bring you up to date as quickly and luridly as possible.

You may remember that I mentioned Hecksler to you in a letter only six weeks ago—something like that, anyway. Herb rejected his

book, *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers*, and provoked a barrage of paranoid hate-mail. Joking aside, his bloody escape has created a real atmosphere of unease here at Z.H. I had a drink with Roger Wade after work tonight in *Four Fathers* (Roger claims that the owner, a genial man named Ginelli with a soft voice and these odd, gleeful eyes, is a mafioso) and told him about Herb's visit to me that afternoon. I pointed out to Herb that it was ridiculous for him to be as frightened as he obviously is (it's sort of funny—under his steely Joe Pyne Exterior, the resident Neanderthal turns out to be Walter Mitty after all) and Herb agreed. Then, after a certain amount of patently artificial small talk, he asked me if I knew where he could get a gun. Mystified—sometimes your ob'dt correspondent is amazingly slow in making the obvious connections, m'dear—I mentioned the sporting goods store five blocks from here, at Park and 32nd.

"No," he said impatiently. "I don't want a shotgun or anything like that." Here he lowered his voice. "I want something I can carry around with me."

Roger nodded and said Herb had been into his office around two, feeling him out on the same subject.

"What did you say?" I asked him.

"I reminded him that the penalties for carrying concealed weapons without a permit in this state are damned severe," Roger said. "At which point Herb drew himself up to his full height (which is, Ruth, about fiveseven) and said, 'A man doesn't need a permit to protect himself, Roger.'"

"And then?"

"Then he walked out. And tried you. Probably tried Bill Gelb as well."

"Don't forget Riddley," I said.

"Ah, yes—and Riddley."

"Who might just be able to help him."

Roger ordered another bourbon, and I was thinking how much older than his actual forty-five he is coming to look when he suddenly grinned that boyish, winning grin that so charmed you when you first met him at that cocktail party in June of '80—the one at Gahan and Nancy Wilson's place in Connecticut, do you remember? "Have you seen Sandra Jackson's new toy?" he asked. "She's the one Herb should have gone to for black market munitions." Roger actually

laughed out loud, a sound I have heard from him very seldom in the last eight months or so. Hearing it made me realize again, Ruth, how much I like and respect him—he could have been a really great editor somewhere—perhaps even in the Maxwell Perkins league. It seems a shame that he's ended up piloting such a leaky craft as Zenith House.

"She's got something called the Rainy Night Friend," he said, still laughing. "It's silver-plated, and almost the size of a mortar shell. Fucking thing fills her whole purse. There's a flashlight set into the blunt end. The tapered end emits a cloud of tear-gas when you press a button—only Sandra says that she spent an extra ten bucks to have the tear-gas canister replaced with Hi-Pro-Gas, which is a hopped-up version of Mace. In the middle of this device, Johnny boy, is a pull-ring that sets off a high-decibel siren. I did not ask for a demonstration. They would have evacuated the building."

"The way you describe it, it sounds as if she could use it as a dildo when there were no muggers around," I said.

He went off into gales of half-hysterical laughter. I joined him—it would have been impossible not to—but I was concerned for him, as well. He's very tired and very close to the edge of his endurance, I think—the parent corporation's steadily eroding support for the house has really started to get to him.

I asked him if something like the Rainy Night Friend was legal.

"I'm not a lawyer so I couldn't tell you for sure," Roger said. "My impression is that a woman who uses a tear-gas pen on a potential mugger or rapist is in a gray area. But Sandra's toy, loaded up with a Mace hybrid... no, I don't think something like that can be kosher."

"But she's got it, and she's carrying it," I said.

"Not only that, but she seems fairly calm about it all," Roger agreed.

"Funny—she was the one who was so scared when the General was sending his poison pen letters, and Herb hardly seemed aware any of it was going on...at least until the bus driver got stabbed. I think what freaked Sandra out before was that she'd never seen him."

"Yes," I said. "She even told me that once."

He paid the tab, waving away my offer to pay my half. "It's the revenge of the flower-people," he said. "First Detweiller, the mad

gardener from Central Falls, and then Hecksler, the mad gardener from Oak Cove."

That gave me what the British mystery writers like to call a nasty start—talk about not making obvious connections! Roger, who is far from being anyone's fool, saw my expression and smiled.

"Didn't think of that, did you?" he asked. "It's just a coincidence, of course, but I guess it was enough to set off a little paranoid chime in Herb Porter's head—I can't imagine him getting so fashed otherwise. We could have the basis of a good Robert Ludlum novel here. The Horticultural Something-or-Other. Come on, let's get out of here."

"Convergence," I said as we hit the street.

"Huh?" Roger looked like someone coming back from a million miles away.

"The Horticultural Convergence," I said. "The perfect Ludlum title. Even the perfect Ludlum plot. It turns out, see, that Detweiller and Hecksler are actually brothers—no, considering the ages, I guess father and son would be better—in the pay of the NKVD. And—"

"I've got to catch my bus, John," he said, not unkindly.

Well, I have my problems, dear Ruth (who knows better than you?), but realizing when I'm being a bore has never been one of them (except when I'm drunk). I saw him down to the bus stop and headed home.

The last thing he said was that the next we heard of General Hecksler would probably be a report of his capture...or his suicide. And Herb Porter would be disappointed as well as relieved.

"It isn't General Hecksler Herb and the rest of us have to be worried about," he said—his little burst of good humor had left him and he looked slumped and small, standing there at the bus stop with his hands jammed into the pockets of his trenchcoat. "It's Harlow Enders and the rest of the accountants who are going to get us. They'll stab us with their red pencils. When I think about Enders, I almost wish I had Sandra Jackson's Rainy Night Friend."

No progress on my novel this week—looking back over this epistle I see why—all this narrative that should have gone into Maymonth tonight went ended up here instead. But if I went on too long and in too much novelistic detail, don't chalk it all up to prolixity, my dear—over the last six months or so I have become a genuine

Lonely Guy. Writing to you isn't as good as talking to you, and talking to you isn't as good as seeing you, and seeing you isn't as good as touching you and being with you (steam-steam! pant-pant!), but a person has to make do with what he has. I know you're busy, studying hard, but going so long without talking to you has got me sorta crazy (and on top of Detweiller and Hecksler, more crazy I do not need to be). I love you, my dear.

Missin' you, needin' you,

John

March 9, 1981 Mr. Herbert Porter Designated Jew
Zenith House
490 Park Avenue New York, NY 10017

Dear Designated Jew,

Did you think I had forgotten you? I bet you did. Well, I didn't. A man doesn't forget the thief who rejected his book after stealing all of the good parts. And how you tried to discredit me. I wonder how you will look with your *penis* in your *ear*. Ha-ha. (But not a joke)

I am coming for you, "big boy."

Major General Anthony R.

Hecksler (Ret.)

P.S. Roses are red. Violets are blue. I am coming to castrate. A Designated Jew. M.G.A.R.H. (Ret.)

MAILGRAM FROM MR. JOHN KENTON TO RUTH TANAKA

MS. RUTH TANAKA
10411 CRESCENT BOULEVARD
LOS ANGELES, CA 90024

MARCH 10, 1981

DEAR RUTH

THIS IS PROBABLY PRIMO STUPIDO BUT PARANOIA BEGETS
PARANOIA AND I STILL
CAN'T RAISE YOU. FINALLY GOT PAST THAT BLANK-BLANK
ANSWERING MACHINE
THIS MORNING TO YOUR ROOMMATE WHO SAID SHE HADN'T
SEEN YOU LAST
TWO DAYS. SHE SOUNDED FUNNY. I HOPE ONLY STONED.
CALL ME SOONEST OR
I'LL BE KNOCKING ON YOUR DOOR THIS WEEKEND. LOVE
YOU.

JOHN

March 10, 1981

Dear John,

I imagine—no, I know—you must be wondering why you haven't heard from me much over the last three weeks. The reason is simple enough; I've been feeling guilty. And the reason I am writing now instead of calling is that I am a coward. Also I think, although you may not believe me when you read the rest of this, which is the hardest letter I've ever had to write, because I love you very much and want so much not to hurt you. All the same I suppose this will hurt and knowing I can't help it makes me cry.

John, I've met a man named Toby Anderson and have fallen head over heels in love with him. If it matters to you—and it probably won't—I met him in one of the two English Restoration drama courses I'm taking. I held him off as best as I could for a long time — I very much want and need you to believe that— but by midFebruary I just couldn't hold him off any longer. My arms got tired.

The last three weeks or so have been a nightmare for me. I don't really expect you to sympathize with my position, but I hope you'll believe I am telling the truth. Although you're on the east coast and I'm three

thousand miles away on the west,I felt as if I were sneaking around on you. And I was. I was! Oh, I don't mean in the sense that you might come home early from work one night and find me with To b y ,but I felt terrible all the same.I couldn't sleep,c o u l d n 't eat, couldn't do my yoga positions or the Jane Fonda Workout.My grades were slipping, but to hell with the grades—my heart was slipping.

I've been ducking your calls because I couldn't bear to hear your voice—it seemed to bring it all home to me—how I was lying and cheating and leading you on.

It all came to a head two nights ago when Toby showed me the lovely diamond engagement ring he had bought for me. He said he wanted me to have it and he hoped I wanted to take it,but he said he couldn't give it to me even if I did until I talked or wrote to you.He's such an honorable man, John, and the irony is that under different circumstances I am sure you would like him very much.

I broke down and cried in his arms and before long his tears were mingled with mine. The upshot of it all was me saying I would be ready for him to slip that gorgeous love-ring on my finger by the end of the week.I think we are going to be married in June.

You see that in the end I took the coward's way out, writing instead of phoning,and it's still taken me

the last two days to get this much down—I've cut every class and have practically put down roots in the library karek where I should be studying for a Transformational Grammar prelim. But to hell with Noam Chomsky and deep structure! And although you may not believe this either, each word of the letter you're reading has been like a lash across my heart.

If you want to talk to me, John—I'd understand if you didn't but you may—you could call me in a week...after you've had a chance to think all this over and get it into some kind of perspective. I am so used to your sweetness and charm and kindness, and so afraid you'll be angry and accusatory—but that is up to you and I'll just have to "take you as you are," I suppose. But you need that time to cool off and settle down, and I need some time, too. You should receive this on the eleventh. I'll be in my apartment from seven to nine-thirty on the nights of the eighteenth through the twenty-second, both expecting your call and dreading it. I won't want to speak to you before then, and I hope you understand—and I think maybe you will, you who were always the most understanding of men in spite of your constant self-deprecation.

One other thing—both Toby and I are in agreement about this: don't take it in your head to

just suddenly jump on a plane and "wing your way into the golden west"—I wouldn't see you if you did. I'm not ready to see you face to face, John—my feelings are still too much in flux and my self-image too much in a state of transition. We will meet again, yes. And dare I say that I even hope you will come to our wedding? I must dare, as I see I have written it down!

Oh, John, I do love you, and I hope this letter has not caused you too much pain—I even hope God has been good and you may have found your own "somebody" in the last couple of weeks—in the meantime, please know that you will always (always!) be somebody to me.

My love,

Ruth

PS—And although it is trite, it is also true: I hope we can always be friends.

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger Wade
f r o m: John Kenton
r e: Resignation

I've been a trifle formal here because this really is a letter of resignation, Roger, memo form or no. I'll be leaving at the end of the day—will, in fact, begin cleaning out my desk as soon as I've finished this. I'd rather not go into my reasons—they are personal. I realize, of course, that leaving with no prior notice is very bad form. Should you choose to take the matter up with the Apex Corporation, I would be happy to pay a reasonable assessment. I'm sorry about this, Roger. I like and respect you a great deal, but this simply has to be.

From John Kenton's diary

March 16, 1981

I haven't tried to keep a diary since I was eleven years old, when my Aunt Susan—dead lo these many years—gave me a small pocket diary for my birthday. It was just a cheap little thing; like Aunt Susan herself, now that I think about it.

I kept that diary, off and on (mostly off) for almost three weeks. I might not get even that far this time, but it doesn't really matter. This was Roger's idea, and Roger's ideas are sometimes good.

I've junked the novel—oh, don't think I did anything melodramatic like casting it into the fire to commemorate the spontaneous combustion of My First Serious Love; I'm actually writing this first (and maybe last) entry in my diary on the backs of the manuscript pages. But junking a novel doesn't have anything to do with the actual pages, anyway; what's on the pages is just so much dead skin. The novel actually falls apart inside your head, it seems, like the parson's wonderful one-hoss shay. Maybe the only good thing about Ruth's cataclysmic letter is that it's put paid to my grandiose literary aspirations. Maymonth, by John Edward Kenton, sucked that fabled hairy bird.

Does one need to begin a diary with background information? This was not a question which crossed my mind when I was eleven—at least not that I recall. And in spite of the great shitload of English courses I've taken in my time, I don't recall ever attending one which covered the Protocol of Journals. Footnotes, synopses, outlines, the proper placement of modifiers, the correct form of the business letter—these were all things in which I took instruction. But on how to start a diary I am as blank as I am, say, on how to continue your life after its light just went out.

Here is my decision, after a full thirty seconds of weighty consideration: a little background information wouldn't hurt. My name, as mentioned above, is John Edward Kenton; I am twenty-six years of age; I attended Brown University, where I majored in English, served as President of the Milton Society, and was

exceedingly full of myself; I believed that everything in my life would eventually turn out just fine; I have since learned better. My father is dead, my mother alive and well and living in Sanford, Maine. I have three sisters. Two are married; the third is living at home and will finish her senior year at Sanford High this June.

I live in a two-room Soho apartment which I thought quite pleasant until the last few days; now it seems drab. I work for a seedy book company which publishes paperback originals, most of them about giant bugs and Viet Nam veterans out to reform the world with automatic weapons. Three days ago I found out my girl has left me for another man. Some response to this seemed to be required, so I tried to quit my job. No sense trying to go into my mental state either then or now. It was none too calm to begin with, due to an outbreak of what I can only call Crazy Fever at work. I may elaborate on that business at some later date, but for the time being the importance of Detweiller and Hecksler seems to have receded far into the background.

If you have ever been abruptly left by someone you did and do love deeply, you'll know the sort of fugue I have been experiencing. If you haven't, you can't. Simple as that.

I keep wanting to say I feel the way I did when my father died, but I don't. Part of me (the part that, writer or not, constantly wants to make metaphors) would like to make it into a bereavement, and I believe Roger was partly right when he made that comparison at the mostly liquid dinner we had the night of my resignation, but there are other elements, too. It is a separation—as if someone told you that you could no longer have your favorite food, or use a drug to which you had become addicted. And there's something worse. However you define the thing, I find that my own sense of self-esteem and self-worth have somehow gotten mixed up in it, and it hurts. It hurts a lot. And it seems to hurt all the time. I always used to be able to escape mental pain and psychic distress in my sleep, but that's no good this time. It hurts there, too.

Ruth's letter (question: how many Dear John letters have actually been sent to Johns? Should we form a club, like the Jim Smith Society?) came on the eleventh—it was waiting in my mailbox like a time-bomb when I got home. I scribbled my resignation on a memo

form the next morning and sent it down to Roger Wade's office via Riddley, who is our janitor cum mailclerk at Zenith House. Roger came down to my office as if he had rockets on his heels. In spite of the pain I'm feeling and the daze I seem to be living in I was absurdly touched. After a short, intense conversation (to my shame I broke down and wept, and although I managed to refrain from telling him specifically what the problem was/is, I think he guessed) I agreed to defer my resignation, at least until that evening, when Roger suggested we get together and talk the situation over.

"A couple of drinks and a medium-rare steak may help to put the situation in perspective," was the way he put it, but I think it actually turned out to be more like a dozen drinks...each, maybe. I lost count. And it was to be Four Fathers again, naturally. At least a place for which I have no associations with Ruth.

After agreeing to Roger's dinner suggestion, I went home, slept for the rest of the day, and woke up feeling thick and dazed and headache-y—that feeling of mild hangover I am left with whenever I get too much sleep I don't really need. It was 5:30, almost dark, and in the unlovely light of a late winter dusk I couldn't imagine why in God's name I had allowed Roger to talk me into the compromise measure of making my resignation provisional for even twelve hours. I felt like an ear of corn on which someone has performed a fabulous magic trick. Taken the corn and the cob and left the green shield of leaves and the fine yellow-white poll of tassel intact.

I am aware—God knows I have read enough to be—of how ByronicKeatsian-Sorrows-of-Young-Werther that sounds, but one of the diary joys I discovered at eleven and may be rediscovering now is that you write with no audience—real or imagined—in mind. You can say whatever you fucking well want.

I took a very long shower, mostly just standing dazedly under the spray with a bar of soap in one hand, and then I dried off and dressed and sat in front of the TV until quarter of seven or so, when it was time to go off and meet Roger. I took Ruth's letter off my desk and stuffed it into my pocket just before I left, deciding that Roger ought to know just what had derailed me. Was I looking for sympathy? A tender ear, as the poet says? I don't know. But mostly I think I wanted him to be sure—really, really sure—that I wasn't just a

rat deserting a sinking ship. Because I really like Roger, and I'm sorry for the jam he's in.

I could describe him—and if he were a character in one of my fictions I suppose I would do so lovingly, in too much detail—but since this diary is for me alone and I know perfectly well what Roger looks like, having trod the metaphoric grapes just down the hall from him for the last seventeen months, there is really no need to. I find that fact unaccountably liberating. The only salient points about Roger are that he is forty-five, looks eight to ten years older, smokes too much, is three-times divorced...and that I like him very much.

When we were settled at a table in the back of Fathers with drinks in front of us, he asked me what was wrong besides the obvious unfortunacies of this evil year. I took Ruth's letter out of my pocket and tossed it wordlessly across the table to him. While he read it I finished my drink and ordered another. When the waiter came with it Roger finished his own drink at a gulp, ordered another, and laid Ruth's letter beside his plate. His eyes were still going over it.

"'Before long his tears were mingled with mine'?" he said in a low justtalking-to-myself voice. "'Each word has been like a lash across my heart'? Jesus, I wonder if she's ever considered writing bodice-rippers. There just might be something there."

"Cut it out, Roger. That isn't funny."

"No, I suppose not," he said, and looked at me with an expression of sympathy that was at the same time deeply comforting and deeply embarrassing. "I doubt if much of anything seems very funny to you now."

"Not even slightly," I agreed.

"I know how much you love her."

"You couldn't."

"Yeah, I could. It's on your face, John."

We drank without saying anything for a little while. The maitre d' came bearing menus and Roger waved him away with barely a look.

"I have been married three times and divorced three times," he said. "It didn't get better, or easier. It actually seemed to get worse, like bumping the same sore place time after time. The J. Geils Band was right. Love stinks." His new drink came and he sipped it. I half-

expected him to say Women! Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em!, but he didn't.

"Women," I said, beginning to feel like a figment of my own imagination. "Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em."

"Oh yes you can," he said, and although his eyes were on me he was quite clearly looking somewhere else. "You can live without 'em quite easily. But life without a woman, even if she's a shrew and a nag, sours a man. It turns an essential part of his soul into a pimple."

"Roger—"

He held up one hand. "You may not believe it, but we're almost done talking about this," he said. "We may get drunk and maudlin and run our gums on the subject, but we'll only be talking about how we've got a skinful, which is the only subject drunks ever talk about, really. I just want to tell you that I'm sincerely sorry Ruth has left you, and I am sorry for your pain. I'd share it if I could."

"Thanks, Roger," I said, my voice a little hoarse. For a second there were three or four Rogers sitting across the table from me and I had to wipe my eyes. "Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome." He took a sip of his drink. "For the moment let us leave what I'm helpless to reverse or alleviate and talk about your future. John, I want you to stay with Zenith House, at least until June. Maybe until the end of the year, but at least until June."

"I can't," I said. "If I stayed I'd just be another millstone around your neck, and I think you've got enough of those already."

"I wouldn't be happy to see you go either time," he said as if he hadn't heard. He had taken the cigarette case he carried—it was too old and scratched and beaten to seem like an affectation—from his inside jacket pocket and was selecting a Kent from among what appeared to be several plump joints. "But I could let you go in June if we look like we're getting on our feet. If Enders swings the axe, I'd like you to stay on until the end of the year and help me wind things up in orderly fashion." He looked at me with something in his eyes that was very close to naked pleading. "Except for me, you're the only sane person at Zenith House. Oh, I guess none of them are as crazy as General Hecksler—although sometimes I wonder about Riddley—but it's only a matter of degree. I'm asking you not to leave

me alone in this purgatory, and that's what Zenith House is this year."

"Roger, if I could—if I—"

"Have you made plans, then?"

"No...not exactly...but—"

"Not planning to go out and confront her, in spite of what this letter says?" He tapped it with a fingernail and then lighted his cigarette.

"No." The idea had certainly crossed my mind, but I didn't need Ruth to tell me it was a bad idea. In a movie the girl might suddenly realize her mistake when she saw the hero of her life standing before her, one hastily packed bag in his hand, shoulders drooping and his face tired from the transcontinental flight on the redeye, but in real life I would only turn her against me completely and forever or provoke some sort of extreme guilt reaction. And I might very well provoke an extreme pugilistic reaction in Mr. Toby Anderson, whose name I have already come to cordially hate. And although I have never seen him (the only thing she forgot to include, the jilted lover said bitterly, was a picture of my replacement), I keep picturing a young cleft-chinned man, very big, who looks, in my imagination at least, as if he belongs in a Los Angeles Rams uniform. I have no problem with landing in traction for my beloved—there is, in fact, a masochistic part of me which would probably welcome it—but I would be embarrassed, and I might cry. It disgusts me to admit it, but I cry rather easily.

Roger was watching me closely but not saying anything, merely twiddling the stem of his drink glass.

And there was something else, wasn't there? Or maybe it was really the only thing, and the others are just rationalizations. In the last couple of months I've gotten a big dose of craziness. Not just the occasional bag-lady who rails at you on the street or the drunks in bars who want to tell you all about the nifty new betting systems with which they mean to take Atlantic City by storm, but real sicko craziness. And being exposed to that is like standing in front of the open door of a furnace in which a lot of very smelly garbage is being burned.

Could I be driven into a rage at seeing them together, her new fella— he of the odious football-player name—maybe stroking her ass with the blasé unconcern of acknowledged ownership? Me, John Kenton, graduate of Brown and president of the blah-blah-blah? Bespectacled John Kenton? Could I perhaps even be driven to some really irrevocable act—an act that might be more likely if he did in fact turn out to be as big as his odious name suggests? Shrieky old John Kenton, who mistook a bunch of special effects for genuine snuff photos?

The answer is, I don't know. But I know this: I awoke from a terrible dream last night, a dream in which I had just thrown battery acid into her face. That was what really scared me, scared me so badly I had to sleep the rest of the night with the light on.

Not his.

Hers.

Ruth's face.

"No," I said again, and then poured the rest of my drink over the dryness I heard in my voice. "No, I think that would be very unwise."

"Then you could stay on."

"Yes, but I couldn't work." I looked at him with some exasperation. My head was starting to buzz. It wasn't a very cheerful buzz, but all the same I signaled the waiter, who had been lurking nearby, for another. "Right now I'm having trouble remembering how to tie my own shoelaces." No. Wrong. That was hip and it sounded good, but it wasn't the truth—my shoelaces had nothing to do with it. "Roger, I'm depressed."

"Bereaved people shouldn't sell the house after the funeral," Roger said, and in my state of buzziness that seemed extremely witty—worthy of H. L. Mencken, in fact. I laughed.

Roger smiled, but I could tell he was serious. "It's true," he said. "One of the few interesting courses I ever took in college was called the Psychology of Human Stress—one of these nifty little blocks they give you to fill up the final eight weeks of your senior year after you're done student teaching—"

"You were going to be a teacher?" I asked startled. I couldn't see Roger teaching—and then, all of a sudden I could.

"I did teach for six years," Roger said. "Four in high school and two in elementary. But that's beside the point. This course took up human stress situations like marriage, divorce, imprisonment, and bereavement. The course wasn't really a Signposts for Better Living sort of deal, but if you kept your eyes open you couldn't help but notice a few. One was this thing about living out at least the first six months of a really deep bereavement in the house where you and your loved one were living when the death occurred."

"Roger, this is not the same thing." I sipped my new drink, which tasted just like my old drink. It occurred to me that I was getting fried. It also occurred to me that I didn't care in the slightest.

"But it is," He said, leaning solemnly toward me. "In a queer way Ruth is dead to you now. You may see her from time to time over the years, but if the break is as final and complete as that letter sounds, the Ruth we could call your Lover-Ruth is dead to you. And you are grieving."

I opened my mouth to tell him he was full of shit, and then I closed it again because he was at least partly right. That's what carrying a torch really means, isn't it? You're grieving for the lover who died—the lover who is dead to you, anyway.

"People tend to think of 'grief' and 'depression' as interchangeable terms," Roger said. His tone was a good deal more pedantic than usual, and his eyes were rimmed with red. It occurred to me that Roger was getting fried, too. "They're really not. There's an element of depression in grief, of course, but there are a whole slew of other feelings as well, ranging from guilt and sadness to anger and relief. A person who runs from the scene of those feelings is a person in retreat from the inevitable. He arrives in a new place and discovers he feels exactly the same mixture of emotions we call grief—except now he feels homesickness as well, and a feeling of having lost the essential linkage which eventually turn grief into remembrance."

"You remember all of that from an eight-week psychology block course you took eighteen years ago?"

Roger sipped modestly at his drink. "Sure," he said. "I got an A."
"Bullshit you do."

"I also banged the grad student who taught the course. What a piece of ass she was."

"It's not my apartment I was planning to leave," I said, although I had no idea if I intended to leave it or not...and I know that wasn't his point anyway.

"It wouldn't matter whether you left that two-room cockroach condo or not," he said. "You know what I'm talking about here. Your job is your house."

"Yeah? Well the roof is sure leaking," I said, and even that seemed sort of witty to me. I was getting fried, all right.

"I want you to help me fix the leak, John," he said, leaning forward earnestly. "That's what I'm saying. That's why I asked you out tonight. And your agreement is the only thing capable of mitigating what is undoubtedly going to be one of the most beastly hangovers of my life. Help us both. Stay on."

"You'll pardon me if all of this sounds just a little bit self-serving and fortuitous."

He sat back. "I respect you," he said a trifle coldly, "but I also like you, John. If I didn't I wouldn't be breaking my ass to keep you on." He hesitated, seemed on the point of saying something more, then didn't. His eyes said it for him: And humiliating myself by damn' near begging.

"I just don't understand why you're trying so hard," I said. "I mean, I'm flattered, but—"

"Because if anyone can bring in a book or create an idea that will keep Zenith from going belly-up, it's you," he said. There was an intensity in his eyes I found almost frightening. "I know how fucking embarrassed you were by the whole Detweiller business, but—"

"Please," I said. "Let's not add insult to injury."

"I had no intention of even bringing it up," he said. "It's just that your very openness to such an off-the-wall proposition—"

"It was off the wall, all right—"

"Will you shut up and listen? Your response to the Detweiller query showed you're still alive to a potentially commercial idea. Herb or Bill would simply have dropped his letter in the circular file."

"And we all would have been a lot better off," I said, but I saw where he was going and would be lying if I didn't say I was

flattered...and that I felt a little better about the Detweiller affair for the first time since my humiliation at the police station.

"This time," he agreed. "But those guys also would have turned down V. C. Andrews with her Toys in the Attic series, or some brand new idea. Boom, into the circular file and then back to contemplating their navels." He paused. "I need you, Johnny, and I think it would be good if you stayed—for you, for me, for Zenith. There's no other way I can put it. Think it over and give me your answer. I'll accept it either way."

"You'd be paying me for the equivalent of cutting out paper dolls, Roger."

"That's a chance I'm willing to take."

I thought about it. I'd started to clean out my desk that day and hadn't gotten very far—to paraphrase Poe, who would have thought the old desk could have had so much crap in it? Or maybe it was just me, and that crack about not even being able to tie my own shoelaces wasn't so wrong, after all. I'd gotten two empty cardboard cartons from Riddley's room (which smells oddly green lately, like fresh marijuana—and no, I didn't see any) and did nothing but stare from one to the other. Maybe with a little more time I could at least complete the elementary job of cleaning up my old life before starting some unimaginable new one. It's just that I've felt so fucking d r e a r y.

"Suppose we table the resignation until the end of the month," I said. "would that ease your mind?"

He smiled. "It's not the best I'd hoped for," he said, "but it's not the worst I was afraid of, either. I'll take it. And now I think we better order while we can still sit up straight."

We ordered steaks, and ate them, but by then my mouth was too numb to taste much. I suppose I just ought to be grateful that no one had to perform the Heimlich Maneuver on either of us.

As we were leaving—holding onto each other, assisted by the anxious maitre d' (who no doubt only wanted to get us the fuck out of there before we broke something), Roger told me: "Something else I learned in that psychology course—"

"What did you say they called it? The Psychology of Damaged Souls?"

We were outside by then, and his cackles drifted away in little frosty plumes of vapor. "It was the Psychology of Human Stress, but I actually like yours better." Roger energetically flagged down a cab, whose driver would shortly be very sorry he picked us up. "It also said that it helps to keep a di a r y."

"Shit," I said. "I haven't kept a diary since I was eleven."

"Well what the hell," he said. "look for it, John. Maybe it's still around somewhere." And he went off into another wild run of cackles which only ended when he leaned over and puked nonchalantly on his own shoes.

He did it twice more on the way to his apartment building at 20th and Park Avenue South, leaning as far out the window as he could (which wasn't too far since it was one of those Plymouths where the rear windows will only roll down about halfway and there's a grim little yellow and black sign that says DO NOT FORCE THE WINDOW!) and just sort of blowing it into the slipstream and then settling back with that same nonchalant expression on his face. Our driver, a Nigerian or Somalian by his accent, was horrified. He pulled over to the curb and ordered us out. I was willing, but Roger sat tight.

"My friend," he said, "I would get out if I could walk. Since I cannot, you must convey us hence."

"I want you out my caib, good sah."

"So far I have done you the courtesy of vomiting out the window," Roger said with that same nonchalant and rather pleasant expression on his face. "It hasn't been easy because of the angle, but I have done it. I think in another few seconds I am going to vomit again. If you don't convey us hence, I am going to do it in your ashtray."

At Roger's building I assisted him into the lobby and saw him into the elevator with his apartment key in his hand. Then I wove my way back to the c a b .

"You git annoder cab, mon," the driver said. "You just pay me and git annoder. I don't want to no mo convey you hence."

"It's just down to Soho," I said, "and I'll give you a hell of a tip. Also, I don't feel like puking." This was a bit of a lie, I'm afraid.

He took me, and from the look of my wallet the next day I did indeed give him a hell of a tip. And I actually managed to make it

upstairs before throwing up. Although once I started I didn't stop for quite awhile.

I didn't go in the next day—it was all I could do to get out of bed. My head felt monstrous, bloated. I called in around three and got Bill Gelb, who told me Roger hadn't shown, either.

Since then I have done a lot of crying and have had mostly sleepless nights, but perhaps Roger wasn't so wrong—the only hours that I feel even halfway myself are the ones spent on the 9th floor at 490 Park. Riddley has just about had to sweep me out the door along with his red sawdust the last two nights. Maybe there is something to that old "he threw himself into his work" crap after all. Even this diary idea feels right...although it may only be the relief of finally being done with my dreadful pastoral novel.

Maybe I'll stay on after all. Onward and upward...if there is any upward left for me. Man, I still can't believe she's gone.

And I still haven't lost hope that she may change her mind.

March 21, 1981

Mr. John "Poop-Shit" Kenton
Zenith House Publishers, Home of the Pus-Bags
490 Kaka Avenue South New York, New York 10017

Dear Poop-Shit,

Did you think I had forgotten you? My plans for revenge will go forward no matter WHAT! happens to me! You and all your fellow "*Pus-Bags*" will soon feel theWRATH! of CARLOS!!

I have coverned the powers of Hell,

Carlos Detweiller

In Transit, U.S.A.

P S—Smell anything "*green*" yet, Mr. Poop-Shit Kenton?

From John Kenton's diary.

March 22, 1981

Had a letter from Carlos today. I laughed until I shrieked. Herb Porter came on the run, wanted to know if I was dying or what. I showed it to him. He read it and only frowned. He wanted to know what I was laughing about— didn't I take this Detweiller fellow seriously?

"Oh, I take him seriously...sort of," I said.

"Then why in hell are you laughing?"

"I guess I just must be a warped plank in the great floor of the universe," I said, and then went off into even madder gales of laughter.

Frowning so deeply now that the lines in his face had become crevasses, Herb laid the letter on the corner of my desk and then backed into the doorway, as if whatever I had might be catching. "I don't know why you're so weird lately," he said, "but I'll give you some good advice anyway. Get yourself some personal protection. And if you need psychiatric help, John—"

I just kept laughing—by then I'd worked myself into a semi-hysterical frenzy. Herb stared at me a moment longer, then slammed the door and walked away. Just as well, really, as I finished by crying.

I expect to speak to Ruth tonight. By exercising all of my willpower I have managed to hold off on calling her, expecting each day that she must call me. Maddening images of her and the odious Toby Anderson cavorting together—the locale which keeps recurring is a hot-tub. So I'll call her. So much for willpower.

If I had a return address for Carlos Detweiler I think I'd drop him a postcard: "Dear Carlos—I know all about covening the powers of Hell. Your Ob'd Servant, Poop-Shit Kenton."

Why I bother to write all this crud down, or why I keep plowing through the stacks of old unreturned manuscripts in the mailroom next to Riddley's janitorial closet, are both mysteries to me.

March 23, 1981

My call to Ruth was an utter disaster. Why I should be sitting here and writing about it when I don't even want to think about it defies reason. Perversity upon perversity. Actually, I do know—I have some dim idea that if I write it down it will lose some of its power over me...so let me by all means confess, but the less said, the better.

Have I written here that I cry very easily? I think so, but I haven't the heart to actually look back and see. Well, I cried. Maybe that says it all. Or maybe it doesn't. I guess it doesn't. I had spent the day—the last two or three days, actually—telling myself that I would not a .) c r y, or b .) beg her to come back. I ended up doi ng c .) both. I've had a lot of gruff locker room chats with myself over the last couple of days (and mostly sleepless nights) on the subject of Pride. As in, "Even after everything else is gone, a man's got his Pride." I would draw some lonely comfort from this thought and fantasize myself as Paul Newman—that scene in Cool Hand Luke where he sits in his cell after his mother's death, playing his banjo and crying soundlessly. Heart-rending, but cool, definitely cool.

Well, my cool lasted just about four minutes after hearing her voice and having a sudden total remembrance of Ruth—something like an imagistic tattoo. What I'm saying is that I didn't know how gone she was until I heard her say "Hello? John?"—just those two words—and had this searing 360 degree memory of Ruth—God, how here she was when she was here!

Even after everything else is gone, a man's got his Pride? Samson might have had similar sentiments about his hair.

A n y w a y, I cried and I begged and after a little while she cried and in the end she had to hang up to get rid of me. Or maybe the odious Toby—I never heard him but am somehow sure he was in the room with her; I could almost smell his Brut cologne—picked the phone out of her hand and did her hanging up for her. So they could discuss his love-ring, or their June wedding, or perhaps so he could mingle his tears with hers. Bitter—bitter—I know. But I've discovered that even after Pride has gone, a man's got his Bitterness.

Did I discover anything else this evening? Yes, I think so. That it is over—genuinely and completely over. Will this stop me from calling her again and debasing myself even further (if that is possible)? I don't know. I hope so—God, I do. And there's always the possibility that she'll change her phone number. In fact, I think that's even a probability, given tonight's festivities.

So what is there for me now? Work, I guess—work, work, and more work. I'm tunneling my way steadily into the logjam of manuscripts in the mailroom—unsolicited scripts which were never returned, for one reason or another (after all, it says right in the boiler-plate that we accept no responsibility for such orphan children). I don't really expect to find the next Flowers in the Attic in there, or a budding John Saul or Rosemary Rogers, but if Roger was wrong about that, he was sublimely right about something much more important—the work is keeping me sane. Pride...then Bitterness...then Work.

Oh, fuck it. I'm going to go out, buy myself a bottle of bourbon, and get shitty-ass drunk. This is John Kenton, signing off and going for the long bomb.

From the journals of Riddley Walker

3/25/81

After what seems like ten weeks of unadulterated excitement—all of it the unhealthiest variety—things at Zenith House seem to have finally settled back into their accustomed drone. Porter sneaks into Jackson's office and sniffs the seat of her office chair during the five-minute period which comes every morning between ten and ten-thirty when the seat is vacant (it is during this half-hour each morning that Ms. Jackson removes herself and a copy of either Vogue or Better Homes and Gardens to the ladies' bog, where she has her daily dump); Gelb has resumed his surreptitious visits to the Riddley Walker Casino and after a rash double-or-nothing proposal earlier this week now owes me \$192.50; Herb Porter, after his brief fugue, has once again mounted into the seat of the great political locomotive which he imagines only himself, of all the earth's billions, really capable of driving; and I have resumed these pages after a three-week hiatus in which I have peacefully

swept dirt by day and spread narrative by night—and if that is not pomposity masquerading as eloquence, then nothing is.

But the accustomed drone is not quite the same as before, is it? There are two principal reasons for this. One is down the hall and one is right here in my little janitorial cubby...or perhaps it's only in my head. I would give a great deal to know which, and please believe me that my tongue is nowhere near my cheek when I say so. The change down the hall is, of course, John Kenton. The change in here (or in my head) is Zenith the Common Ivy.

Herb Porter doesn't realize that anything at all is wrong with Kenton. Bill Gelb has noticed but doesn't care. It was Sandra Jackson who asked me yesterday if I had any idea why John had suddenly decided to go through every old manuscript in that corner of the mailroom I think of as The Isle of Forgotten Novels.

"No ma'am!" I said. "I sho don't!"

"Well, I wish he'd stop," she said. She popped open her compact, peered into it, and began to poke at her hair with an afro comb. "I can't even go in there anymore without sneezing until I'm just about blue. Everything's covered with dust and all that dry creepy stuff that comes out when those cheap padded mailers tear open. You must hate it in there."

"It sho is pow'ful dusty, Miz Jackson, and that's a fack!"

"Is he mailing them back?"

"I doan' know if he is nor not."

"Well, you take care of the mail, don't you?" she asked, putting away her compact and producing a tube of lipstick. A twist of her fingers produced something the size an shape of a child's penis and the color of a hunter's cap. She began to apply this in great shiny plates. I caught a whiff and immediately understood why Porter sniffs her seat instead of her face.

"Yes ma'am, I sho do!"

"So if you haven't seen any of them going out, they aren't going out. Just as well. If he was sending them out I would have to complain to Roger and perhaps even send a memo on the subject to Mr. Enders." She gave her lipstick a twist, recapped it, dropped it into the maw of the huge shapeless trunk she calls her purse, and preened for a moment. "None of them were accompanied by return postage. That's why they're there. It's not our business to send them back—most of them or all of them—but he is doing it at his own expense, and it is thus none of La Jackson's business.

"I wish he'd stop it, even if he's dumping them down the incinerator," she said, now producing a

plastic canister which, when opened, disclosed dusting powder and a rather discolored puff. Sandra Jackson then proceeded to disappear into a choking pink cloud that had much the same effect on me as the one she claimed Kenton's office produced on her. "He's making the rest of us look bad and there's no goddamned need of it," she finished from inside the cloud.

"No ma'am," I said, and sneezed.

"Are you growing marijuana in here, Riddley?" she asked. "It smells funny in here."

"No ma'am, I sho ain't!"

"Uh," she said, and put away the puff. She began to unbutton her blouse just as I'd begun to hope I was going to escape. She doffed it, revealing two small decorous white-lady breasts like uncooked muffins with a cherry poked into each one. She began to unzip her skirt and then paused in the act, giving me another moment of fleeting hope. "What else is wrong with him, Riddley?"

"Ah sho don't know, Miz Jackson," I said, but I know, all right, and Roger Wade knows as well—I think it's almost incredible that Wade somehow persuaded such a total romantic to stay on, but somehow he did. Porter doesn't know, Gelb doesn't care, and Jackson's too self-centered to see what's right in front of her slightly saggy little white-lady tits:

his girl told him that he just dropped off the Top Forty of her life. And Kenton has responded (with a little help from Roger Wade, one must assume) in a way that seems both honorable and courageous to me—a way I like to think I myself would respond: he's working his fucking ass off.

Her skirt puddled around her feet and she stepped out of it.

"Want to play truckdriver and hitchhiker today, Riddley?" she asked.

"I sho do, Miz Jackson!" I said as her hands went to my belt-buckle and tugged it undone. At moments like this I have about four fantasies to fall back on that never fail. One, I regret to say, is of having my sister Deidre first diaper me and then accommodate me after I have made weewee in my didy. Ah, sex is the great comedy, all right. No doubt about that.

"Oh Mr. Truck-Driver, it is so big and hard!" Jackson exclaimed in a squeaky little-girl voice as she grasped me. And, thanks to Deidre and the diapers, it was.

"That there is my Hearst shifter, little Miz Hitchhikuh!" I growled, "and right now I'se gwine th'ow it into overdrive!"

"At least ten minutes, Mr. Truck-Driver," she said, lying down. "I want at lest three and you know it takes me..." She sighed contentedly as I sank my drive-

shaft into her universal joint. "...awhile to get up to cruising speed."

Just before leaving (she had given her hair a few more good pokes with the afro comb before dropping it into her purse on top of her panties) she looked around sharply and asked me again if I wasn't perhaps growing a little cannabis in here.

"No ma'am!" I said—I knew perfectly well by then that it was Zenith she was smelling, just as I know that Zenith the Common Ivy smells like no ivy I ever came in contact with in my life.

"Because if you are," she said, "I want my share."

"But Miz Jackson! I done already tole you—"

"I know. But just remember, if you are, I want my share." And she left. As things turned out she got four instead of three, and with any luck she'll be proof for a week or two before popping back to play Truck-Driver and Hitchhiker or Virgin and Chauffeur or possibly the Teensy White Editor and the Big Black Janitor, which is what all these games boil down to in the end.

But never mind; we have come to the other thing around here which has not lapsed back into dozy familiarity, and that is the ivy-plant sent by Kenton's nemesis. It raises a question in my mind which I have never successfully answered for myself—perhaps because for a long time my life and my ambitions

have rendered it unimportant. It is, I mean, a question I haven't thought about as seriously or so constantly or with such a clear interest that I have a personal stake in the answer since I was—oh, eleven or so, I reckon. The question is just this: Is there an invisible world or not? Are supernatural events possible in a world where everything seems either perfectly explained or perfectly explicable?

Everything, that is, except for the Shroud of Turin...

...and, perhaps, Zenith, the Common Ivy.

I find myself thinking again and again about the feelings of deep foreboding that seemed to fall over me when I touched the box it—

No; no, that isn't right. For whatever it's worth, that is most definitely not right. The bad feelings I had about that box—dread, revulsion, a well-nigh ungovernable feeling of having stepped over a clearly marked border and onto taboo ground—did not come from outside. The chill I felt did not fall over me or smother me or steal up my spine on cold little cat's feet. That feeling came from inside, rising up like a spring rises out of the earth, a cold little circle in which you may glimpse your face, or the face of the moon. Or even better, it came the way Faulkner says the dark comes, not falling out of the sky but rising inexorably up out of the ground. Only in this case I

believe the ground (Floyd would scoff) happens to be my own soul.

Never mind, though—pass it. Never mind feelings, vapors, megrims...or "subjective phenomena," if you want to be polite.

Let us look at some rather more empiric data.

First: After looking at the Ivy entries in both Grolier's and Collier's Encyclopedias, plus the photos in Floyd's college botany book, I am prepared to say that Zenith does not look like any of the ivies pictured there. I mean, it looks like them in the same way that Fords look like Bugattis—they are both gasoline-powered vehicles with four rubber tires—but that's as close as it comes.

Second: Although the little sign poked into the soil of Zenith's pot identified him as "Common Ivy," there is apparently no such thing. There is poison ivy, and Virginia Creeper, and Ground Ivy, and Boston Ivy, and Japanese Ivy; there is also English Ivy, and I suppose that might be called Common Ivy by some people, but Zenith looks more like a cross between Japanese Ivy and poison ivy than it does English Ivy. Sending Kenton a poison ivy plant sounds like something that would tickle the bejabbers out of a fellow like Carlos Detweiller, but I have handled it, felt its leaves and vines, and have no rash. Nor am I

immune. I had some killer cases of poison ivy when Floyd and I were kids.

Third: As Jackson said, it smells like *cannibis sativa*. I dropped into a florist's on my way home tonight and smelled a Boston Ivy and a hybrid called a Marion Ivy. Neither smelled like pot. I asked the proprietor if he knew of any ivies that smelled like marijuana and he said no—he said the only plant he knew of which smelled much like growing *cannibis* is called dark columbine.

Fourth: It is growing at a speed which I find just a bit frightening. I've carefully gone over my few references to the plant in this journal—and believe me when I say that if I had known how much it was going to prey on my mind there would have been more—and have noted the following: on February 23rd, when it arrived, I believed it would most probably die; on the 4th of this month I noted a healthier appearance, an improved smell, four open leaves and two more unfurling, plus a single tendril which reached to the edge of the pot. Now there are almost two dozen leaves, broad and dark green and oily looking. The tendril which had reached the lip of the pot has now attached itself to the wall and runs nearly six inches up toward the ceiling. It would look almost like an FM radio antenna except for the tightened curls of the new leaves along its length.

Other tendrils have begun to crawl along the shelf where I put the plant, and they are attaching themselves in the best ivy tradition. I pulled one of these tendrils loose (had to stand on my overturned mop-bucket to get to Zenith's level) and it came...but with surprising reluctance. The tendrils have stuck themselves to the wooden shelf with surprising tightness. I could hear the minute ripping sound the tendril I chose made when it parted company from the wood, and I did not much care for the sound. It left little marks in the paint. It has, near the pot, produced a single dark blue flower—not very pretty or remarkable. It is of the sort, I believe, produced by the type of ivy commonly called gill-over-the-ground. But...all of this in three weeks?

I have an unpleasant feeling about this plant. It's as much in the way I so easily and unconsciously refer to it as "him," I think, as in its extraordinary growth-spurt. I think I want to have a botanist look at it. Floyd will know one. There's one other thing but I don't even want to write it down. I th

(later)

That was my Aunt Olympia, calling from Babylon, Alabama. My mother is dead. It was very sudden, she said through her tears. A heart attack. During her nap. No pain, she said through her tears. How does anyone know. Oh bullshit, my mother. I loved her.

Aunt O. said she's been trying Floyd but no one answers, oh I did love her my sweet fat uncomplaining mother who saw so much more than she said and knew so much more than she let on. Oh I did love her and love her.

Movement now is best. Floyd first then arrangements; family; burial. Oh mama I love you.

I've had whiskey. Two big gulps. Now I'll write it. That plant. Zenith. Zenith the Common Ivy. Can't be an ivy. Fucking thing's carnivorous. I saw two leaves that were open three days ago rolled up today. So I unrolled them. This is when I was standing on the mop-bucket, looking at it. Dead fly inside of one. What I think was a mostly decomposed baby spider inside the other. No time now. I'll deal with it another time.

Christ I wish I'd said goodbye to my mamma. Does anyone ever get a chance to say goodbye?

From *The New York Post*, page 1, March 27, 1981:

MAD GENERAL DIES IN MORTUARY HORROR!

(Special to the *Post*) The mingled ashes of a man and a woman were recovered from the floor outside the crematorium of the Shady Rest (L.I.) Mortuary yesterday afternoon, and the ashes and bones of a second man, believed to be Major General Anthony R. Hecksler (Ret.), who escaped from Oak Cove Asylum in upstate New York twenty-three days ago, were discovered inside the crematorium furnace itself.

The other two dead were Mr. And Mrs. Hubert D. Leekstodder, owners of the Shady Rest.

Sources close to the investigation told the *Post* yesterday that Hecksler had had business dealings with Mr. And Mrs. Leekstodder some years ago, and that they were on his "grudge-list." A police official who asked not to be identified said that the madman left a note behind identifying the Leekstodders as "foremen of the antichrist" and "real allaround losers."

The note was found pinned to the earlobe of a corpse in the Mortuary's composing room.

"Losers or not, they are real crispy now," said Police Lieutenant Rodney Marksland of the Long Island Police Department.

According to the *Post's* police source, details of what is now believed to be a suicide and double murder are extremely grisly. "We think he killed the Leekstodders first and then stuffed the bodies into the crematorium, mostly because it is just too horrible to believe he could have stuffed them in there while they were still alive," the source said. "But there's not much doubt about what he did then—raked out their ashes, turned on the gas, crawled in himself—although the temperature must have still be very high—and just flicked his Bic. Poof! 3,000 degrees of spot heat. The jets were still

flaming when the heat alarms went off in the house across the street and the Leekstodders' daughter-in-law came to see what was going on."

It was not a Bic lighter that the mad General actually flicked, but a platinum-plated Zippo with the Army Emblem on it and engraved TO TONY FROM DOUG/AUG. 7th, 1945. The "Doug" referred to is believed to be Heckslers close friend General Douglas MacArthur.

"It was Iron-Guts, all right," the *Post's* source claimed, adding that in addition to the lighter, searchers found a number of items amid the bone-dotted clumps of ashes in the death oven that have been positively identified as belonging to Heckslers. Although he declined to name all of these items, our exclusive source revealed to the *Post* that two of them were gold teeth implanted following the end of World War II. Heckslers was briefly captured by the Germans during an intelligence operation in November of 1944, and two of his teeth were pulled during his interrogation. It was the replacements for those two teeth which investigators found in the crematorium furnace, according to the *Post's* source.

Related stories: New Yorkers Breathe Sigh of Relief (4); Colorful career of Iron-Guts Heckslers Recalled (Centerfold).

FROM THE DISPATCHES OF IRON - GUTS HECKSLER

[Editor's note: These dispatches were written in a number of blank S & H Green Stamp books which the General apparently carried on his person at all times.]

Mar 29 81

1990 hrs

Location Classified

Operation Hot Foot completed successfully. Two more foremen of the Antichrist successfully dispatched back to the hell they came from. Also one bum. Sorry I had to give up the lighter. Hurt self plenty, but okay. Can take pain. Always could. HA!! Newspapers say I'm dead. Burn uniform. Behind enemy lines. Shot if caught. Been there before, HA!! Going gets tough. Tough get going. Never punt on 4th down. Must infiltrate city. Designated Jew undoubtedly lulled by reports of my death. Guard down. Will commence Operation Bookworm coming weekend. April Fool to the Designated Jew, HA!! Have had a dream. Someone named CARLOS is looking for me. Means me harm? Yes I think so. CARLOS=spic name. Spics damned good fighters. Crafty. City full of mongoloid-polyglot ruffians. Worse than ever. Air full of brain-killing transmissions. Was there a terrorist named CARLOS? Doesn't matter. Zenith House my objective. Infiltrate on weekend. Kill Designated Jew. Kill whole staff if poss. Kill CARLOS if CARLOS does indeed exist. All foremen of the Antichrist. I will be able to think about Antichrist & other things better after I get some suppositories.

A memo from HAR L

DAT E : 3/30/81

TO: Roger Wade, Editor in Chief, Zenith House SUBJECT: Three Books!! The Principle of Gravity!!

Rog!

Listen, babes, I took a meeting last Fri with Teddy Graustark, the Apex veep in charge of Print Media. Main topic was mags: *Hot Tools*, *Raw Cycle*, *Third World Mercenary*, *Your Pregnancy*, and *Horny Babes*. We're dropping all of them except for *Third World Mercenary* and *Your Pregnancy*. Subj of Zenith House also came up. I bought you a little more time, babes, but forget the year I promised you (which would be down to nine months now anyway, want a sub to *Your Pregnancy*?—joke). Graustark will give you until June 30th to come up with three (3) books you *guaren-goddamn-tee* will hit *The New York Times* Bestseller List. If you can do this, I think your job might be safe until summer of 1982. If they actually *become* bestsellers, it'll be safe until the middle of the decade or even longer. Fail to do this, and the Zenith operation goes the way of *Hot Tools* and *Raw Cycle* by the end of October.

You may be pissed about this, Roger-babes, but Graustark hit me with his version of the Law of Gravity which struck me as TRUE TRUE TRUE!: *SHIT ROLLS DOWNHILL!* That's it in a nutshell. And altho sad, it's true. This particular ball o' shit started with the Number One Apex Big Chief & Head Honcho, Sherwyn Redbone, then rolled down to me. I am now rolling it down to you, Rog, and I assume you will roll it on down to your editorial staff, who just might be able to stop it before it gets all the way down to the bottom of the hill. If they *can't* stop it, your cozy little home at bottom of said hill is going to be buried beneath a huge & smelly ball of shit.

To recapitulate (that's not the one that means surrender, is it?), here is your mission, should you choose to accept it (joke). Three (3) books which you *guaran-goddamn-tee* to be bestsellers, delivered by June 30th. All three must hit the *Times* list *this year*, which means you better get them in production as soon as possible.

Sorry about the rush-rush, babes, but to quote The Chairman of the Board (Frank Sinatra, not Mr. Redbone), "That's life, that's how it goes."

Yours,

Harl Enders Comptroller, Apex

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton, Herb Porter, Bill Gelb, Sandra Jackson DATE:
3/30/81

MESSAGE: Okay, fearless editorial staff, the balloon has gone up. You will want to read the attached Harlow Enders masterpiece for yourselves, but the challenge we have been given is clear: to put three paperbacks on the *Times* list, where no Zenith House product has ever gone before, on or before December 31st. This is absurd, of course—like challenging someone to climb Mount Everest in Bermuda shorts and tennis shoes—but that changes nothing. Editorial meeting later today, as always, but for now I'd like it in writing: do *any* of you have a book you consider to be bestseller material? I want memos by noon.

Memos, please, not calls. From now until the end, I want transcriptions of everything we do. If nothing else, I might want a large wad of paper to stuff up somebody's ass.

Roger

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger

FROM: Bill Gelb RE: Possible Bestseller???

You're kidding, of course. This is lunacy. I have a new Mort Yeager (he wrote it in the prison library—Attica) and it's publishable after we take out the bestiality (halfway through the book, I'm not shitting you on this, the villain has sex with his housecat), but that's about it. We also did succeed in getting rights to novelize *Lesbo Dracula* (see pictorial in this month's ish of *Horny Babes*), but now there seems to be some question if it will be released anywhere except the porno houses. Otherwise, the cupboard is bare.

B.G.

P.S. This memo from Enders is a joke, isn't it? A cruel joke.

P.P.S. When does Riddley get back from Alabama?

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger
FROM: Herb Porter
RE: Possible Bestseller

The idea of this place producing one bestseller, let alone three, is ludicrous. Having said that, I have a wacky idea, and you can shoot it down if you want, but here goes. Let's get Olive Barker—still our best ghost writer, in my estimation—to write a quickie bio of Iron-Guts Hecksler, concentrating on his final rampage. Now that the guy is dead, we've got the whole tale— beginning, middle, fiery climax. I could even kick in a chapter about what went on here, maybe juice it up a little. What do you think?

Herb

P.S. I think you should hunt Enders down and kill him just for calling you "babes." Bad news is bad enough. The man is patronizing.

P.P.S. Has anyone heard from our mailroom and janitorial staff? Riddley, in other words. Went by his cubby today. Something in there smells really good. Sort of like hot toast and jam.

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger Wade
FROM: SANDRA JACKSON
RE: Totally silly request

Roger (or should I call you "Babes"?),

Zenith House has never published a bestseller and never WILL publish a bestseller. But I DO have a rather nutty idea. It has to do with Anthony L.K. LaScorbia, our Nasty Creatures from Hell writer. People have apparently been sending Tony *jokes*. For example: "What do you call 5 million marching Brazilian fire-ants?" Answer: Lunchtime in Rio. Or: "How many babies does it take to satisfy a pack of rampaging scorpions?" Answer: How many have you got? These may not strike you funny, but I laughed my butt off, and several people I've told them to have also laughed (some against their will, from the look on their faces). Why not let him loose on this? It can't hurt. He wants to call it *Jokes from Hell*. He insists it's a new kind of joke, he calls it the "Sick Joke."

What do you think?
Sandi

P.S. When does Riddley get back? My wastebasket is absolutely *overflowing!* I peeped my head in his cubby today, and do you know what? It smells *good*. Sort of the way my grandmother's kitchen used to smell when she was baking cookies. Maybe I'm losing it.

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger

FROM: John

RE: Insane request

RE: Responses from Bill, Herb, and Sandra

Herb said it best, babes—the idea is ludicrous. Nevertheless, I keep working my way through the old manuscripts. Nothing even close so far, and I'm down to the last two shelves. If nothing else, we can all go on unemployment knowing that the mailroom is clean for the next company that moves in.

Having said that, let me tell you that I feel depressed (more than usual, that is) to realize I must count myself, along with Bill, among the goats instead of the sheep. I mean, Herb and Sandra at least came up with ideas, didn't they? Which leads me to the real purpose of this memo. You're the boss, not me, but I actually think both ideas have merit. A book about the General would sell, especially if we really hustled it out there. I know that we don't have the ability to produce an "instant book" like the ones which followed the release of the Watergate tapes, but Olive could work fast, especially if Herb worked on it with her. I'm sure he'd give himself a starring role, but even that might work.

The joke-book idea is more nebulous, but I have to tell you that when I read that, I felt some obscure circuit (probably one I should feel ashamed of) go hot. Possibly we could widen the scope, i.e. sick jokes on every subject? And stick a funny name on the author, something like Ima Sicko or I.B. III? I know how it sounds—in a word, sub-juvenile—and yet it seems to me something might be there.

My first reaction was I wish I'd thought of that. A sick joke in itself. Clearly we have reached the bottom of the barrel, but I think you

should give it a shot. Meanwhile, I'll continue with the last of the unreturned scripts. I'm in too deep to back out now.

John

P.S. A book of jokes would be an even faster turn than a factoid book on old Iron-Guts. Like a week. All we have to do is put our heads together and come up with the most scabrous jokes we can remember. Q. What do you call a kid with no arms and legs? A. Second base.

P.P.S. I really was president of the Literary Society at Brown, although all that seems like a dream to me now. In fact, this whole year seems like a dream.

P.P.S.S. Why is everyone so worried about Riddley? What's this about good smells coming from his closet? The last time I was down there in smelled like mold and Lysol. I might have to check this out. Also, I'm tempted to tell Sandra I know exactly where she can put her wastebasket. I'd be glad to help with the insertion procedure, too.

P.P.S.S.S. When does Riddley get back? I sho does miss dat man! Yassuh!

from the office of the editor-in- chief

TO: Herb DATE: 3/30/81

MESSAGE: The book about Hecksler is green-lit. Tentative title: *The Devil's General*. Talk to Olive Barker at once. You're authorized to offer her \$2,500 plus expenses up to \$150 a week for four weeks. If we're going out, we might as well go out spending Apex's money just as hard and fast as we can. We'll want photos for a middle-of-the-book section. You'll be working on her every step of the way, Herb. Tell her she's off downers for the duration.

Uppers are fine.

Roger

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: Sandra

DATE: 3/30/81

MESSAGE: The joke book is green-lit, but forget LaScorbia; let him concentrate on his wasps and flies. The five of us are going to write this scabrous little tome ourselves. Tentative title: *World's Sickest Jokes*. We'll have our first editorial session on this project this afternoon, at Flaherty's Pub down the street. This is the closest thing we've got to a winner, so let's take it seriously. We need to think about whether or not we want (or dare) to go ethnic, as in "How many Poles does it take" and "How many Mexicans does it take." My feeling is if we're going to go sewer-diving, we might as well go all the way to the bottom. And don't you or anyone else talk to me about sharing royalties on a book of jokes about dead babies and sodomy. We're saving our jobs here, or trying to.

Perhaps we should invite Riddley into our little brain-trust. He'll be back next week, and I hope you'll pass that along to your colleagues. We're dying here, and all anyone seems to care about is the goddamned janitor.

Roger

P.S. Also, stay out of his closet. I think he keeps his personal stuff in there.

P.P.S. Unless you want to wash some windows or wax some floors, of course. In that case, be my guest.

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger FROM: Bill Gelb

RE: Riddley Walker's possible contribution to insane and degrading
jokebook

By all means let's get him in on the project when he gets back.
Maybe he can contribute a few dead-mommy jokes.

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: Bill Gelb DATE: 3/30/81

MESSAGE: As someone who hasn't even come up with a *dim* idea for a book of *any* kind, I suggest you keep your wisecracks to yourself. Or maybe go down to R.W.'s closet and sniff the air. It seems to have done wonders for Herb and Sandra. That is not a serious suggestion. As I told Sandra, the janitor's closet is strictly Riddley's domain.

From John Kenton's diary

March 30, 1981

I staggered into my apartment tonight half-drunk from the weirdest brainstorming session of my life (place, Flaherty's Pub; subject, what do you call a leper in a hot tub, etc., etc.). I'm drinking far too much lately, yet I would be a flat liar if I didn't say I felt a weird, shameful excitement. Nor is it just booze driving my emotions—at least I don't think so. I don't know if a jokebook can possibly hit The New York Times bestseller list—probably not—and yet I think we all felt that sense of something actually happening. Before we were done, half the people in the pub were contributing jokes, my favorite being the above-referenced about what you call a leper in a hot tub (Stu, of course). If it's any consolation, Sandra and Bill both finished up drunker than me, Roger perhaps a shade less so. Herb Porter doesn't drink. I believe he's got a problem with it, and goes to those meetings where you introduce yourself by your first name.

Weird, weird meeting. But not as weird as the letter I found waiting for me in my mailbox when I finally swam home. I'm too headachey to write much more tonight, all I want is to eat something non-contentious and go to bed, but I will clip Ms. Barfield's letter to this page of my diary, and take it in to the office tomorrow. Perhaps by then the nagging chill I feel running up my back will be gone.

Roger will know what to do. At least I hope so. And perhaps he'll know something else as well: how a woman who runs a flower shop and greenhouse in Central Falls, Rhode Island could have known my address. My home address.

And Kevin.

How in God's name could she had known about Kevin? Not just Kevin, either. Kevin Anthony, she writes.

Kevin Anthony, 7/7/67.

She also says she doesn't like Carlos Detweiller—that she's afraid of him—and there's that much to be grateful for, but I find I'm not much comforted.

After all, she could be lying.

Fuck this, I'm going to bed. With luck, they'll all stay out of my dreams. Ruth Tanaka most of all. Something odd: at one point during our time in Flaherty's, I went into the bathroom. While I was standing at the urinal, Ruth's name popped into my mind. Her name but not her face. For a couple of seconds there I couldn't see her face at all. What came instead was the last of the "sacrifice photos." Carlos Detweiller, his face in the shadows, holding up a dripping heart.

Christ.

letter to john kenton from ms. tin a b arfield

Mar 28 '81 Dear Mr John

Kenton,

You don't know me from Eve the First Mother but I know you. Also we have Carlos in common and you know exactly who I mean. I am Tina Barfield the prop of the Central Falls House of Flowers. You think you are thru with Carlos but Carlos is not thru with you. You are in danger. I am in danger. Everyone at the publishing house where you work is in danger. But also you have great opportunity. The Dark Powers must give before they can take. There are things I can tell you. Come and see me as soon as you get this letter. As soon as you get it. My time here must end soon. Some of the Tongues have begun to wag.

Do you think I am crazy. Answer is yes you do. But I can help you find the one you're looking for. It has been in that room all the time. Why do I do this. Partly because my soul, although mortgaged to the Goat, may still be redeemable. Mostly because I fear & loathe Carlos Detweiller. Hate that son of a bitch! Would do anything to see his plans brought to Wrack and Ruin. Believe me when I say reports of his death will be greatly exaggerated. Like the General.

Come Tuesday if you can. Bring the Water-Boy if you want. You can do more than sidestep Carlos's revenge, Mr. John Kenton. With my help you can use him to achieve your dream. If you doubt me think of this: Kevin Anthony 7/7/67. I am sorry if this upsets you but there's no time to spend convincing you that I know what I know.
Sincerely yours,

Tina Barfield

From John Kenton's diary

March 31, 1981

This has been a long day—a terrible day—a wonderful day—an I-don'tknow-what day. All I know for sure is that I'm shaken to my heels. To my very soul. You can blithely quote Hamlet—"more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy"—and never think about what the words mean. And then maybe shit happens, like the kind of shit that happened to Roger and me today. And the floor you have so confidently spent your life walking on suddenly turns transparent and you realize there's a horrible gulf below it. And the worst thing is the gulf isn't empty. There are things in it. I don't know what those things are, but I have an idea they're hungry. I'd like to be out of this. And yet there is something to what Roger says. I feel some of the crazy excitement I saw in his eyes. I—

Oh man, this is no good. I'm all over the map. Time to take a deep breath, settle down, and start from the beginning. I'll get this down even if it takes me all night. I have an idea that I wouldn't be able to sleep much, anyway. And do you know what haunts me? What keeps going through my head like some kind of crazy mantra? The Dark Powers must give before they can take. The possibilities in such a simple statement! If such a simple statement could ever be true!

Okay. From the beginning.

Usually it takes the alarm five minutes of uninterrupted braying to get me up, but this morning my eyes popped open all on their own at 6:58 AM, two minutes before I'd set it to go off. My head was clear, my stomach settled, not so much as a trace of a hangover, but when I got up I left my own dark silhouette behind me on the sheet; I must have sweat out a pint of mingled booze and salt water in the night. I had ugly, tangled dreams; in one of them I was chasing Ruth with

some sort of poisonous plant, yelling after her that if she ate the leaves, she'd live forever.

"You know you want to, you bitch!" I was yelling at her. "Smell the leaves! Like cookies in your grandma's kitchen! How can something that smells like that be bad for you?"

I grabbed a quick shower, a few mouthfuls of juice right from the carton, and then out the door I went. Roger always gets in early, but this morning I meant to beat him.

On the bus I read through the Barfield woman's letter again. Last night, fuzzy with drink and about two thousand jokes concerning lesbians, black people, and deaf nuns, all I could see was my dead brother's name. In the flat gray light of an overcast New York morning, sitting amidst the last wave of blue-collars and the first wave of white- and pink-collars—strangely serene in that uneasy mixture of Posts and Wall Street Journals—I read the letter again, this time better able to appreciate its multi-layered weirdness. Yet it was my brother's name my eyes kept returning to.

I stepped off the elevator and onto the fifth floor of 409 Park Avenue South at 7:50 AM, sure I must have beaten Roger by at least half an hour...but the lights in his office were already on, and I could hear his IBM clacking away. He was transcribing jokes, it turned out. And although his eyes were a trifle bloodshot, he didn't look any more hungover than I felt. Looking at him sitting there, I felt a kind of dull hate for Harlow Enders and all the suits above him, guys who—I'd bet on it—have never read a single one of the books they publish. Their idea of a page-turner is a profit-heavy annual report.

"They don't deserve you," I said.

He looked up, startled, then smiled. "You're here early. But I'm glad. I've got something to show you, John."

"I've got something to show you, too."

"All right." He pushed back from the typewriter, then looked at it with distaste. "The book about General Hecksler is going to be unpleasant, but the joke-book...man, this stuff is ugly." He looked at his current copy and read: "'How many starving Biafarans can you get in an elevator car?'"

"All of them," I said. Now that we were out of the smoke and laughter and yelled drink orders and the blaring juke that combine to

make Flaherty's Flaherty's, the joke really wasn't funny at all. It was sad and ugly and dangerous. The fact that people would laugh at it was the worst thing about it.

"All of them," he agreed softly. "Fucking all of them."

"We don't have to do the book," I said. "There's no paper on it yet except for a couple of memos, and those could disappear."

"If we don't do it, someone else will," Roger said. "It's an idea whose time has come. It is, in its own stinky way, brilliant. You know that?"

I nodded.

"You want to know something else? I think it is going to be a bestseller. And I think the dozen or so sequels we'll do are going to be bestsellers. I think that for the next two years, jokes about niggers, kikes, blindmen, and dying minorities are going to have a... a vogue." His mouth gave a revolted downward twitch...and then he laughed. It was horrible, that laugh. Outraged and yet greedy. Then I heard myself laughing, too, and that was even more horrible.

"What did you want to show me, John?"

"This." I handed him the letter. His eyes went to the signature first, then widened. He looked up at me and I nodded. "Carlos's boss in Central Falls. Maybe we're not through with him after all."

"How did she get your address?"

"I have no idea."

"Do you think she could have gotten it from Detweiller?"

"She says she hates him."

"Doesn't mean she does. Who's Kevin Anthony? Any idea?"

"Kevin Anthony was my brother. When he was ten, he started losing the sight in one eye. It was a tumor. They took the eye, but the cancer had already gotten into his brain. He was dead within six months. My mother and father never got over it."

The color left Roger's face. "God, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"No, you didn't. No one in New York does, so far as I know. Let alone Central Falls. I hadn't even gotten around to telling Ruth."

"And the date? Was that—"

I nodded. "The day he died, right. Of course none of this is top secret. The woman could have found out. Mediums wow their marks

by knowing stuff they're not supposed to know, and in the end it turns out to have been nothing but research and legwork. But—"

"You don't believe it. I don't, either." Roger tapped the letter.

"Bring the Water-Boy if you want to."

"I wondered about that," I said.

"When I was in high school, I went out for the football team. I was serious about it, fool that I was. I only weighed a hundred and thirty pounds, but I had visions of...I don't know...being the Reading High School version of Knute Rockne, I suppose. I was serious, but no one else was. They just about killed themselves laughing. The team, the cheerleaders, the whole student body. Coach along with the rest of them. I ended up being the team waterboy. It became my nickname. It's even in the yearbook. Roger Wade, Class of '68, Drama Club, Glee Club, Newspaper. Ambition, to write the Great American Novel. Nickname, Waterboy."

For a moment neither of us said nothing. Then he picked up the letter again. "She seems to imply that Iron-Guts Hecksler is still alive. Do you think that's possible?"

"I don't see how he could be." But I did see, at least sort of. It had been a fire, after all. Nothing left but ashes and a few teeth. It could have been done. It suggested a degree of cunning I didn't much like to think of, but yes—it could have been done.

"She wants us in Central Falls," Roger said, turning off his typewriter and standing up. "Let's give her what she wants. Still plenty of time to shag ass over to Penn Station and catch The Pilgrim. We can be in Rhode Island by noon."

"What about the joke book? What about The Devil's General?"

"Let those three deadbeats do a little work for a change," Roger said, cocking his thumb at the short corridor which opens on the editors' cubicles.

"You're serious?"

"As a heart attack."

And he was. At 9:40 we were stepping onto Amtrak's Pilgrim in the bowels of Penn Station, armed with magazines and bagels; at 12:15 we were stepping off in Central Falls; at one o'clock we were getting out of a taxi on Alden Street, in front of the Central Falls House of Flowers. The place is a rather shabby New England

saltbox rising behind a dead lawn still dotted with clumps of melting snow. To the rear is an absolutely huge greenhouse which does indeed stretch all the way to the next street. Outside of the Botanical Gardens in D.C., it's the biggest damned greenhouse I've ever seen. But unlike the Botanical in D.C., this one is filthy—the windows are grimy, some mended with tape. We could see little shimmers of heat rising off the top—the apex, if you'll pardon the word. During the weird Mardi Gras of the original Detweiller craziness, someone referred to it as a jungle—I don't remember who, probably one of the cops—and today Roger and I could see why. It wasn't just the heat rising off the glass panels and into the gray March chill; mostly it was the dark bulk of the plants behind those panels. In the dull light they looked black rather than green.

"My uncle would go bonkers," Roger said. "If he was still alive, that is. Uncle Ray. When I was a kid, he'd always greet me with 'Hey, I'm Uncle Ray from Green Bay.' To which it was my job to reply, 'Hey, Ray, what do you say?' And he'd come back with 'Can ya stay, or do ya have to leave today?'"

I suffered this rather bizarre reminiscence in silence. The fact was, I couldn't take my eyes from the dark, crowding bulk of all those plants.

"Anyway, he was an amateur horticulturist, and he had a greenhouse. A little one. Nothing like this. Come on, John."

I thought, being in a rhyming mood, he might add a verbal flip of the hip like Let's get it on, but he just resumed walking up the path. The porch steps were stained with a winter's worth of salt. Beyond them, in a window by the door, was an FTD placard, the one with winged Mercury on it, and a sign reading COME IN, WE'RE OPEN! The words were flanked with roses.

When we reached the steps I stopped for a second. "I just remembered—you said you had something to show me, too. Back at the office. But you never did."

"Just as well. I believe it may be better shown when we get back."

"Does it have anything to do with Riddley's room?" I don't know where that came from, exactly, but once it was out I knew I was right.

"Why, yes. It does." He looked at me closely. Standing there at the foot of the steps with the collar of his overcoat turned up, framing

his face, and a little color in his cheeks, it occurred to me that Roger Wade's a pretty good-looking guy. Better-looking now, probably, than a lot of the fellows who made fun of him back in high school, calling him Waterboy and God knows what else. Roger might even know that, if he's been back to any of his class reunions...but those voices from high school never quite leave our heads, do they? Maybe if you make enough money and bed enough women (I wouldn't know about those things, being both poor and shy), but I doubt if they leave even then.

"John," he said.

"What?"

"We're delaying."

And because I knew it was true—neither of us wanted to go into Carlos Detweiler's erstwhile place of employment—I said, "Delay no more" and lead the way up the steps.

A little bell jingled over the door when we went in. The next thing to hit me was the smell of flowers...but not just flowers. The thought that crossed my mind was Funeral parlor. Funeral parlor in the deep south, during a heat wave. And although I've never been in the deep south during a heat wave—have never been in the deep south at all—I knew that was about right. Because there was another smell under the heavy perfume of roses and orchids and carnations and God knows what else. It was meaty smell, bordering on rancid. Unpleasant. Roger's mouth twitched downward at the corners. He smelled it, too.

Probably back in the forties and fifties, when the place had been a private home, the room we stepped into had been two rooms: the entry and the small front parlor. At some point a wall had been knocked down, making a large retail area with a counter running across it about three-quarters of the way in. There was a pass-through panel in the counter, now raised, and beyond it an open door leading into the greenhouse. It was from there that the worst of the smell was coming. The room was very hot. Behind the counter was a glassed-in coldbox (I don't know if you call that kind of thing a refrigerator or not—I suppose you must). There were bouquets of cut flowers and floral arrangements in there, but the glass was so fogged up—from the temperature difference between the two

environments, I suppose—that you could barely tell the lilies from the chrysanthemums. It was like looking through a heavy English mist (and no, I've never been there, either).

To the left behind the counter, sitting under a blackboard on which various prices had been marked, was a man with the Providence Journal held open in front of his face. We could just see a few wisps of white hair floating like milkweed over an otherwise bald skull. Of Ms. Tina Barfield there was no sign.

"Hello!" Roger said heartily.

No response from the man with the paper. He just sat there with the headline showing—REAGAN WILL PULL THROUGH, DOCTORS VOW.

"Hello? Sir?"

No movement. A queer idea came to me then: that he wasn't really a man but a mannequin posed with the newspaper upraised. To foil shoplifters, perhaps. Not that shoplifters would frequent flower shops in any great numbers, I wouldn't think.

"Pardon?" Roger said, speaking even louder. "We're here to see Ms. Barfield?"

No response. The paper didn't so much as rattle.

Feeling a little like a creature in a dream (although I hadn't completely parted with reality yet—that part I'll be coming to shortly), I stepped forward to the counter, where there was a bell beside a card reading PLEASE RING FOR SERVICE. I banged it smartly with my palm, producing a single sharp ding! I had a crazy urge to call "Front, please!" in my best snooty New-York-desk-clerk voice, and suppressed it.

Slowly, very slowly, the paper came down. When it did, I wished it had stayed up. The descending Journal disclosed a face I had seen before, in the "Sacrifice Photos." There it had been distorted with pain, horror, and incredulity. Now the face of Norville Keen, author of such pearls as "Why describe a guest when you can see that guest," was utterly blank.

No. That's not right.

Shit—

(later)

I've been sitting here in front of this lousy little Olivetti for almost five minutes, trying to think of what le mot juste might be, and the best I can do is slack. The man's face not just being devoid of expression, you understand, but seemingly devoid of muscle tension as well. It had probably always been a long face, but now it seemed absurdly long, almost like a face glimpsed in one of those trick carnival mirrors. It hung off his skull like dough hanging from the lip of a mixing bowl.

Beside me, I heard Roger draw his breath in. He told me later that at first he thought we were looking at a case of Alzheimer's, but I believe that was a lie. We are modern men, Roger and I, a couple of lapsed Christians in the big city who go through our days under the rule of law and the assumption of...how shall I put this? Of empirical reality. We don't believe that reality to be benign, but we don't find it actually malignant, either. Yet we have our secret hearts, of course, and these are closely attuned to the organs of our brute instinct. Those adrenal-fed organs slumber most of the time, but they're there. Ours awoke in the office of the Central Falls House of Flowers and told us the same thing: that the man looking at us from those dusty black expressionless eyes was no longer alive. That he was, in fact, a corpse.

(later)

I haven't had any dinner and don't want any—perhaps appetite will come back when I've finished this. I did go around the corner just now for a double espresso, however, and it's perked me up. Put a little heart back in me. And yet—tell the truth, shame the devil—I found myself more or less scuttling from streetlight to streetlight, not liking the dark, feeling watched. Not by any one person (certainly I didn't sense Carlos Detweiler lurking, perhaps with a pair of nice, sharp pruning shears at the ready) but by the dark itself. Those organs of instinct I mentioned are now fully awake, you see, and above all things they don't like the dark. But now I'm back in my cozy kitchen, under plenty of bright fluorescent light, with half a cup of hot, strong coffee by my right hand and things are better.

Because, you know, there is a good side to all this. You'll see.

All right, where was I? Ah yes, I know. The lowered newspaper and the blank stare. The slack stare.

At first neither Roger nor I could say anything. The man—Mr. Keen— didn't seem to mind; he just sat on his stool by the cash register and stared at us with the newspaper crumpled in his lap instead of in front of his face. The pages he was open to appeared to be a double-spread ad from a car dealership. I could see the words REFUSE TO BE UNDERSOLD.

Finally I managed, "Are you Mr. Keen? Mr. Norville Keen?"

Nothing. Just those staring eyes. To me they looked as dusty as stones in a dry ditch.

"You live in Carlos's building, right?" I asked. "Carlos Detweiller?"

Nothing.

Roger leaned forward and spoke very slowly and clearly, like someone addressing a man he believes to be deaf, mentally retarded, or both.

"We're...looking...for...Tina...Barfield...Is...she...here?"

At first there was nothing in response to this, either. I was about to try my luck (all the time thinking somewhere in the bottom of my mind that it was no good trying to get information from the dead, people had been trying that for years without success), when, very slowly, Mr. Keen raised his hand. He was wearing a short-sleeved white shirt, and the muscles on his upper arm hung lax, sort of dangling off the bone. He pointed one long, yellow finger, and I thought of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, pointing relentlessly at Ebenezer Scrooge's forgotten grave. It wasn't a grave Mr. Keen was pointing at, but the open door to the greenhouse.

"In there, is she?" Roger asked in an insanely hearty tone of voice; it was as if we'd all shared a mildly funny joke. Q. How many dead men does it take to run a greenhouse? A. Just Norv.

No response from Mr. Keen. Except for the pointing finger, that is. It's impossible to convey how uncanny he was. I have asked myself again and again if he was breathing, and I just don't know. It's the pointing finger I remember best—the nail at the end of it was jagged and splintered, as if he had gnawed it. And his eyes. The dusty, expressionless stones of his eyes.

"Come on," Roger said, and started for the raised pass-through.

I began, "Do you really think that's a good..." but Roger obviously thought it was a good idea, because he kept on walking. Or maybe

he'd just decided it was the only idea. And, not wanting to be left under Mr. Keen's unblinking gaze, I followed him.

I hurried through the gap in the counter with my head slightly lowered, and as a result I ran right into Roger's back and almost knocked him over. Something had stopped him cold about ten feet into the greenhouse, and when I raised my own head to look, I saw what it was.

And here, I find, John Kenton's powers of description are totally inadequate to the task of reporting what we were looking at in that damned place. I got A's in all my comp courses, I've published a good many sensitive stories in a good number of sensitive "little magazines" (none lately, however, as editing the *Macho Man* and *Windhover* series of books seems to have blunted my own writing appetite considerably), and at Brown I was considered to be a leading contender for one of America's literary lion spots in the final years of the twentieth century (not least of all by yours truly). One can go on feeling that until one is tested. Today I was tested, and tonight I am found wanting (most of all by yours truly). Yet I think that if a Mailer or a Roth or a Bellow had been with us this afternoon when we stepped into the greenhouse which runs between Alden Steet and Isle Avenue (where it abuts on a high board fence covered with NO TRESPASSING signs), any of them would have found himself similarly daunted by the task of describing what lay on the other side of that door. Perhaps only a poet—a Wallace Stevens or a T.S. Eliot—would have really been up to the task. But since they're not here, I'll have to do my best.

The strongest sensation was of having stepped over the border into another world, a nightmarish ecosystem of gigantic ferns, prehistoric trees, and lush alien greenery. I'm not telling you that I didn't recognize any of the plants, because I did. Bordering the central aisle, for instance, crowding it so that walking in anything other than single-file would have been almost impossible, were what I took to be common ferns, although grown to uncommon size and height (Roger confirmed this, saying that they were overgrown Boston and maidenhair ferns, for the most part). Besides fringing the aisle at whose head we stood, their questing offshoots—rhizomes, if

I remember the word Roger used—went snaking across the cracked and filthy orange tiles like hair-tufted tentacles of some sort.

Beyond them on both sides, towering in some cases all the way to the dirty glass panels at the peak of the greenhouse roof, were palm trees, banana trees (in some cases complete with tiny bunches of hanging green bananas that looked like insect cocoons), and great shouting bursts of rhododendron, mostly green but every here and there blooming out in convoluted clots of azalea. These huge clumps of growth were somehow frightening in their vitality; their packed greenery seemed to threaten, promising to awaken every winter-dormant allergy in your head and your sinuses...before enveloping you and crushing you to death, that was. And it was hot. It might have been only eighty or so in the office, but out here it was ninety or maybe even a hundred. Steamy, too, the air oozing with humidity.

"Whoa," Roger said in a tiny, almost breathless voice. He took off his overcoat with the slow motions of a sleepwalker, and I imitated him. "Good Christ, Johnny. Good Christ almighty." He began to walk down the aisle, brushing the overhanging branches of the great ferns with his coat, which he'd draped over his arm, and looking around with wide, unbelieving eyes.

"Roger, maybe that's not such a good idea," I said. "Maybe we should just—" But he wasn't paying any attention, so I hurried after him.

About thirty feet in, a new aisle crossed the one we'd started on. As if to add the final surreal touch, there was a street-sign planted in the dirt on our side of the intersection. An arrow pointing straight ahead was marked HERE. The ones pointing both ways along the crossing aisle were marked THERE and YONDER. It would have been nice to believe that someone had a sense of humor, perhaps inspired by Lewis Carroll, but I did not, indeed, believe that. The signs seemed somehow deadly serious. (Although I freely admit that this might have been just my perception—I wasn't in a state of mind to appreciate wit.)

I caught up to Roger and again suggested we should go back. He again seemed not to hear me. "This is unreal," he said. "Johnny, this is absolutely unreal."

I couldn't decide if I liked being called Johnny or not—it's a nickname I haven't heard much since junior high. As for the unreal quality of Ms. Barfield's greenhouse, that seemed to me to require no remark. It was evident—not just before us, but now all around us. I'd already sweat through my shirt, and my heartbeat was booming in my own ears like a drum.

"Heliotrope there," he said, pointing. "Hibiscus growing next to it and behind it. Absolutely flourishing, the whole works. Can you smell the 'biscus?"

I was getting hibiscus, all right, plus a dozen other floral and/or herbaceous scents, some as soft as dusk in Polynesia, some sharp and bitter. A squat hemlock and a large yew tree were growing catty-corner from where we stood, seeming to reach for us with their stiff branches. But beneath all the mingled odors was that other one, that meaty mortuary smell.

Heatwave down south, I thought. First the train-wreck, then the power failure. Now there are forty bodies down there, mangled and beginning to stink. Even with all the flowers. Some of the corpses with their eyes open, dusty and blank, like stones in a dry ditch—

"Roger—"

I looked back from the tangle of yew and hemlock (I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to grow such trees in a greenhouse, but there they were) and Roger was gone. I was alone.

Then I saw just a swirl of his overcoat down to my right, along the aisle marked THERE. I started to hurry after him, then stopped, reached into my pocket, and brought out a crumple of paper. It was, in fact, my copy of Harlow Enders's memo, the one with the maniacal demand that we pull three New York Times bestsellers either out of thin air or from our own asses, whichever happened to be the more productive. I tore a piece from the bottom of it, crumpled it up, and tossed it into the center of the intersection of HERE, THERE, and YONDER. I watched it bounce to a stop on the dirty tiles, then hurried after Roger. I felt absurdly like Hansel forsaken by Gretel.

On THERE Street, the ferns and the Boston ivy crowded even closer; the leaves made an unpleasant whispering sound as they brushed the cloth of my increasingly damp shirt. Up ahead I saw

another swirl of overcoat, and one of Roger's shoes before he turned again, this time to the left.

"Roger!" I bawled. "Will you for God's sake wait for me?"

I tore another piece of paper from the Enders memo, dropped it, and trotted along the new path in Roger's wake. Here the way was flanked not by ferns but by overgrown cacti, bright green at their bases, fading to an unpleasant yellow shade at their tops, branching out in crooked arms, all of them armored with thick needles that ended in nasty blunt tips. Like the branches of the ferns, these seemed to reach into the path. Brushing the cactus arms wouldn't just produce a nasty low whispering sound, though; if you brushed these, blood would flow. If they grew any closer, a person couldn't get through, I thought, and then it occurred to me that if Roger and I tried to return this way, we'd find the aisle barred. This place was a maze. A trap. And it was alive.

I realized I could hear more than just the beating of my heart. There was also a low, muted smacking sound, like someone without much in the way of manners sucking at soup. Only this sounded like a lot of someones.

Then another idea occurred to me: that wasn't Roger up ahead at all. Roger had been snatched into the jungle, and I was following someone who had stolen his topcoat and one of his loafers. I was being lured in, lured to the center, where some gigantic, flesh-eating plant awaited me, a venus flytrap, a pitcher-plant, perhaps some species of homicidal vine.

But I came to the next corner (a sign marked this three-way intersection as OVER, BACK, and BEYOND) and Roger was standing there, coat now sagging from one hand, shirt plastered to his back in a dark tree-shape. I almost expected to see him standing on the bank of a jungle river, a sluggish tributary of the Amazon or the Orinoco running smack-dab through the middle of Central Falls, Rhode Island. There was no river, but the smells were denser and spicier, and that undersmell of spoiled flesh was even stronger. The combination was bitter enough to make my nose sting and my eyes water.

"Don't move to your right," Roger said, speaking almost absently. "Poison sumac, poison oak, and poison ivy. All growing together."

I looked and saw a massed bank of shiny leaves, most green, some a baleful scarlet, all seeming to almost drip their poisonous oils. Touch that shit and you'd scratch for a year, I thought.

"Johnny."

"We need to get out of here," I said. Then added: "If we can find our way, that is."

Why had we come in here to begin with? Why, when the fellow who had pointed our way had been so obviously dead? I had no idea. We must have been bewitched.

Certainly Roger Wade seemed bewitched. He spoke my name again— "Johnny"—as if I hadn't said anything.

"What?" I asked, looking mistrustfully at the shining mass of mingled poison oak, sumac, and ivy. That slobbery smacking sound was a good deal closer now. The man-eating plant, no doubt, anxious for its meal. New York Editors tartare, how yummy.

"These're all poison," he said in that same dreamy voice. "Poison or hallucinogenic or both. That's datura, there, common name jimson weed—" Pointing to a nasty snarl of green growing from what looked like a pool of stagnant water. "—and darlingtonia...joe-pye weed... there's nicotiana and nightshade...foxglove...euphorbia, the dangerous version of poinsettia... Christ, I think that one's a night-blooming cereus." He was pointing to a huge plant with its blooms tightly folded in against the dim gray light. Roger turned to me. "And stuff I don't know. Lots of it."

"You recognize the anthurium, of course," said an amused voice from behind us.

We wheeled around and there stood a small woman with a mannish face and a stocky body beneath short, graying hair. She was wearing a gray suede beret and smoking a cigarette. She didn't look hot at all.

"That one's not dangerous, although of course the leaves of the rhubarb might interfere with your digestion— permanently, I wouldn't be surprised—and the pods of the wisteria are also quite nasty. Which of you is John Kenton?"

"I am," I said. "And you're Ms. Barfield."

"Miss," she said. "I don't buy that politically correct shit. I never did. You fellows shouldn't be out here on your own."

"I know that," I said dismally.

I might have said something else, but before I could, Tina Barfield did an amazing thing. She raised one foot, shod in a sensible black shoe, snuffed her cigarette, and held it out to her side, where a branch heavy with pods of some sort overhung the path (I could no longer think of it as an aisle, even though it was floored with the cracked remains of orange tile; we were in the jungle, and when you're there it's paths you follow, not aisles...if, that is, you're lucky enough to find one). One of the pods split open, becoming a small, greedy mouth. It ate the still-smoldering cigarette butt out of her hand and then sealed itself shut again.

"Good God," Roger said hoarsely.

"It's a kind of catchfly," the woman said indifferently. "Silly bugger will eat anything. You'd think it would choke, but nope. Now that you're here, let me show you something."

She brushed past us and strode on down the path, not even looking back to make sure we were following...which we were. She turned left, right, then right again. All the while those arrhythmic smacking sounds grew stronger. I noticed that she was dressed in a cranberry-colored pant suit, every bit as sensible as her shoes. She was dressed, I thought, like a woman who has places to go and things to do.

I can remember now how scared I was, but only in a vague fashion. How sure I was that we'd never get out of that horrible steamy place. Then she turned a final corner and stopped. We joined her.

"Holy...shit," I whispered.

Ahead of us, the path ended. Or perhaps it had been overgrown. The plants blocking the way were a filthy grayish black, and from their branches flowers sprouted—I think they were flowers—the pinkish-red of infected wounds. They were long, like lilies on the verge of blooming, and they were opening and closing slowly, making those smacking sounds. Only now that we were upon them, it no longer sounded like smacking. It sounded like talking.

There comes a point where the mind either breaks or shuts itself down. I know that now. I was all at once filled with a species of surreal calm I've never felt before. On one level I knew that I was

there, looking at those hideous, slow-talking blossoms. But on another, I rejected that completely. I was at home. In my bed. Had to be. I'd overslept the alarm, that was all. I wasn't going to beat Roger to the office as I'd wanted to, but that was okay. More than okay. Because when I finally did wake up, all of this would be gone.

"What in God's name are they?" Roger asked.

Tina Barfield looked at me with her eyebrows raised. It was the expression of a teacher calling on a student who should know the answer.

"They're the Tongues," I said. "Remember the letter? She said some of the Tongues had begun to wag."

"Good for you," the woman said. "You're maybe not as stupid as you acted when Carlos first got in touch with you."

For a moment no one said anything. The three of us simply looked at those blossoms opening and closing, their scarlet interiors winking. The soft, toothless whispering sound made me feel like clapping my hands over my ears. It was almost words, you see. Almost real talk.

Ah, fuck. Scratch that. It was real talk.

"Tongues?" Roger asked at last.

"They're widow's tongue," Tina Barfield replied. "Known in some European countries as witch's tongue or crone bane. Do you know what they're talking about, Mr. Kenton?"

"About us," I said. "Can we get out of here? I'm feeling sort of faint."

"Actually, I am too," Roger said.

"Leaving would be wise." She swept her arm around, as if to encompass that whole world of dank plants and powerful smells. "This is a thin place, always has been. Now it's thinner than ever. Quite dangerous, in fact. But you needed to see it in order to understand. The Dark Powers have been loosed. The fact that it was a brainless asshole like Carlos who loosed them makes no difference. He'll pay, of course. Meanwhile, it's unwise to tempt certain forces too far. Come on, boys."

I didn't like being called her boy, but I was willing enough to follow her, believe me. She lead us back quickly and with no hesitation. Once I clearly saw an earth-clotted root come snaking out of the

foliage at the left side of THERE Street and slither around her shoe. She gave her foot an impatient jerk, snapping the root without even looking down. And all the time we could hear that low, whispering, smacking sound behind us. Tongues, wagging.

I looked down for the crumpled balls of paper I'd dropped, but they were gone. Something had grabbed them just as the root had grabbed Tina Barfield's shoe and whisked my markers away into the undergrowth.

I wasn't surprised. At that point if John F. Kennedy had come strolling out of the bushes arm-in-arm with Adolf Hitler, I don't think I would have been surprised.

My espresso's gone. I promised myself I'd stay away from the booze tonight, but I've got a bottle of Scotch out in the kitchen and I need a little, after all. Right now. For medicinal purposes. If it does nothing else, perhaps it'll stop the shaking in my hands. I'd like to finish this before midnight.

(later)

There. Given the restorative powers of Dewers, I will finish by midnight. And there's no prolixity here, believe me. I'm writing as fast as I can, sticking to what feels like the absolute essentials...and writing it down feels oddly good, like recapturing some emotion you thought was gone forever. I'm still reeling from the events of the day, and there is a sense of having been torn free of a thousand things I always took for granted—a whole way of thinking and perceiving—but there's also an undeniable exhilaration. If nothing else, there's this to be grateful for: the thought of Ruth Tanaka has hardly crossed my mind. Tonight when I think of Ruth, she seems very small, like a person glimpsed through the wrong end of a telescope. That, I find, is a relief.

We were back in the office area in no time at all, following closely on Tina Barfield's heels. It felt warm in the office area after coming in from outside, but after returning from the greenhouse the office felt positively frigid. Roger slipped back into his overcoat, and I did the same.

The old man was sitting exactly where he had been, only with the paper once more raised in front of his face. Barfield lead us past him (I crabbed by in a kind of sideways scuttle, remembering that horror

movie where the hand suddenly shoots out the grave and grabs one of the teenagers) and into a smaller office.

This room contained a desk, one metal folding chair, and a bulletin board. The top of the desk was empty except for a jar-top with a couple of mashed-out cigarette butts in it and an IN/OUT basket with nothing in either tray. The bulletin board was empty except for a little cluster of thumbtacks in the lower corner. There were a few picture-hooks spotted around, each located in a vaguely brighter square of cream-colored wallpaper. Sitting by the door were three smart suitcases of the same cranberry shade as the woman's suit, but I hardly needed to look at them to know that Tina Barfield was not long for the House of Flowers...or Central Falls, for the mater. I guess there's just something about old "Poop-Shit" Kenton that makes people want to put on their boogie shoes and get out of town. This is a trend that began with Ruth, now that I think of it.

Barfield sat down in the chair beside the desk and rummaged in the pocket of her jacket for her cigarettes. "I'd ask you boys to sit down," she said, "but as you can see, seating accommos are limited." As she tapped a cigarette out of the pack, she looked critically at Roger. "You look like shit, Mr...I didn't catch your name."

"Roger Wade. I feel like shit."

"Not really going to pass out, are you?"

"I don't think so. Could I have one of your cigarettes?"

She considered it, then held the pack out. Roger took one with a hand that was far from steady. She offered the pack to me. I started to decline it, then took one. I smoked like a chimney in college—it seemed to be the thing to do if you were creative, like growing your hair long and wearing jeans—but not since then. This seemed to be a good time to start again. As H.P. Lovecraft's *Necronomicon* might put it, When Tongues wag, behold, the lapsed smoker will return to his evil ways; even unto three packs a day will he return. And while I'm on this subject, I might as well confess that double espresso wasn't all I got at the little Korean deli around the corner; I scored a pack of Camels, as well. The unfiltered ones. Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars, go directly to Lung Cancer.

Carlos's former boss eased a book of matches from under the cigarettepack cellophane, struck one, then lit John's cigarette and

my own. That done, she shook the match out, dropped it in the jar-top, scratched another, and lit her own cigarette.

"Never three on a match," she said. "Bad luck. Especially when you're travelling. When you're travelling, boys, you need all the luck you can get."

I took a deep drag, expecting my head to swim. It didn't. I didn't even cough. It was as if I had never been away. That may say everything that needs to be said about my state of mind and emotion.

"Where are you going?" Roger asked her.

She looked at him coolly. "You don't need to know that, my friend. What you do need to know I can tell you in five minutes or so. Which is good." She glanced at her watch. "It's quarter past one right now —"

Startled, I looked at my own watch. She was right. Only an hour since we'd stepped off The Pilgrim. A lot had happened since then. We were older and wiser men. Also more frightened men.

"—and I told the cab company to have someone here promptly at onethirty. When that horn blows, boys, the conference is over."

"You're a witch, aren't you?" I said. "You're a witch, Carlos is a warlock, and there really is some sort of coven at work in Central Falls. This is like..." But the only thing I could think of was Rosemary's Baby, and that sounded stupid.

She waved her hand impatiently, leaving a trail of blue-gray smoke behind. "We're not going to waste our time bandying words, are we? That'd be primo stupid. If you want to call me a witch, fine, yeah, I'm a witch. And if you want to call a bunch of people who mostly got together to use the Ouija board and eat deviled ham sandwiches a coven, be my guest. But don't make the mistake of calling Carlos a warlock. Carlos is an idiot. But he's a dangerous idiot. A powerful idiot. Luckily for you boys, he's also a kind of golden goose. Or could be. Carlos is like some of the stuff out there in the greenhouse. Foxglove, for instance. You eat it in the woods, it can stop your heart like a cheap pocket-watch. But if you process it and inject it—"

"Presto, digitalis," Roger said.

"Give that boy the kewpie-doll," she said, nodding. "I don't have time to give you fellas a complete history of the Dark Arts and Powers, and wouldn't even if I did have time. Except for geeks and dweebs, it's as boring as anything else. Besides, you wouldn't believe the half of it."

"After what we saw in there, I'd believe anything," Roger muttered.

She puffed her cigarette, flared her nostrils, and blew out twin jets of smoke. "Bolsheveky! People always say stuff like that, but it ain't true. Ain't true a minute. Take it from me, big boy, you wouldn't believe the half of it. But you believe enough right now, maybe, to pay attention to what I'm telling you. Which is why I brought you here, okay?"

She mashed her cigarette out in the jar-top and peered at us through the rising smoke.

"Lesson one, chilluns: whatever Carlos told you, take it as the literal truth. He's too dumb to lie. Whatever you saw in those pictures he sent you, take that as the literal truth, too. As for the plant he sent...use it! Why the fuck not? You should have something out of this, if only for the inconvenience he's caused you. Use it, be careful of it, and don't let it get grow too far. Ouija says SAFE—I asked—so you're okay for now. There'll be bloodshed, that's unavoidable, but unless they have help, the dark forces can only take their own. As long as your new houseplant doesn't get any innocent blood, everything is jake...in the short run, at least. Ouija says SAFE. Of course if you play tag around the buzz-saw too long, sooner or later someone is gonna get cut. Just a fact of life. Point is this: when you've got what you need, give that plant a nice DDT shower. Don't be greedy. Adios ivy. Adios Carlos."

"There is no plant," I said. "I mean, he wrote me a letter promising to send one, but he used a rather pitiful alias which I saw through at once. I sent Riddley, he's our mail-room guy, a memo telling him to dump it down the incinerator, if it came. So far as I know, it never did."

"It came," Roger said quietly.

"It did? When? It must have been after Riddley left for his mother's fu—"

"Nope," Roger said. "It came before. Riddley's got it set up in its own little pot, which it has almost entirely outgrown. Damn thing's growing like a weed." He glanced at Tina Barfield. "If you'll pardon the term."

"Why not? It is a weed. A rather special form of ivy imported from... well, from another place. Let's leave it at that, boys, what do you say?"

"In the interest of speedy discourse, I guess Buttwhet say oday," Roger replied, and I gave a hearty, surprised guffaw of laughter. A moment or two later, Tina Barfield joined in. It didn't make us friends, good God no, but it eased the atmosphere a little bit. Restored a sense of rationality, no matter how false that sense might have been.

Roger turned to me, looking slightly apologetic. "That was what I was going to show you this morning," he said. "The plant in Riddley's cubicle. I got curious about Herb and Sandra's memos...the good smells they reported coming from in there...and I walked down to take a look. I—"

"Maybe you boys could catch up on all that stuff going back to New York on the Metropolitan," Barfield said. "I'm sure it will make the miles just fly by. Myself, I could care less. And tempus continues to fugit. Anyone want to freebase a little more nicotine?"

We both took a cigarette; so did she. There followed the ritual of the two matches.

"How'd you know we're going back on the train?" I asked her. "OUIJA?"

"I read those Windhover books," she said, apparently apropos nothing. "Romance is okay, but what I really like is the rough sex." She surveyed us with gleaming eyes, perhaps trying to decide if either of us might be capable of rough sex. "Anyway, I don't need the Ouija board to know a couple of guys working for the company that publishes those probably wouldn't be flying."

"Thanks a pantload, sweetheart," Roger said. He didn't sound amused; he sounded genuinely angry.

"What I want to know," I said, "is why you're giving us all this help."

"Good point," Roger said. "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts and all that. If anything, you should be pissed at us. After all..." He looked

around the bare office. "...it looks like all of this has kind of changed your lifestyle."

"Yep," she agreed, and showed two rows of tiny but sharp-looking teeth in a smile. "Let me out of jail, that's what you did. What I'm trying to do is to thank you. Also to try and make myself safe from Carlos. Whose obituary you'll soon be reading, by the way. I'm surprised he's not dead already. He's stepped out of the protective circle. There are things out there—" She jabbed her cigarette toward the greenhouse... also, I suspect, to some horrible place beyond it. "—and they're all hungry. When Carlos sent you those pictures, and his idiotic manuscript, and finally the plant, he opened himself up to those things. But dead or alive, he can still get me. Unless, that is, I do a genuine Good Turn." I clearly heard the capital letters in her voice. So did Roger; I asked him later. "Which I'm trying to do."

She glanced at her watch again.

"Listen to me, boys, and don't ask questions. Carlos's power came to him from his mother, who wasn't an idiot...except in her blind love for her son, which finally got her killed. Since 1977, when that happened, the group here—the coven, if you like, although we never called ourselves that—has been in Carlos Detweiller's power. There's a story by a man named Jerome Bixby called 'It's a Good Life.' Read it. The situation in that story was our situation. Carlos killed his mother—by accident, I'm almost sure, but he killed her, all right. He killed Don, my husband, and that was no accident. Neither was what happened to Herb Hagstrom. Herb was supposedly Carlos's best friend, but he crossed him and there was a car accident. Herb was decapitated."

Roger winced. I could feel my face doing the same thing.

"The rest of us survived by kowtowing to Carlos...going along with his so-called sacred seances, although they were more and more dangerous...and we survived. But survival isn't the same thing as living, boys. Never was, never will be."

"The old fellow out there doesn't look like he's even surviving," Roger said. "Norville," she agreed. "Carlos's last victim. Sounds like something out of the books you publish, don't it? He had the living heart torn right out of his chest, and do you know why? Do you know what his biggest sin against Carlos was? Norv had a little wine one

night—this was around the turn of the year—and beat Carlos three times running at Crazy Eights. Carlos likes to win at Crazy Eights. He...took offense."

"Mr. Keen's really dead," I murmured. I mean, I knew he was, I think I knew it from the instant he lowered his newspaper and looked at us with those awful dusty eyes, but rationality dies hard. At least in the daytime. Now, after five hours at this Olivetti, I find I have no trouble believing it at all. When the sun comes up again that may change, but as for now I have no trouble whatsoever believing it.

"He's undead," she corrected. "He's a zombie. What's keeping him at least partly alive is my psychic force. When I'm gone, he'll fall over. Not that he'll know or care, God bless him."

"And the plants in the greenhouse?" Roger asked. "What about them?"

"Rhode Island Electric will eventually turn off the electricity for nonpayment. When the lights go, the heat goes. Everything out there will die, and good riddance. I'm tired of selling magic mushrooms to a bunch of bikers and aging hippes, anyway. Fuck them and the pink horses they ride in on."

From outside came the long blat of a horn. Tina Barfield got up immediately, briskly butting the remains of her cigarette in the jar-top.

"I'm off!" she said. "The wide open spaces await. Just call me Buckaroo Banzai."

"You can't go yet!" Roger said. "We have questions—"

"Yeah-yeah-right-right," she said. "If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one around to hear it, does it make any noise? If God made the world, who made God? Did John Kennedy really fuck Marilyn Monroe? Help me with my bags and maybe you'll get a few more answers."

I took one and Roger took two. Tina Barfield opened the door and swept out into the office. Norville Keen, the Undead Florist of Central Falls, had lowered his newspaper again and was staring straight ahead. No, his chest wasn't moving. Not at all. Looking at him hurt my mind in some deep place that has never been hurt before today, at least that I can remember.

"Norv," she said, and when he didn't look at her she said something short and guttural. Uhlahg! is what it sounded like.

Whatever it was, it worked. He stared around. "Open your shirt, Norv."

"No," Roger said uneasily. "That's okay, we don't need to—"

"I think you do," she said. "Going back on the train, your normal way of thinking is going to reassert itself and you'll start doubting everything I just told you. This, though...this'll stick to your ribs." Then, even more sharply: "Uhlahg!"

Mr. Keen unbuttoned his shirt, slowly but steadily. He pulled it open, exposing his gray tideless chest. Running down the center of it was a horrifying bloodless wound like a long vertical mouth. In it we could see the gray and bony bar of his sternum.

Roger turned away, one hand raised to his mouth. From behind it came a dry coughing sound. As for me, I just looked. And believed everything.

"Button up," Tina Barfield said, and Norville Keen began to comply, his long fingers moving just as slowly as they had before. The woman turned to Roger and said, with just a hint of malicious humor in her curiosity: "Now you're going to pass out, yeah?"

Very slowly, Roger straightened up. He dropped his hand from his mouth. His face was white but composed. There was no tremble to his lips. I was proud of him just then. I had been stunned beyond such a reaction, you see; Roger hadn't been, but had managed to hold onto his coffee and bagel just the same.

"I'm not," he said, "but thank you for your concern." He paused, then added: "Bitch."

"The bitch is trying to be your fairy godmother," she said. "Can you carry those, chum?"

Roger picked up the two suitcases, then staggered. I took one of them and he gave me a grateful, sickish smile. We followed her onto the porch. The air was damp and chilly—no more than forty-five degrees—but I never tasted air that was sweeter. I took great breaths of it, smelling only the usual odors of industrial pollution. After the greenhouse, a few hydrocarbons smelled wonderful. At the curb, a Red Top Cab was idling.

"Just a couple of other things," Barfield said. She was every bit as sharp and pointed as a big executive—Sherwyn Redbone himself, perhaps—closing a business deal. As she talked she made her way

first down the saltstained steps and then along the cracked concrete path. "First, when you hear Carlos is dead, go on behaving as if he's alive...because for awhile he will be. As a tulpa."

"Like the one that infested Richard Nixon," I said.

"Right, right—" She stopped at the head of the three steps leading down to the sidewalk and looked at me very sharply indeed. "How'd you know about that?" And before I could answer, she answered herself. "Carlos, of course. When he was alive, Norv used to tell him, 'Carlos, you'll talk yourself dead if you don't watch out.' Which is damned near what he's done.

"Anyway, Carlos won't hang around long; he won't be able to. Two months, maybe three at the outside. Because he's stupid. Brains tell, even on the Other Side."

Once again I heard the capitals. She went down the steps to the sidewalk. The cab driver got out and opened his trunk. We stowed the bags inside next to several boxed VCRs that looked, to my admittedly inexperienced eye, as if they might have been stolen.

"Pop back into the car, big boy," Tina told the cabbie. "I'll be with you shortly."

"Time's money, lady."

"No," she said, "time ain't nothin but time. Still, drop your flag if it makes you feel better."

The cabbie retired to the driver's seat of the Red Top. Tina turned once more to us—a neat little woman, small but broad in the hip and shoulder, dressed in her best travelling suit and her smart suede beret.

"Treat him like he's still alive," she said. "As for the plant, it will soon begin its work—"

"It's already begun it," I said, because now I understood a lot. I hadn't even seen it, but I understood a lot. Herb gets a whiff of it and thinks up The Devil's General. Sandra gets a whiff and comes up with the idea for a book of scabrous jokes.

Barfield cocked one carefully plucked eyebrow at me. "Like the man said, 'Son, you ain't seen nothing yet.' It needs blood to really get rolling, but don't worry. The blood it will draw is the blood of evil or the blood of insanity. Unlike our fucked-up courts, the powers of

darkness don't distinguish between the two. And any innocent blood it drinks can only come from you guys. So don't give it any."

"What do you take us for?" Roger asked.

She gave him a cynical look but said nothing...on that subject, at least. Instead, she turned back to me.

"It's going to grow like a sonofabitch. And it's going to grow everywhere, but no one will see it except for those who are already in its circle. To anyone else, it'll look like nothing but an innocent little ivy in a pot, not very healthy. You have to keep people away from it. If you have a reception area, rub garlic all over the door between there and the editorial offices. That should keep the damn thing where it belongs. People who want to go further into your offices than the reception area should be discouraged. Unless you don't like 'em, of course; in that case invite 'em in and give 'em a beer."

"An invisible plant," Roger said. He seemed to be tasting it.

"An invisible psychic plant," I said, thinking of General Hecksler.

"Right on both counts," she said. "And now, boys, I'm going to put an egg in my shoe and beat it. Have a nice day, have a nice life and...oh, almost forgot." She turned to me again. "OUIJA says stop wasting your time. The one you're looking for is in the purple box on the bottom shelf. Way in the corner. Okay? Got it?"

She was around to the back door of the cab and opening it before either of us could say anything else. I don't know about Roger, but I felt as if I had at least a thousand questions. I just didn't know what any of them were.

She turned back one final time. "Listen, boys. Don't fuck around with that thing. When you've got enough, kill it. And be careful. It can read minds. When you come for it, it'll know."

"How in God's name are we supposed to know when we've got enough?" I blurted. "That's not exactly something people are good at figuring out for themselves."

"Good question," she said. "I respect you for asking it. And you know what? I may actually have an answer for you. OUIJA says LISTEN RIDDLEY. That's Riddley with two d's. Maybe the spelling's a mistake, but the board rarely—"

"It's not a mistake," I said, "he's—"

"Riddley's the janitor, Ms. Barfield," Roger finished.

"I told you I hate that politically correct shit," she told him. "Don't you listen?" And then she was into the cab. She poked her head out the window and said, "I don't care if he's the janitor or Chester the Molester. When he tells you it's time to quit, you boys do yourselves a big favor and quit." Her head drew back inside. A moment later she was out of our lives. At least I think she is.

I'm going to take a bathroom break, have one more drink, and then try to put a button on this. With any luck, I'll actually be able to sleep a little bit tonight.

11:45 P.M.

Okay, it was two drinks, so sue me. And now it's time for that fabled finishing burst.

Roger and I didn't talk much about what had happened on the way back. I don't know if that would sound strange to someone reading these pages (now that Ruth's out of my life, I can't imagine who that someone would be), but it seemed perfectly comfortable to me, the most normal of all reactions. I've never been in a shooting war, but I imagine people who've been in a terrible battle and come out unscathed probably behave a lot like Roger and I did while returning to the city on the Metropolitan. We talked mostly about things that didn't concern us personally. Roger said something about the loony-tune who'd shot Ronald Reagan and I mentioned that I'd read a galley of the new Peter Benchley and hadn't cared for it much. We talked a bit about the weather. Mostly, though, we were silent. We did not compare notes; we made no effort to deconstruct or rationalize our visit to the House of Flowers. In fact, I believe we only mentioned our mad field trip to Central Falls once during the entire two-hour train ride. Roger came back from the club car with sandwiches and Cokes. He passed me my share and I thanked him. I also offered to pay him. Roger laughed and said we were on expense account today—"visiting a potential author" was how he intended to write it up. And then he said in a casual just-asking voice, "That old man was really dead, wasn't he?"

"No," I said. "He was undead."

"A zombie."

"Right."

"Like in Macumba Love."

"I don't know what that is."

"A movie," he said. "The sort of thing Zenith House undoubtedly would have novelized if we'd been around in the fifties."

And that was it.

We took a cab from Penn Station to 409 Park Avenue South, Roger once more getting a receipt and putting it carefully into his wallet. I was impressed, believe me.

The cabbie let us out across the street, in front of Smiler's. There's a new bum there—an old lady with wild white hair, the usual two plastic bags filled with unlikely possessions, a cup for passersby to put change into, and a guitar that looked a thousand years old. Around her neck she wore a sign reading LET JESUS GROW IN YOUR HEART. I shuddered at the sight of it. I remember thinking, I hope one lousy zombie hasn't made me superstitious, and then turning away to hide a smile. Roger had gone into the grocery, and I didn't want the homeless lady to think I was laughing at her. It might make waiting for Roger uncomfortable. They don't mind getting into your face, those homeless people. In fact, I think they like it.

"Hey-you," she said in a raspy, almost mannish voice. "Gimme-buckl'll-play-ya-tune."

"Tell you what," I said. "I'll give you two if you won't."

"Fuck-yeah-gotta-deal," she said, which was why Roger caught me stuffing two hard-earned dollars into a crazy lady's tin cup just as he was coming out of the store. He had a brown bag in one hand and an aspirin tin in the other. As he approached the corner, he popped the tin open and shook several tablets out. He tossed these into his mouth and began crunching them up. The thought of that taste made my eyes ache.

"You really shouldn't give them money," he said as we waited for the WALK light. "It encourages them."

"You really shouldn't chew aspirin, either, but you're doing it," I said. I was in no mood for a lecture.

"True," he said, and offered me the tin as we crossed to our side of the street. "Want to try it?"

The odd thing was, I did. I took a couple and tossed them into my mouth, hating and relishing the bitter taste of the dissolving pills in

equal measure. From behind us came a discordant jangle of guitar strings followed by a high and presumably female voice beginning to shriek "Just A Closer Walk With Thee."

"Inside, quick," Roger said, holding the lobby door for me. "Before my ears start to bleed."

The Metropolitan left Central Falls late and arrived at Penn Station late—it's an Amtrak thing—and the lobby of our building was almost deserted. When I glanced at my watch in the elevator, I saw that it was pressing quarter of six. "Bill, Sandra, and Herb," I said. "What are you going to tell them?"

Roger looked at me as though I were nuts. "Everything," he said. "It's the only thing I can do. The plant in Riddley's closet ain't exactly Sweet William. Which reminds me—along with everything else, we've got to get a locksmith in tomorrow to change the lock on that door. Want to know my nightmare? Riddley comes back from Sweet Home Alabama, all unsuspecting, drops by on Sunday afternoon—"

"Why would he do that?" I asked.

"I have no idea," Roger said testily. "It's a nightmare, didn't I say that? And nightmares rarely make sense. That's part of what makes them scary. Maybe he wants to check that the wastebaskets got emptied while he was gone, or something. Anyhow, he goes into his cubby, and while he's feeling around for the light-switch, something slithers around his neck."

I didn't have to ask him what sort of thing. All I had to do was remember the root that had slid its slim, earth-clotted length around Tina Barfield's shoe.

The elevator doors opened on five and we walked down the hall, past BARCO NOVEL-TEAZ and CRANDALL & OVITZ (a couple of elderly but still cannibalistic lawyers specializing in litigation and liability) and my own personal favorite, Gimme The World Travel Agency. At the far end, guarded by a pair of blessedly plastic ferns, were our double doors with ZENITH HOUSE and AN APEX COMPANY on them in gold letters, the gold as fake as the ferns.

Roger shook out his keys and opened the door. Inside was a receptionist's office with a desk, a gray carpet that at least tried not to look industrial, and walls with travel posters on them which Sandra had promoted from Rita Durst in Gimme The World. Other publishers

no doubt decorate their reception areas with covers of their books blown up to poster-size, but an office decorated with oversized jacket art from *Macho Man: Hanoi Firestorm*, *Ravisher's Moon*, and *Rats from Hell* probably wouldn't have elevated anyone's mood.

"Tomorrow's one of LaShonda's days," I reminded Roger. LaShonda McHue comes in three days a week: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. She rarely ventures beyond her desk (where she mostly does her nails, calls her friends, and prinks at her hair with an Afro comb), and when Tina Barfield talked about "the circle," I don't think she meant our part-time receptionist.

"I know," Roger said. "Luckily, the ladies' room is down the hall past Novel-Teaz, and that's the only place she ever goes."

"But whatever can go wrong—"

"—will go wrong," he finished. "Yeah, yeah. I know." He fetched a deep sigh.

"So are you going to show me our new mascot?"

"I suppose I better, hadn't I?"

He lead me down the hall past his office and the other editorial offices.

We made the little left-hand jog around the corner, where there were two more doors with the water-fountain between them. One of these doors was marked JANITOR; the other MAIL AND STORAGE. Roger picked through his keys again and put the right one in the lock of Riddley's cubby. "I locked it this morning before we left," he explained.

"Under the circumstances, that was a pretty good call," I said.

"I thought so," he agreed. I was peripherally aware of him looking at me curiously as he pushed the door open. Then I was aware of nothing but the smell. That heavenly smell.

My grandmother used to take me to the store with her when she did her shopping—this was back in Green Bay—and what I liked the best was to push the button which operated the coffee-grinder in aisle three. What I smelled now was the wonderful aroma of fresh Five O'Clock Dark Roast. I could nearly see the bag with its red label, and I had a memory, so clear it was almost reality, of a small boy poking his nose into that bag for one final deep whiff before rolling the bag closed.

"Oh, wonderful," I said in a small voice that was close to tears. My Gram has been dead for almost twenty years, but for that one moment she was alive again.

"What is it for you?" Roger asked. He sounded almost greedy. "I got strawberry shortcake, fresh out of the oven. Still hot enough to melt the whipped cream."

"It's coffee," I said, stepping in. "Fresh-ground coffee." I could even see the machine with its chrome chute and its three settings: Fine, Extra-Fine, and Coarse.

Then I saw the cubbyhole, and could say no more.

Like the greenhouse in Central Falls, it had become a jungle. But whereas in Tina Barfield's jungle there had been plants of many kinds, here there was just ivy, ivy, and more ivy. It grew everywhere, twining over the handles of Riddley's broom and window-washer, climbing along the shelves, running up the walls to the ceiling, where it grew along the tiles in tough, zig-zagging strands from which brilliant green leaves hung, some still opening. Riddley's mop-bucket has itself become a large steel plant-pot from which a huge bush of ivy rises in a tangle of tendrils, leaves, and...

"What are those flowers?" I asked. "Those blue flowers? Never seen anything like those before, especially not on an ivy plant."

"You've never seen anything like any of this before, period," he said.

I had to admit I had not. On one of the shelves, just below several tins of floor-wax which had been almost buried in an avalanche of green leaves, was a tiny red clay pot. That was what the plant had originally come in. I was sure of it. There was a tiny plastic tag propped against it. I leaned closer and read what was written there through a convenient gap in the leaves:

HI!
MYNAMEISZENITH
IAMAGIFTTOJOHN
FROMROBERTA

"That bastard Riddley," I said. "And just by the way, are we really supposed to believe that anyone coming in here would see nothing but one modest little ivy-plant? None of the rest of this..." I waved my arm.

"I can't answer that question for sure, but it's certainly what the lady said, isn't it? And the lady also said that anyone coming in here might not get out again."

I saw that one tendril had already grown out the door.

"You better get some garlic," I breathed. "And quick."

Roger opened the bag he'd brought out of Smiler's. I looked in and was not exactly surprised to see that it was full of garlic buds.

"You're on top of things," I said. "I have to give it to you, Roger—you're on top."

"It's why I'm the boss," he said solemnly. We stared at each other for a moment, then began to giggle. It was a supremely weird moment...but not the supremely weird moment. I suddenly realized I had an idea for a novel. This came to me, it seemed, out of a clear blue sky. That was the supremely weird moment.

And I take that clear-blue-sky thing back. The idea wafted to me on the scent of Five O'Clock Coffee, the kind I used to grind for my grandmother in Price's All-Purpose Grocery, back in Green Bay when the world was young...or when I was. I'm certainly not going to summarize my Grand Idea here—not at five past midnight—but take it from me when I say it's a good idea, one that makes Maymonth look like what it really was: a dry-wind graduate thesis masquerading as a novel.

"Holy shit," I breathed.

Roger looked at me, almost slyly. "Getting a few interesting notions, are you?"

"You know it."

"Yes," he said, "I do. I knew we had to go to Central Falls and see the Barfield woman even before you showed me that letter, Johnny. I got the idea in here. Last night. Come on, let's get out of here. Let's..." His eyes sparkled in a funny way. I'd seen it before, but couldn't remember quite where. "Let's let it grow in peace."

We spent the next fifteen minutes busting garlic buds and rubbing them up the sides of the door between Reception and Editorial. Over

the lintel and the jamb, as well. The smell made my eyes water, but I suppose it'll be a little better by tomorrow. At least I hope so. By the time we finished, the place smelled as I imagine a turn-of-the-century tenement in Little Italy might, with all the women making spaghetti sauce.

"You know," I said as we finished, "we're nuts to be marking the boundary out here. What we should be doing is putting garlic on the door to Riddley's janitor-closet. Keeping it in there."

"I don't think that's the way it's supposed to work," he said. "I think we're supposed to more or less let it loose in Editorial."

"Watch us grow," I said. I should have been afraid—I'm afraid now, God knows—but I wasn't then. And I had placed that look in his eyes, too, that feverish sparkle. My best friend in the fifth grade was a kid named Randy Wettermark. And one day, when we stopped in the candy store after school for Pez or something, Randy hawked a Spiderman comic-book. Just put it under his jacket and walked out. Roger had that same look on his face.

Christ, what a day. What an amazing day. My brain feels the way your gut does when you eat not just too much but much too much. I'm going to bed. Hope to heaven I sleep.

PART V



FROM THE DISPATCHES OF IRON-GUTSHECK
SLER

Apr 1 81
0600 hrs
Pk Ave So NYC

City successfully infiltrated. Objective in view. Not this very moment of course. My current location=alley behind Smiler's Market, corner Pk & 32nd. Workplace of Designated Jew almost directly across from my bivouac. Disguised as "Crazy Guitar Gertie" and worked like a charm. No gun but good knife in plastic bag #1 of "homeless person" crap. 2 foremen of the Antichrist working at Satan's House of Zenith showed up 1730 hours yesterday afternoon. One (code name ROGER DODGER) went into market. Bought garlic by smell. Supposed to improve sex-life, HA!! Other (code name JOHN THE BAPTIST) waited outside. Back to me. Could have killed him with no problem. One quick slash. Jugular and carotid. Old commando move. This old dog remembers all his old tricks. Didn't, of course. Must wait for Designated Jew. If others stay out of my way, they may live. If they don't, they will certainly die. No prisoners. BAPTIST gave me two dollars. Cheapskate! Best plan still seems to wait until weekend (i.e. Apr 4-5) and then infiltrate building. Lie low inside until Monday morning (i.e. Apr 6). Of course D.J. may come along before then but cowards travel in packs. Will do you no good D.J. In the end, your meat is mine, HA! "Beaches are sandy, some shores are rocky, I'm going to ventilate, A Designated Mockie." More dreams of CARLOS (code name DESIGNATED SPIC). I think he is close. Wish

I had a picture. Must be crafty. Guitar & wig=good props. DAY OF THE GENERAL instead of DAY OF THE JACKAL, HA!! Guitar needs new strings. Still play pretty well & still sing "like a bird in a tree." Got suppositories. Dropped load. Can think more clearly in spite of brain-killing transmissions.

Must now play waiting game.

Not the first time.

Over and out.

From *The New York Times*, April 1, 1981 Page B-1, National Report

COMMUTER CRASH KILLS 7 IN R.I.

By James Whitney *Special to The Times*

CENTRAL FALLS, RHODE ISLAND: A Cessna 404 Titan commuter airplane owned and operated by Ocean State Airways crashed shortly after takeoff from Barker Field in this small Rhode Island city yesterday afternoon, killing both pilots and all five passengers. Ocean State Airways has been running shuttle flights to New York City's LaGuardia since 1977. OCA Flight 14 was airborne for less than two minutes when it crashed in a vacant lot only a quarter of a mile from its takeoff point. Witnesses said the aircraft banked low over a warehouse, narrowly missing the roof, just before going down. "Whatever was wrong must have gone wrong right away," said Myron Howe, who was cutting weeds between Barker Field's two runways when the accident occurred. "He got upstairs and then he tried to come on back. I heard one engine cut out, then the other. I saw both props were dead. He missed the warehouse, and he missed the access road, but then he went in hard." Preliminary reports indicate no maintenance problems with the C404, which is powered by two 375 horsepower turbo-charged piston engines. The make has an excellent safety record overall, and the aircraft which crashed had less than 9000 hours on its clock, according to Ocean State Airways President George Ferguson. Officials from the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) have launched a joint investigation of the crash. Killed in the accident, the first in Ocean State's four-year history, were John Chesterton, the pilot, and Avery Goldstein, the copilot, both of Pawtucket. Robert Weiner, Tina Barfield, and Dallas Mayr have been identified as three of the downed aircraft's five passengers. The

identities of the other two, thought to have been husband and wife, have been withheld pending notification of next of kin. Ocean State Airways is most commonly used by passengers connecting with larger airlines operating out of LaGuardia Airport. According to Mr. Ferguson, OSA has suspended operations at least until the end of the week and perhaps longer. "I'm devastated by this," he said. "I've flown that particular craft many times, and would have sworn there wasn't a safer plane in the skies, large or small. I flew it down from Boston myself on Monday, and everything was fine with it then. I don't have any idea what could have caused both engines to shut down the way they did. One, possibly, but not both."

From John Kenton's diary

April 1, 1981

There's an old Chinese curse which goes, "May you live in interesting times." I think it must have been especially aimed at folks who keep diaries (and if they follow Roger's edict, that number will soon be increased by three: Bill Gelb, Sandra Jackson, and Herb "Give Me The World And Let Me Boss It" Porter). I sat here in my little home office—which is actually just a corner of the kitchen to which I have added a shelf and a bright light—pounding the keys of my typewriter for nearly five hours last night. Won't be that long tonight; among other things, I have a manuscript to read. And I am going to read it, I think. The dozen or so pages I got through on my way home have pretty well convinced me that this is the one I've been looking for all along, without even really knowing it.

But at least one person of my recent acquaintance won't be reading it. Not even if it's as great as *Great Expectations*. (Not that it will be; I have to keep reminding myself that I work at Zenith House, not Random House.) Poor woman. I don't know if she was telling the exact truth about wanting to do us a Good Turn, but even if she was lying through her teeth, no one should have to die like that, dropped out of the sky and crushed to death in a burning steel tube.

I arrived at work even earlier today, wanting to check the mail room. OUIJA says stop wasting your time, she told me. The one you're looking for is in the purple box on the bottom shelf. Way in the corner. I wanted to check that corner even before I put on the coffee. And to get another look at Zenith the ivy, while I was down there.

At first I thought I'd beaten Roger this time, because there was no clackclack from his typewriter. But the light was on, and when I peeked in the open door of his office, there he was, just sitting behind his desk and looking out at the street.

"Morning, boss," I said. I thought he'd be ready and raring to go, but he just sat there in a semi-slump, pale and disheveled, as if he'd spent the whole night tossing and turning.

"I told you not to encourage her," he said without turning from the window.

I walked over and looked out. The old lady with the guitar, the wild white hair, and the sign about letting Jesus grow in your heart was over there in front of Smiler's again. I couldn't hear what she was singing, at least. There was that much.

"You look like you had a tough night," I said.

"Tougher morning. You seen the Times?"

I had, as a matter of fact—the front page, anyway. There was the usual report on Reagan's condition, the usual stuff about unrest in the mideast, the usual corruption-in-government story, and the usual bottom-of-the-page command to support the Fresh Air Fund. Nothing that struck me as of any immediate concern. Nevertheless, I felt a little stirring of the hairs on the back of my neck.

The Times was sitting folded over in the OUT half of Roger's IN/OUT basket. I took it.

"First page of the B section," he said, still looking out the window. At the bum, presumably...or do you call a female of the species a bumette?

I turned to the National Report and saw a picture of an airplane—what was left of one, anyway—in a weedy field littered with cast-off engine parts. In the background, a bunch of people were standing behind a cyclone fence and gawking. I scanned the headline and knew at once.

"Barfield?" I asked.

"Barfield," he agreed.

"Christ!"

"Christ had nothing to do with it."

I scanned the piece without really reading it, just looking for her name.

And there she was: Tina Barfield of Central Falls, source of that old adage "if you play around the buzz-saw too long, sooner or later someone is gonna get cut." Or burned alive in a Cessna Titan, she should have added.

"She said she'd be safe from Carlos if she did a genuine Good Turn," Roger said. "That might lead some to deduce that what she did us was just the opposite."

"I believed her about that," I said. I think I was telling the truth, but whether I was or wasn't, I didn't want Roger deciding to uproot the ivy growing in Riddley's closet because of what had happened to Tina Barfield. Shocked as I was, I didn't want that. Then I saw—or maybe intuited—that Roger's mind wasn't running that way, and I relaxed a little.

"Actually, I did, too," he said. "She was at least trying to do a Good Turn."

"Maybe she just didn't do it soon enough," I said.

He nodded. "Maybe that was it. I read the short story she mentioned, by the way—the one by Jerome Bixby."

"It's a Good Life."

"Right. By the time I'd read two pages, I recognized it as the basis of a famous Twilight Zone episode starring Billy Mumy. What the hell ever happened to Billy Mumy?"

I didn't give Shit One about what happened to Billy Mumy, but thought it might be a bad idea to say so.

"The story's about a little boy who's a super-psychic. He destroys the whole world, apparently, except for his own little circle of friends and relatives. Those people he holds hostage, killing them if they dare to cross him in any way."

I remembered the episode. The little kid hadn't pulled out anyone's heart or caused any planes to crash, but he'd turned one character—his big brother or maybe a neighbor—into a jack-in-the-box. And when he made a mess, he simply sent it away into the cornfield.

"Based on that, can you imagine what living with Carlos must have been like?" Roger asked me.

"What are we going to do, Roger?"

He turned from the window then and looked at me straight on. Frightened—I was, too—but determined. I respected him for that. And I respect myself, too.

I think.

"We're going to make Zenith House into a profitable concern if we can," he said, "and then we're going to jam about nine gallons of black ink in Harlow Enders's eye. I don't know if that plant is really a modern-day version of Jack's beanstalk or not, but if it is, we're going to climb it and get the golden harp, the golden goose, and all the gold doubloons we can carry. Agreed?"

I stuck out my hand. "Agreed, boss."

He shook it. I haven't had many fine moments before nine in the morning, at least not as an adult, but that was one of them.

"We're also going to be careful," he said. "Agreed there?"

"Agreed." It's only tonight, dear diary, that I realize what you're left with if you take the a out of agreed. I would be telling less than the truth if I didn't say that sort of haunts me.

We talked a little more. I wanted to go down and check on Zenith; Roger suggested we wait for Bill, Herb, and Sandra, then do it together.

LaShonda Evans came in before they did, complaining that the reception area smelled funny. Roger sympathized, suggested it might be mildew in the carpet, and authorized a petty-cash expenditure for a can of Glade, which can be purchased in the Smiler's across the street. He also suggested that she leave the editors pretty much alone for the next couple of months; they were all going to be working hard, he said, trying to live up to the parent company's expectations. He didn't say "unrealistic expectations," but some people can convey a great deal with no more than a certain tone of voice, and Roger is one of them.

"It's my policy not to go any further than right here, Mr. Wade," she said, standing in the door of Roger's office and speaking with great dignity. "You're okay...and so are you, Mr. Kenton...most of the time..."

I thanked her. I've discovered that after your girl has dropped you for some West Coast smoothie who probably knows Tai Chi and has been rolphed as est-ed to a nicety, even left-handed compliments sound pretty good.

"...but those other three are a little on the weird side."

With that, LaShonda left. I imagine she had calls to make, a few of which might even have to do with the publishing business. Roger looked at me, amused, and further ruffled his disarranged hair. "She didn't know what the smell was," he said.

"I don't think LaShonda spends a lot of time in the kitchen."

"When you look like LaShonda, I doubt if you need to," Roger said. "The only time you smell garlic is when the waiter brings your Shrimp Mediterranean."

"Meanwhile," I said, "there's Glade. And the garlic-smell will be gone before long, anyway. Unless, of course, you're either a bloodhound or a supernatural houseplant."

We looked at each other for a moment, then burst out laughing. Maybe just because Tina Barfield was dead and we were alive. Not very nice, I know, but the day brightened from that point on; that much, at least, I'm sure of.

Roger had left little notes on Herb's, Sandra's, and Bill's desks. By ninethirty we were all gathered in Roger's office, which doubles as our editorial conference room. Roger began by saying that he thought both Herb and Sandra had been aided in their inspirations, and with no more preamble than that, he told them the story of our trip to Rhode Island. I helped as much as I could. We both tried to express how strange our visit to the greenhouse had been, how otherworldly, and I believe all three of them understood most of that. When it came to Norville Keen, however, I don't think either Roger or I really got the point across.

Bill and Herb were sitting side by side on the floor, as they often do during our editorial conferences, drinking coffee, and I saw them exchange a glance of the kind in which eyeballs rolling heavenward play a crucial part. I thought about trying to press the point, then didn't. If I may misquote the wisdom of Norville Keen: "You can't believe in a zombie unless you've seen that zombie."

Roger finished the job by handing Bill that day's B section of The New York Times. We waited as it made the rounds.

"Oh, poor woman," Sandra said. She had dragged in her office chair and was sitting in it with her knees primly together. No sitting on the floor for Mr. and Mrs. Jackson's little girl. "I never fly unless I have to. It's much more dangerous than they let on."

"This is crap," Bill said. "I mean, I love you, Roger, but this really is crap. You've been under pressure—you too, John, especially since you got the gate from your girlfriend—and you guys've just...I don't know...let your imaginations run away with you."

Roger nodded as if he had expected no less. He turned to Herb. "What do you think?" he asked him.

Herb stood up and hitched his belt in that take-charge way of his. "I think we ought to go take a look at the famous ivy plant."

"Me too," Sandra said.

"You guys don't actually believe this, do you?" Bill Gelb asked. He sounded both amused and alarmed. "I mean, let's not dial 1-800-MASSHysteria just yet, okay?"

"I don't believe or disbelieve anything," Sandra said. "Not for sure. All I know for sure is that I got my idea about the joke-book after I was down there. After I smelled baking cookies. And why would the janitor's room smell like my grandma's kitchen, anyway?"

"Maybe for the same reason the reception area smells like garlic," Bill said. "Because these guys have been playing jokes." I opened my mouth to say that Sandra had smelled cookies and Herb toast and jam in Riddley's cubicle the day before Roger and I made our trip to Central Falls, but before I could, Bill said: "What about the plant, Sandy? Did you see an ivy growing all over the place in there?"

"No, but I didn't turn on the light," she said. "I just peeped my head in, and then...I don't know...I got a little scared. Like it was spooky, or something."

"It was spooky in spite of the smell of grandma's baking cookies, or because of it?" Bill asked. Like a TV-show prosecutor hammering some hapless defense witness.

Sandra looked at him defiantly and said nothing. Herb tried to take her hand, but she shook it off.

I stood up. "Enough talk. Why describe a guest when you can see that guest?"

Bill looked at me as if I'd flipped my lid. "Say what?"

"I believe that in his own inimitable way, John is trying to express the idea that seeing is believing," Roger said. "Let's go have a look. And may I suggest you all keep your hands to yourselves? I don't

think it bites—not us, anyway—but I do think we'd be wise to be careful."

It sounded like damned good advice to me. As Roger lead us down the hall past our offices in a little troop, I found myself remembering the last words of the rabbit general in Richard Adams's *Watership Down*: "Come back, you fools! Come back! Dogs aren't dangerous!"

When we got to the place where the hall jogs to the left, Bill said: "Hey, hold it, just a goddam minute." Sounding extremely suspicious. And a little bit spooked, maybe, as well.

"What is it, William?" Herb asked, all innocence. "Smelling something nice?"

"Popcorn," he said. His hands were clenched.

"Good smell, is it?" Roger asked gently.

Bill sighed. His hands opened...and all at once his eyes filled with tears. "It smells like *The Nordica*," he said. "The *Nordica Theater*, in Freeport, Maine. It's where we used to go to the show when I was a kid growing up in Gates Falls. It was only open on weekends, and it was always a double feature. There were great big wooden fans in the ceiling and they'd go around during the show...whoosh, whoosh, whoosh...and the popcorn was always fresh. Fresh popcorn with real butter on it in a plain brown bag. To me that's always been the smell of dreams. I just...Is this a joke? Because if it is, tell me right now."

"No joke," I said. "I smell coffee. Five O'Clock brand, and stronger than ever. Sandra, do you still smell cookies?"

She looked at me with dreamy eyes, and right then I sort of understood why Herb is so totally gone on her (yes, we all know it; I think even Riddley and LaShonda know it; the only one who doesn't know it is Sandra herself). Because she was beautiful.

"No," she said, "I smell *Shalimar*. That was the first perfume I ever had. My Aunt Coretta gave it to me for my birthday, when I was twelve." Then she looked at Bill, and smiled warmly. "That was what dreams smelled like to me. *Shalimar* perfume."

"Herb?" I asked.

For a minute I didn't think he was going to say anything; he was cheesed at the way she was looking at Bill. But then he must have

decided this was a little bit bigger than his crush on Sandra.

"Not toast and jam today," he said. "New car today. To me that's the best smell on earth. It was when I was seventeen and couldn't afford one, and I guess it still is now."

Sandra said, "You still can't afford one."

Herb sighed, shrugged. "Yeah, but...fresh wax...new leather..."

I turned to Roger. "What about—" Then I stopped. Bill was only brimming, but Roger Wade was outright weeping. Tears ran down his face in two silent streams.

"My mother's garden, when I was very small," he said in a thick, choked voice. "How I loved that smell. And how I loved her."

Sandra put an arm around him and gave him a little hug. Roger wiped his eyes with his sleeve and tried a smile. Did pretty well, too, for someone remembering his beloved dead mother.

Now Bill pushed ahead. I let him, too. We followed him around the corner to the door just left of the drinking fountain, the one marked JANITOR. He threw it open, started to say something smartass—it might have been Come out, come out, wherever you are—and then stopped. His hands went up in an involuntary warding-off gesture, then dropped again.

"Holy Jesus get-up-in-the-morning," he whispered, and the rest of us crowded around him.

Writing in this journal yesterday, I said that Riddley's closet had become a jungle, but yesterday I didn't understand what a jungle was. I know that must sound strange after my tour of Tina Barfield's greenhouse in Central Falls, but it's true. Riddley won't be shooting dice with Bill Gelb in there anymore, I can tell you that. The room is now a densely packed mass of shiny green leaves and tangled vines, rising from the floor to the ceiling. Within it you can still see a few gleams of metal and wood—the mop-bucket, the broom-handle—but that's it. The shelves are buried. The fluorescent lights overhead are barely visible. The smells that came out at us, although good, were almost overpowering.

And then there was a sigh. We all heard it. A kind of whispered, exhaled greeting.

An avalanche of leaves and stems fell out at our feet and sprawled across the floor. Several tendrils went snaking over the

linoleum. The speed with which this happened was scary. If you'da blinked, you'da missed it, as my father might have said. Sandra screamed, and when Herb put his arms around her shoulders, she didn't seem to mind a bit.

Bill stepped forward and drew his leg back, apparently meaning to kick the rapidly snaking ivy-branches back into the janitor's closet. Or to try. Roger grabbed his shoulder. "Don't do that! Leave it be! It doesn't mean to hurt us! Can't you feel that? Don't you know from the smell?"

Bill stopped, so I guess he did. We watched as several tendrils of ivy climbed up the wall of the corridor. A few of these began to explore the gray steel sides of the water fountain, and when I left the office tonight, the fountain was pretty much buried. It looks as if those of us who like a drink of water every now and then during the course of the day are going to be buying Evian at Smiler's from now on.

Sandra squatted down and held out her hand, the way you might hold your hand out for a strange dog to sniff. I didn't like to see her that way, not while she was so close to the green avalanche we'd let out of the janitor's closet. In its shadow, so to speak. I reached out to pull her back, but Roger stopped me. He had a queer little smile on his face.

"Let her," he said.

A tendril as thick as a branch detached itself from the nearly solid clump of green bulging through the doorway. It reached out to her, trembling, seeming almost to sniff its way to her. It slid around her wrist and she gasped. Herb started forward and Roger yanked him back. "Leave her alone! It's all right!" he said.

"Do you swear?"

Roger's lips were pressed together so tightly they were almost gone. "No," he said in a small voice. "But I think."

"It is all right," Sandra said dreamily. She watched as the tendril slid delicately up her bare arm in a spiral of green and brown, seeming to caress her bare skin as it went. It looked like some exotic snake. "It says it's a friend."

"That's what the Pilgrims told the Indians," Bill said bleakly.

"It says it loves me," she said, now sounding almost ecstatic. We watched as the tip of the moving tendril slipped under the short sleeve of her blouse. A small green leaf near the tip went under next, lifting the cloth a bit. It was like watching some new kind of Hindu fakir at work, a plant charmer instead of a snake charmer. "It says it loves all of us. And it says..." Another tendril snaked loosely around one of her knees, then slipped tenderly down her calf in a loose coil.

"It says one of us is missing," Herb said. I looked around and saw that Herb's shoes had disappeared. He was standing ankle-deep in ivy.

Roger and I walked to the closet's doorway and stood there with the leaves brushing the fronts of our coats. I thought how easy it would be for that thing to grab us by the ties. A couple of long hard yanks and presto—a pair of editors strangled by their own cravats. Then several coils of ivy wrapped themselves around my wrists in loose bracelets, and all those paranoid, fearful thoughts dropped away.

Now, sitting at my apartment desk and pounding away at my old typewriter (also smoking like a furnace again, I'm sorry to say), I can't remember exactly what came next...except that it was warm and comforting and quite a bit more than pleasant. It was lovely, like a warm bath when your back aches, or chips of ice when your mouth is hot and your throat is sore.

What an outsider would have seen, I don't know. Probably not much, if Tina Barfield was telling the truth when she said no one could see it but us; probably just five slightly scruffy editors, four of them on the youngish side (and Herb, who's pushing fifty, would look young at a more respectable publisher's conference table, where the ages of most editors seem to range between sixty-five and dead), standing around the door of the janitor's closet.

What we saw was it. The plant. Zenith the common ivy. It had now expanded (and relaxed) all around us, feeling along the corridor with its tendrils and climbing the walls with its rhizomes, as eager and frisky as a colt let out of the stable on a warm May morning. It had both of Sandra's arms, it had my wrists, it had Bill and Herb by the feet. Roger had grown a loose green necklace, and didn't seem worried about it at all.

We saw it and we experienced it. The physical fact of it and the reassuring mental warmth of it. It experienced us in the same fashion, united us in a way that turned us into a small but perfect mental choir. And yes, I am saying exactly what I seem to be saying, that while we stood there in the grip of those many thin but tough tendrils, we shared a telepathic link. We saw into each others' hearts and minds. I don't know why I should find that so amazing after all the other stuff that's happened—the fact that yesterday I saw a dead man reading a newspaper, for instance—but I do.

Zenith had asked about Riddley. It seemed to have a special interest in the man who had taken it in, given it a place to grow, and enough water to allow it a fragile purchase on life. We assured it (him?) in our choir voice that Riddley was fine, Riddley was away but would be back soon. The plant seemed satisfied. The tendrils holding our arms and legs (not to mention Roger's neck) let go. Some dropped to the floor, some simply withdrew.

"Come on," Roger said quietly. "Let's go."

But for a moment we stood there, looking at it wonderingly. I thought of Tina Barfield telling us to just give it a DDT shower when we were done with it, when we'd gotten what we needed from it, and for a moment I was actually glad she was dead. Coldhearted bitch deserved to be dead, I thought. To talk about killing something that was so powerful and yet so obviously tame and friendly...profit-motive aside, that was just sick.

"All right," Sandra said at last. "Come on, you guys."

"I don't believe it," Bill said. "I see it but I don't believe it."

Except we knew he did. We'd seen it and felt it in his mind.

"What about the door?" Herb asked. "Open or closed?"

"Don't you dare close it," Sandra said indignantly. "You'll cut off some of its little branches if you do."

Herb stepped back from the door and looked at Bill. "Are you convinced, O Doubting Thomas?"

"You know I am," Bill said. "Don't rub it in, okay?"

"Nobody is going to rub anything in," Roger said brusquely.

"We've got more important things to do. Now come on."

He lead us back toward Editorial, smoothing his tie as he went and then tucking it into his belt. I paused just once, at the jog in the

corridor, and looked back. I was convinced that it would be gone, that the whole thing had been some sort of wacky five-way hallucination, but it was still there, a green flood of leaves and a brownish tangle of limber vines, a good many now crawling up the wall.

"Amazing," Herb breathed beside me.

"Yes," I said.

"And all that stuff that happened in Rhode Island? All that's true?"

"It's all true," I agreed.

"Come on," Roger called. "We've got a lot to talk about."

I started moving, but then Herb caught my arm. "I almost wish old Iron-Guts wasn't dead," he said. "Can you imagine how something like this would blow his mind?"

I didn't respond to this, but I was thinking plenty, most of it having to do with Tina Barfield's note.

Back in Roger's office again, Roger behind his desk, me in the chair beside it, Sandra in her chair, Bill and Herb once more sitting on the carpet with their legs stretched out and their backs to the wall.

"Any questions?" Roger asked, and we all shook our heads. Someone reading this diary—someone outside of these events, in other words—would no doubt find that incredible: how in God's name could there be no questions? How could we have avoided spending at least the rest of the morning speculating about the invisible world? More likely the rest of the day?

The answer's simple: it was because of the mind-meld. We had come to a mutual understanding few people are able to manage. And there's also the small fact that we have a business to save—our meal-tickets, if you want to get down and dirty about it. Getting down and dirty seems easier for me since Ruth kissed me off—perhaps the prolixity will go next. I can hope, anyway. I'll tell you something about the fabled meal-ticket, since I'm on the subject. You worry when you're in danger of losing it, but you don't become truly frantic until you're in danger of losing it and you realize it could possibly be saved. If, that is, you move very quickly and don't stumble. Fatalism is a crutch. I never knew that before, but I do now.

And one more thing about the "no questions" thing. People can get used to anything—quadriplegia, hair loss, cancer, even finding

out your beloved only daughter just joined the Hare Krishnas and is currently sparechanging business travelers at Stapleton International in a pair of fetching orange pajamas. We adapt. An invisible, telepathy-inducing ivy is just one more thing to get used to. We'll worry about the ramifications later, maybe. Right then we had a pair of books to work on: World's Sickest Jokes and The Devil's General.

The only one of us to have problems getting with the program was Herb Porter, and his distraction had nothing to do with Zenith the common ivy. At least not directly. He kept shooting reproachful, bewildered glances at Sandra, and thanks to the mind-meld, I knew why. Bill and Roger did, too. It seems that over the last half-year or so, Mr. Riddley Walker of Bug's Anus, Alabama has been waxing more than the floors here at Zenith House.

"Herb?" Roger asked. "Are you with us or agin us?"

Herb kind of snapped around, like a man who's just been awakened from a doze. "Huh? Yeah! Of course!"

"I don't think you are, not entirely. And I want you with us. The good bark Zenith has sprung one hell of a nasty leak, in case you haven't noticed. If we're going to keep her from sinking, we need all hands at the pumps. No frigging in the rigging. Do you take my point?"

"I take it," Herb said sullenly.

Sandra, meanwhile, gave him a look which contained nothing but perplexity. I think she knows what Herb knows (and that we all know). She just can't understand why in God's name Herb would care. Men don't understand women, I know that's true...but women deeply don't understand men. And if they did, they probably wouldn't have much to do with us.

"All right," Roger said, "suppose you tell us what, if anything, is being done with the General Hecksler book."

To Roger's delight and amazement, a great deal has been done on the Iron-Guts bio, and in a very short time. While Roger and I were in Central Falls, Herb Porter was one busy little bee. Not only has he engaged Olive Barker as the ghost on The Devil's General, he's gotten her solemn promise to deliver a sixty thousand-word first draft in just three weeks.

To say that I was surprised by this quick action would be drawing it mild. In my previous experience, Herb Porter only moves fast when Riddley comes down the hall yelling, "Dey's doughnuts in de kitchenette, and dey sho are fine! Dey's doughnuts in de kitchenette, and dey sho are fine!"

"Three weeks, man, I don't know," Bill said dubiously. "Stroke aside, Olive's got this little problem." He mimed swallowing a handful of pills.

"That's the best part," Herb said. "Mademoiselle Barker is clean, at least for the time being. She's going to those meetings and everything. You know she was always the fastest on-demand writer we had when she was straight."

"Clean copy, too," I said. "At least it used to be."

"Can she stay clean for three weeks, do you think?"

"She'll stay clean," Herb said grimly. "For the next three weeks, I'm Olive Barker's personal sponsor. She gets calls three times a day. If I hear so much as a single slurred s, and I'm over there with a stomach-pump. And an enema bag."

"Please," Sandra said, grimacing.

Herb ignored her. "But that's not all. Wait."

He darted out, crossed the hall to the glorified closet that's his office (on the wall is a poster-sized photo of General Anthony Hecksler which Herb throws darts at when he's bored), and came back with a sheaf of paper. He looked uncharacteristically shy as he put them in Roger's hands.

Instead of looking at the manuscript—because of course that was what it was—Roger looked at Herb, eyebrows raised.

For a moment I thought Herb was having an allergic reaction, perhaps as a result of some skin sensitivity to ivy leaves. Then I realized he was blushing. I saw this, but the idea still seems foreign to me, like the idea of Clint Eastwood blubbering into his mommy's lap.

"It's my account of the Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers business," Herb said. "I think it's pretty good, actually. Only about thirty per cent of it is actually true—I never tackled Iron-Guts and brought him to his knees when he showed up here waving a knife, for instance..."

True enough, I thought, since Hecksler never showed up here at all, to the best of our knowledge.

"...but it makes good reading. I...I was inspired." Herb lowered his face for a moment, as if the idea of inspiration struck him as somehow shameful. Then he raised his head again and looked around at us defiantly. "Besides, the goddam loony's dead, and I don't expect any trouble from his sister, especially if we bring her into the tent to help with the book and slip her a couple of hundred for her...well, call it creative assistance."

Roger was looking through the pages Herb had handed him, pretty much ignoring this flood of verbiage. "Herb," he said. "There's...my goodness gracious, there's thirty-eight pages here. That's close to ten thousand words. When did you do it?"

"Last night," he said, looking down at the floor again. His cheeks were brighter than ever. "I told you, I was inspired."

Sandra and Bill looked impressed, but not as impressed as I felt. To the best of my knowledge, only Thomas Wolfe was a ten-thousand-a-day man. Certainly it overshadows my pitiful clackings on this Olivetti. And as Roger leafed through the pages again, I saw less than a dozen strikeouts and interlinings. God, he must have been inspired.

"This is terrific, Herb," Roger said, and there was no doubting the sincerity in his voice. "If the writing's okay—based on your memos and summaries I have every reason to think it will be—it's going to be the heart of the book." Herb flushed again, this time I think with pleasure.

Sandra was looking at his manuscript. "Herb, do you think writing that so fast...do you think it had anything to do with...you know..."

"Sure it did," Bill said. "Must have. Don't you think so, Herb?"

I could see Herb struggling, wanting to take credit for the ten thousand words that were going to form the dramatic heart of *The Devil's General*, and then (I swear this is true) I could sense his thoughts turning to the plant, to the spectacular richness of it when Bill Gelb yanked open the door and it came sprawling out of its closet.

"Of course it was the plant," he said. "I mean, it had to have been. I've never written anything that good in my life."

And I could guess who the hero of the piece would turn out to be, but I kept my mouth shut. On that subject, at least. On another one, I thought it prudent to open it.

"In Tina Barfield's letter to me," I said, "she told me that when we read about Carlos's death, not to believe it. Then she said, 'Like the General.' I repeat: 'Like the General.' "

"That is utter and complete bullshit," Herb said, but he sounded uneasy, and a lot of the color faded out of his cheeks. "The guy crawled into a goddamned gas oven and gave himself a Viking funeral. The cops found his gold teeth, each engraved with the number 7, for 7th Army. And if that's not enough, they also found the lighter Douglas MacArthur gave him. He never would have given that up. Never."

"So maybe he's dead," Bill said. "According to Roger and John, this guy Keen was dead, too, but he was still lively enough to read the used-car ads in the newspaper."

"Mr. Keen just had his heart torn out, though," Herb said. He spoke almost nonchalantly, as if getting your heart torn out was roughly the same as ripping a hangnail off on the trunk-latch of your car. "There wasn't anything left of Iron-Guts but ashes, teeth, and a few lumps of bone."

"There is, however, that tulpa business," Roger reminded him. All of us sitting around and discussing this stuff with perfect calmness, as though it were the plot of Anthony LaScorbia's newest big-bug book.

"What exactly is a tulpa?" Bill asked.

"I don't know," Roger said, "but I will tomorrow."

"You will?"

"Yes. Because you're going to research the subject at the New York Public Library before you go home tonight."

Bill groaned. "Roger, that's not fair! If there's a military-type tulpa out there, it's Herb's tulpa."

"Nevertheless, this particular bit of research is your baby," Roger said, and gave Bill a severe look. "Sandra's got the joke book and Herb's got the nut book. You owe me an inspiration. In the meantime, I expect you to check into the wonderful world of tulpas."

"What about him?" Bill asked sulkily. The him he was looking at was yours truly.

"John also has a project," Roger told him. "Don't you, John?"

"That I do," I replied, reminding myself again not to go home without diving back into the dusty atmosphere of the mailroom at least one more time. According to Tina, what I'd been looking for was in a purple box, on the bottom shelf, and way back in the corner.

No, not according to Tina.

According to OUIJA.

"It's time to go to work," Roger said, "but I want to make three suggestions before I turn you loose. The first is that you stay away from the janitor's closet, no matter how drawn to it you may feel. If the urge gets really strong, do what the alkie's do: call someone else who may have the same problem and talk about it until the urge goes away. Okay?"

His eyes swept us: Sandra once more sitting as prim and neat as a freshman coed at her first sorority social, Herb and Bill side by side on the floor, Mr. Stout and Mr. Narrow. Roger's baby blues touched me last. None of us said anything out loud, but Roger heard us just the same. That's the way it is at Zenith House right now. It's amazing, and most of the world would no doubt find it flat unbelievable, but that's the way it is. For better or worse. And because what he heard was what he wanted, Roger nodded and sat back, relaxing a bit.

"Second thing. You may feel the urge to tell someone outside this office about what has happened here...what is happening. I urge you with all my heart not to do it."

He doesn't have to worry about it. We won't, none of us. It's ordinary human nature to want to confide a great and wonderful secret to which you have become privy, but not this time. I didn't need telepathy to know that; I saw it in their eyes. And I remembered something rather unpleasant from my childhood. There was this kid who lived up the street from me, not the world's nicest one by any means—Tommy Flannagan. He was skinny as a rail. He had a sister, maybe a year or two younger, who was much heavier. And sometimes he would chase her until she cried, yelling Greedy-guts, greedy-guts, greedy-greedy-greedy-guts! I don't know if poor little

Jenny Flannagan was a greedy-guts or not, but I know that's what we looked like right then, the five of us: a bunch of greedy-guts editors sitting around in Roger Wade's office.

That look haunts me, because I'm sure it was on my face, too. The plant feels good. It gives off good smells. Its touch isn't slimy, not repulsive; it feels like a caress. A life-giving caress. Sitting here now, my eyes drooping after another long day (and I still have reading to do, if I can ever finish this entry), I wish I could feel it again. I know it would revive me, cheer me up and rev me up. And yet, some drugs also make you feel good, don't they? Even while they're killing you, they're making you feel good. Maybe that's nonsense, a little Puritanical holdover like a race memory, or maybe it's not. I just don't know. And for the time being, I guess it doesn't matter. Still...

Greedy-guts, greedy-guts, greedy-greedy-greedy-guts.

There was a moment of silence in the office and then Sandra said, "No one's going to spill the beans, Roger."

Bill: "It's not just about saving our jobs in this lousy pulp-mill, either."

Herb: "We want to stick it to that prick Enders as bad as you do, Roger. Believe it."

"Okay," Roger said. "I do. Which brings me to the last thing. John has been keeping a diary."

I almost jumped out of my seat and started to ask how he knew that— I hadn't told him—then realized I didn't have to. Thanks to Zenith down there in Riddley Walker country, we know a lot about each other now. More than is healthy for us, probably.

"It's a good idea," Roger went on. "I suggest you all start keeping diaries."

"If we're really going to crash a bunch of new books into production, I don't expect to have time to wash my own hair," Sandra grumbled. As if she'd been put in charge of editing a newly discovered James Joyce manuscript instead of World's Sickest Jokes.

"Nevertheless, I strongly suggest you find time for this," Roger said. "Written journals might not be worth much if things turn out the way we hope, but they could be invaluable if things don't...well, let's

just say that we don't have any clear idea of what forces we're playing with here."

"He who takes a tiger by the tail dares not let go," Bill said. He spoke in a kind of baleful mutter.

"Nonsense," Sandra said. "It's only a plant. And it's good. I felt that very strongly."

"A lot of people thought Adolf Hitler was just the bee's knees," I said, which earned me a sharp stare from the senorita.

"I keep going back to the thing Barfield said about the plant needing blood to really get rolling," Roger said. "The blood of evil or the blood of insanity. I don't really understand that, and I don't like it. The idea that we're raising a vampire vine in the janitor's closet..."

"And no longer just in the janitor's closet," I added, earning myself dirty looks from Sandra and Herb, plus a puzzled, rather uneasy one from Bill.

"I'd just as soon it didn't sample blood of any kind, that's all," Roger said. "Things are rolling quite enough to suit our purposes right now." He cleared his throat. "I think we're playing with high explosives here, people, and in a case like that, record-keeping can come in handy. Notes and jottings are really all I'm asking for."

"If they were ever read in court, journals about this stuff would probably end us up in Oak Cove," Herb said. "That's the nut-farm old Iron-Guts broke out of, just in case any of you forgot."

"Better Oak Cove than Attica," I said.

"That's comforting, John," Sandra said. "That's very comforting."

"Don't worry, sweetheart," Bill said, reaching out and giving her ankle a pat. "I think they send the ladies to Ossining."

"Yes," she said. "Where I can discover the joys of Sapphic love with a three-hundred-pound biker chick."

"Stop it, all of you," Roger said impatiently. "It's a precaution, that's all. There's really no downside to this. Not if we're careful."

It wasn't until then that I realized just how desperately Roger wants to turn Zenith House around, now that he has the chance. How much he wants to save his reputation now that there's a real chance to save it. I thought again of that rabbit general yelling, "Come back, you fools! Dogs aren't dangerous!"

I believe that, in the days and weeks ahead, Roger Wade will bear watching. The others, too. And myself, of course.

Maybe myself most of all.

"I think I'm ready for a little vacation in Oak Cove, anyway," Bill said. "I feel as if I'm reading you guys' minds, and that's got to be crazy."

No one said anything. No one really needed to.

Dear diary, we're past that point.

I spent the rest of the day recovering my more-or-less normal existence. I removed a long, dull dinner-party scene from Olive's latest Windhover opus and, mindful of the late great Tina Barfield, left in a rough-sex scene that really is rough (at one point a blunt object is inserted in an unlikely place with unlikely, ecstatic results). I tracked down a culinary consultant through the New York Public Library, and she has agreed, for the sum of four hundred dollars (which we can barely afford) to go through the recipes in Janet Freestone-Love's *Your New Astral Cookbook* and try to assure me that there's nothing poisonous in there. Cookbooks are invariably moneymakers, even the bad ones, but few people outside this crazy business realize they can also be dangerous; fuck up a few ingredients and people can die. Ludicrous, but it happens. I went to lunch with Jinky Carstairs, who is novelizing the lesbo-vampire piece of shit we're stuck with (burgers at Burger Heaven, how chi-chi) and had a drink after work with Rodney Slavinsky, who writes the Coldeye Denton westerns under the name of Bart I. Straight. The Coldeyes don't do diddly-dick in the U.S. market, but for some reason they've found an audience in France, Germany, and Japan. We share in those rights. Greedy-guts, greedy-guts.

Before meeting with Rodney—who is one gay cowpoke, pardner—I went back down to the mailroom, stepping over a twisted, twined mat of ivy branches and stems to get there. It's possible to do that without actually treading on any, for which I am grateful. The last thing I needed at three in the afternoon was the pained scream of a psychic ivy suffering a bad case of stompie-toes.

Mostly, Zenith appears to be growing up the wall on either side of the janitor's cubby, creating a complex pattern of green and brown, through which the cream-colored wallboard shows in pleasant

geometric patterns. I didn't hear it sighing this time, but I could swear I heard it breathing, warm and deep and comforting, just within the range of audibility. And again there was a smell, this time not coffee but honeysuckle. I also have fond childhood memories of that smell; it surrounded the library where I spent a great many happy hours as a boy. And as I passed, one strand of ivy reached out and touched my cheek. Not just a touch, either. It was a caress. One great thing I have discovered about keeping a diary: I can be honest here if nowhere else, honest enough in this case to say that that leafy touch made me think of Ruth, who used to touch me in just that way.

I stood perfectly quiet while that delicate bit of stem slipped up to my temple, traced my eyebrow, and then fell away. Before it did, I had a very clear thought, and I'm positive it came from Zenith rather than from my own mind:

Find the purple box.

Find it I did, exactly where the Barfield woman—or her Ouija board —said I would, way back in the corner on the bottom shelf, behind a pair of huge padded mailers oozing out flakes of stuffing. It is the sort of box that medium-grade typing paper comes in. The sender—one James Saltworthy of Queens—simply taped the box shut and slapped a mailing sticker over the ragland bond brand name and logo. His address is in the upper lefthand corner, on another sticker. I think it's sort of amazing that the post office accepted such a package and managed to get it here, but they did, and now it's all mine. Sitting on the floor of the mailroom, smelling dust and honeysuckle, I broke the tape and lifted the box-lid. Inside is about four hundred pages of copy, I should judge, under a title page which reads

THE LAST SURVIVOR By James Saltworthy

And, down in the far corner:

Selling North American Rights
Literary Agent: Self
Approx 195,000 Words

There was also a letter, addressed this way: TO THE EDITOR—
OR WHOEVER SENDS THESE THINGS BACK WHERE THEY
CAME FROM. As with the

Tina Barfield letter, I have attached it. I'm not going to critique or analyze it here, and there's probably no reason to do so at all. Writers who have been trying to get their books published over a long period of time—five years, sometimes ten years, and once in my experience a full fifteen years which encompassed ten unpublished novels, three of them very long—share a similar tone, which I would describe as a thin coat of self-pitying cynicism stretched over a well of growing despair and, in many cases, hysteria. In my imagination, which is probably too vivid, these people always seem like miners who have somehow survived a terrible cave-in, people trapped in the dark and screaming Is there anyone out there? Please, is anyone out there? Can anyone hear me?

What I thought as I folded the letter back into the envelope was that if ever there was a name that sounds as if it should belong to a writer, that name is James Saltworthy. My next thought was to just put the top back on the box and leave whatever was under the title page, good or bad, until I got home. But there's a little Pandora in most of us, I think, and I couldn't resist a look. And before I knew about it, I'd read the first eight or nine pages. It reads that easily, that naturally. It can't be as good as it seems to be, I know that, or it wouldn't be here. And yet a part of me whispers that that might not be true. He is serving as his own agent, and writers who do that are like self-defending lawyers: they have fools for clients.

The pages I read were good enough so I have burned to read the rest ever since leaving the office; my mind keeps going back to Tracy Nordstrom, the charming psycho who is apparently going to be Saltworthy's main character. There's a war going on in my head, the armies of Hope on one side, those of Cynicism on the other. This conflict, I feel, is going to be decided in the two hours between now and midnight, when I really must turn in. But before leaving the

typewriter chair in the kitchen for my reading chair in the living room area of my apartment, I must add one more thing.

When I stood up with Saltworthy's purple box under my arm, I noticed that Zenith the common ivy has burst through the wall between the janitor's closet and the mailroom in at least three dozen places. There are ten steel shelves mounted on that wall, plain gray utilitarian things which are now perfectly empty—in my post-Ruth orgy of work, I cleaned them out completely, without finding a single thing even remotely worth publishing. In most cases it's not even incompetency—boring narration and dull prose— but outright illiteracy. Not one but several of the manuscripts which filled those gray shelves were scrawled in pencil.

But all that's to the side. My point here is just that I could see that wall, because the stacks and jumbles of boxes, bags, and mailers are gone. The cream-colored sheetrock has now been pierced by a galaxy of green stars. In many cases the tips of the ivy's branches have only begun to penetrate, but in others, long and fragile snakelets have already slithered through. They are growing along the empty steel shelves, meeting, twining, climbing, descending. Staking out new territory, in other words. Most of the leaves are still tightly furled, like sleeping infants, but a few have already begun to open. I have a strong suspicion that within a week or two, a month at the outside, the mailroom is going to be as full of Zenith as Riddley's cubbyhole is now.

Which leads to an amusing but perfectly valid question: where are we going to put Riddley when he comes back? And what, exactly, will he be doing?

Enough. Time to see exactly what's in James Saltworthy's box.

April 2, 1981

Dear God. Oh my dear God. I feel like someone who has dipped his fishing line into a little country brook and has managed to hook Moby Dick. I had actually dialed the first five digits of Roger Wade's number before realizing that it's two o'clock in the fucking morning. It'll have to wait, but I don't know how I can wait. I feel like I'm going

to explode. Names and book-titles keep dancing through my head. The Naked and the Dead, by Norman Mailer. Raintree County, by Ross Lockridge. Peyton Place, by Grace Metalious. The Godfather, by Mario Puzo. The Exorcist, by William Peter Blatty. Jaws, by Peter Benchley. Different kinds of books, different kinds of writers, some good, some only competent, but all of them creating a kind of bottled lightning, stories that millions of people simply had to read. Saltworthy's Last Survivor fits very neatly into this group. No goddam doubt about it. I don't think I've found a Masterpiece, but I know I've found The Next Big Thing.

If we let this get away, I'll shoot myself.

No.

I'll walk into Riddley's closet and tell Zenith to strangle me.

My God, what an incredible book. What an incredible story.

February 19, 1981

Editorial Staff and/or Mailroom Crew Zenith House
490 Park Avenue South New York, NY 10017

TO THE EDITOR—OR WHOEVER SENDS THESE THINGS BACK
WHERE
THEY COME FROM,

My name is James Saltworthy, and the attached albatross is a book I wrote. *Last Survivor* is a novel that was set five years in the future when I wrote it in 1977, and now by God that future's almost here!

Looks like the joke's on me. This novel, which has been well-reviewed by both my wife and my department head (I teach 5th grade English at Our Lady of Hope in Queens), has been to a total of twenty-three publishers. I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but since Zenith House is this manuscript's final stop on what has been a long and exceedingly dull train-ride to nowhere, I have decided to "let it all hang out," as we used to say back in the Sexy Sixties, when we all thought we had at least one major novel in us.

I would guess that at several of the publishing houses where *Last Survivor* visited—sort of like an unwelcome in-law that you get rid of as soon as possible—it was actually read (*partially* read might be a better way to put it). From Doubleday came the response "We are looking for more upbeat fiction." Cheers! From Lippincott: "The writing is good, the characters distasteful, the storyline frankly unbelievable." Mazel tov! From Putnam's came that old favorite: "We no longer look at unagented material." Hooray! Agents, schmagents. My first one died on me—he was eighty-one and senile. The second was a crook. The third told me he loved my novel, then offered to sell me some Amway.

I am enclosing \$5.00 for return postage. If you feel like using it to send my story back to me after you finish not reading it, that would be fine. If you want to use it to buy a couple of beers, all I can say is cheers! Mazel tov! Hooray! Meantime, I see that Rosemary Rogers, John Saul, and John Jakes are still selling well, so I guess American literature is doing fine and forging bravely forward toward the 21st century. Who needs Saltworthy?

I wonder if there's money in writing instruction manuals. There certainly isn't much in teaching fifth graders, some of whom carry switchblade knives and sell drugs around the corner. I suppose they wouldn't believe that at Doubleday, would they?

Cordially,

Jim Saltworthy

73 Aberdeen Road

Queens, New York 11432

From Roger Wade's Office Answering Machine, April 2, 1981

3:42 A.M.: Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House.

I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting,

you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America.

The

number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

Roger, this is John, your old Central Falls safari buddy. I'm calling at quarter of four in the morning, April 2nd. I won't be in today. I've just finished the most incredible fucking book of my life. Holy God, boss, I feel like someone put my brain on a damn rocket sled. We need to be extremely clever about this—the book needs hardcover pub, a real all-the-bells-andwhistles launch, and as you know, Apex

has no hardcover house. Like most companies that get into the book biz, they don't have a clue. But we better. We just better have a damn clue. Who do you know at the better hardcover houses? And who do you trust? If we lose the paperback rights to this in the course of getting Saltworthy a hardcover publisher, I'll kill myself. I

3:45 A.M.: Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House.

I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting, you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America. The number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

Motormouth John, even on the goddam answering machine, right, Roger? I can't even remember what I was talking about. I'm just giddy. I'm going to bed. I don't know if I can get to sleep or not. If I can't, maybe I'll come in to work, anyway. Probably in my fucking pajamas! [Laughter] If

not, I'll do a Manuscript Report first thing on Friday, okay? Please don't let us fuck this up, Roger. Please. Okay, I'm going to bed.

3:48 A.M.: Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House.

I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting, you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America. The

number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

Jesus, Roger. Wait til you read this fucker. Just you wait.

3:50 A.M. Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House. I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting, you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America. The number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

If anyone does anything to that plant, they're going to die. You got that? They will fucking...die.

ZENITH HOUSE MANUSCRIPT REPORT

EDITOR: John Kenton

DATE: April 3, 1981

MANUSCRIPT TITLE: Last Survivor

AUTHOR'S NAME: James Saltworthy

FICTION/NONFICTION: F

ILLUSTRATIONS: N

AGENT: None

RIGHTS OFFERED: Author offers North American but doesn't know what he's talking about, so TBD

SUMMARY: This novel is set in the year 1982, but was originally written in 1977. To keep to the writer's intention, the time would have to be changed to at least 1986, 1987, or five years from time of pub.

The basic premise is unique and exciting. A network fading in the ratings (auth calls it UBA, United Broadcasting of America, but it feels like CBS) comes up with a unique game show idea. Twenty-six people are stranded on a desert island, where they must survive for six months. Three trained camera operators are among the contestants. In fact each contestant has a "job" on the island, and the camera operators have to train several contestants in use of the equipment. Other contestants are "farmers," "fishers," "hunters," and so on. The idea is that each week for twenty-six weeks, the contestants as a group must vote one person off the island and into exile. First exile gets one dollar for his trouble. The second gets ten. The third gets one hundred. The fourth gets five hundred. And the last survivor gets a cool million. I know this idea sounds wonky, but Saltworthy actually makes us believe that such a program might find its way onto the air someday, if a network was desperate enough for ratings (and tasteless enough, but on network TV that has never been a problem).

What makes the story brilliant is Saltworthy's delineation of character. TV viewers see the contestants in very simple ways—the Good Young Mother, the Cheerful Athlete, the Rugged Old Fellow, the Tough But Religious Widow. Underneath, however, they are extremely complex. And one of them, a personable young truck driver named Tracy Nordstrom, is actually a dangerous psychopath who will do anything to win the million dollars. In one breathlessly orchestrated scene early in the book, he induces food-poisoning in the Rugged Old Fellow, substituting hallucinogenic mushrooms for the harmless ones gathered by one of the farmers, a sweet exhippie who is heartbroken by her perceived mistake and actually attempts suicide (which the network covers up, as Last Survivor has become a monster hit). Ironically, Nordstrom is the most liked contestant, both by the others on the island and by the huge TV audience. (Saltworthy actually made this reader believe such a show could become a national obsession.)

Only one person, Sally Stamos (the Good Young Mother), suspects how evil Tracy Nordstrom really is. Eventually Nordstrom realizes she's onto him, and sets out to silence her. Will Sally be able to convince the others what's happening? Will she ever get back to her kids?

Saltworthy builds suspense like an old pro, and I simply couldn't put the book down...or turn the pages fast enough. The novel climaxes with a huge storm that accomplishes what until then has just been a cynical TV illusion: the contestants are cut off from everything, real castaways instead of pretend ones. What we've got here is a high concept hybrid between *And Then There Were None* and *Lord of the Flies*. I don't want to put the conclusion in this summary; it needs to be read and savored in the author's own vivid prose. Let me just say that it is so shocking that all the editors who have read it so far have dropped the book like a hot potato. But it works, and I think an American reading public that could accept the supernatural horrors of *Rosemary's Baby* and the criminous ones of *The Godfather* will embrace it, recommend it to their friends, and talk about it for years.

EDITORIAL RECOMMENDATION: We've got to publish this. It's the best and most commercial unpublished novel it has ever been my pleasure to read. If ever there was a book that could put a publisher on the map, this is the one. John Kenton

from THE SAKRED BOO K O F C ARLOS

SAKRED MONTH OFAPRA (Entry #77)

Time has almost come. Stars and planets almost right, praise Demeter.

GOOD, as my own time is short. The traitor bitch Barfield disposed of,

spell worked and plane went down. No problem there, praise Abbalah,

but in the end she double-crossed me just the same. Thieving bitch took

my Talisman (it was an Owl's Beak actually). I have looked everywhere

but my Beak is gone. I bet she had it in her pocket when the plane went

down. Burned! Nothing but ASHES!! With my Protection gone, my

Time is short. Never mind, am tired of being Carlos anyway. Time for

next stage but first will rid myself of Poop-Shit Kenton. I'll teach you what

rejection REALLY MEANS, you Judas! Let plant take care of rest

of them when the Innocent Blood comes.

I have been all around the neighborhood where Kenton works. All

office buildings except for small market across the street. Crazy old Bum

outside. Woman with a Guitar. Plays almost as bad as Poop-Shit

Kenton edits books. Ha! Thought of using her, Innocent Blood, but also

Crazy, so no good. "You can't work wood if the wood won't work" as

Mr. Keen used to tell me. Wise Man in his way.

A few other "regulars" on the street it looks like. One fellow selling

watches and etc. at a folding table. No problem but weekend would be

best. I'll find a way to get inside, best would be to follow someone who's

"pulling a little overtime." I'll sneak upstairs to their offices and just "lie

low" as they say until Monday morning. Plan to cut Poop-Shit Kenton's

throat myself with Sakred Sacrifice Knife. Take his heart if poss. When

his blood flows down my hands I can die happy, praise Abbalah, praise

Demeter. Only no death! Only move on to next level of existence.

COME DEMETER!

COME GREEN!

SAKRED MONTH OF APRA (Entry #78)

Must beware of one thing. I am still having dreams of "The

General." Who is "The General." Why does he think about supposi

tories. Why does he think of Designated Juice. What is Designated

Juice. Perhaps a holy drink like gooseberry bane or nutmeg milk. I don't

know. Sense danger. Meantime have found a cheap hotel about 3 blocks

from Z.H. Cannot hang around any longer. 1. Might attract wrong

attention. 2. Can no longer stand Guitar-playing Woman Bum.

Someone ought to wrap her guitar around her neck.
Boy she plays like

Shit. Maybe it's John Kenton in disguise! Haaaa
haaaaa haaaa.

Weekend almost here. Trials & tribs almost over.
Kenton you will

pay for rejecting my book and then sikking the Police
on me you Crap

Head.

Who is "The General." Who can he be.

Never mind. Weekend almost here.

COME GREEN!

From Sandra Jackson's Journal

April 3 1981 I haven't kept a journal since I was an eleven-year-old girl with mosquitobumps for breasts and a love-life that consisted of moaning over Paul Newman and Robert Redford with my friends Elaine and Phyllis, but here goes. I'm going to skip writing about the plant, as I'm sure John and Roger will have covered that pretty completely (having read a few of John's memos, probably TOO completely). A lot of what I DO have to say, at least in this entry, is of a personal nature, not to say of a sexual nature. I am no longer that little girl, you see! I thought long and hard about whether I should write this down, and finally I decided "why not!" It will probably never be seen by anyone but me anyway, and even if it is, so what? Am I supposed to be ashamed of my sexuality in general, or my attraction to the killingly handsome Riddley Walker in particular? I think neither. I am a modern woman, hear me roar, and see no reason to be ashamed of a. my intellect b. my workplace ambitions (which go a lot higher than the shithole known as Zenith House, believe-youme) or c. my sexuality. I'm not afraid of my sexuality, you see—not to talk about it, and certainly not to let it out for the more-than-occasional walk in the park. I said as much to Herb Porter when he confronted me yesterday. Just thinking about it makes me mad (it also makes me laugh, I'm relieved to say). As if he had the RIGHT to confront me. Me Tarzan, you Jane, this chastity belt.

Herb came into my office around quarter of ten without so much as a byyour-leave, closed the door, and just stood there glowering at me.

"Come on in, Herb," said I, "and why don't you close the door so we can talk in private."

Not so much as a hint of a smile. He just went on glowering. I think I was supposed to be terrified. Certainly Herb Porter is big enough to terrify; he must stand six-one and weigh two hundred and

fifty, and given his high color (he was as red as the side of a fire truck yesterday morning, and I'm not exaggerating one little bit), I worry about his blood pressure and his heart. He also talks big, but I was around when the hate-mail started coming in from General Hecksler, and those letters made Herb small in a hurry. The way he looked on Wednesday, actually, when John suggested that, all evidence to the contrary, General Hecksler STILL might not be dead.

"You've been screwing Riddley," Herb said. This was probably supposed to come out sounding like the accusation of an Old Testament prophet, but it emerged in an unimpressive dry squawk. He was still standing just inside the door, his hands opening and closing. With his green leisure suit and red face, he looked like an advertisement for Christmas in hell. "You've been screwing the goddamned JANITOR!"

Last week that might have put me off my stride, but things around here have changed since last week. I think the New Order will take some getting used to. What I'm talking about is TELEPATHY, my dear little journal. Of course. ESP. Absolutely. MIND READING. No doubt about it. In other words, I knew what was on Herb's mind from the moment he stepped through my door, and that pretty well did away with the shock value.

"Why don't you say the rest of it?" I asked.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Going into that patented Herb Porter bluster of his.

"Yeah, you do," I said. "That I'm fucking the janitor bothers you a lot less than the fact I'm fucking the BLACK janitor. The HANDSOME black janitor."

From the first *fuck*. I had him on the run. I should be ashamed to tell you how much I enjoyed it, but I'm not.

"The fact is, Herbert," said I, "he's hung like a stallion. Such equipment is not the sole property of black men, racist canards to the contrary, but few men, white *or* black, know how to use what God and genetics have given them. Riddley does. And he's livened up many a dull day in this dump, believe me."

"You can't . . . I won't . . . he isn't . . ." Then he just spluttered. But, thanks, to the aforementioned New Order at good old Zenith House, there are no more ellipses around here. For better or worse,

every thought is finished. What I could not hear with my ears I could hear in my mind.

You can't . . . DO THIS!

I won't . . . ALLOW IT!

He isn't . . . OUR KIND OF PERSON!

As if Herb Porter, the Ranting Republican, was MY type of person. (He is, of course, in some important ways: a. he's an editor b. he loves books c. he is sharing the bizarre experience of Life With Ivy.)

"Herb," I said.

"What if you catch a disease?" expostulated Herb. "What if he talks about you to his friends, when they're sitting on their stoops and drinking their GIQs?"

"Herb," I said.

"What if he's got a drug habit? Friends who are criminals? What if . . . "

And there was something sweet at the end of that ellipsis, something that made my heart melt a little. For a racist blowhard Republican, Herb Porter really isn't a bad guy.

What if . . . HE'S MEAN TO YOU?

That was how the last ellipsis ended, and after that Herb just stood there with his shoulders slumped, looking at me.

"Come here," I said, and patted the chair behind my desk. I had about a billion rotten jokes about dead babies, nympho nuns, and stupid Europeans to go through ("Polish Public Service Announcement: It's ten o'clock! Do *you* know what time it is?"), but I felt very close to Herb just then. I know how strange that would sound to John, who probably thinks Herb Porter is from another world (Planet Reagan), but Herb isn't. Herb Porter is just one more fucked-up Earthling.

Know what I really think? I think telepathy changes everything. Simply EVERYTHING.

"Listen to me," said I. "The first thing is that Riddley is more likely to catch something from me than me from him. He's the healthiest person in this office, that's my guess. Certainly he's in the best shape. The second thing is that he's more like us than you think.

He's working on a book. I know because I saw one of his notebooks one day. It was on his desk, and I peeked."

"Impossible!" Herb snapped. "The idea of the JANITOR writing a BOOK . . . especially the janitor in THIS PLACE . . . !"

"The third thing is that I doubt very much if he sits on his stoop, drinking GIQs with his friends. Riddley has a wonderful little apartment in Dobbs Ferry, I had the privilege of being there once, and I don't think they're much for drinking on stoops in that neighborhood."

"I believe Riddley's Dobbs Ferry address is a convenient fiction," said Herb in his most pompous oh-dear-I-seem-to-have-a-stick-up-my-ass voice. "If he took you to a place up there, I doubt like hell it was HIS place. As for the supposed book, how would a novel by Riddley Walker start? 'Come on ovah heah, I'se gwineter tell y'all a story?'"

An extremely hateful thing to say, but with almost no sting in it. Thanks to Zenith, whose soothing atmosphere now absolutely pervades our offices, I knew that what Herb really felt just then was stunned surprise . . . and, inadequacy. I think that his subconscious mind has been aware for a long time that there's more to Riddley than meets the eye. I also have reason to believe that Herb and inadequacy go together like a horse and carriage, as the song says. At least until yesterday. That's the part I'm getting to.

"The last thing is this," said I (as gently as I could). "If Riddley is mean to me, I will have to deal with it. And I can. I have before. I'm not a child, Herb. I'm a grown woman." And then I added: "I also know that you've been coming in here when I'm elsewhere and sniffing the seat of my chair. I really think that ought to stop, don't you?"

All the color fell out of his face, and for one moment I thought he was going to faint. I have an idea the telepathy may have saved him. Just as I knew what he'd come in to accuse me of, *he* knew—if only a few seconds in advance—that I'm now aware of his little hobby. So what I said didn't come to him out of a *completely* clear blue sky.

He started to puff up again, a little of the color came back into his face . . . and then he just wilted. It made me feel bad for him. When

guys like Herb Porter wilt, they are not a pretty sight. Think jellyfish washed up on the beach.

"I'm sorry," he said, and turned to go. "I'm very sorry. I've known for some time that I have . . . certain problems. I suppose it's time for me to seek professional help. I'll stay out of your way as much as possible in the meantime, and I'd thank you to stay out of mine."

"Herb," said I.

He had one hand on the doorknob. He didn't leave, but he didn't turn around, either. I sensed both hope and dread. God knows what he sensed coming from me.

"Herb," said I once more.

Nothing. Poor Herb just standing there with his shoulders hunched almost up to his ears and me knowing he was trying his hardest not to cry. People who make their living reading and writing are a lot of things, but immune to shame is not one of them.

"Turn around," said I.

Herb stood as he was a moment longer, gathering himself for the ordeal, and then he did as I asked. Instead of being flushed or pale all over his face, he had popped three spots as bright as rouge, one in each cheek and another running across his forehead in a thick line.

"We've got a lot of work to do around here," said I, "and it won't help to have this between us." I was speaking in my calmest, most reasonable voice, but I would be lying if I didn't say I also felt a pleasantly nasty tickle of excitement in my stomach. I have a pretty good idea of what Riddley thinks of me, and while he's not entirely right, he's not entirely wrong, either; I admit to certain rather low tastes. Well, so what? Some people eat tripe for breakfast. And all I can do here is stick to the facts. One of them is this: something about Sandra Georgette Jackson turned Herb on enough to inspire a number of covert seat-sniffing expeditions. And that has turned *me* on. Until yesterday I never thought of myself as the Eula Varner type, but . . .

"What are you talking about?" asked Herb gruffly, but those spots of red were spreading, flushing away his pallor. He knew perfectly well what I was talking about. We might as well have been wearing signs around our necks reading CAUTION! TELEPATHY AT WORK!

"I think we need to get beyond this," said I. "That's what I'm talking about. If having it off with me will do that, then I'm willing."

"Sort of like taking one for the team, eh?" said he. He was trying to sound nasty and sarcastic, but I wasn't fooled. And he *knew* I wasn't fooled.

All sort of delightful, in a weird way.

"Call it whatcha wanna," said I, "but if you're reading my mind as clearly as I'm reading yours, you know that's not all. I'm . . . let's say I'm interested. Feeling adventurous."

Still trying to be nasty, Herb said, "Let's say you have certain appetites, shall we? Playing truck-driver and hitchhiker with Riddley, for one. Boffing loudmouth co-worker Herb Porter, for another."

"Herb," said I, "do you want to stand there talking for the rest of the day, or do you want to do something?"

"It just so happens I have a certain problem," said Herb. He was nibbling away at his lower lip, and I saw he was breaking out in a sweat. I was enchanted. Is that terribly mean, do you think? "This is a problem that affects men of all ages and all walks of life. It—"

"Is it bigger than a breadbox, Herb?" said she in her best coy tone.

"Joke about it all you want," said Herb morosely. "Women can, because they just have to lie there and take it. Hemingway was right about that much"

"Yeah, when it comes to Limpdick Disease, a fair number of literary scholars seem to believe that Papa wrote the book," said she, now in her best nasty tone. Herb, however, paid no attention. I don't suppose he'd ever talked about impotency in his entire life (Real Men don't), and here it was, out of the closet and all dressed up for a night on the town.

"This little problem, which so many women seem to think is funny, has all but ruined my life," said Herb. "It wrecked my marriage, for one thing."

I thought, *I didn't know you were married*, and his thought came back right away, filling my head for just a moment: *It was a long time before I ended up in this shithole.*

We stared at each other, big-eyed.

"Wow," said he.

"Yeah," said she. "Go on, Herb. And while I can't speak for all women, this one has never laughed at impotency in her life."

Herb went on, a little more subdued. "Lisa left me when I was twentyfour, because I couldn't satisfy her as a woman. I never hated her for it; she gave it her best for two years. Couldn't have been easy. Since then, I think I've managed it . . . you know, *it* . . . maybe three times."

I thought about this and my mind boggled. Herb claims to be forty-three, but thanks to our ivy-induced ESP, I know he's forty-eight. His wife left him in search of greener pastures (and stiffer penises) half a lifetime ago. If he's only had successful sexual relations three times since then, that means he's gotten laid once every time Neptune circles the sun. Dear, dear, dear.

"There's a good medical reason for this," said he, with great earnestness. "From the age of ten to the age of fifteen—my sexually formative years—I was a paperboy, and—"

"Being a paperboy made you impotent?" I asked.

"Would you be quiet a minute?"

I mimed running a zipper shut across my lips and settled back in my chair. I like a good story as well as anyone; I just haven't seen many at Zenith House.

"I had a three-speed Raleigh bike," Herb said. "At first it was all right, and then one day while it was parked behind the school, some asshole came along and knocked off the seat." Herb paused dramatically. "That asshole ruined my life."

Do tell, I thought.

"Although," continued Herb, "my cheapskate father must also bear part of the blame."

Plenty of blame to go around, thought I. *Everyone gets a helping but you.*

"I heard that," he said sharply.

"I'm sure you did," said I. "Just go on with your story."

"The bike was obviously ruined, but would that cheapskate get me a new one?"

"No," I said. "Instead of a new bike, the cheapskate got you a new seat."

"That's right," said Herb., by this point too deep into his own narrative to realize I was stealing all of his best lines right out of his head. The truth is, Herb has been telling himself this story for a lot of years. For him, *My Dad Wrecked My Sex Life* is right up there with *The Democrats Ruined the Economy* and *Let's Fry the Addicts and End America's Drug Problem*. "Only the bike-store didn't have a Raleigh seat, and could my father wait for one? Oh no. I had papers to deliver. Also, the no-brand seat the guy showed him was ten bucks cheaper than the replacement Raleigh seat in the catalogue. Of course it was also a lot *smaller*. In fact, it was a *pygmy* bicycle seat. This little vinyl-covered triangle that shoved right up . . . well . . . "

"Up *there*," I said, wanting to be helpful (also wanting to get back to work at some point before July Fourth).

"That's right," he said. "Up *there*. For almost five years I rode all over Danbury, Connecticut with that goddamn pygmy bicycle seat pushing up into the most delicate region of a young boy's body. And look at me now." Herb raised his arms and then dropped them, as if to indicate what a pitiful, wasted creature he has become. Which is quite funny, when you consider the size of him. "These days my idea of a meaningful physical experience with a woman is going down to The Landing Strip, where I might stuff a five dollar bill into some girl's g-string."

"Herb," I said. "Do you get a hardon when you do that?"

He drew himself up, and I saw an interesting thing: Herb had a pretty damned good one right *then*. Hubba, hubba!

"That's a damned personal question, Sandra," said he in a grave and heavy tone of voice. "Pretty gosh-damn personal."

"Do you get a hardon when you masturbate?"

"Let me tell you a little secret," he said. "There are basketball players who can shoot it from downtown all over the court, nothing but net until practice is over and the buzzer goes off. Then every toss is a brick."

"Herb," said I, "let me tell *you* a little secret. The bicycle seat story has been around since bicycles were invented. Before that it was the mumps, or maybe a cross-eyed look from the village witch. And I don't need telepathy to know the answer to the questions I've been

asking. I've got eyes." And I dropped them to the area just below his belt. By then it looked like he had a pretty good-sized socket wrench hidden down there.

"Doesn't last," said he, and right then he looked so sad that I felt sad. Men are fragile creatures, when you get right down to it, the real animals in the glass menagerie. "Once the action starts, Mr. Johnson likes life a lot better in the rear echelon. Where nobody stands at attention and nobody salutes."

"You're caught in a Catch-22," said I. "All men suffering from chronic impotency are. You can't get it up because you're afraid you won't be able to, and you're afraid you won't be able to because—"

"Thank you, Betty Freidan," said Herb. "It just so happens that there are a great many physical causes of impotency. Some day there'll probably be a pill that will take care of the problem."

"Some day there'll probably be Holiday Inns on the moon," I said. "In the meantime, how would you like to do something a bit more interesting than sniffing the seat of my office chair?"

He looked at me unhappily. "Sandra," said he, with no trace of his usual bluster, "I can't. I just can't. I've done this enough—*tried* to do this enough, I should say—to know what happens."

Inspiration struck then . . . although I don't entirely believe I can take credit for it. Things have changed here. I never thought I'd be glad to get to the office, but I think that for the rest of this year I'll just about race into my clothes so I can get here early. Because things have changed. Lights have come on in my head (other places, as well) that I never even *suspected* until now.

"Herb," said I. "I want you to go down to Riddley's cubby. I want you to stand there and look at the plant. Most of all, I want you to take four or five really deep breaths—pull them all the way down to the bottom of your lungs. Really smell those good smells. And then come right back here."

He looked uneasily out through the window in my door. John and Bill were out there, talking in the hall. Bill saw Herb and gave him a little wave.

"Sandra, if we were to have sex, I hardly think your office would be a viable—"

"You let me worry about that," I said. "Just go on up there and take a few deep breaths. Then come on back. Will you do that?"

He thought about it, then nodded reluctantly. He started to open the door, then looked back at me. "I appreciate you bothering with me," said he, "especially when I was giving you such a hard time. I just wanted to tell you that."

I thought of telling him that altruism does not form a large part of Sandra Jackson's makeup—my motor was revving pretty hard by then—and decided he probably knew that.

"Just go on," I said. "We don't have all day."

When he was gone, I took out my pad and scribbled a note on it: "The ladies' room on six is usually deserted at this time of day. I expect to be there for the next twenty minutes or so with my skirt up and my knickers down. A man of stout heart (or stout *something*) might join me." I paused, then added: "A man of moderate intelligence as well as stout heart might toss this note in the wastebasket before leaving for the sixth floor."

I went up to six, where the ladies' is almost *always* deserted (it has crossed my mind that perhaps there are currently no female employees on that floor of 490 Park Avenue South), went into the stall at the end, and removed certain garments. Then I waited, not sure what might happen next. And I mean that. Whatever telepathy there may be in the fifth-floor offices of Zenith House, its effective range is even shorter than that of a college FM radio station.

Five minutes went by, then seven. I'd made up my mind that he wasn't coming, and then the door squeaked open and a very cautious, very unPorterly voice whispered, "Sandra?"

"Trot down here to the end," said I, "and make it quick."

He came down and opened the stall door. To say he looked excited would be an understatement. And he no longer looked as if he had a socketwrench stuffed down the front of his pants. By then it looked more like a goodsized Craftsman hammer.

"Gee," said I, reaching out to touch him, "I guess maybe the effect of that bicycle seat finally wore off."

He started fumbling at his belt. It kept sliding through his fingers. It was sort of funny, but also very sweet. I pushed his hands away and did it myself.

"Quick," he panted. "Oh, quick. Before it goes away."

"This guy isn't going anywhere," said I, although I did actually have a certain short-term storage site in mind. "Relax."

"It was the plant," he said. "The smell . . . oh my God, the smell . . . musky and *dark*, somehow . . . the way I'd always imagined the fields would smell in that county Faulkner wrote about, the one with the name no one can pronounce . . . oh Sandra, good Christ, I feel like I could *pole-vault* on this thing!"

"Shut up and change places with me," I said. "You sit down and then I'll—"

"To the devil with that," he said, and lifted me up. He's strong—a lot stronger than I ever would have guessed—and almost before I knew what was happening, we were off to the races.

As races of this sort go, it was neither the longest nor the fastest in which I have ever run, but it wasn't bad, especially considering that Herb Porter was last laid around the time Nixon resigned, if he was telling me the truth. When he finally set me down, there were tears on his cheeks. Plus there's this: before leaving he a. thanked me and b. kissed me. I don't subscribe to many of the romantic ideals, I'm more of a Dorothy Parker type ("good girls go to heaven, bad girls go everywhere"), but sweet is nice. The man who left ahead of me (pausing at the door and checking both ways before going out) seemed a lot different from the man who came stalking into my office with a load in his balls and a chip on his shoulder. That's the kind of judgement only time can confirm, and I know very well that men after sex usually turn into exactly the same men they were before sex, but I have hopes for Herb. And I never wanted to change his life; all I wanted was to clear away as much of the crap between us as I could, so we can work as a team. I never knew how much I wanted this job until this week. How much I wanted to make a *success* of this job. If blowing all four of those guys in Times Square at high noon would help that happen, I'd run out to Game Day on 53rd and buy myself a pair of kneepads.

Spent the rest of the day working on the joke book. How foul in concept, how scabrous in execution...and what a success it is going to be in an America that still longs for the death penalty and secretly believes (not everyone, but a goodly number of citizens, I'd bet) that

Hitler had the right idea about eugenics. There is no shortage of these nasty, mean-spirited boogers, but the weird thing is how many I'm making up on my own.

What's red and white and has trouble turning corners? A baby with a javelin through its head.

What's small, brown, and spits? A baby in a frypan.

Little girl wakes up in the hospital and says, "Doctor! I can't feel my legs!" Doctor replies, "That's normal in cases where we have to amputate the arms."

I am grossed out by my own inventiveness. Question is, *is* it mine? Or am I getting these ideas from the same place Herb Porter got his new lease on sexual life?

Never mind. Weekend's almost here. Supposed to be warm, and if so I'm going to Cony Island with my favorite niece, our yearly rite of spring. A couple of days away from this place may help to put all questions in perspective. And Riddley's due back next week. I'll be hoping to comfort him in his time of sorrow as much as possible.

Keeping a journal reminds me of what old Doc Henries used to say after he gave me a tetanus shot when I was ten: "There, Sandra, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Not at all. Not at all.

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John DATE 4/3/81

MESSAGE: I've made two calls since reading your Ms. Report. The first was to that astute business lad and all around prince of a guy, Harlow Enders. I lofted a trial balloon concerning a Zenith House hardcover, and despite dredging up a phrase which I thought would appeal to his presumed imagination (if you're wondering, it was "Event Publishing"), he shot it down at once. His stated reason is there is no h'cover infrastructure either at Zenith or in the larger world of Apex Corporation, but we both know better. The real issue is lack of confidence. All right, okay, fine.

Second call was to Alan Williams, a senior editor at Viking Press. Williams is one of the best in the business, and save your nasty ("Then how do *you* know him?") question. The answer is, from The New York Health Club racquetball tournament, where the gods of chance paired us three years ago. We have played off and on ever since. Alan says that if the Saltworthy is as good as you say it is, that we can probably swing a soft-to-hard deal, with Viking doing the h'cover and Zenith the pb. I know it isn't precisely what we wanted, John, but think of it this way: did you ever in your life believe there might come a day when we would be doing the pb edition of a Viking Press book? Little Zenith? And as for the cynical Mr. Saltworthy, I think you could say his luck has changed with a vengeance. We might have been able to swing \$20,000, and that much only if we'd been able to get Enders enthusiastically on board. With Viking as a partner, we may be able to score this guy a \$100,000 advance. That's my salary for almost four years.

Williams wants to see the ms. ASAP. You should take a copy over to their offices on Madison Avenue yourself. Put on a title page that says something like LAST SEASON, by John Oceanby. Sorry about the cloak and dagger, but Williams thinks it's necessary, and so do I.

Roger

PS: Make me a copy that I can take home and read over the weekend, would you?

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger

FROM: John

RE: "LAST SEASON," by "John Oceanby"

Are you saying you set all this in motion without reading the book?
That takes my breath away.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John DATE: 4/3/81

MESSAGE: You're my guy, John. We may have had our differences from time to time, but I've never doubted your editorial judgement for a single moment. If you say this is the one, this is the one. On that score, the ivy makes no difference. You're my guy. And while I probably don't need to tell you this, I will: no contact with James Saltworthy until we hear from Alan Williams. Okay?

Roger

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger

FROM: John

RE: Vote of confidence

To say I'm touched by your confidence in me doesn't go far enough, boss. Especially after the Detweiller fuck-up. Fact is, I'm sitting here at my desk and damned near blubbering on my blotter. All will be as you say. My lips are sealed.

John

PS: You do know, don't you, that Saltworthy must have already sent the book to Viking?

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John DATE: 4/3/81

MESSAGE: First, no blubbering on the blotter—blotters cost money, and as you know, all expenses must now be forwarded to the parent company on a week by week basis (if we needed another sign that The End Is Near, surely that's it). Blubber in your wastebasket...or go on down to Riddley's former quarters and water the plant with your grateful tears.

(Yes, I know perfectly well that no one is paying the slightest attention to my strong recommendation that we all stay clear of the ivy. I could put it in writing, I suppose, but it would just be a waste of ink. Especially since I've been down there a time or two myself, breathing deep and drawing inspiration.)

Second, how can you call the Detweiller business a fuck-up, considering how it has turned out? Harlow Enders and Apex may not

know we're ready to turn the corner into a glorious future, *but we do!*

Third, Alan Williams checked the files over there. *Last Survivor* was supposedly read (or scanned, or perhaps just shifted from the envelope it came in to the one it went back in) and rejected in November of 1978. The editor who signed off on it was one George Flynn, who left publishing to set up his own job-printing business in Brooklyn about a year ago. According to AW, and I quote, "George Flynn had the editorial antennae of a rutabaga."

Fourth, don't give the ms. to LaShonda. Make the copies yourself, *and remember the false title page.*

Fifth (I'm *ready* for a fifth, believe me), please no more memos until at least afternoon. I know I said "everything in writing" from here on out, but my head is starting to ache. I have one from Bill I haven't even looked at.

Roger

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger
FROM: Bill Gelb
RE: Possible Bestseller

You asked for ideas, and I've had what might be a doozy, boss. I went over to Smiler's earlier in the day (warning: that idiotic woman with the guitar is still in front—if she gets picked up and institutionalized, I hope the judge sends her to music school) and checked out their paperback rack. It's a pretty good one (i.e., lots of Pocket Books, Signets, Avons, Bantams, no Zenith Houses except for one dusty Windhover that was published 2 years ago). I counted five so-called nonfiction books about aliens and/or flying saucers, and six on investing in the Reagan Era stock market. My idea is suppose we combined the two?

The core concept is this: a stockbroker is abducted by little gray men who first read his brainwaves, suck blood from his nasal cavities, and probe his anus — standard stuff, in other words, been-there done-that. But then, to make up for the inconvenience, they give him stock tips based on their certain market knowledge, obtained in faster-than-light trips to the future. Most of it would be zen stuff like "Never fill your barrow with old bricks" and "Ancient stars offer the best navigation." This crap would, however, be spiced with more practical advice like "Never sell short in a bull market" and "In the long run, power and light stocks always rise." We could call it *Alien Investing*. I know that at first blush the idea sounds crazy, but who would have figured a breakout bestseller called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*?

I even have a writer in mind — Dawson Postlewaite, aka Nick Hardaway, the Macho Man himself. The stock market is Dawson's hobby (fuck, it's his mania, what keeps him poor and thus in our stable) and I think he'd almost do it gratis.

What do you think? And feel free to tell me I'm nuts, if that's what you think.

Bill

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: Bill Gelb DATE: 4/3/81

MESSAGE: I don't think you're nuts. No more so than the rest of us, anyway. And it's a great title, almost a guaranteed pick-it-up-andtake-a-look on a rack of paperbacks. *Alien Investing* is hereby greenlit. On the cover I see a photo of the Stock Exchange with a space alien laid in, shooting cosmic rays (green, like the color of money) from his big black eyes. Get Postlewaite on it at once. I know he's got a deadline on *Fresno Firestorm*, but I'll see he gets the necessary extension.

R.

WHILE YOU WERE OUT!

Caller Riddley Walker

For Roger Wade

Date April 3rd 1981

Time 12:35 PM

Message He will be back Wednesday or Thursday of next week. Winding up mother's affairs taking longer than he thought, There are difficulties with his brother and sister. Mostly sister. Asks if you will water plant but not mention to J. Kenton that you are doing it. Says "hoodoo ivy make dat boy pow'ful nervous." Whatever that means.

Message taken by LaShonda

From Roger Wade's Audio Journal, Cassette 1

This is Friday the third of April. Afternoon. Bill Gelb has come up with an idea. It's a dandy, too. I'm not surprised. Given what's happening, brilliance around here is almost a foregone conclusion. When I returned from lunch...with Alan Williams...what a wonderful guy he is, not in the least because he treated at Onde's, a place that would collapse my meager expense account allowance for a month... anyway, when I got back I spied an amusing thing. Bill Gelb was sitting in his office and rolling dice on his desk. He was too absorbed to notice me noticing him. He'd roll, make a notation on one of those mini legal pads, then roll again, then make another notation. Of course we all know he shoots craps with Riddley every chance he gets, but Riddley's in Alabama and won't be back until the middle of next week. So what's this about? Staying in practice? Just can't get enough of dem bones? Some new system? All gamblers have systems, don't they? Who the hell knows. He's had a great idea... *Alien Investing*, forsooth...and that earns him a little eccentric-editor time.

Herb Porter has been going around all day with a big, silly smile on his chops. He is actually being *nice* to people. What in God's name can that be about? As if I didn't know, nyuck-nyuck-nyuck.

Never mind Bill and Herb. Never mind Sandra's hot thighs, either. I have another and more interesting thing to ponder. There was a pink WHILE YOU WERE OUT slip on my desk when I got back from lunch. Riddley called and LaShonda took the message. He says he won't be back until next Wednesday or so, because winding up his mother's affairs is taking longer than he thought. But that isn't the interesting part. LaShonda has written, and I quote, "There are difficulties with his brother and sister. Mostly sister." Did Riddley actually tell her that? They have never seemed particularly friendly, in fact I've always gotten the idea that LaShonda considers Riddley to be beneath her, maybe because she believes the Amos 'n Andy accent...although that's a little tough to swallow. Mostly I think it's because he comes to work in gray fatigues from Dickey and she always shows up dressed to the nines...some days to the tens.

No, I don't think Riddley exactly *said* anything about having problems with his brother and sister. I think L. just sort of...*knew*. Zenith isn't out in the reception area, so far the garlic seems to be working and it's mostly growing in the other direction...toward the end of the hall and the window that looks out on the airshaft...but its *influence* may have reached the reception area.

I think LaShonda read his mind. Read it over fifteen hundred miles or so of long distance telephone line. And without even knowing it. Maybe I'm wrong but...

No, I'm not wrong.

Because I'm reading *her* mind, and I *know*.

[Five second pause on tape]

Whoo, Jesus.

Jesus Christ, this is big.

This is fucking *big*.

From Bill Gelb's Diary

4/3/81

I'm at my apartment tonight, but am thinking about Paramus, New Jersey, tomorrow night. There's an all-night poker game there on Saturdays, pretty high stakes and connected to the Italian Brotherhood, if you know what I mean. Ginelli's game, or so I've heard (he's the Mafia type who owns Four Fathers, two blocks from here). I've only gone there a couple of times and lost my shirt on both occasions (I paid up, too, you don't fuck with the Italian gentlemen), but I have a feeling that this time things might be different.

Today in my office, after R.W. okayed my book idea (*Alien Investing* is going to sell at least 3 million copies, don't ask me how I know that but I do), I took my dice out of the desk drawer where I keep them and started rolling. At first I was barely paying attention to what I was doing, then I took a closer look and holy shit, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I got out a legal pad and recorded forty straight rolls.

Thirty-four sevens.

Six elevens.

No snake-eyes, no boxcars. Not even a single point.

I tried the same experiment here at home (as soon as I got in through the door, as a matter of fact), not sure it would work because the telepathy doesn't travel much beyond the fifth floor at 490 Park. The fact is, you can feel it fade each time you go down (or up) in the

elevator. It drains away like water draining out of a sink, and it's a sad sensation.

Anyway, tonight, rolling forty times on my kitchen table produced twenty sevens, six elevens, and fourteen "points"—i.e. spot combos adding up to three, four, five, six, eight, nine, and ten. No snake-eyes. No boxcars. The luck isn't quite so strong away from the office, but twenty sevens and six elevens are pretty amazing. More amazing still, I didn't crap out *one single time*, not at 490, not even here at home.

Will I be as successful at five-card stud and jacks or better on the other side of the Hudson?

Only one way to find out, baby. Tomorrow night.

I can hardly believe what's happening, but there isn't the slightest doubt in my mind that it *is* happening. Roger suggested that we stay away from the plant, and what a joke *that* is. Might as well suggest the tide not to turn, or that Harlow Enders not be such an asshole. (Enders is a Robert Goulet fan. All you have to do to know that is to look at him.)

I found myself wandering down toward Riddley's closet once or twice an hour all day long, just to take a big brain-clearing whiff. Sometimes it smells like popcorn (the Nordica Theater, where I copped my first feel...I didn't tell the others that part, but given current conditions I'm sure they must know), sometimes like freshly cut grass, sometimes like Wildroot Crème Oil, which is what I always wanted the barber to put on my hair as the finishing touch when I was but a wee slip of a lad. On several occasions others were there when I arrived, and just before quitting time we all turned up at once, standing side by side and breathing deep, storing up those good aromas—and good ideas, maybe—for the weekend. I suppose we would have looked hilarious to an outsider, like a *New Yorker* cartoon without a caption (would we even need one to be amusing? I think not), but believe me, there was nothing hilarious about it. Nothing scary, either. It was nice, that's all. Plain old nice.

Is breathing Zenith addictive? I suppose it must be, but it doesn't feel like a harsh, governing addiction ("governing" may be the wrong word, but it's the only one I can think of). Not like the cigarette habit, in other words, or the pot habit. People say pot isn't addictive, but

after my junior year at Bates, I know better—that shit almost got me flunked out. But I repeat, this is not like that. I don't seem to miss it when I'm away from it, as I am now (at least not yet). And at work there is the indescribable feeling of being at one with your mates. I don't know if I'd call it telepathy, exactly (Herb and Sandra do, John and Roger seem a little less sure). It's more like singing in harmony, or walking together in a parade, matching strides. (Not marching, though, it doesn't feel that structured.) And although John, Roger, Sandra, and Herb have all gone their separate ways for the weekend and we're all far from the plant, I still feel in touch with them, as if I could reach out and connect if I really wanted to. Or needed to.

The mailroom is now almost completely empty of manuscripts, which is a damned good thing, because it's now almost completely full of Zenith. Z has also overgrown the walls of the corridor, although much more densely in the southerly direction—i.e. toward the rear of the building and the airshaft. Going the other way it has curled its friendly (we assume they're friendly) tendrils around Sandra's door and John's facing hers, but that's as far as it had progressed as of four o'clock this afternoon, when I split. It seems reasonable to assume that the Barfield woman was right about the garlic and the smell—which we mere humans can no longer detect—is slowing it down, at least in that direction. South of the janitor's closet and the mailroom, however, the corridor is well on the way to becoming a jungle path. There's Z all over the walls (it's buried the framed book jacket blow-ups down that way, which is a *great* relief), and large hanging bunches of green Z-leaves. It has also produced several dark blue Z-flowers, which have their own pleasant smell. Sort of like burnt wax (a smell I associate with candles in the Halloween jack-o-lanterns of my youth). Never seen flowers growing on an ivy, but what do I know about plants? The answer is not much.

There's a window reinforced with wire mesh overlooking the airshaft, and Z has begun to overgrow this as well, all leaves (and flowers) turned out toward the sun. Herb Porter says he saw one of those leaves snatch up a fly that was crawling over a pane of that window. Madness? Undoubtedly! But: true madness or false? True, I think, which suggests some unpleasant possibilities to go with all

those pleasant smells. But I don't want to deal with that this weekend.

Where I want to go this weekend is Paramus.

Maybe with a stop at my local OTB for good measure.

I probably shouldn't say it, but God! This is more fun than Studio 54!

From the journals of Riddley Walker

4/4/81

12:35 A.M.

Aboard the Silver Meteor

Question: Has Riddley Pearson Walker ever in his life been so confused, so disheartened, so shaken, so downright sad?

I don't think so.

Has Riddley Pearson Walker ever had a worse week in the twenty-six years of his life?

Absolutely not.

I am aboard Amtrak's Train 36, headed back to Manhattan at least three days early. No one knows I'm coming, but then, who would care? Roger Wade? Kenton, perhaps? My landlord?

I tried for a plane out of B'ham, but no seats available until Sunday. I could not bring myself to stay in Blackwater—or anywhere south of the Mason-Dixon line—that long. Hence the train. And so, to the sound of snores all around me, and in spite of the swaying motion of the car on the rails, I write in this diary. I can't sleep. Perhaps I will be able to when I

get back to Dobbs Ferry sometime this afternoon, but the afternoon seems an eternity away. I remember the narrative intro to that old TV show, *The Fugitive*. "Richard Kimball looks out the window and sees only darkness," William Conrad would say each week. He went on, "But in that darkness, Fate moves its huge hand." Will that huge hand move for me? I think not. I fear not. Unless there is fate in John Kenton's ivy, and how can fate—or Fate—reside in such a small and anonymous plant? Crazy idea. God knows what put it in my head.

My reception in Blackwater was warm only from the McDowells—my Uncle Michael and Aunt Olympia. Sister Evelyn, sister Sophie, sister Madeline (always my favorite, which is what makes this hurt so much), and brother Floyd all cold, reserved. Until late Friday afternoon I put that down to the distractions of grief, no more. Certainly we got through the painful rituals of the burial all right. Mama Walker rests beside my father, in the town graveyard. In the *black* section of the town graveyard, for there the rule of segregation holds as firm as ever, not as a matter of law but due to the laws of family custom—unspoken, unwritten, but as strong as tears and love.

Out my window I see a full moon riding serenely in the still-southern sky, a silver dollar pancake of a moon. So my Mama called it, and tonight it has gone

full without her. For the first time in sixty-two years it has gone full without her. I sit here writing and feel the tears sliding down my cheeks. Oh Mama, how I weep for you! How yo littlest chile, de one dem white boys used to call little ole blueblack, how dat chile do weep! Tonight I is a Stephen Foster fiel' nigger fo sho! Yassuh! Mama in de col' col' groun'! Yes ma'am!

Estranged from my sisters and my brother as well. Where will I be buried, I wonder? In what strange ground?

Anyway, it came out. All the bitterness. And the hate? Was it hate I saw in their eyes? In my dear Maddy's eyes? She who used to hold my hand when we went to school, and who used to comfort me when the others teased me and called me blueblack or bluegum or L'il Heinie on account of the time in first grade when my pants fell down? I want to say no and no and no, but my heart denies that no. My heart says it was. My heart says yes and yes and yes.

There was a family gathering at the house this afternoon, the last act of the sadly prosaic drama that began with Mama's heart attack on the 25th. Michael and Olympia were the nominal host and hostess. It began with coffee, but soon the wine was circulating in the parlor and something quite a bit stronger out on the back porch. I didn't see my brother or any of my sisters in the house, so checked the porch. Floyd

was there, drinking a little glass of whiskey and "memorating" (Mama's word for reminiscence) with some of her cousins, and Orthina and Gertrude, from her book-circle (both ladies decorous but undoubtedly tiddly), and Jack Hance, Evvie's husband. No sign of Evvie herself, or Sophie, or Madeline.

I went looking for them, worried that they might not be all right. Upstairs, from the room at the end of the hall where Mama slept alone for the last dozen years since Pop died, I finally heard their voices. There was murmuring; there was also low laughter. I went down there, my footsteps muffled by the thick hall runner, doing a little memorating myself—on Mama's bitter complaints about that thick runner and how it used to show the dirt. Yet she never changed it. How I wish she had. If they had heard me coming—just the simple sound of approaching footfalls—everything might have been different. Not in reality, of course; dislike is dislike, hate is hate, those things are at least quasi-empirical, I know. It is my illusions that I am talking about. The illusions of my family's regard, the illusions of what I myself had always believed they believed: brave Riddley, the Cornell graduate who has taken a series of menial jobs, work for the body while the mind remains free and uncluttered and able to continue work on the Great Book, a kind

of *fin de siecle Invisible Man*. How often I have invoked the spirit of Ralph Ellison! I even dared to write him once, and received a kind, encouraging reply. It hangs framed on the wall of my apartment, over my typewriter. Whether I will be able to continue on after this is anybody's guess...and yet I think I must. Because without the book, what else is there? Why dere's de broomhandle! De can o' Johnson's flo' wax! De squeegee for de windows and de brush for de tawlit's! Yassuh!

No, there must be the book. In spite of everything, *because* of everything, there must be this book. In a very real sense, it's all I have left.

All right. Enough crybaby stuff. Let's get down to it.

I've already written here about the reading of my Mama's last will and testament on the day between her wake and her burial, and how Law Tidyman, her lifelong friend, allowed most of it to stand in her own words. It struck me passing strange then (although I did not put it down, being tired and grief-struck, states of remarkable similarity) that Mama would have asked Law to do it, old friend or not, rather than her own son, who is now considered one of the best lawyers of any color, at least on this side of Birmingham. Now perhaps I understand that a little bit better.

In her will, Mama wrote that she wanted "all cash, of which I do have a little, to go to the Blackwater Library Fund. All negotiable items, of which I do have yet a few, should be sold by my executor at top price available within the twelvemonth following my death, and all proceeds donated to the Blackwater High School Scholarship Fund, with the understanding that any such resulting scholarships, which may be called Fortuna Walker Scholarships if the Committee would so honor me, should be given without regard to race or religion, as all during my life I, Fortuna Walker, have believed Whites to be every bit as good as Blacks, and Catholics *almost* as good as Southern Baptists."

How we chuckled at that nearly perfect microcosm of all her wit. But there was no chuckling this afternoon. At least, not after my sisters looked up from where they sat on her bed and saw me standing shocked in the doorway.

By then I had seen all I needed to see. "Anyone a step over puffick idiot'd know what *that* was about," Mama herself no doubt would have said—more memoration. And what I saw in my dead mother's bedroom will be printed on my memory until memoration itself ceases.

Her dresser drawers were open, all of them. Her things were still in the top ones, although many of her

blouses and scarves slopped over the edges, and it was clear that everything had been stirred about and pawed through—a puffick idiot could have seen that. But the things which had been in the two bottom drawers had been pulled out and lay scattered in drifts across her rose-colored rug, the one which had never shown dirt because nothing dirty was allowed in that quiet room. At least not until last evening, that is, when she was dead and unable to stop it. What made it worse, what made them seem to me so much like pirates and plunderers, was the fact that it was her unmentionables lying there. My dead mother's underwear, scattered hell to breakfast by her daughters, who in my eyes made Lear's look kind by comparison.

Am I unkind? Self-righteous? I no longer know. All I know is that my heart hurts and my head is roaring with confusion. And I know what I saw: her drawers opened, her slips and underpants and righteous Playtex girdles spread across the floor. And they on the bed, laughing, with a red tin box on the coverlet in the middle of their circle; a red box with its Sweetheart Girl cover taken off and laid aside. It had been full of cash and jewelry. Now it was empty and it was their hands that were full of her greenbacks and heirlooms. How much might their trove have been worth? Not a huge amount, but by no means paltry;

some of the pins and broaches could have been costume stuff, but I saw two rings whose stones were, according to Mama herself, diamonds. And Mama didn't lie. One of them was her engagement ring.

It was perhaps a minute before they saw me. I said nothing myself; I was literally struck dumb.

Evelyn, the oldest, looking young in spite of the gray in her hair, with her hands full of old tens and fives, put aside by my mother over the years.

Sophie, counting through official-looking papers that might have been stock certificates or perhaps treasury bonds, her fingers speeding along like a bank-teller ready to cash out her drawer for the weekend.

And my youngest sister, Maddy. My schoolyard guardian angel. Sitting with her palms full of pearls (probably cultured, I grant you) and earrings and necklaces, sorting through them, as absorbed as an archeologist. That was what hurt the worst. She hugged me when I got off the plane, and wept against my neck. Now she picked through her dead mother's things, the good stuff and the trumpery, grinning like a jewel thief after a successful heist.

All of them grinning. All of them laughing.

Evvie held up the cash money and said, "There's over eight thousand right here! Won't Jack yell when

I tell him! And I bet this isn't all. I bet—"

Then she saw Sophie was no longer looking at her, and no longer smiling. Evvie turned her head, and Madeline did, too. The color left Maddy's cheeks, turning her rich complexion dull.

"And how were you going to split it?" I heard myself ask in a voice that did not sound like my own at all. "Three ways? Or is Floyd in on this, too?"

And from behind me, as if he'd only been waiting for his cue, Floyd himself said: "Floyd's in on it, little brother. Oh yes indeed. Was Floyd told the ladies what that box looked like and where it was apt to be. I saw it last winter. She left it out when she was having one of her spells. But you don't know about her spells, do you?"

I turned, startled. From the smell of the whiskey on Floyd's breath and the dark tinge of red in the corners of his eyes, the tot I'd seen him drinking on the porch hadn't been his first of the day. Or his third, for that matter. He pushed by me into the room, and said to Sophie (always *his* favorite): "Evvie's right—there'll be more. That box is the most of it, I think, but a long way from the all of it."

He turned to me and said, "She was a packrat. That's what she turned into over the last few years. One of the things she turned into, anyhow."

"Her will—" I began.

"Her will, what about it?" Sophie asked. She dropped the papers she'd been studying to the coverlet and made a shooing gesture with her slim brown hands, as if dismissing the whole subject. "Do you think we had a chance to talk to her about it? She shut us out. Look who she got to draw up her death-letter. Law Tidyman! That old Uncle Tom!"

The contempt with which she spoke struck me deep, not because of the sentiment but because of the simple fact that I'd seen Sophie and Evelyn and Evvie's Jack laughing and talking with Law Tidyman and Law's wife Sulla not half an hour before. Best of friends, they'd looked like.

"You don't know how she got these last few years, Rid," Madeline said. She sat there, her lap all but overflowing with her mother's keepsakes and gracenotes, sat there defending what she was doing—what *they* were doing. "She—"

"I might not know how she *got*," I said, "but I know pretty damned well what she *wanted*. Wasn't I there with the rest of you when Law read her will? Didn't we all sit around in a circle, like at a goddamned séance? And isn't that what it was, with Mama talking to us from the other side of her grave? Didn't I hear her say in Law Tidyman's voice that she wanted that there—" I pointed to the plunder on the bed. "—to go

to the town library and to the high school scholarship fund? In her name, if they'd have it that way?"

My voice was rising, I couldn't help it. Because now Floyd was sitting on the bed with them, one arm around Sophie's shoulders, as if to comfort her. And when Maddy's hand crept into his, he took it the way you take the hand of a frightened child. To comfort her, too. It was them on the bed and me in the doorway and I saw their eyes and knew they were against me. Even Maddy was against me. *Especially* Maddy, it seems. My schoolyard angel.

"Didn't you see me there, nodding my head because I understood what she wanted? I know I saw you-all nodding the same way. It's now I must be dreaming. Because it can't be that the folks I grew up with down here in this godforsaken map-splat of the world could have turned into graveyard ghouls."

Maddy's face sagged at that and she began to cry. And I was glad I had made her cry. That's how angry I was, how angry I still am when I think of them sitting there in the lamplight. When I think of the tin box with its Sweetheart Girl cover set aside, its insides all turned out. Their hands and laps full of her things. Their eyes full of her things. Their hearts, too. Not *her*, but her *things*. Her remainder.

"Oh you self-righteous little *prig*," Evelyn said.
"And weren't you *always*!"

She stood up and swept her hands back along her cheeks, as if to wipe away her tears...but there were no tears in those flaming eyes of hers. Not this evening. This evening I saw my brother and three sisters with their masks laid aside.

"Save your accusations," I said. I have never liked her—regal Evelyn, whose eyes were so firmly fixed on the prize that she never had time for her littlest brother...or for anyone who did not think the stars pretty much changed their courses to watch Evelyn Walker Hance in her enchanted walk through life. "It's hard to point fingers successfully when your hands are full of stolen goods. You might drop your loot."

"But she's right," Madeline said. "You *are* self-righteous. You *are* a prig."

"Maddy, how can you say that?" I asked. The others could not have hurt me, I don't think, at least not one by one; only she.

"Because it's true." She let go of Floyd's hand, stood up, and faced me. I don't believe I will ever forget a single word of what she said. More memorating, God help me.

"You were here for the wake, you were here for the reading of a deadletter her own son wasn't good enough to write, you were here for the burying, you were here for the after-burying, and you're here now, looking at things you don't understand and passing a

fool's judgement on them because of all the things you don't know. Things that went on while you were up in New York, chasing the Pulitzer Prize with a broom in your hand. Up in New York, playing the nigger and telling yourself whatever different it takes for you to get to sleep at night."

"Amen! Tell it!" Sophie said. Her eyes were blazing, too. They were a demon's eyes, almost. And I? I was silent. Stunned to silence. Filled with that horrible, deathlike emotion that comes when someone finally spills out the home truths. When you finally understand that the person you see in the mirror is not the one others see.

"Where were you when she died, though? Where were you when she had the six or seven little heart attacks leading up to the big ones? Where were you when she had all those little strokes and got so funny in her head?"

"Oh, he was in New York," Floyd said cheerily. "He was employing his fine arts degree scrubbing floors in some white man's book-publishing office."

"It's research," I said in a voice so low I could barely hear it. I felt all at once as though I might faint. "Research for the book."

"Research, that explains it," Evelyn said with a sage nod, and put the cash money carefully back into the tin box. "That's why she went without lunches for

four years in order to pay for your schoolbooks. So you could research the wonderful world of custodial science."

"Oh, ain't you a bitch," I said...just as though I had not written many of those same things about my job at Zenith House, not once but several times, in the pages of this journal.

"Shut up," Maddy said. "Just shut up and listen to me, you self-righteous, judgmental prig." She spoke in a low, furious voice that I had never heard before, had never imagined might come from her. "You, the only one of us not married and with children. The only one with the luxury of seeing family through this...this...I don't know..."

"This golden haze of memory," Floyd suggested. He had a little silver bottle in his pants pocket. He drew it out then and had himself a nip.

Maddy nodded. "You don't have the slightest idea of what we need, do you? Of where we are. Floyd and Sophie have got kids getting ready to go to college. Evvie's have gone through, and she's got the unpaid bills to prove it. Mine are coming along. Only you—"

"Why not ask Floyd to help you?" I asked her. "Mama wrote me a letter and said he cleared a quarter of a million last year. Don't you see...don't

any of you see what this is? This is robbing pennies off a dead woman's eyes! She—"

Floyd stepped up. His eyes were deadly flat. He held up a clenched fist. "You say another word like that, Riddie, and I'm going to break your nose."

There was a moment of tense silence, and then from down below Aunt Olympia called up, her voice high and jolly and nervous. "Boys and girls? Everything all right up there?"

"Fine, Aunt Olly," Evelyn called back. Her voice was light and carefree; her eyes, which never left mine, were murderous. "Talking over the old times. We'll be down in a wink. Y'all stay close, all right?"

"You're sure everything is okay?"

And I, God help me, felt an insane urge to scream: *No! It's not okay! Get up here! You and Uncle Michael both get up here! Get up here and rescue me! Save me from the pecking of the carrion birds!*

But I kept my mouth shut, and Evvie shut the door.

Sophie said, "Mama wrote you all the time, we knew that, Rid. You were always her favorite, she spoiled you rotten, especially after Pop died and there was no more holding her back. You got plenty of how she saw it."

"That's not true," I said.

"But it is," Maddy said. "And do you know what? The way Mama saw things was pretty selective. She

told you about all the money Floyd made last year, I've no doubt of it, but I doubt if she told you about how Floyd's partner stole everything he could get his hands on. Hi-ho, it's Oren Anderson, off to the Bahamas with his chippy of the month."

I felt as if I'd been sucker-punched. I looked at Floyd. "Is that true?"

Floyd took another little nip at the silver flask that had been Pop's before it was his and grinned at me. It was a ghastly grin. His eyes were redder than ever and there was spit on his lips. He looked like a man at the end of a month-long binge. Or at the beginning of one.

"True as can be, little brother," he said. "I was rooked like an amateur. I think I'm going to be able to sail through without getting in the papers, but it's still not a sure thing. I came to her for help and she told me how she was broke. Never got over putting you through Cornell is what she said. How broke does that on the bed look to you, little brother? Eight thousand in cash...at least...and twice that in jewelry. Thirty thousand in stocks, maybe. And she wanted to give it to the *library*." A glare of contempt closed his face like a cramp. "Jesus please us."

I looked to Evvie. "Your husband Jack...the construction business..."

"Jack's had a hard two years," she said. "He's in trouble. Every bank within fifty miles is carrying his paper. How much he owes is all that's propping him up." She laughed, but her eyes were frightened. "Just something else you didn't know. Sophie's Randall is a little better off—"

"We keep even, but get ahead?" Sophie also laughed. "Not likely. Floyd helped all of us along when he could, but since Oren doublecrossed him..."

"That *snake*," Maddy said. "That fucking *snake*."

I turned to Floyd, and nodded at the little flask. "Maybe you've been taking a little too much of that. Maybe that's why you didn't mind your business a little better when you had a little more business to mind."

Floyd's fist came slowly up again. This time I stuck out my chin. You get to a point when you just don't care anymore. I know that now.

"Go ahead, Floyd. If it'll make you feel better, go on ahead. And if you think twenty or even forty thousand dollars is going to bail y'all out, then go ahead with that, too. More fools you be."

Floyd drew his fist back. He would have hit me, too, but Maddy stepped between us. She looked at me, and I looked away. I couldn't bear what I saw in her eyes.

"You with the quotes," she said softly. "Always with the quotable quotes. Well, here's one for you, Mr. Uppity: 'He that hath a wife and children hath given hostages to fortune.' Francis Bacon said that almost three hundred years ago, and it was folks like us he was talking about, not folks like you. Not folks that take twenty or thirty thousand dollars to get educated, then have to do research in floor-polishing. How much have you given back to your family? I'll tell you how much! *Nothing!* And *nothing!* And *nothing!*"

She was standing so close and spat each *nothing* so hard that spit flew from her lips to mine.

"Maddy, I—"

"Shut up," she said. "*I'm* talking now."

"Tell it!" Sophie said happily. It was a nightmare, I tell you. A nightmare.

"I'm getting out of here," I said, and started to turn away.

They wouldn't let me. That's like nightmares, too; they won't let you get away. Evelyn grabbed me on one side, Floyd on the other.

"No," Evvie said, and I could smell booze on her breath, too. The wine they were drinking downstairs. "You listen. For once in your stuckup life, you just listen."

"You weren't here when she got funny, but we were," Maddy said. "The strokes she had affected her mind. Sometimes she went wandering, and we had to go find her and bring her back. Once she did it at night and we had half the town out looking for her with flashlights. So far as I could tell, you weren't there when we finally found her at two in the morning, curled up on the riverbank fast asleep with half a dozen fat copperheads down there not four yards from her bare feet. So far as I know, you were up there in your New York apartment when that happened, fast asleep yourself."

"Tell it," Floyd said grimly. All of them acting as though I live in the Dakota, in a penthouse, instead of my little place in Dobbs Ferry...and yet my little place is nice enough, isn't it? Perfectly affordable, even on a janitor's salary, for a man with no vices and no hostages to fortune.

"Sometimes she messed herself," Maddy said. "Sometimes she talked crazy in church. She'd go to her book-circle and rave half an hour about some book she'd read twenty years ago. She'd be all right for awhile...she had plenty of good days until the last few months...but sooner or later the nutty stuff would start in again, each time a little worse, a little longer. And you didn't know about any of it, did you?"

"How could I?" I asked. "How could I, when none of you wrote and told me? Not so much as a word?"

That was the one shot of mine that went home. Maddy flushed. Sophie and Evvie looked away, saw the treasure scattered on the bed, and then looked away from that, too.

"Would you have come?" Floyd asked quietly. "If we'd written you, Riddie, would you have come?"

"Of course," I said, and heard the terrible stiff falsity in my voice. So, of course, did they...and the moral advantage passed away from me. For tonight, most likely for good, as far as they are concerned. That their own moral stance was at least partly an excuse for reprehensible behavior I do not doubt. But their anger at me was genuine, and at least partly justified—I don't doubt that, either.

"Of course," he said, nodding and grinning his red-eyed grin. "Of *course*."

"We took care of her," Maddy said. "We banded together and we took care of her. There was no hospital and no nursing home, even after she started to wander. After the riverbank adventure I slept here some nights; so did Sophie; so did Evelyn and Floyd. Everyone but you, Rid. And how did she thank us? By leaving us a worthless house and a worthless barn and four acres of nearly worthless land. The things that *were* worth something—money that could

pay off the credit cards Floyd uses for his business and give Jack a little more breathing-space—those she denied us. So we took them. And you come in, Mr. Smart Northern Nigger comes in, and tells us we're ghouls stealing the pennies off a dead woman's eyes."

"But Maddy...don't you see that if what you take isn't what she wanted to give, no matter how much of a tight place you're in or how bad you need it, that's stealing? Stealing from your own mother?"

"My own mother was crazy!" she cried at me in a whispered shriek. She pistoned her tiny fists in the air, I think expressing her frustration that I should continue to balk over a point that was so clear to her...perhaps because she had been there, she had seen Mama's craziness at its fruitiest, and I had not. *"She lived the last part of her life crazy and she died crazy! That will was crazy!"*

"We earned this here," Sophie said, first patting Maddy's back and then drawing her gently away from me, "so never mind your talk about stealing. She tried to give away what was ours. I don't blame her for it, she was crazy, but it's not going to stand. Riddie, you just want to take all your Boy Scout ideas on out of here and let us finish our business."

"That's right," Evvie said. "Go on down and get a glass of wine. If Boy Scouts drink wine, that is. Tell

them we'll be down directly."

I looked at Floyd. He nodded, not smiling now. By then none of them were smiling. Smiling was done. "That's it, little brother. And never mind that oh-poor-me look on your face. You stuck your nose in where it didn't belong. If you got bee-stung, it's nobody's fault but your own."

At the last I looked at Maddy. Just hoping. Well, hope in one hand and shit in the other; even a puffick idiot knows how that one turns out.

"Go on," she said. "I can't bear to look at you."

I went back down the stairs like a man in a dream, and when Aunt Olympia laid her hand on my arm and asked what was wrong up there, I smiled and said nothing, we were just talking over old times and got a little hot under the collar. The Southern family at its finest; paging Tennessee Williams. I said I was going into town to get a few things, and when Aunt Olly asked me what things—meaning what had she forgotten when she stocked for Mama's last party—I didn't answer her. I just went on out, marching straight ahead with that meaningless little smile on my face, and got into my rental car. Basically what I've done since is just keep going. I left a few clothes and a paperback book, and they can stay there until the end of the age, as far as it concerns me. And all the while I've been moving I've also been replaying

what I saw as I stood unnoticed in her doorway: drawers pulled out and underwear scattered and them on the bed with their hands full of her things and the cover of her tin box set aside. And everything they said may have been true, or partially true (I think the most convincing lies *are* almost always partially true), but what I remember most clearly is their overheard laughter, which had nothing in it of absconding partners or husbands teetering on the edge of insolvency or credit card bills long past due and stamped with those ugly red-ink warnings. Nothing to do with kids needing money for college, either. The rue count, in other words, was zero. The laughter I overheard was that of pirates or trolls who have found buried treasure and are dividing it up, perchance by the light of a silver dollar pancake moon. I went down the stairs and down the back porch steps and away from that place like a man in a dream, and I am still that dreamer, sitting in a train with ink splattered all the way up my hand to the wrist and several pages of scribbling, probably indecipherable, now behind me. How foolish it is to write, what a pitiful bulwark against this world's hard realities and bitter home truths. How terrible to say, "This is all I have." Everything aches: hand, wrist, arm, head, heart. I am going to close my eyes and try to sleep...at least to doze.

It's Maddy's face that terrifies me. Greed has made her a stranger to me. A terrible stranger, like one of those female monsters in the Greek fairy-tales. No doubt I *am* a prig, just as they said, a self-righteous prig, but nothing will change what I saw in their eyes when they didn't know I was seeing them.

Nothing.

More than my book, I find it's the simplicities of work that I long for—Kenton's endless self-analysis and agonizing, Gelb's amusing fixation with the dice, Porter's even more amusing fixation with the seat of Sandra Jackson's office chair. I wouldn't even mind having it off with her again, starring in one of her fantasies. I want the simplicity of my janitor's cubby, where all things are known, normal, unsurprising. I want to see if that pitiful little ivy is maintaining its toehold on life.

Around moonset, the Silver Meteor crossed the Mason-Dixon line. My sisters and my brother are on the other side of that line now, and I'm glad.

I can't wait to get back to New York.

Later/8 A.M.

Slept for almost five hours. My neck is stiff and my back feels like a mule kicked me, but on the whole I feel a little better. At least I was able to eat a little breakfast. I thought the idea I woke with might go

away in the dining car, but it has remained clear. The idea—the intuition—is that if I were to go into the office instead of switching trains for Dobbs Ferry, I might feel better yet. I feel drawn there. It's as though I had a dream about the place, one I can't quite remember.

Maybe it's the plant—Zenith the ivy. My subconscious telling me to go in and water the poor little thing before it dies of thirst.

Well...why not?

FROM THE DISPATCHES OF IRON-GUTSHECKS
LER

Apr 4 81
0600 hrs
Pk Ave So NYC

Zero hour approaching. I plan to make my entry into the Publishing House of Satan across the street in 2-3 hours. "Crazy Guitar Gertie" disguise put away. Respectable businessman in weekend clothes now, HA!

Look out, you Designated Jew. I will be in your office by noon, waiting

On Monday morning your ass is mine.

No more dreams of CARLOS. He may be gone. Good. One less thing to worry about.

from THE SAKRED BOO K O F C ARLOS

SAKRED MONTH OFAPRA (Entry #79)

Saturday morning. As soon as I finish this entry, I leave for Zenith

House of Kaka-Poop. Have my "special suitcase" with all sakred sacrifice

knives. They are "plenty sharp," too! I am dressed nice, like a business

man on his Saturday in the city. I should have no problems penetrating

into that house of thieves and mockers.

Wonder if Kenton got my "little present."

Wonder if he knows what's happening with his girlfriend or should

I say ex girlfriend. Too bad he'll be dead before she can give him anymore

"pussy." Innocent blood! Innocent blood from her if no other first!

Myself I will die a virgin and I am glad.

I hope and expect to be locked away in Kenton's office by noon today.

I have plenty of snacks and two sodas in with my knives and I will be able

to "hold out" until Monday just fine.

No more dreams of "The General" and his Designated Juice. That's

a load off my mind.

And now for you, John Kenton. Betrayer of my dreams, thief of my

book. Why wait for the abbalah to do what I can do myself?

COME DEMETER!

COME GREEN!

END OF THE PLANT, PART FIVE

Following next month's installment of this story--next month's very long installment of this story--The Plant will be going back into hibernation so that I can continue work on Black House (the sequel to The Talisman, written in collaboration with Peter Straub). I also need to complete work on two new novels (the first, Dreamcatcher, will be available from Scribner's next March) and see if I can't get going on The Dark Tower again. And my agent insists I need to take a breather so that foreign translation and publication of The Plant--also in installments, also on the Net--can catch up with American publication. Yet don't despair. The last time The Plant furled its leaves, the story remained dormant for nineteen years. If it could survive that, I'm sure it can survive a year or two while I work on other projects.

Part 6 is the most logical stopping point. In a traditional print book, it would be the end of the first long section (which I would probably call "Zenith Rising"). You will find a climax of sorts, and while not all of your questions will be answered--not yet, at least--the fates of several characters will be resolved.

Nastily
Permanently.

As a way of thanking those readers (somewhere between 75 and 80 per cent) who came along for the ride and paid their dues, Part 6 of The Plant will be available free of charge. Enjoy...but don't relax too much. When The Plant returns, it will once more be on a pay-as-you-go basis.

In the meantime, get ready for Part 6. I think you're going to be surprised. Perhaps even shocked.
Best regards (and happy holidays), Stephen King

PART VI

E D I T O R ' S N O T E

Z is almost certainly the most interesting document in the collection which makes up this story. Although remarkably coherent, the careful reader must certainly detect the work of various voices, most or all of them already encountered in the various memos, letters, and journals presented so far. In addition to this, the discovered manuscript (it would harm the unfolding story to say much about the circumstances of that discovery here) shows many different typefaces and editorial hands. About thirty per cent of it was typed on a portable Olivetti, which can be positively identified as John Kenton's by the flying d and the distinctive crack running through the capital S. Another thirty per cent is certainly the work of Riddley Walker's 1948 office-model Underwood, which was found on the desk of his study in Dobbs Ferry. The other typefaces are those produced by the sort of IBM Selectrics then in use at the Zenith House offices. Ten per cent of the manuscript was typed with the IBM type-ball "Script," which was favored by Sandra Jackson. Twenty per cent of the manuscript is in IBM's "Courier" format, which was favored by both Herb Porter and Roger Wade. The remaining work is in IBM's "Letter Gothic," which can be found on many (although not all) of Bill Gelb's business letters and in-house memos.

The most interesting thing about this collaboration, which is remarkably unified in spite of the stylistic interplay, is the fact that it is told in the third-person omniscient style. Information is conveyed by use of a shifting perspective, and include many incidents at which none of the narrators—Kenton, Wade, Jackson, Gelb, or Walker—were present. The reader may wonder if these passages (several of which are interwoven below) are informed speculation based on the available evidence, or if they are pure imagination, no more to be believed than the plots of Anthony LaScorbia's "big bug" books. To these possibilities, the editor would first like to remind the reader that there was a sixth participant at Zenith House during those months in 1981, and then to suggest that if what Kenton, Wade, et. al.

suspected was true—that the ivy sent to them was telepathic and to some degree manipulative—then perhaps the true narrator of Z was Zenith the common ivy itself (or himself, to use Riddley Walker’s most common pronounal reference).

Although insane by all normal standards of deduction, the idea has a certain persuasive charm when taken in context with other events of that year—many verifiable, such as the crash of the commuter plane on which Tina Barfield was a passenger—and offers at least one explanation for the manuscript. The idea that a telepathic ivy plant turned the typewriters of five previously normal editors into Ouija boards is an outrage to rational thought; with that much, no sane person could fail to agree. And yet there is a certain pull to the idea, at least for this reader, a sense that yes, this is how these things happened, and yes, this is how the truth of those days came to be written down.

S. K.

From Z, an unpublished manuscript

April 4, 1981

490 Park Avenue South

New York City

Skies fair, winds light, temperature 50 F.

9:16 A.M.

RainBo Soft Drinks has its New York offices on the third floor of the building which stands at 490 Park Avenue South. Although small (market share as of 3/1/81: 6.5%), RainBo is enthusiastic, a young and growing concern. In early April of 1981, the RainBo top brass certainly has something to be excited about: they have gotten the rights (for a price they can afford) to commercially exploit the classic Harold Arlen composition "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." They are tooling up a whole new PR campaign around the song.

On this Saturday morning, executive vice president George Patella ("I'm a knee man" is his favorite singles-bar pickup line...not that he is single) has driven in from his home in Westport because a brilliant concept has come to him in the middle of the night. He wants to memo it and lay it on his superior's desk before noon. And after noon, there's a certain new tittybar over on 7th Avenue that he's been meaning to check out.

His head full of animated soda bottles dancing over the rainbow in cunning little red shoes, George Patella barely registers the man who follows him in, catching the door and murmuring "Thank you" after George has used his key. All he notices is an older gentleman,

in his late sixties or early seventies, handsome in a haggard sort of way, and wearing a green military uniform.

If asked later to be more specific about this uniform, Mr. Patella would be unable to add much, although he is by nature a friendly and helpful man (albeit one with a tendency to put his wedding ring into a rear compartment of his wallet on certain occasions). If his head hadn't been so full of those dancing soda bottles, he might have seen that the elderly fellow with the steel gray brush-cut wore no insignia and no badges of rank. If chivvied into total recall (or hypnotized into it), Patella might have said this of the man who stepped into the elevator with him that Saturday morning: he was wearing a dark green shirt, a black tie held to the shirt with a plain gold bar, and dark green pants, sharply creased and cuffed, over brightly shined black shoes. An outfit of military aspect, in other words, but one that could have been purchased at the Army-Navy store a block over for a total cost of under forty dollars.

It is the way he wears what he has on that gives the impression of military dress; once the older gentleman has pushed the button for his floor (George Patella has no idea which one), he stands perfectly straight and perfectly still, with his hands clasped in front of him and his eyes on the lighted floor-indicator. He doesn't fidget or call attention to himself in any way, certainly not by attempting to chat. And there is nothing in his posture which suggests discomfort. This is a man who has stood so—not quite at attention, but certainly not at ease—many times before. His face communicates that. That, and the idea that he perhaps enjoys such a posture.

All and all no surprise that George Patella, preoccupied with his own concerns (he's too deep within them to even realize he's softly whistling "Somewhere Over the Rainbow"), does not question the man's right to be there. All else aside, the man in the green shirt and trousers radiates that sense of right place-right time. And certainly George Patella does not recognize the man sharing his elevator car as General Anthony "Iron-Guts" Hecksler (U.S. Army Ret.), madman, murderer, and fugitive from justice. Patella gets off on Three to write

his memo about the dancing soda bottles. The man in the green pants and shirt stays aboard the elevator car. Patella the soft-drink seller has one last glimpse of the military fella as he (Patella) turns the corner toward the RainBo offices: an elderly gent standing quietly erect, looking straight ahead, hands clasped in front of him, the fingers of those hands slightly bunched by arthritis. Just standing there, just waiting for the elevator to go up, so he can get on with his own business.

Whatever that business might be.

April 4, 1981

Cony Island

Skies fair, winds light, temperature 51 F.

9:40 A.M.

As soon as Sandra Jackson and Dina Andrews step off the train, eleven-year-old Dina expresses her desire to go on the Wonder Wheel, which has just resumed operation for another season.

On their way down there, they are huckstered cheerfully from both sides of the mostly empty midway. One cry makes Sandra smile: “Hey, pretty blonde lady! Hey, you little red-headed cutie! Come on over here and try your luck! Make my day!”

Sandra diverts to the Wheel of Chance and sizes the game up. It’s a little like roulette, only with prizes instead of money if you win. Hit red or black, odd or even, and win a small prize. Hit one of the triples and win a bigger one. Hit a four-way and win a bigger one yet. And if you should pick a single number and hit, you win the prize of prizes—the big pink teddy bear. All this possibility for a quarter!

Sandra turns to Dina (who is indeed both a redhead and a cutie).
“What are you going to name your new bear?” she asks her.

The guy running the Wheel of Chance grins. “Confidence!” he cries.
“Sweetheart, that’s the best thing in life!”

“I’ll name him Rinaldo,” Dina says promptly. “If you win him.”

“Oh, I’ll win him, all right,” Sandra says. She takes a quarter from her purse and surveys the numbers, which run from one to thirty-four and include such ringers as FREE SPIN, BYE-BYE NICE TRY, and double zero. She looks at the concessionaire, who is checking out her bod in a way that is thorough without being creepy. “My friend,” she says to him, “I want you to remember that I’m only putting a floor under you. From this point, your season is only going to get better.”

“Gosh, you are confident,” he says. “Well, pick your number and I’ll let er rip.”

Sandra lays her quarter down on seventeen. Three minutes later the concessionaire is watching with wide eyes as the pretty lady and her pretty young friend continue to walk down toward the Wonder Wheel, the pretty young friend now in charge of a pink teddy-bear almost as big as she is.

“How’d you do it, Aunt Sandy?” Dina wants to know. She is all but bursting with excitement. “How’d you do it?”

Aunt Sandy taps her forehead and grins. “Psychic waves, sweetheart. Call it that. Come on, let’s see what the world looks like from way up high.”

Sometimes life exhibits (or seems to exhibit) an observable pattern. This is certainly one of those times. Because, as the two of them begin to skip hand in hand toward the Wonder Wheel, Sandra Jackson begins to sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and Dina quickly joins in.

April 4, 1981

490 Park Avenue South

9:55 A.M.

Gosh and fishes, gee whillikers, and Katie bar the door! What a time old Iron-Guts is having! Talk about making the best of your time! Talk about your gauzy moon-drenched madhouse dreams made real!

At first he felt some doubt. Disquiet, even. For a few moments there, after he picked the lock of the hallway door (no problem there, he could have done it in a doze) and stepped into the Zenith House reception area, something in the back of his brain actually tried to flash a Code Red. It was as if all those alligator instincts which served him so well in three wars and half a dozen brushfire skirmishes had sniffed something out and were trying to warn him. But a command officer didn't call off a mission simply because of a little trench-fright. What a command officer did was remind himself of his objective.

"Designated Jew," Hecksler murmured. That was his objective. The liar who had led him on and then stolen his best ideas.

Nonetheless he continued to feel that electric tickle of unease, that sense of being watched. Being watched by the very walls, it seemed.

He looked sharply along those walls, keeping his gaze above eye-level and peering with special penetrating attention into the corners. No surveillance cameras. So that was all right.

He sniffed sharply, spreading the wings of his nose, really flaring the old nostrils.

“Garlic,” he muttered. “No question. Known it and grown it. All my life. Ha! And...”

Something else, there was definitely something else, but he couldn't get it. Not, at least, in the reception area.

“Damn garlic,” he said. “Like a bore at a party. A bore with a loud voice.”

At the portal which lead into the editorial offices, that interior warning voice spoke again. Only two words, but Hecksler heard them clearly: GET OUT !

“Not happening,” he said, and issued the Saturday-silent world of Zenith House a tight and unpleasant grin that likely would have turned Herb Porter's blood if he'd seen it. “Screaming lone eagle. Suicide mission, if that's what it takes. Nobody goes home.”

A step further and the smell of garlic was gone, as if someone had rubbed the stuff around the doorway. What replaced it was an entrancing odor Hecksler knew well and loved above all things: the tangy, bitter smell of burst gunpowder. The smell of battle.

The General, who had hunched over a bit without even realizing it (the first impulse when going into an unknown and possibly dangerous area, he knew, was to protect the family jewels), now straightened up. He looked around with a mad glare that would have done more than turn Herb's blood; it would have sent him fleeing in a blind panic. After a moment he relaxed. And now, below the bulging eyes, the lips first parted and then began to draw up. They reached the point where you would have said lips must stop and still they continued, until the corners seemed to have reached the level of Hecksler's bulging blue eyes. The smile became a grin; the grin became a bigger grin; the bigger grin became a grimace; the

grimace became a cannibal's leer; the cannibal's leer became an insane cannibal's leer.

"Zenith House, I am here!" he thundered into the empty corridor with its faded gray industrial strength rug and its framed book jackets of bosomy maidens and marching giant bugs on the walls. He struck his chest with a closed fist "You house of mockers, I am here! You den of thieves, I am here! Designated Jew, I AM HERE!"

His first impulse, curbed only with difficulty, was to remove his not inconsiderable penis from his pants and urinate everywhere: on the carpet, the walls, even the framed jacket covers if his admittedly aging piss-pump could fling the stream that high (twenty years before he could have washed the ceiling tiles, by God), like a dog marking its territory. Sanity didn't reassert itself because there was none left in the haunted belfry of his brushcut-topped head, but there was still plenty of guile. Nothing must appear out of place here in the hallway. Chances that the D.J. would come in first on Monday were mighty slim.

"Goddam slacker is what he is," Hecksler said. "A goddam commissary cowboy. Ha! Seen a thousand of em!"

And so he walked down the main corridor as decorously as a nun, passing doors marked WADE EDITOR IN CHIEF, KENTON, and GELB (that one another Jew, undoubtedly, but not the Jew) before coming to one marked...PORTER.

"Yesssss," Hecksler said, bringing the word out in a long and satisfying hiss, like steam.

There wasn't even any need to pick the lock; the D.J.'s door was open. The General stepped in. And now...now that he's in a place where he no longer has to be careful...gosh!

The urine which General Hecksler withheld in the hall goes into Herb Porter's desk drawers, starting with the lower and working to the upper. There is even a final squirt for the keyboard of typewriter.

There's an IN/OUT box filled with what look like submission letters, manuscript reports, and a personal letter (although typed) which begins Dear Fergus. Hecksler tears it all up and sprinkles the pieces on top of the desk like confetti.

Next to the IN/OUT is an envelope marked GOTHAM COLLECTIBLES, addressed to Mr. Herbert Porter care of Zenith House, and marked CONFIDENTIAL. Inside, the General finds three items. One is a letter which says, in essence, that the folks at Gotham Collectibles were mighty glad they could find the enclosed rarity for such a valued customer. The rarity is a Honus Wagner baseball card in a glassine envelope. The last enclosure is a bill in the amount of two hundred and fifty American men. The General is astounded and outraged. Two hundred and fifty dollars for a yid baseball player? And of course he is a yid; Hecksler can pick them out anywhere. Look at that schnozzola, by the jacked-up Jesus! (Unaware that Honus Wagner's schnozzola is pretty much identical to Anthony Hecksler's own.) Iron-Guts takes the card out of its envelope, and soon the image of Honus Wagner has joined the other, considerably less valuable, confetti on Herb's desk.

Hecksler begins to sing softly, a beer jingle: "Here's to you...for all you do...you des-ig-NAYY-ted Jew..."

There are the file cabinets. He could tip them over, but what if someone below heard the thud? And it seems meaningless. If he opens them, he knows what he'll find: just more paper. He's ripped enough of that for one day, by God. Also, he's getting a little pooped. It's been a stressful morning (a stressful week, a stressful month, a stressful goddam life). If he could find one more thing...one more meaningful thing...

And there it is. Most of the stuff on the walls is uninteresting—covers of books the D.J. has edited, photos of the D.J. with a number of men (and one woman) who the General supposes are writers but look to him suspiciously like wankers—but there's one picture that's different. Not only is it set off from the others, in its own little space, but the Herb Porter in it has an actual expression on his face. In the

others, the best he's managed is a sort of oh-fuck-I'm-getting-my-goddam-picture-taken-again squint, but in this one he's actually smiling, and it is a smile of unquestionable love. The woman he's smiling at is taller than the D.J. and looks about sixty. Held in front of her is the sort of large black satchel purse which by law only woman of sixty or over may carry.

Hecksler croons, "I see me, I see you, I see the mother, of a designated Jew."

He pulls the picture from the wall, turns it over, and sees the sort of cardboard backing he would have expected. Oh yes, he knows his man: sly tricks in front, cardboard backing behind. Yowza.

Hecksler pulls out the cardboard, then the picture of Herb and his beloved Marmar, which was taken at the twentyfifth anniversary party Herb organized for his parents out on Montauk in 1978. Iron-Guts drops trou (they go down fast, perhaps because of the large fold-up knife in the right front pocket), grabs one skinny butt-cheek and gives it a brisk sideways yank, the better to present the back door, the tan track, the everloving dirt road. Then the former United States General, who was personally decorated by Dwight Eisenhower in 1954, rubs his ass briskly and thoroughly with this picture which Herb loves above all others.

Gosh, what a time we're having!

But good times wear a person out, especially an older person, especially an older bonkers person. Enough be enough, as Amos might have said to Andy. The General hauls up his pants, squares himself away, then sits down in Herb's office chair. He did not pee in this chair, mostly because it never occurred to him, so the seat is nice and dry.

He swivels slowly around and looks out Herb's window. No view; just a few feet of empty space and then the windows of another office building. Most of those are covered with venetian blinds, and where the blinds aren't drawn, the offices are perfectly still. No doubt

somewhere in that building, as in this, executives are squeezing in a little overtime, but not in sight of Herb Porter's window.

The sun comes slanting in on General Hecksler's face, cruelly spotlighting his age-roughened skin and the burst veins at his temples; another vein, this one blue, pulses steadily in the middle of his deeply lined forehead. His eyelids are folded and wrinkled. More and more of them become visible as the General, who has dozed but not really slept in weeks, moves to the border which divides the land of wakefulness from that of Nod.

They close all the way...remain so, looking smoother now...and then they open again, disclosing faded blue eyes which are wary and crazy and most of all tired unto death. He has reached the border crossing—temporary peace lies beyond—but does he dare use it? Does he dare cross? There are so many enemies still, a world filled with scheming Jews, violent Italians, craven homosexuals, and theftly dance-footed Negros; so many sworn enemies of both the General and the country he has sworn to uphold...and could they be here now? Even now?

For a moment his lids take on their former wrinkled aspect as the eyes they guard open all the way, shifting in their sockets, but this only lasts a moment. The voice that warned him in the reception area has fallen silent, but he can still smell a lingering effluvia of gunsmoke, as soothing as memory.

Safe, that odor whispers. It is, of course, the odor and the voice of Zenith, the common ivy. You're safe. Home is the hunter, home from the hill, and you're safe for the next forty hours and more. Sleep, General. Sleep.

General Hecksler knows good advice when he hears it. Sitting in his enemy's chair, turned away from his enemy's desk (into which he has poured the piss of righteousness), General Hecksler sleeps.

He cannot see the ivy which has already entered this room and grows invisibly around his shoes and up the walls. Smelling

gunpowder and dreaming of ancient battles, General Heckler begins to snore.

April 4, 1981

490 Park Avenue South

New York City

Skies fair, winds light, temperature 55 F.

10:37 A.M.

When Frank DeFelice arrives at 490 Park Avenue South, stepping out of a Checker Cab and tipping a perfectly precise ten per cent, he's not in the same buoyant mood as George Patella the soft-drink fella, but he's every bit as preoccupied. DeFelice works at Tallyrand Office Supply on the 7th floor, and he has forgotten some paperwork he needs in order to be ready for the pre-inventory meeting at 9 A.M. on Monday morning. His intention is to simply dash up, grab the inventory summaries, and head back to Grand Central. DeFelice lives in Croton-on-Hudson, and plans to spend the afternoon doing yard work. This Saturday trip down to the city is your basic PITA: pain in the ass.

He takes some vague notice of the man in the sand-colored business suit standing to the left of the door; the man is holding a large attache case and checking his watch. He is young for the suit, but good-looking and wellgroomed: blond, blue-eyed. Certainly Carlos Detweiller, who has his mother's Nordic genes, doesn't look like anyone's idea of a spic, designated or otherwise.

As DeFelice opens the lobby door with his key, the young man with the attache case sighs and murmurs, “Hold it a sec, would you?”

Frank DeFelice obligingly holds the door and they cross the lobby together, heels clicking and echoing.

“People shouldn’t be allowed to be late on Saturdays,” the young man says, and DeFelice gives an agreeable, meaningless little smile. His mind is a million miles away...well, forty, at any rate, dwelling on various spring bulbs and fertilizers.

Perhaps this run of thought is why he notices a certain odd smell about the young man as they step into the elevator together—a certain earthy smell, almost like peat. Can that be some new aftershave? Something called Spring Garden or April Delight?

DeFelice pushes for seven.

“Hit five while you’re at it, would you?” the young man in the sand-colored suit asks, and DeFelice notices an interesting thing: there’s a combination lock on the guy’s attache case. That’s sort of cool, he thinks, and that thought leads to another: Father’s Day isn’t that far off. Hints dropped in the right location (to the mother of his children rather than the children themselves, in other words) might not go amiss. In fact—

“Five?” the young man in the sand-colored suit asks again, and DeFelice pushes five. He then points at the attache case.

“Abercrombie?” he asks.

“Kmart,” the young man replies, and offers a smile that makes DeFelice slightly nervous. It has an emptiness that goes beyond daffy. The two men journey silently after that, rising in the faint smell of peat.

Carlos Detweiller steps out on five. He walks to the wall where there are arrows pointing the way to the various businesses: Barco Novel-

Teaz, Crandall & Ovitz, Attorneys at Law, Zenith Publishing. He is examining these when the elevator doors slide shut. Frank DeFelice feels a momentary relief, then turns his mind to his own affairs.

10:38 A.M.

General Heckslar has sprung the lock instead of forcing it, and Carlos enters Zenith House without considering the unlocked main door suspicious— he's a gardener, a writer, and a Psykik Savant, after all, not a detective. Also, he's spent so many years getting what he wants that he's come to expect it.

In the reception area he smells garlic and nods briskly, like a man whose suspicions have been confirmed. Although in truth, they are rather more than suspicions. He is in touch with certain Powers, after all, and they've kept him ahead of the curve (as mid-level executives such as Frank DeFelice and George Patella might say) in most respects. One of the respects in which they have been a trifle behind the curve has to do with Iron-Guts Heckslar's current presence in the Zenith offices. Drawing conclusions in matters supernatural is always a risky business, but we might assume from this that the Powers of Darkness enjoy a giggle as much as the rest of us.

Yet does Carlos not smell something other than garlic out here? Certainly a frown clouds his blandly handsome face. Then it clears. He dismisses the faint whiff of the General's insanity which his trained nose has picked up as no more than a lingering trace of the receptionist's perfume. (What, one wonders, would such a perfume be called? Paranoia in Paris?)

Carlos moves across the room and pauses. Here the smell of garlic is stronger. She told them how to keep it in its place, he thinks, meaning the late Tina Barfield. Did she also tell them that, given a taste of the right blood, such precautions would be useless? Perhaps. In any case, it doesn't matter. He could care less at this point. Zenith would likely take care of John Kenton given time, but "likely" isn't good enough for Carlos Detweiller, and he doesn't have time. There probably won't be time to make John Kenton his zombie slave, either, but there should be enough time on Monday morning to cut Kenton's lying, misleading, thieving heart out of his chest. Carlos has plenty of knives in his Sakred Case, not to mention a new brush-cutter from American Gardener. He hopes to use this to remove Mr. John "Poop-Shit" Kenton's scalp. He can wear it like a hat while he snacks on "Poop-Shit's" valves and ventricles.

Carlos steps into the hall beyond the reception area and pauses again. He stands exactly where Hecksler stood when he proclaimed his presence to the empty offices. He notes (not without admiration) the framed book jackets: a giant ant poised over a screaming, half-nude woman; a mercenary shooting down a squad of charging Oriental soldiers while a city that appears to be Miami flames in the background; a woman in a slip in the embrace of a bare-chested pirate who appears to have an erection the size of an industrial plumbing fixture inside his colorful pantaloons; a red-eyed lurker watching the approach of a young lady on a deserted street; two or three cookbooks, just for spice.

Carlos thinks with some longing that in a better world, where people were honest, the jacket of his own book might be up there, as well. True Tales of Demon Infestations, with a photo of the one and only Carlos Detweiller on the cover. Smoking a pipe, perhaps, and looking Lovecrafty. That is not to be...but they will pay. Kenton, at least, will pay.

The hall looks empty except for the framed covers and the doors to the editorial cubicles beyond them, but the newcomer knows better. “Carlos, you weren’t born yesterday or even the day before,” as Mr. Keen might have said in happier times, times when people didn’t forget who was supposed to win all the card games.

Looks, however, can be deceiving.

With the garlic-rubbed portal behind him, Carlos can easily smell the Tibetan kadath ivy he has sent John Kenton, and he smells its true aroma: not popcorn, chocolate, coffee, honeysuckle, or Shalimar perfume but a darker odor, strict and sharp. It isn’t oil of clove, but perhaps that comes closest. It is a smell Carlos has detected emanating from his own armpits when he has been being strenuously psykik.

He closes his eyes and murmurs, “Talla. Demeter. Abbalah. Great Opoanax.” He breathes deep and the smell intensifies, filling his head, making it swim with visions that are dark and full of gusty-cold flying. They are visions of the land to which he will soon be going, the place where he will make his transition from earthy mortal to tulpa, a creature of the invisible world fully capable of returning to this one and possessing the bodies of the still-living. Perhaps he will use this power; perhaps he will not. Right now, such things do not matter.

He opens his eyes again and yes, there is the kadath. It is growing all over the walls and the carpet, thinning as it advances toward the reception area, thick and luxuriant further down the corridor. Somewhere down there, Carlos knows, is the place where the original pot still resides, buried in billowing drifts of green which would be invisible to all those who don’t believe in the plant’s power. The far end of the corridor looks as impenetrable as a rainforest jungle, buried in growth right up to the fluorescents, but Carlos

knows people could walk blithely up and down that corridor with absolutely no idea of what they were walking through...unless, of course, Zenith wanted them to know. In which case it would be the last thing they'd ever know. Basically, Zenith House is now a large green bear trap, spring-loaded.

Carlos walks down the corridor, Sacred Sacrifice Case held at chest level. He steps over the first trailing strand of Zenith, then an entire clot of entwined branches and rhizomes. One stirs and touches his ankle. Carlos stands patiently, and after a moment the strand drops away. Here, on the left, is the office of WADE EDITOR IN CHIEF. Carlos glances in without much interest, then passes on to the next door. Here the ivy-growth is much thicker, the strands covering the lower part of the door in zigzag patterns and twining around the knob in a loose lover's knot. One strand clings to the upper panel, which is glass, and streaks across the name like a stroke of green lightning.

"Kenton," Carlos says in a low voice. "You mocker."

10:44 A.M.

In Herb Porter's office, General Anthony Heckler opens his eyes. The thought that he may have dreamed the voice never so much as crosses his mind. What he has heard is this: Kenton, you mockie.

Someone else is in the Zenith House offices.

Someone else on a Saturday morning.

Iron-Guts has a pretty good idea who the someone else must be. "Tick-tick," he whispers, his lips barely moving. "Designated spic." In his doze, Heckler has slid down a bit in Porter's chair. Now he

slides even farther, wanting to make absolutely sure that the top of his head won't show if the D.S. should wander a few yards farther down the hall. It's okay for "Carlos" to see the mess in here as long as he doesn't see the man in here.

Silent as a sigh, Heckler eases his hand into the pocket of his pants and pulls out another of his Army-Navy store purchases: a bone-handled hunting knife with a seven-inch tungsten blade.

There is the faintest click as the General unfolds the blade and locks it into position. He holds it against his chest, the tip nearly touching the undershelf of his stringently shaved chin, and waits for whatever comes next.

Central Park

Skies fair, winds light, temperature 60 F.

10:50 A.M.

Bill Gelb is so excited about his planned excursion to Paramus that he hardly slept at all last night, and still he feels energized this Saturday morning, totally jazzed. He couldn't stay in the goddam apartment, just couldn't. The question was, where to go? Ordinarily he'd think movie, Bill loves the movies, but he couldn't sit still in one today. And then, in the shower, the answer came.

On a Saturday morning in Central Park, especially on a pretty spring morning like this one, there'll be a veritable Olympic games going on, everything from skateboarding and pick-up softball to chess and checkers.

There will also be a crap game going on at the edge of the Sheep Meadow; of this Bill is almost sure. It may have been closed down, but he can't imagine why the cops would bust such an innocuous game: low stakes, young white guys pretending to be cool dudes rolling the bones. Seven come eleven, baby needs a new pair of Adidas sneakers. A bottle or two of cheap wine will make the rounds, allowing the players to feel totally raffish, not to say decadent, shooting craps and drinking Night Train at eleven o'clock in the morning.

Bill has played in this game maybe half a dozen times over the last two years, always in warm weather. He likes to gamble, but shooting craps in Central Park when the temperature is below forty? No way. But today WINS radio says the mercury may shoot all the way up to an unseasonable seventy degrees, and besides...what better way to see if the force is still with him?

Which is why—as Riddley's train approaches Manhattan, as Sandra and her niece continue their whirlwind tour of Coney Island's early-season amusements, as Carlos Detweiler begins inspecting "Poop-Shit" Kenton's files, and General Hecksler sits slouched in Herb Porter's office chair, knife gleaming in the sunlight—we find Bill Gelb down on his knees in a circle of yelling, laughing white guys who are happy to fade his heat. Lucky son of a bitch got in the game, bet two guys to crap out (and won), then took the dice himself. Since then he's rolled five straight sevens. Now he's promising them a sixth, and further promising them it'll be sixty-one. Dude is crazy, so of course they're happy to fade him. And Bill is happy, as well. As happy as he's ever been in his life, it seems to him. He showed up here on the Meadow with just fifteen dollars in his pocket, deliberately leaving the rest of his cash at home; he's already tripled that. And this, by God,

is just the warmup! Tonight, in Paramus, he will sit down to the main course.

“God bless that crazy houseplant,” he murmurs, and rolls the dice onto the painted hopscotch grid that serves as the pit. They bounce, they roll, they tumble—

—and the Saturday morning yuppie crap-artists groan in mingled disbelief, despair, and amazement.

It’s six and one.

Bill snatches up the wad of currency lying on the HOME slot of the hopscotch grid, smacks it, and holds it up to the bright blue sky, laughing.

“You want to pass the dice, Mr. Lucky?” one of the other players asks.

“When I’m on a roll like this?” Bill Gelb leans forward and snatches the dice. “No fuckin way.” The bones feel warm in his hand. Someone hands him a bottle of Boone’s Farm and he takes a hit. “No fuckin way am I passing,” he repeats. “Gents, I’m going to roll these bones until the spots fall off.”

11:05 A.M.

The kadath has infiltrated Kenton’s office right through the cracks at the edges of the door, growing exuberantly up the walls, but Carlos barely notices. The ivy is nothing to him, one way or the other. Not now. It might have been fun to sit back and watch it work if not for Tina Barfield, but the bitch stole his owl’s beak and time has grown short. Let Zenith take care of the rest if it wants to; Kenton is his.

“You mocker,” he says again. “You thief.”

As in Herb’s office, there are pictures on the walls of Kenton with various authors. Carlos cares nothing for the authors (they look like wankers to him, too), but he looks fixedly at the repetitions of Kenton himself, memorizing the lean face with its shock of too-long black hair. What does he think he is? Carlos asks himself indignantly. A damned old rock star? A Beatle? A Rolling Stone? The name of a rock and roll group Kenton could belong to occurs to him: Johnny and the Poop-Shits.

As always, Carlos is startled by his own wit. He is serious so much of the time that he’s always shocked at what a good sense of humor he has. Now he barks laughter.

Still chuckling, he tries Kenton’s desk drawers, but, unlike Herb’s, they are locked. There is an IN/OUT box on top of the desk, but, also unlike Herb’s, it is almost completely empty. The one sheet of paper has several lines jotted on it that Carlos doesn’t understand in the slightest:

Leper hockey game: face off in the corner

7: 6 to carry the coffin, 1 to carry the boombox

Never mind the jam on your mouth, what’s that peanut butter doing on your forehead? “Fuck the mailman, give him a dollar and a sweet roll.”

Orange manhole cover in France=Howard Johnson’s.

What in the name of Demeter is all that crap about? Carlos doesn't know and decides he doesn't care, either.

He goes to Kenton's file cabinets, expecting them to be locked as well, but he has a long weekend ahead of him, and if he gets bored, he can open both the desk and the files. He has plenty of tools in the Sakrifice Case that will do the job. But the drawers of the file cabinets turn out to be unlocked—go figure.

Carlos begins searching the files with a high degree of interest that quickly fades. Poop-Shit's files are alphabetized, but after CURRAN, JAMES (author of four paperback originals in 1978 and '79, with titles like Love's Strange Delight and Love's Strange Obsession), comes DORCHESTER, ELLEN (six brief manuscript reports, each signed by Kenton and each attached to a rejection letter). There's no file marked DETWEILLER, CARLOS.*

The one item of interest Carlos discovers is in the bottom drawer, lying behind the few hanging files marked W-Z. It's a framed photograph which undoubtedly graced Kenton's desk until recently. In it, Kenton and a pretty young Oriental woman are standing on the rink at Rockefeller Plaza with their arms around each other, laughing into the camera.

A smile of surpassing nastiness dawns on Carlos's face. The woman is in California, but for a genuine Psykik Savant, a few thousand miles presents

* Such a file by then existed, of course, and it contained material that might well have caused Detweiller to explode with rage, but it was in the publishing house safe, behind a picture in Roger Wade's office. Neither Hecksler nor Detweiller so much as entered that office. That file also contained material concerning the General and the company's new mascot.

absolutely no problem. Miss Ruth Tanaka is already discovering that she has backed the wrong horse in the Romance Sweepstakes. Carlos knows she'll be back in New York before long, and thinks that she may stop by Zenith House shortly after she arrives. Kenton will be dead by then, but she will have questions, won't she? Yes. The ladies always have questions.

And when she comes...

"Innocent blood," Carlos murmurs. He tosses the framed photo back into the drawer and the glass front shatters. In the quiet office, the sound is satisfyingly loud. Across the hall, General Hecksler jumps slightly in Herb's chair, almost pricking himself with his own knife.

Carlos kicks the file-drawer shut, goes across to Kenton's desk, and sits down in Kenton's chair. He feels like Goldilocks, only with a pretty decent stiffy. He sits there for a little while, drumming the fingers of one hand on the Sakrifice Case and idly boinking his hardon with the fingers of the other. Later, he thinks, he'll probably masturbate—it is something he does often and well. Not knowing, of course, that his days of self-abuse are now gone.

In the office across the corridor, Iron-Guts has taken up a position against the wall to the left of Herb Porter's door. He can see a reflection of the office across the way in Herb's window—faint, but good enough. When "Carlos" comes out to further recon the area, as sooner or later he will, the General will be ready.

11:15 A.M.

It occurs to Carlos that he's hungry. It further occurs to him that he has forgotten to bring any food. There might be candy bars or

something in Kenton's desk—gum, at least, everyone has a few sticks of gum lying around—but the jeezly bastardly thing is locked. Prying open the drawers in search of something that might not be there seems like too much work.

What about the other offices, though? Maybe there's even a canteen, with sodas and everything. Carlos decides to check. He has nothing but time, after all.

He gets up, goes to the door, and steps out. Once again the ivy in the hall touches his shoes; one strand curls around his ankle. Once again Carlos stands patiently until the strand lets go. The words pass, friend whisper in his head.

Carlos goes to the next door down the hall, the one marked JACKSON. He doesn't hear Herb Porter's door as it opens squeaklessly behind him; doesn't sense the tall old man with the knife in his hand who's measuring distances with cold blue eyes and finding them acceptable.

As Carlos opens the door to Sandra's office, Iron-Guts springs. One forearm—old, scrawny, hideously strong—hooks around Carlos's throat and shuts off his air. Carlos has a moment to feel a new emotion: utter terror. Then a lightning-bright line of heat prints itself across his lower midsection. He thinks he has been burned with something, perhaps even branded, and would have screamed if not for his closed windpipe. He hasn't the slightest idea that he's been partially disemboweled, and has only avoided the total deal by staggering to his left, bumping the General against the edge of

Sandra Jackson's door, and causing him to slash a little high and nowhere near as deeply as he intended.

"You're one dead SOB." Heckler whispers these words in Carlos's ear as tenderly as a lover. Carlos smells Roloids and madness. He throws himself to the right, against the other side of the door, but the General is ready for this trick and rides him as easily as a cowpoke on an old nag. He raises the knife again, meaning to open Carlos's throat for him. Then he hesitates.

"What kind of spic has blond hair and blue eyes?" he asks. "What—" He feels the mothflutter of Carlos's hand against his thigh an instant too late. Before he can draw back, the designated spic has grabbed his testicles and crushed them in the iron grip of one who is fighting for his life and knows it.

" YOWWWW!" Heckler cries, and for just one moment the armlock on Carlos's throat weakens. It isn't the pain, enormous though it is, that causes the death-grip to weaken; Iron-Guts has devoted years to living with pain and through it. No, it's surprise. The D.S. is being choked, the D.S. has been slashed, and still he is fighting back.

Carlos throws himself to the left again, slamming the General's bony shoulder against the doorjamb. Heckler's grip loosens a bit more, and before he can re-establish it, Zenith—more in the spirit of puckish good humor than anything else—takes a hand.

It's actually the General's feet the ivy takes, wrapping a loose green fist around both and yanking backward. Although the branches are still new and thin (some are pulled apart by Hecksler's weight), Z's grip is surprisingly strong. And surprise, of course, is the key word. If Iron-Guts had expected such a cowardly sneak attack, he almost certainly would have kept his feet. Instead, he thumps heavily to his knees.

Carlos whirls in the doorway, gasping and gagging and hacking for air. He still feels that band of heat across his belly, and it seems to be spreading. The bastard shocked me, he thinks. He had one of those things, those illegal laser things.

He has to get back to Kenton's office, where he has foolishly left the Sacrifice Case, but when he starts forward, the General slashes his knife through the air. Carlos recoils just fast enough to keep from losing his nose. The General bares his teeth at Carlos—those that have survived the Shady Rest Mortuary, at least. Bright color blazons his cheeks.

"Get out of my way!" Carlos squalls. "Abbalah! Abbalah can tak! Demeter can tah! Gah! Gam!"

"Save your spic gabble for someone who gives a rip," the General says. He makes no attempt to get off his knees, simply sways from side to side, looking as mystic (and as deadly) as any snake ever piped out of a fakir's basket. "You want to get past me, son? Then come on. Try for it."

Carlos looks over the old man's shoulder and sees there are still green boughs of ivy looped around the old man's ankles.

“Kadath!” Carlos calls. “Cam-ma! Can tak!” These words mean nothing in themselves. They are invocatory in nature, Carlos Detweiller’s way of shaping a telepathic command. He has told Zenith to yank the old man again, to pull him right down the hall into the main growth and crush him.

Instead, the knots around the General’s ankles untie themselves and slither away.

“No!” Carlos bawls. He cannot believe that the Dark Powers have deserted him. “No, come back! Kadath! Kadath can tak!”

“Better take a look at yourself, son,” General Hecksler advises slyly.

Carlos looks down and sees that his sand-colored suit has turned bright red from the coat pockets on down. There’s a long, tattered rip across his midsection; the end of his tie has actually been lopped off. He can see something shiny and purple in the slash and realizes with disbelieving dismay that those are his guts.

While he’s distracted, Hecksler lunges forward and swipes with his knife again. This time he opens Carlos’s shoulder down to the bone. “Olay!” Iron-Guts screams.

“You crazy old fuck!” Carlos screams back, and lashes out a foot. This sends a terrible dull cramp of pain through his belly and a freshet of blood down the front of his pants, but the shoe catches General Hecksler square in the skinny beak and breaks it. He goes flopping back. Carlos starts forward but the evil old bastard is up on his knees again in a goddamned flash, slashing everywhere. What is he made of, iron?

Carlos dodges back into Sandra’s office, panting, and slams the door just as Hecksler curls the fingers of his free hand around the jamb. Hecksler utters a howl as his fingers are crushed, and it is music to Carlos’s ears. But the old son of a bitch won’t stop. He’s like a robot with its selector switch frozen on KILL. Carlos hears the office door bang open behind him as he staggers across Sandra’s office with

the left arm of his jacket turning crimson and one hand on his slashed midsection, trying to keep those purple things in where they belong. He hears a harsh, doglike panting as air rushes in and out of the madman's old lungs. In a moment the robot will be on him again. The robot has a weapon; Carlos has none. Even if he had his Sakrifice Case, the robot would give him no time to work the combination.

I'm going to die, Carlos thinks wonderingly. If I don't do something right away, I'm actually going to die. He has known that death was coming, of course, but until this minute it has been an academic concept. There is nothing academic about having a crazy robot after you while blood pours down your arm and legs, however.

Carlos looks at Sandra's desk, which is a cluttered, paper-strewn mess. Scissors? A letter-opener? Even a damned nailfile? Anything — Good Demeter, what's that?

Lying beside her blotter, partly obscured by a framed photo of Sandra and Dina taken on their trip to Nova Scotia two years before, is a large silver object which looks like a gunshell. Sandra, her mind full of books and plants and manuscripts and tales of elderly Rhode Island zombies, has forgotten to put the gunshell in her purse when she left on Friday afternoon. Also, it's now easy for her to forget: the plant has given her a new sense of security and well-being. This object no longer seems so vital to her.

It's vital to Carlos, though.

Carlos has spotted Sandra's Rainy Night Friend.

11:27 A.M.

"What's the matter, Aunt Sandra?" Dina asks. A moment before they were been walking down the boardwalk together, eating the delicious

grilled franks you can only get at Cony. Then Sandra stopped, gasped, and put a hand to her stomach. "Is your hotdog no good?"

"It's fine," Sandra said, although a sudden pain had, in fact, just ripped through her belly. It wasn't the kind of pain she associated with food-poisoning, but she turned and deposited the remainder of her dog in a trash barrel just the same. She was no longer hungry.

"Then what is it?"

It was a voice in her head, calling. But if she told Dina that, her niece would probably think she was crazy. Especially if she told her it was a green voice.

"I don't know," Sandra said, "but maybe I ought to take you home, hon. If I'm going to get sick, I don't want to get caught all the way out here."

11:27 A.M.

John Kenton has been scrambling eggs in his little kitchen, whistling "ChimChim-Chiree" from Mary Poppins as he stirs with his whisk. The pain comes like lightning out of a blue sky, ripping across his middle, there and gone.

He cries out and jerks backward, the whisk pulling the frypan off the stove and splattering half-congealed eggs on the linoleum. Both the eggs and the pan miss his bare feet, which could almost qualify as a miracle.

The office, he thinks. I have to get to the office. Something's gone wrong. And then his head suddenly fills with sound and he screams.

11:28 A.M.

Roger Wade is already headed for the door of his apartment when the unearthly wowl of Sandra's Rainy Day Friend fills his head, threatening to burst it open from the inside out. He drops to his knees like a man who's had a heart attack, holding his head and uttering screams he can't hear.

11:28 A.M.

On the edge of the Sheep's Meadow, the little cluster of Saturday morning gamblers watch the fleeing man with bemused surprise. He was cleaning them out, righteously and in record time. Then, suddenly, he gave a scream and lurched to his feet, first clutching his gut and then slamming the heels of his hands against his ears, as if assaulted by some monstrous sound. As if to confirm this, he had gasped "Oh God, turn it off!" Then he fled, staggering from side to side like a drunk.

"What's up with him?" one of the crap-artists asked.

"I don't know," said another, "but I know one thing: he left the gelt." For a moment they simply look at the untidy pile of bills beside Bill

Gelb's vacated spot. Then, quite spontaneously, the six of them begin to applaud.

April 4, 1981

Somewhere in New Jersey

Aboard the Silver Meteor 11:28 A.M.

In his seat by the window, Riddley is asleep and dreaming of other, younger days. He is dreaming, in fact, of 1961. In his dream, he and Maddy are walking to school hand in hand beneath a brilliant November sky. Together they chant their old favorite, which they made up themselves: “Whammerjammer-Alabammer! Beetle Bailey, Katzenjammer! Gi’me back my goddam hammer! Whammerjammer-Alabammer!” Then they giggle.

It is a good day. The Cuban stuff, which scared everybody near bout to death, is over. Rid has drawn a pitcher, and he thinks Mrs. Ellis will ask him to show it to the rest of the kinnygarden. Mrs. Ellis likes his pitchers.

Then, suddenly, Maddy stops. From the north comes a rising rumble. She looks at him solemnly. “Those are the bombers,” she says. “Hit happened. Hit’s World War Three.”

“Naw,” Riddley says. “Hit’s over. The Roosians backed down. Kennedy scared em honest. Bald Roosian fella told his boats to turn around and go home. Mama said so.”

“Mama’s crazy,” Maddy replies. “She sleeps on the riverbank. She sleeps with the copperhairs.”

And as if to prove it, the Blackwater air-raid siren goes off, deafening him—

11:29 A.M.

Riddley straightens up and stares out at New Jersey: stares, in fact, at the exact swampy wasteland he will that night be visiting.

The man across the aisle looks up from his paperback book. "Are you all right, sir?" he asks.

Riddley cannot hear him. The air-raid siren has followed him out of his dream. It is filling his head, bursting his brains.

Then, suddenly, it cuts off. When the man across the aisle asks his question again, this time with real concern, Riddley hears him.

"Yes, thanks," he says in a voice that's almost steady. In his head, the old rhyme beats: Whammer-jammer-Alabammer. "I'm fine."

But some folks are not, he thinks. Some folks most definitely are not.

490 Park Avenue South 5th floor

11:29 A.M.

In 1970, a large number of American brass were celebrating at a Saigon bar and whorehouse called Haiphong Charlie's. Word had come down from Washington that the war would certainly continue for at least another year, and these career soldiers, who had gotten the ass-kicking of their lives over the last twenty months or so and wanted payback more than they wanted life itself, were raising the roof. The miracle was that something in the bomb the anonymous waiter planted was defective, and instead of spraying the whole room with nails and screws, it only sprayed those soldiers who happened to be near the stage, where it had been hidden in a flower arrangement. One of those unfortunates was Anthony Heckler's aide-de-camp. Poor sonofabitch lost both hands and one eye while he was doing the frug or the Watusi or one of those.

Hecksler himself was on the edge of the room, talking with Westy Westmoreland, and although a number of nails flew between them—both men heard their whining passage—neither suffered so much as a nicked earlobe. But the sound of the explosion in that small room was enormous. IronGuts hadn't minded being spared the screams of the wounded, but it had been nine full days before his hearing began to come back. He had about given that sensation up for dead when it finally returned home (and still for a week or so every conversation had been like a transatlantic phone call in the nineteen-twenties). His ears have been sensitive to loud noises ever since.

Which is why, when Carlos yanks the pull-ring in the center of the silver thing, setting off the high-decibel siren, Iron-Guts recoils with a harsh grunt of surprise and pain—"AHHH?"—and puts his hands to his ears.

All at once the knife is pointing at the ceiling instead of at Carlos, and Carlos doesn't hesitate to take advantage. Badly hurt as he is, as surprised as he is, he's never gone more than half a step over the edge of panic. He knows there are only two ways out of this office, and that the five-story drop from the windows behind him is unacceptable. It must be the door, and that means he must deal with The General.

Near the top of the screaming gunshell, about eight inches beyond the pull-ring, is a promising red button. As The General lunges forward again, Carlos thrusts the gunshell gadget at him and pushes the button. He's hoping for acid.

A cloud of white stuff billows from the pinhole in the very tip of the gunshell and envelops the General. Hi-Pro gas isn't acid—not quite—but it isn't cotton candy, either. The General feels as if a swarm of biting insects (Gnats from Hell) had just settled on the wet and delicate surfaces of his eyes. These same insects pour up his nostrils, and the General suspends breathing at once.

Like Carlos, he keeps control. He knows he's been gassed. Even blinded, he can deal with that, has dealt with it before. It's the siren that's really screwing up his action. It's bludgeoning his brains.

He falls back toward the door, pressing his free hand against his left ear and waving the knife in front of him, creating what he hopes will be a zone of serious injury.

And then, oh praise God, the siren quits. Maybe its Taiwanese circuits are defective; maybe the nine-volt battery which powered it just ran out of juice. Hecksler doesn't give a shit which it is. All he knows is that he can think again, and this fills his warrior's heart with gratitude.

With luck, however, the D.S. won't know he's got it back together. A little acting is in order. Hecksler staggers against the side of the door, still screaming. He allows the knife to drop. His eyes, he knows, are swelling shut. If Carlos buys his ruse—

Carlos does. The doorway is clear. The man sagging against one side of it is out of action, must be out of action after that. Carlos tries

to give him another spray for good measure, but this time when he triggers the button there's nothing but an impotent phut sound and a little gasp of something like steam. No matter. Time to get while the getting is good. Carlos staggers for the office doorway, his blood-sodden pants sticking to his legs. He is already thinking, in a hysterical and unformed way, about emergency rooms and assumed names.

The General is blind and the General is deaf, but his nose hasn't swelled entirely shut and he catches that dark, peaty odor which Frank DeFelice noticed in the elevator. He straightens up and lashes out at the center of the smell. The Army-Navy hunting knife goes into Carlos's chest up to the hilt, skewering the Mad Florist's heart like a piece of beef on a shish kabob. If he had been at Coney Island with Sandra and Dina, Iron-Guts undoubtedly would have won a teddy bear.

Carlos takes two shuffling steps backward, tearing the knife out of the General's grip. He looks down at it unbelievably and utters a single incoherent word. It sounds like Iggala (not that the General can hear it), but it's probably Abbalah. He tries to pull the knife free and cannot. His legs fold up and he drops to his knees. He is still pulling feebly at the hilt when he falls forward, pushing the tip of the blade all the way out through the back of his jacket. His heart gives a final spasm around the knife that has outraged it and then quits. Carlos feels a sensation of flying as the stained and filthy piece of laundry which is his soul finally flies off the line of his life and into whatever world there comes next.

11:33 A.M.

Iron-Guts can't see, but he knows when his enemy dies—he feels the passage of the son of a bitch's soul, and good goddam riddance. He staggers in the doorway, lost in a world of black space and streaming white dots like galaxies.

“Now what?” he croaks.

The first thing is to get away from the gas the Designated Spic shot into his face. Hecksler backs into the hall, breathing as shallowly as possible, and then a voice speaks to him.

This way, Tony, it says calmly. Turn portside. I'm going to lead you out.

“Doug?” Hecksler croaks.

Yep. It's me , General MacArthur says. You're not exactly looking squared away, Tony, but you're still standing at the end of the fight, and that's the important thing. Turn portside, now. Walk forty paces, and that's gonna take you to the elevator.

Iron-Guts has lost his usually formidable sense of direction, but with that voice to guide him, he doesn't need it. He turns portside, which happens to be directly away from the reception area and the elevator. Blind, now facing toward the ivy-choked far end of the hallway, he begins to walk, trailing one hand along the wall. At first he thinks the soft touch slithering around his shoulders are Dougout Doug's guiding hands...but how can they be so thin? How can there be so many fingers? And what is that bitter smell?

Then Zenith is winding itself around his neck, shutting off his air, yanking him forward into its cannibal embrace. Hecksler tries to scream. Leaf-decked branches, slender but horribly strong, leap eagerly into his mouth. One wraps around the leathery meat of his tongue and yanks it out. Others thrust their way down his elderly gullet, anxious to sample the digestive stew of the General's last meal (two doughnuts, a cup of black coffee, and half a roll of antacids). Zenith loops bracelets of ivy around his arms and thighs. It fashions a new belt around his waist. It picks his pockets, spilling out a mostly nonsensical strew of litter: receipts, memoranda to himself, a guitar pick, twenty or thirty dollars in assorted change and currency, one of the S&H stamp-books in which he wrote his dispatches.

Anthony "Iron-Guts" Hecksler is pulled briskly into the jungle which now infests the rear of the fifth floor with his clothes shredding and his pockets turned out, feeding the plant the blood of insanity, bringing it to full life and consciousness, and here he passes out of our tale forever.

From John Kenton's diary

April 4, 1981

It's 10:45 P.M., and I'm sitting here waiting for the phone to ring. I remember, not so long ago, sitting in this same chair and waiting for Ruth to call, thinking that nothing could be worse than being a man in love sending thought-waves at the telephone, trying to make it ring.

But this is worse.

This is much worse.

Because when the phone finally rings, what if it's not Bill or Riddley on

the other end of the line? What if it's some New Jersey cop who wants to know—

No. I refuse to let my mind run in that direction. It'll ring and it will be one of them. Or maybe Roger, if they call him first and leave it to him to call me. But everything is going to be fine.

Because now we have protection.

Let me go back to when I yanked the frypan right off the stove (which turned out to be something of a blessing; when I got back to the apartment some hours later, I discovered I'd left the burner on). I grabbed the kitchen table and kept on my feet, and then that goddamned siren went off in the middle of my head.

I don't know how long it went on; pain really does negate the whole concept of time. Fortunately, the reverse also seems to be true: given time, even the most horrible pain loses its immediacy, and you can no longer remember exactly how it felt. This was bad, I know that much—like having the most delicate tissues of your body repeatedly raked by some sharp, barbed object.

When it finally did stop, I was cringing against the wall between the kitchen and my combination living room/study, shaking and sobbing, my cheeks wet with tears and my upper lip lathered with snot.

The pain was gone, but the sense of urgency wasn't. I needed to get to

the office, and just as fast as I could. I was almost down to the lobby of my building when I checked to see if I'd put anything on my feet. As it happened, I'd found an old pair of moccasins. I must have gotten them out of the closet by the TV, although I'll be damned if I can remember that part. If my feet had been bare, I'm not sure I could have forced myself to go back up to the ninth floor. That's how strong that sense of urgency was.

Of course I knew what the siren in my head had been, even though I'd never been given an actual demonstration of Sandra's Rainy Day Friend, and I suppose I knew what was calling me, as well: our new mascot.

I caught a taxi with no trouble—thank God for Saturdays—and the run from my place to Zenith House was a quick one. Bill Gelb was standing out in front, pacing back and forth with one side of his shirt untucked and hanging down over his belt, running his hands back and forth through his hair, which was standing up in spikes and quills. He looked as nutty as the old lady in front of Smiler's, and

Funny thought to have. Because there was no lady in front of Smiler's, not really. We know that now.

I'm getting ahead of myself again, but it's hard to write scintillating prose when you can't stop looking at the phone, willing the damned thing to go off and put an end to the suspense, one way or the other. But I'll try. I think I must try.

Bill saw me and raced over to the cab. He started grabbing at my arm while I was still trying to pay the driver, pulling me onto the curb as if I'd fallen into a shark-infested pool. I dropped some coins and started to bend over.

“Leave em, for Christ sake, leave em!” he barked. “Have you got your office keys? I left mine on the bureau at home. I was out for a...” Out for a walk was what he meant to say, but instead of finishing he gave a kind of outof-breath, screamy laugh. A woman passing us gave him a hard look and hurried on a little faster. “Oh shit, you know what I was doing.”

Indeed I did. He’d been shooting craps in Central Park, but he’d left the majority of his cash on his bureau (along with his office keyring) because he had other plans for it. I could have gotten the other plans, too, if I’d wanted to look, but I didn’t. One thing was obvious: the telepathic range of the plant has gotten stronger. A lot.

We started for the door, and just then another cab pulled up. Herb Porter got out, redder in the face than I’d ever seen him. The man looked like a stroke waiting to happen. I’d never seen him in bluejeans, either, or with his shirt misbuttoned so it bloused out on one side. Also, it was sticking to his body and his hair (what little of it there is; he keeps it cropped short) was wet.

“I was in the goddam shower, okay?” he said. “Come on.”

We went to the door and I managed to get my key in the slot after three pokes. My hand was shaking so badly I had to grasp my wrist with the other one to hold it steady. At least there was no weekend security guy in the lobby to worry about. I suppose that particular paranoid virus will work its way down Park Avenue South eventually, but for the time being, building management still assumes that if you’ve got the right set of keys, you must be in the right place.

We got in through the door and then Herb stopped, holding my upper arm with one hand and Bill’s with the other. A daffy, goony smile was surfacing on his face, where his complexion had begun to subside to a more normal pink.

“He’s dead, you guys. He wasn’t before, but he is now. Ding-dong, the General’s dead!” And to my total amazement, Herb Porter, the Barry Goldwater of 490 Park Avenue South, actually raised his

hands, began snapping his fingers, and did a little Mexican hat-dance step.

“You’re sick, Herb,” Bill said.

“He’s also right,” I said. “The General’s dead and so’s—”

There came a clattery, disorganized knocking on the street door. It made us all jump and clutch each other. We must have looked like Dorothy and her friends on the Yellow Brick Road, faced with some new danger.

“Let go of me, both of you,” Bill said. “It’s just the boss.”

It was indeed Roger, hammering on the door and peering in at us, with the tip of his nose squished into a little white dime against the glass. Bill let him in. Roger joined us. He also looked as if someone had lit him on fire and then blown him out, but at least he was dressed, socks and all. Probably he was on his way out, anyway.

“Where’s Sandra?” was the first thing he asked.

“She was going to Cony Island,” Herb said. His color was coming back, and I realized he was blushing. It was sort of cute, in a ponderous way. “She might well turn up, though.” He paused. “If it carried that far. The telepathy thing, I mean.” He looked almost timid, an expression I never expected to see on Herb’s face. “What do you guys think?”

“I think it might have,” Roger said. “That was her gadget that went off in our heads, wasn’t it? The Dark and Stormy Night whatsit.”

I nodded. So did Bill and Herb.

Roger took a deep breath, held it, then let it out. “Come on, let’s see what kind of a mess we’re in.” He paused. “And whether or not we can get out of it.”

The elevator seemed to take forever. None of us said anything, not out loud, anyway, and when I discovered I could turn off the run of their thoughts, I did so. Hearing all those muttering voices twined together in the middle of your head is distressing. I suppose that now I know how schizophrenics must feel.

When the door opened on the fifth floor and the smell hit us, we all winced. Not in distaste, but in surprise. “Oh man,” Herb said. “All the way out here in the fucking hall. Do you suppose anyone else could smell it? I mean, anyone else but us?”

Roger shook his head and started toward the Zenith offices, walking with his hands rolled into fists. He stopped outside the office door. “Which of you has the key? Because I left mine at home.”

I was rummaging for them in my pocket when Bill stepped forward and tried the knob. It turned. He looked at us with his eyebrows raised, then went in.

I’d characterize what we’d smelled when the elevator door opened on Five as a scent. In the reception office it was much, much stronger—what you would have called a reek, if it had been unpleasant. It wasn’t, so what does that leave? Pungent, I suppose; a pungent, earthy smell.

This is so hard. To this point I’ve been racing along, wanting to get to what we found (and what we didn’t), but here I find myself moving much more slowly, searching for ways to describe what is, essentially, indescribable. And it occurs to me how infrequently we are called upon to write about smells and the powerful ways in which they affect us. The smell in the Central Falls House of Flowers was similar to this in its strength, but in other ways, important ways, entirely different. The greenhouse smell was threatening, sinister. This one was like...

Well, I might as well just say it. It was like coming home.

Roger looked around at Bill and me and gave us a forbidding District Attorney stare. “Toast and jam?” he asked. “Popcorn? Honeysuckle? New goddam car?”

We shook our heads. Zenith had put its various disguises aside, perhaps because it no longer needs them to entice us. I tuned into their thoughts again, just enough to know that Bill and Roger smelled what I did. There were variations, I’m sure, as no two sets of perception are alike (not to mention no two sets of olfactory receptors), but basically it was the same thing. Green...strong...friendly...home. I just hope and pray I’m not wrong about the friendly part.

“Come on,” Roger said.

Herb grabbed his arm. “What if somebody—”

“Nobody’s here,” I said. “Carlos was and the General was, but they’re...you know...gone.”

“Don’t gild the lily,” Bill said. “They’re dead.”

“Come on,” Roger repeated, and we followed him.

The reception area was clean as a whistle, the garlic still holding Zenith at bay, but the first green scouts had already gotten to within five feet of the pass-through to the editorial department (there’s no door at the reception end of the hallway, only a square arch flanked by Macho Man posters). Fifteen or twenty feet down, where the door to Roger’s office opens on the left, the growth has thickened considerably, covering most of the carpet and climbing up the walls. By the point where Herb’s office and Sandra’s face each other, it has covered the old gray carpet in a new carpet of fresh green, as well as most of the walls. It has gotten a start on the ceiling for good measure, hanging from the fluorescent lights in ropy swags. Beyond that, down toward Riddley’s country, it has become a jungle. Yet I knew that if I walked down there, it would open to let me pass.

Pass, friend, come home. Yes, I could hear it when Roger said. “That was her gadget that went off in our heads, wasn’t it? The Dark and Stormy Night whatsit.”

I nodded. So did Bill and Herb.

Roger took a deep breath, held it, then let it out. “Come on, let’s see what kind of a mess we’re in.” He paused. “And whether or not we can get out of it.”

The elevator seemed to take forever. None of us said anything, not out loud, anyway, and when I discovered I could turn off the run of their thoughts, I did so. Hearing all those muttering voices twined together in the middle of your head is distressing. I suppose that now I know how schizophrenics must feel.

When the door opened on the fifth floor and the smell hit us, we all winced. Not in distaste, but in surprise. “Oh man,” Herb said. “All the way out here in the fucking hall. Do you suppose anyone else could smell it? I mean, anyone else but us?”

Roger shook his head and started toward the Zenith offices, walking with his hands rolled into fists. He stopped outside the office door. “Which of you has the key? Because I left mine at home.”

I was rummaging for them in my pocket when Bill stepped forward and tried the knob. It turned. He looked at us with his eyebrows raised, then went in.

I’d characterize what we’d smelled when the elevator door opened on Five as a scent. In the reception office it was much, much stronger—what you would have called a reek, if it had been unpleasant. It wasn’t, so what does that leave? Pungent, I suppose; a pungent, earthy smell.

This is so hard. To this point I’ve been racing along, wanting to get to what we found (and what we didn’t), but here I find myself moving much more slowly, searching for ways to describe what is,

essentially, indescribable. And it occurs to me how infrequently we are called upon to write about smells and the powerful ways in which they affect us. The smell in the Central Falls House of Flowers was similar to this in its strength, but in other ways, important ways, entirely different. The greenhouse smell was threatening, sinister. This one was like...

Well, I might as well just say it. It was like coming home.

Roger looked around at Bill and me and gave us a forbidding District Attorney stare. "Toast and jam?" he asked. "Popcorn? Honeysuckle? New goddam car?"

We shook our heads. Zenith had put its various disguises aside, perhaps because it no longer needs them to entice us. I tuned into their thoughts again, just enough to know that Bill and Roger smelled what I did. There were variations, I'm sure, as no two sets of perception are alike (not to mention no two sets of olfactory receptors), but basically it was the same thing. Green...strong...friendly...home. I just hope and pray I'm not wrong about the friendly part.

"Come on," Roger said.

Herb grabbed his arm. "What if somebody—"

"Nobody's here," I said. "Carlos was and the General was, but they're...you know...gone."

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to Roger's office opens on the left, the growth has thickened considerably, covering most of the carpet and climbing up the walls. By the point where Herb's office and Sandra's face each other, it has covered the old gray carpet in a new carpet of fresh green, as well as most of the walls. It has gotten a start on the ceiling for good measure, hanging from the fluorescent lights in ropy swags. Beyond that, down toward Riddley's country, it has become a jungle. Yet I knew that if I walked down there, it would open to let me pass.

Pass, friend, come home. Yes, I could hear it whispering that to me.

"Ho...lee...shit," Bill said.

"We've created a monster," Herb said, and even in that moment of stress and wonder it occurred to me that he'd been reading too many Anthony LaScorbia novels for his own good.

Roger started down the hallway, moving slowly. We had all heard pass, friend, and we all felt that undeniable welcome, but we were all ready to run, just the same. It was just too new, too weird.

Although there's only one corridor in the office suite, it makes that little zigzag jog in the middle. We call the part running through the editorial offices "the front corridor." Beyond the jog are the mailroom, the janitor's cubby, and a utility room to which only the building's personnel are supposed to have access (although I suspect Riddley has a key). This part is called "the back corridor."

In the front corridor, there are three offices on the left: Roger's, Bill's, and Herb's. On the right there's a small office supply closet mostly taken up by our cranky Xerox machine, then my office, and finally Sandra's. The doors to Roger's office, Bill's, and the supply closet were all closed. My door, Herb's door, and Sandra's door were all open.

"Fuu-uck," Herb said in a horrified whisper. "Look on the side of her door."

“It’s not Kool-Aid, I can tell you that much,” Bill said.

“More on the carpet, too,” Roger said. Herb used the f-word again, once more breaking it into two syllables.

There was no blood on the ivy-runners, I noticed, and although I didn’t want to think about that too much, I suppose I know why not. Our buddy gets hungry, and doesn’t that make perfect sense? There’s so much more of it to support now, so many new outposts and colonies, and our psychic vibrations can probably offer it only so much in the way of nourishment. There’s an old blues tune on the subject. “Grits ain’t groceries,” the chorus goes. By the same token, friendly thoughts and supportive editors ain’t...

Well, they ain’t blood.

Are they?

Roger looked into Herb’s office and I looked into mine. My place looked okay, but I knew damned well Carlos had been there, and not just because of the fancy-shmancy attache case sitting on top of the desk. I could almost smell him.

“Things are a trifle disarranged in your cubby, Herbert,” Bill said in a really terrible English butler voice. Maybe it was his way of trying to lighten the tension. “In fact, I believe someone may have urinated a bit in theah.”

Herb glanced in, saw the destruction, and grunted an oath that sounded almost absent-minded before turning to Sandra’s office. By then, I was getting a pretty clear picture. Two crazy men, both with grudges against different Zenith House editors. I didn’t care how they got in or which of them had arrived first, but I was curious about how far apart in time they’d been. If they’d met in the lobby and had their lunatic shootout there, they could have saved us a lot of trouble. Only that probably wasn’t the way Zenith wanted it. Aside from the fact that Carlos may have owed a rather large debt to something (or Something) in the Great Beyond, there’s the fact that grits ain’t

groceries. Telepathic plants get more than lonely, it seems. Pore little fellers get hungry, too.

It's certainly something to think about.

"Roger?" Herb asked. He was still standing by his door, and he sounded timid again. "She...she's not in there, is she?"

"No," Roger said absently, "you know she's not. Sandra's on her way back from Cony Island. But our friend from Central Falls is finally present and accounted for."

We gathered around the door and looked in.

Carlos Detweiller lay face-down in what Anthony LaScorbia would undoubtedly call "a gruesome pool of spreading blood." The back of his suitcoat was pulled upward in a tent-shape, and the tip of a knife protruded through it. His hands were outstretched toward the desk. His feet, pointing toward the door, had already been partially covered by thin green bows of ivy. Zenith had actually pulled off one of his loafers and worked his way through the sock beneath. Maybe there was a hole in the sock to begin with, but somehow I don't think so. Because there were broken strands of ivy, you see. As if it had tried to pull him out, out and down toward the main mass of the growth, and had been unable. You could almost feel the hunger. The longing to have his carcass the way it had undoubtedly already had the General's.

"This is where they fought, of course," Roger said, still in that absent tone of voice. He saw the Rainy Day Friend lying on the floor, picked it up, sniffed at the little hole on top, and winced. His eyes began to water at once.

"If you set off the siren in that thing again, I will be forced to kill you as dead as the asshole at your feet," Bill said.

"I think the battery's fried," Roger said, but he set the thing down on Sandra's desk very carefully, also being careful not to step on

Detweiller's outstretched hand.

Carlos had been in my office, because I was the one against whom he'd built his grudge. Then he left for something.

"I think it was food," Bill said. "He got hungry and went looking for food. The General jumped him. Carlos got to Sandra's gadget before Hecksler could give him the coup de grace, but it wasn't enough. Do you see that part, John?"

I shook my head. Maybe I just didn't want to see it.

"What's this?" Bill was out in the hall. He dropped to one knee, moved aside a clump of ivy, and showed us a guitar pick. Like the leaves of Zenith himself, the pick was as clean as a whistle. No blood, I mean.

"Something printed on it," Bill said, and squinted. "JUST A CLOSER WALK WITH THEE, it says."

Roger looked at me, finally startled out of his daze. "Good God, John," he said, "that was him! He was her!"

"What are you talking about?" Bill asked, turning the pick over and over in his fingers. "What are you thinking about? Who's Crazy Guitar Gertie?"

"The General," I said hollowly, and wondered if he'd had the knife when I gave him the two dollars. If Herb had been there that day, he'd be dead now. There was absolutely no question about that in my mind. And I myself was lucky to be alive.

"Well, I wasn't there, and you are alive," Herb said. He spoke with his old don't-trouble-me-with-the-details irritability, but his face was still pale and shocked, the face of a man who is running entirely on instinct. "And congratulations, Gelb, you just left your dabs on that guitar pick. Better wipe em off."

I could see other stuff scattered amid the thickening greenery back down the hall: shredded bits of clothing, a few pieces of what looked like a pamphlet of some kind, paper money, coins.

“Fingerprints aren’t a problem because nobody’s ever going to see any of the old coot’s stuff,” Roger said. He took the pick from Bill, briefly examined the printing, then walked a little way down the corridor. The drifts and clumps of ivy drew back for him, just as I had known they would. Roger tossed the pick. A leaf folded over it and it was gone. Just like that.

Then, in my head, I heard Roger’s voice. Zenith! As if calling a dog. Eat this crap up! Make it gone!

And for the first time I heard it speak a coherent reply. There isn’t anything I can do about the coins. Or these damn things.

Halfway up the wall, just beyond Herb’s office door, a shiny green leaf almost the size of a dinner plate unrolled. Something bright dropped to the carpet with a clink. I walked down and picked up Iron-Guts’s Army ID tags on a silver beaded chain. Feeling very weird about it—you must believe me when I say words cannot begin to tell—I slipped them into my pants pocket. Meanwhile, Bill and Herb were picking up the General’s silver change. As this went on, there was a low rustling sound. The bits of clothing and shreds of paper were disappearing back into the jungle where the front corridor becomes the back one.

“And Detweiller?” Bill asked in a hushed voice. “Same deal?”

Roger’s eyes met mine for a moment, questioning. Then we shook our heads, both at the same time.

“Why not?” Herb asked.

“Too dangerous,” I said.

We waited for Zenith to speak again, to contradict the idea, perhaps, but there was nothing.

“Then what?” Herb asked plaintively. “What are we supposed to do with him? What are we supposed to do with his goddam briefcase? For that matter, what are we supposed to do with any little pieces of the General we come across in the back corridor? His belt-buckle, for instance?”

Before any of us could answer, a man’s voice called from the reception area. “Hello? Is anyone here?”

We looked at each other in utter surprise, in that first moment too shocked for panic.

From the journals of Riddley Walker

4/5/81

When I got to the train station, I stuck my suitcase into the first unoccupied coin-op locker I came to, snatched the key with the big orange head out of the lock, and dropped it into my pocket, where it will undoubtedly stay at least until tomorrow. The worst is over—for now—but I can’t even think about getting my luggage, or doing any sort of ordinary chore. Not yet. I’m too exhausted. Physically, yes, but I’ll tell you what’s worse: I’m morally exhausted. I think that is a result of returning to Zenith House so soon upon the heels of my nightmare falling-out with my sisters and brother. Any high moral ground I might have claimed when the train pulled out of Birmingham is all gone now, I can assure you. It’s hard to feel moral after you’ve crossed the George Washington Bridge with a body in the back of a borrowed panel truck. Very hard indeed. And I can’t get that goddamned whitebread John Denver song out of my head. “There’s a fire softly burning, supper’s on the stove, gee it’s good to be back home again.” That’s one wad I’m tard of chewin’, Uncle Michael might have said.

But 490 Park Avenue did feel like home. Does. In spite of all the horror and strangeness, it feels like home. Kenton knows. The others, too, but Kenton knows it best of all. I've grown to like them all (in my own admittedly involuted way), but Kenton is the one I respect. And if this situation starts to spin out of control, I believe it's Kenton that I'd go to. Although I must say this before plunging back into narrative: I'm afraid of myself now. Afraid of my capacity to do ill, and to carry on doing ill until it's too late to turn around and make amends.

In other words, the situation may already be out of control, and me with it.

Gee, it's good to be back home again.

Well, let it go. I'm tired and I still have a lot to tell, so that's best. I feel a moral tract itching to get out, but we'll just save it for another day, shall we?

I told the cab driver to take me to 490, then changed my mind and had him drop me at Park and Twenty-ninth, instead. I wanted to scout a little bit, I suppose. Get the lay of the land and creep up on the blind side. It's important to make one thing clear: the range of the telepathy generated from the plant, while wider, is still limited to the vicinity of the building...unless the situation is extreme, as it was during the death-struggle between Hecksler and the Mad Florist.

I don't know if I expected police, SWAT teams, or fire trucks, but all I saw was Sandra Jackson, pacing up and down in front of the building, looking half-distracted with worry and indecision. She didn't see me. I don't think she would have seen Robert Redford if he'd strolled by stark naked. As I walked toward her, she went to the

building's door, hands cupped to the sides of her face, then seemed to come to a decision. She spun on her heels and started toward the street, clearly meaning to cross to the uptown side.

"Sandra!" I called, breaking into a trot. "Sandra, hold on!"

She turned, first startled, then relieved. I saw she was wearing a big pink button on her coat which read I LUV CONY ISLAND! She started running toward me, and I realized it was the first time I had ever seen her in a pair of sneakers. She threw herself into my arms so hard she almost knocked me onto the sidewalk.

"Riddley, Riddley, thank God you came back early," she babbled. "I took a cab all the way from Cony Island...cost a fortune...my niece thinks I'm either crazy or in love...I...what are you doing here?"

"Just think of me as the cavalry in a John Wayne movie," I said, and set her back on her feet. That much was easy. Getting her to let go, I thought, might not be. She clung like a barnacle.

"Tell me you've got your office keys," she said, and I could smell something sweet on her breath—cotton candy, maybe.

"I've got them," I said, "but I can't get them unless you let go of me, honey child." I called her that with no irony whatsoever. It's what Mama always called us when we came in with scraped knees, or upset from being teased.

She let go and looked up at me solemnly, as big-eyed as a waif in one of those velvet paintings. "Something's different about you, Riddley. What is it?"

I shrugged and shook my head. "Don't know. Maybe we can discuss it at another time."

"John's enemy is dead. So is Herb's. I think they killed each other."

That wasn't what she thought, not exactly, but I took her by the arm and lead her back toward the door. The only thing I wanted right then was to get her off the street. People were looking at us strangely, and not because she's white and I'm black. And people who see a crying woman on a sunny Saturday afternoon are apt to remember her, even in a city where instant amnesia is the rule rather than the exception.

"The rest of them are up there," she said, "but I forgot my damned keys. I'd just decided to go across to Smiler's and try calling them when you showed up. Thank God you did."

"Thank God I did," I agreed, and used my keys to let us into the lobby.

We smelled it as soon as we got off on Five, and in the Zenith House reception area, it was strong enough to knock you down. A spicy aroma. And green. Sandra was clutching my hand hard enough to hurt.

"Hello?" I called. "Is anyone here?"

Nothing for a moment. Then I heard Wade say, "It's Riddley." To which Porter replied, "Don't be an ass." To which Gelb replied, "Yes. It is."

"Are you guys all right?" Sandra asked. She still had me by my hand and was dragging me toward the hall. At first I didn't want to go...and then I did.

We got around LaShonda's desk and there they were. At first I hardly noticed them, though. The only thing I had eyes for was the plant. No more tired, bedraggled little ivy in a pot. The Brazilian rainforest has been transplanted to Park Avenue South. It was everywhere.

"Riddley," Kenton said with obvious relief. "Sandra."

“What are you doing here, Riddley?” Gelb asked. “I thought you weren’t coming back until the middle of next week.”

“My plans changed,” I said. “I got in on the train less than an hour ago.”

“What happened to your accent?” Porter asked. He was standing there with that crazy plant growing all around his feet, caressing his ankles, for God’s sake, and looking at me with beetle-browed suspicion. At me with suspicion!

“That’s it,” Sandra breathed. “That’s what’s different.”

I freed my hand from her grip, feeling that I might need my fingers in reasonable working order before the day was done. The picture (a picture, anyway) was coming clear in my head: a kind of silent movie, in fact. I was getting some of it from them and some of it from Zenith.

The suspicion had left Herb Porter’s face. It was only my lack of accent which had bothered him, not me. What I felt as we stood there amid that green madness was a sense of family, a sense of all I had missed down in Alabama, and I embraced it. Away from the plant it is still possible to question, to mistrust. Within its range of influence? Never. These were my brothers, Sandra my sister (although the relationship between she and I is admittedly an incestuous one). And the plant? Our father, which art in Zenith. Color—white, black, green—was just then the least important thing about us. This afternoon it was us against the world.

“I wouldn’t go in your office just this minute, Sandra,” Roger said. “Mr. Detweiller is currently in residence. And he ain’t pretty.”

“The General?” she asked.

“The plant took him,” John replied, and at that moment Zenith spat back the remaining bits of Hecksler it had decided it couldn’t digest, perhaps conveying them all the way from the back of the office. The

stuff hit the carpet in a rainy, metallic tinkle. There was a pocket watch, the chain it had been on (in three pieces), a belt buckle, a very small plastic box, and several tiny pieces of metal. Herb and Bill picked all this stuff up.

“Good Lord,” Bill said, looking at the box. “It’s his pacemaker.”

“And these are surgical pins,” Herb said. “The kind orthopedic surgeons use to hold bones together.”

“All right,” Wade said. “Let’s assume that the plant is taking care of the General’s corpse. I think it’s clear we can dispose of his remaining...accessories...with no trouble, should we choose to. Detweiller’s attache case, too.”

“What do you think is in it?” Sandra asked.

“I don’t want to know. The question is what to do with his body. I’m on record as saying we shouldn’t feed it to the plant. I think it’s had all the...all the nourishment it needs.”

“All that’s safe for it to have,” John said.

“Maybe more,” Bill added.

I should step in here just long enough to say that, although I am presenting all of this as spoken conversation, a good part of it was mind to mind. I can’t remember which was which, and wouldn’t know how to express the difference, anyway. I’m not sure it even matters. What I remember most clearly was a sense of absurd happiness. After nine months of pushing a broom or the mail-cart, I was attending my first editorial meeting. Because isn’t that what we were doing? Editing the situation, or preparing to?

“We could call the cops,” Roger said, and when Bill and John both started to protest, he raised his hand to stop them. “I’m just articulating the idea. They wouldn’t see the plant, we know that.”

“But they might feel it,” Sandra said, clearly dismayed. “And Roger —”

“Zenith might decide to lunch on one of them,” I finished for her.

“Filet de flic, the special of the day. He might not be able to help himself. Or itself. Zenith may or may not be our true friend, but it’s essentially a man-eater. It would behoove us to remember that.”

I have to admit I found the way Herb Porter was looking at me rather delicious. It was as if, while visiting the zoo, he’d heard one of the monkeys begin to recite Shakespeare.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” John said. “Roger, may I?”

Roger nodded assent.

“We’ve gotten this raggedy-ass publishing company to the edge of

something,” John said, “and I’m not talking about mere financial solvency. I’m talking about financial success. With Last Survivor, the joke book, and the General book, we’re not just going to make a noise in the publishing industry; we’re going to create a goddam sonic boom that’ll startle the shit out of everyone. A lot of people are going to turn around and take notice. And for me, that’s not even the best of it. The best is that we’re going to stick it to those assholes at Apex.”

“Tell it!” Bill cried savagely, and that gave me a shiver. It was what Sophie had said to my sister Maddy, when Maddy accused me of playing nigger up in New York. Like hearing a ghost, in other words. Because that’s what my family is to me now, all of them. Ghosts.

“It took magic to make the turnaround possible,” John continued, “and I admit that. But all of publishing is a kind of magic, isn’t it? And not just publishing. Any company that successfully brokers the creative arts to the public is magic. It’s spinning straw into gold. Look at us, for Christ’s sake! Accountants by day, dreamers by night—”

“And bullshitters in the afternoon,” Herb put in. “Don’t forget that.” “Maybe you could get back to the point, John,” Roger agreed. “The point is no cops,” John said harshly. And, I felt, with admirable

brevity. “No outsiders. That ivy is helping us clean up our mess, and we’re going to clean up its mess.”

“Dead people, though,” Sandra said. She looked quite pale, and when she reached out for my hand again, I let her take it. I was glad for the touch myself. “We’re talking about dead people.”

“We’re talking about a couple of dead loonies who killed each other,” Herb said. “Besides, only one corpse.”

There was a moment of silence as we dealt with that. I think it was the crucial moment. Because, down deep, we all knew that, while the General might have killed Carlos, Zenith had taken care of Heckler.

“Nothing bad happened here,” Bill said, as if to himself.

“You got that right,” Herb said. “Anyone want to defend the position that the world is worse off because those two jagoffs are no longer in it?”

A moment’s silence, and then John Kenton said: “If we’re not going to feed Detweiller to the plant, how are we going to get rid of him?”

Bill Gelb said: “I have an idea.”

“If that’s true,” Roger said, “then this might be a good time to spill it.”

From Bill Gelb's Diary

4/5/81

There were some doubts at first, but I'll tell you one thing: mind-reading cuts through a lot of bullshit, the emotional as well as the plain old everyday problems people have trying to communicate by word of mouth. I'm pretty sure that what got through to them was my confidence, my sense that I had the right idea and that we could carry it off. It was the way I felt in the park, shooting dice with the rest of the yuppie scum. I only wish I'd gotten to the poker game. Oh well, there'll be another time.

Besides, I did get to Paramus.

From the journals of Riddley Walker

4/5/81 (continued)

The truck was an old rattletrap, the windshield milky around the edges; the heater didn't work and the springs were shot; the seats were lumpy and the stink of cooking exhaust came up through the floorboards, presumably from a defective exhaust-pipe or manifold. But the toll-taker on the GW never even looked at us twice, so I considered it a beautiful thing. Also, the radio worked. When I turned it on, the first thing I got was John Denver: "Gee it's great to be back home again! Sometimes this old farm seems like a long-lost friend..."

"Please," Bill said. "Do you have to?"

"I like it," I said, and began tapping my feet. Between us was a medium-sized paper bag with the Smiler's logo on it. Inside it were those few of the General's effects which Zenith found indigestible. The Mad Florist's briefcase was under the seat, giving off some very

nasty vibrations. And no, I do not believe that was just my imagination.

“You like this? Riddley, I don’t make reference to your color lightly, but don’t Afro-American gentlemen such as yourself usually enjoy folks like Marvin Gaye? The Temptations? The Stylistics? James Brown? Arthur Conley? Otis Redding?”

I thought of telling him that Otis Redding was as dead as the fellow in the back of the rattly old panel truck in which we were currently crossing the Hudson River, then decided to keep my mouth shut on that score.

“I happen to enjoy this particular tune.” In fact, I did. “Look outside, Bill. The moon’s coming up on one side and the sun’s going down on the other. It’s what my Mama used to call double delight.”

“I was very sorry to hear about your Mama, Riddley,” he said, and I blessed him for that. Inside my head, however, where he could no longer hear the blessing. Not once we got away from the building where Zenith the common ivy now holds court.

“Thank you, Bill.”

“Did she...you know, did she suffer?”

“No. I don’t believe she did.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“Yes,” I said.

The John Denver song ended and was replaced by something infinitely worse: Sammy Davis Jr. singing about the candyman. Who can take a rainbow, dip it in a dream? Shuddering, I turned the radio off again. But the John Denver song lingered in my head: Gee it’s good to be back home again.

We alit on the Jersey side, me in the passenger seat and Bill behind the wheel of the old truck with the fading Holsum Bread stickers on the sides. He had borrowed it from a friend, who hopefully has no idea of what we were transporting, rolled up in an old rug-remnant which Herb Porter found in the supply closet.

When, some hours before, Bill finished outlining his plan, Roger asked: "Who's going to go with you, Bill? You can't do it alone."

"I will," I said.

"You?" John asked. "But you're—" He stopped there, but we were still on the fifth floor, still in Zenith's presence, and we all heard the continuation of his thought: —only the janitor!

"Not any more, he's not," Roger said. "I'm hereby hiring you in an executive capacity, Riddley. If you want it, that is."

I gave him my Number One Nigger Jim smile, the one which features roughly two thousand huge white teeth. "I'se gwine to be an edituh in dis heah fine cump'ny? Why, sho! Sho! Dat'd be purty good!"

"But not if you talk like that," John said.

"I'se gwine try to do bettah! Try to improve mah dictive qualities, as well!"

"This smells like bribery to me," Sandra said. She squeezed my hand and looked at Roger with mistrusting eyes.

"You know better," Roger said, and of course she did. That sense of family was too strong to deny. God only knows what's ahead of us, but we're in it together. Of that there can no longer be any doubt.

"What are you going to pay him with?" Herb wanted to know.

"Smiler's Extra Value coupons? Enders will never approve another editor's salary. And if he finds out you're promoting the janitor, he'll shit."

“For payroll purposes, Riddley will continue in his janitorial capacity for the time being,” Roger said. He sounded perfectly serene, perfectly sure of himself. “Later, we’re going to have all the money we need to pay him a full salary. Riddley, how does \$35,000 a year sound to you? Retroactive to today, April 4, 1981?”

“Goodness-graciousme! I be de flashies’ nigga in de Cotton Club!”

“It sounds fine to me, too,” John said, “since it’s five a year more than I am currently making.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Roger said. “You, Herb, Bill, and Sandra are being raised to...let’s see...fortyfive a year.”

“Fortyfive thousand?” Herb whispered. His eyes had a suspicious gleam to them, as if he were about to break down and cry. “Fortyfive thousand dollars?”

“Retroactive to April 4th, same as Rid.” He turned to me. “And seriously, Rid—ditch the Rastus.”

“It’s gone for good as of now,” I said.

He nodded. “As for me,” he said, “what does the Bible say? ‘The laborer is worthy of his hire.’ I’m now making forty. How much should I get for steering the good ship Zenith away from the rocks of the lee shore and into the open sea, where the trade winds blow?”

“How about sixty?” Bill asked.

“Make it sixtyfive,” Sandra proposed giddily. After all, it was Sherwyn Redbone’s money Roger was spending.

“No,” Roger said, “no need to be vulgar, not the first year, anyway. I think fifty thousand will be fine.”

“Not bad for any of us, considering the plant’s doing it all,” Bill said.

“That’s not true,” John said, a little sharply. “We’ve always had the skills to do this job, all of us. The plant is just giving us the opportunity.”

“Besides,” Herb said, “it’s getting room and board. What more does it require? An ivy doesn’t exactly need a new car, does it?” He looked at Bill. “Are you sure you don’t want me to join the disposal crew? I will, if you want me.”

Bill Gelb thought it over, then shook his head. “Two of us should do just fine. But we ought to put the...you know, the remains...in something. I wonder what there is?”

Which was when Herb went into the supply closet, rummaged awhile, then came back out dragging the rug remnant behind him.

It turned out to be just the right size. Bill and I were exempted from the task of gift-wrapping Carlos Detweiller, and I thought Sandra would stay with us out in the hall (exempting herself, as it were, by virtue of her sex), but she pitched in with a will. And all around us Zenith hummed contentedly, putting a floor under us, sending out what the Beach Boys (another whitebread favorite of mine) would probably call “good vibrations.”

“Telepathy seems to improve teamwork,” Bill commented, and I had to admit it was true. Sandra and Herb spread out the rug beside Sandra’s desk. Roger and John lifted Detweiller and deposited him face-down at one end of the rug. Then, working together, they simply rolled him up like a Devil Dog pastry, securing the whole with the heaviest twine the supply closet could provide.

“Man, he bled a lot,” Bill said. “That rug’s a mess.”

“The plant will suck up most of it today and Sunday,” I said.

“You really think so?”

I really did. I also thought that I could get up most of the residue with a good application of Genie Rug Cleaner. The final result might not fool a police forensics specialist, but if the police wind up in here, our butts are probably going to be baked, anyway. To an ordinary outsider, the remaining stain on Sandra's carpet will look as if someone spilled a pot of coffee there a few months ago. Maybe the only real question is whether or not Sandra can live with that manta-ray shadow in the place where she earns her daily bread. If she can't, I suppose I can replace that particular piece of carpet. Because it's as Roger says: such minimal expenses will soon no longer annoy us.

"You're sure you can get this truck?" Roger called out from Sandra's office. He was sitting back on his heels and wiping his forehead with his sleeve. "What if the guy's gone for the weekend?"

"He's home," Bill said, "or at least he was an hour and a half ago. I saw him on my way out. And for fifty dollars, he'd rent me his grandmother. He's a nice enough guy, but he's got this little problem." He mimed sniffing, first closing one nostril and then the other.

"Make sure he's there," Roger said, then turned to John. "Body disposal bonuses at Christmas for all of us. Make a note."

"Sure, just don't put it in your monthly report," John said, and we all laughed. I suppose that must sound gruesome, but it was the cheeriest, most collegial laughter you ever heard. I believe that Sandra, with a tiny smear of Carlos Detweiller's blood on her forearm and another on her right palm, laughed hardest of all.

Bill went in his office and got on the phone. Roger and John moved Carlos, now wrapped in the brown rug remnant, down to the reception area, behind LaShonda's desk.

"I can see his shoes," Sandra said. "They're sticking out a little."

“Don’t worry, it’ll be okay,” Herb said, and just like that I knew that he’s been doing the horizontal bop with the lady fair. Well, mo powah to him, is all dis fella kin say. Might be no mo playin truck-drivah and l’il girl hitchhikah, praise de Lawd.

“Nothing’s going to be okay until that homicidal idiot’s taken care of,” Sandra said. She started to brush her hair back, saw the blood on her hand, and grimaced.

Bill came out of his office, smiling. “One old but serviceable panel truck, at our service,” he said. “Bread company advertising logos on the sides, very faded. Riddley, we take it away this afternoon at four—in less than three hours, in other words—and I bring it back later tonight. No questions asked, although I had to agree to mileage, as well. Two bits per. That okay, boss?”

Roger nodded. “This guy lives downstairs from you, right?”

“Right. He’s a stockbroker. Buying vehicles at auction and turning them over is just a sideline. I think he scams the insurance companies when he can, as well. I could have gotten a hearse, actually, but that seemed...I don’t know... ostentatious.”

To me, the idea of taking Detweiller to a Jersey landfill in a hurry-up wagon seemed not ostentatious but downright creepy. I kept my mouth shut on the subject, however.

“And this place in Paramus?” John asked. “It’s safe? Relatively safe?”

“According to some of the talk I’ve heard at Ginelli’s game, it’s as safe as the grave.” Bill saw our faces and grimaced. “To coin a phrase.”

“All right,” Roger said heavily. “Sandra’s office looks more or less okay. Let’s clean up Herb’s and John’s and then get the hell out of here.”

We did it, then adjourned to the cafeteria a block over to get something to eat. None of us had much in the way of appetite, and Bill left early to conclude negotiations with the fellow downstairs.

Outside the cafeteria, on the curb, John took my arm. He looked tired but composed. In better shape than before I left for home, actually. "Riddley, are you okay with this?"

"Fine with it," I said.

"Want me to ride along?"

I thought it over, then shook my head. "Three's a crowd. I'll call you when it's taken care of. But it may be late."

He nodded, started away, then turned back and grinned. There was something heartbreakingly sweet about it. "Welcome to the Green Thumb Editorial Society," he said.

I sketched him a little salute. "Good to be here."

As it was. And when I got to Bill's place shortly thereafter, the old panel truck was already parked at the curb. Bill was standing next to it, smoking a cigarette and looking entirely at peace.

"Let's pick up some cargo and take it to Jersey," he said.

I clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm your man," I said.

We arrived back at 490 around quarter to five. At that hour on a Saturday afternoon, the building was as quiet as it ever gets. Absolutely dead, to coin another phrase. John's nemesis lay where we had left him, neatly tied into his bundle of rug.

"Look at the plant, Riddley," Bill said, but I already had. Runners had worked their way to the end of the corridor. There they clustered, barely held back by the garlic John and Roger had rubbed on the sides of the door. The tips were raised, and I could see them quivering. I thought of hungry diners looking in a restaurant window,

and shivered a little. If not for the garlic, those advance feelers would already have worked their way into the carpet and around the corpse's feet. Zenith is on our side, I feel quite sure of that, but neither a stiff dick nor a hungry belly has much in the way of conscience, I'm afraid.

"Let's get him out of here," I said.

Bill agreed. "And make a note to refresh the garlic on that door. Tomorrow, maybe."

"I don't think garlic will hold it forever," I said.

"What do you mean?"

Because we were back under Zenith's telepathic umbrella, I thought my response at him rather than saying it out loud: It's got to grow. If it can't grow, it'll die. But before it dies, it might—

Get mean? Bill finished for me.

I nodded. Yes, it might get mean. I'm sure that Detweiller and General Hecksler would say it had gotten fairly mean already.

We carried the rolled-up length of rug down the hall to the elevator, which opened at the touch of a button. There was no one else in the building to divert it to another location, of that I was positive. We would have heard their thoughts.

"We're not going to have any problems at all, are we?" I asked Bill as we rode down. Mr. Detweiller lay between us, a troublesome fellow soon to take up permanent residence in New Jersey. "No little unexpected Hitchcock touches."

Bill smiled. "I don't think so, Riddley. We're going to roll all sevens. Because the force is with us."

And so it has been.

By the time the truck's headlights picked out the sign on the edge of Route 27—PETERBOROUGH DISPOSAL CO. LANDFILL ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING—it was full dark and the moon was riding high in the sky. High and dreamy. It crossed my mind that the same moon was looking down on my Mama's fresh grave in Blackwater.

There was a chain across the dirt road leading to the land fill, but it appeared to be looped over the posts to either side, not locked. I got out, slipped one of the loops free, and then motioned Bill to drive through. Once he was on the other side, I refixed the chain and got back in.

"The mob uses this place, I take it?" I asked.

"That's the rumor." Bill lowered his voice a little. "I heard one of Richie Ginelli's pals say that Jimmy Hoffa is taking an extended vacation out this way."

"Bill," I said, "far be it for Zenith House's most junior editor to tell you what to do—"

"Lay on, MacDuff," he said, smiling.

"—but a poker game where one hears such odd bits of trivia might

not be the place for an inoffensive editor of paperback originals."

"Speak for yourself," he said, and although he was still smiling, I

don't believe that what came next was a joke. "If the bad boys cross me,

I'll just sic my plant on them.”

“That’s what Carlos Detweiller thought, and he’s making his final pilgrimage in the back of a bread truck,” I said.

He looked at me, the smile fading a little. “You might have a point there, partner.”

I did have a point there, but I doubt it will stop Bill from his weekend poker forays. Just as I doubt that successfully having it off with Sandra

Jackson will stop Herb Porter from the occasional clandestine seat-sniffing expedition. We say “so-and-so should have known better” when soand-so comes to grief, but there is a world of difference between knowing

better and doing better. To misquote the Bible, we return to our vices like

a dog to its vomit, and when one thinks in such terms, I wonder at our

apparent determination to co-exist with Zenith the common ivy. To think

that he—or it—can make either our situation or ourselves any better. After considering what I’ve just written, I must laugh. I’m like a

junkie between fixes, temporarily sober and pontificating on the evils of

dope. Once I’m back in range of those humming good vibrations, everything will change. I know it as well as I know my own name. Knowing better...and doing better. Between them is the chasm. The dirt road ran through scruffy pine woods for a quarter of a mile

and then brought us out into a vast dirt circle filled with trash,
discarded

appliances, and a stacked wall of junked cars. By the light of a full
moon,

it looked like the death of all civilization. On the far side was a
dropoff, its

steep sides covered with more trash. At the bottom, the bulldozers
and

backhoes looked the size of a child's toys.

"They bulldoze the crap down there, then cover it," Bill said. "We'll

take him twenty or thirty feet down the slope, then bury him. I've got
shovels. I've also got gloves. I'm told there are rats in there as big as
terriers." But all that proved to be unnecessary; as Bill had said, the
force was

with us and we were rolling all sevens. As he drove slowly toward
the

dropoff and the actual landfill, weaving between those rusty
cenotaphs of

junk, I saw a cluster of blue objects off to the left. They looked like
mansized plastic capsules standing on end.

"Go over there," I said, pointing.

"Why?"

"Just a feeling. Please, Bill."

He shrugged and headed the panel truck that way. As we got closer,

a big grin began to dawn on his face. They were the Port-a-Pottys you see

at construction sites and in some roadside rest areas, but all these had had

the hell beaten out of them: dented roofs, broken doors, gaping holes in

some of the sides. They were standing about forty feet from the maw of a

silent machine that could only be a crusher.

“Think we hit the jackpot, Rid?” Bill asked, grinning. “I think we hit the jackpot. In fact, I think you’re a fucking genius.”

There was a length of yellow tape strung around the cluster of blue capsules, with KEEP OUT KEEP OUT KEEP OUT repeating endlessly in big black letters. Stuck to it with a lick of electrical tape was a note

written on a piece of cardboard in big hasty letters. I got out and read it

by the glow of the panel truck’s weak headlights:

TURK! These are the ones I told you about, City of Para. Please get that damn Mintz off my back and CRUSH THESE SOME-BITCHES MONDAY 1st thing! Thanks Buddy, “I owe you 1.”

FELIX

Bill had joined me and was also reading the note. "What do you think?" he asked.

"I think Carlos Detweiller is going to rejoin the universe as part of a City of Paramus Port-a-Potty reject," I said. "Early Monday morning. Come on, let's get it done. This place gives me a severe case of the creeps."

A gust of wind blew through, rattling trash and sending cans rolling with a sound like rusty laughter. Bill looked around nervously. "Yeah," he said. "Me too. Hang on while I kill the truck headlights."

He popped the lights off and then we went around to the back of the truck and pulled out the rolled-up rug with our compadre Carlos inside. The moon had dived behind a cloud and as we ducked under the yellow KEEP OUT tape it re-emerged, once more flooding the wasteland. I felt like a pirate in a Robert Louis Stevenson novel. But instead of "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum," the tune knocking around in my head was that damned John Denver thing about how good it was to be back home again. In this moonlit memorial to the gods of conspicuous consumption, I heard new words, my own words: There's a crusher softly rumblin, rats are in the trash; gee it's good to be back home again.

"Hang on, hang on," Bill said, reaching behind him with one hand and propping the rug up with a raised knee. He looked like some bizarre species of stork.

At last he got the door of a Port-a-Potty open. We muscled our burden inside and propped it up between the gray plastic urinal and

the toilet seat. The place still held the vague smell of urine and the ghost of old farts. In one high corner was a cobweb with the corpse of an ancient fly dangling from it. On the wall, by moonlight, I read two scrawlings. "For XCELLENT BLOJOB BE HERE 10 PM SHOW HARD I SWALLOW," read one. The other, infinitely more disturbing, said: "I WILL DO IT AGAIN & AGAIN & AGAIN. UNTIL I AM CAUGHT."

Suddenly I wanted to be miles from that place.

"Come on," I said to Bill. "Please, man. Come on."

"Just one more second."

He went back to the truck and got the bag with the General's final effects in it—buckle, pacemaker, osteopathic pins. He raised the lid on the toilet, then shook his head.

"Collection bin's gone. It'll just fall on the ground."

"You don't have the damn briefcase, either," I said.

"We can't leave that here," Bill said. "Something in it might identify

him."

"Hell, his fingerprints will identify him, if anyone finds him in there."

"Maybe. But we don't know what's in the case, do we? Best we drop

it in the Hudson on our way back. Safer.”

That made sense. “Give me the bag,” I said, but before he could I snatched the Smiler’s bag from him. I jogged to the edge of the drop-off and threw it as far out as I could. I watched it turn over and over in the moonlight. I even imagined I could hear the pins which had held the old warrior’s bones together rattling. Then it was gone.

I jogged back to Bill, who had re-latched the Port-a-Potty door. For a wonder, it was one of the less battered ones. It would keep the secret we needed it to keep.

“It’s all going to work, isn’t it?” Bill asked.

I nodded. Had no doubts then and no doubts now. We are being protected. All we need to do is to take reasonable precautions ourselves. And take care of our new friend, as well.

The moon sank back into the clouds. Bill’s eyes glittered in the sudden gloom like the eyes of an animal. Which is, of course, what we were. Two junkyard dogs, one with a white hide and one with a brown hide, skulking in the trash. A couple of junkyard dogs who had successfully buried their bones.

I had a moment of clarity then. A moment of sanity. I’m a Cornell graduate, aspiring novelist, fledgling editor (I can do the job to which Roger Wade has promoted me, of that I have no doubt). Bill Gelb is a graduate of William and Mary, a Red Cross blood-donor, a reader to the blind once a week at The Lighthouse. Yet we had just deposited the body of a murdered man in an acknowledged mafia

graveyard. The General stabbed him, but are we not all accessories, in some measure?

Perhaps only John Kenton escapes blame on that score. He did tell me to throw the ivy away, after all. I even have the memo somewhere.

“We’re mad,” I whispered to Bill.

His whisper back was soft and deadly. “I don’t give a shit.”

We looked at each other for a moment, not speaking. Then the moon came out again, and we both dropped our eyes.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

And so we did. Back to Route 27, then back to the turnpike, then back to the George Washington Bridge. No one was behind us at that hour, and Carlos Detweiller’s case with the combination lock on it sailed away into the drink. No problems; smooth sailing. Saturday night and we didn’t even see a cop. And all the way, that song went running through my head: Gee it’s good to be back home again.

From John Kenton's diary

April 5, 1981 1:30 A.M.

Riddley just called. Mission accomplished. The General is gone, and now the Mad Florist and his attache case are gone, as well.

Or maybe he's not.

I just leafed back through these pages to the conversation Roger and I had with Tina Barfield, and what I read there, while not completely accurate, is hardly encouraging. She said we'd be reading Carlos's obituary; what she neglected to tell me (probably because she didn't know) was that I'd be writing it myself. She also told us to go on behaving as if Carlos were alive even after we knew he was dead. Because, she said, he'll be back.

As a tulpa.

Even now I don't know exactly what that is, but I tell you this with absolute certainty, utter conviction, and complete clarity of mind: the six of us haven't gone through all of this to be stopped by anyone living, let alone

STEPHEN
KING

RIDING
THE
BULLET

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STEPHEN
KING

RIDING
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I've never told anyone this story, and never thought I would—not because I was afraid of being disbelieved, exactly, but because I was ashamed . . . and because it was *mine*. I've always felt that telling it would cheapen both me and the story itself, make it smaller and more mundane, no more than a camp counselor's ghost story told before lights-out. I think I was also afraid that if I told it, heard it with my own ears, I might start to disbelieve it myself. But since my mother died I haven't been able to sleep very well. I doze off and then snap back again, wide awake and shivering. Leaving the bedside lamp on helps, but not as much as you might think. There are so many more shadows at night, have you ever noticed that? Even with a light on there are so many shadows. The long ones could be the shadows of anything, you think.

Anything at all.

. . .

I was a junior at the University of Maine when Mrs. McCurdy called about ma. My father died when I was too young to remember him and I was an only child, so it was just Alan and Jean Parker against the world. Mrs. McCurdy, who lived just up the road, called at the apartment I shared with three other guys. She had gotten the number off the magnetic minder-board ma kept on her fridge.

"'Twas a stroke," she said in that long and drawling Yankee accent of hers. "Happened at the restaurant. But don't you go flyin off all half-cocked. Doctor says it wa'ant too bad. She's awake and she's talkin."

"Yeah, but is she making sense?" I asked. I was trying to sound calm, even amused, but my heart was beating fast and the living room suddenly felt too warm. I had the apartment all to myself; it was Wednesday, and both my roomies had classes all day.

"Oh, ayuh. First thing she said was for me to call you but not to scare you. That's pretty sensible, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah." But of course I was scared. When someone calls and tells you your mother's been taken from work to the hospital in an

ambulance, how else are you supposed to feel?

“She said for you to stay right there and mind your schoolin until the weekend. She said you could come then, if you didn’t have too much studyin t’do.”

Sure, I thought. Fat chance. I’d just stay here in this ratty, beer-smelling apartment while my mother lay in a hospital bed a hundred miles south, maybe dying.

“She’s still a young woman, your ma,” Mrs. McCurdy said. “It’s just that she’s let herself get awful heavy these last few years, and she’s got the hypertension. Plus the cigarettes. She’s goin to have to give up the smokes.”

I doubted if she would, though, stroke or no stroke, and about that I was right—my mother loved her smokes. I thanked Mrs. McCurdy for calling.

“First thing I did when I got home,” she said. “So when are you coming, Alan? Sad’dy?” There was a sly note in her voice that suggested she knew better.

I looked out the window at a perfect afternoon in October: bright blue New England sky over trees that were shaking down their yellow leaves onto Mill Street. Then I glanced at my watch. Twenty past three. I’d just been on my way out to my four o’clock philosophy seminar when the phone rang.

“You kidding?” I asked. “I’ll be there tonight.”

Her laughter was dry and a little cracked around the edges—Mrs. McCurdy was a great one to talk about giving up the cigarettes, her and her Winstons. “Good boy! You’ll go straight to the hospital, won’t you, then drive out to the house?”

“I guess so, yeah,” I said. I saw no sense in telling Mrs. McCurdy that there was something wrong with the transmission of my old car, and it wasn’t going anywhere but the driveway for the foreseeable future. I’d hitchhike down to Lewiston, then out to our little house in Harlow if it wasn’t too late. If it was, I’d snooze in one of the hospital lounges. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d ridden my thumb home from school. Or slept sitting up with my head leaning against a Coke machine, for that matter.

“I’ll make sure the key’s under the red wheelbarrow,” she said. “You know where I mean, don’t you?”

“Sure.” My mother kept an old red wheelbarrow by the door to the back shed; in the summer it foamed with flowers. Thinking of it for some reason brought Mrs. McCurdy’s news home to me as a true fact: my mother was in the hospital, the little house in Harlow where I’d grown up was going to be dark tonight—there was no one there to turn on the lights after the sun went down. Mrs. McCurdy could say she was young, but when you’re just twenty-one yourself, forty-eight seems ancient.

“Be careful, Alan. Don’t speed.”

My speed, of course, would be up to whoever I hooked a ride with, and I personally hoped that whoever it was would go like hell. As far as I was concerned, I couldn’t get to Central Maine Medical Center fast enough. Still, there was no sense worrying Mrs. McCurdy.

“I won’t. Thanks.”

“Welcome,” she said. “Your ma’s going to be just fine. And won’t she be some happy to see you.”

I hung up, then scribbled a note saying what had happened and where I was going. I asked Hector Passmore, the more responsible of my roommates, to call my adviser and ask him to tell my instructors what was up so I wouldn’t get whacked for cutting—two or three of my teachers were real bears about that. Then I stuffed a change of clothes into my backpack, added my dog-eared copy of *Introduction to Philosophy*, and headed out. I dropped the course the following week, although I had been doing quite well in it. The way I looked at the world changed that night, changed quite a lot, and nothing in my philosophy textbook seemed to fit the changes. I came to understand that there are things underneath, you see—*underneath*—and no book can explain what they are. I think that sometimes it’s best to just forget those things are there. If you can, that is.

• • •

It’s a hundred and twenty miles from the University of Maine in Orono to Lewiston in Androscoggin County, and the quickest way to get there is by I-95. The turnpike isn’t such a good road to take if

you're hitchhiking, though; the state police are apt to boot anyone they see off—even if you're just standing on the ramp they give you the boot—and if the same cop catches you twice, he's apt to write you a ticket, as well. So I took Route 68, which winds southwest from Bangor. It's a pretty well-traveled road, and if you don't look like an out-and-out psycho, you can usually do pretty well. The cops leave you alone, too, for the most part.

My first lift was with a morose insurance man and took me as far as Newport. I stood at the intersection of Route 68 and Route 2 for about twenty minutes, then got a ride with an elderly gentleman who was on his way to Bowdoinham. He kept grabbing at his crotch as he drove. It was as if he was trying to catch something that was running around in there.

"My wife allus told me I'd wind up in the ditch with a knife in my back if I kept on picking up hitchhikers," he said, "but when I see a young fella standin t'side of the rud, I allus remember my own younger days. Rode my thumb quite a bit, so I did. Rode the rods, too. And lookit this, her dead four year and me still a-goin, drivin this same old Dodge. I miss her somethin turrible." He snatched at his crotch. "Where you headed, son?"

I told him I was going to Lewiston, and why.

"That's turrible," he said. "Your ma! I'm so sorry!"

His sympathy was so strong and spontaneous that it made the corners of my eyes prickle. I blinked the tears back. The last thing in the world I wanted was to burst out crying in this old man's old car, which rattled and wallowed and smelled quite strongly of pee.

"Mrs. McCurdy—the lady who called me—said it isn't that serious. My mother's still young, only forty-eight."

"Still! A stroke!" He was genuinely dismayed. He snatched at the baggy crotch of his green pants again, yanking with an old man's oversized, clawlike hand. "A stroke's allus serious! Son, I'd take you to the CMMC myself—drive you right up to the front door—if I hadn't promised my brother Ralph I'd take him up to the nursin home in Gates. His wife's there, she has that forgettin disease, I can't think what in the world they call it, Anderson's or Alvarez or somethin like that—"

"Alzheimer's," I said.

“Ayuh, prob’ly I’m gettin it myself. Hell, I’m tempted to take you anyway.”

“You don’t need to do that,” I said. “I can get a ride from Gates easy.”

“Still,” he said. “Your mother! A stroke! Only forty-eight!” He grabbed at the baggy crotch of his pants. “Fucking truss!” he cried, then laughed—the sound was both desperate and amused. “Fucking rupture! If you stick around, son, all your works start fallin apart. God kicks your ass in the end, let me tell you. But you’re a good boy to just drop everythin and go to her like you’re doin.”

“She’s a good mom,” I said, and once again I felt the tears bite. I never felt very homesick when I went away to school—a little bit the first week, that was all—but I felt homesick then. There was just me and her, no other close relatives. I couldn’t imagine life without her. Wasn’t too bad, Mrs. McCurdy had said; a stroke, but not too bad. Damn old lady better be telling the truth, I thought, she just better be.

We rode in silence for a little while. It wasn’t the fast ride I’d hoped for—the old man maintained a steady forty-five miles an hour and sometimes wandered over the white line to sample the other lane—but it was a long ride, and that was really just as good. Highway 68 unrolled before us, turning its way through miles of woods and splitting the little towns that were there and gone in a slow blink, each one with its bar and its self-service gas station: New Sharon, Ophelia, West Ophelia, Ganistan (which had once been Afghantistan, strange but true), Mechanic Falls, Castle View, Castle Rock. The bright blue of the sky dimmed as the day drained out of it; the old man turned on first his parking lights and then his headlights. They were the high beams but he didn’t seem to notice, not even when cars coming the other way flashed their own high beams at him.

“My sister’n-law don’t even remember her own name,” he said. “She don’t know aye, yes, no, nor maybe. That’s what that Anderson’s Disease does to you, son. There’s a look in her eyes . . . like she’s sayin ‘Let me *out* of here’ . . . or *would* say it, if she could think of the words. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” I said. I took a deep breath and wondered if the pee I smelled was the old man’s or if he maybe had a dog that rode with

him sometimes. I wondered if he'd be offended if I rolled down my window a little. Finally I did. He didn't seem to notice, any more than he noticed the oncoming cars flashing their highs at him.

Around seven o'clock we breasted a hill in West Gates and my chauffeur cried, "Lookit, son! The moon! Ain't she a corker?"

She was indeed a corker—a huge orange ball hoisting itself over the horizon. I thought there was nevertheless something terrible about it. It looked both pregnant and infected. Looking at the rising moon, a sudden and awful thought came to me: what if I got to the hospital and my ma didn't recognize me? What if her memory was gone, completely shot, and she didn't know aye, yes, no, nor maybe? What if the doctor told me she'd need someone to take care of her for the rest of her life? That someone would have to be me, of course; there was no one else. Goodbye college. What about that, friends and neighbors?

"Make a wish on it, boyo!" the old man cried. In his excitement his voice grew sharp and unpleasant—it was like having shards of glass stuffed into your ear. He gave his crotch a terrific tug. Something in there made a snapping sound. I didn't see how you could yank on your crotch like that and not rip your balls right off at the stem, truss or no truss. "Wish you make on the ha'vest moon allus comes true, that's what my father said!"

So I wished that my mother would know me when I walked into her room, that her eyes would light up at once and she would say my name. I made that wish and immediately wished I could have it back again; I thought that no wish made in that fevery orange light could come to any good.

"Ah, son!" the old man said. "I wish my wife was here! I'd beg forgiveness for every sha'ap and unkind word I ever said to her!"

Twenty minutes later, with the last light of the day still in the air and the moon still hanging low and bloated in the sky, we arrived in Gates Falls. There's a yellow blinker at the intersection of Route 68 and Pleasant Street. Just before he reached it, the old man swerved to the side of the road, bumping the Dodge's right front wheel up over the curb and then back down again. It rattled my teeth. The old man looked at me with a kind of wild, defiant excitement—everything about him was wild, although I hadn't seen that at first; everything

about him had that broken-glass feeling. And everything that came out of his mouth seemed to be an exclamation.

“I’ll take you up there! I will, yessir! Never mind Ralph! Hell with him! You just say the word!”

I wanted to get to my mother, but the thought of another twenty miles with the smell of piss in the air and cars flashing their brights at us wasn’t very pleasant. Neither was the image of the old fellow wandering and weaving across four lanes of Lisbon Street. Mostly, though, it was him. I couldn’t stand another twenty miles of crotch-snatching and that excited broken-glass voice.

“Hey, no,” I said, “that’s okay. You go on and take care of your brother.” I opened the door and what I’d feared happened—he reached out and took hold of my arm with his twisted old man’s hand. It was the hand with which he kept tearing at his crotch.

“You just say the word!” he told me. His voice was hoarse, confidential. His fingers were pressing deep into the flesh just below my armpit. “I’ll take you right to the hospital door! Ayuh! Don’t matter if I never saw you before in my life nor you me! Don’t matter aye, yes, no, nor maybe! I’ll take you right . . . *there!*”

“It’s okay,” I repeated, and all at once I was fighting an urge to bolt out of the car, leaving my shirt behind in his grip if that was what it took to get free. It was as if he were drowning. I thought that when I moved, his grip would tighten, that he might even go for the nape of my neck, but he didn’t. His fingers loosened, then slipped away entirely as I put my leg out. And I wondered, as we always do when an irrational moment of panic passes, what I had been so afraid of in the first place. He was just an elderly carbon-based life-form in an elderly Dodge’s pee-smelling ecosystem, looking disappointed that his offer had been refused. Just an old man who couldn’t get comfortable in his truss. What in God’s name had I been afraid of?

“I thank you for the ride and even more for the offer,” I said. “But I can go out that way—” I pointed at Pleasant Street. “—and I’ll have a ride in no time.”

He was quiet for a moment, then sighed and nodded. “Ayuh, that’s the best way to go,” he said. “Stay right out of town, nobody wants to give a fella ride in town, no one wants to slow down and get honked at.”

He was right about that; hitchhiking in town, even a small one like Gates Falls, was futile. I guess he *had* spent some time riding his thumb.

“But, son, are you sure? You know what they say about a bird in the hand.”

I hesitated again. He was right about a bird in the hand, too. Pleasant Street became Ridge Road a mile or so west of the blinker, and Ridge Road ran through fifteen miles of woods before arriving at Route 196 on the outskirts of Lewiston. It was almost dark, and it’s always harder to get a ride at night—when headlights pick you out on a country road, you look like an escapee from Wyndham Boys’ Correctional even with your hair combed and your shirt tucked in. But I didn’t want to ride with the old man anymore. Even now, when I was safely out of his car, I thought there was something creepy about him—maybe it was just the way his voice seemed full of exclamation points. Besides, I’ve always been lucky getting rides.

“I’m sure,” I said. “And thanks again. Really.”

“Any time, son. Any time. My wife . . .” He stopped, and I saw there were tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. I thanked him again, then slammed the door shut before he could say anything else.

I hurried across the street, my shadow appearing and disappearing in the light of the blinker. On the far side I turned and looked back. The Dodge was still there, parked beside Frank’s Fountain & Fruits. By the light of the blinker and the streetlight twenty feet or so beyond the car, I could see him sitting slumped over the wheel. The thought came to me that he was dead, that I had killed him with my refusal to let him help.

Then a car came around the corner and the driver flashed his high beams at the Dodge. This time the old man dipped his own lights, and that was how I knew he was still alive. A moment later he pulled back into the street and piloted the Dodge slowly around the corner. I watched until he was gone, then looked up at the moon. It was starting to lose its orange bloat, but there was still something sinister about it. It occurred to me that I had never heard of wishing on the moon before—the evening star, yes, but not the moon. I wished again I could take my own wish back; as the dark drew down and I

stood there at the crossroads, it was too easy to think of that story about the monkey's paw.

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I walked out Pleasant Street, waving my thumb at cars that went by without even slowing. At first there were shops and houses on both sides of the road, then the sidewalk ended and the trees closed in again, silently retaking the land. Each time the road flooded with light, pushing my shadow out ahead of me, I'd turn around, stick out my thumb, and put what I hoped was a reassuring smile on my face. And each time the oncoming car would swoosh by without slowing. Once, someone shouted out, "Get a job, monkeymeat!" and there was laughter.

I'm not afraid of the dark—or wasn't then—but I began to be afraid I'd made a mistake by not taking the old man up on his offer to drive me straight to the hospital. I could have made a sign reading NEED A RIDE, MOTHER SICK before starting out, but I doubted if it would have helped. Any psycho can make a sign, after all.

I walked along, sneakers scuffing the gravelly dirt of the soft shoulder, listening to the sounds of the gathering night: a dog, far away; an owl, much closer; the sigh of a rising wind. The sky was bright with the moonlight, but I couldn't see the moon itself just now—the trees were tall here and had blotted it out for the time being.

As I left Gates farther behind, fewer cars passed me. My decision not to take the old man up on his offer seemed more foolish with each passing minute. I began to imagine my mother in her hospital bed, mouth turned down in a frozen sneer, losing her grip on life but trying to hold on to that increasingly slippery bark for me, not knowing I wasn't going to make it simply because I hadn't liked an old man's shrill voice, or the pissy smell of his car.

I breasted a steep hill and stepped back into moonlight again at the top. The trees were gone on my right, replaced by a small country graveyard. The stones gleamed in the pale light. Something small and black was crouched beside one of them, watching me. I took a step closer, curious. The black thing moved and became a woodchuck. It spared me a single reproachful red-eyed glance and

was gone into the high grass. All at once I became aware that I was very tired, in fact close to exhausted. I had been running on pure adrenaline since Mrs. McCurdy called five hours before, but now that was gone. That was the bad part. The good part was that the useless sense of frantic urgency left me, at least for the time being. I had made my choice, decided on Ridge Road instead of Route 68, and there was no sense beating myself up over it—fun is fun and done is done, my mother sometimes said. She was full of stuff like that, little Zen aphorisms that almost made sense. Sense or nonsense, this one comforted me now. If she was dead when I got to the hospital, that was that. Probably she wouldn't be. Doctor said it wasn't too bad, according to Mrs. McCurdy; Mrs. McCurdy had also said she was still a young woman. A bit on the heavy side, true, and a heavy smoker in the bargain, but still young.

Meantime, I was out here in the williwags and I was suddenly tired out—my feet felt as if they had been dipped in cement.

There was a stone wall running along the road side of the cemetery, with a break in it where two ruts ran through. I sat on the wall with my feet planted in one of these ruts. From this position I could see a good length of Ridge Road in both directions. When I saw headlights coming west, in the direction of Lewiston, I could walk back to the edge of the road and put my thumb out. In the meantime, I'd just sit here with my backpack in my lap and wait for some strength to come back into my legs.

A groundmist, fine and glowing, was rising out of the grass. The trees surrounding the cemetery on three sides rustled in the rising breeze. From beyond the graveyard came the sound of running water and the occasional plunk-plunk of a frog. The place was beautiful and oddly soothing, like a picture in a book of romantic poems.

I looked both ways along the road. Nothing coming, not so much as a glow on the horizon. Putting my pack down in the wheelrut where I'd been dangling my feet, I got up and walked into the cemetery. A lock of hair had fallen onto my brow; the wind blew it off. The mist roiled lazily around my shoes. The stones at the back were old; more than a few had fallen over. The ones at the front were much newer. I bent, hands planted on knees, to look at one which

was surrounded by almost-fresh flowers. By moonlight the name was easy to read: GEORGE STAUB. Below it were the dates marking the brief span of George Staub's life: JANUARY 19, 1977, at one end, OCTOBER 12, 1998, at the other. That explained the flowers which had only begun to wilt; October 12th was two days ago and 1998 was just two years ago. George's friends and relatives had stopped by to pay their respects. Below the name and dates was something else, a brief inscription. I leaned down farther to read it—

—and stumbled back, terrified and all too aware that I was by myself, visiting a graveyard by moonlight.

FUN IS FUN AND DONE IS DONE

was the inscription.

My mother was dead, had died perhaps at that very minute, and something had sent me a message. Something with a thoroughly unpleasant sense of humor.

I began to back slowly toward the road, listening to the wind in the trees, listening to the stream, listening to the frog, suddenly afraid I might hear another sound, the sound of rubbing earth and tearing roots as something not quite dead reached up, groping for one of my sneakers—

My feet tangled together and I fell down, thumping my elbow on a gravestone, barely missing another with the back of my head. I landed with a grassy thud, looking up at the moon which had just barely cleared the trees. It was white instead of orange now, and as bright as a polished bone.

Instead of panicking me further, the fall cleared my head. I didn't know what I'd seen, but it couldn't have been what I *thought* I'd seen; that kind of stuff might work in John Carpenter and Wes Craven movies, but it wasn't the stuff of real life.

Yes, okay, good, a voice whispered in my head. *And if you just walk out of here now, you can go on believing that. You can go on believing it for the rest of your life.*

"Fuck that," I said, and got up. The seat of my jeans was wet, and I plucked it away from my skin. It wasn't exactly easy to reapproach the stone marking George Staub's final resting place, but it wasn't as

hard as I'd expected, either. The wind sighed through the trees, still rising, signaling a change in the weather. Shadows danced unsteadily around me. Branches rubbed together, a creaky sound off in the woods. I bent over the tombstone and read:

GEORGE STAUB
JANUARY 19, 1977–OCTOBER 12, 1998
Well Begun, Too Soon Done.

I stood there, leaning down with my hands planted just above my knees, not aware of how fast my heart had been beating until it started to slow down. A nasty little coincidence, that was all, and was it any wonder that I'd misread what was beneath the name and dates? Even without being tired and under stress, I might have read it wrong—moonlight was a notorious misleader. Case closed.

Except I *knew* what I'd read: *Fun Is Fun and Done Is Done.*

My ma was dead.

"Fuck that," I repeated, and turned away. As I did, I realized the mist curling through the grass and around my ankles had begun to brighten. I could hear the mutter of an approaching motor. A car was coming.

I hurried back through the opening in the rock wall, snagging my pack on the way by. The lights of the approaching car were halfway up the hill. I stuck out my thumb just as they struck me, momentarily blinding me. I knew the guy was going to stop even before he started slowing down. It's funny how you can just know sometimes, but anyone who's spent a lot of time hitchhiking will tell you that it happens.

The car passed me, brake lights flaring, and swerved onto the soft shoulder near the end of the rock wall dividing the graveyard from Ridge Road. I ran to it with my backpack banging against the side of my knee. The car was a Mustang, one of the cool ones from the late sixties or early seventies. The motor rumbled loudly, the fat sound of it coming through a muffler that maybe wouldn't pass inspection the next time the sticker came due . . . but that wasn't my problem.

I swung the door open and slid inside. As I put my backpack between my feet, an odor struck me, something almost familiar and

a trifle unpleasant. "Thank you," I said. "Thanks a lot."

The guy behind the wheel was wearing faded jeans and a black tee shirt with the arms cut off. His skin was tanned, the muscles heavy, and his right bicep was ringed with a blue barbwire tattoo. He was wearing a green John Deere cap turned around backwards. There was a button pinned near the round collar of his tee shirt, but I couldn't read it from my angle. "Not a problem," he said. "You headed up the city?"

"Yes," I said. In this part of the world "up the city" meant Lewiston, the only city of any size north of Portland. As I closed the door, I saw one of those pine-tree air fresheners hanging from the rearview mirror. That was what I'd smelled. It sure wasn't my night as far as odors went; first pee and now artificial pine. Still, it was a ride. I should have been relieved. And as the guy accelerated back onto Ridge Road, the big engine of his vintage Mustang growling, I tried to tell myself I was relieved.

"What's going on for you in the city?" the driver asked. I put him at about my age, some townie who maybe went to vocational-technical school in Auburn or maybe worked in one of the few remaining textile mills in the area. He'd probably fixed up this Mustang in his spare time, because that was what townie kids did: drank beer, smoked a little rope, fixed up their cars. Or their motorcycles.

"My brother's getting married. I'm going to be his best man." I told this lie with absolutely no premeditation. I didn't want him to know about my mother, although I didn't know why. Something was wrong here. I didn't know what it was or why I should think such a thing in the first place, but I knew. I was positive. "The rehearsal's tomorrow. Plus a stag party tomorrow night."

"Yeah? That right?" He turned to look at me, wide-set eyes and handsome face, full lips smiling slightly, the eyes unbelieving.

"Yeah," I said.

I was afraid. Just like that I was afraid again. Something was wrong, had maybe started being wrong when the old geezer in the Dodge had invited me to wish on the infected moon instead of on a star. Or maybe from the moment I'd picked up the telephone and listened to Mrs. McCurdy saying she had some bad news for me, but 'twasn't s'bad as it could've been.

“Well that’s good,” said the young man in the turned-around cap. “A brother getting married, man, that’s good. What’s your name?”

I wasn’t just afraid, I was terrified. Everything was wrong, *everything*, and I didn’t know why or how it could possibly have happened so fast. I did know one thing, however: I wanted the driver of the Mustang to know my name no more than I wanted him to know my business in Lewiston. Not that I’d be getting to Lewiston. I was suddenly sure that I would never see Lewiston again. It was like knowing the car was going to stop. And there was the smell, I knew something about that, as well. It wasn’t the air freshener; it was something *beneath* the air freshener.

“Hector,” I said, giving him my roommate’s name. “Hector Passmore, that’s me.” It came out of my dry mouth smooth and calm, and that was good. Something inside me insisted that I must not let the driver of the Mustang know that I sensed something wrong. It was my only chance.

He turned toward me a little, and I could read his button: I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I knew the place; had been there, although not for a long time.

I could also see a heavy black line which circled his throat just as the barbwire tattoo circled his upper arm, only the line around the driver’s throat wasn’t a tattoo. Dozens of black marks crossed it vertically. They were the stitches put in by whoever had put his head back on his body.

“Nice to meet you, Hector,” he said. “I’m George Staub.”

My hand seemed to float out like a hand in a dream. I wish that it had been a dream, but it wasn’t; it had all the sharp edges of reality. The smell on top was pine. The smell underneath was some chemical, probably formaldehyde. I was riding with a dead man.

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The Mustang rushed along Ridge Road at sixty miles an hour, chasing its high beams under the light of a polished button moon. To either side, the trees crowding the road danced and writhed in the wind. George Staub smiled at me with his empty eyes, then let go of my hand and returned his attention to the road. In high school I’d

read *Dracula*, and now a line from it recurred, clanging in my head like a cracked bell: The dead drive fast.

Can't let him know I know. This also clanged in my head. It wasn't much, but it was all I had. *Can't let him know, can't let him, can't.* I wondered where the old man was now. Safe at his brother's? Or had the old man been in on it all along? Was he maybe right behind us, driving along in his old Dodge, hunched over the wheel and snapping at his truss? Was he dead, too? Probably not. The dead drive fast, according to Bram Stoker, but the old man had never gone a tick over forty-five. I felt demented laughter bubbling in the back of my throat and held it down. If I laughed he'd know. And he mustn't know, because that was my only hope.

"There's nothing like a wedding," he said.

"Yeah," I said, "everyone should do it at least twice."

My hands had settled on each other and were squeezing. I could feel the nails digging the backs of them just above the knuckles, but the sensation was distant, news from another country. I couldn't let him know, that was the thing. The woods were all around us, the only light was the heartless bone-glow of the moon, and I couldn't let him know that I knew he was dead. Because he wasn't a ghost, nothing so harmless. You might see a ghost, but what sort of thing stopped to give you a ride? What kind of creature was that? Zombie? Ghoul? Vampire? None of the above?

George Staub laughed. "Do it twice! Yeah, man, that's my whole family! "

"Mine, too," I said. My voice sounded calm, just the voice of a hitchhiker passing the time of day—night, in this case—making agreeable conversation as some small payment for his ride. "There's really nothing like a funeral."

"Wedding," he said mildly. In the light from the dashboard, his face was waxy, the face of a corpse before the makeup went on. That turned-around cap was particularly horrible. It made you wonder how much was left beneath it. I had read somewhere that morticians sawed off the top of the skull and took out the brains and put in some sort of chemically treated cotton. To keep the face from falling in, maybe.

“Wedding,” I said through numb lips, and even laughed a little—a light little chuckle. “Wedding’s what I meant to say.”

“We always say what we mean to say, that’s what I think,” the driver said. He was still smiling.

Yes, Freud had believed that, too. I’d read it in Psych 101. I doubted if this fellow knew much about Freud, I didn’t think many Freudian scholars wore sleeveless tee shirts and baseball caps turned around backwards, but he knew enough. Funeral, I’d said. Dear Christ, I’d said funeral. It came to me then that he was playing me. I didn’t want to let him know I knew he was dead. *He* didn’t want to let me know that he knew I knew he was dead. And so I couldn’t let him know that I knew that he knew that . . .

The world began to swing in front of me. In a moment it would begin to spin, then to whirl, and I’d lose it. I closed my eyes for a moment. In the darkness, the afterimage of the moon hung, turning green.

“You feeling all right, man?” he asked. The concern in his voice was gruesome.

“Yes,” I said, opening my eyes. Things had steadied again. The pain in the backs of my hands where my nails were digging into the skin was strong and real. And the smell. Not just pine air freshener, not just chemicals. There was a smell of earth, as well.

“You sure?” he asked.

“Just a little tired. Been hitchhiking a long time. And sometimes I get a little carsick.” Inspiration suddenly struck. “You know what, I think you better let me out. If I get a little fresh air, my stomach will settle. Someone else will come along and—”

“I couldn’t do that,” he said. “Leave you out here? No way. It could be an hour before someone came along, and they might not pick you up when they did. I got to take care of you. What’s that song? Get me to the church on time, right? No way I’m letting you out. Crack your window a little, that’ll help. I know it doesn’t smell exactly great in here. I hung up that air freshener, but those things don’t work worth a shit. Of course, some smells are harder to get rid of than others.”

I wanted to reach out for the window crank and turn it, let in the fresh air, but the muscles in my arm wouldn’t seem to tighten. All I

could do was sit there with my hands locked together, nails biting into the backs of them. One set of muscles wouldn't work; another wouldn't stop working. What a joke.

"It's like that story," he said. "The one about the kid who buys the almost new Cadillac for seven hundred and fifty dollars. You know that story, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said through my numb lips. I didn't know the story, but I knew perfectly well that I didn't want to hear it, didn't want to hear any story this man might have to tell. "That one's famous." Ahead of us the road leaped forward like a road in an old black-and-white movie.

"Yeah it is, fucking famous. So the kid's looking for a car and he sees an almost brand-new Cadillac on this guy's lawn."

"I said I—"

"Yeah, and there's a sign that says FOR SALE BY OWNER in the window."

There was a cigarette parked behind his ear. He reached for it, and when he did, his shirt pulled up in the front. I could see another puckered black line there, more stitches. Then he leaned forward to punch in the cigarette lighter and his shirt dropped back into place.

"Kid knows he can't afford no Cadillac-car, can't get within a *shout* of a Caddy, but he's curious, you know? So he goes over to the guy and says, 'How much does something like that go for?' And the guy, he turns off the hose he's got—cause he's washin the car, you know—and he says, 'Kid, this is your lucky day. Seven hundred and fifty bucks and you drive it away.' "

The cigarette lighter popped out. Staub pulled it free and pressed the coil to the end of his cigarette. He drew in smoke and I saw little tendrils come seeping out between the stitches holding the incision on his neck closed.

"The kid, he looks in through the driver's side window and sees there's only seventeen thou on the odometer. He says to the guy, 'Yeah, sure, that's as funny as a screen door in a submarine.' The guy says, 'No joke, kid, pony up the cash and it's yours. Hell, I'll even take a check, you got a honest face.' And the kid says . . ."

I looked out the window. I *had* heard the story before, years ago, probably while I was still in junior high. In the version I'd been told

the car was a Thunderbird instead of a Caddy, but otherwise everything was the same. The kid says *I may only be seventeen but I'm not an idiot, no one sells a car like this, especially one with low mileage, for only seven hundred and fifty bucks.* And the guy tells him he's doing it because the car smells, you can't get the smell out, he's tried and tried and nothing will take it out. You see he was on a business trip, a fairly long one, gone for at least . . .

“. . . a coupla weeks,” the driver was saying. He was smiling the way people do when they're telling a joke that really slays them. “And when he comes back, he finds the car in the garage and his wife in the car, she's been dead practically the whole time he's been gone. I don't know if it was suicide or a heart attack or what, but she's all bloated up and the car, it's full of that smell and all he wants to do is sell it, you know.” He laughed. “That's quite a story, huh?”

“Why wouldn't he call home?” It was my mouth, talking all by itself. My brain was frozen. “He's gone for two weeks on a business trip and he never calls home once to see how his wife's doing?”

“Well,” the driver said, “that's sorta beside the point, wouldn't you say? I mean hey, what a bargain—*that's* the point. Who wouldn't be tempted? After all, you could always drive the car with the fuckin windows open, right? And it's basically just a story. Fiction. I thought of it because of the smell in *this* car. Which is fact.”

Silence. And I thought: *He's waiting for me to say something, waiting for me to end this.* And I wanted to. I did. Except . . . what then? What would he do then?

He rubbed the ball of his thumb over the button on his shirt, the one reading I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I saw there was dirt under his fingernails. “That's where I was today,” he said. “Thrill Village. I did some work for a guy and he gave me an all-day pass. My girlfriend was gonna go with me, but she called and said she was sick, she gets these periods that really hurt sometimes, they make her sick as a dog. It's too bad, but I always think, hey, what's the alternative? No rag at all, right, and then I'm in trouble, we both are.” He yapped, a humorless bark of sound. “So I went by myself. No sense wasting an all-day pass. You ever been to Thrill Village?”

“Yes,” I said. “Once. When I was twelve.”

“Who’d you go with?” he asked. “You didn’t go alone, did you? Not if you were only twelve.”

I hadn’t told him that part, had I? No. He was playing with me, that was all, swatting me idly back and forth. I thought about opening the door and just rolling out into the night, trying to tuck my head into my arms before I hit, only I knew he’d reach over and pull me back before I could get away. And I couldn’t raise my arms, anyway. The best I could do was clutch my hands together.

“No,” I said. “I went with my dad. My dad took me.”

“Did you ride the Bullet? I rode that fucker four times. Man! It goes right upside down!” He looked at me and uttered another empty bark of laughter. The moonlight swam in his eyes, turning them into white circles, making them into the eyes of a statue. And I understood he was more than dead; he was crazy. “Did you ride that, Alan?”

I thought of telling him he had the wrong name, my name was Hector, but what was the use? We were coming to the end of it now.

“Yeah,” I whispered. Not a single light out there except for the moon. The trees rushed by, writhing like spontaneous dancers at a tent-show revival. The road rushed under us. I looked at the speedometer and saw he was up to eighty miles an hour. We were riding the bullet right now, he and I; the dead drive fast. “Yeah, the Bullet. I rode it.”

“Nah,” he said. He drew on his cigarette, and once again I watched the little trickles of smoke escape from the stitched incision on his neck. “You never. Especially not with your father. You got into the line, all right, but you were with your ma. The line was long, the line for the Bullet always is, and she didn’t want to stand out there in the hot sun. She was fat even then, and the heat bothered her. But you pestered her all day, pestered pestered pestered, and here’s the joke of it, man—when you finally got to the head of the line, you chickened. Didn’t you?”

I said nothing. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth.

His hand stole out, the skin yellow in the light of the Mustang’s dashboard lights, the nails filthy, and gripped my locked hands. The strength went out of them when he did and they fell apart like a knot that magically unties itself at the touch of the magician’s wand. His skin was cold and somehow snaky.

“*Didn’t* you?”

“Yes,” I said. I couldn’t get my voice much above a whisper. “When we got close and I saw how high it was . . . how it turned over at the top and how they screamed inside when it did . . . I chickened out. She swatted me, and she wouldn’t talk to me all the way home. I never rode the Bullet.” Until now, at least.

“You should have, man. That’s the best one. That’s the one to ride. Nothin else is as good, at least not there. I stopped on the way home and got some beers at that store by the state line. I was gonna stop over my girlfriend’s house, give her the button as a joke.” He tapped the button on his chest, then unrolled his window and flicked his cigarette out into the windy night. “Only you probably know what happened.”

Of course I knew. It was every ghost story you’d ever heard, wasn’t it? He crashed his Mustang and when the cops got there he’d been sitting dead in the crumpled remains with his body behind the wheel and his head in the backseat, his cap turned around backwards and his dead eyes staring up at the roof, and ever since you see him on Ridge Road when the moon is full and the wind is high, *wheee-oooo*, we will return after this brief word from our sponsor. I know something now that I didn’t before—the worst stories are the ones you’ve heard your whole life. Those are the real nightmares.

“Nothing like a funeral,” he said, and laughed. “Isn’t that what you said? You slipped there, Al. No doubt about it. Slipped, tripped, and fell.”

“Let me out,” I whispered. “Please.”

“Well,” he said, turning toward me, “we have to talk about that, don’t we? Do you know who I am, Alan?”

“You’re a ghost,” I said.

He gave an impatient little snort, and in the glow of the speedometer the corners of his mouth turned down. “Come on, man, you can do better than that. Fuckin *Casper’s* a ghost. Do I float in the air? Can you see through me?” He held up one of his hands, opened and closed it in front of me. I could hear the dry, unlubricated sound of his tendons creaking.

I tried to say something. I don't know what, and it doesn't really matter, because nothing came out.

"I'm a kind of messenger," Staub said. "Fuckin FedEx from beyond the grave, you like that? Guys like me actually come out pretty often whenever the circumstances are just right. You know what I think? I think that whoever runs things—God or whatever—must like to be entertained. He always wants to see if you'll keep what you already got or if he can talk you into goin for what's behind the curtain. Things have to be just right, though. Tonight they were. You out all by yourself . . . mother sick . . . needin a ride . . ."

"If I'd stayed with the old man, none of this would have happened," I said. "Would it?" I could smell Staub clearly now, the needle-sharp smell of the chemicals and the duller, blunter stink of decaying meat, and wondered how I ever could have missed it, or mistaken it for something else.

"Hard to say," Staub replied. "Maybe this old man you're talking about was dead, too."

I thought of old man's shrill handful-of-glass voice, the snap of his truss. No, he hadn't been dead, and I had traded the smell of piss in his old Dodge for something a lot worse.

"Anyway, man, we don't have time to talk about all that. Five more miles and we'll start seeing houses again. Seven more and we're at the Lewiston city line. Which means you have to decide now."

"Decide what?" Only I thought I knew.

"Who rides the Bullet and who stays on the ground. You or your mother." He turned and looked at me with his drowning moonlight eyes. He smiled more fully and I saw most of his teeth were gone, knocked out in the crash. He patted the steering wheel. "I'm taking one of you with me, man. And since you're here, you get to choose. What do you say?"

You can't be serious rose to my lips, but what would be the point of saying that, or anything like it? Of course he was serious. Dead serious.

I thought of all the years she and I had spent together, Alan and Jean Parker against the world. A lot of good times and more than a few really bad ones. Patches on my pants and casserole suppers. Most of the other kids took a quarter a week to buy the hot lunch; I

always got a peanut-butter sandwich or a piece of bologna rolled up in day-old bread, like a kid in one of those dopey rags-to-riches stories. Her working in God knew how many different restaurants and cocktail lounges to support us. The time she took the day off work to talk to the ADC man, her dressed in her best pants suit, him sitting in our kitchen rocker in a suit of his own, one even a nine-year-old kid like me could tell was a lot better than hers, with a clipboard in his lap and a fat, shiny pen in his fingers. Her answering the insulting, embarrassing questions he asked with a fixed smile on her mouth, even offering him more coffee, because if he turned in the right report she'd get an extra fifty dollars a month, a lousy fifty bucks. Lying on her bed after he'd gone, crying, and when I came in to sit beside her she had tried to smile and said ADC didn't stand for Aid to Dependent Children but Awful Damn Crapheads. I had laughed and then she laughed, too, because you had to laugh, we'd found that out. When it was just you and your fat chain-smoking ma against the world, laughing was quite often the only way you could get through without going insane and beating your fists on the walls. But there was more to it than that, you know. For people like us, little people who went scurrying through the world like mice in a cartoon, sometimes laughing at the assholes was the only revenge you could ever get. Her working all those jobs and taking the overtime and taping her ankles when they swelled and putting her tips away in a jar marked ALAN'S COLLEGE FUND—just like one of those dopey rags-to-riches stories, yeah, yeah—and telling me again and again that I had to work hard, other kids could maybe afford to play Freddy Fuckaround at school but I couldn't because she could put away her tips until doomsday cracked and there still wouldn't be enough; in the end it was going to come down to scholarships and loans if I was going to go to college and I *had* to go to college because it was the only way out for me . . . and for her. So I had worked hard, you want to believe I did, because I wasn't blind—I saw how heavy she was, I saw how much she smoked (it was her only private pleasure . . . her only vice, if you're one of those who must take that view), and I knew that some day our positions would reverse and I'd be the one taking care of her. With a college education and a good job, maybe I could do that. I *wanted* to do that. I loved her. She had a fierce temper and

an ugly mouth on her—that day we waited for the Bullet and then I chickened out wasn't the only time she ever yelled at me and then swatted me—but I loved her in spite of it. Partly even *because* of it. I loved her when she hit me as much as when she kissed me. Do you understand that? Me either. And that's all right. I don't think you can sum up lives or explain families, and we were a family, she and I, the smallest family there is, a tight little family of two, a shared secret. If you had asked, I would have said I'd do anything for her. And now that was exactly what I was being asked to do. I was being asked to die for her, to die in her place, even though she had lived half her life, probably a lot more. I had hardly begun mine.

"What say, Al?" George Staub asked. "Time's wasting."

"I can't decide something like that," I said hoarsely. The moon sailed above the road, swift and brilliant. "It's not fair to ask me."

"I know, and believe me, that's what they all say." Then he lowered his voice. "But I gotta tell you something—if you don't decide by the time we get back to the first house lights, I'll have to take you both." He frowned, then brightened again, as if remembering there was good news as well as bad. "You could ride together in the backseat if I took you both, talk over old times, there's that."

"Ride to where?"

He didn't reply. Perhaps he didn't know.

The trees blurred by like black ink. The headlights rushed and the road rolled. I was twenty-one. I wasn't a virgin but I'd only been with a girl once and I'd been drunk and couldn't remember much of what it had been like. There were a thousand places I wanted to go—Los Angeles, Tahiti, maybe Luchenbach, Texas—and a thousand things I wanted to do. My mother was forty-eight and that was *old*, goddammit. Mrs. McCurdy wouldn't say so but Mrs. McCurdy was old herself. My mother had done right by me, worked all those long hours and taken care of me, but had I chosen her life for her? Asked to be born and then demanded that she live for me? She was forty-eight. I was twenty-one. I had, as they said, my whole life before me. But was that the way you judged? How did you decide a thing like this? How *could* you decide a thing like this?

The woods bolting by. The moon looking down like a bright and deadly eye.

“Better hurry up, man,” George Staub said. “We’re running out of wilderness.”

I opened my mouth and tried to speak. Nothing came out but an arid sigh.

“Here, got just the thing,” he said, and reached behind him. His shirt pulled up again and I got another look (I could have done without it) at the stitched black line on his belly. Were there still guts behind that line or just packing soaked in chemicals? When he brought his hand back, he had a can of beer in it—one of those he’d bought at the state line store on his last ride, presumably.

“I know how it is,” he said. “Stress gets you dry in the mouth. Here.”

He handed me the can. I took it, pulled the ringtab, and drank deeply. The taste of the beer going down was cold and bitter. I’ve never had a beer since. I just can’t drink it. I can barely stand to watch the commercials on TV.

Ahead of us in the blowing dark, a yellow light glimmered.

“Hurry up, Al—got to speed it up. That’s the first house, right up at the top of this hill. If you got something to say to me, you better say it now.”

The light disappeared, then came back again, only now it was several lights. They were windows. Behind them were ordinary people doing ordinary things—watching TV, feeding the cat, maybe beating off in the bathroom.

I thought of us standing in line at Thrill Village, Jean and Alan Parker, a big woman with dark patches of sweat around the armpits of her sundress and her little boy. She hadn’t wanted to stand in that line, Staub was right about that . . . but I had pestered pestered pestered. He had been right about that, too. She had swatted me, but she had stood in line with me, too. She had stood with me in a lot of lines, and I could go over all of it again, all the arguments pro and con, but there was no time.

“Take her,” I said as the lights of the first house swept toward the Mustang. My voice was hoarse and raw and loud. “Take her, take my ma, don’t take me.”

I threw the can of beer down on the floor of the car and put my hands up to my face. He touched me then, touched the front of my

shirt, his fingers fumbling, and I thought—with sudden brilliant clarity—that it had all been a test. I had failed and now he was going to rip my beating heart right out of my chest, like an evil *djinn* in one of those cruel Arabian fairy tales. I screamed. Then his fingers let go—it was as if he'd changed his mind at the last second—and he reached past me. For one moment my nose and lungs were so full of his deathly smell that I felt positive I was dead myself. Then there was the click of the door opening and cold fresh air came streaming in, washing the death smell away.

“Pleasant dreams, Al,” he grunted in my ear and then pushed. I went rolling out into the windy October darkness with my eyes closed and my hands raised and my body tensed for the bone-breaking smashdown. I might have been screaming, I don't remember for sure.

The smashdown didn't come and after an endless moment I realized I was already down—I could feel the ground under me. I opened my eyes, then squeezed them shut almost at once. The glare of the moon was blinding. It sent a bolt of pain through my head, one that settled not behind my eyes, where you usually feel pain after staring into an unexpectedly bright light, but in the back, way down low just above the nape of my neck. I became aware that my legs and bottom were cold and wet. I didn't care. I was on the ground, and that was all I cared about.

I pushed up on my elbows and opened my eyes again, more cautiously this time. I think I already knew where I was, and one look around was enough to confirm it: lying on my back in the little graveyard at the top of the hill on Ridge Road. The moon was almost directly overhead now, fiercely bright but much smaller than it had been only a few moments before. The mist was deeper as well, lying over the cemetery like a blanket. A few markers poked up through it like stone islands. I tried getting to my feet and another bolt of pain went through the back of my head. I put my hand there and felt a lump. There was sticky wetness, as well. I looked at my hand. In the moonlight, the blood streaked across my palm looked black.

On my second try I succeeded in getting up, and stood there swaying among the tombstones, knee-deep in mist. I turned around, saw the break in the rock wall and Ridge Road beyond it. I couldn't

see my pack because the mist had overlaid it, but I knew it was there. If I walked out to the road in the lefthand wheelrut of the lane, I'd find it. Hell, would likely stumble over it.

So here was my story, all neatly packaged and tied up with a bow: I had stopped for a rest at the top of this hill, had gone inside the cemetery to have a little look around, and while backing away from the grave of one George Staub had tripped over my own large and stupid feet. Fell down, banged my head on a marker. How long had I been unconscious? I wasn't savvy enough to tell time by the changing position of the moon with to-the-minute accuracy, but it had to have been at least an hour. Long enough to have a dream that I'd gotten a ride with a dead man. What dead man? George Staub, of course, the name I'd read on a grave-marker just before the lights went out. It was the classic ending, wasn't it? Gosh-What-an-Awful-Dream-I-Had. And when I got to Lewiston and found my mother had died? Just a little touch of pre-cognition in the night, put it down to that. It was the sort of story you might tell years later, near the end of a party, and people would nod their heads thoughtfully and look solemn and some dinkleberry with leather patches on the elbows of his tweed jacket would say there were more things in heaven and earth than were dreamed of in our philosophy and then—

"Then shit," I croaked. The top of the mist was moving slowly, like mist on a clouded mirror. "I'm never talking about this. Never, not in my whole life, not even on my deathbed."

But it had all happened just the way I remembered it, of that I was sure. George Staub had come along and picked me up in his Mustang, Ichabod Crane's old pal with his head stitched on instead of under his arm, demanding that I choose. And I *had* chosen—faced with the oncoming lights of the first house, I had bartered away my mother's life with hardly a pause. It might be understandable, but that didn't make the guilt of it any less. No one had to know, however; that was the good part. Her death would look natural—hell, would *be* natural—and that's the way I intended to leave it.

I walked out of the graveyard in the lefthand rut, and when my foot struck my pack, I picked it up and slung it back over my shoulders. Lights appeared at the bottom of the hill as if someone had given them the cue. I stuck out my thumb, oddly sure it was the old man in

the Dodge—he'd come back this way looking for me, of course he had, it gave the story that final finishing roundness.

Only it wasn't the old guy. It was a tobacco-chewing farmer in a Ford pick-up truck filled with apple baskets, a perfectly ordinary fellow: not old and not dead.

"Where you goin, son?" he asked, and when I told him he said, "That works for both of us." Less than forty minutes later, at twenty minutes after nine, he pulled up in front of the Central Maine Medical Center. "Good luck. Hope your ma's on the mend."

"Thank you," I said, and opened the door.

"I see you been pretty nervous about it, but she'll most likely be fine. Ought to get some disinfectant on those, though." He pointed at my hands.

I looked down at them and saw the deep, purpling crescents on the backs. I remembered clutching them together, digging in with my nails, feeling it but unable to stop. And I remembered Staub's eyes, filled up with moonlight like radiant water. *Did you ride the Bullet?* he'd asked me. *I rode that fucker four times.*

"Son?" the man driving the pick-up asked. "You all right?"

"Huh?"

"You come over all shivery."

"I'm okay," I said. "Thanks again." I slammed the door of the pickup and went up the wide walk past the line of parked wheelchairs gleaming in the moonlight.

I walked to the information desk, reminding myself that I had to look surprised when they told me she was dead, had to look surprised, they'd think it was funny if I didn't . . . or maybe they'd just think I was in shock . . . or that we didn't get along . . . or . . .

I was so deep in these thoughts that I didn't at first grasp what the woman behind the desk had told me. I had to ask her to repeat it.

"I said that she's in room 487, but you can't go up just now. Visiting hours end at nine."

"But . . ." I felt suddenly woozy. I gripped the edge of the desk. The lobby was lit by fluorescents, and in that bright even glare the cuts on the backs of my hands stood out boldly—eight small purple crescents like grins, just above the knuckles. The man in the pick-up was right, I ought to get some disinfectant on those.

The woman behind the desk was looking at me patiently. The plaque in front of her said she was YVONNE EDERLE.

“But is she all right?”

She looked at her computer. “What I have here is S. Stands for satisfactory. And four is a general population floor. If your mother had taken a turn for the worse, she’d be in ICU. That’s on three. I’m sure if you come back tomorrow, you’ll find her just fine. Visiting hours begin at—”

“She’s my ma,” I said. “I hitchhiked all the way down from the University of Maine to see her. Don’t you think I could go up, just for a few minutes?”

“Exceptions are sometimes made for immediate family,” she said, and gave me a smile. “You just hang on a second. Let me see what I can do.” She picked up the phone and punched a couple of buttons, no doubt calling the nurse’s station on the fourth floor, and I could see the course of the next two minutes as if I really *did* have second sight. Yvonne the Information Lady would ask if the son of Jean Parker in 487 could come up for a minute or two—just long enough to give his mother a kiss and an encouraging word—and the nurse would say oh God, Mrs. Parker died not fifteen minutes ago, we just sent her down to the morgue, we haven’t had a chance to update the computer, this is so terrible.

The woman at the desk said, “Muriel? It’s Yvonne. I have a young man here down here at the desk, his name is—” She looked at me, eyebrows raised, and I gave her my name. “—Alan Parker. His mother is Jean Parker, in 487? He wonders if he could just . . .”

She stopped. Listened. On the other end the nurse on the fourth floor was no doubt telling her that Jean Parker was dead.

“All right,” Yvonne said. “Yes, I understand.” She sat quietly for a moment, looking off into space, then put the mouthpiece of the telephone against her shoulder and said, “She’s sending Anne Corrigan down to peek in on her. It will only be a second.”

“It never ends,” I said.

Yvonne frowned. “I beg pardon?”

“Nothing,” I said. “It’s been a long night and—”

“—and you’re worried about your mom. Of course. I think you’re a very good son to drop everything the way you did and come on the

run.”

I suspected Yvonne Ederle’s opinion of me would have taken a drastic drop if she’d heard my conversation with the young man behind the wheel of the Mustang, but of course she hadn’t. That was a little secret, just between George and me.

It seemed that hours passed as I stood there under the bright fluorescents, waiting for the nurse on the fourth floor to come back on the line. Yvonne had some papers in front of her. She trailed her pen down one of them, putting neat little check marks beside some of the names, and it occurred to me that if there really was an Angel of Death, he or she was probably just like this woman, a slightly overworked functionary with a desk, a computer, and too much paperwork. Yvonne kept the phone pinched between her ear and one raised shoulder. The loudspeaker said that Dr. Farquahr was wanted in radiology, Dr. Farquahr. On the fourth floor a nurse named Anne Corrigan would now be looking at my mother, lying dead in her bed with her eyes open, the stroke-induced sneer of her mouth finally relaxing.

Yvonne straightened as a voice came back on the line. She listened, then said: “All right, yes, I understand. I will. Of course I will. Thank you, Muriel.” She hung up the telephone and looked at me solemnly. “Muriel says you can come up, but you can only visit for five minutes. Your mother’s had her evening meds, and she’s very soupy.”

I stood there, gaping at her.

Her smile faded a little bit. “Are you sure you’re all right, Mr. Parker?”

“Yes,” I said. “I guess I just thought—”

Her smile came back. It was sympathetic this time. “Lots of people think that,” she said. “It’s understandable. You get a call out of the blue, you rush to get here . . . it’s understandable to think the worst. But Muriel wouldn’t let you up on her floor if your mother wasn’t fine. Trust me on that.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Thank you so much.”

As I started to turn away, she said: “Mr. Parker? If you came from the University of Maine up north, may I ask why you’re wearing that button? Thrill Village is in New Hampshire, isn’t it?”

I looked down at the front of my shirt and saw the button pinned to the breast pocket: I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I remembered thinking he intended to rip my heart out. Now I understood: he had pinned his button on my shirt just before pushing me into the night. It was his way of marking me, of making our encounter impossible not to believe. The cuts on the backs of my hands said so, the button on my shirt said so, too. He had asked me to choose and I had chosen.

So how could my mother still be alive?

“This?” I touched it with the ball of my thumb, even polished it a little. “It’s my good luck charm.” The lie was so horrible that it had a kind of splendor. “I got it when I was there with my mother, a long time ago. She took me on the Bullet.”

Yvonne the Information Lady smiled as if this were the sweetest thing she had ever heard. “Give her a nice hug and kiss,” she said. “Seeing you will send her off to sleep better than any of the pills the doctors have.” She pointed. “The elevators are over there, around the corner.”

With visiting hours over, I was the only one waiting for a car. There was a litter basket off to the left, by the door to the newsstand, which was closed and dark. I tore the button off my shirt and threw it in the basket. Then I rubbed my hand on my pants. I was still rubbing it when one of the elevator doors opened. I got in and pushed for four. The car began to rise. Above the floor buttons was a poster announcing a blood drive for the following week. As I read it, an idea came to me . . . except it wasn’t so much an idea as a certainty. My mother was dying now, at this very second, while I rode up to her floor in this slow industrial elevator. I had made the choice; it therefore fell to me to find her. It made perfect sense.

. . .

The elevator door opened on another poster. This one showed a cartoon finger pressed to big red cartoon lips. Beneath it was a line reading OUR PATIENTS APPRECIATE YOUR QUIET! Beyond the elevator lobby was a corridor going right and left. The odd-numbered rooms were to the left. I walked down that way, my sneakers seeming to

gain weight with every step. I slowed in the four-seventies, then stopped entirely between 481 and 483. I couldn't do this. Sweat as cold and sticky as half-frozen syrup crept out of my hair in little trickles. My stomach was knotted up like a fist inside a slick glove. No, I couldn't do it. Best to turn around and skedaddle like the cowardly chickenshit I was. I'd hitchhike out to Harlow and call Mrs. McCurdy in the morning. Things would be easier to face in the morning.

I started to turn, and then a nurse poked her head out of the room two doors up . . . my mother's room. "Mr. Parker?" she asked in a low voice.

For a wild moment I almost denied it. Then I nodded.

"Come in. Hurry. She's going."

They were the words I'd expected, but they still sent a cramp of terror through me and buckled my knees.

The nurse saw this and came hurrying toward me, her skirt rustling, her face alarmed. The little gold pin on her breast read ANNE CORRIGAN. "No, no, I just meant the *sedative* . . . She's going to sleep. Oh my God, I'm so stupid. She's fine, Mr. Parker, I gave her her Ambien and she's going, to sleep, that's all I meant. You aren't going to faint, are you?" She took my arm.

"No," I said, not knowing if I was going to faint or not. The world was swooping and there was a buzzing in my ears. I thought of how the road had leaped toward the car, a black-and-white movie road in all that silver moonlight. *Did you ride the Bullet? Man, I rode that fucker four times.*

Anne Corrigan lead me into the room and I saw my mother. She had always been a big woman, and the hospital bed was small and narrow, but she still looked almost lost in it. Her hair, now more gray than black, was spilled across the pillow. Her hands lay on top of the sheet like a child's hands, or even a doll's. There was no frozen stroke-sneer such as the one I'd imagined on her face, but her complexion was yellow. Her eyes were closed, but when the nurse beside me murmured her name, they opened. They were a deep and iridescent blue, the youngest part of her, and perfectly alive. For a moment they looked nowhere, and then they found me. She smiled

and tried to hold out her arms. One of them came up. The other trembled, rose a little bit, then fell back. "Al," she whispered.

I went to her, starting to cry. There was a chair by the wall, but I didn't bother with it. I knelt on the floor and put my arms around her. She smelled warm and clean. I kissed her temple, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. She raised her good hand and patted her fingers under one of my eyes.

"Don't cry," she whispered. "No need of that."

"I came as soon as I heard," I said. "Betsy McCurdy called."

"Told her . . . weekend," she said. "Said the weekend would be fine."

"Yeah, and to hell with that," I said, and hugged her.

"Car fixed?"

"No," I said. "I hitchhiked."

"Oh gorry," she said. Each word was clearly an effort for her, but they weren't slurred, and I sensed no bewilderment or disorientation. She knew who she was, who I was, where we were, why we were here. The only sign of anything wrong was her weak left arm. I felt an enormous sense of relief. It had all been a cruel practical joke on Staub's part . . . or perhaps there had been no Staub, perhaps it had all been a dream after all, corny as that might be. Now that I was here, kneeling by her bed with my arms around her, smelling a faint remnant of her Lanvin perfume, the dream idea seemed a lot more plausible.

"Al? There's blood on your collar." Her eyes rolled closed, then came slowly open again. I imagined her lids must feel as heavy to her as my sneakers had to me, out in the hall.

"I bumped my head, ma, it's nothing."

"Good. Have to . . . take care of yourself." The lids came down again; rose even more slowly.

"Mr. Parker, I think we'd better let her sleep now," the nurse said from behind me. "She's had an extremely difficult day."

"I know." I kissed her on the corner of the mouth again. "I'm going, ma, but I'll be back tomorrow."

"Don't . . . hitchhike . . . dangerous."

"I won't. I'll catch a ride in with Mrs. McCurdy. You get some sleep."

“Sleep . . . all I do,” she said. “I was at work, unloading the dishwasher. I came over all headachey. Fell down. Woke up . . . here.” She looked up at me. “Was a stroke. Doctor says . . . not too bad.”

“You’re fine,” I said. I got up, then took her hand. The skin was fine, as smooth as watered silk. An old person’s hand.

“I dreamed we were at that amusement park in New Hampshire,” she said.

I looked down at her, feeling my skin go cold all over. “Did you?”

“Ayuh. Waiting in line for the one that goes . . . way up high. Do you remember that one?”

“The Bullet,” I said. “I remember it, ma.”

“You were afraid and I shouted. Shouted at you.”

“No, ma, you—”

Her hand squeezed down on mine and the corners of her mouth deepened into near dimples. It was a ghost of her old impatient expression.

“Yes,” she said. “Shouted and swatted you. Back . . . of the neck, wasn’t it?”

“Probably, yeah,” I said, giving up. “That’s mostly where you gave it to me.”

“Shouldn’t have,” she said. “It was hot and I was tired, but still . . . shouldn’t have. Wanted to tell you I was sorry.”

My eyes started leaking again. “It’s all right, ma. That was a long time ago.”

“You never got your ride,” she whispered.

“I did, though,” I said. “In the end I did.”

She smiled up at me. She looked small and weak, miles from the angry, sweaty, muscular woman who had yelled at me when we finally got to the head of the line, yelled and then whacked me across the nape of the neck. She must have seen something on someone’s face—one of the other people waiting to ride the Bullet—because I remember her saying *What are you looking at, beautiful?* as she lead me away by the hand, me snivelling under the hot summer sun, rubbing the back of my neck . . . only it didn’t really hurt, she hadn’t swatted me *that* hard; mostly what I remember was

being grateful to get away from that high, twirling construction with the capsules at either end, that revolving scream machine.

“Mr. Parker, it really is time to go,” the nurse said.

I raised my mother’s hand and kissed the knuckles. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said. “I love you, ma.”

“Love you, too. Alan . . . sorry for all the times I swatted you. That was no way to be.”

But it had been; it had been *her* way to be. I didn’t know how to tell her I knew that, accepted it. It was part of our family secret, something whispered along the nerve endings.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, ma. Okay?”

She didn’t answer. Her eyes had rolled shut again, and this time the lids didn’t come back up. Her chest rose and fell slowly and regularly. I backed away from the bed, never taking my eyes off her.

In the hall I said to the nurse, “Is she going to be all right? Really all right?”

“No one can say that for sure, Mr. Parker. She’s Dr. Nunnally’s patient. He’s very good. He’ll be on the floor tomorrow afternoon and you can ask him—”

“Tell me what *you* think.”

“I think she’s going to be fine,” the nurse said, leading me back down the hall toward the elevator lobby. “Her vital signs are strong, and all the residual effects suggest a very light stroke.” She frowned a little. “She’s going to have to make some changes, of course. In her diet . . . her lifestyle . . .”

“Her smoking, you mean.”

“Oh yes. That has to go.” She said it as if my mother quitting her lifetime habit would be no more difficult than moving a vase from a table in the living room to one in the hall. I pushed the button for the elevators, and the door of the car I’d ridden up in opened at once. Things clearly slowed down a lot at CMMC once visiting hours were over.

“Thanks for everything,” I said.

“Not at all. I’m sorry I scared you. What I said was incredibly stupid.”

“Not at all,” I said, although I agreed with her. “Don’t mention it.”

I got into the elevator and pushed for the lobby. The nurse raised her hand and twiddled her fingers. I twiddled my own in return, and then the door slid between us. The car started down. I looked at the fingernail marks on the backs of my hands and thought that I was an awful creature, the lowest of the low. Even if it had only been a dream, I was the lowest of the goddam low. *Take her*, I'd said. She was my mother but I had said it just the same: *Take my ma, don't take me*. She had raised me, worked overtime for me, waited in line with me under the hot summer sun in a dusty little New Hampshire amusement park, and in the end I had hardly hesitated. *Take her, don't take me*. Chickenshit, chickenshit, you fucking chickenshit.

When the elevator door opened I stepped out, took the lid off the litter basket, and there it was, lying in someone's almost-empty paper coffee cup: I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA.

I bent, plucked the button out of the cold puddle of coffee it was lying in, wiped it on my jeans, put it in my pocket. Throwing it away had been the wrong idea. It was my button now—good luck charm or bad luck charm, it was mine. I left the hospital, giving Yvonne a little wave on my way by. Outside, the moon rode the roof of the sky, flooding the world with its strange and perfectly dreamy light. I had never felt so tired or so dispirited in my whole life. I wished I had the choice to make again. I would have made a different one. Which was funny—if I'd found her dead, as I'd expected to, I think I could have lived with it. After all, wasn't that the way stories like this one were supposed to end?

Nobody wants to give a fella a ride in town, the old man with the truss had said, and how true that was. I walked all the way across Lewiston—three dozen blocks of Lisbon Street and nine blocks of Canal Street, past all the bottle clubs with the jukeboxes playing old songs by Foreigner and Led Zeppelin and AC/DC in French—without putting my thumb out a single time. It would have done no good. It was well past eleven before I reached the DeMuth Bridge. Once I was on the Harlow side, the first car I raised my thumb to stopped. Forty minutes later I was fishing the key out from under the red wheelbarrow by the door to the back shed, and ten minutes after that I was in bed. It occurred to me as I dropped off that it was the first time in my life I'd slept in that house all by myself.

• • •

It was the phone that woke me up at quarter past noon. I thought it would be the hospital, someone from the hospital saying my mother had taken a sudden turn for the worse and had passed away only a few minutes ago, so sorry. But it was only Mrs. McCurdy, wanting to be sure I'd gotten home all right, wanting to know all the details of my visit the night before (she took me through it three times, and by the end of the third recitation I had begun to feel like a criminal being interrogated on a murder charge), also wanting to know if I'd like to ride up to the hospital with her that afternoon. I told her that would be great.

When I hung up, I crossed the room to the bedroom door. Here was a full-length mirror. In it was a tall, unshaven young man with a small potbelly, dressed only in baggy undershorts. "You have to get it together, big boy," I told my reflection. "Can't go through the rest of your life thinking that every time the phone rings it's someone calling to tell you your mother's dead."

Not that I would. Time would dull the memory, time always did . . . but it was amazing how real and immediate the night before still seemed. Every edge and corner was sharp and clear. I could still see Staub's good-looking young face beneath his turned-around cap, and the cigarette behind his ear, and the way the smoke had seeped out of the incision on his neck when he inhaled. I could still hear him telling the story of the Cadillac that was selling cheap. Time would blunt the edges and round the corners, but not for awhile. After all, I had the button, it was on the dresser by the bathroom door. The button was my souvenir. Didn't the hero of every ghost story come away with a souvenir, something that proved it had all really happened?

There was an ancient stereo system in the corner of the room, and I shuffled through my old tapes, hunting for something to listen to while I shaved. I found one marked FOLK MIX and put it in the tape player. I'd made it in high school and could barely remember what was on it. Bob Dylan sang about the lonesome death of Hattie Carroll, Tom Paxton sang about his old ramblin' pal, and then Dave Van Ronk started to sing about the cocaine blues. Halfway through

the third verse I paused with my razor by my cheek. *Got a headful of whiskey and a bellyful of gin*, Dave sang in his rasping voice. *Doctor say it kill me but he don't say when*. And that was the answer, of course. A guilty conscience had lead me to assume that my mother would die *immediately*, and Staub had never corrected that assumption—how could he, when I had never even asked?—but it clearly wasn't true.

Doctor say it kill me but he don't say when.

What in God's name was I beating myself up about? Didn't my choice amount to no more than the natural order of things? Didn't children usually outlive their parents? The son of a bitch had tried to scare me—to guilt-trip me—but I didn't have to buy what he was selling, did I? Didn't we all ride the Bullet in the end?

You're just trying to let yourself off. Trying to find a way to make it okay. Maybe what you're thinking is true . . . but when he asked you to choose, you chose her. There's no way to think your way around that, buddy—you chose her.

I opened my eyes and looked at my face in the mirror. "I did what I had to," I said. I didn't quite believe it, but in time I supposed I would.

Mrs. McCurdy and I went up to see my mother and my mother was a little better. I asked her if she remembered her dream about Thrill Village, in Laconia. She shook her head. "I barely remember you coming in last night, she said. "I was awful sleepy. Does it matter?"

"Nope," I said, and kissed her temple. "Not a bit."

. . .

My ma got out of the hospital five days later. She walked with a limp for a little while, but that went away and a month later she was back at work again—only half shifts at first but then full time, just as if nothing had happened. I returned to school and got a job at Pat's Pizza in downtown Orono. The money wasn't great, but it was enough to get my car fixed. That was good; I'd lost what little taste for hitchhiking I'd ever had.

. . .

My mother tried to quit smoking and for a little while she did. Then I came back from school for April vacation a day early, and the kitchen was just as smoky as it had ever been. She looked at me with eyes that were both ashamed and defiant. “I can’t,” she said. “I’m sorry, Al—I know you want me to and I know I should, but there’s such a hole in my life without it. Nothin fills it. The best I can do is wish I’d never started in the first place.”

Two weeks after I graduated from college, my ma had another stroke—just a little one. She tried to quit smoking again when the doctor scolded her, then put on fifty pounds and went back to the tobacco. “As a dog returneth to its vomit,” the Bible says; I’ve always liked that one. I got a pretty good job in Portland on my first try—lucky, I guess, and started the work of convincing her to quit her own job. It was a tough sled at first.

I might have given up in disgust, but I had a certain memory that kept me digging away at her Yankee defenses.

“You ought to be saving for your own life, not taking care of me,” she said. “You’ll want to get married someday, Al, and what you spend on me you won’t have for that. For your real life.”

“*You’re* my real life,” I said, and kissed her. “You can like it or lump it, but that’s just the way it is.”

And finally she threw in the towel.

We had some pretty good years after that—seven of them in all. I didn’t live with her, but I visited her almost every day. We played a lot of gin rummy and watched a lot of movies on the video recorder I bought her. Had a bucketload of laughs, as she liked to say. I don’t know if I owe those years to George Staub or not, but they were good years. And my memory of the night I met Staub never faded and grew dreamlike, as I always expected it would; every incident, from the old man telling me to wish on the harvest moon to the fingers fumbling at my shirt as Staub passed his button on to me remained perfectly clear. And there came a day when I could no longer find that button. I knew I’d had it when I moved into my little apartment in Falmouth—I kept it in the top drawer of my bedside table, along with a couple of combs, my two sets of cuff links, and an old political button that said BILL CLINTON, THE SAFE SAX PRESIDENT—

but then it came up missing. And when the telephone rang a day or two later, I knew why Mrs. McCurdy was crying. It was the bad news I'd never quite stopped expecting; fun is fun and done is done.

• • •

When the funeral was over, and the wake, and the seemingly endless line of mourners had finally come to its end, I went back to the little house in Harlow where my mother had spent her final few years, smoking and eating powdered doughnuts. It had been Jean and Alan Parker against the world; now it was just me.

I went through her personal effects, putting aside the few papers that would have to be dealt with later, boxing up the things I'd want to keep on one side of the room and the things I'd want to give away to the Goodwill on the other. Near the end of the job I got down on my knees and looked under her bed and there it was, what I'd been looking for all along without quite admitting it to myself: a dusty button reading I RODE THE BULLET AT THRILL VILLAGE, LACONIA. I curled my fist tight around it. The pin dug into my flesh and I squeezed my hand even tighter, taking a bitter pleasure in the pain. When I rolled my fingers open again, my eyes had filled with tears and the words on the button had doubled, overlaying each other in a shimmer. It was like looking at a 3-D movie without the glasses.

"Are you satisfied?" I asked the silent room. "Is it enough?" There was no answer, of course. "Why did you even bother? What was the goddamn point?"

Still no answer, and why would there be? You wait in line, that's all. You wait in line beneath the moon and make your wishes by its infected light. You wait in line and listen to them screaming—they pay to be terrified, and on the Bullet they always get their money's worth. Maybe when it's your turn you ride; maybe you run. Either way it comes to the same, I think. There ought to be more to it, but there's really not—fun is fun and done is done.

Take your button and get out of here.

Stephen King is the author of more than thirty books, all of them worldwide bestsellers. Among his most recent are *Hearts in Atlantis*, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, *The Green Mile*, and the audio-only release, *Blood and Smoke*. Pocket Books has also released the paperback edition of *Hearts in Atlantis*. The Scribner publication of *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, is also now available. Information about Stephen King and his writing can be found at the official King website: <http://www.StephenKing.com>.

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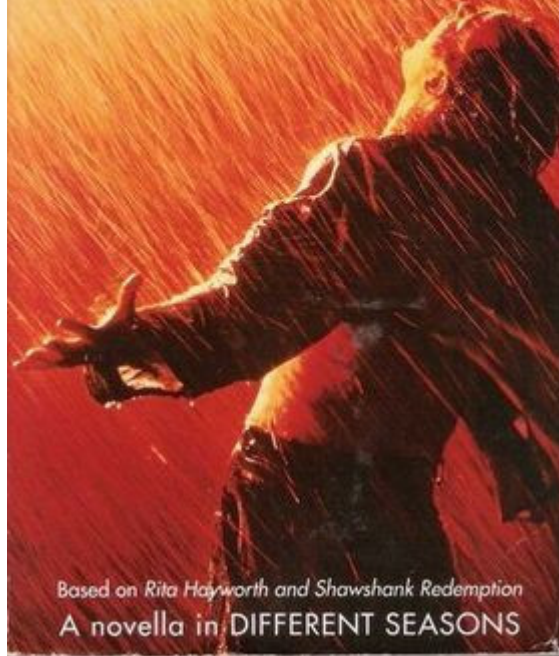
COVER DESIGN BY JOHN FONTANA

TEXT DESIGN BY ERICH HOBGING

ISBN 0-7432-0467-0
ISBN 13: 978-0-7432-0467-5 (ebook)

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**RITA HAYWORTH AND THE SHAWSHANK
REDEMPTION**

Stephen King

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

For Russ and Florence Dorr

There's a guy like me in every state and federal prison in America, I guess—I'm the guy who can get it for you. Tailormade cigarettes, a bag of reefer if you're partial to that, a bottle of brandy to celebrate your son or daughter's high school graduation, or almost anything else ... within reason, that is. It wasn't always that way.

I came to Shawshank when I was just twenty, and I am one of the few people in our happy little family willing to own up to what they did. I committed murder. I put a large insurance policy on my wife, who was three years older than I was, and then I fixed the brakes of the Chevrolet coupe her father had given us as a wedding present. It worked out exactly as I had planned, except I hadn't planned on her stopping to pick up the neighbor woman and the neighbor woman's infant son on their way down Castle Hill and into town. The brakes let go and the car crashed through the bushes at the edge of the town common, gathering speed. Bystanders said it must have been doing fifty or better when it hit the base of the Civil War statue and burst into flames.

I also hadn't planned on getting caught, but caught I was. I got a season's pass into this place. Maine has no death-penalty, but the District Attorney saw to it that I was tried for all three deaths and given three life sentences, to run one after the other. That fixed up any chance of parole I might have for a long, long time. The judge called what I had done "a hideous, heinous crime," and it was, but it is also in the past now. You can look it up in the yellowing files of the Castle Rock Call, where the big headlines announcing my conviction look sort of funny and antique next to the news of Hitler and Mussolini and FDR's alphabet soup agencies.

Have I rehabilitated myself, you ask? I don't even know what that word means, at least as far as prisons and corrections go. I think it's a politician's word. It may have some other meaning, and it may be that I will have a chance to find out, but that is the future ... something cons teach themselves not to think about. I was young, good-looking, and from the poor side of town. I knocked up a pretty, sulky, headstrong girl who lived in one of the fine old houses on Carbine Street. Her father was agreeable to the marriage if I would take a job in the optical company he owned and "work my way up." I found out that what he really had in mind was keeping me in his house and under his thumb, like a disagreeable pet that has not quite been housebroken and which may bite. Enough hate eventually piled up to cause me to do what I did. Given a second chance I would not do it again, but I'm not sure that means I am rehabilitated.

Anyway, it's not me I want to tell you about; I want to tell you about a guy named Andy Dufresne. But before I can tell you about Andy, I have to explain a few other things about myself. It won't take long.

As I said, I've been the guy who can get it for you here at Shawshank for damn near forty years. And that doesn't just mean contraband items like extra cigarettes or booze, although those items always top the list. But I've gotten thousands of other items for men doing time here, some of them perfectly legal yet hard to come by in a place where you've supposedly been brought to be punished. There was one fellow who was in for raping a little girl and exposing himself to dozens of others; I got him three pieces of pink Vermont marble and he did three lovely sculptures out of them—a baby, a boy of about twelve, and a bearded young man. He called them The Three Ages of Jesus, and those pieces of sculpture are now in the parlor of a man who used to be governor of this state.

Or here's a name you may remember if you grew up north of Massachusetts—Robert Alan Cote. In 1951 he tried to rob the First Mercantile Bank of Mechanic Falls, and the holdup turned into a bloodbath—six dead in the end, two of them members of the gang,

three of them hostages, one of them a young state cop who put his head up at the wrong time and got a bullet in the eye. Cote had a penny collection. Naturally they weren't going to let him have it in here, but with a little help from his mother and a middleman who used to drive a laundry truck, I was able to get it for him. I told him, Bobby, you must be crazy, wanting to have a coin collection in a stone hotel full of thieves. He looked at me and smiled and said, I know where to keep them. They'll be safe enough. Don't you worry. And he was right. Bobby Cote died of a brain tumor in 1967, but that coin collection has never turned up.

I've gotten men chocolates on Valentine's Day; I got three of those green milkshakes they serve at McDonald's around St. Paddy's Day for a crazy Irishman named O'Malley; I even arranged for a midnight showing of Deep Throat and The Devil in Miss Jones for a party of twenty men who had pooled their resources to rent the films ... although I ended up doing a week in solitary for that little escapade. It's the risk you run when you're the guy who can get it.

I've gotten reference books and fuck-books, joke novelties like handbuzzers and itching powder, and on more than one occasion I've seen that a long-timer has gotten a pair of panties from his wife or his girlfriend... and I guess you'll know what guys in here do with such items during the long nights when time draws out like a blade. I don't get all those things gratis, and for some items the price comes high. But I don't do it just for the money; what good is money to me? I'm never going to own a Cadillac car or fly off to Jamaica for two weeks in February. I do it for the same reason that a good butcher will only sell you fresh meat: I got a reputation and I want to keep it. The only two things I refuse to handle are guns and heavy drugs. I won't help anyone kill himself or anyone else. I have enough killing on my mind to last me a lifetime.

Yeah, I'm a regular Neiman-Marcus. And so when Andy Dufresne came to me in 1949 and asked if I could smuggle Rita Hayworth into the prison for him, I said it would be no problem at all. And it wasn't.

When Andy came to Shawshank in 1948, he was thirty years old. He was a short, neat little man with sandy hair and small, clever hands. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles. His fingernails were always clipped, and they were always clean. That's a funny thing to remember about a man, I suppose, but it seems to sum Andy up for me. He always looked as if he should have been wearing a tie. On the outside he had been a vice-president in the trust department of a large Portland bank. Good work for a man as young as he was especially when you consider how conservative most banks are ... and you have to multiply that conservatism by ten when you get up into New England, where folks don't like to trust a man with their money unless he's bald, limping, and constantly plucking at his pants to get his truss around straight. Andy was in for murdering his wife and her lover.

As I believe I have said, everyone in prison is an innocent man. Oh, they read that scripture the way those holy rollers on TV read the Book of Revelation. They were the victims of judges with hearts of stone and balls to match, or incompetent lawyers, or police frame-ups, or bad luck. They read the scripture, but you can see a different scripture in their faces. Most cons are a low sort, no good to themselves or anyone else, and their worst luck was that their mothers carried them to term.

In all my years at Shawshank, there have been less than ten men whom I believed when they told me they were innocent. Andy Dufresne was one of them, although I only became convinced of his innocence over a period of years. If I had been on that jury that heard his case in Portland Superior Court over six stormy weeks in 1947-48, I would have voted to convict, too.

It was one hell of a case, all right; one of those juicy ones with all the right elements. There was a beautiful girl with society connections (dead), a local sports figure (also dead), and a prominent young businessman in the dock. There was this, plus all the scandal the newspapers could hint at. The prosecution had an open-and-shut case. The trial only lasted as long as it did because the DA was

planning to run for the U.S. House of Representatives and he wanted John Q. Public to get a good long look at his phiz. It was a crackerjack legal circus, with spectators getting in line at four in the morning, despite the subzero temperatures, to assure themselves of a seat.

The facts of the prosecution's case that Andy never contested were these: that he had a wife, Linda Collins Dufresne; that in June of 1947 she had expressed an interest in learning the game of golf at the Falmouth Hills Country Club; that she did indeed take lessons for four months; that her instructor was the Falmouth Hills golf pro, Glenn Quentin; that in late August of 1947 Andy learned that Quentin and his wife had become lovers; that Andy and Linda Dufresne argued bitterly on the afternoon of September 10th, 1947; that the subject of their argument was her infidelity.

He testified that Linda professed to be glad he knew; the sneaking around, she said, was distressing. She told Andy that she planned to obtain a Reno divorce. Andy told her he would see her in hell before he would see her in Reno. She went off to spend the night with Quentin in Quentin's rented bungalow not far from the golf course. The next morning his cleaning woman found both of them dead in bed. Each had been shot four times.

It was that last fact that militated more against Andy than any of the others. The DA with the political aspirations made a great deal of it in his opening statement and his closing summation. Andrew Dufresne, he said, was not a wronged husband seeking a hot-blooded revenge against his cheating wife; that, the DA said, could be understood, if not condoned. But this revenge had been of a much colder type. Consider! the DA thundered at the jury. Four and four! Not six shots, but eight! He had fired the gun empty ... and then stopped to reload so he could shoot each of them again! **FOUR FOR HIM AND FOUR FOR HER**, the Portland Sun blared. The Boston Register dubbed him The Even-Steven Killer.

A clerk from the Wise Pawnshop in Lewiston testified that he had sold a six-shot .38 Police Special to Andrew Dufresne just two days

before the double murder. A bartender from the country club bar testified that Andy had come in around seven o'clock on the evening of September 10th, had tossed off three straight whiskeys in a twenty-minute period—when he got up from the bar-stool he told the bartender that he was going up to Glenn Quentin's house and he, the bartender, could "read about the rest of it in the papers." Another clerk, this one from the Handy-Pik store a mile or so from Quentin's house, told the court that Dufresne had come in around quarter to nine on that same night. He purchased cigarettes, three quarts of beer, and some dishtowels. The county medical examiner testified that Quentin and the Dufresne woman had been killed between 11:00 P.M. and 2:00 A.M. on the night of September 10th-11th. The detective from the Attorney General's office who had been in charge of the case testified that there was a turnout less than seventy yards from the bungalow, and that on the afternoon of September 11th, three pieces of evidence had been removed from that turnout: first item, two empty quart bottles of Narragansett Beer (with the defendant's fingerprints on them); second item, twelve cigarette ends (all Kools, the defendant's brand); third item, a plaster moulage of a set of tire tracks (exactly matching the tread-and-wear pattern of the tires on the defendant's 1947 Plymouth).

In the living room of Quentin's bungalow, four dishtowels had been found lying on the sofa. There were bullet-holes through them and powder-burns on them. The detective theorized (over the agonized objections of Andy's lawyer) that the murderer had wrapped the towels around the muzzle of the murder-weapon to muffle the sound of the gunshots.

Andy Dufresne took the stand in his own defense and told his story calmly, coolly, and dispassionately. He said he had begun to hear distressing rumors about his wife and Glenn Quentin as early as the last week in July. In late August he had become distressed enough to investigate a bit. On an evening when Linda was supposed to have gone shopping in Portland after her golf lesson, Andy had followed her and Quentin to Quentin's one-story rented house (inevitably dubbed "the love-nest" by the papers). He had parked in

the turnout until Quentin drove her back to the country club where her car was parked, about three hours later.

“Do you mean to tell this court that you followed your wife in your brand-new Plymouth sedan?” the DA asked him on cross-examination.

“I swapped cars for the evening with a friend,” Andy said, and this cool admission of how well-planned his investigation had been did him no good at all in the eyes of the jury.

After returning the friend’s car and picking up his own, he had gone home. Linda had been in bed, reading a book. He asked her how her trip to Portland had been. She replied that it had been fun, but she hadn’t seen anything she liked well enough to buy. “That’s when I knew for sure,” Andy told the breathless spectators. He spoke in the same calm, remote voice in which he delivered almost all of his testimony.

“What was your frame of mind in the seventeen days between then and the night your wife was murdered?” Andy’s lawyer asked him.

“I was in great distress,” Andy said calmly, coldly. Like a man reciting a shopping list he said that he had considered suicide, and had even gone so far as to purchase a gun in Lewiston on September 8th.

His lawyer then invited him to tell the jury what had happened after his wife left to meet Glenn Quentin on the night of the murders. Andy told them ... and the impression he made was the worst possible.

I knew him for close to thirty years, and I can tell you he was the most self-possessed man I’ve ever known. What was right with him he’d only give you a little at a time. What was wrong with him he kept bottled up inside. If he ever had a dark night of the soul, as some writer or other has called it, you would never know. He was the type of man who, if he had decided to commit suicide, would do it without leaving a note but not until his affairs had been put neatly in order. If he had cried on the witness stand, or if his voice had thickened and

grown hesitant, even if he had started yelling at that Washington-bound District Attorney, I don't believe he would have gotten the life sentence he wound up with. Even if he had've, he would have been out on parole by 1954. But he told his story like a recording machine, seeming to say to the jury: This is it. Take it or leave it. They left it.

He said he was drunk that night, that he'd been more or less drunk since August 24th, and that he was a man who didn't handle his liquor very well. Of course that by itself would have been hard for any jury to swallow. They just couldn't see this coldly self-possessed young man in the neat double-breasted three-piece woollen suit ever getting falling-down drunk over his wife's sleazy little affair with some small-town golf pro. I believed it because I had a chance to watch Andy that those six men and six women didn't have.

Andy Dufresne took just four drinks a year all the time I knew him. He would meet me in the exercise yard every year about a week before his birthday and then again about two weeks before Christmas. On each occasion he would arrange for a bottle of Jack Daniel's. He bought it the way most cons arrange to buy their stuff—the slave's wages they pay in here, plus a little of his own. Up until 1965 what you got for your time was a dime an hour. In '65 they raised it all the way up to a quarter. My commission on liquor was and is ten per cent, and when you add on that surcharge to the price of a fine sippin whiskey like the Black Jack, you get an idea of how many hours of Andy Dufresne's sweat in the prison laundry was going to buy his four drinks a year.

On the morning of his birthday, September 20th, he would have himself a big knock, and then he'd have another that night after lights-out. The following day he'd give the rest of the bottle back to me, and I would share it around. As for the other bottle, he dealt himself one drink Christmas night and another on New Year's Eve. Then that bottle would also come to me with instructions to pass it on. Four drinks a year—and that is the behavior of a man who has been bitten hard by the bottle. Hard enough to draw blood.

He told the jury that on the night of the tenth he had been so drunk he could only remember what had happened in little isolated snatches. He had gotten drunk that afternoon—"I took on a double helping of Dutch courage" is how he put it—before taking on Linda.

After she left to meet Quentin, he remembered deciding to confront them. On the way to Quentin's bungalow, he swung into the country club for a couple of quick ones. He could not, he said, remember telling the bartender he could "read about the rest of it in the papers," or saying anything to him at all. He remembered buying beer in the Handy-Pik, but not the dishtowels. "Why would I want dishtowels?" he asked, and one of the papers reported that three of the lady jurors shuddered.

Later, much later, he speculated to me about the clerk who had testified on the subject of those dishtowels, and I think it's worth jotting down what he said. "Suppose that, during their canvass for witnesses," Andy said one day in the exercise yard, "they stumble on this fellow who sold me the beer that night. By then three days have gone by. The facts of the case have been broadsided in all the papers. Maybe they ganged up on the guy, five or six cops, plus the dick from the Attorney General's office, plus the DA's assistant. Memory is a pretty subjective thing, Red. They could have started out with 'Isn't it possible that he purchased four or five dishtowels?' and worked their way up from there. If enough people want you to remember something, that can be a pretty powerful persuader."

I agreed that it could.

"But there's one even more powerful," Andy went on in that musing way of his. "I think it's at least possible that he convinced himself. It was the limelight. Reporters asking him questions, his picture in the papers ... all topped, of course, by his star turn in court. I'm not saying that he deliberately falsified his story, or perjured himself. I think it's possible that he could have passed a lie detector test with flying colors, or sworn on his mother's sacred name that I bought those dishtowels. But still ... memory is such a goddam subjective thing.

“I know this much: even though my own lawyer thought I had to be lying about half my story, he never bought that business about the dishtowels. It’s crazy on the face of it. I was pig-drunk, too drunk to have been thinking about muffling the gunshots. If I’d done it, I just would have let them rip.”

He went up to the turnout and parked there. He drank beer and smoked cigarettes. He watched the lights downstairs in Quentin’s place go out. He watched a single light go on upstairs ... and fifteen minutes later he watched that one go out. He said he could guess the rest.

“Mr. Dufresne, did you then go up to Glenn Quentin’s house and kill the two of them?” his lawyer thundered.

“No, I did not,” Andy answered. By midnight, he said, he was sobering up. He was also feeling the first signs of a bad hangover. He decided to go home and sleep it off and think about the whole thing in a more adult fashion the next day. “At that time, as I drove home, I was beginning to think that the wisest course would be to simply let her go to Reno and get her divorce.”

“Thank you, Mr. Dufresne.”

The DA popped up.

“You divorced her in the quickest way you could think of, didn’t you? You divorced her with a .38 revolver wrapped in dishtowels, didn’t you?”

“No, sir, I did not,” Andy said calmly.

“And then you shot her lover.”

“No, sir.”

“You mean you shot Quentin first?”

“I mean I didn’t shoot either one of them. I drank two quarts of beer and smoked however many cigarettes the police found at the turnout. Then I drove home and went to bed.”

“You told the jury that between August twenty-fourth and September tenth you were feeling suicidal.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Suicidal enough to buy a revolver.”

“Yes.”

“Would it bother you overmuch, Mr. Dufresne, if I told you that you do not seem to me to be the suicidal type?”

“No,” Andy said, “but you don’t impress me as being terribly sensitive, and I doubt very much that, if I were feeling suicidal, I would take my problem to you.”

There was a slight tense titter in the courtroom at this, but it won him no points with the jury.

“Did you take your thirty-eight with you on the night of September tenth?”

“No; as I’ve already testified—”

“Oh, yes!” The DA smiled sarcastically. “You threw it into the river, didn’t you? The Royal River. On the afternoon of September ninth.”

“Yes, sir.”

“One day before the murders.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s convenient, isn’t it?”

“It’s neither convenient nor inconvenient. Only the truth.”

“I believe you heard Lieutenant Mincher’s testimony?” Mincher had been in charge of the party which had dragged the stretch of the Royal near Pond Road Bridge, from which Andy had testified he had thrown the gun. The police had not found it.

“Yes, sir. You know I heard it.”

“Then you heard him tell the court that they found no gun, although they dragged for three days. That was rather convenient, too, wasn’t it?”

“Convenience aside, it’s a fact that they didn’t find the gun,” Andy responded calmly. “But I should like to point out to both you and the jury that the Pond Road Bridge is very close to where the Royal River empties into the Bay of Yarmouth. The current is strong. The gun may have been carried out into the bay itself.”

“And so no comparison can be made between the riflings on the bullets taken from the bloodstained corpses of your wife and Mr. Glenn Quentin and the riflings on the barrel of your gun. That’s correct, isn’t it, Mr. Dufresne?”

“Yes.”

“That’s also rather convenient, isn’t it?”

At that, according to the papers, Andy displayed one of the few slight emotional reactions he allowed himself during the entire six-week period of the trial. A slight, bitter smile crossed his face.

“Since I am innocent of this crime, sir, and since I am telling the truth about throwing my gun into the river the day before the crime took place, then it seems to me decidedly inconvenient that the gun was never found.”

The DA hammered at him for two days. He re-read the Handy-Pik clerk's testimony about the dishtowels to Andy. Andy repeated that he could not recall buying them, but admitted that he also couldn't remember not buying them.

Was it true that Andy and Linda Dufresne had taken out a joint insurance policy in early 1947? Yes, that was true. And if acquitted, wasn't it true that Andy stood to gain fifty thousand dollars in benefits? True. And wasn't it true that he had gone up to Glenn Quentin's house with murder in his heart, and wasn't it also true that he had indeed committed murder twice over? No, it was not true. Then what did he think had happened, since there had been no signs of robbery?

"I have no way of knowing that, sir," Andy said quietly.

The case went to the jury at 1:00 P.M. on a snowy Wednesday afternoon. The twelve jurymen and -women came back in at 3:30. The bailiff said they would have been back earlier, but they had held off in order to enjoy a nice chicken dinner from Bentley's Restaurant at the county's expense. They found him guilty, and brother, if Maine had the death-penalty, he would have done the airdance before that spring's crocuses poked their heads out of the snow.

The DA had asked him what he thought had happened, and Andy slipped the question—but he did have an idea, and I got it out of him late one evening in 1955. It had taken those seven years for us to progress from nodding acquaintances to fairly close friends—but I never felt really close to Andy until 1960 or so, and I believe I was the only one who ever did get really close to him. Both being long-timers, we were in the same cellblock from beginning to end, although I was halfway down the corridor from him.

"What do I think?" He laughed—but there was no humor in the sound. "I think there was a lot of bad luck floating around that night. More than could ever get together in the same short span of time again. I think it must have been some stranger, just passing through. Maybe someone who had a flat tire on that road after I went home.

Maybe a burglar. Maybe a psychopath. He killed them, that's all. And I'm here."

As simple as that. And he was condemned to spend the rest of his life in Shawshank—or the part of it that mattered. Five years later he began to have parole hearings, and he was turned down just as regular as clockwork in spite of being a model prisoner. Getting a pass out of Shawshank when you've got murder stamped on your admittance-slip is slow work, as slow as a river eroding a rock. Seven men sit on the board, two more than at most state prisons, and every one of those seven has an ass as hard as the water drawn up from a mineral-spring well. You can't buy those guys, you can't sweet-talk them, you can't cry for them. As far as the board in here is concerned, money don't talk, and nobody walks. There were other reasons in Andy's case as well ... but that belongs a little further along in my story.

There was a trusty, name of Kendricks, who was into me for some pretty heavy money back in the fifties, and it was four years before he got it all paid off. Most of the interest he paid me was information—in my line of work, you're dead if you can't find ways of keeping your ear to the ground. This Kendricks, for instance, had access to records I was never going to see running a stamper down in the goddam plate-shop.

Kendricks told me that the parole board vote was 7—0 against Andy Dufresne through 1957, 6—1 in '58; 7—0 again in '59, and 5—2 in '60. After that I don't know, but I do know that sixteen years later he was still in Cell 14 of Cellblock 5. By then, 1975, he was fifty-seven. They probably would have gotten big-hearted and let him out around 1983. They give you life, and that's what they take—all of it that counts, anyway. Maybe they set you loose someday, but ... well, listen: I knew this guy, Sherwood Bolton, his name was, and he had this pigeon in his cell. From 1945 until 1953, when they let him out, he had that pigeon. He wasn't any Birdman of Alcatraz; he just had this pigeon. Jake, he called him. He set Jake free a day before he, Sherwood, that is, was to walk, and Jake flew away just as pretty as

you could want. But about a week after Sherwood Bolton left our happy little family, a friend of mine called me over to the west corner of the exercise yard, where Sherwood used to hang out. A bird was lying there like a very small pile of dirty bedlinen. It looked starved. My friend said: "Isn't that Jake, Red?" It was. That pigeon was just as dead as a turd.

I remember the first time Andy Dufresne got in touch with me for something; I remember like it was yesterday. That wasn't the time he wanted Rita Hayworth, though. That came later. In the summer of 1948 he came around for something else.

Most of my deals are done right there in the exercise yard, and that's where this one went down. Our yard is big, much bigger than most. It's a perfect square, ninety yards on a side. The north side is the outer wall, with a guard-tower at either end. The guards up there are armed with binoculars and riot guns. The main gate is in that north side. The truck loading-bays are on the south side of the yard. There are five of them. Shawshank is a busy place during the work-week—deliveries in, deliveries out. We have the license-plate factory, and a big industrial laundry that does all the prison wetwash, plus that of Kittery Receiving Hospital and the Eliot Nursing Home. There's also a big automotive garage where mechanic inmates fix prison, state, and municipal vehicles—not to mention the private cars of the screws, the administration offices ... and, on more than one occasion, those of the parole board.

The east side is a thick stone wall full of tiny slit windows. Cellblock 5 is on the other side of that wall. The west side is Administration and the infirmary. Shawshank has never been as overcrowded as most prisons, and back in '48 it was only filled to something like two-thirds capacity, but at any given time there might be eighty to a hundred and twenty cons on the yard—playing toss with a football or baseball, shooting craps, jawing at each other, making deals. On Sunday the place was even more crowded; on Sunday the place would have looked like a country holiday ... if there had been any women.

It was on a Sunday that Andy first came to me. I had just finished talking to Elmore Armitage, a fellow who often came in handy to me, about a radio when Andy walked up. I knew who he was, of course; he had a reputation for being a snob and a cold fish. People were saying he was marked for trouble already. One of the people saying so was Bogs Diamond, a bad man to have on your case. Andy had no cellmate, and I'd heard that was just the way he wanted it, although people were already saying he thought his shit smelled sweeter than the ordinary. But I don't have to listen to rumors about a man when I can judge him for myself.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Andy Dufresne." He offered his hand and I shook it. He wasn't a man to waste time being social; he got right to the point. "I understand that you're a man who knows how to get things."

I agreed that I was able to locate certain items from time to time.

"How do you do that?" Andy asked.

"Sometimes," I said, "things just seem to come into my hand. I can't explain it. Unless it's because I'm Irish."

He smiled a little at that. "I wonder if you could get me a rock-hammer."

"What would that be, and why would you want it?"

Andy looked surprised. "Do you make motivations a part of your business?" With words like those I could understand how he had gotten a reputation for being the snobby sort, the kind of guy who likes to put on airs—but I sensed a tiny thread of humor in his question.

"I'll tell you," I said. "If you wanted a toothbrush, I wouldn't ask questions. I'd just quote you a price. Because a toothbrush, you see, is a non-lethal sort of an object."

“You have strong feelings about lethal objects?”

“I do.”

An old friction-taped baseball flew toward us and he turned, cat-quick, and picked it out of the air. It was a move Frank Malzone would have been proud of. Andy flicked the ball back to where it had come from—just a quick and easy-looking flick of the wrist, but that throw had some mustard on it, just the same. I could see a lot of people were watching us with one eye as they went about their business. Probably the guards in the tower were watching, too. I won't gild the lily; there are cons that swing weight in any prison, maybe four or five in a small one, maybe two or three dozen in a big one. At Shawshank I was one of those with some weight, and what I thought of Andy Dufresne would have a lot to do with how his time went. He probably knew it, too, but he wasn't kowtowing or sucking up to me, and I respected him for that.

“Fair enough. I'll tell you what it is and why I want it. A rock-hammer looks like a miniature pickaxe—about so long.” He held his hands about a foot apart, and that was when I first noticed how neatly kept his nails were. “It's got a small sharp pick on one end and a flat, blunt hammerhead on the other. I want it because I like rocks.”

“Rocks,” I said.

“Squat down here a minute,” he said.

I humored him. We hunkered down on our haunches like Indians.

Andy took a handful of exercise yard dirt and began to sift it between his neat hands, so it emerged in a fine cloud. Small pebbles were left over, one or two sparkly, the rest dull and plain. One of the dull ones was quartz, but it was only dull until you'd rubbed it clean. Then it had a nice milky glow. Andy did the cleaning and then tossed it to me. I caught it and named it.

“Quartz, sure,” he said. “And look. Mica. Shale. Silted granite. Here’s a piece of graded limestone, from when they cut this place out of the side of the hill.” He tossed them away and dusted his hands. “I’m a rockhound. At least ... I was a rockhound. In my old life. I’d like to be one again, on a limited scale.”

“Sunday expeditions in the exercise yard?” I asked, standing up. It was a silly idea, and yet ... seeing that little piece of quartz had given my heart a funny tweak. I don’t know exactly why; just an association with the outside world, I suppose. You didn’t think of such things in terms of the yard. Quartz was something you picked out of a small, quick-running stream.

“Better to have Sunday expeditions here than no Sunday expeditions at all,” he said.

“You could plant an item like that rock-hammer in somebody’s skull,” I remarked.

“I have no enemies here,” he said quietly.

“No?” I smiled. “Wait awhile.”

“If there’s trouble, I can handle it without using a rock-hammer.”

“Maybe you want to try an escape? Going under the wall? Because if you do—”

He laughed politely. When I saw the rock-hammer three weeks later, I understood why.

“You know,” I said, “if anyone sees you with it, they’ll take it away. If they saw you with a spoon, they’d take it away. What are you going to do, just sit down here in the yard and start bangin away?”

“Oh, I believe I can do a lot better than that.”

I nodded. That part of it really wasn’t my business, anyway. A man engages my services to get him something. Whether he can keep it

or not after I get it is his business.

“How much would an item like that go for?” I asked. I was beginning to enjoy his quiet, low-key style. When you’ve spent ten years in stir, as I had then, you can get awfully tired of the bellows and the braggarts and the loud-mouths. Yes, I think it would be fair to say I liked Andy from the first.

“Eight dollars in any rock-and-gem shop,” he said, “but I realize that in a business like yours you work on a cost-plus basis—”

“Cost plus ten per cent is my going rate, but I have to go up some on a dangerous item. For something like the gadget you’re talking about, it takes a little more goose-grease to get the wheels turning. Let’s say ten dollars.”

“Ten it is.”

I looked at him, smiling a little. “Have you got ten dollars?”

“I do,” he said quietly.

A long time after, I discovered that he had better than five hundred. He had brought it in with him. When they check you in at this hotel, one of the bellhops is obliged to bend you over and take a look up your works—but there are a lot of works, and, not to put too fine a point on it, a man who is really determined can get a fairly large item quite a ways up them—far enough to be out of sight, unless the bellhop you happen to draw is in the mood to pull on a rubber glove and go prospecting.

“That’s fine,” I said. “You ought to know what I expect if you get caught with what I get you.”

“I suppose I should,” he said, and I could tell by the slight change in his gray eyes that he knew exactly what I was going to say. It was a slight lightening, a gleam of his special ironic humor.

“If you get caught, you’ll say you found it. That’s about the long and short of it. They’ll put you in solitary for three or four weeks ... plus, of course, you’ll lose your toy and you’ll get a black mark on your record. If you give them my name, you and I will never do business again. Not for so much as a pair of shoelaces or a bag of Bugler. And I’ll send some fellows around to lump you up. I don’t like violence, but you’ll understand my position. I can’t allow it to get around that I can’t handle myself. That would surely finish me.”

“Yes. I suppose it would. I understand, and you don’t need to worry.”

“I never worry,” I said. “In a place like this there’s no percentage in it.”

He nodded and walked away. Three days later he walked up beside me in the exercise yard during the laundry’s morning break. He didn’t speak or even look my way, but pressed a picture of the Hon. Alexander Hamilton into my hand as neatly as a good magician does a card-trick. He was a man who adapted fast. I got him his rock-hammer. I had it in my cell for one night, and it was just as he described it. It was no tool for escape (it would have taken a man just about six hundred years to tunnel under the wall using that rock-hammer, I figured), but I still felt some misgivings. If you planted that pickaxe end in a man’s head, he would surely never listen to Fibber McGee and Molly on the radio again. And Andy had already begun having trouble with the sisters. I hoped it wasn’t them he was wanting the rock-hammer for.

In the end, I trusted my judgment. Early the next morning, twenty minutes before the wake-up horn went off, I slipped the rock-hammer and a package of Camels to Ernie, the old trusty who swept the Cellblock 5 corridors until he was let free in 1956. He slipped it into his tunic without a word, and I didn’t see the rock-hammer again for nineteen years, and by then it was damned near worn away to nothing.

The following Sunday Andy walked over to me in the exercise yard again. He was nothing to look at that day, I can tell you. His lower lip was swelled up so big it looked like a summer sausage, his right eye

was swollen half-shut, and there was an ugly washboard scrape across one cheek. He was having his troubles with the sisters, all right, but he never mentioned them. “Thanks for the tool,” he said, and walked away.

I watched him curiously. He walked a few steps, saw something in the dirt, bent over, and picked it up. It was a small rock. Prison fatigues, except for those worn by mechanics when they’re on the job, have no pockets. But there are ways to get around that. The little pebble disappeared up Andy’s sleeve and didn’t come down. I admired that ... and I admired him. In spite of the problems he was having, he was going on with his life. There are thousands who don’t or won’t or can’t, and plenty of them aren’t in prison, either. And I noticed that, although his face looked as if a twister had happened to it, his hands were still neat and clean, the nails well-kept.

I didn’t see much of him over the next six months; Andy spent a lot of that time in solitary.

A few words about the sisters.

In a lot of pens they are known as bull queers or jailhouse susies—just lately the term in fashion is “killer queens.” But in Shawshank they were always the sisters. I don’t know why, but other than the name I guess there was no difference.

It comes as no surprise to most these days that there’s a lot of buggery going on inside the wats—except to some of the new fish, maybe, who have the misfortune to be young, slim, good-looking, and unwary—but homosexuality, like straight sex, comes in a hundred different shapes and forms. There are men who can’t stand to be without sex of some kind and turn to another man to keep from going crazy. Usually what follows is an arrangement between two fundamentally heterosexual men, although I’ve sometimes wondered if they are quite as heterosexual as they thought they were going to be when they get back to their wives or their girlfriends.

There are also men who get “turned” in prison. In the current parlance they “go gay,” or “come out of the closet.” Mostly (but not always) they play the female, and their favors are competed for fiercely.

And then there are the sisters.

They are to prison society what the rapist is to the society outside the walls. They’re usually long-timers, doing hard bullets for brutal crimes. Their prey is the young, the weak, and the inexperienced ... or, as in the case of Andy Dufresne, the weak-looking. Their hunting grounds are the showers, the cramped, tunnel-like areaway behind the industrial washers in the laundry, sometimes the infirmary. On more than one occasion rape has occurred in the closet-sized projection booth behind the auditorium. Most often what the sisters take by force they could have had for free, if they wanted it that way; those who have been turned always seem to have “crushes” on one sister or another, like teenage girls with their Sinatras, Presleys, or Redfords. But for the sisters, the joy has always been in taking it by force ... and I guess it always will be.

Because of his small size and fair good looks (and maybe also because of that very quality of self-possession I had admired), the sisters were after Andy from the day he walked in. If this was some kind of fairy story, I’d tell you that Andy fought the good fight until they left him alone. I wish I could say that, but I can’t. Prison is no fairy-tale world.

The first time for him was in the shower less than three days after he joined our happy Shawshank family. Just a lot of slap and tickle that time, I understand. They like to size you up before they make their real move, like jackals finding out if the prey is as weak and hamstrung as it looks.

Andy punched back and bloodied the lip of a big, hulking sister named Bogs Diamond—gone these many years since to who knows where. A guard broke it up before it could go any further, but Bogs promised to get him—and Bogs did.

The second time was behind the washers in the laundry. A lot has gone on in that long, dusty, and narrow space over the years; the guards know about it and just let it be. It's dim and littered with bags of washing and bleaching compound, drums of Hexlite catalyst, as harmless as salt if your hands are dry, murderous as battery acid if they're wet. The guards don't like to go back there. There's no room to maneuver, and one of the first things they teach them when they come to work in a place like this is to never let the cons get you in a place where you can't back up.

Bogs wasn't there that day, but Henley Backus, who had been washroom foreman down there since 1922, told me that four of his friends were. Andy held them at bay for awhile with a scoop of Hexlite, threatening to throw it in their eyes if they came any closer, but he tripped trying to back around one of the big Washex four-pockets. That was all it took. They were on him.

I guess the phrase gang-rape is one that doesn't change much from one generation to the next. That's what they did to him, those four sisters. They bent him over a gear-box and one of them held a Phillips screwdriver to his temple while they gave him the business. It rips you up some, but not bad—am I speaking from personal experience, you ask?—I only wish I weren't. You bleed for awhile. If you don't want some clown asking you if you just started your period, you wad up a bunch of toilet paper and keep it down the back of your underwear until it stops. The bleeding really is like a menstrual flow; it keeps up for two, maybe three days, a slow trickle. Then it stops. No harm done, unless they've done something even more unnatural to you. No physical harm done—but rape is rape, and eventually you have to look at your face in the mirror again and decide what to make of yourself.

Andy went through that alone, the way he went through everything alone in those days. He must have come to the conclusion that others before him had come to, namely, that there are only two ways to deal with the sisters: fight them and get taken, or just get taken.

He decided to fight. When Bogs and two of his buddies came after him a week or so after the laundry incident (“I heard ya got broke in,” Bogs said, according to Ernie, who was around at the time), Andy slugged it out with them. He broke the nose of a fellow named Rooster MacBride, a heavy-gutted farmer who was in for beating his stepdaughter to death. Rooster died in here, I’m happy to add.

They took him, all three of them. When it was done, Rooster and the other egg—it might have been Pete Verness, but I’m not completely sure—forced Andy down to his knees. Bogs Diamond stepped in front of him. He had a pearl-handled razor in those days with the words Diamond Pearl engraved on both sides of the grip. He opened it and said, “I’m gonna open my fly now, mister man, and you’re going to swallow what I give you to swallow. And when you done swallowed mine, you’re gonna swallow Rooster’s. I guess you done broke his nose and I think he ought to have something to pay for it.”

Andy said, “Anything of yours that you stick in my mouth, you’re going to lose it.”

Bogs looked at Andy like he was crazy, Ernie said.

“No,” he told Andy, talking to him slowly, like Andy was a stupid kid. “You didn’t understand what I said. You do anything like that and I’ll put all eight inches of this steel into your ear. Get it?”

“I understood what you said. I don’t think you understood me. I’m going to bite whatever you stick into my mouth. You can put that razor into my brain, I guess, but you should know that a sudden serious brain injury causes the victim to simultaneously urinate, defecate ... and bite down.”

He looked up at Bogs smiling that little smile of his, old Ernie said, as if the three of them had been discussing stocks and bonds with him instead of throwing it to him just as hard as they could. Just as if he was wearing one of his three-piece bankers’ suits instead of kneeling on a dirty broom-closet floor with his pants around his ankles and blood trickling down the insides of his thighs.

“In fact,” he went on, “I understand that the bite-reflex is sometimes so strong that the victim’s jaws have to be pried open with a crowbar or a jackhandle.”

Bogs didn’t put anything in Andy’s mouth that night in late February of 1948, and neither did Rooster MacBride, and so far as I know, no one else ever did, either. What the three of them did was to beat Andy within an inch of his life, and all four of them ended up doing a jolt in solitary. Andy and Rooster MacBride went by way of the infirmary.

How many times did that particular crew have at him? I don’t know. I think Rooster lost his taste fairly early on—being in nose-splints for a month can do that to a fellow—and Bogs Diamond left off that summer, all at once.

That was a strange thing. Bogs was found in his cell, badly beaten, one morning in early June, when he didn’t show up in the breakfast nose-count. He wouldn’t say who had done it, or how they had gotten to him, but being in my business, I know that a screw can be bribed to do almost anything except get a gun for an inmate. They didn’t make big salaries then, and they don’t now. And in those days there was no electronic locking system, no closed-circuit TV, no master-switches which controlled whole areas of the prison. Back in 1948, each cellblock had its own turnkey. A guard could have been bribed real easy to let someone—maybe two or three someones—into the block, and, yes, even into Diamond’s cell.

Of course a job like that would have cost a lot of money. Not by outside standards, no. Prison economics are on a smaller scale. When you’ve been in here awhile, a dollar bill in your hand looks like a twenty did outside. My guess is that, if Bogs was done, it cost someone a serious piece of change—fifteen bucks, we’ll say, for the turnkey, and two or three apiece for each of the lump-up guys.

I’m not saying it was Andy Dufresne, but I do know that he brought in five hundred dollars when he came, and he was a banker in the

straight world—a man who understands better than the rest of us the ways in which money can become power.

And I know this: after the beating—the three broken ribs, the hemorrhaged eye, the sprained back, and the dislocated hip—Bogs Diamond left Andy alone. In fact, after that he left everyone pretty much alone. He got to be like a high wind in the summertime, all bluster and no bite. You could say, in fact, that he turned into a “weak sister.”

That was the end of Bogs Diamond, a man who might eventually have killed Andy if Andy hadn't taken steps to prevent it (if it was him who took the steps). But it wasn't the end of Andy's troubles with the sisters. There was a little hiatus, and then it began again, although not so hard or so often. Jackals like easy prey, and there were easier pickings around than Andy Dufresne.

He always fought them, that's what I remember. He knew, I guess, that if you let them have at you even once without fighting, it got that much easier to let them have their way without fighting next time. So Andy would turn up with bruises on his face every once in awhile, and there was the matter of the two broken fingers six or eight months after Diamond's beating. Oh yes—and sometime in late 1949, the man landed in the infirmary with a broken cheekbone that was probably the result of someone swinging a nice chunk of pipe with the business-end wrapped in flannel. He always fought back, and as a result, he did his time in solitary. But I don't think solitary was the hardship for Andy that it was for some men. He got along with himself.

The sisters was something he adjusted himself to—and then, in 1950, it stopped almost completely. That is a part of my story that I'll get to in due time.

In the fall of 1948, Andy met me one morning in the exercise yard and asked me if I could get him half a dozen rock-blankets.

“What the hell are those?” I asked.

He told me that was just what rockhounds called them; they were polishing cloths about the size of dishtowels. They were heavily padded, with a smooth side and a rough side—the smooth side like fine-grained sandpaper, the rough side almost as abrasive as industrial steel wool (Andy also kept a box of that in his cell, although he didn't get it from me—I imagine he kited it from the prison laundry).

I told him I thought we could do business on those, and I ended up getting them from the very same rock-and-gem shop where I'd arranged to get the rock-hammer. This time I charged Andy my usual ten per cent and not a penny more. I didn't see anything lethal or even dangerous in a dozen 7" x 7" squares of padded cloth. Rock-blankets, indeed.

It was about five months later that Andy asked if I could get him Rita Hayworth. That conversation took place in the auditorium, during a movie-show. Nowadays we get the movie-shows once or twice a week, but back then the shows were a monthly event. Usually the movies we got had a morally uplifting message to them, and this one, *The Lost Weekend*, was no different. The moral was that it's dangerous to drink. It was a moral we could take some comfort in.

Andy maneuvered to get next to me, and about halfway through the show he leaned a little closer and asked if I could get him Rita Hayworth. I'll tell you the truth, it kind of tickled me. He was usually cool, calm, and collected, but that night he was jumpy as hell, almost embarrassed, as if he was asking me to get him a load of Trojans or one of those sheepskin-lined gadgets that are supposed to "enhance your solitary pleasure," as the magazines put it. He seemed overcharged, a man on the verge of blowing his radiator.

"I can get her," I said. "No sweat, calm down. You want the big one or the little one?" At that time Rita was my best girl (a few years before it had been Betty Grable) and she came in two sizes. For a buck you could get the little Rita. For two-fifty you could have the big Rita, four feet high and all woman.

“The big one,” he said, not looking at me. I tell you, he was a hot sketch that night. He was blushing just like a kid trying to get into a kootch show with his big brother’s draftcard. “Can you do it?”

“Take it easy, sure I can. Does a bear shit in the woods?” The audience was applauding and catcalling as the bugs came out of the walls to get Ray Milland, who was having a bad case of the DT’s.

“How soon?”

“A week. Maybe less.”

“Okay.” But he sounded disappointed, as if he had been hoping I had one stuffed down my pants right then. “How much?”

I quoted him the wholesale price. I could afford to give him this one at cost; he’d been a good customer, what with his rock-hammer and his rock-blankets. Furthermore, he’d been a good boy—on more than one night when he was having his problems with Bogs, Rooster, and the rest, I wondered how long it would be before he used the rock-hammer to crack someone’s head open.

Posters are a big part of my business, just behind the booze and cigarettes, usually half a step ahead of the reefer. In the sixties the business exploded in every direction, with a lot of people wanting funky hang-ups like Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, that Easy Rider poster. But mostly it’s girls; one pin-up queen after another.

A few days after Andy spoke to me, a laundry driver I did business with back then brought in better than sixty posters, most of them Rita Hayworths. You may even remember the picture; I sure do. Rita is dressed—sort of—in a bathing suit, one hand behind her head, her eyes half-closed, those full, sulky red lips parted. They called it Rita Hayworth, but they might as well have called it Woman in Heat.

The prison administration knows about the black market, in case you were wondering. Sure they do. They probably know almost as much about my business as I do myself. They live with it because they

know that a prison is like a big pressure-cooker, and there have to be vents somewhere to let off some steam. They make the occasional bust, and I've done time in solitary a time or three over the years, but when it's something like posters, they wink. Live and let live. And when a big Rita Hayworth went up in some fishie's cell, the assumption was that it came in the mail from a friend or a relative. Of course all the care-packages from friends and relatives are opened and the contents inventoried, but who goes back and re-checks the inventory sheets for something as harmless as a Rita Hayworth or an Ava Gardner pin-up? When you're in a pressure-cooker you learn to live and let live or somebody will carve you a brand-new mouth just above the Adam's apple. You learn to make allowances.

It was Ernie again who took the poster up to Andy's cell, 14, from my own, 6. And it was Ernie who brought back the note, written in Andy's careful hand, just one word: "Thanks."

A little while later, as they filed us out for morning chow, I glanced into his cell and saw Rita over his bunk in all her swimsuited glory, one hand behind her head, her eyes half-closed, those soft, satiny lips parted. It was over his bunk where he could look at her nights, after lights-out, in the glow of the arc sodiums in the exercise yard.

But in the bright morning sunlight, there were dark slashes across her face—the shadow of the bars on his single slit window.

Now I'm going to tell you what happened in mid-May of 1950 that finally ended Andy's three-year series of skirmishes with the sisters. It was also the incident which eventually got him out of the laundry and into the library, where he filled out his work-time until he left our happy little family earlier this year.

You may have noticed how much of what I've told you already is hearsay—someone saw something and told me and I told you. Well, in some cases I've simplified it even more than it really was, and have repeated (or will repeat) fourth-or fifth-hand information. That's the way it is here. The grapevine is very real, and you have to use it if you're going to stay ahead. Also, of course, you have to know how

to pick out the grains of truth from the chaff of lies, rumors, and wish-it-had-beens.

You may also have gotten the idea that I'm describing someone who's more legend than man, and I would have to agree that there's some truth to that. To us long-timers who knew Andy over a space of years, there was an element of fantasy to him, a sense, almost, of myth-magic, if you get what I mean. That story I passed on about Andy refusing to give Bogs Diamond a head-job is part of that myth, and how he kept on fighting the sisters is part of it, and how he got the library job is part of it, too ... but with one important difference: I was there and I saw what happened, and I swear on my mother's name that it's all true. The oath of a convicted murderer may not be worth much, but believe this: I don't lie.

Andy and I were on fair speaking terms by then. The guy fascinated me. Looking back to the poster episode, I see there's one thing I neglected to tell you, and maybe I should. Five weeks after he hung Rita up (I'd forgotten all about it by then, and had gone on to other deals), Ernie passed a small white box through the bars of my cell.

"From Dufresne," he said, low, and never missed a stroke with his push-broom.

"Thanks, Ernie," I said, and slipped him half a pack of Camels.

Now what the hell was this, I was wondering as I slipped the cover from the box. There was a lot of white cotton inside, and below that

...

I looked for a long time. For a few minutes it was like I didn't even dare touch them, they were so pretty. There's a crying shortage of pretty things in the slam, and the real pity of it is that a lot of men don't even seem to miss them.

There were two pieces of quartz in that box, both of them carefully polished. They had been chipped into driftwood shapes. There were little sparkles of iron pyrites in them like flecks of gold. If they hadn't

been so heavy, they would have served as a fine pair of men's cufflinks—they were that close to being a matched set.

How much work went into creating those two pieces? Hours and hours after lights-out, I knew that. First the chipping and shaping, and then the almost endless polishing and finishing with those rock-blankets. Looking at them, I felt the warmth that any man or woman feels when he or she is looking at something pretty, something that has been worked and made—that's the thing that really separates us from the animals, I think—and I felt something else, too. A sense of awe for the man's brute persistence. But I never knew just how persistent Andy Dufresne could be until much later.

In May of 1950, the powers that be decided that the roof of the license-plate factory ought to be re-surfaced with roofing tar. They wanted it done before it got too hot up there, and they asked for volunteers for the work, which was planned to take about a week. More than seventy men spoke up, because it was outside work and May is one damn fine month for outside work. Nine or ten names were drawn out of a hat, and two of them happened to be Andy's and my own.

For the next week we'd be marched out to the exercise yard after breakfast, with two guards up front and two more behind ... plus all the guards in the towers keeping a weather eye on the proceedings through their field-glasses for good measure.

Four of us would be carrying a big extension ladder on those morning marches—I always got a kick out of the way Dickie Betts, who was on that job, called that sort of ladder an extensible—and we'd put it up against the side of that low, flat building. Then we'd start bucket-brigading hot buckets of tar up to the roof. Spill that shit on you and you'd jitterbug all the way to the infirmary.

There were six guards on the project, all of them picked on the basis of seniority. It was almost as good as a week's vacation, because instead of sweating it out in the laundry or the plate-shop or standing over a bunch of cons cutting pulp or brush somewhere out in the

willywags, they were having a regular May holiday in the sun, just sitting there with their backs up against the low parapet, shooting the bull back and forth.

They didn't even have to keep more than half an eye on us, because the south wall sentry post was close enough so that the fellows up there could have spit their chews on us, if they'd wanted to. If anyone on the roof-sealing party had made one funny move, it would take four seconds to cut him smack in two with .45-caliber machine-gun bullets. So those screws just sat there and took their ease. All they needed was a couple of six-packs buried in crushed ice, and they would have been the lords of all creation.

One of them was a fellow named Byron Hadley, and in that year of 1950, he'd been at Shawshank longer than I had. Longer than the last two wardens put together, as a matter of fact. The fellow running the show in 1950 was a prissy-looking downeast Yankee named George Dunahy. He had a degree in penal administration. No one liked him, as far as I could tell, except the people who had gotten him his appointment. I heard that he was only interested in three things: compiling statistics for a book (which was later published by a small New England outfit called Light Side Press, where he probably had to pay to have it done), which team won the intramural baseball championship each September, and getting a death-penalty law passed in Maine. A regular bear for the death-penalty was George Dunahy. He was fired off the job in 1953, when it came out he was running a discount auto-repair service down in the prison garage and splitting the profits with Byron Hadley and Greg Stamma. Hadley and Stamma came out of that one okay—they were old hands at keeping their asses covered—but Dunahy took a walk. No one was sorry to see him go, but nobody was exactly pleased to see Greg Stamma step into his shoes, either. He was a short man with a tight, hard gut and the coldest brown eyes you ever saw. He always had a painful, pursed little grin on his face, as if he had to go to the bathroom and couldn't quite manage it. During Stamma's tenure as warden there was a lot of brutality at Shawshank, and although I have no proof, I believe there were maybe half a dozen moonlight

burials in the stand of scrub forest that lies east of the prison. Dunahy was bad, but Greg Stamma was a cruel, wretched, cold-hearted man.

He and Byron Hadley were good friends. As warden, George Dunahy was nothing but a posturing figurehead; it was Stamma, and through him, Hadley, who actually administered the prison.

Hadley was a tall, shambling man with thinning red hair. He sunburned easily and he talked loud and if you didn't move fast enough to suit him, he'd clout you with his stick. On that day, our third on the roof, he was talking to another guard named Mert Entwistle.

Hadley had gotten some amazingly good news, so he was griping about it. That was his style—he was a thankless man with not a good word for anyone, a man who was convinced that the whole world was against him. The world had cheated him out of the best years of his life, and the world would be more than happy to cheat him out of the rest. I have seen some screws that I thought were almost saintly, and I think I know why that happens—they are able to see the difference between their own lives, poor and struggling as they might be, and the lives of the men they are paid by the State to watch over. These guards are able to formulate a comparison concerning pain. Others can't, or won't.

For Byron Hadley there was no basis of comparison. He could sit there, cool and at his ease under the warm May sun, and find the gall to mourn his own good luck while less than ten feet away a bunch of men were working and sweating and burning their hands on great big buckets filled with bubbling tar, men who had to work so hard in their ordinary round of days that this looked like a respite. You may remember the old question, the one that's supposed to define your outlook on life when you answer it. For Byron Hadley the answer would always be half empty, the glass is half empty. Forever and ever, amen. If you gave him a cool drink of apple cider, he'd think about vinegar. If you told him his wife had always been faithful to him, he'd tell you it was because she was so damn ugly.

So there he sat, talking to Mert Entwhistle loud enough for all of us to hear, his broad white forehead already starting to redden with the sun. He had one hand thrown back over the low parapet surrounding the roof. The other was on the butt of his .38.

We all got the story along with Mert. It seemed that Hadley's older brother had gone off to Texas some fourteen years ago and the rest of the family hadn't heard from the son of a bitch since. They had all assumed he was dead, and good riddance. Then, a week and a half ago, a lawyer had called them long-distance from Austin. It seemed that Hadley's brother had died four months ago, and a rich man at that ("It's frigging incredible how lucky some assholes can get," this paragon of gratitude on the plate-shop roof said). The money had come as a result of oil and oil-leases, and there was close to a million dollars.

No, Hadley wasn't a millionaire—that might have made even him happy, at least for awhile—but the brother had left a pretty damned decent bequest of thirty-five thousand dollars to each surviving member of his family back in Maine, if they could be found. Not bad. Like getting lucky and winning a sweepstakes.

But to Byron Hadley the glass was always half empty. He spent most of the morning bitching to Mert about the bite that the goddam government was going to take out of his windfall. "They'll leave me about enough to buy a new car with," he allowed, "and then what happens? You have to pay the damn taxes on the car, and the repairs and maintenance, you got your goddam kids pestering you to take 'em for a ride with the top down—"

"And to drive it, if they're old enough," Mert said. Old Mert Entwhistle knew which side his bread was buttered on, and he didn't say what must have been as obvious to him as to the rest of us: If that money's worrying you so bad, Byron old kid old sock, I'll just take it off your hands. After all, what are friends for?

"That's right, wanting to drive it, wanting to learn to drive on it, for Chrissake," Byron said with a shudder. "Then what happens at the

end of the year? If you figured the tax wrong and you don't have enough left over to pay the overdraft, you got to pay out of your own pocket, or maybe even borrow it from one of those kikey loan agencies. And they audit you anyway, you know. It don't matter. And when the government audits you, they always take more. Who can fight Uncle Sam? He puts his hand inside your shirt and squeezes your tit until it's purple, and you end up getting the short end. Christ."

He lapsed into a morose silence, thinking of what terrible bad luck he'd had to inherit that thirty-five thousand dollars. Andy Dufresne had been spreading tar with a big Padd brush less than fifteen feet away and now he tossed it into his pail and walked over to where Mert and Hadley were sitting.

We all tightened up, and I saw one of the other screws, Tim Youngblood, drag his hand down to where his pistol was holstered. One of the fellows in the sentry tower struck his partner on the arm and they both turned, too. For one moment I thought Andy was going to get shot, or clubbed, or both.

Then he said, very softly, to Hadley: "Do you trust your wife?"

Hadley just stared at him. He was starting to get red in the face, and I knew that was a bad sign. In about three seconds he was going to pull his billy and give Andy the butt end of it right in the solar plexus, where that big bundle of nerves is. A hard enough hit there can kill you, but they always go for it. If it doesn't kill you it will paralyze you long enough to forget whatever cute move it was that you had planned.

"Boy," Hadley said, "I'll give you just one chance to pick up that Padd. And then you're goin off this roof on your head."

Andy just looked at him, very calm and still. His eyes were like ice. It was as if he hadn't heard. And I found myself wanting to tell him how it was, to give him the crash course. The crash course is you never let on that you hear the guards talking, you never try to horn in on their conversation unless you're asked (and then you always tell

them just what they want to hear and shut up again). Black man, white man, red man, yellow man, in prison it doesn't matter because we've got our own brand of equality. In prison every con's a nigger and you have to get used to the idea if you intend to survive men like Hadley and Greg Stammers, who really would kill you just as soon as look at you. When you're in stir you belong to the State and if you forget it, woe is you. I've known men who've lost eyes, men who've lost toes and fingers; I knew one man who lost the tip of his penis and counted himself lucky that was all he lost. I wanted to tell Andy that it was already too late. He could go back and pick up his brush and there would still be some big lug waiting for him in the showers that night, ready to charley-horse both of his legs and leave him writhing on the cement. You could buy a lug like that for a pack of cigarettes or three Baby Ruths. Most of all, I wanted to tell him not to make it any worse than it already was.

What I did was to keep on running tar out onto the roof as if nothing at all was happening. Like everyone else, I look after my own ass first. I have to. It's cracked already, and in Shawshank there have always been Hadleys willing to finish the job of breaking it.

Andy said, "Maybe I put it wrong. Whether you trust her or not is immaterial. The problem is whether or not you believe she would ever go behind your back, try to hamstring you."

Hadley got up. Mert got up. Tim Youngblood got up. Hadley's face was as red as the side of a firebarn. "Your only problem," he said, "is going to be how many bones you still got unbroken. You can count them in the infirmary. Come on, Mert. We're throwing this sucker over the side."

Tim Youngblood drew his gun. The rest of us kept tarring like mad. The sun beat down. They were going to do it; Hadley and Mert were simply going to pitch him over the side. Terrible accident. Dufresne, prisoner 81433-SHANK, was taking a couple of empties down and slipped on the ladder. Too bad.

They laid hold of him, Mert on the right arm, Hadley on the left. Andy didn't resist. His eyes never left Hadley's red, horsey face.

"If you've got your thumb on her, Mr. Hadley," he said in that same calm, composed voice, "there's not a reason why you shouldn't have every cent of that money. Final score, Mr. Byron Hadley thirty-five thousand, Uncle Sam zip."

Mert started to drag him toward the edge. Hadley just stood there. For a moment Andy was like a rope between them in a tug-of-war game. Then Hadley said, "Hold on one second, Mert. What do you mean, boy?"

"I mean, if you've got your thumb on your wife, you can give it to her," Andy said.

"You better start making sense, boy, or you're going over."

"The IRS allows you a one-time-only gift to your spouse," Andy said. "It's good up to sixty thousand dollars."

Hadley was now looking at Andy as if he had been poleaxed. "Naw, that ain't right," he said. "Tax free?"

"Tax free," Andy said. "IRS can't touch one cent."

"How would you know a thing like that?"

Tim Youngblood said: "He used to be a banker, Byron. I s'pose he might—"

"Shut ya head, Trout," Hadley said without looking at him. Tim Youngblood flushed and shut up. Some of the guards called him Trout because of his thick lips and buggy eyes. Hadley kept looking at Andy. "You're the smart banker who shot his wife. Why should I believe a smart banker like you? So I can wind up in here breaking rocks right alongside you? You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Andy said quietly: “If you went to jail for tax evasion, you’d go to a federal penitentiary, not Shawshank. But you won’t. The tax-free gift to the spouse is a perfectly legal loophole. I’ve done dozens ... no, hundreds of them. It’s meant primarily for people with small businesses to pass on, for people who come into one-time-only windfalls. Like yourself.”

“I think you’re lying,” Hadley said, but he didn’t—you could see he didn’t. There was an emotion dawning on his face, something that was grotesque overlying that long, ugly countenance and that receding, sunburned brow. An almost obscene emotion when seen on the features of Byron Hadley. It was hope.

“No, I’m not lying. There’s no reason why you should take my word for it, either. Engage a lawyer—”

“Ambulance-chasing highway-robbing cocksuckers!” Hadley cried.

Andy shrugged. “Then go to the IRS. They’ll tell you the same thing for free. Actually, you don’t need me to tell you at all. You would have investigated the matter for yourself.”

“You’re fucking-A. I don’t need any smart wife-killing banker to show me where the bear shit in the buckwheat.”

“You’ll need a tax lawyer or a banker to set up the gift for you and that will cost you something,” Andy said. “Or ... if you were interested, I’d be glad to set it up for you nearly free of charge. The price would be three beers apiece for my co-workers—”

“Co-workers,” Mert said, and let out a rusty guffaw. He slapped his knee. A real knee-slapper was old Mert, and I hope he died of intestinal cancer in a part of the world where morphine is as of yet undiscovered. “Co-workers, ain’t that cute? Co-workers? You ain’t got any—”

“Shut your friggin trap,” Hadley growled, and Mert shut. Hadley looked at Andy again. “What was you sayin?”

“I was saying that I’d only ask three beers apiece for my co-workers, if that seems fair,” Andy said. “I think a man feels more like a man when he’s working out of doors in the springtime if he can have a bottle of suds. That’s only my opinion. It would go down smooth, and I’m sure you’d have their gratitude.”

I have talked to some of the other men who were up there that day—Rennie Martin, Logan St. Pierre, and Paul Bonsaint were three of them—and we all saw the same thing then ... felt the same thing. Suddenly it was Andy who had the upper hand. It was Hadley who had the gun on his hip and the billy in his hand, Hadley who had his friend Greg Stamma behind him and the whole prison administration behind Stamma, the whole power of the State behind that, but all at once in that golden sunshine it didn’t matter, and I felt my heart leap up in my chest as it never had since the truck drove me and four others through the gate back in 1938 and I stepped out into the exercise yard.

Andy was looking at Hadley with those cold, clear, calm eyes, and it wasn’t just the thirty-five thousand then, we all agreed on that. I’ve played it over and over in my mind and I know. It was man against man, and Andy simply forced him, the way a strong man can force a weaker man’s wrist to the table in a game of Indian rasseling. There was no reason, you see, why Hadley couldn’t’ve given Mert the nod at that very minute, pitched Andy overside onto his head, and still taken Andy’s advice.

No reason. But he didn’t.

“I could get you all a couple of beers if I wanted to,” Hadley said. “A beer does taste good while you’re workin.” The colossal prick even managed to sound magnanimous.

“I’d just give you one piece of advice the IRS wouldn’t bother with,” Andy said. His eyes were fixed unwinkingly on Hadley’s. “Make this gift to your wife if you’re sure. If you think there’s even a chance she might double-cross you or backshoot you, we could work out something else—”

“Double-cross me?” Hadley asked harshly. “Double-cross me? Mr. Hotshot Banker, if she ate her way through a boxcar of Ex-Lax, she wouldn’t dare fart unless I gave her the nod.”

Mert, Youngblood, and the other screws yucked it up dutifully. Andy never cracked a smile.

“I’ll write down the forms you need,” he said. “You can get them at the post office, and I’ll fill them out for your signature.”

That sounded suitably important, and Hadley’s chest swelled. Then he glared around at the rest of us and hollered,

“What are you jimmies starin at? Move your asses, goddammit!” He looked back at Andy. “You come over here with me, hotshot. And listen to me well: if you’re jewing me somehow, you’re gonna find yourself chasing your own head around Shower C before the week’s out.”

“Yes, I understand that,” Andy said softly.

And he did understand it. The way it turned out, he understood a lot more than I did—more than any of us did.

That’s how, on the second-to-last day of the job, the convict crew that tarred the plate-factory roof in 1950 ended up sitting in a row at ten o’clock on a spring morning, drinking Black Label beer supplied by the hardest screw that ever walked a turn at Shawshank State Prison. That beer was pisswarm, but it was still the best I ever had in my life. We sat and drank it and felt the sun on our shoulders, and not even the expression of half-amusement, half-contempt on Hadley’s face—as if he were watching apes drink beer instead of men—could spoil it. It lasted twenty minutes, that beer-break, and for those twenty minutes we felt like free men. We could have been drinking beer and tarring the roof of one of our own houses.

Only Andy didn’t drink. I already told you about his drinking habit. He sat hunkered down in the shade, hands dangling between his knees,

watching us and smiling a little. It's amazing how many men remember him that way, and amazing how many men were on that work-crew when Andy Dufresne faced down Byron Hadley. I thought there were nine or ten of us, but by 1955 there must have been two hundred of us, maybe more ... if you believed what you heard.

So yeah—if you asked me to give you a flat-out answer to the question of whether I'm trying to tell you about a man or a legend that got made up around the man, like a pearl around a little piece of grit—I'd have to say that the answer lies somewhere in between. All I know for sure is that Andy Dufresne wasn't much like me or anyone else I ever knew since I came inside. He brought in five hundred dollars jammed up his back porch, but somehow that graymeat son of a bitch managed to bring in something else as well. A sense of his own worth, maybe, or a feeling that he would be the winner in the end ... or maybe it was only a sense of freedom, even inside these goddamned gray walls. It was a kind of inner light he carried around with him. I only knew him to lose that light once, and that is also a part of this story.

By World Series time of 1950—this was the year the Philadelphia Whiz Kids dropped four straight, you will remember—Andy was having no more trouble from the sisters. Stammers and Hadley had passed the word. If Andy Dufresne came to either of them, or any of the other screws that formed a part of their coterie, and showed so much as a single drop of blood in his underpants, every sister in Shawshank would go to bed that night with a headache. They didn't fight it. As I have pointed out, there was always an eighteen-year-old car thief or a firebug or some guy who'd gotten his kicks handling little children. After the day on the plate-shop roof, Andy went his way and the sisters went theirs.

He was working in the library then, under a tough old con named Brooks Hatlen. Hatlen had gotten the job back in the late twenties because he had a college education. Brooksie's degree was in animal husbandry, true enough, but college educations in institutes

of lower learning like The Shank are so rare that it's a case of beggars not being able to be choosers.

In 1952 Brooksie, who had killed his wife and daughter after a losing streak at poker back when Coolidge was President, was paroled. As usual, the State in all its wisdom had let him go long after any chance he might have had to become a useful part of society was gone. He was sixty-eight and arthritic when he tottered out of the main gate in his Polish suit and his French shoes, his parole papers in one hand and a Greyhound bus ticket in the other. He was crying when he left. Shawshank was his world. What lay beyond its walls was as terrible to Brooks as the Western Seas had been to superstitious fifteenth-century sailors. In prison, Brooksie had been a person of some importance. He was the librarian, an educated man. If he went to the Kittery library and asked for a job, they wouldn't even give him a library card. I heard he died in a home for indigent old folks up Freeport way in 1953, and at that he lasted about six months longer than I thought he would. Yeah, I guess the State got its own back on Brooksie, all right. They trained him to like it inside the shithouse and then they threw him out.

Andy succeeded to Brooksie's job, and he was librarian for twenty-three years. He used the same force of will I'd seen him use on Byron Hadley to get what he wanted for the library, and I saw him gradually turn one small room (which still smelled of turpentine because it had been a paint closet until 1922 and had never been properly aired) lined with Reader's Digest Condensed Books and National Geographics into the best prison library in New England.

He did it a step at a time. He put a suggestion box by the door and patiently weeded out such attempts at humor as More Fuk-Boox Pleeze and Excape in 10 EZ Lesions. He got hold of the things the prisoners seemed serious about. He wrote to the major book clubs in New York and got two of them, The Literary Guild and The Book-of-the-Month Club, to send editions of all their major selections to us at a special cheap rate. He discovered a hunger for information on such small hobbies as soap-carving, woodworking, sleight of hand,

and card solitaire. He got all the books he could on such subjects. And those two jailhouse staples, Erle Stanley Gardner and Louis L'Amour. Cons never seem to get enough of the courtroom or the open range. And yes, he did keep a box of fairly spicy paperbacks under the checkout desk, loaning them out carefully and making sure they always got back. Even so, each new acquisition of that type was quickly read to tatters.

He began to write to the State Senate in Augusta in 1954. Stamma was warden by then, and he used to pretend Andy was some sort of mascot. He was always in the library, shooting the bull with Andy, and sometimes he'd even throw a paternal arm around Andy's shoulders or give him a goose. He didn't fool anybody. Andy Dufresne was no one's mascot.

He told Andy that maybe he'd been a banker on the outside, but that part of his life was receding rapidly into his past and he had better get a hold on the facts of prison life. As far as that bunch of jumped-up Republican Rotarians in Augusta was concerned, there were only three viable expenditures of the taxpayers' money in the field of prisons and corrections. Number one was more walls, number two was more bars, and number three was more guards. As far as the State Senate was concerned, Stamma explained, the folks in Thomaston and Shawshank and Pittsfield and South Portland were the scum of the earth. They were there to do hard time, and by God and Sonny Jesus, it was hard time they were going to do. And if there were a few weevils in the bread, wasn't that just too fucking bad?

Andy smiled his small, composed smile and asked Stamma what would happen to a block of concrete if a drop of water fell on it once every year for a million years. Stamma laughed and clapped Andy on the back. "You got no million years, old horse, but if you did, I bleeve you'd do it with that same little grin on your face. You go on and write your letters. I'll even mail them for you if you pay for the stamps."

Which Andy did. And he had the last laugh, although Stammas and Hadley weren't around to see it. Andy's requests for library funds were routinely turned down until 1960, when he received a check for two hundred dollars—the Senate probably appropriated it in hopes that he would shut up and go away. Vain hope. Andy felt that he had finally gotten one foot in the door and he simply redoubled his efforts; two letters a week instead of one. In 1962 he got four hundred dollars, and for the rest of the decade the library received seven hundred dollars a year like clockwork. By 1971 that had risen to an even thousand. Not much stacked up against what your average small-town library receives, I guess, but a thousand bucks can buy a lot of recycled Perry Mason stories and Jake Logan Westerns. By the time Andy left, you could go into the library (expanded from its original paint-locker to three rooms), and find just about anything you'd want. And if you couldn't find it, chances were good that Andy could get it for you.

Now you're asking yourself if all this came about just because Andy told Byron Hadley how to save the taxes on his windfall inheritance. The answer is yes ... and no. You can probably figure out what happened for yourself.

Word got around that Shawshank was housing its very own pet financial wizard. In the late spring and the summer of 1950, Andy set up two trust funds for guards who wanted to assure a college education for their kids, he advised a couple of others who wanted to take small fliers in common stock (and they did pretty damn well, as things turned out; one of them did so well he was able to take an early retirement two years later), and I'll be damned if he didn't advise the warden himself, old Lemon Lips George Dunahy, on how to go about setting up a tax-shelter for himself. That was just before Dunahy got the bum's rush, and I believe he must have been dreaming about all the millions his book was going to make him. By April of 1951, Andy was doing the tax returns for half the screws at Shawshank, and by 1952, he was doing almost all of them. He was paid in what may be a prison's most valuable coin: simple good will.

Later on, after Greg Stamma took over the warden's office, Andy became even more important—but if I tried to tell you the specifics of just how, I'd be guessing. There are some things I know about and others I can only guess at. I know that there were some prisoners who received all sorts of special considerations—radios in their cells, extraordinary visiting privileges, things like that—and there were people on the outside who were paying for them to have those privileges. Such people are known as “angels” by the prisoners. All at once some fellow would be excused from working in the plate-shop on Saturday forenoons, and you'd know that fellow had an angel out there who'd coughed up a chunk of dough to make sure it happened. The way it usually works is that the angel will pay the bribe to some middle-level screw, and the screw will spread the grease both up and down the administrative ladder.

Then there was the discount auto-repair service that laid Warden Dunahy low. It went underground for awhile and then emerged stronger than ever in the late fifties. And some of the contractors that worked at the prison from time to time were paying kickbacks to the top administration officials, I'm pretty sure, and the same was almost certainly true of the companies whose equipment was bought and installed in the laundry and the license-plate shop and the stamping-mill that was built in 1963.

By the late sixties there was also a booming trade in pills, and the same administrative crowd was involved in turning a buck on that. All of it added up to a pretty good-sized river of illicit income. Not like the pile of clandestine bucks that must fly around a really big prison like Attica or San Quentin, but not peanuts, either. And money itself becomes a problem after awhile. You can't just stuff it into your wallet and then shell out a bunch of crumpled twenties and dog-eared tens when you want a pool built in your back yard or an addition put on your house. Once you get past a certain point, you have to explain where that money came from ... and if your explanations aren't convincing enough, you're apt to wind up wearing a number yourself.

So there was a need for Andy's services. They took him out of the laundry and installed him in the library, but if you wanted to look at it another way, they never took him out of the laundry at all. They just set him to work washing dirty money instead of dirty sheets. He funnelled it into stocks, bonds, tax-free municipals, you name it.

He told me once about ten years after that day on the plate-shop roof that his feelings about what he was doing were pretty clear, and that his conscience was relatively untroubled. The rackets would have gone on with him or without him. He had not asked to be sent to Shawshank, he went on; he was an innocent man who had been victimized by colossal bad luck, not a missionary or a do-gooder.

"Besides, Red," he told me with that same half-grin, "what I'm doing in here isn't all that different from what I was doing outside. I'll hand you a pretty cynical axiom: the amount of expert financial help an individual or company needs rises in direct proportion to how many people that person or business is screwing.

"The people who run this place are stupid, brutal monsters for the most part. The people who run the straight world are brutal and monstrous, but they happen not to be quite as stupid, because the standard of competence out there is a little higher. Not much, but a little."

"But the pills," I said. "I don't want to tell you your business, but they make me nervous. Reds, uppers, downers, Nembutals—now they've got these things they call Phase Fours. I won't get anything like that. Never have."

"No," Andy said. "I don't like the pills, either. Never have. But I'm not much of a one for cigarettes or booze, either. But I don't push the pills. I don't bring them in, and I don't sell them once they are in. Mostly it's the screws who do that."

"But—"

“Yeah, I know. There’s a fine line there. What it comes down to, Red, is some people refuse to get their hands dirty at all. That’s called sainthood, and the pigeons land on your shoulders and crap all over your shirt. The other extreme is to take a bath in the dirt and deal any goddamned thing that will turn a dollar—guns, switchblades, big H, what the hell. You ever have a con come up to you and offer you a contract?”

I nodded. It’s happened a lot of times over the years. You are, after all, the man who can get it. And they figure if you can get them batteries for their transistor radios or cartons of Luckies or lids of reefer, you can put them in touch with a guy who’ll use a knife.

“Sure you have,” Andy agreed. “But you don’t do it. Because guys like us, Red, we know there’s a third choice. An alternative to staying simon-pure or bathing in the filth and the slime. It’s the alternative that grown-ups all over the world pick. You balance off your walk through the hog-wallow against what it gains you. You choose the lesser of two evils and try to keep your good intentions in front of you. And I guess you judge how well you’re doing by how well you sleep at night... and what your dreams are like.”

“Good intentions,” I said, and laughed. “I know all about that, Andy. A fellow can toddle right off to hell on that road.”

“Don’t you believe it,” he said, growing somber. “This is hell right here. Right here in The Shank. They sell pills and I tell them what to do with the money. But I’ve also got the library, and I know of over two dozen guys who have used the books in there to help them pass their high school equivalency tests. Maybe when they get out of here they’ll be able to crawl off the shitheap. When we needed that second room back in 1957, I got it. Because they want to keep me happy. I work cheap. That’s the trade-off.”

“And you’ve got your own private quarters.”

“Sure. That’s the way I like it.”

The prison population had risen slowly all through the fifties, and it damn near exploded in the sixties, what with every college-kid in America wanting to try dope and the perfectly ridiculous penalties for the use of a little reefer. But in all that time Andy never had a cellmate, except for a big, silent Indian named Normaden (like all Indians in The Shank, he was called Chief), and Normaden didn't last long. A lot of the other long-timers thought Andy was crazy, but Andy just smiled. He lived alone and he liked it that way... and as he'd said, they liked to keep him happy. He worked cheap.

Prison time is slow time, sometimes you'd swear it's stoptime, but it passes. It passes. George Dunahy departed the scene in a welter of newspaper headlines shouting SCANDAL and NEST-FEATHERING. Stamma succeeded him, and for the next six years Shawshank was a kind of living hell. During the reign of Greg Stamma, the beds in the infirmary and the cells in the Solitary Wing were always full.

One day in 1958 I looked at myself in a small shaving mirror I kept in my cell and saw a forty-year-old man looking back at me. A kid had come in back in 1938, a kid with a big mop of carrot red hair, half-crazy with remorse, thinking about suicide. That kid was gone. The red hair was going gray and starting to recede. There were crow's tracks around the eyes. On that day I could see an old man inside, waiting his time to come out. It scared me. Nobody wants to grow old in stir.

Stamma went early in 1959. There had been several investigative reporters sniffing around, and one of them even did four months under an assumed name, for a crime made up out of whole cloth. They were getting ready to drag out SCANDAL and NEST-FEATHERING again, but before they could bring the hammer down on him, Stamma ran. I can understand that; boy, can I ever. If he had been tried and convicted, he could have ended up right in here. If so, he might have lasted all of five hours. Byron Hadley had gone two years earlier. The sucker had a heart attack and took an early retirement.

Andy never got touched by the Stamma's affair. In early 1959 a new warden was appointed, and a new assistant warden, and a new chief of guards. For the next eight months or so, Andy was just another con again. It was during that period that Normaden, the big half-breed Passamaquoddy, shared Andy's cell with him. Then everything just started up again. Normaden was moved out, and Andy was living in solitary splendor again. The names at the top change, but the rackets never do.

I talked to Normaden once about Andy. "Nice fella," Normaden said. It was hard to make out anything he said because he had a harelip and a cleft palate; his words all came out in a slush. "I liked it there. He never made fun. But he didn't want me there. I could tell." Big shrug. "I was glad to go, me. Bad draft in that cell. All the time cold. He don't let nobody touch his things. That's okay. Nice man, never made fun. But big draft."

Rita Hayworth hung in Andy's cell until 1955, if I remember right. Then it was Marilyn Monroe, that picture from *The Seven-Year Itch* where she's standing over a subway grating and the warm air is flipping her skirt up. Marilyn lasted until 1960, and she was considerably tattered about the edges when Andy replaced her with Jayne Mansfield. Jayne was, you should pardon the expression, a bust. After only a year or so she was replaced with an English actress—might have been Hazel Court, but I'm not sure. In 1966 that one came down and Raquel Welch went up for a record-breaking six-year engagement in Andy's cell. The last poster to hang there was a pretty country-rock singer whose name was Linda Ronstadt.

I asked him once what the posters meant to him, and he gave me a peculiar, surprised sort of look. "Why, they mean the same thing to me as they do to most cons, I guess," he said. "Freedom. You look at those pretty women and you feel like you could almost ... not quite but almost... step right through and be beside them. Be free. I guess that's why I always liked Raquel Welch the best. It wasn't just her; it was that beach she was standing on. Looked like she was down in Mexico somewhere. Someplace quiet, where a man would be able to

hear himself think. Didn't you ever feel that way about a picture, Red? That you could almost step right through it?"

I said I'd never really thought of it that way.

"Maybe someday you'll see what I mean," he said, and he was right. Years later I saw exactly what he meant ... and when I did, the first thing I thought of was Normaden, and about how he'd said it was always cold in Andy's cell.

A terrible thing happened to Andy in late March or early April of 1963. I have told you that he had something that most of the other prisoners, myself included, seemed to lack. Call it a sense of equanimity, or a feeling of inner peace, maybe even a constant and unwavering faith that someday the long nightmare would end. Whatever you want to call it, Andy Dufresne always seemed to have his act together. There was none of that sullen desperation about him that seems to afflict most lifers after awhile; you could never smell hopelessness on him. Until that late winter of '63.

We had another warden by then, a man named Samuel Norton. The Mathers, Cotton and Increase, would have felt right at home with Sam Norton. So far as I know, no one had ever seen him so much as crack a smile. He had a thirty-year pin from the Baptist Advent Church of Eliot. His major innovation as the head of our happy family was to make sure that each incoming prisoner had a New Testament. He had a small plaque on his desk, gold letters inlaid in teakwood, which said CHRIST IS MY SAVIOR. A sampler on the wall, made by his wife, read: HIS JUDGMENT COMETH AND THAT RIGHT EARLY. This latter sentiment cut zero ice with most of us. We felt that the judgment had already occurred, and we would be willing to testify with the best of them that the rock would not hide us nor the dead tree give us shelter. He had a Bible quote for every occasion, did Mr. Sam Norton, and whenever you meet a man like that, my best advice to you would be to grin big and cover up your balls with both hands.

There were less infirmary cases than in the days of Greg Stamma, and so far as I know the moonlight burials ceased altogether, but this is not to say that Norton was not a believer in punishment. Solitary was always well populated. Men lost their teeth not from beatings but from bread and water diets. It began to be called grain and drain, as in “I’m on the Sam Norton grain and drain train, boys.”

The man was the foulest hypocrite that I ever saw in a high position. The rackets I told you about earlier continued to flourish, but Sam Norton added his own new wrinkles. Andy knew about them all, and because we had gotten to be pretty good friends by that time, he let me in on some of them. When Andy talked about them, an expression of amused, disgusted wonder would come over his face, as if he were telling me about some ugly, predatory species of bug that was, by its very ugliness and greed, somehow more comic than terrible.

It was Warden Norton who instituted the “Inside-Out” program you may have read about some sixteen or seventeen years back; it was even written up in Newsweek. In the press it sounded like a real advance in practical corrections and rehabilitation. There were prisoners out cutting pulpwood, prisoners repairing bridges and causeways, prisoners constructing potato cellars. Norton called it “Inside-Out” and was invited to explain it to damn near every Rotary and Kiwanis club in New England, especially after he got his picture in Newsweek. The prisoners called it “road-ganging,” but so far as I know, none of them were ever invited to express their views to the Kiwanians or the Loyal Order of Moose.

Norton was right in there on every operation, thirty-year church-pin and all; from cutting pulp to digging storm-drains to laying new culverts under state highways, there was Norton, skimming off the top. There were a hundred ways to do it—men, materials, you name it. But he had it coming another way, as well. The construction businesses in the area were deathly afraid of Norton’s Inside-Out program, because prison labor is slave labor, and you can’t compete with that. So Sam Norton, he of the Testaments and the thirty-year

church-pin, was passed a good many thick envelopes under the table during his sixteen-year tenure as Shawshank's warden. And when an envelope was passed, he would either overbid the project, not bid at all, or claim that all his Inside-Outers were committed elsewhere. It has always been something of a wonder to me that Norton was never found in the trunk of a Thunderbird parked off a highway somewhere down in Massachusetts with his hands tied behind his back and half a dozen bullets in his head.

Anyway, as the old barrelhouse song says, My God, how the money rolled in. Norton must have subscribed to the old Puritan notion that the best way to figure out which folks God favors is by checking their bank accounts.

Andy Dufresne was his right hand in all of this, his silent partner. The prison library was Andy's hostage to fortune. Norton knew it, and Norton used it. Andy told me that one of Norton's favorite aphorisms was One hand washes the other. So Andy gave good advice and made useful suggestions. I can't say for sure that he hand-tooled Norton's Inside-Out program, but I'm damned sure he processed the money for the Jesus-shouting son of a whore. He gave good advice, made useful suggestions, the money got spread around, and ... son of a bitch! The library would get a new set of automotive repair manuals, a fresh set of Grolier Encyclopedias, books on how to prepare for the Scholastic Achievement Tests. And, of course, more Erle Stanley Gardners and more Louis L'Amours.

And I'm convinced that what happened happened because Norton just didn't want to lose his good right hand. I'll go further: it happened because he was scared of what might happen—what Andy might say against him—if Andy ever got clear of Shawshank State Prison.

I got the story a chunk here and a chunk there over a space of seven years, some of it from Andy—but not all. He never wanted to talk about that part of his life, and I don't blame him. I got parts of it from maybe half a dozen different sources. I've said once that prisoners are nothing but slaves, but they have that slave habit of looking dumb and keeping their ears open. I got it backwards and forwards

and in the middle, but I'll give it to you from point A to point Z, and maybe you'll understand why the man spent about ten months in a bleak, depressed daze. See, I don't think he knew the truth until 1963, fifteen years after he came into this sweet little hell-hole. Until he met Tommy Williams, I don't think he knew how bad it could get.

Tommy Williams joined our happy little Shawshank family in November of 1962. Tommy thought of himself as a native of Massachusetts, but he wasn't proud; in his twenty-seven years he'd done time all over New England. He was a professional thief, and as you may have guessed, my own feeling was that he should have picked another profession.

He was a married man, and his wife came to visit each and every week. She had an idea that things might go better with Tommy—and consequently better with their three-year-old son and herself—if he got his high school degree. She talked him into it, and so Tommy Williams started visiting the library on a regular basis.

For Andy, this was an old routine by then. He saw that Tommy got a series of high school equivalency tests. Tommy would brush up on the subjects he had passed in high school—there weren't many—and then take the test. Andy also saw that he was enrolled in a number of correspondence courses covering the subjects he had failed in school or just missed by dropping out.

He probably wasn't the best student Andy ever took over the jumps, and I don't know if he ever did get his high school diploma, but that forms no part of my story. The important thing was that he came to like Andy Dufresne very much, as most people did after awhile.

On a couple of occasions he asked Andy "what a smart guy like you is doing in the joint"—a question which is the rough equivalent of that one that goes "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" But Andy wasn't the type to tell him; he would only smile and turn the conversation into some other channel. Quite normally, Tommy asked someone else, and when he finally got the story, I guess he also got the shock of his young life.

The person he asked was his partner on the laundry's steam ironer and folder. The inmates call this device the mangler, because that's exactly what it will do to you if you aren't paying attention and get your bad self caught in it. His partner was Charlie Lathrop, who had been in for about twelve years on a murder charge. He was more than glad to reheat the details of the Dufresne murder trial for Tommy; it broke the monotony of pulling freshly pressed bedsheets out of the machine and tucking them into the basket. He was just getting to the jury waiting until after lunch to bring in their guilty verdict when the trouble whistle went off and the mangle grated to a stop. They had been feeding in freshly washed sheets from the Eliot Nursing Home at the far end; these were spat out dry and neatly pressed at Tommy's and Charlie's end at the rate of one every five seconds. Their job was to grab them, fold them, and slap them into the cart, which had already been lined with clean brown paper.

But Tommy Williams was just standing there, staring at Charlie Lathrop, his mouth unhinged all the way to his chest. He was standing in a drift of sheets that had come through clean and which were now sopping up all the wet muck on the floor—and in a laundry wetwash, there's plenty of muck.

So the head bull that day, Homer Jessup, comes rushing over, bellowing his head off and on the prod for trouble. Tommy took no notice of him. He spoke to Charlie as if old Homer, who had busted more heads than he could probably count, hadn't been there.

“What did you say that golf pro's name was?”

“Quentin,” Charlie answered back, all confused and upset by now. He later said that the kid was as white as a truce flag. “Glenn Quentin, I think. Something like that, anyway—”

“Here now, here now,” Homer Jessup roared, his neck as red as a rooster's comb. “Get them sheets in cold water! Get quick! Get quick, by Jesus, you—”

“Glenn Quentin, oh my God,” Tommy Williams said, and that was all he got to say because Homer Jessup, that least peaceable of men, brought his billy down behind his ear. Tommy hit the floor so hard he broke off three of his front teeth. When he woke up he was in solitary, and confined to same for a week, riding a boxcar on Sam Norton’s famous grain and drain train. Plus a black mark on his report card.

That was in early February of 1963, and Tommy Williams went around to six or seven other long-timers after he got out of solitary and got pretty much the same story. I know; I was one of them. But when I asked him why he wanted it, he just clammed up.

Then one day he went to the library and spilled one helluva big budget of information to Andy Dufresne. And for the first and last time, at least since he had approached me about the Rita Hayworth poster like a kid buying his first pack of Trojans, Andy lost his cool... only this time he blew it entirely.

I saw him later that day, and he looked like a man who has stepped on the business end of a rake and given himself a good one, whap between the eyes. His hands were trembling, and when I spoke to him, he didn’t answer. Before that afternoon was out he had caught up with Billy Hanlon, who was the head screw, and set up an appointment with Warden Norton for the following day. He told me later that he didn’t sleep a wink all that night; he just listened to a cold winter wind howling outside, watched the searchlights go around and around, putting long, moving shadows on the cement walls of the cage he had called home since Harry Truman was President, and tried to think it all out. He said it was as if Tommy had produced a key which fit a cage in the back of his mind, a cage like his own cell. Only instead of holding a man, that cage held a tiger, and that tiger’s name was Hope. Williams had produced the key that unlocked the cage and the tiger was out, willy-nilly, to roam his brain.

Four years before, Tommy Williams had been arrested in Rhode Island, driving a stolen car that was full of stolen merchandise. Tommy turned in his accomplice, the DA played ball, and he got a

lighter sentence ... two to four, with time served. Eleven months after beginning his term, his old cellmate got a ticket out and Tommy got a new one, a man named Elwood Blatch. Blatch had been busted for burglary with a weapon and was serving six to twelve.

“I never seen such a high-strung guy,” Tommy told me. “A man like that should never want to be a burglar, specially not with a gun. The slightest little noise, he’d go three feet into the air ... and come down shooting, more likely than not. One night he almost strangled me because some guy down the hall was whopping on his cell bars with a tin cup.

“I did seven months with him, until they let me walk free. I got time served and time off, you understand. I can’t say we talked because you didn’t, you know, exactly hold a conversation with El Blatch. He held a conversation with you. He talked all the time. Never shut up. If you tried to get a word in, he’d shake his fist at you and roll his eyes. It gave me the cold chills whenever he done that. Big tall guy he was, mostly bald, with these green eyes set way down deep in the sockets. Jeez, I hope I never see him again.

“It was like a talkin jag every night. Where he grew up, the orphanages he run away from, the jobs he done, the women he fucked, the crap games he cleaned out. I just let him run on. My face ain’t much, but I didn’t want it, you know, rearranged for me.

“According to him, he’d burgled over two hundred joints. It was hard for me to believe, a guy like him who went off like a firecracker every time someone cut a loud fart, but he swore it was true. Now ... listen to me, Red. I know guys sometimes make things up after they know a thing, but even before I knew about this golf pro guy, Quentin, I remember thinking that if El Blatch ever burgled my house, and I found out about it later, I’d have to count myself just about the luckiest motherfucker going still to be alive. Can you imagine him in some lady’s bedroom, sifting through her jool’ry box, and she coughs in her sleep or turns over quick? It gives me the cold chills just to think of something like that, I swear on my mother’s name it does.

“He said he’d killed people, too. People that gave him shit. At least that’s what he said. And I believed him. He sure looked like a man that could do some killing. He was just so fucking high-strung! Like a pistol with a sawed-off firing pin. I knew a guy who had a Smith and Wesson Police Special with a sawed-off firing pin. It wasn’t no good for nothing, except maybe for something to jaw about. The pull on that gun was so light that it would fire if this guy, Johnny Callahan, his name was, if he turned his record-player on full volume and put it on top of one of the speakers. That’s how El Blatch was. I can’t explain it any better. I just never doubted that he had greased some people.

“So one night, just for something to say, I go: ‘Who’d you kill?’ Like a joke, you know. So he laughs and says: ‘There’s one guy doing time up-Maine for these two people I killed. It was this guy and the wife of the slob who’s doing the time. I was creeping their place and the guy started to give me some shit.’

“I can’t remember if he ever told me the woman’s name or not,” Tommy went on. “Maybe he did. But in New England, Dufresne’s like Smith or Jones in the rest of the country, because there’s so many Frogs up here. Dufresne, Lavesque, Ouelette, Poulin, who can remember Frog names? But he told me the guy’s name. He said the guy was Glenn Quentin and he was a prick, a big rich prick, a golf pro. El said he thought the guy might have cash in the house, maybe as much as five thousand dollars. That was a lot of money back then, he says to me. So I go: ‘When was that?’ And he goes: ‘After the war. Just after the war.’

“So he went in and he did the joint and they woke up and the guy gave him some trouble. That’s what El said. Maybe the guy just started to snore, that’s what I say. Anyway, El said Quentin was in the sack with some hotshot lawyer’s wife and they sent the lawyer up to Shawshank State Prison. Then he laughs this big laugh. Holy Christ, I was never so glad of anything as I was when I got my walking papers from that place.”

I guess you can see why Andy went a little wonky when Tommy told him that story, and why he wanted to see the warden right away. Elwood Blatch had been serving a six-to-twelve rap when Tommy knew him four years before. By the time Andy heard all of this, in 1963, he might be on the verge of getting out... or already out. So those were the two prongs of the spit Andy was roasting on—the idea that Blatch might still be in on one hand, and the very real possibility that he might be gone like the wind on the other.

There were inconsistencies in Tommy's story, but aren't there always in real life? Blatch told Tommy the man who got sent up was a hotshot lawyer, and Andy was a banker, but those are two professions that people who aren't very educated could easily get mixed up. And don't forget that twelve years had gone by between the time Blatch was reading the clippings about the trial and the time he told the tale to Tommy Williams. He also told Tommy he got better than a thousand dollars from a footlocker Quentin had in his closet, but the police said at Andy's trial that there had been no sign of burglary. I have a few ideas about that. First, if you take the cash and the man it belonged to is dead, how are you going to know anything was stolen, unless someone else can tell you it was there to start with? Second, who's to say Blatch wasn't lying about that part of it? Maybe he didn't want to admit killing two people for nothing. Third, maybe there were signs of burglary and the cops either overlooked them—cops can be pretty dumb—or deliberately covered them up so they wouldn't screw the DA's case. The guy was running for public office, remember, and he needed a conviction to run on. An unsolved burglary-murder would have done him no good at all.

But of the three, I like the middle one best. I've known a few Elwood Blatches in my time at Shawshank—the triggerpullers with the crazy eyes. Such fellows want you to think they got away with the equivalent of the Hope Diamond on every caper, even if they got caught with a two-dollar Timex and nine bucks on the one they're doing time for.

And there was one thing in Tommy's story that convinced Andy beyond a shadow of a doubt. Blatch hadn't hit Quentin at random. He had called Quentin "a big rich prick," and he had known Quentin was a golf pro. Well, Andy and his wife had been going out to that country club for drinks and dinner once or twice a week for a couple of years, and Andy had done a considerable amount of drinking there once he found out about his wife's affair. There was a marina with the country club, and for awhile in 1947 there had been a part-time grease-and-gas jockey working there who matched Tommy's description of Elwood Blatch. A big tall man, mostly bald, with deep-set green eyes. A man who had an unpleasant way of looking at you, as though he was sizing you up. He wasn't there long, Andy said. Either he quit or Briggs, the fellow in charge of the marina, fired him. But he wasn't a man you forgot. He was too striking for that.

So Andy went to see Warden Norton on a rainy, windy day with big gray clouds scudding across the sky above the gray walls, a day when the last of the snow was starting to melt away and show lifeless patches of last year's grass in the fields beyond the prison.

The warden has a good-sized office in the Administration Wing, and behind the warden's desk there's a door which connects with the assistant warden's office. The assistant warden was out that day, but a trusty was there. He was a half-lame fellow whose real name I have forgotten; all the inmates, me included, called him Chester, after Marshal Dillon's sidekick. Chester was supposed to be watering the plants and waxing the floor. My guess is that the plants went thirsty that day and the only waxing that was done happened because of Chester's dirty ear polishing the keyhole plate of that connecting door.

He heard the warden's main door open and close and then Norton saying: "Good morning, Dufresne, how can I help you?"

"Warden," Andy began, and old Chester told us that he could hardly recognize Andy's voice it was so changed. "Warden... there's something... something's happened to me that's ... that's so ... so ... I hardly know where to begin."

“Well, why don’t you just begin at the beginning?” the warden said, probably in his sweetest let’s-all-turn-to-the-Twenty-third-Psalm-and-read-in-unison voice. “That usually works the best.”

And so Andy did. He began by refreshing Norton on the details of the crime he had been imprisoned for. Then he told the warden exactly what Tommy Williams had told him. He also gave out Tommy’s name, which you may think wasn’t so wise in light of later developments, but I’d just ask you what else he could have done, if his story was to have any credibility at all.

When he had finished, Norton was completely silent for some time. I can just see him, probably tipped back in his office chair under the picture of Governor Reed hanging on the wall, his fingers steepled, his liver lips pursed, his brow wrinkled into ladder rungs halfway to the crown of his head, his thirty-year pin gleaming mellowly.

“Yes,” he said finally. “That’s the damndest story I ever heard. But I’ll tell you what surprises me most about it, Dufresne.”

“What’s that, sir?”

“That you were taken in by it.”

“Sir? I don’t understand what you mean.” And Chester said that Andy Dufresne, who had faced down Byron Hadley on the plate-shop roof thirteen years before, was almost floundering for words.

“Wellnow,” Norton said. “It’s pretty obvious to me that this young fellow Williams is impressed with you. Quite taken with you, as a matter of fact. He hears your tale of woe, and it’s quite natural of him to want to ... cheer you up, let’s say. Quite natural. He’s a young man, not terribly bright. Not surprising he didn’t realize what a state it would put you into. Now what I suggest is—”

“Don’t you think I thought of that?” Andy asked. “But I’d never told Tommy about the man working down at the marina. I never told

anyone that—it never even crossed my mind! But Tommy’s description of his cellmate and that man

... they’re identical!” “Wellnow, you may be indulging in a little selective perception there,” Norton said with a chuckle. Phrases like that, selective perception, are required learning for people in the penology and corrections business, and they use them all they can.

“That’s not it all. Sir.”

“That’s your slant on it,” Norton said, “but mine differs. And let’s remember that I have only your word that there was such a man working at the Falmouth Hills Country Club back then.”

“No, sir,” Andy broke in again. “No, that isn’t true. Because—”

“Anyway,” Norton overrode him, expansive and loud, “let’s just look at it from the other end of the telescope, shall we? Suppose—just suppose, now—that there really was a fellow named Elwood Blatch.”

“Blatch,” Andy said tightly.

“Blatch, by all means. And let’s say he was Thomas Williams’s cellmate in Rhode Island. The chances are excellent that he has been released by now. Excellent. Why, we don’t even know how much time he might have done there before he ended up with Williams, do we? Only that he was doing a six-to-twelve.”

“No. We don’t know how much time he’d done. But Tommy said he was a bad actor, a cut-up. I think there’s a fair chance that he may still be in. Even if he’s been released, the prison will have a record of his last known address, the names of his relatives—”

“And both would almost certainly be dead ends.”

Andy was silent for a moment, and then he burst out:

“Well, it’s a chance, isn’t it?”

“Yes, of course it is. So just for a moment, Dufresne, let’s assume that Blatch exists and that he is still ensconced in the Rhode Island State Penitentiary. Now what is he going to say if we bring this kettle of fish to him in a bucket? Is he going to fall down on his knees, roll his eyes, and say: ‘I did it! I did it! By all means add a life term onto my charge!’?”

“How can you be so obtuse?” Andy said, so low that Chester could barely hear. But he heard the warden just fine.

“What? What did you call me?”

“Obtuse!” Andy cried. “Is it deliberate?”

“Dufresne, you’ve taken five minutes of my time—no, seven—and I have a very busy schedule today. So I believe we’ll just declare this little meeting closed and—”

“The country club will have all the old time-cards, don’t you realize that?” Andy shouted. “They’ll have tax-forms and W-twos and unemployment compensation forms, all with his name on them! There will be employees there now that were there then, maybe Briggs himself! It’s been fifteen years, not forever! They’ll remember him! They will remember Blatch! If I’ve got Tommy to testify to what Blatch told him, and Briggs to testify that Blatch was there, actually working at the country club, I can get a new trial! I can—”

“Guard! Guard! Take this man away!”

“What’s the matter with you?” Andy said, and Chester told me he was very nearly screaming by then. “It’s my life, my chance to get out, don’t you see that? And you won’t make a single long-distance call to at least verify Tommy’s story? Listen, I’ll pay for the call! I’ll pay for—”

Then there was a sound of thrashing as the guards grabbed him and started to drag him out.

“Solitary,” Warden Norton said dryly. He was probably fingering his thirty-year pin as he said it. “Bread and water.”

And so they dragged Andy away, totally out of control now, still screaming at the warden; Chester said you could hear him even after the door was shut: “It’s my life! It’s my life, don’t you understand it’s my life?”

Twenty days on the grain and drain train for Andy down there in solitary. It was his second jolt in solitary, and his dust-up with Norton was his first real black mark since he had joined our happy family.

I’ll tell you a little bit about Shawshank’s solitary while we’re on the subject. It’s something of a throwback to those hardy pioneer days of the early to mid-1700s in Maine. In those days no one wasted much time with such things as “penology” and “rehabilitation” and “selective perception.” In those days, you were taken care of in terms of absolute black and white. You were either guilty or innocent. If you were guilty, you were either hung or put in gaol. And if you were sentenced to gaol, you did not go to an institution. No, you dug your own gaol with a spade provided by the Province of Maine. You dug it as wide and as deep as you could during the period between sunup and sundown. Then they gave you a couple of skins and a bucket, and down you went. Once down, the gaoler would bar the top of your hole, throw down some grain or maybe a piece of maggoty meat once or twice a week, and maybe there would be a dipperful of barley soup on Sunday night. You pissed in the bucket, and you held up the same bucket for water when the gaoler came around at six in the morning. When it rained, you used the bucket to bail out your gaol-cell... unless, that is, you wanted to drown like a rat in a rainbarrel.

No one spent a long time “in the hole” as it was called; thirty months was an unusually long term, and so far as I’ve been able to tell, the longest term ever spent from which an inmate actually emerged alive was served by the so-called “Durham Boy,” a fourteen-year-old psychopath who castrated a schoolmate with a piece of rusty metal. He did seven years, but of course he went in young and strong.

You have to remember that for a crime that was more serious than petty theft or blasphemy or forgetting to put a snortrag in your pocket when out of doors on the Sabbath, you were hung. For low crimes such as those just mentioned and for others like them, you'd do your three or six or nine months in the hole and come out fishbelly white, cringing from the wide-open spaces, your eyes half-blind, your teeth more than likely rocking and rolling in their sockets from the scurvy, your feet crawling with fungus. Jolly old Province of Maine. Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum.

Shawshank's Solitary Wing was nowhere as bad as that... I guess. Things come in three major degrees in the human experience, I think. There's good, bad, and terrible. And as you go down into progressive darkness toward terrible, it gets harder and harder to make subdivisions.

To get to Solitary Wing you were led down twenty-three steps to a basement level where the only sound was the drip of water. The only light was supplied by a series of dangling sixty-watt bulbs. The cells were keg-shaped, like those wall-safes rich people sometimes hide behind a picture. Like a safe, the round doorways were hinged, and solid instead of barred. You got ventilation from above, but no light except for your own sixty-watt bulb, which was turned off from a master-switch promptly at 8:00 P.M., an hour before lights-out in the rest of the prison. The lightbulb wasn't in a wire mesh cage or anything like that. The feeling was that if you wanted to exist down there in the dark, you were welcome to it. Not many did ... but after eight, of course, you had no choice. You had a bunk bolted to the wall and a can with no toilet seat. You had three ways to spend your time: sitting, shitting, or sleeping. Big choice. Twenty days could get to seem like a year. Thirty days could seem like two, and forty days like ten. Sometimes you could hear rats in the ventilation system. In a situation like that, subdivisions of terrible tend to get lost.

If anything at all can be said in favor of solitary, it's just that you get time to think. Andy had twenty days in which to think while he enjoyed his grain and drain, and when he got out he requested

another meeting with the warden. Request denied. Such a meeting, the warden told him, would be “counter-productive.” That’s another of those phrases you have to master before you can go to work in the prisons and corrections field.

Patiently, Andy renewed his request. And renewed it. And renewed it. He had changed, had Andy Dufresne. Suddenly, as that spring of 1963 bloomed around us, there were lines in his face and sprigs of gray showing in his hair. He had lost that little trace of a smile that always seemed to linger around his mouth. His eyes stared out into space more often, and you get to know that when a man stares that way, he is counting up the years served, the months, the weeks, the days.

He renewed his request and renewed it. He was patient. He had nothing but time. It got to be summer. In Washington, President Kennedy was promising a fresh assault on poverty and on civil rights inequalities, not knowing he had only half a year to live. In Liverpool, a musical group called The Beatles was emerging as a force to be reckoned with in British music, but I guess that no one Stateside had yet heard of them. The Boston Red Sox, still four years away from what New England folks call The Miracle of ‘67, were languishing in the cellar of the American League. All of those things were going on out in a larger world where people walked free.

Norton saw him near the end of June, and this conversation I heard about from Andy himself some seven years later.

“If it’s the squeeze, you don’t have to worry,” Andy told Norton in a low voice. “Do you think I’d talk that up? I’d be cutting my own throat. I’d be just as indictable as—”

“That’s enough,” Norton interrupted. His face was as long and cold as a slate gravestone. He leaned back in his office chair until the back of his head almost touched the sampler reading HIS JUDGMENT COMETH AND THAT RIGHT EARLY.

“But—”

“Don’t you ever mention money to me again,” Norton said. “Not in this office, not anywhere. Not unless you want to see that library turned back into a storage room and paint-locker again. Do you understand?”

“I was trying to set your mind at ease, that’s all.”

“Wellnow, when I need a sorry son of a bitch like you to set my mind at ease, I’ll retire. I agreed to this appointment because I got tired of being pestered, Dufresne. I want it to stop. If you want to buy this particular Brooklyn Bridge, that’s your affair. Don’t make it mine. I could hear crazy stories like yours twice a week if I wanted to lay myself open to them. Every sinner in this place would be using me for a crying towel. I had more respect for you. But this is the end. The end. Have we got an understanding?”

“Yes,” Andy said. “But I’ll be hiring a lawyer, you know.”

“What’s in God’s name for?”

“I think we can put it together,” Andy said. “With Tommy Williams and with my testimony and corroborative testimony from records and employees at the country club, I think we can put it together.”

“Tommy Williams is no longer an inmate of this facility.”

“What?”

“He’s been transferred.”

“Transferred where?”

“Cashman.”

At that, Andy fell silent. He was an intelligent man, but it would have taken an extraordinarily stupid man not to smell deal all over that. Cashman was a minimum-security prison far up north in Aroostook County. The inmates pick a lot of potatoes, and that’s hard work, but they are paid a decent wage for their labor and they can attend

classes at CVI, a pretty decent vocational-technical institute, if they so desire. More important to a fellow like Tommy, a fellow with a young wife and a child, Cashman had a furlough program... which meant a chance to live like a normal man, at least on the weekends. A chance to build a model plane with his kid, have sex with his wife, maybe go on a picnic.

Norton had almost surely dangled all of that under Tommy's nose with only one string attached: not one more word about Elwood Blatch, not now, not ever. Or you'll end up doing hard time in Thomaston down there on scenic Route 1 with the real hard guys, and instead of having sex with your wife you'll be having it with some old bull queer.

"But why?" Andy said. "Why would—"

"As a favor to you," Norton said calmly, "I checked with Rhode Island. They did have an inmate named Elwood Blatch. He was given what they call a PP—provisional parole, another one of these crazy liberal programs to put criminals out on the streets. He's since disappeared."

Andy said: "The warden down there... is he a friend of yours?"

Sam Norton gave Andy a smile as cold as a deacon's watchchain. "We are acquainted," he said.

"Why?" Andy repeated. "Can't you tell me why you did it? You knew I wasn't going to talk about... about anything you might have had going. You knew that. So why?"

"Because people like you make me sick," Norton said deliberately. "I like you right where you are, Mr. Dufresne, and as long as I am warden here at Shawshank, you are going to be right here. You see, you used to think that you were better than anyone else. I have gotten pretty good at seeing that on a man's face. I marked it on yours the first time I walked into the library. It might as well have been written on your forehead in capital letters. That look is gone

now, and I like that just fine. It is not just that you are a useful vessel, never think that. It is simply that men like you need to learn humility. Why, you used to walk around that exercise yard as if it was a living room and you were at one of those cocktail parties where the hellbound walk around coveting each others' wives and husbands and getting swinishly drunk. But you don't walk around that way anymore. And I'll be watching to see if you should start to walk that way again. Over a period of years, I'll be watching you with great pleasure. Now get the hell out of here."

"Okay. But all the extracurricular activities stop now, Norton. The investment counseling, the scams, the free tax advice. It all stops. Get H and R Block to tell you how to declare your income."

Warden Norton's face first went brick-red... and then all the color fell out of it. "You're going back into solitary for that. Thirty days. Bread and water. Another black mark. And while you're in, think about this: if anything that's been going on should stop, the library goes. I will make it my personal business to see that it goes back to what it was before you came here. And I will make your life... very hard. Very difficult. You'll do the hardest time it's possible to do. You'll lose that one-bunk Hilton down in Cellblock Five, for starters, and you'll lose those rocks on the windowsill, and you'll lose any protection the guards have given you against the sodomites. You will ... lose everything. Clear?"

I guess it was clear enough.

Time continued to pass—the oldest trick in the world, and maybe the only one that really is magic. But Andy Dufresne had changed. He had grown harder. That's the only way I can think of to put it. He went on doing Warden Norton's dirty work and he held onto the library, so outwardly things were about the same. He continued to have his birthday drinks and his year-end holiday drinks; he continued to share out the rest of each bottle. I got him fresh rock-polishing cloths from time to time, and in 1967 I got him a new rock-hammer—the one I'd gotten him nineteen years ago had, as I told you, plumb worn out. Nineteen years! When you say it sudden like

that, those three syllables sound like the thud and double-locking of a tomb door. The rock-hammer, which had been a ten-dollar item back then, went for twenty-two by '67. He and I had a sad little grin over that.

Andy continued to shape and polish the rocks he found in the exercise yard, but the yard was smaller by then; half of what had been there in 1950 had been asphalted over in 1962. Nonetheless, he found enough to keep him occupied, I guess. When he had finished with each rock he would put it carefully on his window ledge, which faced east. He told me he liked to look at them in the sun, the pieces of the planet he had taken up from the dirt and shaped. Schists, quartzes, granites. Funny little mica-sculptures that were held together with airplane glue. Various sedimentary conglomerates that were polished and cut in such a way that you could see why Andy called them “millennium sandwiches”—the layers of different material that had built up over a period of decades and centuries.

Andy would give his stones and his rock-sculptures away from time to time in order to make room for new ones. He gave me the greatest number, I think—counting the stones that looked like matched cufflinks, I had five. There was one of the mica-sculptures I told you about, carefully crafted to look like a man throwing a javelin, and two of the sedimentary conglomerates, all the levels showing in smoothly polished cross-section. I've still got them, and I take them down every so often and think about what a man can do, if he has time enough and the will to use it, a drop at a time.

So, on the outside, at least, things were about the same. If Norton had wanted to break Andy as badly as he had said, he would have had to look below the surface to see the change. But if he had seen how different Andy had become, I think Norton would have been well-satisfied with the four years following his clash with Andy.

He had told Andy that Andy walked around the exercise yard as if he were at a cocktail party. That isn't the way I would have put it, but I know what he meant. It goes back to what I said about Andy wearing his freedom like an invisible coat, about how he never really

developed a prison mentality. His eyes never got that dull look. He never developed the walk that men get when the day is over and they are going back to their cells for another endless night—that flat-footed, hump-shouldered walk. Andy walked with his shoulders squared, and his step was always light, as if he were heading home to a good home-cooked meal and a good woman instead of to a tasteless mess of soggy vegetables, lumpy mashed potato, and a slice or two of that fatty, gristly stuff most of the cons called mystery meat... that, and a picture of Raquel Welch on the wall.

But for those four years, although he never became exactly like the others, he did become silent, introspective, and brooding. Who could blame him? So maybe it was Warden Norton who was pleased... at least, for awhile.

His dark mood broke around the time of the 1967 World Series. That was the dream year, the year the Red Sox won the pennant instead of placing ninth, as the Las Vegas bookies had predicted. When it happened—when they won the American League pennant—a kind of ebullience engulfed the whole prison. There was a goofy sort of feeling that if the Dead Sox could come to life, then maybe anybody could do it. I can't explain that feeling now, any more than an ex-Beatlemaniac could explain that madness, I suppose. But it was real. Every radio in the place was tuned to the games as the Red Sox pounded down the stretch. There was gloom when the Sox dropped a pair in Cleveland near the end, and a nearly riotous joy when Rico Petrocelli put away the pop fly that clinched it. And then there was the gloom that came when Lonborg was beaten in the seventh game of the Series to end the dream just short of complete fruition. It probably pleased Norton to no end, the son of a bitch. He liked his prison wearing sackcloth and ashes.

But for Andy, there was no tumble back down into gloom. He wasn't much of a baseball fan anyway, and maybe that was why. Nevertheless, he seemed to have caught the current of good feeling, and for him it didn't peter out again after the last game of the Series. He had taken that invisible coat out of the closet and put it on again.

I remember one bright-gold fall day in very late October, a couple of weeks after the World Series had ended. It must have been a Sunday, because the exercise yard was full of men “walking off the week”—tossing a Frisbee or two, passing around a football, bartering what they had to barter. Others would be at the long table in the Visitors’ Hall, under the watchful eyes of the screws, talking with their relatives, smoking cigarettes, telling sincere lies, receiving their picked-over care-packages.

Andy was squatting Indian fashion against the wall, chunking two small rocks together in his hands, his face turned up into the sunlight. It was surprisingly warm, that sun, for a day so late in the year.

“Hello, Red,” he called. “Come on and sit a spell.”

I did.

“You want this?” he asked, and handed me one of the two carefully polished “millennium sandwiches” I just told you about.

“I sure do,” I said. “It’s very pretty. Thank you.”

He shrugged and changed the subject. “Big anniversary coming up for you next year.”

I nodded. Next year would make me a thirty-year man. Sixty per cent of my life spent in Shawshank State Prison.

“Think you’ll ever get out?”

“Sure. When I have a long white beard and just about three marbles left rolling around upstairs.”

He smiled a little and then turned his face up into the sun again, his eyes closed. “Feels good.”

“I think it always does when you know the damn winter’s almost right on top of you.”

He nodded, and we were silent for awhile.

“When I get out of here,” Andy said finally, “I’m going where it’s warm all the time.” He spoke with such calm assurance you would have thought he had only a month or so left to serve. “You know where I’m goin, Red?”

“Nope.”

“Zihuatanejo,” he said, rolling the word softly from his tongue like music. “Down in Mexico. It’s a little place maybe twenty miles from Playa Azul and Mexico Highway Thirty-seven. It’s a hundred miles northwest of Acapulco on the Pacific Ocean. You know what the Mexicans say about the Pacific?”

I told him I didn’t.

“They say it has no memory. And that’s where I want to finish out my life, Red. In a warm place that has no memory.”

He had picked up a handful of pebbles as he spoke; now he tossed them, one by one, and watched them bounce and roll across the baseball diamond’s dirt infield, which would be under a foot of snow before long.

“Zihuatanejo. I’m going to have a little hotel down there. Six cabanas along the beach, and six more set further back, for the highway trade. I’ll have a guy who’ll take my guests out charter-fishing. There’ll be a trophy for the guy who catches the biggest marlin of the season, and I’ll put his picture up in the lobby. It won’t be a family place. It’ll be a place for people on their honeymoons... first or second varieties.”

“And where are you going to get the money to buy this fabulous place?” I asked. “Your stock account?”

He looked at me and smiled. “That’s not so far wrong,” he said. “Sometimes you startle me, Red.”

“What are you talking about?”

“There are really only two types of men in the world when it comes to bad trouble,” Andy said, cupping a match between his hands and lighting a cigarette. “Suppose there was a house full of rare paintings and sculptures and fine old antiques, Red? And suppose the guy who owned the house heard that there was a monster of a hurricane headed right at it? One of those two kinds of men just hopes for the best. The hurricane will change course, he says to himself. No right-thinking hurricane would ever dare wipe out all these Rembrandts, my two Degas horses, my Grant Woods, and my Bentons. Furthermore, God wouldn’t allow it. And if worse comes to worst, they’re insured. That’s one sort of man. The other sort just assumes that hurricane is going to tear right through the middle of his house. If the weather bureau says the hurricane just changed course, this guy assumes it’ll change back in order to put his house on ground-zero again. This second type of guy knows there’s no harm in hoping for the best as long as you’re prepared for the worst.”

I lit a cigarette of my own. “Are you saying you prepared for the eventuality?”

“Yes. I prepared for the hurricane. I knew how bad it looked. I didn’t have much time, but in the time I had, I operated. I had a friend—just about the only person who stood by me—who worked for an investment company in Portland. He died about six years ago.”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah.” Andy tossed his butt away. “Linda and I had about fourteen thousand dollars. Not a big bundle, but hell, we were young. We had our whole lives ahead of us.” He grimaced a little, then laughed. “When the shit hit the fan, I started lugging my Rembrandts out of the path of the hurricane. I sold my stocks and paid the capital gains tax just like a good little boy. Declared everything. Didn’t cut any corners.”

“Didn’t they freeze your estate?”

“I was charged with murder, Red, not dead! You can’t freeze the assets of an innocent man—thank God. And it was awhile before they even got brave enough to charge me with the crime. Jim—my friend—and I, we had some time. I got hit pretty good, just dumping everything like that. Got my nose skinned. But at the time I had worse things to worry about than a small skinning on the stock market.”

“Yeah, I’d say you did.”

“But when I came to Shawshank it was all safe. It’s still safe. Outside these walls, Red, there’s a man that no living soul has ever seen face to face. He has a Social Security card and a Maine driver’s license. He’s got a birth certificate. Name of Peter Stevens. Nice, anonymous name, huh?”

“Who is he?” I asked. I thought I knew what he was going to say, but I couldn’t believe it.

“Me.”

“You’re not going to tell me that you had time to set up a false identity while the bulls were sweating you,” I said, “or that you finished the job while you were on trial for—”

“No, I’m not going to tell you that. My friend Jim was the one who set up the false identity. He started after my appeal was turned down, and the major pieces of identification were in his hands by the spring of 1950.”

“He must have been a pretty close friend,” I said. I was not sure how much of this I believed—a little, a lot, or none. But the day was warm and the sun was out, and it was one hell of a good story. “All of that’s one hundred per cent illegal, setting up a false ID like that.”

“He was a close friend,” Andy said. “We were in the war together. France, Germany, the occupation. He was a good friend. He knew it was illegal, but he also knew that setting up a false identity in this

country is very easy and very safe. He took my money—my money with all the taxes on it paid so the IRS wouldn't get too interested—and invested it for Peter Stevens. He did that in 1950 and 1951. Today it amounts to three hundred and seventy thousand dollars, plus change.”

I guess my jaw made a thump when it dropped against my chest, because he smiled.

“Think of all the things people wish they'd invested in since 1950 or so, and two or three of them will be things Peter Stevens was into. If I hadn't ended up in here, I'd probably be worth seven or eight million bucks by now. I'd have a Rolls... and probably an ulcer as big as a portable radio.”

His hands went to the dirt and began sifting out more pebbles. They moved gracefully, restlessly.

“It was hoping for the best and expecting the worst—nothing but that. The false name was just to keep what little capital I had untainted. It was lugging the paintings out of the path of the hurricane. But I had no idea that the hurricane... that it could go on as long as it has.”

I didn't say anything for awhile. I guess I was trying to absorb the idea that this small, spare man in prison gray next to me could be worth more money than Warden Norton would make in the rest of his miserable life, even with the scams thrown in.

“When you said you could get a lawyer, you sure weren't kidding,” I said at last. “For that kind of dough you could have hired Clarence Darrow, or whoever's passing for him these days. Why didn't you, Andy? Christ! You could have been out of here like a rocket.”

He smiled. It was the same smile that had been on his face when he'd told me he and his wife had had their whole lives ahead of them. “No,” he said.

“A good lawyer would have sprung the Williams kid from Cashman whether he wanted to go or not,” I said. I was getting carried away now. “You could have gotten your new trial, hired private detectives to look for that guy Blatch, and blown Norton out of the water to boot. Why not, Andy?”

“Because I outsmarted myself. If I ever try to put my hands on Peter Stevens’s money from inside here, I’ll lose every cent of it. My friend Jim could have arranged it, but Jim’s dead. You see the problem?”

I saw it. For all the good that money could do Andy, it might as well have really belonged to another person. In a way, it did. And if the stuff it was invested in suddenly turned bad, all Andy could do would be to watch the plunge, to trace it day after day on the stocks-and-bonds page of the Press-Herald. It’s a tough life if you don’t weaken, I guess.

“I’ll tell you how it is, Red. There’s a big hayfield in the town of Buxton. You know where Buxton is at, don’t you?”

I said I did. It lies right next door to Scarborough.

“That’s right. And at the north end of this particular hayfield there’s a rock wall, right out of a Robert Frost poem. And somewhere along the base of that wall is a rock that has no business in a Maine hayfield. It’s a piece of volcanic glass, and until 1947 it was a paperweight on my office desk. My friend Jim put it in that wall. There’s a key underneath it. The key opens a safe deposit box in the Portland branch of the Casco Bank.”

“I guess you’re in a peck of trouble,” I said. “When your friend Jim died, the IRS must have opened all of his safe deposit boxes. Along with the executor of his will, of course.”

Andy smiled and tapped the side of my head. “Not bad. There’s more up there than marshmallows, I guess. But we took care of the possibility that Jim might die while I was in the slam. The box is in the Peter Stevens name, and once a year the firm of lawyers that

served as Jim's executors sends a check to the Casco to cover the rental of the Stevens box.

"Peter Stevens is inside that box, just waiting to get out. His birth certificate, his Social Security card, and his driver's license. The license is six years out of date because Jim died six years ago, true, but it's still perfectly renewable for a five-dollar fee. His stock certificates are there, the tax-free municipals, and about eighteen bearer bonds in the amount of ten thousand dollars each:"

I whistled.

"Peter Stevens is locked in a safe deposit box at the Casco Bank in Portland and Andy Dufresne is locked in a safe deposit box at Shawshank," he said. "Tit for tat. And the key that unlocks the box and the money and the new life is under a hunk of black glass in a Buxton hayfield. Told you this much, so I'll tell you something else, Red—for the last twenty years, give or take, I have been watching the papers with a more than usual interest for news of any construction project in Buxton. I keep thinking that someday soon I'm going to read that they're putting a highway through there, or erecting a new community hospital, or building a shopping center. Burying my new life under ten feet of concrete, or spitting it into a swamp somewhere with a big load of fill."

I blurted, "Jesus Christ, Andy, if all of this is true, how do you keep from going crazy?"

He smiled. "So far, all quiet on the Western front."

"But it could be years—"

"It will be. But maybe not as many as the State and Warden Norton think it's going to be. I just can't afford to wait that long. I keep thinking about Zihuatanejo and that small hotel. That's all I want from my life now, Red, and I don't think that's too much to want. I didn't kill Glenn Quentin and I didn't kill my wife, and that hotel... it's not too

much to want. To swim and get a tan and sleep in a room with open windows and space... that's not too much to want."

He slung the stones away.

"You know, Red," he said in an offhand voice. "A place like that... I'd have to have a man who knows how to get things."

I thought about it for a long time. And the biggest drawback in my mind wasn't even that we were talking pipedreams in a shitty little prison exercise yard with armed guards looking down at us from their sentry posts. "I couldn't do it," I said. "I couldn't get along on the outside. I'm what they call an institutional man now. In here I'm the man who can get it for you, yeah. But out there, anyone can get it for you. Out there, if you want posters or rock-hammers or one particular record or a boat-in-a-bottle model kit, you can use the fucking Yellow Pages. In here, I'm the fucking Yellow Pages. I wouldn't know how to begin. Or where."

"You underestimate yourself," he said. "You're a self-educated man, a self-made man. A rather remarkable man, I think."

"Hell, I don't even have a high school diploma."

"I know that," he said. "But it isn't just a piece of paper that makes a man. And it isn't just prison that breaks one, either."

"I couldn't hack it outside, Andy. I know that."

He got up. "You think it over," he said casually, just as the inside whistle blew. And he strolled off, as if he were a free man who had just made another free man a proposition. And for awhile just that was enough to make me feel free. Andy could do that. He could make me forget for a time that we were both lifers, at the mercy of a hard-ass parole board and a psalm-singing warden who liked Andy Dufresne right where he was. After all, Andy was a lap-dog who could do tax-returns. What a wonderful animal!

But by that night in my cell I felt like a prisoner again. The whole idea seemed absurd, and that mental image of blue water and white beaches seemed more cruel than foolish—it dragged at my brain like a fishhook. I just couldn't wear that invisible coat the way Andy did. I fell asleep that night and dreamed of a great glassy black stone in the middle of a hayfield; a stone shaped like a giant blacksmith's anvil. I was trying to rock the stone up so I could get the key that was underneath. It wouldn't budge; it was just too damned big.

And in the background, but getting closer, I could hear the baying of bloodhounds.

Which leads us, I guess, to the subject of jailbreaks. Sure, they happen from time to time in our happy little family. You don't go over the wall, though, not at Shawshank, not if you're smart. The searchlight beams go all night, probing long white fingers across the open fields that surround the prison on three sides and the stinking marshland on the fourth. Cons do go over the wall from time to time, and the searchlights almost always catch them. If not, they get picked up trying to thumb a ride on Highway 6 or Highway 99. If they try to cut across country, some farmer sees them and just phones the location in to the prison. Cons who go over the wall are stupid cons. Shawshank is no Canon City, but in a rural area a man humping his ass across country in a gray pajama suit sticks out like a cockroach on a wedding cake.

Over the years, the guys who have done the best—maybe oddly, maybe not so oddly—are the guys who did it on the spur of the moment. Some of them have gone out in the middle of a cartful of sheets; a convict sandwich on white, you could say. There was a lot of that when I first came in here, but over the years they have more or less closed that loophole.

Warden Norton's famous "Inside-Out" program produced its share of escapees, too. They were the guys who decided they liked what lay to the right of the hyphen better than what lay to the left. And again, in most cases it was a very casual kind of thing. Drop your blueberry rake and stroll into the bushes while one of the screws is having a

glass of water at the truck or when a couple of them get too involved in arguing over yards passing or rushing on the old Boston Patriots.

In 1969, the Inside-Outers were picking potatoes in Sabbatus. It was the third of November and the work was almost done. There was a guard named Henry Pugh—and he is no longer a member of our happy little family, believe me—sitting on the back bumper of one of the potato trucks and having his lunch with his carbine across his knees when a beautiful (or so it was told to me, but sometimes these things get exaggerated) ten-point buck strolled out of the cold early afternoon mist. Pugh went after it with visions of just how that trophy would look mounted in his rec room, and while he was doing it, three of his charges just walked away. Two were recaptured in a Lisbon Falls pinball parlor. The third has not been found to this day.

I suppose the most famous case of all was that of Sid Nedeau. This goes back to 1958, and I guess it will never be topped. Sid was out lining the ballfield for a Saturday intramural baseball game when the three o'clock inside whistle blew, signalling the shift-change for the guards. The parking lot is just beyond the exercise yard, on the other side of the electrically operated main gate. At three the gate opens and the guards coming on duty and those going off mingle. There's a lot of back-slapping and bullyragging, comparison of league bowling scores and the usual number of tired old ethnic jokes.

Sid just trundled his lining machine right out through the gate, leaving a three-inch baseline all the way from home plate in the exercise yard to the ditch on the far side of Route 6, where they found the machine overturned in a pile of lime. Don't ask me how he did it. He was dressed in his prison uniform, he stood six-feet-two, and he was billowing clouds of lime-dust behind him. All I can figure is that, it being Friday afternoon and all, the guards going off were so happy to be going off, and the guards coming on were so downhearted to be coming on, that the members of the former group never got their heads out of the clouds and those in the latter never got their noses off their shoetops ... and old Sid Nedeau just sort of slipped out between the two.

So far as I know, Sid is still at large. Over the years, Andy Dufresne and I had a good many laughs over Sid Nedeau's great escape, and when we heard about that airline hijacking for ransom, the one where the guy parachuted from the back door of the airplane, Andy swore up and down that D. B. Cooper's real name was Sid Nedeau.

"And he probably had a pocketful of baseline lime in his pocket for good luck," Andy said. "That lucky son of a bitch."

But you should understand that a case like Sid Nedeau, or the fellow who got away clean from the Sabbatus potato-field crew, guys like that are winning the prison version of the Irish Sweepstakes. Purely a case of six different kinds of luck somehow jelling together all at the same moment. A stiff like Andy could wait ninety years and not get a similar break.

Maybe you remember, a ways back, I mentioned a guy named Henley Backus, the washroom foreman in the laundry. He came to Shawshank in 1922 and died in the prison infirmary thirty-one years later. Escapes and escape attempts were a hobby of his, maybe because he never quite dared to take the plunge himself. He could tell you a hundred different schemes, all of them crackpot, and all of them had been tried in The Shank at one time or another. My favorite was the tale of Beaver Morrison, a b&e convict who tried to build a glider from scratch in the plate-factory basement. The plans he was working from were in a circa-1900 book called *The Modern Boy's Guide to Fun and Adventure*. Beaver got it built without being discovered, or so the story goes, only to discover there was no door from the basement big enough to get the damned thing out. When Henley told that story, you could bust a gut laughing, and he knew a dozen—no, two dozen—almost as funny.

When it came to detailing Shawshank bust-outs, Henley had it down chapter and verse. He told me once that during his time there had been better than four hundred escape attempts that he knew of. Really think about that for a moment before you just nod your head and read on. Four hundred escape attempts! That comes out to 12.9 escape attempts for every year Henley Backus was in Shawshank

and keeping track of them. The Escape-Attempt-of-the-Month Club. Of course most of them were pretty slipshod affairs, the sort of thing that ends up with a guard grabbing some poor, sidling slob's arm and growling, "Where do you think you're going, you happy asshole?"

Henley said he'd class maybe sixty of them as more serious attempts, and he included the "prison break" of 1937, the year before I arrived at The Shank. The new Administration Wing was under construction then and fourteen cons got out, using construction equipment in a poorly locked shed. The whole of southern Maine got into a panic over those fourteen "hardened criminals," most of whom were scared to death and had no more idea of where they should go than a jackrabbit does when it's headlight-pinned to the highway with a big truck bearing down on it. Not one of those fourteen got away. Two of them were shot dead—by civilians, not police officers or prison personnel—but none got away.

How many had gotten away between 1938, when I came here, and that day in October when Andy first mentioned Zihuatanejo to me? Putting my information and Henley's together, I'd say ten. Ten that got away clean. And although it isn't the kind of thing you can know for sure, I'd guess that at least half of those ten are doing time in other institutions of lower learning like The Shank. Because you do get institutionalized. When you take away a man's freedom and teach him to live in a cell, he seems to lose his ability to think in dimensions. He's like that jackrabbit I mentioned, frozen in the oncoming lights of the truck that is bound to kill it. More often than not a con who's just out will pull some dumb job that hasn't a chance in hell of succeeding... and why? Because it'll get him back inside. Back where he understands how things work.

Andy wasn't that way, but I was. The idea of seeing the Pacific sounded good, but I was afraid that actually being there would scare me to death—the bigness of it.

Anyhow, the day of that conversation about Mexico, and about Mr. Peter Stevens... that was the day I began to believe that Andy had some idea of doing a disappearing act. I hoped to God he would be

careful if he did, and still, I wouldn't have bet money on his chances of succeeding. Warden Norton, you see, was watching Andy with a special close eye. Andy wasn't just another deadhead with a number to Norton; they had a working relationship, you might say. Also, Andy had brains and he had heart. Norton was determined to use the one and crush the other.

As there are honest politicians on the outside—ones who stay bought—there are honest prison guards, and if you are a good judge of character and if you have some loot to spread around, I suppose it's possible that you could buy enough look-the-other-way to make a break. I'm not the man to tell you such a thing has never been done, but Andy Dufresne wasn't the man who could do it. Because, as I've said, Norton was watching. Andy knew it, and the screws knew it, too.

Nobody was going to nominate Andy for the Inside-Out program, not as long as Warden Norton was evaluating the nominations. And Andy was not the kind of man to try a casual Sid Nedeau type of escape.

If I had been him, the thought of that key would have tormented me endlessly. I would have been lucky to get two hours' worth of honest shut-eye a night. Buxton was less than thirty miles from Shawshank. So near and yet so far.

I still thought his best chance was to engage a lawyer and try for the retrial. Anything to get out from under Norton's thumb. Maybe Tommy Williams could be shut up by nothing more than a cushy furlough program, but I wasn't entirely sure. Maybe a good old Mississippi hard-ass lawyer could crack him ... and maybe that lawyer wouldn't even have to work that hard. Williams had honestly liked Andy. Every now and then I'd bring these points up to Andy, who would only smile, his eyes far away, and say he was thinking about it.

Apparently he'd been thinking about a lot of other things, as well.

In 1975, Andy Dufresne escaped from Shawshank. He hasn't been recaptured, and I don't think he ever will be. In fact, I don't think Andy Dufresne even exists anymore. But I think there's a man down in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, named Peter Stevens. Probably running a very new small hotel in this year of our Lord 1976.

I'll tell you what I know and what I think; that's about all I can do, isn't it?

On March 12th, 1975, the cell doors in Cellblock 5 opened at 6:30 A.M., as they do every morning around here except Sunday. And as they do every day except Sunday, the inmates of those cells stepped forward into the corridor and formed two lines as the cell doors slammed shut behind them. They walked up to the main cellblock gate, where they were counted off by two guards before being sent on down to the cafeteria for a breakfast of oatmeal, scrambled eggs, and fatty bacon.

All of this went according to routine until the count at the cellblock gate. There should have been twenty-seven. Instead, there were twenty-six. After a call to the Captain of the Guards, Cellblock 5 was allowed to go to breakfast.

The Captain of the Guards, a not half-bad fellow named Richard Gonyar, and his assistant, a jolly prick named Dave Burkes, came down to Cellblock 5 right away. Gonyar reopened the cell doors and he and Burkes went down the corridor together, dragging their sticks over the bars, their guns out. In a case like that what you usually have is someone who has been taken sick in the night, so sick he can't even step out of his cell in the morning. More rarely, someone has died... or committed suicide.

But this time, they found a mystery instead of a sick man or a dead man. They found no man at all. There were fourteen cells in Cellblock 5, seven to a side, all fairly neat—restriction of visiting privileges is the penalty for a sloppy cell at Shawshank—and all very empty.

Gonyar's first assumption was that there had been a miscount or a practical joke. So instead of going off to work after breakfast, the inmates of Cellblock 5 were sent back to their cells, joking and happy. Any break in the routine was always welcome.

Cell doors opened; prisoners stepped in; cell doors closed. Some clown shouting, "I want my lawyer, I want my lawyer, you guys run this place just like a frigging prison."

Burkes: "Shut up in there, or I'll rank you."

The clown: "I ranked your wife, Burkie."

Gonyar: "Shut up, all of you, or you'll spend the day in there."

He and Burkes went up the line again, counting noses. They didn't have to go far.

"Who belongs in this cell?" Gonyar asked the rightside night guard.

"Andrew Dufresne," the rightside answered, and that was all it took. Everything stopped being routine right then. The balloon went up.

In all the prison movies I've seen, this wailing horn goes off when there's been a break. That never happens at Shawshank. The first thing Gonyar did was to get in touch with the warden. The second thing was to get a search of the prison going. The third was to alert the state police in Scarborough to the possibility of a breakout.

That was the routine. It didn't call for them to search the suspected escapee's cell, and so no one did. Not then. Why would they? It was a case of what you see is what you get. It was a small square room, bars on the window and bars on the sliding door. There was a toilet and an empty cot. Some pretty rocks on the windowsill.

And the poster, of course. It was Linda Ronstadt by then. The poster was right over his bunk. There had been a poster there, in that exact same place, for twenty-six years. And when someone—it was

Warden Norton himself, as it turned out, poetic justice if there ever was any—looked behind it, they got one hell of a shock.

But that didn't happen until six-thirty that night, almost twelve hours after Andy had been reported missing, probably twenty hours after he had actually made his escape.

Norton hit the roof.

I have it on good authority—Chester, the trusty, who was waxing the hall floor in the Admin Wing that day. He didn't have to polish any keyplates with his ear that day; he said you could hear the warden clear down to Records & Files as he chewed on Rich Gonyar's ass.

“What do you mean, you're 'satisfied he's not on the prison grounds'? What does that mean? It means you didn't find him! You better find him! You better! Because I want him! Do you hear me? I want him!”

Gonyar said something.

“Didn't happen on your shift? That's what you say. So far as I can tell, no one knows when it happened. Or how. Or if it really did. Now, I want him in my office by three o'clock this afternoon, or some heads are going to roll. I can promise you that, and I always keep my promises.”

Something else from Gonyar, something that seemed to provoke Norton to even greater rage.

“No? Then look at this! Look at this! You recognize it? Last night's tally for Cellblock Five. Every prisoner accounted for! Dufresne was locked up last night at nine and it is impossible for him to be gone now! It is impossible! Now you find him!”

But at three that afternoon Andy was still among the missing. Norton himself stormed down to Cellblock 5 a few hours later, where the rest of us had been locked up all of that day. Had we been questioned?

We had spent most of that long day being questioned by harried screws who were feeling the breath of the dragon on the backs of their necks. We all said the same thing: we had seen nothing, heard nothing. And so far as I know, we were all telling the truth. I know that I was. All we could say was that Andy had indeed been in his cell at the time of the lock-in, and at lights-out an hour later.

One wit suggested that Andy had poured himself out through the keyhole. The suggestion earned the guy four days in solitary. They were uptight.

So Norton came down—stalked down—glaring at us with blue eyes nearly hot enough to strike sparks from the tempered steel bars of our cages. He looked at us as if he believed we were all in on it. Probably he did believe it.

He went into Andy's cell and looked around. It was just as Andy had left it, the sheets on his bunk turned back but without looking slept-in. Rocks on the windowsill... but not all of them. The ones he liked best he took with him.

"Rocks," Norton hissed, and swept them off the window ledge with a clatter. Gonyar, who was now on overtime, winced but said nothing.

Norton's eyes fell on the Linda Ronstadt poster. Linda was looking back over her shoulder, her hands tucked into the back pockets of a very tight pair of fawn-colored slacks. She was wearing a halter and she had a deep California tan. It must have offended the hell out of Norton's Baptist sensibilities, that poster. Watching him glare at it, I remembered what Andy had once said about feeling he could almost step through the picture and be with the girl.

In a very real way, that was exactly what he did—as Norton was only seconds from discovering.

"Wretched thing!" he grunted, and ripped the poster from the wall with a single swipe of his hand.

And revealed the gaping, crumbled hole in the concrete behind it.

Gonyar wouldn't go in.

Norton ordered him—God, they must have heard Norton ordering Rich Gonyar to go in there all over the prison—and Gonyar just refused him, point blank.

“I'll have your job for this!” Norton screamed. He was as hysterical as a woman having a hot-flash. He had utterly blown his cool. His neck had turned a rich, dark red, and two veins stood out, throbbing, on his forehead. “You can count on it, you... you Frenchman! I'll have your job and I'll see to it that you never get another one in any prison system in New England!”

Gonyar silently held out his service pistol to Norton, butt first. He'd had enough. He was then two hours overtime, going on three, and he'd just had enough. It was as if Andy's defection from our happy little family had driven Norton right over the edge of some private irrationality that had been there for a long time... certainly he was crazy that night.

I don't know what that private irrationality might have been, of course. But I do know that there were twenty-six cons listening to Norton's little dust-up with Rich Gonyar that evening as the last of the light faded from a dull late-winter sky, all of us hard-timers and long-line riders who had seen the administrators come and go, the hard-asses and the candy-asses alike, and we all knew that Warden Samuel Norton had just passed what the engineers like to call “the breaking strain.”

And by God, it almost seemed to me that somewhere I could hear Andy Dufresne laughing.

Norton finally got a skinny drink of water on the night shift to go into the hole that had been behind Andy's poster of Linda Ronstadt. The skinny guard's name was Rory Tremont, and he was not exactly a ball of fire in the brains department. Maybe he thought he was going

to win a Bronze Star or something. As it turned out, it was fortunate that Norton got someone of Andy's approximate height and build to go in there; if they had sent a big-assed fellow—as most prison guards seem to be—the guy would have stuck in there as sure as God made green grass... and he might be there still.

Tremont went in with a nylon filament rope, which someone had found in the trunk of his car, tied around his waist and a big six-battery flashlight in one hand. By then Gonyar, who had changed his mind about quitting and who seemed to be the only one there still able to think clearly, had dug out a set of blueprints. I knew well enough what they showed him—a wall which looked, in cross-section, like a sandwich. The entire wall was ten feet thick. The inner and outer sections were each about four feet thick. In the center was two feet of pipe-space, and you want to believe that was the meat of the thing... in more ways than one.

Tremont's voice came out of the hole, sounding hollow and dead. "Something smells awful in here, Warden."

"Never mind that! Keep going."

Tremont's lower legs disappeared into the hole. A moment later his feet were gone, too. His light flashed dimly back and forth.

"Warden, it smells pretty damn bad."

"Never mind, I said!" Norton cried.

Dolorously, Tremont's voice floated back: "Smells like shit. Oh God, that's what it is, it's shit, oh my God lemme outta here I'm gonna blow my groceries oh shit it's shit oh my Gawwwwwd—" And then came the unmistakable sound of Rory Tremont losing his last couple of meals.

Well, that was it for me. I couldn't help myself. The whole day—hell no, the last thirty years—all came up on me at once and I started laughing fit to split, a laugh such as I'd never had since I was a free

man, the kind of laugh I never expected to have inside these gray walls. And oh dear God didn't it feel good!

"Get that man out of here!" Warden Norton was screaming, and I was laughing so hard I didn't know if he meant me or Tremont. I just went on laughing and kicking my feet and holding onto my belly. I couldn't have stopped if Norton had threatened to shoot me dead-bang on the spot. "Get him OUT!"

Well, friends and neighbors, I was the one who went. Straight down to solitary, and there I stayed for fifteen days. A long shot. But every now and then I'd think about poor old not-too-bright Rory Tremont bellowing oh shit it's shit, and then I'd think about Andy Dufresne heading south in his own car, dressed in a nice suit, and I'd just have to laugh. I did that fifteen days in solitary practically standing on my head. Maybe because half of me was with Andy Dufresne, Andy Dufresne who had waded in shit and came out clean on the other side, Andy Dufresne, headed for the Pacific.

I heard the rest of what went on that night from half a dozen sources. There wasn't all that much, anyway. I guess that Rory Tremont decided he didn't have much left to lose after he'd lost his lunch and dinner, because he did go on. There was no danger of falling down the pipe-shaft between the inner and outer segments of the cellblock wall; it was so narrow that Tremont actually had to wedge himself down. He said later that he could only take half-breaths and that he knew what it would be like to be buried alive.

What he found at the bottom of the shaft was a master sewer-pipe which served the fourteen toilets in Cellblock 5, a porcelain pipe that had been laid thirty-three years before. It had been broken into. Beside the jagged hole in the pipe, Tremont found Andy's rock-hammer.

Andy had gotten free, but it hadn't been easy.

The pipe was even narrower than the shaft Tremont had just descended. Rory Tremont didn't go in, and so far as I know, no one

else did, either. It must have been damn near unspeakable. A rat jumped out of the pipe as Tremont was examining the hole and the rock-hammer, and he swore later that it was nearly as big as a cocker spaniel pup. He went back up the crawlspace to Andy's cell like a monkey on a stick.

Andy had gone into that pipe. Maybe he knew that it emptied into a stream five hundred yards beyond the prison on the marshy western side. I think he did. The prison blueprints were around, and Andy would have found a way to look at them. He was a methodical cuss. He would have known or found out that the sewer-pipe running out of Cellblock 5 was the last one in Shawshank not hooked into the new waste-treatment plant, and he would have known it was do it by mid-1975 or do it never, because in August they were going to switch us over to the new waste-treatment plant, too.

Five hundred yards. The length of five football fields. Just shy of half a mile. He crawled that distance, maybe with one of those small Penlites in his hand, maybe with nothing but a couple of books of matches. He crawled through foulness that I either can't imagine or don't want to imagine. Maybe the rats scattered in front of him, or maybe they went for him the way such animals sometimes will when they've had a chance to grow bold in the dark. He must have had just enough clearance at the shoulders to keep moving, and he probably had to shove himself through the places where the lengths of pipe were joined. If it had been me, the claustrophobia would have driven me mad a dozen times over. But he did it.

At the far end of the pipe they found a set of muddy footprints leading out of the sluggish, polluted creek the pipe fed into. Two miles from there a search party found his prison uniform—that was a day later.

The story broke big in the papers, as you might guess, but no one within a fifteen-mile radius of the prison stepped forward to report a stolen car, stolen clothes, or a naked man in the moonlight. There was not so much as a barking dog in a farmyard. He came out of the sewer-pipe and he disappeared like smoke.

But I am betting he disappeared in the direction of Buxton.

Three months after that memorable day, Warden Norton resigned. He was a broken man, it gives me great pleasure to report. The spring was gone from his step. On his last day he shuffled out with his head down like an old con shuffling down to the infirmary for his codeine pills. It was Gonyar who took over, and to Norton that must have seemed like the unkindest cut of all. For all I know, Sam Norton is down there in Eliot now, attending services at the Baptist church every Sunday, and wondering how the hell Andy Dufresne ever could have gotten the better of him.

I could have told him; the answer to the question is simplicity itself. Some have got it, Sam. And some don't, and never will.

That's what I know; now I'm going to tell you what I think. I may have it wrong on some of the specifics, but I'd be willing to bet my watch and chain that I've got the general outline down pretty well. Because, with Andy being the sort of man that he was, there's only one or two ways that it could have been. And every now and then, when I think it out, I think of Normaden, that half-crazy Indian. "Nice fella," Normaden had said after celling with Andy for eight months. "I was glad to go, me. Bad draft in that cell. All the time cold. He don't let nobody touch his things. That's okay. Nice man, never made fun. But big draft." Poor crazy Normaden. He knew more than all the rest of us, and he knew it sooner. And it was eight long months before Andy could get him out of there and have the cell to himself again. If it hadn't been for the eight months Normaden had spent with him after Warden Norton first came in, I do believe that Andy would have been free before Nixon resigned.

I believe now that it began in 1949, way back then—not with the rock-hammer, but with the Rita Hayworth poster. I told you how nervous he seemed when he asked for that, nervous and filled with suppressed excitement. At the time I thought it was just embarrassment, that Andy was the sort of guy who'd never want someone else to know that he had feet of clay and wanted a woman... especially if it was a fantasy-woman. But I think now that I

was wrong. I think now that Andy's excitement came from something else altogether.

What was responsible for the hole that Warden Norton eventually found behind the poster of a girl that hadn't even been born when that photo of Rita Hayworth was taken? Andy Dufresne's perseverance and hard work, yeah—I don't take any of that away from him. But there were two other elements in the equation: a lot of luck, and WPA concrete.

You don't need me to explain the luck, I guess. The WPA concrete I checked out for myself. I invested some time and a couple of stamps and wrote first to the University of Maine History Department and then to a fellow whose address they were able to give me. This fellow had been foreman of the WPA project that built the Shawshank Max Security Wing.

The wing, which contains Cellblocks 3, 4, and 5, was built in the years 1934-37. Now, most people don't think of cement and concrete as "technological developments," the way we think of cars and old furnaces and rocket-ships, but they really are. There was no modern cement until 1870 or so, and no modern concrete until after the turn of the century. Mixing concrete is as delicate a business as making bread. You can get it too watery or not watery enough. You can get the sand-mix too thick or too thin, and the same is true of the gravel-mix. And back in 1934, the science of mixing the stuff was a lot less sophisticated than it is today.

The walls of Cellblock 5 were solid enough, but they weren't exactly dry and toasty. As a matter of fact, they were and are pretty damned dank. After a long wet spell they would sweat and sometimes even drip. Cracks had a way of appearing, some an inch deep. They were routinely mortared over.

Now here comes Andy Dufresne into Cellblock 5. He's a man who graduated from the University of Maine's school of business, but he's also a man who took two or three geology courses along the way. Geology had, in fact, become his chief hobby. I imagine it appealed

to his patient, meticulous nature. A ten-thousand-year ice age here. A million years of mountain-building there. Plates of bedrock grinding against each other deep under the earth's skin over the millennia. Pressure. Andy told me once that all of geology is the study of pressure.

And time, of course.

He had time to study those walls. Plenty of time. When the cell door slams and the lights go out, there's nothing else to look at.

First-timers usually have a hard time adjusting to the confinement of prison life. They get screw-fever. Sometimes they have to be hauled down to the infirmary and sedated a couple of times before they get on the beam. It's not unusual to hear some new member of our happy little family banging on the bars of his cell and screaming to be let out... and before the cries have gone on for long, the chant starts up along the cellblock: "Fresh fish, hey little fishie, fresh fish, fresh fish, got fresh fish today!"

Andy didn't flip out like that when he came to The Shank in 1948, but that's not to say that he didn't feel many of the same things. He may have come close to madness; some do, and some go sailing right over the edge. Old life blown away in the wink of an eye, indeterminate nightmare stretching out ahead, a long season in hell.

So what did he do, I ask you? He searched almost desperately for something to divert his restless mind. Oh, there are all sorts of ways to divert yourself, even in prison; it seems like the human mind is full of an infinite number of possibilities when it comes to diversion. I told you about the sculptor and his Three Ages of Jesus. There were coin collectors who were always losing their collections to thieves, stamp collectors, one fellow who had postcards from thirty-five different countries—and let me tell you, he would have turned out your lights if he'd caught you diddling with his postcards.

Andy got interested in rocks. And the walls of his cell.

I think that his initial intention might have been to do no more than to carve his initials into the wall where the poster of Rita Hayworth would soon be hanging. His initials, or maybe a few lines from some poem. Instead, what he found was that interestingly weak concrete. Maybe he started to carve his initials and a big chunk of the wall just fell out. I can see him, lying there on his bunk, looking at that broken chunk of concrete, turning it over in his hands. Never mind the wreck of your whole life, never mind that you got railroaded into this place by a whole trainload of bad luck. Let's forget all that and look at this piece of concrete.

Some months further along he might have decided it would be fun to see how much of that wall he could take out. But you can't just start digging into your wall and then, when the weekly inspection (or one of the surprise inspections that are always turning up interesting caches of booze, drugs, dirty pictures, and weapons) comes around, say to the guard:

"This? Just excavating a little hole in my cell wall. Not to worry, my good man."

No, he couldn't have that. So he came to me and asked if I could get him a Rita Hayworth poster. Not a little one but a big one.

And, of course, he had the rock-hammer. I remember thinking when I got him that gadget back in '48 that it would take a man six hundred years to burrow through the wall with it. True enough. But Andy only had to go through half the wall—and even with the soft concrete, it took him two rock-hammers and twenty-seven years to do it.

Of course he lost most of one of those years to Normaden, and he could only work at night, preferably late at night, when almost everybody is asleep—including the guards who work the night shift. But I suspect the thing which slowed him down the most was getting rid of the wall as he took it out. He could muffle the sound of his work by wrapping the head of his hammer in rock-polishing cloths, but what to do with the pulverized concrete and the occasional chunks that came out whole?

I think he must have broken up the chunks into pebbles and ...

I remember the Sunday after I had gotten him the rock-hammer. I remember watching him walk across the exercise yard, his face puffy from his latest go-round with the sisters. I saw him stoop, pick up a pebble... and it disappeared up his sleeve. That inside sleeve-pocket is an old prison trick. Up your sleeve or just inside the cuff of your pants. And I have another memory, very strong but unfocused, maybe something I saw more than once. This memory is of Andy Dufresne walking across the exercise yard on a hot summer day when the air was utterly still. Still, yeah ... except for the little breeze that seemed to be blowing sand around Andy Dufresne's feet.

So maybe he had a couple of cheaters in his pants below the knees. You loaded the cheaters up with fill and then just strolled around, your hands in your pockets, and when you felt safe and unobserved, you gave the pockets a little twitch. The pockets, of course, are attached by string or strong thread to the cheaters. The fill goes cascading out of your pantslegs as you walk. The World War II POWs who were trying to tunnel out used the dodge.

The years went past and Andy brought his wall out to the exercise yard cupful by cupful. He played the game with administrator after administrator, and they thought it was because he wanted to keep the library growing. I have no doubt that was part of it, but the main thing Andy wanted was to keep Cell 14 in Cellblock 5 a single occupancy.

I doubt if he had any real plans or hopes of breaking out, at least not at first. He probably assumed the wall was ten feet of solid concrete, and that if he succeeded in boring all the way through it, he'd come out thirty feet over the exercise yard. But like I say, I don't think he was worried overmuch about breaking through. His assumption could have run this way: I'm only making a foot of progress every seven years or so; therefore, it would take me seventy years to break through; that would make me one hundred and one years old.

Here's a second assumption I would have made, had I been Andy: that eventually I would be caught and get a lot of solitary time, not to mention a very large black mark on my record. After all, there was the regular weekly inspection and a surprise toss—which usually came at night—every second week or so. He must have decided that things couldn't go on for long. Sooner or later, some screw was going to peek behind Rita Hayworth just to make sure Andy didn't have a sharpened spoon-handle or some marijuana reefers Scotch-taped to the wall.

And his response to that second assumption must have been To hell with it. Maybe he even made a game out of it. How far in can I get before they find out? Prison is a goddam boring place, and the chance of being surprised by an unscheduled inspection in the middle of the night while he had his poster unstuck probably added some spice to his life during the early years.

And I do believe it would have been impossible for him to get away with it just on dumb luck. Not for twenty-seven years. Nevertheless, I have to believe that for the first two years—until mid-May of 1950, when he helped Byron Hadley get around the tax on his windfall inheritance—that's exactly what he did get by on.

Or maybe he had something more than dumb luck going for him even back then. He had money, and he might have been slipping someone a little squeeze every week to take it easy on him. Most guards will go along with that if the price is right; it's money in their pockets and the prisoner gets to keep his whack-off pictures or his tailormade cigarettes. Also, Andy was a model prisoner—quiet, well-spoken, respectful, non-violent. It's the crazies and the stampeders that get their cells turned upside-down at least once every six months, their mattresses unzipped, their pillows taken away and cut open, the outflow pipe from their toilets carefully probed.

Then, in 1950, Andy became something more than a model prisoner. In 1950, he became a valuable commodity, a murderer who did tax-returns better than H & R Block. He gave gratis estate-planning advice, set up tax-shelters, filled out loan applications (sometimes

creatively). I can remember him sitting behind his desk in the library, patiently going over a car-loan agreement paragraph by paragraph with a screwhead who wanted to buy a used DeSoto, telling the guy what was good about the agreement and what was bad about it, explaining to him that it was possible to shop for a loan and not get hit quite so bad, steering him away from the finance companies, which in those days were sometimes little better than legal loan-sharks. When he'd finished, the screwhead started to put out his hand... and then drew it back to himself quickly. He'd forgotten for a moment, you see, that he was dealing with a mascot, not a man.

Andy kept up on the tax laws and the changes in the stock market, and so his usefulness didn't end after he'd been in cold storage for awhile, as it might have done. He began to get his library money, his running war with the sisters had ended, and nobody tossed his cell very hard. He was a good nigger.

Then one day, very late in the going—perhaps around October of 1967—the long-time hobby suddenly turned into something else. One night while he was in the hole up to his waist with Raquel Welch hanging down over his ass, the pick end of his rock-hammer must have suddenly sunk into concrete past the hilt.

He would have dragged some chunks of concrete back, but maybe he heard others falling down into that shaft, bouncing back and forth, clinking off that standpipe. Did he know by then that he was going to come upon that shaft, or was he totally surprised? I don't know. He might have seen the prison blueprints by then or he might not have. If not, you can be damned sure he found a way to look at them not long after.

All at once he must have realized that, instead of just playing a game, he was playing for high stakes... in terms of his own life and his own future, the highest. Even then he couldn't have known for sure, but he must have had a pretty good idea because it was right around then that he talked to me about Zihuatanejo for the first time. All of a sudden, instead of just being a toy, that stupid hole in the wall

became his master—if he knew about the sewer-pipe at the bottom, and that it led under the outer wall, it did, anyway.

He'd had the key under the rock in Buxton to worry about for years. Now he had to worry that some eager-beaver new guard would look behind his poster and expose the whole thing, or that he would get another cellmate, or that he would, after all those years, suddenly be transferred. He had all those things on his mind for the next eight years. All I can say is that he must have been one of the coolest men who ever lived. I would have gone completely nuts after awhile, living with all that uncertainty. But Andy just went on playing the game.

He had to carry the possibility of discovery for another eight years—the probability of it, you might say, because no matter how carefully he stacked the cards in his favor, as an inmate of a state prison, he just didn't have that many to stack ... and the gods had been kind to him for a very long time; some nineteen years.

The most ghastly irony I can think of would have been if he had been offered a parole. Can you imagine it? Three days before the parolee is actually released, he is transferred into the light security wing to undergo a complete physical and a battery of vocational tests. While he's there, his old cell is completely cleaned out. Instead of getting his parole, Andy would have gotten a long turn downstairs in solitary, followed by some more time upstairs ... but in a different cell.

If he broke into the shaft in 1967, how come he didn't escape until 1975?

I don't know for sure—but I can advance some pretty good guesses.

First, he would have become more careful than ever. He was too smart to just push ahead at flank speed and try to get out in eight months, or even in eighteen. He must have gone on widening the opening on the crawlspace a little at a time. A hole as big as a teacup by the time he took his New Year's

Eve drink that year. A hole as big as a dinner-plate by the time he took his birthday drink in 1968. As big as a serving-tray by the time the 1969 baseball season opened.

For a time I thought it should have gone much faster than it apparently did—after he broke through, I mean. It seemed to me that, instead of having to pulverize the crap and take it out of his cell in the cheater gadgets I have described, he could simply let it drop down the shaft. The length of time he took makes me believe that he didn't dare do that. He might have decided that the noise would arouse someone's suspicions. Or, if he knew about the sewer-pipe, as I believe he must have, he would have been afraid that a falling chunk of concrete would break it before he was ready, screwing up the cellblock sewage system and leading to an investigation. And an investigation, needless to say, would lead to ruin.

Still and all, I'd guess that, by the time Nixon was sworn in for his second term, the hole would have been wide enough for him to wriggle through... and probably sooner than that. Andy was a small guy.

Why didn't he go then?

That's where my educated guesses run out, folks; from this point they become progressively wilder. One possibility is that the crawlspace itself was clogged with crap and he had to clear it out. But that wouldn't account for all the time. So what was it?

I think that maybe Andy got scared.

I've told you as well as I can how it is to be an institutional man. At first you can't stand those four walls, then you get so you can abide them, then you get so you accept them... and then, as your body and your mind and your spirit adjust to live on an HO scale, you get to love them. You are told when to eat, when you can write letters, when you can smoke. If you're at work in the laundry or the plate-shop, you're assigned five minutes of each hour when you can go to the bathroom. For thirty-five years, my time was twenty-five minutes

after the hour, and after thirty-five years, that's the only time I ever felt the need to take a piss or have a crap; twenty-five minutes past the hour. And if for some reason I couldn't go, the need would pass at thirty after, and come back at twenty-five past the next hour.

I think Andy may have been wrestling with that tiger—that institutional syndrome—and also with the bulking fears that all of it might have been for nothing.

How many nights must he have lain awake under his poster, thinking about that sewer line, knowing that the one chance was all he'd ever get? The blueprints might have told him how big the pipe's bore was, but a blueprint couldn't tell him what it would be like inside that pipe—if he would be able to breathe without choking, if the rats were big enough and mean enough to fight instead of retreating... and a blueprint couldn't've told him what he'd find at the end of the pipe, when and if he got there. Here's a joke even funnier than the parole would have been: Andy breaks into the sewer line, crawls through five hundred yards of choking, shit-smelling darkness, and comes up against a heavy-gauge mesh screen at the end of it. Ha, ha, very funny.

That would have been on his mind. And if the long shot actually came in and he was able to get out, would he be able to get some civilian clothes and get away from the vicinity of the prison undetected? Last of all, suppose he got out of the pipe, got away from Shawshank before the alarm was raised, got to Buxton, overturned the right rock... and found nothing beneath? Not necessarily something so dramatic as arriving at the right field and discovering that a highrise apartment building had been erected on the spot, or that it had been turned into a supermarket parking lot. It could have been that some little kid who liked rocks noticed that piece of volcanic glass, turned it over, saw the deposit-box key, and took both it and the rock back to his room as souvenirs. Maybe a November hunter kicked the rock, left the key exposed, and a squirrel or a crow with a liking for bright shiny things had taken it

away. Maybe there had been spring floods one year, breaching the wall, washing the key away. Maybe anything.

So I think—wild guess or not—that Andy just froze in place for awhile. After all, you can't lose if you don't bet. What did he have to lose, you ask? His library, for one thing. The poison peace of institutional life, for another. Any future chance to grab his safe identity.

But he finally did it, just as I have told you. He tried ... and, my! Didn't he succeed in spectacular fashion? You tell me!

But did he get away, you ask? What happened after? What happened when he got to that meadow and turned over that rock ... always assuming the rock was still there?

I can't describe that scene for you, because this institutional man is still in this institution, and expects to be for years to come.

But I'll tell you this. Very late in the summer of 1975, on September 15th, to be exact, I got a postcard which had been mailed from the tiny town of McNary, Texas. That town is on the American side of the border, directly across from El Porvenir. The message side of the card was totally blank. But I know. I know it in my heart as surely as I know that we're all going to die someday.

McNary was where he crossed. McNary, Texas.

So that's my story, Jack. I never believed how long it would take to write it all down, or how many pages it would take. I started writing just after I got that postcard, and here I am finishing up on January 14th, 1976. I've used three pencils right down to knuckle-stubs, and a whole tablet of paper. I've kept the pages carefully hidden ... not that many could read my hen-tracks, anyway.

It stirred up more memories than I ever would have believed. Writing about yourself seems to be a lot like sticking a branch into clear river-water and roiling up the muddy bottom.

Well, you weren't writing about yourself, I hear someone in the peanut-gallery saying. You were writing about Andy Dufresne. You're nothing but a minor character in your own story. But you know, that's just not so. It's all about me, every damned word of it. Andy was the part of me they could never lock up, the part of me that will rejoice when the gates finally open for me and I walk out in my cheap suit with my twenty dollars of mad-money in my pocket. That part of me will rejoice no matter how old and broken and scared the rest of me is. I guess it's just that Andy had more of that part than me, and used it better.

There are others here like me, others who remember Andy. We're glad he's gone, but a little sad, too. Some birds are not meant to be caged, that's all. Their feathers are too bright, their songs too sweet and wild. So you let them go, or when you open the cage to feed them they somehow fly out past you. And the part of you that knows it was wrong to imprison them in the first place rejoices, but still, the place where you live is that much more drab and empty for their departure.

That's the story and I'm glad I told it, even if it is a bit inconclusive and even though some of the memories the pencil prodded up (like that branch poking up the river-mud) made me feel a little sad and even older than I am. Thank you for listening. And Andy, if you're really down there, as I believe you are, look at the stars for me just after sunset, and touch the sand, and wade in the water, and feel free.

I never expected to take up this narrative again, but here I am with the dog-eared, folded pages open on the desk in front of me. Here I am adding another three or four pages, writing in a brand-new tablet. A tablet I bought in a store—I just walked into a store on Portland's Congress Street and bought it.

I thought I had put finish to my story in a Shawshank prison cell on a bleak January day in 1976. Now it's May of 1977 and I am sitting in a small, cheap room of the Brewster Hotel in Portland, adding to it.

The window is open, and the sound of the traffic floating in seems huge, exciting, and intimidating. I have to look constantly over at the window and reassure myself that there are no bars on it. I sleep poorly at night because the bed in this room, as cheap as the room is, seems much too big and luxurious. I snap awake every morning promptly at six-thirty, feeling disoriented and frightened. My dreams are bad. I have a crazy feeling of free fall. The sensation is as terrifying as it is exhilarating.

What has happened in my life? Can't you guess? I was paroled. After thirty-eight years of routine hearings and routine denials (in the course of those thirty-eight years, three lawyers died on me), my parole was granted. I suppose they decided that, at the age of fifty-eight, I was finally used up enough to be deemed safe.

I came very close to burning the document you have just read. They search outgoing parolees almost as carefully as they search incoming "new fish." And beyond containing enough dynamite to assure me of a quick turnaround and another six or eight years inside, my "memoirs" contained something else: the name of the town where I believe Andy Dufresne to be. Mexican police gladly cooperate with the American police, and I didn't want my freedom—or my unwillingness to give up the story I'd worked so long and hard to write—to cost Andy his.

Then I remembered how Andy had brought in his five hundred dollars back in 1948, and I took out my story of him the same way. Just to be on the safe side, I carefully rewrote each page which mentioned Zihuatanejo. If the papers had been found during my "outside search," as they call it at The Shank, I would have gone back in on turnaround... but the cops would have been looking for Andy in a Peruvian seacoast town named Las Intrudres.

The Parole Committee got me a job as a "stock-room assistant" at the big FoodWay Market at the Spruce Mall in South Portland—which means I became just one more ageing bag-boy. There's only two kinds of bag-boys, you know; the old ones and the young ones. No one ever looks at either kind. If you shop at the Spruce Mall

FoodWay, I may have even taken your groceries out to your car ... but you'd have had to have shopped there between March and April of 1977, because that's as long as I worked there.

At first I didn't think I was going to be able to make it on the outside at all. I've described prison society as a scaled-down model of your outside world, but I had no idea of how fast things moved on the outside; the raw speed people move at. They even talk faster. And louder.

It was the toughest adjustment I've ever had to make, and I haven't finished making it yet... not by a long way. Women, for instance. After hardly knowing that they were half of the human race for forty years, I was suddenly working in a store filled with them. Old women, pregnant women wearing tee-shirts with arrows pointing downward and a printed motto reading BABY HERE, skinny women with their nipples poking out at their shirts—a woman wearing something like that when I went in would have gotten arrested and then had a sanity hearing—women of every shape and size. I found myself going around with a semi-hard almost all the time and cursing myself for being a dirty old man.

Going to the bathroom, that was another thing. When I had to go (and the urge always came on me at twenty-five past the hour), I had to fight the almost overwhelming need to check it with my boss. Knowing that was something I could just go and do in this too-bright outside world was one thing; adjusting my inner self to that knowledge after all those years of checking it with the nearest screwhead or facing two days in solitary for the oversight... that was something else.

My boss didn't like me. He was a young guy, twenty-six or -seven, and I could see that I sort of disgusted him, the way a cringing, servile old dog that crawls up to you on its belly to be petted will disgust a man. Christ, I disgusted myself. But... I couldn't make myself stop. I wanted to tell him: That's what a whole life in prison does for you, young man. It turns everyone in a position of authority into a master, and you into every master's dog. Maybe you know

you've become a dog, even in prison, but since everyone else in gray is a dog, too, it doesn't seem to matter so much. Outside, it does. But I couldn't tell a young guy like him. He would never understand. Neither would my PO, a big, bluff ex-Navy man with a huge red beard and a large stock of Polish jokes. He saw me for about five minutes every week. "Are you staying out of the bars, Red?" he'd ask when he'd run out of Polish jokes. I'd say yeah, and that would be the end of it until next week.

Music on the radio. When I went in, the big bands were just getting up a good head of steam. Now every song sounds like it's about fucking. So many cars. At first I felt like I was taking my life into my hands every time I crossed the street.

There was more—everything was strange and frightening—but maybe you get the idea, or can at least grasp a corner of it. I began to think about doing something to get back in. When you're on parole, almost anything will serve. I'm ashamed to say it, but I began to think about stealing some money or shoplifting stuff from the FoodWay, anything, to get back in where it was quiet and you knew everything that was going to come up in the course of the day.

If I had never known Andy, I probably would have done that. But I kept thinking of him, spending all those years chipping patiently away at the cement with his rock-hammer so he could be free. I thought of that and it made me ashamed and I'd drop the idea again. Oh, you can say he had more reason to be free than I did—he had a new identity and a lot of money. But that's not really true, you know. Because he didn't know for sure that the new identity was still there, and without the new identity, the money would always be out of reach. No, what he needed was just to be free, and if I kicked away what I had, it would be like spitting in the face of everything he had worked so hard to win back.

So what I started to do on my time off was to hitchhike rides down to the little town of Buxton. This was in the early April of 1977, the snow just starting to melt off the fields, the air just beginning to be warm, the baseball teams coming north to start a new season playing the

only game I'm sure God approves of. When I went on these trips, I carried a Silva compass in my pocket.

There's a big hayfield in Buxton, Andy had said, and at the north end of that hayfield there's a rock wall, right out of a Robert Frost poem. And somewhere along the base of that wall is a rock that has no earthly business in a Maine hayfield.

A fool's errand, you say. How many hayfields are there in a small rural town like Buxton? Fifty? A hundred? Speaking from personal experience, I'd put it at even higher than that, if you add in the fields now cultivated which might have been haygrass when Andy went in. And if I did find the right one, I might never know it. Because I might overlook that black piece of volcanic glass, or, much more likely, Andy put it into his pocket and took it with him.

So I'd agree with you. A fool's errand, no doubt about it. Worse, a dangerous one for a man on parole, because some of those fields were clearly marked with NO TRESPASSING signs. And, as I've said, they're more than happy to slam your ass back inside if you get out of line. A fool's errand ... but so is chipping at a blank concrete wall for twenty-seven years. And when you're no longer the man who can get it for you and just an old bag-boy, it's nice to have a hobby to take your mind off your new life. My hobby was looking for Andy's rock.

So I'd hitchhike to Buxton and walk the roads. I'd listen to the birds, to the spring runoff in the culverts, examine the bottles the retreating snows had revealed—all useless non-returnables, I am sorry to say; the world seems to have gotten awfully spendthrift since I went into the slam—and looking for hayfields.

Most of them could be eliminated right off. No rock walls. Others had rock walls, but my compass told me they were facing the wrong direction. I walked these wrong ones anyway. It was a comfortable thing to be doing, and on those outings I really felt free, at peace. An old dog walked with me one Saturday. And one day I saw a winter-skinny deer.

Then came April 23rd, a day I'll not forget even if I live another fifty-eight years. It was a balmy Saturday afternoon, and I was walking up what a little boy fishing from a bridge told me was called The Old Smith Road. I had taken a lunch in a brown FoodWay bag, and had eaten it sitting on a rock by the road. When I was done I carefully buried my leavings, as my dad taught me before he died, when I was a sprat no older than the fisherman who had named the road for me.

Around two o'clock I came to a big field on my left. There was a stone wall at the far end of it, running roughly northwest. I walked back to it, squelching over the wet ground, and began to walk the wall. A squirrel scolded me from an oak tree.

Three-quarters of the way to the end, I saw the rock. No mistake. Black glass and as smooth as silk. A rock with no earthly business in a Maine hayfield. For a long time I just looked at it, feeling that I might cry, for whatever reason. The squirrel had followed me, and it was still chattering away. My heart was beating madly.

When I felt I had myself under control, I went to the rock, squatted beside it—the joints in my knees went off like a double-barrelled shotgun—and let my hand touch it. It was real. I didn't pick it up because I thought there would be anything under it; I could just as easily have walked away without finding what was beneath. I certainly had no plans to take it away with me, because I didn't feel it was mine to take—I had a feeling that taking that rock from the field would have been the worst kind of theft. No, I only picked it up to feel it better, to get the heft of the thing, and, I suppose, to prove its reality by feeling its satiny texture against my skin.

I had to look at what was underneath for a long time. My eyes saw it, but it took awhile for my mind to catch up. It was an envelope, carefully wrapped in a plastic bag to keep away the damp. My name was written across the front in Andy's clear script.

I took the envelope and left the rock where Andy had left it, and Andy's friend before him.

Dear Red,

If you're reading this, then you're out. One way or another, you're out. And if you've followed along this far, you might be willing to come a little further. I think you remember the name of the town, don't you? I could use a good man to help me get my project on wheels.

Meantime, have a drink on me—and do think it over. I will be keeping an eye out for you. Remember that hope is a good thing, Red, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well.

Your friend,

Peter Stevens

I didn't read that letter in the field. A kind of terror had come over me, a need to get away from there before I was seen. To make what may be an appropriate pun, I was in terror of being apprehended.

I went back to my room and read it there, with the smell of old men's dinners drifting up the stairwell to me—Beefaroni, Rice-a-Roni, Noodle Roni. You can bet that whatever the old folks of America, the ones on fixed incomes, are eating tonight, it almost certainly ends in roni.

I opened the envelope and read the letter and then I put my head in my arms and cried. With the letter there were twenty new fifty-dollar bills.

And here I am in the Brewster Hotel, technically a fugitive from justice again—parole violation is my crime. No one's going to throw up any roadblocks to catch a criminal wanted on that charge, I guess—wondering what I should do now.

I have this manuscript. I have a small piece of luggage about the size of a doctor's bag that holds everything I own. I have nineteen fifties, four tens, a five, three ones, and assorted change. I broke one of the fifties to buy this tablet of paper and a deck of smokes.

Wondering what I should do.

But there's really no question. It always comes down to just two choices. Get busy living or get busy dying.

First I'm going to put this manuscript back in my bag. Then I'm going to buckle it up, grab my coat, go downstairs, and check out of this fleabag. Then I'm going to walk uptown to a bar and put that five-dollar bill down in front of the bartender and ask him to bring me two straight shots of Jack Daniel's—one for me and one for Andy Dufresne. Other than a beer or two, they'll be the first drinks I've

taken as a free man since 1938. Then I am going to tip the bartender a dollar and thank him kindly. I will leave the bar and walk up Spring Street to the Greyhound terminal there and buy a bus ticket to El Paso by way of New York City. When I get to El Paso, I'm going to buy a ticket to McNary. And when I get to McNary, I guess I'll have a chance to find out if an old crook like me can find a way to float across the border and into Mexico.

Sure I remember the name. Zihuatanejo. A name like that is just too pretty to forget.

I find I am excited, so excited I can hardly hold the pencil in my trembling hand. I think it is the excitement that only a free man can feel, a free man starting a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain.

I hope Andy is down there.

I hope I can make it across the border.

I hope to see my friend and shake his hand.

I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams.

I hope.

STEPHEN KING

FROM HIS LATEST BESTSELLER
FOUR PAST MIDNIGHT



**TWO PAST MIDNIGHT:
SECRET WINDOW,
SECRET GARDEN**

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED ON FOUR AUDIO CASSETTES

READ BY JAMES WOODS

TWO PAST MIDNIGHT:

SECRET WINDOW,

SECRET GARDEN

Stephen King

A note on 'Secret Window, Secret Garden':

I'm one of those people who believe that life is a series of cycles - wheels within wheels, some meshing with others, some spinning alone, but all of them performing some finite, repeating function. I like that abstract image of life as something like an efficient factory machine, probably because actual life, up close and personal, seems so messy and strange. It's nice to be able to pull away every once in awhile and say, 'There's a pattern there after all! I'm not sure what it means, but by God, I see it!'

All of these wheels seem to finish their cycles at roughly the same time, and when they do - about every twenty years would be my guess - we go through a time when we end things. Psychologists have even lifted a parliamentary term to describe this phenomenon - they call it cloture.

I'm forty-two now, and as I look back over the last four years of my life I can see all sorts of cloture. It's as apparent in my work as anywhere else. In It, I took an outrageous amount of space to finish talking about children and the wide perceptions which light their interior lives. Next year I intend to publish the last Castle Rock novel, Needful Things (the last story in this volume, 'The Sun Dog,' forms a prologue to that novel). And this story is, I think, the last story about writers and writing and the strange no man's land which exists between what's real and what's make-believe. I believe a good many of my long-time readers, who have borne my fascination with this subject patiently, will be glad to hear that.

A few years ago I published a novel called Misery which tried, at least in part, to illustrate the powerful hold fiction can achieve over the reader. Last year I published a book called The Dark Half where I tried to explore the converse: the powerful hold fiction can achieve over the writer. While that book was between drafts, I started to think that there might be a way to tell both stories at the same time by approaching some of the plot elements of The Dark Half from a totally different angle. Writing, it seems to me, is a secret act - as

secret as dreaming - and that was one aspect of this strange and dangerous craft I had never thought about much.

I knew that writers have from time to time revised old works - John Fowles did it with *The Magus*, and I have done it myself with *The Stand* - but revision was not what I had in mind. What I wanted to do was to take familiar elements and put them together in an entirely new way. This I had tried to do at least once before, restructuring and updating the basic elements of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to create *'Salem's Lot*, and I was fairly comfortable with the idea.

One day in the late fall of 1987, while these things were tumbling around in my head, I stopped in the laundry room of our house to drop a dirty shirt into the washing machine. Our laundry room is a small, narrow alcove on the second floor. I disposed of the shirt and then stepped over to one of the room's two windows. It was casual curiosity, no more. We've been living in the same house for eleven or twelve years now, but I had never taken a good hard look out this particular window before. The reason is perfectly simple; set at floor level, mostly hidden behind the drier, half blocked by baskets of mending, it's a hard window to look out of.

I squeezed in, nevertheless, and looked out. That window looks down on a little brick-paved alcove between the house and the attached sunporch. It's an area I see just about every day ... but the angle was new. My wife had set half a dozen pots out there, so the plants could take a little of the early-November sun, I suppose, and the result was a charming little garden which only I could see. The phrase which occurred to me was, of course, the title of this story. It seemed to me as good a metaphor as any for what writers - especially writers of fantasy - do with their days and nights. Sitting down at the typewriter or picking up a pencil is a physical act; the spiritual analogue is looking out of an almost forgotten window... a window which offers a common view from an entirely different angle ... an angle which renders the common extraordinary. The writer's job is to gaze through that window and report on what he sees.

But sometimes windows break. I think that, more than anything else, is the concern of this story: what happens to the wide-eyed observer when the window between reality and unreality breaks and the glass begins to fly?

‘You stole my story,’ the man on the doorstep said. ‘You stole my story and something’s got to be done about it. Right is right and fair is fair and something has to be done.’

Morton Rainey, who had just gotten up from a nap and who was still feeling only halfway into the real world, didn’t have the slightest idea what to say. This was never the case when he was at work, sick or well, wide awake or half asleep; he was a writer, and hardly ever at a loss when it became necessary to fill a character’s mouth with a snappy comeback. Rainey opened his mouth, found no snappy comeback there (not even a limp one, in fact), and so closed it again.

He thought: This man doesn’t look exactly real. He looks like a character out of a novel by William Faulkner.

This was of no help in resolving the situation, but it was undeniably true. The man who had rung Rainey’s doorbell out here in the western Maine version of nowhere looked about forty-five. He was very thin. His face was calm, almost serene, but carved with deep lines. They moved horizontally across his high brow in regular waves, cut vertically downward from the ends of his thin lips to his jawline, and radiated outward in tiny sprays from the corners of his eyes. The eyes were bright, unfaded blue. Rainey couldn’t tell what color his hair was; he wore a large black hat with a round crown planted squarely on his head. The underside of the brim touched the tops of his ears. It looked like the sort of hat Quakers wore. He had no sideburns, either, and for all Morton Rainey knew, he might be as bald as Telly Savalas under that round-crowned felt hat.

He was wearing a blue work-shirt. It was buttoned neatly all the way to the loose, razor-reddened flesh of his neck, although he wore no tie. The bottom of the shirt disappeared into a pair of blue-jeans that looked a little too big for the man who was wearing them. They

ended in cuffs which lay neatly on a pair of faded yellow workshoes which looked made for walking in a furrow of played-out earth about three and a half feet behind a mule's ass.

'Well?' he asked when Rainey continued to say nothing.

'I don't know you,' Rainey said finally. It was the first thing he'd said since he'd gotten up off the couch and come to answer the door, and it sounded sublimely stupid in his own ears.

'I know that,' said the man. 'That doesn't matter. I know you, Mr Rainey. That's what matters.' And then he reiterated: 'You stole my story.'

He held out his hand, and for the first time Rainey saw that he had something in it. It was a sheaf of paper. But not just any old sheaf of paper; it was a manuscript. After you've been in the business awhile, he thought, you always recognized the look of a manuscript. Especially an unsolicited one.

And, belatedly, he thought: Good thing for you it wasn't a gun, Mort old kid. You would have been in hell before you knew you were dead.

And even more belatedly, he realized that he was probably dealing with one of the Crazy Folks. It was long overdue, of course; although his last three books had been best-sellers, this was his first visit from one of that fabled tribe. He felt a mixture of fear and chagrin, and his thoughts narrowed to a single point: how to get rid of the guy as fast as possible, and with as little unpleasantness as possible.

'I don't read manuscripts - ' he began.

'You read this one already,' the man with the hard-working sharecropper's face said evenly. 'You stole it.' He spoke as if stating a simple fact. like a man noting that the sun was out and it was a pleasant fall day.

All of Mort's thoughts were belated this afternoon, it seemed; he now realized for the first time how alone he was out here. He had come to the house in Tashmore Glen in early October, after two miserable months in New York; his divorce had become final just last week.

It was a big house, but it was a summer place, and Tashmore Glen was a summer town. There were maybe twenty cottages on this particular road running along the north bay of Tashmore Lake, and in July or August there would be people staying in most or all of them ... but this wasn't July or August. It was late October. The sound of a gunshot, he realized, would probably drift away unheard. If it was heard, the hearers would simply assume someone was shooting at quail or pheasant - it was the season.

'I can assure you - '

'I know you can.' the man in the black hat said with that same unearthly patience. 'I know that.'

Behind him, Mort could see the car the man had come in. It was an old station wagon which looked as if it had seen a great many miles, very few of them on good roads. He could see that the plate on it wasn't from the State of Maine, but couldn't tell what state it was from; he'd known for some time now that he needed to go to the optometrist and have his glasses changed, had even planned early last summer to do that little chore, but then Henry Young had called him one day in April, asking who the fellow was he'd seen Amy with at the mall - some relative, maybe? - and the suspicions which had culminated in the eerily quick and quiet no-fault divorce had begun, the shitstorm which had taken up all his time and energy these last few months. During that time he had been doing well if he remembered to change his underwear, let alone handle more esoteric things like optometrist appointments.

'If you want to talk to someone about some grievance you feel you have,' Mort began uncertainly, hating the pompous, talking-boilerplate sound of his own voice but not knowing how else to reply, 'you could talk to my ag -'

'This is between you and me,' the man on the doorstep said patiently. Bump, Mort's tomcat, had been curled up on the low cabinet built into the side of the house - you had to store your garbage in a closed compartment or the racoons came in the night and pulled it all over hell - and now he jumped down and twined his way sinuously between the stranger's legs. The stranger's bright-blue eyes never left Rainey's face. 'We don't need any outsiders, Mr Rainey. It is strictly between you and me.'

'I don't like being accused of plagiarism, if that's what you're doing,' Mort said. At the same time, part of his mind was cautioning him that you had to be very careful when dealing with people of the Crazy Folks tribe. Humor them? Yes. But this man didn't seem to have a gun, and Mort outweighed him by at least fifty pounds. I've also got five or ten years on him, by the look, he thought. He had read that a bonafide Crazy Guy could muster abnormal strength, but he was damned if he was simply going to stand here and let this man he had never seen before go on saying that he, Morton Rainey, had stolen his story. Not without some kind of rebuttal.

'I don't blame you for not liking it,' the man in the black hat said. He spoke in the same patient and serene way. He spoke, Mort thought, like a therapist whose work is teaching small children who are retarded in some mild way. 'But you did it. You stole my story.'

'You'll have to leave,' Mort said. He was fully awake now, and he no longer felt so bewildered, at such a disadvantage. 'I have nothing to say to you.'

'Yes, I'll go,' the man said. 'We'll talk more later.' He held out the sheaf of manuscript, and Mort actually found himself reaching for it. He put his hand back down to his side just before his uninvited and unwanted guest could slip the manuscript into it, like a process server finally slipping a subpoena to a man who has been ducking it for months.

'I'm not taking that,' Mort said, and part of him was marvelling at what a really accommodating beast a man was: when someone held

something out to you, your first instinct was to take it. No matter if it was a check for a thousand dollars or a stick of dynamite with a lit and fizzing fuse, your first instinct was to take it.

‘Won’t do you any good to play games with me, Mr Rainey,’ the man said mildly. ‘This has got to be settled.’

‘So far as I’m concerned, it is,’ Mort said, and closed the door on that lined, used, and somehow timeless face.

He had only felt a moment or two of fear, and those had come when he first realized, in a disoriented and sleep-befogged way, what this man was saying. Then it had been swallowed by anger - anger at being bothered during his nap, and more anger at the realization that he was being bothered by a representative of the Crazy Folks.

Once the door was closed, the fear returned. He pressed his lips together and waited for the man to start pounding on it. And when that didn’t come, he became convinced that the man was just standing out there, still as a stone and as patient as same, waiting for him to reopen the door ... as he would have to do, sooner or later.

Then he heard a low thump, followed by a series of light steps crossing the board porch. Mort walked into the master bedroom, which looked out on the driveway. There were two big windows in here, one giving on the driveway and the shoulder of hill behind it, the other providing a view of the slope which fell away to the blue and agreeable expanse of Tashmore Lake. Both windows were reflectorized, which meant he could look out but anyone trying to look in would see only his own distorted image, unless he put his nose to the glass and cupped his eyes against the glare.

He saw the man in the work-shirt and cuffed blue-jeans walking back to his old station wagon. From this angle, he could make out the license plate’s state of issue - Mississippi. As the man opened the driver’s-side door, Mort thought: Oh shit. The gun’s in the car. He didn’t have it on him because he believed he could reason with me

... whatever his idea of 'reasoning' is. But now he's going to get it and come back. It's probably in the glove compartment or under the seat

But the man got in behind the wheel, pausing only long enough to take off his black hat and toss it down beside him. As he slammed the door and started the engine, Mort thought, There's something different about him now. But it wasn't until his unwanted afternoon visitor had backed up the driveway and out of sight behind the thick screen of bushes Mort kept forgetting to trim that he realized what it was.

When the man got into his car, he had no longer been holding the manuscript.

2

It was on the back porch. There was a rock on it to keep the individual pages from blowing all over the little dooryard in the light breeze. The small thump he'd heard had been the man putting the rock on the manuscript.

Mort stood in the doorway, hands in the pockets of his khaki pants, looking at it. He knew that craziness wasn't catching (except maybe in cases of prolonged exposure, he supposed), but he still didn't want to touch the goddam thing. He supposed he would have to, though. He didn't know just how long he would be here - a day, a week, a month, and a year all looked equally possible at this point - but he couldn't just let the fucking thing sit there. Greg Carstairs, his caretaker, would be down early this afternoon to give him an estimate on how much it would cost to reshingle the house, for one thing, and Greg would wonder what it was. Worse, he would probably assume it was Mort's, and that would entail more explanations than the damned thing was worth.

He stood there until the sound of his visitor's engine had merged into the low, slow hum of the afternoon, and then he went out on the porch, walking carefully in his bare feet (the porch had needed painting for at least a year now, and the dry wood was prickly with potential splinters), and tossed the rock into the juniper-choked gully to the left of the porch. He picked up the little sheaf of pages and looked down at it. The top one was a title page. It read:

SECRET WINDOW, SECRET GARDEN

By John Shooter

Mort felt a moment's relief in spite of himself. He had never heard of John Shooter, and he had never read or written a short story called 'Secret Window, Secret Garden' in his life.

He tossed the manuscript in the kitchen wastebasket on his way by, went back to the couch in the living room, lay down again, and was asleep in five minutes.

He dreamed of Amy. He slept a great lot and he dreamed of Amy a great lot these days, and waking up to the sound of his own hoarse shouts no longer surprised him much. He supposed it would pass.

3

The next morning he was sitting in front of his word processor in the small nook off the living room which had always served as his study when they were down here. The word processor was on, but Mort was looking out the window at the lake. Two motor-boats were out there, cutting broad white wakes in the blue water. He had thought they were fishermen at first, but they never slowed down - just cut back and forth across each other's bows in big loops. Kids, he decided. Just kids playing games.

They weren't doing anything very interesting, but then, neither was he. He hadn't written anything worth a damn since he had left Amy. He sat in front of the word processor every day from nine to eleven, just as he had every day for the last three years (and for about a thousand years before that he had spent those two hours sitting in front of an old Royal office model), but for all the good he was doing with it, he might as well have traded it in on a motor-boat and gone out grab-assing with the kids on the lake.

Today, he had written the following lines of deathless prose during his two-hour stint:

Four days after George had confirmed to his own satisfaction that his wife was cheating on him, he confronted her. 'I have to talk to you, Abby,' he said.

It was no good.

It was too close to real life to be good.

He had never been so hot when it came to real life. Maybe that was part of the problem.

He turned off the word processor, realizing just a second after he'd flicked the switch that he'd forgotten to save the document. Well, that

was all right. Maybe it had even been the critic in his subconscious, telling him the document wasn't worth saving.

Mrs Gavin had apparently finished upstairs; the drone of the Electrolux had finally ceased. She came in every Tuesday to clean, and she had been shocked into a silence very unlike her when Mort had told her two Tuesdays ago that he and Amy were quits. He suspected that she had liked Amy a good deal more than she had liked him. But she was still coming, and Mort supposed that was something.

He got up and went out into the living room just as Mrs Gavin came down the main staircase. She was holding the vacuum-cleaner hose and dragging the small tubular machine after her. It came down in a series of thumps, looking like a small mechanical dog. If I tried to pull the vacuum downstairs that way, it'd smack into one of my ankles and then roll all the way to the bottom, Mort thought. How does she get it to do that, I wonder?

'Hi there, Mrs G.,' he said, and crossed the living room toward the kitchen door. He wanted a Coke. Writing shit always made him thirsty.

'Hello, Mr Rainey.' He had tried to get her to call him Mort, but she wouldn't. She wouldn't even call him Morton. Mrs Gavin was a woman of her principles, but her principles had never kept her from calling his wife Amy.

Maybe I should tell her I caught Amy in bed with another man at one of Derry's finer motels, Mort thought as he pushed through the swing door. She might go back to calling her Mrs Rainey again, at the very least.

This was an ugly and mean-spirited thought, the kind of thinking he suspected was at the root of his writing problems, but he didn't seem to be able to help it. Perhaps it would also pass ... like the dreams. For some reason this idea made him think of a bumper sticker he'd

seen once on the back of a very old VW beetle. CONSTIPATED - CANNOT PASS, the sticker had read.

As the kitchen door swung back, Mrs Gavin called: 'I found one of your stories in the trash, Mr Rainey. I thought you might want it, so I put it on the counter.'

'Okay,' he said, having no idea what she might be talking about. He was not in the habit of tossing bad manuscripts or frags in the kitchen trash. When he produced a stinker - and lately he had produced more than his share - it went either directly to data heaven or into the circular file to the right of his word-processing station.

The man with the lined face and round black Quaker hat never even entered his mind.

He opened the refrigerator door, moved two small Tupperware dishes filled with nameless leftovers, discovered a bottle of Pepsi, and opened it as he nudged the fridge door closed with his hip. As he went to toss the cap in the trash, he saw the manuscript - its title page was spotted with something that looked like orange juice, but otherwise it was all right - sitting on the counter by the Silex. Then he remembered. John Shooter, right. Charter member of the Crazy Folks, Mississippi Branch.

He took a drink of Pepsi, then picked up the manuscript. He put the title page on the bottom and saw this at the head of the first page.

John Shooter

General Delivery

Dellacourt, Mississippi

30 pages

Approximately 7500 words

Selling 1st serial rights, North America

SECRET WINDOW, SECRET GARDEN

By John Shooter

The manuscript had been typed on a good grade of bond paper, but the machine must have been a sad case - an old office model, from the look, and not very well maintained. Most of the letters were as crooked as an old man's teeth.

He read the first sentence, then the second, then the third, for a few moments clear thought ceased.

Todd Downey thought that a woman who would steal your love when your love was really all you had was not much of a woman. He therefore decided to kill her. He would do it in the deep corner formed when the house and the barn came together at an extreme angle - he would do it where his wife kept her garden.

'Oh shit,' Mort said, and put the manuscript back down. His arm struck the Pepsi bottle. It overturned, foaming and fizzing across the counter and running down the cabinet facings. 'Oh SHIT!' he yelled.

Mrs Gavin came in a hurry, surveyed the situation, and said: 'Oh, that's nothing. I thought from the sound that maybe you'd cut your own throat. Move a little, can't you, Mr Rainey?'

He moved, and the first thing she did was to pick the sheaf of manuscript up off the counter and thrust it back into his hands. It was still okay; the soda had run the other way. He had once been a man with a fairly good sense of humor - he had always thought so,

anyway - but as he looked down at the little pile of paper in his hands, the best he could manage was a sour sense of irony. It's like the cat in the nursery rhyme, he thought. The one that kept coming back.

'If you're trying to wreck that,' Mrs Gavin said, nodding at the manuscript as she got a dishrag from under the sink, 'you're on the right track.'

'It's not mine,' he said, but it was funny, wasn't it? Yesterday, when he had almost reached out and taken the script from the man who had brought it to him, he'd thought about what an accommodating beast a man was. Apparently that urge to accommodate stretched in all directions, because the first thing he'd felt when he read those three sentences was guilt ... and wasn't that just what Shooter (if that was really his name) had wanted him to feel? Of course it was. You stole my story, he'd said, and weren't thieves supposed to feel guilty?

'Pardon me, Mr Rainey,' Mrs Gavin said, holding up the dishrag.

He stepped aside so she could get at the spill. 'It's not mine,' he repeated - insisted, really.

'Oh,' she said, wiping up the spill on the counter and then stepping to the sink to wring out the cloth. 'I thought it was.'

'It says John Shooter,' he said, putting the title page back on top and turning it toward her. 'See?'

Mrs Gavin favored the title page with the shortest glance politeness would allow and then began wiping the cabinet faces. 'Thought it was one of those whatchacallums,' she said. 'Pseudonames. Or nyms. Whatever the word is names.'

'I don't use one,' he said. 'I never have.'

This time she favored him with a brief glance - country shrewd and slightly amused - before getting down on her knees to wipe up the puddle of Pepsi on the floor. 'Don't s'pose you'd tell me if you did,' she said.

'I'm sorry about the spill,' he said, edging toward the door.

'My job,' she said shortly. She didn't look up again. Mort took the hint and left.

He stood in the living room for a moment, looking at the abandoned vacuum cleaner in the middle of the rug. In his head he heard the man with the lined face saying patiently, This is between you and me. We don't need any outsiders, Mr Rainey. It is strictly between you and me.

Mort thought of that face, recalled it carefully to a mind which was trained to recall faces and actions, and thought: It wasn't just a momentary aberration, or a bizarre way to meet an author he may or may not consider famous. He will be back.

He suddenly headed back into his study, rolling the manuscript into a tube as he went.

4

Three of the four study walls were lined with bookshelves, and one of them had been set aside for the various editions, domestic and foreign, of his works. He had published six books in all: five novels and a collection of short stories. The book of short stories and his first two novels had been well received by his immediate family and a few friends. His third novel, *The OrganGrinder's Boy*, had been an instant best-seller. The early works had been reissued after he became a success, and had done quite well, but they had never been as popular as his later books.

The short-story collection was called *Everybody Drops the Dime*, and most of the tales had originally been published in the men's magazines, sandwiched around pictures of women wearing lots of eye make-up and not much else. One of the stories, however, had been published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. It was called 'Sowing Season,' and it was to this story he now turned.

A woman who would steal your love when your love was all you had wasn't much of a woman - that, at least, was Tommy Havelock's opinion. He decided to kill her. He even knew the place he would do it, the exact place: the little patch of garden she kept in the extreme angle formed where the house and the barn came together.

Mort sat down and worked his way slowly through the two stories, reading back and forth. By the time he was halfway through, he understood he really didn't need to go any further. They varied in diction in some places; in many others even that was the same, word for word. Diction aside, they were exactly the same. In both of them, a man killed his wife. In both of them, the wife was a cold, loveless bitch who cared only for her garden and her canning. In both of them, the killer buried his spousal victim in her garden and then tended it, growing a really spectacular crop. In Morton Rainey's version, the crop was beans. In Shooter's, it was corn. In both versions, the killer eventually went crazy and was discovered by the

police eating vast amounts of the vegetable in question and swearing he would be rid of her, that in the end he would finally be rid of her.

Mort had never considered himself much of a horror-story writer - and there was nothing supernatural about 'Sowing Season' - but it had been a creepy little piece of work all the same. Amy had finished it with a little shiver and said, 'I suppose it's good, but that man's mind ... God, Mort, what a can of worms.'

That had summed up his own feelings pretty well. The landscape of 'Sowing Season' wasn't one he would care to travel through often, and it was no 'TellTale Heart,' but he thought he had done a fair job of painting Tom Havelock's homicidal breakdown. The editor at EQ had agreed, and so had the readers - the story had generated favorable mail. The editor had asked for more, but Mort had never come up with another story even remotely like 'Sowing Season.'

'I know I can do it,' Tod Downey said, helping himself to another ear of corn from the steaming bowl. 'I'm sure that in time all of her will be gone.'

That was how Shooter's ended.

'I am confident I can take care of this business,' Tom Havelock told them, and helped himself to another portion of beans from the brimming, steaming bowl. 'I'm sure that, in time, her death will be a mystery even to me.'

That was how Mort Rainey's ended.

Mort closed his copy of Everybody Drops the Dime and replaced it thoughtfully on his shelf of first editions.

He sat down and began to rummage slowly and thoroughly through the drawers of his desk. It was a big one, so big the furniture men had had to bring it into the room in sections, and it had a lot of drawers. The desk was solely his domain; neither Amy nor Mrs G.

had ever set a hand to it, and the drawers were full of ten years' worth of accumulated rick-rack. It had been four years since Mort had given up smoking, and if there were any cigarettes left in the house, this was where they would be. If he found some, he would smoke. just about now, he was crazy for a smoke. If he didn't find any, that was all right, too; going through his junk was soothing. Old letters which he'd put aside to answer and never had, what had once seemed so important now looking antique, even arcane; postcards he'd bought but never mailed; chunks of manuscript in varying stages of completion; half a bag of very elderly Doritos; envelopes; paper-clips; cancelled checks. He could sense layers here which were almost geological - layers of summer life frozen in place. And it was soothing. He finished one drawer and went on to the next, thinking all the while about John Shooter and how John Shooter's story - his story, goddammit! - had made him feel.

The most obvious thing, of course, was that it had made him feel like he needed a cigarette. This wasn't the first time he'd felt that way in the last four years; there had been times when just seeing someone puffing away behind the wheel of a car next to his at a stoplight could set off a raging momentary lust for tobacco. But the key word there, of course, was 'momentary.' Those feelings passed in a hurry, like fierce rainsqualls - five minutes after a blinding silver curtain of rain has dropped out of the sky, the sun is shining again. He'd never felt the need to turn in to the next convenience store on his way for a deck of smokes ... or go rummaging through his glove compartment for a stray or two as he was now rummaging through his desk.

He felt guilty, and that was absurd. Infuriating. He had not stolen John Shooter's story, and he knew he hadn't - if there had been stealing (and there must have been; for the two stories to be that close without prior knowledge on the part of one of the two players was impossible for Mort to believe), then it had been Shooter who had stolen from him.

Of course.

It was as plain as the nose on his face ... or the round black hat on John Shooter's head.

Yet he still felt upset, unsettled, guilty ... he felt at a loss in a way for which there was perhaps no word. And why? Well ... because...

At that moment Mort lifted up a Xerox of The OrganGrinder's Boy manuscript, and there, beneath it, was a package of L & M cigarettes. Did they make L & M's anymore? He didn't know. The pack was old, crumpled, but definitely not flat. He took it out and looked at it. He reflected that he must have bought this particular pack in 1985, according to the informal science of stratification one might call - for want of a better word - Deskology.

He peered inside the pack. He saw three little coffin nails, all in a row.

Time-travellers from another age, Mort thought. He stuck one of the cigarettes in his mouth, then went out into the kitchen to get a match from the box by the stove. Time-travellers from another age, riding up through the years, patient cylindrical voyagers, their mission to wait, to persevere, to bide until the proper moment to start me on the road to lung cancer again finally arrives. And it seems the time has finally come.

'It'll probably taste like shit,' he said aloud to the empty house (Mrs Gavin had long since gone home), and set fire to the tip of the cigarette. It didn't taste like shit, though. It tasted pretty good. He wandered back toward his study, puffing away and feeling pleasantly lightheaded. Ah, the dreadful patient persistence of addiction, he thought. What had Hemingway said? Not this August, nor this September - this year you have to do what you like. But the time comes around again. It always does. Sooner or later you stick something back in your big dumb old mouth again. A drink, a smoke, maybe the barrel of a shotgun. Not this August, nor this September ...

... unfortunately, this was October.

At an earlier point in his prospecting, he had found an old bottle half full of Planter's Peanuts. He doubted if the nuts would be fit to eat, but the lid of the bottle made a fine ashtray. He sat behind his desk, looked out at the lake (like Mrs G., the boats which had been out there earlier were gone), relished his old, vile habit, and found he could think about John Shooter and John Shooter's story with a little more equanimity.

The man was one of the Crazy Folks, of course; that was now proven in brass if any further proof had been needed. As to how it had made him feel, finding that the similarity actually existed ...

Well, a story was a thing, a real thing - you could think of it like that, anyway, especially if someone had paid you for it - but in another, more important, way, it wasn't a thing at all. It wasn't like a vase, or a chair, or an automobile. It was ink on paper, but it wasn't the ink and it wasn't the paper. People sometimes asked him where he got his ideas, and although he scoffed at the question, it always made him feel vaguely ashamed, vaguely spurious. They seemed to feel there was a Central Idea Dump somewhere (just as there was supposed to be an elephant graveyard somewhere, and a fabled lost city of gold somewhere else), and he must have a secret map which allowed him to get there and back, but Mort knew better. He could remember where he had been when certain ideas came to him, and he knew that the idea was often the result of seeing or sensing some odd connection between objects or events or people which had never seemed to have the slightest connection before, but that was the best he could do. As to why he should see these connections or want to make stories out of them after he had ... to that he hadn't a clue.

If John Shooter had come to his door and said 'You stole my car' instead of 'You stole my story,' Mort would have scotched the idea quickly and decisively. He could have done it even if the two cars in question had been the same year, make, model, and color. He would have shown the man in the round black hat his automobile

registration, invited him to compare the number on the pink slip to the one on the doorpost, and sent him packing.

But when you got a story idea, no one gave you a bill of sale. There was no provenance to be traced. Why would there be? Nobody gave you a bill of sale when you got something for free. You charged whoever wanted to buy that thing from you - oh yes, all the traffic would bear, and a little more than that, if you could, to make up for all the times the bastards shorted you - magazines, newspapers, book publishers, movie companies. But the item came to you free, clear, and unencumbered. That was it, he decided. That was why he felt guilty even though he knew he hadn't plagiarized Farmer John Shooter's story. He felt guilty because writing stories had always felt a little bit like stealing, and probably always would. John Shooter just happened to be the first person to show up on his doorstep and accuse him of it right out loud. He thought that, subconsciously, he had been expecting something like this for years.

Mort crushed out his cigarette and decided to take a nap. Then he decided that was a bad idea. It would be better, healthier both mentally and physically, to eat some lunch ' read for half an hour or so, and then go for a nice long walk down by the lake. He was sleeping too much, and sleeping too much was a sign of depression. Halfway to the kitchen, he deviated to the long sectional couch by the window-wall in the living room. The hell with it, he thought, putting a pillow under his neck and another one behind his head. I Am depressed.

His last thought before drifting off was a repeat: He's not done with me yet. Oh no, not this guy. He's a repeater.

5

He dreamed he was lost in a vast cornfield. He blundered from one row to the next, and the sun glinted off the watches he was wearing - half a dozen on each forearm, and each watch set to a different time.

Please help me! he cried. Someone please help me! I'm lost and afraid!

Ahead of him, the corn on both sides of the row shook and rustled. Amy stepped out from one side. John Shooter stepped out from the other. Both of them held knives.

I am confident I can take care of this business, Shooter said as they advanced on him with their knives raised. I'm sure that, in time, your death will be a mystery even to us.

Mort turned to run, but a hand - Amy's, he was sure - seized him by the belt and pulled him back. And when the knives, glittering in the hot sun of this huge secret garden

6

It was the telephone which woke him an hour and a quarter later. He struggled out of a terrible dream - someone had been chasing him, that was all he could clearly remember - to a sitting position on the couch. He was horribly hot; every inch of his skin seemed to be running with sweat. The sun had crept around to this side of the house while he was sleeping and had shone in on him through the window-wall for God knew how long.

Mort walked slowly toward the telephone table in the front hall, plodding like a man in a diver's suit walking in the bed of a river against the current, his head thumping slowly, his mouth tasting like old dead gopher-shit. For every step he took forward, the entrance to the hall seemed to retreat a step, and it occurred to Mort, not for the first time, that hell was probably like the way you felt after sleeping too long and too hard on a hot afternoon. The worst of it wasn't physical. The worst was that dismaying, disorienting sense of being outside yourself, somehow - just an observer looking through dual TV cameras with blurry lenses.

He picked up the phone thinking it would be Shooter.

Yeah, it'll be him, all right - the one person in the whole wide world I shouldn't be talking to with my guard down and one half of my mind feeling unbuttoned from the other half. Sure tell be him - who else?

'Hello?'

It wasn't Shooter, but as he listened to the voice on the other end of the line reply to his greeting, he discovered there was at least one other person to whom he had no business talking while in a physically vulnerable state.

'Hello, Mort,' Amy said. 'Are you all right?'

7

Some time later that afternoon, Mort donned the extra-large red flannel shirt he used as a jacket in the early fall and took the walk he should have taken earlier. Bump the cat followed him long enough to ascertain that Mort was serious, then returned to the house.

He walked slowly and deliberately through an exquisite afternoon which seemed to be all blue sky, red leaves, and golden air. He walked with his hands stuffed into his pockets, trying to let the lake's quiet work through his skin and calm him down, as it had always done before - he supposed that was the reason he had come here instead of staying in New York, as Amy had expected him to do, while they trundled steadily along toward divorce. He had come here because it was a magic place, especially in autumn, and he had felt, when he arrived, that if there was a sad sack anywhere on the planet who needed a little magic, he was that person. And if that old magic failed him now that the writing had turned so sour, he wasn't sure what he would do.

It turned out that he didn't need to worry about it. After awhile the silence and that queer atmosphere of suspension which always seemed to possess Tashmore Lake when fall had finally come and the summer people had finally gone began to work on him, loosening him up like gently kneading hands. But now he had something besides John Shooter to think about; he had Amy to think about as well.

'Of course I'm all right,' he'd said, speaking as carefully as a drunk trying to convince people that he's sober. In truth, he was still so muzzy that he felt a little bit drunk. The shapes of words felt too big in his mouth, like chunks of soft, friable rock, and he had proceeded with great care, groping his way through the opening formalities and gambits of telephone conversation as if for the first time. 'How are you?'

'Oh, fine, I'm fine,' she said, and then trilled the quick little laugh which usually meant she was either flirting or nervous as hell, and Mort doubted that she was flirting with him - not at this point. The realization that she was nervous, too, set him a little more at ease. 'It's just that you're alone down there, and almost anything could happen and nobody would know - ' She broke off abruptly.

'I'm really not alone,' he said mildly. 'Mrs Gavin was here today and Greg Carstairs is always around.'

'Oh, I forgot about the roof repairs,' Amy said, and for a moment he marvelled at how natural they sounded, how natural and undivorced. Listening to us, Mort thought, you'd never guess there's a rogue real-estate agent in my bed ... or what used to be my bed. He waited for the anger to come back - the hurt, jealous, cheated anger - but only a ghost stirred where those lively if unpleasant feelings had been.

'Well, Greg didn't forget,' he assured her. 'He came down yesterday and crawled around on the roof for an hour and a half.'

'How bad is it?'

He told her, and they talked about the roof for the next five minutes or so, while Mort slowly woke up; they talked about that old roof as if things were just the same as they always had been, talked about it as if they would be spending next summer under the new cedar shingles just as they had spent the last nine summers under the old cedar shingles. Mort thought: Gimme a roof, gimme some shingles, and I'll talk to this bitch forever.

As he listened to himself holding up his side of the conversation, he felt a deepening sense of unreality settling in. It felt as if he were returning to the half-waking, half-sleeping zombie state in which he had answered the phone, and at last he couldn't stand it anymore. If this was some sort of contest to see who could go the longest pretending that the last six months had never happened, then he was willing to concede. More than willing.

She was asking where Greg was going to get the cedar shakes and if he would be using a crew from town when Mort broke in. 'Why did you call, Amy?'

There was a moment's silence in which he sensed her trying on responses and then rejecting them, like a woman trying on hats, and that did cause the anger to stir again. It was one of the things - one of the few things, actually - that he could honestly say he detested in her. That totally unconscious duplicity.

'I told you why,' she said at last. 'To see if you were all right.' She sounded flustered and unsure of herself again, and that usually meant she was telling the truth. When Amy lied, she always sounded as if she was telling you the world was round. 'I had one of my feelings - I know you don't believe in them, but I think you do know that I get them, and that I believe in them ... don't you, Mort?' There was none of her usual posturing or defensive anger, that was the thing - she sounded almost as if she were pleading with him.

'Yeah, I know that.'

'Well, I had one. I was making myself a sandwich for lunch, and I had a feeling that you ... that you might not be all right. I held off for awhile - I thought it would go away, but it didn't. So I finally called. You are all right, aren't you?'

'Yes,' he said.

'And nothing's happened?'

'Well, something did happen,' he said, after only a moment of interior debate. He thought it was possible, maybe even likely, that John Shooter (if that's really his name, his mind insisted on adding) had tried to make contact with him in Derry before coming down here. Derry, after all, was where he usually was at this time of year. Amy might even have sent him down here.

'I knew it,' she said. 'Did you hurt yourself with that goddam chainsaw? Or - '

'Nothing requiring hospitalization,' he said, smiling a little. 'Just an annoyance. Does the name John Shooter ring a bell with you, Amy?'

'No, why?'

He let an irritated little sigh escape through his closed teeth like steam. Amy was a bright woman, but she had always had a bit of a dead-short between her brain and her mouth. He remembered once musing that she should have a tee-shirt reading SPEAK NOW, THINK LATER. 'Don't say no right off the bat. Take a few seconds and really think about it. The guy is fairly tall, about six feet, and I'd guess he's in his mid-forties. His face looked older, but he moved like a man in his forties. He has a country kind of face. Lots of color, lots of sun-wrinkles. When I saw him, I thought he looked like a character out of Faulk - '

'What's this all about, Mort?'

Now he felt all the way back; now he could understand again why, as hurt and confused as he had been, he had rejected the urges he felt - mostly at night - to ask her if they couldn't at least try to reconcile their differences. He supposed he knew that, if he asked long enough and hard enough, she would agree. But facts were facts; there had been a lot more wrong with their marriage than Amy's real-estate salesman. The drilling quality her voice had taken on now - that was another symptom of what had killed them. What have you done now? the tone under the words asked ... no, demanded. What kind of a mess have you gotten yourself into now? Explain yourself.

He closed his eyes and hissed breath through his closed teeth again before answering. Then he told her about John Shooter, and Shooter's manuscript, and his own short story. Amy clearly remembered 'Sowing Season,' but said she had never heard of a man named John Shooter - it wasn't the kind of name you forget,

she said, and Mort was inclined to agree - in her life. And she certainly hadn't seen him.

'You're sure?' Mort pressed.

'Yes, I am,' Amy said. She sounded faintly resentful of Mort's continued questioning. 'I haven't seen anyone like that since you left. And before you tell me again not to say no right off the bat, let me assure you that I have a very clear memory of almost everything that's happened since then.'

She paused, and he realized she was speaking with an effort now, quite possibly with real pain. That small, mean part of him rejoiced. Most of him did not; most of him was disgusted to find even a small part of him happy about any of this. That had no effect on the interior celebrant, however. That guy might be outvoted, but he also seemed impervious to Mort's - the larger Mort's - attempts to root him out.

'Maybe Ted saw him,' he said. Ted Milner was the real-estate agent. He still found it hard to believe she had tossed him over for a real-estate agent, and he supposed that was part of the problem, part of the conceit which had allowed things to progress to this point in the first place. He certainly wasn't going to claim, especially to himself, that he had been as innocent as Mary's little lamb, was he?

'Is that supposed to be funny?' Amy sounded angry, ashamed, sorrowful, and defiant all at the same time.

'No,' he said. He was beginning to feel tired again.

'Ted isn't here,' she said. 'Ted hardly ever comes here. I ... I go to his place.'

Thank you for sharing that with me, Amy, he almost said, and choked it off. It would be nice to get out of at least one conversation without a swap of accusations. So he didn't say thanks for sharing and he didn't say that'll change and most of all he didn't ask what in the hell's the matter with you, Amy?

Mostly because she might then have asked the same thing of him.

8

She had suggested he call Dave Newsome, the Tashmore constable - after all, the man might be dangerous. Mort told her he didn't think that would be necessary, at least not yet, but if 'John Shooter' called by again, he would probably give Dave a jingle. After a few more stilted amenities, they hung up. He could tell she was still smarting over his oblique suggestion that Ted might currently be sitting in Mortybear's chair and sleeping in Mortybear's bed, but he honestly didn't know how he could have avoided mentioning Ted Milner sooner or later. The man had become a part of Amy's life, after all. And she had called him, that was the thing. She had gotten one of her funny feelings and called him.

Mort reached the place where the lakeside path forked, the righthand branch climbing the steep bank back up to Lake Drive. He took that branch, walking slowly and savoring the fall color. As he came around the final curve in the path and into sight of the narrow ribbon of blacktop, he was somehow not surprised to see the dusty blue station wagon with the Mississippi plates parked there like an off-whipped dog chained to a tree, nor the lean figure of John Shooter propped against the right front mudguard with his arms folded across his chest.

Mort waited for his heartbeat to speed up, for the surge of adrenaline into his body, but his heart went on maintaining its normal beat, and his glands kept their own counsel - which, for the time being, seemed to be to remain quiet.

The sun, which had gone behind a cloud, came out again, and fall colors which had already been bright now seemed to burst into flame. His own shadow reappeared, dark and long and clearcut. Shooter's round black hat looked blacker, his blue shirt bluer, and the air was so clear the man seemed scissored from a swatch of reality that was brighter and more vital than the one Mort knew as a rule. And he understood that he had been wrong about his reasons

for not calling Dave Newsome - wrong, or practicing a little deception - on himself as well as on Amy. The truth was that he wanted to deal with this matter himself. Maybe just to prove to myself that there are things I still deal with, he thought, and started up the hill again toward where John Shooter was leaning against his car and waiting for him.

9

His walk along the lake path had been both long and slow, and Amy's call hadn't been the only thing Mort had thought about as he picked his way over or around the occasional downed tree or paused to skip the occasional flat stone across the water (as a boy he had been able to get a really good one - what they called 'a flattie' - to skip as many as nine times, but today four was the most he'd been able to manage). He had also thought about how to deal with Shooter, when and if Shooter turned up again.

It was true he had felt a transient - or maybe not-so-transient - guilt when he saw how close to identical the two stories were, but he had worked that one out; it was only the generalized guilt he guessed all writers of fiction felt from time to time. As for Shooter himself, the only feelings he had were annoyance, anger ... and a kind of relief. He was full of an unfocussed rage; had been for months. It was good to finally have a donkey to pin this rotten, stinking tail on.

Mort had heard the old saw about how, if four hundred monkeys banged away on four hundred typewriters for four million years, one of them would produce the complete works of Shakespeare. He didn't believe it. Even if it were true, John Shooter was no monkey and he hadn't been alive anywhere near that long, no matter how lined his face was.

So Shooter had copied his story. Why he had picked 'Sowing Season' was beyond Mort Rainey's powers of conjecture, but he knew that was what had happened because he had ruled out coincidence, and he knew damned well that, while he might have stolen that story, like all his others, from The Great Idea Bank of the Universe, he most certainly had not stolen it from Mr John Shooter of the Great State of Mississippi.

Where, then, had Shooter copied it from? Mort thought that was the most important question; his chance to expose Shooter as a fake

and a cheat might lie buried within the answer to it.

There were only two possible answers, because 'Sowing Season' had only been published twice - first in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, and then in his collection, Everybody Drops the Dime. The dates of publication for the short stories in a collection are usually listed on the copyright page at the front of the book, and this format had been followed in Everybody Drops the Dime. He had looked up the acknowledgement for 'Sowing Season' and found that it had been originally published in the June, 1980, issue of EQMM. The collection, Everybody Drops the Dime, had been issued by St Martin's Press in 1983. There had been subsequent printings since then - all but one of them in paperback - but that didn't matter. All he really had to work with were those two dates 1980 and 1983 ... and his own hopeful belief that, aside from agents and publishing-company lawyers, no one paid much attention to those lines of fine print on the copyright page.

Hoping that this would prove true to John Shooter, hoping that Shooter would simply assume - as most general readers did - that a story he had read for the first time in a collection had no prior existence, Mort approached the man and finally stood before him on the edge of the road.

10

'I guess you must have had a chance to read my story by now,' Shooter said. He spoke as casually as a man commenting on the weather.

'I did.'

Shooter nodded gravely. 'I imagine it rang a bell, didn't it?'

'It certainly did,' Mort agreed, and then, with studied casualness: 'When did you write it?'

'I thought you'd ask that,' Shooter said. He smiled a secret little smile, but said no more. His arms remained crossed over his chest, his hands laid against his sides just below the armpits. He looked like a man who would be perfectly content to remain where he was forever, or at least until the sun sank below the horizon and ceased to warm his face.

'Well, sure,' Mort said, still casually. 'I have to, you know. When two fellows show up with the same story, that's serious.'

'Serious,' Shooter agreed in a deeply meditative tone of voice.

'And the only way to sort a thing like that out,' Mort continued, 'to decide who copied from whom, is to find out who wrote the words first.' He fixed Shooter's faded blue eyes with his own dry and uncompromising gaze. Somewhere nearby a chickadee twittered self-importantly in a tangle of trees and was then quiet again.

'Wouldn't you say that's true?'

'I suppose I would,' Shooter agreed. 'I suppose that's why I came all the way up here from Miss'ippi.'

Mort heard the rumble of an approaching vehicle. They both turned in that direction, and Tom Greenleafs Scout came over the nearest

hill, pulling a little cyclone of fallen leaves behind it. Tom, a hale and healthy Tashmore native of seventy-something, was the caretaker for most of the places on this side of the lake that Greg Carstairs didn't handle. Tom raised one hand in salute as he passed. Mort waved back. Shooter removed one hand from its resting place and tipped a finger at Tom in a friendly gesture which spoke in some obscure way of a great many years spent in the country, of the uncountable and unrecollected number of times he had saluted the passing drivers of passing trucks and tractors and tedders and balers in that exact same casual way. Then, as Tom's Scout passed out of sight, he returned his hand to his ribcage so that his arms were crossed again. As the leaves rattled to rest on the road, his patient, unwavering, almost eternal gaze came back to Mort Rainey's face once more. 'Now what were we saying?' he asked almost gently.

'We were trying to establish provenance,' Mort said. 'That means -'

'I know what it means,' Shooter said, favoring Mort with a glance which was both calm and mildly contemptuous. 'I know I am wearing shitkicker clothes and driving a shitkicker car, and I come from a long line of shitkickers, and maybe that makes me a shitkicker myself, but it doesn't necessarily make me a stupid shitkicker.'

'No,' Mort agreed. 'I don't guess it does. But being smart doesn't necessarily make you honest, either. In fact, I think it's more often apt to go the other way.'

'I could figure that much out from you, had I not known it,' Shooter said dryly, and Mort felt himself flush. He didn't like to be zinged and rarely was, but Shooter had just done it with the effortless ease of an experienced shotgunner popping a clay pigeon.

His hopes of trapping Shooter dropped. Not all the way to zero, but quite a considerable way. Smart and sharp were not the same things, but he now suspected that Shooter might be both. Still, there was no sense drawing this out. He didn't want to be around the man any longer than he had to be. In some strange way he had looked forward to this confrontation, once he had become sure that another

confrontation was inevitable - maybe only because it was a break in a routine which had already become dull and unpleasant. Now he wanted it over. He was no longer sure John Shooter was crazy - not completely, anyway - but he thought the man could be dangerous. He was so goddam implacable. He decided to take his best shot and get it over with - no more dancing around.

'When did you write your story, Mr Shooter?'

'Maybe my name's not Shooter,' the man said, looking faintly amused. 'Maybe that's just a pen name.'

'I see. What's your real one?'

'I didn't say it wasn't; I only said maybe. Either way, that's not part of our business.' He spoke serenely, appearing to be more interested in a cloud which was making its way slowly across the high blue sky and toward the westering sun.

'Okay,' Mort said, 'but when you wrote that story is.'

'I wrote it seven years ago,' he said, still studying the cloud - it had touched the edge of the sun now and had acquired a gold fringe. 'In 1982.'

Bingo, Mort thought. Wily old bastard or not, he stepped right into the trap after all. He got the story out of the collection, all right. And since Everybody Drops the Dime was published in 1983, he thought any date before then had to be safe. Should have read the copyright page, old son.

He waited for a feeling of triumph, but there was none. Only a muted sense of relief that this nut could be sent on his merry way with no further fuss or muss. Still, he was curious; it was the curse of the writing class. For instance, why that particular story, a story which was so out of his usual run, so downright atypical? And if the guy was going to accuse him of plagiarism, why settle for an obscure short story when he could have cobbled up the same sort of almost

identical manuscript of a best-seller like *The OrganGrinder's Bay*? That would have been juicy; this was almost a joke.

I suppose knocking off one of the novels would have been too much like work,

Mort thought.

'Why did you wait so long?' he asked. 'I mean, my book of short stories was published in 1983, and that's six years ago. Going on seven now.'

'Because I didn't know,' Shooter said. He removed his gaze from the cloud and studied Mort with that discomfiting look of faint contempt again. 'A man like you, I suppose that kind of man just assumes that everyone in America, if not everyone in every country where his books are published, reads what he has written.'

'I know better than that, I think,' Mort said, and it was his turn to be dry.

'But that's not true,' Shooter went on, ignoring what Mort had said in his scarily serene and utterly fixated way. 'That is not true at all. I never saw that story until the middle of June. This June.'

Mort thought of saying: Well, guess what, Johnny-me-bay? I never saw my wife in bed with another man until the middle of May! Would it knock Shooter off his pace if he actually did say something like that out loud?

He looked into the man's face and decided not. The serenity had burned out of those faded eyes the way mist burns off the hills on a day which is going to be a real scorcher. Now Shooter looked like a fundamentalist preacher about to ladle a large helping of fire and brimstone upon the trembling, downcast heads of his flock, and for the first time Mort Rainey felt really and personally afraid of the man. Yet he was also still angry. The thought he'd had near the end of his first encounter with 'John Shooter' now recurred: scared or not, he

was damned if he was just going to stand here and take it while this man accused him of theft -especially now that the falsity had been revealed out of the man's own mouth.

'Let me guess,' Mort said. 'A guy like you is a little too picky about what he reads to bother with the sort of trash I write. You stick to guys like Marcel Proust and Thomas Hardy, right? At night, after the milking's done, you like to fire up one of those honest country kerosene lamps, plunk it down on the kitchen table - which is, of course, covered with a homey red-and-whitechecked tablecloth - and unwind with a little Tess or Remembrance of Things Past. Maybe on the weekend you let your hair down a little, get a little funky, and drag out some Erskine Caldwell or Annie Dillard. It was one of your friends who told you about how I'd copied your honestly wrought tale. Isn't that how the story goes, Mr Shooter ... or whatever your name is?'

His voice had taken on a rough edge, and he was surprised to find himself on the edge of real fury. But, he discovered, not totally surprised.

'Nope. I don't have any friends.' Shooter spoke in the dry tone of a man who is only stating a fact. 'No friends, no family, no wife. I've got a little place about twenty miles south of Perkinsburg, and I do have a checked tablecloth on my kitchen table - now that you mention it - but we got electric lights in our town. I only bring out the kerosenes when there's a storm and the lines go down.'

'Good for you,' Mort said.

Shooter ignored the sarcasm. 'I got the place from my father, and added to it with a little money that came to me from my gram. I do have a dairy herd, about twenty milkers, you were right about that, too, and in the evenings I write stories. I suppose you've got one of those fancy computers with a screen, but I make do with an old typewriter.'

He fell silent, and for a moment they could both hear the crisp rustle of the leaves in the light late-afternoon wind that had sprung up.

'As for your story being the same as mine, I found that out all on my own hook. You see, I'd been thinking about selling the farm. Thinking that with a little more money, I could write days, when my mind's fresh, instead of just after dark. The realtor in Perkinsburg wanted me to meet a fellow up in Jackson, who owns a lot of dairy farms in Miss'ippi. I don't like to drive more than ten or fifteen miles at a time - it gives me a headache, especially when some of it's city driving, because that's where they let all the fools loose - and so I took the bus. I got ready to get on, and then remembered I hadn't brought anything to read. I hate a long bus ride without something to read.'

Mort found himself nodding involuntarily. He also hated a ride - bus, train, plane, or car - without something to read, something a little more substantial than the daily paper.

'There isn't any bus station in Perkinsburg - the Greyhound just stops at the Rexall for five minutes or so and then it's down the road. I was already inside the door of that 'hound and starting up the steps when I realized I was empty-handed. I asked the bus driver if he'd hold it for me and he said he was damned if he would, he was late already, and he was pulling out in another three minutes by his pocket-watch. If I was with him, that would be fine by him, and if I wasn't, then I could kiss his fanny when we met up again.'

He TALKS like a storyteller, Mort thought. Be damned if he doesn't. He tried to cancel this thought - it didn't seem to be a good way to be thinking - and couldn't quite do it.

'Well, I ran inside that drugstore. They've got one of those old fashioned wire paperback racks in the Perkinsburg Rexall, the ones that turn around and around, just like the one in the little general store up the road from you.'

'Bowie's?'

Shooter nodded. 'That's the place, all right. Anyway, I grabbed the first book my hand happened on. Could have been a paperback Bible, for all I saw of the cover. But it wasn't. It was your book of short stories. Everybody Drops the Dime. And for all I know, they were your short stories. All but that one.'

Stop this now. He's working up a head of steam, so spike his boiler right now.

But he discovered. he didn't want to. Maybe Shooter was a writer. He fulfilled both of the main requirements: he told a tale you wanted to hear to the end, even if you had a pretty good idea what the end was going to be, and he was so full of shit he squeaked.

Instead of saying what he should have said - that even if Shooter was by some wild stretch of the imagination telling the truth, he, Mort, had beaten him to that miserable story by two years - he said: 'So you read "Sowing Season" on a Greyhound bus while you were going to Jackson to sell your dairy farm last June.'

'No. The way it happened, I read it on the way back. I sold the farm and went back on the Greyhound with a check for sixty thousand dollars in my pocket. I'd read the first half a dozen stories going down. I didn't think they were any great shakes, but they passed the time.'

'Thank you.'

Shooter studied him briefly. 'Wasn't offering you any real compliment.'

'Don't I know it.'

Shooter thought about this for a moment, then shrugged. 'Anyway, I read two more going back ... and then that one. My story.'

He looked at the cloud, which was now an airy mass of shimmering gold, and then back at Mort. His face was as dispassionate as ever,

but Mort suddenly understood he had been badly mistaken in believing this man possessed even the slightest shred of peace or serenity. What he had mistaken for those things was the iron mantle of control Shooter had donned to keep himself from killing Morton Rainey with his bare hands. The face was dispassionate, but his eyes blazed with the deepest, wildest fury Mort had ever seen. He understood that he had stupidly walked up the path from the lake toward what might really be his own death at this fellow's hands. Here was a man mad enough - in both senses of that word - to do murder.

'I am surprised no one has taken that story up with you before - it's not like any of the others, not a bit.' Shooter's voice was still even, but Mort now recognized it as the voice of a man laboring mightily to keep from striking out, bludgeoning, perhaps throttling; the voice of a man who knows that all the incentive he would ever need to cross the line between talking and killing would be to hear his own voice begin to spiral upward into the registers of cheated anger; the voice of a man who knows how fatally easy it would be to become his own lynch-mob.

Mort suddenly felt like a man in a dark room which is crisscrossed with hair-thin tripwires, all of them leading to packets of high explosive. It was hard to believe that only moments ago he had felt in charge of this situation. His problems - Amy, his inability to write - now seemed like unimportant figures in an unimportant landscape. In a sense, they had ceased to be problems at all. He only had one problem now, and that was staying alive long enough to get back to his house, let alone long enough to see the sun go down.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. There was nothing he dared to say, not now. The room was full of tripwires.

'I am very surprised,' Shooter repeated in that heavy even voice that now sounded like a hideous parody of calmness.

Mort heard himself say: 'My wife. She didn't like it. She said that it wasn't like anything I'd ever written before.'

'How did you get it?' Shooter asked slowly and fiercely. 'That's what I really want to know. How in hell did a big-money scribbling asshole like you get down to a little shitsplat town in Mississippi and steal my goddam story? I'd like to know why, too, unless you stole all the other ones as well, but the how of it'll be enough to satisfy me right now.'

The monstrous unfairness of this brought Mort's own anger back like an unslaked thirst. For a moment he forgot that he was out here on Lake Drive, alone except for this lunatic from Mississippi.

'Drop it,' he said harshly.

'Drop it?' Shooter asked, looking at Mort with a kind of clumsy amazement. 'Drop it? What in hell do you mean, drop it?'

'You said you wrote your story in 1982,' Mort said. 'I think I wrote mine in late 1979. I can't remember the exact date, but I do know that it was published for the first time in June of 1980. In a magazine. I beat you by two years, Mr Shooter or whatever your name is. If anyone here has got a bitch about plagiarism, it's me.'

Mort did not precisely see the man move. At one moment they were standing by Shooter's car, looking at each other; at the next he found himself pressed against the driver's door, with Shooter's hands wrapped around his upper arms and Shooter's face pressed against his own, forehead to forehead. In between his two positions, there was only a blurred sensation of being first grabbed and then whirled.

'You lie,' Shooter said, and on his breath was a dry whiff of cinnamon.

'The fuck I do,' Mort said, and lunged forward against the man's pressing weight.

Shooter was strong, almost certainly stronger than Mort Rainey, but Mort was younger, heavier, and he had the old blue station wagon to

push against. He was able to break Shooter's hold and send him stumbling two or three steps backward.

Now he'll come for me, Mort thought. Although he hadn't had a fight since a schoolyard you-pull-me-and-I'll-push-you scuffle back in the fourth grade, he was astounded to find his mind was clear and cool. We're going to duke it out over that dumb fucking story. Well, okay; I wasn't doing anything else today anyhow.

But it didn't happen. Shooter raised his hands, looked at them, saw they were knotted into fists ... and forced them to open. Mort saw the effort it took for the man to reimpose that mantle of control, and felt a kind of awe. Shooter put one of his open palms to his mouth and wiped his lips with it, very slowly and very deliberately.

'Prove it,' he said.

'All right. Come back to the house with me. I'll show you the entry on the copyright page of the book.'

'No,' Shooter said. 'I don't care about the book, I don't care a pin for the book. Show me the story. Show me the magazine with the story in it, so I can read it for myself.'

'I don't have the magazine here.'

He was about to say something else, but Shooter turned his face up toward the sky and uttered a single bark of laughter. The sound was as dry as an axe splitting kindling wood. 'No,' he said. The fury was still blazing and dancing in his eyes, but he seemed in charge of himself again. 'No, I bet you don't.'

'Listen to me,' Mort said. 'Ordinarily, this is just a place my wife and I come in the summer. I have copies of my books here, and some foreign editions, but I've published in a lot of magazines as well - articles and essays as well as stories. Those magazines are in our year-round house. The one in Derry.'

'Then why aren't you there?' Shooter asked. In his eyes Mort read both disbelief and a galling satisfaction - it was clear that Shooter had expected him to try and squirm his way out of it, and in Shooter's mind, that was just what Mort was doing. Or trying to do.

'I'm here because - ' He stopped. 'How did you know I'd be here?'

'I just looked on the back of the book I bought,' Shooter said, and Mort could have slapped his own forehead in frustration and sudden understanding. Of course - there had been a picture of him on the back of both the hardcover and paperback editions of Everybody Drops the Dime. Amy had taken it herself, and it had been an excellent shot. He was in the foreground; the house was in the middle distance; Tashmore Lake was in the background. The caption had read simply, Morton Rainey at his home in western Maine. So Shooter had come to western Maine, and he probably hadn't had to visit too many small-town bars and/or drugstores before he found someone who said, 'Mort Rainey? Hell, yes! Got a place over in Tashmore. Personal friend of mine, in fact!'

Well, that answered one question, anyway.

'I'm here because my wife and I got a divorce,' he said. 'It just became final. She stayed in Derry. Any other year, the house down here would have been empty.'

'Uh-huh,' Shooter said. His tone of voice infuriated Mort all over again. You're lying, it said, but in this case it doesn't much matter. Because I knew you'd lie. After all, lying is mostly what you're about, isn't it? 'Well, I would have found you, one place or the other.'

He fixed Mort with a flinty stare.

'I would have found you if you'd moved to Brazil.'

'I believe that,' Mort said. 'Nevertheless, you are mistaken. Or conning me. I'll do you the courtesy of believing it's only a mistake, because you seem sincere enough - '

Oh God, didn't he.

' - but I published that story two years before you say you wrote it.'

He saw that mad flash in Shooter's eyes again, and then it was gone. Not extinguished but collared, the way a man might collar a dog with an evil nature.

'You say this magazine is at your other house?'

'Yes.'

'And the magazine has your story in it.'

'Yes.'

'And the date of that magazine is June, 1980.'

'Yes.'

Mort had felt impatient with this laborious catechism (there was a long, thoughtful pause before each question) at first, but now he felt a little hope: it was as if the man was trying to teach himself the truth of what Mort had said ... a truth, Mort thought, that part of 'John Shooter' must have known all along, because the almost exact similarity between the two stories was not coincidence. He still believed that firmly, but he had come around to the idea that Shooter might have no conscious memory of committing the plagiarism. Because the man was clearly mad.

He wasn't quite as afraid as he had been when he first saw the hate and fury dancing in Shooter's eyes, like the reflection of a barn-fire blazing out of control. When he pushed the man, he had staggered backward, and Mort thought that if it came to a fight, he could probably hold his own ... or actually put his man on the ground.

Still, it would be better if it didn't come to that. In an odd, backhand sort of way, he had begun to feel a bit sorry for Shooter.

That gentleman, meanwhile, was stolidly pursuing his course.

'This other house - the one your wife has now - it's here in Maine, too?'

'Yes.'

'She's there?'

'Yes.'

There was a much longer pause this time. In a weird way, Shooter reminded Mort of a computer processing a heavy load of information. At last he said: 'I'll give you three days.'

'That's very generous of you,' Mort said.

Shooter's long upper lip drew back from teeth too even to be anything but mail-order dentures. 'Don't you make light of me, son,' he said. 'I'm trying my best to hold my temper, and doing a pretty good job of it, but -'

'You!' Mort cried at him. 'What about me? This is unbelievable! You come out of nowhere and make just about the most serious accusation a man can make against a writer, and when I tell you I've got proof you're either mistaken or lying through your damned teeth, you start patting yourself on the back for holding your temper! Unbelievable!'

Shooter's eyelids drooped, giving him a sly look. 'Proof?' he said. 'I don't see no proof. I hear you talking, but talking ain't proof.'

'I told you!' Mort shouted. He felt helpless, like a man trying to box cobwebs. 'I explained all that!'

Shooter looked at Mort for a long moment, then turned and reached through the open window of his car.

'What are you doing?' Mort asked, his voice tight. Now he felt the adrenaline dump into his body, readying him for fight or flight ... probably the latter, if Shooter was reaching for the big handgun Mort suddenly saw in the eye of his imagination.

'Just gettin m'smokes,' Shooter said. 'Hold your water.'

When he pulled his arm out of the car, he had a red package of Pall Malls in his hand. He had taken them off the dashboard. 'Want one?'

'I have my own,' Mort said rather sulkily, and took the ancient pack of L & M's from the pocket beneath the red flannel overshirt.

They lit up, each from his own pack.

'If we keep on this way, we're going to have a fight,' Shooter said finally. 'I don't want that.'

'Well, Jesus, neither do I'

'Part of you does,' Shooter contradicted. He continued to study Mort from beneath his dropped lids with that expression of country shrewdness. 'Part of you wants just that. But I don't think it's just me or my story that's making you want to fight. You have got some other bee under your blanket that's got you all riled up, and that is making this harder. Part of you wants to fight, but what you don't understand is that, if we do start to fight, it's not going to end until one or the other of us is dead.'

Mort looked for signs that Shooter was exaggerating for effect and saw none. He suddenly felt cold along the base of his spine.

'So I'm going to give you three days. You call your ex and get her to send down the magazine with your story in it, if there is such a magazine. And I'll be back. There isn't any magazine, of course; I think we both know that. But you strike me as a man who needs to do some long, hard thinking.'

He looked at Mort with a disconcerting expression of stern pity.

'You didn't believe anybody would ever catch you out, did you?' he asked. 'You really didn't.'

'If I show you the magazine, will you go away?' Mort asked. He was speaking more to himself than to Shooter. 'I guess what I really want to know is whether or not it's even worth it.'

Shooter abruptly opened his car door and slid in behind the wheel. Mort found the speed with which the man could move a little creepy. 'Three days. Use it the way you like, Mr Rainey.'

He started the engine. It ran with the low wheeze characteristic of valves which need to be reground, and the tang of oilsmoke from the old tailpipe polluted the air of the fading afternoon. 'Right is right and fair is fair. The first thing is to get you to a place where you see I have really got you, and you can't wiggle out of this mess the way you've probably been wiggling out of the messes you have made all your life. That's the first thing.'

He looked at Mort expressionlessly out of the driver's-side window.

'The second thing,' he said, 'is the real reason I come.'

'What's that?' Mort heard himself say. It was strange and not a little infuriating, but he felt that sensation of guilt creeping relentlessly over him again, as if he really had done the thing of which this rustic lunatic was accusing him.

'We'll talk about it,' Shooter said, and threw his elderly station wagon in gear. 'Meantime, you think about what's right and what's fair.'

'You're nuts!' Mort shouted, but Shooter was already rolling up Lake Drive toward where it spilled out onto Route 23.

He watched until the wagon was out of sight, then walked slowly back to the house. It felt emptier and emptier in his mind as he drew

closer and closer to it. The rage and the fear were gone. He felt only cold, tired, and homesick for a marriage which no longer was, and which, it now began to seem to him, had never been at all.

The telephone started ringing when he was halfway along the driveway which ran down the steep hill from Lake Drive to the house. Mort broke into a run, knowing he wasn't going to make it but running anyway, cursing himself for his foolish reaction. Talk about Pavlov's dogs!

He had opened the screen door and was fumbling with the knob of the inside door when the phone silenced. He stepped in, closed the door behind him, and looked at the telephone, which stood on a little antique desk Amy had picked up at a flea market in Mechanic Falls. He could, in that moment, easily imagine that the phone was looking back at him with studied mechanical impatience: Don't ask me, boss - I don't make the news ' I only report it. He thought that he ought to buy one of those machines that take messages ... or maybe not. When he thought about it carefully, he realized that the telephone was hardly his favorite gadget. If people really wanted you, they eventually called back.

He made himself a sandwich and a bowl of soup and then discovered he didn't want them. He. felt lonely, unhappy, and mildly infected by John Shooter's craziness. He was not much surprised to find that the sum of these feelings was sleepiness. He began to cast longing glances at the couch.

Okay, an interior voice whispered. Remember, though -you can run but you can't hide. This shit is still gonna be here when you wake up.

That was very true, he thought, but in the meantime, it would all be gone, gone, blessedly gone. The one thing you could definitely say for short-term solutions was that they were better than nothing. He decided he would call home (his mind persisted in thinking of the Derry house as home, and he suspected that was a circumstance which would not soon change), ask Amy to pull the copy of EQMM with 'Sowing Season' in it and send it down by express mail. Then

he would sack on the couch for a couple of hours. He would arise around seven or so, go into the study refreshed, and write a little more shit.

And shit i's all you will write, with that attitude, the interior voice reproached him.

'Fuck you,' Mort told it - one of the few advantages to living alone, so far as he could see, was that you could talk to yourself right out loud without having anyone wonder if you were crazy or what.

He picked up the phone and dialled the Derry number. He listened to the customary clicks of the long-distance connection being made, and then that most irritating of all telephone sounds: the dah-dah-dah of a busy signal. Amy was on the telephone with someone, and when Amy really got going, a conversation could go on for hours. Possibly days.

'Oh, fuck, great!' Mort cried, and jacked the handset back into the cradle hard enough to make the bell jingle faintly.

So - what now, little man?

He supposed he could call Isabelle Fortin who lived across the street, but that suddenly seemed like too much work and a pain in the ass besides. Isabelle was already so deeply into his and Amy's breakup that she was doing everything but taking home movies. Also, it was already past five o'clock - the magazine couldn't actually start to move along the postal channel between Derry and Tashmore until tomorrow morning no matter what time it was mailed today. He would try Amy later on this evening, and if the line to the house was busy again (or if Amy was, perchance, still on the same call), he would call Isabelle with the message after all. For the moment, the siren-song of the couch in the living room was too strong to be denied.

Mort pulled the phone jack - whoever had tried to call him just as he was coming down the driveway would have to wait a little longer,

please and thank you - and strolled into the living room.

He propped the pillows in their familiar positions, one behind his head and one behind his neck, and looked out at the lake, where the sun was setting at the end of a long and spectacular golden track. I have never felt so lonely and so utterly horrible in my whole life, he thought with some amazement. Then his lids closed slowly over his slightly bloodshot eyes, and Mort Rainey, who had yet to discover what true horror was all about, fell asleep.

12

He dreamed he was in a classroom.

It was a familiar classroom, although he couldn't have said just why. He was in the classroom with John Shooter. Shooter was holding a grocery bag in the curve of one arm. He took an orange out of the bag and bounced it reflectively up and down in his hand. He was looking in Mort's direction, but not at Mort; his gaze seemed fixed on something beyond Mort's shoulder. Mort turned and saw a cinderblock wall and a blackboard and a door with a frosted-glass upper panel. After a moment he could puzzle out the backward writing on the frosted glass.

WELCOME TO THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

it said. The writing on the blackboard was easier to read.

SOWING SEASON

A Short Story by Morton Rainey

it said.

Suddenly something whizzed over Mort's shoulder, just missing his head. The orange. As Mort cringed back, the orange struck the blackboard, burst open with a rotten squashing sound, and splattered gore across what had been written there.

He turned back to Shooter. Stop that! he cried in a shaky, scolding voice.

Shooter dipped into his bag again. What's the matter? Shooter asked in his calm, stern voice. Don't you recognize blood oranges when you see them? What kind of writer are you?

He threw another one. It splattered crimson across Mort's name and began to drip slowly down the wall.

No more! Mort screamed, but Shooter dipped slowly, implacably, into the bag again. His long, callused fingers sank into the skin of the orange he brought out; blood began to sweat its way onto the orange's skin in pinprick droplets.

No more! No more! Please! No more! I'll admit it, I'll admit anything. everything, if you just stop! Anything, if you'll just stop! If you'll

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stop, if you'll just stop -

He was falling.

Mort grabbed at the edge of the couch just in time to save himself a short and probably painful trip to the living-room floor. He rolled toward the back of the couch and simply lay there for a moment, clutching the cushions, shivering, and trying to grasp at the ragged tails of the dream.

Something about a classroom, and blood oranges, and the school of hard knocks. Even this was going, and the rest was already gone. It had been real, whatever it was. Much too real.

At last he opened his eyes, but there was precious little to see; he had slept until long past sundown. He was horribly stiff, especially at the base of his neck, and he suspected he had been asleep at least four hours, maybe five. He felt his way cautiously to the living-room light-switch, managing to avoid the octagonal glass-topped coffee table for a change (he had an idea the coffee table was semi-sentient, and given to shifting its position slightly after dark, the better to hack away at his shins), and then went into the front hall to try Amy again. On the way, he checked his watch. It was quarter past ten. He had slept over five hours ... nor was this the first time. And he wouldn't even pay for it by tossing and turning all night, judging by past experience, he would be asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow in the bedroom.

He picked up the phone, was momentarily puzzled by the dead silence in his ear. then remembered he had yanked the damn thing's fang. He pulled the wire through his fingers until he got to the jack, turned around to plug it in ... and paused. From here he could look out the small window to the left of the door. This gave him an angle of vision on the back porch, where the mysterious and unpleasant Mr Shooter had left his manuscript under a rock yesterday. He could

also see the garbage cabinet, and there was something on it - two somethings, actually. A white something and a dark something. The dark something looked nasty; for one frightening second, Mort thought a giant spider was crouched there.

He dropped the phone cord and turned on the porch light in a hurry. Then there was a space of time - he didn't know just how long and didn't care to know -when he was incapable of further movement.

The white thing was a sheet of paper - a perfectly ordinary 8 1/2" x 11" sheet of typing paper. Although the garbage cabinet was a good fifteen feet away from where Mort was standing, the few words on it were printed in large strokes and he could read them easily. He thought Shooter must have used either a pencil with an extremely soft lead or a piece of artist's charcoal. REMEMBER, YOU HAVE 3 DAYS, the message read. I AM NOT JOKING.

The black thing was Bump. Shooter had apparently broken the cat's neck before nailing him to the roof of the garbage cabinet with a screwdriver from Mort's own toolshed.

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He wasn't aware of breaking the paralysis which held him. At one moment he was standing frozen in the hall by the telephone table, looking out at good old Bump, who seemed to have grown a screwdriver handle in the middle of his chest, where there was a ruff of white fur - what Amy had liked to call Bump's bib. At the next he was standing in the middle of the porch with the chilly night air biting through his thin shirt, trying to look six different ways at once.

He forced himself to stop. Shooter was gone, of course. That's why he had left the note. Nor did Shooter seem like the kind of nut who would enjoy watching Mort's obvious fear and horror. He was a nut, all right, but one which had fallen from a different tree. He had simply used Bump, used him on Mort the way a farmer might use a crowbar on a stubborn rock in his north forty. There was nothing personal in it; it was just a job that had to be done.

Then he thought of how Shooter's eyes had looked that afternoon and shivered violently. No, it was personal, all right. It was all kinds of personal.

'He believes I did it,' Mort whispered to the cold western Maine night, and the words came out in ragged chunks, bitten off by his chattering teeth. 'The crazy son of a bitch really believes I did it.'

He approached the garbage cabinet and his stomach rolled over like a dog doing a trick. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, and he wasn't sure he could take care of what needed taking care of. Bump's head was cocked far to the left, giving him a grotesque questioning look. His teeth, small, neat, and needle-sharp, were bared. There was a little blood around the blade of the screwdriver at the point where it was driven into his

(bib)

ruff, but not very much. Bump was a friendly cat; if Shooter had approached him, Bump would not have shied away. And that was what Shooter must have done, Mort thought, and wiped the sick sweat off his forehead. He had picked the cat up, snapped its neck between his fingers like a Popsicle stick, and then nailed it to the slanting roof of the garbage cabinet, all while Mort Rainey slept, if not the sleep of the just, that of the unheeding.

Mort crumpled up the sheet of paper, stuffed it in his back pocket, then put his hand on Bump's chest. The body, not stiff and not even entirely cold, shifted under his hand. His stomach rolled again, but he forced his other hand to close around the screwdriver's yellow plastic handle and pull it free.

He tossed the screwdriver onto the porch and held poor old Bump in his right hand like a bundle of rags. Now his stomach was in free fall, simply rolling and rolling and rolling. He lifted one of the two lids on top of the garbage cabinet, and secured it with the hook-and-eyelet that kept the heavy lid from crashing down on the arms or head of whoever was depositing trash inside. Three cans were lined up within. Mort lifted the lid from the center one and deposited Bump's body gently inside. It lay draped over the top of an olive-green Hefty bag like a fur stole.

He was suddenly furious with Shooter. If the man had appeared in the driveway at that second, Mort would have charged him without a second thought - driven him to the ground and choked him if he could.

Easy - it really is catching.

Maybe it was. And maybe he didn't care. It wasn't just that Shooter had killed his only companion in this lonely October house by the lake; it was that he had done it while Mort was asleep, and in such a way that good old Bump had become an object of revulsion, something it was hard not to puke over.

Most of all it was the fact that he had been forced to put his good cat in a garbage can like a piece of worthless trash.

I'll bury him tomorrow. Right over in that soft patch to the left of the house. In sight of the lake.

Yes, but tonight Bump would lie in undignified state on top of a Hefty bag in the garbage cabinet because some man - some crazy son of a bitch - could be out there, and the man had a grudge over a story Mort Rainey hadn't even thought of for the last five years or so. The man was crazy, and consequently Mort was afraid to bury Bump tonight, because, note or no note, Shooter might be out there.

I want to kill him. And if the crazy bastard pushes me much more, I might just try to do it.

He went inside, slammed the door, and locked it. Then he walked deliberately through the house, locking all the doors and windows. When that was done, he went back to the window by the porch door and stared pensively out into the darkness. He could see the screwdriver lying on the boards, and the dark round hole the blade had made when Shooter plunged it into the righthand lid of the garbage cabinet.

All at once he remembered he had been about to try Amy again.

He plugged the jack into the wall. He dialled rapidly, fingers tapping the old familiar keys which added up to home, and wondered if he would tell Amy about Bump.

There was an unnaturally long pause after the preliminary clicks. He was about to hang up when there was one final click - so loud it was almost a thud - followed by a robot voice telling him that the number he had dialled was out of service.

'Wonderful,' he muttered. 'What the hell did you do, Amy? Use it until it broke?'

He pushed the disconnect button down, thinking he would have to call Isabelle Fortin after all, and while he was conning his memory for her number, the telephone rang in his hand.

He hadn't realized how keyed up he was until that happened. He gave a squeaky little cry and skipped backward, dropping the telephone handset on the floor and then almost tripping over the goddam bench Amy had bought and put by the telephone table, the bench absolutely no one, including Amy herself, ever used.

He pawed out with one hand, grabbed the bookcase, and kept himself from falling. Then he snatched up the phone and said, 'Hello? Is that you, Shooter?' For in that moment, when it seemed that the whole world was slowly but surely turning topsy-turvy, he couldn't imagine who else it could be.

'Mort?' It was Amy, and she was nearly screaming. He knew the tone very well from the last two years of their marriage. It was either frustration or fury, more likely the latter. 'Mort, is that you? Is it you, for God's sake? Mort?'

'Yes, it's me,' he said. He suddenly felt weary.

'Where in the hell have you been? I've been trying to get you for the last three hours!'

'Asleep,' he said.

'You pulled the jack.' She spoke in the tired but accusatory tone of one who had been down this road before. 'Well, you picked a great time to do it this time, champ.'

'I tried to call you around five -'

'I was at Ted's.'

'Well, somebody was there,' he said. 'Maybe'

'What do you mean, someone was there?' she asked, whiplash quick. 'Who was there?'

'How the hell would I know, Amy? You're the one in Derry, remember? You Derry, me Tashmore. All I know is that the line was busy when I tried to call you. If you were over at Ted's, then I assume Isabelle - '

'I'm still at Ted's,' she said, and now her voice was queerly flat. 'I guess I'll be at Ted's for quite awhile to come, like it or not. Someone burned our house down, Mort. Someone burned it right to the ground.' And suddenly Amy began to cry.

15

He had become so fixated on John Shooter that his immediate assumption, as he stood numbly in the hallway of the one remaining Rainey home with the telephone screwed against his ear, was that Shooter had burned the house down. Motive? Why, certainly, officer. He burned the house, a restored Victorian worth about \$800,000, to get rid of a magazine. Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, to be precise; June of 1980 issue.

But could it have been Shooter? Surely not. The distance between Derry and Tashmore was over a hundred miles, and Bump's body had still been warm and flexible, the blood around the screwdriver blade tacky but not yet dry.

If he hurried

Oh, quit it, why don't you? Pretty soon you'll be blaming Shooter for your divorce and thinking you've been sleeping sixteen hours out of every twenty-four because Shooter has been putting Phenobarb in your food. And after that? You can start writing letters to the paper saying that America's cocaine kingpin is a gentleman from Crow's Ass Mississippi named John Shooter. That he killed Jimmy Hoffa and also happened to be the famous second gun who fired at Kennedy from the grassy knoll in November of 1963. The man's crazy, okay ... but do you really think he drove a hundred miles north and massacred your goddam house in order to kill a magazine? Especially when there must be copies of that magazine still in existence all across America? Get serious.

But still ... if he hurried ...

No. It was ridiculous. But, Mort suddenly realized, he wouldn't be able to show the man his goddam proof, would he? Not unless...

The study was at the back of the house; they had converted what had once been the loft of the carriage-barn.

'Amy,' he said.

'It's so horrible!' she wept. 'I was at Ted's and Isabelle called ... she said there were at least fifteen fire trucks there ... hoses spraying ... crowds ... rubbernecks ... gawkers ... you know how I hate it when people come and gawk at the house, even when it's not burning down ...'

He had to bite down hard on the insides of his cheeks to stifle a wild bray of laughter. To laugh now would be the worst thing, the cruellest thing he could possibly do, because he did know. His success at his chosen trade after the years of struggle had been a great and fulfilling thing for him; he sometimes felt like a man who has won his way through a perilous jungle where most other adventurers perish and has gained a fabulous prize by so doing. Amy had been glad for him, at least initially, but for her there had been a bitter downside: the loss of her identity not only as a private person but as a separate person.

'Yes,' he said as gently as he could, still biting at his cheeks to protect against the laughter which threatened. If he laughed, it would be at her unfortunate choice of phrasing, but she wouldn't see it that way. So often during their years together she had misinterpreted his laughter. 'Yes, I know, hon. Tell me what happened.'

'Somebody burned down our house!' Amy cried tearily. 'That's what happened!'

'Is it a total loss?'

'Yes. That's what the fire chief said.' He could hear her gulping, trying to get herself under control, and then her tears stormed out again. 'It b-burned fuh-fuh-flat!'

'Even my study?'

'That's w-where it st-started,' she sniffled. 'At least, that's what the fire chief said they thought. And it fits with what Patty saw.'

‘Patty Champion?’

The Champions owned the house next to the Raineys’ on the right; the two lots were separated by a belt of yew trees that had slowly run wild over the years.

‘Yes. just a second, Mort.’

He heard a mighty honk as she blew her nose, and when she came back on the line, she seemed more composed. ‘Patty was walking her dog, she told the firemen. This was a little while after it got dark. She walked past our house and saw a car parked under the portico. Then she heard a crash from inside, and saw fire in your big study window.’

‘Did she see what kind of car it was?’ Mort asked. He felt sick in the pit of his stomach. As the news sank in, the John Shooter business began to dwindle in size and importance. It wasn’t just the goddam June, 1980, issue of EQMM; it was almost all his manuscripts, both those which had been published and those which were incomplete, it was most of his first editions, his foreign editions, his contributors’ copies.

Oh, but that was only the start. They had lost their books, as many as four thousand volumes. All of Amy’s clothes would have burned, if the damage was as bad as she said it was, and the antique furniture she had collected - sometimes with his help, but mostly on her own - would all be cinders and clinkers now. Her jewelry and their personal papers - insurance policies and so on - would probably be okay (the safe hidden at the back of the upstairs closet was supposed to be fireproof), but the Turkish rugs would be ash, the thousand or so videotapes melted lumps of plastic, the audio-visual equipment ... his clothes ... their photographs, thousands of them ...

Good Christ, and the first thing he’d thought of was that goddam magazine.

'No,' Amy was saying, answering the question he had almost forgotten asking in his realization of how enormous the personal loss must be, 'she couldn't tell what kind of car it was. She said she thought somebody must have used a Molotov cocktail, or something like that. Because of the way the fire came up in the window right after the sound of breaking glass. She said she started up the driveway and then the kitchen door opened and a man ran out. Bruno started to bark at him, but Patty got scared and pulled him back, although she said he just about ripped the leash out of her hand.

'Then the man got into the car and started it up. He turned on the headlights, and Patty said they almost blinded her. She threw her arm up to shield her eyes and the car just roared out from under the portico ... that's what she said ... and she squeezed back against our front fence and pulled Bruno as hard as she could, or the man would have hit him. Then he turned out of the driveway and drove down the street, fast.'

'And she never saw what kind of car it was?'

'No. First it was dark, and then, when the fire started to shine through your study window, the headlights dazzled her. She ran back to the house and called the fire department. Isabelle said they came fast, but you know how old our house is ... was ... and ... and how fast dry wood burns ... especially if you use gasoline ...'

Yes, he knew. Old, dry, full of wood, the house had been an arsonist's wet dream. But who? If not Shooter, who? This terrible news, coming on top of the day's events like a hideous dessert at the end of a loathsome meal, had almost completely paralyzed his ability to think.

'He said it was probably gasoline ... the fire chief, I mean ... he was there first, but then the police came, and they kept asking questions, Mort, most about you ... about any enemies you might have made ... enemies ... and I said I didn't think you h-had any enemies ... I tried to answer all his questions ...'

'I'm sure you did the best job you could,' he said gently.

She went on as if she hadn't heard him, speaking in breathless ellipses, like a telegraph operator relating dire news aloud just as it spills off the wire. 'I didn't even know how to tell them we were divorced ... and of course they didn't know ... it was Ted who had to tell them finally ... Mort ... my mother's Bible ... it was on the nightstand in the bedroom ... there were pictures in it of my family ... and ... and it was the only thing ... only thing of hers I h-h-had ...'

Her voice dissolved into miserable sobs.

'I'll be up in the morning,' he said. 'If I leave at seven, I can be there by nine-thirty. Maybe by nine, now that there's no summer traffic. Where will you stay tonight? At Ted's?'

'Yes,' she said, sniffing. 'I know you don't like him, Mort, but I don't know what I would have done without him tonight ... how I could have handled it ... you know ... all their questions ...'

'Then I'm glad you had him,' he said firmly. He found the calmness, the civilization, in his voice really astounding. 'Take care of yourself. Have you got your pills?' She'd had a tranquilizer prescription for the last six years of their marriage, but only took them when she had to fly ... or, he remembered, when he had some public function to fulfill. One which required the presence of the Designated Spouse.

'They were in the medicine cabinet,' she said dully. 'It doesn't matter. I'm not stressed. just heartsick.'

Mort almost told her he believed they were the same thing, and decided not to.

'I'll be there as soon as I can,' he said. 'If you think I could do something by coming tonight - '

'No,' she said. 'Where should we meet? Ted's?'

Suddenly, unbidden, he saw his hand holding a chambermaid's passkey. Saw it turning in the lock of a motel-room door. Saw the door swinging open. Saw the surprised faces above the sheet, Amy's on the left, Ted Milner's on the right. His blow-dried look had been knocked all aslant and asprawl by sleep, and to Mort he had looked a little bit like Alfalfa in the old Little Rascals short subjects. Seeing Ted's hair in sleep corkscrews like that had also made the man look really real to Mort for the first time. He had seen their dismay and their bare shoulders. And suddenly, almost randomly, he thought: A woman who would steal your love when your love was really all you had

'No,' he said, 'not Ted's. What about that little coffee shop on Witcham Street?'

'Would you prefer I came alone?' She didn't sound angry, but she sounded ready to be angry. How well I know her, he thought. Every move, every lift and drop of her voice, every turn of phrase. And how well she must know me.

'No,' he said. 'Bring Ted. That'd be fine.' Not fine, but he could live with it. He thought.

'Nine-thirty, then,' she said, and he could hear her standing down a little. 'Marchman's.'

'Is that the name of that place?'

'Yes - Marchman's Restaurant.'

'Okay. Nine-thirty or a little earlier. If I get there first, I'll chalk a mark on the door -'

'-and if I get there first, I'll rub it out,' she finished the old catechism, and they both laughed a little. Mort found that even the laugh hurt. They knew each other, all right. Wasn't that what the years together were supposed to be for? And wasn't that why it hurt so goddam bad

when you discovered that, not only could the years end, they really had?

He suddenly thought of the note which had been stuck under one of the garbage cabinet's shake shingles - REMEMBER, YOU HAVE 3 DAYS. I AM NOT JOKING. He thought of saying, I've had a little trouble of my own down here, Amy, and then knew he couldn't add that to her current load of woe. It was his trouble.

'If it had happened later, at least you would have saved your stuff,' she was saying. 'I don't like to think about all the manuscripts you must have lost, Mort. If you'd gotten the fireproof drawers two years ago, when Herb suggested them, maybe - '

'I don't think it matters,' Mort said. 'I've got the manuscript of the new novel down here.' He did, too. All fourteen shitty, wooden pages of it. 'To hell with the rest. I'll see you tomorrow, Amy. I

(love you)

He closed his lips over it. They were divorced. Could he still love her? It seemed almost perverse. And even if he did, did he have any right to say so?

'I'm sorry as hell about this,' he told her instead.

'So am I, Mort. So very sorry.' She was starting to cry again. Now he could hear someone - a woman, probably Isabelle Fortin - comforting her.

'Get some sleep, Amy.'

'You, too.'

He hung up. All at once the house seemed much quieter than it had on any of the other nights he had been here alone; he could hear nothing but the night wind whispering around the eaves and, very far off, a loon calling on the lake. He took the note out of his pocket,

smoothed it out, and read it again. It was the sort of thing you were supposed to put aside for the police. In fact, it was the sort of thing you weren't even supposed to touch until the police had had a chance to photograph it and work their juju on it. It was - ruffle of drums and blast of trumpets, please - EVIDENCE.

Well, fuck it, Mort thought, crumpling it up again. No police. Dave Newsome, the local constable, probably had trouble remembering what he'd eaten for breakfast by the time lunch rolled around, and he couldn't see taking the matter to either the county sheriff or the State Police. After all, it wasn't as though an attempt had been made on his life; his cat had been killed, but a cat wasn't a person. And in the wake of Amy's devastating news, John Shooter simply didn't seem as important anymore. He was one of the Crazy Folks, he had a bee in his bonnet, and he might be dangerous ... but Mort felt more and more inclined to try and handle the business himself, even if Shooter was dangerous. Especially if he was dangerous.

The house in Derry took precedence over John Shooter and John Shooter's crazy ideas. It even took precedence over who had done the deed - Shooter or some other fruitcake with a grudge, a mental problem, or both. The house, and, he supposed, Amy. She was clearly in bad shape, and it couldn't hurt either of them for him to offer her what comfort he could. Maybe she would even ...

But he closed his mind to any speculation of what Amy might even do. He saw nothing but pain down that road. Better to believe that road was closed for good.

He went into the bedroom, undressed, and lay down with his hands behind his head. The loon called again, desperate and distant. It occurred to him again that Shooter could be out there, creeping around, his face a pale circle beneath his odd black hat. Shooter was nuts, and although he had used his hands and a screwdriver on Bump, that did not preclude the possibility that he still might have a gun.

But Mort didn't think Shooter was out there, armed or not.

Calls, he thought. I'll have to make at least two on my way up to Deny. One to Greg Carstairs and one to Herb Creekmore. Too early to make them from here if I leave at seven, but I could use one of the pay phones at the Augusta tollbooths ...

He turned over on his side, thinking it would be a long time before he fell asleep tonight after all ... and then sleep rolled over him in a smooth dark wave, and if anyone came to peer in on him as he slept, he did not know it.

16

The alarm got him up at six-fifteen. He took half an hour to bury Bump in the sandy patch of ground between the house and the lake, and by seven he was rolling, just as planned. He was ten miles down the road and heading into Mechanic Falls, a bustling metropolis which consisted of a textile mill that had closed in 1970, five thousand souls, and a yellow blinker at the intersection of Routes 23 and 7, when he noticed that his old Buick was running on fumes. He pulled into Bill's Chevron, cursing himself for not having checked the gauge before setting out - if he had gotten through Mechanic Falls without noticing how low the gauge had fallen, he might have had a pretty good walk for himself and ended up very late for his appointment with Amy.

He went to the pay phone on the wall while the pump jockey tried to fill the Buick's bottomless pit. He dug his battered address book out of his left rear pocket and dialed Greg Carstairs's number. He thought he might actually catch Greg in this early, and he was right.

'Hello?'

'Hi, Greg - Mort Rainey.'

'Hi, Mort. I guess you've got some trouble up in Derry, huh?'

'Yes,' Mort said. 'Was it on the news?'

'Channel 5.'

'How did it look?'

'How did what look?' Greg replied. Mort winced ... but if he had to hear that from anybody, he was glad it had been Greg Carstairs. He was an amiable, long-haired ex-hippie who had converted to some fairly obscure religious sect - the Swedenborgians, maybe - not long after Woodstock. He had a wife and two kids, one seven and one

five, and so far as Mort could tell, the whole family was as laid back as Greg himself. You got so used to the man's small but constant smile that he looked undressed on the few occasions he was without it.

'That bad, huh?'

'Yes,' Greg said simply. 'It must have gone up like a rocket. I'm really sorry, man.'

'Thank you. I'm on my way up there now, Greg. I'm calling from Mechanic Falls. Can you do me a favor while I'm gone?'

'If you mean the shingles, I think they'll be in by-'

'No, not the shingles. Something else. There's been a guy bothering me the last two or three days. A crackpot. He claims I stole a story he wrote six or seven years ago. When I told him I'd written my version of the same story before he claims to have written his, and told him I could prove it, he got wiggy. I was sort of hoping I'd seen the last of him, but no such luck. Last evening, while I was sleeping on the couch, he killed my cat.'

'Bump?' Greg sounded faintly startled, a reaction that equalled roaring surprise in anyone else. 'He killed Bump?'

'That's right.'

'Did you talk to Dave Newsome about it?'

'No, and I don't want to, either. I want to handle him myself, if I can.'

'The guy doesn't exactly sound like a pacifist, Mort.'

'Killing a cat is a long way from killing a man,' Mort said, 'and I think maybe I could handle him better than Dave.'

'Well, you could have something there,' Greg agreed. 'Dave's slowed down a little since he turned seventy. What can I do for you, Mort?'

'I'd like to know where the guy is staying, for one thing.'

'What's his name?'

'I don't know. The name on the story he showed me was John Shooter, but he got cute about that later on, told me it might be a pseudonym. I think it is - it sounds like a pseudonym. Either way, I doubt if he's registered under that name if he's staying at an area motel.'

'What does he look like?'

'He's about six feet tall and forty-something. He's got a kind of weatherbeaten face - sun-wrinkles around his eyes and lines going down from the corners of the mouth, kind of bracketing the chin.'

As he spoke, the face of 'John Shooter' floated into his consciousness with increasing clarity, like the face of a spirit swimming up to the curved side of a medium's crystal ball. Mort felt gooseflesh prick the backs of his hands and shivered a little. A voice in his midbrain kept muttering that he was either making a mistake or deliberately misleading Greg. Shooter was dangerous, all right. He hadn't needed to see what the man had done to Bump to know that. He had seen it in Shooter's eyes yesterday afternoon. Why was he playing vigilante, then?

Because, another, deeper, voice answered with a kind of dangerous firmness. Just because, that's all.

The midbrain voice spoke up again, worried: Do you mean to hurt him? Is that what this is all about? Do you mean to hurt him?

But the deep voice would not answer. It had fallen silent.

'Sounds like half the farmers around here,' Greg was saying doubtfully.

'Well, there's a couple of other things that may help pick him out,' Mort said. 'He's Southern, for one thing - got an accent on him that sticks out a mile. He wears a big black hat - felt, I think - with a round crown. It looks like the kind of hat Amish men wear. And he's driving a blue Ford station wagon, early or mid-sixties. Mississippi plates.'

'Okay - better. I'll ask around. If he's in the area, somebody'll know where. Outta-state plates stand out this time of year.'

'I know.' Something else crossed his mind suddenly. 'You might start by asking Tom Greenleaf. I was talking to this Shooter yesterday on Lake Drive, about half a mile north of my place. Tom came along in his Scout. He waved at us when he went by, and both of us waved back. Tom must have gotten a damned fine look at him.'

'Okay. I'll probably see him up at Bowie's Store if I drop by for a coffee around ten.'

'He's been there, too,' Mort said. 'I know, because he mentioned the paperback book-rack. It's one of the old-fashioned ones.'

'And if I track him down, what?'

'Nothing,' Mort said. 'Don't do a thing. I'll call you tonight. Tomorrow night I should be back at the place on the lake. I don't know what the hell I can do up in Derry, except scuffle through the ashes.'

'What about Amy?'

'She's got a guy,' Mort said, trying not to sound stiff and probably sounding that way just the same. 'I guess what Amy does next is something the two of them will have to work out.'

'Oh. Sorry.'

'No need to be,' Mort said. He looked over toward the gas islands and saw that the jockey had finished filling his tank and was now

washing the Buick's windshield, a sight he had never expected to witness again in his lifetime.

'Handling this guy yourself ... are you really sure it's what you want to do?'

'Yes, I think so,' Mort said.

He hesitated, suddenly understanding what was very likely going on in Greg's mind: he was thinking that if he found the man in the black hat and Mort got hurt as a result, he, Greg, would be responsible.

'Listen, Greg - you could go along while I talk to the guy, if you wanted to.'

'I might just do that,' Greg said, relieved.

'It's proof he wants,' Mort said, 'so I'll just have to get it for him.'

'But you said you had proof.'

'Yes, but he didn't exactly take my word for it. I guess I'm going to have to shove it in his face to get him to leave me alone.'

'Oh.' Greg thought it over. 'The guy really is crazy, isn't he?'

'Yes indeed.'

'Well, I'll see if I can find him. Give me a call tonight.'

'I will. And thanks, Greg.'

'Don't mention it. A change is as good as a rest.'

'So they say.'

He told Greg goodbye and checked his watch. It was almost seven thirty, and that was much too early to call Herb Creekmore, unless he wanted to pry Herb out of bed, and this wasn't that urgent. A stop

at the Augusta tollbooths would do fine. He walked back to the Buick, replacing his address book and digging out his wallet. He asked the pump jockey how much he owed him.

'That's twenty-two fifty, with the cash discount,' the jockey said, and then looked at Mort shyly. 'I wonder if I could have your autograph, Mr Rainey? I've read all your books.'

That made him think of Amy again, and how Amy had hated the autograph seekers. Mort himself didn't understand them, but saw no harm in them. For her they had seemed to sum up an aspect of their lives which she found increasingly hateful. Toward the end, he had cringed inwardly every time someone asked that question in Amy's presence. Sometimes he could almost sense her thinking: If you love me, why don't you STOP them? As if he could, he thought. His job was to write books people like this guy would want to read ... or so he saw it. When he succeeded at that, they asked for autographs.

He scribbled his name on the back of a credit slip for the pump jockey (who had, after all, actually washed his windshield) and reflected that if Amy had blamed him for doing something they liked - and he thought that, on some level she herself might not be aware of, she had - he supposed he was guilty. But it was only the way he had been built.

Right was right, after all, just as Shooter had said. And fair was fair.

He got back into his car and drove off toward Derry.

17

He paid his seventy-five cents at the Augusta toll plaza, then pulled into the parking area by the telephones on the far side. The day was sunny, chilly, and windy - coming out of the southwest from the direction of Litchfield and running straight and unbroken across the open plain where the turnpike plaza lay, that wind was strong enough to bring tears to Mort's eyes. He relished it, all the same. He could almost feel it blowing the dust out of rooms inside his head which had been closed and shuttered too long.

He used his credit card to call Herb Creekmore in New York - the apartment, not the office. Herb wouldn't actually make it to James and Creekmore, Mort Rainey's literary agency, for another hour or so, but Mort had known Herb long enough to guess that the man had probably been through the shower by now and was drinking a cup of coffee while he waited for the bathroom mirror to unsteam so he could shave.

He was lucky for the second time in a row. Herb answered in a voice from which most of the sleep-fuzz had departed. Am I on a roll this morning, or what? Mort thought, and grinned into the teeth of the cold October wind. Across the four lanes of highway, he could see men stringing snowfence in preparation for the winter which lay just over the calendar's horizon.

'Hi, Herb,' he said. 'I'm calling you from a pay telephone outside the Augusta toll plaza. My divorce is final, my house in Derry burned flat last night, some nut killed my cat, and it's colder than a well-digger's belt buckle - are we having fun yet?'

He hadn't realized how absurd his catalogue of woes sounded until he heard himself reciting them aloud, and he almost laughed. Jesus, it was cold out here, but didn't it feel good! Didn't it feel clean!

'Mort?' Herb said cautiously, like a man who suspects a practical joke.

'At your service,' Mort said.

'What's this about your house?'

'I'll tell you, but only once. Take notes if you have to, because I plan to be back in my car before I freeze solid to this telephone.' He began with John Shooter and John Shooter's accusation. He finished with the conversation he'd had with Amy last night.

Herb, who had spent a fair amount of time as Mort and Amy's guest (and who had been entirely dismayed by their breakup, Mort guessed), expressed his surprise and sorrow at what had happened to the house in Derry. He asked if Mort had any idea who had done it. Mort said he didn't.

'Do you suspect this guy Shooter?' Herb asked. 'I understand the significance of the cat being killed only a short time before you woke up, but -'

'I guess it's technically possible, and I'm not ruling it out completely,' Mort said, 'but I doubt it like hell. Maybe it's only because I can't get my mind around the idea of a man burning down a twenty-four-room house in order to get rid of a magazine. But I think it's mostly because I met him. He really believes I stole his story, Herb. I mean, he has no doubts at all. His attitude when I told him I could show him proof was "Go ahead, motherfucker, make my day." '

'Still ... you called the police, didn't you?'

'Yeah, I made a call this morning,' Mort said, and while this statement was a bit disingenuous, it was not an out-and-out lie. He had made a call this morning. To Greg Carstairs. But if he told Herb Creekmore, whom he could visualize sitting in the living room of his New York apartment in a pair of natty tweed pants and a strap-style tee-shirt, that he intended to handle this himself, with only Greg to lend a hand, he doubted if Herb would understand. Herb was a good friend, but he was something of a stereotype: Civilized Man, late-twentieth-century model, urban and urbane. He was the sort of man

who believed in counselling. The sort of man who believed in meditation and mediation. The sort of man who believed in discussion when reason was present, and the immediate delegation of the problem to Persons in Authority when it was absent. To Herb, the concept that sometimes a man has got to do what a man has got to do was one which had its place ... but its place was in movies starring Sylvester Stallone.

'Well, that's good.' Herb sounded relieved. 'You've got enough on your plate without worrying about some psycho from Mississippi. If they find him, what will you do? Have him charged with harassment?'

'I'd rather convince him to take his persecution act and put it on the road,' Mort said. His feeling of cheery optimism, so unwarranted but indubitably real, persisted. He supposed he would crash soon enough, but for the time being, he couldn't stop grinning. So he wiped his leaking nose with the cuff of his coat and went right on doing it. He had forgotten how good it could feel to have a grin pasted onto your kisser.

'How will you do that?'

'With your help, I hope. You've got files of my stuff, right?'

'Right, but - '

'Well, I need you to pull the June, 1980, issue of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. That's the one with "Sowing Season" in it. I can't very well pull mine because of the fire, so - '

'I don't have it,' Herb said mildly.

'You don't?' Mort blinked. This was one thing he hadn't expected.

'Why not?'

'Because 1980 was two years before I came on board as your agent. I have at least one copy of everything I sold for you, but that's one of

the stories you sold yourself.'

'Oh, shit!' In his mind's eye, Mort could see the acknowledgment for 'Sowing Season' in Everybody Drops the Dime. Most of the other acknowledgments contained the line, 'Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, James and Creekmore.' The one for 'Sowing Season' (and two or three other stories in the collection) read only, 'Reprinted by permission of the author.'

'Sorry,' Herb said.

'Of course I sent it in myself - I remember writing the query letter before I submitted. It's just that it seems like you've been my agent forever.' He laughed a little then and added, 'No offense.'

'None taken,' Herb said. 'Do you want me to make a call to EQMM? They must have back issues.'

'Would you?' Mort asked gratefully. 'That'd be great.'

'I'll do it first thing. Only -' Herb paused.

'Only what?'

'Promise me you're not planning to confront this guy on your own once you have a copy of the printed story in hand.'

'I promise,' Mort agreed promptly. He was being disingenuous again, but what the hell - he had asked Greg to come along when he did it, and Greg had agreed, so he wouldn't be alone. And Herb Creekmore was his literary agent, after all, not his father. How he handled his personal problems wasn't really Herb's concern.

'Okay,' Herb said. 'I'll take care of it. Call me from Derry, Mort - maybe it isn't as bad as it seems.'

'I'd like to believe that.'

'But you don't?'

'Afraid not.'

'Okay.' Herb sighed. Then, diffidently, he added: 'Is it okay to ask you to give Amy my best?'

'It is, and I will.'

'Good. You go on and get out of the wind, Mort. I can hear it shrieking in the receiver. You must be freezing.'

'Getting there. Thanks again, Herb.'

He hung up and looked thoughtfully at the telephone for a moment. He'd forgotten that the Buick needed gas, which was minor, but he'd also forgotten that Herb Creekmore hadn't been his agent until 1982, and that wasn't so minor. Too much pressure, he supposed. It made a man wonder what else he might have forgotten.

The voice in his mind, not the midbrain voice but the one from the deep ranges. spoke up suddenly: What about stealing the story in the first place? Maybe you forgot that.

He snorted a laugh as he hurried back to his car. He had never been to Mississippi in his life, and even now, stuck in a writer's block as he was. he was a long way from stooping to plagiarism. He slid behind the wheel and started the engine, reflecting that a person's mind certainly got up to some weird shit every now and again.

18

Mort didn't believe that people - even those who tried to be fairly honest with themselves - knew when some things were over. He believed they often went on believing, or trying to believe, even when the handwriting was not only on the wall but writ in letters large enough to read a hundred yards away without a spyglass. If it was something you really cared about and felt that you needed, it was easy to cheat, easy to confuse your life with TV and convince yourself that what felt so wrong would eventually come right ... probably after the next commercial break. He supposed that, without its great capacity for self-deception, the human race would be even crazier than it already was.

But sometimes the truth crashed through, and if you had consciously tried to think or dream your way around that truth, the results could be devastating. It was like being there when a tidal wave roared not over but straight through a dike which had been set in its way, smashing it and you flat.

Mort Rainey experienced one of these cataclysmic epiphanies after the representatives of the police and fire departments had gone and he and Amy and Ted Milner were left alone to walk slowly around the smoking ruin of the green Victorian house which had stood at 92 Kansas Street for one hundred and thirty-six years. It was while they were making that mournful inspection tour that he understood that his marriage to the former Amy Dowd of Portland, Maine, was over. It was no 'period of marital stress.' It was no 'trial separation.' It was not going to be one of those cases you heard of from time to time where both parties repented their decision and remarried. It was over. Their lives together were history. Even the house where they had shared so many good times was nothing but evilly smouldering beams tumbled into the cellar-hole like the teeth of a giant.

Their meeting at Marchman's, the little coffee shop on Witcham Street, had gone well enough. Amy had hugged him and he had

hugged her back, but when he tried to kiss her mouth, she turned her head deftly aside so that the lips landed on her cheek instead. Kiss-kiss, as they said at the office parties. So good to see you, darling.

Ted Milner, blow-dried hair perfectly in place this morning and nary an Alfalfa corkscrew in sight, sat at the table in the corner, watching them. He was holding the pipe which Mort had seen clenched in his teeth at various parties over the last three years or so. Mort was convinced the pipe was an affectation, a little prop employed for the sole purpose of making its owner look older than he was. And how old was that? Mort wasn't sure, but Amy was thirty-six, and he thought Ted, in his impeccable stone-washed jeans and open-throated J. Press shirt, had to be at least four years younger than that, possibly more. He wondered if Amy knew she could be in for trouble ten years down the line - maybe even five - and then reflected it would take a better man than he was to suggest it to her.

He asked if there was anything new. Amy said there wasn't. Then Ted took over, speaking with a faintly Southern accent which was a good deal softer than John Shooter's nasal burr. He told Mort the fire chief and a lieutenant from the Derry Police Department would meet them at what Ted called 'the site.' They wanted to ask Mort a few questions. Mort said that was fine. Ted asked if he'd like a cup of coffee - they had time. Mort said that would also be fine. Ted asked how he had been. Mort used the word fine again. Each time it came out of his mouth it felt a little more threadbare. Amy watched the exchange between them with some apprehension, and Mort could understand that. On the day he had discovered the two of them in bed together, he had told Ted he would kill him. In fact, he might have said something about killing them both. His memory of the event was quite foggy. He suspected theirs might be rather foggy, too. He didn't know about the other two corners of the triangle, but he himself found that fogger not only understandable but merciful.

They had coffee. Amy asked him about 'John Shooter.' Mort said he thought that situation was pretty much under control. He did not

mention cats or notes or magazines. And after awhile, they left Marchman's and went to 92 Kansas Street, which had once been a house instead of a site.

The fire chief and police detective were there as promised, and there were questions, also as promised. Most of the questions were about any people who might dislike him enough to have tossed a Texaco cocktail into his study. If Mort had been on his own, he would have left Shooter's name out of it entirely, but of course Amy would bring it up if he didn't, so he recounted the initial encounter just as it had happened.

The fire chief, Wickersham, said: 'The guy was pretty angry?'

'Yes.'

'Angry enough to have driven to Derry and torched your house?' the police detective, Bradley, asked.

He was almost positive Shooter hadn't done it, but he didn't want to delve into his brief dealings with Shooter any more deeply. It would mean telling them what Shooter had done to Bump, for one thing. That would upset Amy; it would upset her a great deal ... and it would open up a can of worms he would prefer to leave closed. It was time, Mort reckoned, to be disingenuous again.

'He might have been at first. But after I discovered the two stories really were alike, I looked up the original date of publication on mine.'

'His had never been published?' Bradley asked.

'No, I'm sure it hadn't been. Then, yesterday, he showed up again. I asked him when he'd written his story, hoping he'd mention a date that was later than the one I had. Do you understand?'

Detective Bradley nodded. 'You were hoping to prove you scooped him.'

'Right. "Sowing Season" was in a book of short stories I published in 1983, but it was originally published in 1980. I was hoping the guy would feel safe picking a date only a year or two before 1983. I got lucky. He said he'd written it in 1982. So you see, I had him.'

He hoped it would end there, but Wickersham, the fire chief, pursued it. 'You see and we see, Mr Rainey, but did he see?'

Mort sighed inwardly. He supposed he had known that you could only be disingenuous for so long - if things went on long enough, they almost always progressed to a point where you had to either tell the truth or carve an outright lie. And here he was, at that point. But whose business was it? Theirs or his? His. Right. And he meant to see it stayed that way.

'Yes,' he told them, 'he saw.'

'What did he do?' Ted asked. Mort looked at him with mild annoyance. Ted glanced away, looking as if he wished he had his pipe to play with. The pipe was in the car. The J. Press shirt had no pocket to carry it in.

'He went away,' Mort said. His irritation with Ted, who had absolutely no business sticking his oar in, made it easier to lie. The fact that he was lying to Ted seemed to make it more all right, too. 'He muttered some bullshit about what an incredible coincidence it all was, then jumped into his car like his hair was on fire and his ass was catching, and took off.'

'Happen to notice the make of the car and the license plate, Mr Rainey?' Bradley asked. He had taken out a pad and a ballpoint pen.

'It was a Ford,' Mort said. 'I'm sorry, but I can't help you with the plate. It wasn't a Maine plate, but other than that ...' He shrugged and tried to look apologetic. Inside, he felt increasingly uncomfortable with the way this was going. It had seemed okay when he was just being cute, skirting around any outright lies - it had seemed a way of sparing Amy the pain of knowing that the man had

broken Bump's neck and then skewered him with a screwdriver. But now he had put himself in a position where he had told different stories to different people. If they got together and did a comparison, he wouldn't look so hot. Explaining his reasons for the lies might be sticky. He supposed that such comparisons were pretty unlikely, as long as Amy didn't talk to either Greg Carstairs or Herb Creekmore, but suppose there was a hassle with Shooter when he and Greg caught up to him and shoved the June, 1980, issue of EQMM in Shooter's face?

Never mind, he told himself, we'll burn that bridge when we come to it, big guy. At this thought, he experienced a brief return of the high spirits he'd felt while talking to Herb at the toll plaza, and almost cackled aloud. He held it in. They would wonder why he was laughing if he did something like that, and he supposed they would be right to wonder.

'I think Shooter must be bound for

(Mississippi.)

' - for wherever he came from by now,' he finished, with hardly a break.

'I imagine you're right,' Lieutenant Bradley said, 'but I'm inclined to pursue this, Mr Rainey. You might have convinced the guy he was wrong, but that doesn't mean he left your place feeling mellow. It's possible that he drove up here in a rage and torched your house just because he was pissed off -pardon me, Mrs Rainey.'

Amy offered a crooked little smile and waved the apology away.

'Don't you think that's possible?'

No, Mort thought, I don't. If he'd decided to torch the house, I think he would have killed Bump before he left for Derry, just in case I woke up before he got back. In that case, the blood would have been dry and Bump would have been stiff when I found him. That isn't the

way it happened ... but I can't say so. Not even if I wanted to. They'd wonder why I held back the stuff about Bump as long as I did, for one thing. They'd probably think I've got a few loose screws.

'I guess so,' he said, 'but I met the guy. He didn't strike me as the house-burning type.'

'You mean he wasn't a Snopes,' Amy said suddenly.

Mort looked at her, startled - then smiled. 'That's right,' he said. 'A Southerner, but not a Snopes.'

'Meaning what?' Bradley asked, a little warily.

'An old joke, Lieutenant,' Amy said. 'The Snopeses were characters in some novels by William Faulkner. They got their start in business burning barns.'

'Oh,' Bradley said blankly.

Wickersham said: 'There is no house-burning type, Mr Rainey. They come in all shapes and sizes. Believe me.'

'Well - '

'Give me a little more on the car, if you can,' Bradley said. He poised a pencil over his notebook. 'I want to make the State Police aware of this guy.'

Mort suddenly decided he was going to lie some more. Quite a lot more, actually.

'Well, it was a sedan. I can tell you that much for sure.'

'Uh-huh. Ford sedan. Year?'

'Somewhere in the seventies, I guess,' Mort said. He was fairly sure Shooter's station wagon had actually been built around the time a fellow named Oswald had elected Lyndon Johnson President of the

United States. He paused, then added: 'The plate was a light color. It could have been Florida. I won't swear to it, but it could have been.'

'Uh-huh. And the man himself?'

'Average height. Blonde hair. Eyeglasses. The round wire-framed ones John Lennon used to wear. That's really all I re - '

'Didn't you say he was wearing a hat?' Amy asked suddenly.

Mort felt his teeth come together with a click. 'Yes,' he said pleasantly. 'That's right, I forgot. Dark gray or black. Except it was more of a cap. With a bill, you know.'

'Okay.' Bradley snapped his book closed. 'It's a start.'

'Couldn't this have been a simple case of vandalism, arson for kicks?' Mort asked. 'In novels, everything has a connection, but my experience has been that in real life, things sometimes just happen.'

'It could have been,' Wickersham agreed, 'but it doesn't hurt to check out the obvious connections.' He dropped Mort a solemn little wink and said, 'Sometimes life imitates art, you know.'

'Do you need anything else?' Ted asked them, and put an arm around Amy's shoulders.

Wickersham and Bradley exchanged a glance and then Bradley shook his head. 'I don't think so, at least not at the present.'

'I only ask because Amy and Mort will have to put in some time with the insurance agent,' Ted said. 'Probably an investigator from the parent company, as well.'

Mort found the man's Southern accent more and more irritating. He suspected that Ted came from a part of the South several states north of Faulkner country, but it was still a coincidence he could have done without.

The officials shook hands with Amy and Mort, expressed their sympathy, told them to get in touch if anything else occurred to either of them, and then took themselves off, leaving the three of them to take another turn around the house.

'I'm sorry about all of this, Amy,' Mort said suddenly. She was walking between them, and looked over at him, apparently startled by something she had heard in his voice. Simple sincerity, maybe. 'All of it. Really sorry.'

'So am I,' she said softly, and touched his hand.

'Well, Teddy makes three,' Ted said with solemn heartiness. She turned back to him, and in that moment Mort could have cheerfully strangled the man until his eyes popped out jittering at the ends of their optic strings.

They were walking up the west side of the house toward the street now. Over here had been the deep corner where his study had met the house, and not far away was Amy's flower-garden. All the flowers were dead now, and Mort reflected that was probably just as well. The fire had been hot enough to crisp what grass had remained green in a twelve-foot border all around the ruin. If the flowers had been in bloom, it would have crisped them, as well, and that would have been just too sad. It would have been

Mort stopped suddenly. He was remembering the stories. The story. You could call it 'Sowing Season' or you could call it 'Secret Window, Secret Garden,' but they were the same thing once you took the geegaws off and looked underneath. He looked up. There was nothing to see but blue sky, at least now, but before last night's fire, there would have been a window right where he was looking. It was the window in the little room next to the laundry. The little room that was Amy's office. It was where she went to write checks, to write in her daily journal, to make the telephone calls that needed to be made ... the room where, he suspected, Amy had several years ago started a novel. And, when it died, it was the room where she had buried it decently and quietly in a desk drawer. The desk had been

by the window. Amy had liked to go there in the mornings. She could start the wash in the next room and then do paperwork while she waited for the buzzer which proclaimed it was time to strip the washer and feed the drier. The room was well away from the main house and she liked the quiet, she said. The quiet and the clear, sane morning light. She liked to look out the window every now and then, at her flowers growing in the deep corner formed by the house and the study ell. And he heard her saying, It's the best room in the house, at least for me, because hardly anybody ever goes there but me. It's got a secret window, and it looks down on a secret garden.

'Mort?' Amy was saying now, and for a moment Mort took no notice, confusing her real voice with her voice in his mind, which was the voice of memory. But was it a true memory or a false one? That was the real question, wasn't it? It seemed like a true memory, but he had been under a great deal of stress even before Shooter, and Bump, and the fire. Wasn't it at least possible that he was having a ... well, a recollective hallucination? That he was trying to make his own past with Amy in some way conform to that goddam story where a man had gone crazy and killed his wife?

Jesus, I hope not. I hope not, because if I am, that's too close to nervousbreakdown territory for comfort.

'Mort, are you okay?' Amy asked. She plucked fretfully at his sleeve, at least temporarily breaking his trance.

'Yes,' he said, and then, abruptly: 'No. To tell you the truth, I'm feeling a little sick.'

'Breakfast, maybe,' Ted said.

Amy gave him a look that made Mort feel a bit better. It was not a very friendly look. 'It isn't breakfast,' she said a little indignantly. She swept her arm at the blackened ruins. 'It's this. Let's get out of here.'

'The insurance people are due at noon,' Ted said.

'Well, that's more than an hour from now. Let's go to your place, Ted. I don't feel so hot myself. I'd like to sit down.'

'All right.' Ted spoke in a slightly nettled no-need-to-shout tone which also did Mort's heart good. And although he would have said at breakfast that morning that Ted Milner's place was the last one on earth he wanted to go, he accompanied them without protest.

19

They were all quiet on the ride across town to the split-level on the east side where Ted hung his hat. Mort didn't know what Amy and Ted were thinking about, although the house for Amy and whether or not they'd be on time to meet the wallahs from the insurance company for Ted would probably be a couple of good guesses, but he knew what he was thinking about. He was trying to decide if he was going crazy or not. Is it real, or is it Memorex?

He decided finally that Amy really had said that about her office next to the laundry room - it was not a false memory. Had she said it before 1982, when 'John Shooter' claimed to have written a story called 'Secret Window' Secret Garden'? He didn't know. No matter how earnestly he coned his confused and aching brain, what kept coming back was a single curt message: answer inconclusive. But if she had said it, no matter when, couldn't the title of Shooter's story still be simple coincidence? Maybe, but the coincidences were piling up, weren't they? He had decided the fire was, must be, a coincidence. But the memory which Amy's garden with its crop of dead flowers had prodded forth ... well, it was getting harder and harder to believe all of this wasn't tied together in some strange, possibly even supernatural fashion.

And in his own way, hadn't 'Shooter' himself been just as confused? How did you get it? he had asked, his voice had been fierce with rage and puzzlement. That's what I really want to know. How in hell did a big-money scribbling asshole like you get down to a little shitsplat town in Mississippi and steal my goddam story? At the time, Mort had thought either that it was another sign of the man's madness or that the guy was one hell of a good actor. Now, in Ted's car, it occurred to him for the first time that it was exactly the way he himself would have reacted, had the circumstances been reversed.

As, in a way, they had been. The one place where the two stories differed completely was in the matter of the title. They both fit, but

now Mort found that he had a question to ask Shooter which was very similar to the one Shooter had already asked him: How did you happen by that title, Mr Shooter? That's what I really want to know. How did you happen to know that, twelve hundred miles away from your shitsplat town in Mississippi . ' the wife of a writer you claim you never heard of before this year had her own secret window, looking down on her own secret garden?

Well, there was only one way to find out, of course. When Greg ran Shooter down Mort would have to ask him.

20

Mort passed on the cup of coffee Ted offered and asked if he had a Coke or a Pepsi. Ted did, and after Mort had drunk it, his stomach settled. He had expected that just being here, here where Ted and Amy played house now that they no longer had to bother with the cheap little town-line motels, would make him angry and restless. It didn't. It was just a house, one where every room seemed to proclaim that the owner was a Swinging Young Bachelor Who Was Making It. Mort found that he could deal with that quite easily, although it made him feel a little nervous for Amy all over again. He thought of her little office with its clear, sane light and the soporific drone of the drier coming through the wall, her little office with its secret window, the only one in the whole place which looked down into the tight little angle of space formed by the house and the ell, and thought how much she had belonged there and how little she seemed to belong here. But that was something she would have to deal with herself, and he thought, after a few minutes in this other house which was not a dreaded den of iniquity at all but only a house, that he could live with that ... that he could even be content with it.

She asked him if he would be staying in Derry overnight.

'Uh-uh. I'll be going back as soon as we finish with the insurance adjustors. If something else pops, they can get in touch with me ... or you can.'

He smiled at her. She smiled back and touched his hand briefly. Ted didn't like it. He frowned out the window and fingered his pipe.

21

They were on time for their meeting with the representatives of the insurance company, which undoubtedly relieved Ted Milner's mind. Mort was not particularly crazy about having Ted in attendance; it had never been Ted's house, after all, not even after the divorce. Still, it seemed to ease Amy's mind to have him there, and so Mort left it alone.

Don Strick, the Consolidated Assurance Company agent with whom they had done business, conducted the meeting at his office, where they went after another brief tour of 'the site.' At the office, they met a man named Fred Evans, a Consolidated field investigator specializing in arson. The reason Evans hadn't been with Wickersham and Bradley that morning or at 'the site' when Strick met them there at noon became obvious very quickly: he had spent most of the previous night poking through the ruins with a ten-cell flashlight and a Polaroid camera. He had gone back to his motel room, he said, to catch a few winks before meeting the Rainey's.

Mort liked Evans very much. He seemed to really care about the loss he and Amy had suffered, while everyone else, including Mr Teddy Makes Three, seemed to have only mouthed the traditional words of sympathy before going on to whatever they considered the business at hand (and in Ted Milner's case, Mort thought, the business at hand was getting him out of Derry and back to Tashmore Lake as soon as possible). Fred Evans did not refer to 92 Kansas Street as 'the site.' He referred to it as 'the house.'

His questions, while essentially the same as those asked by Wickersham and Bradley, were gentler, more detailed, and more probing. Although he'd had four hours' sleep at most, his eyes were bright, his speech quick and clear. After speaking with him for twenty minutes, Mort decided that he would deal with a company other than Consolidated Assurance if he ever decided to burn down a house for the insurance money. Or wait until this man retired.

When he had finished his questions, Evans smiled at them. 'You've been very helpful, and I want to thank you again, both for your thoughtful answers and for your kind treatment of me. In a lot of cases, people's feathers get ruffled the second they hear the words "insurance investigator." They're already upset, understandably so, and quite often they take the presence of an investigator on the scene as an accusation that they torched their own property.'

'Given the circumstances, I don't think we could have asked for better treatment,' Amy said, and Ted Milner nodded so violently that his head might have been on a string - one controlled by a puppeteer with a bad case of nerves.

'This next part is hard,' Evans said. He nodded to Strick, who opened a desk drawer and produced a clipboard with a computer printout on it. 'When an investigator ascertains that a fire was as serious as this one clearly was, we have to show the clients a list of claimed insurable property. You look it over, then sign an affidavit swearing that the items listed still belong to you, and that they were still in the house when the fire occurred. You should put a check mark beside any item or items you've sold since your last insurance overhaul with Mr Strick here, and any insured property which was not in the house at the time of the fire.' Evans put a fist to his lips and cleared his throat before going on. 'I'm told that there has been a separation of residence recently, so that last bit may be particularly important.'

'We're divorced,' Mort said bluntly. 'I'm living in our place on Tashmore Lake. We only used it during the summers, but it's got a furnace and is livable during the cold months. Unfortunately, I hadn't got around to moving the bulk of my things out of the house up here. I'd been putting it off.'

Don Strick nodded sympathetically. Ted crossed his legs, fiddled with his pipe, and generally gave the impression of a man who is trying not to look as deeply bored as he is.

'Do the best you can with the list,' Evans said. He took the clipboard from Strick and handed it across the desk to Amy. 'This can be a bit unpleasant - it's a little like a treasure hunt in reverse.'

Ted had put his pipe down and was craning at the list, his boredom gone' at least for the time being; his eyes were as avid as those of any bystander gleaning the aftermath of a bad accident. Amy saw him looking and obligingly tipped the form his way. Mort, who was sitting on the other side of her, tipped it back the other way.

'Do you mind?' he asked Ted. He was angry, really angry, and they all heard it in his voice.

'Mort - ' Amy said.

'I'm not going to make a big deal of this,' Mort said to her, 'but this was our stuff, Amy. Ours.'

'I hardly think - 'Ted began indignantly.

'No, he's perfectly right, Mr Milner,' Fred Evans said with a mildness Mort felt might have been deceptive. 'The law says you have no right to be looking at the listed items at all. We wink at something like that if nobody minds ... but I think Mr Rainey does.'

'You're damned tooting Mr Rainey does,' Mort said. His hands were tightly clenched in his lap; he could feel his fingernails biting smile-shapes into the soft meat of his palms.

Amy switched her look of unhappy appeal from Mort to Ted. Mort expected Ted to huff and puff and try to blow somebody's house down, but Ted did not. Mort supposed it was a measure of his own hostile feeling toward the man that he'd made such an assumption; he didn't know Ted very well (although he did know he looked a bit like Alfalfa when you woke him up suddenly in a no-tell motel), but he knew Amy. If Ted had been a blowhard, she would have left him already.

Smiling a little, speaking to her and ignoring Mort and the others completely, Ted said: 'Would it help matters if I took a walk around the block?'

Mort tried to restrain himself and couldn't quite do it. 'Why not make it two?' he asked Ted with bogus amiability.

Amy shot him a narrow, dark stare, then looked back at Ted. 'Would you? This might be a little easier ...'

'Sure,' he said. He kissed her high on her cheekbone, and Mort had another dolorous revelation: the man cared for her. He might not always care for her, but right now he did. Mort realized he had come halfway to thinking Amy was just a toy that had captivated Ted for a little while, a toy of which he would tire soon enough. But that didn't jibe with what he knew of Amy, either. She had better instincts about people than that ... and more respect for herself.

Ted got up and left. Amy looked at Mort reproachfully. 'Are you satisfied?'

'I suppose,' he said. 'Look, Amy - I probably didn't handle that as well as I could have, but my motives are honorable enough. We shared a lot over the years. I guess this is the last thing, and I think it belongs between the two of us. Okay?'

Strick looked uncomfortable. Fred Evans did not; he looked from Mort to Amy and then back to Mort again with the bright interest of a man watching a really good tennis match.

'Okay,' Amy said in a low voice. He touched her hand lightly, and she gave him a smile. It was strained, but better than no smile at all, he reckoned.

He pulled his chair closer to hers and they bent over the list, heads close together, like kids studying for a test. It didn't take Mort long to understand why Evans had warned them. He thought he had grasped the size of the loss. He had been wrong.

Looking at the columns of cold computer type, Mort thought he could not have been more dismayed if someone had taken everything in the house at 92 Kansas Street and strewn it along the block for the whole world to stare at. He couldn't believe all the things he had forgotten, all the things that were gone.

Seven major appliances. Four TVs, one with a videotape editing hook-up. The Spode china, and the authentic Early American furniture which Amy had bought a piece at a time. The value of the antique armoire which had stood in their bedroom was listed at \$14,000. They had not been serious art-collectors, but they had been appreciators, and they had lost twelve pieces of original art. Their value was listed at \$22,000, but Mort didn't care about the dollar value; he was thinking about the N. C. Wyeth fine-drawing of two boys putting to sea in a small boat. It was raining in the picture; the boys were wearing slickers and galoshes and big grins. Mort had loved that picture, and now it was gone. The Waterford glassware. The sports equipment stored in the garage - skis, ten-speed bikes, and the Old Town canoe. Amy's three furs were listed. He saw her make tiny check marks beside the beaver and the mink - still in storage, apparently - but she passed the short fox jacket without checking it off. It had been hanging in the closet, warm and stylish outerware for fall, when the fire happened. He remembered giving her that coat for her birthday six or seven years ago. Gone now. His Celestron telescope. Gone. The big puzzle quilt Amy's mother had given them when they were married. Amy's mother was dead and the quilt was now so much ash in the wind.

The worst, at least for Mort, was halfway down the second column, and again it wasn't the dollar value that hurt. 124 BOTS. WINE, the item read. VALUE \$4,900. Wine was something they had both liked. They weren't rabid about it, but they had built the little wine room in the cellar together, stocked it together, and had drunk the occasional bottle together.

'Even the wine,' he said to Evans. 'Even that.'

Evans gave him an odd look that Mort couldn't interpret, then nodded. 'The wine room itself didn't burn, because you had very little fuel oil in the cellar tank and there was no explosion. But it got very hot inside, and most of the bottles burst. The few that didn't ... Well, I don't know much about wine, but I doubt if it would be good to drink. Perhaps I'm wrong.'

'You're not,' Amy said. A single tear rolled down her cheek and she wiped it absently away.

Evans offered her his handkerchief. She shook her head and bent over the fist with Mort again.

Ten minutes later it was finished. They signed on the correct lines and Strick witnessed their signatures. Ted Milner showed up only instants later, as if he had been watching the whole thing on some private viewscreen.

'Is there anything else?' Mort asked Evans.

'Not now. There may be. Is your number down in Tashmore unlisted, Mr Rainey?'

'Yes.' He wrote it down for Evans. 'Please get in touch if I can help.'

'I will.' He rose, hand outstretched. 'This is always a nasty business. I'm sorry you two had to go through it.'

They shook hands all around and left Strick and Evans to write reports. It was well past one, and Ted asked Mort if he'd like to have some lunch with him and Amy. Mort shook his head.

'I want to get back. Do some work and see if I can't forget all this for awhile.' And he felt as if maybe he really could write. That was not surprising. In tough times - up until the divorce, anyway, which seemed to be an exception to the general rule - he had always found it easy to write. Necessary, even. It was good to have those make-believe worlds to fall back on when the real one had hurt you.

He half-expected Amy to ask him to change his mind, but she didn't. 'Drive safe,' she said, and planted a chaste kiss on the corner of his mouth. 'Thanks for coming, and for being so ... so reasonable about everything.'

'Can I do anything for you, Amy?'

She shook her head, smiling a little, and took Ted's hand. If he had been looking for a message, this one was much too clear to miss.

They walked slowly toward Mort's Buick.

'You keepin well enough down there?' Ted asked. 'Anything you need?'

For the third time he was struck by the man's Southern accent - just one more coincidence.

'Can't think of anything,' he said, opening the Buick's door and fishing the car keys out of his pocket. 'Where do you come from originally, Ted? You or Amy must have told me sometime, but I'll be damned if I can remember. Was it Mississippi?'

Ted laughed heartily. 'A long way from there, Mort. I grew up in Tennessee. A little town called Shooter's Knob, Tennessee.'

22

Mort drove back to Tashmore Lake with his hands clamped to the steering wheel, his spine as straight as a ruler, and his eyes fixed firmly on the road. He played the radio loud and concentrated ferociously on the music each time he sensed telltale signs of mental activity behind the center of his forehead. Before he had made forty miles, he felt a pressing sensation in his bladder. He welcomed this development and did not even consider stopping at a wayside comfort-station. The need to take a whizz was another excellent distraction.

He arrived at the house around four-thirty and parked the Buick in its accustomed place around the side of the house. Eric Clapton was throttled in the middle of a full-tilt-boogie guitar solo when Mort shut off the motor, and quiet crashed down like a load of stones encased in foam rubber. There wasn't a single boat on the lake, not a single bug in the grass.

Pissing and thinking have a lot in common, he thought, climbing out of the car and unzipping his fly. You can put them both off... but not forever.

Mort Rainey stood there urinating and thought about secret windows and secret gardens; he thought about those who might own the latter and those who might look through the former. He thought about the fact that the magazine he needed to prove a certain fellow was either a lunatic or a con man had just happened to bum up on the very evening he had tried to get his hands on it. He thought about the fact that his ex-wife's lover, a man he cordially detested, had come from a town called Shooter's Knob and that Shooter happened to be the pseudonym of the aforementioned loony-or-con-man who had come into Mort Rainey's life at the exact time when the aforementioned Mort Rainey was beginning to grasp his divorce not just as an academic concept but as a simple fact of his life forever after. He even thought about the fact that 'John Shooter' claimed to have

discovered Mort Rainey's act of plagiarism at about the same time Mort Rainey had separated from his wife.

Question: Were all of these things coincidences?

Answer: It was technically possible.

Question: Did he believe all these things were coincidences?

Answer: No.

Question: Did he believe he was going mad, then?

'The answer is no,' Mort said. 'He does not. At least not yet.' He zipped up his fly and went back around the corner to the door.

23

He found his housekey, started to put it in the lock, and then pulled it out again. His hand went to the doorknob instead, and as his fingers closed over it, he felt a clear certainty that it would rotate easily. Shooter had been here ... had been, or was still. And he wouldn't have needed to force entry, either. Nope. Not this sucker. Mort kept a spare key to the Tashmore Lake house in an old soap-dish on a high shelf in the toolshed, which was where Shooter had gone to get a screwdriver in a hurry when the time had come to nail poor old Bump to the garbage cabinet. He was in the house now, looking around ... or maybe hiding. He was

The knob refused to move; Mort's fingers simply slid around it. The door was still locked.

'Okay,' Mort said. 'Okay, no big deal.' He even laughed a little as he socked the key home and turned it. Just because the door was locked didn't mean Shooter wasn't in the house. In fact, it made it more likely that he was in the house, when you really stopped to think about it. He could have used the spare key, put it back, then locked the door from the inside to lull his enemy's suspicions. All you had to do to lock it, after all, was to press the button set into the knob. He's trying to psych me out, Mort thought as he stepped in.

The house was full of dusty late-afternoon sunlight and silence. But it did not feel like unoccupied silence.

'You're trying to psych me out, aren't you?' he called. He expected to sound crazy to himself. a lonely, paranoid man addressing the intruder who only exists, after all, in his own imagination. But he didn't sound crazy to himself. He sounded, instead, like a man who has tumbled to at least half the trick. Only getting half a scam wasn't so great, maybe, but half was better than nothing.

He walked into the living room with its cathedral ceiling, its window-wall facing the lake, and, of course, The World-Famous Mort Rainey

Sofa, also known as The Couch of the Comatose Writer. An economical little smile tugged at his cheeks. His balls felt high and tight against the fork of his groin.

'Half a scam's better than none, right, Mr Shooter?' he called.

The words died into dusty silence. He could smell old tobacco smoke in that dust. His eye happened on the battered package of cigarettes he had excavated from the drawer of his desk. It occurred to him that the house had a smell - almost a stink - that was horribly negative: it was an unwoman smell. Then he thought: No. That's a mistake. That's not it. What you smell is Shooter. You smell the man, and you smell his cigarettes. Not yours, his.

He turned slowly around, his head cocked back. A second-floor bedroom looked down on the living room halfway up the cream-colored wall; the opening was lined with dark-brown wooden slats. The slats were supposed to keep the unwary from falling out and splattering themselves all over the living-room floor, but they were also supposed to be decorative. Right then they didn't look particularly decorative to Mort; they looked like the bars of a jail cell. All he could see of what he and Amy had called the guest bedroom was the ceiling and one of the bed's four posts.

'You up there, Mr Shooter?' he yelled.

There was no answer.

'I know you're trying to psych me out!' Now he was beginning to feel just the tiniest bit ridiculous. 'It won't work, though!'

About six years before, they had plugged the big fieldstone fireplace in the living room with a Blackstone jersey stove. A rack of fire-tools stood beside

it. Mort grasped the handle of the ash-shovel, considered it for a moment, then let go of it and took the poker instead. He faced the barred guest-room overlook and held the poker up like a knight

saluting his queen. Then he walked slowly to the stairs and began to climb them. He could feel tension worming its way into his muscles now, but he understood it wasn't Shooter he was afraid of; what he was afraid of was finding nothing.

'I know you're here, and I know you're trying to psych me out! The only thing I don't know is what it's all about, Alfie, and when I find you, you better tell me!'

He paused on the second-floor landing, his heart pumping hard in his chest now. The guest-room door was to his left. The door to the guest bathroom was to the right. And he suddenly understood that Shooter was here, all right, but not in the bedroom. No; that was just a ploy. That was just what Shooter wanted him to believe.

Shooter was in the bathroom.

And, as he stood there on the landing with the poker clutched tightly in his right hand and sweat running out of his hair and down his cheeks, Mort heard him. A faint shuffle-shuffle. He was in there, all right. Standing in the tub, by the sound. He had moved the tiniest bit. Peekaboo, Johnny-boy, I hear you. Are you armed, fuckface?

Mort thought he probably was, but he didn't think it would turn out to be a gun. Mort had an idea that the man's pen name was about as close to firearms as he had ever come. Shooter had looked like the sort of guy who would feel more at home with instruments of a blunter nature. What he had done to Bump seemed to bear this out.

I bet it's a hammer, Mort thought, and wiped sweat off the back of his neck with his free hand. He could feel his eyes pulsing in and out of their sockets in time with his heartbeat. I'm betting it's a hammer from the toolshed.

He had no more thought of this before he saw Shooter, saw him clearly, standing in the bathtub in his black round-crowned hat and his yellow shitkicker workshoes, his lips split over his mail-order dentures in a grin which was really a grimace, sweat trickling down

his own face, running down the deep lines grooved there like water running down a network of galvanized tin gutters, with the hammer from the toolshed raised to shoulder height like a judge's gavel. just standing there in the tub, waiting to bring the hammer down. Next case, bailiff.

I know you, buddy. I got your number. I got it the first time I saw you. And guess what? You picked the wrong writer to fuck with. I think I've been wanting to kill somebody since the middle of May, and you'll do as well as anybody.

He turned his head toward the bedroom door. At the same time, he reached out with his left hand (after drying it on the front of his shirt so his grip wouldn't slip at the crucial moment) and curled it around the bathroom doorknob.

'I know you're in there!' he shouted at the closed bedroom door. If you're under the bed, you better get out! I'm counting to five! If you're not out by the time I get there, I'm coming in ... and I'll come in swinging! You hear me?'

There was no answer ... but, then, he hadn't really expected one. Or wanted one. He tightened his grip on the bathroom doorknob, but would shout the numbers toward the guest-room door. He didn't know if Shooter would hear or sense the difference if he turned his head in the direction of the bathroom, but he thought Shooter might. The man was obviously clever. Hellishly clever.

In the instant before he started counting, he heard another faint movement in the bathroom. He would have missed it, even standing this close, if he hadn't been listening with every bit of concentration he could muster.

'One!'

Christ, he was sweating! Like a pig!

'Two!'

The knob of the bathroom door was like a cold rock in his clenched fist.

‘Thr -‘

He turned the knob of the bathroom door and slammed in, bouncing the door off the wall hard enough to chop through the wallpaper and pop the door’s lower hinge, and there he was, there he was, coming at him with a raised weapon, his teeth bared in a killer’s grin, and his eyes were insane, utterly insane, and Mort brought the poker down in a whistling overhand blow and he had just time enough to realize that Shooter was also swinging a poker, and to realize that Shooter was not wearing his round-crowned black hat, and to realize it wasn’t Shooter at all, to realize it was him, the madman was him, and then the poker shattered the mirror over the washbasin and silver-backed glass sprayed every whichway, twinkling in the gloom, and the medicine cabinet fell into the sink. The bent door swung open like a gaping mouth, spilling bottles of cough syrup and iodine and Listerine.

‘I killed a goddam fucking mirror!’ he shrieked, and was about to sling the poker away when something did move in the tub, behind the corrugated shower door. There was a frightened little squeal. Grinning, Mort slashed sideways with the poker, tearing a jagged gash through the plastic door and knocking it off its tracks. He raised the poker over his shoulder, his eyes glassy and staring, his lips drawn into the grimace he had imagined on Shooter’s face.

Then he lowered the poker slowly. He found he had to use the fingers of his left hand to pry open the fingers of his right so that the poker could fall to the floor.

‘Wee sleekit cowerin’ beastie,’ he said to the fieldmouse scurrying blindly about in the tub. ‘What a panic’s in thy breastie.’ His voice sounded hoarse and flat and strange. It didn’t sound like his own voice at all. It was like listening to himself on tape for the first time.

He turned and walked slowly out of the bathroom past the leaning door with its popped hinge, his shoes gritting on broken mirror glass.

All at once he wanted to go downstairs and lie on the couch and take a nap. All at once he wanted that more than anything else in the world.

24

It was the telephone that woke him up. Twilight had almost become night, and he made his way slowly past the glass-topped coffee table that liked to bite with a weird feeling that time had somehow doubled back on itself. His right arm ached like hell. His back wasn't in much better shape. Exactly how hard had he swung that poker, anyway? How much panic had been driving him? He didn't like to think.

He picked up the telephone, not bothering to guess who it might be. Life has been so dreadfully busy lately, darling, that it might even be the President. 'Hello?'

'How you doin, Mr Rainey?' the voice asked, and Mort recoiled, snatching the telephone away from his ear for a moment as if it were a snake which had tried to bite. He returned it slowly.

'I'm doing fine, Mr Shooter,' he said in a dry, spitless voice. 'How are you doing?'

'I'm-a country fair,' Shooter allowed, speaking in that thick crackerbarrel Southern accent that was somehow as bald and staring as an unpainted barn standing all by itself in the middle of a field. 'But I don't think you're really all that well. Stealing from another man, that don't seem to have ever bothered you none. Being caught up on, though ... that seems to have given you the pure miseries.'

'What are you talking about?'

Shooter sounded faintly amused. 'Well, I heard on the radio news that someone burned down your house. Your other house. And then, when you come back down here, it sounded like you pitched a fit or something once you got into the house. Shouting ... whacking on things ... or maybe it's just that successful writers like you throw tantrums when things don't go the way they expect. Is that it, maybe?'

My God, he was here. He was.

Mort found himself looking out the window as if Shooter still might be out there ... hiding in the bushes, perhaps, while he spoke to Mort on some sort of cordless telephone. Ridiculous, of course.

'The magazine with my story in it is on the way,' he said. 'When it gets here, are you going to leave me alone?'

Shooter still sounded lazily amused. 'There isn't any magazine with that story in it, Mr Rainey. You and me, we know that. Not from 1980, there isn't. How could there be, when my story wasn't there for you to steal until 1982?'

'Goddammit, I did not steal your st-'

'When I heard about your house,' Shooter said, 'I went out and bought an Evening Express. They had a picture of what was left. Wasn't very much. Had a picture of your wife, too.' There was a long, thoughtful pause. Then Shooter said, 'She's purty.' He used the country pronunciation purposely, sarcastically. 'How'd an ugly son of a buck like you luck into such a purty wife, Mr Rainey?'

'We're divorced,' he said. 'I told you that. Maybe she discovered how ugly I was. Why don't we leave Amy out of this? It's between you and me.'

For the second time in two days, he realized he had answered the phone while he was only half awake and nearly defenseless. As a result, Shooter was in almost total control of the conversation. He was leading Mort by the nose, calling the shots.

Hang up, then.

But he couldn't. At least, not yet.

'Between you and me, is it?' Shooter asked. 'Then I don't s'pose you even mentioned me to anyone else.'

'What do you want? Tell me! What in the hell do you want?'

'You want the second reason I came, is that it?'

'Yes!'

'I want you to write me a story,' Shooter said calmly. 'I want you to write a story and put my name on it and then give it to me. You owe me that. Right is right and fair is fair.'

Mort stood in the hallway with the telephone clutched in his aching fist and a vein pulsing in the middle of his forehead. For a few moments his rage was so total that he found himself buried alive inside it and all he was capable of thinking was So THAT'S it! SO THAT'S it! SO THAT'S it! over and over again.

'You there, Mr Rainey?' Shooter asked in his calm, drawling voice.

'The only thing I'll write for you,' Mort said, his own voice slow and syrupy-thick with rage, 'is your death-warrant, if you don't leave me alone.'

'You talk big, pilgrim,' Shooter said in the patient voice of a man explaining a simple problem to a stupid child, 'because you know I can't put no hurtin on you. If you had stolen my dog or my car, I could take your dog or car. I could do that just as easy as I broke your cat's neck. If you tried to stop me, I could put a hurtin on you and take it anyway. But this is different. The goods I want are inside your head. You got the goods locked up like they were inside a safe. Only I can't just blow off the door and torch open the back. I have to find me the combination. Don't I?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Mort said, 'but the day you get a story out of me will be the day the Statue of Liberty wears a diaper. Pilgrim.'

Shooter said meditatively, 'I'd leave her out of it if I could, but I'm startin to think you ain't going to leave me that option.'

All the spit in Mort's mouth was suddenly gone, leaving it dry and glassy and hot. 'What ... what do you -'

'Do you want to wake up from one of your stupid naps and find Amy nailed to your garbage bin?' Shooter asked. 'Or turn on the radio some morning and hear she came off second best in a match with the chainsaw you keep in your garage up there? Or did the garage burn, too?'

'Watch what you say,' Mort whispered. His wide eyes began to prickle with tears of rage and fear.

'You still have two days to think about it. I'd think about it real close, Mr Rainey. I mean I'd really hunker down over her, if I were you. And I don't think I'd talk about this to anyone else. That'd be like standing out in a thunderstorm and tempting the lightning. Divorced or not, I have got an idea you still have some feeling for that lady. It's time for you to grow up a little. You can't get away with it. Don't you realize that yet? I know what you did, and I ain't quitting until I get what's mine.'

'You're crazy!' Mort screamed.

'Good night, Mr Rainey,' Shooter said, and hung up.

25

Mort stood there for a moment, the handset sinking away from his ear. Then he scooped up the bottom half of the Princess-style telephone. He was on the verge of throwing the whole combination against the wall before he was able to get hold of himself. He set it down again and took a dozen deep breaths - enough to make his head feel swimmy and light. Then he dialled Herb Creekmore's home telephone.

Herb's lady-friend, Delores, picked it up on the second ring and called Herb to the telephone.

'Hi, Mort,' Herb said. 'What's the story on the house?' His voice moved away from the telephone's mouthpiece a little. 'Delores, will you move that skillet to the back burner?'

Suppertime in New York, Mort thought, and he wants me to know it. Well, what the hell. A maniac has just threatened to turn my wife into veal cutlets, but life has to go on, right?

'The house is gone,' Mort said. 'The insurance will cover the loss.' He paused. 'The monetary loss, anyway.'

'I'm sorry,' Herb said. 'Can I do anything?'

'Well, not about the house,' Mort said, 'but thanks for offering. About the story, though -'

'What story is that, Mort?'

He felt his hand tightening down on the telephone's handset again and forced himself to loosen up. He doesn't know what the situation up here is. You have to remember that.

'The one my nutty friend is kicking sand about,' he said, trying to maintain a tone which was light and mostly unconcerned. 'Sowing

Season. Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine?'

'Oh, that!' Herb said.

Mort felt a jolt of fear. 'You didn't forget to call, did you?'

'No - I called,' Herb reassured him. 'I just forgot all about it for a minute. You losing your house and all.'

'Well? What did they say?'

'Don't worry about a thing. They're going to send a Xerox over to me by messenger tomorrow, and I'll send it right up to you by Federal Express. You'll have it by ten o'clock day after tomorrow.'

For a moment it seemed that all of his problems were solved, and he started to relax. Then he thought of the way Shooter's eyes had blazed. The way he had brought his face down until his forehead and Mort's were almost touching. He thought of the dry smell of cinnamon on Shooter's breath as he said, 'You lie.'

A Xerox? He was by no means sure that Shooter would accept an original copy ... but a Xerox?

'No,' he said slowly. 'That's no good, Herb. No Xerox, no phone-call from the editor. It has to be an original copy of the magazine.'

'Well, that's a little tougher. They have their editorial offices in Manhattan, of course, but they store copies at their subscription offices in Pennsylvania. They only keep about five copies of each issue - it's really all they can afford to keep, when you consider that EQMM has been publishing since 1941. They really aren't crazy about lending them out.'

'Come on, Herb! You can find those magazines at yard sales and in half the small-town libraries in America!'

'But never a complete run.' Herb paused. 'Not even a phone-call will do, huh? Are you telling me this guy is so paranoid he'd think he was

talking to one of your thousands of stooges?’

From the background: ‘Do you want me to pour the wine, Herb?’

Herb spoke again with his mouth away from the phone. ‘Hold on a couple of minutes, Dee.’

‘I’m holding up your dinner,’ Mort said. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘It goes with the territory. Listen, Mort, be straight with me - is this guy as crazy as he sounds? Is he dangerous?’

I don’t think I’d talk about this to anyone else. That’d be like standing out in a thunderstorm and tempting the lightning.

‘I don’t think so,’ he said, ‘but I want him off my back, Herb.’ He hesitated, searching for the right tone. ‘I’ve spent the last half-year or so walking through a shitstorm. This might be one thing I can do something about. I just want the doofus off my back.’

‘Okay,’ Herb said with sudden decision. ‘I’ll call Marianne Jaffery over at EQMM. I’ve known her for a long time. If I ask her to ask the library curator -that’s what they call the guy, honest, the library curator - to send us a copy of the June, 1980, ish, she’ll do it. Is it okay if I say you might have a story for them at some point in the future?’

‘Sure,’ Mort said, and thought: Tell her it’ll be under the name John Shooter, and almost laughed aloud.

‘Good. She’ll have the curator send it on to you Federal Express, direct from Pennsylvania. just return it in good condition, or you’ll have to find a replacement copy at one of those yard sales you were talking about.’

‘Is there any chance all this could happen by the day after tomorrow?’ Mort asked. He felt miserably sure that Herb would think

he was crazy for even asking ... and he surely must feel that Mort was making an awfully big mountain out of one small molehill.

'I think there's a very good chance,' Herb said. 'I won't guarantee it, but I'll almost guarantee it.'

'Thanks, Herb,' Mort said with honest gratitude. 'You're swell.'

'Aw, shucks, ma'am,' Herb said, doing the bad John Wayne imitation of which he was so absurdly proud.

'Now go get your dinner. And give Delores a kiss for me.'

Herb was still in his John Wayne mode. 'To heck with that. I'll give 'er a kiss fer me, pilgrim.'

You talk big, pilgrim.

Mort felt such a spurt of horror and fear that he almost cried out aloud. Same word, same flat, staring drawl. Shooter had tapped his telephone line' somehow, and no matter who Mort tried to call or what number he dialled. it was John Shooter who answered. Herb Creekmore had become just another one of his pen names, and

'Mort? Are you still there?'

He closed his eyes. Now that Herb had dispensed with the bogus John Wayne imitation, it was okay. It was just Herb again, and always had been. Herb using that word, that had just been

What?

Just another float in the Parade of Coincidences? Okay. Sure. No problem. I'll just stand on the curb and watch it slide past. Why not? I've already watched half a dozen bigger ones go by.

'Right here, Herb,' he said, opening his eyes. 'I was just trying to figure out how do I love thee. You know, counting the ways?'

'You're thilly,' Herb said, obviously pleased. 'And you're going to handle this carefully and prudently, right?'

'Right.'

'Then I think I'll go eat supper with the light of my life.'

'That sounds like a good idea. Goodbye, Herb - and thanks.'

'You're welcome. I'll try to make it the day after tomorrow. Dee says goodbye, too.'

'If she wants to pour the wine, I bet she does,' Mort said, and they both hung up laughing.

As soon as he put the telephone back on its table, the fantasy came back. Shooter. He do the police in different voices. Of course, he was alone and it was dark, a condition which bred fantasies. Nevertheless, he did not believe - at least in his head - that John Shooter was either a supernatural being or a supercriminal. If he had been the former, he would surely know that Morton Rainey had not committed plagiarism - at least not on that particular story - and if he had been the latter, he would have been off knocking over a bank or something, not farting around western Maine, trying to squeeze a short story out of a writer who made a lot more money from his novels.

He started slowly back toward the living room, intending to go through to the study and try the word processor, when a thought

(at least not that particular story)

struck him and stopped him.

What exactly did that mean, not that particular story? Had he ever stolen someone else's work?

For the first time since Shooter had turned up on his porch with his sheaf of pages, Mort considered this question seriously. A good

many reviews of his books had suggested that he was not really an original writer; that most of his works consisted of twice-told tales. He remembered Amy reading a review of *The OrganGrinder's Boy* which had first acknowledged the book's pace and readability, and then suggested a certain derivativeness in its plotting. She'd said, 'So what? Don't these people know there are only about five really good stories, and writers just tell them over and over, with different characters?'

Mort himself believed there were at least six stories: success; failure; love and loss; revenge, mistaken identity; the search for a higher power, be it God or the devil. He had told the first four over and over, obsessively, and now that he thought of it, 'Sowing Season' embodied at least three of those ideas. But was that plagiarism? If it was, every novelist at work in the world would be guilty of the crime.

Plagiarism, he decided, was outright theft. And he had never done it in his life. Never.

'Never,' he said, and strode into his study with his head up and his eyes wide, like a warrior approaching the field of battle. And there he sat for the next one hour, and words he wrote none.

26

His dry stint on the word processor convinced him that it might be a good idea to drink dinner instead of eat it, and he was on his second bourbon and water when the telephone rang again. He approached it gingerly, suddenly wishing he had a phone answering machine after all. They did have at least one sterling quality: you could monitor incoming calls and separate friend from foe.

He stood over it irresolutely, thinking how much he disliked the sound modern telephones made. Once upon a time they had rung - jingled merrily, even. Now they made a shrill ululating noise that sounded like a migraine headache trying to happen.

Well, are you going to pick it up or just stand here listening to it do that?

I don't want to talk to him again. He scares me and he infuriates me, and I don't know which feeling I dislike more.

Maybe it's not him.

Maybe it is.

Listening to those two thoughts go around and around was even worse than listening to the warbling beep-yawp of the phone, so he picked it up and said hello gruffly and it was, after all, no one more dangerous than his caretaker, Greg Carstairs.

Greg asked the now-familiar questions about the house and Mort answered them all again, reflecting that explaining such an event was very similar to explaining a sudden death - if anything could get you over the shock, it was the constant repetition of the known facts.

'Listen, Mort, I finally caught up with Tom Greenleaf late this afternoon,' Greg said, and Mort thought Greg sounded a little funny -

a little cautious. 'He and Sonny Trotts were painting the Methodist Parish Hall.'

'Uh-huh? Did you speak to him about my buddy?'

'Yeah, I did,' Greg said. He sounded more cautious than ever.

'Well?'

There was a short pause. Then Greg said, 'Tom thought you must have been mixed up on your days.'

'Mixed up on my ... what do you mean?'

'Well,' Greg said apologetically, 'he says he did swing down Lake Drive yesterday afternoon and he did see you; he said he waved to you and you waved back. But, Mort -'

'What?' But he was afraid he already knew what.

'Tom says you were alone,' Greg finished.

27

For a long moment, Mort didn't say anything. He did not feel capable of saying anything. Greg didn't say anything, either, giving him time to think. Tom Greenleaf, of course, was no spring chicken; he was Dave Newsome's senior by at least three and perhaps as many as six years. But neither was he senile.

'Jesus,' Mort said at last. He spoke very softly. The truth was, he felt a little winded.

'My idea,' Greg said diffidently, 'was maybe Tom was the one who got a little mixed up. You know he's not exactly -'

'A spring chicken,' Mort finished. 'I know it. But if there's anybody in Tashmore with a better eye for strangers than Tom, I don't know who it is. He's been remembering strangers all his life, Greg. That's one of the things caretakers do, right?' He hesitated, then burst out: 'He looked at us! He looked right at both of us!'

Carefully, speaking as if he were only joshing, Greg said: 'Are you sure you didn't just dream this fella, Mort?'

'I hadn't even considered it,' Mort said slowly, 'until now. If none of this happened, and I'm running around telling people it did, I guess that would make me crazy.'

'Oh, I don't think that at all,' Greg said hastily.

'I do,' Mort replied. He thought: But maybe that's what he really wants. To make people think you are crazy. And, maybe in the end, to make what people think the truth.

Oh yes. Right. And he partnered up with old Tom Greenleaf to do the job. In fact, it was probably Tom who went up to Derry and burned the house, while Shooter stayed down here and wasted the cat - right?

Now, think about it. Really THINK. Was he there? Was he REALLY?

So Mort thought about it. He thought about it harder than he had ever thought about anything in his life; harder, even, than he had thought about Amy and Ted and what he should do about them after he had discovered them in bed together on that day in May. Had he hallucinated John Shooter?

He thought again of the speed with which Shooter had grabbed him and thrown him against the side of the car.

'Greg?'

'I'm here, Mort.'

'Tom didn't see the car, either? Old station wagon, Mississippi plates?'

'He says he didn't see a car on Lake Drive at all yesterday. just you, standing up by the end of the path that goes down to the lake. He thought you were admiring the view.'

Is it live, or is it Memorex?

He kept coming back to the hard grip of Shooter's hands on his upper arms, the speed with which the man had thrown him against the car. 'You lie,' Shooter had said. Mort had seen the rage chained in his eyes, and had smelled dry cinnamon on his breath.

His hands.

The pressure of his hands.

'Greg, hold the phone a sec.'

'Sure.'

Mort put the receiver down and tried to roll up his shirtsleeves. He was not very successful, because his hands were shaking badly. He

unbuttoned the shirt instead, pulled it off, then held out his arms. At first he saw nothing. Then he rotated them outward as far as they would go, and there they were, two yellowing bruises on the inside of each arm, just above the elbow.

The marks made by John Shooter's thumbs when he grabbed him and threw him against the car.

He suddenly thought he might understand, and was afraid. Not for himself, though.

For old Tom Greenleaf.

28

He picked up the telephone. 'Greg?'

'I'm here.'

'Did Tom seem all right when you talked to him?'

'He was exhausted,' Greg said promptly. 'Foolish old man has got no business crawling around on a scaffold and painting all day in a cold wind. Not at his age. He looked ready to fall into the nearest pile of leaves, if he couldn't get to a bed in a hurry. I see what you're getting at, Mort, and I suppose that if he was tired enough, it could have slipped his mind, but -'

'No, that's not what I'm thinking about. Are you sure exhaustion was all it was? Could he have been scared?'

Now there was a long, thinking silence at the other end of the line. Impatient though he was, Mort did not break it. He intended to allow Greg all the thinking time he needed.

'He didn't seem himself,' Greg said at last. 'He seemed distracted ... off, somehow. I chalked it up to plain old tiredness, but maybe that wasn't it. Or not all of it.'

'Could he have been hiding something from you?'

This time the pause was not so long. 'I don't know. He might have been. That's all I can say for sure, Mort. You're making me wish I'd talked to him longer and pressed him a little harder.'

'I think it might be a good idea if we went over to his place,' Mort said.

'Now. It happened the way I told you, Greg. If Tom said something different, it could be because my friend scared the bejesus out of

him. I'll meet you there.'

'Okay.' Greg sounded worried all over again. 'But, you know, Tom isn't the sort of man who'd scare easy.'

'I'm sure that was true once, but Tom's seventy-five if he's a day. I think that the older you get, the easier to scare you get.'

'Why don't I meet you there?'

'That sounds like a good idea.' Mort hung up the telephone, poured the rest of his bourbon down the sink, and headed for Tom Greenleafs house in the Buick.

29

Greg was parked in the driveway when Mort arrived. Tom's Scout was by the back door. Greg was wearing a flannel jacket with the collar turned up; the wind off the lake was keen enough to be uncomfortable.

'He's okay,' he told Mort at once.

'How do you know?'

They both spoke in low tones.

'I saw his Scout, so I went to the back door. There's a note pinned there saying he had a hard day and went to bed early.' Greg grinned and shoved his long hair out of his face. 'It also says that if any of his regular people need him, they should call me.'

'Is the note in his handwriting?'

'Yeah. Big old-man's scrawl. I'd know it anywhere. I went around and looked in his bedroom window. He's in there. The window's shut, but it's a wonder he doesn't break the damned glass, he's snoring so loud. Do you want to check for yourself?'

Mort sighed and shook his head. 'But something's wrong, Greg. Tom saw us. Both of us. The man got hot under the collar a few minutes after Tom passed and grabbed me by the arms. I'm wearing his bruises. I'll show you, if you want to see.'

Greg shook his head. 'I believe you. The more I think about it, the less I like the way he sounded when he said you were all by yourself when he saw you. There was something ... off about it. I'll talk to him again in the morning. Or we can talk to him together, if you want.'

'That would be good. What time?'

'Why not come down to the Parish Hall around nine-thirty? He'll have had two-three cups of coffee - you can't say boo to him before he's had his coffee - and we can get him down off that damned scaffolding for awhile. Maybe save his life. Sound okay?'

'Yes.' Mort held out his hand. 'Sorry I got you out on a wild goosechase.' Greg shook his hand. 'No need to be. Something's not right here. I'm good and curious to find out what it is.'

Mort got back into his Buick, and Greg slipped behind the wheel of his truck. They drove off in opposite directions, leaving the old man to his exhausted sleep.

Mort himself did not sleep until almost three in the morning. He tossed and turned in the bedroom until the sheets were a battlefield and he could stand it no longer. Then he walked to the living-room couch in a kind of daze. He barked his shins on the rogue coffee table, cursed in a monotone, lay down, adjusted the cushions behind his head, and fell almost immediately down a black hole.

When he woke up at eight o'clock the next morning, he thought he felt fine. He went right on thinking so until he swung his legs off the couch and sat up. Then a groan so loud it was almost a muted scream escaped him and he could only sit for a moment, wishing he could hold his back, his knees, and his right arm all at the same time. The arm was the worst, so he settled for holding that. He had read someplace that people can accomplish almost supernatural acts of strength while in the grip of panic; that they feel nothing while lifting cars off trapped infants or strangling killer Dobermans with their bare hands, only realizing how badly they have strained their bodies after the tide of emotion has receded. Now he believed it. He had thrown open the door of the upstairs bathroom hard enough to pop one of the hinges. How hard had he swung the poker? Harder than he wanted to think about, according to the way his back and right arm felt this morning. Nor did he want to think what the damage up there might look like to a less inflamed eye. He did know that he was going to put the damage right himself - or as much of it as he could, anyway. Mort thought Greg Carstairs must have some serious doubts about his sanity already, his protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. A look at the broken bathroom door, smashed shower-stall door, and shattered medicine cabinet would do little to improve Greg's faith in his rationality. He remembered thinking that Shooter might be trying to make people believe he was crazy. The idea did not seem foolish at all now that he examined it in the light of day; it seemed, if anything, more logical and believable than ever.

But he had promised to meet Greg at the Parish Hall in ninety minutes - less than that, now - to talk to Tom Greenleaf. Sitting here and counting his aches wasn't going to get him there.

Mort forced himself to his feet and walked slowly through the house to the master bathroom. He turned the shower on hot enough to send up billows of steam, swallowed three aspirin, and climbed in.

By the time he emerged, the aspirin had started its work, and he thought he could get through the day after all. It wouldn't be fun, and he might feel as if it had lasted several years by the time it was over, but he thought he could get through it.

This is the second day, he thought as he dressed. A little cramp of apprehension went through him. Tomorrow is his deadline. That made him think first of Amy, and then of Shooter saying, I'd leave her out of it if I could, but I'm startin to think you ain't going to leave me that option.

The cramp returned. First the crazy son of a bitch had killed Bump, then he had threatened Tom Greenleaf (surely he must have threatened Tom Greenleaf), and, Mort had come to realize, it really was possible that Shooter could have torched the Derry house. He supposed he had known this all along, and had simply not wanted to admit it to himself. Torching the house and getting rid of the magazine had been his main mission - of course; a man as crazy as Shooter simply wouldn't think of all the other copies of that magazine that were lying around. Such things would not be part of a lunatic's world view.

And Bump? The cat was probably just an afterthought. Shooter got back, saw the cat on the stoop waiting to be let back in, saw that Mort was still sleeping, and killed the cat on a whim. Making a round trip to Derry that fast would have been tight, but it could have been done. It all made sense.

And now he was threatening to involve Amy.

I'll have to warn her, he thought, stuffing his shirt into the back of his pants. Call her up this morning and come totally clean. Handling the man myself is one thing; standing by while a madman involves the only woman I've ever really loved in something she doesn't know anything about ... that's something else.

Yes. But first he would talk with Tom Greenleaf and get the truth out of him. Without Tom's corroboration of the fact that Shooter was

really around and really dangerous, Mort's own behavior was going to look suspicious or nutty, or both. Probably both. So, Tom first.

But before he met Greg at the Methodist Parish Hall, he intended to stop in at Bowie's and have one of Gerda's famous bacon-and-cheese omelettes. An army marches on its stomach, Private Rainey. Right you are, sir. He went out to the front hallway, opened the little wooden box mounted on the wall over the telephone table, and felt for the Buick keys. The Buick keys weren't there.

Frowning, he walked out into the kitchen. There they were, on the counter by the sink. He picked them up and bounced them thoughtfully on the palm of his hand. Hadn't he put them back in the box when he returned from his run to Tom's house last night? He tried to remember, and couldn't - not for sure. Dropping the keys into the box after returning home was such a habit that one drop-off blended in with another. If you ask a man who likes fried eggs what he had for breakfast three days ago, he can't remember - he assumes he had fried eggs, because he has them so often, but he can't be sure. This was like that. He had come back tired, achy, and preoccupied. He just couldn't remember.

But he didn't like it.

He didn't like it at all.

He went to the back door and opened it. There, lying on the porch boards, was John Shooter's black hat with the round crown.

Mort stood in the doorway looking at it, his car keys clutched in one hand with the brass key-fob hanging down so it caught and reflected a shaft of morning sunlight. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears. It was beating slowly and deliberately. Some part of him had expected this.

The hat was lying exactly where Shooter had left his manuscript. And beyond it, in the driveway, was his Buick. He had parked it

around the corner when he returned last night - that he did remember - but now it was here.

'What did you do?' Mort Rainey screamed suddenly into the morning sunshine, and the birds which had been twittering unconcernedly away in the trees fell suddenly silent. 'What in God's name did you do?'

But if Shooter was there, watching him, he made no reply. Perhaps he felt that Mort would find out what he had done soon enough.

31

The Buick's ashtray was pulled open, and there were two cigarette butts in it. They were unfiltered. Mort picked one of them out with his fingernails, his face contorted into a grimace of distaste, sure it would be a Pall Mall, Shooter's brand. It was.

He turned the key and the engine started at once. Mort hadn't heard it ticking and popping when he came out, but it started as if it were warm, all the same. Shooter's hat was now in the trunk. Mort had picked it up with the same distaste he had shown for the cigarette butt, putting only enough of his fingers on the brim to get a grip on it. There had been nothing under it, and nothing inside it but a very old sweat-stained inner band. It had some other smell, however, one which was sharper and more acrid than sweat. It was a smell which Mort recognized in some vague way but could not place. Perhaps it would come to him. He put the hat in the Buick back seat, then remembered he would be seeing Greg and Tom in a little less than an hour. He wasn't sure he wanted them to see the hat. He didn't know exactly why he felt that way, but this morning it seemed safer to follow his instincts than to question them, so he put the hat in the trunk and set off for town.

32

He passed Tom's house again on the way to Bowie's. The Scout was no longer in the driveway. For a moment this made Mort feel nervous, and then he decided it was a good sign, not a bad one - Tom must have already started his day's work. Or he might have gone to Bowie's himself - Tom was a widower, and he ate a lot of his meals at the lunch counter in the general store.

Most of the Tashmore Public Works Department was at the counter, drinking coffee and talking about the upcoming deer season, but Tom was

(dead he's dead Shooter killed him and guess whose car he used)
not among them.

'Mort Rainey!' Gerda Bowie greeted him in her usual hoarse, Bleacher Creature's shout. She was a tall woman with masses of frizzy chestnut hair and a great rounded bosom. 'Ain't seen you in a coon's age! Writing any good books lately?'

'Trying,' Mort said. 'You wouldn't make me one of your special omelettes, would you?'

'Shit, no!' Gerda said, and laughed to show she was only joking. The PW guys in their olive-drab coveralls laughed right along with her. Mort wished briefly for a great big gun like the one Dirty Harry wore under his tweed sport-coats. Boom-bang-blam, and maybe they could have a little order around here. 'Coming right up, Mort.'

'Thanks.'

When she delivered it, along with toast, coffee, and OJ, she said in a lower voice: 'I heard about your divorce. I'm sorry.'

He lifted the mug of coffee to his lips with a hand that was almost steady. 'Thanks, Gerda.'

'Are you taking care of yourself?'

'Well ... trying.'

'Because you look a little peaky.'

'It's hard work getting to sleep some nights. I guess I'm not used to the quiet yet.'

'Bullshit - it's sleeping alone you're not used to yet. But a man doesn't have to sleep alone forever, Mort, just because his woman don't know a good thing when she has it. I hope you don't mind me talking to you this way -'

'Not at all,' Mort said. But he did. He thought Gerda Bowie made a shitty Ann Landers.

'- but you're the only famous writer this town has got.'

'Probably just as well.'

She laughed and tweaked his ear. Mort wondered briefly what she would say, what the big men in the olive-drab coveralls would say, if he were to bite the hand that tweaked him. He was a little shocked at how powerfully attractive the idea was. Were they all talking about him and Amy? Some saying she didn't know a good thing when she had it, others saying the poor woman finally got tired of living with a crazy man and decided to get out, none of them knowing what the fuck they were talking about, or what he and Amy had been about when they had been good? Of course they were, he thought tiredly. That's what people were best at. Big talk about people whose names they saw in the newspapers.

He looked down at his omelette and didn't want it.

He dug in just the same, however, and managed to shovel most of it down his throat. It was still going to be a long day. Gerda Bowie's opinions on his looks and his love-life wouldn't change that.

When he finished, paid for breakfast and a paper, and left the store (the Public Works crews had decamped en masse five minutes before him, one stopping just long enough to obtain an autograph for his niece, who was having a birthday), it was five past nine. He sat behind the steering wheel long enough to check the paper for a story about the Derry house, and found one on page three. DERRY FIRE INSPECTORS REPORT NO LEADS IN RAINEY ARSON, the headline read. The story itself was less than half a column long. The last sentence read, 'Morton Rainey, known for such best-selling novels as *The OrganGrinder's Boy* and *The Delacourt Family*, could not be reached for comment.' Which meant that Amy hadn't given them the Tashmore number. Good deal. He'd thank her for that if he talked to her later on.

Tom Greenleaf came first. It would be almost twenty past the hour by the time he reached the Methodist Parish Hall. Close enough to nine-thirty. He put the Buick in gear and drove off.

33

When he arrived at the Parish Hall, there was a single vehicle parked in the drive - an ancient Ford Bronco with a camper on the back and a sign reading SONNY TROTTS PAINTING CARETAKING GENERAL CARPENTRY on each of the doors. Mort saw Sonny himself, a short man of about forty with no hair and merry eyes, on a scaffolding. He was painting in great sweeps while the boom box beside him played something Las Vegas by Ed Ames or Tom Jones -one of those fellows who sang with the top three buttons of their shirts undone, anyway.

'Hi, Sonny!' Mort called.

Sonny went on painting, sweeping back and forth in almost perfect rhythm as Ed Ames or whoever it was asked the musical questions what is a man, what has he got. They were questions Mort had asked himself a time or two, although without the horn section.

'Sonny!'

Sonny jerked. White paint flew from the end of his brush, and for an alarming moment Mort thought he might actually topple off the scaffold. Then he caught one of the ropes, turned, and looked down. 'Why, Mr Rainey!' he said. 'You gave me a helluva turn!'

For some reason Mort thought of the doorknob in Disney's Alice in Wonderland and had to suppress a violent bray of laughter.

'Mr Rainey? You okay?'

'Yes Mort swallowed crooked. It was a trick he had learned in parochial school about a thousand years ago, and was the only foolproof way to keep from laughing he had ever found. Like most good tricks that worked, it hurt. 'I thought you were going to fall off.'

'Not me,' Sonny said with a laugh of his own. He killed the voice coming from the boom box as it set off on a fresh voyage of emotion. 'Tom might fall off, maybe, but not me.'

'Where is Tom?' Mort asked. 'I wanted to talk to him.'

'He called early and said he couldn't make it today. I told him that was okay, there wasn't enough work for both of us anyways.'

Sonny looked down upon Mort confidentially.

'There is, a' course, but Tom ladled too much onto his plate this time. This ain't no job for a older fella. He said he was all bound up in his back. Must be, too. Didn't sound like himself at all.'

'What time was that?' Mort asked, trying hard to sound casual.

'Early,' Sonny said. 'Six or so. I was just about to step into the old shitatorium for my morning constitutional. Awful regular, I am.' Sonny sounded extremely proud of this. 'Course Tom, he knows what time I rise and commence my doins.'

'But he didn't sound so good?'

'Nope. Not like himself at all.' Sonny paused, frowning. He looked as if he was trying very hard to remember something. Then he gave a little shrug and went on. 'Wind off the lake was fierce yesterday. Probably took a cold. But Tommy's iron. Give him a day or two and he'll be fine. I worry more about him gettin preoccupied and walkin the plank.' Sonny indicated the floor of the scaffold with his brush, sending a ruffle of white drops marching up the boards past his shoes. 'Can I do anything for you, Mr Rainey?'

'No,' Mort said. There was a dull ball of dread, like a piece of crumpled canvas, under his heart. 'Have you seen Greg, by the way?'

'Greg Carstairs?'

'Yes.'

'Not this morning. Course, he deals with the carriage trade.' Sonny laughed. 'Rises later'n the rest of us, he does.'

'Well, I thought he was going to come by and see Tom, too,' Mort said. 'Do you mind if I wait a little? He might show up.'

'Be my guest,' Sonny said. 'You mind the music?'

'Not at all.'

'You can get some wowser tapes off the TV these days. All you gotta do is give em your MasterCard number. Don't even have to pay for the call. It's a eight-hundred number.' He bent toward the boom box, then looked earnestly down at Mort. 'This is Roger Whittaker,' he said in low and reverent tones.

'Oh.'

Sonny pushed PLAY. Roger Whittaker told them there were times (he was sure they knew) when he bit off more than he could chew. That was also something Mort had done without the horn section. He strolled to the edge of the driveway and tapped absently at his shirt pocket. He was a little surprised to find that the old pack of L & M's, now reduced to a single hardy survivor, was in there. He lit the last cigarette, wincing in anticipation of the harsh taste. But it wasn't bad. It had, in fact, almost no taste at all ... as if the years had stolen it away.

That's not the only thing the years have stolen.

How true. Irrelevant, but true. He smoked and looked at the road. Now Roger Whittaker was telling him and Sonny that a ship lay loaded in the harbor, and that soon for England they would sail. Sonny Trotts sang the last word of each line. No more; just the last word. Cars and trucks went back and forth on Route 23. Greg's Ford Ranger did not come. Mort pitched away his cigarette, looked at his

watch, and saw it was quarter to ten. He understood that Greg, who was almost religiously punctual, was not coming, either.

Shooter got them both.

Oh, bullshit! You don't know that!

Yes I do. The hat. The car. The keys.

You're not just Jumping to conclusions, you're leaping to them.

The hat. The car. The keys.

He turned and walked back toward the scaffold. 'I guess he forgot,' he said, but Sonny didn't hear him. He was swaying back and forth, lost in the art of painting and the soul of Roger Whittaker.

Mort got back into his car and drove away. Lost in his own thoughts, he never heard Sonny call after him.

The music probably would have covered it, anyway.

34

He arrived back at his house at quarter past ten, got out of the car, and started for the house. Halfway there, he turned back and opened the trunk. The hat sat inside, black and final, a real toad in an imaginary garden. He picked it up, not being so choosy of how he handled it this time, slammed the trunk shut, and went into the house.

He stood in the front hallway, not sure what he wanted to do next ... and suddenly, for no reason at all, he put the hat on his head. He shuddered when he did it, the way a man will sometimes shudder after swallowing a mouthful of raw liquor. But the shudder passed.

And the hat felt like quite a good fit, actually.

He went slowly into the master bathroom, turned on the light, and positioned himself in front of the mirror. He almost burst out laughing - he looked like the man with the pitchfork in that Grant Wood painting, 'American Gothic.' He looked like that even though the guy in the picture was bareheaded. The hat covered Mort's hair completely, as it had covered Shooter's (if Shooter had hair - that was yet to be determined, although Mort supposed that he would know for sure the next time he saw him, since Mort now had his chapeau), and just touched the tops of his ears. It was pretty funny. A scream, in fact.

Then the restless voice in his head asked, Why'd you put it on? Who'd you think you'd look like? Him? and the laughter died. Why had he put the hat on in the first place?

He wanted you to, the restless voice said quietly.

Yes? But why? Why would Shooter want Mort to put on his hat?

Maybe he wants you to ...

Yes? he prompted the restless voice again. Wants me to what?

He thought the voice had gone away and was reaching for the light-switch when it spoke again.

... to get confused, it said.

The phone rang then, making him jump. He snatched the hat off guiltily (a little like a man who fears he may be caught trying on his wife's underwear) and went to answer it, thinking it would be Greg, and it would turn out Tom was at Greg's house. Yes, of course, that was what had happened; Tom had called Greg, had told him about Shooter and Shooter's threats, and Greg had taken the old man to his place. To protect him. It made such perfect sense that Mort couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it before.

Except it wasn't Greg. It was Herb Creekmore.

'Everything's arranged,' Herb said cheerfully. 'Marianne came through for me. She's a peach.'

'Marianne?' Mort asked stupidly.

'Marianne Jaffery, at EQMM!' Herb said. 'EQMM? "Sowing Season"? June, 1980? You understand dese t'ings, bwana?'

'Oh,' Mort said. 'Oh, good! Thanks, Herb! Is it for sure?'

'Yep. You'll have it tomorrow - the actual magazine, not just a Xerox of the story. It's coming up from PA Federal Express. Have you heard anything else from Mr Shooter?'

'Not yet,' Mort said., looking down at the black hat in his hand. He could still smell the odd, evocative aroma it held.

'Well, no news is good news, they say. Did you talk to the local law?'

Had he promised Herb he would do that? Mort couldn't remember for sure, but he might have. Best to play safe, anyway. 'Yes. Old Dave

Newsome didn't exactly burst a gasket. He thought the guy was probably just playing games.' It was downright nasty to lie to Herb, especially after Herb had done him such a favor, but what sense would it make to tell him the truth? It was too crazy, too complicated.

'Well you passed it along. I think that's important, Mort - I really do.'

'Yes.'

'Anything else?'

'No - but thanks a million for this. You saved my life.' And maybe, he thought, that wasn't just a figure of speech.

'My pleasure. Remember that in small towns, FedEx usually delivers right to the local post office. Okay?'

'Yeah.'

'How's the new book coming? I've really been wanting to ask.'

'Great!' Mort cried heartily.

'Well, good. Get this guy off your back and turn to it. Work has saved many a better man than you or me, Mort.'

'I know. Best to your lady.'

'Thanks. Best to -' Herb stopped abruptly, and Mort could almost see him biting his lip. Separations were hard to get used to. Amputees kept feeling the foot which was no longer there, they said. '- to you,' he finished.

'I got it,' Mort said. 'Take care, Herbert.'

He walked slowly out to the deck and looked down at the lake. There were no boats on it today. I'm one step up, no matter what else happens. I can show the man the goddam magazine. It may not tame him ... but then again, it may. He's crazy, after all, and you

never know what people from the fabled tribe of the Crazy Folks will or won't do. That is their dubious charm. Anything is possible.

It was even possible that Greg was at home after all, he thought - he might have forgotten their meeting at the Parish Hall, or something totally unrelated to this business might have come up. Feeling suddenly hopeful, Mort went to the telephone and dialled Greg's number. The phone was on the third ring when he remembered Greg saying the week before that his wife and kids were going to spend some time at his in-laws'. Megan starts school next year, and it'll be harder for them to get away, he'd said.

So Greg had been alone.

(the hat)

Like Tom Greenleaf.

(the car)

The young husband and the old widower.

(the keys)

And how does it work? Why, as simple as ordering a Roger Whittaker tape off the TV. Shooter goes to Tom Greenleaf's house, but not in his station wagon - oh no, that would be too much like advertising. He leaves his car parked in Mort Rainey's driveway, or maybe around the side of the house. He goes to Tom's in the Buick. Forces Tom to call Greg. Probably gets Greg out of bed, but Greg has got Tom on his mind and comes in a hurry. Then Shooter forces Tom to call Sonny Trotts and tell Sonny he doesn't feel well enough to come to work. Shooter puts a screwdriver against old Tom's jugular and suggests that if Tom doesn't make it good, he'll be one sorry old coot. Tom makes it good enough ... although even Sonny, not too bright and just out of bed, realizes that Tom doesn't sound like himself at all. Shooter uses the screwdriver on Tom. And when

Greg Carstairs arrives, he uses the screwdriver - or something like it - on him. And ...

You've gone shit out of your mind. This is just a bad case of the screaming meemies and that's all. Repeat: that ... IS ... ALL.

That was reasonable, but it didn't convince him. It wasn't a Chesterfield. It didn't satisfy.

Mort walked rapidly through the downstairs part of the house, tugging and twirling at his hair.

What about the trucks? Tom's Scout, Greg's Ranger? Add the Buick and you're thinking about three vehicles here - four if you count in Shooter's Ford wagon, and Shooter is just one man.

He didn't know ... but he knew that enough was enough.

When he arrived at the telephone again, he pulled the phone book out of its drawer and started looking for the town constable's number. He stopped abruptly.

One of those vehicles was the Buick, my Buick.

He put the telephone down slowly. He tried to think of a way Shooter could have handled all of the vehicles. Nothing came. It was like sitting in front of the word processor when you were tapped for ideas - you got nothing but a blank screen. But he did know he didn't want to call Dave Newsome. Not yet. He was walking away from the telephone, headed toward no place in particular, when it rang.

It was Shooter.

'Go to where we met the other day,' Shooter said. 'Walk down the path a little way. You impress me as a man who thinks the way old folks chew their food, Mr Rainey, but I'm willing to give you all the time you need. I'll call back late this afternoon. Anybody you call between now and then is your responsibility.'

'What did you do?' he asked again. This time his voice was robbed of all force, little more than a whisper. 'What in the world did you do?'

But there was only a dead line.

35

He walked up to the place where the path and the road came together, the place where he had been talking to Shooter when Tom Greenleaf had had the misfortune to see them. For some reason he didn't like the idea of driving the Buick. The bushes on either side of the path were beaten down and skinned-looking, making a rough path. He walked jerkily down this path, knowing what he would find in the first good-sized copse of trees he came to ... and he did find it. It was Tom Greenleaf's Scout. Both men were inside.

Greg Carstairs was sitting behind the wheel with his head thrown back and a screwdriver - a Phillips, this time - buried up to the hilt in his forehead, above his right eye. The screwdriver had come from a cupboard in the pantry of Mort's house. The red plastic handle was badly chipped and impossible not to recognize.

Tom Greenleaf was in the back seat with a hatchet planted in the top of his head. His eyes were open. Dried brains had trickled down around his ears. Written along the hatchet's ash handle in faded but still legible red letters was one word: RAINEY. It had come from the toolshed.

Mort stood silently. A chickadee called. A woodpecker used a hollow tree to send Morse code. A freshening breeze was producing whitecaps on the lake; the water was a dark cobalt today, and the whitecaps made a pretty contrast.

There was a rustling sound behind him. Mort wheeled around so fast he almost fell - would have fallen, if he'd not had the Scout to lean against. It wasn't Shooter. It was a squirrel. It looked down at him with bright hate from where it was frozen halfway up the trunk of a maple which blazed with red fall fire. Mort waited for his galloping heart to slow. He waited for the squirrel to dash up the tree. His heart did; the squirrel did not.

'He killed them both,' he said at last, speaking to the squirrel. 'He went to Tom's in my Buick. Then he went to Greg's in Tom's Scout, with Tom driving. He killed Greg. Then he had Tom drive down here, and killed him. He used my tools to do both of them. Then he walked back to Tom's house ... or maybe he jogged. He looks rugged enough to have jogged. Sonny didn't think Tom sounded like himself, and I know why. By the time Sonny got that call, the sun was getting ready to come up and Tom was already dead. It was Shooter, imitating Tom. And it was probably easy. From the way Sonny had his music cranked this morning, he's a little deaf, anyway. Once he was done with Sonny Trotts, he got in my Buick again and drove it back to the house. Greg's Ranger is still parked in his own driveway, where it's been all along. And that's how -'

The squirrel scurried up the trunk and disappeared into the blazing red leaves.

'-that's how it worked,' Mort finished dully.

Suddenly his legs felt watery. He took two steps back up the path, thought of Tom Greenleaf's brains drying on his cheeks, and his legs just gave up. He fell down and the world swam away for awhile.

36

When he came to, Mort rolled over, sat up groggily, and turned his wrist to look at his watch. It said quarter past two, but of course it must have stopped at that time last night; he had found Tom's Scout at mid-morning, and this couldn't be afternoon. He had fainted, and, considering the circumstances, that wasn't surprising. But no one faints for three and a half hours.

The watch's second hand was making its steady little circle, however.

Must have jogged it when I sat up, that's all.

But that wasn't all. The sun had changed position, and would soon be lost behind the clouds which were filling up the sky. The color of the lake had dulled to a listless chrome.

So he had started off fainting, or swooning, and then what? Well, it sounded incredible, but he supposed he must have fallen asleep. The last three days had been nerve-racking, and last night he had been sleepless until three. So call it a combination of mental and physical fatigue. His mind had just pulled the plug. And

Shooter! Christ. Shooter said he'd call!

He tried to get to his feet, then fell back with a little oof! sound of mingled pain and surprise as his left leg buckled under him. It was full of pins and needles, all of them crazily dancing. He must have lain on the goddam thing. Why hadn't he brought the Buick, for Christ's sake? If Shooter called and Mort wasn't there to take the call, the man might do anything.

He lunged to his feet again, and this time made it all the way up. But when he tried to stride on the left leg, it refused his weight and spilled him forward again. He almost hit his head on the side of the truck going down and was suddenly looking at himself in one of the

hubcaps of the Scout. The convex surface made his face look like a grotesque funhouse mask. At least he had left the goddamned hat back at the house; if he had seen that on his head, Mort thought he would have screamed. He wouldn't have been able to help himself.

All at once he remembered there were two dead men in the Scout. They were sitting above him, getting stiff, and there were tools sticking out of their heads.

He crawled out of the Scout's shadow, dragged his left leg across his right with his hands, and began to pound at it with his fists, like a man trying to tenderize a cheap cut of meat.

Stop it! a small voice cried - it was the last kernel of rationality at his command, a little sane light in what felt like a vast bank of black thunderheads between his ears. Stop it! He said he'd call late in the afternoon, and it's only quarter past two! Plenty of time! Plenty of time!

But what if he called early? Or what if 'late afternoon' started after two o'clock in the deep-dish, crackerbarrel South?

Keep beating on your leg like that and you'll wind up with a charley horse. Then you can see how you like trying to crawl back in time to take his call.

That did the trick. He was able to make himself stop. This time he got up more cautiously and just stood for a moment (he was careful to keep his back to Tom's Scout - he did not want to look inside again) before trying to walk. He found that the pins and needles were subsiding. He walked with a pronounced limp at first, but his gait began to smooth out after the first dozen strides .

He was almost clear of the bushes Shooter had stripped and beaten down with Tom's Scout when he heard a car approaching. Mort dropped to his knees without even thinking about it and watched as a rusty old Cadillac swept by. It belonged to Don Bassinger, who owned a place on the far side of the lake. Bassinger, a veteran

alcoholic who spent most of his time drinking up what remained of his once-substantial inheritance, often used Lake Drive as a shortcut to what was known as Bassinger Road. Don was about the only year-round resident down here, Mort thought.

After the Caddy was out of sight, Mort got to his feet and hurried the rest of the way up to the road. Now he was glad he hadn't brought the Buick. He knew Don Bassinger's Cadillac, and Bassinger knew Mort's Buick. It was probably too early in the day for Don to be in a blackout, and he might well have remembered seeing Mort's car, if it had been there, parked not far from the place where, before too much longer, someone was going to make an extremely horrible discovery.

He's busy tying you to this business, Mort thought as he limped along Lake Drive toward his house. He's been doing it all along. If anyone saw a car near Tom Greenleafs last night, it will almost certainly turn out to be your Buick. He killed them with your tools

I could get rid of the tools, he thought suddenly. I could throw them in the lake. I might heave up a time or two getting them out, but I think I could go through with it.

Could you? I wonder. And even if you did ... well, Shooter almost certainly will have thought of that possibility, too. He seems to have thought of all the others. And he knows that if you tried to get rid of the hatchet and the screwdriver and the police dragged the bottom for them and they were found, things would look even worse for you. Do you see what he's done? Do you?

Yes. He saw. John Shooter had given him a present. It was a tar baby. A large, glistening tar baby. Mort had smacked the tar baby in the head with his left hand and it had stuck fast. So he had whopped that old tar baby in the gut with his right hand to make it let go, only his right hand had stuck, too. He had been - what was the word he had kept using with such smug satisfaction? 'Disingenuous,' wasn't it? Yes, that was it. And all the time he had been getting more entangled with John Shooter's tar baby. And now? Well, he had told

lies to all sorts of people, and that would look bad if it came out, and a quarter of a mile behind him a man was wearing a hatchet for a hat and Mort's name was written on the handle, and that would look even worse.

Mort imagined the telephone ringing in the empty house and forced himself into a trot.

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Shooter didn't call.

The minutes stretched out like taffy, and Shooter didn't call. Mort walked restlessly through the house, twirling and pulling at his hair. He imagined this was what it felt like to be a junkie waiting for the pusher-man.

Twice he had second thoughts about waiting, and went to the phone to call the authorities - not old Dave Newsome, or even the county sheriff, but the State Police. He would hew to the old Vietnam axiom: Kill em all and let God sort em out. Why not? He had a good reputation, after all; he was a respected member of two Maine communities, and John Shooter was a

Just what was Shooter?

The word 'phantom' came to mind.

The word 'will-o-the-wisp' also came to mind.

But it was not this that stopped him. What stopped him was a horrible certainty that Shooter would be trying to call while Mort himself was using the line ... that Shooter would hear the busy signal, hang up, and Mort would never hear from him again.

At quarter of four, it began to rain - a steady fall rain, cold and gentle, sighing down from a white sky, tapping on the roof and the stiff leaves around the house.

At ten of, the telephone rang. Mort leaped for it.

It was Amy.

Amy wanted to talk about the fire. Amy wanted to talk about how unhappy she was, not just for herself, but for both of them. Amy

wanted to tell him that Fred Evans, the insurance investigator, was still in Derry, still picking over the site, still asking . questions about everything from the most recent wiring inspection to who had the keys to the wine cellar, and Ted was suspicious of his motives. Amy wanted Mort to wonder with her if things would have been different if they had had children.

Mort responded to all this as best he could, and all the time he was talking with her, he felt time - prime late-afternoon time - slipping away. He was half mad with worry that Shooter would call, find the line busy, and commit some fresh atrocity. Finally he said the only thing he could think of to get her off the line: that if he didn't get to the bathroom soon, he was going to have an accident.

'Is it booze?' she asked, concerned. 'Have you been drinking?'

'Breakfast, I think,' he said. 'Listen, Amy, I -'

'At Bowie's?'

'Yes,' he said, trying to sound strangled with pain and effort. The truth was, he felt strangled. It was all quite a comedy, when you really considered it. 'Amy, really, I -'

'God, Mort, she keeps the dirtiest grill in town,' Amy said. 'Go. I'll call back later.' The phone went dead in his ear. He put the receiver into its cradle, stood there a moment, and was amazed and dismayed to discover his fictional complaint was suddenly real: his bowels had drawn themselves into an aching, throbbing knot.

He ran for the bathroom, unclasping his belt as he went.

It was a near thing, but he made it. He sat on the ring in the rich odor of his own wastes, his pants around his ankles, catching his breath ... and the phone began to ring again.

He sprang up like a jack released from its box, cracking one knee smartly on the side of the washstand, and ran for it, holding his pants

up with one hand and mincing along like a girl in a tight skirt. He had that miserable, embarrassing I-didn't-have-time-to-wipe feeling, and he guessed it happened to everyone, but it suddenly occurred to him he had never read about it in a book - not one single book, ever.

Oh, life was such a comedy.

This time it was Shooter.

'I saw you down there,' Shooter said. His voice was as calm and serene as ever. 'Down where I left them, I mean. Looked like you had you a heat-stroke, only it isn't summer.'

'What do you want?' Mort switched the telephone to his other ear. His pants slid down to his ankles again. He let them go and stood there with the waistband of his jockey shorts suspended halfway between his knees and his hips. What an author photograph this would make, he thought.

'I almost pinned a note on you,' Shooter said. 'I decided not to.' He paused, then added with a kind of absent contempt: 'You scare too easy.'

'What do you want?'

'Why, I told you that already, Mr Rainey. I want a story to make up for the one you stole. Ain't you ready to admit it yet?'

Yes - tell him yes! Tell him anything, the earth is flat, John Kennedy and Elvis Presley are alive and well and playing banjo duets in Cuba, Meryl Streep's a transvestite, tell him ANYTHING

But he wouldn't.

All the fury and frustration and horror and confusion suddenly burst out of his mouth in a howl.

'I DIDN'T! I DIDN'T! YOU'RE CRAZY, AND I CAN PROVE IT! I HAVE THE MAGAZINE, YOU LOONY! DO YOU HEAR ME? I HAVE

THE GODDAM MAGAZINE!

The response to this was no response. The line was silent and dead, without even the faraway gabble of a phantom voice to break that smooth darkness, like that which crept up to the window-wall each night he had spent here alone.

'Shooter?'

Silence.

'Shooter, are you still there?'

More silence. He was gone.

Mort let the telephone sag away from his ear. He was returning it to the cradle when Shooter's voice, tinny and distant and almost lost, said:

. . . now?'

Mort put the phone back to his ear. It seemed to weigh eight hundred pounds. 'What?' he asked. 'I thought you were gone.'

'You have it? You have this so-called magazine? Now?' He thought Shooter sounded upset for the first time. Upset and unsure.

'No,' Mort said.

'Well, there!' Shooter said, sounding relieved. 'I think you might finally be ready to talk turk -'

'It's coming Federal Express,' Mort interrupted. 'It will be at the post office by ten tomorrow.'

'What will be?' Shooter asked. 'Some fuzzy old thing that's supposed to be a copy?'

'No,' Mort said. The feeling that he had rocked the man, that he had actually gotten past his defenses and hit him hard enough to make it hurt, was strong and undeniable. For a moment or two Shooter had sounded almost afraid, and Mort was angrily glad. 'The magazine. The actual magazine.'

There was another long pause, but this time Mort kept the telephone screwed tightly against his ear. Shooter was there. And suddenly the story was the central issue again, the story and the accusation of plagiarism; Shooter treating him like he was a goddam college kid was the issue, and maybe the man was on the run at last.

Once, in the same parochial school where Mort had learned the trick of swallowing crooked, he had seen a boy stick a pin in a beetle which had been trundling across his desk. The beetle had been caught - pinned, wriggling, and dying. At the time, Mort had been sad and horrified. Now he understood. Now he only wanted to do the same thing to this man. This crazy man.

'There can't be any magazine,' Shooter said finally. 'Not with that story in it. That story is mine!'

Mort could hear anguish in the man's voice. Real anguish. It made him glad. The pin was in Shooter. He was wriggling around on it.

'It'll be here at ten tomorrow,' Mort said, 'or as soon after as FedEx drops the Tashmore stuff. I'll be happy to meet you there. You can take a look. As long a look as you want, you goddamned maniac.'

'Not there,' Shooter said after another pause. 'At your house.'

'Forget it. When I show you that issue of Ellery Queen, I want to be someplace where I can yell for help if you go apeshit.'

'You'll do it my way,' Shooter said. He sounded a little more in control ... but Mort did not believe Shooter had even half the control he'd had previously. 'If you don't, I'll see you in the Maine State Prison for murder.'

'Don't make me laugh.' But Mort felt his bowels begin to knot up again.

'I hooked you to those two men in more ways than you know,' Shooter said, 'and you have told a right smart of lies. If I just disappear, Mr Rainey, you are going to find yourself standing with your head in a noose and your feet in Crisco.'

'You don't scare me.'

'Yeah, I do,' Shooter said. He spoke almost gently. 'The only thing is. you're startin to scare me a little, too. I can't quite figure you out.'

Mort was silent.

'It'd be funny,' Shooter said in a strange, ruminating tone. 'if we had come by the same story in two different places, at two different times.'

'The thought had occurred to me.'

'Did it?'

'I dismissed it,' Mort said. 'Too much of a coincidence. If it was just the same plot, that would be one thing. But the same language? The same goddam diction?'

'Uh-huh,' Shooter said. 'I thought the same thing, pilgrim. It's just too much. Coincidence is out. You stole it from me, all right, but I'm goddamned if I can figure out how or when.'

'Oh, quit it!' Mort burst out. 'I have the magazine! I have proof! Don't you understand that? It's over! Whether it was some nutty game on your part or just a delusion, it is over! I have the magazine!'

After a long silence, Shooter said: 'Not yet, you don't.'

'How true,' Mort said. He felt a sudden and totally unwanted sense of kinship with the man. 'So what do we do tonight?'

'Why, nothing,' Shooter said. 'Those men will keep. One has a wife and kids visiting family. The other lives alone. You go and get your magazine tomorrow morning. I will come to your place around noon.'

'You'll kill me,' Mort said. He found that the idea didn't carry much terror with it - not tonight, anyway. 'If I show you the magazine, your delusion will break down and you'll kill me.'

'No!' Shooter replied, and this time he seemed clearly surprised. 'You? No, sir! But those others were going to get in the way of our business. I couldn't have that ... and I saw that I could use them to make you deal with me. To face up to your responsibility.'

'You're crafty,' Mort said. 'I'll give you that. I believe you're nuts, but I also believe you're just about the craftiest son of a bitch I ever ran across in my life.'

'Well, you can believe this,' Shooter said. 'If I come tomorrow and find you gone, Mr Rainey, I will make it my business to destroy every person in the world that you love and care for. I will burn your life like a canefield in a high wind. You will go to jail for killing those two men, but going to jail will be the least of your sorrows. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' Mort said. 'I understand. Pilgrim.'

'Then you be there.'

'And suppose - just suppose - I show you the magazine, and it has my name on the contents page and my story inside. What then?'

There was a short pause. Then Shooter said, 'I go to the authorities and confess to the whole shooting match. But I'd take care of myself long before the trial, Mr Rainey. Because if things turn out that way, then I suppose I am crazy. And that kind of a crazy man ...' There was a sigh. 'That kind of crazy man has no excuse or reason to live.'

The words struck Mort with queer force. He's unsure, he thought. For the first time, he's really unsure ... which is more than I've ever been.

But he cut that off, and hard. He had never had a reason to be unsure. This was Shooter's fault. Every bit of it was Shooter's fault.

He said: 'How do I know you won't claim the magazine is a fake?'

He expected no response to this, except maybe something about how Mort would have to take his word, but Shooter surprised him.

'If it's real, I'll know,' he said, 'and if it's fake, we'll both know. I don't reckon you could have rigged a whole fake magazine in three days, no matter how many people you have got working for you in New York.'

It was Mort's turn to think, and he thought for a long, long time. Shooter waited for him.

'I'm going to trust you,' Mort said at last. 'I don't know why, for sure. Maybe because I don't have a lot to live for myself these days. But I'm not going to trust you whole hog. You come down here. Stand in the driveway where I can see you, and see that you're unarmed. I'll come out. Is that satisfactory?'

'That'll do her.'

'God help us both.'

'Yessir. I'll be damned if I'm sure what I'm into anymore ... and that is not a comfortable feeling.'

'Shooter?'

'Right here.'

'I want you to answer one question.'

Silence ... but an inviting silence, Mort thought.

'Did you burn down my house in Derry?'

'No,' Shooter said at once. 'I was keeping an eye on you.'

'And Bump,' Mort said bitterly.

'Listen,' Shooter said. 'You got my hat?'

'Yes.'

'I'll want it,' Shooter said, 'one way or the other.'

And the line went dead.

Just like that.

Mort put the phone down slowly and carefully and walked back to the bathroom - once again holding his pants up as he went - to finish his business.

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Amy did call back, around seven, and this time Mort was able to talk to her quite normally - just as if the bathroom upstairs wasn't trashed and there weren't two dead men sitting behind a screen of bushes on the path down to the lake, stiffening as the twilight turned to dark around them.

She had spoken with Fred Evans herself since her last call, she said, and she was convinced he either knew something or suspected something about the fire he didn't want to tell them. Mort tried to soothe her, and thought he succeeded to some degree, but he was worried himself. If Shooter hadn't started the fire -and Mort felt inclined to believe the man had been telling the truth about that -then it must have been raw coincidence ... right?

He didn't know if it was right or not.

'Mort, I've been so worried about you,' she said suddenly.

That snapped him back from his thoughts. 'Me? I'm okay.'

'Are you sure? When I saw you yesterday, I thought you looked ... strained.' She paused. 'In fact, I thought you looked like you did before you had the ... you know.'

'Amy, I did not have a nervous breakdown.'

'Well, no,' she said quickly. 'But you know what I mean. When the movie people were being so awful about The Delacourt Family.'

That had been one of the bitterest experiences of Mort's life. Paramount had optioned the book for \$75,000 on a pick-up price Of \$750,000 - damned big money. And they had been on the verge of exercising their option when someone had turned up an old script in the files, something called The HomeTeam, which was enough like The Delacourt Family to open up potential legal problems. It was the

only time in his career - before this nightmare, anyway -when he had been exposed to the possibility of a plagiarism charge. The execs had ended up letting the option lapse at the eleventh hour. Mort still did not know if they had been really worried about plagiarism or had simply had second thoughts about his novel's film potential. If they really had been worried, he didn't know how such a bunch of pansies could make any movies. Herb Creekmore had obtained a copy of the Home Team screenplay, and Mort had seen only the most casual similarity. Amy agreed.

The fuss happened just as he was reaching a dead end on a novel he had wanted desperately to write. There had been a short PR tour for the paperback version of The Delacourt Family at the same time. All of that at once had put him under a great deal of strain.

But he had not had a nervous breakdown.

'I'm okay,' he insisted again, speaking gently. He had discovered an amazing and rather touching thing about Amy some years before: if you spoke to her gently enough, she was apt to believe you about almost anything. He had often thought that, if it had been a species-wide trait, like showing your teeth to indicate rage or amusement, wars would have ceased millennia ago.

'Are you sure, Mort?'

'Yes. Call me if you hear any more from our insurance friend.'

'I will.'

He paused. 'Are you at Ted's?'

'Yes.'

'How do you feel about him, these days?'

She hesitated, then said simply: 'I love him.'

'Oh.'

'I didn't go with other men,' she said suddenly. 'I've always wanted to tell you that. I didn't go with other men. But Ted ... he looked past your name and saw me, Mort. He saw me.'

'You mean I didn't.'

'You did when you were here,' she said. Her voice sounded small and forlorn. 'But you were gone so much.'

His eyes widened and he was instantly ready to do battle. Righteous battle. 'What? I haven't been on tour since The Delacourt Family! And that was a short one!'

'I don't want to argue with you, Mort,' she said softly. 'That part should be over. All I'm trying to say is that, even when you were here, you were gone a lot. You had your own lover, you know. Your work was your lover.' Her voice was steady, but he sensed tears buried deep inside it. 'How I hated that bitch, Mort. She was prettier than me, smarter than me, more fun than me. How could I compete?'

'Blame it all on me, why not?' he asked her, dismayed to find himself on the edge of tears. 'What did you want me to do? Become a goddam plumber? We would have been poor and I would have been unemployed. There was nothing else I could fucking do, don't you understand that? There was nothing else I could do!' He had hoped the tears were over, at least for awhile, but here they were. Who had rubbed this horrible magic lamp again? Had it been him or her this time?

'I'm not blaming you. There's blame for me, too. You never would have found us ... the way you did ... if I hadn't been weak and cowardly. It wasn't Ted; Ted wanted us to go to you and tell you together. He kept asking. And I kept putting him off. I told him I wasn't sure. I told myself I still loved you, that things could go back to the way they were ... but things never do, I guess. I'll -' She caught her breath, and Mort realized she was crying, too. 'I'll never forget the look on your face when you opened the door of that motel room. I'll carry that to my grave.'

Good! he wanted to cry out at her. Good! Because you only had to see it! I had to wear it!

'You knew my love,' he said unsteadily. 'I never hid her from you. You knew from the start.'

'But I never knew,' she said, 'how deep her embrace could be.'

'Well, cheer up,' Mort said. 'She seems to have left me now.'

Amy was weeping. 'Mort, Mort - I only want you to live and be happy. Can't you see that? Can't you do that?'

What he had seen was one of her bare shoulders touching one of Ted Milner's bare shoulders. He had seen their eyes, wide and frightened, and Ted's hair stuck up in an Alfa corkscrew. He thought of telling her this - of trying, anyway -and let it go. It was enough. They had hurt each other enough. Another time, perhaps, they could go at it again. He wished she hadn't said that thing about the nervous breakdown, though. He had not had a nervous breakdown.

'Amy, I think I ought to go.'

'Yes - both of us. Ted's out showing a house, but he'll be back soon. I have to put some dinner together.'

'I'm sorry about the argument.'

'Will you call if you need me? I'm still worried.'

'Yes,' he said, and said goodbye, and hung up. He stood there by the telephone for a moment, thinking he would surely burst into tears. But it passed. That was perhaps the real horror.

It passed.

39

The steadily falling rain made him feel listless and stupid. He made a little fire in the woodstove, drew a chair over, and tried to read the current issue of Harper's, but he kept nodding off and then jerking awake again as his chin dropped, squeezing his windpipe and producing a snore. I should have bought some cigarettes today, he thought. A few smokes would have kept me awake. But he hadn't bought any smokes, and he wasn't really sure they would have kept him awake, anyway. He wasn't just tired; he was suffering from shock.

At last he walked over to the couch, adjusted the pillows, and lay back. Next to his cheek, cold rain spickle-spackled against the dark glass.

Only once, he thought. I only did it once. And then he fell deeply asleep.

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In his dream, he was in the world's biggest classroom.

The walls stretched up for miles. Each desk was a mesa, the gray tiles the endless plain which swept among them. The clock on the wall was a huge cold sun. The door to the hallway was shut, but Morton Rainey could read the words on the pebbled glass:

HOME TEAM WRITING ROOM

PROF. DELLACOURT

They spelled it wrong, Mort thought, too many L's.

But another voice told him this was not so.

Mort was standing on the giant blackboard's wide chalk gutter, stretching up. He had a piece of chalk the size of a baseball bat in his hand. He wanted to drop his arm, which ached ferociously, but he could not. Not until he had written the same sentence on the blackboard five hundred times: I will not copy from John Kintner. He must have written it four hundred times already, he thought, but four hundred wasn't enough. Stealing a man's work when a man's work was really all he had was unforgivable. So he would have to write and write and write, and never mind the voice in his mind trying to tell him that this was a dream, that his right arm ached for other reasons.

The chalk squeaked monstrously. The dust, acrid and somehow familiar - so familiar - sifted down into his face. At last he could go on no longer. His arm dropped to his side like a bag filled with lead shot. He turned on the chalk gutter, and saw that only one of the desks in the huge classroom was occupied. The occupant was a young man with a country kind of face; a face you expected to see in the north forty behind the ass end of a mule. His pale-brown hair stuck up in spikes from his head. His country-cousin hands, seemingly all

knuckles, were folded on the desk before him. He was looking at Mort with pale, absorbed eyes.

I know you, Mort said in the dream.

That's right, pilgrim, John Kintner said in his bald, drawling Southern accent. You just put me together wrong. Now keep on writing. It's not five hundred. It's five thousand.

Mort started to turn, but his foot slipped on the edge of the gutter, and suddenly he was spilling outward, screaming into the dry, chalky air, and John Kintner was laughing, and he

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- woke up on the floor with his head almost underneath the rogue coffee table, clutching at the carpet and crying out in high-pitched, whinnying shrieks.

He was at Tashmore Lake. Not in some weird, cyclopean classroom but at the lake ... and dawn was coming up misty in the east.

I'm all right. It was just a dream and I'm all right.

But he wasn't. Because it hadn't just been a dream. John Kintner had been real. How in God's name could he have forgotten John Kintner?

Mort had gone to college at Bates, and had majored in creative writing. Later, when he spoke to classes of aspiring writers (a chore he ducked whenever possible), he told them that such a major was probably the worst mistake a man or woman could make, if he or she wanted to write fiction for a living.

'Get a job with the post office,' he'd say. 'It worked for Faulkner.' And they would laugh. They liked to listen to him, and he supposed he was fairly good at keeping them entertained. That seemed very important, since he doubted that he or anyone else could teach them how to write creatively. Still, he was always glad to get out at the end of the class or seminar or workshop. The kids made him nervous. He supposed John Kintner was the reason why.

Had Kintner been from Mississippi? Mort couldn't remember, but he didn't think so. But he had been from some enclave of the Deep South all the same - Alabama, Louisiana, maybe the toolies of north Florida. He didn't know for sure. Bates College had been a long time ago, and he hadn't thought of John Kintner, who had suddenly dropped out one day for reasons known only to himself, in years.

That's not true. You thought about him last night.

Dreamed about him, you mean, Mort corrected himself quickly, but that hellish little voice inside would not let it go.

No, earlier than that. You thought about him while you were talking to Shooter on the telephone.

He didn't want to think about this. He wouldn't think about this. John Kintner was in the past; John Kintner had nothing to do with what was happening now. He got up and walked unsteadily toward the kitchen in the milky, early light to make strong coffee. Lots and lots of strong coffee. Except the hellish little voice wouldn't let him be. Mort looked at Amy's set of kitchen knives hanging from their magnetized steel runners and thought that if he could cut that little voice out, he would try the operation immediately.

You were thinking that you rocked the man - that you finally rocked him. You were thinking that the story had become the central issue again, the story and the accusation of plagiarism. Shooter treating you like a goddam college kid was the issue. Like a goddam college kid. Like a

'Shut up,' Mort said hoarsely. 'Just shut the fuck up.'

The voice did, but he found himself unable to stop thinking about John Kintner anyway.

As he measured coffee with a shaking hand, he thought of his constant, strident protestations that he hadn't plagiarized Shooter's story, that he had never plagiarized anything.

But he had, of course.

Once.

Just once.

'But that was so long ago,' he whispered. 'And it doesn't have anything to do with this.'

It might be true, but that did not stop his thoughts.

42

He had been a junior, and it was spring semester. The creative-writing class of which he was a part was focussing on the short story that semester. The teacher was a fellow named Richard Perkins, Jr, who had written two novels which had gotten very good reviews and sold very few copies. Mort had tried one, and thought the good reviews and bad sales had the same root cause: the books were incomprehensible. But the man hadn't been a bad teacher - he had kept them entertained, at least.

There had been about a dozen students in the class. One of them was John Kintner. Kintner was only a freshman, but he had gotten special permission to take the class. And had deserved it, Mort supposed. Southern-fried cracker or not, that sucker had been good.

The course required each of them to write either six short stories or three longer ones. Each week, Perkins dittoed off the ones he thought would make for the liveliest discussion and handed them out at the end of the class. The students were supposed, to come the following week prepared to discuss and criticize. It was the usual way to run such a class. And one week Perkins had given them a story from John Kintner. It had been called ... What had it been called?

Mort had turned on the water to fill the coffeemaker, but now he only stood, looking absently out at the fog beyond the window-wall and listening to the running water.

You know damned well what It was called. 'Secret Window, Secret Garden.'

'But it wasn't!' he yelled petulantly to the empty house. He thought furiously, determined to shut the hellish little voice up once and for all ... and suddenly it came to him.

“Crowfoot Mile!” he shrieked. ‘The name of the story was “Crowfoot Mile,” and it doesn’t have anything to do with anything!’

Except that was not quite true, either, and he didn’t really need the little, voice hunkered down someplace in the middle of his aching head to point out the fact.

Kintner had turned in three or maybe four stories before disappearing to wherever he had disappeared to (if asked to guess, Mort would have guessed Vietnam - it was where most of them had disappeared to at the end of the sixties -the young men, anyhow). ‘Crowfoot Mile’ hadn’t been the best of Kintner’s stories ... but it had been good. Kintner was clearly the best writer in Richard Perkins, Jr’s class. Perkins treated the boy almost as an equal, and in Mort Rainey’s not-so-humble estimation, Perkins had been right to do so, because he thought Kintner had been quite a bit better than Richard Perkins, Jr. As far as that went, Mort believed he had been better.

But had he been better than Kintner?

‘Huh-uh,’ he said under his breath as he turned on the coffeemaker. ‘I was second.’

Yes. He had been second, and he had hated that. He knew that most students taking writing courses were just marking time, pursuing a whim before giving up childish things and settling into a study of whatever it was that would be their real life’s work. The creative writing most of them would do in later life would consist of contributing items to the Community Calendar pages of their local newspapers or writing advertising copy for Bright Blue Breeze dish detergent. Mort had come into Perkins’s class confidently expecting to be the best, because it had never been any other way with him. For that reason, John Kintner had come as an unpleasant shock.

He remembered trying to talk to the boy once ... but Kintner, who contributed in class only when asked, had proved to be almost inarticulate. When he spoke out loud, he mumbled and stumbled like a poor-white sharecropper’s boy whose education had stopped at

the fourth-grade level. His writing was the only voice he had, apparently.

And you stole it.

'Shut up,' he muttered. 'Just shut up.'

You were second best and you hated it. You were glad when he was gone, because then you could be first again. Just like you always had been.

Yes. True. And a year later, when he was preparing to graduate, he had been cleaning out the back closet of the sleazy Lewiston apartment he had shared with two other students, and had come upon a pile of offprints from Perkins's writing course. Only one of Kintner's stories had been in the stack. It happened to be 'Crowfoot Mile.'

He remembered sitting on the seedy, beer-smelling rug of his bedroom, reading the story, and the old jealousy had come over him again.

He threw the other offprints away, but he had taken that one with him ... for reasons he wasn't sure he wanted to examine closely.

As a sophomore, Mort had submitted a story to a literary magazine called Aspen Quarterly. It came back with a note which said the readers had found it quite good 'although the ending seemed rather jejune.' The note, which Mort found both patronizing and tremendously exciting, invited him to submit other material.

Over the next two years, he had submitted four more stories. None were accepted, but a personal note accompanied each of the rejection slips. Mort went through an unpublished writer's agony of optimism alternating with deep pessimism. He had days when he was sure it was only a matter of time before he cracked Aspen Quarterly. And he had days when he was positive that the entire editorial staff - pencil-necked geeks to a man - was only playing with

him, teasing him the way a man might tease a hungry dog by holding a piece of meat up over its head and then jerking the scrap out of reach when it leaps. He sometimes imagined one of them holding up one of his manuscripts, fresh out of its manila envelope, and shouting: 'Here's another one from that putz in Maine! Who wants to write the letter this time?' And all of them cracking up, perhaps even rolling around on the floor underneath their posters of Joan Baez and Moby Grape at the Fillmore.

Most days, Mort had not indulged in this sort of sad paranoia. He understood that he was good, and that it was only a matter of time. And that summer, working as a waiter in a Rockland restaurant, he thought of the story by John Kintner. He thought it was probably still in his trunk, kicking around at the bottom. He had a sudden idea. He would change the title and submit 'Crowfoot Mile' to Aspen Quarterly under his own name! He remembered thinking it would be a fine joke on them, although, looking back now, he could not imagine what the joke would have been.

He did remember that he'd had no intention of publishing the story under his own name ... or, if he had had such an intention on some deeper level, he hadn't been aware of it. In the unlikely event of an acceptance, he would withdraw the story, saying he wanted to work on it some more. And if they

rejected it, he could at least take some cheer in the thought that John Kintner wasn't good enough for Aspen Quarterly, either.

So he had sent the story.

And they had accepted it.

And he had let them accept it.

And they sent him a check for twenty-five dollars. 'An honorarium,' the accompanying letter had called it.

And then they had published it.

And Morton Rainey, overcome by belated guilt at what he had done, had cashed the check and had stuffed the bills into the poor box of St Catherine's in Augusta one day.

But guilt hadn't been all he'd felt. Oh no.

Mort sat at the kitchen table with his head propped in one hand, waiting for the coffee to perk. His head ached. He didn't want to be thinking about John Kintner and John Kintner's story. What he had done with 'Crowfoot Mile' had been one of the most shameful events of his life; was it really surprising that he had buried it for so many years? He wished he could bury it again now. This, after all, was going to be a big day - maybe the biggest of his life. Maybe even the last of his life. He should be thinking about going to the post office. He should be thinking about his confrontation with Shooter, but his mind would not let that sad old time alone.

When he'd seen the magazine, the actual magazine with his name in it above John Kintner's story, he felt like a man waking from a horrible episode of sleepwalking, an unconscious outing in which he has done some irrevocable thing. How had he let it go so far? It was supposed to have been a joke, for Christ's sake, just a little giggle

But he had let it go so far. The story had been published, and there were at least a dozen other people in the world who knew it wasn't his - including Kintner himself. And if one of them happened to pick up Aspen Quarterly

He himself told no one - of course. He simply waited, sick with terror. He slept and ate very little that late summer and early fall; he lost weight and dark shadows brushed themselves under his eyes. His heart began to triphammer every time the telephone rang. If the call was for him, he would approach the instrument with dragging feet and cold sweat on his brow, sure it would be Kintner, and the first words out of Kintner's mouth would be, You stole my story, and something has got to be done about it. I think I'll start by telling everybody what kind of thief you are.

The most incredible thing was this: he had known better. He had known the possible consequences of such an act for a young man who hoped to make a career of writing. It was like playing Russian roulette with a bazooka. Yet still ... still ...

But as that fall slipped uneventfully past, he began to relax a little. The issue of Aspen Quarterly had been replaced by a new issue. The issue was no longer lying out on tables in library periodical rooms all across the country; it had been tucked away into the stacks or transferred to microfiche. It might still cause trouble - he bleakly supposed he would have to live with that possibility for the rest of his life - but in most cases, out of sight meant out of mind.

Then, in November of that year, a letter from Aspen Quarterly came.

Mort held it in his hands, looking at his name on the envelope, and began to shake all over. His eyes filled with some liquid that felt too hot and corrosive to be tears, and the envelope first doubled and then trebled.

Caught. They caught me. They'll want me to respond to a letter they have from Kintner ... or Perkins ... or one of the others in the class ... I'm caught.

He had thought of suicide then - quite calmly and quite rationally. His mother had sleeping pills. He would use those. Somewhat eased by this prospect, he tore the envelope open and pulled out a single sheet of stationery. He held it folded in one hand for a long moment and considered burning it without even looking at it. He wasn't sure he could stand to see the accusation held baldly up in front of him. He thought it might drive him mad.

Go ahead, dammit - look. The least you can do is look at the consequences. You may not be able to stand up to them, but you can by-God look at them.

He unfolded the letter.

Dear Mort Rainey,

Your short story, 'Eye of the Crow,' was extremely well received here. I'm sorry this follow-up letter has been so slow in coming, but, frankly, we expected to hear from you. You have been so faithful in your submissions over the years that your silence now that you have finally succeeded in 'making it' is a little perplexing. If there was anything about the way your story was handled - typesetting, design, placement, *etc.* - that you didn't like, we hope you'll bring it up. Meantime, how about another tale?

Respectfully yours,

Charlie

Charles Palmer

Assistant Editor

Mort had read this letter twice, and then began to peal hoarse bursts of laughter at the house, which was luckily empty. He had heard of side-splitting laughter, and this was surely it - he felt that if he didn't stop soon, his sides really would split, and send his guts spewing out all over the floor. He had been ready to kill himself with his mother's sleeping pills, and they wanted to know if he was upset with the way the story had been typeset! He had expected to find that his career was ruined even before it was fairly begun, and they wanted more! More!

He laughed - howled, actually - until his side-splitting laughter turned to hysterical tears. Then he sat on the sofa, reread Charles Palmer's letter, and cried until he laughed again. At last he had gone into his room and lain down with the pillows arranged behind him just the way he liked, and then he had fallen asleep.

He had gotten away with it. That was the upshot. He had gotten away with it, and he had never done anything even remotely like it

again, and it had all happened about a thousand years ago, and so why had it come back to haunt him now?

He didn't know, but he intended to stop thinking about it.

'And right now, too,' he told the empty room, and walked briskly over to the coffeemaker, trying to ignore his aching head.

You know why you're thinking about it now.

'Shut up.' He spoke in a conversational tone which was rather cheery ... but his hands were shaking as he picked up the Silex.

Some things you can't hide forever. You might be ill, Mort.

'Shut up, I'm warning you,' he said in his cheery conversational voice.

You might be very ill. In fact, you might be having a nervous br...

'Shut up!' he cried, and threw the Silex as hard as he could. It sailed over the counter, flew across the room, turning over and over as it went, crunched into the window-wall, shattered, and fell dead on the floor. He looked at the window-wall and saw a long, silvery crack zig-zagging up to the top. It started at the place where the Silex had impacted. He felt very much like a man who might have a similar crack running right through the middle of his brain.

But the voice had shut up.

He walked stolidly into the bedroom, got the alarm clock, and walked back into the living room. He set the alarm for ten-thirty as he walked. At ten-thirty he was going to go to the post office, pick up his Federal Express package, and go stolidly about the task of putting this nightmare behind him.

In the meantime, though, he would sleep.

He would sleep on the couch, where he had always slept best.

'I am not having a nervous breakdown,' he whispered to the little voice, but the little voice was having none of the argument. Mort thought that he might have frightened the little voice. He hoped so, because the little voice had certainly frightened him.

His eyes found the silvery crack in the window-wall and traced it dully. He thought of using the chambermaid's key. How the room had been dim, and it had taken his eyes a moment to adjust. Their naked shoulders. Their frightened eyes. He had been shouting, He couldn't remember what - and had never dared to ask Amy - but it must have been some scary shit, judging from the look in their eyes.

If I was ever going to have a nervous breakdown, he thought, looking at the lightning-bolt senselessness of the crack, it would have been then. Hell, that letter from Aspen Quarterly was nothing compared to opening a motel-room door and seeing your wife with another man, a slick real-estate agent from some shitsplat little town in Tennessee

Mort closed his eyes, and when he opened them again it was because another voice was clamoring. This one belonged to the alarm clock. The fog had cleared, the sun had come out, and it was time to go to the post office.

43

On the way, he became suddenly sure that Federal Express would have come and gone ... and Juliet would stand there at the window with her bare face hanging out and shake her head and tell him there was nothing for him, sorry. And his proof? It would be gone like smoke. This feeling was irrational - Herb was a cautious man, one who did not make promises that couldn't be kept - but it was almost too strong to deny.

He had to force himself out of the car, and the walk from the door of the post office to the window where Juliet Stoker stood sorting mail seemed at least a thousand miles long.

When he got there, he tried to speak and no words came out. His lips moved, but his throat was too dry to make the sounds. Juliet looked up at him, then took a step back. She looked alarmed. Not, however, as alarmed as Amy and Ted had looked when he opened the motel-room door and pointed the gun at them.

'Mr Rainey? Are you all right?'

He cleared his throat. 'Sorry, Juliet. My throat kind of double-clutched on me for a second.'

'You're very pale,' she said, and he could hear in her voice that tone so many of the Tashmore residents used when they spoke to him - it was a sort of pride, but it held an undertaste of irritation and condescension, as though he was a child prodigy who needed special care and feeding.

'Something I ate last night, I guess,' he said. 'Did Federal Express leave anything for me?'

'No, not a thing.'

He gripped the underside of the counter desperately, and for a moment thought he would faint, although he had understood almost immediately that that was not what she had said.

'Pardon me?'

She had already turned away; her sturdy country bum was presented to him as she shuffled through some packages on the floor.

'Just the one thing, I said,' she replied, and then turned around and slid

the package across the counter to him. He saw the return address was EQMM in Pennsylvania, and Pelt relief course through him. It felt like cool water pouring down a dry throat.

'Thank you.'

'Welcome. You know, the post office would have a cow if they knew we handle that Federal Express man's mail.'

'Well, I certainly appreciate it,' Mort said. Now that he had the magazine, he felt a need to get away, to get back to the house. This need was so strong it was almost elemental. He didn't know why - it was an hour and a quarter until noon -but it was there. In his distress and confusion, he actually thought of giving Juliet a tip to shut her up ... and that would have caused her soul, Yankee to its roots, to rise up in a clamor.

'You won't tell them, will you?' she asked archly.

'No way,' he said, managing a grin.

'Good,' Juliet Stoker said, and smiled. 'Because I saw what you did.'

He stopped by the door. 'Pardon me?'

'I said they'd shoot me if you did,' she said, and looked closely at his face. 'You ought to go home and lie down, Mr Rainey. You really don't look well at all.'

I feel like I spent the last three days lying down, Juliet - the time I didn't spend hitting things, that is.

'Well,' he said, 'maybe that's not such a bad idea. I still feel weak.'

'There's a virus going around. You probably caught it.'

Then the two women from Camp Wigmore - the ones everybody in town suspected of being lesbians, albeit discreet ones - came in, and Mort made good his escape. He sat in the Buick with the blue package on his lap, not liking the way everybody kept saying he looked sick, liking the way his mind had been working even less.

It doesn't matter. It's almost over.

He started to pull the envelope open, and then the ladies from Camp Wigmore came back out and looked at him. They put their heads together. One of them smiled. The other laughed out loud. And Mort suddenly decided he would wait until he got back home.

44

He parked the Buick around the side of the house, in its customary place, turned off the ignition ... and then a soft grayness came over his vision. When it drew back, he felt strange and frightened. Was something wrong with him, then? Something physical?

No - he was just under strain, he decided.

He heard something - or thought he did - and looked around quickly.

Nothing there. Get hold of your nerves, he told himself shakily. That's really all you have to do -just get hold of your motherfucking nerves.

And then he thought: I did have a gun. That day. But it was unloaded. I told them that, later. Amy believed me. I don't know about Milner, but Amy did, and

Was it, Mort? Was it really unloaded?

He thought of the crack in the window-wall again, senseless silver lightning-bolt zig-zagging right up through the middle of things. That's how it happens, he thought. That's how it happens in a person's life.

Then he looked down at the Federal Express package again. This was what he should be thinking about, not Amy and Mr Ted Kiss-My-Ass from Shooter's Knob, Tennessee, but this.

The flap was already half-open - everyone was careless these days. He pulled it up and shook the magazine out into his lap. Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, the logo said in bright red letters. Beneath that, in much smaller type, June, 1980. And below that, the names of some of the writers featured in the issue. Edward D. Hoch. Ruth Rendell. Ed McBain. Patricia Highsmith. Lawrence Block.

His name wasn't on the cover.

Well, of course not. He was scarcely known as a writer at all then, and certainly not as a writer of mystery stories; 'Sowing Season' had been a oneer. His name would have meant nothing to regular readers of the magazine, so the editors would not have put it on. He turned the cover back.

There was no contents page beneath.

The contents page had been cut out.

He thumbed frantically through the magazine, dropping it once and then picking it up with a little cry. He didn't find the excision the first time, but on the second pass, he realized that pages 83 to 97 were gone.

'You cut it out!' he screamed. He screamed so loudly that his eyeballs bulged from their sockets. He began to bring his fists down on the steering wheel of the Buick, again and again and again. The horn burped and blared. 'You cut it out, you son of a bitch! How did you do that? You cut it out! You cut it out! You cut it out!'

45

He was halfway to the house before the deadly little voice again wondered how Shooter could have done that. The envelope had come Federal Express from Pennsylvania, and Juliet had taken possession of it, so how, how in God's name

He stopped.

Good, Juliet had said. Good, because I saw what you did.

That was it; that explained it. Juliet was in on it. Except -

Except Juliet had been in Tashmore since forever.

Except that hadn't been what she said. That had only been his mind. A little paranoid flatulence.

'He's doing it, though,' Mort said. He went into the house and once he was inside the door, he threw the magazine as hard as he could. It flew like a startled bird, pages riffling, and landed on the floor with a slap. 'Oh yeah, you bet, you bet your fucking ass, he's doing it. But I don't have to wait around for him.!' -'

He saw Shooter's hat. Shooter's hat was lying on the floor in front of the door to his study.

Mort stood where he was for a moment, heart thundering in his ears, and then walked over to the stove in great cartoon tippy-toe steps. He pulled the poker from the little clutch of tools, wincing when the poker's tip clanged softly against the ash-shovel. He took the poker and walked carefully back to the closed door again, holding the poker as he had held it before crashing into the bathroom. He had to skirt the magazine he'd thrown on the way.

He reached the door and stood in front of it.

'Shooter?'

There was no answer.

'Shooter, you better come out under your own power! If I have to come in and get you, you'll never walk out of anyplace under your own power again !'

There was still no answer.

He stood a moment longer, nerving himself (but not really sure he had the nerve), and then twisted the knob. He hit the door with his shoulder and barrelled in, screaming, waving the poker

And the room was empty.

But Shooter had been here, all right. Yes. The VDT unit of Mort's word cruncher lay on the floor, its screen a shattered staring eye. Shooter had killed it. On the desk where the VDT had stood was an old Royal typewriter. The steel surfaces of this dinosaur were dull and dusty. Propped on the keyboard was a manuscript. Shooter's manuscript, the one he had left under a rock on the porch a million years ago.

It was 'Secret Window, Secret Garden.'

Mort dropped the poker on the floor. He walked toward the typewriter as if mesmerized and picked up the manuscript. He shuffled slowly through its pages, and came to understand why Mrs Gavin had been so sure it was his ... sure enough to rescue it from the trash. Maybe she hadn't known consciously, but her eye had recognized the irregular typeface. And why not? She had seen manuscripts which looked like 'Secret Window, Secret Garden' for years. The Wang word processor and the System Five laser printer were relative newcomers. For most of his writing career he had used this old Royal.

The years had almost worn it out, and it was a sad case now - when you typed on it, it produced letters as crooked as an old man's teeth.

But it had been here all the time, of course - tucked away at the back of the study closet behind piles of old galleys and manuscripts ... what editors called 'foul matter.' Shooter must have stolen it, typed his manuscript on it, and then sneaked it back when Mort was out at the post office. Sure. That made sense, didn't it?

No, Mort. That doesn't make sense. Would you like to do something that does make sense? Call the police, then. That makes sense. Call the police and tell them to come down here and lock you up. Tell them to do it fast, before you can do any more damage. Tell them to do it before you kill anyone else.

Mort dropped the pages with a great wild cry and they seesawed lazily down around him as all of the truth rushed in on him at once like a jagged bolt of silver lightning.

46

There was no John Shooter.

There never had been.

‘No,’ Mort said. He was striding back and forth through the big living room again. His headache came and went in waves of pain. ‘No, I do not accept that. I do not accept that at all.’

But his acceptance or rejection didn’t make much difference. All the pieces of the puzzle were there, and when he saw the old Royal typewriter, they began to fly together. Now, fifteen minutes later, they were still flying together, and he seemed to have no power to will them apart.

The picture which kept coming back to him was of the gas jockey in Mechanic Falls, using a squeegee to wash his windshield. A sight he had never expected to witness again in his lifetime. Later, he had assumed that the kid had given him a little extra service because he had recognized Mort and liked Mort’s books. Maybe that was so, but the windshield had needed washing. Summer was gone, but plenty of stuff still splatted on your windshield if you drove far enough and fast enough on the back roads. And he must have used the back roads. He must have sped up to Derry and back again in record time, only stopping long enough to burn down his house. He hadn’t even stopped long enough to get gas on the way back. After all, he’d had places to go and cats to kill, hadn’t he? Busy, busy, busy.

He stopped in the middle of the floor and whirled to stare at the window wall. ‘If I did all that, why can’t I remember?’ he asked the silvery crack in the glass. ‘Why can’t I remember even now?’

He didn’t know ... but he did know where the name had come from, didn’t he? One half from the Southern man whose story he had stolen in college; one half from the man who had stolen his wife. It was like some bizarre literary in-joke.

She says she loves him, Mort. She says she loves him now.

'Fuck that. A man who sleeps with another man's wife is a thief. And the woman is his accomplice.'

He looked defiantly at the crack.

The crack said nothing.

Three years ago, Mort had published a novel called The Delacourt Family. The return address on Shooter's story had been Dellacourt, Mississippi. It -

He suddenly ran for the encyclopedias in the study, slipping and almost falling in the mess of pages strewn on the floor in his hurry. He pulled out the M volume and at last found the entry for Mississippi. He ran a trembling finger down the list of towns - it took up one entire page - hoping against hope.

It was no good.

There was no Dellacourt or Delacourt, Mississippi.

He thought of looking for Perkinsburg, the town where Shooter had told him he'd picked up a paperback copy of Everybody Drops the Dime before getting on the Greyhound bus, and then simply closed the encyclopedia. Why bother? There might be a Perkinsburg in Mississippi, but it would mean nothing if there was.

The name of the novelist who'd taught the class in which Mort had met John Kintner had been Richard Perkins, Jr. That was where the name had come from.

Yes, but I don't remember any of this, so how -?

Oh, Mort, the small voice mourned. You're very sick. You're a very sick man.

'I don't accept that,' he said again, horrified by the wavery weakness of his voice, but what other choice was there? Hadn't he even thought once that it was almost as if he were doing things, taking irrevocable steps, in his sleep?

You killed two men, the little voice whispered. You killed Tom because he knew you were alone that day, and you killed Greg so he wouldn't find out for sure. If you had just killed Tom, Greg would have called the police. And you didn't want that, COULDN'T have that. Not until this horrible story you've been telling is all finished. You were so sore when you got up yesterday. So stiff and sore. But it wasn't just from breaking in the bathroom door and trashing the shower stall, was it? You were a lot busier than that. You had Tom and Greg to take care of. And you were right about how the vehicles got moved around ... but You were the one who jogged all the way back to Tom's to get the Buick, and You were the one who called up Sonny Trotts and pretended to be Tom. A man who just got into town from Mississippi wouldn't know Sonny was a little deaf, but You would. You killed them, Mort, you **KILLED** those men!

'I do not accept that I did!' he shrieked. 'This is all just Part of his plan! This

I do not

is just part of his little game! His little mind-game! And I do not accept...'

Stop, the little voice whispered inside his head, and Mort stopped.

For a moment there was utter silence in both worlds: the one inside his head, and the one outside of it.

And, after an interval the little voice asked quietly: Why did You do It, Mort? This whole elaborate and homicidal episode? Shooter kept saying he wanted a story, but there is no Shooter. What do You want, Mort? What did you create John Shooter FOR?

Then, from outside, came the sound of a car rolling down the driveway. Mort looked at his watch and saw that the hands were standing straight up at noon. A blaze of triumph and relief roared through him like flames shooting up the neck of a chimney. That he had the magazine but still no proof did not matter. That Shooter might kill him did not matter. He could die happily, just knowing that there was a John Shooter and that he himself was not responsible for the horrors he had been considering.

'He's here!' he screamed joyfully, and ran out of the study. He waved his hands wildly above his head, and actually cut a little caper as he rounded the corner and came into the hall.

He stopped, looking out at the driveway past the sloping roof of the garbage cabinet where Bump's body had been nailed up. His hands dropped slowly to his sides. Dark horror stole over his brain. No, not over it; it came down, as if some merciless hand were pulling a shade. The last piece fell into place. It had occurred to him moments before in the study that he might have created a fantasy assassin because he lacked the courage to commit suicide. Now he realized that Shooter had told the truth when he said he would never kill Mort.

It wasn't John Shooter's imaginary station wagon but Amy's nonsense little Subaru which was just now coming to a stop. Amy was behind the wheel. She had stolen his love, and a woman who would steal your love when your love was really all you had to give was not much of a woman.

He loved her, all the same.

It was Shooter who hated her. It was Shooter who meant to kill her and then bury her down by the lake near Bump. where she would before long be a mystery to both of them.

'Go away, Amy,' he whispered in the palsied voice of a very old man. 'Go away before it's too late.'

But Amy was getting out of the car, and as she closed the door behind her, the hand pulled the shade in Mort's head all the way down and he was in darkness.

47

Amy tried the door and found it unlocked. She stepped in, started to call for Mort, and then didn't. She looked around, wide-eyed and startled.

The place was a mess. The trash can was full and had overflowed onto the floor. A few sluggish autumn flies were crawling in and out of an aluminum pot-pie dish that had been kicked into the corner. She could smell stale cooking and musty air. She thought she could even smell spoiled food.

'Mort?'

There was no answer. She walked further into the house, taking small steps, not entirely sure she wanted to look at the rest of the place. Mrs Gavin had been in only three days ago - how had things gotten so out of hand since then? What had happened?

She had been worried about Mort during the entire last year of their marriage, but she had been even more worried since the divorce. Worried, and, of course, guilty. She held part of the blame for herself. and supposed she always would. But Mort had never been strong ... and his greatest weakness was his stubborn (and sometimes almost hysterical) refusal to recognize the fact. This morning he had sounded like a man on the point of suicide. And the only reason she had heeded his admonition not to bring Ted was because she thought the sight of him might set Mort off if he really was poised on the edge of such an act.

The thought of murder had never crossed her mind, nor did it do so now. Even when he had brandished the gun at them that horrible afternoon at the motel, she had not been afraid. Not of that. Mort was no killer.

'Mort? M -'

She came around the kitchen counter and the word died. She stared at the big living room with wide, stunned eyes. Paper was littered everywhere. It looked as if Mort must at some point have exhumed every copy of every manuscript he had in his desk drawers and in his files and strewn the pages about in here like confetti at some black New Year's Eve celebration. The table was heaped with dirty dishes. The Silex was lying shattered on the floor by the window-wall, which was cracked.

And everywhere, everywhere, everywhere was one word. The word was SHOOTER.

SHOOTER had been written on the walls in colored chalks he must have taken from her drawer of art supplies. SHOOTER was sprayed on the window twice in what looked like dried whipped cream - and yes, there was the Redi-Whip pressure-can, lying discarded under the stove. SHOOTER was written over and over on the kitchen counters in ink, and on the wooden support posts of the deck on the far side of the house in pencil - a neat column like adding that went down in a straight line and said SHOOTER SHOOTER SHOOTER SHOOTER.

Worst of all, it had been carved into the polished cherrywood surface of the table in great jagged letters three feet high, like a grotesque declaration of love: SHOOTER.

The screwdriver he had used to do this last was lying on a chair nearby. There was red stuff on its steel shaft - stain from the cherrywood, she assumed.

'Mort?' she whispered, looking around.

Now she was frightened that she would find him dead by his own hand. And where? Why, in his study, of course. Where else? He had lived all the most important parts of his life in there; surely he had chosen to die there.

Although she had no wish to go in, no wish to be the one to find him, her feet carried her in that direction all the same. As she went, she kicked the issue of EQMM Herb Creekmore had had sent out of her way. She did not look down. She reached the study door and pushed it slowly open.

Mort stood in front of his old Royal typewriter; the screen-and-keyboard unit of his word processor lay overturned in a bouquet of glass on the floor. He looked strangely like a country preacher. It was partly the posture he had adopted, she supposed; he was standing almost primly with his hands behind his back. But most of it was the hat. The black hat, pulled down so it almost touched the tops of his ears. She thought he looked a little bit like the old man in that picture, 'American Gothic,' even though the man in the picture wasn't wearing a hat.

'Mort?' she asked. Her voice was weak and uncertain.

He made no reply, only stared at her. His eyes were grim and glittering. She had never seen Mort's eyes look this way, not even on the horrible afternoon at the motel. It was almost as if this was not Mort at all, but some stranger who looked like Mort.

She recognized the hat, though.

'Where did you find that old thing? The attic?' Her heartbeat was in her voice, making it stagger.

He must have found it in the attic. The smell of mothballs on it was strong, even from where she was standing. Mort had gotten the hat years ago, at a gift shop in Pennsylvania. They had been travelling through Amish country. She had kept a little garden at the Derry house, in the angle where the house and the study addition met. It was her garden, but Mort often went out to weed it when he was stuck for an idea. He usually wore the hat when he did this. He called it his thinking cap. She remembered him looking at himself in a mirror once when he was wearing it and joking that he ought to have a bookjacket photo taken in it. 'When I put this on,' he'd said, 'I look like a

man who belongs out in the north forty, walking plow-furrows behind a mule's ass.'

Then the hat had disappeared. It must have migrated down here and been stored. But...

'It's my hat,' he said at last in a rusty, bemused voice. 'Wasn't ever anybody else's.'

'Mort? What's wrong? What's

'You got you a wrong number, woman. Ain't no Mort here. Mort's dead.' The gimlet eyes never wavered. 'He did a lot of squirming around, but in the end he couldn't lie to himself anymore, let alone to me. I never put a hand on him, Mrs Rainey. I swear. He took the coward's way out.'

'Why are you talking that way?' Amy asked.

'This is just the way I talk,' he said with mild surprise. 'Everybody down in Miss'ippi talks this way.'

'Mort, stop!'

'Don't you understand what I said?' he asked. 'You ain't deaf, are you? He's dead. He killed himself.'

'Stop it, Mort,' she said, beginning to cry. 'You're scaring me, and I don't like it.'

'Don't matter,' he said. He took his hands out from behind his back. In one of them he held the scissors from the top drawer of the desk. He raised them. The sun had come out, and it sent a starfish glitter along the blades as he snicked them open and then closed. 'You won't be scared long.' He began walking toward her.

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For a moment she stood where she was. Mort would not kill her; if there had been killing in Mort, then surely he would have done some that day at the motel.

Then she saw the look in his eyes and understood that Mort knew that, too.

But this wasn't him.

She screamed and wheeled around and lunged for the door.

Shooter came after her, bringing the scissors down in a silver arc. He would have buried them up to the handles between her shoulderblades if his feet had not slid on the papers scattered about the hardwood floor. He fell full-length with a cry of mingled perplexity and anger. The blades stabbed down through page nine of 'Secret Window, Secret Garden' and the tips broke off. His mouth struck the floor and sprayed blood. The package of Pall Malls - the brand John Kintner had silently smoked during the breaks halfway through the writing class he and Mort Rainey had shared - shot out of his pocket and slid along the slick wood like the weight in a barroom shuffleboard game. He got up on his knees, his mouth snarling and smiling through the blood which ran over his lips and teeth.

'Won't do you no help, Mrs Rainey!' he cried, getting to his feet. He looked at the scissors, snicked them open to study the blunted tips a little better, and then tossed them impatiently aside. 'I got a place in the garden for you! I got it all picked out. You mind me, now!'

He ran out the door after her.

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Halfway across the living room, Amy took her own spill. One of her feet came down on the discarded issue of EQMM and she fell sprawling on her side, hurting her hip and right breast. She cried out.

Behind her, Shooter ran across to the table and snatched up the screwdriver he had used on the cat.

'Stay right there, and be still,' he said as she turned over on her back and stared at him with wide eyes which looked almost drugged. 'If you move around, I'm only goin to hurt you before it's over. I don't want to hurt you, missus, but I will if I have to. I've got to have something, you see. I have come all this way, and I've got to have something for my trouble.'

As he approached, Amy propped herself up on her elbows and shoved herself backward with her feet. Her hair hung in her face. Her skin was coated with sweat; she could smell it pouring out of her, hot and stinking. The face above her was the solemn, judgmental face of insanity.

'No, Mort! Please! Please, Mort

He flung himself at her, raising the screwdriver over his head and then bringing it down. Amy shrieked and rolled to the left. Pain burned a line across her hip as the screwdriver blade tore her dress and grooved her flesh. Then she was scrambling to her knees, hearing and feeling the dress shred out a long unwinding strip as she did it.

'No, ma'am,' Shooter panted. His hand closed upon her ankle. 'No, ma'am.' She looked over her shoulder and through the tangles of her hair and saw he was using his other hand to work the screwdriver out of the floor. The round-crowned black hat sat askew on his head.

He yanked the screwdriver free and drove it into her right calf.

The pain was horrid. The pain was the whole world. She screamed and kicked backward, connecting with his nose, breaking it. Shooter grunted and fell on his side, clutching at his face, and Amy got to her feet. She could hear a woman howling. It sounded like a dog howling at the moon. She supposed it wasn't a dog. She supposed it was her.

Shooter was getting to his feet. His lower face was a mask of blood. The mask split open, showing Mort Rainey's crooked front teeth. She could remember licking across those teeth with her tongue.

'Feisty one, ain't you?' he said, grinning. 'That's all right, ma'am. You go right on.'

He lunged for her.

Amy staggered backward. The screwdriver fell out of her calf and rolled across the floor. Shooter glanced at it, then lunged at her again, almost playfully. Amy grabbed one of the living-room chairs and dumped it in front of him. For a moment they only stared at each other over it . and then he snatched for the front of her dress. Amy recoiled.

'I'm about done fussin with you,' he panted.

Amy turned and bolted for the door.

He was after her at once, flailing at her back, his fingertips skating skidding down the nape of her neck, trying to close on the top of the dress, catching it, then just missing the hold which would have coiled her back to him for good.

Amy bolted past the kitchen counter and toward the back door. Her right loafer squelched and smooched on her foot. It was full of blood. Shooter was after her, puffing and blowing bubbles of blood from his nostrils, clutching at her.

She struck the screen door with her hands, then tripped and fell full-length on the porch, the breath whooshing out of her. She fell exactly where Shooter had left his manuscript. She rolled over and saw him coming. He only had his bare hands now, but they looked like they would be more than enough. His eyes were stern and unflinching and horribly kind beneath the brim of the black hat.

'I am so sorry, missus,' he said.

'Rainey!' a voice cried. 'Stop!'

She tried to look around and could not. She had strained something in her neck. Shooter never even tried. He simply came on toward her.

'Rainey! Stop!'

'There is no Rainey h -' Shooter began, and then a gunshot rapped briskly across the fall air. Shooter stopped where he was, and looked curiously, almost casually, down at his chest. There was a small hole there. No blood issued from it - at least, not at first - but the hole was there. He put his hand to it, then brought it away. His index finger was marked by a small dot of blood. It looked like a bit of punctuation - the kind which ends a sentence. He looked at this thoughtfully. Then he dropped his hands and looked at Amy.

'Babe?' he asked, and then fell full-length beside her on the porch boards.

She rolled over, managed to get up on her elbows, and crawled to where he lay, beginning to sob.

'Mort?' she cried. 'Mort? Please, Mort, try to say something!'

But he was not going to say anything, and after a moment she let this realization fill her up. She would reject the simple fact of his death again and again over the next few weeks and months, and would then weaken, and the realization would fill her up again. He

was dead. He was dead. He had gone crazy down here and he was dead.

He, and whoever had been inside him at the end.

She put her head down on his chest and wept, and when someone came up behind her and put a comforting hand on her shoulder, Amy did not look around.

EPILOGUE

Ted and Amy Milner came to see the man who had shot and killed Amy's first husband, the well-known writer Morton Rainey, about three months after the events at Tashmore Lake.

They had seen the man at one other time during the three-month period, at the inquest, but that had been a formal situation, and Amy had not wanted to speak to him personally. Not there. She was grateful that he had saved her life ... but Mort had been her husband, and she had loved him for many years, and in her deepest heart she felt that Fred Evans's finger hadn't been the only one which pulled the trigger.

She would have come in time anyway, she suspected, in order to clarify it as much as possible in her mind. Her time might have been a year, or two, possibly even three. But things had happened in the meanwhile which made her move more quickly. She had hoped Ted would let her come to New York alone, but he was emphatic. Not after the last time he had let her go someplace alone. That time she had almost gotten killed.

Amy pointed out with some asperity that it would have been hard for Ted to 'let her go,' since she had never told him she was going in the first place, but Ted only shrugged. So they went to New York together, rode up to the fifty-third floor of a large skyscraper together, and were together shown to the small cubicle in the offices of the Consolidated Assurance Company which Fred Evans called home during the working day . unless he was in the field, of course.

She sat as far into the corner as she could get, and although the offices were quite warm, she kept her shawl wrapped around her.

Evans's manner was slow and kind - he seemed to her almost like the country doctor who had nursed her through her childhood illnesses - and she liked him. But that's something he'll never know, she thought. I might be able to summon up the strength to tell him,

and he would nod, but his nod wouldn't indicate belief. He only knows that to me he will always be the man who shot Mort, and he had to watch me cry on Mort's chest until the ambulance came, and one of the paramedics had to give me a shot before I would let him go. And what he won't know is that I like him just the same.

He buzzed a woman from one of the outer offices and had her bring in three big, steaming mugs of tea. It was January outside now, the wind high, the temperature low. She thought with some brief longing of how it would be in Tashmore, with the lake finally frozen and that killer wind blowing long, ghostly snakes of powdered snow across the ice. Then her mind made some obscure but nasty association, and she saw Mort hitting the floor, saw the package of Pall Malls skidding across the wood like a shuffleboard weight. She shivered, her brief sense of longing totally dispelled.

'Are you okay, Mrs Milner?' Evans asked.

She nodded.

Frowning ponderously and playing with his pipe, Ted said, 'My wife wants to hear everything you know about what happened, Mr Evans. I tried to discourage her at first, but I've come to think that it might be a good thing. She's had bad dreams ever since

'Of course,' Evans said, not exactly ignoring Ted, but speaking directly to Amy. 'I suppose you will for a long time. I've had a few of my own, actually. I never shot a man before.' He paused, then added, 'I missed Vietnam by a year or so.'

Amy offered him a smile. It was wan, but it was a smile.

'She heard it all at the inquest,' Ted went on, 'but she wanted to hear it again, from you, and with the legalese omitted.'

'I understand,' Evans said. He pointed at the pipe. 'You can light that, if you want to.'

Ted looked at it, then dropped it into the pocket of his coat quickly, as if he were slightly ashamed of it. 'I'm trying to give it up, actually.'

Evans looked at Amy. 'What purpose do you think this will serve?' he asked her in the same kind, rather sweet voice. 'Or maybe a better question would be what purpose do you need it to serve?'

'I don't know.' Her voice was low and composed. 'But we were in Tashmore three weeks ago, Ted and I, to clean the place out - we've put it up for sale - and something happened. Two things, actually.' She looked at her husband and offered the wan smile again. 'Ted knows something happened, because that's when I got in touch with you and made this appointment. But he doesn't know what, and I'm afraid he's put out with me. Perhaps he's right to be.'

Ted Milner did not deny that he was put out with Amy. His hand stole into his coat pocket, started to remove the pipe, and then let it drop back again.

'But these two things - they bear on what happened to your lake home in October?'

'I don't know. Mr Evans ... what did happen? How much do you know?'

'Well,' he said, leaning back in his chair and sipping from his mug, 'if you came expecting all the answers, you're going to be sorely disappointed. I can tell you about the fire, but as for why your husband did what he did ... you can probably fill in more of those blanks than I can. What puzzled us most about the fire was where it started - not in the main house but in Mr Rainey's office, which is an addition. That made the act seem directed against him, but he wasn't even there.'

'Then we found a large chunk of bottle in the wreckage of the office. It had contained wine - champagne, to be exact - but there wasn't any doubt that the last thing it had contained was gasoline. Part of the label was intact, and we sent a Fax copy to New York. It was

identified as Moet et Chandon, nineteen-eighty-something. That wasn't proof indisputable that the bottle used for the Molotov cocktail came from your own wine room, Mrs Milner, but it was very persuasive, since you listed better than a dozen bottles of Moet et Chandon, some from 1983 and some from 1984.

'This led us toward a supposition which seemed clear but not very sensible: that you or your ex-husband might have burned down your own house. Mrs Milner here said she went off and left the house unlocked - '

'I lost a lot of sleep over that,' Amy said. 'I often forgot to lock up when I was only going out for a little while. I grew up in a little town north of Bangor and country habits die hard. Mort used to ...' Her lips trembled and she stopped speaking for a moment, pressing them together so tightly they turned white. When she had herself under control again, she finished her thought in a low voice. 'He used to scold me about it.'

Ted took her hand.

'It didn't matter, of course,' Evans said. 'If you had locked the house, Mr Rainey still could have gained access, because he still had his keys. Correct?'

'Yes,' Ted said.

'It might have sped up the detection end a little if you'd locked the door, but it's impossible to say for sure. Monday-morning quarterbacking is a vice we try to steer clear of in my business, anyway. There's a theory that it causes ulcers, and that's one I subscribe to. The point is this: given Mrs Rainey's - excuse me, Mrs Milner's - testimony that the house was left unlocked, we at first believed the arsonist could have been literally anyone. But once we started playing around with the assumption that the bottle used had come from the cellar wine room, it narrowed things down.'

'Because that room was locked,' Ted said.

Evans nodded. 'Do you remember me asking who held keys to that room, Mrs Milner?'

'Call me Amy, won't you?'

He nodded. 'Do you remember, Amy?'

'Yes. We started locking the little wine closet three or four years ago, after some bottles of red table wine disappeared. Mort thought it was the housekeeper. I didn't like to believe it, because I liked her, but I knew he could be right, and probably was. We started locking it then so nobody else would be tempted.'

Evans looked at Ted Milner.

'Amy had a key to the wine room, and she believed Mr Rainey still had his. So that limited the possibilities. Of course, if it had been Amy, you would have had to have been in collusion with her, Mr Milner, since you were each other's alibis for that evening. Mr Rainey didn't have an alibi, but he was at a considerable distance. And the main thing was this: we could see no motive for the crime. His work had left both Amy and himself financially comfortable. Nevertheless, we dusted for fingerprints and came up with two good ones. This was the day after we had our meeting in Derry. Both prints belonged to Mr Rainey. It still wasn't proof - '

'It wasn't?' Ted asked, looking startled.

Evans shook his head. 'Lab tests were able to confirm that the prints were made before what remained of the bottle was charred in the fire, but not how long before. The heat had cooked the oils in them, you see. And if our assumption that the bottle came from the wine room was correct, why, someone had to physically pick it up out of the bag or carton it came in and store it in its cradle. That someone would have been either Mr or Mrs Rainey, and he could have argued that that was where the prints came from.'

'He was in no shape to argue anything,' Amy said softly. 'Not at the end.'

'I guess that's true, but we didn't know that. All we knew is that when people carry bottles, they generally pick them up by the neck or the upper barrel. These two prints were near the bottom, and the angle was very odd.'

'As if he had been carrying it sideways or even upside down,' Ted broke in. 'Isn't that what you said at the hearing?'

'Yes - and people who know anything about wine don't do it. With most wines, it disturbs the sediment. And with champagne

'It shakes it up,' Ted said.

Evans nodded. 'If you shake a bottle of champagne really hard, it will burst from the pressure.'

'But there was no champagne in it, anyway,' Amy said quietly.

'No. Still, it was not proof. I canvassed the area gas stations to see if anyone who looked like Mr Rainey had bought a small amount of gas that night, but had no luck. I wasn't too surprised; he could have bought the gasoline in Tashmore or at half a hundred service stations between the two places.

'Then I went to see Patricia Champion, our one witness. I took a picture of a 1986 Buick - the make and model we assumed Mr Rainey would have been driving. She said it might have been the car, but she still couldn't be sure. So I was up against it. I went back out to the house to look around, and you came, Amy. It was early morning. I wanted to ask you some questions, but you were clearly upset. I did ask you why you were there, and you said a peculiar thing. You said you were going down to Tashmore Lake to see your husband, but you came by first to look in the garden.'

'On the phone he kept talking about what he called my secret window ... the one that looked down on the garden. He said he'd left something there. But there wasn't anything. Not that I could see, anyway.'

'I had a feeling about the man when we met,' Evans said slowly. 'A feeling that he wasn't ... quite on track. It wasn't that he was lying about some things, although I was pretty sure he was. It was something else. A kind of distance.'

'Yes - I felt it in him more and more. That distance.'

'You looked almost sick with worry. I decided I could do worse than follow you down to the other house, Amy, especially when you told me not to tell Mr Milner here where you'd gone if he came looking for you. I didn't believe that idea was original with you. I thought I might just find something out. And I also thought ...' He trailed off, looking bemused.

'You thought something might happen to me,' she said. 'Thank you, Mr Evans. He would have killed me, you know. If you hadn't followed me, he would have killed me.'

'I parked at the head of the driveway and walked down. I heard a terrific rumpus from inside the house and I started to run. That was when you more or less fell out through the screen door, and he came out after you.'

Evans looked at them both earnestly.

'I asked him to stop,' he said. 'I asked him twice.'

Amy reached out, squeezed his hand gently for a moment, then let it go.

'And that's it,' Evans said. 'I know a little more, mostly from the newspapers and two chats I had with Mr Milner

'Call me Ted.'

'Ted, then.' Evans did not seem to take to Ted's first name as easily as he had to Amy's. 'I know that Mr Rainey had what was probably a schizophrenic episode in which he was two people, and that neither one of them had any idea they were actually existing in the same body. I know that one of them was named John Shooter. I know from Herbert Creekmore's deposition that Mr Rainey imagined this Shooter was hounding him over a story called "Sowing Season," and that Mr Creekmore had a copy of the magazine in which that story appeared sent up so Mr Rainey could prove that he had published first. The magazine arrived shortly before you did, Amy - it was found in the house. The Federal Express envelope it came in was on the seat of your ex-husband's Buick.'

'But he cut the story out, didn't he?' Ted asked.

'Not just the story - the contents page as well. He was careful to remove every trace of himself. He carried a Swiss-army knife, and that was probably what he used. The missing pages were in the Buick's glove compartment.'

'In the end, the existence of that story became a mystery even to him,' Amy said softly.

Evans looked at her, eyebrows raised. 'Beg pardon?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing.'

'I think I've told you everything I can,' Evans said. 'Anything else would be pure speculation. I'm an insurance investigator, after all, not a psychiatrist.'

'He was two men,' Amy said. 'He was himself ... and he became a character he created. Ted believes that the last name, Shooter, was something

Mort picked up and stored in his head when he found out Ted came from a little town called Shooter's Knob, Tennessee. I'm sure he's right. Mort was always picking out character names just that way ... like anagrams, almost.

'I don't know the rest of it - I can only guess. I do know that when a film studio dropped its option on his novel *The Delacourt Family*, Mort almost had a nervous breakdown. They made it clear - and so did Herb Creekmore - that they were concerned about an accidental similarity, and they understood he never could have seen the screenplay, which was called *The Home Team*. There was no question of plagiarism ... except in Mort's head. His reaction was exaggerated, abnormal. It was like stirring a stick around in what looks like a dead campfire and uncovering a live coal.'

'You don't think he created John Shooter just to punish you, do you?' Evans asked.

'No. Shooter was there to punish Mort. I think . She paused and adjusted her shawl, pulling it a little more tightly about her shoulders. Then she picked up her teacup with a hand which wasn't quite steady. 'I think that Mort stole somebody's work sometime in the past,' she said. 'Probably quite far in the past, because everything he wrote from *The OrganGrinder's Boy* on was widely read. It would have come out, I think. I doubt that he even actually published what he stole. But I think that's what happened, and I think that's where John Shooter really came from. Not from the film company dropping his novel, or from my ... my time with Ted, and not from the divorce. Maybe all those things contributed, but I think the root goes back to a time before I knew him. Then, when he was alone at the lake house ...'

'Shooter came,' Evans said quietly. 'He came and accused him of plagiarism. Whoever Mr Rainey stole from never did, so in the end he had to punish himself. But I doubt if that was all, Amy. He did try to kill you.'

'No,' she said. 'That was Shooter.'

He raised his eyebrows. Ted looked at her carefully, and then drew the pipe out of his pocket again.

'The real Shooter.'

'I don't understand you.'

She smiled her wan smile. 'I don't understand myself. That's why I'm here. I don't think telling this serves any practical purpose - Mort's dead, and it's over -but it may help me. It may help me to sleep better.'

'Then tell us, by all means,' Evans said.

'You see, when we went down to clean out the house, we stopped at the little store in town - Bowie's. Ted filled the gas tank - it's always been self-service at Bowie's - and I went in to get some things. There was a man in there, Sonny Trotts, who used to work with Tom Greenleaf. Tom was the older of the two caretakers who were killed. Sonny wanted to tell me how sorry he was about Mort, and he wanted to tell me something else, too, because he saw Mort the day before Mort died, and meant to tell him. So he said. It was about Tom Greenleaf - something Tom told Sonny while they were painting the Methodist Parish Hall together. Sonny saw Mort after that, but didn't think to tell him right away, he said. Then he remembered that it had something to do with Greg Carstairs

'The other dead man?'

'Yes. So he turned around and called, but Mort didn't hear him. And the next day, Mort was dead.'

'What did Mr Greenleaf tell this guy?'

'That he thought he might have seen a ghost,' Amy said calmly.

They looked at her, not speaking.

'Sonny said Tom had been getting forgetful lately, and that Tom was worried about it. Sonny thought it was no more than the ordinary sort of forgetfulness that settles in when a person gets a little older, but Tom had nursed his wife through Alzheimer's disease five or six years before, and he was terrified of getting it himself and going the same way. According to Sonny, if Tom forgot a paintbrush, he spent half the day obsessing about it. Tom said that was why, when Greg Carstairs asked him if he recognized the man he'd seen Mort Rainey talking to the day before, or if he would recognize him if he saw him again, Tom said he hadn't seen anyone with Mort - that Mort had been alone.'

There was the snap of a match. Ted Milner had decided to light his pipe after all. Evans ignored him. He was leaning forward in his chair, his gaze fixed intently on Amy Milner.

'Let's get this straight. According to this Sonny Troots

'Troots.'

'Okay, Troots. According to him, Tom Greenleaf did see Mort with someone?'

'Not exactly,' Amy said. 'Sonny thought if Tom believed that, believed it for sure, he wouldn't have lied to Greg. What Tom said was that he didn't know what he'd seen. That he was confused. That it seemed safer to say nothing about it at all. He didn't want anybody - particularly Greg Carstairs, who was also in the caretaking business - to know how confused he was, and most of all he didn't want anybody to think that he might be getting sick the way his late wife had gotten sick.'

'I'm not sure I understand this - I'm sorry.'

'According to Sonny,' she said, 'Tom came down Lake Drive in his Scout and saw Mort, standing by himself where the lakeside path comes out.'

'Near where the bodies were found?'

'Yes. Very near. Mort waved. Tom waved back. He drove by. Then, according to what Sonny says, Tom looked in his rear-view mirror and saw another man with Mort, and an old station wagon, although neither the man nor the car had been there ten seconds before. The man was wearing a black hat. he said ... but you could see right through him, and the car, too.'

'Oh, Amy,' Ted said softly. 'The man was bullshitting you. Big time.'

She shook her head. 'I don't think Sonny is smart enough to make up such a story. He told me Tom thought he ought to get in touch with Greg and tell him he might have seen such a man after all; that it would be all right if he left out the see-through part. But Sonny said the old man was terrified. He was convinced that it was one of two things: either he was coming down with Alzheimer's disease, or he'd seen a ghost.'

'Well, it's certainly creepy,' Evans said, and it was - the skin on his arms and back had crinkled into gooseflesh for a moment or two. 'But it's hearsay ... hearsay from a dead man, in fact.'

'Yes ... but there's the other thing.' She set her teacup on the desk, picked up her purse, and began to rummage in it. 'When I was cleaning out Mort's office, I found that hat - that awful black hat - behind his desk. It gave me a shock, because I wasn't expecting it. I thought the police must have taken it away as evidence, or something. I hooked it out from behind there with a stick. It came out upside down, with the stick inside it. I used the stick to carry it outside and dump it in the trash cabinet. Do you understand?'

Ted clearly didn't; Evans clearly did. 'You didn't want to touch it.'

'That's right. I didn't want to touch it. It landed right side up on one of the green trash bags - I'd swear to that. Then, about an hour later, I went out with a bag of old medicines and shampoos and things from the bathroom. When I opened the lid of the garbage cabinet to put it

in, the hat was turned over again. And this was tucked into the sweatband.' She pulled a folded sheet of paper from her purse and offered it to Evans with a hand that still trembled minutely. 'It wasn't there when the hat came out from behind the desk. I know that.'

Evans took the folded sheet and just held it for a moment. He didn't like it. It felt too heavy, and the texture was somehow wrong.

'I think there was a John Shooter,' she said. 'I think he was Mort's greatest creation - a character so vivid that he actually did become real.'

'And I think that this is a message from a ghost.'

He took the slip of paper and opened it. Written halfway down was this message:

Missus - I am sorry for all the trouble. Things got out of hand. I am going back to my home now, I got my story, which is all I came for in the first place. It is called 'Crowfoot Mile,' and it is a crackerjack.
Yours truly,

John Shooter

The signature was a bald scrawl below the neat lines of script.

'Is this your late husband's signature, Amy?' Evans asked.

'No,' she said. 'Nothing like it.'

The three of them sat in the office, looking at one another. Fred Evans tried to think of something to say and could not. After awhile, the silence (and the smell of Ted Milner's pipe) became more than any of them could stand. So Mr and Mrs Milner offered their thanks, said their goodbyes, and left his office to get on with their lives as best they could, and Fred Evans got on with his own as best he could, and sometimes, late at night, both he and the woman who had been married to Morton Rainey woke from dreams in which a man in

a round-crowned black hat looked at them from sun-faded eyes caught in nets of wrinkles. He looked at them with no love ... but, they both felt, with an odd kind of stern pity.

It was not a kind expression, and it left no feeling of comfort, but they also both felt, in their different places, that they could find room to live with that look. And to tend their gardens.

**A picture
is worth a
1000
words...
his is your
life.**

Sun 660

AUTOFOCUS



The Sun Dog

Stephen King

THE SUN DOG

Stephen King

CHAPTER 1

September 15th was Kevin's birthday, and he got exactly what he wanted: a Sun.

The Kevin in question was Kevin Delevan, the birthday was his fifteenth, and the Sun was a Sun 660, a Polaroid camera which does everything for the novice photographer except make bologna sandwiches.

There were other gifts, of course; his sister, Meg, gave him a pair of mittens she had knitted herself, there was ten dollars from his grandmother in Des Moines, and his Aunt Hilda sent - as she always did - a string tie with a horrible clasp. She had sent the first of these when Kevin was three, which meant he already had twelve unused string ties with horrible clasps in a drawer of his bureau, to which this would be added - lucky thirteen. He had never worn any of them but was not allowed to throw them away. Aunt Hilda lived in Portland. She had never come to one of Kevin's or Meg's birthday parties, but she might decide to do just that one of these years. God knew she could; Portland was only fifty miles south of Castle Rock. And suppose she did come ... and asked to see Kevin in one of his other ties (or Meg in one of her other scarves, for that matter)? With some relatives, an excuse might do. Aunt Hilda, however, was different. Aunt Hilda presented a certain golden possibility at a point where two essential facts about her crossed: she was Rich, and she was Old.

Someday, Kevin's Mom was convinced, she might DO SOMETHING for Kevin and Meg. It was understood that the SOMETHING would probably come after Aunt Hilda finally kicked it, in the form of a clause in her will. In the meantime, it was thought wise to keep the horrible string ties and the equally horrible scarves. So this thirteenth string tie (on the clasp of which was a bird Kevin thought was a woodpecker) would join the others, and Kevin would write Aunt Hilda

a thank-you note, not because his mother would insist on it and not because he thought or even cared that Aunt Hilda might DO SOMETHING for him and his kid sister someday, but because he was a generally thoughtful boy with good habits and no real vices.

He thanked his family for all his gifts (his mother and father had, of course, supplied a number of lesser ones, although the Polaroid was clearly the centerpiece, and they were delighted with his delight), not forgetting to give Meg a kiss (she giggled and pretended to rub it off but her own delight was equally clear) and to tell her he was sure the mittens would come in handy on the ski team this winter - but most of his attention was reserved for the Polaroid box, and the extra film packs which had come with it.

He was a good sport about the birthday cake and the ice cream, although it was clear he was itching to get at the camera and try it out. And as soon as he decently could, he did.

That was when the trouble started.

He read the instruction booklet as thoroughly as his eagerness to begin would allow, then loaded the camera while the family watched with anticipation and unacknowledged dread (for some reason, the gifts which seem the most wanted are the ones which so often don't work). There was a little collective sigh - more puff than gust - when the camera obediently spat out the cardboard square on top of the film packet, just as the instruction booklet had promised it would.

There were two small dots, one red and one green, separated by a zig-zag lightning-bolt on the housing of the camera. When Kevin loaded the camera, the red light came on. It stayed on for a couple of seconds. The family watched in silent fascination as the Sun 660 sniffed for light. Then the red light went out and the green light began to blink rapidly.

'It's ready,' Kevin said, in the same straining-to-be-offhand-but-not-quite-making-it tone with which Neil Armstrong had reported his first

step upon the surface of Luna. 'Why don't all you guys stand together?'

'I hate having my picture taken!' Meg cried, covering her face with the theatrical anxiety and pleasure which only sub-teenage girls and really bad actresses can manage.

'Come on, Meg,' Mr Delevan said.

'Don't be a goose, Meg,' Mrs Delevan said.

Meg dropped her hands (and her objections), and the three of them stood at the end of the table with the diminished birthday cake in the foreground.

Kevin looked through the viewfinder. 'Squeeze a little closer to Meg, Mom,' he said, motioning with his left hand. 'You too, Dad.' This time he motioned with his right.

'You're squishing me!' Meg said to her parents.

Kevin put his finger on the button which would fire the camera, then remembered a briefly glimpsed note in the instructions about how easy it was to cut off your subjects' heads in a photograph. Off with their heads, he thought, and it should have been funny, but for some reason he felt a little tingle at the base of his spine, gone and forgotten almost before it was noticed. He raised the camera a little. There. They were all in the frame. Good.

'Okay!' he sang. 'Smile and say Intercourse!'

'Kevin!' his mother cried out.

His father burst out laughing, and Meg screeched the sort of mad laughter not even bad actresses often essay; girls between the ages of ten and twelve own sole title to that particular laugh.

Kevin pushed the button.

The flashbulb, powered by the battery in the film pack, washed the room in a moment of righteous white light.

It's mine, Kevin thought, and it should have been the surpassing moment of his fifteenth birthday. Instead, the thought brought back that odd little tingle. It was more noticeable this time.

The camera made a noise, something between a squeal and a whirr, a sound just a little beyond description but familiar enough to most people, just the same: the sound of a Polaroid camera squirting out what may not be art but what is often serviceable and almost always provides instant gratification.

'Lemme see it!' Meg cried.

'Hold your horses, muffin,' Mr Delevan said. 'They take a little time to develop.'

Meg was staring at the stiff gray surface of what was not yet a photograph with the rapt attention of a woman gazing into a crystal ball.

The rest of the family gathered around, and there was that same feeling of anxiety which had attended the ceremony of Loading the Camera: still life of the American Family waiting to let out its breath.

Kevin felt a terrible tenseness stealing into his muscles, and this time there was no question of ignoring it. He could not explain it ... but it was there. He could not seem to take his eyes from that solid gray square within the white frame which would form the borders of the photograph.

'I think I see me!' Meg cried brightly. Then, a moment later: 'No. I guess I don't. I think I see -'

They watched in utter silence as the gray cleared, as the mists are reputed to do in a seer's crystal when the vibrations or feelings or whatever they are are right, and the picture became visible to them.

Mr Delevan was the first to break the silence.

'What is this?' he asked no one in particular. 'Some kind of joke?'

Kevin had absently put the camera down rather too close to the edge of the table in order to watch the picture develop. Meg saw what the picture was and took a single step away. The expression on her face was neither fright nor awe but just ordinary surprise. One of her hands came up as she turned toward her father. The rising hand struck the camera and knocked it off the table onto the floor. Mrs Delevan had been looking at the emerging picture in a kind of trance, the expression on her face either that of a woman who is deeply puzzled or who is feeling the onset of a migraine headache. The sound of the camera hitting the floor startled her. She uttered a little scream and recoiled. In doing this, she tripped over Meg's foot and lost her balance. Mr Delevan reached for her, propelling Meg, who was still between them, forward again, quite forcefully. Mr Delevan not only caught his wife, but did so with some grace; for a moment they would have made a pretty picture indeed: Mom and Dad, showing they still know how to Cut A Rug, caught at the end of a spirited tango, she with one hand thrown up and her back deeply bowed, he bent over her in that ambiguous male posture which may be seen, when divorced from circumstance, as either solicitude or lust.

Meg was eleven, and less graceful. She went flying back toward the table and smacked into it with her stomach. The hit was hard enough to have injured her, but for the last year and a half she had been taking ballet lessons at the YWCA three afternoons a week. She did not dance with much grace, but she enjoyed ballet, and the dancing had fortunately toughened the muscles of her stomach enough for them to absorb the blow as efficiently as good shock absorbers

absorb the pounding a road full of potholes can administer to a car. Still, there was a band of black and blue just above her hips the next day. These bruises took almost two weeks to first purple, then yellow, then fade ... like a Polaroid picture in reverse.

At the moment this Rube Goldberg accident happened, she didn't even feel it; she simply banged into the table and cried out. The table tipped. The birthday cake, which should have been in the foreground of Kevin's first picture with his new camera, slid off the table. Mrs Delevan didn't even have time to start her Meg, are you all right? before the remaining half of the cake fell on top of the Sun 660 with a juicy splat! that sent frosting all over their shoes and the baseboard of the wall.

The viewfinder, heavily smeared with Dutch chocolate, peered out like a periscope. That was all.

Happy birthday, Kevin.

Kevin and Mr Delevan were sitting on the couch in the living room that evening when Mrs Delevan came in, waving two dog-eared sheets of paper which had been stapled together. Kevin and Mr Delevan both had open books in their laps (The Best and the Brightest for the father; ShootOut at Laredo for the son), but what they were mostly doing was staring at the Sun camera, which sat in disgrace on the coffee table amid a litter of Polaroid pictures. All the pictures appeared to show exactly the same thing.

Meg was sitting on the floor in front of them, using the VCR to watch a rented movie. Kevin wasn't sure which one it was, but there were a lot of people running around and screaming, so he guessed it was a horror picture. Megan had a passion for them. Both parents considered this a low taste (Mr Delevan in particular was often outraged by what he called 'that useless junk'), but tonight neither of them had said a word. Kevin guessed they were just grateful she

had quit complaining about her bruised stomach and wondering aloud what the exact symptoms of a ruptured spleen might be.

'Here they are,' Mrs Delevan said. 'I found them at the bottom of my purse the second time through.' She handed the papers - a sales slip from J. C. Penney's and a MasterCard receipt - to her husband. 'I can never find anything like this the first time. I don't think anyone can. It's like a law of nature.'

She surveyed her husband and son, hands on her hips.

'You two look like someone just killed the family cat.'

'We don't have a cat,' Kevin said.

'Well, you know what I mean. It's a shame, of course, but we'll get it sorted out in no time. Penney's will be happy to exchange it -'

'I'm not so sure of that,' John Delevan said. He picked up the camera, looked at it with distaste (almost sneered at it, in fact), and then set it down again. 'It got chipped when it hit the floor. See?'

Mrs Delevan took only a cursory glance. 'Well, if Penney's won't, I'm positive that the Polaroid company will. I mean, the fall obviously didn't cause whatever is wrong with it. The first picture looked just like all these, and Kevin took that one before Meg knocked it off the table.'

'I didn't mean to,' Meg said without turning around. On the screen, a pint-sized figure - a malevolent doll named Chuckie, if Kevin had it right - was chasing a small boy. Chuckie was dressed in blue overalls and waving a knife.

'I know, dear. How's your stomach?'

'Hurts,' Meg said. 'A little ice cream might help. Is there any left over?'

'Yes, I think so.'

Meg gifted her mother with her most winning smile. 'Would you get some for me?'

'Not at all,' Mrs Delevan said pleasantly. 'Get it yourself. And what's that horrible thing you're watching?'

'Child's Play,' Megan said. 'There's this doll named Chuckie that comes to life. It's neat.'

Mrs Delevan wrinkled her nose.

'Dolls don't come to life, Meg,' her father said. He spoke heavily, as if knowing this was a lost cause.

'Chuckie did,' Meg said. 'In movies, anything can happen.' She used the remote control to freeze the movie and went to get her ice cream.

'Why does she want to watch that crap?' Mr Delevan asked his wife, almost plaintively.

'I don't know, dear.'

Kevin had picked up the camera in one hand and several of the exposed Polaroids in the other - they had taken almost a dozen in all. 'I'm not so sure I want a refund,' he said.

His father stared at him. 'What? Jesus wept!'

'Well,' Kevin said, a little defensively, 'I'm just saying that maybe we ought to think about it. I mean, it's not exactly an ordinary defect, is it? I mean, if the pictures came out overexposed ... or underexposed ... or just plain blank ... that would be one thing. But how do you get a thing like this? The same picture, over and over? I mean, look! And

they're outdoors, even though we took every one of these pictures inside!

'It's a practical joke,' his father said. 'It must be. The thing to do is just exchange the damned thing and forget about it.'

'I don't think it's a practical joke,' Kevin said. 'First, it's too complicated to be a practical joke. How do you rig a camera to take the same picture over and over? Plus, the psychology is all wrong.'

'Psychology, yet,' Mr Delevan said, rolling his eyes at his wife.

'Yes, psychology!' Kevin replied firmly. 'When a guy loads your cigarette or hands you a stick of pepper gum, he hangs around to watch the fun, doesn't he? But unless you or Mom have been pulling my leg -'

'Your father isn't much of a leg-puller, dear,' Mrs Delevan said, stating the obvious gently.

Mr Delevan was looking at Kevin with his lips pressed together. It was the look he always got when he perceived his son drifting toward that area of the ballpark where Kevin seemed most at home: left field. Far left field. There was a hunchy, intuitive streak in Kevin that had always puzzled and confounded him. He didn't know where it had come from, but he was sure it hadn't been his side of the family.

He sighed and looked at the camera again. A piece of black plastic had been chipped from the left side of the housing, and there was a crack, surely no thicker than a human hair, down the center of the viewfinder lens. The crack was so thin it disappeared completely when you raised the camera to your eye to set the shot you would not get - what you would get was on the coffee table, and there were nearly a dozen other examples in the dining room.

What you got was something that looked like a refugee from the local animal shelter.

'All right, what in the devil are you going to do with it?' he asked. 'I mean, let's think this over reasonably, Kevin. What practical good is a camera that takes the same picture over and over?'

But it was not practical good Kevin was thinking about. In fact, he was not thinking at all. He was feeling ... and remembering. In the instant when he had pushed the shutter release, one clear idea

(it's mine)

had filled his mind as completely as the momentary white flash had filled his eyes. That idea, complete yet somehow inexplicable, had been accompanied by a powerful mixture of emotions which he could still not identify completely ... but he thought fear and excitement had predominated.

And besides - his father always wanted to look at things reasonably. He would never be able to understand Kevin's intuitions or Meg's interest in killer dolls named Chuckie.

Meg came back in with a huge dish of ice cream and started the movie again. Someone was now attempting to toast Chuckie with a blowtorch, but he went right on waving his knife. 'Are you two still arguing?'

'We're having a discussion,' Mr Delevan said. His lips were pressed more tightly together than ever.

'Yeah, right,' Meg said, sitting down on the floor again and crossing her legs. 'You always say that.'

'Meg?' Kevin said kindly.

'What?'

'If you dump that much ice cream on top of a ruptured spleen, you'll die horribly in the night. Of course, your spleen might not actually be ruptured, but -'

Meg stuck her tongue out at him and turned back to the movie.

Mr Delevan was looking at his son with an expression of mingled affection and exasperation. 'Look, Kev - it's your camera. No argument about that. You can do whatever you want with it. But -'

'Dad, aren't you even the least bit interested in why it's doing what it's doing?'

'Nope,' John Delevan said.

It was Kevin's turn to roll his eyes. Meanwhile, Mrs Delevan was looking from one to the other like someone who is enjoying a pretty good tennis match. Nor was this far from the truth. She had spent years watching her son and her husband sharpen themselves on each other, and she was not bored with it yet. She sometimes wondered if they would ever discover how much alike they really were.

'Well, I want to think it over.'

'Fine. I just want you to know that I can swing by Penney's tomorrow and exchange the thing - if you want me to and they agree to swap a piece of chipped merchandise, that is. If you want to keep it, that's fine, too. I wash my hands of it.' He dusted his palms briskly together to illustrate.

'I suppose you don't want my opinion,' Meg said.

'Right,' Kevin said.

'Of course we do, Meg,' Mrs Delevan said.

'I think it's a supernatural camera,' Meg said. She licked ice cream from her spoon. 'I think it's a Manifestation.'

'That's utterly ridiculous,' Mr Delevan said at once.

'No, it's not,' Meg said. 'It happens to be the only explanation that fits. You just don't think so because you don't believe in stuff like that. If a ghost ever floated up to you, Dad, you wouldn't even see it. What do you think, Kev?'

For a moment Kevin didn't - couldn't - answer. He felt as if another flashbulb had gone off, this one behind his eyes instead of in front of them.

'Kev? Earth to Kevin!'

'I think you might just have something there, squirt,' he said slowly.

'Oh my dear God,' John Delevan said, getting up. 'It's the revenge of Freddy and Jason - my kid thinks his birthday camera's haunted. I'm going to bed, but before I do, I want to say just one more thing. A camera that takes photographs of the same thing over and over again - especially something as ordinary as what's in these pictures - is a boring manifestation of the supernatural.'

'Still . . .' Kevin said. He held up the photos like a dubious poker hand.

'I think it's time we all went to bed,' Mrs Delevan said briskly. 'Meg, if you absolutely need to finish that cinematic masterpiece, you can do it in the morning.'

'But it's almost over!' Meg cried.

'I'll come up with her, Mom,' Kevin said, and, fifteen minutes later, with the malevolent Chuckie disposed of (at least until the sequel), he did. But sleep did not come easily for Kevin that night. He lay long

awake in his bedroom, listening to a strong late-summer wind rustle the leaves outside into whispery conversation, thinking about what might make a camera take the same picture over and over and over again, and what such a thing might mean. He only began to slip toward sleep when he realized his decision had been made; he would keep the Polaroid Sun at least a little while longer.

It's mine, he thought again. He rolled over on his side, closed his eyes, and was sleeping deeply forty seconds later.

CHAPTER 2

Amid the tickings and tockings of what sounded like at least fifty thousand clocks and totally undisturbed by them, Reginald 'Pop' Merrill shone a pencil-beam of light from a gadget even more slender than a doctor's ophthalmoscope into Kevin's Polaroid 660 while Kevin stood by. Pop's eyeglasses, which he didn't need for close work, were propped on the bald dome of his head.

'Uh-huh,' he said, and clicked the light off.

'Does that mean you know what's wrong with it?' Kevin asked.

'Nope,' Pop Merrill said, and snapped the Sun's film compartment, now empty, closed. 'Don't have a clue.' And before Kevin could say anything else, the clocks began to strike four o'clock, and for a few moments conversation, although possible, seemed absurd.

I want to think it over, he had told his father on the evening he had turned fifteen - three days ago now - and it was a statement which had surprised both of them. As a child he had made a career of not thinking about things, and Mr Delevan had in his heart of hearts come to believe Kevin never would think about things, whether he ought to or not. They had been seduced, as fathers and sons often are, by the idea that their behavior and very different modes of thinking would never change, thus fixing their relationship eternally ... and childhood would thus go on forever. I want to think it over: there was a world of potential change implicit in that statement.

Further, as a human being who had gone through his life to that point making most decisions on instinct rather than reason (and he was one of those lucky ones whose instincts were almost always good - the sort of person, in other words, who drives reasonable people mad), Kevin was surprised and intrigued to find that he was actually on the Horns of a Dilemma.

Horn #1: he had wanted a Polaroid camera and he had gotten one for his birthday, but, dammit, he had wanted a Polaroid camera that worked.

Horn #2: he was deeply intrigued by Meg's use of the word supernatural.

His younger sister had a daffy streak a mile wide, but she wasn't stupid, and Kevin didn't think she had used the word lightly or thoughtlessly. His father, who was of the Reasonable rather than Instinctive tribe, had scoffed, but Kevin found he wasn't ready to go and do likewise . . . at least, not yet. That word. That fascinating, exotic word. It became a plinth which his mind couldn't help circling.

I think it's a Manifestation.

Kevin was amused (and a little chagrined) that only Meg had been smart enough - or brave enough - to actually say what should have occurred to all of them, given the oddity of the pictures the Sun produced, but in truth, it wasn't really that amazing. They were not a religious family; they went to church on the Christmas Day every third year when Aunt Hilda came to spend the holiday with them instead of her other remaining relatives, but except for the occasional wedding or funeral, that was about all. If any of them truly believed in the invisible world it was Megan, who couldn't get enough of walking corpses, living dolls, and cars that came to life and ran down people they didn't like.

Neither of Kevin's parents had much taste for the bizarre. They didn't read their horoscopes in the daily paper; they would never mistake comets or falling stars for signs from the Almighty; where one couple might see the face of Jesus on the bottom of an enchilada, John and Mary Delevan would see only an overcooked enchilada. It was not surprising that Kevin, who had never seen the man in the moon because neither mother nor father had bothered to point it out to him, had been likewise unable to see the possibility of a supernatural

Manifestation in a camera which took the same picture over and over again, inside or outside, even in the dark of his bedroom closet, until it was suggested to him by his sister, who had once written a fan-letter to Jason and gotten an autographed glossy photo of a guy in a bloodstained hockey mask by return mail.

Once the possibility had been pointed out, it became difficult to unthink; as Dostoyevsky, that smart old Russian, once said to his little brother when the two of them were both smart young Russians, try to spend the next thirty seconds not thinking of a blue-eyed polar bear.

It was hard to do.

So he had spent two days circling that plinth in his mind, trying to read hieroglyphics that weren't even there, for pity's sake, and trying to decide which he wanted more: the camera or the possibility of a Manifestation. Or, put another way, whether he wanted the Sun ... or the man in the moon.

By the end of the second day (even in fifteen-year-olds who are clearly destined for the Reasonable tribe, dilemmas rarely last longer than a week), he had decided to take the man in the moon ... on a trial basis, at least.

He came to this decision in study hall period seven, and when the bell rang, signalling the end of both the study hall and the school-day, he had gone to the teacher he respected most, Mr Baker, and had asked him if he knew of anyone who repaired cameras.

'Not like a regular camera-shop guy,' he explained. 'More like a ... you know ... a thoughtful guy.'

'An F-stop philosopher?' Mr Baker asked. His saying things like that was one of the reasons why Kevin respected him. It was just a cool thing to say. 'A sage of the shutter? An alchemist of the aperture? A-'

'A guy who's seen a lot,' Kevin said cagily.

'Pop Merrill,' Mr Baker said.

'Who?'

'He runs the Emporium Galorium.'

'Oh. That place.'

'Yeah,' Mr Baker said, grinning. 'That place. If, that is, what you're looking for is a sort of homespun Mr Fixit.'

'I guess that's what I am looking for.'

'He's got damn near everything in there,' Mr Baker said, and Kevin could agree with that. Even though he had never actually been inside, he passed the Emporium Galorium five, ten, maybe fifteen times a week (in a town the size of Castle Rock, you had to pass everything a lot, and it got amazingly boring in Kevin Delevan's humble opinion), and he had looked in the windows. It seemed crammed literally to the rafters with objects, most of them mechanical. But his mother called it 'a junk-store' in a sniffing voice, and his father said Mr Merrill made his money 'rooking the summer people,' and so Kevin had never gone in. If it had only been a 'junk-store,' he might have; almost certainly would have, in fact. But doing what the summer people did, or buying something where summer people 'got rooked' was unthinkable. He would be as apt to wear a blouse and skirt to high school. Summer people could do what they wanted (and did). They were all mad, and conducted their affairs in a mad fashion. Exist with them, fine. But be confused with them? No. No. And no sir.

'Damn near everything,' Mr Baker repeated, 'and most of what he's got, he fixed himself. He thinks that crackerbarrel-philosopher act he does, glasses up on top of the head, wise pronouncements, all of

that - fools people. No one who knows him disabuses him. I'm not sure anyone would dare disabuse him.'

'Why? What do you mean?'

Mr Baker shrugged. An odd, tight little smile touched his mouth. 'Pop - Mr Merrill, I mean - has got his fingers in a lot of pies around here. You'd be surprised, Kevin.'

Kevin didn't care about how many pies Pop Merrill was currently fingering, or what their fillings might be. He was left with only one more important question, since the summer people were gone and he could probably slink into the Emporium Galorium unseen tomorrow afternoon if he took advantage of the rule which allowed all students but freshmen to cut their last-period study hall twice a month.

'Do I call him Pop or Mr Merrill?'

Solemnly, Mr Baker replied, 'I think the man kills anyone under the age of sixty who calls him Pop.'

And the thing was, Kevin had an idea Mr Baker wasn't exactly joking.

'You really don't know, huh?' Kevin said when the clocks began to wind down.

It had not been like in a movie, where they all start and finish striking at once; these were real clocks, and he guessed that most of them - along with the rest of the appliances in the Emporium Galorium - were not really running at all but sort of lurching along. They had begun at what his own Seiko quartz watch said was 3:58. They began to pick up speed and volume gradually (like an old truck fetching second gear with a tired groan and jerk). There were maybe four seconds when all of them really did seem to be striking, bonging, chiming, clanging, and cuckoo-ing at the same time, but four seconds was all the synchronicity they could manage. And

'winding down' was not exactly what they did. What they did was sort of give up, like water finally consenting to gurgle its way down a drain which is almost but not quite completely plugged.

He didn't have any idea why he was so disappointed. Had he really expected anything else? For Pop Merrill, whom Mr Baker had described as a crackerbarrel philosopher and homespun Mr Fixit, to pull out a spring and say, 'Here it is - this is the bastard causing that dog to show up every time you push the shutter release. It's a dog-spring, belongs in one of those toy dogs a kid winds up so it'll walk and bark a little, some joker on the Polaroid Sun 660 assembly line's always putting them in the damn cameras.'

Had he expected that?

No. But he had expected ... something.

'Don't have a friggin clue,' Pop repeated cheerfully. He reached behind him and took a Douglas MacArthur corncob pipe from a holder shaped like a bucket seat. He began to tamp tobacco into it from an imitation-leather pouch with the words EVIL WEED stamped into it. 'Can't even take these babies apart, you know.'

'You can't?'

'Nope,' Pop said. He was just as chipper as a bird. He paused long enough to hook a thumb over the wire ridge between the lenses of his rimless specs and give them a yank. They dropped off his bald dome and fell neatly into place, hiding the red spots on the sides of his nose, with a fleshy little thump. 'You could take apart the old ones,' he went on, now producing a Diamond Blue Tip match from a pocket of his vest (of course he was wearing a vest) and pressing the thick yellow thumbnail of his right hand on its head. Yes, this was a man who could rook the summer people with one hand tied behind his back (always assuming it wasn't the one he used to first fish out his matches and then light them) - even at fifteen years of age, Kevin

could see that. Pop Merrill had style. 'The Polaroid Land cameras, I mean. Ever seen one of those beauties?'

'No,' Kevin said.

Pop snapped the match alight on the first try, which of course he would always do, and applied it to the corncob, his words sending out little smokesignals which looked pretty and smelled absolutely foul.

'Oh yeah,' he said. 'They looked like those old-time cameras people like Mathew Brady used before the turn of the century - or before the Kodak people introduced the Brownie box camera, anyway. What I mean to say is' (Kevin was rapidly learning that this was Pop Merrill's favorite phrase; he used it the way some of the kids in school used 'you know,' as intensifier, modifier, qualifier, and most of all as a convenient thought-gathering pause) 'they tricked it up some, put on chrome and real leather side-panels, but it still looked old-fashioned, like the sort of camera folks used to make daguerreotypes with. When you opened one of those old Polaroid Land cameras, it snapped out an accordion neck, because the lens needed half a foot, maybe even nine inches, to focus the image. It looked old-fashioned as hell when you put it next to one of the Kodaks in the late forties and early fifties, and it was like those old daguerreotype cameras in another way - it only took black-and-white photos.'

'Is that so?' Kevin asked, interested in spite of himself.

'Oh, ayuh!' Pop said, chipper as a chickadee, blue eyes twinkling at Kevin through the smoke from his fuming stewpot of a pipe and from behind his round rimless glasses. It was the sort of twinkle which may indicate either good humor or avarice. 'What I mean to say is that people laughed at those cameras the way they laughed at the Volkswagen Beetles when they first come out ... but they bought the Polaroids just like they bought the VWs. Because the Beetles got good gas mileage and didn't go bust so often as American cars, and

the Polaroids did one thing the Kodaks and even the Nikons and Minoltas and Leicas didn't.'

'Took instant pictures.'

Pop smiled. 'Well ... not exactly. What I mean to say is you took your pitcher, and then you yanked on this flap to pull it out. It didn't have no motor, didn't make that squidgy little whining noise like modern Polaroids.'

So there was a perfect way to describe that sound after all, it was just that you had to find a Pop Merrill to tell it to you: the sound that Polaroid cameras made when they spat out their produce was a squidgy little whine.

'Then you had to time her,' Pop said.

'Time -?'

'Oh, ayuh!' Pop said with great relish, bright as the early bird who has found that fabled worm. 'What I mean to say is they didn't have none of this happy automatic crappy back in those days. You yanked and out come this long strip which you put on the table or whatever and timed off sixty seconds on your watch. Had to be sixty, or right around there, anyway. Less and you'd have an underexposed pitcher. More and it'd be overexposed.'

'Wow,' Kevin said respectfully. And this was not bogus respect, jollyng the old man along in hopes he would get back to the point, which was not a bunch of long-dead cameras that had been wonders in their day but his own camera, the damned balky Sun 660 sitting on Pop's worktable with the guts of an old seven-day clock on its right and something which looked suspiciously like a dildo on its left. It wasn't bogus respect and Pop knew it, and it occurred to Pop (it wouldn't have to Kevin) how fleeting that great white god 'state-of-the-art' really was; ten years, he thought, and the phrase itself would be gone. From the boy's fascinated expression, you would have

thought he was hearing about something as antique as George Washington's wooden dentures instead of a camera everyone had thought was the ultimate only thirty-five years ago. But of course this boy had still been circling around in the unhatched void thirty-five years ago, part of a female who hadn't yet even met the male who would provide his other half.

'What I mean to say is it was a regular little darkroom goin on in there between the pitcher and the backing,' Pop resumed, slow at first but speeding up as his own mostly genuine interest in the subject resurfaced (but the thoughts of who this kid's father was and what the kid might be worth to him and the strange thing the kid's camera was up to never completely left his mind). 'And at the end of the minute, you peeled the pitcher off the back - had to be careful when you did it, too, because there was all this goo like jelly on the back, and if your skin was in the least bit sensitive, you could get a pretty good burn.'

'Awesome,' Kevin said. His eyes were wide, and now he looked like a kid hearing about the old two-holer outhouses which Pop and all his childhood colleagues (they were almost all colleagues; he had had few childhood friends in Castle Rock, perhaps preparing even then for his life's work of rooking the summer people and the other children somehow sensing it, like a faint smell of skunk) had taken for granted, doing your business as fast as you could in high summer because one of the wasps always circling around down there between the manna and the two holes which were the heaven from which the manna fell might at any time take a notion to plant its stinger in one of your tender little boycheeks, and also doing it as fast as you could in deep winter because your tender little boycheeks were apt to freeze solid if you didn't. Well, Pop thought, so much for the Camera of the Future. Thirty-five years and to this kid it's interestin in the same way a backyard shithouse is interestin.

'The negative was on the back,' Pop said. 'And your positive - well, it was black and white, but it was fine black and white. It was just as

crisp and clear as you'd ever want even today. And you had this little pink thing, about as long as a school eraser. as I remember; it squeegeed out some kind of chemical, smelled like ether, and you had to rub it over the pitcher as fast as you could, or that pitcher'd roll right up, like the tube in the middle of a roll of bung-fodder.'

Kevin burst out laughing, tickled by these pleasant antiquities.

Pop quit long enough to get his pipe going again. When he had, he resumed: 'A camera like that, nobody but the Polaroid people really knew what it was doing - I mean to say those people were close - but it was mechanical. You could take it apart.'

He looked at Kevin's Sun with some distaste.

'And, lots of times when one went bust, that was as much as you needed. Fella'd come in with one of those and say it wouldn't work, moanin about how he'd have to send it back to the Polaroid people to get it fixed and that'd prob'ly take months and would I take a look. "Well," I'd say, "prob'ly nothin I can do, what I mean to say is nobody really knows about these cameras but the Polaroid people and they're goddam close, but I'll take a look." All the time knowin it was prob'ly just a loose screw inside that shutter-housin or maybe a fouled spring, or hell, maybe junior slathered some peanut butter in the film compartment.'

One of his bright bird-eyes dropped in a wink so quick and so marvellously sly that, Kevin thought, if you hadn't known he was talking about summer people, you would have thought it was your paranoid imagination, or, more likely, missed it entirely.

'What I mean to say is you had your perfect situation,' Pop said. 'If you could fix it, you were a goddam wonder-worker. Why, I have put eight dollars and fifty cents in my pocket for takin a couple of little pieces of potato-chip out from between the trigger and the shutter-spring, my son, and the woman who brought that camera in kissed me on the lips. Right ... on ... the lips.'

Kevin observed Pop's eye drop momentarily closed again behind the semi-transparent mat of blue smoke.

'And of course, if it was somethin you couldn't fix, they didn't hold it against you because, what I mean to say, they never really expected you to be able to do nothin in the first place. You was only a last resort before they put her in a box and stuffed newspapers around her to keep her from bein broke even worse in the mail, and shipped her off to Schenectady.

'But - this camera.' He spoke in the ritualistic tone of distaste all philosophers of the crackerbarrel, whether in Athens of the golden age or in a small-town junk-shop during this current one of brass, adopt to express their view of entropy without having to come right out and state it. 'Wasn't put together, son. What I mean to say is it was poured. I could maybe pop the lens, and will if you want me to, and I did look in the film compartment, although I knew I wouldn't see a goddam thing wrong - that I recognized, at least - and I didn't. But beyond that I can't go. I could take a hammer and wind it right to her, could break it, what I mean to say, but fix it?' He spread his hands in pipe-smoke. 'Nossir.'

'Then I guess I'll just have to -' return it after all, he meant to finish, but Pop broke in.

'Anyway, son, I think you knew that. What I mean to say is you're a bright boy, you can see when a thing's all of a piece. I don't think you brought that camera in to be fixed. I think you know that even if it wasn't all of a piece, a man couldn't fix what that thing's doing, at least not with a screwdriver. I think you brought it in to ask me if I knew what it's up to.'

'Do you?' Kevin asked. He was suddenly tense all over.

'I might,' Pop Merrill said calmly. He bent over the pile of photographs twenty-eight of them now, counting the one Kevin had

snapped to demonstrate, and the one Pop had snapped to demonstrate to himself. 'These in order?'

'Not really. Pretty close, though. Does it matter?'

'I think so,' Pop said. 'They're a little bit different, ain't they? Not much, but a little.'

'Yeah,' Kevin said. 'I can see the difference in some of them, but .

'Do you know which one is the first? I could prob'ly figure it out for myself, but time is money, son.'

'That's easy,' Kevin said, and picked one out of the untidy little pile. 'See the frosting?' He pointed at a small brown spot on the picture's white edging.

'Ayup.' Pop didn't spare the dab of frosting more than a glance. He looked closely at the photograph, and after a moment he opened the drawer of his worktable. Tools were littered untidily about inside. To one side, in its own space, was an object wrapped in jeweler's velvet. Pop took this out, folded the cloth back, and removed a large magnifying glass with a switch in its base. He bent over the Polaroid and pushed the switch. A bright circle of light fell on the picture's surface.

'That's neat!' Kevin said.

'Ayup,' Pop said again. Kevin could tell that for Pop he was no longer there. Pop was studying the picture closely.

If one had not known the odd circumstances of its taking, the picture would hardly have seemed to warrant such close scrutiny. Like most photographs which are taken with a decent camera, good film, and by a photographer at least intelligent enough to keep his finger from blocking the lens, it was clear, understandable ... and, like so many Polaroids, oddly undramatic. It was a picture in which you could

identify and name each object, but its content was as flat as its surface. It was not well composed, but composition wasn't what was wrong with it - that undramatic flatness could hardly be called wrong at all, any more than a real day in a real life could be called wrong because nothing worthy of even a made-for-television movie happened during its course. As in so many Polaroids, the things in the picture were only there, like an empty chair on a porch or an unoccupied child's swing in a back yard or a passengerless car sitting at an unremarkable curb without even a flat tire to make it interesting or unique.

What was wrong with the picture was the feeling that it was wrong. Kevin had remembered the sense of unease he had felt while composing his subjects for the picture he meant to take, and the ripple of gooseflesh up his back when, with the glare of the flashbulb still lighting the room, he had thought, It's mine. That was what was wrong, and as with the man in the moon you can't unsee once you've seen it, so, he was discovering, you couldn't unfeel certain feelings ... and when it came to these pictures, those feelings were bad.

Kevin thought: It's like there was a wind - very soft, very cold - blowing out of that picture.

For the first time, the idea that it might be something supernatural - that this was part of a Manifestation - did something more than just intrigue him. For the first time he found himself wishing he had simply let this thing go. It's mine - that was what he had thought when his finger had pushed the shutter-button for the first time. Now he found himself wondering if maybe he hadn't gotten that backward.

I'm scared of it. Of what it's doing.

That made him mad, and he bent over Pop Merrill's shoulder, hunting as grimly as a man who has lost a diamond in a sandpile, determined that, no matter what he saw (always supposing he

should see something new, and he didn't think he would; he had studied all these photographs often enough now to believe he had seen all there was to see in them), he would look at it, study it, and under no circumstances allow himself to unsee it. Even if he could ... and a dolorous voice inside suggested very strongly that the time for unseeing was now past, possibly forever.

What the picture showed was a large black dog in front of a white picket fence. The picket fence wasn't going to be white much longer, unless someone in that flat Polaroid world painted or at least whitewashed it. That didn't seem likely; the fence looked untended, forgotten. The tops of some pickets were broken off. Others sagged loosely outward.

The dog was on a sidewalk in front of the fence. His hindquarters were to the viewer. His tail, long and bushy, drooped. He appeared to be smelling one of the fence-pickets - probably, Kevin thought, because the fence was what his dad called a 'letter-drop,' a place where many dogs would lift their legs and leave mystic yellow squirts of message before moving on.

The dog looked like a stray to Kevin. Its coat was long and tangled and sown with burdocks. One of its ears had the crumpled look of an old battle-scar. Its shadow trailed long enough to finish outside the frame on the weedy, patchy lawn inside the picket fence. The shadow made Kevin think the picture had been taken not long after dawn or not long before sunset; with no idea of the direction the photographer (what photographer, ha-ha) had been facing, it was impossible to tell which, just that he (or she) must have been standing only a few degrees shy of due east or west.

There was something in the grass at the far left of the picture which looked like a child's red rubber ball. It was inside the fence, and enough behind one of the lackluster clumps of grass so it was hard to tell.

And that was all.

'Do you recognize anything?' Pop asked, cruising his magnifying glass slowly back and forth over the photo's surface. Now the dog's hindquarters swelled to the size of hillocks tangled with wild and ominously exotic black undergrowth; now three or four of the scaly pickets became the size of old telephone poles; now, suddenly, the object behind the clump of grass clearly became a child's ball (although under Pop's glass it was as big as a soccer ball): Kevin could even see the stars which girdled its middle in upraised rubber lines. So something new was revealed under Pop's glass, and in a few moments Kevin would see something else himself, without it. But that was later.

'Jeez, no,' Kevin said. 'How could I, Mr Merrill?'

'Because there are things here,' Pop said patiently. His glass went on cruising. Kevin thought of a movie he had seen once where the cops sent out a searchlight-equipped helicopter to look for escaped prisoners. 'A dog, a sidewalk, a picket fence that needs paintin or takin down, a lawn that needs tendin. The sidewalk ain't much - you can't even see all of it - and the house, even the foundation, ain't in the frame, but what I mean to say is there's that dog. You recognize it?'

'No.'

'The fence?'

'No.'

'What about that red rubber ball? What about that, son?'

'No ... but you look like you think I should.'

'I look like I thought you might,' Pop said. 'You never had a ball like that when you were a tyke?'

'Not that I remember, no.'

'You got a sister, you said.'

'Megan.'

'She never had a ball like that?'

'I don't think so. I never took that much interest in Meg's toys. She had a BoLo bouncer once, and the ball on the end of it was red, but a different shade. Darker.'

'Ayuh. I know what a ball like that looks like. This ain't one. And that mightn't be your lawn?'

'Jes - I mean jeeppers, no.' Kevin felt a little offended. He and his dad took good care of the lawn around their house. It was a deep green and would stay that way, even under the fallen leaves, until at least mid-October. 'We don't have a picket fence, anyway.' And if we did, he thought, it wouldn't look like that mess.

Pop let go of the switch in the base of the magnifying glass, placed it on the square of jeweler's velvet, and with a care which approached reverence folded the sides over it. He returned it to its former place in the drawer and closed the drawer. He looked at Kevin closely. He had put his pipe aside, and there was now no smoke to obscure his eyes, which were still sharp but not twinkling anymore.

'What I mean to say is, could it have been your house before you owned it, do you think? Ten years ago -'

'We owned it ten years ago,' Kevin replied, bewildered.

'Well, twenty? Thirty? What I mean to say, do you recognize how the land lies? Looks like it climbs a little.'

'Our front lawn -' He thought deeply, then shook his head. 'No, ours is flat. If it does anything, it goes down a little. Maybe that's why the cellar ships a little water in a wet spring.'

'Ayuh, ayuh, could be. What about the back lawn?'

'There's no sidewalk back there,' Kevin said. 'And on the sides -' He broke off. 'You're trying to find out if my camera's taking pictures of the past!' he said, and for the first time he was really, actively frightened. He rubbed his tongue on the roof of his mouth and seemed to taste metal.

'I was just askin.' Pop rapped his fingers beside the photographs, and when he spoke, it seemed to be more to himself than to Kevin. 'You know,' he said, 'some goddam funny things seem to happen from time to time with two gadgets we've come to take pretty much for granted. I ain't sayin they do happen; only if they don't, there are a lot of liars and out-n-out hoaxers in the world.'

'What gadgets?'

'Tape recorders and Polaroid cameras,' Pop said, still seeming to talk to the pictures, or himself, and there was no Kevin in this dusty clock-drumming space at the back of the Emporium Galorium at all. 'Take tape recorders. Do you know how many people claim to have recorded the voices of dead folks on tape recorders?'

'No,' Kevin said. He didn't particularly mean for his own voice to come out hushed, but it did; he didn't seem to have a whole lot of air in his lungs to speak with, for some reason or other.

'Me neither,' Pop said, stirring the photographs with one finger. It was blunt and gnarled, a finger which looked made for rude and clumsy motions and operations, for poking people and knocking vases off endtables and causing nosebleeds if it tried to do so much as hook a humble chunk of dried snot from one of its owner's nostrils. Yet Kevin had watched the man's hands and thought there was probably more

grace in that one finger than in his sister Meg's entire body (and maybe in his own; Clan Delevan was not known for its lightfootedness or handedness, which was probably one reason why he thought that image of his father so nimbly catching his mother on the way down had stuck with him, and might forever). Pop Merrill's finger looked as if it would at any moment sweep all the photographs onto the floor - by mistake; this sort of clumsy finger would always poke and knock and tweak by mistake - but it did not. The Polaroids seemed to barely stir in response to its restless movements.

Supernatural, Kevin thought again, and shivered a little. An actual shiver, surprising and dismaying and a little embarrassing even if Pop had not seen it.

'But there's even a way they do it,' Pop said, and then, as if Kevin had asked: 'Who? Damn if I know. I guess some of them are "psychic investigators," or at least call themselves that or some such, but I guess it's more'n likely most of em are just playin around, like folks that use Ouija Boards at parties.'

He looked up at Kevin grimly, as if rediscovering him.

'You got a Ouija, son?'

'No.'

'Ever played with one?'

'No.'

'Don't,' Pop said more grimly than ever. 'Fuckin things are dangerous.'

Kevin didn't dare tell the old man he hadn't the slightest idea what a weegee board was.

'Anyway, they set up a tape machine to record in an empty room. It's supposed to be an old house, is what I mean to say, one with a History, if they can find it. Do you know what I mean when I say a house with a History, son?'

'I guess ... like a haunted house?' Kevin hazarded. He found he was sweating lightly, as he had done last year every time Mrs Whittaker announced a pop quiz in Algebra 1.

'Well, that'll do. These ... people ... like it best if it's a house with a Violent History, but they'll take what they can get. Anyhow, they set up the machine and record that empty room. Then, the next day - they always do it at night is what I mean to say, they ain't happy unless they can do it at night, and midnight if they can get it - the next day they play her back.'

'An empty room?'

'Sometimes,' Pop said in a musing voice that might or might not have disguised some deeper feeling, 'there are voices.'

Kevin shivered again. There were hieroglyphics on the plinth after all. Nothing you'd want to read, but ... yeah. They were there.

'Real voices?'

'Usually imagination,' Pop said dismissively. 'But once or twice I've heard people I trust say they've heard real voices.'

'But you never have?'

'Once,' Pop said shortly, and said nothing else for so long Kevin was beginning to think he was done when he added, 'It was one word. Clear as a bell. 'Twas recorded in the parlor of an empty house in Bath. Man killed his wife there in 1946.'

'What was the word?' Kevin asked, knowing he would not be told just as surely as he knew no power on earth, certainly not his own willpower, could have kept him from asking.

But Pop did tell.

'Basin.'

Kevin blinked. 'Basin?'

'Ayuh.'

'That doesn't mean anything.'

'It might,' Pop said calmly, 'if you know he cut her throat and then held her head over a basin to catch the blood.'

'Oh my God!'

'Ayuh.'

'Oh my God, really?'

Pop didn't bother answering that.

'It couldn't have been a fake?'

Pop gestured with the stem of his pipe at the Polaroids. 'Are those?'

'Oh my God.'

'Polaroids, now,' Pop said, like a narrator moving briskly to a new chapter in a novel and reading the words *Meanwhile*, in another part of the forest, 'I've seen pitchers with people in em that the other people in the pitcher swear weren't there with em when the pitcher was taken. And there's one - this is a famous one - that a lady took over in England. What she did was snap a pitcher of some fox-hunters comin back home at the end of the day. You see em, about

twenty in all, comin over a little wooden bridge. It's a tree-lined country road on both sides of that bridge. The ones in front are off the bridge already. And over on the right of the pitcher, standin by the road, there's a lady in a long dress and a hat with a veil on it so you can't see her face and she's got her pocketbook over her arm. Why, you can even see she's wearin a locket on her bosom, or maybe it's a watch.

'Well, when the lady that took the pitcher saw it, she got wicked upset, and wasn't nobody could blame her, son, because what I mean to say is she meant to take a pitcher of those fox-hunters comin home and no one else, because there wasn't nobody else there. Except in the pitcher there is. And when you look real close, it seems like you can see the trees right through that lady.'

He's making all this up, putting me on, and when I leave he'll have a great big horselaugh, Kevin thought, knowing Pop Merrill was doing nothing of the sort.

'The lady that took that pitcher was stayin at one of those big English homes like they have on the education-TV shows, and when she showed that pitcher, I heard the man of the house fainted dead away. That part could be made up. Prob'ly is. Sounds made up, don't it? But I seen that pitcher in an article next to a painted portrait of that fella's great-grandmother, and it could be her, all right. Can't tell for certain because of the veil. But it could be.'

'Could be a hoax, too,' Kevin said faintly.

'Could be,' Pop said indifferently. 'People get up to all sorts of didos. Lookit my nephew, there, for instance, Ace.' Pop's nose wrinkled. 'Doin four years in Shawshank, and for what? Bustin into The Mellow Tiger. He got up to didos and Sheriff Pangborn. slammed him in the jug for it. Little ringmeat got just what he deserved.'

Kevin, displaying a wisdom far beyond his years, said nothing.

'But when ghosts show up in photographs, son - or, like you say, what people claim to be ghosts - it's almost always in Polaroid photographs. And it almost always seems to be by accident. Now your pitchers of flyin saucers and that Lock Nest Monster, they almost always show up in the other kind. The kind some smart fella can get up to didos with in a darkroom.'

He dropped Kevin a third wink, expressing all the didos (whatever they were) an unscrupulous photographer might get up to in a well-equipped darkroom.

Kevin thought of asking Pop if it was possible someone could get up to didos with a weegee and decided to continue keeping his mouth shut. It still seemed by far the wisest course.

'All by way of sayin I thought I'd ask if you saw somethin you knew in these Polaroid pitchers.'

'I don't, though,' Kevin said so earnestly that he believed Pop would believe he was lying, as his mom always did when he made the tactical mistake of even controlled vehemence.

'Ayuh, ayuh,' Pop said, believing him so dismissively Kevin was almost irritated.

'Well,' Kevin said after a moment which was silent except for the fifty thousand ticking clocks, 'I guess that's it, huh?'

'Maybe not,' Pop said. 'What I mean to say is I got me a little idear. You mind takin some more pitchers with that camera?'

'What good is it? They're all the same.'

'That's the point. They ain't.'

Kevin opened his mouth, then closed it.

'I'll even chip in for the film,' Pop said, and when he saw the amazed look on Kevin's face he quickly qualified: 'A little, anyway.'

'How many pictures would you want?'

'Well, you got ... what? Twenty-eight already, is that right?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Thirty more,' Pop said after a moment's thought.

'Why?'

'Ain't gonna tell you. Not right now.' He produced a heavy purse that was hooked to a belt-loop on a steel chain. He opened it and took out a ten-dollar bill, hesitated, and added two ones with obvious reluctance. 'Guess that'd cover half of it.'

Yeah, right, Kevin thought.

'If you really are int'rested in the trick that camera's doing, I guess you'd pony up the rest, wouldn't you?' Pop's eyes gleamed at him like the eyes of an old, curious cat.

Kevin understood the man did more than expect him to say yes; to Pop it was inconceivable that he could say no. Kevin thought, If I said no he wouldn't hear it; he'd say 'Good, that's agreed, then,' and I'd end up back on the sidewalk with his money in my pocket whether I wanted it or not.

And he did have his birthday money.

All the same, there was that chill wind to think about. That wind that seemed to blow not from the surface but right out of those photographs in spite of their deceptively flat, deceptively shiny surfaces. He felt that wind coming from them despite their mute declaration which averred We are Polaroids, and for no reason we

can tell or even understand, we show only the undramatic surfaces of things. That wind was there. What about that wind?

Kevin hesitated a moment longer and the bright eyes behind the rimless spectacles measured him. I ain't gonna ask you if you're a man or a mouse, Pop Merrill's eyes said. You're fifteen years old, and what I mean to say is at fifteen you may not be a man yet, not quite, but you are too goddam old to be a mouse and both of us know it. And besides you're not from Away; you're from town, just like me.

'Sure,' Kevin said with a hollow lightness in his voice. It fooled neither of them. 'I can get the film tonight, I guess, and bring the pictures in tomorrow, after school.'

'Nope,' Pop said.

'You're closed tomorrow?'

'Nope,' Pop said, and because he was from town, Kevin waited patiently. 'You're thinkin about takin thirty pictures all at once, aren't you?'

'I guess so.' But Kevin hadn't thought about it; he had simply taken it for granted.

'That ain't the way I want you to do it,' Pop said. 'It don't matter where you take them, but it does matter when. Here. Lemme figure.'

Pop figured, and then even wrote down a list of times, which Kevin pocketed.

'So!' Pop said, rubbing his hands briskly together so that they made a dry sound that was like two pieces of used-up sandpaper rubbing together. 'You'll see me in ... oh, three days or so?'

'Yes . . . I guess so.'

'I'll bet you'd just as lief wait until Monday after school, anyway,' Pop said. He dropped Kevin a fourth wink, slow and sly and humiliating in the extreme. 'So your friends don't see you comin in here and tax you with it, is what I mean to say.'

Kevin flushed and dropped his eyes to the worktable and began to gather up the Polaroids so his hands would have something to do. When he was embarrassed and they didn't, he cracked his knuckles.

'I -' He began some sort of absurd protest that would convince neither of them and then stopped, staring down at one of the photos.

'What?' Pop asked. For the first time since Kevin had approached him, Pop sounded entirely human, but Kevin hardly heard his words, much less his tone of faint alarm. 'Now you look like you seen a ghost, boy.'

'No,' Kevin said. 'No ghost. I see who took the picture. Who really took the picture.'

'What in glory are you talking about?'

Kevin pointed to a shadow. He, his father, his mother, Meg, and apparently Mr Merrill himself had taken it for the shadow of a tree that wasn't itself in the frame. But it wasn't a tree. Kevin saw that now, and what you had seen could never be unseen.

More hieroglyphics on the plinth.

'I don't see what you're gettin at,' Pop said. But Kevin knew the old man knew he was getting at something, which was why he sounded put out.

'Look at the shadow of the dog first,' Kevin said. 'Then look at this one here again.' He tapped the left side of the photograph. 'In the picture, the sun is either going down or coming up. That makes all

the shadows long, and it's hard to tell what's throwing them. But looking at it, just now, it clicked home for me.'

'What clicked home, son?' Pop reached for the drawer, probably meaning to get the magnifying glass with the light in it again ... and then stopped. All at once he didn't need it. All at once it had clicked into place for him, too.

'It's the shadow of a man, ain't it?' Pop said. 'I be go to hell if that one ain't the shadow of a man.'

'Or a woman. You can't tell. Those are legs, I'm sure they are, but they could belong to a woman wearing pants. Or even a kid. With the shadow running so long -'

'Ayuh, you can't tell.'

Kevin said, 'It's the shadow of whoever took it, isn't it?'

'Ayuh.'

'But it wasn't me,' Kevin said. 'It came out of my camera - all of them did - but I didn't take it. So who did, Mr Merrill? Who did?'

'Call me Pop,' the old man said absently, looking at the shadow in the picture, and Kevin felt his chest swell with pleasure as those few clocks still capable of running a little fast began to signal the others that, weary as they might be, it was time to charge the half-hour.

CHAPTER 3

When Kevin arrived back at the Emporium Galorium with the photographs on Monday after school, the leaves had begun to turn color. He had been fifteen for almost two weeks and the novelty had worn off.

The novelty of that plinth, the supernatural, had not, but this wasn't anything he counted among his blessings. He had finished taking the schedule of photographs Pop had given him, and by the time he had, he had seen clearly - clearly enough, anyway - why Pop had wanted him to take them at intervals: the first ten on the hour, then let the camera rest, the second ten every two hours, and the third at three-hour intervals. He'd taken the last few that day at school. He had seen something else as well, something none of them could have seen at first; it was not clearly visible until the final three pictures. They had scared him so badly he had decided, even before taking the pictures to the Emporium Galorium, that he wanted to get rid of the Sun 660. Not exchange it; that was the last thing he wanted to do, because it would mean the camera would be out of his hands and hence out of his control. He couldn't have that.

It's mine, he had thought, and the thought kept recurring, but it wasn't a true thought. If it was - if the Sun only took pictures of the black breedless dog by the white picket fence when he, Kevin, was the one pushing the trigger - that would have been one thing. But that wasn't the case. Whatever the nasty magic inside the Sun might be, he was not its sole initiator. His father had taken the same (well, almost the same) picture, and so had Pop Merrill, and so had Meg when Kevin had let her take a couple of the pictures on Pop's carefully timed schedule.

'Did you number em, like I asked?' Pop asked when Kevin delivered them.

'Yes, one to fifty-eight,' Kevin said. He thumbed through the stack of photographs, showing Pop the small circled numbers in the lower lefthand corner of each. 'But I don't know if it matters. I've decided to get rid of the camera.'

'Get rid of it? That ain't what you mean.'

'No. I guess not. I'm going to break it up with a sledgehammer.'

Pop looked at him with those shrewd little eyes. 'That so?'

'Yes,' Kevin said, meeting the shrewd gaze steadfastly. 'Last week I would have laughed at the idea, but I'm not laughing now. I think the thing is dangerous.'

'Well, I guess you could be right, and I guess you could tape a charge of dynamite to it and blow it to smithereens if you wanted. It's yours, is what I mean to say. But why don't you hold off a little while? There's somethin I want to do with these pitchers. You might be interested.'

'What?'

'I druther not say,' Pop answered, 'case it don't turn out. But I might have somethin by the end of the week that'd help you decide better, one way or the other.'

'I have decided,' Kevin said, and tapped something that had shown up in the last two photographs.

'What is it?' Pop asked. 'I've looked at it with m'glass, and I feel like I should know what it is - it's like a name you can't quite remember but have right on the tip of your tongue, is what I mean to say - but I don't quite.'

'I suppose I could hold off until Friday or so,' Kevin said, choosing not to answer the old man's question. 'I really don't want to hold off

much longer.'

'Scared?'

'Yes,' Kevin said simply. 'I'm scared.'

'You told your folks?'

'Not all of it, no.'

'Well, you might want to. Might want to tell your dad, anyway, is what I mean to say. You got time to think on it while I take care of what it is I want to take care of.'

'No matter what you want to do, I'm going to put my dad's sledgehammer on it come Friday,' Kevin said. 'I don't even want a camera anymore. Not a Polaroid or any other kind.'

'Where is it now?'

'In my bureau drawer. And that's where it's going to stay.'

'Stop by the store here on Friday,' Pop said. 'Bring the camera with you. We'll take a look at this little idear of mine, and then, if you want to bust the goddam thing up, I'll provide the sledgehammer myself. No charge. Even got a chopping block out back you can set it on.'

'That's a deal,' Kevin said, and smiled.

'Just what have you told your folks about all this?'

'That I'm still deciding. I didn't want to worry them. My mom, especially.' Kevin looked at him curiously. 'Why did you say I might want to tell my dad?'

'You bust up that camera, your father is going to be mad at you,' Pop said. 'That ain't so bad, but he's maybe gonna think you're a little bit

of a fool, too. Or an old maid, squallin burglar to the police on account of a creaky board is what I mean to say.'

Kevin flushed a little, thinking of how angry his father had gotten when the idea of the supernatural had come up, then sighed. He hadn't thought of it in that light at all, but now that he did, he thought Pop was probably right. He didn't like the idea of his father being mad at him, but he could live with it. The idea that his father might think him a coward, a fool, or both, though ... that was a different kettle of fish altogether.

Pop was watching him shrewdly, reading these thoughts as easily as a man might read the headlines on the front pages of a tabloid newspaper as they crossed Kevin's face.

'You think he could meet you here around four in the afternoon on Friday?'

'No way,' Kevin said. 'He works in Portland. He hardly ever gets home before six.'

'I'll give him a call, if you want,' Pop said. 'He'll come if I call.'

Kevin gave him a wide-eyed stare.

Pop smiled thinly. 'Oh, I know him,' he said. 'Know him of old. He don't like to let on about me any more than you do, and I understand that, but what I mean to say is I know him. I know a lot of people in this town. You'd be surprised, son.'

'How?'

'Did him a favor one time,' Pop said. He popped a match alight with his thumbnail, and veiled those eyes behind enough smoke so you couldn't tell if it was amusement, sentiment, or contempt in them.

'What kind of favor?'

'That,' Pop said, 'is between him and me. Just like this business here' - he gestured at the pile of photographs - 'is between me and you. That's what I mean to say.'

'Well ... okay ... I guess. Should I say anything to him?'

'Nope!' Pop said in his chipper way. 'You let me take care of everything.' And for a moment, in spite of the obfuscating pipe-smoke, there was something in Pop Merrill's eyes Kevin Delevan didn't care for. He went out, a sorely confused boy who knew only one thing for sure: he wanted this to be over.

When he was gone, Pop sat silent and moveless for nearly five minutes. He allowed his pipe to go out in his mouth and drummed his fingers, which were nearly as knowing and talented as those of a concert violinist but masqueraded as equipment which should more properly have belonged to a digger of ditches or a pourer of cement, next to the stack of photographs. As the smoke dissipated, his eyes stood out clearly, and they were as cold as ice in a December puddle.

Abruptly he put the pipe in its holder and called a camera-and-video shop in Lewiston. He asked two questions. The answer to both of them was yes.

Pop hung up the phone and went back to drumming his fingers on the table beside the Polaroids. What he was planning wasn't really fair to the boy, but the boy had uncovered the corner of something he not only didn't understand but didn't want to understand.

Fair or not, Pop didn't believe he intended to let the boy do what the boy wanted to do. He hadn't decided what he himself meant to do, not yet, not entirely, but it was wise to be prepared.

That was always wise.

He sat and drummed his fingers and wondered what that thing was the boy had seen. He had obviously felt Pop would know - or might know - but Pop hadn't a clue. The boy might tell him on Friday. Or not. But if the boy didn't, the father, to whom Pop had once loaned four hundred dollars to cover a bet on a basketball game, a bet he had lost and which his wife knew nothing about, certainly would. If, that was, he could. Even the best of fathers didn't know all about their sons anymore once those sons were fifteen or so, but Pop thought Kevin was a very young fifteen, and that his dad knew most things ... or could find them out.

He smiled and drummed his fingers and all the clocks began to charge wearily at the hour of five.

CHAPTER 4

Pop Merrill turned the sign which hung in his door from OPEN to CLOSED at two o'clock on Friday afternoon, slipped himself behind the wheel of his 1959 Chevrolet, which had been for years perfectly maintained at Sonny's Texaco at absolutely no cost at all (the fallout of another little loan, and Sonny Jackett another town fellow who would prefer hot coals pressed against the soles of his feet to admitting that he not only knew but was deeply indebted to Pop Merrill, who had gotten him out of a desperate scrape over in New Hampshire in '69), and took himself up to Lewiston, a city he hated because it seemed to him that there were only two streets in the whole town (maybe three) that weren't oneways. He arrived as he always did when Lewiston and only Lewiston would do: not by driving to it but arriving somewhere near it and then spiralling slowly inward along those beshitted one-way streets until he reckoned he was as close as he could get and then walking the rest of the way, a tall thin man with a bald head, rimless specs, clean khaki pants with creases and cuffs, and a blue workman's shirt buttoned right up to the collar.

There was a sign in the window of Twin City Camera and Video that showed a cartoon man who appeared to be battling a huge tangle of movie-film and losing. The fellow looked just about ready to blow his stack. The words over and under the picture read: TIRED OF FIGHTING? WE TRANSFER YOUR 8 MM MOVIES (SNAPSHOTS TOO!) ONTO VIDEO TAPE!

Just another goddam gadget, Pop thought, opening the door and going in. World's dying of em.

But he was one of those people - world's dying of em - not at all above using what he disparaged if it proved expedient. He spoke briefly with the clerk. The clerk got the proprietor. They had known each other for many years (probably since Homer sailed the wine-

dark sea, some wits might have said). The proprietor invited Pop into the back room, where they shared a nip.

'That's a goddam strange bunch of photos,' the proprietor said.

'Ayuh.'

'The videotape I made of them is even stranger.'

'I bet so.'

'That all you got to say?'

'Ayuh.'

'Fuck ya, then,' the proprietor said, and they both cackled their shrill old-man's cackles. Behind the counter, the clerk winced.

Pop left twenty minutes later with two items: a video cassette, and a brand-new Polaroid Sun 660, still in its box.

When he got back to the shop, he called Kevin's house. He was not surprised when it was John Delevan who answered.

'If you've been fucking my boy over, I'll kill you, you old snake,' John Delevan said without preamble, and distantly Pop could hear the boy's wounded cry: 'Da-ad!'

Pop's lips skinned back from his teeth - crooked, eroded, pipe-yellow, but his own, by the bald-headed Christ - and if Kevin had seen him in that moment he would have done more than wonder if maybe Pop Merrill was something other than the Castle Rock version of the Kindly Old Sage of the Crackerbarrel: he would have known.

'Now, John,' he said. 'I've been trying to help your boy with that camera. That's all in the world I've been trying to do.' He paused.

'Just like that one time I gave you a help when you got a little too proud of the Seventy-Sixers, is what I mean to say.'

A thundering silence from John Delevan's end of the line which meant he had plenty to say on that subject, but the kiddo was in the room and that was as good as a gag.

'Now, your kid don't know nothing about that,' Pop said, that nasty grin broadening in the tick-tock shadows of the Emporium Galorium, where the dominant smells were old magazines and mouse-turds. 'I told him it wasn't none of his business, just like I told him that this business here was. I wouldn't have even brought up that bet if I knew another way to get you here, is what I mean to say. And you ought to see what I've got, John, because if you don't you won't understand why the boy wants to smash that camera you bought him -'

'Smash it!'

◆and why I think it's a hell of a good idea. Now are you going to come down here with him, or not?'

'I'm not in Portland, am I, dammit?'

'Never mind the CLOSED sign on the door,' Pop said in the serene tone of a man who has been getting his own way for many years and expects to go right on getting it for many more. 'Just knock.'

'Who in hell gave my boy your name, Merrill?'

'I didn't ask him,' Pop said in that same infuriatingly serene tone of voice, and hung up the telephone. And, to the empty shop: 'All I know is that he came. Just like they always do.'

While he waited, he took the Sun 660 he had bought in Lewiston out of its box and buried the box deep in the trash-can beside his worktable. He looked at the camera thoughtfully, then loaded the

four-picture starter-pack that came with the camera. With that done, he unfolded the body of the camera, exposing the lens. The red light to the left of the lightning-bolt shape came on briefly, and then the green one began to stutter. Pop was not very surprised to find he was filled with trepidation. Well, he thought, God hates a coward, and pushed the shutter-release. The clutter of the Emporium Galorium's barnlike interior was bathed in an instant of merciless and improbable white light. The camera made its squidgy little whine and spat out what would be a Polaroid picture - perfectly adequate but somehow lacking; a picture that was all surfaces depicting a world where ships undoubtedly would sail off the fuming and monster-raddled edge of the earth if they went far enough west.

Pop watched it with the same mesmerized expression Clan Delevan had worn as it waited for Kevin's first picture to develop. He told himself this camera would not do the same thing, of course not, but he was stiff and wiry with tension just the same and, tough old bird or not, if a random board had creaked in the place just then, he almost certainly would have cried out.

But no board did creak, and when the picture developed it showed only what it was supposed to show: clocks assembled, clocks in pieces, toasters. stacks of magazines tied with twine, lamps with shades so horrible only women of the British upper classes could truly love them, shelves of quarter paperbacks (six for a buck) with titles like *After Dark My Sweet* and *Fire in the Flesh* and *The Brass Cupcake*, and, in the distant background, the dusty front window. You could read the letters EMPOR backward before the bulky silhouette of a bureau blocked off the rest.

No hulking creature from beyond the grave; no knife-wielding doll in blue overalls. just a camera. He supposed the whim which had caused him to take a picture in the first place, just to see, showed how deeply this thing had worked its way under his skin.

Pop sighed and buried the photograph in the trash-can. He opened the wide drawer of the worktable and took out a small hammer. He held the camera firmly in his left hand and then swung the hammer on a short arc through the dusty tick-tock air. He didn't use a great deal of force. There was no need. Nobody took any pride in workmanship anymore. They talked about the wonders of modern science, synthetics, new alloys, polymers, Christ knew what. It didn't matter. Snot. That was what everything was really made out of these days, and you didn't have to work very hard to bust a camera that was made of snot.

The lens shattered. Shards of plastic flew from around it. and that reminded Pop of something else. Had it been the left or right side? He frowned. Left. He thought. They wouldn't notice anyway, or remember which side themselves if they did, you could damn near take that to the bank, but Pop hadn't feathered his nest with damn-nears. It was wise to be prepared.

Always wise.

He replaced the hammer. used a small brush to sweep the broken chunks of glass and plastic off the table and onto the floor, then returned the brush and took out a grease-pencil with a fine tip and an X-Act-O knife. He drew what he thought was the approximate shape of the piece of plastic which had broken off Kevin Delevan's Sun when Meg knocked it on the floor, then used the X-Act-O to carve along the lines. When he thought he had dug deep enough into the plastic, he put the X-Act-O back in the drawer, and then knocked the Polaroid camera off the worktable. What had happened once ought to happen again, especially with the fault-lines he had pre-carved.

It worked pretty slick, too. He examined the camera, which now had a chunk of plastic gone from the side as well as a busted lens, nodded, and placed it in the deep shadow under the worktable. Then he found the piece of plastic that had split off from the camera, and

buried it in the trash along with the box and the single exposure he had taken.

Now there was nothing to do but wait for the Delevans to arrive. Pop took the video cassette upstairs to the cramped little apartment where he lived. He put it on top of the VCR he had bought to watch the fuck-movies you could buy nowadays, then sat down to read the paper. He saw there had been a plane-crash in Pakistan. A hundred and thirty people killed. Goddam fools were always getting themselves killed, Pop thought, but that was all right. A few less woggies in the world was a good thing all around. Then he turned to the sports to see how the Red Sox had done. They still had a good chance of winning the Eastern Division.

CHAPTER 5

'What was it?' Kevin asked as they prepared to go. They had the house to themselves. Meg was at her ballet class, and it was Mrs Delevan's day to play bridge with her friends. She would come home at five with a large loaded pizza and news of who was getting divorced or at least thinking of it.

'None of your business,' Mr Delevan said in a rough voice which was both angry and embarrassed.

The day was chilly. Mr Delevan had been looking for his flight jacket. Now he stopped and turned around and looked at his son, who was standing behind him, wearing his own jacket and holding the Sun camera in one hand.

'All right,' he said. 'I never pulled that crap on you before and I guess I don't want to start now. You know what I mean.'

'Yes,' Kevin said, and thought: I know exactly what you're talking about, is what I mean to say.

'Your mother doesn't know anything about this.'

'I won't tell her.'

'Don't say that,' his father told him sharply. 'Don't start down that road or you'll never stop.'

'But you said you never-'

'No, I never told her,' his father said, finding the jacket at last and shrugging into it. 'She never asked and I never told her. If she never asks you, you never have to tell her. That sound like a bullshit qualification to you?'

'Yeah,' Kevin said. 'To tell you the truth, it does.'

'Okay,' Mr Delevan said. 'Okay ... but that's the way we do it. If the subject ever comes up, you - we - have to tell. If it doesn't, we don't. That's just the way we do things in the grown-up world. It sounds fucked up, I guess, and sometimes it is fucked up, but that's how we do it. Can you live with that?'

'Yes. I guess so.'

'Good. Let's go.'

They walked down the driveway side by side, zipping their jackets. The wind played with the hair at John Delevan's temples, and Kevin noted for the first time - with uneasy surprise - that his father was starting to go gray there.

'It was no big deal, anyway,' Mr Delevan said. He might almost have been talking to himself. 'It never is with Pop Merrill. He isn't a big-deal kind of guy, if you know what I mean.'

Kevin nodded.

'He's a fairly wealthy man, you know, but that junk-shop of his isn't the reason why. He's Castle Rock's version of Shylock.'

'Of who?'

'Never mind. You'll read the play sooner or later if education hasn't gone entirely to hell. He loans money at interest rates that are higher than the law allows.'

'Why would people borrow from him?' Kevin asked as they walked toward downtown under trees from which leaves of red and purple and gold sifted slowly down.

'Because,' Mr Delevan said sourly, 'they can't borrow anyplace else.'

'You mean their credit's no good?'

'Something like that.'

'But we ... you . . .'

'Yeah. We're doing all right now. But we weren't always doing all right. When your mother and I were first married, how we were doing was all the way across town from all right.'

He fell silent again for a time, and Kevin didn't interrupt him.

'Well, there was a guy who was awful proud of the Celtics one year,' his father said. He was looking down at his feet, as if afraid to step on a crack and break his mother's back. 'They were going into the play-offs against the Philadelphia Seventy-Sixers. They - the Celtics - were favored to win, but by a lot less than usual. I had a feeling the Seventy-Sixers were going to take them, that it was their year.'

He looked quickly at his son, almost snatching the glance as a shoplifter might take a small but fairly valuable item and tuck it into his coat, and then went back to minding the cracks in the sidewalk again. They were now walking down Castle Hill and toward the town's single signal-light at the crossing of Lower Main Street and Watermill Lane. Beyond the intersection, what locals called the Tin Bridge crossed Castle Stream. Its overstructure cut the deep-blue autumn sky into neat geometrical shapes.

'I guess it's that feeling, that special sureness, that infects the poor souls who lose their bank accounts, their houses, their cars, even the clothes they stand up in at casinos and back-room poker games. That feeling that you got a telegram from God. I only got it that once, and I thank God for that.'

'In those days I'd make a friendly bet on a football game or the World Series with somebody, five dollars was the most, I think, and usually

it was a lot less than that, just a token thing, a quarter or maybe a pack of cigarettes.'

This time it was Kevin who shoplifted a glance, only Mr Delevan caught it, cracks in the sidewalk or no cracks.

'Yes, I smoked in those days, too. Now I don't smoke and I don't bet. Not since that last time. That last time cured me.

'Back then your mother and I had only been married two years. You weren't born yet. I was working as a surveyor's assistant, bringing home just about a hundred and sixteen dollars a week. Or that was what I cleared, anyway, when the government finally let go of it.

'This fellow who was so proud of the Celtics was one of the engineers. He even wore one of those green Celtics warm-up jackets to work, the kind that have the shamrock on the back. The week before the play-offs, he kept saying he'd like to find someone brave enough and stupid enough to bet on the Seventy-Sixers, because he had four hundred dollars just waiting to catch him a dividend.

'That voice inside me kept getting louder and louder, and the day before the championship series started, I went up to him on lunch-break. My heart felt like it was going to tear right out of my chest, I was so scared.'

'Because you didn't have four hundred dollars,' Kevin said. 'The other guy did, but you didn't.' He was looking at his father openly now, the camera completely forgotten for the first time since his first visit to Pop Merrill. The wonder of what the Sun 660 was doing was lost - temporarily, anyway - in this newer, brighter wonder: as a young man his father had done something spectacularly stupid, just as Kevin knew other men did, just as he might do himself someday, when he was on his own and there was no adult member of the Reasonable tribe to protect him from some terrible impulse, some misbegotten instinct. His father, it seemed, had briefly been a

member of the Instinctive tribe himself. It was hard to believe, but wasn't this the proof?

'Right.'

'But you bet him.'

'Not right away,' his father said. 'I told him I thought the Seventy-Sixers would take the championship, but four hundred bucks was a lot to risk for a guy who was only a surveyor's assistant.'

'But you never came right out and told him you didn't have the money.'

'I'm afraid it went a little further than that, Kevin. I implied I did have it. I said I couldn't afford to lose four hundred dollars, and that was disingenuous, to say the least. I told him I couldn't risk that kind of money on an even bet - still not lying, you see, but skating right up to the edge of the lie. Do you see?'

'Yes.'

'I don't know what would have happened - maybe nothing - if the foreman hadn't rung the back-to-work bell right then. But he did, and this engineer threw up his hands and said, "I'll give you two-to-one, sonny, if that's what you want. It don't matter to me. It's still gonna be four hundred in my pocket." And before I knew what was happening we'd shook on it with half a dozen men watching and I was in the soup, for better or worse. And going home that night I thought of your mother, and what she'd say if she knew, and I pulled over to the shoulder of the road in the old Ford I had back then and I puked out the door.'

A police car came rolling slowly down Harrington Street. Norris Ridgewick was driving and Andy Clutterbuck was riding shotgun. Clut raised his hand as the cruiser turned left on Main Street. John and Kevin Delevan raised their hands in return, and autumn drowsed

peacefully around them as if John Delevan had never sat in the open door of his old Ford and puked into the road-dust between his own feet.

They crossed Main Street.

'Well ... you could say I got my money's worth, anyway. The Sixers took it right to the last few seconds of the seventh game, and then one of those Irish bastards - I forget which one it was - stole the ball from Hal Greer and went to the hole with it and there went the four hundred dollars I didn't have. When I paid that goddam engineer off the next day he said he "got a little nervous there near the end." That was all. I could have popped his eyes out with my thumbs.'

'You paid him off the next day? How'd you do that?'

'I told you, it was like a fever. Once we shook hands on the bet, the fever passed. I hoped like hell I'd win that bet, but I knew I'd have to think like I was going to lose. There was a lot more at stake than just four hundred dollars. There was the question of my job, of course, and what might happen if I wasn't able to pay off the guy I'd bet with. He was an engineer, after all, and technically my boss. That fellow had just enough son of a bitch in him to have fired my ass if I didn't pay the wager. It wouldn't have been the bet, but he would have found something, and it would have been something that would go on my work-record in big red letters, too. But that wasn't the biggest thing. Not at all.'

'What was?'

'Your mother. Our marriage. When you're young and don't have either a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of, a marriage is under strain all the time. It doesn't matter how much you love each other, that marriage is like an overloaded packhorse and you know it can fall to its knees or even roll over dead if all the wrong things happen at all the wrong times. I don't think she would have divorced me over a four-hundred-dollar bet, but I'm glad I never had to find

out for sure. So when the fever passed, I saw that I might have bet a little more than four hundred dollars. I might just have bet my whole goddam future.'

They were approaching the Emporium Galorium. There was a bench on the verge of the grassy town common, and Mr Delevan gestured for Kevin to sit down.

'This won't take long,' he said, and then laughed. It was a grating, compressed sound, like an inexperienced driver working a transmission lever. 'It hurts too much to stretch out, even after all these years.'

So they sat on the bench and Mr Delevan finished the story of how he happened to know Pop Merrill while they looked across the grassy common with the bandstand in the middle.

'I went to him the same night I made the bet,' he said. 'I told your mother I was going out for cigarettes. I went after dark, so no one would see me. From town, I mean. They would have known I was in some kind of trouble, and I didn't want that. I went in and Pop said, "What's a professional man like you doing in a place like this, Mr John Delevan?" and I told him what I'd done and he said, "You made a bet and already you have got your head set to the idea you've lost it." "If I do lose it," I said, "I want to make sure I don't lose anything else."

'That made him laugh. "I respect a wise man," he said. "I reckon I can trust you. If the Celtics win, you come see me. I'll take care of you. You got an honest face.'

'And that was all?' Kevin asked. In eighth-grade math, they had done a unit on loans, and he still remembered most of it. 'He didn't ask for any, uh, collateral?'

'People who go to Pop don't have collateral,' his father said. 'He's not a loan-shark like you see in the movies; he doesn't break any legs if

you don't pay up. But he has ways of fixing people.'

'What ways?'

'Never mind,' John Delevan said. 'After that last game ended, I went upstairs to tell your mother I was going to go out for cigarettes - again. She was asleep, though, so I was spared that lie. It was late, late for Castle Rock, anyway, going on eleven, but the lights were on in his place. I knew they would be. He gave me the money in tens. He took them out of an old Crisco can. All tens. I remember that. They were crumpled but he had made them straight. Forty ten-dollar bills, him counting them out like a bank-clerk with that pipe going and his glasses up on his head and for just a second there I felt like knocking his teeth out. Instead I thanked him. You don't know how hard it can be to say thank you sometimes. I hope you never do. He said, "You understand the terms, now, don't you?" and I said I did, and he said, "That's good. I ain't worried about you. What I mean to say is you got an honest face. You go on and take care of your business with that fella at work, and then take care of your business with me. And don't make any more bets. Man only has to look in your face to see you weren't cut out to be a gambler. " So I took the money and went home and put it under the floor-mat of the old Chevy and lay next to your mother and didn't sleep a wink all night long because I felt filthy. Next day I gave the tens to the engineer I bet with, and he counted them out, and then he just folded them over and tucked them into one of his shirt pockets and buttoned the flap like that cash didn't mean any more than a gas receipt he'd have to turn in to the chief contractor at the end of the day. Then he clapped me on the shoulder and said, "Well, you're a good man, Johnny. Better than I thought. I won four hundred but I lost twenty to Bill Untermeyer. He bet you'd come up with the dough first thing this morning and I bet him I wouldn't see it till the end of the week. If I ever did." "I pay my debts," I said. "Easy, now," he said, and clapped me on the shoulder again, and I think that time I really did come close to popping his eyeballs out with my thumbs.'

'How much interest did Pop charge you, Dad?'

His father looked at him sharply. 'Does he let you call him that?'

'Yeah, why?'

'Watch out for him, then,' Mr Delevan said. 'He's a snake.'

Then he sighed, as if admitting to both of them that he was begging the question, and knew it. 'Ten per cent. That's what the interest was.'

'That's not so m -'

'Compounded weekly,' Mr Delevan added.

Kevin sat struck dumb for a moment. Then: 'But that's not legal!'

'How true,' Mr Delevan said dryly. He looked at the strained expression of incredulity on his son's face and his own strained look broke. He laughed and clapped his son on the shoulder. 'It's only the world, Kev,' he said. 'It kills us all in the end, anyhow.'

'But -'

'But nothing. That was the freight, and he knew I'd pay it. I knew they were hiring on the three-to-eleven shift at the mill over in Oxford. I told you I'd gotten myself ready to lose, and going to Pop wasn't the only thing I did. I'd talked to your mother, said I might take a shift over there for awhile. After all, she'd been wanting a newer car, and maybe to move to a better apartment, and get a little something into the bank in case we had some kind of financial setback.'

He laughed.

'Well, the financial setback had happened, and she didn't know it, and I meant to do my damndest to keep her from finding out. I didn't know if I could or not, but I meant to do my damndest. She

was dead set against it. She said I'd kill myself, working sixteen hours a day. She said those mills were dangerous, you were always reading about someone losing an arm or leg or even getting crushed to death under the rollers. I told her not to worry, I'd get a job in the sorting room, minimum wage but sit-down job, and if it really was too much, I'd give it up. She was still against it. She said she'd go to work herself, but I talked her out of that. That was the last thing I wanted, you know.'

Kevin nodded.

'I told her I'd quit in six months, eight at the outside, anyway. So I went up and they hired me on, but not in the sorting room. I got a job in the rolling shed, feeding raw stock into a machine that looked like the wringer on a giant's washing machine. It was dangerous work, all right; if you slipped or if your attention wandered - and it was hard to keep that from happening because it was so damned monotonous - you'd lose part of yourself or all of it. I saw a man lose his hand in a roller once and I never want to see anything like that again. It was like watching a charge of dynamite go off in a rubber glove stuffed with meat.'

'God-damn,' Kevin said. He had rarely said that in his father's presence, but his father did not seem to notice.

'Anyway, I got two dollars and eighty cents an hour, and after two months they bumped me to three ten,' he said. 'It was hell. I'd work on the road project all day long - at least it was early spring and not hot - and then race off to the mill, pushing that Chevy for all it was worth to keep from being late. I'd take off my khakis and just about jump into a pair of blue-jeans and a tee-shirt and work the rollers from three until eleven. I'd get home around midnight and the worst part was the nights when your mother waited up - which she did two or three nights a week - and I'd have to act cheery and full of pep when I could hardly walk a straight line, I was so tired. But if she'd seen that -'

'She would have made you stop.'

'Yes. She would. So I'd act bright and chipper and tell her funny stories about the sorting room where I wasn't working and sometimes I'd wonder what would happen if she ever decided to drive up some night to give me a hot dinner, or something like that. I did a pretty good job, but some of it must have showed, because she kept telling me I was silly to be knocking myself out for so little - and it really did seem like chicken-feed once the government dipped their beak and Pop dipped his. It seemed like just about what a fellow working in the sorting room for minimum wage would clear. They paid Wednesday afternoons, and I always made sure to cash my check in the office before the girls went home.

'Your mother never saw one of those checks.

'The first week I paid Pop fifty dollars - forty was interest, and ten was on the four hundred, which left three hundred and ninety owing. I was like a walking zombie. On the road job I'd sit in my car at lunch, eat my sandwich, and then sleep until the foreman rang his goddamned bell. I hated that bell.

'I paid him fifty dollars the second week - thirty-nine was interest, eleven was on the principal - and I had it down to three hundred and seventy-nine dollars. I felt like a bird trying to eat a mountain one peck at a time.

'The third week I almost went into the roller myself, and it scared me so bad I woke up for a few minutes - enough to have an idea, anyway, so I guess it was a blessing in disguise. I had to give up smoking. I couldn't understand why I hadn't seen it before. In those days a pack of smokes cost forty cents.

I smoked two packs a day. That was five dollars and sixty cents a week!

'We had a cigarette break every two hours and I looked at my pack of Tareytons and saw I had ten, maybe twelve. I made those cigarettes last a week and a half, and I never bought another pack.

'I spent a month not knowing if I could make it or not. There were days when the alarm went off at six o'clock and I knew I couldn't, that I'd just have to tell Mary and take whatever she wanted to dish out. But by the time the second month started, I knew I was probably going to be all right. I think to this day it was the extra five sixty a week - that, and all the returnable beer and soda bottles I could pick up along the sides of the road - that made the difference. I had the principal down to three hundred, and that meant I could knock off twenty-five, twenty-six dollars a week from it, more as time went on.

'Then, in late April, we finished the road project and got a week off, with pay. I told Mary I was getting ready to quit my job at the mill and she said thank God, and I spent that week off from my regular job working all the hours I could get at the mill, because it was time and a half. I never had an accident. I saw them, saw men fresher and more awake than I was have them, but I never did. I don't know why. At the end of that week I gave Pop Merrill a hundred dollars and gave my week's notice at the paper mill. After that last week I had whittled the nut down enough so I could chip the rest off my regular pay-check without your mother noticing.'

He fetched a deep sigh.

'Now you know how I know Pop Merrill, and why I don't trust him. I spent ten weeks in hell and he reaped the sweat off my forehead and my ass, too, in ten-dollar bills that he undoubtedly took out of that Crisco can or another one and passed on to some other sad sack who had got himself in the same kind of mess I did.'

'Boy, you must hate him.'

'No,' Mr Delevan said, getting up. 'I don't hate him and I don't hate myself. I got a fever, that's all. It could have been worse. My

marriage could have died of it, and you and Meg never would have been born ' Kevin. Or I might have died of it myself. Pop Merrill was the cure. He was a hard cure, but he worked. What's hard to forgive is how he worked. He took every damned cent and wrote it down in a book in a drawer under his cash register and looked at the circles under my eyes and the way my pants had gotten a way of hanging off my hip-bones and he said nothing.'

They walked toward the Emporium Galorium, which was painted the dusty faded yellow of signs left too long in country store windows, its false front both obvious and unapologetic. Next to it, Polly Chalmers was sweeping her walk and talking to Alan Pangborn, the county sheriff. She looked young and fresh with her hair pulled back in a horsetail; he looked young and heroic in his neatly pressed uniform. But things were not always the way they looked; even Kevin, at fifteen, knew that. Sheriff Pangborn had lost his wife and youngest son in a car accident that spring, and Kevin had heard that Ms Chalmers, young or not, had a bad case of arthritis and might be crippled up with it before too many more years passed. Things were not always the way they looked. This thought caused him to glance toward the Emporium Galorium again ... and then to look down at his birthday camera, which he was carrying in his hand.

'He even did me a favor,' Mr Delevan mused. 'He got me to quit smoking. But I don't trust him. Walk careful around him, Kevin. And no matter what, let me do the talking. I might know him a little better now.'

So they went into the dusty ticking silence, where Pop Merrill waited for them by the door, with his glasses propped on the bald dome of his head and a trick or two still up his sleeve.

CHAPTER 6

'Well, and here you are, father and son,' Pop said, giving them an admiring, grandfatherly smile. His eyes twinkled behind a haze of pipe-smoke and for a moment, although he was clean-shaven, Kevin thought Pop looked like Father Christmas. 'You've got a fine boy, Mr Delevan. Fine.'

'I know,' Mr Delevan said. 'I was upset when I heard he'd been dealing with you because I want him to stay that way.'

'That's hard,' Pop said, with the faintest touch of reproach. 'That's hard comin from a man who when he had nowhere else to turn

'That's over,' Mr Delevan said.

'Ayuh, ayuh, that's just what I mean to say.'

'But this isn't.'

'It will be,' Pop said. He held a hand out to Kevin and Kevin gave him the Sun camera. 'It will be today.' He held the camera up, turning it over in his hands. 'This is a piece of work. What kind of piece I don't know, but your boy wants to smash it because he thinks it's dangerous. I think he's right. But I told him, "You don't want your daddy to think you're a sissy, do you?" That's the only reason I had him ho you down here, John -'

'I liked "Mr Delevan" better.'

'All right,' Pop said, and sighed. 'I can see you ain't gonna warm up none and let bygones be bygones.'

'No.'

Kevin looked from one man to the other, his face distressed.

'Well, it don't matter,' Pop said; both his voice and face went cold with remarkable suddenness, and he didn't look like Father Christmas at all. 'When I said the past is the past and what's done is done, I meant it ... except when it affects what people do in the here and now. But I'm gonna say this, Mr Delevan: I don't bottom deal, and you know it.'

Pop delivered this magnificent lie with such flat coldness that both of them believed it; Mr Delevan even felt a little ashamed of himself, as incredible as that was.

'Our business was our business. You told me what you wanted, I told you what I'd have to have in return, and you give it to me, and there was an end to it. This is another thing.' And then Pop told a lie even more magnificent, a he which was simply too towering to be disbelieved. 'I got no stake in this, Mr Delevan. There is nothing I want but to help your boy. I like him.'

He smiled and Father Christmas was back so fast and strong that Kevin forgot he had ever been gone. Yet more than this: John Delevan, who had for months worked himself to the edge of exhaustion and perhaps even death between the rollers in order to pay the exorbitant price this man demanded to atone for a momentary lapse into insanity - John Delevan forgot that other expression, too.

Pop led them along the twisting aisles, through the smell of dead newsprint and past the tick-tock clocks, and he put the Sun 660 casually down on the worktable a little too near the edge (just as Kevin had done in his own house after taking that first picture) and then just went on toward the stairs at the back which led up to his little apartment. There was a dusty old mirror propped against the wall back there, and Pop looked into it, watching to see if the boy or his father would pick the camera up or move it further away from the edge. He didn't think either would, but it was possible.

They spared it not so much as a passing glance and as Pop led them up the narrow stairway with the ancient eroded rubber treads he grinned in a way it would have been bad business for anyone to see and thought, Damn, I'm good!

He opened the door and they went into the apartment.

Neither John nor Kevin Delevan had ever been in Pop's private quarters, and John knew of no one who had. In a way this was not surprising; no one was ever going to nominate Pop as the town's number-one citizen. John thought it was not impossible that the old fuck had a friend or two - the world never exhausted its oddities, it seemed - but if so, he didn't know who they were.

And Kevin spared a fleeting thought for Mr Baker, his favorite teacher. He wondered if, perchance, Mr Baker had ever gotten into the sort of crack he'd need a fellow like Pop to get him out of. This seemed as unlikely to him as the idea of Pop having friends seemed to his father ... but then, an hour ago the idea that his own father ...

Well. It was best let go, perhaps.

Pop did have a friend (or at least an acquaintance) or two, but he didn't bring them here. He didn't want to. It was his place, and it came closer to revealing his true nature than he wanted anyone to see. It struggled to be neat and couldn't get there. The wallpaper was marked with water-stains; they weren't glaring, but stealthy and brown, like the phantom thoughts that trouble anxious minds. There were crusty dishes in the old-fashioned deep sink, and although the table was clean and the lid on the plastic waste-can was shut, there was an odor of sardines and something else - unwashed feet, maybe - which was almost not there. An odor as stealthy as the water-stains on the wallpaper.

The living room was tiny. Here the smell was not of sardines and (maybe) feet but of old pipe-smoke. Two windows looked out on nothing more scenic than the alley that ran behind Mulberry Street,

and while their panes showed some signs of having been washed - at least swiped at occasionally - the corners were bleared and greasy with years of condensed smoke. The whole place had an air of nasty things swept under the faded hooked rugs and hidden beneath the old-fashioned, overstuffed easy-chair and sofa. Both of these articles were light green, and your eye wanted to tell you they matched but couldn't, because they didn't. Not quite.

The only new things in the room were a large Mitsubishi television with a twenty-five-inch screen and a VCR on the endtable beside it. To the left of the endtable was a rack which caught Kevin's eye because it was totally empty. Pop had thought it best to put the better than seventy fuck-movies he owned in the closet for the time being.

One video cassette rested on top of the television in an unmarked case.

'Sit down,' Pop said, gesturing at the lumpy couch. He went over to the TV and slipped the cassette out of its case.

Mr Delevan looked at the couch with a momentary expression of doubt, as if he thought it might have bugs, and then sat down gingerly. Kevin sat beside him. The fear was back, stronger than ever.

Pop turned on the VCR, slid the cassette in, and then pushed the carriage down. 'I know a fellow up the city,' he began (to residents of Castle Rock and its neighboring towns, 'up the city' always meant Lewiston), 'who's run a camera store for twenty years or so. He got into the VCR business as soon as it started up, said it was going to be the wave of the future. He wanted me to go halves with him, but I thought he was nuts. Well, I was wrong on that one, is what I mean to say, but -'

'Get to the point,' Kevin's father said.

'I'm tryin,' Pop said, wide-eyed and injured. 'If you'll let me.'

Kevin pushed his elbow gently against his father's side, and Mr Delevan said no more.

'Anyway, a couple of years ago he found out rentin tapes for folks to watch wasn't the only way to make money with these gadgets. If you was willing to lay out as little as eight hundred bucks, you could take people's movies and snapshots and put em on a tape for em. Lots easier to watch.'

Kevin made a little involuntary noise and Pop smiled and nodded.

'Ayuh. You took fifty-eight pitchers with that camera of yours, and we all saw each one was a little different than the last one, and I guess we knew what it meant, but I wanted to see for myself. You don't have to be from Missouri to say show me, is what I mean to say.'

'You tried to make a movie out of those snapshots?' Mr Delevan asked.

'Didn't try,' Pop said. 'Did. Or rather, the fella I know up the city did. But it was my idea.'

'Is it a movie?' Kevin asked. He understood what Pop had done, and part of him was even chagrined that he hadn't thought of it himself, but mostly he was awash in wonder (and delight) at the idea.

'Look for yourself,' Pop said, and turned on the TV. 'Fifty-eight pitchers. When this fella does snapshots for folks, he generally videotapes each one for five seconds - long enough to get a good look, he says, but not long enough to get bored before you go on to the next one. I told him I wanted each of these on for just a single second, and to run them right together with no fades.'

Kevin remembered a game he used to play in grade school when he had finished some lesson and had free time before the next one

began. He had a little dime pad of paper which was called a Rain-Bo Skool Pad because there would be thirty pages of little yellow sheets, then thirty pages of little pink sheets, then thirty pages of green, and so on. To play the game, you went to the very last page and at the bottom you drew a stick-man wearing baggy shorts and holding his arms out. On the next page you drew the same stick-man in the same place and wearing the same baggy shorts, only this time you drew his arms further up ... but just a little bit. You did that on every page until the arms came together over the stick-man's head. Then, if you still had time, you went on drawing the stick-man, but now with the arms going down. And if you flipped the pages very fast when you were done, you had a crude sort of cartoon which showed a boxer celebrating a KO: he raised his hands over his head, clasped them, shook them, lowered them.

He shivered. His father looked at him. Kevin shook his head and murmured, 'Nothing.'

'So what I mean to say is the tape only runs about a minute,' Pop said. 'You got to look close. Ready?'

No, Kevin thought.

'I guess so,' Mr Delevan said. He was still trying to sound grumpy and put-out, but Kevin could tell he had gotten interested in spite of himself.

'Okay,' Pop Merrill said, and pushed the PLAY button.

Kevin told himself over and over again that it was stupid to feel scared. He told himself this and it didn't do a single bit of good.

He knew what he was going to see, because he and Meg had both noticed the Sun was doing something besides simply reproducing the same image over and over, like a photocopier; it did not take long for them to realize that the photographs were expressing movement from one to the next.

'Look,' Meg had said. 'The dog's moving!'

Instead of responding with one of the friendly-but-irritating wisecracks he usually reserved for his little sister, Kevin had said, 'It does look like it ... but you can't tell for sure, Meg.'

'Yes, you can,' she said. They were in his room, where he had been morosely looking at the camera. It sat on the middle of his desk with his new schoolbooks, which he had been meaning to cover, pushed to one side. Meg had bent the goose-neck of his study-lamp so it shone a bright circle of light on the middle of his desk blotter. She moved the camera aside and put the first picture - the one with the dab of cake-frosting on it - in the center of the light. 'Count the fence-posts between the dog's behind and the righthand edge of the picture,' she said.

'Those are pickets, not fence-posts,' he told her. 'Like what you do when your nose goes on strike.'

'Ha-ha. Count them.'

He did. He could see four, and part of a fifth, although the dog's scraggly hindquarters obscured most of that one.

'Now look at this one.'

She put the fourth Polaroid in front of him. Now he could see all of the fifth picket, and part of a sixth.

So he knew - or believed - he was going to see a cross between a very old cartoon and one of those 'flip-books' he used to make in grammar school when the time weighed heavy on his hands.

The last twenty-five seconds of the tape were indeed like that, although, Kevin thought, the flip-books he had drawn in the second grade were really better ... the perceived action of the boxer raising and lowering his hands smoother. In the last twenty-five seconds of

the videotape the action moved in rams and jerks which made the old Keystone Kops silent films look like marvels of modern filmmaking in comparison.

Still, the key word was action, and it held all of them - even Pop - spellbound. They watched the minute of footage three times without saying a word. There was no sound but breathing: Kevin's fast and smooth through his nose, his father's deeper, Pop's a phlegmy rattle in his narrow chest.

And the first thirty seconds or so ...

He had expected action, he supposed; there was action in the flip-books, and there was action in the Saturday-morning cartoons, which were just a slightly more sophisticated version of the flip-books, but what he had not expected was that for the first thirty seconds of the tape it wasn't like watching notebook pages rapidly thumbed or even a primitive cartoon like Possible Possum on TV: for thirty seconds (twenty-eight, anyway), his single Polaroid photographs looked eerily like a real movie. Not a Hollywood movie, of course, not even a low-budget horror movie of the sort Megan sometimes pestered him to rent for their own VCR when their mother and father went out for the evening; it was more like a snippet of home movie made by someone who has just gotten an eight-millimeter camera and doesn't know how to use it very well yet.

In those first twenty-eight seconds, the black no-breed dog walked with barely perceptible jerks along the fence, exposing five, six, seven pickets; it even paused to sniff a second time at one of them, apparently reading another of those canine telegrams. Then it walked on, head down and toward the fence, hindquarters switched out toward the camera. And, halfway through this first part, Kevin noted something else he hadn't seen before: the photographer had apparently swung his camera to keep the dog in the frame. If he (or she) hadn't done so, the dog would have simply walked out of the picture, leaving nothing to look at but the fence. The pickets at the

far right of the first two or three photographs disappeared beyond the righthand border of the picture and new pickets appeared at the left. You could tell, because the tip of one of those two rightmost pickets had been broken off. Now it was no longer in the frame.

The dog started to sniff again ... and then its head came up. Its good ear stiffened; the one which had been slashed and laid limp in some long-ago fight tried to do the same. There was no sound, but Kevin felt with a certainty beyond repudiation that the dog had begun to growl. The dog had sensed something or someone. What or who?

Kevin looked at the shadow they had at first dismissed as the branch of a tree or maybe a phone-pole and knew.

Its head began to turn ... and that was when the second half of this strange 'film' began, thirty seconds of snap-jerk action that made your head ache and your eyeballs hot. Pop had had a hunch, Kevin thought, or maybe he had even read about something like this before. Either way, it had proved out and was too obvious to need stating. With the pictures taken quite closely together, if not exactly one after another, the action in the makeshift 'movie' almost flowed. Not quite, but almost. But when the time between photographs was spaced, what they were watching became something that nauseated your eye because it wanted to see either a moving picture or a series of still photographs and instead it saw both and neither.

Time was passing in that flat Polaroid world. Not at the same speed it passed in this

(real?)

one, or the sun would have come up (or gone down) over there three times already and whatever the dog was going to do would be done (if it had something to do), and if it did not, it would just be gone and there would be only the moveless and seemingly eternal eroded picket fence guarding the listless patch of lawn, but it was passing.

The dog's head was coming around to face the photographer, owner of the shadow, like the head of a dog in the grip of a fit: at one moment the face and even the shape of the head was obscured by that floppy ear; then you saw one black-brown eye enclosed by a round and somehow mucky corona that made Kevin think of a spoiled egg-white; then you saw half the muzzle with the lips appearing slightly wrinkled, as if the dog were getting ready to bark or growl; and last of all you saw three-quarters of a face somehow more awful than the face of any mere dog had a right to be, even a mean one. The white spackles along its muzzle suggested it was no longer young. At the very end of the tape you saw the dog's lips were indeed pulling back. There was one blink of white Kevin thought was a tooth. He didn't see that until the third run-through. It was the eye that held him. It was homicidal. This breedless dog almost screamed rogue. And it was nameless; he knew that, as well. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that no Polaroid man or Polaroid woman or Polaroid child had ever named that Polaroid dog; it was a stray, born stray, raised stray, grown old and mean stray, the avatar of all the dogs who had ever wandered the world, unnamed and unhomed, killing chickens, eating garbage out of the cans they had long since learned to knock over, sleeping in culverts and beneath the porches of deserted houses. Its wits would be dim, but its instincts would be sharp and red. It ..

When Pop Merrill spoke, Kevin was so deeply and fundamentally startled out of his thoughts that he nearly screamed.

'The man who took those pitchers,' he said. 'If there was a person, is what I mean to say. What do you suppose happened to him?'

Pop had frozen the last frame with his remote control. A line of static ran through the picture. Kevin wished it ran through the dog's eye, but the line was below it. That eye stared out at them, baleful, stupidly murderous - no, not stupidly, not entirely, that was what made it not merely frightening but terrifying -and no one needed to answer Pop's question. You needed no more pictures to understand

what was going to happen next. The dog had perhaps heard something: of course it had, and Kevin knew what. It had heard that squidgy little whine.

Further pictures would show it continuing to turn, and then beginning to fill more and more of each frame until there was nothing to see but dog - no listless patchy lawn, no fence, no sidewalk, no shadow. Just the dog.

Who meant to attack.

Who meant to kill, if it could.

Kevin's dry voice seemed to be coming from someone else. 'I don't think it likes getting its picture taken,' he said.

Pop's short laugh was like a bunch of dry twigs broken over a knee for kindling.

'Rewind it,' Mr Delevan said.

'You want to see the whole thing again?' Pop asked.

'No - just the last ten seconds or so.'

Pop used the remote control to go back, then ran it again. The dog turned its head, as jerky as a robot which is old and running down but still dangerous, and Kevin wanted to tell them, Stop now. Just stop. That's enough. Just stop and let's break the camera. Because there was something else, wasn't there? Something he didn't want to think about but soon would, like it or not; he could feel it breaching in his mind like the broad back of a whale.

'Once more,' Mr Delevan said. 'Frame by frame this time. Can you do that?'

'Ayuh,' Pop said. 'Goddam machine does everything but the laundry.'

This time one frame, one picture, at a time. It was not like a robot now, or not exactly, but like some weird clock, something that belonged with Pop's other specimens downstairs. jerk. Jerk. Jerk. The head coming around. Soon they would be faced by that merciless, not-quite-idiotic eye again.

'What's that?' Mr Delevan asked.

'What's what?' Pop asked, as if he didn't know it was the thing the boy hadn't wanted to talk about the other day, the thing, he was convinced, that had made up the boy's mind about destroying the camera once and for all.

'Underneath its neck,' Mr Delevan said, and pointed. 'It's not wearing a collar or a tag, but it's got something around its neck on a string or a thin rope.'

'I dunno,' Pop said imperturbably. 'Maybe your boy does. Young folks have sharper eyes than us old fellas.'

Mr Delevan turned to look at Kevin. 'Can you make it out?'

He fell silent. 'It's really small.'

His mind returned to what his father had said when they were leaving the house. If she never asks you, you never have to tell her ... That's just the way we do things in the grown-up world. Just now he had asked Kevin if he could make out what that thing under the dog's neck was. Kevin hadn't really answered that question; he had said something else altogether. It's really small. And it was. The fact that he knew what it was in spite of that ... well ...

What had his father called it? Skating up to the edge of a lie?

And he couldn't actually see it. Not actually. just the same, he knew. The eye only suggested; the heart understood. just as his heart

understood that, if he was right, the camera must be destroyed. Must be.

At that moment, Pop Merrill was suddenly struck by an agreeable inspiration. He got up and snapped off the TV. 'I've got the pitchers downstairs,' he said. 'Brought em back with the videotape. I seen that thing m'self, and ran my magnifying glass over it, but still couldn't tell ... but it does look familiar, God cuss it. just let me go get the pitchers and m'glass.'

'We might as well go down with you,' Kevin said, which was the last thing in the world Pop wanted, but then Delevan stepped in, God bless him, and said he might like to look at the tape again after they looked at the last couple of pictures under the magnifying glass.

'Won't take a minute,' Pop said, and was gone, sprightly as a bird hopping from twig to twig on an apple tree, before either of them could have protested, if either had had a mind to.

Kevin did not. That thought had finally breached its monstrous back in his mind, and, like it or not, he was forced to contemplate it.

It was simple, as a whale's back is simple - at least to the eye of one who does not study whales for a living - and it was colossal in the same way.

It wasn't an idea but a simple certainty. It had to do with that odd flatness Polaroids always seemed to have, with the way they showed you things only in two dimensions, although all photographs did that; it was that other photographs seemed to at least suggest a third dimension, even those taken with a simple Kodak 110.

The things in his photographs, photographs which showed things he had never seen through the Sun's viewfinder or anywhere else, for that matter, were that same way: flatly, unapologetically two-dimensional.

Except for the dog.

The dog wasn't flat. The dog wasn't meaningless, a thing you could recognize but which had no emotional impact. The dog not only seemed to suggest three dimensions but to really have them, the way a hologram seems to really have them, or one of those 3-D movies where you had to wear special glasses to reconcile the double images.

It's not a Polaroid dog, Kevin thought, and it doesn't belong in the world Polaroids take pictures of. That's crazy, I know it is, but I also know it's true. So what does it mean? Why is my camera taking pictures of it over and over ... and what Polaroid man or Polaroid woman is snapping pictures of it? Does he or she even see it? If it is a three-dimensional dog in a two-dimensional world, maybe he or she doesn't see it ... can't see it. They say for us time is the fourth dimension, and we know it's there, but we can't see it. We can't even really feel it pass, although sometimes, especially when we're bored, I guess, it seems like we can.

But when you got right down to it, all that might not even matter, and the questions were far too tough for him, anyway. There were other questions that seemed more important to him, vital questions, maybe even mortal ones.

Like why was the dog in his camera?

Did it want something of him, or just of anybody? At first he had thought the Answer was anybody, anybody would do because anybody could take pictures of it and the movement always advanced. But the thing around its neck, that thing that wasn't a collar ... that had to do with him, Kevin Delevan, and nobody else. Did it want to do something to him? If the answer to that question was yes, you could forget all the other ones, because it was pretty goddamned obvious what the dog wanted to do. It was in its murky

eye, in the snarl you could just see beginning. He thought it wanted two things.

First to escape.

Then to kill.

There's a man or woman over there with a camera who maybe doesn't even see that dog, Kevin thought, and if the photographer can't see the dog, maybe the dog can't see the photographer, and so the photographer is safe. But if the dog really is three-dimensional, maybe he sees out - maybe he sees whoever is using my camera. Maybe it's still not me, or not specifically me; maybe whoever is using the camera is its target.

Still - the thing it was wearing around its neck. What about that?

He thought of the cur's dark eyes, saved from stupidity by a single malevolent spark. God knew how the dog had gotten into that Polaroid world in the first place, but when its picture was taken, it could see out, and it wanted to get out, and Kevin believed in his heart that it wanted to kill him first, the thing it was wearing around its neck said it wanted to kill him first, proclaimed that it wanted to kill him first, but after that?

Why, after Kevin, anyone would do.

Anyone at all.

In a way it was like another game you played when you were a little kid, wasn't it? It was like Giant Step. The dog had been walking along the fence. The dog had heard the Polaroid, that squidgy little whine. It turned, and saw ... what? Its own world or universe? A world or universe enough like its own so it saw or sensed it could or at least might be able to live and hunt here? It didn't matter. Now, every time someone took a picture of it, the dog would get closer. It

would get closer and closer until ... well, until what? Until it burst through, somehow?

'That's stupid,' he muttered. 'It'd never fit.'

'What?' his father asked, roused from his own musings.

'Nothing,' Kevin said. 'I was just talking to myse -'

Then, from downstairs, muffled but audible, they heard Pop Merrill cry out in mingled dismay, irritation, and surprise: 'Well shit fire and save matches! Goddammit!'

Kevin and his father looked at each other, startled.

'Let's go see what happened,' his father said, and got up. 'I hope he didn't fall down and break his arm, or something. I mean, part of me does hope it, but ... you know.'

Kevin thought: What if he's been taking pictures? What if that dog's down there?

It hadn't sounded like fear in the old man's voice, and of course there really was no way a dog that looked as big as a medium-sized German shepherd could come through either a camera the size of the Sun 660 or one of the prints it made. You might as well try to drag a washing machine through a knothole.

Still, he felt fear enough for both of them - for all three of them - as he followed his father back down the stairs to the gloomy bazaar below.

Going down the stairs, Pop Merrill was as happy as a clam at high tide.

He had been prepared to make the switch right in front of them if he had to. Might have been a problem if it had just been the boy, who

was still a year or so away from thinking he knew everything, but the boy's dad - ah, fooling that fine fellow would have been like stealing a bottle from a baby. Had he told the boy about the jam he'd gotten into that time? From the way the boy looked at him - a new, cautious way - Pop thought Delevan probably had. And what else had the father told the son? Well, let's see. Does he let you call him Pop? That means he's planning to pull a fast one on you. That was for starters. He's a lowdown snake in the grass, son. That was for seconds. And, of course, there was the prize of them all: Let me do the talking, boy. I know him better than you do. You just let me handle everything. Men like Delevan were to Pop Merrill what a nice platter of fried chicken was to some folks - tender, tasty, juicy, and all but falling off the bone. Once Delevan had been little more than a kid himself, and he would never fully understand that it wasn't Pop who had stuck his tit in the wringer but he himself. The man could have gone to his wife and she would have tapped that old biddy aunt of hers whose tight little ass was lined with hundred-dollar bills, and Delevan would have spent some time in the doghouse, but she would have let him out in time. He not only hadn't seen it that way; he hadn't seen it at all. And now, for no reason but idiot time, which came and went without any help from anyone, he thought he knew all there was to know about Reginald Marion Merrill.

Which was just the way Pop liked it.

Why, he could have swapped one camera for the other right in front of the man instead and Delevan never would have seen a goddamned thing - that was how sure he was he had old Pop figured out.

But this was better.

You never ever asked Lady Luck for a date; she had a way of standing men up just when they needed her the most. But if she showed up on her own ... well, it was wise to drop whatever it was you were doing and take her out and wine her and dine her just as

lavishly as you could. That was one bitch who always put out if you treated her right.

So he went quickly to the worktable, bent, and extracted the Polaroid 660 with the broken lens from the shadows underneath. He put it on the table, fished a key-ring from his pocket (with one quick glance over his shoulder to be sure neither of them had decided to come down after all), and selected the small key which opened the locked drawer that formed the entire left side of the table. In this deep drawer were a number of gold Krugerrands; a stamp album in which the least valuable stamp was worth six hundred dollars in the latest Scott Stamp Catalogue; a coin collection worth approximately nineteen thousand dollars; two dozen glossy photographs of a bleary-eyed woman having sexual congress with a Shetland pony; and an amount of cash totalling just over two thousand dollars.

The cash, which he stowed in a variety of tin cans, was Pop's loan-out money. John Delevan would have recognized the bills. They were all crumpled tens.

Pop deposited Kevin's Sun 660 in this drawer, locked it, and put his key-ring back in his pocket. Then he pushed the camera with the broken lens off the edge of the worktable (again) and cried out 'Well shit fire and save matches! Goddammit!' loud enough for them to hear.

Then he arranged his face in the proper expression of dismay and chagrin and waited for them to come running to see what had happened.

'Pop?' Kevin cried. 'Mr Merrill? Are you okay?'

'Ayuh,' he said. 'Didn't hurt nothin but my goddam pride. That camera's just bad luck, I guess. I bent over to open the tool-drawer, is what I mean to say, and I knocked the fuckin thing right off onto the floor. Only I guess it didn't come through s'well this time. I dunno if I should say I'm sorry or not. I mean, you was gonna -'

He held the camera apologetically out to Kevin, who took it, looked at the broken lens and shattered plastic of the housing around it. 'No, it's okay,' Kevin told him, turning the camera over in his hands - but he did not handle it in the same gingerly, tentative way he had before: as if it might really be constructed not of plastic and glass but some sort of explosive. 'I meant to bust it up, anyhow.'

'Guess I saved you the trouble.'

'I'd feel better -' Kevin began.

'Ayuh, ayuh. I feel the same way about mice. Laugh if you want to, but when I catch one in a trap and it's dead, I beat it with a broom anyway. just to be sure, is what I mean to say.'

Kevin smiled faintly, then looked at his father. 'He said he's got a chopping block out back, Dad -'

'Got a pretty good sledge in the shed, too, if ain't nobody took it.'

'Do you mind, Dad?'

'It's your camera, Kev,' Delevan said. He flicked a distrustful glance at Pop, but it was a glance that said he distrusted Pop on general principles, and not for any specific reason. 'But if it will make you feel any better, I think it's the right decision.'

'Good,' Kevin said. He felt a tremendous weight go off his shoulders - no, it was from his heart that the weight was lifted. With the lens broken, the camera was surely useless ... but he wouldn't feel really at ease until he saw it in fragments around Pop's chopping block. He turned it over in his hands, front to back and back to front, amused and amazed at how much he liked the broken way it looked and felt.

'I think I owe you the cost of that camera, Delevan,' Pop said, knowing exactly how the man would respond.

'No,' Delevan said. 'Let's smash it and forget this whole crazy thing ever hap -' He paused. 'I almost forgot - we were going to look at those last few photos under your magnifying glass. I wanted to see if I could make out the thing that dog's wearing. I keep thinking it looks familiar.'

'We can do that after we get rid of the camera, can't we?' Kevin asked. 'Okay, Dad?'

'Sure.'

'And then,' Pop said, 'it might not be such a bad idea to burn the pitchers themselves. You could do it right in my stove.'

'I think that's a great idea,' Kevin said. 'What do you think, Dad?'

'I think Mrs Merrill never raised any fools,' his father said.

'Well,' Pop said, smiling enigmatically from behind folds of rising blue smoke, 'there was five of us, you know.'

The day had been bright blue when Kevin and his father walked down to the Emporium Galorium; a perfect autumn day. Now it was four-thirty, the sky had mostly clouded over, and it looked like it might rain before dark. The first real chill of the fall touched Kevin's hands. It would chap them red if he stayed out long enough, but he had no plans to. His mom would be home in half an hour, and already he wondered what she would say when she saw Dad was with him, and what his dad would say.

But that was for later.

Kevin set the Sun 660 on the chopping block in the little backyard, and Pop Merrill handed him a sledgehammer. The haft was worn smooth with usage. The head was rusty, as if someone had left it carelessly out in the rain not once or twice but many times. Yet it would do the job, all right. Kevin had no doubt of that. The Polaroid,

its lens broken and most of the housing around it shattered as well, looked fragile and defenseless sitting there on the block's chipped, chunked, and splintered surface, where you expected to see a length of ash or maple waiting to be split in two.

Kevin set his hands on the sledgehammer's smooth handle and tightened them.

'You're sure, son?' Mr Delevan asked.

'Yes.'

'Okay.' Kevin's father glanced at his own watch. 'Do it, then.'

Pop stood to one side with his pipe clamped between his wretched teeth, hands in his back pockets. He looked shrewdly from the boy to the man and then back to the boy, but said nothing.

Kevin lifted the sledgehammer and, suddenly surprised by an anger at the camera he hadn't even known he felt, he brought it down with all the force he could muster.

Too hard, he thought. You're going to miss it, be lucky not to mash your own foot, and there it will sit, not much more than a piece of hollow plastic a little kid could stomp flat without half trying, and even if you're lucky enough to miss your foot, Pop will look at you. He won't say anything; he won't have to. It'll all be in the way he looks at you.

And thought also: It doesn't matter if I hit it or not. It's magic, some kind of magic camera, and you CAN'T break it. Even if you hit it dead on the money the sledge will just bounce off it, like bullets off Superman's chest.

But then there was no more time to think anything, because the sledge connected squarely with the camera. Kevin really had swung much too hard to maintain anything resembling control, but he got

lucky. And the sledgehammer didn't just bounce back up, maybe hitting Kevin square between the eyes and killing him, like the final twist in a horror Story.

The Sun didn't so much shatter as detonate. Black plastic flew everywhere. A long rectangle with a shiny black square at one end - a picture which would never be taken, Kevin supposed - fluttered to the bare ground beside the chopping block and lay there, face down.

There was a moment of silence so complete they could hear not only the cars on Lower Main Street but kids playing tag half a block away in the parking lot behind Wardell's Country Store, which had gone bankrupt two years before and had stood vacant ever since.

'Well, that's that,' Pop said. 'You swung that sledge just like Paul Bunyan, Kevin! I should smile n kiss a pig if you didn't.'

'No need to do that,' he said, now addressing Mr Delevan, who was picking up broken chunks of plastic as prissily as a man picking up the pieces of a glass he has accidentally knocked to the floor and shattered. 'I have a boy comes in and cleans up the yard every week or two. I know it don't look much as it is, but if I didn't have that kid ... Glory!'

'Then maybe we ought to use your magnifying glass and take a look at those pictures,' Mr Delevan said, standing up. He dropped the few pieces of plastic he had picked up into a rusty incinerator that stood nearby and then brushed off his hands.

'Fine by me,' Pop said.

'Then burn them,' Kevin reminded. 'Don't forget that.'

'I didn't,' Pop said. 'I'll feel better when they're gone, too.'

'Jesus!' John Delevan said. He was bending over Pop Merrill's worktable, looking through the lighted magnifying glass at the

second-to-last photograph. It was the one in which the object around the dog's neck showed most clearly; in the last photo, the object had swung back in the other direction again. 'Kevin, look at that and tell me if it's what I think it is.'

Kevin took the magnifying glass and looked. He had known, of course, but even so it still wasn't a look just for form's sake. Clyde Tombaugh must have looked at an actual photograph of the planet Pluto for the first time with the same fascination. Tombaugh had known it was there; calculations showing similar distortions in the orbital paths of Neptune and Uranus had made Pluto not just a possibility but a necessity. Still, to know a thing was there, even to know what it was ... that did not detract from the fascination of actually seeing it for the first time.

He let go of the switch and handed the glass back to Pop. 'Yeah,' he said to his father. 'It's what you think it is.' His voice was as flat as ... as flat as the things in that Polaroid world, he supposed, and he felt an urge to laugh. He kept the sound inside, not because it would have been inappropriate to laugh (although he supposed it would have been) but because the sound would have come out sounding ... well . . . flat.

Pop waited and when it became clear to him they were going to need a nudge, he said: 'Well, don't keep me hoppin from one foot to the other! What the hell is it?'

Kevin had felt reluctant to tell him before, and he felt reluctant now. There was no reason for it, but

Stop being so goddamned dumb! He helped you when you needed helping, no matter how he earns his dough. Tell him and bum the pictures and let's get out of here before all those clocks start striking five.

Yes. If he was around when that happened, he thought it would be the final touch; he would just go completely bananas and they could

cart him away to juniper Hill, raving about real dogs in Polaroid worlds and cameras that took the same picture over and over again except not quite.

'The Polaroid camera was a birthday present,' he heard himself saying in that same dry voice. 'What it's wearing around its neck was another one.'

Pop slowly pushed his glasses up onto his bald head and squinted at Kevin. 'I don't guess I'm followin you, son.'

'I have an aunt,' Kevin said. 'Actually she's my great-aunt, but we're not supposed to call her that, because she says it makes her feel old. Aunt Hilda. Anyway, Aunt Hilda's husband left her a lot of money - my mom says she's worth over a million dollars - but she's a tightwad.'

He stopped, leaving his father space to protest, but his father only smiled sourly and nodded. Pop Merrill, who knew all about that situation (there was not, in truth, much in Castle Rock and the surrounding areas Pop didn't know at least something about), simply held his peace and waited for the boy to get around to spilling it.

'She comes and spends Christmas with us every three years, and that's about the only time we go to church, because she goes to church. We have lots of broccoli when Aunt Hilda comes. None of us like it, and it just about makes my sister puke, but Aunt Hilda likes broccoli a lot, so we have it. There was a book on our summer reading list, Great Expectations, and there was a lady in it who was just like Aunt Hilda. She got her kicks dangling her money in front of her relatives. Her name was Miss Havisham, and when Miss Havisham said frog, people jumped. We jump, and I guess the rest of our family does, too.'

'Oh, your Uncle Randy makes your mother look like a piker,' Mr Delevan said unexpectedly. Kevin thought his dad meant it to sound amused in a cynical sort of way, but what came through was a deep,

acidic bitterness. 'When Aunt Hilda says frog in Randy's house, they all just about turn cartwheels over the roofbeams.'

'Anyway,' Kevin told Pop, 'she sends me the same thing for my birthday every year. I mean, each one is different, but each one's really the same.'

'What is it she sends you, boy?'

'A string tie,' Kevin said. 'Like the kind you see guys wearing in old-time country-music bands. It has something different on the clasp every year, but it's always a string tie.'

Pop snatched the magnifying glass and bent over the picture with it. 'Stone the crows!' he said, straightening up. 'A string tie! That's just what it is! Now how come I didn't see that?'

'Because it isn't the sort of thing a dog would wear around his neck, I guess,' Kevin said in that same wooden voice. They had been here for only forty-five minutes or so, but he felt as if he had aged another fifteen years. The thing to remember, his mind told him over and over, is that the camera is gone. It's nothing but splinters. Never mind all the King's horses and all the King's men; not even all the guys who work making cameras at the Polaroid factory in Schenectady could put that baby back together again.

Yes, and thank God. Because this was the end of the line. As far as Kevin was concerned, if he never encountered the supernatural again until he was eighty, never so much as brushed up against it, it would still be too soon.

'Also, it's very small,' Mr Delevan pointed out. 'I was there when Kevin took it out of the box, and we all knew what it was going to be. The only mystery was what would be on the clasp this year. We joked about it.'

'What is on the clasp?' Pop asked, peering into the photograph again ... or peering at it, anyway: Kevin would testify in any court in the land that peering into a Polaroid was simply impossible.

'A bird,' Kevin said. 'I'm pretty sure it's a woodpecker. And that's what the dog in the picture is wearing around its neck. A string tie with a woodpecker on the clasp.'

'Jesus!' Pop said. He was in his own quiet way one of the world's finest actors, but there was no need to simulate the surprise he felt now.

Mr Delevan abruptly swept all the Polaroids together. 'Let's put these goddam things in the woodstove,' he said.

When Kevin and his father got home, it was ten minutes past five and starting to drizzle. Mrs Delevan's two-year-old Toyota was not in the driveway, but she had been and gone. There was a note from her on the kitchen table, held down by the salt and pepper shakers. When Kevin unfolded the note, a ten-dollar bill fell out.

Dear Kevin,

At the bridge game Jane Doyon asked if Meg and I would like to have dinner with her at Bonanza as her husband is off to Pittsburgh on business and she's knocking around the house alone. I said we'd be delighted. Meg especially. You know how much she likes to be 'one of the girls'! Hope you don't mind eating in 'solitary splendor.' Why not order a pizza & some soda for yourself, and your father can order for himself when he gets home. He doesn't like reheated pizza & you know he'll want a couple of beers.

Luv you,

Mom

They looked at each other, both saying Well, there's one thing we don't have to worry about without having to say it out loud. Apparently neither she nor Meg had noticed that Mr Delevan's car was still in the garage.

'Do you want me to -' Kevin began, but there was no need to finish because his father cut across him: 'Yes. Check. Right now.'

Kevin went up the stairs by twos and into his room. He had a bureau and a desk. The bottom desk drawer was full of what Kevin simply thought of as 'stuff': things it would have seemed somehow criminal to throw away, although he had no real use for any of them. There was his grandfather's pocket-watch, heavy, scrolled, magnificent ... and so badly rusted that the jeweler in Lewiston he and his mother had brought it to only took one look, shook his head, and pushed it back across the counter. There were two sets of matching cufflinks and two orphans, a Penthouse gatefold, a paperback book called Gross Jokes, and a Sony Walkman which had for some reason developed a habit of eating the tapes it was supposed to play. It was just stuff, that was all. There was no other word that fit.

Part of the stuff, of course, was the thirteen string ties Aunt Hilda had sent him for his last thirteen birthdays.

He took them out one by one, counted, came up with twelve instead of thirteen, rooted through the stuff-drawer again, then counted again. Still twelve.

'Not there?'

Kevin, who had been squatting, cried out and leaped to his feet.

'I'm sorry,' Mr Delevan said from the doorway. 'That was dumb.'

'That's okay,' Kevin said. He wondered briefly how fast a person's heart could beat before the person in question simply blew his engine. 'I'm just ... on edge. Stupid.'

'It's not.' His father looked at him soberly. 'When I saw that tape, I got so scared I felt like maybe I'd have to reach into my mouth and push my stomach back down with my fingers.'

Kevin looked at his father gratefully.

'It's not there, is it?' Mr Delevan said. 'The one with the woodpecker or whatever in hell it was supposed to be?'

'No. It's not.'

'Did you keep the camera in that drawer?'

Kevin nodded his head slowly. 'Pop - Mr Merrill - said to let it rest every so often. That was part of the schedule he made out.'

Something tugged briefly at his mind, was gone.

'So I stuck it in there.'

'Boy,' Mr Delevan said softly.

'Yeah.'

They looked at each other in the gloom, and then suddenly Kevin smiled. It was like watching the sun burst through a raft of clouds.

'What?'

'I was remembering how it felt,' Kevin said. 'I swung that sledgehammer so hard -'

Mr Delevan began to smile, too. 'I thought you were going to take off your own damned and when it hit it made this CRUNCH! sound flew every damn whichway -'

'BOOM!' Kevin finished. 'Gone!'

They began to laugh together in Kevin's room, and Kevin found he was almost - almost - glad all this had happened. The sense of relief was as inexpressible and yet as perfect as the sensation one feels when, either by happy accident or by some psychic guidance, another person manages to scratch that one itchy place on one's back that one cannot scratch oneself, hitting it exactly, bang on the money, making it wonderfully worse for a single second by the simple touch, pressure, arrival, of those fingers ... and then, oh blessed relief.

It was like that with the camera and with his father's knowing.

'It's gone,' Kevin said. 'Isn't it?'

'As gone as Hiroshima after the Enola Gay dropped the A-bomb on it,' Mr Delevan replied, and then added: 'Smashed to shit, is what I mean to say.'

Kevin gawped at his father and then burst into helpless peals - screams, almost - of laughter. His father joined him. They ordered a loaded pizza shortly after. When Mary and Meg Delevan arrived home at twenty past seven, they both still had the giggles.

'Well, you two look like you've been up to no good,' Mrs Delevan said, a little puzzled. There was something in their hilarity that struck the woman centre of her - that deep part which the sex seems to tap into fully only in times of childbirth and disaster - as a little unhealthy. They looked and sounded like men who may have just missed having a car accident. 'Want to let the ladies in on it?'

'Just two bachelors having a good time,' Mr Delevan said.

'Smashing good time,' Kevin amplified, to which his father added, 'is what we mean to say,' and they looked at each other and were howling again.

Meg, honestly bewildered, looked at her mother and said: 'Why are they doing that, Mom?'

Mrs Delevan said, 'Because they have penises, dear. Go hang up your coat.'

Pop Merrill let the Delevans, pere et fils, out, and then locked the door behind them. He turned off all the lights save for the one over the worktable, produced his keys, and opened his own stuff-drawer. From it he took Kevin Delevan's Polaroid Sun 660, chipped but otherwise undamaged, and looked at it fixedly. It had scared both

the father and the son. That was clear enough to Pop; it had scared him as well, and still did. But to put a thing like this on a block and smash it to smithereens? That was crazy.

There was a way to turn a buck on this goddam thing.

There always was.

Pop locked it away in the drawer. He would sleep on it, and by the morning he would know how to proceed. In truth, he already had a pretty goddam good idea.

He got up, snapped off the work-light, and wove his way through the gloom toward the steps leading up to his apartment. He moved with the unthinking surefooted grace of long practice.

Halfway there, he stopped.

He felt an urge, an amazingly strong urge, to go back and look at the camera again. What in God's name for? He didn't even have any film for the Christless thing ... not that he had any intentions of taking any pictures with it. If someone else wanted to take some snapshots, watch that dog's progress, the buyer was welcome. Caveet emperor, as he always said. Let the goddam emperor caveet or not as it suited him. As for him, he'd as soon go into a cage filled with lions without even a goddam whip and chair.

Still ...

'Leave it,' he said roughly in the darkness, and the sound of his own voice startled him and got him moving and he went upstairs without another look back.

CHAPTER 7

Very early the next morning, Kevin Delevan had a nightmare so horrible he could only remember parts of it, like isolated phrases of music heard on a radio with a defective speaker.

He was walking into a grungy little mill-town. Apparently he was on the bum, because he had a pack on his back. The name of the town was Oatley, and Kevin had the idea it was either in Vermont or upstate New York. You know anyone hiring here in Oatley? he asked an old man pushing a shoppingcart along a cracked sidewalk. There were no groceries in the cart; it was full of indeterminate junk, and Kevin realized the man was a wino. Get away! the wino screamed. Get away! Feef! Fushing feef! Fushing FEEF!

Kevin ran, darted across the street, more frightened of the man's madness than he was of the idea anyone might believe that he, Kevin, was a thief. The wino called after him: This ain't Oatley! This is Hildasville! Get out of town, you fushing feef!

It was then that he realized that this town wasn't Oatley or Hildasville or any other town with a normal name. How could an utterly abnormal town have a normal name?

Everything - streets, buildings, cars, signs, the few pedestrians - was two-dimensional. Things had height, they had width ... but they had no thickness. He passed a woman who looked the way Meg's ballet teacher might look if the ballet teacher put on a hundred and fifty pounds. She was wearing slacks the color of Bazooka bubble gum. Like the wino, she was pushing a shopping-cart. It had a squeaky wheel. It was full of Polaroid Sun 660 cameras. She looked at Kevin with narrow suspicion as they drew closer together. At the moment when they passed each other on the sidewalk, she disappeared. Her shadow was still there and he could still hear that

rhythmic squeaking, but she was no longer there. Then she reappeared, looking back at him from her fat flat suspicious face, and Kevin understood the reason why she had disappeared for a moment. It was because the concept of 'a side view' didn't exist, couldn't exist, in a world where everything was perfectly flat.

This is Polaroidville, he thought with a relief which was strangely mingled with horror. And that means this is only a dream.

Then he saw the white picket fence, and the dog, and the photographer standing in the gutter. There were rimless spectacles propped up on his head. It was Pop Merrill.

Well, son, you found him, the two-dimensional Polaroid Pop said to Kevin without removing his eye from the shutter. That's the dog, right there. The one tore up that kid out in Schenectady. YOUR dog, is what I mean to say.

Then Kevin woke up in his own bed, afraid he had screamed but more concerned at first not about the dream but to make sure he was all there, all three dimensions of him.

He was. But something was wrong.

Stupid dream, he thought. Let it go, why can't you? It's over. Photos are burned, all fifty-eight of them. And the camera's bus

His thought broke off like ice as that something, that something wrong, teased at his mind again.

It's not over, he thought. It's n-

But before the thought could finish itself, Kevin Delevan fell deeply, dreamlessly asleep. The next morning, he barely remembered the nightmare at all.

CHAPTER 8

The two weeks following his acquisition of Kevin Delevan's Polaroid Sun were the most aggravating, infuriating, humiliating two weeks of Pop Merrill's life. There were quite a few people in Castle Rock who would have said it couldn't have happened to a more deserving guy. Not that anyone in Castle Rock did know ... and that was just about all the consolation Pop could take. He found it cold comfort. Very cold indeed, thank you very much.

But who would have ever believed the Mad Hatters would have, could have, let him down so badly?

It was almost enough to make a man wonder if he was starting to slip a little.

God forbid.

CHAPTER 9

Back in September, he hadn't even bothered to wonder if he would sell the Polaroid; the only questions were how soon and how much. The Delevans had bandied the word supernatural about, and Pop hadn't corrected them, although he knew that what the Sun was doing would be more properly classed by psychic investigators as a paranormal rather than supernatural phenomenon. He could have told them that, but if he had, they might both have wondered how come the owner of a small-town used-goods store (and part-time usurer) knew so much about the subject. The fact was this: he knew a lot because it was profitable to know a lot, and it was profitable to know a lot because of the people he thought of as 'my Mad Hatters.'

Mad Hatters were people who recorded empty rooms on expensive audio equipment not for a lark or a drunken party stunt, but either because they believed passionately in an unseen world and wanted to prove its existence, or because they wanted passionately to get in touch with friends and/or relatives who had 'passed on' ('passed on': that's what they always called it; Mad Hatters never had relatives who did something so simple as die).

Mad Hatters not only owned and used Ouija Boards, they had regular conversations with 'spirit guides' in the 'other world' (never 'heaven,' 'hell,' or even 'the rest area of the dead' but the 'other world') who put them in touch with friends, relatives, queens, dead rock-and-roll singers, even arch-villains. Pop knew of a Mad Hatter in Vermont who had twice-weekly conversations with Hitler. Hitler had told him it was all a bum rap, he had sued for peace in January of 1943 and that son of a bitch Churchill had turned him down. Hitler had also told him Paul Newman was a space alien who had been born in a cave on the moon.

Mad Hatters went to seances as regularly (and as compulsively) as drug addicts visited their pushers. They bought crystal balls and amulets guaranteed to bring good luck; they organized their own little societies and investigated reputedly haunted houses for all the usual phenomena: teleplasma, table-rappings, floating tables and beds, cold spots, and, of course, ghosts.

They noted all of these, real or imagined, with the enthusiasm of dedicated bird-watchers.

Most of them had a ripping good time. Some did not. There was that fellow from Wolfeboro, for instance. He hanged himself in the notorious Tecumseh House, where a gentleman farmer had, in the 1880s and '90s, helped his fellow men by day and helped himself to them by night, dining on them at a formal table in his cellar. The table stood upon a floor of sour packed dirt which had yielded the bones and decomposed bodies of at least twelve and perhaps as many as thirty-five young men, all vagabonds. The fellow from Wolfeboro had left this brief note on a pad of papers beside his Ouija Board: Can't leave the house. Doors all locked. I hear him eating. Tried cotton. Does no good.

And the poor deluded asshole probably thought he really did, Pop had mused after hearing this story from a source he trusted.

Then there was a fellow in Dunwich, Massachusetts, to whom Pop had once sold a so-called 'spirit trumpet' for ninety dollars; the fellow had taken the trumpet to the Dunwich Cemetery and must have heard something exceedingly unpleasant, because he had been raving in a padded cell in Arkham for almost six years now, totally insane. When he had gone into the boneyard, his hair had been black; when his screams awoke the few neighbors who lived close enough to the cemetery to hear them and the police were summoned, it was as white as his howling face.

And there was the woman in Portland who lost an eye when a session with the Ouija Board went cataclysmically wrong ... the man in Kingston, Rhode Island, who lost three fingers on his right hand when the rear door of a car in which two teenagers had committed suicide closed on it ... the old lady who landed in Massachusetts Memorial Hospital short most of one ear when her equally elderly cat, Claudette, supposedly went on a rampage during a seance ...

Pop believed some of these things, disbelieved others, and mostly held no opinion - not because he didn't have enough hard evidence one way or the other, but because he didn't give a fart in a high wind about ghosts, seances, crystal balls, spirit trumpets, rampaging cats, or the fabled John the Conquerer Root. As far as Reginald Marion 'Pop' Merrill was concerned, the Mad Hatters could all take a flying fuck at the moon.

As long, of course, as one of them handed over some mighty tall tickets for Kevin Delevan's camera before taking passage on the next shuttle.

Pop didn't call these enthusiasts Mad Hatters because of their spectral interests; he called them that because the great majority - he was sometimes tempted to say all of them - seemed to be rich, retired, and just begging to be plucked. If you were willing to spend fifteen minutes with them nodding and agreeing while they assured you they could pick a fake medium from a real one just by walking into the room, let alone sitting down at the seance table, or if you spent an equal amount of time listening to garbled noises which might or might not be words on a tape player with the proper expression of awe on your face, you could sell them a four-dollar paperweight for a hundred by telling them a man had once glimpsed his dead mother in it. You gave them a smile and they wrote you a check for two hundred dollars. You gave them an encouraging word and they wrote you a check for two thousand dollars. If you gave them both things at the same time, they just

kind of passed the checkbook over to you and asked you to fill in an amount.

It had always been as easy as taking candy from a baby.

Until now.

Pop didn't keep a file in his cabinet marked MAD HATTERS any more than he kept one marked COIN COLLECTORS or STAMP COLLECTORS. He didn't even have a file-cabinet. The closest thing to it was a battered old book of phone numbers he carried around in his back pocket (which, like his purse, had over the years taken on the shallow ungenerous curve of the spindly buttock it lay against every day). Pop kept his files where a man in his line of work should always keep them: in his head. There were eight full-blown Mad Hatters that he had done business with over the years, people who didn't just dabble in the occult but who got right down and rolled around in it. The richest was a retired industrialist named McCarty who lived on his own island about twelve miles off the coast. This fellow disdained boats and employed a full-time pilot who flew him back and forth to the mainland when he needed to go.

Pop went to him on September 28th, the day after he obtained the camera from Kevin (he didn't, couldn't, exactly think of it as robbery; the boy, after all, had been planning to smash it to shit anyway, and what he didn't know surely couldn't hurt him). He drove to a private airstrip just north of Boothbay Harbor in his old but perfectly maintained car, then gritted his teeth and slitted his eyes and held onto the steel lockbox with the Polaroid Sun 660 in it for dear fife as the Mad Hatter's Beechcraft plunged down the dirt runway like a rogue horse, rose into the air just as Pop was sure they were going to fall off the edge and be smashed to jelly on the rocks below, and flew away into the autumn empyrean. He had made this trip twice before, and had sworn each time that he would never get into that goddam flying coffin again.

They bumped and jounced along with the hungry Atlantic less than five hundred feet below, the pilot talking cheerfully the whole way. Pop nodded and said ayuh in what seemed like the right places, although he was more concerned with his imminent demise than with anything the pilot was saying.

Then the island was ahead with its horribly, dismally, suicidally short landing strip and its sprawling house of redwood and fieldstone, and the pilot swooped down, leaving Pop's poor old acid-shrivelled stomach somewhere in the air above them, and they hit with a thud and then, somehow, miraculously, they were taxiing to a stop, still alive and whole, and Pop could safely go back to believing God was just another invention of the Mad Hatters ... at least until he had to get back in that damned plane for the return journey.

'Great day for flying, huh, Mr Merrill?' the pilot asked, unfolding the steps for him.

'Finest kind,' Pop grunted, then strode up the walk to the house where the Thanksgiving turkey stood in the doorway, smiling in eager anticipation. Pop had promised to show him 'the goddammedest thing I ever come across,' and Cedric McCarty looked like he couldn't wait. He'd take one quick look for form's sake, Pop thought, and then fork over the lettuce. He went back to the mainland forty-five minutes later, barely noticing the thumps and jounces and gut-goozling drops as the Beech hit the occasional air-pocket. He was a chastened, thoughtful man.

He had aimed the Polaroid at the Mad Hatter and took his picture. While they waited for it to develop, the Mad Hatter took a picture of Pop ... and when the flashbulb went off, had he heard something? Had he heard the low, ugly snarl of that black dog, or had it been his imagination? Imagination, most likely. Pop had made some magnificent deals in his time, and you couldn't do that without imagination.

Still

Cedric McCarty, retired industrialist par excellence and Mad Hatter extraordinaire, watched the photographs develop with that same childlike eagerness, but when they finally came clear, he looked amused and even perhaps a little contemptuous and Pop knew with the infallible intuition which had developed over almost fifty years that arguing, cajolery, even vague hints that he had another customer just slaving for a chance to buy this camera - none of those usually reliable techniques would work. A big orange NO SALE card had gone up in Cedric McCarty's mind.

But why?

Goddammit, why?

In the picture Pop took, that glint Kevin had spotted amid the wrinkles of the black dog's muzzle had clearly become a tooth - except tooth wasn't the right word, not by any stretch of the imagination. That was a fang. In the one McCarty took, you could see the beginnings of the neighboring teeth.

Fucking dog's got a mouth like a bear-trap, Pop thought. Unbidden, an image of his arm in that dog's mouth rose in his mind. He saw the dog not biting it, not eating it, but shredding it, the way the many teeth of a wood-chipper shreds bark, leaves, and small branches. How long would it take? he wondered, and looked at those dirty eyes staring out at him from the overgrown face and knew it wouldn't take long. Or suppose the dog seized him by the crotch, instead? Suppose But McCarty had said something and was waiting for a response. Pop turned his attention to the man, and any lingering hope he might have held of making a sale evaporated. The Mad Hatter extraordinaire, who would cheerfully spend an afternoon with you trying to call UP the ghost of your dear departed Uncle Ned, was gone. In his place was McCarty's other side: the hardheaded realist who had made Fortune magazine's

listing of the richest men in America for twelve straight years - not because he was an airhead who had had the good fortune to inherit both a lot of money and an honest, capable staff to husband and expand it, but because he had been a genius in the field of aerodynamic design and development. He was not as rich as Howard Hughes but not quite as crazy as Hughes had been at the end, either. When it came to psychic phenomena, the man was a Mad Hatter. Outside that one area, however, he was a shark that make the likes of Pop Merrill look like a tadpole swimming in a mud-puddle.

'Sorry,' Pop said. 'I was woolgatherin a little, Mr McCarty.'

'I said it's fascinating,' McCarty said. 'Especially the subtle indications of passing time from one photo to the next. How does it work? Camera in camera?'

'I don't understand what you're gettin at.'

'No, not a camera,' McCarty said, speaking to himself. He picked the camera up and shook it next to his ear. 'More likely some sort of roller device.'

Pop stared at the man with no idea what he was talking about ... except it spelled NO SALE, whatever it was. That goddam Christless ride in the little plane (and soon to do over again), all for nothing. But why? Why? He had been so sure of this fellow, who would probably believe the Brooklyn Bridge was a spectral illusion from the 'other side' if you told him it was. So why?

'Slots, of course!' McCarty said, as delighted as a child. 'Slots! There's a circular belt on pulleys inside this housing with a number of slots built into it. Each slot contains an exposed Polaroid picture of this dog. Continuity suggests' -he looked carefully at the pictures again - 'yes, that the dog might have been filmed, with the Polaroids made from individual frames. When the shutter is

released, a picture drops from its slot and emerges. The battery turns the belt enough to position the next photo, and - voila!

His pleasant expression was suddenly gone, and Pop saw a man who looked like he might have made his way to fame and fortune over the broken, bleeding bodies of his competitors ... and enjoyed it.

'Joe will fly you back,' he said. His voice had gone chill and impersonal. 'You're good, Mr Merrill' - this man, Pop realized glumly, would never call him Pop again - 'I'll admit that. You've finally overstepped yourself, but for a long time you had me fooled. How much did you take me for? Was it all claptrap?'

'I didn't take you for one red cent,' Pop said, lying stoutly. 'I never sold you one single thing I didn't b'lieve was the genuine article, and what I mean to say is that goes for that camera as well.'

'You make me sick,' McCarty said. 'Not because I trusted you; I've trusted others who were fakes and shams. Not because you took my money; it wasn't enough to matter. You make me sick because it's men like you that have kept the scientific investigation of psychic phenomena in the dark ages, something to be laughed at, something to be dismissed as the sole province of crackpots and dimwits. The one consolation is that sooner or later you fellows always overstep yourselves. You get greedy and try to palm off something ridiculous like this. I want you out of here, Mr Merrill.'

Pop had his pipe in his mouth and a Diamond Blue Tip in one shaking hand. McCarty pointed at him, and the chilly eyes above that finger made it look like the barrel of a gun.

'And if you light that stinking thing in here,' he said, 'I'll have Joe yank it out of your mouth and dump the coals down the back of your pants. So unless you want to leave my house with your skinny ass in flames, I suggest -'

'What's the matter with you, Mr McCarty?' Pop bleated. 'These pitchers didn't come out all developed! You watched em develop with your own eyes!'

'An emulsion any kid with a twelve-dollar chemistry set could whip up,' McCarty said coldly. 'It's not the catalyst-fixative the Polaroid people use, but it's close. You expose your Polaroids - or create them from movie-film, if that's what you did - and then you take them in a standard darkroom and paint them with the goop. When they're dry, you load them. When they pop out, they look like any Polaroid that hasn't started to develop yet. Solid gray in a white border. Then the light hits your home-made emulsion, creating a chemical change, and it evaporates, showing a picture you yourself took hours or days or weeks before. Joe?'

Before Pop could say anything else, his arms were seized and he was not so much walked as propelled from the spacious, glass-walled living room. He wouldn't have said anything, anyway. Another of the many things a good businessman had to know was when he was licked. And yet he wanted to shout over his shoulder: Some dumb cunt with dyed hair and a crystal ball she ordered from Fate magazine floats a book or a lamp or a page of goddam sheet-music through a dark room and you bout shit yourself, but when I show you a camera that takes pitchers of some other world, you have me thrown out by the seat of m'pants! You're mad as a hatter, all right! Well, fuck ya! There's other fish in the sea!

So there were.

On October 5th, Pop got into his perfectly maintained car and drove to Portland to pay a visit on the Pus Sisters.

The Pus Sisters were identical twins who lived in Portland. They were eighty or so but looked older than Stonehenge. They chain-smoked Camel cigarettes, and had done so since they were seventeen, they were happy to tell you. They never coughed in

spite of the six packs they smoked between them each and every day. They were driven about - on those rare occasions when they left their red brick Colonial mansion - in a 1958 Lincoln Continental which had the somber glow of a hearse. This vehicle was piloted by a black woman only a little younger than the Pus Sisters themselves. This female chauffeur was probably a mute, but might just be something a bit more special: one of the few truly taciturn human beings God ever made. Pop did not know and had never asked. He had dealt with the two old ladies for nearly thirty years, the black woman had been with them all that time, mostly driving the car, sometimes washing it, sometimes mowing the lawn or clipping the hedges around the house, sometimes stalking down to the mailbox on the corner with letters from the Pus Sisters to God alone knew who (he didn't know if the black woman ever went or was allowed inside the house, either, only that he had never seen her there), and during all that time he had never heard this marvellous creature speak.

The Colonial mansion was in Portland's Bramhall district, which is to Portland what the Beacon Hill area is to Boston. In that latter city, in the land of the bean and the cod, it's said the Cabots speak only to Lowells and the Lowells speak only to God, but the Pus Sisters and their few remaining contemporaries in Portland would and did calmly assert that the Lowells had turned a private connection into a party line some years after the Deeres and their Portland contemporaries had set up the original wire.

And of course no one in his right mind would have called them the Pus Sisters to their identical faces any more than anyone in his right mind would have stuck his nose in a bandsaw to take care of a troublesome itch. They were the Pus Sisters when they weren't around (and when one was fairly sure one was in company which didn't contain a tale-bearer or two), but their real names were Miss Eleusippus Deere and Mrs. Meleusippus Verrill. Their father, in his determination to combine devout Christianity with an exhibition of

his own erudition, had named them for two of three triplets who had all become saints ... but who, unfortunately, had been male saints.

Meleusippus's husband had died a great many years before, during the Battle of Leyte Gulf in 1944, as a matter of fact. but she had resolutely kept his name ever since, which made it impossible to take the easy way out and simply call them the Misses Deere. No; you had to practice those goddamned tongue-twister names until they came out as smooth as shit from a waxed asshole. If you fucked up once, they held it against you, and you might lose their custom for as long as six months or a year. Fuck up twice, and don't even bother to call. Ever again.

Pop drove with the steel box containing the Polaroid camera on the seat beside him, saying their names over and over again in a low voice: 'Eleusippus. Meleusippus. Eleusippus and Meleusippus. Ayuh. That's all right.'

But, as it turned out, that was the only thing that was all right. They wanted the Polaroid no more than McCarty had wanted it ... although Pop had been so shaken by that encounter he went in fully prepared to take ten thousand dollars less, or fifty per cent of his original confident estimate of what the camera might fetch.

The elderly black woman was raking leaves, revealing a lawn which, October or not, was still as green as the felt on a billiard table. Pop nodded to her. She looked at him, looked through him, and continued raking leaves. Pop rang the bell and, somewhere in the depths of the house, a bell bonged. Mansion seemed the perfectly proper word for the Pus Sisters' domicile. Although it was nowhere as big as some of the old homes in the Bramhall district, the perpetual dimness which reigned inside made it seem much bigger. The sound of the bell really did seem to come floating through a depth of rooms and corridors and the sound of that bell always stirred a specific image in Pop's mind: the dead-cart passing through the streets of London during the plague year, the

driver ceaselessly tolling his bell and crying, 'Bring outcher dead! Bring outcher dead! For the luvva Jaysus, bring outcher dead!'

The Pus Sister who opened the door some thirty seconds later looked not only dead but embalmed; a mummy between whose lips someone had poked the smouldering butt of a cigarette for a joke.

'Merrill,' the lady said. Her dress was a deep blue, her hair colored to match. She tried to speak to him as a great lady would speak to a tradesman who had come to the wrong door by mistake, but Pop could see she was, in her way, every bit as excited as that son of a bitch McCarty had been; it was just that the Pus Sisters had been born in Maine, raised in Maine, and would die in Maine, while McCarty hailed from someplace in the Midwest, where the art and craft of taciturnity were apparently not considered an important part of a child's upbringing.

A shadow flitted somewhere near the parlor end of the hallway, just visible over the bony shoulder of the sister who had opened the door. The other one. Oh. they were eager, all right. Pop began to wonder if he couldn't squeeze twelve grand out of them after all. Maybe even fourteen.

Pop knew he could say, 'Do I have the honor of addressing Miss Deere or Mrs Verrill?' and be completely correct and completely polite, but he had dealt with this pair of eccentric old bags before and he knew that, while the Pus Sister who had opened the door wouldn't raise an eyebrow or flare a nostril, would simply tell him which one he was speaking to, he would lose at least a thousand by doing so. They took great pride in their odd masculine names, and were apt to look more kindly on a person who tried and failed than one who took the coward's way out.

So, saying a quick mental prayer that his tongue wouldn't fail him now that the moment had come, he gave it his best and was pleased to hear the names slip as smoothly from his tongue as a

pitch from a snake-oil salesman: 'Is it Eleusippus or Meleusippus?' he asked, his face suggesting he was no more concerned about getting the names right than if they had been Joan and Kate.

'Meleusippus, Mr Merrill,' she said, ah, good, now he was Mister Merrill, and he was sure everything was going to go just as slick as ever a man could want, and he was just as wrong as ever a man could be. 'Won't you step in?'

'Thank you kindly,' Pop said, and entered the gloomy depths of the Deere Mansion.

'Oh dear,' Eleusippus Deere said as the Polaroid began to develop.

'What a brute he looks!' Meleusippus Verrill said, speaking in tones of genuine dismay and fear.

The dog was getting uglier, Pop had to admit that, and there was something else that worried him even more: the time-sequence of the pictures seemed to be speeding up.

He had posed the Pus Sisters on their Queen Anne sofa for the demonstration picture. The camera flashed its bright white light, turning the room for one single instant from the purgatorial zone between the land of the living and that of the dead where these two old relics somehow existed into something flat and tawdry, like a police photo of a museum in which a crime had been committed.

Except the picture which emerged did not show the Pus Sisters sitting together on their parlor sofa like identical bookends. The picture showed the black dog, now turned so that it was full-face to the camera and whatever photographer it was who was nuts enough to stand there and keep snapping pictures of it. Now all of its teeth were exposed in a crazy, homicidal snarl, and its head had taken on a slight, predatory tilt to the left. That head, Pop thought, would continue to tilt as it sprang at its victim, accomplishing two purposes: concealing the vulnerable area of its neck from possible

attack and putting the head in a position where, once the teeth were clamped solidly in flesh, it could revolve upright again, ripping a large chunk of living tissue from its target.

'It's so awful!' Eleusippus said, putting one mummified hand to the scaly flesh of her neck.

'So terrible!' Meleusippus nearly moaned, lighting a fresh Camel from the butt of an old one with a hand shaking so badly she came close to branding the cracked and fissured left corner of her mouth.

'It's totally in-ex-PLICK-able!' Pop said triumphantly, thinking: I wish you was here, McCarty, you happy asshole. I just wish you was. Here's two ladies been round the Horn and back a few times that don't think this goddam camera's just some kind of a carny magic-show trick!

'Does it show something which has happened?' Meleusippus whispered.

'Or something which will happen?' Eleusippus added in an equally awed whisper.

'I dunno,' Pop said. 'All I know for sure is that I have seen some goddam strange things in my time, but I've never seen the beat of these pitchers.'

'I'm not surprised!' Eleusippus.

'Nor E' Meleusippus.

Pop was all set to start the conversation going in the direction of price - a delicate business when you were dealing with anyone, but never more so than when you were dealing with the Pus Sisters: when it got down to hard trading, they were as delicate as a pair of virgins - which, for all Pop knew, at least one of them was. He was just deciding on the To start with, it never crossed my mind to sell

something like this, but ... approach (it was older than the Pus Sisters themselves - although probably not by much, you would have said after a good close look at them - but when you were dealing with Mad Hatters, that didn't matter a bit; in fact, they liked to hear it, the way small children like to hear the same fairy tales over and over) when Eleusippus absolutely floored him by saying, 'I don't know about my sister, Mr Merrill, but I wouldn't feel comfortable looking at anything you might have to' - here a slight, pained pause - 'offer us in a business way until you put that ... that camera, or whatever God-awful thing it is ... back in your car.'

'I couldn't agree more,' Meleusippus said, stubbing out her half-smoked Camel in a fish-shaped ashtray which was doing everything but shitting Camel cigarette butts.

'Ghost photographs,' Eleusippus said, 'are one thing. They have a certain -'

'Dignity,' Meleusippus suggested.

'Yes! Dignity! But that dog -' The old woman actually shivered. 'It looks as if it's ready to jump right out of that photograph and bite one of us.'

'All of us!' Meleusippus elaborated.

Up until this last exchange, Pop had been convinced - perhaps because he had to be - that the sisters had merely begun their own part of the dickering, and in admirable style. But the tone of their voices, as identical as their faces and figures (if they could have been said to have such things as figures), was beyond his power to disbelieve. They had no doubt that the Sun 660 was exhibiting some sort of paranormal behavior ... too paranormal to suit them. They weren't dickering; they weren't pretending; they weren't playing games with him in an effort to knock the price down. When they said they wanted no part of the camera and the weird thing it was doing, that was exactly what they meant - nor had they done

him the discourtesy (and that's just what it would have been, in their minds) of supposing or even dreaming that selling it had been his purpose in coming.

Pop looked around the parlor. It was like the old lady's room in a horror movie he'd watched once on his VCR - a piece of claptrap called *Burnt Offerings*, where this big old beefy fella tried to drown his son in the swimming pool but nobody even took their clothes off. That lady's room had been filled, overfilled, actually stuffed with old and new photographs. They sat on the

tables and the mantel in every sort of frame; they covered so much of the walls you couldn't even tell what the pattern on the friggling paper was supposed to be.

The Pus Sisters' parlor wasn't quite that bad, but there were still plenty of photographs; maybe as many as a hundred and fifty, which seemed like three times that many in a room as small and dim as this one. Pop had been here often enough to notice most of them at least in passing, and he knew others even better than that, for he had been the one to sell them to Eleusippus and Meleusippus.

They had a great many more 'ghost photographs,' as Eleusippus Deere called them, perhaps as many as a thousand in all, but apparently even they had realized a room the size of their parlor was limited in terms of display-space, if not in those of taste. The rest of the ghost photographs were distributed among the mansion's other fourteen rooms. Pop had seen them all. He was one of the fortunate few who had been granted what the Pus Sisters called, with simple grandiosity, *The Tour*. But it was here in the parlor that they kept their prize 'ghost photographs,' with the prize of prizes attracting the eye by the simple fact that it stood in solitary splendor atop the closed Steinway baby grand by the bow windows. In it, a corpse was levitating from its coffin before fifty or sixty horrified mourners. It was a fake, of course. A child of ten -

hell, a child of eight - would have known it was a fake. It made the photographs of the dancing elves which had so bewitched poor Arthur Conan Doyle near the end of his life look accomplished by comparison. In fact, as Pop ranged his eye about the room, he saw only two photographs that weren't obvious fakes. It would take closer study to see how the trickery had been worked in those. Yet these two ancient pussies, who had collected 'ghost photographs' all their lives and claimed to be great experts in the field, acted like a couple of teenage girls at a horror movie when he showed them not just a paranormal photograph but a goddam Jesus-jumping paranormal camera that didn't just do its trick once and then quit, like the one that had taken the picture of the ghost-lady watching the fox-hunters come home, but one that did it again and again and again, and how much had they spent on this stuff that was nothing but claptrap? Thousands? Tens of thousands? Hundreds of

'-show us?' Meleusippus was asking him.

Pop Merrill forced his lips to turn up in what must have been at least a reasonable imitation of his Folksy Crackerbarrel Smile, because they registered no surprise or distrust.

'Pardon me, dear lady,' Pop said. 'M'mind went woolgatherin all on its own for a minute or two there. I guess it happens to all of us as we get on.'

'We're eighty-three, and our minds are as clear as window-glass,' Eleusippus said with clear disapproval.

◆ Freshly washed window-glass,' Meleusippus added. 'I asked if you have some new photographs you would care to show us ... once you've put that wretched thing away, of course.'

'It's been ages since we saw any really good new ones,' Eleusippus said, lighting a fresh Camel.

'We went to The New England Psychic and Tarot Convention in Providence last month,' Meleusippus said, 'and while the lectures were enlightening◆◆

◆◆and uplifting -'

◆◆so many of the photographs were arrant fakes! Even a child of ten -' of seven! -'

◆◆could have seen through them. So ◆◆. Meleusippus paused. Her face assumed an expression of perplexity which looked as if it might hurt (the muscles of her face having long since atrophied into expressions of mild pleasure and serene knowledge). 'I am puzzled. Mr Merrill, I must admit to being a bit puzzled.'

'I was about to say the same thing,' Eleusippus said.

'Why did you bring that awful thing?' Meleusippus and Eleusippus asked in perfect two-part harmony, spoiled only by the nicotine rasp of their voices.

The urge Pop felt to say Because I didn't know what a pair of chickenshit old cunts you two were was so strong that for one horrified second he believed he had said it, and he quailed, waiting for the twin screams of outrage to rise in the dim and hallowed confines of the parlor, screams which would rise like the squeal of rusty bandsaws biting into tough pine-knots, and go on rising until the glass in the frame of every bogus picture in the room shattered in an agony of vibration.

The idea that he had spoken such a terrible thought aloud lasted only a split-second, but when he relived it on later wakeful nights while the clocks rustled sleepily below (and while Kevin Delevan's Polaroid crouched sleeplessly in the locked drawer of the worktable), it seemed much longer. In those sleepless hours, he sometimes found himself wishing he had said it, and wondered if he was maybe losing his mind.

What he did do was react with speed and a canny instinct for selfpreservation that were nearly noble. To blow up at the Pus Sisters would give him immense gratification, but it would, unfortunately, be short-lived gratification. If he buttered them up - which was exactly what they expected, since they had been basted in butter all their fives (although it hadn't done a goddam thing for their skins) - he could perhaps sell them another three or four thousand dollars' worth of claptrap 'ghost photographs,' if they continued to elude the lung cancer which should surely have claimed one or both at least a dozen years ago.

And there were, after all, other Mad Hatters in Pop's mental file, although not quite so many as he'd thought on the day he'd set off to see Cedric McCarty. A little checking had revealed that two had died and one was currently learning how to weave baskets in a posh northern California retreat which catered to the incredibly rich who also happened to have gone hopelessly insane.

'Actually,' he said, 'I brought the camera out so you ladies could look at it. What I mean to say,' he hastened on, observing their expressions of consternation, 'is I know how much experience you ladies have in this field.'

Consternation turned to gratification; the sisters exchanged smug, comfy looks, and Pop found himself wishing he could douse a couple of their goddam packs of Camels with barbecue lighter fluid and jam them up their tight little old-maid asses and then strike a match. They'd smoke then, all right. They'd smoke just like plugged chimneys, was what he meant to say.

'I thought you might have some advice on what I should do with the camera, is what I mean to say,' he finished.

'Destroy it,' Eleusippus said immediately.

'I'd use dynamite,' Meleusippus said.

'Acid first, then dynamite,' Eleusippus said.

'Right,' Meleusippus finished. 'It's dangerous. You don't have to look at that devil-dog to know that.' She did look, though; they both did, and identical expressions of revulsion and fear crossed their faces.

'You can feel eevil coming out of it,' Eleusippus said in a voice of such portentousness that it should have been laughable, like a high-school girl playing a witch in Macbeth, but which somehow wasn't. 'Destroy it, Mr Merrill. Before something awful happens. Before - perhaps, you'll notice I only say perhaps - it destroys you.'

'Now, now,' Pop said, annoyed to find he felt just a little uneasy in spite of himself, 'that's drawing it a little strong. It's just a camera, is what I mean to say.'

Eleusippus Deere said quietly: 'And the planchette that put out poor Colette Simineaux's eye a few years ago - that was nothing but a piece of fiberboard.'

'At least until those foolish, foolish, foolish people put their fingers on it and woke it up,' Meleusippus said, more quietly still.

There seemed nothing left to say. Pop picked up the camera - careful to do so by the strap, not touching the actual camera itself, although he told himself this was just for the benefit of these two old pussies - and stood.

'Well, you're the experts,' he said. The two old women looked at each other and preened.

Yes; retreat. Retreat was the answer ... for now, at least. But he wasn't done yet. Every dog has its day, and you could take that to the bank. 'I don't want to take up any more of y'time, and I surely don't want to discommode you.'

'Oh, you haven't!' Eleusippus said, also rising.

'We have so very few guests these days!' Meleusippus said, also rising.

'Put it in your car, Mr Merrill,' Eleusippus said, 'and then -'

'- come in and have tea.'

'High tea!'

And although Pop wanted nothing more in his life than to be out of there (and to tell them exactly that: Thanks but no thanks. I want to get the fuck OUT of here), he made a courtly little half-bow and an excuse of the same sort. 'It would be my pleasure,' he said, 'but I'm afraid I have another appointment. I don't get to the city as often as I'd like.' If you're going to tell one lie, you might as well tell a pack, Pop's own Pop had often told him, and it was advice he had taken to heart. He made a business of looking at his watch. 'I've stayed too long already. You girls have made me late, I'm afraid, but I suppose I'm not the first man you've done that to.'

They giggled and actually raised identical blushes, like the glow of very old roses. 'Why, Mr Merrill!' Eleusippus trilled.

'Ask me next time,' he said, smiling until his face felt as if it would break. 'Ask me next time, by the Lord Harry! You just ask and see if I don't say yes faster'n a hoss can trot!'

He went out, and as one of them quickly closed the door behind him (maybe they think the sun'll fade their goddam fake ghost photographs, Pop thought sourly), he turned and snapped the Polaroid at the old black woman, who was still raking leaves. He did it on impulse, as a man with a mean streak may on impulse swerve across a country road to kill a skunk or raccoon.

The black woman's upper lip rose in a snarl, and Pop was stunned to see she was actually forking the sign of the evil eye at him.

He got into his car and backed hurriedly down the driveway.

The rear end of his car was halfway into the street and he was turning to check for traffic when his eye happened upon the Polaroid he had just taken. It wasn't fully developed; it had the listless, milky look of all Polaroid photographs which are still developing.

Yet it had come up enough so that Pop only stared at it, the breath he had begun to unthinkingly draw into his lungs suddenly ceasing like a breeze that unaccountably drops away to nothing for a moment. His very heart seemed to cease in mid-beat.

What Kevin had imagined was now happening. The dog had finished its pivot, and had now begun its relentless ordained irrefutable approach toward the camera and whoever held it ... ah, but he had held it this time, hadn't he? He, Reginald Marion 'Pop' Merrill, had raised it and snapped it at the old black woman in a moment's pique like a spanked child that shoots a pop bottle off the top of a fence-post with his BB gun because he can't very well shoot his father, although in that humiliating, bottom-throbbing time directly after the paddling he would be more than happy to.

The dog was coming. Kevin had known that would happen next, and Pop would have known it, too, if he'd had occasion to think on it, which he hadn't -although from this moment on he would find it hard to think of anything else when he thought of the camera, and he would find those thoughts filling more and more of his time, both waking and dreaming.

It's coming, Pop thought with the sort of frozen horror a man might feel standing in the dark as some Thing, some unspeakable and unbearable Thing, approaches with its razor-sharp claws and teeth. Oh my God, it's coming, that dog is coming.

But it wasn't just coming; it was changing.

It was impossible to say how. His eyes hurt, caught between what they should be seeing and what they were seeing, and in the end the only handle he could find was a very small one: it was as if someone had changed the lens on the camera, from the normal one to a fish-eye, so that the dog's forehead with its clots of tangled fur seemed somehow to bulge and recede at the same time, and the dog's murderous eyes seemed to have taken on filthy, barely visible glimmers of red, like the sparks a Polaroid flash sometimes puts in people's eyes.

The dog's body seemed to have elongated but not thinned; if anything, it seemed thicker - not fatter, but more heavily muscled.

And its teeth were bigger. Longer. Sharper.

Pop suddenly found himself remembering Joe Camber's Saint Bernard, Cujo -the one who had killed Joe and that old tosspot Gary Pervier and Big George Bannerman. The dog had gone rabid. It had trapped a woman and a young boy in their car up there at Camber's place and after two or three days the kid had died. And now Pop found himself wondering if this was what they had been looking at during those long days and nights trapped in the steaming oven of their car; this or something like this, the muddy red eyes, the long sharp teeth

A horn blared impatiently.

Pop screamed, his heart not only starting again but gunning, like the engine of a Formula One racing-car.

A van swerved around his sedan, still half in the driveway and half in the narrow residential street. The van's driver stuck his fist out his open window and his middle finger popped up.

'Eat my dick, you son of a whore!' Pop screamed. He backed the rest of the way out, but so jerkily that he bumped up over the curb on the far side of the street. He twisted the wheel viciously (inadvertently honking his horn in the process) and then drove off. But three blocks south he had to pull over and just sit there behind the wheel for ten minutes, waiting for the shakes to subside enough so he could drive.

So much for the Pus Sisters.

During the next five days, Pop ran through the remaining names on his mental list. His asking price, which had begun at twenty thousand dollars with McCarty and dropped to ten with the Pus Sisters (not that he had gotten far enough into the business to mention price in either case), dropped steadily as he ran out the string. He was finally left with Emory Chaffee, and the possibility of realizing perhaps twenty-five hundred.

Chaffee presented a fascinating paradox: in all Pop's experience with the Mad Hatters - an experience that was long and amazingly varied - Emory Chaffee was the only believer in the 'other world' who had absolutely no imagination whatsoever. That he had ever spared a single thought for the 'other world' with such a mind was surprising; that he believed in it was amazing; that he paid good money to collect objects connected with it was something Pop found absolutely astounding. Yet it was so, and Pop would have put Chaffee much higher on his list save for the annoying fact that Chaffee was by far the least well off of what Pop thought of as his 'rich' Mad Hatters. He was doing a game but poor job of holding onto the last unravelling threads of what had once been a great family fortune. Hence, another large drop in Pop's asking price for Kevin's Polaroid.

But, he had thought, pulling his car into the overgrown driveway of what had in the twenties been one of Sebago Lake's finest summer homes and which was now only a step or two away from becoming

one of Sebago Lake's shabbiest year-round homes (the Chaffee house in Portland's Bramhall district had been sold for taxes fifteen years before), if anyone'll buy this beshitted thing, I reckon Emory will.

The only thing that really distressed him - and it had done so more and more as he worked his way fruitlessly down the list - was the demonstration part. He could describe what the camera did until he was black in the face, but not even an odd duck like Emory Chaffee would lay out good money on the basis of a description alone.

Sometimes Pop thought it had been stupid to have Kevin take all those pictures so he could make that videotape. But when you got right down to where the bear shit in the buckwheat, he wasn't sure it would have made any difference. Time passed over there in that world (for, like Kevin, he had come to think of it as that: an actual world), and it passed much more slowly than it did in this one ... but wasn't it speeding up as the dog approached the camera? Pop thought it was. The movement of the dog along the fence had been barely visible at first; now only a blind man could fail to see that the dog was closer each time the shutter was pressed. You could see the difference in distance even if you snapped two photographs one right after the other. It was almost as if time over there were trying to ... well, trying to catch up somehow, and get in sync with time over here.

If that had been all, it would have been bad enough. But it wasn't all.

That was no dog, goddammit.

POP didn't know what it was, but he knew as well as he knew his mother was buried in Homeland Cemetery that it was no dog.

He thought it had been a dog, when it had been snuffling its way along that picket fence which it had now left a good ten feet behind;

it had looked like one, albeit an exceptionally mean one once it got its head turned enough so you could get a good look at its phiz.

But to Pop it now looked like no creature that had ever existed on God's earth, and probably not in Lucifer's hell, either. What troubled him even more was this: the few people for whom he had taken demonstration photographs did not seem to see this. They inevitably recoiled, inevitably said it was the ugliest, meanest-looking junkyard mongrel they had ever seen, but that was all. Not a single one of them suggested that the dog in Kevin's Sun 660 was turning into some kind of monster as it approached the photographer. As it approached the lens which might be some sort of portal between that world and this one.

Pop thought again (as Kevin had), But it could never get through. Never. If something is going to happen, I'll tell you what that something will be, because that thing is an ANIMAL, Maybe a goddam ugly one, a scary one, even, like the kind of thing a little kid imagines in his closet after his momma turns off the lights, but it's still an ANIMAL, and if anything happens it'll be this: there'll be one last pitcher where you can't see nothing but blur because that devil-dog will have jumped, you can see that's what it means to do, and after that the camera either won't work, or if it does, it won't take pitchers that develop into anything but

Black squares, because you can't take pitchers with a camera that has a busted lens or with one that's broke right in two for that matter, and if whoever owns that shadow drops the camera when the devil-dog hits it and him, and I imagine he will, it's apt to fall on the sidewalk and it probably WILL break. Goddam thing's nothing but plastic, after all, and plastic and cement don't get along hardly at all.

But Emory Chaffee had come out on his splintery porch now, where the paint on the boards was flaking off and the boards themselves were warping out of true and the screens were turning the rusty

color of dried blood and gaping holes in some of them; Emory Chaffee wearing a blazer which had once been a natty blue but had now been cleaned so many times it was the nondescript gray of an elevator operator's uniform; Emory Chaffee with his high forehead sloping back and back until it finally disappeared beneath what little hair he had left and grinning his Pip-pip, jolly good, old boy, jolly good, wot, wot? grin that showed his gigantic buck teeth and made him look the way Pop imagined Bugs Bunny would look if Bugs had suffered some cataclysmic mental retardation.

Pop took hold of the camera's strap - God, how he had come to hate the thing! -got out of his car, and forced himself to return the man's wave and grin.

Business, after all, was business.

'That's one ugly pup, wouldn't you say?'

Chaffee was studying the Polaroid which was now almost completely developed. Pop had explained what the camera did, and had been encouraged by Chaffee's frank interest and curiosity. Then he had given the Sun to the man, inviting him to take a picture of anything he liked.

Emory Chaffee, grinning that repulsive buck-toothed grin, swung the Polaroid Pop's way.

'Except me,' Pop said hastily. 'I'd rather you pointed a shotgun at my head instead of that camera.'

'When you sell a thing, you really sell it,' Chaffee said admiringly, but he had obliged just the same, turning the Sun 660 toward the wide picture window with its view of the lake, a magnificent view that remained as rich now as the Chaffee family itself had been in those years which began after World War I, golden years which had somehow begun to turn to brass around 1970.

He pressed the shutter.

The camera whined.

Pop winced. He found that now he winced every time he heard that sound -that squidgy little whine. He had tried to control the wince and had found to his dismay that he could not.

'Yes, sir, one goddamned ugly brute!' Chaffee repeated after examining the developed picture, and Pop was sourly pleased to see that the repulsive buck-toothed wot-ho, bit-of-a-sticky-wicket grin had disappeared at last. The camera had been able to do that much, at least.

Yet it was equally clear to him that the man wasn't seeing what he, Pop, was seeing. Pop had had some preparation for this eventuality; he was, all the same, badly shaken behind his impassive Yankee mask. He believed that if Chaffee had been granted the power (for that was what it seemed to be) to see what Pop was seeing, the stupid fuck would have been headed for the nearest door, and at top speed.

The dog - well, it wasn't a dog, not anymore, but you had to call it something - hadn't begun its leap at the photographer yet, but it was getting ready; its hindquarters were simultaneously bunching and lowering toward the cracked anonymous sidewalk in a way that somehow reminded Pop of a kid's soupedup car, trembling, barely leashed by the clutch during the last few seconds of a red light; the needle on the rpm dial already standing straight up at 60 X 10, the engine screaming through chrome pipes, fat deep-tread tires ready to smoke the macadam in a hot soul-kiss.

The dog's face was no longer a recognizable thing at all. It had twisted and distorted into a carny freak-show thing that seemed to have but a single dark and malevolent eye, neither round nor oval but somehow runny, like the yolk of an egg that has been stabbed with the tines of a fork. Its nose was a black beak with deep flared

holes drilled into either side. And was there smoke coming from those holes - like steam from the vents of a volcano? Maybe - or maybe that part was just imagination.

Don't matter, Pop thought. You just keep working that shutter, or letting people like this fool work it, and you are gonna find out, aren't you?

But he didn't want to find out. He looked at the black, murdering thing whose matted coat had caught perhaps two dozen wayward burdocks, the thing which no longer had fur, exactly, but stuff like living spikes, and a tail like a medieval weapon. He observed the shadow it had taken a damned snot-nosed kid to extract meaning from, and saw it had changed. One of the shadow-legs appeared to have moved a stride backward - a very long stride, even taking the effect of the lowering or rising sun (but it was going down; Pop had somehow become very sure it was going down, that it was night coming in that world over there, not day) into account.

The photographer over there in that world had finally discovered that his subject did not mean to sit for its portrait; that had never been a part of its plan. It intended to eat, not sit. That was the plan.

Eat, and, maybe, in some way he didn't understand, escape.

Find out! he thought ironically. Go ahead! Just keep taking pictures! You'll find out! You'll find out PLENTY!

'And you, sir,' Emory Chaffee was saying, for he had only been stopped for a moment; creatures of little imagination are rarely stopped for long by such trivial things as consideration, 'are one hell of a salesman!'

The memory of McCarty was still very close to the surface of Pop's mind, and it still rankled.

'If you think it's a fake -' he began.

'A fake? Not at all! Not ... at all!' Chaffee's buck-toothed smile spread wide in all its repulsive splendor. He spread his hands in a surely-you-jest motion. 'But I'm afraid, you see, that we can't do business on this particular item, Mr Merrill. I'm sorry to say so, but -'

'Why?' Pop bit off. 'If you don't think the goddam thing's a fake, why in the hell don't you want it?' And he was astonished to hear his voice rising in a kind of plaintive, balked fury. There had never been anything like this, never in the history of the world, Pop was sure of it, nor ever would be again. Yet it seemed he couldn't give the goddam thing away.

'But . . .' Chaffee looked puzzled, as if not sure how to state it, because whatever it was he had to say seemed so obvious to him. In that moment he looked like a pleasant but not very capable pre-school teacher trying to teach a backward child how to tie his shoes. 'But it doesn't do anything, does it?'

'Doesn't do anything?' Pop nearly screamed. He couldn't believe he had lost control of himself to such a degree as this, and was losing more all the time. What was happening to him? Or, cutting closer to the bone, what was the son-of-a-bitching camera doing to him? 'Doesn't do anything? What are you, blind? It takes pitchers of another world! It takes pitchers that move in time from one to the next, no matter where you take em or when you take em in this world! And that ... that thing ... that monster -'

Oh. Oh dear. He had finally done it. He had finally gone too far. He could see it in the way Chaffee was looking at him.

'But it's just a dog, isn't it?' Chaffee said in a low, comforting voice. It was the sort of voice you'd use to try and soothe a madman while the nurses ran for the cabinet where they kept the hypos and the knock-out stuff.

'Ayuh,' Pop said slowly and tiredly. 'Just a dog is all it is. But you said yourself it was a hell of an ugly brute.'

'That's right, that's right, I did,' Chaffee said, agreeing much too quickly. Pop thought if the man's grin got any wider and broader he might just be treated to the sight of the top three-quarters of the idiot's head toppling off into his lap. 'But ... surely you see, Mr Merrill ... what a problem this presents for the collector. The serious collector.'

'No, I guess I don't,' Pop said, but after running through the entire list of Mad Hatters, a list which had seemed so promising at first, he was beginning to. In fact, he was beginning to see a whole host of problems the Polaroid Sun presented for the serious collector. As for Emory Chaffee ... God knew what Emory thought, exactly.

'There are most certainly such things as ghost photographs,' Chaffee said in a rich, pedantic voice that made Pop want to strangle him. 'But these are not ghost photographs. They -'

'They're sure as hell not normal photographs!'

'My point exactly,' Chaffee said, frowning slightly. 'But what sort of photographs are they? One can hardly say, can one? One can only display a perfectly normal camera that photographs a dog which is apparently preparing to leap. And once it leaps, it will be gone from the frame of the picture. At that point, one of three things may happen. The camera may start taking normal pictures, which is to say, pictures of the things it is aimed at; it may take no more pictures at all, its one purpose, to photograph - to document ' one might even say - that dog, completed; or it may simply go on taking pictures of that white fence and the ill-tended lawn behind it.' He paused and added, 'I suppose someone might walk by at some point, forty photographs down the line - or four hundred - but unless the photographer raised his angle, which he doesn't seem to have done in any of these, one would only see the passerby from the waist down. More or less.' And, echoing Kevin's father without even knowing who Kevin's father was, he added: 'Pardon me for saying so, Mr Merrill, but you've shown me something I thought I'd never

see: an inexplicable and almost irrefutable paranormal occurrence that is really quite boring.'

This amazing but apparently sincere remark forced Pop to disregard whatever Chaffee might think about his sanity and ask again: 'It really is only a dog, as far as you can see?'

'Of course,' Chaffee said, looking mildly surprised. 'A stray mongrel that looks exceedingly bad-tempered.'

He sighed.

'And it wouldn't be taken seriously, of course. What I mean is it wouldn't be taken seriously by people who don't know you personally, Mr Merrill. People who aren't familiar with your honesty and reliability in these matters. It looks like a trick, you see? And not even a very good one. Something on the order of a child's Magic Eight-Ball.'

Two weeks ago, Pop would have argued strenuously against such an idea. But that was before he had been not walked but actually propelled from that bastard McCarty's house.

'Well, if that's your final word,' Pop said, getting up and taking the camera by the strap.

'I'm very sorry you made a trip to such little purpose,' Chaffee said ... and then his horrid grin burst forth again, all rubbery lips and huge teeth shining with spit. 'I was about to make myself a Spam sandwich when you drove in. Would you care to join me, Mr Merrill? I make quite a nice one, if I do say so myself. I add a little horseradish and Bermuda onion - that's my secret - and then I -'

'I'll pass,' Pop said heavily. As in the Pus Sisters' parlor, all he really wanted right now was to get out of here and put miles between himself and this grinning idiot. Pop had a definite allergy to places where he had gambled and lost. just lately there seemed to be a lot

of those. Too goddam many. 'I already had m'dinner, is what I mean to say. Got to be getting back.'

Chaffee laughed fruitily. 'The lot of the toiler in the vineyards is busy but yields great bounty,' he said.

Not just lately, Pop thought. Just lately it ain't yielded no fucking bounty at all.

'It's a livin anyway,' Pop replied, and was eventually allowed out of the house, which was damp and chill (what it must be like to live in such a place come February, Pop couldn't imagine) and had that mousy, mildewed smell that might be rotting curtains and sofa-covers and such ... or just the smell money leaves behind when it has spent a longish period of time in a place and then departed. He thought the fresh October air, tinged with just a small taste of the lake and a stronger tang of pine-needles, had never smelled so good.

He got into his car and started it up. Emory Chaffee, unlike the Pus Sister who had shown him as far as the door and then closed it quickly behind him, as if afraid the sun might strike her and turn her to dust like a vampire, was standing on the front porch, grinning his idiot grin and actually waving, as if he were seeing Pop off on a goddam ocean cruise.

And, without thinking, just as he had taken the picture of (or at, anyway) the old black woman without thinking, he had snapped Chaffee and the just-starting-to-moulder house which was all that remained of the Chaffee family holdings. He didn't remember picking the camera up off the seat where he had tossed it in disgust before closing his door, was not even aware that the camera was in his hands or the shutter fired until he heard the whine of the mechanism shoving the photograph out like a tongue coated with some bland gray fluid -Milk of Magnesia, perhaps. That sound seemed to vibrate along his nerve-endings now, making them

scream; it was like the feeling you got when something too cold or hot hit a new filling.

He was peripherally aware that Chaffee was laughing as if it was the best goddam joke in the world before snatching the picture from the slot in a kind of furious horror, telling himself he had imagined the momentary, blurred sound of a snarl, a sound like you might hear if a power-boat was approaching while you had your head ducked under water; telling himself he had imagined the momentary feeling that the camera had bulged in his hands, as if some huge pressure inside had pushed the sides out momentarily. He punched the glove-compartment button and threw the picture inside and then closed it so hard and fast that he tore his thumbnail all the way down to the tender quick.

He pulled out jerkily, almost stalling, then almost hitting one of the hoary old spruces which flanked the house end of the long Chaffee driveway, and all the way up that driveway he thought he could hear Emory Chaffee laughing in loud mindless cheery bellows of sound: Haw! Haw! Haw! Haw!

His heart slammed in his chest, and his head felt as if someone was using a sledgehammer inside there. The small cluster of veins which nestled in the hollows of each temple pulsed steadily.

He got himself under control little by little. Five miles, and the little man inside his head quit using the sledgehammer. Ten miles (by now he was almost halfway back to Castle Rock), and his heartbeat was back to normal. And he told himself: You ain't gonna look at it. YOU AIN'T. Let the goddam thing rot in there. You don't need to look at it, and you don't need to take no more of em, either. Time to mark the thing off as a dead loss. Time to do what you should have let the boy, do in the first place.

So of course when he got to the Castle View rest area, a turn-out from which you could, it seemed, see all of western Maine and half

of New Hampshire, he swung in and turned off his motor and opened the glove compartment and brought out the picture which he had taken with no more intent or knowledge than a man might have if he did a thing while walking in his sleep. The photograph had developed in there, of course; the chemicals inside that deceptively flat square had come to life and done their usual efficient job. Dark or light, it didn't make any difference to a Polaroid picture.

The dog-thing was crouched all the way down now. It was as fully coiled as it was going to get, a trigger pulled back to full cock. Its teeth had outgrown its mouth so that the thing's snarl seemed now to be not only an expression of rage but a simple necessity; how could its lips ever fully close over those teeth? How could those jaws ever chew? It looked more like a weird species of wild boar than a dog now, but what it really looked like was nothing Pop had ever seen before. It did more than hurt his eyes to look at it; it hurt his mind. It made him feel as if he was going crazy.

Why not get rid of that camera right here? he thought suddenly. You can. Just get out, walk to the guardrail there, and toss her over. All gone. Goodbye.

But that would have been an impulsive act, and Pop Merrill belonged to the Reasonable tribe - belonged to it body and soul, is what I mean to say. He didn't want to do anything on the spur of the moment that he might regret later, and

If you don't do this, you'll regret it later.

But no. And no. And no. A man couldn't run against his nature. It was unnatural. He needed time to think. To be sure.

He compromised by throwing the print out instead and then drove on quickly. For a minute or two he felt as if he might throw up, but the urge passed. When it did, he felt a little more himself. Safely back in his shop, he unlocked the steel box, took out the Sun,

rummaged through his keys once more, and located the one for the drawer where he kept his 'special' items. He started to put the camera inside ... and paused, brow furrowed. The image of the chopping block out back entered his mind with such clarity, every detail crisply firmed, that it was like a photograph itself.

He thought: Never mind all that about how a man can't run against his nature. That's crap, and you know it. It ain't in a man's nature to eat dirt, but you could eat a whole bowl of it, by the bald-headed Christ, if someone with a gun pointed at your head told you to do it. You know what time it is, chummy - time to do what you should have let the boy do in the first place. After all, It ain't like you got any investment in this.

But at this, another part of his mind rose in angry, fist-waving protest. Yes I do! I do have an investment, goddammit! That kid smashed a perfectly good Polaroid camera! He may not know it, but that don't change the fact that I'm out a hundred and thirty-nine bucks!

'Oh, shit on toast!' he muttered agitatedly. 'It ain't that! It ain't the fuckin money!'

No - it wasn't the fucking money. He could at least admit that it wasn't the money. He could afford it; Pop could indeed have afforded a great deal, including his own mansion in Portland's Bramhall district and a brand-new Mercedes-Benz to go in the carport. He never would have bought those things - he pinched his pennies and chose to regard almost pathological miserliness as nothing more than good old Yankee thrift - but that didn't mean he couldn't have had them if he so chose.

It wasn't about money; it was about something more important than money ever could be. It was about not getting skinned. Pop had made a life's work out of not getting skinned, and on the few

occasions when he had been, he had felt like a man with red ants crawling around inside his skull.

Take the business of the goddam Kraut record-player, for instance. When Pop found out that antique dealer from Boston - Donahue, his name had been - had gotten fifty bucks more than he'd ought to have gotten for a 1915 Victor-Graff gramophone (which had actually turned out to be a much more common 1919 model), Pop had lost three hundred dollars' worth of sleep over it, sometimes plotting various forms of revenge (each more wild-eyed and ridiculous than the last), sometimes just damning himself for a fool, telling himself he must really be slipping if a city man like that Donahue could skin Pop Merrill. And sometimes he imagined the fucker telling his poker-buddies about how easy it had been, hell, they were all just a bunch of rubes up there, he believed that if you tried to sell the Brooklyn Bridge to a fellow like that country mouse Merrill in Castle Rock, the damned fool would ask 'How much?' Then him and his cronies rocking back in their chairs around that poker-table (why he always saw them around such a table in this morbid daydream Pop didn't know, but he did), smoking dollar cigars and roaring with laughter like a bunch of trolls.

The business of the Polaroid was eating into him like acid, but he still wasn't ready to let go of the thing yet.

Not quite yet.

You're crazy! a voice shouted at him. You're crazy to go on with it!

'Damned if I'll eat it,' he muttered sulkily to that voice and to his empty shadowed store, which ticked softly to itself like a bomb in a suitcase. 'Damned if I will.'

But that didn't mean he had to go haring off on any more stupid goddam trips trying to sell the sonofawhore, and he certainly didn't mean to take any more pictures with it. He judged there were at least three more 'safe' ones left in it, and there were probably as

many as seven, but he wasn't going to be the one to find out. Not at all.

Still, something might come up. You never knew. And it could hardly do him or anyone else any harm locked up in a drawer, could it?

'Nope,' Pop agreed briskly to himself. He dropped the camera inside, locked the drawer, repocketed his keys, and then went to the door and turned CLOSED over to OPEN with the air of a man who has finally put some nagging problem behind him for good.

CHAPTER 10

Pop woke up at three the next morning, bathed with sweat and peering fearfully into the dark. The clocks had just begun another weary run at the hour.

It was not this sound which awakened him, although it could have done, since he was not upstairs in his bed but down below, in the shop itself. The Emporium Galorium was a cave of darkness crowded with hulking shadows created by the streetlamps outside, which managed to send just enough light through the dirty plate-glass windows to create the unpleasant feeling of things hiding beyond the borders of vision.

It wasn't the clocks that woke him; it was the flash.

He was horrified to find himself standing in his pyjamas beside his worktable with the Polaroid Sun 660 in his hands. The 'special' drawer was open. He was aware that, although he had taken only a single picture, his finger had been pushing the button which triggered the shutter again and again and again. He would have taken a great many more than the one that protruded from the slot at the bottom of the camera but for simple good luck. There had only been a single picture left in the film pack currently in the camera.

Pop started to lower his arms - he had been holding the camera pointed toward the front of the shop, the viewfinder with its minute hairline crack held up to one open, sleeping eye - and when he got them down as far as his ribcage, they began to tremble and the muscles holding the hinges of his elbows just seemed to give way. His arms fell, his fingers opened, and the camera tumbled back into the 'special' drawer with a clatter. The picture he had taken slipped from the slot and fluttered. It struck one edge of the open drawer,

teetered first one way as if it would follow the camera in, and then the other. It fell on the floor.

Heart attack, Pop thought incoherently. I'm gonna have a goddam Christing heart attack.

He tried to raise his right arm, wanting to massage the left side of his chest with the hand on the end of it, but the arm wouldn't come. The hand on the end of it dangled as limp as a dead man at the end of a hangrope. The world wavered in and out of focus. The sound of the clocks (the tardy ones were just finishing up) faded away to distant echoes. Then the pain in his chest diminished, the light seemed to come back a little, and he realized all he was doing was trying to faint.

He made to sit down in the wheeled chair behind the worktable, and the business of lowering himself into the seat, like the business of lowering the camera, began all right, but before he had gotten even halfway down, those hinges, the ones that strapped his thighs and calves together by way of his knees, also gave way and he didn't so much sit in the chair as cave into it. It rolled a foot backward, struck a crate filled with old Life and Look magazines, and stopped.

Pop put his head down, the way you were supposed to do when you felt lightheaded, and time passed. He had no idea at all, then or later, how much. He might even have gone back to sleep for a little while. But when he raised his head, he was more or less all right again. There was a steady dull throbbing at his temples and behind his forehead, probably because he had stuffed his goddam noodle with blood, hanging it over so long that way, but he found he could stand up and he knew what he had to do. When the thing had gotten hold of him so badly it could make him walk in his sleep, then make him (his mind tried to revolt at that verb, that make, but he wouldn't let it) take pictures with it, that was enough. He had no

idea what the goddam thing was, but one thing was clear: you couldn't compromise with it.

Time to do what you should have let the boy do in the first place.

Yes. But not tonight. He was exhausted, drenched with sweat, and shivering. He thought he would have his work cut out for him just climbing the stairs to his apartment again, let alone swinging that sledge. He supposed he could do the job in here, simply pick it out of the drawer and dash it against the floor again and again, but there was a deeper truth, and he'd better own up to it: he couldn't have any more truck with that camera tonight. The morning would be time enough ... and the camera couldn't do any damage between now and then, could it? There was no film in it.

Pop shut the drawer and locked it. Then he got up slowly, looking more like a man pushing eighty than seventy, and tottered slowly to the stairs. He climbed them one at a time, resting on each, clinging to the bannister (which was none too solid itself) with one hand while he held his heavy bunch of keys on their steel ring in the other. At last he made the top. With the door shut behind him, he seemed to feel a little stronger. He went back into his bedroom and got into bed, unaware as always of the strong yellow smell of sweat and old man that puffed up when he lay down - he changed the sheets on the first of every month and called it good.

I won't sleep now, he thought, and then: Yes you will. You will because you can, and you can because tomorrow morning you're going to take the sledge and pound that fucking thing to pieces and there's an end to it.

This thought and sleep came simultaneously, and Pop slept without dreaming, almost without moving, all the rest of that night. When he woke he was astonished to hear the clocks downstairs seeming to chime an extra stroke, all of them: eight instead of seven. It wasn't until he looked at the light falling across the floor and wall in a

slightly slanted oblong that he realized it really was eight; he had overslept for the first time in ten years. Then he remembered the night before. Now, in daylight, the whole episode seemed less weird; had he nearly fainted? Or was that maybe just a natural sort of weakness that came to a sleepwalker when he was unexpectedly wakened?

But of course, that was it, wasn't it? A little bright morning sunshine wasn't going to change that central fact: he had walked in his sleep, he had taken at least one picture and would have taken a whole slew of them if there had been more film in the pack.

He got up, got dressed, and went downstairs, meaning to see the thing in pieces before he even had his morning's coffee.

CHAPTER 11

Kevin wished his first visit to the two-dimensional town of Polaroidsville had also been his last visit there, but that was not the case. During the thirteen nights since the first one, he'd had the dream more and more often. If the dumb dream happened to take the night off - little vacation, Kev, but seeya soon, okay? - he was apt to have it twice the next night. Now he always knew it was a dream, and as soon as it started he would tell himself that all he had to do was wake himself up, dammit, just wake yourself up! Sometimes he did wake up, and sometimes the dream just faded back into deeper sleep, but he never succeeded in waking himself up.

It was always Polaroidsville now - never Oatley or Hildasville, those first two efforts of his fumbling mind to identify the place. And like the photograph, each dream took the action just a little bit further. First the man with the shopping-cart, which was never empty now even to start with but filled with a jumble of objects ... mostly clocks, but all from the Emporium Galorium, and all with the eerie look not of real things but rather of photographs of real things which had been cut out of magazines and then somehow, impossibly, paradoxically, stuffed into a shopping-cart, which, since it was as two-dimensional as the objects themselves, had no breadth in which to store them. Yet there they were, and the old man hunched protectively over them and told Kevin to get out, that he was a fushing feef ... only now he also told Kevin that if he didn't get out, 'I'll sic Pop's dawg on you! Fee if I don't!'

The fat woman who couldn't be fat since she was perfectly flat but who was fat anyway came next. She appeared pushing her own shopping-cart filled with Polaroid Sun cameras. She also spoke to him before he passed her. 'Be careful, boy,' she'd say in the loud but toneless voice of one who is utterly deaf, 'Pop's dog broke his leash and he's a mean un. He tore up three or four people at the

Trenton Farm in Camberville before he came here. It's hard to take his pitcher, but you can't do it at all, 'less you have a cam'ra.'

She would bend to get one, would sometimes get as far as holding it out, and he would reach for the camera, not knowing why the woman would think he should take the dog's picture or why he'd want to ... or maybe he was just trying to be polite?

Either way, it made no difference. They both moved with the stately slowness of underwater swimmers, as dream-people so often do, and they always just missed making connections; when Kevin thought of this part of the dream, he often thought of the famous picture of God and Adam which Michelangelo had painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: each of them with an arm outstretched, and each with the hand at the end of the arm also outstretched, and the forefingers almost - not quite, but almost - touching.

Then she would disappear for a moment because she had no width, and when she reappeared again she was out of reach. Well just go back to her, then, Kevin would think each time the dream reached this point, but he couldn't. His feet carried him heedlessly and serenely onward to the peeling white picket fence and Pop and the dog ... only the dog was no longer a dog but some horrible mixed thing that gave off heat and smoke like a dragon and had the teeth and twisted, scarred snout of a wild pig. Pop and the Sun dog would turn toward him at the same time, and Pop would have the camera - his camera, Kevin knew, because there was a piece chipped out of the side - up to his right eye. His left eye was squinted shut. His rimless spectacles glinted on top of his head in hazy sunlight. Pop and the Sun dog had all three dimensions. They were the only things in this seedy, creepy little dreamtown that did.

'He's the one!' Pop cried in a shrill, fearful voice. 'He's the thief! Sic em, boy! Pull his fuckin guts out is what I mean to say!'

And as he screamed out this last, heatless lightning flashed in the day as Pop triggered the shutter and the flash, and Kevin turned to run. The dream had stopped here the second time he had had it. Now, on each subsequent occasion, things went a little further. Again he was moving with the aquatic slowness of a performer in an underwater ballet. He felt that, if he had been outside himself, he would even have looked like a dancer, his arms turning like the blades of a propeller just starting up, his shirt twisting with his body, pulling taut across his chest and his belly at the same time he heard the shirt's tail pulling free of his pants at the small of his back with a magnified rasp like sandpaper.

Then he was running back the way he came, each foot rising slowly and then floating dreamily (of course dreamily, what else, you fool? he would think at this point every time) back down until it hit the cracked and listless cement of the sidewalk, the soles of his tennis shoes flattening as they took his weight and spanking up small clouds of grit moving so slowly that he could see the individual particles revolving like atoms.

He ran slowly, yes, of course, and the Sun dog, nameless stray Grendel of a thing that came from nowhere and signified nothing and had all the sense of a cyclone but existed nevertheless, chased him slowly . . . but not quite as slowly.

On the third night, the dream faded into normal sleep just as Kevin began to turn his head in that dragging, maddening slow motion to see how much of a lead he had on the dog. It then skipped a night. On the following night it returned -twice. In the first dream he got his head halfway around so he could see the street on his left disappearing into limbo behind him as he ran along it; in the second (and from this one his alarm-clock woke him, sweating lightly in a crouched fetal position on the far side of the bed) he got his head turned enough to see the dog just as its forepaws came down in his own tracks, and he saw the paws were digging crumbly little craters in the cement because they had sprouted claws ... and

from the back of each lower leg-joint there protruded a long thorn of bone that looked like a spur. The thing's muddy reddish eye was locked on Kevin. Dim fire blew and dripped from its nostrils. Jesus, Jesus Christ, its SNOT'S on fire, Kevin thought, and when he woke he was horrified to hear himself whispering it over and over, very rapidly: '. . . snot's on fire, snot's on fire, snot's on fire.'

Night by night the dog gained on him as he fled down the sidewalk. Even when he wasn't turning to look he could hear the Sun dog gaining. He was aware of a spread of warmth from his crotch and knew he was in enough fear to have wet himself, although the emotion came through in the same diluted, numbed way he seemed to have to move in this world. He could hear the Sun dog's paws striking the cement, could hear the dry crack and squall of the cement breaking. He could hear the hot blurts of its breath, the suck of air flowing in past those outrageous teeth.

And on the night Pop woke up to find he had not only walked in his sleep but taken at least one picture in it, Kevin felt as well as heard the Sun dog's breath for the first time: a warm rush of air on his buttocks like the sultry suck of wind a subway on an express run pulls through a station where it needn't stop. He knew the dog was close enough to spring on his back now, and that would come next; he would feel one more breath, this one not just warm but hot, as hot as acute indigestion in your throat, and then that crooked living bear-trap of a mouth would sink deep into the flesh of his back, between the shoulderblades, ripping the skin and meat off his spine, and did he think this was really just a dream? Did he?

He awoke from this last one just as Pop was gaining the top of the stairs to his apartment and resting one final time before going inside back to bed. This time Kevin woke sitting bolt upright, the sheet and blanket which had been over him puddled around his waist, his skin covered with sweat and yet freezing, a million stiff little white goose-pimples standing out all over his belly, chest,

back, and arms like stigmata. Even his cheeks seemed to crawl with them.

And what he thought about was not the dream, or at least not directly; he thought instead: It's wrong, the number is wrong, it says three but it can't -

Then he flopped back and, in the way of children (for even at fifteen most of him was still a child and would be until later that day), he fell into a deep sleep again.

The alarm woke him at seven-thirty, as it always did on school mornings, and he found himself sitting up in bed again, wide-eyed, every piece suddenly in place. The Sun he had smashed hadn't been his Sun, and that was why he kept having this same crazy dream over and over and over again. Pop Merrill, that kindly old crackerbarrel philosopher and repairer of cameras and clocks and small appliances, had euchered him and his father as neatly and competently as a riverboat gambler does the tenderfeet in an old Western movie.

His father -!

He heard the door downstairs slam shut and leaped out of bed. He took two running strides toward the door in his underwear, thought better of it, turned, yanked the window up, and hollered 'Dad!' just as his father was folding himself into the car to go to work.

CHAPTER 12

Pop dredged his key-ring up from his pocket, unlocked the 'special' drawer, and took out the camera, once again being careful to hold it by the strap only. He looked with some hope at the front of the Polaroid, thinking he might see that the lens had been smashed in its latest tumble, hoping that the goddam thing's eye had been poked out, you might say, but his father had been fond of saying that the devil's luck is always in, and that seemed to be the case with Kevin Delevan's goddamned camera. The chipped place on the thing's side had chipped away a little more, but that was all.

He closed the drawer and, as he turned the key, saw the one picture he'd taken in his sleep lying face-down on the floor. As unable not to look at it as Lot's wife had been unable not to turn back and look at the destruction of Sodom, he picked it up with those blunt fingers that hid their dexterity from the world so well and turned it over.

The dog-creature had begun its spring. Its forepaws had barely left the ground, but along its misshapen backbone and in the bunches of muscle under the hide with its hair like the stiff filaments sticking out of black steel brushes he could see all that kinetic energy beginning to release itself. Its face and head were actually a little blurred in this photograph as its mouth yawned wider, and drifting up from the picture, like a sound heard under glass, he seemed to hear a low and throaty snarl beginning to rise toward a roar. The shadow-photographer looked as if he were trying to stumble back another pace, but what did it matter? That was smoke jetting from the holes in the dog-thing's muzzle, all right, smoke, and more smoke drifting back from the hinges of its open jaws in the little space where the crogged and ugly stake-wall of its teeth ended, and any man would stumble back from a horror like that, any man would try to turn and run, but all Pop had to do was look to tell you that the man (of course it was a man, maybe once it had been a

boy, a teenage boy, but who had the camera now?) who had taken that picture in mere startled reflex, with a kind of wince of the finger ... that man didn't them, and all the difference it would make would be as to how he died: while he was on his feet or while he was on his ass.

Pop crumpled the picture between his fingers and then stuck his key-ring back into his pocket. He turned, holding what had been Kevin Delevan's Polaroid Sun 660 and was now his Polaroid Sun 660 by the strap and started toward the back of the store; he would pause on the way just long enough to get the sledge. And as he neared the door to the back shed, a shutterflash, huge and white and soundless, went off not in front of his eyes but behind them, in his brain.

He turned back, and now his eyes were as empty as the eyes of a man who has been temporarily blinded by some bright light. He walked past the worktable with the camera now held in his hands at chest level, as one might carry a votive urn or some other sort of religious offering or relic. Halfway between the worktable and the front of the store was a bureau covered with clocks. To its left was one of the barnlike structure's support beams, and from a hook planted in this there hung another clock, an imitation German cuckoo clock. Pop grasped it by the roof and pulled it off its hook, indifferent to the counterweights, which immediately became entangled in one another's chains, and to the pendulum, which snapped off when one of the disturbed chains tried to twine around it. The little door below the roofpeak of the clock sprang ajar; the wooden bird poked out its beak and one startled eye. It gave a single choked sound - kook! - as if in protest of this rough treatment before creeping back inside again.

Pop hung the Sun by its strap on the hook where the clock had been, then turned and moved toward the back of the store for the second time, his eyes still blank and dazzled. He clutched the clock by its roof, swinging it back and forth indifferently, not hearing the

cluds and clunks from inside it, or the occasional strangled sound that might have been the bird trying to escape, not noticing when one of the counterweights smacked the end of an old bed, snapped off, and went rolling beneath, leaving a deep trail in the undisturbed dust of years. He moved with the blank mindless purpose of a robot. In the shed, he paused just long enough to pick up the sledgehammer by its smooth shaft. With both hands thus filled, he had to use the elbow of his left arm to knock the hook out of the eyebolt so he could push open the shed door and walk into the backyard.

He crossed to the chopping block and set the imitation German cuckoo clock on it. He stood for a moment with his head inclined down toward it, both of his hands now on the handle of the sledge. His face remained blank, his eyes dim and dazzled, but there was a part of his mind which not only thought clearly but thought all of him was thinking - and acting - clearly. This part of him saw not a cuckoo clock which hadn't been worth much to begin with and was now broken in the bargain; it saw Kevin's Polaroid. This part of his mind really believed he had come downstairs, gotten the Polaroid from the drawer, and proceeded directly out back, pausing only to get the sledge.

And it was this part that would do his remembering later ... unless it became convenient for him to remember some other truth. Or any other truth, for that matter.

Pop Merrill raised the sledgehammer over his right shoulder and brought it down hard - not as hard as Kevin had done, but hard enough to do the job. It struck squarely on the roof of the imitation German cuckoo clock. The clock did not so much break or shatter as splatter; pieces of plastic wood and little gears and springs flew everywhere. And what that little piece of Pop which saw would remember (unless, of course, it became convenient to remember otherwise) were pieces of camera splattering everywhere.

He pulled the sledge off the block and stood for a moment with his meditating, unseeing eyes on the shambles. The bird, which to Pop looked exactly like a film-case, a Polaroid Sun film-case, was lying on its back with its little wooden feet sticking straight up in the air, looking both deader than any bird outside of a cartoon ever looked and yet somehow miraculously unhurt at the same time. He had his look, then turned and headed back toward the shed door.

'There,' he muttered under his breath. 'Good 'nuff.'

Someone standing even very close to him might have been unable to pick up the words themselves, but it would have been hard to miss the unmistakable tone of relief with which they were spoken.

'That's done. Don't have to worry about that anymore. Now what's next? Pipe-tobacco, isn't it?'

But when he got to the drugstore on the other side of the block fifteen minutes later, it was not pipe-tobacco he asked for (although that was what he would remember asking for). He asked for film.

Polaroid film.

CHAPTER 13

'Kevin, I'm going to be late for work if I don't -'

'Will you call in? Can you? Call in and say you'll be late, or that you might not get there at all? If it was something really, really, really important?'

Warily, Mr Delevan asked, 'What's the something?'

'Could you?'

Mrs Delevan was standing in the doorway of Kevin's bedroom now. Meg was behind her. Both of them were eyeing the man in his business suit and the tall boy, still wearing only his jockey shorts, curiously.

'I suppose I - yes, say I could. But I won't until I know what it is.'

Kevin lowered his voice, and, cutting his eyes toward the door, he said: 'It's about Pop Merrill. And the camera.'

Mr Delevan, who had at first only looked puzzled at what Kevin's eyes were doing, now went to the door. He murmured something to his wife, who nodded. Then he closed the door, paying no more attention to Meg's protesting whine than he would have to a bird singing a bundle of notes on a telephone wire outside the bedroom window.

'What did you tell Mom?' Kevin asked.

'That it was man-to-man stuff.' Mr Delevan smiled a little. 'I think she thinks you want to talk about masturbating.'

Kevin flushed.

Mr Delevan looked concerned. 'You don't, do you? I mean, you know about -'

'I know, I know,' Kevin said hastily; he was not about to tell his father (and wasn't sure he would have been able to put the right string of words together, even if he had wanted to) that what had thrown him momentarily off-track was finding out that not only did his father know about whacking off - which of course shouldn't have surprised him at all but somehow did, leaving him with feelings of surprise at his own surprise - but that his mother somehow did, too.

Never mind. All this had nothing to do with the nightmares, or with the new certainty which had locked into place in his head.

'It's about Pop, I told you. And some bad dreams I've been having. But mostly it's about the camera. Because Pop stole it somehow, Dad.'

'Kevin -'

'I beat it to pieces on his chopping block, I know. But it wasn't my camera. It was another camera. And that isn't even the worst thing. The worst thing is that he's still using mine to take pictures! And that dog is going to get out! When it does, I think it's going to kill me. In that other world it's already started to j-j-j ❖'

He couldn't finish. Kevin surprised himself again - this time by bursting into tears.

By the time John Delevan got his son calmed down it was ten minutes of eight, and he had resigned himself to at least being late for work. He held the boy in his arms - whatever it was, it really had the kid shook, and if it really was nothing but a bunch of dreams, Mr Delevan supposed he would find sex at the root of the matter someplace.

When Kevin was shivering and only sucking breath deep into his lungs in an occasional dry-sob, Mr Delevan went to the door and opened it cautiously, hoping Kate had taken Meg downstairs. She had; the hallway was empty. That's one for our side, anyway, he thought, and went back to Kevin.

'Can you talk now?' he asked.

'Pop's got my camera,' Kevin said hoarsely. His red eyes, still watery, peered at his father almost myopically. 'He got it somehow, and he's using it.'

◆'And this is something you dreamed?'

'Yes ... and I remembered something.'

'Kevin ... that was your camera. I'm sorry, son, but it was. I even saw the little chip in the side.'

'He must have rigged that somehow -'

'Kevin, that seems pretty farf -'

'Listen,' Kevin said urgently, 'will you just listen?'

'All right. Yes. I'm listening.'

'What I remembered was that when he handed me the camera - when we went out back to crunch it, remember?'

'Yes ... and I remembered something.'

'I looked in the little window where the camera keeps count of how many shots there are left. And it said three, Dad! It said three!'

'Well? What about it?'

'It had film in it, too! Film! I know, because I remember one of those shiny black things jumping up when I squashed the camera. It jumped up and then it fluttered back down.'

'I repeat: so what?'

'There wasn't any film in my camera when I gave it to Pop! That's so-what.'

I had twenty-eight pictures. He wanted me to take thirty more, for a total of fifty-eight. I might have bought more film if I'd known what he was up to, but probably not. By then I was scared of the thing

'Yeah. I was, a little, too.'

Kevin looked at him respectfully. 'Were you?'

'Yeah. Go on. I think I see where you're heading.'

'I was just going to say, he chipped in for the film, but not enough - not even half. He's a wicked skinflint, Dad.'

John Delevan smiled thinly. 'He is that, my boy. One of the world's greatest, is what I mean to say. Go on and finish up. Tempus is fugiting away like mad.'

Kevin glanced at the clock. It was almost eight. Although neither of them knew it, Pop would wake up in just under two minutes and start about his morning's business, very little of which he would remember correctly.

'All right,' Kevin said. 'All I'm trying to say is I couldn't have bought any more film even if I'd wanted to. I used up all the money I had buying the three film packs. I even borrowed a buck from Megan, so I let her shoot a couple, too.'

'Between the two of you, you used up all the exposures? Every single one?'

'Yes! Yes! He even said it was fifty-eight! And between the time when I finished shooting all the pictures he wanted and when we went to look at the tape he made, I never bought any more film. It was dead empty when I brought it in, Dad! The number in the little window was a zero! I saw it, I remember! So if it was my camera, how come it said three in the window when we went back downstairs?'

'He couldn't have -' Then his father stopped, and a queer look of uncharacteristic gloom came over his face as he realized that Pop could have, and that the truth of it was this: he, John Delevan, didn't want to believe that Pop had; that even bitter experience had not been sufficient vaccination against foolishness, and Pop might have pulled the wool over his own eyes as well as those of his son.

'Couldn't have what? What are you thinking about, Dad? Something just hit you!'

Something had hit him, all right. How eager Pop had been to go downstairs and get the original Polaroids so they could all get a closer look at the thing around the dog's neck, the thing that turned out to be Kevin's latest string tie from Aunt Hilda, the one with the bird on it that was probably a woodpecker.

We might as well go down with you, Kevin had said when Pop had offered to get the photos, but hadn't Pop jumped up himself, chipper as a chickadee? Won't take a minute, the old man had said, or some such thing, and the truth was, Mr Delevan told himself, I hardly noticed what he was saying or doing, because I wanted to watch that goddamned tape again. And the truth also was this: Pop hadn't even had to pull the old switcheroo right in front of them - although, with his eyes unwooled, Mr Delevan was reluctantly willing to believe the old son of a bitch had probably

been prepared to do just that, if he had to, and probably could have done it, too, pushing seventy or not. With them upstairs and him downstairs, presumably doing no more than getting Kevin's photographs, he could have swapped twenty cameras, at his leisure.

'Dad?'

'I suppose he could have,' Mr Delevan said. 'But why?'

Kevin could only shake his head. He didn't know why. But that was all right; Mr Delevan thought he did, and it was something of a relief. Maybe honest men didn't have to learn the world's simplest truths over and over again; maybe some of those truths eventually stuck fast. He'd only had to articulate the question aloud in order to find the answer. Why did the Pop Merrills of this world do anything? To make a profit. That was the reason, the whole reason, and nothing but the reason. Kevin had wanted to destroy it. After looking at Pop's videotape, Mr Delevan had found himself in accord with that. Of the three of them, who had been the only one capable of taking a longer view?

Why, Pop, of course. Reginald Marion 'Pop' Merrill.

John Delevan had been sitting on the edge of Kevin's bed with an arm about his son's shoulders. Now he stood up. 'Get dressed. I'll go downstairs and call in. I'll tell Brandon I'll probably just be late, but to assume I won't be in at all.'

He was preoccupied with this, already talking to Brandon Reed in his mind, but not so preoccupied he didn't see the gratitude which lighted his son's worried face. Mr Delevan smiled a little and felt that uncharacteristic gloom first ease and then let go entirely. There was this much, at least: his son was as yet not too old to take comfort from him, or accept him as a higher power to whom appeals could sometimes be directed in the knowledge that they

would be acted upon; nor was he himself too old to take comfort from his son's comfort.

'I think,' he said, moving toward the door, 'that we ought to pay a call on Pop Merrill.' He glanced at the clock on Kevin's night-table. It was ten minutes after eight, and in back of the Emporium Galorium, a sledgehammer was coming down on an imitation German cuckoo clock. 'He usually opens around eight-thirty. just about the time we'll get there, I think. If you get a wiggle on, that is.'

He paused on his way out and a brief, cold smile flickered on his mouth. He was not smiling at his son. 'I think he's got some explaining to do, is what I mean to say.'

Mr Delevan went out, closing the door behind him. Kevin quickly began to dress.

CHAPTER 14

The Castle Rock LaVerdiere's Super Drug Store was a lot more than just a drugstore. Put another way, it was really only a drugstore as an afterthought. It was as if someone had noticed at the last moment - just before the grand opening, say - that one of the words in the sign was still 'Drug.' That someone might have made a mental note to tell someone else, someone in the company's management, that here they were, opening yet another LaVerdiere's, and they had by simple oversight neglected yet again to correct the sign so it read more simply and accurately, LaVerdiere's Super Store ... and, after making the mental note, the someone in charge of noticing such things had delayed the grand opening a day or two so they could shoe-horn in a prescription counter about the size of a telephone booth in the long building's furthest, darkest, and most neglected corner.

The LaVerdiere's Super Drug Store was really more of a jumped-up five-and-dime than anything else. The town's last real five-and-dime, a long dim room with the feeble, fly-specked overhead globes hung on chains and reflected murkily in the creaking but often-waxed wooden floor, had been The Ben Franklin Store. It had given up the ghost in 1978 to make way for a video-games arcade called Galaxia and E-Z Video Rentals, where Tuesday was Toofers Day and no one under the age of twenty could go in the back room.

LaVerdiere's carried everything the old Ben Franklin had carried, but the goods were bathed in the pitiless light of Maxi-Glo fluorescent bars which gave every bit of stock its own hectic, feverish shimmer. Buy me! each item seemed to shriek. Buy me or you may die! Or your wife may die! Or your kids! Or your best friend! Possibly all of them at once! Why? How should I know? I'm just a brainless item sitting on a Pre-fab LaVerdiere's shelf! But doesn't it feel true? You know It does! So buy me and buy me RIGHT ... NOW!

There was an aisle of notions, two aisles of first-aid supplies and nostrums, an aisle of video and audio tapes (both blank and pre-recorded). There was a long rack of magazines giving way to paperback books, a display of lighters under one digital cash-register and a display of watches under another (a third register was hidden in the dark corner where the pharmacist lurked in his lonely shadows). Halloween candy had taken over most of the toy aisle (the toys would not only come back after Halloween but eventually take over two whole aisles as the days slid remorselessly down toward Christmas). And, like something too neat to exist in reality except as a kind of dumb admission that there was such a thing as Fate with a capital F, and that Fate might, in its own way, indicate the existence of that whole 'other world' about which Pop had never before cared (except in terms of how it might fatten his pocketbook, that was) and about which Kevin Delevan had never before even thought, at the front of the store, in the main display area, was a carefully arranged work of salesmanship which was billed as the FALL FOTO FESTIVAL.

This display consisted of a basket of colorful autumn leaves spilling out on the floor in a bright flood (a flood too large to actually have come from that one basket alone, a careful observer might have concluded). Amid the leaves were a number of Kodak and Polaroid cameras - several Sun 660s among the latter - and all sorts of other equipment: cases, albums, film, flashbars. In the midst of this odd cornucopia, an old-fashioned tripod rose like one of H. G. Wells's Martian death-machines towering over the crispy wreck of London. It bore a sign which told all patrons interested enough to look that this week one could obtain SUPER REDUCTIONS ON ALL POLAROID CAMERAS & ACCESSORIES!

At eight-thirty that morning, half an hour after LaVerdiere's opened for the day, 'all patrons' consisted of Pop Merrill and Pop alone. He took no notice of the display but marched straight to the only open counter, where Molly Durham had just finished laying out the watches on their imitationvelvet display-cloth.

Oh no, here comes old Eyeballs, she thought, and grimaced. Pop's idea of a really keen way to kill a stretch of time about as long as Molly's coffee-break was to kind of ooze up to the counter where she was working (he always picked hers, even if he had to stand in line; in fact, she thought he liked it better when there was a line) and buy a pouch of Prince Albert tobacco. This was a purchase an ordinary fellow could transact in maybe thirty seconds, but if she got Eyeballs out of her face in under three minutes, she thought she was doing very well indeed. He kept all of his money in a cracked leather purse on a chain, and he'd haul it out of his pocket - giving his doorbells a good feel on the way, it always looked to Molly - and then open it. It always gave out a little screee-eek! noise, and honest to God if you didn't expect to see a moth flutter out of it, just like in those cartoons people draw of tightwads. On top of the purse's contents there would be a whole mass of paper money, bills that looked somehow as if you shouldn't handle them, as if they might be coated with disease germs of some kind, and jingling silver underneath. Pop would fish out a dollar bill and then kind of hook the other bills to one side with one of those thick fingers of his to get to the change underneath - he'd never give you a couple of bucks, hunh-uh, that would make everything go too quick to suit him - and then he'd work that out, too. And all the time his eyes would be busy, flicking down to the purse for a second or two but mostly letting the fingers sort out the proper coins by touch while his eyes crawled over her boobs, her belly, her hips, and then back up to her boobs again. Never once her face; not even so far as her mouth, which was a part of a girl in which most men seemed to be interested; no, Pop Merrill was strictly interested in the lower portions of the female anatomy. When he finally finished - and no matter how quick that was, it always seemed like three times as long to Molly - and got the hell out of the store again, she always felt like going somewhere and taking a long shower.

So she braced herself, put on her best it's-only-eight-thirty-and-I've-got-seven-and-a-half-hours-to-go smile, and stood at the counter as Pop approached. She told herself, He's only looking at you,

guys have been doing that since you sprouted, and that was true, but this wasn't the same. Because Pop Merrill wasn't like most of the guys who had run their eyes over her trim and eminently watchable superstructure since that time ten years ago. Part of it was that Pop was old, but that wasn't all of it. The truth was that some guys looked at you and some - a very few - seemed to actually be feeling you up with their eyes, and Merrill was one of those. His gaze actually seemed to have weight; when he fumbled in his creaky old-maid's purse on its length of incongruously masculine chain, she seemed to actually feel his eyes squirming up and down her front, lashing their way up her hills on their optic nerves like tadpoles and then sliding bonelessly down into her valleys, making her wish she had worn a nun's habit to work that day. Or maybe a suit of armor.

But her mother had been fond of saying What can't be cured must be endured, sweet Molly, and until someone discovered a method of weighing gazes so those of dirty men both young and old could be outlawed, or, more likely, until Pop Merrill did everyone in Castle Rock a favor by dying so that eyesore of a tourist trap he kept could be torn down, she would just have to deal with it as best she could.

But today she was in for a pleasant surprise - or so it seemed at first. Pop's usual hungry appraisal was not even an ordinary patron's look; it seemed utterly blank. It wasn't that he looked through her, or that his gaze struck her and bounced off. It seemed to Molly that he was so deep in his thoughts that his usually penetrating look did not even reach her, but made it about halfway and then petered out - like a man trying to locate and observe a star on the far side of the galaxy with just the naked eye.

'May I help you, Mr Merrill?' she asked, and her feet were already cocking so she could turn quickly and reach up for where the pouches of tobacco were kept. With Pop, this was a task she always did as quickly as possible, because when she turned and

reached, she could feel his eyes crawling busily over her ass, dropping for a quick check of her legs, then rising again to her butt for a final ocular squeeze and perhaps a pinch before she turned back.

'Yes,' he said calmly and serenely, and he might as well have been talking to one of those automated bank machines for all the interest in her he showed. That was fine by Molly. 'I'd like some' and then either a word she didn't hear right or one that was utter gibberish. If it was gobbledegook, she thought with some hope, maybe the first few parts of the complicated network of dykes, levees, and spillways the old crock had constructed against the rising sea of senility were finally giving way.

It sounded as if he had said toefilmacco, which wasn't a product they stocked ... unless it was a prescription drug of some sort.

'I beg pardon, Mr Merrill?'

'Film,' he said, so clearly and firmly that Molly was more than disappointed; she was convinced he must have said it just that way the first time and her ears had picked it up wrong. Maybe she was the one who was beginning to lose her dykes and levees.

'What kind would you like?'

'Polaroid,' he said. 'Two packs.' She didn't know exactly what was going on here, but it was beyond doubt that Castle Rock's premier dirty old man was not himself today. His eyes would still not focus, and the words ... they reminded her of something, something she associated with her five-year-old niece, Ellen, but she couldn't catch hold of it.

'For what model, Mr Merrill?'

She sounded brittle and actressy to herself, but Pop Merrill didn't even come close to noticing. Pop was lost in the ozone.

After a moment's consideration in which he did not look at her at all but seemed instead to study the racks of cigarettes behind her left shoulder, he jerked out: 'For a Polaroid Sun camera. Model 660.' And then it came to her, even as she told him she'd have to get it from the display. Her niece owned a big soft panda toy, which she had, for reasons which would probably make sense only to another little girl, named Paulette. Somewhere inside of Paulette was an electronic circuit-board and a memory chip on which were stored about four hundred short, simple sentences such as 'I like to hug, don't you?' and 'I wish you'd never go away.' Whenever you poked Paulette above her fuzzy little navel, there was a brief pause and then one of those lovesome little remarks would come out, almost jerk out, in a somehow remote and emotionless voice that seemed by its tone to deny the content of the words. Ellen thought Paulette was the nuts. Molly thought there was something creepy about it; she kept expecting Ellen to poke the panda-doll in the guts someday and it would surprise them all (except for Aunt Molly from Castle Rock) by saying what was really on its mind. 'I think tonight after you're asleep I'll strangle you dead,' perhaps, or maybe just 'I have a knife.'

Pop Merrill sounded like Paulette the stuffed panda this morning. His blank gaze was uncannily like Paulette's. Molly had thought any change from the old man's usual leer would be a welcome one. She had been wrong.

Molly bent over the display, for once totally unconscious of the way her rump was poking out, and tried to find what the old man wanted as quickly as she could. She was sure that when she turned around, Pop would be looking at anything but her. This time she was right. When she had the film and started back (brushing a couple of errant fall leaves from one of the boxes), Pop was still staring at the cigarette racks, at first glance appearing to look so closely he might have been inventorying the stock. It took a second or two to see that that expression was no expression at all, really, but a gaze of almost divine blankness.

Please get out of here, Molly prayed. Please, just take your film and go. And whatever else you do, don't touch me. Please.

If he touched her while he was looking like that, Molly thought she would scream. Why did the place have to be empty? Why couldn't at least one other customer be in here, preferably Sheriff Pangborn, but since he seemed to be otherwise engaged, anyone at all? She supposed Mr Constantine, the pharmacist, was in the store someplace, but the drug counter looked easily a quarter of a mile away, and while she knew it couldn't be that far, not really, it was still too far for him to reach her in a hurry if old man Merrill decided to touch her. And suppose Mr Constantine had gone out to Nan's for coffee with Mr Keeton from the selectmen's office? The more she thought about that possibility, the more likely it seemed. When something genuinely weird like this happened, wasn't it an almost foregone conclusion that it should happen while one was alone?

He's having a mental breakdown of some kind.

She heard herself saying with glassy cheerfulness: 'Here you are, Mr Merrill.' She put the film on the counter and scooted to her left and behind the register at once, wanting it between her and him.

The ancient leather purse came out of Pop Merrill's pants, and her stuttering fingers miskeyed the purchase so she had to clear the register and start again.

He was holding two ten-dollar bills out to her.

She told herself they were only rumpled from being squashed up with the other bills in that little pocket-book, probably not even old, although they looked old. That didn't stop her galloping mind, however. Her mind insisted that they weren't just rumpled, they were rumpled and slimy. It further insisted that old wasn't the right word, that old wasn't even in the ballpark. For those particular items of currency, not even the word ancient would do. Those were

prehistoric tens, somehow printed before Christ was born and Stonehenge was built, before the first low-browed, no-neck Neanderthal had crawled out of his cave. They belonged to a time when even God had been a baby.

She didn't want to touch them.

She had to touch them.

The man would want his change.

Steeling herself, she took the bills and shoved them into the cash register as fast as she could, banging a finger so hard she ripped most of the nail clear off, an ordinarily exquisite pain she would not notice, in her extreme state of distress, until sometime later ... when, that was, she had chivvied her willing mind around enough to scold herself for acting like a whoopsy little girl on the edge of her first menstrual period.

At the moment, however, she only concentrated on getting the bills into the register as fast as she could and getting her hand off them, but even later she would remember what the surfaces of those tens had felt like. It felt as if they were actually crawling and moving under the pads of her fingers; as if billions of germs, huge germs almost big enough to be seen with the naked eye, were sliding along them toward her, eager to infect her with whatever he had.

But the man would want his change.

She concentrated on that, lips pressed together so tightly they were dead white; four singles that did not, absolutely did not want to come out from beneath the roller that held them down in the cash drawer. Then a dime, but oh jesus-please-us, there were no dimes, and what the hell was wrong with her, what had she done to be saddled for so long with this weird old man on the one morning in recorded history when he actually seemed to want to get out of here in a hurry?

She fished out a nickel, feeling the silent, stinky loom of him so close to her (and she felt that when she was finally forced to look up she would see he was even closer, that he was leaning over the counter toward her), then three pennies, four, five ... but the last one dropped back into the drawer among the quarters and she had to fish for it with one of her cold, numb fingers. It almost squirted away from her again; she could feel sweat popping out on the nape of her neck and on the little strip of skin between her nose and her upper lip. Then, clutching the coins tightly in her fist and praying he wouldn't have his hand outstretched to receive them so she would have to touch his dry, reptilian skin, but knowing, somehow knowing that he would she looked up, feeling her bright and cheery LaVerdiere's smile stretching the muscles of her face in a kind of frozen scream, trying to steel herself for even that, telling herself it would be the last, and never mind the image her stupid, insistent mind kept trying to make her see, an image of that dry hand suddenly snapping shut over hers like the talon of some old and horrid bird, a bird not of prey, no, not even that, but one of carrion; she told herself she did not see those images, absolutely did NOT, and, seeing them all the same, she looked up with that smile screaming off her face as brightly as a cry of murder on a hot still night, and the store was empty.

Pop was gone.

He had left while she was making change.

Molly began to shudder all over. If she had needed concrete proof that the old geezer was not right, this was it. This was proof positive, proof indubitable, proof of the purest ray serene: for the first time in her memory (and in the living memory of the town, she would have bet, and she would have won her bet), Pop Merrill, who refused to tip even on those rare occasions when he was forced to eat in a restaurant that had no take-out service, had left a place of business without waiting for his change.

Molly tried to open her hand and let go of the four ones, the nickel, and the five pennies. She was stunned to find she couldn't do it. She had to reach over with her other hand and pry the fingers loose. Pop's change dropped to the glass top of the counter and she swept it off to one side, not wanting to touch it.

And she never wanted to see Pop Merrill again.

CHAPTER 15

Pop's vacant gaze held as he left LaVerdiere's. It held as he crossed the sidewalk with the boxes of film in his hand. It broke and became an expression of somehow unsettling alertness as he stepped off into the gutter ... and stopped there, with one foot on the sidewalk and one planted amid the litter of squashed cigarette butts and empty potato-chip bags. Here was another Pop Molly would not have recognized, although there were those who had been sharp-traded by the old man who would have known it quite well. This was neither Merrill the lecher nor Merrill the robot, but Merrill the animal with its wind up. All at once he was there, in a way he seldom allowed himself to be there in public. Showing so much of one's true self in public was not, in Pop's estimation, a good idea. This morning, however, he was far from being in command of himself, and there was no one out to observe him, anyway. If there had been, that person would not have seen Pop the folksy crackerbarrel philosopher or even Pop the sharp trader, but something like the spirit of the man. In that moment of being totally there, Pop looked like a rogue dog himself, a stray who has gone feral and now pauses amid a midnight henhouse slaughter, raggedy ears up, head cocked, bloodstreaked teeth showing a little as he hears some sound from the farmer's house and thinks of the shotgun with its wide black holes like a figure eight rolled onto its side. The dog knows nothing of figure eights, but even a dog may recognize the dim shape of eternity if its instincts are honed sharp enough.

Across the town square he could see the urine-yellow front of the Emporium Galorium, standing slightly apart from its nearest neighbors: the vacant building which had housed The Village Washtub until earlier that year, Nan's Luncheonette, and You Sew and Sew, the dress-and-notions shop run by Evvie Chalmers's great-granddaughter, Polly - a woman of whom we must speak at another time.

There were slant-parking spaces in front of all the shops on Lower Main Street, and all of them were empty ... except for one, which was just now being filled with a Ford station-wagon Pop recognized. The light throb of its engine was clearly audible in the morning-still air. Then it cut off, the brakelights went out, and Pop pulled back the foot which had been in the gutter and prudently withdrew himself to the corner of LaVerdiere's. Here he stood as still as that dog who has been alerted in the henhouse by some small sound, the sort of sound which might be disregarded in the killing frenzy of dogs neither so old nor so wise as this one.

John Delevan got out from behind the wheel of the station-wagon. The boy got out on the passenger side. They went to the door of the Emporium Galorium. The man began to knock impatiently, loud enough so the sound of it came as clearly to Pop as the sound of the engine had done. Delevan paused, they both listened, and then Delevan started in again, not knocking now but hammering at the door, and you didn't have to be a goddam mind-reader to know the man was steamed up.

They know, Pop thought. Somehow they know. Damned good thing I smashed the fucking camera.

He stood a moment longer, nothing moving except his hooded eyes, and then he slipped around the corner of the drugstore and into the alley between it and the neighboring bank. He did it so smoothly that a man fifty years younger might have envied the almost effortless agility of the movement.

This morning, Pop figured, it might be a little wiser to go back home by backyard express.

CHAPTER 16

When there was still no answer, John Delevan went at the door a third time, hammering so hard he made the glass rattle loosely in its rotting putty gums and hurting his hand. It was hurting his hand that made him realize how angry he was. Not that he felt the anger was in any way unjustified if Merrill had done what Kevin thought he had done - and yes, the more he thought about it, the more John Delevan was sure that Kevin was right. But he was surprised that he hadn't recognized the anger for what it was until just now.

This seems to be a morning for learning about myself, he thought, and there was something schoolmarmish in that. It allowed him to smile and relax a little.

Kevin was not smiling, nor did he look relaxed.

'It seems like one of three things has happened,' Mr Delevan said to his son. 'Merrill's either not up, not answering the door, or he figured we were getting warm and he's absconded with your camera.' He paused, then actually laughed. 'I guess there's a fourth, too. Maybe he died in his sleep.'

'He didn't die.' Kevin now stood with his head against the dirty glass of the door he mightily wished he had never gone through in the first place. He had his hands cupped around his eyes to make blinders, because the sun rising over the east side of the town square ran a harsh glare across the glass. 'Look.'

Mr Delevan cupped his own hands to the sides of his face and pressed his nose to the glass. They stood there side by side, backs to the square, looking into the dimness of the Emporium Galorium like the world's most dedicated window-shoppers. 'Well,' he said after a few seconds, 'it looks like if he absconded he left his shit behind.'

'Yeah - but that's not what I mean. Do you see it?'

'See what?'

'Hanging on that post. The one by the bureau with all the clocks on it.'

And after a moment, Mr Delevan did see it: a Polaroid camera, hanging by its strap from a hook on the post. He thought he could even see the chipped place, although that might have been his imagination.

It's not your imagination.

The smile faded off his lips as he realized he was starting to feel what Kevin was feeling: the weird and distressing certainty that some simple yet terribly dangerous piece of machinery was running ... and unlike most of Pop's clocks, it was running right on time.

'Do you think he's just sitting upstairs and waiting for us to go away?' Mr Delevan spoke aloud, but he was really talking to himself. The lock on the door looked both new and expensive ... but he was willing to bet that if one of them - probably Kevin was in better shape - hit the door hard enough, it would rip right through the old wood. He mused randomly: A lock is only as good as the door you put it in. People never think.

Kevin turned his strained face to look at his father. In that moment, John Delevan was as struck by Kevin's face as Kevin had been by his not long ago. He thought: I wonder how many fathers get a chance to see what their sons will look like as men? He won't always look this strained, this tightly drawn - God, I hope not - but this is what he will look like. And, Jesus, he's going to be handsome!

He, like Kevin, had that one moment in the midst of whatever it was that was going on here, and the moment was a short one, but he

also never forgot; it was always within his mind's reach.

'What?' Kevin asked hoarsely. 'What, Dad?'

'You want to bust it? Because I'd go along.'

'Not yet. I don't think we'll have to. I don't think he's here ... but he's close.'

You can't know any such thing. Can't even think it.

But his son did think it, and he believed Kevin was right. Some sort of link had been formed between Pop and his son. 'Some sort' of link? Get serious. He knew perfectly well what the link was. It was that fucking camera hanging on the wall in there, and the longer this went on, the longer he felt that machinery running, its gears grinding and its vicious unthinking cogs turning, the less he liked it.

Break the camera, break the camera, he thought, and said: 'Are you sure, Kev?'

'Let's go around to the back. Try the door there.'

'There's a gate. He'll keep it locked.'

'Maybe we can climb over.'

'Okay,' Mr Delevan said, and followed his son down the steps of the Emporium Galorium and around to the alley, wondering as he went if he had lost his mind.

But the gate wasn't locked. Somewhere along the line Pop had forgotten to lock it, and although Mr Delevan hadn't liked the idea of climbing over the fence, or maybe falling over the fence, quite likely tearing the hell out of his balls in the process, he somehow liked the open gate even less. All the same, he and Kevin went

through it and into Pop's littered backyard, which not even the drifts of fallen October leaves could improve.

Kevin wove his way through the piles of junk Pop had thrown out but not bothered to take to the dump, and Mr Delevan followed him. They arrived at the chopping block at about the same time Pop was coming out of Mrs Althea Linden's backyard and onto Mulberry Street, a block west. He would follow Mulberry Street until he reached the offices of the Wolf Jaw Lumber Company. Although the company's pulp trucks would already be coursing the roads of western Maine and the yowl and yark of the cutters' chainsaws would have been rising from the area's diminishing stands of hardwood since six-thirty or so, no one would come in to man the office until nine, which was still a good fifteen minutes away. At the rear of the lumber company's tiny backyard was a high board fence. It was gated, and this gate was locked, but Pop had the key. He would unlock the gate and step through into his own backyard.

Kevin reached the chopping block. Mr Delevan caught up, followed his son's gaze, and blinked. He opened his mouth to ask what in the hell this was all about, then shut it again. He was starting to have an idea of what in the hell it was all about without any aid from Kevin. It wasn't light to have such ideas, wasn't natural, and he knew from bitter experience (in which Reginald Marion 'Pop' Merrill himself had played a part at one point, as he had told his son not so long ago) that doing things on impulse was a good way to reach the wrong decision and go flying off half-cocked, but it didn't matter. Although he did not think it in such terms, it would be fair to say Mr Delevan just hoped he could apply for readmittance to the Reasonable tribe when this was over.

At first he thought he was looking at the smashed remains of a Polaroid camera. Of course that was just his mind, trying to find a little rationality in repetition; what lay on and around the chopping block didn't look anything at all like a camera, Polaroid or otherwise. All those gears and flywheels could only belong to a

clock. Then he saw the dead cartoon-bird and even knew what kind of clock. He opened his mouth to ask Kevin why in God's name Pop would bring a cuckoo clock out back and then sledgehammer it to death. He thought it over again and decided he didn't have to ask, after all. The answer to that was also beginning to come. He didn't want it to come, because it pointed to madness on what seemed to Mr Delevan a grand scale, but that didn't matter; it came anyway.

You had to hang a cuckoo clock on something. You had to hang it because of the pendulum weights. And what did you hang it on? Why, a hook, of course.

Maybe a hook sticking out of a beam.

Like the beam Kevin's Polaroid had been hanging on.

Now he spoke, and his words seemed to come from some long distance away: 'What in the hell is wrong with him, Kevin? Has he gone nuts?'

'Not gone,' Kevin answered, and his voice also seemed to come from some long distance away as they stood above the chopping block, looking down on the busted timepiece. 'Driven there. By the camera.'

'We've got to smash it,' Mr Delevan said. His voice seemed to float to his ears long after he had felt the words coming out of his mouth.

'Not yet,' Kevin said. 'We have to go to the drugstore first. They're having a special sale on them.'

'Having a special sale on wh-◆?

Kevin touched his arm. John Delevan looked at him. Kevin's head was up, and he looked like a deer scenting fire. In that moment the

boy was more than handsome; he was almost divine, like a young poet at the hour of his death.

'What?' Mr Delevan asked urgently.

'Did you hear something?' Alertness slowly changing to doubt.

'A car on the street,' Mr Delevan said. How much older was he than his son? he wondered suddenly. Twenty-five years? Jesus, wasn't it time he started acting it?

He pushed the strangeness away from him, trying to get it at arm's length. He groped desperately for his maturity and found a little of it. Putting it on was like putting on a badly tattered overcoat.

'You sure that's all it was, Dad?'

'Yes. Kevin, you're wound up too tight. Get hold of yourself or . Or what? But he knew, and laughed shakily. 'Or you'll have us both running like a pair of rabbits.'

Kevin looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, like someone coming out of a deep sleep, perhaps even a trance, and then nodded. 'Come on.'

'Kevin, why? What do you want? He could be upstairs, just not answering 0'

'I'll tell you when we get there, Dad. Come on.' And almost dragged his father out of the littered backyard and into the narrow alleyway.

'Kevin, do you want to take my arm off, or what?' Mr Delevan asked when they got back to the sidewalk.

'He was back there,' Kevin said. 'Hiding. Waiting for us to go. I felt him.'

'He was -' Mr Delevan stopped, then started again. 'Well ... let's say he was. Just for argument, let's say he was. Shouldn't we go back there and collar him?' And, belatedly: 'Where was he?'

'On the other side of the fence,' Kevin said. His eyes seemed to be floating. Mr Delevan liked this less all the time. 'He's already been. He's already got what he needs. We'll have to hurry.'

Kevin was already starting for the edge of the sidewalk, meaning to cut across the town square to LaVerdiere's. Mr Delevan reached out and grabbed him like a conductor grabbing a fellow he's caught trying to sneak aboard a train without a ticket. 'Kevin, what are you talking about?'

And then Kevin actually said it: looked at him and said it. 'It's coming, Dad. Please. It's my life.' He looked at his father, pleading with his pallid face and his fey, floating eyes. 'The dog is coming. It won't do any good to just break in and take the camera. It's gone way past that now. Please don't stop me. Please don't wake me up. It's my life.'

Mr Delevan made one last great effort not to give in to this creeping craziness ... and then succumbed.

'Come on,' he said, hooking his hand around his son's elbow and almost dragging him into the square. 'Whatever it is, let's get it done.' He paused. 'Do we have enough time?'

'I'm not sure,' Kevin said, and then, reluctantly: 'I don't think so.'

CHAPTER 17

Pop waited behind the board fence, looking at the Delevans through a knothole. He had put his tobacco in his back pocket so that his hands would be free to clench and unclench, clench and unclench.

You're on my property, his mind whispered at them, and if his mind had had the power to kill, he would have reached out with it and struck them both dead. You're on my property, goddammit, you're on my property!

What he ought to do was go get old John Law and bring him down on their fancy Castle View heads. That was what he ought to do. And he would have done it, too, right then, if they hadn't been standing over the wreckage of the camera the boy himself had supposedly destroyed with Pop's blessing two weeks ago. He thought maybe he would have tried to bullshit his way through anyway, but he knew how they felt about him in this town. Pangborn, Keeton, all the rest of them. Trash. That's what they thought of him. Trash.

Until they got their asses in a crack and needed a fast loan and the sun was down, that was.

Clench, unclench. Clench, unclench.

They were talking, but Pop didn't bother listening to what they were saying. His mind was a fuming forge. Now the litany had become: They're on my goddam property and I can't do a thing about it! They're on my goddam property and I can't do a thing about it! Goddam them! Goddam them!

At last they left. When he heard the rusty screech of the gate in the alley, Pop used his key on the one in the board fence. He slipped

through and ran across the yard to his back door - ran with an unsettling fleetness for a man of seventy, with one hand clapped firmly against his upper right leg, as if, fleet or not, he was fighting a bad rheumatism pain there. In fact, Pop was feeling no pain at all. He didn't want either his keys or the change in his purse jingling, that was all. In case the Delevans were still there, lurking just beyond where he could see. Pop wouldn't have been surprised if they were doing just that. When you were dealing with skunks, you expected them to get up to stinking didos.

He slipped his keys out of his pocket. Now they rattled, and although the sound was muted, it seemed very loud to him. He cut his eyes to the left for a moment, sure he would see the brat's staring sheep's face. Pop's mouth was set in a hard, strained grin of fear. There was no one there.

Yet, anyway.

He found the right key, slipped it into the lock, and went in. He was careful not to open the door to the shed too wide, because the hinges picked up a squeal when you exercised them too much.

Inside, he turned the thumb-bolt with a savage twist and then went into the Emporium Galorium. He was more than at home in these shadows. He could have negotiated the narrow, junk-lined corridors in his sleep ... had, in fact, although that, like a good many other things, had slipped his mind for the time being.

There was a dirty little side window near the front of the store that looked out upon the narrow alleyway the Delevans had used to trespass their way into his backyard. It also gave a sharply angled view on the sidewalk and part of the town common.

Pop slipped up to this window between piles of useless, valueless magazines that breathed their dusty yellow museum scent into the dark air. He looked out into the alley and saw it, was empty. He looked to the right and saw the Delevans, wavery as fish in an

aquarium through this dirty, flawed glass, crossing the common just below the bandstand. He didn't watch them out of sight in this window or go to the front windows to get a better angle on them. He guessed they were going over to LaVerdiere's, and since they had already been here, they would be asking about him. What could the little counter-slut tell them? That he had been and gone. Anything else?

Only that he had bought two pouches of tobacco.

Pop smiled.

That wasn't likely to hang him.

He found a brown bag, went out back, started for the chopping block, considered, then went to the gate in the alleyway instead. Careless once didn't mean a body had to be careless again.

After the gate was locked, he took his bag to the chopping block and picked up the pieces of shattered Polaroid camera. He worked as fast as he could, but he took time to be thorough.

He picked up everything but little shards and splinters that could be seen as no more than anonymous litter. A Police Lab investigating unit would probably be able to ID some of the stuff left around; Pop had seen TV crime shows (when he wasn't watching X-rated movies on his VCR, that was) where those scientific fellows went over the scene of a crime with little brushes and vacuums and even pairs of tweezers, putting things in little plastic bags, but the Castle Rock Sheriffs Department didn't have one of those units. And Pop doubted if Sheriff Pangborn could talk the State Police into sending their crime wagon, even if Pangborn himself could be persuaded to make the effort - not for what was no more than a case of camera theft, and that was all the Delevans could accuse him of without sounding crazy. Once he had policed the area, he went back inside, unlocked his 'special' drawer, and deposited the brown bag inside. He relocked the drawer and put his keys back in his pocket.

That was all right, then. He knew all about search warrants, too. It would be a snowy day in hell before the Delevans could get Pangborn into district court to ask for one of those. Even if he was crazy enough to try, the remains of the goddamned camera would be gone - permanently - long before they could turn the trick. To try and dispose of the pieces for good right now would be more dangerous than leaving them in the locked drawer. The Delevans would come back and catch him right in the middle of it. Best to wait.

Because they would be back.

Pop Merrill knew that as well as he knew his own name.

Later, perhaps, after all this hooraw and foolishness died down, he would be able to go to the boy and say Yes. That's right. Everything you think I did, I did. Now why don't we just leave her alone and go back to not knowin each other ... all right? We can afford to do that. You might not think so, at least not at first, but we can. Because look - you wanted to bust it up because you thought it was dangerous, and I wanted to sell it because I thought it was valuable. Turned out you was right and I was wrong, and that's all the revenge you're ever gonna need. If you knew me better, you'd know why - there ain't many men in this town that have ever heard me say such a thing. It sticks in my gut, is what I mean to say, but that don't matter; when I'm wrong, I like to think I'm big enough to own up to it, no matter how bad it hurts. In the end, boy, I did what you meant to do in the first place. We all came out on the same street, is what I mean to say, and I think we ought to let bygones be bygones. I know what you think of me, and I know what I think of you, and neither of us would ever vote for the other one to be Grand Marshal in the annual Fourth of July parade, but that's all right; we can live with that, can't we? What I mean to say is just this: we're both glad that goddam camera is gone, so let's call it quits and walk away.

But that was for later, and even then it was only perhaps. It wouldn't do for right now, that was for sure. They would need time to cool down. Right now both of them would be raring to tear a chunk out of his ass, like

(the dog in that pitcher)

like ... well, never mind what they'd be like. The important thing was to be down here, business as usual and as innocent as a goddam baby when they got back.

Because they would be back.

But that was all right. It was all right because 'B'cause things are under control,' Pop whispered. 'That's what I mean to say.'

Now he did go to the front door, and switched the CLOSED sign over to OPEN (he then turned it promptly back to CLOSED again, but this Pop did not observe himself doing, nor would he remember it later). All right; that was a start. What was next? Make it look like just another normal day, no more and no less. He had to be all surprise and what-in-the-tarnation-are-you-talking-about when they came back with steam coming out of their collars, all ready to do or die for what had already been killed just as dead as sheepdip.

So ... what was the most normal thing they could find him doing when they came back, with Sheriff Pangborn or without him?

Pop's eye fixed on the cuckoo clock hanging from the beam beside that nice bureau he'd gotten at an estate sale in Sebago a month or six weeks ago. Not a very nice cuckoo clock, probably one originally purchased with trading stamps by some soul trying to be thrifty (people who could only try to be thrifty were, in Pop's estimation, poor puzzled souls who drifted through life in a vague and constant state of disappointment). Still, if he could put it right so it would run a little, he could maybe sell it to one of the skiers who would be up in another month or two, somebody who needed

a clock at their cottage or ski-lodge because the last bargain had up and died and who didn't understand yet (and probably never would) that another bargain wasn't the solution but the problem.

Pop would feel sorry for that person, and would dicker with him or her as fairly as he thought he could, but he wouldn't disappoint the buyer. Caveet emperor was not only what he meant to say but often did say, and he had a living to make, didn't he?

Yes. So he would just sit back there at his worktable and fuss around with that clock, see if he could get it running, and when the Delevans got back, that was what they would find him doing. Maybe there'd even be a few prospective customers browsing around by then; he could hope, although this was always a slack time of year. Customers would be icing on the cake, anyway. The important thing was how it would look: just a fellow with nothing to hide, going through the ordinary motions and ordinary rhythms of his ordinary day.

Pop went over to the beam and took the cuckoo clock down, being careful not to tangle up the counterweights. He carried it back to his worktable, humming a little. He set it down, then felt his back pocket. Fresh tobacco. That was good, too.

Pop thought he would have himself a little pipe while he worked.

CHAPTER 18

'You can't know he was in here, Kevin!' Mr Delevan was still protesting feebly as they went into LaVerdiere's.

Ignoring him, Kevin went straight to the counter where Molly Durham stood. Her urge to vomit had passed off, and she felt much better. The whole thing seemed a little silly now, like a nightmare you have and then wake up from and after the initial relief you think: I was afraid of THAT? How could I ever have thought THAT was really happening to me, even in a dream?

But when the Delevan boy presented his drawn white face at the counter, she knew how you could be afraid, yes, oh yes, even of things as ridiculous as the things which happened in dreams, because she was tumbled back into her own waking dreamscape again.

The thing was, Kevin Delevan had almost the same look on his face: as though he were so deep inside somewhere that when his voice and his gaze finally reached her, they seemed almost expended.

'Pop Merrill was in here,' he said. 'What did he buy?'

'Please excuse my son,' Mr Delevan said. 'He's not feeling w -'

Then he saw Molly's face and stopped. She looked like she had just seen a man lose his arm to a factory machine.

'Oh!' she said. 'Oh my God!'

'Was it film?' Kevin asked her.

'What's wrong with him?' Molly asked faintly. 'I knew something was the minute he walked in. What is it? Has he ... done something?'

Jesus, John Delevan thought. He DOES know. It's all true, then.

At that moment, Mr Delevan made a quietly heroic decision: he gave up entirely. He gave up entirely and put himself and what he believed could and could not be true entirely in his son's hands.

'It was, wasn't it?' Kevin pressed her. His urgent face rebuked her for her flutters and tremors. 'Polaroid film. From that.' He pointed at the display.

'Yes.' Her complexion was as pale as china; the bit of rouge she had put on that morning stood out in hectic, flaring patches. 'He was so ... strange. Like a talking doll. What's wrong with him? What -'

But Kevin had whirled away, back to his father.

'I need a camera,' he rapped. 'I need it right now. A Polaroid Sun 660. They have them. They're even on special. See?'

And in spite of his decision, Mr Delevan's mouth would not quite let go of the last clinging shreds of rationality. 'Why -' he began, and that was as far as Kevin let him get.

'I don't KNOW why!' he shouted, and Molly Durham moaned. She didn't want to throw up now; Kevin Delevan was scary, but not that scary. What she wanted to do right now was simply go home and creep up to her bedroom and draw the covers over her head. 'But we have to have it, and time's almost up, Dad!'

'Give me one of those cameras,' Mr Delevan said, drawing his wallet out with shaking hands, unaware that Kevin had already darted to the display.

'Just take one,' she heard a trembling voice entirely unlike her own say. 'Just take one and go.'

CHAPTER 19

Across the square, Pop Merrill, who believed he was peacefully repairing a cheap cuckoo clock, innocent as a babe in arms, finished loading Kevin's camera with one of the film packs. He snapped it shut. It made its squidgy little whine.

Damn cuckoo sounds like he's got a bad case of laryngitis. Slipped a gear, I guess. Well, I got the cure for that.

'I'll fix you,' Pop said, and raised the camera. He applied one blank eye to the viewfinder with the hairline crack which was so tiny you didn't even see it when you got your eye up to it. The camera was aimed at the front of the store, but that didn't matter; wherever you pointed it, it was aimed at a certain black dog that wasn't any dog God had ever made in a little town called for the want of a better word Polaroidsville, which He also hadn't ever made.

FLASH!

That squidgy little whine as Kevin's camera pushed out a new picture.

'There,' Pop said with quiet satisfaction. 'Maybe I'll do more than get you talking, bird. What I mean to say is I might just get you singing. I don't promise, but I'll give her a try.'

Pop grinned a dry, leathery grin and pushed the button again.

FLASH!

They were halfway across the square when John Delevan saw a silent white light fill the dirty windows of the Emporium Galorium. The light was silent, but following it, like an aftershock, he heard a low, dark rumble that seemed to come to his ears from the old man's junk-store ... but only because the old man's junk-store was

the only place it could find a way to get out. Where it seemed to be emanating from was under the earth ... or was it just that the earth itself seemed the only place large enough to cradle the owner of that voice?

'Run, Dad!' Kevin cried. 'He's started doing it!'

That flash recurred, lighting the windows like a heatless stroke of electricity. It was followed by that subaural growl again, the sound of a sonic boom in a wind-tunnel, the sound of some animal which was horrible beyond comprehension being kicked out of its sleep.

Mr Delevan, helpless to stop himself and almost unaware of what he was doing, opened his mouth to tell his son that a light that big and bright could not possibly be coming from the built-in flash of a Polaroid camera, but Kevin had already started to run.

Mr Delevan began to run himself, knowing perfectly well what he meant to do: catch up to his son and collar him and drag him away before something dreadful beyond his grasp of all dreadful things could happen.

CHAPTER 20

The second Polaroid Pop took forced the first one out of the slot. It fluttered down to the top of the desk, where it landed with a thud heavier than such a square of chemically treated cardboard could possibly make. The Sun dog filled almost the entire frame now; the foreground was its impossible head, the black pits of the eyes, the smoking, teeth-filled jaws. The skull seemed to be elongating into a shape like a bullet or a teardrop as the dog-thing's speed and the shortening distance between it and the lens combined to drive it further out of focus. Only the tops of the pickets in the fence behind it were visible now; the bulk of the thing's flexed shoulders ate up the rest of the frame.

Kevin's birthday string tie, which had rested next to the Sun camera in his drawer, showed at the bottom of the frame, winking back a shaft of hazy sunlight.

'Almost got you, you son of a whore,' Pop said in a high, cracked voice. His eyes were blinded by the light. He saw neither dog nor camera. He saw only the voiceless cuckoo which had become his life's mission. 'You'll sing, damn you! I'll make you sing!'

FLASH!

The third picture pushed the second from the slot. It fell too fast, more like a chunk of stone than a square of cardboard, and when it hit the desk, it dug through the ancient frayed blotter there and sent startled splinters flying up from the wood beneath.

In this picture, the dog's head was torn even further out of focus., it had become a long column of flesh that gave it a strange, almost three-dimensional aspect.

In the third one, still poking out of the slot in the bottom of the camera, the Sun dog's snout seemed, impossibly, to be coming back into focus again. It was impossible because it was as close to the lens as it could get; so close it seemed to be the snout of some sea-monster just below that fragile meniscus we call the surface.

'Damn thing still ain't quite right,' Pop said.

His finger pushed the Polaroid's trigger again.

CHAPTER 21

Kevin ran up the steps of the Emporium Galorium. His father reached for him, caught nothing but the air an inch from the fluttering tail of Kevin's shirt, stumbled, and landed on the heels of his hands. They slid across the second step from the top, sending a quiver of small splinters into his skin.

'Kevin!'

He looked up and for a moment the world was almost lost in another of those dazzling white flashes. This time the roar was much louder. It was the sound of a crazed animal on the verge of making its weakening cage give it up. He saw Kevin with his head down, one hand shielding his eyes from the white glare, frozen in that stroboscopic light as if he himself had turned into a photograph. He saw cracks like quicksilver jig-jag their way down the show windows.

'Kevin, look ou -'

The glass burst outward in a glittery spray and Mr Delevan ducked his own head. Glass flew around him in a squall. He felt it patter into his hair and both cheeks were scratched, but none of the glass dug deeply into either the boy or the man; most of it had been pulverized to crumbs.

There was a splintering crunch. He looked up again and saw that Kevin had gained entry just as Mr Delevan had thought they might earlier: by ramming the now-glassless door with his shoulder and tearing the new locking bolt right through the old, rotted wood.

'KEVIN, GODDAMMIT!' he bawled. He got up, almost stumbled to one knee again as his feet tangled together, then lurched upright and plunged after his son.

Something had happened to the goddam cuckoo clock. Something bad.

It was striking again and again - bad enough, but that wasn't all. It had also gained weight in Pop's hands ... and it seemed to be growing uncomfortably hot, as well.

Pop looked down at it, and suddenly tried to scream in horror through jaws which felt as if they had been wired together somehow.

He realized he had been struck blind, and he also suddenly realized that what he held was not a cuckoo clock at all.

He tried to make his hands relax their death-grip on the camera and was horrified to find he could not open his fingers. The field of gravity around the camera seemed to have increased. And the horrid thing was growing steadily hotter. Between Pop's splayed, white-nailed fingers, the gray plastic of the camera's housing had begun to smoke.

His right index finger began to crawl upward toward the red shutter-button like a crippled fly.

'No,' he muttered, and then, in a plea: 'Please .'

His finger paid no attention. It reached the red button and settled upon it just as Kevin slammed his shoulder into the door and burst in. Glass from the door's panes crunched and sprayed.

Pop didn't push the button. Even blind, even feeling the flesh of his fingers begin to smoulder and scorch, he knew he didn't push the button. But as his finger settled upon it, that gravitational field first seemed to double, then treble. He tried to hold his finger up and off the button. It was like trying to hold the push-up position on the planet Jupiter.

'Drop it!' the kid screamed from somewhere out on the rim of his darkness. 'Drop it, drop it!'

'No!' Pop screamed back. 'What I mean to say is I CAN'T!'

The red button began to slide in toward its contact point.

Kevin was standing with his legs spread, bent over the camera they had just taken from LaVerdiere's, the box it had come in lying at his feet. He had managed to hit the button that released the front of the camera on its hinge, revealing the wide loading slot. He was trying to jam one of the film packs into it, and it stubbornly refused to go - it was as if this camera had turned traitor, too, possibly in sympathy to its brother.

Pop screamed again, but this time there were no words, only an inarticulate cry of pain and fear. Kevin smelled hot plastic and roasting flesh. He looked up and saw the Polaroid was melting, actually melting, in the old man's frozen hands. Its square, boxy silhouette was rearranging itself into an odd, hunched shape. Somehow the glass of both the viewfinder and the lens had also become plastic. Instead of breaking or popping out of the camera's increasingly shapeless shell, they were elongating and drooping like taffy, becoming a pair of grotesque eyes like those in a mask of tragedy.

Dark plastic, heated to a sludge like warm wax, ran over Pop's fingers and the backs of his hands in thick runnels, carving troughs in his flesh. The plastic cauterized what it burned, but Kevin saw blood squeezing from the sides of these runnels and dripping down Pop's flesh to strike the table in smoking droplets which sizzled like hot fat.

'Your film's still wrapped up!' his father bawled from behind him, breaking Kevin's paralysis. 'Unwrap it! Give it to me!'

His father reached around him, bumping Kevin so hard he almost knocked him over. He snatched the film pack, with its heavy paper-foil wrapping still on it, and ripped the end. He stripped it off.

'HELP ME!' Pop screeched; the last coherent words either of them heard him say.

'Quick!' His father yelled, putting the fresh film pack back in his hands. 'Quick!'

The sizzle of hot flesh. The patter of hot blood on the desk, what had been a shower now becoming a storm as the bigger veins and arteries in Pop's fingers and the backs of his hands began to let go. A brook of hot, running plastic braceleted his left wrist and the bundle of veins so close to the surface there let go, spraying out blood as if through a rotten gasket which has first begun to leak in several places and now begins to simply disintegrate under the insistent, beating pressure.

Pop howled like an animal.

Kevin tried to jam the film pack in again and cried out 'Fuck!' as it still refused to go.

'It's backwards!' Mr Delevan hollered. He tried to snatch the camera from Kevin, and Kevin tore away, leaving his father with a scrap of shirt and no more. He pulled the film pack out and for a moment it jittered on the ends of his fingers, almost dropping to the floor - which, he felt, longed to actually hump itself up into a fist and smash it when it came down.

Then he had it, turned it around, socked it home, and slammed the front of the camera, which was hanging limply downward like a creature with a broken neck, shut on its hinge.

Pop howled again, and

FLASH!

CHAPTER 22

This time it was like standing in the center of a sun which goes supernova in one sudden, heatless gust of light. Kevin felt as if his shadow had actually been hammered off his heels and driven into the wall. Perhaps this was at least partly true, for all of the wall behind him was instantly flash-baked and threaded with a thousand crazy cracks except for one sunken area where his shadow fell. His outline, as clear and unmistakable as a silhouette cut-out, was tattooed there with one elbow stuck out in a flying wedge, caught and frozen even as the arm which cast the shadow left its frozen image behind, rising to bring the new camera up to his face.

The top of the camera in Pop's hands tore free of the rest with a thick sound like a very fat man clearing his throat. The Sun dog growled, and this time that bass thunder was loud enough, clear enough, near enough, to shatter the glass in the fronts of the clocks and to send the glass in the mirrors and in the frames of pictures belching across the floor in momentary crystal arcs of amazing and improbable beauty.

The camera did not moan or whine this time; the sound of its mechanism was a scream, high and drilling, like a woman who is dying in the throes of a breech delivery. The square of paper which shoved and bulled its way out of that slitted opening smoked and fumed. Then the dark delivery-slot itself began to melt, one side drooping downward, the other wrinkling upward, all of it beginning to yawn like a toothless mouth. A bubble was forming upon the shiny surface of the last picture, which still hung in the widening mouth of the channel from which the Polaroid Sun gave birth to its photographs.

As Kevin watched, frozen, looking through a curtain of flashing, zinging dots that last white explosion had put in front of his eyes, the Sun dog roared again. The sound was smaller now, with less of

that sense that it was coming from beneath and from everywhere, but it was also more deadly because it was more real, more here.

Part of the dissolving camera blew backward in a great gray goblet, striking Pop Merrill's neck and expanding into a necklace. Suddenly both Pop's jugular vein and carotid artery gave way in spraying gouts of blood that jetted upward and outward in bright-red spirals. Pop's head whipped bonelessly backward.

The bubble on the surface of the picture grew. The picture itself began to jitter in the yawning slot at the bottom of the now-decapitated camera. Its sides began to spread, as if the picture was no longer on cardboard at all but some flexible substance like knitted nylon. It wiggled back and forth in the slot, and Kevin thought of the cowboy boots he had gotten for his birthday two years ago, and how he had had to wiggle his feet into them, because they were a little too tight.

The edges of the picture struck the edges of the camera delivery slot, where they should have stuck firmly. But the camera was no longer a solid; was, in fact, losing all resemblance to what it had been. The edges of the picture sliced through its sides as cleanly as the razor-sharp sides of a good doubleedged knife slide through tender meat. They poked through what had been the Polaroid's housing, sending gray drops of smoking plastic flying into the dim air. One landed in a dry, crumbling stack of old Popular Mechanics magazines and burrowed a fuming, charred hole into them.

The dog roared again, an angry, ugly sound - the cry of something with nothing but rending and killing on its mind. Those things, and nothing else.

The picture teetered on the edge of the sagging, dissolving slit, which now looked more like the bell of some misshapen wind instrument than anything else, and then fell forward to the desk with the speed of a stone tumbling into a well.

Kevin felt a hand claw at his shoulder.

'What's it doing?' his father asked hoarsely. 'Jesus Christ almighty, Kevin, what's it doing?'

Kevin heard himself answer in a remote, almost disinterested voice: 'Being born.'

CHAPTER 23

Pop Merrill died leaning back in the chair behind his worktable, where he had spent so many hours sitting: sitting and smoking; sitting and fixing things up so they would run for at least awhile and he could sell the worthless to the thoughtless; sitting and loaning money to the impulsive and the improvident after the sun went down. He died staring up at the ceiling, from which his own blood dripped back down to splatter on his cheeks and into his open eyes.

His chair overbalanced and spilled his lolling body onto the floor. His purse and his key-ring clattered.

On his desk, the final Polaroid continued to jiggle about restlessly. Its sides spread apart, and Kevin seemed to sense some unknown thing, both alive and not alive, groaning in horrid, unknowable labor pains.

'We've got to get out of here,' his father panted, pulling at him. John Delevan's eyes were large and frenzied, riveted on that spreading, moving photograph which now covered half of Merrill's worktable. It no longer resembled a photograph at all. Its sides bulged out like the cheeks of someone trying frantically to whistle. The shiny bubble, now a foot high, humped and shuddered. Strange, unnameable colors raced aimlessly back and forth across a surface which seemed to have broken some oily sort of sweat. That roar' full of frustration and purpose and frantic hunger, ripped through his brain again and again, threatening to split it and let in madness.

Kevin pulled away from him, ripping his shirt along the shoulder. His voice was full of a deep, strange calm. 'No - it would just come after us. I think it wants me, because if it wanted Pop it's already got him and I was the one who owned the camera first, anyway.

But it wouldn't stop there. It'd take you, too. And it might not stop there, either.'

'You can't do anything!' his father screamed.

'Yes,' Kevin said. 'I've got one chance.'

And raised the camera.

The edges of the picture reached the edges of the worktable. Instead of lolling over, they curled up and continued to twist and spread. Now they resembled odd wings which were somehow equipped with lungs and were trying to breathe in some tortured fashion.

The entire surface of the amorphous, pulsing thing continued to puff up; what should have been flat surface had become a horrid tumor. its lumped and cratered sides trickling with vile liquid. It gave off the bland smell of head cheese.

The dog's roars had become continuous, the trapped and furious belling of a hell-hound bent on escape, and some of the late Pop Merrill's clocks began to strike again and again, as if in protest.

Mr Delevan's frantic urge to escape had deserted him; he felt overcome by a deep and dangerous lassitude, a kind of lethal sleepiness.

Kevin held the camera's viewfinder to his eye. He had only been deerhunting a few times, but he remembered how it was when it was your turn to wait, hidden, with your rifle as your hunting partners walked through the woods toward you, deliberately making as much noise as they could, hoping to drive something out of the trees and into the clearing where you were waiting, your field of fire a safe angle that would cross in front of the men. You didn't have to worry about hitting them; you only had to worry about hitting the deer.

There was time to wonder if you could hit it, when and if it showed itself. There was also time to wonder if you could bring yourself to fire at all. Time to hope that the deer would remain hypothetical, so the test did not have to be made ... and so it had always turned out to be. The one time there had been a deer, his father's friend Bill Roberson had been lying up in the blind. Mr Roberson had put the bullet just where you were supposed to put it, at the juncture of neck and shoulder, and they had gotten the game-warden to take their pictures around it, a twelve-point buck any man would be happy to brag on.

Bet you wish it'd been your turn in the puckies, don't you, son? the game-warden had asked, ruffling Kevin's hair (he had been twelve then, the growth spurt which had begun about seventeen months ago and which had so far taken him to just an inch under six feet still a year away ... which meant he had not been big enough to be resentful of a man who wanted to ruffle his hair). Kevin had nodded, keeping his secret to himself. he was glad it hadn't been his turn in the puckies, his the rifle which must be responsible for throwing the slug or not throwing it ... and, if he had turned out to have the courage to do the shooting, his reward would have been only another troublesome responsibility: to shoot the buck clean. He didn't know if he could have mustered the courage to put another bullet in the thing if the kill wasn't clean, or the strength to chase the trail of its blood and steaming, startled droppings and finish what he had started if it ran.

He had smiled up at the game-warden and nodded and his dad had snapped a picture of that, and there had never been any need to tell his dad that the thought going on behind that upturned brow and under the game-warden's ruffling hand had been No. I don't wish it. The world is full of tests, but twelve's too young to go hunting them. I'm glad it was Mr Roberson. I'm not ready yet to try a man's tests.

But now he was the one in the blind, wasn't he? And the animal was coming, wasn't it? And it was no harmless eater of grasses this time, was it? This was a killing engine big enough and mean enough to swallow a tiger whole, and it meant to kill him, and that was only for starters, and he was the only one that could stop it.

The thought of turning the Polaroid over to his father crossed his mind, but only momentarily. Something deep inside himself knew the truth: to pass the camera would be tantamount to murdering his father and committing suicide himself. His father believed something, but that wasn't specific enough. The camera wouldn't work for his father even if his father managed to break out of his current stunned condition and press the shutter.

It would only work for him.

So he waited on the test, peering through the viewfinder of the camera as if it were the gunsight of a rifle, peering at the photograph as it continued to spread and force that shiny, liquescent bubble wider and wider and higher and higher.

Then the actual birthing of the Sun dog into this world began to happen. The camera seemed to gain weight and turn to lead as the thing roared again with a sound like a whiplash loaded with steel shot. The camera trembled in his hands and he could feel his wet, slippery fingers simply wanting to uncurl and let go. He held on, his lips pulling back from his teeth in a sick and desperate grin. Sweat ran into one eye, momentarily doubling his vision. He threw his head back, snapping his hair off his forehead and out of his eyebrows, and then nestled his staring eye back into the viewfinder as a great ripping sound, like heavy cloth being torn in half by strong, slow hands, filled the Emporium Galorium.

The shiny surface of the bubble tore open. Red smoke, like the blast from a tea kettle set in front of red neon, billowed out.

The thing roared again, an angry, homicidal sound. A gigantic jaw, filled with crogged teeth, burst up through the shrivelling membrane of the now-collapsing bubble like the jaw of a breaching pilot whale. It ripped and chewed and gnawed at the membrane, which gave way with gummy splattering sounds.

The clocks struck wildly, crazily.

His father grabbed him again, so hard that Kevin's teeth rapped against the plastic body of the camera and it came within a hair of spilling out of his hands and shattering on the floor.

'Shoot it!' his father screamed over the thing's bellowing din. 'Shoot it, Kevin, if you can shoot it, SHOOT IT Now, Christ Jesus, it's going to -'

Kevin yanked away from his father's hand. 'Not yet,' he said. 'Not just y-'

The thing screamed at the sound of Kevin's voice. The Sun dog lunged up from wherever it was, driving the picture still wider. It gave and stretched with a groaning sound. This was replaced by the thick cough of ripping fabric again.

And suddenly the Sun dog was up, its head rising black and rough and tangled through the hole in reality like some weird periscope which was all tangled metal and glittering, glaring lenses ... except it wasn't metal but that twisted, spiky fur Kevin was looking at, and those were not lenses but the thing's insane, raging eyes.

It caught at the neck, the spines of its pelt shredding the edges of the hole it had made into a strange sunburst pattern. It roared again, and sickly yellow-red fire licked out of its mouth.

John Delevan took a step backward and struck a table overloaded with thick copies of *Weird Tales* and *Fantastic Universe*. The table tilted and Mr Delevan flailed helplessly against it, his heels first

rocking back and then shooting out from under him. Man and table went over with a crash. The Sun dog roared again, then dipped its head with an unsuspected delicacy and tore at the membrane which held it. The membrane ripped. The thing barked out a thin stream of fire which ignited the membrane and turned it to ash. The beast lunged upward again and Kevin saw that the thing on the tie around its neck was no longer a tie-clasp but the spoon-shaped tool which Pop Merrill had used to clean his pipe.

In that moment a clean calmness fell over the boy. His father bellowed in surprise and fear as he tried to untangle himself from the table he had fallen over, but Kevin took no notice. The cry seemed to come from a great distance away.

It's all right, Dad, he thought, fixing the struggling, emerging beast more firmly in the viewfinder. It's all right, don't you see? It can be all right, anyway ... because the charm it wears has changed.

He thought that perhaps the Sun dog had its master, too, and its master had realized that Kevin was no longer sure prey.

And perhaps there was a dog-catcher in that strange nowhere town of Polaroidville; there must be, else why had the fat woman been in his dream? It was the fat woman who had told him what he must do, either on her own or because that dog-catcher had put her there for him to see and notice: the two-dimensional fat woman with her two-dimensional shopping-cart full of two-dimensional cameras. Be careful, boy. Pop's dog broke his leash and he's a mean 'un ... It's hard to take his pitcher, but you can't do it at all, 'less you have a cam'ra.

And now he had his camera, didn't he? It was not sure, not by any means, but at least he had it.

The dog paused, head turning almost aimlessly ... until its muddy, burning gaze settled on Kevin Delevan. Its black lips peeled back from its corkscrewed boar's fangs, its muzzle opened to reveal the

smoking channel of its throat, and it gave a high, drilling howl of fury. The ancient hanging globes that lit Pop's place at night shattered one after another in rows, sending down spinning shards of frosted fly-beshitted glass. It lunged, its broad, panting chest bursting through the membrane between the worlds.

Kevin's finger settled on the Polaroid's trigger.

It lunged again, and now its front legs popped free, and those cruel spurs of bone, so like gigantic thorns, scraped and scabbled for purchase on the desk. They dug long vertical scars in the heavy rock-maple. Kevin could hear the dusky thud-and-scratch of its pistoning rear legs digging for a grip down there (wherever down there was), and he knew that this was the final short stretch of seconds in which it would be trapped and at his mercy; the next convulsive lunge would send it flying over the desk, and once free of the hole through which it was squirming, it would move as fast as liquid death, charging across the space between them, setting his pants ablaze with its fiery breath split-seconds before it tore into his warm innards.

Very clearly, Kevin instructed: 'Say cheese, you motherfucker.'

And triggered the Polaroid.

CHAPTER 24

The flash was so bright that Kevin could not conceive of it later; could, in fact, barely remember it at all. The camera he was holding did not grow hot and melt; instead there were three or four quick, decisive breaking sounds from inside it as its ground-glass lenses burst and its springs either snapped or simply disintegrated.

In the white afterglare he saw the Sun dog frozen, a perfect black-and-white Polaroid photograph, its head thrown back, every twisting fold and crevasse in its wildly bushed-out fur caught like the complicated topography of a dry river-valley. Its teeth shone, no longer subtly shaded yellow but as white and nasty as old bones in that sterile emptiness where water had quit running millennia ago. Its single swollen eye, robbed of the dark and bloody porthole of iris by the merciless flash, was as white as an eye in the head of a Greek bust. Smoking snot drizzled from its flared nostrils and ran like hot lava in the narrow gutters between its rolled-back muzzle and its gums.

It was like a negative of all the Polaroids Kevin had ever seen: black-and-white instead of color, and in three dimensions instead of two. And it was like watching a living creature turned instantly to stone by a careless look at the head of Medusa.

'You're done, you son of a bitch!' Kevin screamed in a cracked, hysterical voice, and as if in agreement, the thing's frozen forelegs lost their hold on the desk and it began to disappear, first slowly and then rapidly, into the hole from which it had come. It went with a rocky coughing sound, like a landslide.

What would I see if I ran over now and looked into that hole? he wondered incoherently. Would I see that house, that fence, the old man with his shoppingcart, staring with wide-eyed wonder at the

face of a giant, not a boy but a Boy, staring back at him from a torn and charred hole in the hazy sky? Would it suck me in? What?

Instead, he dropped the Polaroid and raised his hands to his face.

Only John Delevan, lying on the floor, saw the final act: the twisted, dead membrane shrivelling in on itself, pulling into a complicated but unimportant node around the hole, crumpling there, and then falling (or being inhaled) into itself.

There was a whooping sound of air, which rose from a broad gasp to a thin tea-kettle whistle.

Then it turned inside-out and was gone. Simply gone, as if it had never been.

Getting slowly and shakily to his feet, Mr Delevan saw that the final inrush (or outrush, he supposed, depending on which side of that hole you were on) of air had pulled the desk-blotter and the other Polaroids the old man had taken in with it.

His son was standing in the middle of the floor with his hands over his face, weeping.

'Kevin,' he said quietly, and put his arms around his boy.

'I had to take its picture,' Kevin said through his tears and through his hands. 'It was the only way to get rid of it. I had to take the rotten whoredog's picture. That's what I mean to say.'

'Yes.' He hugged him tighter. 'Yes, and you did it.'

Kevin looked at his father with naked, streaming eyes. 'That's how I had to shoot it, Dad. Do you see?'

'Yes,' his father said. 'Yes, I see that.' He kissed Kevin's hot cheek again. 'Let's go home, son.'

He tightened his grip around Kevin's shoulders, wanting to lead him toward the door and away from the smoking, bloody body of the old man (Kevin hadn't really noticed yet, Mr Delevan thought, but if they spent much longer here, he would), and for a moment Kevin resisted him.

'What are people going to say?' Kevin asked, and his tone was so prim and spinsterish that Mr Delevan laughed in spite of his own sizzling nerves.

'Let them say whatever they want,' he told Kevin. 'They'll never get within shouting distance of the truth, and I don't think anyone will try very hard, anyway.' He paused. 'No one really liked him much, you know.'

'I never want to be in shouting distance of the truth,' Kevin whispered. 'Let's go home.'

'Yes. I love you, Kevin.'

'I love you, too,' Kevin said hoarsely, and they went out of the smoke and the stink of old things best left forgotten and into the bright light of day.

EPILOGUE

It was Kevin Delevan's sixteenth birthday, and he got exactly what he wanted: a WordStar 70 PC and word processor. It was a seventeen-hundred-dollar toy, and his parents could never have afforded it in the old days, but in January, about three months after that final confrontation in the Emporium Galorium, Aunt Hilda had died quietly in her sleep. She had indeed Done Something for Kevin and Meg; had, in fact, Done Quite a Lot for the Whole Family. When the will cleared probate in early June, the Delevans found themselves richer by nearly seventy thousand dollars ... and that was after taxes, not before.

'Jeez, it's neat! Thank you!' Kevin cried, and kissed his mother, his father, and even his sister, Meg (who giggled but, being a year older, made no attempt to rub it off; Kevin couldn't decide if this change was a step in the right direction or not). He spent much of the afternoon in his room, fussing over it and trying out the test program.

Around four o'clock, he came downstairs and into his father's den. 'Where's Mom and Meg?' he asked.

'They've gone out to the craft fair at ... Kevin? Kevin, what's wrong?'

'You better come upstairs,' Kevin said hollowly.

At the door to his room, he turned his pale face toward his father's equally pale face. There was something more to pay, Mr Delevan had been thinking as he followed his son up the stairs. Of course there was. And hadn't he also learned that from Reginald Marion 'Pop' Merrill? The debt you incurred was what hurt you.

It was the interest that broke your back.

'Can we get another one of these?' Kevin asked, pointing to the laptop computer which stood open on his desk, glowing a mystic yellow oblong of light onto the blotter.

'I don't know,' Mr Delevan said, approaching the desk. Kevin stood behind him, a pallid watcher. 'I guess, if we had to

He stopped, looking down at the screen.

'I booted up the word-processing program and typed "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy sleeping dog,"' Kevin said. 'Only that was what came out of the printer.'

Mr Delevan stood, silently reading the hard copy. His hands and forehead felt very cold. The words there read:

The dog is loose again.

It is not sleeping.

It is not lazy.

It's coming for you, Kevin.

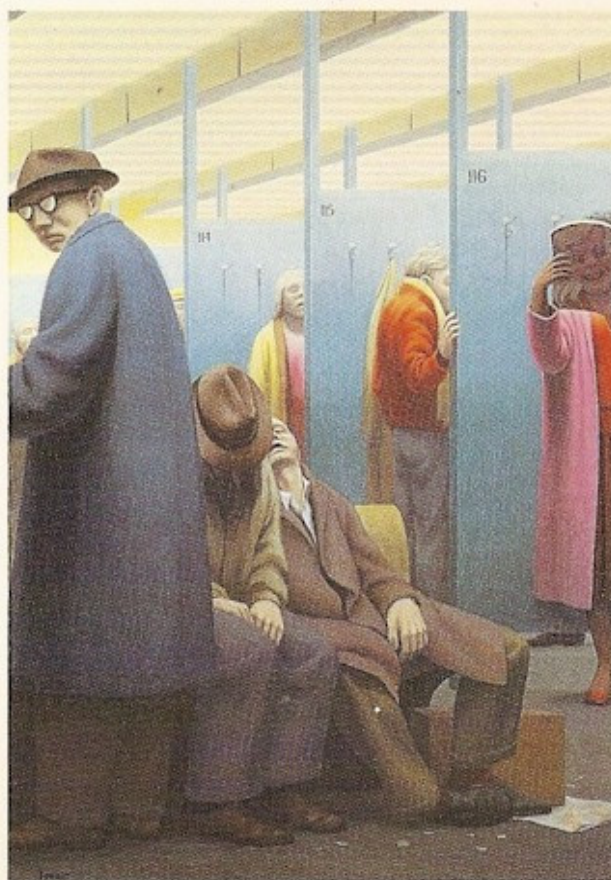
The original debt was what hurt you, he thought again; it was the interest that broke your back. The last two lines read:

It's very hungry.

And it's VERY angry.

STEPHEN KING

UMNEY'S LAST CASE



p e n g u i n 6 0 s



UMNEY'S LAST CASE

Stephen King

The rains are over. The hills are still green and in the valley across the Hollywood hills you can see snow on the high mountains. The fur stores are advertising their annual sales. The call houses that specialize in sixteen-year-old virgins are doing a land-office business. And in Beverly Hills the jacaranda trees are beginning to bloom.

Raymond Chandler, *The Little Sister*

I. The News from Peoria.

It was one of those spring mornings so L.A.-perfect you keep expecting to see that little trademark symbol—(R)—stamped on it somewhere. The exhaust of the vehicles passing on Sunset smelled faintly of oleander, the oleander was lightly perfumed with exhaust, and the sky overhead was as clear as a hardshell Baptist's conscience.

Peoria Smith, the blind paperboy, was standing in his accustomed place on the corner of Sunset and Laurel, and if that didn't mean God was in His heaven and all was jake with the world, I didn't know what did.

Yet since I'd swung my feet out of bed that morning at the unaccustomed hour of 7:30 a.m., things had felt a little off-kilter, somehow; a tad woozy around the edges. It was only as I was shaving—or at least showing those pesky bristles the razor in an effort to scare them into submission—that I realized part of the reason why. Although I'd been up reading until at least two, I hadn't heard the Demmicks roll in, squiffed to the earlobes and trading those snappy one-liners that apparently form the basis of their marriage. Nor had I heard Buster, and that was maybe even odder. Buster, the Demmicks' Welsh Corgi, has a high-pitched bark that goes through your head like slivers of glass, and he uses it as much as he can. Also, he's the jealous type. He lets loose with one of his shrill barking squalls every time George and Gloria clinch, and when they aren't zinging each other like a couple of vaudeville comedians, George and Gloria usually are clinching. I've gone to sleep on more than one occasion listening to them giggle while that mutt prances around their feet going yarkyarkyark and wondering how difficult it would be to strangle a muscular, medium-sized dog with a length of pianowire. Last night, however, the Demmicks' apartment had been as quiet as the grave. It was passing strange, but a long way from earth-shattering; the Demmicks weren't exactly your perfect life-on-

a-timetable couple at the best of times. Peoria Smith was all right, though—chipper as a chipmunk, just as always, and he'd recognized me by my walk even though it was at least an hour before my usual time. He was wearing a baggy CalTech sweatshirt that came down to his thighs and a pair of corduroy knickers that showed off his scabby knees. His hated white cane leaned casually against the side of the card-table he did business on.

“Say, Mr. Umney! Howza kid?”

Peoria's dark glasses glinted in the morning sunlight, and as he turned toward the sound of my step with my copy of the L.A. Times held up in front of him, I had a momentary unsettling thought: it was as if someone had drilled two big black holes into his face. I shivered the thought off my back, thinking that maybe the time had come to cut out the before-bedtime shot of rye. Either that or double the dose. Hitler was on the front of the Times, as he so often was these days. This time it was something about Austria. I thought, and not for the first time, how at home that pale face and limp forelock would have looked on a post-office bulletin board.

“The kid is just about okay, Peoria,” I said. “In fact, the kid is as fine as fresh paint on an outhouse wall.”

I dropped a dime into the Corona box resting atop Peoria's stack of newspapers. The Times is a three-center, and over-priced at that, but I've been dropping that same chip into Peoria's change-box since time out of mind. He's a good kid, and making good grades in school—I took it on myself to check that last year, after he'd helped me out on the Weld case. If Peoria hadn't shown up on Harris Brunner's houseboat when he did, I'd still be trying to swim with my feet cemented into a kerosene drum, somewhere off Malibu. To say I owe him a lot is an understatement.

In the course of that particular investigation (Peoria Smith, not Harris Brunner and Mavis Weld), I even found out the kid's real name, although wild horses wouldn't have dragged it out of me. Peoria's father took a permanent coffee-break out a ninth-floor office window

on Black Friday, his mother's the only white frail working in that goofy Chinese laundry down on La Punta, and the kid's blind. With all that, does the world need to know they hung Francis on him when he was too young to fight back? The defense rests. If anything really juicy happened the night before, you almost always find it on the front page of the Times, left side, just below the fold. I turned the newspaper over and saw that a bandleader of the Cuban persuasion had suffered a heart attack while dancing with his female vocalist at The Carousel in Burbank. He died an hour later at L.A. General. I had some sympathy for the maestro's widow, but none for the man himself. My opinion is that people who go dancing in Burbank deserve what they get.

I opened to the sports section to see how Brooklyn had done in their doubleheader with the Cards the day before. "How about you, Peoria? Everyone holding their own in your castle? Moats and battlements all in good repair?"

"I'll say, Mr. Umney! Oh, boy!"

Something in his voice caught my attention, and I lowered the paper to take a closer look at him. When I did, I saw what a gilt-edged shamus like me should have seen right away: the kid was all but busting with happiness.

"You look like somebody just gave you six tickets to the first game of the World Series," I said. "What's the buzz, Peoria?"

"My mom hit the lottery down in Tijuana!" he said. "Forty thousand bucks! We're rich, brother! Rich!"

I gave him a grin he couldn't see and ruffled his hair. It popped his cowlick up, but what the hell. "Whoa, hold the phone. How old are you, Peoria?"

"Twelve in May. You know that, Mr. Umney, you gave me a polo-shirt. But I don't see what that has to do with—"

“Twelve’s old enough to know that sometimes people get what they want to happen mixed up with what actually does happen. That’s all I meant.”

“If you’re talkin about daydreams, you’re right—I do know all about em,” Peoria said, running his hands over the back of his head in an effort to make his cowlick lie down again, “but this ain’t no daydream, Mr. Umney. It’s real! My Uncle Fred went down and picked up the cash yest’y afternoon. He brought it back in the saddlebag of his Vinnie! I smelled it! Hell, I rolled in it! It was spread all over my mom’s bed! Richest feeling I ever had, let me tell you-forty-froggin-thousand smackers!”

“Twelve may be old enough to know the difference between daydreams and what’s real, but it’s not old enough for that kind of talk,” I said. It sounded good—I’m sure the Legion of Decency would have approved two thousand per cent—but my mouth was running on automatic pilot, and I barely heard what was coming out of it. I was too busy trying to get my brain wrapped around what he’d just told me. Of one thing I was absolutely positive: he’d made a mistake. He must have made a mistake, because if it was true, then Peoria wouldn’t be standing here anymore when I came by on my way to my office in the Fulwider Building. And that just couldn’t be. I found my mind returning to the Demmicks, who for the first time in recorded history hadn’t played any of their big-band records at full volume before retiring, and to Buster, who for the first time in recorded history hadn’t greeted the sound of George’s latchkey turning in the lock with a fusillade of barks. The thought that something was off-kilter returned, and it was stronger this time.

Meanwhile, Peoria was looking at me with an expression I’d never expected to see on his honest, open face: sulky irritation mixed with exasperated humor. It was the way a kid looks at a windbag uncle who’s told all his stories, even the boring ones, three or four times.

“Ain’t you picking up on this newsflash, Mr. Umney? We’re rich! My mom ain’t going to have to press shirts for that damned old Lee Ho anymore, and I ain’t going to have to sell papers on the corner

anymore, shiverin when it rains in the winter and havin to suck up to those nutty old bags who work down at Bilder's. I can quit actin like I died and went to heaven every time some blowhard leaves me a nickel tip."

I started a little at that, but what the hell—I wasn't a nickel man. I left Peoria seven cents, day in and day out. Unless I was too broke to afford it, of course, but in my business an occasional stony stretch comes with the territory.

"Maybe we ought to go up to Blondie's and have a cup of java," I said. "Talk this thing over."

"Can't. It's closed."

"Blondie's? The hell you say!"

But Peoria couldn't be bothered with such mundane stuff as the coffee shop up the street. "You ain't heard the best, Mr.

Umney! My Uncle Fred knows a doctor up in Frisco—a specialist—who thinks he can do something about my eyes."

He turned his face up to mine. Below the cheaters and his too-thin nose, his lips were trembling. "He says it might not be the optic nerves after all, and if it's not, there's an operation ... I don't understand all the technical stuff, but I could see again, Mr. Umney!" He reached out for me blindly ... well, of course he did. How else could he reach out? "I could see again!"

He clutched at me, and I gripped his hands and squeezed them briefly before pushing them gently away. There was ink on his fingers, and I'd been feeling so good when I got up that I'd put on my new chalk worsted. Hot for summer, of course, but the whole city is air-conditioned these days, and besides, I was feeling naturally cool. I didn't feel so cool now. Peoria was looking up at me, his thin and somehow perfect newsboy's face troubled. A little breeze—scented with oleander and exhaust—ruffled his cowlick, and I realized that I

could see it because he wasn't wearing his tweed cap. He looked somehow naked without it, and why not? Every newsboy should wear a tweed cap, just like every shoeshine boy should wear a beanie cocked way back on his head.

"What's the matter, Mr. Umney? I thought you'd be happy. Jeepers, I didn't have to come out here to this lousy corner today, you know, but I did—I even got here early, because I kinda had an idea you'd get here early. I thought you'd be happy, my mom hittin the lottery and me gettin a chance at an operation, but you ain't." Now his voice trembled with resentment. "You ain't!"

"Yes I am," I said, and I wanted to be happy—part of me did, anyway—but the bitch of it was that he was mostly right. Because it meant things would change, you see, and things weren't supposed to change. Peoria Smith was supposed to be right here, year in and year out, with that perfect cap of his tilted back on hot days and pulled down low on rainy ones, so that the raindrops dripped off the bill. He was always supposed to be smiling, was never supposed to say "hell" or "frogging," and most of all, he was supposed to be blind.

"You ain't!" he said, and then, shockingly, he pushed his card-table over. It fell into the street, papers flapping everywhere. His white cane rolled into the gutter. Peoria heard it go and bent down to get it. I could see tears coming out from beneath his dark glasses and go rolling down his pale, thin cheeks. He started groping for the cane, but it had fallen near me and he was going the wrong way. I felt a sudden strong urge to haul off and kick him in his blind newsboy's ass.

Instead, I bent over, got his stick, and tapped him lightly on the hip with it. Peoria turned, quick as a snake, and snatched it. Out of the corner of my eye I could see pictures of Hitler and the recently deceased Cuban bandleader flapping all over Sunset Boulevard—a bus bound for Van Ness snored through a little drift of them, leaving a bitter tang of diesel fumes behind. I hated the way those newspapers looked, fluttering here and there. They looked messy. Worse, they looked wrong. Utterly and completely wrong. I fought

another urge, as strong as the first one, to grab Peoria and shake him. To tell him he was going to spend the morning picking up those newspapers, and I wasn't going to let him go home until he'd gotten every last one. It occurred to me that less than ten minutes ago, I'd been thinking that this was the perfect L.A. morning—so perfect it deserved a trademark symbol. And it had been, dammit. So where had things gone wrong?

And how had it happened so fast?

No answers came, only an irrational but powerful voice from inside, telling me that the kid's mother couldn't have won the lottery, that the kid couldn't stop selling newspapers, and that, most of all, the kid couldn't see. Peoria Smith was supposed to be blind for the rest of his life.

Well, it's got to be something experimental, I thought. Even if the doctor up in Frisco isn't a quack, and he probably is, the operation's bound to fail.

And, bizarre as it sounds, the thought calmed me down.

"Listen," I said, "we got off on the wrong foot this morning, that's all. Let me make it up to you. We'll go down to Blondie's and I'll buy you breakfast. What do you say, Peoria? You can dig into a plate of bacon and eggs and tell me all ab—"

"Fuck you!" he shouted, shocking me all the way down to my shoes. "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, you cheap gumshoe! You think blind people can't tell when people like you are lying through their teeth? Fuck you! And keep your hands off me from now on! I think you're a faggot!"

That did it—no one calls me a faggot and gets away with it, not even a blind newsboy. I forgot all about how Peoria had saved my life during that Mavis Weld business; I reached for his cane, meaning to take it away from him and whack him across the keister with it a few times. Teach him some manners. Before I could get it, though, he

hauled off and slammed the cane's tip into my lower belly—and I do mean lower. I doubled up in agony, but even while I was trying to keep from howling with pain, I was counting my blessings; two inches lower still and I could have quit peeping for a living and gotten a job singing soprano in the Palace of the Doges.

I made a quick, reflexive grab for him anyway, and he brought the cane down on the back of my neck. Hard. It didn't break, but I heard it crack. I figured I could finish the job when I caught him and ran it into his right ear. I'd show him who was a faggot.

He backed away from me as if he'd caught my brainwave, and threw the cane into the street.

"Peoria," I managed. Maybe it still wasn't too late to catch sanity by the shirttail. "Peoria, what the hell's wrong with—"

"And don't call me that!" he screamed. "My name's Francis! Frank! You're the one who started calling me Peoria!

You started it and now everyone calls me that and I hate it!"

My watering eyes doubled him as he turned and fled across the street, heedless of traffic (of which there was currently none, luckily for him), hands held out in front of him. I thought he would trip over the far curb—was looking forward to it, in fact—but I guess blind people must keep a pretty good set of topographical survey maps in their heads. He jumped onto the sidewalk as nimbly as a goat, then turned his dark glasses back in my direction. There was an expression of crazed triumph on his tear-streaked face, and the dark lenses looked more like holes than ever. Big ones, as if someone had hit him with two large-caliber shotgun rounds.

"Blondie's is gone, I toldja!" he screamed. "My mom says he upped and ran away with that redhead floozy he hired last month! You should be so lucky, you ugly prick!"

He turned and went running up Sunset in that strange way of his, with his splayed fingers held out in front of him.

People stood in little clusters on both sides of the street, looking at him, looking at the papers fluttering in the street, looking at me.

Mostly looking at me, it seemed.

This time Peoria—well, okay, Francis—made it as far as Derringer's Bar before turning to deliver one final salvo.

"Fuck you, Mr. Umney!" he screamed, and ran on.

II. Vernon's Cough.

I managed to pull myself erect and make my way across the street. Peoria, aka Francis Smith, was long gone, but I wanted to put those blowing newspapers behind me, too. Looking at them was giving me a headache that was somehow worse than the ache in my groin.

On the far side of the street I stared into Felt's Stationery as if the new Parker ball-point pen in the window was the most fascinating thing I'd ever seen in my life (or maybe it was those sexy imitation leather appointment books). After five minutes or so—time enough to commit every item in the dusty show-window to memory—I felt capable of resuming my interrupted voyage up Sunset without listing too noticeably to port. Questions circled in my mind the way mosquitoes circle your head at the drive-in in San Pedro when you forget to bring along an insect stick or two. I was able to ignore most of them, but a couple got through. First, what the hell had gotten into Peoria? Second, what the hell had gotten into me? I kept slapping at these uncomfortable queries until I got to Blondie's City Eats, Open 24 Hrs, Bagels Our Specialty, on the corner of Sunset and Travernia, and when I got that far, they were driven out in a single wallop. Blondie's had been on that corner for as long as I could remember—the sharpies and the hustlers and the hipsters and the hypes going in and going out, not to mention the debs, the dykes, and the dopes. A famous silent-movie star was once arrested for murder as he was coming out of Blondie's, and I myself had concluded a nasty piece of business there not so long ago, shooting a coked-up fashion-plate named Dunninger who had killed three hopheads in the aftermath of a Hollywood dope party. It was also the place where I'd said goodbye to the silver-haired, violet-eyed Ardis McGill. I'd spent the rest of that lost night walking in a rare Los Angeles fog which might have only been behind my eyes ... and trickling down my cheeks, by the time the sun came up.

Blondie's closed? Blondie's gone? Impossible, you would have said—more likely that the Statue of Liberty should have disappeared from her barren lick of rock in New York Harbor. Impossible but true. The window which had once held a mouth-watering selection of pies and cakes was soaped over, but the job had been done indifferently, and I could see a nearly empty room through the stripes. The lino looked filthy and barren. The grease-darkened blades of the overhead fans hung down like the propellers of crashed airplanes. There were a few tables left, and six or eight of the familiar red-upholstered chairs piled on them with the legs sticking up, but that was all ... except for a couple of empty sugar-shakers tumbled in one corner.

I stood there trying to get it into my head, and it was like trying to get a big sofa up a narrow flight of stairs. All that life and excitement, all that late-night hustle and surprise—how could it be ended?

It didn't seem like a mistake; it seemed like a blasphemy. For me Blondie's had summed up all the glittering contradictions that surround L.A.'s essentially dark and loveless heart; I had sometimes thought Blondie's was L.A. as I had known it over the last fifteen or twenty years, only drawn small. Where else could you see a mobster eating breakfast at 9:00 p.m. with a priest, or a diamond-decked glamorpuss sitting on a counter-stool next to a grease-monkey celebrating the end of his shift with a hot cup of java? I suddenly found myself thinking of the Cuban bandleader and his heart attack again, this time with considerably more sympathy.

All that fabulous starry City of Lost Angels life—do you get it, chum? Are you picking up this newsflash?

The sign hung in the door read CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS, REOPENING SOON, but I didn't believe it. Empty sugar-shakers lying in the corner do not, in my experience, indicate renovations in progress. Peoria had been right:

Blondie's was history. I turned away and went on up the street, but now I walked slowly and had to consciously order my head to stay

up. As I approached the Fulwider Building, where I've kept an office for more years than I like to think about, an odd certainty gripped me. The handles of the big double doors would be wrapped up in a thick tow-chain and held with a padlock. The glass would be soaped over in indifferent stripes. And there would be a sign reading CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS, REOPENING SOON.

By the time I reached the building, this nutty idea had taken over my mind with the force of a compulsion, and not even the sight of Bill Tuggle, the rummy CPA from the third floor, going inside could quite dispel it. But seeing is believing, they say, and when I got to 2221, I saw no chain, no sign, and no soap on the glass. It was just the Fulwider, the same as ever. I went into the lobby, smelled the familiar odor—it reminds me of the pink cakes they put in the urinals of public men's rooms these days—and glanced around at the same ratty palm trees overhanging the same faded red tile floor.

Bill was standing next to Vernon Klein, world's oldest elevator operator, in Car 2. In his frayed red suit and ancient pillbox hat, Vernon looks like a cross between the Philip Morris bellboy and a rhesus monkey which has fallen into an industrial steam-cleaning machine. He looked up at me with his mournful basset-hound eyes, which were watering from the Camel pasted in the middle of his mouth. His peepers should have gotten used to the smoke years ago; I couldn't remember ever having seen him without a Camel parked in that same position. Bill moved over a little, but not far enough. There wasn't room enough in the car for him to move far enough. I'm not sure there would have been room in Rhode Island for him to move far enough. Delaware, maybe. He smelled like bologna which has spent a year or so marinating in cheap bourbon. And just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, he belched.

"Sorry, Clyde."

"Well, you certainly ought to be," I said, waving the air in front of my face as Vern slid the gate across the front of the car and prepared to fly us to the moon ... or at least to the seventh floor. "What drainpipe did you spend the night in, Bill?"

Yet there was something comforting about that smell—I'd be lying if I said there wasn't. Because it was a familiar smell. It was just Bill Tuggle, odoriferous, hung over, and standing with his knees slightly bent, as if someone had filled the crotch of his underpants with chicken salad and he'd just realized it. Not pleasant, nothing about that morning's elevator ride was pleasant, but it was at least known. Bill gave me a sick smile as the elevator began to rattle upward but said nothing. I swung my head in Vernon's direction, mostly to get away from the smell of overbaked accountant, but whatever small talk I'd been meaning to make died in my throat. The two pictures which had hung over Vern's stool since the beginning of time—one of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee while his boatbound disciples gawped at him and the other of Vern's wife in a buckskin-fringed Sweetheart of the Rodeo outfit and a turnof-the-century hairdo—were both gone. What had replaced them shouldn't have been shocking, especially in light of Vernon's age, but it hit me like a barge-load of bricks just the same.

It was a card, that's all—a simple card showing the silhouette of a man fishing on a lake at sunset. It was the sentiment printed below the canoe that floored me: **HAPPY RETIREMENT!**

You could have doubled the way I felt when Peoria told me he might see again and still have come up short. Memories flickered through my mind with the speed of cards being shuffled by a riverboat gambler. There was the time Vern broke into the office next to mine to call an ambulance when that nutty dame, Agnes Sternwood, first tore my phone out of the wall and then swallowed what she swore was draincleaner. The “draincleaner”

turned out to be nothing but crystals of raw sugar, and the office Vern broke into turned out to be a highclass horse parlor. So far as I know, the guy who leased the place and slapped MacKenzie Imports on the door is still receiving his annual Sears Roebuck catalogue in San Quentin. Then there was the guy Vern cold-conked with his stool just before he could ventilate my guts; that was the Mavis Weld business again, of course. Not to mention the time he brought his daughter to

me—what a babe she was!—when she got involved with that dirty-picture racket. Vern retiring?

It wasn't possible. It just wasn't.

"Vernon," I asked, "what kind of joke is this?"

"No joke, Mr. Umney," he said, and as he brought the elevator car to a stop on Three, he began to hack a deep cough I'd never heard in all the years I'd known him. It was like listening to marble bowling balls rolling down a stone alley. He took the Camel out of his mouth, and I was horrified to see the end of it was pink, and not with lipstick. He looked at it for a moment, grimaced, then replaced it and yanked back the accordion grille. "Thuhree, Mr. Tuggle."

"Thanks, Vern," Bill said.

"Remember the party on Friday," Vernon said. His words were muffled; he'd taken a handkerchief spotted with brown stains out of his back pocket and was wiping his lips with it. "I sure would admire for you to come." He glanced at me with his rheumy eyes, and what was in them scared the bejabbers out of me. Something was waiting for Vernon Klein just around the next bend in the road, and that look said Vernon knew all about it.

"You too, Mr. Umney—we been through a lot together, and I'd be tickled to raise a glass with you."

"Wait a minute!" I shouted, grabbing Bill as he tried to step out of the elevator.

"You wait just a God damned minute, both of you! What party? What's going on here?"

"Retirement," Bill said. "It usually happens at some point after your hair turns white, in case you've been too busy to notice. Vernon's party is going to be in the basement on Friday afternoon. Everybody in the building's going to be there, and I'm going to make my world-

famous Dynamite Punch. What's the matter with you, Clyde? You've known for a month that Vern was finishing up on May thirtieth."

That made me angry all over again, the way I'd been when Peoria called me a faggot. I grabbed Bill by the padded shoulders of his double-breasted suit and gave him a shake. "The hell you say!"

He gave me a small, pained smile. "The hell I don't, Clyde. But if you don't want to come, fine. Stay away. You've been acting poco loco for the last six months, anyhow."

I shook him again. "What do you mean, poco loco?"

"Crazy as a loon, nutty as a fruitcake, two wheels off the road, out to lunch, playing without a full deck—any of those ring a bell? And before you answer, just let me inform you that if you shake me one more time, even a little shake, my guts are going to explode straight out through my chest, and not even dry-cleaning will get that mess off your suit."

He pulled away before I could do it again even if I'd wanted to and started down the hall with the seat of his pants hanging somewhere down around the level of his knees, as per usual. He glanced back just once, while Vernon was sliding the brass gate across. "You need to take some time off, Clyde. Starting last week."

"What's gotten into you?' I shouted at him. "What's gotten into all of you?' But by then the inner door was closed and we were headed up again—this time to Seven. My little slice of heaven. Vern dropped his cigarette butt into the bucket of sand that squats in the corner, and immediately stuck a fresh one in his kisser. He popped a wooden match alight with his thumbnail, set the fag on fire, and immediately started coughing again. Now I could see fine drops of blood misting out from between his cracked lips. It was a gruesome sight. His eyes had dropped; they stared vacantly into the far corner, seeing nothing, hoping for nothing. Bill Tuggle's B.O. hung between us like the Ghost of Binges Past.

“Akay, Vern,” I said. “What is it and where are you going?”

Vernon had never been one to wear out the English language, and that at least hadn't changed. “It's Big C,” he said.

“An Saturday I catch the Desert Blossom to Arizona. I'm going to live with my sister. I don't expect to wear out my welcome, though. She might have to change the bed twice.” He brought the elevator to a stop and rattled the gate back.

“Seven, Mr. Umney. Your little slice of heaven.” He smiled at that just as he always did, but this time it looked like the kind of smile you see on the candy skulls down in Tijuana, on the Day of the Dead. Now that the elevator door was open, I smelled something up here in my little slice of heaven that was so out of place it took a moment for me to recognize it: fresh paint. Once it was noted, I filed it. I had other fish to fry.

“This isn't right,” I said. “You know it isn't, Vern.”

He turned his frightening vacant eyes on me. Death in them, a black shape flapping and beckoning just beyond the faded blue. “What isn't right, Mr. Umney?”

“You're supposed to be here, damn it! Right here! Sitting on your stool with Jesus and your wife over your head. Not this!” I reached up, grabbed the card with the picture of the man fishing on the lake, tore it in two, put the pieces together, tore it in four, and then gave them the toss. They fluttered to the faded red rug on the floor of the elevator car like confetti.

“S'posed to be right here,” he repeated, those terrible eyes of his never leaving mine. Beyond us, two men in paint-splattered coveralls had turned to look in our direction.

“That's right.”

“For how long, Mr. Umney? Since you know everything else, you can probably tell me that, can’tcha? How long am I supposed to keep drivin this damned car?”

“Well ... forever,” I said, and the word hung between us, another ghost in the cigarette-smokey elevator car. Given a choice of ghosts, I guess I would have picked Bill Tuggle’s B.O... . but I wasn’t given a choice. Instead, I said it again.

“Forever, Vern.”

He dragged on his Camel, coughed out smoke and a fine spray of blood, and went on looking at me. “It ain’t my place to give the tenants advice, Mr. Umney, but I guess I’ll give you some, anyway—it being my last week and all. You might consider seeing a doctor. The kind that shows you ink-pitchers and you say what they look like.”

“You can’t retire, Vern.” My heart was beating harder than ever, but I managed to keep my voice level. “You just can’t.”

“No?” He took his cigarette out of his mouth—fresh blood was already soaking into the tip—and then looked back at me. His smile was ghastly. “The way it looks to me, I ain’t exactly got a choice, Mr. Umney.”

III. Of Painters and Pesos.

The smell of fresh paint seared my nose, overpowering both the smell of Vernon's smoke and Bill Tuggle's armpits.

The men in the coveralls were currently taking up space not far from my office door. They had put down a dropcloth, and the tools of their trade were spread out all along it—tins and brushes and turp. There were two step-ladders as well, flanking the painters like scrawny bookends. What I wanted to do was to run down the hall, kicking the whole works every whichway as I went. What right had they to paint these old dark walls that glaring, sacrilegious white?

Instead, I walked up to the one who looked as if it might take a two-digit number to express his IQ and politely asked what he and his fellow mug thought they were doing. He glanced around at me. "Hellzit look like? I'm givin Miss America a finger-frig and Chick there's puttin rouge on Betty Grable's nippy-nips."

I'd had enough. Enough of them, enough of everything. I reached out, grabbed the quizkid under the armpit, and used my fingertips to engage a particularly nasty nerve that hides up there. He screamed and dropped his brush. White paint splattered his shoes. His partner gave me a timid doe-eyed look and took a step backward.

"If you try taking off before I'm done with you," I snarled, "you're going to find the handle of your paint-brush so far up your ass you'll need a boathook to find the bristles. You want to try me and see if I'm lying?"

He stopped moving and just stood there on the edge of the dropcloth, eyes darting from side to side, looking for help.

There was none to be had. I half-expected Candy to open my door and look out to see what the fracas was, but the door stayed firmly closed. I turned my attention back to the quizkid I was holding onto.

“The question was simple enough, bud—what the hell are you doing here? Can you answer it, or do I give you another blast?”

I twiddled my fingers in his armpit just to refresh his memory and he screamed again.

“Paintin the hall! Jeezis, can’t you see?”

I could see, all right, and even if I’d been blind, I could smell. I hated what both of those senses were telling me. The hallway wasn’t supposed to be painted, especially not this glaring, light-reflecting white. It was supposed to be dim and shadowy; it was supposed to smell like dust and old memories. Whatever had started with the Demmicks”

unaccustomed silence was getting worse all the time. I was mad as hell, as this unfortunate fellow was discovering. I was also scared, but that was a feeling you get good at hiding when carrying a heater in a clamshell holster is part of the way you make your living.

“Who sent you two dubs down here?”

“Aur boss,” he said, looking at me as if I were crazy. “We work for Challis Custom Painters, on Van Nuys. The boss is Hap Corrigan. If you want to know who hired the cumpny, you’ll have to ask h—”

“It was the owner,” the other painter said quietly. “The owner of this building. A guy named Samuel Landry.”

I searched my memory, trying to put the name of Samuel Landry together with what I knew of the Fulwider Building and couldn’t do it. In fact, I couldn’t put the name of Samuel Landry together with anything ... yet for all that it seemed almost to chime in my head, like a church-bell you can hear from miles away on a foggy morning.

“You’re lying,” I said, but with no real force. I said it simply because it was something to say.

“Call the boss,” the other painter said. Appearances could be deceiving; he was apparently the brighter of the two, after all. He reached inside his grimy, paint-smeared coverall and brought out a little card.

I waved it away, suddenly tired. “Who in the name of Christ would want to paint this place, anyway?”

It wasn’t them I was asking, but the painter who’d offered me the business card answered just the same. “Well, it brightens the place up,” he said cautiously. “You gotta admit that.”

“Son,” I asked, taking a step toward him, “did your mother ever have any kids that lived, or did she just produce the occasional afterbirth like you?”

“Hey, whatever, whatever,” he said, taking a step backward. I followed his worried gaze down to my own balled-up fists and forced them open again. He didn’t look very relieved, and I actually didn’t blame him very much. “You don’t like it—you’re coming through loud and clear on that score. But I gotta do what the boss tells me, don’t I? I mean, hell, that’s the American way.”

He glanced at his partner, then back to me. It was a quick glance, really no more than a flick, but in my line of work I’d seen it more than once, and it’s the kind of look you file away. Don’t bother this guy, it said. Don’t bump him, don’t rattle him. He’s nitro.

“I mean, I’ve got a wife and a little kid to take care of,” he went on. “There’s a Depression going on out there, you know.”

Confusion came over me then, drowning my anger the way a downpour drowns a brushfire.

Was there a Depression going on out there? Was there?

“I know,” I said, not knowing anything. “Let’s just forget it, what do you say?”

“Sure,” the painters agreed, so eager they sounded like half of a barbershop quartet. The one I’d mistakenly tabbed as half-bright had his left hand buried deep in his right armpit, trying to get that nerve to go back to sleep. I could have told him he had an hour’s work ahead of him, maybe more, but I didn’t want to talk to them anymore. I didn’t want to talk to anyone or see anyone—not even the delectable Candy Kane, whose humid glances and smooth, subtropical curves have been known to send seasoned street-brawlers reeling to their knees. The only thing I wanted to do was to get across the outer office and into my inner sanctum. There was a bottle of Robb’s Rye in the bottom lefthand drawer, and right now I needed a shot in the worst way.

I walked down toward the frosted-glass door marked CLYDE UMNEY PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR, restraining a renewed urge to see if I could drop-kick a can of Dutch Boy Oyster White through the window at the end of the hall and out onto the fire-escape. I was actually reaching for my doorknob when a thought struck me and I turned back to the painters ... but slowly, so they wouldn’t believe I was being gripped by some new seizure. Also, I had an idea that if I turned too fast, I’d see them grinning at each other and twirling their fingers around their ears—the looney-gesture we all learned in the schoolyard.

They weren’t twirling their fingers, but they hadn’t taken their eyes off me, either. The half-smart one seemed to be gauging the distance to the door marked STAIRWELL. Suddenly I wanted to tell them that I wasn’t such a bad guy when you got to know me; that there were, in fact, a few clients and at least one exwife who thought me something of a hero. But that wasn’t a thing you could say about yourself, especially not to a couple of bozos like these.

“Take it easy,” I said. “I’m not going to jump you. I just wanted to ask another question.”

They relaxed a little. A very little, actually.

“Ask it,” Painter Number Two said.

“Either of you ever played the numbers down in Tijuana?”

“La loteria?’ Number One asked.

“Your knowledge of Spanish stuns me. Yeah. La loteria.”

Number One shook his head. “Mex numbers and Mex call houses are strictly for suckers.”

Why do you think I asked you? I thought but didn’t say.

“Besides,” he went on, “you win ten or twenty thousand pesos, big deal. What’s that in real money? Fifty bucks?

Eighty?”

My mom hit the lottery down in Tijuana, Peoria had said, and I had known something about it wasn’t right even then.

Forty thousand bucks ... My Uncle Fred went down and picked up the cash yest’r afternoon. He brought it back in the saddlebag of his Vinnie!

“Yeah,” I said, “something like that, I guess. And they always pay off that way, don’t they? In pesos?”

He gave me that look again, as if I was crazy, then remembered I really was and readjusted his face. “Well, yeah. It is the Mexican lottery, you know. They couldn’t very well pay off in dollars.”

“How true,” I said, and in my mind I saw Peoria’s thin, eager face, heard him saying, It was spread all over my mom’s bed! Forty-froggin-thousand smackers!

Except how could a blind kid be sure of the exact amount... or even that it really was money he was rolling around in?

The answer was simple: he couldn’t. But even a blind newsboy would know that La loteria paid off in pesos rather than in dollars,

and even a blind newsboy had to know you couldn't carry forty thousand dollars' worth of Mexican lettuce in the saddlebag of a Vincent motorcycle. His uncle would have needed a City of Los Angeles dump truck to transport that much dough.

Confusion, confusion—nothing but dark clouds of confusion.

“Thanks,” I said, and headed for my office.

I'm sure that was a relief for all three of us.

IV. Umney's Last Client.

“Candy, honey, I don't want to see anybody or take any ca—”

I broke off. The outer office was empty. Candy's desk in the corner was unnaturally bare, and after a moment I saw why: the IN/OUT tray had been dumped into the trash basket and her pictures of Errol Flynn and William Powell were both gone. So was her Philco. The little blue stenographer's stool, from which Candy had been wont to flash her gorgeous gams, was unoccupied.

My eyes returned to the IN/OUT tray sticking out of the trash can like the prow of a sinking ship, and for a moment my heart leaped. Perhaps someone had been in here, tossed the place, kidnapped Candy. Perhaps it was a case, in other words. At that moment I would have welcomed a case, even if it meant some mug was tying Candy up at this very moment ... and adjusting the rope over the firm swell of her breasts with particular care. Any way out of the cobwebs that seemed to be falling around me sounded just peachy to me. The trouble with the idea was simple: the room hadn't been tossed. The IN/OUT was in the trash, true enough, but that didn't indicate a struggle; in fact, it was more as if ... There was just one thing left on the desk, placed squarely in the center of the blotter. A white envelope. Just looking at it gave me a bad feeling. My feet carried me across the room just the same, however, and I picked it up. Seeing my name written across the front of the envelope in Candy's wide loops and swirls was no surprise; it was just another unpleasant part of this long, unpleasant morning. I ripped it open and a single slip of note-paper fell out into my hand. Dear Clyde, I have had all of the groping and sneering I'm going to take from you, and I am tired of your ridiculous and childish jokes about my name. Life is too short to be pawed by a middle-aged divorce detective with bad breath. You did have your good points Clyde but they are getting drowned out by the bad ones, especially since you started drinking

all the time. Do yourself a favor and grow up. Yours truly, Arlene Cain P.S.: I'm going back to my mother's in Idaho.

Do not try to get in touch with me.

I held the note a moment or two longer, looking at it unbelievably, then dropped it. One phrase from it recurred as I watched it seesaw lazily down toward the already occupied trash basket: I am tired of your ridiculous and childish jokes about my name. But had I ever known her name was anything other than Candy Kane? I searched my mind as the note continued its lazy—and seemingly endless—swoops back and forth, and the answer was an honest and resounding no.

Her name had always been Candy Kane, we'd joked about it many a time, and if we'd had a few rounds of office slap-and-tickle, what of that? She'd always enjoyed it. We both had. Did she enjoy it? a voice spoke up from somewhere deep inside me. Did she really, or is that just another little fairytale you've been telling yourself all these years?

I tried to shut that voice out, and after a moment or two I succeeded, but the one that replaced it was even worse. That voice belonged to none other than Peoria Smith. I can quit actin like I died and went to heaven every time some blowhard leaves me a nickel tip, he said. Ain't you picking up on this newsflash, Mr. Umney?

"Shut up, kid," I said to the empty room. "Gabriel Heater you ain't." I turned away from Candy's desk, and as I did, faces passed in front of my mind's eye like the faces of some lunatic marching band from hell: George and Gloria Demmick, Peoria Smith, Bill Tuggle, Vernon Klein, a million-dollar blonde who went under the two-bit name of Arlene Cain ... even the two painters were there. Confusion, confusion, nothing but confusion.

Head down, I trudged into my office, closed the door behind me, and sat at the desk. Dimly, through the closed window, I could hear the traffic out on Sunset. I had an idea that, for the right person, it was

still a spring morning so L.A.-perfect you expected to see that little trademark symbol stamped on it somewhere, but for me all the light had gone from the day ... inside as well as out. I thought about the bottle of hooch in the bottom drawer, but all of a sudden even bending down to get it seemed like too much work. It seemed, in fact, a job akin to climbing Mount Everest in tennis shoes.

The smell of fresh paint had penetrated all the way into my inner sanctum. It was a smell I ordinarily liked, but not then. At that moment it was the smell of everything that had gone wrong since the Demmicks hadn't come into their Hollywood bungalow bouncing wisecracks off each other like rubber balls and playing their records at top volume and throwing their Corgi into convulsions with their endless billing and cooing. It occurred to me with perfect clarity and simplicity—the way I'd always imagined great truths must occur to the people they occur to—that if some doctor could cut out the cancer that was killing the Fulwider Building's elevator operator, it would be white. Oyster white.

And it would smell just like fresh Dutch Boy paint. This thought was so tiring that I had to put my head down with the heels of my palms pressed against my temples, holding it in place ... or maybe just keeping what was inside from exploding out and making a mess on the walls. And when the door opened softly and footsteps entered the room, I didn't look up. It seemed like more of an effort than I was able to make at that particular moment.

Besides, I had the strange idea that I already knew who it was. I couldn't put a name to my knowledge, but the step was somehow familiar. So was the cologne, although I knew I wouldn't be able to name it even if someone had put a gun to my head, and for a very simple reason: I'd never smelled it before in my life. How could I recognize a scent I'd never smelled before, you ask? I can't answer that one, bud, but I did. Nor was that the worst of it. The worst of it was this: I was scared nearly out of my mind. I've faced blazing guns in the hands of angry men, which is bad, and daggers in the hands of angry women, which is a thousand times worse; I was once tied to

the wheel of a Packard automobile that had been parked on the tracks of a busy freight line; I have even been tossed out a third-story window. It's been an eventful life, all right, but nothing in it had ever scared me the way the smell of that cologne and that soft footstep scared me. My head seemed to weigh at least six hundred pounds.

"Clyde," a voice said. A voice I'd never heard before, a voice I nevertheless knew as well as my own. Just that one word and the weight of my head went up to an even ton.

"Get outta here, whoever you are," I said without looking up. "Joint's closed."

And something made me add, "For renovations."

"Bad day, Clyde?"

Was there sympathy in that voice? I thought maybe there was, and somehow that made things worse. Whoever this mug was, I didn't want his sympathy. Something told me that his sympathy would be more dangerous than his hate.

"Not so bad," I said, supporting my heavy, aching head with the palms of my hands and looking down at my desk-blotter for all I was worth. Written in the upper lefthand corner was Mavis Weld's number. I sent my eyes tracing over it again and again—BEverley 6-4214. Keeping my eyes on the blotter seemed like a good idea. I didn't know who my visitor was, but I knew I didn't want to see him. Right then it was the only thing I did know.

"I think maybe you're being a little ... disingenuous, shall we say?" the voice asked, and it was sympathy, all right; the sound of it made my stomach curl up into something that felt like a quivering fist soaked with acid. There was a creak as he dropped into the client's chair.

“I don’t exactly know what that word means, but by all means, let’s say it,” I agreed. “And now that we have, why don’t you rise up righteous, Moggins, and shift on out of here. I’m thinking of taking a sick day. I can do that without much argument, you see, because I’m the boss. Neat, the way things work out sometimes, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so. Look at me, Clyde.”

My heart stuttered but my head stayed down and my eyes kept tracing over BEverley 6 4214. Part of me wondered if hell was hot enough for Mavis Weld. When I spoke, my voice came out steady. I was surprised but grateful. “In fact, I might take a whole year of sick days. In Carmel, maybe. Sit out on the deck with the American Mercury in my lap and watch the big ones come in from Hawaii.”

“Look at me.”

I didn’t want to, but my head came up just the same. He was sitting in the client’s chair where Mavis had once sat, and Ardis McGill, and Big Tom Hatfield. Even Vernon Klein had sat there once, when he got those pictures of his daughter wearing nothing but an opium grin and her birthday suit. Sitting there with the same patch of California sun slanting across his features—features I most certainly had seen before. The last time had been less than an hour ago, in my bathroom mirror. I’d been scraping a Gillette Blue Blade over them. The expression of sympathy in his eyes—in my eyes—was the most hideous thing I’d ever seen, and when he held out his hand—held out my hand—I felt a sudden urge to wheel around in my swivel chair, get to my feet, and go running straight out my seventh-floor office window. I think I might even have done it, if I hadn’t been so confused, so totally lost. I’ve read the word unmanned plenty of times—it’s a favorite of the pulp-smiths and sob-sisters—but this was the first time I’d ever actually felt that way.

Suddenly the office darkened. The day had been perfectly clear, I would have sworn to that, but a cloud had crossed the sun just the same. The man on the other side of the desk was at least ten years older than I was, maybe fifteen, his hair almost completely white

while mine was still almost all black, but that didn't change the simple fact—no matter what he was calling himself or how old he looked, he was me. Had I thought his voice sounded familiar? Sure. The way your own voice sounds familiar—although not quite the way it sounds inside your own head-when you hear it on a recording.

He picked my limp hand up off the desk, shook it with the briskness of a real-estate agent on the make, then dropped it again. It hit the desk-blotter with a plop, landing on Mavis Weld's telephone number. When I raised my fingers, I saw that Mavis's number was gone. In fact, all the numbers I'd scratched on the blotter over the years were gone. It was as clear as ... well, as clear as a hardshell Baptist's conscience.

"Jesus," I croaked. "Jesus Christ."

"Not at all," the older version of me sitting in the client's chair on the other side of the desk said. "Landry. Samuel D.

Landry. At your service."

V. An Interview with God.

Even as rattled as I was, it only took me two or three seconds to place the name, probably because I'd heard it such a short time ago. According to Painter Number Two, Samuel Landry was the reason why the long dark hall leading to my office was soon going to be oyster white. Landry was the owner of the Fulwider Building.

A crazy idea suddenly occurred to me, but its patent craziness did nothing to dim the sudden blaze of hope which accompanied it. They—whoever they are—say that everyone on the face of the earth has a double. Maybe Landry was mine. Maybe we were identical twins, unrelated doubles who had somehow been born to different parents and ten or fifteen years out of step in time with each other. The idea did nothing to explain the rest of the day's high weirdness, but it was something to hang onto, damn it.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Landry?” I asked. I was trying like hell, but my voice was no longer quite steady. “If it's about the lease, you'll have to give me a day or two to get squared around. It seems my secretary just discovered she had pressing business back home in Armpit, Idaho.”

Landry paid absolutely no attention to this feeble effort on my part to shift the focus of the conversation. “Yes,” he said in a musing tone of voice, “I imagine it's been the granddaddy of bad days ... and it's my fault. I'm sorry, Clyde—really. Meeting you in person has been ... well, not what I expected. Not at all. For one thing, I like you quite a bit better than I expected to. But there's no going back now.” And he fetched a deep sigh. I didn't like the sound of it very much.

“What do you mean by that?” My voice was trembling worse than ever now, and the blaze of hope was dying. Lack of oxygen inside the cave-in site which had once been my brain seemed to be the cause. He didn't answer right away. He leaned over instead, and

grasped the handle of the slim leather case leaning against the front leg of the client's chair. The initials stamped on it were S.D.L., and I deduced that my weird visitor had brought it in with him. I didn't win the Shamus of the Year Award in 1934 and '35 for nothing, you know.

I had never seen a case quite like it in my life—it was too small and too slim to be a briefcase, and it was fastened not with buckles and straps but with a zipper. I'd never seen a zipper quite like this one, either, now that I thought about it.

The teeth were extremely tiny, and they hardly looked like metal at all. But the oddities only began with Landry's luggage. Even setting aside his uncanny older-brother resemblance to me, Landry looked like no businessman I'd ever seen in my life, and certainly not one prosperous enough to own the Fulwider Building. It's not the Ritz, granted, but it is in downtown L.A., and my client (if that was what he was) looked like an Okie on a good day, one which had included a bath and a shave. He was wearing blue jeans pants, for one thing, and a pair of sneakers on his feet . .

. . except they didn't look like any sneakers I'd ever seen before. They were great big clumpy things. What they really looked like were the shoes Boris Karloff wears as part of his Frankenstein get-up, and if they were made of canvas, I'd eat my favorite Fedora. The word written up the sides in red script looked like the name of a dish on a Chinese carry-out menu: REEBOK.

I looked down at the blotter which had once been covered with a tangle of telephone numbers, and suddenly realized that I could no longer remember Mavis Weld's, although I must have called it a billion times only this past winter. That feeling of dread intensified.

"Mister," I said, "I wish you'd state your business and get out of here. Come to think of it, why don't you skip the talking and just go right to the getting-out part?"

He smiled ... tiredly, I thought. That was the other thing. The face above the plain open-collared white shirt looked terribly tired. Terribly sad, as well. It said the man who owned it had been through things I couldn't even dream of. I felt some sympathy for my visitor, but what I mostly felt was fear. And anger. Because it was my face, too, and the bastard had apparently gone a long way toward wearing it out.

"Sorry, Clyde," he said. "No can do."

He put his hand on that tiny, cunning zipper, and all at once Landry opening that case was the last thing in the world I wanted. To stop him I said, "Do you always go visiting your tenants dressed like a guy who makes his living following the cabbage crop? What are you, one of those eccentric millionaires?"

"I'm eccentric, all right," he said. "And it won't do you any good to draw this business out, Clyde."

"What gave you that ide—"

Then he said the thing I'd been dreading, and put out the last tiny flicker of hope at the same time. "I know all your ideas, Clyde. After all, I'm you."

I licked my lips and forced myself to speak; anything to keep him from yanking that zipper. Anything at all. My voice came out husky, but at least it did come out.

"Yeah, I noticed the resemblance. I'm not familiar with the cologne, though. I'm an Old Spice man, myself."

His thumb and finger remained pinched on the zipper, but he didn't pull it. At least not yet.

"But you like this," he said with perfect assurance, "And you'd use it if you could get it down at the Rexall on the corner, wouldn't you? Unfortunately, you can't. It's Aramis, and it won't be invented for

another forty years or so.” He glanced down at his weird, ugly basketball shoes. “Like my sneakers.”

“The devil you say.”

“Well, yes, I suppose the devil might come into it somewhere,” Landry said, and he didn’t smile.

“Where are you from?”

“I thought you knew.” Landry pulled the zipper, revealing a rectangular gadget made of some smooth plastic. It was the same color the seventh-floor hall was going to be by the time the sun went down. I’d never seen anything like it.

There was no brand name on it, just something that must have been a serial number: T 1000. Landry lifted it out of its carrying case, thumbed the catches on the sides, and lifted the hinged top to reveal something that looked like the telescreen in a Buck Rogers movie. “I come from the future,” Landry said. “Just like in a pulp magazine story.”

“You come from Sunnyland Sanitarium, more like it,” I croaked.

“But not exactly like a pulp science-fiction story,” he went on, ignoring what I’d said. “No, not exactly.” He pushed a button on the side of the plastic case. There was a faint whirring sound from inside the gadget, followed by a brief, whistling beep. The thing sitting on his lap looked like some strange stenographer’s machine ... and I had an idea that that wasn’t far from the truth.

He looked up at me and said, “What was your father’s name, Clyde?”

I looked at him for a moment, resisting an urge to lick my lips again. The room was still dark, the sun still behind some cloud that hadn’t even been in sight when I came in off the street. Landry’s face seemed to float in the gloom like an old, shrivelled balloon.

“What’s that got to do with the price of cucumbers in Monrovia?’ I asked.

“You don’t know, do you?”

“Af course I do,” I said, and I did. I just couldn’t come up with it, that was all—it was stuck there on the tip of my tongue, like Mavis Weld’s phone number, which had been BAYshore something-or-other.

“How about your mother’s?”

“Quit playing games with me!”

“Here’s an easy one—what high school did you go to? Every red-blooded American man remembers what school he went to, right? Or the first girl he ever went all the way with. Or the town he grew up in. Was yours San Luis Obispo?”

I opened my mouth, but this time nothing came out.

“Carmel?”

That sounded right ... and then felt all wrong. My head was whirling.

“Ar maybe it was Dusty Bottom, New Mexico.”

“Cut the crap!” I shouted.

“Do you know? Do you?”

“Yes! It was—”

He bent over. Rattled the keys of his strange steno machine.

“San Diego! Born and raised!”

He put the machine on my desk and turned it around so I could read the words floating in the window above the keyboard.

“San Diego! Born and raised!”

My eyes dropped from the window to the word stamped into the plastic frame surrounding it.

“What’s a Toshiba?’ I asked. “Something that comes on the side when you order a Reebok dinner?”

“It’s a Japanese electronics company.”

I laughed dryly. “Who’re you kidding, mister? The Japs can’t even make wind-up toys without getting the springs in upside down.”

“Not now,” he agreed, “And speaking of now, Clyde, when is now? What year is it?”

“1938,” I said, then raised a half-numb hand to my face and rubbed my lips.

“Wait a minute—1939.”

“It might even be 1940. Am I right?”

I said nothing, but I felt my face heating up.

“Don’t feel bad, Clyde; you don’t know because I don’t know. I always left it vague. The time-frame I was trying for was actually more of a feel ... call it Chandler American Time, if you like. It worked like gangbusters for most of my readers, and it made things simpler from a copy-editing standpoint as well, because you can never exactly pinpoint the passage of time. Haven’t you ever noticed how often you say things like ‘for more years than I can remember’ or ‘longer ago than I like to think about’ or ‘since Hector was a pup’?”

“Nope—can’t say that I have.” But now that he mentioned it, I did notice. And that made me think of the L.A. Times. I read it every day, but exactly which days were they? You couldn’t tell from the paper itself, because there was never a date on the masthead, only that

slogan which reads “America’s Fairest Newspaper in America’s Fairest City.”

“You say those things because time doesn’t really pass in this world. It is ...”

He paused, then smiled. It was a terrible thing to look at, that smile, full of yearning and strange greed. “It is one of its many charms,” he finished.

I was scared, but I’ve always been able to bite the bullet when I felt it really needed biting, and this was one of those times. “Tell me what the hell’s going on here.”

“All right ... but you’re already beginning to know, Clyde. Aren’t you?”

“Maybe. I don’t know my dad’s name or my mom’s name or the name of the first girl I ever went to bed with because you don’t know them. Is that it?”

He nodded, smiling the way a teacher would smile at a pupil who’s made a leap of logic and come up with the right answer against all odds. But his eyes were still full of that terrible sympathy.

“And when you wrote San Diego on your gadget there and it came into my head at the same time ...”

He nodded, encouraging me.

“It isn’t just the Fulwider Building you own, is it?” I swallowed, trying to get rid of a large blockage in my throat that had no intention of going anywhere. “You own everything.”

But Landry was shaking his head. “Not everything. Just Los Angeles and a few surrounding areas. This version of Los Angeles, that is, complete with the occasional continuity glitch or made-up addition.”

“Bull,” I said, but I whispered the word.

“See the picture on the wall to the left of the door, Clyde?”

I glanced at it, but hardly had to; it was Washington crossing the Delaware, and it had been there since ... well, since Hector was a pup.

Landry had taken his plastic Buck Rogers steno machine back onto his lap, and was bending over it.

“Don’t do that!” I shouted, and tried to reach for him. I couldn’t do it. My arms had no strength, it seemed, and I could summon no resolve. I felt lethargic, drained, as if I had lost about three pints of blood and was losing more all the time.

He rattled the keys again. Turned the machine toward me so I could read the words in the window. They read: On the wall to the left of the door leading out to Candy-Land, Our Revered Leader hangs ... but always slightly askew. That’s my way of keeping him in perspective.

I looked back at the picture. George Washington was gone, replaced by a photo of Franklin Roosevelt. F.D.R. had a grin on his face and his cigarette holder jutting upward at that angle his supporters think of as jaunty and his detractors as arrogant. The picture was hanging slightly askew.

“I don’t need the laptop to do it,” he said. He sounded a little embarrassed, as if I’d accused him of something. “I can do it just by concentrating—as you saw when the numbers disappeared from your blotter—but the laptop helps.

Because I’m used to writing things down, I suppose. And then editing them. In a way, editing and rewriting are the most fascinating parts of the job, because that’s where the final changes—usually small but often crucial—take place and the picture really comes into focus.”

I looked back at Landry, and when I spoke, my voice was dead. “You made me up, didn’t you?”

He nodded, looking strangely ashamed, as if what he had done was something dirty.

“When?” I uttered a strange, croaky little laugh. “Ar is that the right question?”

“I don’t know if it is or isn’t,” he said, “And I imagine any writer would tell you about the same. It didn’t happen all at once—that much I’m sure of. It’s been an ongoing process. You first showed up in Scarlet Town, but I wrote that back in 1977 and you’ve changed a lot since then.”

1977, I thought. A Buck Rogers year for sure. I didn’t want to believe this was happening, wanted to believe it was all a dream. Oddly enough, it was the smell of his cologne that kept me from being able to do that—that familiar smell I’d never smelled in my life. How could I have? It was Aramis, a brand as unfamiliar to me as Toshiba.

But he was going on.

“You’ve grown a lot more complex and interesting. You were pretty one-dimensional to start with.” He cleared his throat and smiled down at his hands for a moment. “What a pisser for me.”

He winced a little at the anger in my voice, but made himself look up again, just the same. “Your last book was *How Like a Fallen Angel*. I started that one in 1990, but it took until 1993 to finish. I’ve had some problems in the interim.

My life has been ... interesting.” He gave the word an ugly, bitter twist.

“Writers don’t do their best work during interesting times, Clyde. Take my word for it.”

I glanced at the baggy way his hobo clothes hung on him and decided he might have a point there. “Maybe that’s why you screwed up in such a big way on this one,” I said. “That stuff about the lottery

and the forty thousand dollars was pure guff—they pay off in pesos south of the border.”

“I knew that,” he said mildly. “I’m not saying I don’t goof up from time to time—I may be a kind of God in this world, or to this world, but in my own I’m perfectly human—but when I do goof up, you and your fellow characters never know it, Clyde, because my mistakes and continuity lapses are part of your truth. No, Peoria was lying. I knew it, and I wanted you to know it.”

“Why?”

He shrugged, again looking uneasy and a little ashamed. “To prepare you for my coming a little, I suppose. That’s what all of it was for, starting with the Demmicks. I didn’t want to scare you any more than I had to.”

Any private eye worth his salt has a pretty good idea when the person in the client’s chair is lying and when he’s telling the truth; knowing when the client is telling the truth but purposely leaving gaps is a rarer talent, and I doubt if even the geniuses among us can tap it all the time. Maybe I was only tapping it now because my brainwaves and Landry’s were marching in lock-step, but I was tapping it. There was stuff he wasn’t telling me. The question was whether or not I should call him on it.

What stopped me was a sudden, horrible intuition that came waltzing out of nowhere, like a ghost oozing out of the wall of a haunted house. It had to do with the Demmicks. The reason they’d been so quiet last night was because dead people don’t engage in marital spats—it’s one of those rules, like the one that says crap rolls downhill, that you can pretty much count on through thick and thin. >From almost the first moment I’d met him, I’d sensed there was a violent temper under George’s urbane top layer, and that there might be a sharp-clawed bitch lurking in the shadows behind Gloria Demmick’s pretty face and daffy demeanor. They were just a little too Cole Porter to be true, if you see what I mean. And now I was somehow sure that George had finally snapped and killed his wife .

. . probably their yappy Welsh Corgi, as well. Gloria might be sitting propped up in the bathroom corner between the shower and the toilet right now, her face black, her eyes bulging like old dull marbles, her tongue protruding between her blue lips. The dog was lying with its head in her lap and a wire coathanger twisted around its neck, its shrill bark stilled forever. And George? Dead on the bed with Gloria's bottle of Veronals—now empty—standing beside him on the night-table. No more parties, no more jitterbugging at Al Arif, no more frothy upper-class murder cases in Palm Desert or Beverly Glen. They were cooling off now, drawing flies, growing pale under their fashionable poolside tans.

George and Gloria Demmick, who had died inside this man's machine. Who had died inside this man's head.

“You did one lousy job of not scaring me,” I said, and immediately wondered if it would have been possible for him to do a good one. Ask yourself this: how do you get a person ready to meet God? I'll bet even Moses got a little hot under the robe when he saw that bush start to glow, and I'm nothing but a shamus who works for forty a day plus expenses.

“How Like a Fallen Angel was the Mavis Weld story. The name, Mavis Weld, is from a novel called *The Little Sister* By Raymond Chandler.” He looked at me with a kind of troubled uncertainty that had some small whiff of guilt in it.

“It's an homage.” He said the first syllable so it rhymed with Rome.

“Bully for you,” I said, “but the guy's name rings no bells.”

“Af course not. In your world—which is my version of L.A., of course—Chandler never existed. Nevertheless, I've used all sorts of names from his books in mine. The Fulwider Building is where Chandler's detective, Philip Marlowe, had his office. Vernon Klein ... Peoria Smith ... and Clyde Umney, of course. That was the name of the lawyer in *Playback*.”

“And you call those things hommages?”

“That’s right.”

“If you say so, but it sounds like a fancy word for plain old copying to me.” But it made me feel funny, knowing that my name had been made up by a man I’d never heard of in a world I’d never dreamed of. Landry had the good grace to flush, but his eyes didn’t drop.

“All right; perhaps I did do a little pilfering. Certainly I adopted Chandler’s style for my own, but I’m hardly the first; Ross Macdonald did the same thing in the fifties and sixties, Robert Parker did it in the seventies and eighties, and the critics decked them with laurel leaves for it. Besides, Chandler learned from Hammett and Hemingway, not to mention pulp-writers like—”

I held up my hand. “Let’s skip the lit class and get down to the bottom line. This is crazy, but—” My eyes drifted to the picture of Roosevelt, from there they went to the eerily blank blotter, and from there they went back to the haggard face on the other side of the desk. “—but let’s say I believe it. What are you doing here? What did you come for?”

Except I already knew. I detect for a living, but the answer to that one came from my heart, not my head.

“I came for you.”

“For me.”

“Sorry, yes. I’m afraid you’ll have to start thinking of your life in a new way, Clyde. As ... well ... a pair of shoes, let’s say. You’re stepping out and I’m stepping in. And once I’ve got the laces tied, I’m going to walk away.”

Of course. Of course he was. And I suddenly knew what I had to do ... the only thing I could do.

Get rid of him.

I let a big smile spread across my face. A tell-me-more smile. At the same time I coiled my legs under me, getting them ready to launch me across the desk at him. Only one of us could leave this office, that much was clear. I intended to be the one.

“Ah, really?” I said. “How fascinating. And what happens to me, Sammy? What happens to the shoeless private eye?”

What happens to Clyde—”

Umney, the last word was supposed to be my last name, the last word this interloping, invading thief would ever hear in his life. The minute it was out of my mouth I intended to leap. The trouble was, that telepathy business seemed to work both ways. I saw an expression of alarm dawn in his eyes, and then they slipped shut and his mouth tightened with concentration. He didn't bother with the Buck Rogers machine; I suppose he knew there was no time for it.

” `His revelations hit me like some kind of debilitating drug,’ ” he said, speaking in the low but carrying tone of one who recites rather than simply speaking. “All the strength went out of my muscles, my legs felt like a couple of strands of al dente spaghetti, and all I could do was flop back in my chair and look at him.’ “

I flopped back in my chair, my legs uncoiling beneath me, unable to do anything but look at him.

“Not very good,” he said apologetically, “but rapid composition has never been a strong point of mine.”

“You bastard,” I rasped weakly. “You son of a bitch.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I suppose I am.”

“Why are you doing this? Why are you stealing my life?”

His eyes flickered with anger at that. “Your life? You know better than that, Clyde, even if you don’t want to admit it.

It isn’t your life at all. I made you up, starting on one rainy day in January of 1977 and continuing right up to the present time. I gave you your life, and it’s mine to take away.”

“Very noble,” I sneered, “but if God came down here right now and started yanking your life apart like bad stitches in a scarf, you might find it a little easier to appreciate my point of view.”

“All right,” he said, “I suppose you’ve got a point. But why argue it? Arguing with one’s self is like playing solitaire chess—a fair game results in a stalemate every time. Let’s just say I’m doing it because I can.”

I felt a little calmer, all of a sudden. I had been down this street before. When they got the drop on you, you had to get them talking and keep them talking. It had worked with Mavis Weld and it would work here. They said stuff like Well, I suppose it won’t hurt you to know now or What harm can it do?

Mavis’s version had been downright elegant: I want you to know, Umney—I want you to take the truth to hell with you.

You can pass it on to the devil over cake and coffee. It really didn’t matter what they said, but if they were talking, they weren’t shooting.

Always keep em talking, that was the thing. Keep em talking and just hope the cavalry would show up from somewhere.

“The question is, why do you want to?” I asked. “It’s hardly the usual thing, is it? I mean, aren’t you writer types usually content to cash the checks when they come, and go about your business?”

“You’re trying to keep me talking, Clyde. Aren’t you?”

That hit me like a sucker-punch to the gut, but playing it down to the last card was the only choice I had. I grinned and shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, I really do want to know.” And there was no lie in that.

He looked unsure for a moment longer, bent over and touched the keys inside that strange plastic case (I felt cramps in my legs and gut and chest as he stroked them), then straightened up again.

“I suppose it won’t hurt you to know now,” he said finally. “After all, what harm can it do?”

“Not a bit.”

“You’re a clever boy, Clyde,” he said, “And you’re perfectly right — writers very rarely plunge all the way into the worlds they’ve created, and when they do I think they end up doing it strictly in their heads, while their bodies vegetate in some mental asylum. Most of us are content simply to be tourists in the country of our imaginations. Certainly that was the case with me. I’m not a fast writer— composition has always been torture for me, I think I told you that— but I managed five Clyde Umney books in ten years, each more successful than the last. In 1983 I left my job as regional manager for a big insurance company and started to write full-time. I had a wife I loved, a little boy that kicked the sun out of bed every morning and put it to bed every night—that’s how it seemed to me, anyway—and I didn’t think life could get any better.”

He shifted in the overstuffed client’s chair, moved his hand, and I saw the cigarette burn Ardis McGill had put in the overstuffed arm was also gone. He voiced a bitterly cold laugh.

“And I was right,” he said. “It couldn’t get any better, but it could get a whole hell of a lot worse. And did. About three months after I started *How Like a Fallen Angel*, Danny—our little boy—fell out of a swing in the park and bashed his head. Cold-conked himself, in your parlance.”

A brief smile, every bit as cold and bitter as the laugh had been, crossed his face. It came and went at the speed of grief.

“He bled a lot—you’ve seen enough head-wounds in your time to know how they are—and it scared the crap out of Linda, but the doctors were good and it did turn out to be only a concussion; they got him stabilized and gave him a pint of blood to make up for what he’d lost. Maybe they didn’t have to—and that haunts me—but they did. The real problem wasn’t with his head, you see; it was with that pint of blood. It was infected with AIDS.”

“Come again?”

“It’s something you can thank your God you don’t know about,” Landry said. “It doesn’t exist in your time, Clyde. It won’t show up until the mid-seventies. Like Aramis cologne.”

“What does it do?”

“Eats away at your immune system until the whole thing collapses like the wonderful one-hoss shay. Then every bug circling around out there, from cancer to chicken pox, rushes in and has a party.”

“Good Christ!”

His smile came and went like a cramp. “If you say so. AIDS is primarily a sexually transmitted disease, but every now and then it pops up in the blood supply. I suppose you could say my kid won big in a very unlucky version of La loteria.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and although I was scared to death of this thin man with the tired face, I meant it. Losing a kid to something like that ... what could be worse? Probably something, yeah—there’s always something—but you’d have to sit down and think about it, wouldn’t you?

“Thanks,” he said. “Thanks, Clyde. It went fast for him, at least. He fell out of the swing in May. The first purple blotches—Kaposi’s

sarcoma—showed up in time for his birthday in September. He died on March 18, 1991. And maybe he didn't suffer as much as some of them do, but he suffered. Oh yes, he suffered."

I didn't have the slightest idea what Kaposi's sarcoma was, either, and decided I didn't want to ask. I knew more than I wanted to already.

"You can maybe understand why it slowed me down a little on your book," he said.

"Can't you, Clyde?"

I nodded.

"I pushed on, though. Mostly because I think make-believe is a great healer. Maybe I have to believe that. I tried to get on with my life, too, but things kept going wrong with it—it was as if How Like a Fallen Angel was some kind of weird bad-luck charm that had turned me into Job. My wife went into a deep depression following Danny's death, and I was so concerned with her that I hardly noticed the red patches that had started breaking out on my legs and stomach and chest. And the itching. I knew it wasn't AIDS, and at first that was all I was concerned with. But as time went on and things got worse ... have you ever had shingles, Clyde?"

Then he laughed and clapped the heel of his hand to his forehead in a what-a-dunce-lam gesture before I could shake my head.

"Af course you haven't—you've never had more than a hangover. Shingles, my shamus friend, is a funny name for a terrible, chronic ailment. There's some pretty good medicine available to help alleviate the symptoms in my version of Los Angeles, but it wasn't helping me much; by the end of 1991 I was in agony. Part of it was general depression over what had happened to Danny, of course, but most of it was the agony and the itching. That would make an interesting book title about a tortured writer, don't you think? The

Agony and the Itching, or, Thomas Hardy Faces Puberty.” He voiced a harsh, distracted little laugh.

“Whatever you say, Sam.”

“I say it was a season in hell. Of course it’s easy to make light of it now, but by Thanksgiving of that year it was no joke—I was getting three hours of sleep a night, tops, and I had days when it felt like my skin was trying to crawl right off my body and run away like The Gingerbread Man. And I suppose that’s why I didn’t see how bad it was getting with Linda.”

I didn’t know, couldn’t know ... but I did. “She killed herself.”

He nodded. “In March of 1992, on the anniversary of Daniel’s death. Over two years ago now.”

A single tear tracked down his wrinkled, prematurely aged cheek, and I had an idea that he had gotten old in one hell of a hurry. It was sort of awful, realizing I had been made by such a bush-league version of God, but it also explained a lot. My shortcomings, mainly.

“That’s enough,” he said in a voice which was blurred with anger as well as tears.

“Get to the point, you’d say. In my time we say cut to the chase, but it comes to the same. I finished the book. On the day I discovered Linda dead in bed—the way the police are going to find Gloria Demmick later today, Clyde—I had finished one hundred and ninety pages of manuscript. I was up to the part where you fish Mavis’s brother out of Lake Tahoe. I came home from the funeral three days later, fired up the word-processor, and got started right in on page one-ninety-one. Does that shock you?”

“No,” I said. I thought about asking him what a word-processor might be, then decided I didn’t have to. The thing in his lap was a word-processor, of course. Had to be.

“You’re in a decided minority,” Landry said. “It shocked what few friends I had left, shocked them plenty. Linda’s relatives thought I had all the emotion of a warthog. I didn’t have the energy to explain that I was trying to save myself.

Frog them, as Peoria would say. I grabbed my book the way a drowning man would grab a life-ring. I grabbed you, Clyde. My case of the shingles was still bad, and that slowed me down—to some extent it kept me out, or I might have gotten here sooner—but it didn’t stop me. I started getting a little better-physically, at least—right around the time I finished the book. But when I had finished, I fell into what I suppose must have been my own state of depression. I went through the edited script in a kind of daze. I felt such a feeling of regret ... of loss ...” He looked directly at me and said, “Does any of this make any sense to you?”

“It makes sense,” I said. And it did. In a crazy sort of way.

“There were lots of pills left in the house,” he said. “Linda and I were like the Demmicks in a lot of ways, Clyde—we really did believe in living better chemically, and a couple of times I came very close to taking a couple of double handfuls. The way the thought always came to me wasn’t in terms of suicide, but in terms of wanting to catch up to Linda and Danny. To catch up while there was still time.”

I nodded. It was what I’d thought about Ardis McGill when, three days after we’d said toodle-oo to each other in Blondie’s, I’d found her in that stuffy attic room with a small blue hole in the center of her forehead. Except it had been Sam Landry who had really killed her, and who had accomplished the deed with a kind of flexible bullet to the brain.

Of course it had been. In my world Sam Landry, this tired-looking man in the hobo’s pants, was responsible for everything. The idea should have seemed crazy, and it did ... but it was getting saner all the time.

I found I had just energy enough to swivel my chair and look out my window. What I saw somehow did not surprise me in the least: Sunset Boulevard and all that surrounded it had frozen solid. Cars, buses, pedestrians, all stopped dead in their tracks. It was a Kodak snapshot world out there, and why not? Its creator could not be bothered with animating much of it, at least for the time being; he was still caught in the whirlpool of his own pain and grief. Hell, I was lucky to still be breathing myself.

“So what happened?” I asked. “How did you get here, Sam? Can I call you that? Do you mind?”

“No, I don’t mind. I can’t give you a very good answer, though, because I don’t exactly know. All I know for sure is that every time I thought of the pills, I thought of you. What I thought specifically was, ‘Clyde Umney would never do this, and he’d sneer at anyone who did. He’d call it the coward’s way out.’ “

I considered that, found it fair enough, and nodded. For someone staring some horrible ailment in the face—Vernon’s cancer, or the misbegotten nightmare that had killed this man’s son—I might make an exception, but take the pipe just because you were depressed? That was for pansies.

“Then I thought, ‘But that’s Clyde Umney, and Clyde is make-believe ... just a figment of your imagination.’ That idea wouldn’t live, though. It’s the dumbbells of the world—politicians and lawyers, for the most part—who sneer at imagination, and think a thing isn’t real unless they can smoke it or stroke it or feel it or fuck it. They think that way because they have no imagination themselves, and they have no idea of its power. I knew better. Hell, I ought to—my imagination has been buying my food and paying the mortgage for the last ten years or so.

“At the same time, I knew I couldn’t go on living in what I used to think of as ‘the real world,’ by which I suppose we all mean ‘the only world.’ That’s when I started to realize there was only one place left where I could go and feel welcome, and only one person I could be

when I got there. The place was here—Los Angeles, in 1930-something. And the person was you.”

I heard that faint whirring sound coming from inside his gadget again, but I didn't turn around.

Partly because I was afraid to.

And partly because I no longer knew if I could.

VI. Umney's Last Case.

On the street seven stories below, a man was frozen with his head half-turned to look at the woman on the corner, who was climbing up the step of the eight-fifty bus headed downtown. She had exposed a momentary length of beautiful leg, and this was what the man was looking at. A little farther down the street a boy was holding out his battered old baseball glove to catch the ball frozen in mid-air just above his head. And, floating six feet above the street like a ghost called up by a third-rate swami at a carnival seance, was one of the newspapers from Peoria Smith's overturned table.

Incredibly, I could see the two photographs on it from up here: Hitler above the fold, the recently deceased Cuban bandleader below it.

Landry's voice seemed to come from a long way off.

"At first I thought that meant I'd be spending the rest of my life in some nut-ward, thinking I was you, but that was all right, because it would only be my physical self locked up in the funny-farm, do you see? And then, gradually, I began to realize that it could be a lot more than that ... that maybe there might be a way I could actually ... well ... slip all the way in. And do you know what the key was?"

"Yes," I said, not looking around. That whir came again as something in his gadget revolved, and suddenly the newspaper frozen in mid-air flapped off down the frozen Boulevard. A moment or two later an old DeSoto rolled jerkily through the intersection of Sunset and Fernando. It struck the boy wearing the baseball glove, and both he and the DeSoto sedan disappeared. Not the ball, though. It fell into the street, rolled halfway to the gutter, then froze solid again.

"You do?" He sounded surprised.

"Yeah. Peoria was the key."

“That’s right.” He laughed, then cleared his throat—nervous sounds, both of them.

“I keep forgetting that you’re me.”

It was a luxury I didn’t have.

“I was fooling around with a new book, and not getting anywhere. I’d tried Chapter One six different ways to Sunday before realizing a really interesting thing: Peoria Smith didn’t like you.”

That made me swing around in a hurry. “The hell you say!”

“I didn’t think you’d believe it, but it’s the truth, and I’d somehow known it all along. I don’t want to convene the lit class again, Clyde, but I’ll tell you one thing about my trade—writing stories in the first person is a funny, tricky business. It’s as if everything the writer knows comes from his main character, like a series of letters or dispatches from some far-off battle zone. It’s very rare for the writer to have a secret, but in this case I did. It was as if your little part of Sunset Boulevard were the Garden of Eden—”

“I never heard it called that before,” I remarked.

“—and there was a snake in it, one I saw and you didn’t. A snake named Peoria Smith.”

Outside, the frozen world that he’d called my Garden of Eden continued to darken, although the sky was cloudless. The Red Door, a nightclub reputedly owned by Lucky Luciano, disappeared. For a moment there was just a hole where it had been, and then a new building filled it—a restaurant called Petit Dejeuner with a window full of ferns. I glanced up the street and saw that other changes were going on—new buildings were replacing old ones with silent, spooky speed.

They meant I was running out of time; I knew this. Unfortunately, I knew something else, as well—there was probably not going to be

any nick in this bundle of time. When God walks into your office and tells you He's decided he likes your life better than His own, what the hell are your options?

"I junked all the various drafts of the novel I'd started two months after my wife's death," Landry said. "It was easy—poor crippled things that they were. And then I started a new one. I called it .

. . can you guess, Clyde?"

"Sure," I said, and swung around. It took all my strength, but what I suppose this geek would call my "motivation"

was good. Sunset Strip isn't exactly the Champs Elysees or Hyde Park, but it's my world. I didn't want to watch him tear it apart and rebuild it the way he wanted it. "I suppose you called it Umney's Last Case."

He looked faintly surprised. "You suppose right."

I waved my hand. It was an effort, but I managed. "I didn't win the Shamus of the Year Award in 1934 and '35 for nothing, you know."

He smiled at that. "Yes. I always did like that line."

Suddenly I hated him—hated him like poison. If I could have summoned the strength to lunge across the desk and choke the life out of him, I would have done it. He saw it, too. The smile faded.

"Forget it, Clyde—you wouldn't have a chance."

"Why don't you get out of here?" I grated at him. "Just get out and let a working stiff alone?"

"Because I can't. I couldn't even if I wanted to . . . and I don't." He looked at me with an odd mixture of anger and pleading. "Try to look at it from my point of view, Clyde—"

"Do I have any choice? Have I ever?"

He ignored that. “Here’s a world where I’ll never get any older, a year where all the clocks are stopped at just about eighteen months before World War II, where the newspapers always cost three cents, where I can eat all the eggs and red meat I want and never have to worry about my cholesterol level.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

He leaned forward earnestly. “No, you don’t! And that’s exactly the point, Clyde!

This is a world where I can really do the job I dreamed about doing when I was a little boy—I can be a private eye. I can go racketing around in a fast car at two in the morning, shoot it out with hoodlums—knowing they may die but I won’t—and wake up eight hours later next to a beautiful chanteuse with the birds twittering in the trees and the sun shining in my bedroom window. That clear, beautiful California sun.”

“My bedroom window faces west,” I said.

“Not anymore,” he replied calmly, and I felt my hands curl into strengthless fists on the arms of my chair. “Do you see how wonderful it is? How perfect? In this world, people don’t go half-mad with itching caused by a stupid, undignified disease called shingles. In this world, people don’t go gray, let alone bald.”

He looked at me levelly, and in his gaze I saw no hope for me. No hope at all.

“In this world, beloved sons never die of AIDS and beloved wives never take overdoses of sleeping pills. Besides, you were always the outsider here, not me, no matter how it might have felt to you. This is my world, born in my imagination and maintained by my effort and ambition. I loaned it to you for awhile, that’s all ... and now I’m taking it back.”

“Finish telling me how you got in, will you do that much? I really want to hear.”

“It was easy. I tore it apart, starting with the Demmicks, who were never much more than a lousy imitation of Nick and Nora Charles, and rebuilt it in my own image. I took away all the beloved supporting characters, and now I’m removing all the old landmarks. I’m pulling the rug out from under you a strand at a time, in other words, and I’m not proud of it, but I am proud of the sustained effort of will it’s taken to pull it off.”

‘What’s happened to you back in your own world?’ I was still keeping him talking, but now it was nothing but habit, like an old milk-horse finding his way back to the barn on a snowy morning. He shrugged. “Dead, maybe. Or maybe I really have left a physical self—a husk-sitting catatonic in some mental institution. I don’t think either of those things is really the case, though—all of this feels too real. No, I think I made it all the way, Clyde. I think that back home they’re looking for a missing writer ... with no idea that he’s disappeared into the storage banks of his own word-processor. And the truth is I really don’t care.”

“And me? What happens to me?”

“Clyde,” he said, “I don’t care about that, either.”

He bent over his gadget again.

“Don’t!” I said sharply.

He looked up.

“I ...” I heard the quiver in my voice, tried to control it, and found I couldn’t.

“Mister, I’m afraid. Please leave me alone. I know it’s not really my world out there anymore—hell, in here, either—but it’s the only world I’ll ever come close to knowing. Let me have what’s left of it. Please.”

“Too late, Clyde.” Again I heard that merciless regret in his voice.
“Close your eyes. I’ll make it as fast as I can.”

I tried to jump him—I tried as hard as I could. I didn’t move so much as an iota. And as far as closing my eyes went, I discovered I didn’t need to. All the light had gone out of the day, and the office was as dark as midnight in a coalsack.

I sensed rather than saw him lean over the desk toward me. I tried to draw back and discovered I couldn’t even do that.

Something dry and rustly touched my hand and I screamed.

“Take it easy, Clyde.” His voice, coming out of the darkness. Coming not just from in front of me but from everywhere. Of course, I thought. After all, I’m a figment of his imagination. “It’s only a check.”

“A ... check?”

“Yes. For five thousand dollars. You’ve sold me the business. The painters will scratch your name off the door and paint mine on before they leave tonight.” He sounded dreamy. “Samuel D. Landry, Private Detective. It’s got a great ring, doesn’t it?”

I tried to beg and found I couldn’t. Now even my voice had failed me.

“Get ready,” he said. “I don’t know exactly what’s coming, Clyde, but it’s coming now. I don’t think it’ll hurt.” But I don’t really care if it does—that was the part he didn’t say. That faint whirring sound came out of the blackness. I felt my chair melt away beneath me, and suddenly I was falling.

Landry’s voice fell with me, reciting along with the clicks and taps of his fabulous futuristic steno machine, reciting the last two sentences of a novel called Umney’s Last Case.

” `So I left town, and as to where I finished up ... well, mister, I think that’s my business. Don’t you?’ “

There was a brilliant green light below me. I was falling toward it. Soon it would consume me, and the only feeling I had was one of relief.

" `THE END,' " Landry's voice boomed, and then I fell into the green light, it was shining through me, in me, and Clyde Umney was no more.

So long, shamus.

VII. The Other Side of the Light.

All that was six months ago.

I came to on the floor of a gloomy room with a humming in my ears, pushed myself to my knees, shook my head to clear it, and looked up into the bright green glare I'd fallen through, like Alice through the looking glass. I saw a Buck Rogers machine that was the big brother of the one Landry had brought into my office. Green letters shone on it and I pushed myself to my feet so I could read them, absently running my fingernails up and down over my lower arms as I did so:

So I left town, and as to where I finished up ... well, mister, I think that's my business. Don't you?

And below that, capitalized and centered, two more words: THE END. I read it again, now running my fingers over my stomach. I was doing it because there was something wrong with my skin, something that wasn't exactly painful but was certainly bothersome. As soon as it rose to the fore in my mind, I realized that weird sensation was going on everywhere—the nape of my neck, the backs of my thighs, in my crotch.

Shingles, I thought suddenly. I've got Landry's shingles. What I'm feeling is itching, and the reason I didn't recognize it right away is because—"Because I've never had an itch before," I said, and then the rest of it clicked into place. The click was so sudden and so hard that I actually swayed on my feet. I walked slowly across to a mirror on the wall, trying not to scratch my weirdly crawling skin, knowing I was going to see an aged version of my face, a face cut with lines like old dry washes and topped with a shock of lackluster white hair.

Now I knew what happened when writers somehow took over the lives of the characters they had created. It wasn't exactly theft after all.

More of a swap.

I stood staring into Landry's face—my face, only aged fifteen hard years—and felt my skin tingling and buzzing.

Hadn't he said his shingles had been getting better? If this was better, how had he endured worse without going completely insane?

I was in Landry's house, of course—my house, now—and in the bathroom off the study, I found the medication he took for his shingles. I took my first dose less than an hour after I came to on the floor below his desk and the humming machine on it, and it was as if I had swallowed his life instead of medicine. As if I'd swallowed his whole life.

These days the shingles are a thing of the past, I'm happy to report. Maybe it just ran its course, but I like to think that the old Clyde Umney spirit had something to do with it—Clyde was never sick a day in his life, you know, and although I seem to always have the sniffles in this run-down Sam Landry body, I'll be damned if I'll give in to them ...

and since when did it hurt to turn on a little of that positive thinking? I think the correct answer to that one is "since never."

There have been some pretty bad days, though, the first one coming less than twentyfour hours after I showed up in the unbelievable year of 1994. I was looking through Landry's fridge for something to eat (I'd pigged out on his Black Horse Ale the night before and felt it couldn't hurt my hangover to eat something) when a sudden pain knifed into my guts. I thought I was dying. It got worse, and I knew I was dying. I fell to the kitchen floor, trying not to scream. A moment or two later, something happened, and the pain eased. Most of my life I've been using the phrase "I don't give a shit." All that has changed, starting that morning. I cleaned myself up, then climbed the stairs, knowing what I'd find in the bedroom: wet sheets in Landry's bed.

My first week in Landry's world was spent mostly in toilet-training myself. In my world, of course, nobody ever went to the bathroom. Or to the dentist, for that matter, and my first trip to the one listed in Landry's Rolodex is something I don't even want to think about, let alone discuss. But there's been an occasional rose in this nest of brambles. For one thing, there's been no need to go job-hunting in Landry's confusing, jet-propelled world; his books apparently continue to sell very well, and I have no problem cashing the checks that come in the mail. My signature and his are, of course, identical. As for any moral compunctions I might have about doing that, don't make me laugh. Those checks are for stories about me. Landry only wrote them; I lived them. Hell, I deserved fifty thou and a rabies shot just for getting within scratching distance of Mavis Weld's claws.

I expected to have problems with Landry's so-called friends, but I suppose a heavyduty shamus like me should have known better—would a guy with any real friends want to disappear into a world he'd created on the soundstage of his own imagination? Not likely. Landry's friends were his son and his wife, and they were dead. There are acquaintances and neighbors, but they seem to accept me as him. The woman across the street throws me puzzled glances from time to time, and her little girl cries when I come near even though I used to baby-sit for them every now and then (the woman says I did, anyway, and why would she lie?), but that's no big deal. I have even spoken to Landry's agent, a guy from New York named Verrill. He wants to know when I'm going to start a new book.

Soon, I tell him. Soon.

Mostly I stay in. I have no urge to explore the world Landry pushed me into when he pushed me out of my own; I see more than I want to on my once-weekly trip to the bank and the grocery store, and I threw a bookend through his awful television machine less than two hours after I figured out how to use it. It doesn't surprise me that Landry wanted to leave this groaning world with its freight of disease and senseless violence—a world where naked women dance in nightclub windows, and sex with them can kill you. No, I spend my

time inside, mostly. I have re-read each of his novels, and each one is like leafing through the pages of a well-loved scrapbook. And I've taught myself to use his word-processing machine, of course. It's not like the television machine; the screen is similar, but on the word-processor, you can make whatever pictures you want to see, because they all come from inside your own head.

I like that.

I've been getting ready, you see—trying sentences and discarding them the way you try pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. And this morning I wrote a few that seem right ... or almost right. Want to hear? Okay, here goes:

When I looked toward the door, I saw a very chastened, very downcast Peoria Smith standing there. "I guess I treated you pretty bad the last time I saw you, Mr. Umney," he said. "I came to say I'm sorry." It had been over six months, but he looked the same as ever. And I do mean the same.

"You're still wearing your cheaters," I said.

"Yeah. We tried the operation, but it didn't work." He sighed, then grinned and shrugged. In that moment he looked like the Peoria I'd always known. "What the hey, Mr. Umney—bein blind ain't so bad."

It isn't perfect; sure, I know that. I started out as a detective, not a writer. But I believe you can do just about anything, if you want to bad enough, and when you get right down to where the cheese binds, this is a kind of keyhole-peeping, too. The size and shape of the word-processor keyhole are a little different, but it's still looking into other people's lives and then reporting back to the client on what you saw. I'm teaching myself for one very simple reason: I don't want to be here. You can call it L.A. in 1994 if you want to; I call it hell. It's awful frozen dinners you cook in a box called a "microwave," it's sneakers that look like Frankenstein shoes, it's music that comes out of the radio sounding like crows being steamed alive in a pressure-

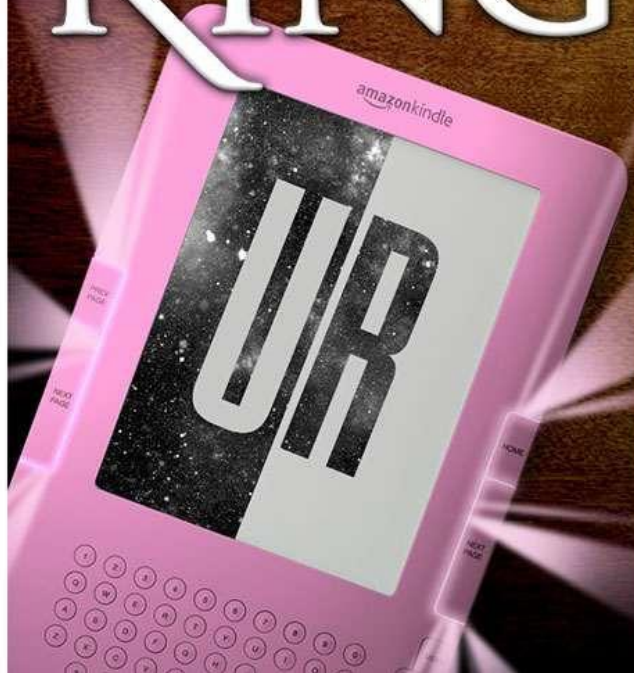
cooker, it's-Well, it's everything. I want my life back, I want things the way they were, and I think I know how to make that happen.

You're one sad, thieving bastard, Sam—may I still call you that?—and I feel sorry for you ... but sorry only stretches so far, because the operant word here is thieving. My original opinion on the subject hasn't changed at all, you see—I still don't believe that the ability to create conveys the right to steal. What are you doing right this minute, you thief? Eating dinner at that Petit Dejeuner restaurant you made up? Sleeping beside some gorgeous honey with perfect no-sag breasts and murder up the sleeve of her negligee? Driving down to Malibu with carefree abandon? Or just kicking back in the old office chair, enjoying your painless, odorless, shitless life? What are you doing?

I've been teaching myself to write, that's what I've been doing, and now that I've found my way in, I think I'll get better in a hurry. Already I can almost see you.

Tomorrow morning, Clyde and Peoria are going to go down to Blondie's, which has reopened for business. This time Peoria's going to take Clyde up on that breakfast offer. That will be step two. Yes, I can almost see you, Sam, and pretty soon I will. But I don't think you'll see me. Not until I step out from behind my office door and wrap my hands around your throat. This time nobody goes home.

STEPHEN KING



UR

Stephen King

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Ralph M. Vicinanza, Ltd.
303 West 18th Street
New York, N.Y. 10011

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I—Experimenting with New Technology

When Wesley Smith's colleagues asked him—some with an eyebrow hoicked satirically—what he was doing with that gadget (they all called it a gadget), he told them he was experimenting with new technology, but that was not true.

He bought the gadget, which was called a Kindle, out of spite.

I wonder if the market analysts at Amazon even have that one on their product-survey radar, he thought. He guessed not. This gave him some satisfaction, but not as much as he hoped to derive from Ellen Silverman's surprise when she saw him with his new purchase. That hadn't happened yet, but it would. It was a small campus, after all, and he'd only been in possession of his new toy (he called it his new toy, at least to begin with) for a week.

Wesley was an instructor in the English Department at MooreCollege, in Moore, Kentucky. Like all instructors of English, he thought he had a novel in him somewhere and would write it someday. MooreCollege was the sort of institution that people call "a good school." Wesley's friend in the English Department (his only friend in the English Department) once explained what that meant. His friend's name was Don Allman, and when he introduced himself, he liked to say, "One of the Allman Brothers. I play a mean tuba." (He did not actually play anything.)

"A good school," he said, "is one nobody has ever heard of outside a thirty-mile radius. People call it a good school because nobody knows it's a *bad* school, and most people are optimists, although they may claim they are not. People who call themselves realists are often the biggest optimists of all."

"Does that make you a realist?" Wesley once asked him.

"I think the world is mostly populated by shitheads," Don Allman responded. "*You* figure it out."

Moore wasn't a good school, but neither was it a bad school. On the great scale of academic excellence, its place resided just a little south of mediocre. Most of its three thousand students paid their bills and many of them got jobs after graduating, although few went on to obtain (or even try for) graduate degrees. There was a fair amount of drinking, and of course there were parties, but on the great scale of

party-schools, Moore's place resided a little to the north of mediocre. It had produced politicians, but all of the small-water variety, even when it came to graft and chicanery. In 1978, one Moore graduate was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, but he dropped dead of a heart attack after serving only four months. His replacement was a graduate of Baylor.

The school's only marks of exceptionality had to do with its Division Three football team and its Division Three women's basketball team. The football team (the Moore Meerkats) was one of the worst in America, having won only seven games in the last ten years. There was constant talk of disbanding it. The current coach was a drug addict who liked to tell people that he had seen *The Wrestler* twelve times and never failed to cry when Mickey Rourke told his estranged daughter that he was just a broken-down piece of meat.

The women's basketball team, however, was exceptional in a *good* way, especially considering that most of the players were no more than five-feet-seven and were preparing for jobs as marketing managers, wholesale buyers, or (if they were lucky) personal assistants to Men of Power. The Lady Meerkats had won eight conference titles in the last ten years. The coach was Wesley's ex-girlfriend, ex as of one month previous. Ellen Silverman was the source of the spite that had moved Wesley to buy a Kindle from Amazon, Inc., the company that sold them. Well...Ellen and the Henderson kid in Wesley's Introduction to Modern American Fiction class.

Don Allman also claimed the Moore faculty was mediocre. Not terrible, like the football team—that, at least, would have been interesting—but definitely mediocre.

"What about us?" Wesley asked. They were in the office they shared. If a student came in for a conference, the instructor who had not been sought would leave. For most of the fall and spring semesters this was not an issue, as students never came in for conferences until just before finals. Even then, only the veteran grade-grubbers, the ones who'd been doing it since elementary school, turned up. Don Allman said he sometimes fantasized about a

juicy coed wearing a tee-shirt that said I WILL SCREW YOU FOR AN A, but this never happened.

“What about us? What about *us*? *Look* at us, bro.”

“I’m going to write a novel,” Wesley replied, although even saying it depressed him. Almost everything depressed him since Ellen had walked out. When he wasn’t depressed, he felt spiteful.

“Yes! And President Obama is going to tab me as the new Poet Laureate!” Don Allman exclaimed. Then he pointed at something on Wesley’s cluttered desk. The Kindle was currently sitting on *American Dreams*, the textbook Wesley used in his Intro to American Lit class. “How’s that working out for you?”

“Fine,” Wesley said.

“Will it ever replace the book?”

“Never,” Wesley said. But he had already begun to wonder.

“I thought they only came in white,” Don Allman said.

Wesley looked at Don as haughtily as he himself had been looked at in the department meeting where his Kindle had made its public debut. “Nothing only comes in white,” he said. “This is America.”

Don Allman considered this, then said: “I heard you and Ellen broke up.”

Wesley sighed.

Ellen had been his *other* friend, and one with benefits, until four weeks ago. She wasn’t in the English Department, of course, but the thought of going to bed with anyone in the English Department, even Suzanne Montanari, who was vaguely presentable, made him shudder. Ellen was five-two (eyes of blue!), slim, with a mop of short, curly black hair that made her look distinctly elfin. She had a dynamite figure and kissed like a dervish. (Wesley had never kissed a dervish, but he could imagine.) Nor did her energy flag when they were in bed.

Once, winded, he lay back and said, “I’ll never equal you as a lover.”

“If you keep talking snooty like that, you won’t be my lover for long. You’re okay, Wes.”

But he guessed he wasn’t. He guessed he was just sort of... mediocre.

It wasn't his less-than-athletic sexual ability that ended their relationship, however. It wasn't the fact that Ellen was a vegan with tofu hotdogs in her fridge. It wasn't the fact that she would sometimes lie in bed after lovemaking, talking about pick-and-rolls, give-and-gos, and the inability of Shawna Deeson to learn something Ellen called "the old garden gate." In fact, these monologues sometimes put Wesley into his deepest, sweetest, and most refreshing sleeps. He thought it was the monotony of her voice, so different from the shrieks (often profane) of encouragement she let out while they were making love, shrieks that were similar to the ones she uttered during games, running up and down the sidelines like a hare (or a squirrel going up a tree), exhorting her girls to "Pass the ball!" and "Go to the hole!" and "Drive the paint!" Sometimes in bed she was reduced to yelling "Harder, harder, harder!" As, in the closing minutes of a game, she was often able to exhort no more than "Bucket-bucket-*bucket!*"

They were in some ways perfectly matched, at least for the short term; she was fiery iron, straight from the forge, and he—in his apartment filled with books—was the water in which she cooled herself.

The books were the problem. That, and the fact that he had called her an illiterate bitch. He had never called a woman such a thing in his life before, but she had surprised an anger out of him that he had never suspected. He might be a mediocre instructor, as Don Allman had suggested, and the novel he had in him might remain in him (like a wisdom tooth that never comes up, at least avoiding the possibility of rot, infection, and an expensive—not to mention painful—dental process), but he loved books. Books were his Achilles heel.

She had come in fuming, which was not new, but also fundamentally upset—a state he failed to recognize because he had never seen her in it before. Also, he was re-reading James Dickey's *Deliverance*, reveling again in how well Dickey had harnessed his poetic sensibility, at least that once, to narrative, and he had just gotten to the closing passages, where the unfortunate canoeists are trying to cover up both what they have done and what has been done to them. He had no idea that Ellen had just been forced to boot Shawna Deeson off the team, or that the two of them had had a

screaming fight in the gym in front of the whole team—plus the boys' basketball team, which was waiting their turn to practice their mediocre moves—or that Shawna Deeson had then gone outside and heaved a large rock at the windshield of Ellen's Volvo, an act for which she would surely be suspended. He had no idea that Ellen was now blaming herself, *bitterly* blaming herself, because "she was supposed to be the adult."

He heard that part—"I'm supposed to be the adult"—and said *Uh-huh* for the fifth or sixth time, which was one time too many for Ellen Silverman, whose fiery temper hadn't exhausted itself for the day after all. She plucked *Deliverance* from Wesley's hands, threw it across the room, and said the words that would haunt him for the next lonely month:

"Why can't you just read off the computer, like the rest of us?"

"She really said that?" Don Allman asked, a remark that woke Wesley from a trancelike state. He realized he had just told the whole story to his office-mate. He hadn't meant to, but he had. And there was no going back now.

"She did. And I said, 'That was a first edition I got from my father, you illiterate bitch.'"

Don Allman was speechless. He could only stare.

"She walked out," Wesley said miserably. "I haven't seen or spoken to her since."

"Haven't even called to say you're sorry?"

Wesley had tried to do this, and had gotten only her answering machine. He had thought of going over to the house she rented from the college, but thought she might put a fork in his face...or some other part of his anatomy. Also, he didn't consider what had happened to be entirely his fault. She hadn't even given him a *chance*. *Plus...she was* illiterate, or close to it. Had told him once in bed that the only book she'd read for pleasure since coming to Moore was *Reach for the Summit: The Definite Dozen System for Succeeding at Whatever You Do*, by Tennessee Vols coach Pat Summit. She watched TV (mostly sports), and when she wanted to dig deeper into some news story, she went to The Drudge Report. She certainly wasn't computer illiterate. She praised the MooreCollege wireless network (which was superlative rather than

mediocre), and never went anywhere without her laptop slung over her shoulder. On the front was a picture of Tamika Catchings with blood running down her face from a split eyebrow and the legend I PLAY LIKE A GIRL.

Don Allman sat in silence for a few moments, tapping his fingers on his narrow chest. Outside their window, November leaves rattled across Moore Quadrangle. Then he said: "Did Ellen walking out have anything to do with that?" He nodded to Wesley's new electronic sidekick. "It did, didn't it? You decided to read off the computer, just like the rest of us. To...what? Woo her back?"

"No," Wesley said, because he didn't want to tell the truth: in a way he still didn't completely understand, he had done it to get back at her. Or make fun of her. Or something. "Not at all. I'm merely experimenting with new technology."

"Right," said Don Allman. "And I'm the new Poet Laureate."

His car was in Parking Lot A, but Wesley elected to walk the two miles back to his apartment, a thing he often did when he wanted to think. He trudged down

Moore Avenue

, first past the fraternity houses, then past apartment houses blasting rock and rap from every window, then past the bars and take-out restaurants that serve as a life-support system for every small college in America. There was also a bookstore specializing in used texts and last year's bestsellers offered at fifty per cent off. It looked dusty and dispirited and was often empty. Because people were home reading off the computer, Wesley assumed.

Brown leaves blew around his feet. His briefcase banged against one knee. Inside were his texts, the current book he was reading for pleasure (2666, by the late Roberto Bolano), and a bound notebook with beautiful marbled boards. This had been a gift from Ellen on the occasion of his birthday.

"For your book ideas," she had said.

In July, that was, when things between them had still been swell and they'd had the campus pretty much to themselves. The blank book had over two hundred pages, but only the first one had been marked by his large, flat scrawl.

At the top of the page (printed) was: THE NOVEL!

Below that was: *A young boy discovers that his father and mother are both having affairs*

And

A young boy, blind since birth, is kidnapped by his lunatic grandfather who

And

A teenager falls in love with his best friend's mother and

Below this one was the final idea, written shortly after Ellen had thrown *Deliverance* across the room and stalked out of his life.

A shy but dedicated small college instructor and his athletic but largely illiterate girlfriend have a falling-out after

It was probably the best idea—write what you know, all the experts agreed on that—but he simply couldn't go there. Talking to Don had been hard enough. And even then, complete honesty had escaped him. Like saying how much he wanted her back, for instance.

As he approached the three-room flat he called home—what Don Allman sometimes called his “bachelor pad”—Wesley's thoughts turned to the Henderson kid. Was his name Richard or Robert? Wesley had a block about that, not the same as the block he had about fleshing out any of the fragmentary mission-statements for his novel, but probably related. He had an idea all such blocks were probably fear-centered and basically hysterical in nature, as if the brain detected (or thought it had detected) some nasty interior beast and had locked it in a cell with a steel door. You could hear it thumping and jumping in there like a rabid raccoon that would bite if approached, but you couldn't see it.

The Henderson kid was on the football team—a noseback or point guard or some such thing—and while he was as horrible on the gridiron as any of them, he was a nice kid and a fairly good student. Wesley liked him. But still, he had been ready to tear the boy's head off when he spotted him in class with what Wesley assumed was a PDA or a newfangled cell phone. This was shortly after Ellen had walked out. In those early days of the breakup, Wesley often found himself up at three in the morning, pulling some literary comfort-food down from the shelf: usually his old friends Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin, their adventures recounted by Patrick O'Brian. And

not even that had kept him from remembering the ringing slam of the door as Ellen left his life, probably for good.

So he was in a foul mood and more than ready for backtalk as he approached Henderson and said, "Put it away. This is a literature class, not an Internet chat-room."

The Henderson kid had looked up and given him a sweet smile. It hadn't lifted Wesley's foul mood in the slightest, but it did dissolve his anger on contact. Mostly because he wasn't an angry man by nature. He supposed he was *depressive* by nature, maybe even dysthymic. Hadn't he always suspected that Ellen Silverman was too good for him? Hadn't he known, in his heart of hearts, that the doorslam had been waiting for him from the very beginning, when he'd spent the evening talking to her at a boring faculty party? Ellen played like a girl; he played like a loser. He couldn't even stay mad at a student who was goofing with his pocket computer (or Nintendo, or whatever it was) in class.

"It's the assignment, Mr. Smith," the Henderson kid had said (on his forehead was a large purple bruise from his latest outing in the Meerkat blue). "It's 'Paul's Case.' Look."

The kid turned the gadget so Wesley could see it. It was a flat white panel, rectangular, less than half an inch thick. At the top was **amazon**kindle and the smile-logo Wesley knew well; he was not entirely computer illiterate himself, and had ordered books from Amazon plenty of times (although he usually tried the bookstore in town first, partly out of pity; even the cat who spent most of its life dozing in the window looked malnourished).

The interesting thing on the kid's gadget wasn't the logo on top or the teeny-tiny keyboard (a computer keyboard, surely!) on the bottom. In the middle of the gadget was a screen, and on the screen was not a screen-saver or a video game where young men and women with buffed-out bodies were killing zombies in the ruins of New York, but a page of Willa Cather's story about the poor boy with the destructive illusions.

Wesley had reached for it, then drew back his hand. "May I?"

"Go ahead," the Henderson kid—Richard or Robert—told him. "It's pretty neat. You can download books from thin air, and you can

make the type as big as you want. Also, the books are cheaper because there's no paper or binding."

That sent a minor chill through Wesley. He became aware that most of his Intro to American Lit class was watching him. As a thirty-five-year-old, Wesley supposed it was hard for them to decide if he was Old School (like the ancient Dr. Wence, who looked remarkably like a crocodile in a three-piece suit) or NewSchool (like Suzanne Montanari, who liked to play Avril Lavigne's "Girlfriend" in her Introduction to Modern Drama class). Wesley supposed his reaction to Henderson's Kindle would help them with that.

"Mr. Henderson," he said, "there will always be books. Which means there will always be paper and binding. Books are *real objects*. Books are *friends*."

"Yeah, but!" Henderson had replied, his sweet smile now becoming slightly sly.

"But?"

"They're also ideas and emotions. You said so in our first class."

"Well," Wesley had said, "you've got me there. But books aren't *solely* ideas. Books have a smell, for instance. One that gets better—more nostalgic—as the years go by. Does this gadget of yours have a smell?"

"Nope," Henderson replied. "Not really. But when you turn the pages...here, with this button...they kind of flutter, like in a real book, and I can go to any page I want, and when it sleeps, it shows pictures of famous writers, and it holds a charge, and—"

"It's a computer," Wesley had said. "You're reading off the computer."

The Henderson kid had taken his Kindle back. "You say that like it's a bad thing. It's still 'Paul's Case.'"

"You've never heard of a Kindle, Mr. Smith?" Josie Quinn had asked. Her tone was that of a kindly anthropologist asking a member of New Guinea's Kombai tribe if he had ever heard of electric stoves and elevator shoes.

"No," he said, not because it was true—he *had* seen something called SHOP THE KINDLE STORE when he bought books from Amazon online—but because, on the whole, he thought he would

prefer being perceived by them as Old School. New School was somehow...mediocre.

"You ought to get one," the Henderson kid said, and when Wesley had replied, without even thinking, "Perhaps I will," the class had broken into spontaneous applause. For the first time since Ellen's departure, Wesley had felt faintly cheered. Because they wanted him to get a book-reading gadget, and also because the applause suggested they did see him as Old School. *Teachable* Old School.

He did not seriously consider buying a Kindle (if he was Old School, then books were definitely the way to go) until a couple of weeks later. One day on his way home from school he imagined Ellen seeing him with his Kindle, just strolling across the quad and bopping his finger on the little NEXT PAGE button.

What in the world are you doing? she would ask. Speaking to him at last.

Reading off the computer, he would say. *Just like the rest of you.*

Spiteful!

But, as the Henderson kid might put it, was that a bad thing? It occurred to him that spite was a kind of methadone for lovers. Was it better to go cold turkey? Perhaps not.

When he got home he turned on his desktop Dell (he owned no laptop and took pride in the fact) and went to the Amazon website. He had expected the gadget to go for four hundred dollars or so, maybe more if there was a Cadillac model, and was surprised to find it was cheaper than that. Then he went to the Kindle Store (which he had been so successfully ignoring) and discovered that the Henderson kid was right: the books were ridiculously cheap, hardcover novels (*what* cover, ha-ha) priced below most trade paperbacks. Considering what he spent on books, the Kindle might pay for itself. As for the reaction of his colleagues—all those hoicked eyebrows—Wesley discovered he relished the prospect. Which led to an interesting insight into human nature, or at least the human nature of the academic: one liked to be perceived by one's students as Old School, but by one's peers as NewSchool.

I'm experimenting with new technology, he imagined himself saying.

He liked the sound of it. It was NewSchool all the way.

He also liked thinking of Ellen's reaction. He had stopped leaving messages on her phone, and he had begun avoiding places—The Pit Stop, Harry's Pizza—where he might run into her, but that could change. Surely *I'm reading off the computer, just like the rest of you* was too good a line to waste.

Oh, that's small, he scolded himself as he sat in front of his computer, looking at the picture of the Kindle. *That is spite so small it probably wouldn't poison a newborn kitten.*

True! But if it was the only spite of which he was capable, why not indulge it?

So he had clicked on the Buy Kindle box, and the gadget had arrived a day later, in a box stamped with the smile logo and the words ONE-DAY DELIVERY. Wesley hadn't opted for one-day, and would protest that charge if it showed up on his MasterCard bill, but he had unpacked his new acquisition with real pleasure—similar to the pleasure he felt when unpacking a box of books, but sharper. Because there was that sense of heading into the unknown, he supposed. Not that he expected the Kindle to replace books, or to be much more than a novelty item, really; an attention-getter for a few weeks or months that would afterward stand forgotten and gathering dust beside the Rubik's Cube on the knickknack shelf in his living room.

It didn't strike him as peculiar that, whereas the Henderson kid's Kindle had been white, his was pink.

Not then.

II—Ur Functions

When Wesley got back to his apartment after his confessional conversation with Don Allman, the message light on his answering machine was blinking. Two messages. He pushed the playback button, expecting to hear his mother complaining about her arthritis and making trenchant observations about how some sons actually called home more often than twice a month. After that would come a robo-call from the *MooreEcho*, reminding him—for the dozenth time—that his subscription had lapsed. But it wasn't his mother and it wasn't the newspaper. When he heard Ellen's voice, he paused in the act of reaching for a beer and listened bent-over, with one hand outstretched in the fridge's frosty glow.

"Hi, Wes," she said, sounding uncharacteristically unsure of herself. There was a long pause, long enough for Wesley to wonder if that was all there was going to be. In the background he heard hollow shouts and bouncing balls. She was in the gym, or had been when she left the message. "I've been thinking about us. Thinking that maybe we should try again. I miss you." And then, as if she had seen him rushing for the door: "But not yet. I need to think a little more about...what you said." A pause. "I was wrong to throw your book like that, but I was upset." Another pause, almost as long as the one after she'd said hi. "There's a pre-season tourney in Lexington this weekend. You know, the one they call the Bluegrass. It's a big deal. Maybe when I get back, we should talk. Please don't call me until then, because I've got to concentrate on the girls. Defense is terrible, and I've only got one girl who can actually shoot from the perimeter, and...I don't know, this is probably a big mistake."

"It's not," he told the answering machine. His heart was pumping. He was still leaning into the open refrigerator, feeling the cold wafting out and striking his face, which seemed too hot. "Believe me, it's not."

"I had lunch with Suzanne Montanari the other day, and she says you're carrying around one of those electronic reading thingies. To me that seemed...I don't know, like a sign that we should try again."

She laughed, then screamed so loud that Wesley jumped. “*Chase down that loose ball! You either run or you sit!*” Then: “Sorry. I’ve got to go. Don’t call me. I’ll call you. One way or the other. After the Bluegrass. I’m sorry I’ve been dodging your calls, but...you hurt my feelings, Wes. Coaches have feelings too, you know. I—”

A beep interrupted her. The allotted message time had run out. Wesley uttered the word Norman Mailer’s publishers had refused to let him use in *The Naked and the Dead*.

Then the second message started and she was back. “I guess English teachers also have feelings. Suzanne says we’re not right for each other, she says we’re too far apart in our interests, but...maybe there’s a middle ground. I’m glad you got the reader. If it’s a Kindle, I think you can also use it to go to the Internet. I...I need to think about this. Don’t call me. I’m not quite ready. Goodbye.”

Wesley got his beer. He was smiling. Then he thought of the spite that had been living in his heart for the last month and stopped. He went to the calendar on the wall, and wrote PRE-SEASON TOURNEY across Saturday and Sunday. He paused, then drew a line through the days of the work-week after, a line on which he wrote ELLEN???

With that done he sat down in his favorite chair, drank his beer, and tried to read 2666. It was a crazy book, but sort of interesting.

He wondered if it was available from the Kindle Store.

That evening, after replaying Ellen’s messages for the third time, Wesley turned on his Dell and went to the Athletic Department website to check for details concerning the Bluegrass Pre-Season Invitational Tournament. He knew it would be a mistake to turn up there, and he had no intentions of doing so, but he did want to know who the Meerkats were playing, what their chances were, and when Ellen would be back.

It turned out there were eight teams, seven from Division Two and only one from Division Three: the Lady Meerkats of Moore. Wesley felt pride on Ellen’s behalf when he saw that, and was once more ashamed of his spite...which she (lucky him!) knew nothing about. She actually seemed to think he had bought the Kindle as a way of sending her a message: *Maybe you’re right, and maybe I can*

change. Maybe we both can. He supposed that if things went well, he would in time come to convince himself that was indeed so.

On the website he saw that the team would leave for Lexington by bus at noon this coming Friday. They would practice at Rupp Arena that evening, and play their first game—against the Bulldogs of Truman State, Indiana—on Saturday morning. Because the tourney was double elimination, they wouldn't be starting back until Sunday evening no matter what. Which meant he wouldn't hear from her until the following Monday at the earliest.

It was going to be a long week.

“And,” he told his computer (a good listener!), “she may decide against trying again, anyway. I have to be prepared for that.”

Well, he could try. And he could also call that bitch Suzanne Montanari and tell her in no uncertain terms to stop campaigning against him. Why would she do that in the first place? She was a *colleague*, for God's sake!

Only if he did that, Suzanne might carry tales straight back to her friend (*friend? who knew? who even suspected?*) Ellen. It might be best to leave that aspect of things alone. Although the spite wasn't entirely out of his heart after all, it seemed. Now it was directed at Ms. Montanari.

“Never mind,” he told his computer. “George Herbert was wrong. Living well isn't the best revenge; loving well is.”

He started to turn off his computer, then remembered something Don Allman had said about Wesley's Kindle: *I thought they only came in white*. Certainly the Henderson kid's had been white, but—what was the saying?—one swallow didn't make a summer. After a few false starts (Google, full of information but essentially dumb as a post, lead him first to a discussion of whether or not the Kindle would ever be able to produce color images on its screen, a subject in which Wesley—as a book-reader—had absolutely zero interest), he thought to search for Kindle Fan Sites. He found one called The Kindle Kandle. At the top was a bizarre photo of a woman in Quaker garb reading her Kindle by candlelight. Or possibly kandlelight. Here he read several posts—complaints, mostly—about how the Kindle came in only one color, which one blogger called “plain old smudge-friendly white.” Below it was a reply suggesting that if the complainer

persisted in reading with dirty fingers, he could buy a custom sleeve for his Kindle. “In any color you like,” she added. “Grow up and show some creativity!”

Wesley turned off his computer, went into the kitchen, got another beer, and pulled his own Kindle from his briefcase. His pink Kindle. Except for the color, it looked exactly the same as the ones on the Kindle Kandle website.

“Kindle-Kandle, bibble-babble,” he said. “It’s just some flaw in the plastic.” Perhaps, but why had it come one-day express delivery when he hadn’t specified that? Because someone at the Kindle factory wanted to get rid of the pink mutant as soon as possible? That was ridiculous. They would have just thrown it away. Another victim of quality control.

He thought of Ellen’s message again (by then he had it by heart). *If it’s a Kindle, I think you can use it to go to the Internet*, she’d said. He wondered if it was true. He turned the Kindle on, and as he did so, he remembered there was something else odd about it: no instruction booklet. He hadn’t questioned that until now, because the device was so simple to use it practically ran itself (a creepy idea, when you considered it). He thought of going back to the Kindle Kanders to find out if this was a *true* oddity, then dismissed the idea. He was just goofing around, after all, beginning to while away the hours between now and next Monday, when he might hear from Ellen again.

“I miss you, kiddo,” he said, and was surprised to hear his voice waver. He did miss her. He hadn’t realized how much until he’d heard her voice. He’d been too wrapped up in his own wounded ego. Not to mention his sweaty little spite. Strange to think that spite might have earned him a second chance. Much stranger, when you got right down to it, than a pink Kindle.

The screen titled *Wesley’s Kindle* booted up. Listed were the books he had so far purchased—

Revolutionary Road

, by Richard Yates, and *The Old Man and the Sea*, by Hemingway. The gadget had come with *The New Oxford American Dictionary* pre-loaded. You only had to begin typing your word and the Kindle found it for you. It was, he thought, TiVo for smart people.

The question was, could you access the Internet?

He pushed the MENU button and was presented with a number of choices. The top one (of course) invited him to SHOP THE KINDLE STORE. But near the bottom was something called EXPERIMENTAL. That looked interesting. He moved the cursor to it, opened it, and read this at the top of the screen: *We are working on these experimental prototypes. Do you find them useful?*

“Well, I don’t know,” Wesley said. “What are they?”

The first prototype turned out to be BASIC WEB. So Ellen was right. The Kindle was apparently a lot more computerized than it looked at first blush. He glanced at the other experimental choices: music downloads (big whoop) and text-to-speech (which might come in handy if he were blind). He pushed the NEXT PAGE button to see if there were other experimental prototypes. There was one: UR FUNCTIONS.

Now what in the hell was that? Ur, so far as he knew, had only two meanings: a city in the Old Testament, and a prefix meaning “primitive” or “basic.” The screen didn’t help; although there were explanations for the other experimental functions, there was none for this. Well, there was one way to find out. He highlighted UR FUNCTIONS and selected it.

A new menu appeared. There were three items: UR BOOKS, UR NEWS ARCHIVE, and UR LOCAL (UNDER CONSTRUCTION).

“Huh,” Wesley said. “What in the *world*.”

He highlighted UR BOOKS, dropped his finger onto the select button, then hesitated. Suddenly his skin felt cold, as when he’d been stilled by the sound of Ellen’s recorded voice while reaching into the fridge for a beer. He would later think, *It was my own ur. Something basic and primitive deep inside, telling me not to do it.*

But was he not a modern man? One who now read off the computer?

He was. He was. So he pushed the button.

The screen blanked, then WELCOME TO UR BOOKS! appeared at the top of the screen...and in red! The Kanders were behind the technological curve, it seemed; there *was* Kolor on the Kindle. Beneath the welcome message was a picture—not of Charles Dickens or Eudora Welty, but of a large black tower. There was

something ominous about it. Below, also in red, was an invitation to *Select Author (your choice may not be available)*. And below that, a blinking cursor.

“What the hell,” Wesley told the empty room. He licked his lips, which were suddenly dry, and typed ERNEST HEMINGWAY.

The screen wiped itself clean. The function, whatever it was supposed to be, didn’t seem to work. After ten seconds or so, Wesley reached for the Kindle, meaning to turn it off. Before he could push the slide-switch, the screen finally produced a new message.

10,438,721 URS SEARCHED
17,894 ERNEST HEMINGWAY TITLES DETECTED
IF YOU DO NOT KNOW TITLE, SELECT UR
OR RETURN TO UR FUNCTIONS MENU
SELECTIONS FROM YOUR CURRENT UR WILL NOT BE
DISPLAYED

“What in the name of God is *this*?” Wesley whispered. Below the message, the cursor blinked. Above it, in small type (black, not red), was one further instruction: NUMERIC ENTRY ONLY. NO COMMAS OR DASHES. YOUR CURRENT UR: **117586**.

Wesley felt a strong urge (an *ur* urge!) to turn the pink Kindle off and drop it into the silverware drawer. Or into the freezer along with the ice cream and Stouffer’s frozen dinners, that might be even better. Instead, he used the teeny-tiny keypad to enter his birth date. 7191974 would do as well as any number, he reckoned. He hesitated again, then plunged the tip of his index finger down on the select button. When the screen blanked this time, he had to fight an impulse to get up from the kitchen chair he was sitting in and back away from the table. A crazy certainty had arisen in his mind: a hand—or perhaps a claw—was going to swim up from the grayness of the Kindle’s screen, grab him by the throat, and yank him in. He would exist forever after in computerized grayness, floating around the microchips and between the many worlds of Ur.

Then the screen produced type, plain old prosaic type, and the superstitious dread departed. He scanned the Kindle’s screen (the

size of a small paperback) eagerly, although what he was eager for he had no idea.

At the top was the author's full name—Ernest Miller Hemingway—and his dates. Next came a long list of his published works...but it was wrong. *The Sun Also Rises* was there...*For Whom the Bell Tolls*...the short stories...*The Old Man and the Sea*, of course...but there were also three or four titles Wesley didn't recognize, and except for minor essays, he thought he had read all of Hemingway's considerable output. Also...

He examined the dates again and saw that the death-date was wrong. Hemingway had died on July 2, 1961, of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. According to the screen, he had gone to that great library in the sky on August 19, 1964.

"Birth date's wrong, too," Wesley muttered. He was running his free hand through his hair, pulling it into exotic new shapes. "I'm almost sure it is. Should be 1899, not 1897."

He moved the cursor down to one of the titles he didn't know: *Cortland's Dogs*. This was some lunatic computer programmer's idea of a joke, pretty much had to be, but *Cortland's Dogs* at least sounded like a Hemingway title. Wesley selected it.

The screen blanked, then produced a book cover. The jacket image—in black and white—showed barking dogs surrounding a scarecrow. In the background, shoulders slumped in a posture of weariness or defeat (or both), was a hunter with a gun. The eponymous Cortland, surely.

In the woods of upper Michigan, James Cortland deals with the infidelity of his wife and his own mortality. When three dangerous criminals appear at the old Cortland farm, "Papa's" most famous hero is faced with a terrible choice. Rich in event and symbolism, Ernest Hemingway's final novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize shortly before his death. \$7.50

Below the thumbnail, Kindle asked: BUY THIS BOOK? Y N.

"Total bullshit," Wesley whispered as he highlighted Y and pushed the select button.

The screen blanked again, then flashed a new message: *Ur novels may not be disseminated as according to all applicable Paradox Laws. Do you agree? Y N.*

Smiling—as befitted someone who got the joke but was going along with it anyway—Wesley selected Y. The screen blanked, then presented new information:

THANK YOU, WESLEY!
YOUR UR NOVEL HAS BEEN ORDERED
YOUR ACCOUNT WILL BE DEBITED \$7.50
REMEMBER UR NOVELS TAKE LONGER TO DOWNLOAD
ALLOW 2-4 MINS

Wesley returned to the screen headed *Wesley's Kindle. The same items were there—*

Revolutionary Road

, *The Old Man and the Sea*, the New Oxford American—and he was sure that wouldn't change. There was no Hemingway novel called *Cortland's Dogs*, not in this world or any other. Nonetheless, he got up and went to the phone. It was picked up on the first ring.

“Don Allman,” his office-mate said. “And yes, I was indeed born a ramblin' man.” No hollow gym-sounds in the background this time; just the barbaric yawps of Don's three sons, who sounded as though they might be dismantling the Allman residence board by board.

“Don, it's Wesley.”

“Ah, Wesley! I haven't seen you in...gee, it must be three hours!” From deeper within the lunatic asylum where Wesley assumed Don lived with his family, there came what sounded like a death-scream. Don Allman was not perturbed. “Jason, don't throw that at your brother. Be a good little troll and go watch *SpongeBob*.” Then, to Wesley: “What can I do for you, Wes? Advice on your love-life? Tips on improving your sexual performance and stamina? A title for your novel in progress?”

“I have no novel in progress and you know it,” Wesley snapped. “But it's novels I want to talk about. You know Hemingway's *oeuvre*, don't you?”

“I love it when you talk dirty.”

“Do you or don't you?”

“Of course. But not as well as you, I hope. You're the 20th century American lit man, after all; I stick to the days when writers wore wigs,

took snuff, and said picturesque things like *ecod* and *damme*. What's on your mind?"

"To your knowledge, did Hemingway ever write any fiction about dogs?"

Don considered while another young child commenced shrieking. "Wes, are you okay? You sound a little—"

"Just answer the question. Did he or didn't he?" *Highlight Y or N*, Wesley thought.

"All right," Don said. "So far as I can say without consulting my trusty computer, he didn't. I remember him once claiming the Batista partisans clubbed his pet pooch to death, though—how's that for a factoid? You know, when he was in Cuba. He took it as a sign that he and Mary should beat feet to Florida, and they did—posthaste."

"You don't happen to remember that dog's name, do you?"

"I think I do. I'd want to double-check it on the Internet, but I think it was Cortland. Like the apple?"

"Thanks, Don." His lips felt numb. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wes, are you sure you're...*FRANKIE, PUT THAT DOWN! DON'T* —" There was a crash. "Shit. I think that was Delft. I gotta go, Wes. See you tomorrow."

"Right."

Wesley went back to the kitchen table. He saw that a fresh selection now appeared on the contents page of his Kindle. A novel (or *something*) called *Cortland's Dogs* had been downloaded from...

Where, exactly? Some other plane of reality called Ur (or possibly UR) 7,191,974?

Wesley no longer had the strength to call this idea ridiculous and push it away. He did, however, have enough to go to the refrigerator and get a beer. Which he needed. He opened it, drank half in five long swallows, belched. He sat down, feeling a little better. He highlighted his new acquisition (\$7.50 would be mighty cheap for an undiscovered Hemingway, he reckoned) and a title page came up. The next page was a dedication: *To Sy, and to Mary, with love*. Then this:

Chapter 1

A man's life was five dogs long, Cortland believed. The first was the one that taught you. The second was the one you

taught. The third and fourth were the ones you worked. The last was the one that outlived you. That was the winter dog. Cortland's winter dog had no name. He thought of it only as the scarecrow dog...

Liquid rose up in Wesley's throat. He ran for the sink, bent over it, and struggled to keep the beer down. His gorge settled, and instead of turning on the water to rinse puke down the drain, he cupped his hands under the flow and splashed it on his sweaty skin. That was better.

Then he went back to the Kindle and stared down at it.

A man's life was five dogs long, Cortland believed.

Somewhere—at some college a lot more ambitious than Moore of Kentucky—there was a computer programmed to read books and identify the writers by their stylistic tics and tocks, which were supposed to be as unique as fingerprints or snowflakes. Wesley had a vague recollection that this computer program had been used to identify the author of a pseudonymous novel called *Primary Colors*; the program had whiffled through thousands of writers in a matter of hours or days and had come up with a newsmagazine columnist named Joe Klein, who later owned up to his literary paternity.

Wesley thought that if he submitted *Cortland's Dogs* to that computer, it would spit out Ernest Hemingway's name. In truth, he didn't think he needed a computer.

He picked up the Kindle with hands that were now shaking badly. "What *are* you?" he asked.

The Kindle did not answer.

III—Wesley Refuses to Go Mad

In a real dark night of the soul, Scott Fitzgerald had said, *it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day.*

At three o'clock on that Tuesday morning, Wesley lay feverishly awake, wondering if he might be cracking up himself. He had forced himself to turn off the pink Kindle and put it back in his briefcase an hour ago, but its hold over him remained every bit as strong as it had been at midnight, when he had still been deep in the UR BOOKS menu.

He had searched for Ernest Hemingway in two dozen of the Kindle's almost ten and a half million Urs, and had come up with at least twenty novels he had never heard of. In one of the Urs (it happened to be 6,201,949—which, when broken down, was his mother's birth date), Hemingway appeared to have been a crime writer. Wesley had downloaded a title called *It's Blood, My Darling!*, and discovered your basic dime novel...but written in staccato, punchy sentences he would have recognized anywhere.

Hemingway sentences.

And even as a crime writer, Hemingway had departed from gang wars and cheating, gore-happy debs long enough to write *A Farewell to Arms*. He *always* wrote *A Farewell to Arms*, it seemed; other titles came and went, but *A Farewell to Arms* was always there and *The Old Man and the Sea* was *usually* there.

He tried Faulkner.

Faulkner was not there at all, in any of the Urs.

He checked the regular menu, and discovered that Faulkner was not available in what he was coming to think of as his reality, either, at least not in Kindle editions. Only a few books about American literature's Count No'count.

He checked Roberto Bolano, the author of *2666*, and although it wasn't available from the normal Kindle menu, it was listed in several UR BOOKS sub-menus. So were other Bolano novels, including (in Ur 101) a book with the colorful title *Marilyn Blows Fidel*. He almost downloaded that one, then changed his mind. So many authors, so many Urs, so little time.

A part of his mind—distant yet authentically terrified—continued to insist it was all an elaborate joke which had arisen from some degenerate computer programmer's lunatic imagination. Yet the evidence, which he continued to compile as that long night progressed, suggested otherwise.

James Cain, for instance. In one Ur Wesley checked, he had died exceedingly young, producing only two books: *Nightfall* (a new one) and *Mildred Pierce* (an oldie). Wesley would have bet on *The Postman Always Rings Twice* to have been a Cain constant—his ur-novel, so to speak—but no. Although he checked a dozen Urs for Cain, he found *Postman* only once. *Mildred Pierce*, on the other hand—which he considered very minor Cain, indeed—was always there. Like *A Farewell to Arms*.

He had checked his own name, and discovered what he feared: although the Urs were lousy with Wesley Smiths (one appeared to be a writer of Westerns, another the author of porno novels such as *Hot Tub Honey*), none seemed to be him. Of course it was hard to be a hundred per cent sure, but it appeared that he had stumbled on 10.4 million alternate realities and he was an unpublished loser in all of them.

Wide awake in his bed, listening to one lonely dog bark in the distance, Wesley began to shiver. His own literary aspirations seemed very minor to him at this moment. What seemed major—what loomed over his life and very sanity—were the riches hidden within that slim pink panel of plastic. He thought of all the writers whose passing he had mourned, from Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow to Donald Westlake and Evan Hunter; one after another, Thanatos stilled the magic voices and they spoke no more.

But now they could.

They could speak to him.

He threw back the bedclothes. The Kindle was calling him. Not in a human voice, but in an organic one. It sounded like a beating heart, Poe's tell-tale heart, coming from inside his briefcase instead of from under the floorboards, and—

Poe!

Good God, he had never checked Poe!

He had left his briefcase in its accustomed spot beside his favorite chair. He hurried to it, opened it, grabbed the Kindle, and plugged it in (no way he was going to risk running down the battery). He hurried to UR BOOKS, typed in Poe's name, and on his first try found an Ur —2,555,676—where Poe had lived until 1875 instead of dying in 1849, at the age of forty. And this version of Poe had written novels! Six of them! Greed filled Wesley's heart (his mostly *kind* heart) as his eyes raced over the titles.

One was called *The House of Shame, or Degradation's Price*. Wesley downloaded it—the charge for this one was only \$4.95—and read until dawn. Then he turned off the pink Kindle, put his head in his arms, and slept for two hours at the kitchen table.

He also dreamed. No images; only words. Titles! Endless lines of titles, many of them of undiscovered masterpieces. As many titles as there were stars in the sky.

He got through Tuesday and Wednesday—somehow—but during his Intro to American Lit class on Thursday, lack of sleep and overexcitement caught up with him. Not to mention his increasingly tenuous hold on reality. Halfway through his Mississippi Lecture (which he usually gave with a high degree of cogency) about how Hemingway was downriver from Twain, and almost all of twentieth century American fiction was downriver from Hemingway, he realized he was telling the class that Papa had never written a great story about dogs, but if he had lived, he surely would have.

“Something more nutritious than *Marley and Me*,” he said, and laughed with unnerving good cheer.

He turned from the blackboard and saw twenty-two pairs of eyes looking at him with varying degrees of concern, perplexity, and amusement. He heard a whisper, low, but as clear as the beating of the old man's heart to the ears of Poe's mad narrator: “Smithy's losin' it.”

Smithy wasn't, but there could be no doubt that he was in *danger* of losing it.

I refuse, he thought. *I refuse, I refuse*. And realized, to his horror, that he was actually muttering this under his breath.

The Henderson kid, who sat in the first row, had heard it. “Mr. Smith?” A hesitation. “Sir? Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he said. “No. A touch of the bug, maybe.” *Poe’s gold-bug*, he thought, and barely restrained himself from bursting into wild cackles. “Class dismissed. Go on, get out of here.”

And, as they scrambled for the door, he had presence of mind enough to add: “Raymond Carver next week! Don’t forget! *Where I’m Calling From!*”

And thought: *What else is there by Raymond Carver in the worlds of Ur? Is there one—or a dozen, or a thousand—where he quit smoking, lived to be seventy, and wrote another half a dozen books?*

He sat down at his desk, reached for his briefcase with the pink Kindle inside, then pulled his hand back. He reached again, stopped himself again, and moaned. It was like a drug. Or a sexual obsession. Thinking of that made him think of Ellen Silverman, something he hadn’t done since discovering the Kindle’s hidden menus. For the first time since she’d walked out, Ellen had completely slipped his mind.

Ironic, isn’t it? Now I’m reading off the computer, Ellen, and I can’t stop.

“I refuse to spend the rest of the day looking into that thing,” he said, “and I refuse to go mad. I refuse to look, and I refuse to go mad. To look or go mad. I refuse both. I—”

But the pink Kindle was in his hand! He had taken it out even as he had been denying its power over him! When had he done that? And did he really intend to sit here in this empty classroom, mooning over it?

“Mr. Smith?”

The voice startled him so badly that he dropped the Kindle on his desk. He snatched it up at once and examined it, terrified it might be broken, but it was all right. Thank God.

“I didn’t mean to startle you.” It was the Henderson kid, standing in the doorway and looking concerned. This didn’t surprise Wesley much. *If I saw me right now, I’d probably be concerned, too.*

“Oh, you didn’t startle me,” Wesley said. This obvious lie struck him as funny, and he gave voice to a glassy giggle. He clapped his hand over his mouth to hold it in.

“What’s wrong?” The Henderson kid took a step inside. “I think it’s more than a virus. Man, you look awful. Did you get some bad news, or something?”

Wesley almost told him to mind his business, peddle his papers, put an egg in his shoe and beat it, but then the terrified part of him that had been cowering in the farthest corner of his brain, insisting that the pink Kindle was a prank or the opening gambit of some elaborate con, decided to stop hiding and start acting.

If you really refuse to go mad, you better do something about this, it said. So how about it?

“What’s your first name, Mr. Henderson? It’s entirely slipped my mind.”

The kid smiled. A pleasant smile, but the concern was still in his eyes. “Robert, sir. Robbie.”

“Well, Robbie, I’m Wes. And I want to show you something. Either you will see nothing—which means I’m deluded, and very likely suffering a nervous breakdown—or you will see something that completely blows your mind. But not here. Come to my office, would you?”

Henderson tried to ask questions as they crossed the mediocre quad. Wesley shook them off, but he was glad Robbie Henderson had come back, and glad that the terrified part of his mind had taken the initiative and spoken up. He felt better about the Kindle—*safer*—than he had since discovering the hidden menus. In a fantasy story, Robbie Henderson would see nothing and the protagonist would decide he was going insane. Or had already gone. Reality seemed to be different. *His reality, at least, Wesley Smith’s Ur.*

I actually want it to be a delusion. Because if it is, and if with this young man’s help I can recognize it as such, I’m sure I can avoid going mad. And I refuse to go mad.

“You’re muttering sir,” Robbie said. “Wes, I mean.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re scaring me a little.”

“I’m also scaring *me* a little.”

Don Allman was in the office, wearing headphones, correcting papers, and singing about Jeremiah the bullfrog in a voice that went

beyond the borders of merely bad and into the unexplored country of the execrable. He shut off his iPod when he saw Wesley.

“I thought you had class.”

“Canceled it. This is Robert Henderson, one of my American Lit students.”

“Robbie,” Henderson said, extending his hand.

“Hello, Robbie. I’m Don Allman. One of the Allman Brothers. I play a mean tuba.”

Robbie laughed politely and shook Don Allman’s hand. Until that moment, Wesley had planned on asking Don to leave, thinking one witness to his mental collapse would be enough. But maybe this was that rare case where the more really was the merrier.

“Need some privacy?” Don asked.

“No,” Wesley said. “Stay. I want to show you guys something. And if you see nothing and I see something, I’ll be delighted to check into Central State Psychiatric.” He opened his briefcase.

“Whoa!” Robbie exclaimed. “A pink Kindle! Sweet! I’ve never seen one of those before!”

“Now I’m going to show you something else that you’ve never seen before,” Wesley said. “At least, I think I am.”

He plugged in the Kindle and turned it on.

What convinced Don Allman was the *Collected Works of William Shakespeare* from Ur 17,000. After downloading it at Don’s request—because in this particular Ur, Shakespeare had died in 1620 instead of 1616—the three men discovered two new plays. One was titled *Two Ladies of Hampshire*, a comedy that seemed to have been written soon after *Julius Caesar*. The other was a tragedy called *A Black Fellow in London*, written in 1619. Wesley opened this one and then (with some reluctance) handed Don the Kindle.

Don Allman was ordinarily a ruddy-cheeked guy who smiled a lot, but as he paged through Acts I and II of *A Black Fellow in London*, he lost both his smile and his color. After twenty minutes, during which Wesley and Robbie sat watching him silently, he pushed the Kindle back to Wesley. He did it with the tips of his fingers, as if he really didn’t want to touch it at all.

“So?” Wesley asked. “What’s the verdict?”

“It could be an imitation,” Don said, “but of course there have always been scholars who claimed that Shakespeare’s plays weren’t written by Shakespeare. There are supporters of Christopher Marlowe...Francis Bacon...even the Earl of Darby...”

“Yeah, and James Frey wrote *Macbeth*,” Wesley said. “What do you think?”

“I think this could be authentic Willie,” Don said. He sounded on the verge of tears. Or laughter. Maybe both. “I think it’s far too elaborate to be a joke. And if it’s a hoax, I have no idea how it works.” He reached a finger to the Kindle, touched it lightly, then pulled it away. “I’d have to study both plays closely, with reference works at hand, to be more definite, but...it’s got his *lilt*.”

Robbie Henderson, it turned out, had read almost all of John D. MacDonald’s mystery and suspense novels. In the Ur 2,171,753 listing of MacDonald’s works, he found seventeen novels in what was called “the Dave Higgins series.” All the titles had colors in them.

“That part’s right,” Robbie said, “but the titles are all wrong. And John D’s series character was named Travis McGee, not Dave Higgins.”

Wesley downloaded one called *The Blue Lament*, hitting his credit card with another \$4.50 charge, and pushed the Kindle over to Robbie once the book had been downloaded to the ever-growing library that was *Wesley’s Kindle*. While Robbie read, at first from the beginning and then skipping around, Don went down to the main office and brought back three coffees. Before settling in behind his desk, he hung the little-used CONFERENCE IN PROGRESS DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door.

Robbie looked up, nearly as pale as Don had been after dipping into the never-written Shakespeare play about the African prince who is brought to London in chains.

“This is a lot like a Travis McGee novel called *Pale Gray for Guilt*,” he said. “Only Travis McGee lives in Fort Lauderdale, and this guy Higgins lives in Sarasota. McGee has a friend named Meyer—a guy—and Higgins has a friend named Sarah...” He bent over the Kindle for a moment. “Sarah Mayer.” He looked at Wesley, his eyes

showing too much white around the irises. “Jesus Christ, and there’s *ten million* of these...these other worlds?”

“Ten million, four hundred thousand and some, according to the UR BOOKS menu,” Wesley said. “I think exploring even one author fully would take more years than you have left in your life, Robbie.”

“I could die today,” Robbie Henderson said in a low voice. “That thing could give me a freaking heart attack.” He abruptly seized his Styrofoam cup of coffee and swallowed most of the contents, although the coffee was still steaming.

Wesley, on the other hand, felt almost like himself again. But with the fear of madness removed, a host of questions were cramming his mind. Only one seemed completely relevant. “So what do I do now?”

“For one thing,” Dan said, “this has to stay a dead secret among the three of us.” He turned to Robbie. “Can you keep a secret? Say no and I’ll have to kill you.”

“I can keep one. But how about the people who sent it to you, Wes? Can *they* keep a secret? *Will* they?”

“How do I know that when I don’t know who they are?”

“What credit card did you use when you ordered Little Pink here?”

“MasterCard. It’s the only one I use these days.”

Robbie pointed to the English Department computer terminal Wesley and Don shared. “Go online, why don’t you, and check your account. If those...those ur-books came from Amazon, I’ll be very surprised.”

“Where else *could* they have come from?” Wesley asked. “It’s their gadget, they sell the books for it. Also, it came in an Amazon box. It had the smile on it.”

“And do they sell their gadget in Glowstick Pink?” Robbie asked.

“Well, no.”

“Dude, check your credit card account.”

Wesley drummed his fingers on Don’s Mighty Mouse mousepad as the office’s outdated PC cogitated. Then he sat up straight and began to read.

“Well?” Don asked. “Share.”

“According to this,” Wesley said, “my latest MasterCard purchase was a blazer from Men’s Warehouse. A week ago. No downloaded books.”

“Not even the ones you ordered the normal way? *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Revolutionary Road*?”

“Nope.”

Robbie asked, “What about the Kindle itself?”

Wesley scrolled back. “Nothing...nothing...noth...wait, here it—” He leaned forward until his nose was almost touching the screen. “I’ll be damned.”

“What?” Don and Robbie said it together.

“According to this, my purchase was denied. It says, ‘wrong credit-card number.’” He considered. “That could be. I’m always reversing two of the digits, sometimes even when I have the damn card right beside the keyboard. I’m a little dyslexic.”

“But the order went through, anyway,” Don said thoughtfully. “Somehow...to someone. *Somewhere*. What Ur does the Kindle say we’re in? Refresh me on that.”

Wesley went back to the relevant screen. “117,586. Only to enter that as a choice, you omit the comma.”

Don said, “That might not be the Ur we’re living in, but I bet it was the Ur this Kindle came from. In *that* Ur, the MasterCard number you gave is the right one for the Wesley Smith that exists there.”

“What are the odds of something like that happening?” Robbie asked.

“I don’t know,” Don said, “but probably a lot steeper than 10.4 million to one.”

Wesley opened his mouth to say something, and was interrupted by a fusillade of knocks on the door. They all jumped. Don Allman actually uttered a little scream.

“Who is it?” Wesley asked, grabbing the Kindle and holding it protectively to his chest.

“Janitor,” the voice on the other side of the door said. “You folks ever going home? It’s almost seven o’clock, and I need to lock up the building.”

IV—News Archive

They weren't done, couldn't be done. Not yet. Wesley in particular was anxious to press on. Although he hadn't slept for more than three hours at a stretch in days, he felt wide awake, energized. He and Robbie walked back to his apartment while Don went home to help his wife put the boys to bed. When that was done, he'd join them at Wesley's place for an extended skull-session. Wesley said he'd order some food.

"Good," Don said, "but be careful. Ur-Chinese just doesn't taste the same."

For a wonder, Wesley found he could actually laugh.

"So this is what an English instructor's apartment looks like," Robbie said, gazing around. "Man, I dig all the books."

"Good," Wesley said. "I loan to people who bring back. Keep it in mind."

"I will. My parents have never been, you know, great readers. Few magazines, some diet books, a self-help manual or two...that's all. I might have been the same way, if not for you. Just bangin' my head out on the football field, you know, with nothing ahead except maybe teaching PE in GilesCounty. That's in Tennessee. Yeehaw."

Wesley was touched by this. Probably because he'd been hurled through so many emotional hoops just lately. "Thanks," he said. "Just remember, there's nothing wrong with a good loud yeehaw. That's part of who you are, too. Both parts are equally valid."

He thought of Ellen, ripping *Deliverance* out of his hands and hurling across the room. And why? Because she hated books? No, because he hadn't been listening when she needed him to. Hadn't it been Fritz Leiber, the great fantasist and science fiction writer, who had called books "the scholar's mistress?" And when Ellen needed him, hadn't he had been in the arms of his other lover, the one who made no demands (other than on his vocabulary) and always took him in?

"Wes? What were those other things on the UR FUNCTIONS menu?"

At first Wesley didn't know what the kid was talking about. Then he remembered that there *had* been a couple of other items. He'd been so fixated on the BOOKS sub-menu that he had forgotten the other two.

"Well, let's see," he said, and turned the Kindle on. Every time he did this, he expected either the EXPERIMENTAL menu or the UR FUNCTIONS menu to be gone—that would also happen in a fantasy story or a *Twilight Zone* episode—but they were still right there.

"UR NEWS ARCHIVE and UR LOCAL," Robbie said. "Huh. UR LOCAL's under construction. Better watch out, traffic fines double."

"What?"

"Never mind, just goffin witcha. Try the news archive."

Wesley selected it. The screen blanked. After a few moments, a message appeared.

WELCOME TO THE NEWS ARCHIVE!
ONLY THE NEW YORK *TIMES* IS AVAILABLE AT THIS TIME
YOUR PRICE IS \$1.00/4 DOWNLOADS
\$10/50 DOWNLOADS
\$100/800 DOWNLOADS
SELECT WITH CURSOR YOUR ACCOUNT WILL BE BILLED

Wesley looked at Robbie, who shrugged. "I can't tell you what to do, but if *my* credit card wasn't being billed—in this world, anyway—I'd spend the hundred."

Wesley thought he had a point, although he wondered what the other Wesley (if indeed there was one) was going to think when he opened his next MasterCard bill. He highlighted the \$100/800 line and pushed the select button. This time the Paradox Laws didn't come up. Instead, the new message invited him to CHOOSE DATE AND UR. USE APPROPRIATE FIELDS.

"You do it," he said, and pushed the Kindle across the kitchen table to Robbie. This was getting easier to do, and he was glad. An obsession about keeping the Kindle in his own hands was a complication he didn't need, understandable as it was.

Robbie thought for a moment, then typed in January 21, 2009. In the Ur field he selected 1000000. "Ur one million," he said. "Why

not?” And pushed the button.

The screen went blank, then produced a message reading ENJOY YOUR SELECTION! A moment later the front page of the New York *Times* appeared. They bent over the screen, reading silently, until there was a knock at the door.

“That’ll be Don,” Wesley said. “I’ll let him in.”

Robbie Henderson didn’t reply. He was still transfixed.

“Getting cold out there,” Don said as he came in. “And there’s a wind knocking all the leaves off the—” He studied Wesley’s face. “What? Or should I say, what now?”

“Come and see,” Wesley said.

Don went into Wesley’s book-lined living room-study, where Robbie remained bent over the Kindle. The kid looked up and turned the screen so Don could see it. There were blank patches where the photos should have gone, each with the message IMAGE UNAVAILABLE, but the headline was big and black: **NOW IT’S HER TURN**. And below it, the subhead: ***Hillary Clinton Takes Oath, Assumes Role as 44th President***.

“Looks like she made it after all,” Wesley said. “At least in Ur 1,000,000.”

“And check out who she’s replacing,” Robbie said, and pointed to the name. It was Albert Arnold Gore.

An hour later, when the doorbell rang, they didn’t jump but rather looked around like men startled from a dream. Wesley went downstairs and paid the delivery guy, who had arrived with a loaded pizza from Harry’s and a six-pack of Pepsi. They ate at the kitchen table, bent over the Kindle. Wesley put away three slices himself, a personal best, with no awareness of what he was eating.

They didn’t use up the eight hundred downloads they had ordered—nowhere near it—but in the next four hours they skimmed enough stories from various Urs to make their heads ache. Wesley felt as though his *mind* were aching. From the nearly identical looks he saw on the faces of the other two—pale cheeks, avid eyes in bruised sockets, crazed hair—he guessed he wasn’t alone. Looking into one alternate reality would have been challenging enough; here were

over ten million, and although most appeared to be similar, not one was exactly the same.

The inauguration of the forty-fourth President of the United States was only one example, but a powerful one. They checked it in two dozen different Urs before getting tired and moving on. Fully seventeen front pages on January 21st of 2009 announced Hillary Clinton as the new President. In fourteen of them, Bill Richardson of New Mexico was her vice president. In two, it was Joe Biden. In one it was a Senator none of them had heard of: Linwood Speck of New Jersey.

“He always says no when someone else wins the top spot,” Don said.

“Who always says no?” Robbie asked. “Obama?”

“Yeah. He always gets asked, and he always says no.”

“It’s in character,” Wesley said. “And while events change, character never seems to.”

“You can’t say that for sure,” Don said. “We have a miniscule sample compared to the...the...” He laughed feebly. “You know, the whole thing. All the worlds of Ur.”

Barack Obama had been elected in six Urs. Mitt Romney had been elected once, with John McCain as his running mate. He had run against Obama, who had been tapped after Hillary was killed in a motorcade accident late in the campaign.

They saw not a single mention of Sarah Palin. Wesley wasn’t surprised. He thought that if they stumbled on her, it would be more by luck than by probability, and not just because Mitt Romney showed up more often as the Republican nominee than John McCain did. Palin had always been an outsider, a longshot, the one nobody expected.

Robbie wanted to check the Red Sox. Wesley felt it was a waste of time, but Don came down on the kid’s side, so Wesley agreed. The two of them checked the sports pages for October in ten different Urs, plugging in dates from 1918 to 2009.

“This is depressing,” Robbie said after the tenth try. Don Allman agreed.

“Why?” Wesley asked. “They win lots of times.”

“But there’s no rhyme or reason to it,” Robbie said.

“And no curse,” Don said. “They always win just enough to avoid it. Which is sort of boring.”

“What curse?” Wesley was mystified.

Don opened his mouth to explain, then sighed. “Never mind,” he said. “It would take too long, and you wouldn’t get it, anyway.”

“Look on the bright side,” Robbie said. “The Yankees are always there, so it isn’t *all* luck.”

“Yeah,” Don said glumly. “The military-industrial complex of the sporting world.”

“Soh-ree. Does anyone want that last slice?”

Don and Wes shook their heads. Robbie scarfed it and said, “Why not peek at the Big Casino, before we all decide we’re nuts and check ourselves into CentralState?”

“What Big Casino might that be, Yoda?” Don asked.

“The JFK assassination,” Robbie said. “Mr. Tollman says that was the seminal event of the twentieth century, even more important than the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo. I thought seminal events usually happened in bed, but hey, I came to college to learn. Mr. Tollman’s in the History Department.”

“I know who Hugh Tollman is,” Don said. “He’s a goddam commie, and he never laughs at my jokes.”

“But he could be right about the Kennedy assassination,” Wesley said. “Let’s look.”

They pursued the John-Kennedy-in-Dallas thread until nearly eleven o’clock, while college students hooted unnoticed below them, on their way to and from the local beerpits. They checked over seventy versions of the *New York Times* for November 23rd, 1963, and although the story was never the same, one fact seemed undeniable to all of them: whether he missed Kennedy, wounded Kennedy, or killed Kennedy, it was always Lee Harvey Oswald, and he always acted alone.

“The Warren Report was right,” Don said. “For once the bureaucracy did its job. I’m gobsmacked.”

In some Urs, that day in November had passed with no assassination stories, either attempted or successful. Sometimes Kennedy decided not to visit Dallas after all. Sometimes he did, and

his motorcade was uneventful; he arrived at the Dallas Trade Mart, gave his hundred-dollar-a-plate luncheon speech (“God, things were cheap back in the day, weren’t they?” Robbie remarked), and flew off into the sunset.

This was the case in Ur 88,416. Wesley began to plug in more dates from that Ur. What he saw filled him with awe and horror and wonder and sorrow. In Ur 88,416, Kennedy had seen the folly of Vietnam and had pulled out over the vehement objections of Robert McNamara, his Secretary of Defense. McNamara quit and was replaced by a man named Bruce Palmer, who resigned his rank of U.S. Army general to take the job. The civil rights turmoil was milder than when Lyndon Johnson was President, and there were almost no riots in the American cities—partly because in Ur 88,416, Martin Luther King wasn’t assassinated in Memphis or anywhere else.

In this Ur, JFK was elected for a second term. In 1968, Edmund Muskie of Maine won the Presidency in a landslide over Nelson Rockefeller. By then the outgoing President was hardly able to walk without the aid of crutches, and said his first priority was going to be major back surgery.

Robbie ignored that and fixed on a story that had to do with Kennedy’s last White House party. The Beatles had played, but the concert ended early when drummer Pete Best suffered a seizure and had to be taken to Washington DC Hospital.

“Holy shit,” Don whispered. “What happened to Ringo?”

“Guys,” Wesley said, yawning, “I have to go to bed. I’m dying here.”

“Check one more,” Robbie said. “4,121,989. It’s my birthday. Gotta be lucky.”

But it wasn’t. When Wesley selected the Ur and added a date—January 20, 1973—not quite at random, what came up instead of ENJOY YOUR SELECTION was this: NO *TIMES* THIS UR AFTER NOVEMBER 19, 1962.

“Oh my God,” Wesley said, and clapped a hand to his mouth. “Dear sweet God.”

“What?” Robbie asked. “What is it?”

“I think I know,” Don said. He tried to take the pink Kindle.

Wesley, who guessed he had gone pale (but probably not as pale as he felt inside), put a hand over Don's. "No," he said. "I don't think I can bear it."

"Bear *what*?" Robbie nearly shouted.

"Didn't Hugh Tollman cover the Cuban Missile Crisis?" Don asked. "Or didn't you get that far yet?"

"*What* missile crisis? Was it something to do with Castro?"

Don was looking at Wesley. "I don't really want to see, either," he said, "but I won't sleep tonight unless I make sure, and I don't think you will, either."

"Okay," Wesley said, and thought—not for the first time, either—that curiosity rather than rage was the true bane of the human spirit. "You'll have to do it, though. My hands are trembling too much."

Don filled in the fields for NOVEMBER 19, 1962. The Kindle told him to enjoy his selection, but he didn't. None of them did. The headlines were stark and huge:

**NYC TOLL SURPASSES 6 MILLION
MANHATTAN DECIMATED BY RADIATION
RUSSIA SAID TO BE OBLITERATED
LOSSES IN EUROPE AND ASIA
"INCALCULABLE"
CHINESE LAUNCH 40 ICBMS**

"Turn it off," Robbie said in a small, sick voice. "It's like that song says—I don't wanna see no more."

Don said, "Look on the bright side, you two. It seems we dodged the bullet in most of the Urs, including this one." But his voice wasn't quite steady.

"Robbie's right," Wesley said. He had discovered that the final issue of the New York *Times* in Ur 4,121,989 was only three pages long. And every article was death. "Turn it off. I wish I'd never seen the damn thing in the first place."

"Too late now," Robbie said. And how right he was.

They went downstairs together and stood on the sidewalk in front of Wesley's building.

Main Street

was almost deserted now. The rising wind moaned around the buildings and rattled late November leaves along the sidewalks. A trio of drunk students was stumbling back toward Fraternity Row, singing what might have been “ParadiseCity.”

“I can’t tell you what to do—it’s your gadget—but if it was mine, I’d get rid of it,” Don said. “It’ll suck you in.”

Wesley thought of telling him he’d already had this idea, but didn’t. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“Nope,” Don said. “I’m driving the wife and kids to Frankfort for a wonderful three-day weekend at my in-laws’. Suzy Montanari’s taking my classes. And after this little seminar tonight, I’m delighted to be getting away. Robbie? Drop you somewhere?”

“Thanks, but no need. I share an apartment with a couple of other guys two blocks up the street. Over Susan and Nan’s Place.”

“Isn’t that a little noisy?” Wesley asked. Susan and Nan’s was the local café, and opened at six AM seven days a week.

“Most days I sleep right through it.” Robbie flashed a grin. “Also, when it comes to the rent, the price is right.”

“Good deal. Night, you guys,” Don started for his Tercel, then turned back. “I intend to kiss my kids before I turn in. Maybe it’ll help me get to sleep. That last story—” He shook his head. “I could have done without that. No offense, Robbie, but stick your birthday up your ass.”

They watched his diminishing taillights and Robbie said thoughtfully, “Nobody ever told me to stick my birthday before.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t want you to take it personally. And he’s probably right about the Kindle, you know. It’s fascinating—*too* fascinating—but useless in any practical sense.”

Robbie stared at him, wide-eyed. “You’re calling access to thousands of undiscovered novels by the great masters of the craft *useless*? Sheezis, what kind of English teacher are you?”

Wesley had no comeback. Especially when he knew that, late or not, he’d probably be reading more of *Cortland’s Dogs* before turning in.

“Besides,” Robbie said. “It might not be *entirely* useless. You could type up one of those books and send it in to a publisher, ever think of

that? You know, submit it under your own name. Become the next big thing. They'd call you the heir to Vonnegut or Roth or whoever."

It was an attractive idea, especially when Wesley thought of the useless scribbles in his briefcase. But he shook his head. "It'd probably violate the Paradox Laws...whatever *they* are. More importantly, it would eat at me like acid. From the inside out." He hesitated, not wanting to sound prissy, but wanting to articulate what felt like the real reason for not doing such a thing. "I would feel ashamed."

The kid smiled. "You're a good dude, Wesley." They were walking in the direction of Robbie's apartment now, the leaves rattling around their feet, a quarter moon flying through the wind-driven clouds overhead.

"You think so?"

"I do. And so does Coach Silverman."

Wesley stopped, caught by surprise. "What do you know about me and Coach Silverman?"

"Personally? Not a thing. But you must know Josie's on the team. Josie Quinn from class?"

"Of course I know Josie." The one who'd sounded like a kindly anthropologist when they'd been discussing the Kindle. And yes, he *had* known she was a Lady Meerkat. Unfortunately one of the subs who usually got into the game only if it was a total blowout.

"Josie says Coach has been really sad since you and her broke up. Grouchy, too. She makes them run all the time, and kicked one girl right off the team."

"That was before we broke up." Thinking: *In a way that's why we broke up.* "Um...does the whole team know about us?"

Robbie Henderson looked at him as though he were mad. "If Josie knows, they all know."

"How?" Because Ellen wouldn't have told them; briefing the team on your love-life was not a coachly thing to do.

"How do women know anything?" Robbie asked. "They just do."

"Are you and Josie Quinn an item, Robbie?"

"We're going in the right direction. G'night, Wes. I'm gonna sleep in tomorrow—no classes on Friday—but if you drop by Susan and Nan's for lunch, come on up and knock on my door."

“I might do that,” Wesley said. “Goodnight, Robbie. Thanks for being one of the Three Stooges.”

“I’d say the pleasure was all mine, but I have to think about that.”

Instead of reading ur-Hemingway when he got back, Wesley stuffed the Kindle in his briefcase. Then he took out the mostly blank bound notebook and ran his hand over its pretty cover. *For your book ideas*, Ellen had said, and it had to’ve been an expensive present. Too bad it was going to waste.

I could still write a book, he thought. *Just because I haven’t in any of the other Urs doesn’t mean I couldn’t here.*

It was true. He could be the Sarah Palin of American letters. Because sometimes longshots came in.

Both for good and for ill.

He undressed, brushed his teeth, then called the English Department and left a message for the secretary to cancel his one morning class. “Thanks, Marilyn. Sorry to put this on you, but I think I’m coming down with the flu.” He added an unconvincing cough and hung up.

He thought he would lie sleepless for hours, thinking of all those other worlds, but in the dark they seemed as unreal as actors when you saw them on a movie screen. They were big up there—often beautiful, too—but they were still only shadows thrown by light. Maybe the Ur-worlds were like that, too.

What seemed real in this post-midnight hour was the sound of the wind, the beautiful sound of the wind telling tales of Tennessee, where it had been earlier this evening. Lulled by it, Wesley fell asleep, and he slept deeply and long. There were no dreams, and when he woke up, sunshine was flooding his bedroom. For the first time since his own undergraduate days, he had slept until almost eleven in the morning.

V—Ur Local (Under Construction)

He took a long hot shower, shaved, dressed, and decided to go down to Susan and Nan's for either a late breakfast or an early lunch, whichever looked better on the menu. As for Robbie, Wesley decided he'd let the kid sleep. He'd be out practicing with the rest of the hapless football team this afternoon; surely he deserved to sleep late. It occurred to him that, if he took a table by the window, he might see the Athletic Department bus go by as the girls set off for the Bluegrass Invitational, eighty miles away. He'd wave. Ellen wouldn't see him, but he'd do it anyway.

He took his briefcase without even thinking about it.

He ordered the Susan's Sexy Scramble (onions, peppers, mozzarella cheese) with bacon on the side, along with coffee and juice. By the time the young waitress brought his food, he'd taken out the Kindle and was reading *Cortland's Dogs*. It was Hemingway, all right, and one terrific story.

"Kindle, isn't it?" the waitress asked. "I got one for Christmas, and I love it. I'm reading my way through all of Jodi Picoult's books."

"Oh, probably not all of them," Wesley said.

"Huh? Why not?"

"She's probably got another one done already. That's all I meant."

"And James Patterson's probably written one since he got up this morning!" she said, and went off chortling.

Wesley had pushed the MAIN MENU button while they were talking, hiding the Ur-Hemingway novel without really thinking about it. Feeling guilty about what he was reading? Afraid the waitress might get a look and start screaming *That's not real Hemingway?* Ridiculous. But just owning the pink Kindle made him feel a little bit like a crook. It wasn't his, after all, and the stuff he had downloaded wasn't really his, either, because he wasn't the one paying for it.

Maybe no one is, he thought, but didn't believe it. He thought one of the universal truths of life was that, sooner or later, someone always paid.

There was nothing especially sexy about his scramble, but it was good. Instead of going back to Cortland and his winter dog, he accessed the UR menu. The one function he hadn't peeked into was UR LOCAL. Which was UNDER CONSTRUCTION. What had Robbie said about that last night? *Better watch out, traffic fines double.* The kid was sharp and might get even sharper, if he didn't batter his brains out playing senseless Division Three football. Smiling, Wesley highlighted UR LOCAL and pushed the select button. This message came up:

ACCESS CURRENT UR LOCATION? Y N

Wesley selected Y. The Kindle thought some more, then posted a new message:

THE CURRENT UR LOCAL IS MOOREECHO
ACCESS? Y N

Wesley considered the question while eating a strip of bacon. The *Echo* was a rag specializing in yard sales, local sports, and town politics. The townies scanned those things, he supposed, but mostly bought the paper for the obituaries and Police Beat. Everybody liked to know which neighbors had died or been jailed. Searching 10.4 million Moore, Kentucky Urs sounded pretty boring, but why not? Wasn't he basically marking time, drawing his breakfast out, so he could watch the players' bus go by?

"Sad but true," he said, and highlighted the Y button. What came up was similar to a message he had seen before: *Ur Local is protected by all applicable Paradox Laws. Do you agree? Y N.*

Now *that* was strange. The New York *Times* archive wasn't protected by these Paradox Laws, whatever they were, but their pokey local paper was? It made no sense, but seemed harmless. Wesley shrugged and selected Y.

WELCOME TO THE *ECHO* PRE-ARCHIVE!
YOUR PRICE IS \$40.00/4 DOWNLOADS
\$350.00/10 DOWNLOADS
\$2500.00/100 DOWNLOADS

Wesley put his fork on his plate and sat frowning at the screen. Not only was the local paper Paradox Law-protected, it was a hell of

a lot more expensive. Why? And what the hell was a pre-archive? To Wesley, that sounded like a paradox in itself. Or an oxymoron.

“Well, it’s under construction,” he said. “Traffic fines double and so do download expenses. That’s the explanation. Plus, I’m not paying for it.”

No, but because the idea persisted that he might someday be forced to (someday *soon!*), he compromised on the middle choice. The next screen was similar to the one for the *Times* archive, but not quite the same; it just asked him to select a date. To him this suggested nothing but an ordinary newspaper archive, the kind he could find on microfilm at the local library. If so, why the big expense?

He shrugged, typed in July 5, 2008, and pushed select. The Kindle responded immediately, posting this message:

FUTURE DATES ONLY
THIS IS NOVEMBER 20, 2009

For a moment he didn’t get it. Then he did, and the world suddenly turned itself up to super-bright, as if some supernatural being had cranked the rheostat controlling the daylight. And all the noises in the café—the clash of forks, the rattle of plates, the steady babble of conversation—seemed too loud.

“My God,” he whispered. “No wonder it’s expensive.”

This was too much. *Way* too much. He moved to turn the Kindle off, then heard cheering and yelling outside. He looked up and saw a yellow bus with MOORE COLLEGE ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT printed on the side. Cheerleaders and players were leaning out the open windows, waving and laughing and yelling stuff like “Go, *Meerkats!*” and “*We’re number one!*” One of the young women was actually wearing a big foam Number One finger on her hand. The pedestrians on

Main Street

were grinning and waving back.

Wesley lifted his own hand and waved feebly. The bus driver honked his horn. Flapping from the rear of the bus was a piece of sheeting with **THE MEERKATS WILL ROCK THE RUPP** spray-painted on it. Wesley became aware that people in the café were

applauding. All this seemed to be happening in another world. Another Ur.

When the bus was gone, Wesley looked down at the pink Kindle again. He decided he wanted to utilize at least one of his ten downloads, after all. The locals didn't have much use for the student body as a whole—the standard town-versus-gown thing—but they loved the Lady Meerkats because everybody loves a winner. The tourney's results, pre-season or not, would be front-page news in Monday's *Echo*. If they won, he could buy Ellen a victory gift, and if they lost, he could buy her a consolation present.

"I'm a winner either way," he said, and entered Monday's date: November 23rd, 2009.

The Kindle thought for a long time, then produced a newspaper front page.

The date was Monday's date.

The headline was huge and black.

Wesley spilled his coffee and yanked the Kindle out of danger even as lukewarm coffee soaked his crotch.

Fifteen minutes later he was pacing the living room of Robbie Henderson's apartment while Robbie—who'd been up when Wesley came hammering at the door but was still wearing the tee-shirt and basketball shorts he slept in—stared at the screen of the Kindle.

"We have to call someone," Wesley said. He was smacking a fist into an open palm, and hard enough to turn the skin red. "We have to call the police. No, wait! The arena! Call the Rupp and leave a message for her to call me, ASAP! No, that's wrong! Too slow! I'll call her now. That's what—"

"Relax, Mr. Smith—Wes, I mean."

"How can I relax? Don't you see that thing? Are you *blind*?"

"No, but you still have to relax. Pardon the expression, but you're losing your shit, and people can't think productively when they're doing that."

"But—"

"Take a deep breath. And remind yourself that according to this, we've got almost sixty hours."

“Easy for you to say. *Your* girlfriend isn’t going to be on that bus when it starts back to—” Then he stopped, because that wasn’t so. Josie Quinn was on the team, and according to Robbie, he and Josie had a thing going on.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I saw the headline and freaked. I didn’t even pay for my breakfast, just ran up here. I know I look like I wet my pants, and I damn near did. Not with coffee, either. Thank God your roommates are gone.”

“I’m pretty freaked, too,” Robbie admitted, and for a moment they studied the screen in silence. According to Wesley’s Kindle, Monday’s edition of *The Echo* was going to have a black border around the front page as well as a black headline on top of it. That headline read:

COACH, 7 STUDENTS KILLED IN HORRIFIC BUS CRASH; 9 OTHERS CRITICAL

The story itself really wasn’t a story at all, only an item. Even in his distress, Wesley knew why. The accident had happened—no, was *going* to happen—at just short of nine PM on Sunday night. Too late to report any details, although probably if they heated up Robbie’s computer and went to the Internet—

What was he thinking? The Internet did not predict the future; only the pink Kindle did that.

His hands were shaking too badly to enter November 24th. He pushed the Kindle to Robbie. “You do it.”

Robbie managed, though it took him two tries. *The Echo’s* Tuesday story was more complete, but the headline was even worse:

DEATH TOLL RISES TO 10 TOWN AND COLLEGE MOURN

“Is Josie—” Wesley began.

“Yeah,” Robbie said. “Survives the crash, dies on Monday. Christ.”

According to Antonia “Toni” Burrell, one of the Meerkat cheerleaders, and one of the lucky ones to survive Sunday night’s horrific bus-crash with only cuts and bruises, the

celebration was still going on, the Bluegrass Trophy still being passed hand-to-hand. “We were singing ‘We Are the Champions’ for the twentieth time or so,” she said from the hospital in Bowling Green, where most of the survivors were taken. “Coach turned around and yelled for us to keep it down, and that’s when it happened.”

According to State Police Captain Moses Arden, the bus was traveling on Route 139, the Princeton Road, and was about two miles west of Cadiz when an SUV driven by Candy Rymer of Montgomery struck it. “Ms. Rymer was traveling at a high rate of speed west along Highway 80,” Captain Arden said, “and struck the bus at the intersection.”

The bus-driver, Herbert Allison, 58, of Moore apparently saw Ms. Rymer’s vehicle at the last moment and tried to swerve. That swerve, coupled with the impact, drove the bus into the ditch, where it overturned and exploded...

There was more, but neither of them wanted to read it.

“Okay,” Robbie said. “Let’s think about this. First, can we be sure it’s true?”

“Maybe not,” Wesley said. “But Robbie...can we afford to take the chance?”

“No,” Robbie said. “No, I guess we can’t. Of *course* we can’t. But Wes, if we call the police, they won’t believe us. You know that.”

“We’ll show them the Kindle! We’ll show them the story!” But even to himself, Wesley sounded deflated. “Okay, how about this. I’ll tell Ellen. Even if she won’t believe me, she might agree to hold the bus for fifteen minutes or so, or change the route this guy Allison’s planning to take.”

Robbie considered. “Yeah. Worth a try.”

Wesley took his phone out of his briefcase. Robbie had gone back to the story, using the NEXT PAGE button to access the rest.

The phone rang twice...three times...four.

Wesley was preparing to deliver his message to voicemail when Ellen answered. “Wesley, I can’t talk to you now. I thought you understood that—”

“Ellen, listen—”

“—but if you got my message, you know we’re *going* to talk.” In the background he could hear raucous, excited girls—Josie would be among them—and lots of loud music.

“Yes, I did get the message, but we have to talk n—”

“No!” Ellen said. “We *don’t*. I’m not going to take your calls this weekend, and I’m not going to listen to your messages.” Her voice softened. “And hon—every one you leave is going to make it harder. For us, I mean.”

“Ellen, you don’t understa—”

“Goodbye, Wes. I’ll talk to you next week. Do you wish us luck?”

“Ellen, *please!*”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she said. “And you know what? I guess I still care about you, even though you are a lug.”

With that she was gone.

He poised his finger over the redial button...then made himself not push it. It wouldn’t help. Ellen was wearing her my-way-or-the-highway hat. It was insane, but there it was.

“She won’t talk to me except on her schedule. What she doesn’t realize is that after Sunday night she may not *have* a schedule. You’ll have to call Ms. Quinn.” In his current state, the girl’s first name escaped him.

“Josie’d think I was pranking’ on her,” Robbie said. “A story like that, *any* girl’d think I was pranking’ on her.” He was still studying the Kindle’s screen. “Want to know something? The woman who caused the accident—who *will* cause it—hardly gets hurt at all. I’ll bet you next semester’s tuition she was just as drunk as a goddam skunk.”

Wesley hardly heard this. “Tell Josie that Ellen *has* to take my call. Have her say it’s not about us. Tell her to say it’s an emer—”

“Dude,” Robbie said. “Slow down and listen. Are you listening?”

Wesley nodded, but what he heard most clearly was his own pounding heart.

“Point one, Josie would *still* think I was pranking’ on her. Point two, she might think we *both* were. Point three, I don’t think she’d go to Coach Silverman anyway, given the mood that Coach has been in lately...and she gets even worse on game trips, Josie says.” Robbie

sighed. “You have to understand about Josie. She’s sweet, she’s smart, she’s sexy as hell, but she’s also a timid little mousie. It’s sort of what I like about her.”

“That probably says heaps of good things about your character, Robbie, but you’ll pardon me if right now I don’t give a tomcat’s ass. You’ve told me what won’t work; do you have any idea what might?”

“That’s point four. With a little luck, we won’t have to tell anybody about this. Which is good, since they wouldn’t believe it.”

“Elucidate.”

“First, we need to use another one of your *Echo* downloads.” Robbie punched in November 25th, 2009. Another girl, a cheerleader who had been horribly burned in the explosion, had died, raising the death-toll to eleven. Although the *Echo* didn’t come right out and say so, more were likely to die before the week was out.

Robbie only gave this story a quick scan. What he was looking for was a boxed story on the lower half of page one:

**CANDACE RYMER CHARGED WITH MULTIPLE
COUNTS OF VEHICULAR HOMICIDE**

There was a gray square in the middle of the story—her picture, Wesley assumed, only the pink Kindle didn’t seem able to reprint news photographs. But it didn’t matter, because now he got it. It wasn’t the bus they had to stop; it was the woman who was going to hit the bus.

She was point four.

VI—Candy Rymer

At five o'clock on a gray Sunday afternoon—as the Lady Meerkats were cutting down basketball nets in a not-too-distant part of the state—Wesley Smith and Robbie Henderson were sitting in Wesley's modest Chevy Malibu, watching the door of a roadhouse in Eddyville, twenty miles north of Cadiz. The parking lot was oiled dirt and mostly empty. There was almost certainly a TV inside The Broken Windmill, but Wesley guessed discriminating tipplers would rather do their drinking and NFL-watching at home. You didn't have to go inside the joint to know it was a hole. Candy Rymer's first stop had been bad, but this second one was worse.

Parked slightly crooked (and blocking what appeared to be the fire exit) was a filthy, dinged-up Ford Explorer with two bumper stickers on the back. MY CHILD IS AN HONOR STUDENT AT THE STATE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY, one read. The other was even more succinct: I BRAKE FOR JACK DANIELS.

"Maybe we oughtta do it right here," Robbie said. "While she's inside slopping it up and watching the Titans."

It was a tempting idea, but Wesley shook his head. "We'll wait. She's got one more stop to make. Hopson, remember?"

"That's miles from here."

"Right," Wesley said. "But we've got time to kill, and we're going to kill it."

"Why?"

"Because what we're up to is changing the future. Or trying to, at least. We have no idea how tough that is. Waiting as long as possible improves our chances."

"Wesley, that is one drunk chick. She was drunk when she got out of that first juke-joint in Central City, and she's going to be a lot drunker when she comes out of yonder shack. I can't see her getting her car repaired in time to rendezvous with the girls' bus forty miles from here. And what if we break down while we're trying to follow her to her last stop?"

Wesley hadn't considered this. Now he did. "My instincts say wait, but if you have a strong feeling that we should do it now, we will."

“The only strong feeling I have is a scared-to-freakin’-death feeling,” Robbie said. He sat up. “Too late to do anything else, anyway. Here she comes, Miss America.”

Candy Rymer emerged from The Broken Windmill in a moderate weave. She dropped her purse, bent down to get it, almost fell over, cursed, picked it up, laughed, and then continued to where her Explorer was parked, digging her keys out as she went. Her face was puffy, not quite hiding the remains of what must once have been very good looks. Her hair, blond on top and black at the roots, hung around her cheeks in lank curls. Her belly pooched out the front of elastic-waist jeans just below the hem of what had to be a Kmart smock top.

She got in her beat-to-shit SUV, kicked the engine into life (it sounded in desperate need of a tune-up) and drove forward into the roadhouse’s fire door. There was a crunch. Then her backup lights came on and she reversed so fast that for one sickening moment Wesley thought she was going to hit his Malibu, crippling it and leaving them on foot as she drove off toward her appointment in Samarra. But she stopped in time and peeled onto the highway without pausing to look for traffic. A moment later Wesley was following as she headed east toward Hopson. And the intersection where the Lady Meerkats’ bus would arrive in four hours.

In spite of the terrible thing she was going to do, Wesley couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for her, and he had an idea Robbie felt the same. The follow-up story they’d read about her in the *Echo* told a tale as familiar as it was sordid.

Candace “Candy” Rymer, age forty-one, divorced. Three children, now in the custody of their father. For the last twelve years of her life she’d been in and out of spin-dry facilities. According to an acquaintance (she seemed to have no friends), she had tried AA and decided it wasn’t for her. Too much holy-rolling. She had been arrested for DUI half a dozen times. She had lost her license after each of the last two, but in both cases it had been restored, the second time by special petition. She needed her license to get to her job at the fertilizer factory in Bainbridge, she told Judge Wallenby. What she didn’t tell him was that she had lost the job six months

previous...and nobody checked. Candy Rymer was a booze-bomb waiting to go off, and the explosion was now very close.

The story hadn't mentioned her home address in Montgomery, but it didn't need to. In what Wesley considered a rather brilliant piece of investigative journalism (especially for the *Echo*), the reporter had retraced Candy's final binge, from The Pot O' Gold in Central City to The Broken Windmill in Eddyville to Banty's Bar in Hopson. There the bartender was going to try to take her keys. Unsuccessfully. Candy was going to give him the finger and leave, shouting "I'm done giving my business to this dive!" back over her shoulder. That was at seven o'clock. The reporter theorized that Candy must have pulled over somewhere for a short nap, possibly on Route 124, before cutting across to Route 80. A little further down 80, she would make her final stop. A fiery one.

Once Robbie put the thought in his head, Wesley kept expecting his always-trustworthy Chevrolet to die and coast to a stop at the side of the two-lane blacktop, a victim of either a bad battery or the Paradox Laws. Candy Rymer's taillights would disappear from view and they would spend the following hours making frantic but useless calls (always assuming their phones would even work out here in the williwags) and cursing themselves for not disabling her vehicle back in Eddyville, while they still had a chance.

But the Malibu cruised as effortlessly as always, without a single gurgle or glitch. He stayed about half a mile behind Candy's Explorer.

"Man, she's all over the road," Robbie said. "Maybe she'll ditch the damn thing before she gets to the next bar. Save us the trouble of slashing her tires."

"According to the *Echo*, that doesn't happen."

"Yeah, but we know the future's not cast in stone, don't we? Maybe this is another Ur, or something."

Wesley didn't think it worked that way with UR LOCAL, but he kept his mouth shut. Either way, it was too late now.

Candy Rymer made it to Banty's without going in the ditch or hitting any oncoming traffic, although she could have done either; God knew she had enough close calls. When one of the cars that

swerved out of her way passed Wesley's Malibu, Robbie said: "That's a family. Mom, Pop, three little kids goofin' around in the back."

That was when Wesley stopped feeling sorry for Rymer and started feeling angry at her. It was a clean, hot emotion that made his pique at Ellen feel paltry by comparison.

"That bitch," he said. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel. "That drunken who-gives-a-shit *bitch*. I'll kill her if that's the only way I can stop her."

"I'll help," Robbie said, then clamped his mouth so tightly shut his lips nearly disappeared.

They didn't have to kill her, and the Paradox Laws stopped them no more than the laws against drinking and driving had stopped Candy Rymer on her tour of southern Kentucky's more desperate watering holes.

The parking lot of Banty's Bar was paved, but the buckling concrete looked like something left over from an Israeli bombing raid in Gaza. Overhead, a fizzing neon rooster flashed on and off. Hooked in one set of its talons was a moonshine jug with XXX printed on the side.

The Rymer woman's Explorer was parked almost directly beneath this fabulous bird, and by its stuttering orange-red glow, Wesley slashed open the elderly SUV's front tires with the butcher knife they had brought for that express purpose. As the *whoosh* of escaping air hit him, he was struck by a wave of relief so great that at first he couldn't get up but only hunker on his knees like a man praying.

"My turn," Robbie said, and a moment later the Explorer settled further as the kid punctured the rear tires. Then came another hiss. He had put a hole in the spare for good measure. By then Wesley had gotten to his feet.

"Let's park around to the side," Robbie said. "I think we better keep an eye on her."

"I'm going to do a lot more than that," Wesley said.

"Easy, big fella. What are you planning on?"

"I'm not planning. I'm beyond that." But the rage shaking through his body suggested something different.

According to the *Echo*, she had called Banty's a dive in her parting shot, but apparently that had been cleaned up for family consumption. What she actually threw back over her shoulder was, "I'm done doing business with this shitpit!" Only by this point she was so drunk the vulgarity came out in a slippery slur: *shippih*.

Robbie, fascinated at seeing the news story played out before his eyes right down to the upraised middle finger (which the *Echo* had primly referred to as "an obscene gesture"), made no effort to grab Wesley as he strode toward her. He *did* call "Wait!" but Wesley didn't. He seized the woman and commenced shaking her.

Candy Rymer's mouth dropped open; the keys she'd been holding in the hand not occupied with bird-flipping dropped to the cracked concrete tarmac.

"Leggo me, you bassard!"

Wesley didn't. He slapped her face hard enough to split her lower lip, then went back on her the other way. "*Sober up!*" he screamed into her frightened face. "*Sober up, you useless bitch! Get a life and stop fucking up other peoples'! You're going to kill people! Do you understand that? You are going to fucking KILL people!*"

He slapped her a third time, the sound as loud as a pistol-shot. She staggered back against the side of the building, weeping and holding her hands up to protect her face. Blood trickled down her chin. Their shadows, turned into elongated gantries by the neon bird, winked off and on.

He raised his hand to slap a fourth time—better to slap than to choke, which was what he really wanted to do—but Robbie grabbed him from behind and wrestled him away. "Stop it! That's enough!"

The bartender and a couple of goofy-looking patrons were now standing in the doorway, gawking. Candy Rymer had slid down to a sitting position. She was weeping hysterically, her hands pressed to her swelling face. "Why does everyone hate me?" she sobbed. "Why is everyone so goddam mean?"

Wesley looked at her dully, the anger out of him. What replaced it was a kind of hopelessness. You would say that a drunk driver who caused the deaths of at least eleven people had to be evil, but there was no evil here. Only a sobbing alkie sitting on the cracked, weedy

concrete of a country roadhouse parking lot. A woman who, if the off-and-on light of the stuttering rooster did not lie, had wet her pants.

"You can get the person but you can't get the evil," Wesley said. "The evil always survives. Isn't that a bitch. Just a total bitch."

"Yeah, I'm sure, but come on. Before they get a *really* good look at you."

Robbie was leading him back to the Malibu. Wesley went as docilely as a child. He was trembling. "The evil always survives, Robbie. In all the Urs. Remember that."

"You bet, absolutely. Give me the keys. I'll drive."

"*Hey!*" someone shouted from behind them. "Why in the hell did you beat up that woman? She wasn't doing nothing to you! Come back here!"

Robbie pushed Wesley into the car, ran around the hood, threw himself behind the wheel, and drove away fast. He kept the pedal down until the stuttering rooster disappeared, then eased up. "What now?"

Wesley ran a hand over his eyes. "I'm sorry I did that," he said. "And yet I'm not. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," Robbie said. "You bet. It was for Coach Silverman. And Josie too." He smiled. "My little mousie."

Wesley nodded.

"So where do we go? Home?"

"Not yet," Wesley said.

.

They parked on the edge of a cornfield near the intersection of Route 139 and Highway 80, two miles west of Cadiz. They were early, and Wesley used the time to fire up the pink Kindle. When he tried to access UR LOCAL, he was greeted by a somehow unsurprising message: THIS SERVICE NO LONGER AVAILABLE.

"Probably for the best," he said.

Robbie turned toward him. "Say what?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter." He put the Kindle back in his briefcase.

"Wes?"

“What, Robbie?”

“Did we break the Paradox Laws?”

“Undoubtedly,” Wes said. And with some satisfaction.

At five to nine, they heard honking and saw lights. They got out of the Malibu and stood in front of it, waiting. Wesley observed that Robbie’s hands were clenched, and was glad he himself wasn’t the only one still afraid that Candy Rymer might still somehow appear.

Headlights breasted the nearest hill. It was the bus, followed by a dozen cars filled with Lady Meerkat supporters, all honking deliriously and flashing their high beams off and on. As the bus passed, Wesley heard young female voices singing “We Are the Champions” and felt a chill race up his back and lift the hair on his neck.

He raised his hand and waved.

Beside him, Robbie did the same. Then he turned to Wesley, smiling. “What do you say, Prof? Want to join the parade?”

Wesley clapped him on the shoulder. “That sounds like a damn fine idea.”

When the last of the cars had passed, Robbie got in line. Like the others, he honked and flashed his lights all the way back to Moore.

Wesley didn’t mind.

VII—The Paradox Police

When Robbie got out in front of Susan and Nan's (where LADY MEERKATS RULE had been soaped on the window), Wesley said, "Wait a sec."

He came around the front of the car and embraced the kid. "You did good."

"Ungrammatical but appreciated." Robbie wiped at his eyes, then grinned. "Does this mean I get a gift A for the semester?"

"Nope, just some advice. Get out of football. You'll never make it a career, and your head deserves better."

"Duly noted," Robbie said...which was not agreement, as they both knew. "See you in class?"

"On Tuesday," Wesley said. But fifteen minutes later he had reason to wonder if *anyone* would see him. Ever again.

There was a car in the spot where he usually left the Malibu when he didn't leave it in Parking Lot A at the college. Wesley could have parked behind it, but chose the other side of the street instead. Something about the car made him uneasy. It was a Cadillac, and in the glow of the arc sodium beneath which it was parked, it seemed too bright. The red paint almost seemed to yell *Here I am! Do you like me?*

Wesley didn't. Nor did he like the tinted windows or the oversized gangsta hubcaps with their gold Cadillac emblems. It looked like a drug dealer's car. If, that was, the dealer in question also happened to be a homicidal maniac.

Now why would I think that?

"Stress of the day, that's all," he said as he crossed the deserted street with his briefcase banging against his leg. He bent down. Nobody was inside the car. At least he didn't *think* so. With the darkened windows, it was hard to be entirely sure.

It's the Paradox Police. They've come for me.

This idea should have seemed ridiculous at best, a paranoid fantasy at worst, but felt like neither. And when you considered all that had happened, maybe it wasn't paranoid at all.

Wesley stretched out a hand, touched the door of the car, then snatched it back. The door felt like metal, but it was warm. And it seemed to be *pulsing*. As if, metal or not, the car were alive.

Run.

The thought was so powerful he felt his lips mouth it, but he knew running wasn't an option. If he tried, the man or men who belonged to the loathsome red car would find him. This was a fact so simple that it defied logic. It *bypassed* logic. So instead of running, he used his key to open the street door and went upstairs. He did it slowly, because his heart was racing and his legs kept threatening to give way.

The door of his apartment stood open, light spilling onto the upstairs landing in a long rectangle.

"Ah, here you are," a not-quite-human voice said. "Come in, Wesley of Kentucky."

There were two of them. One was young and one was old. The old one sat on his sofa, where Wesley and Ellen Silverman had once seduced each other to their mutual enjoyment (nay, ecstasy). The young one sat in Wesley's favorite chair, the one he always ended up in when the night was late, the leftover cheesecake tasty, the book interesting, and the light from the standing lamp just right. They both wore long mustard-colored coats, the kind that are called dusters, and Wesley understood, without knowing how he understood, that the coats were alive. He also understood that the men wearing them were not men at all. Their faces kept *changing*, and what lay just beneath the skin was reptilian. Or birdlike. Or both.

On their lapels, where lawmen in a Western movie would have worn badges, both wore buttons bearing a red eye. Wesley thought these too were alive. Those eyes were watching him.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Smelled you," the older of the two replied, and the terrible thing was this: it didn't sound like a joke.

"What do you want?"

"You know why we're here," the young one said. The older of the two never spoke again at all until the end of the visit. Listening to one

of them was bad enough. It was like listening to a man whose voice-box was stuffed with crickets.

“I suppose I do,” Wesley said. His voice was steady, at least so far. “I broke the Paradox Laws.” He prayed they didn’t know about Robbie, and thought they might not; the Kindle had been registered to Wesley Smith, after all.

“You have no idea what you did,” the man in the yellow coat said in a meditative voice. “The Tower trembles; the worlds shudder in their courses. The rose feels a chill, as of winter.”

Very poetic, but not very illuminating. “What Tower? What rose?” Wesley could feel sweat breaking on his forehead even though he liked to keep the apartment cool. *It’s because of them*, he thought. *These boys run hot.*

“It doesn’t matter,” his younger visitor said. “Explain yourself, Wesley of Kentucky. And do it well, if you would ever see sunshine again.”

For a moment Wesley couldn’t. His mind was filled with a single thought: *I’m on trial here*. Then he swept it aside. The return of his anger—a pale imitation of what he had felt toward Candy Rymer, but real anger, just the same—helped in this regard.

“People were going to die. Almost a dozen. Maybe more. That might not mean much to fellows like you, but it does to me, especially since one of them happens to be a woman I’m in love with. All because of one self-indulgent drunk who won’t address her problems. And...” He almost said *And we*, but made the necessary course-correction just in time. “And I didn’t even hurt her. Slapped her a little, but I couldn’t help myself.”

“You boys can *never* help yourselves,” the buzzing voice of the thing in his favorite chair—which would never be his favorite chair again—replied. “Poor impulse control is ninety per cent of your problem. Did it ever cross your mind, Wesley of Kentucky, that the Paradox Laws exist for a reason?”

“I didn’t—”

The thing raised its voice. “Of course you *didn’t*. We know you *didn’t*. We’re here because you *didn’t*. It didn’t cross your mind that one of the people on that bus might become a serial killer, someone who might murder dozens, including a child who would otherwise

grow up to cure cancer or Alzheimer's Disease. It didn't occur to you that one of those young women might give birth to the next Hitler or Stalin, a human monster who could go on to kill millions of your fellow humans on this level of the Tower. It didn't occur to you that you were meddling in events far beyond your ability to understand!"

No, he had not considered those things at all. Ellen was what he had considered. As Josie Quinn was what Robbie had considered. And together they had considered the others. Kids screaming, their skin turning to tallow and dripping off their bones, maybe dying the worst deaths God visits on His suffering people.

"Does that happen?" he whispered.

"We don't *know* what happens," the thing in the yellow coat said. "That's precisely the point. The experimental program you foolishly accessed can see clearly six months into the future...within a single narrow geographical area, that is. Beyond six months, predictive sight grows dim. Beyond a year, all is darkness. So you see, we don't know *what* you and your young friend may have done. And since we don't, there's no chance to repair the damage, if there was damage."

Your young friend. They knew about Robbie Henderson after all. Wesley's heart sank.

"Is there some sort of power controlling all this? There is, isn't there? When I accessed UR BOOKS for the first time, I saw a tower."

"All things serve the Tower," the man-thing in the yellow duster said, and touched the hideous button on its coat with a kind of reverence.

"Then how do you know I'm not serving it, too?"

They said nothing. Only stared at them with their black, predatory bird-eyes.

"I never ordered it, you know. I mean...I ordered a Kindle, that much is true, but I never ordered the one I got. It just came."

There was a long silence, and Wesley understood that his life was spinning inside it. Life as he knew it, at least. He might continue some sort of existence if these two creatures took him away in their loathsome red car, but it would be a dark existence, probably an imprisoned existence, and he guessed he would not retain his sanity for long.

“We think it was a mistake in shipping,” the young one said finally.

“But you don’t know for sure, do you? Because you don’t know where it came from. Or who sent it.”

More silence. Then the older of the two said: “All things serve the Tower.” He stood, and held out his hand. It shimmered and became a claw. Shimmered again and became a hand. “Give it to me, Wesley of Kentucky.”

Wesley of Kentucky didn’t have to be asked twice, although his hands were trembling so badly that he fumbled with the buckles of his briefcase for what felt like hours. At last the top sprang open, and he held the pink Kindle out to the older of the two. The creature stared at it with a crazed hunger that made Wesley feel like screaming.

“I don’t think it works anymore, anyw—”

The creature snatched it. For one second Wesley felt its skin and understood the creature’s flesh had its own thoughts. Howling thoughts that ran along their own unknowable circuits. This time he *did* scream...or tried to. What actually came out was a low, choked groan.

“This time we’re giving you a pass,” the young one said. “But if anything like this ever happens again...” It didn’t finish. It didn’t have to.

They moved to the door, the hems of their coats making loathsome liquid chuckling sounds. The older one went out, still holding the pink Kindle in its claw-hands. The other paused for a moment to look back at Wesley. “Do you understand how lucky you are?”

“Yes,” Wesley whispered.

“Then say thank you.”

“Thank you.”

It was gone without another word.

He couldn’t bring himself to sit on the sofa, or in the chair that had seemed—in the days before Ellen—to be his best friend in the world. He lay down on his bed and crossed his arms over his chest in an effort to stop the shudders that were whipping through him. He left the lights on because there was no sense turning them off. He felt

sure he would not sleep again for weeks. Perhaps never. He'd begin to drift off, then see those greedy black eyes and hear that voice saying *Do you understand how lucky you are?*

No, sleep was definitely out.

And with that, consciousness ceased.

VIII—Ellen

Wesley slept until the music-box tinkle of Pachelbel's "Canon in D" woke him at nine o'clock the next morning. If there were dreams (of pink Kindles, women in roadhouse parking lots, or low men in yellow coats), he did not remember them. All he knew was that someone was calling his cell, and it might be someone he wanted to talk to very badly.

He ran into the living room, but the ringing ceased before he could get the phone out of his briefcase. He flipped it open and saw YOU HAVE 1 NEW MESSAGE. He accessed it.

"Hey, pal," Don Allman's voice said. "You better check the morning paper."

That was all.

He no longer subscribed to the *Echo*, but old Mrs. Ridpath, his downstairs neighbor, did. He took the stairs two at a time, and there it was, sticking out of her mailbox. He reached for it, then hesitated. What if his deep sleep hadn't been natural? What if he had been anesthetized somehow, so he could be booted into a different Ur, one where the crash had happened after all? What if Don had called to prepare him? Suppose he unfolded the paper and saw the black border that was the newspaper world's version of funeral crepe?

"Please," he whispered, unsure if it was God or that mysterious dark tower he was praying to. "Please let it still be my Ur."

He took the paper in a numb hand and unfolded it. The border was there, boxing in the entire front page, but it was blue rather than black.

Meerkat blue.

The photo was the biggest he'd ever seen in the *Echo*; it took up half of the front page, under a headline reading **LADY MEERKATS TAKE BLUEGRASS, AND THE FUTURE LIES AHEAD!** The team was clustered on the hardwood of Rupp Arena. Three were hoisting a shiny silver trophy. Another—it was Josie—stood on a stepladder, twirling a net over her head.

Standing in front of her team, dressed in the prim blue slacks and blue blazer she invariably wore on game days, was Ellen Silverman.

She was smiling and holding up a handmade sign that read **I LOVE YOU WESLEY.**

Wesley thrust his hands, one still holding the newspaper, over his head and let out a yell that caused a couple of kids on the other side of the street to look around.

“Wassup?” one of them called.

“Sports fan!” Wesley called back, then raced back upstairs. He had a call to make.

A VERY TIGHT PLACE

Stephen King

Curtis Johnson rode his bike five miles every morning. He had stopped for a while after Betsy died, but found that without his morning exercise he was sadder than ever. So he took it up again. The only difference was that he stopped wearing his bike helmet. He rode two and a half miles down Gulf Boulevard, then turned around and rode back. He always kept to the bike lanes. He might not care if he lived or died, but he respected the rule of law.

Gulf Boulevard was the only road on Turtle Island. It ran past a lot of homes owned by millionaires. Curtis didn't notice them. For one thing, he was a millionaire himself. He had made his money the old-fashioned way, in the stock market. For another, he had no problem with any of the people living in the houses he passed. The only one he had a problem with was Tim Grunwald, alias The Motherfucker, and Grunwald lived in the other direction. Not the last lot on Turtle Island before Daylight Channel, but the second-to-last. It was the last lot that was the problem between them (one of the problems). That lot was the biggest, with the best view of the Gulf, and the only one without a house on it. The only things on it were scrub grass, sea oats, stunted palms, and a few Australian pines.

The nicest thing, the very nicest, about his morning rides was no phone. He was officially off the grid. Once he got back, the phone would seldom leave his hand, especially while the market was open. He was athletic; he would stride around the house using the cordless, occasionally returning to his office, where his computer would be scrolling the numbers. Sometimes he left the house to walk out to the road, and then he took his cell phone. Usually he would turn right, toward the stub end of Gulf Boulevard. Toward The Motherfucker's house. But he wouldn't go so far that Grunwald could see him; Curtis wouldn't give the man that satisfaction. He just went far enough to make sure Grunwald wasn't trying to pull a fast one with the Vinton Lot. Of course there was no way The Motherfucker could get heavy machinery past him, not even at night—Curtis slept lightly since there was no Betsy lying beside him. But he still checked, usually standing behind the last palm in a shady stretch of

two dozen. Just to be sure. Because destroying empty lots, burying them under tons of concrete, was Grunwald's goddam business.

And The Motherfucker was sly.

So far, though, all was well. If Grunwald did try to pull a fast one, Curtis was ready to empty the holes (legally speaking). Meanwhile, Grunwald had Betsy to answer for, and answer he would. Even if Curtis had largely lost his taste for the fray (he denied this to himself, but knew it was true), he would see that Grunwald answered for her. The Motherfucker would discover that Curtis Johnson had jaws of chrome ... jaws of chrome steel ... and when he took hold of a thing, he did not let go.

When he returned to his home on this particular Tuesday morning, with ten minutes still to go before the opening bell on Wall Street, Curtis checked his cell phone for messages, as he always did. Today there were two. One was from Circuit City, probably some salesman trying to sell him something under the guise of checking his satisfaction with the wall-hung flatscreen he'd purchased the month before.

When he scrolled down to the next message, he read this: 383-0910 TMF.

The Motherfucker. Even his Nokia knew who Grunwald was, because Curtis had taught it to remember. The question was, what did The Motherfucker want with him on a Tuesday morning in June?

Maybe to settle, and on Curtis's terms.

He allowed himself a laugh at this idea, then played the message. He was stunned to hear that was exactly what Grunwald did want—or appeared to want. Curtis supposed it could be some sort of ploy, but he didn't understand what Grunwald stood to gain by such a thing. And then there was the tone: heavy, deliberate, almost plodding. Maybe it wasn't sorrow, but it surely sounded like sorrow. It

was the way Curtis himself sounded all too often on the phone these days, as he tried to get his head back in the game.

“Johnson ... Curtis,” Grunwald said in his plodding voice. His recorded voice paused longer, as if debating the use of Curtis’s given name, then moved on in the same dead and lightless way. “I can’t fight a war on two fronts. Let’s end this. I’ve lost my taste for it. If I ever had a taste for it. I’m in a very tight place, neighbor.”

He sighed.

“I’m prepared to give up the lot, and for no financial consideration. I’ll also compensate you for your ... for Betsy. If you’re interested, you can find me at Durkin Grove Village. I’ll be there most of the day.” A long pause. “I go out there a lot now. In a way I still can’t believe the financing fell apart, and in a way I’m not surprised at all.” Another long pause. “Maybe you know what I mean.”

Curtis thought he did. He seemed to have lost his nose for the market. More to the point, he didn’t seem to care. He caught himself feeling something suspiciously like sympathy for The Motherfucker. That plodding voice.

“We used to be friends,” Grunwald went on. “Do you remember that? I do. I don’t think we can be friends again—things went too far for that, I guess—but maybe we could be neighbors again. Neighbor.” Another of those pauses. “If I don’t see you out at Grunwald’s Folly, I’ll just instruct my lawyer to settle. On your terms. But ...”

Silence, except for the sound of The Motherfucker breathing. Curtis waited. He was sitting at the kitchen table now. He didn’t know what he felt. In a little while he might, but for the time being, no.

“But I’d like to shake your hand and tell you I’m sorry about your damn dog.” There was a choked sound that might have been—incredible!—the sound of a sob, and then a click, followed by the phone-robot telling him there were no more messages.

Curtis sat where he was for a moment longer, in a bright bar of Florida sun that the air conditioner couldn't quite cool out, not even at this hour. Then he went into his study. The market was open; on his computer screen, the numbers had begun their endless crawl. He realized they meant nothing to him. He left it running but wrote a brief note for Mrs. Wilson—Had to go out—before leaving the house.

There was a motor scooter parked in the garage beside his BMW, and on the spur of the moment he decided to take it. He would have to nip across the main highway on the other side of the bridge, but it wouldn't be the first time.

He felt a pang of hurt and grief as he took the scooter's key from the peg and the other attachment on the ring jingled. He supposed that feeling would pass in time, but now it was almost welcome. Almost like welcoming a friend.

*

The troubles between Curtis and Tim Grunwald had started with Ricky Vinton, who had once been old and rich and then progressed to old and senile. Before progressing to dead, he'd sold his undeveloped lot at the end of Turtle Island to Curtis Johnson for one-point-five million dollars, taking Curtis's personal check for a hundred and fifty thousand as earnest money and in return writing Curtis a bill of sale on the back of an advertising circular.

Curtis felt a little like a hound for taking advantage of the old fellow, but it wasn't as if Vinton—owner of Vinton Wire and Cable—was going away to starve. And while a million-five might be considered ridiculously low for such a prime piece of Gulfside real estate, it wasn't insanely low, given current market conditions.

Well ... yes it was, but he and the old man had liked one another, and Curtis was one of those who believed all was fair in love and war, and that business was a subsidiary of the latter. The man's housekeeper—the same Mrs. Wilson who kept house for Curtis—

witnessed the signatures. In retrospect Curtis realized he should have known better than that, but he was excited.

A month or so after selling the undeveloped lot to Curtis Johnson, Vinton sold it to Tim Grunwald, alias The Motherfucker. This time the price was a more lucid five-point-six million, and this time Vinton—perhaps not such a fool after all, perhaps actually sort of a con man, even if he was dying—got half a million in earnest money.

Grunwald's bill of sale had been witnessed by The Motherfucker's yardman (who also happened to be Vinton's yardman). Also pretty shaky, but Curtis supposed Grunwald had been as excited as he, Curtis, had been. Only Curtis's excitement proceeded from the idea that he would be able to keep the end of Turtle Island clean, pristine, and quiet. Exactly the way he liked it.

Grunwald, on the other hand, saw it as the perfect site for development: one condominium or perhaps even two (when Curtis thought of two, he thought of them as The Motherfucker Twin Towers). Curtis had seen such developments before—in Florida they popped up like dandelions on an indifferently maintained lawn—and he knew what The Motherfucker would be inviting in: idiots who mistook retirement funds for the keys to the kingdom of heaven. There would be four years of construction, followed by decades of old men on bicycles with pee bags strapped to their scrawny thighs. And old women who wore sun visors, smoked Parliaments, and didn't pick up the droppings after their designer dogs shat on the beach. Plus, of course, ice cream-slathered grandbrats with names like Lindsay and Jayson. If he let it happen, Curtis knew, he would die with their howls of discontent—"You said we'd go to Disney World today!"—in his ears.

He would not let it happen. And it turned out to be easy. Not pleasant, and the lot didn't belong to him, might never belong to him, but at least it wasn't Grunwald's. It didn't even belong to the relatives who had appeared (like roaches in a Dumpster when a bright light is suddenly turned on), disputing the signatures of the witnesses on both agreements. It belonged to the lawyers and the courts.

Which was like saying it belonged to nobody.

Curtis could work with nobody.

The wrangling had gone on for two years now, and Curtis's legal fees were approaching a quarter of a million dollars. He tried to think of the money as a contribution to some particularly nice environmental group—Johnsonpeace instead of Greenpeace—but of course he couldn't deduct these contributions on his income tax. And Grunwald pissed him off. Grunwald made it personal, partly because he hated to lose (Curtis hated it, too, in those days; not so much now), and partly because he had personal problems.

Grunwald's wife had divorced him; that was Personal Problem Number One. She was Mrs. Motherfucker no more. Then, Personal Problem Number Two, Grunwald had needed some sort of operation. Curtis didn't know for sure it was cancer, he only knew that The Motherfucker came out of Sarasota Memorial twenty or thirty pounds lighter, and in a wheelchair. He had eventually discarded the wheelchair, but hadn't been able to put the weight back on. Wattles hung from his formerly firm neck.

There were also problems with his once fearsomely healthy company. Curtis had seen that for himself at the site of The Motherfucker's current scorched-earth campaign. That would be Durkin Grove Village, located on the mainland twenty miles east of Turtle Island. The place was a half-constructed ghost town. Curtis had parked on a knoll overlooking the silent suspension, feeling like a general surveying the ruins of an enemy encampment. Feeling that life was, all in all, his very own shiny red apple.

Betsy had changed everything. She was—had been—a Lowchen, elderly but still spry. When Curtis walked her on the beach, she always carried her little red rubber bone in her mouth. When Curtis wanted the TV remote, he only had to say "Fetch the idiot stick, Betsy," and she would pluck it from the coffee table and bring it to him in her mouth. It was her pride. And his, of course. She had been

his best friend for seventeen years. The French lion-dogs usually lived to no more than fifteen.

Then Grunwald had put in an electric fence between his property and Curtis's.

That Motherfucker.

It wasn't especially high voltage, Grunwald said he could prove that and Curtis believed him, but it had been of a voltage high enough to do for a slightly overweight old dog with a bad heart. And why an electric fence in the first place? The Motherfucker had spouted a lot of bullshit having to do with discouraging potential home-breakers—presumably creeping from Curtis's property to that upon which La Maison Motherfuckair reared its purple stucco head—but Curtis didn't believe it. Dedicated home-breakers would come in a boat, from the Gulf side. What he believed was that Grunwald, disgruntled about the Vinton Lot, had put in the electric fence for the express purpose of annoying Curtis Johnson. And perhaps hurting his beloved dog. As for actually killing his beloved dog? Curtis believed that had been a bonus.

He was not a weeping man, but he had wept when, prior to her cremation, he had removed Betsy's dog tag from her collar.

Curtis sued The Motherfucker for the price of the dog—twelve hundred dollars. If he could have sued for ten million—that was roughly how much pain he felt when he looked at the idiot stick lying, innocent of dogspit now and forever, on the coffee table—he would have done so in a heartbeat, but his lawyer told him that pain and suffering wouldn't fly in a civil suit. Those things were for divorces, not dogs. He would have to settle for the twelve hundred, and he meant to have it.

The Motherfucker's lawyers responded that the electric fence had been strung a full ten yards on Grunwald's side of the property line, and the battle—the second battle—was on. It had been raging for eight months now. Curtis believed the delaying tactics being

employed by The Motherfucker's lawyers suggested that they knew Curtis had a case. He also believed that their failure to propose a settlement, and Grunwald's failure to just cough up the twelve hundred, suggested that it had become as personal to Grunwald as it was to him. These lawyers were also costing them plenty. But of course, the matter was no longer about money.

Riding out along Route 17, through what had once been ranchland and was now just overgrown scrub ground (Grunwald had been raving mad to build out here, Curtis thought), Curtis only wished he felt happier about this turn of events. Victory was supposed to make your heart leap, and his wasn't. All he seemed to want was to see Grunwald, hear what he was actually proposing, and put all this shit behind them if the proposal wasn't too ridiculous. Of course that would probably mean the roach-relatives would get the Vinton Lot, and they might well decide to put up their own condo development, but did it even matter? It didn't seem to.

Curtis had his own problems to deal with, although his were mental rather than marital (God forbid), financial, or physical. They had begun not long after finding Betsy stiff and cold in the side yard. Others might have called these problems neuroses, but Curtis preferred to think of them as angst.

His current disenchantment with the stock market, which had fascinated him ceaselessly since he had discovered it at sixteen, was the most identifiable component of this angst, but by no means the only one. He had begun taking his pulse and counting his toothbrush strokes. He could no longer wear dark shirts, because he was plagued with dandruff for the first time since junior high school. Dead white crap plated up on his scalp and drifted down to his shoulders. If he scraped with the teeth of a comb, it came down in ghastly snow flurries. He hated this, but still sometimes found himself doing it while sitting at the computer, or while talking on the phone. Once or twice he'd scraped until he drew blood.

Scraping and scraping. Excavating that white deadness. Sometimes looking at the idiot stick on the coffee table and thinking (of course)

of how happy Betsy was when she brought it to him. Human eyes hardly ever looked that happy, especially not when the humans in question were doing chores.

A midlife crisis, Sammy said (Sammy was his once-a-week masseur). You need to get laid, Sammy said, but he didn't offer his own services, Curtis noticed.

Still, the phrase rang true—as true as any twenty-first-century newspeak, he supposed. Whether the Vinton Lot fuck-a-monkey show had provoked the crisis or the crisis had provoked the Vinton mess, he didn't know. What he did know was that he had come to think heart attack instead of indigestion each time he felt a transient, stabbing pain in his chest, that he had become obsessed with the notion that his teeth were going to fall out (even though they had never given him any particular trouble), and that when he'd gotten a cold in April, he had diagnosed himself as being on the verge of a complete immunological breakdown.

Plus this other little problem. This compulsion, which he hadn't told his doctor about. Or even Sammy, and he told Sammy everything.

It was on him now, fifteen miles inland on seldom-traveled Route 17, which had never been particularly busy and had now been rendered all but obsolescent by the 375 Extension. Right here with the green scrub pressing in on both sides (the man had been bonkers to build out here), with the bugs singing in high grass no cows had grazed for ten years or more and the power lines buzzing and the sun beating down like a padded hammer on his helmetless head.

He knew just thinking of the compulsion summoned it, but that was of no particular help. None at all, in fact.

He pulled over where a track marked DURKIN GROVE VILLAGE ROAD shot off to the left (grass was now growing up the center hump, an arrow pointing the way to failure) and put the Vespa in neutral. Then, while it purred contentedly between his legs, he forked the first two fingers of his right hand into a V and stuck them down

his throat. His gag reflex had grown numb over the last two or three months, and his hand was in almost all the way to the bracelets of fortune on his wrist before it finally happened.

Curtis leaned to one side and ejected his breakfast. It wasn't getting rid of the food that interested him; he was many things, but bulimic wasn't one of them. It wasn't even the vomiting part that he liked. What he liked was the gagging: that hard rejecting clench of the midsection, plus the accompanying yaw of the mouth and throat. The body was totally in gear, determined to oust the intruder.

The smells—green bushes, wild honeysuckle—were suddenly stronger. The light was brighter. The sun beat down more heavily than ever; the pad was off the hammer and he could feel the skin on the nape of his neck sizzling, the cells there maybe at this very moment turning outlaw and heading for the chaotic land of melanoma.

He didn't care. He was alive. He rammed his spread fingers down his throat again, scraping the sides. The rest of breakfast yurped up. The third time he produced only long strings of spittle, stained faintly pink with his throat's blood. Then he felt satisfied. Then he could go on toward Durkin Grove Village, The Motherfucker's half-built Xanadu out here in the silent bee-buzzing wilds of Charlotte County.

It occurred to him, as he putted modestly along the overgrown lane in the right-hand wheelrut, that Grunwald might not be the only one who was in a tight place these days.

*

Durkin Grove Village was a mess.

There were puddles in the ruts of the not-yet-paved streets and in the cellar holes of unfinished (in some cases not yet even framed) buildings. What Curtis saw below—half-built shops, a few pieces of shabby-looking construction equipment here and there, sagging yellow caution tape—was surely a blueprint for deep financial

trouble, perhaps even ruin. Curtis didn't know if The Motherfucker's preoccupation with the Vinton Lot—not to mention the decampment of his wife, his illness, and his legal problems concerning Curtis's dog—had been the cause of the man's current overextension or not, but he knew overextension was what it was. Even before continuing down to the open gate and seeing the sign posted there, he knew.

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Below this, some exuberant wit had spray-painted: DIAL
EXTENSION 69 AND ASK FOR THE CUNT-LICKER GENERAL!

The tar ended and the potholes began after the only three buildings that looked completed: two shops on one side of the street and a model home on the other. The model home was a faux Cape Cod that made Curtis's blood run cold. He didn't trust the Vespa on the unpaved surface, so he turned in beside a payloader that looked as if it had been parked there for a century or more—grass was growing in the dirt at the bottom of its partially raised scoop—put down the stand, and turned off the engine.

Silence poured in to fill the socket which had been occupied by the Vespa's fat purr. Then a crow cawed. It was answered by another. Curtis looked up and saw a trio of them poised on a scaffolding that enshrouded a partially finished brick building. Maybe it had been intended as a bank. Now it's Grunwald's tombstone, he thought, but the idea didn't even bring a smile to his lips. He felt like gagging himself again, and might even have done it, but farther down the deserted dirt street—at the far end, in fact—he saw a man standing beside a white sedan with a green palm tree on it. Above the palm tree: GRUNWALD. Below it: CONTRACTORS & BUILDERS. The man was waving to him. Grunwald was for some reason driving a company car today instead of his Porsche. Curtis supposed it wasn't impossible that Grunwald had sold the Porsche. It wasn't impossible to think the IRS had seized it, and might even seize Grunwald's Turtle Island property. Then the Vinton Lot would be the least of his worries.

I just hope they leave him enough to pay for my dog, Curtis thought. He waved back to Grunwald, flicked the red alarm switch below the ignition after removing the key (these things were only reflex; he did not think the Vespa was in any danger of being stolen, not out here, but he had been taught to take care of his things), and put the key in his pocket with his cell phone. Then he started down the dirt street—a Main Street that never was, and, it now seemed certain, never would be—to meet his neighbor and settle the trouble between them once and for all, if that were possible. He was careful to avoid the puddles left from the previous night's shower.

“Yo, neighbor!” Grunwald said as Curtis approached. He was wearing khakis and a T-shirt with his company's palm-tree logo on it. The shirt bagged on him. Except for hectic blotches of red high on his cheekbones and dark—almost black—circles under his eyes, his face was pale. And although he sounded cheerful, he looked sicker than ever. Whatever they tried to cut out of him, Curtis thought, they failed. Grunwald had one hand behind him. Curtis assumed it was in his back pocket. This turned out not to be true.

A little farther down the rutted and puddled dirt road was a trailer up on blocks. The on-site office, Curtis supposed. There was a notice encased in a protective plastic sleeve, hanging from a little plastic suction cup. There was a lot printed on it, but all Curtis could read (all he needed to read) were the words at the top: NO ENTRY.

Yes, The Motherfucker had fallen on hard times. Hard cheese on Tony, as Evelyn Waugh might have said.

“Grunwald?” It was enough to start with; considering what had happened to Betsy, it was all The Motherfucker deserved. Curtis stopped about ten feet from him, his legs slightly spread to avoid a puddle. Grunwald's legs were spread, too. It occurred to Curtis that this was a classic pose: gunfighters about to do their deal on the only street of a ghost town.

“Yo, neighbor!” Grunwald repeated, and this time he actually laughed. There was something familiar about his laugh. And why

not? Surely he had heard The Motherfucker laugh before. He couldn't remember just when, but surely he must have.

Behind Grunwald, across from the trailer and not far from the company car Grunwald had driven out here, stood a line of four blue Port-O-Sans. Weeds and nodding wedelia sprouted around their bases. The runoff from frequent June thunderstorms (such afternoon tantrums were a Gulf Coast specialty) had undercut the ground in front of them and turned it into a ditch. Almost a creek. It was filled with standing water now, the surface dusty and bleared with pollen, so that it cast back only a vague blue intimation of sky. The quartet of shithouses leaned forward like frost-heaved old gravestones. There must have been quite a crew out here at one time, because there was also a fifth. That one had actually fallen over and lay door-down in the ditch. It was the final touch, underlining the fact that this project—crazy to begin with—was now a dead letter.

One of the crows took off from the scaffolding around the unfinished bank and flapped across the hazy blue sky, cawing at the two men facing each other below. The bugs buzzed unconcernedly in the high grass. Curtis realized he could smell the Port-O-Sans; they must not have been pumped out in some time.

“Grunwald?” he said again. And then (because now something more seemed to be required): “How can I help you? Do we have something to discuss?”

“Well, neighbor, it's how I can help you. It's strictly down to that.” He started to laugh again, then choked it off. And Curtis knew why the sound was familiar. He'd heard it on his cell phone, at the end of The Motherfucker's message. It hadn't been a choked-off sob, after all. And the man didn't look sick—or not just sick. He looked mad.

Of course he's mad. He's lost everything. And you let him get you out here alone. Not wise, buddy. You didn't think it through.

No. Since Betsy's death, he had neglected to think a great many things through. Hadn't seemed worth the trouble. But this time he

should have taken the time.

Grunwald was smiling. Or at least showing his teeth. “I notice you didn’t wear your helmet, neighbor.” He shook his head, still smiling that cheery sick man’s smile. His hair flapped against his ears. It looked as if it hadn’t been washed in a while. “A wife wouldn’t let you get away with careless shit like that, I bet, but of course guys like you don’t have wives, do they? They have dogs.” He stretched it out, turning it into something from *The Dukes of Hazzard*: dawwwgs.

“Fuck this, I’m taillights,” Curtis said. His heart was hammering, but he didn’t think it showed in his voice. He hoped not. All at once it seemed very important that Grunwald not know he was scared. He started to turn around, back the way he’d come.

“I thought the Vinton Lot might get you out here,” Grunwald said, “but I knew you’d come if I added in that butt-ugly dog of yours. I heard her yelp, you know. When she ran into the fence. Trespassing bitch.”

Curtis turned back, unbelieving.

The Motherfucker was nodding, his lank hair framing his pale smiling face. “Yes,” he said. “I went over and saw her lying on her side. Little ragbag with eyes. I watched her die.”

“You said you were away,” Curtis said. His voice sounded small in his own ears, a child’s voice.

“Well, neighbor, I sure did lie about that. I was back early from my doctor’s, and feeling sad that I had to turn him down after he’d worked so hard at persuading me to take the chemo, and then I saw that ragbag of yours lying in a puddle of her own puke, panting, flies all around her, and I cheered right up. I thought, ‘Goddam, there is justice. There is justice after all.’ It was only a low-voltage, low-current cattle fence—I was absolutely honest about that—but it certainly did the job, didn’t it?”

Curtis Johnson got the full sense of this after a moment of utter, perhaps willful, incomprehension. Then he started forward, rolling his hands into fists. He hadn't hit anyone since a playground scuffle when he was in the third grade, but he meant to hit someone now. He meant to hit The Motherfucker. The bugs still buzzed obliviously in the grass, and the sun still hammered down—nothing in the essential world had changed except for him. The uncaring listlessness was gone. He cared about at least one thing: beating Grunwald until he cried and bled and crawfished. And he thought he could do it. Grunwald was twenty years older, and not well. And when The Motherfucker was on the ground—hopefully with his newly broken nose in one of those nasty puddles—Curtis would say, That was for my ragbag. Neighbor.

Grunwald took one compensatory step backward. Then he brought his hand out from behind his back. In it was a large handgun. “Stop right there, neighbor, or I'll put an extra hole in your head.”

Curtis almost didn't stop. The gun seemed unreal. Death, out of that black eyehole? Surely not possible. But—

“It's a .45 AMT Hardballer,” Grunwald said, “loaded with soft-point ammo. I got it the last time I was in Vegas. At a gun show. Just after Ginny left, that was. I thought I might shoot her, but I find I've lost all interest in Ginny. Basically, she's just another anorexic Suncoast cunt with Styrofoam tits. You, however—you're something different. You're malevolent, Johnson. You're a fucking gay witch.”

Curtis stopped. He believed.

“But now you're in my power, as they say.” The Motherfucker laughed, once more choking it off so it sounded strangely like a sob. “I don't even have to hit you dead on. This is a powerful gun, or so I was told. Even a hit in the hand would render you dead, because it would tear your hand right off. And in the midsection? Your guts'd fly forty feet. So do you want to try it? Do you feel lucky, punk?”

Curtis did not want to try it. He did not feel lucky. The truth was belated but obvious: he had been cozened out here by a complete barking lunatic.

“What do you want? I’ll give you what you want.” Curtis swallowed. There was an insectile click in his throat. “Do you want me to call off the suit about Betsy?”

“Don’t call her Betsy,” The Motherfucker said. He had the gun—the Hardballer, what a grotesque name—pointed at Curtis’s face, and now the hole looked very big indeed. Curtis realized he would probably be dead before he heard the gun’s report, although he might see flame—or the beginning of flame—spurt from the barrel. He also realized that he was perilously close to pissing himself. “Call her ‘my ass-faced ragbag bitch.’”

“My ass-faced ragbag bitch,” Curtis repeated at once, and didn’t feel the slightest twinge of disloyalty to Betsy’s memory.

“Now say, ‘And how I loved to lick her smelly cunt,’” The Motherfucker further instructed.

Curtis was silent. He was relieved to discover there were still limits. Besides, if he said that, The Motherfucker would only want him to say something else.

Grunwald did not seem particularly disappointed. He wagged the gun. “Just joking about that one, anyway.”

Curtis was silent. Part of his mind was roaring with panic and confusion, but another part seemed clearer than it had been since Betsy died. Maybe clearer than it had been in years. That part was musing on the fact that he really could die out here.

He thought, What if I never get to eat another slice of bread?, and for a moment his mind united—the confused part and the clear part—in a desire to live so strong it was terrible.

“What do you want, Grunwald?”

“For you to get into one of those Port-O-Sans. The one on the end.”
He wagged the gun again, this time to the left.

Curtis turned to look, feeling a small thread of hope. If Grunwald intended to lock him up ... that was good, right? Maybe now that he'd scared Curtis and blown off a little steam, Grunwald intended to stash him and make his getaway. Or maybe he'll go home and shoot himself, Curtis thought. Take that old .45 Hardballer cancer cure. A well-known folk remedy.

He said, “All right. I can do that.”

“But first I want you to empty your pockets. Dump them right out on the ground.”

Curtis pulled out his wallet, then, reluctantly, his cell phone. A little sheaf of bills in a money clip. His dandruff-flecked comb.

“That it?”

“Yes.”

“Turn those pocketsets inside out, Precious. I want to see for myself.”

Curtis turned out his left front pocket, then his right. A few coins and the key to his motor scooter fell to the ground, where they glittered in the hazy sun.

“Good,” Grunwald said. “Now the back ones.”

Curtis turned out his rear pockets. There was an old shopping list jotted on a scrap of paper. Nothing else.

Grunwald said, “Kick your cell phone over here.”

Curtis tried, and missed completely.

“You asshole,” Grunwald said, and laughed. The laugh ended in that same choking, sobbing sound, and for the first time in his life, Curtis completely understood murder. The clear part of his mind registered this as a wonderful thing, because murder—previously inconceivable to him—turned out to be as simple as reducing fractions.

“Hurry the fuck up,” Grunwald said. “I want to go home and get in the hot tub. Forget the painkillers, that hot tub is the only thing that works. I’d live in that baby if I could.” But he did not look particularly anxious to be gone. His eyes were sparkling.

Curtis kicked at the phone again and this time connected, sending it skittering all the way to Grunwald’s feet.

“He shoots, he scores!” The Motherfucker cried. He dropped to one knee, picked up the Nokia (never taking the gun off Curtis), then straightened up with a small, effortful grunt. He slipped Curtis’s phone into the right pocket of his pants. He pointed the muzzle of the gun briefly at the litter lying on the road. “Now pick up the rest of your crap and put it back in your pockets. Get all the change. Who knows, you might find a snack machine in there.”

Curtis did it silently, again feeling a little pang as he looked at the attachment on the Vespa’s keyring. Some things didn’t change even in extremis, it seemed.

“You forgot your shopping list, Fucko. You don’t want to forget that. Everything back in your pockets. As for your phone, I’m going to put that back on its little charger in your little housie. After I delete the message I left you, that is.”

Curtis picked up the scrap of paper—OJ, Roloids, pce of fish, Eng muffins, it said—and stuffed it back into one of his rear pockets. “You can’t do that,” he said.

The Motherfucker raised his bushy old-man eyebrows. “Want to share?”

“The house alarm’s set.” Curtis couldn’t remember if he had set it or not. “Also, Mrs. Wilson will be there by the time you get back to Turtle.”

Grunwald gave him an indulgent look. The fact that it was mad indulgence made it terrifying instead of just infuriating. “It’s Thursday, neighbor. Your housekeeper only comes in during the afternoons on Thursdays and Fridays. Did you think I wasn’t keeping an eye on you? Just like you’ve been keeping one on me?”

“I don’t—”

“Oh, I see you, peeking from behind your favorite palm tree on the road—did you think I didn’t?—but you never saw me, did you? Because you’re lazy. And lazy people are blind people. Lazy people get what they deserve.” His voice lowered confidentially. “All gay people are lazy; it’s been scientifically proven. The gay lobby tries to cover it up, but you can find the studies on the Internet.”

In his mounting dismay, Curtis hardly noticed this last. If he’s been charting Mrs. Wilson ... Christ, how long has he been brooding and planning?

At least since Curtis had sued him over Betsy. Maybe even before.

“As for your alarm code ...” The Motherfucker loosed his sobbing laugh again. “I’ll let you in on a little secret: your system was put in by Hearn Security, and I’ve been working with them for almost thirty years. I could have the security codes for any Hearn-serviced home on the Island, if I wanted. But, as it happens, the only one I wanted was yours.” He sniffed, spat on the ground, then coughed a loose rumbling cough that came from deep in his chest. It sounded as if it hurt (Curtis hoped so), but the gun never wavered. “I don’t think you set it, anyway. Got your mind on blowjobs and such.”

“Grunwald, can’t we—”

“No. We can’t. You deserve this. You earned it, you bought it, you got it. Get in the fucking shithouse.”

Curtis started toward the Port-O-Sans, but aimed for the one on the far right instead of the far left.

“Nope, nope,” Grunwald said. Patiently, as if speaking to a child. “The one on the other end.”

“That one’s leaning too far,” Curtis said. “If I get in, it might fall over.”

“Nope,” Grunwald said. “That thing’s as solid as your beloved stock market. Special sides is why. But I’m sure you’ll enjoy the smell. Guys like you spend a lot of time in crappers, you must like the smell. You must love the smell.” Suddenly the gun poked into Curtis’s buttocks. Curtis gave a small, startled scream, and Grunwald laughed. That Motherfucker. “Now get in there before I decide to turn your old tan track into a brand-new superhighway.”

Curtis had to lean across the ditch of still, scummy water, and because the Port-O-San was leaning, the door swung out and almost hit him in the face when it came off the latch. This occasioned another burst of laughter from Grunwald, and at the sound, Curtis was once more visited with thoughts of murder. All the same, it was amazing how engaged he felt. How suddenly in love with the green smells of the foliage and the hazy look of the blue Florida sky. How much he longed to eat a piece of bread—even a slice of Wonder Bread would be a gourmet treat; he would eat it with a napkin in his lap and choose a complementary vintage from his little wine closet. He had gained a whole new perspective on life. He only hoped he would live to enjoy it. And if The Motherfucker just intended to lock him in, maybe he would.

He thought (it was as random and as unprompted as his thought about the bread): If I get out of this, I’m going to start giving money to Save the Children.

“Get in there, Johnson.”

“I tell you it’ll fall over!”

“Who’s the construction guy here? It won’t fall over if you’re careful. Get in.”

“I don’t understand why you’re doing this!”

Grunwald laughed unbelievably. Then he said, “You get your ass in there or I will blow it off, so help me God.”

Curtis stepped across the ditch and into the Port-O-San. It rocked forward alarmingly under his weight. He cried out and leaned over the bench with the closed toilet seat in it, splaying his hands against the back wall. And while he was standing there like a suspect about to be frisked, the door slammed shut behind him. The sunlight was gone. He was suddenly in hot, deep shadows. He looked back over his shoulder and the Port-O-San rocked again, on the very edge of balance.

There was a knock on the door. Curtis could imagine The Motherfucker out there, leaning over the ditch, one hand braced on the blue siding, the other fisted up to knock with. “Comfy in there? Snug?”

Curtis made no reply. At least with Grunwald leaning on the Port-O-San’s door, the damned thing had steadied.

“Sure you are. Snug as a bug in a whatever.”

There was another thump, and then the toilet rocked forward again. Grunwald had removed his weight from it. Curtis once more assumed the position, standing on the balls of his feet, bending all his will to keeping the stinking cubicle more or less upright. Sweat was trickling down his face, stinging a shaving cut on the left jawline. This made him think of his own bathroom, usually taken for granted, with loving nostalgia. He would give every dollar in his retirement fund to be there, razor in his right hand, watching blood trickle through the shaving cream on the left-hand side while some stupid

pop song played from the clock radio beside his bed. Something by The Carpenters or Don Ho.

It's going over this time, going over for sure, that was his plan all along—

But the Port-O-San steadied instead of tumbling over. All the same it was close to going, very close. Curtis stood on tiptoe with his hands braced against the wall and his midsection arched over the bench seat, becoming aware now of how badly the hot little cubicle smelled, even with the seat closed. There was the odor of disinfectant—it would be the blue stuff, of course—mingling with the stench of decaying human waste, and that made it somehow even worse.

When Grunwald spoke again, his voice came from beyond the rear wall. He had stepped over the ditch and circled around to the back of the Port-O-San. Curtis was so surprised he almost recoiled, but managed not to. Still, he couldn't suppress a jerk. His splayed hands momentarily left the wall. The Port-O-San tottered. He brought his hands back to the wall again, leaning forward as far as he could, and it steadied.

"How you doing, neighbor?"

"Scared to death," Curtis said. His hair had fallen onto his forehead, it was sticking in the sweat there, but he was afraid to flick it back. Even that much extra movement might send the Port-O-San tumbling. "Let me out. You've had your fun."

"If you think I'm having fun, you're very much mistaken," The Motherfucker said in a pedantic voice. "I've thought about this a long time, neighbor, and finally decided it was necessary—the only course of action. And it had to be now, because if I waited much longer, I'd no longer be able to trust my body to do what I needed it to do."

"Grunwald, we can settle this like men. I swear we can."

“Swear all you like, I would never take the word of a man like you,” he said in that same pedantic voice. “Any man who takes the word of a faggot deserves what he gets.” And then, yelling so loud his voice broke into splinters: “YOU GUYS THINK YOU’RE SO SMART! HOW SMART DO YOU FEEL NOW?”

Curtis said nothing. Each time he thought he was getting a handle on The Motherfucker’s madness, new vistas opened before him.

At last, in a calmer tone, Grunwald went on.

“You want an explanation. You think you deserve one. Possibly you do.”

Somewhere a crow cawed. To Curtis, in his hot little box, it sounded like laughter.

“Did you think I was joking when I called you a gay witch? I was not. Does that mean you know you’re a, well, a malevolent supernatural force sent to try me and test me? I don’t know. I don’t. I’ve spent many a sleepless night since my wife took her jewelry and left thinking about this question—among others—and I still don’t. You probably don’t.”

“Grunwald, I assure you I’m not—”

“Shut up. I’m talking here. And of course, that’s what you’d say, isn’t it? Regardless of whether you knew or not, it’s what you’d say. Look at the testimonies of various witches in Salem. Go on, look. I have. It’s all on the Internet. They swore they weren’t witches, and when they thought it would get them out of death’s receiving room they swore they were, but very few of them actually knew for sure themselves! That becomes clear when you look at it with your enlightened ... you know, enlightened ... your enlightened whatever. Mind or whatever. Hey neighbor, how is it when I do this?”

Suddenly The Motherfucker—sick but apparently still quite strong—began to rock the Port-O-San. Curtis was almost thrown against the

door, which would have resulted in disaster for sure.

“Stop it!” he roared. “Stop doing that!”

Grunwald laughed indulgently. The Port-O-San stopped rocking. But Curtis thought the angle of the floor was steeper than it had been. “What a baby you are. It’s as solid as the stock market, I tell you!”

A pause.

“Of course ... there is this: all faggots are liars, but not all liars are faggots. It’s not a balancing equation, if you see what I mean. I’m as straight as an arrow, always have been, I’d fuck the Virgin Mary and then go to a barn dance, but I lied to get you out here, I freely admit it, and I might be lying now.”

That cough again—deep and dark and almost certainly painful.

“Let me out, Grunwald. I beg you. I am begging you.”

A long pause, as if The Motherfucker were considering this. Then he resumed his previous scripture.

“In the end—when it comes to witches—we can’t rely on confessions,” he said. “We can’t even rely on testimony, because it might be cocked. When you’re dealing with witches, the subjective gets all ... it gets all ... you know. We can only rely on the evidence. So I considered the evidence in my case. Let’s look at the facts. First, you fucked me on the Vinton Lot. That was the first thing.”

“Grunwald, I never—”

“Shut up, neighbor. Unless you want me to tip over your happy little home, that is. In that case, you can talk all you want. Is that what you want?”

“No!”

“Good call. I don’t know exactly why you fucked me, but I believe you did it because you were afraid I meant to stick a couple of condos out there on Turtle Point. In any case, the evidence—namely, your ridiculous so-called bill of sale—indicates that fuckery was what it was, pure and simple. You claim that Ricky Vinton meant to sell you that lot for one million, five hundred thousand dollars. Now, neighbor, I ask you. Would any judge and jury in the world believe that?”

Curtis didn’t reply. He was afraid to even clear his throat now, and not just because it might set The Motherfucker off; it might tip the precariously balanced Port-O-San over. He was afraid it might go over if he so much as lifted a little finger from the back wall. Probably that was stupid, but maybe it wasn’t.

“Then the relatives swooped in, complicating a situation that was already complicated enough—by your gayboy meddling! And you were the one who called them. You or your lawyer. That’s obvious, a, you know, QED type of situation. Because you like things just the way they are.”

Curtis remained silent, letting this go unchallenged.

“That’s when you threw your curse. Must have been. Because the evidence bears it out. ‘You don’t need to see Pluto to deduce Pluto is there.’ Some scientist said that. He figured out Pluto existed by observing the irregularities in some other planet’s orbit, did you know that? Deducing witchcraft is like that, Johnson. You have to check the evidence and look for irregularities in the orbit of your, you know, your whatever. Life. Plus, your spirit darkens. It darkens. I felt that happening. Like an eclipse. It—”

He coughed some more. Curtis stood in the ready-to-be-frisked position, butt out, stomach arched over the toilet where Grunwald’s carpenters had once sat down to take care of business after their morning coffee kicked in.

“Next, Ginny left me,” The Motherfucker said. “She’s currently living on Cape Cod. She says she’s there by herself, of course she does,

because she wants that alimony—they all do—but I know better. If that randy bitch didn't have a cock to pole-vault on twice a day, she'd eat chocolate truffles in front of American Idol until she exploded.

“Then the IRS. Those bastards came next, with their laptops and questions. ‘Did you do this, did you do that, where’s the paperwork on the other?’ Was that witchcraft, Johnson? Or maybe fuckery of a more, I don’t know, ordinary kind? Like you picking up the telephone and saying, ‘Audit this guy, he’s got a lot more cake in his pantry than he’s letting on.’”

“Grunwald, I never called—”

The Port-O-San shook. Curtis rocked backward, sure that this time

...

But once more the Port-O-San settled. Curtis was starting to feel woozy. Woozy and pukey. It wasn't just the smell; it was the heat. Or maybe it was both together. He could feel his shirt sticking to his chest.

“I’m laying out the evidence,” Grunwald said. “You shut up when I’m laying out the evidence. Order in the fucking court.”

Why was it so hot in here? Curtis looked up and saw no roof vents. Or—there were, but they were covered over. By what looked like a piece of sheet metal. Three or four holes had been punched into it, letting in some light but absolutely no breeze. The holes were bigger than quarters, smaller than silver dollars. He looked over his shoulder and saw another line of holes, but the two door vents were also almost completely covered.

“They’ve frozen my assets,” Grunwald said in a heavy put-upon voice. “Did an audit first, said it was all just routine, but I know what they do, and I knew what was coming.”

Of course you did, because you were guilty as hell.

“But even before the audit, I developed this cough. That was your work, too, of course. Went to the doctor. Lung cancer, neighbor, and it’s spread to my liver and stomach and fuck knows what else. All the soft parts. Just what a witch would go for. I’m surprised you didn’t put it in my balls and up my ass as well, although I’m sure it’ll get there in good time. If I let it. But I won’t. That’s why, although I think I’ve got this business out here covered, my, you know, ass in diapers, it doesn’t matter even if I don’t. I’m going to put a bullet through my head pretty soon. From this very gun, neighbor. While I’m in my hot tub.”

He sighed sentimentally.

“That’s the only place I’m happy anymore. In my hot tub.”

Curtis realized something. Maybe it was hearing The Motherfucker say I think I’ve got this business out here covered, but more likely he had known for some time now. The Motherfucker meant to tip the Port-O-San over. He was going to do that if Curtis blubbered and protested; he was going to do it if Curtis held his peace. It didn’t really matter. But for the time being, he held his peace anyway. Because he wanted to stay upright as long as possible—yes, of course—but also out of dreadful fascination. Grunwald wasn’t speaking metaphorically; Grunwald actually believed Curtis Johnson was some kind of sorcerer. His brain had to be rotting along with the rest of him.

“LUNG CANCER!” Grunwald proclaimed to his empty, deserted development—and then began coughing again. Crows cawed in protest. “I quit smoking thirty years ago, and I get lung cancer NOW?”

“You’re crazy,” Curtis said.

“Sure, the world would say so. That was the plan, wasn’t it? That was the fucking PLAAAAN. And then, on top of everything else, you sue me over your damn ass-faced dog? Your damn dog that was on MY PROPERTY? And what was the purpose of that? After you’d

taken my lot, my wife, my business, and my life, what possible purpose? Humiliation, of course! Insult to injury! Coals to Newcastle! Witchcraft! And do you know what the Bible says? Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live! Everything that's happened to me is your fault, and thou shalt not suffer a witch ... TO LIVE !”

Grunwald shoved the Port-O-San. He must have really put his shoulder into it, because there was no hesitation this time, no tottering. Curtis, momentarily weightless, fell backward. The latch should have broken under his weight, but didn't. The Motherfucker must have done something to that, too.

Then his weight returned and he crashed down on his back as the portable toilet hit the ground door-first. His teeth snapped shut on his tongue. The back of his head connected with the door and he saw stars. The lid of the toilet opened like a mouth. Brown-black fluid, thick as syrup, vomited out. A decomposing turd landed on his crotch. Curtis gave a cry of revulsion, batted it aside, then wiped his hand on his shirt, leaving a brown stain. A vile creek was spilling out of the gaping toilet seat. It ran down the side of the bench seat and pooled around his sneakers. A Reese's Peanut Butter Cup wrapper floated in it. Streamers of toilet paper hung out of the toilet's mouth. It looked like New Year's Eve in hell. This absolutely could not be happening. It was a nightmare left over from childhood.

“How's the smell in there now, neighbor?” The Motherfucker called. He was laughing and coughing. “Just like home, isn't it? Think of it as a twenty-first-century gayboy ducking stool, why don't you? All you need is that gayboy Senator and a pile of Victoria's Secret undies and you could have a lingerie party!”

Curtis's back was wet, too. He realized the Port-O-San must have landed in or just bridged the water-filled ditch. Water was seeping in through the holes in the door.

“Mostly these portable toilets are just thin molded plastic—you know, the ones you see at truck stops or turnpike rest areas—and you could punch right through the walls or the roof, if you were

dedicated. But at construction sites, we sheet-metal the sides. Cladding, it's called. Otherwise, people come along and punch holes through them. Vandals, just for fun, or gayboys like you. To make what they call 'glory holes.' Oh yes, I know about those things. I have all the information, neighbor. Or kids will come along and huck rocks through the roofs, just to hear the sound it makes. It's a popping sound, like popping a great big paper bag. So we sheet those, too. Of course it makes it hotter, but that's actually an efficiency thing. Nobody wants to spend fifteen minutes reading a magazine in a shithouse as hot as a Turkish prison cell."

Curtis turned over. He was lying in a brackish, smelly puddle. There was a piece of toilet paper wrapped around his wrist, and he stripped it away. He saw a brown smear—some long-since-laid-off construction worker's leavings—on the paper and began to cry. He was lying in shit and toilet paper, more water was bubbling in through the door, and it wasn't a dream. Somewhere not too far distant his Macintosh was scrolling up numbers from Wall Street, and here he lay in a puddle of pisswater with an old black turd curled in the corner and a gaping toilet seat not far above his heels, and it wasn't a dream. He would have sold his soul to wake up in his own bed, clean and cool.

"Let me out! GRUNWALD, PLEASE!"

"Can't. It's all arranged," The Motherfucker said in a businesslike voice. "You came out here to do a little sightseeing—a little gloating. You felt a call of nature, and there were the porta-potties. You stepped into the one on the end and it fell over. End of story. When you're found—when you're finally found—the cops will see they're all leaning, because the afternoon rains have undercut them. They'll have no way of knowing your current abode was leaning a little more than the others. Or that I took your cell phone. They'll just assume you left it at home, you silly sissy. The situation will look very clear to them. The evidence, you know—it always comes back to the evidence."

He laughed. No coughing this time, just the warm, self-satisfied laugh of a man who has covered all the bases. Curtis lay in filthy water that was now two inches deep, felt it soaking through his shirt and pants to his skin, and wished The Motherfucker would die of a sudden stroke or heart attack. Fuck the cancer; let him drop right out there on the unpaved street of his stupid bankrupt development. Preferably on his back, so the birds could peck out his eyes.

If that happened, I'd die in here.

True, but that was what Grunwald had planned from the first, so what difference?

“They’ll see there was no robbery; your money is still in your pocket. So’s the key to your motor scooter. Those things are very unsafe, by the way; almost as bad as ATVs. And without a helmet! Shame on you, neighbor. I noticed you set the alarm, though, and that’s fine. A nice touch, in fact. You don’t even have a pen to write a note on the wall with. If you’d had one, I would have taken that, too, but you don’t. It’s going to look like a tragic accident.”

He paused. Curtis could picture him out there with hellish clarity. Standing there in his too-big clothes with his hands stuffed in his pockets and his unwashed hair clumping over his ears. Ruminating. Talking to Curtis but also talking to himself, looking for loopholes even now, even after what must have been weeks of sleepless nights spent planning this.

“Of course, a person can’t plan for everything. There are always wild cards in the deck. Deuces and jacks, man with the axe, natural sevens take all. That kind of thing. And chances of anyone coming out here and finding you? While you’re still alive, that is? Low, I’d say. Very low. And what have I got to lose?” He laughed, sounding delighted with himself. “Are you lying in the shit, Johnson? I hope so.”

Curtis looked at the coil of excrement he had shoved off his pants, but said nothing. There was a low buzzing. Flies. Only a few, but

even a few was too many, in his opinion. They were escaping from the gaping toilet seat. They must have been trapped in the collection tank that should have been below him instead of lying at his feet.

“I’m going now, neighbor, but consider this: you are suffering a true, you know, witchly fate. And like the man said: in the shithouse, no one can hear you scream.”

Grunwald started away. Curtis could track him by the diminishing sound of his coughing laughter.

“Grunwald! Grunwald, come back!”

Grunwald called: “Now you’re the one in a tight place. A very tight place indeed.”

Then—he should have expected it, did expect it, but it was still unbelievable—he heard the company car with the palm tree on the side starting up.

“Come back, you Motherfucker!”

But now it was the sound of the car that was diminishing, as Grunwald drove first up the unpaved street (Curtis could hear the wheels splashing through the puddles), then up the hill, past where a very different Curtis Johnson had parked his Vespa. The Motherfucker gave a single blip of his horn—cruel and cheery—and then the sound of the engine merged with the sound of the day, which was nothing but the buzz of the insects in the grass and the hum of the flies that had escaped from the waste tank and the drone of a far-off plane where the people in first class might be eating Brie on crackers.

A fly lit on Curtis’s arm. He brushed it away. It landed on the coil of turd and commenced its lunch. Suddenly the stench of the disturbed waste tank seemed like a living thing, like a brown-black hand crawling down Curtis’s throat. But the smell of old decaying crap

wasn't the worst; the worst was the smell of the disinfectant. It was the blue stuff. He knew it was the blue stuff.

He did a sit-up—there was just room—and vomited between his spread knees, into the puddled water and floating strands of toilet paper. After his earlier adventures in regurgitation there wasn't much left but bile. He sat bent over and panting, hands behind him and braced against the door he was now sitting on, the shaving cut by his jawline throbbing and stinging. Then he heaved again, this time producing only a belch that sounded like the buzz of a cicada.

And, oddly enough, he felt better. Somehow honest. That had been earned vomiting. No fingers down the throat needed. As far as his dandruff went, who knew? Perhaps he could gift the world with a new treatment: the Aged Urine Rinse. He would be sure to check his scalp for improvement when he got out of here. If he got out of here.

Sitting up, at least, was no problem. It was fearsomely hot, and the stench was terrible (he didn't want to think what might have been stirred up in the holding tank, and at the same time couldn't push such thoughts away), but at least there was headroom.

“Must count blessings,” he muttered. “Must count those sons of bitches carefully.”

Yes, and take stock. That would be good, too. The water he was sitting in wasn't getting any deeper, and that was probably another blessing. He wasn't going to drown. Not, that was, unless the afternoon showers turned into downpours. He had seen it happen. And it was no good telling himself he'd be out of here by afternoon, of course he would, because that kind of magical thinking would be playing right into The Motherfucker's hands. He couldn't just sit here, thanking God he at least had some headroom, and waiting for rescue.

Maybe someone from the Charlotte County Department of Building and Planning will come out. Or a team of headhunters from the IRS.

Nice to imagine, but he had an idea it wasn't going to happen. The Motherfucker would have taken those possibilities into consideration, too. Of course some bureaucrat or team of them might take an unscheduled swing by here, but counting on it would be as stupid as hoping that Grunwald would have a change of heart. And Mrs. Wilson would assume he'd gone to an afternoon movie in Sarasota, as he often did.

He rapped on the walls, first the left, then the right. On both sides he felt hard metal just beyond the thin and yielding plastic. Cladding. He got up on his knees, and this time he did bump his head, but hardly noticed. What he saw was not encouraging: the flat ends of the screws holding the unit together. The heads were on the outside. This wasn't a shithouse; it was a coffin.

At this thought, his moment of clarity and calm vanished. Panic descended in its place. He began to hammer on the walls of the toilet, screaming to be let out. He threw himself from side to side like a child having a tantrum, trying to roll the Port-O-San over so he could at least free the door, but the fucking thing hardly moved at all. The fucking thing was heavy. The cladding that sheathed it made it heavy.

Heavy like a coffin! his mind shrieked. In his panic, every other thought had been banished. Heavy like a coffin! Like a coffin! A coffin!

He didn't know how long he went on like that, but at some point he tried to stand up, as if he could burst through the wall now facing the sky like Superman. He hit his head again, this time much harder. He fell forward on his stomach. His hand splatted into something gooey—something that smeared—and he wiped it on the seat of his jeans. He did this without looking. His eyes were squeezed shut. Tears trickled from the corners. In the blackness behind his lids, stars zoomed and exploded. He wasn't bleeding—he supposed that was good, one more goddam blessing to count—but he had almost knocked himself out.

“Calm down,” he said. He got up on his knees again. His head was down, his hair hanging, his eyes closed. He looked like a man who was praying, and he supposed he was. A fly did a touch-and-go on the nape of his neck. “Going nuts won’t help, he’d love it if he heard you screaming and carrying on, so calm down, don’t give him what he’d love, just calm the fuck down and think about this.”

What was there to think about? He was trapped.

Curtis sat back against the door and put his face in his hands.

*

Time passed and the world went on.

The world did its thing.

On Route 17, a few vehicles—mostly workhorses; farm trucks bound for either the markets in Sarasota or the whole-foods store in Nokomis, the occasional tractor, the postman’s station wagon with the yellow lights on the roof—trundled by. None took the turnoff to Durkin Grove Village.

Mrs. Wilson arrived at Curtis’s house, let herself in, read the note Mr. Johnson had left on the kitchen table, and began to vacuum. Then she ironed clothes in front of the afternoon soap operas. She made a macaroni casserole, stuck it in the fridge, then jotted simple instructions concerning its preparation—Bake 350, 45 mins—and left them on the table where Curtis’s note had been. When thunder began to mutter out over the Gulf of Mexico, she left early. She often did this when it rained. Nobody down here knew how to drive in the rain, they treated every shower like a nor’easter in Vermont.

In Miami, the IRS agent assigned to the Grunwald case ate a Cuban sandwich. Instead of a suit, he wore a tropical shirt with parrots on it. He was sitting under an umbrella at a sidewalk restaurant. There was no rain in Miami. He was on vacation. The Grunwald case would

still be there when he got back; the wheels of government ground slow but exceedingly fine.

Grunwald relaxed in his patio hot tub, dozing, until the approaching afternoon storm woke him with the sound of thunder. He hauled himself out and went inside. As he closed the sliding glass door between the patio and the living room, the rain began to fall. Grunwald smiled. "This'll cool you off, neighbor," he said.

The crows had once more taken up station on the scaffolding which clasped the half-finished bank on three sides, but when thunder cracked almost directly overhead and the rain began to fall they took wing and sought shelter in the woods, cawing their displeasure at being disturbed.

In the Port-O-San—it seemed he'd been locked in here for at least three years—Curtis listened to the rain on the roof of his prison. The roof that had been the rear side until The Motherfucker tipped it over. The rain tapped at first, then beat, then roared. At the height of the storm, it was like being in a telephone booth lined with stereo speakers. Thunder exploded overhead. He had a momentary vision of being struck by lightning and cooked like a capon in a microwave. He found this didn't disturb him much. It would be quick, at least, and what was happening now was slow.

The water began to rise again, but not fast. Curtis was actually glad about this, now that he had determined there was no actual risk of drowning like a rat that has tumbled into a toilet bowl. At least it was water, and he was very thirsty. He lowered his head to one of the holes in the steel cladding. Water from the overflowing ditch was bubbling up through it. He drank like a horse at a trough, sucking it up. The water was gritty, but he drank until his belly sloshed, constantly reminding himself that it was water, it was.

"There may be a certain piss content, but I'm sure it's low," he said, and began to laugh. The laughter turned to sobbing, then back to laughter again.

The rain ended around six P.M., as it usually did this time of year. The sky cleared in time to provide a grade-A Florida sunset. The few summer residents of Turtle Island gathered on the beach to watch it, as they usually did. No one commented on Curtis Johnson's absence. Sometimes he was there, sometimes he wasn't. Tim Grunwald was there, and several of the sunsetters remarked that he seemed exceptionally cheery that evening. Mrs. Peebles told her husband, as they walked home hand in hand along the beach, that she believed Mr. Grunwald was finally getting over the shock of losing his wife. Mr. Peebles told her she was a romantic. "Yes, dear," she said, momentarily putting her head on his shoulder, "that's why I married you."

When Curtis saw the light coming through the holes in the cladding—the few that weren't facedown in the ditch—fading from peach to gray, he realized he was actually going to spend the night in this stinking coffin with two inches of water on the floor and a half-closed toilet hole at his feet. He was probably going to die in here, but that seemed academic. To spend the night in here, however—hours stacked on more hours, piles of hours like piles of great black books—that was real and unavoidable.

The panic pounced again. He once more began to scream and pound the walls, this time turning around and around on his knees, first beating his right shoulder against one wall and then his left against the other. Like a bird caught in a church steeple, he thought, but could not stop. One flailing foot splattered the escaped turd against the bottom of the bench seat. He tore his pants. He first bruised his knuckles, then split them. At last he stopped, weeping and sucking at his hands.

Got to stop. Got to save my strength.

Then he thought: For what?

By eight o'clock, the air had begun to cool. By ten o'clock, the puddle in which Curtis was lying had also cooled—seemed cold, in fact—

and he began to tremble. He clutched his arms around himself and drew his knees up to his chest.

I'll be all right as long as my teeth don't chatter, he thought. I can't bear to hear my teeth chatter.

At eleven o'clock, Grunwald went to bed. He lay there in his pajamas under the revolving fan, looking up into the dark and smiling. He felt better than he had felt for months. He was gratified but not surprised. "Goodnight, neighbor," he said, and closed his eyes. He slept through the night without waking for the first time in six months.

At midnight, not far away from Curtis's makeshift cell, some animal—probably just a wild dog, but to Curtis it sounded like a hyena—let out a long, screaming howl. His teeth began to chatter. The sound was every bit as awful as he had feared.

Some unimaginable time later, he slept.

*

When he woke up, he was shivering all over. Even his feet were jerking, tapdancing like the feet of a junkie in withdrawal. I'm getting sick, I'll have to go to the damn doctor, I ache all over, he thought. Then he opened his eyes, saw where he was, remembered where he was, and gave a loud, desolate cry: "Ohhhh ... no! NO!"

But it was oh yes. At least the Port-O-San wasn't entirely dark anymore. Light was coming through the circular holes: the pale rose glow of morning. It would soon strengthen as the day brightened and heated up. Before long he would be steam-cooking again.

Grunwald will come back. He's had a night to think it over, he'll realize how insane this is, and he'll come back. He'll let me out.

Curtis did not believe this. He wanted to, but didn't.

He needed to take a leak in the worst way, but he was damned if he was going to piss in the corner, even though there was crap and used toilet paper everywhere from yesterday's overturning. He felt somehow that if he did that—a nasty thing like that—it would be the same as announcing to himself that he had given up hope.

I have given up hope.

But he hadn't. Not completely. As tired and achey as he was, as frightened and dispirited, part of him still hadn't given up hope. And there was a bright side: he felt no urge to gag himself, and he hadn't spent even a single minute of the night just gone by, nearly eternal though it had been, scourging his scalp with his comb.

There was no need to piss in the corner, anyway. He would just raise the toilet seat lid with one hand, aim with the other, and let fly. Of course, given the Port-O-San's new configuration, that would mean pissing horizontally instead of at a downward-pointing angle. The current throb in his bladder suggested that would be absolutely no problem. Of course the final squirt or two would probably go on the floor, but—

“But them's are the fortunes of war,” he said, and surprised himself with a croaky laugh. “And as far as the toilet seat goes ... fuck holding it up. I can do better than that.”

He was no Mr. Hercules, but both the half-ajar toilet seat and the flanges holding it to the bench were plastic—the seat and ring black, the flanges white. This whole goddam box was really just a cheap plastic prefab job, you didn't have to be a big-time construction contractor to see that, and unlike the walls and the door, there was no cladding on the seat and its fastenings. He thought he could tear it off pretty easily, and if he could he would—if only to vent some of his anger and terror.

Curtis seized the seat and lifted it, meaning to grip the ring just beneath and pull sideways. Instead he paused, looking through the

circular hole and into the tank beneath, trying to make sense of what he saw.

It looked like a thin seam of daylight.

He looked at this with perplexity into which hope came stealing slowly—not dawning, exactly, but seeming to rise through his sweaty, ordure-streaked skin. At first he thought it was either a swatch of fluorescent paint or an out-and-out optical illusion. This latter idea was reinforced when the line of light began to fade away. Little ... less ... least ...

But then, just before it could disappear completely, it began to brighten again, a line of light so brilliant he could see it floating behind his lids when he closed his eyes.

That's sunlight. The bottom of the toilet—what was the bottom before Grunwald tipped it over—is facing east, where the sun just rose.

And when it faded?

“Sun went behind a cloud,” he said, and shoved his sweat-clumped hair back from his forehead with the hand not holding the toilet seat. “Now it's out again.”

He examined this idea for the deadly pollution of wishful thinking and found none. The evidence was before his eyes: sunlight shining through a thin crack in the bottom of the Port-O-San's holding tank. Or perhaps it was a split. If he could get in there and widen that split, that glowing aperture into the outside world—

Don't count on it.

And to get to it, he would have to—

Impossible, he thought. If you're thinking of wriggling into the holding tank through the toilet seat—like Alice into some shit-splattered

Wonderland—think again. Maybe if you were the skinny kid you used to be, but that kid was thirty-five years ago.

That was true. But he was still slim—he supposed his daily bicycle rides were mostly responsible for that—and the thing was, he thought he could wriggle in through the hole under the toilet seat's ring. It might not even be that tough.

What about getting back out?

Well ... if he could do something about that seam of light, maybe he wouldn't have to leave the same way he went in.

“Assuming I can even get in,” he said. His empty stomach was suddenly full of butterflies, and for the first time since arriving here at scenic Durkin Grove Village, he felt an urge to gag himself. He would be able to think more clearly about this if he just stuck his fingers down his throat and—

“No,” he said curtly, and yanked the toilet seat and ring sideways with his left hand. The flanges creaked but didn't let go. He applied his other hand to the task. His hair fell back down on his forehead, and he gave an impatient snap of his head to flop it aside. He yanked again. The seat and ring held a moment longer, then tore free. One of the two white plastic dowels fell into the waste tank. The other, cracked down the middle, spun across the door Curtis was kneeling on.

He tossed the seat and ring aside and peered into the tank, hands braced on the bench. The first whiff of the poisoned atmosphere down there caused him to recoil, wincing. He thought he'd gotten used to the smell (or numbed to it), but that wasn't the case, at least not this close to the source. He wondered again when the damned thing had last been pumped.

Look on the bright side; it's been a long time since it was used, too.

Maybe, probably, but Curtis wasn't sure that made things any better. There was still a lot of stuff down there—a lot of crap down there, floating in whatever remained of the disinfected water. Dim as the light was, there was enough to be sure of that. Then there was the matter of getting back out again. He could probably do it—if he could go one way, he could almost certainly go the other—but it was all too easy to imagine how he'd look, a stinking creature being born from the ooze, not a mudman but a shit-man.

The question was, did he have another choice?

Well, yes. He could sit here, trying to persuade himself that rescue probably would come after all. The cavalry, like in the last reel of an old western. Only he thought it was more likely that The Motherfucker would come back, wanting to make sure he was still ... what had he said? Snug in his little housie. Something like that.

That decided him. He looked at the hole in the bench, the dark hole with its evil aroma drifting out, the dark hole with its one hopeful seam of light. A hope as thin as the light itself. He calculated. First his right arm, then his head. Left arm pressed against his body until he had wriggled in as far as his waist. Then, when his left arm was free ...

Only what if he wasn't able to get it free? He saw himself stuck, right arm in the tank, left arm pinned against his body, his midsection blocking the hole, blocking the air, dying a dog's death, flailing at the sludge just below him while he strangled, the last thing he saw the mocking bright stitch that had lured him on.

He saw someone finding his body half-plugged into the toilet hole with his ass sticking up and his legs splayed, smeary brown sneaker prints stamped on the goddam toilet cubicle from his final dying kicks. He could hear someone—perhaps the IRS agent who was The Motherfucker's bete noire—saying “Holy shit, he must have dropped something really valuable down there.”

It was funny, but Curtis didn't feel like laughing.

How long had he been kneeling there, peering into the tank? He didn't know—his watch was back in his study, sitting by his computer's mousepad—but the ache in his thighs suggested quite awhile. And the light had brightened considerably. The sun would be entirely over the horizon now, and soon his prison would once more turn into a steam room.

"Gotta go," he said, and wiped sweat from his cheeks with the palms of his hands. "It's the only thing." But he paused again, because another thought had occurred to him.

What if there was a snake in there?

What if The Motherfucker, imagining that his witchly enemy might try this very thing, had put a snake in there? A copperhead, perhaps, for the time being fast asleep under a layer of cool human mud? A copperhead bite on the arm and he would die slowly and painfully, his arm swelling even as the temperature climbed. A bite from a coral snake would take him more quickly but even more painfully: his heart lunging, stopping, lunging again, then finally giving up.

There are no snakes in there. Bugs, maybe, but no snakes. You saw him, you heard him. He wasn't thinking that far ahead. He was too sick, too crazy.

Perhaps, perhaps not. You couldn't really gauge crazy people, could you? They were wild cards.

"Deuces and jacks, man with the axe, natural sevens take all," Curtis said. The Tao of The Motherfucker. All he knew for sure was that if he didn't try it down there, he was almost certainly going to die up here. And in the end, a snakebite might be quicker and more merciful.

"Gotta," he said, once more wiping his cheeks. "Gotta."

As long as he didn't get stuck halfway in and halfway out of the hole. That would be a terrible way to die.

“Not going to get stuck,” he said. “Look how big it is. That thing was built for the asses of doughnut-eating long-haul truckers.”

This made him giggle. The sound contained more hysteria than humor. The toilet hole did not look big to him; it looked small. Almost tiny. He knew that was only his nervous perception of it—hell, his scared perception, his frightened to death perception—but knowing that didn’t help much.

“Gotta do it, though,” he said. “There’s really nothing else.”

And in the end it would probably be for nothing ... but he doubted anyone had bothered to add a steel outer layer to the holding tank, and that decided him.

“God help me,” he said. It was his first prayer in almost forty years. “God, please help me not get stuck.”

He poked his right arm through the hole, then his head (first taking one more deep breath of the better air in the cubicle). He pressed his left arm to his side and slithered into the hole. His left shoulder caught, but before he could panic and draw back—this was, part of him understood, the critical moment, the point of no return—he shimmied it like a man doing the Watusi. His shoulder popped through. He jackknifed into the stinking tank up to his waist. With his hips—slim, but not nonexistent—plugging the hole, it was now as black as pitch. That seam of light seemed to float mockingly just before his eyes. Like a mirage.

Oh God, please don’t let it be a mirage.

The tank was maybe four feet deep, maybe a trifle more. Bigger than the trunk of a car, but not—unfortunately—the size of a pickup truck’s bed. There was no way to tell for sure, but he thought his hanging hair was touching the disinfected water, and that the top of his head must be within inches of the muck filling the bottom. His left arm was still pinned against his body. Pinned at the wrist now. He couldn’t get it free. He shimmied from one side to the other. His arm

stayed where it was. His worst nightmare: caught. Caught after all. Caught head down in stinking blackness.

Panic flared. He reached out with his free hand, not thinking about it, just doing it. For a moment he could see his fingers outlined by the scant light coming in through the bottom of the tank, which was now facing the sunrise instead of the ground. The light was right there, right in front of him. He grabbed for it. The first three fingers of his flailing hand were too big to fit through the narrow gap, but he was able to hook his pinky into the split. He pulled, feeling the ragged edge—metal or plastic, he didn't know which—first dig into the skin of his finger and then tear it open. Curtis didn't care. He pulled harder.

His hips popped through the hole like a cork coming out of a bottle. His wrist came free, but too late for him to lift his left arm and help break his fall. He crashed headfirst into the shit.

Curtis came up choking and flailing, his nose plugged with wet stink. He coughed and spat, aware that he was in a very tight place now, oh for sure. Had he thought the toilet was tight? Ridiculous. The toilet was the wide-open spaces. The toilet was the American west, the Australian Outback, the Great Horsehead Nebula. And he had given it up to crawl into a dark womb half-filled with rotting shit.

He wiped his face, then flung his hands to either side. Ribbons of dark stuff flew from his fingertips. His eyes were stinging, blurring. He wiped them with first one arm, then the other. His nose was plugged. He stuck his pinky fingers up them—he could feel blood running down the right one—and cleared his nostrils as best he could. He got enough out so he could breathe again, but when he did, the stench of the tank seemed to leap down his throat and sink claws into his stomach. He retched, a deep growling sound.

Get hold of yourself. Just get hold, or it's for nothing.

He leaned back against the caked side of the tank, dragging in deep gasps of air through his mouth, but that was almost as bad. Just

above him was a large pearl of oval light. The toilet hole he had, in his madness, wriggled through. He retched again. To his own ears he sounded like a bad-tempered dog on a hot day, trying to bark while half-strangled by a too-tight collar.

What if I can't stop? What if I can't stop doing that? I'll have a seizure.

He was too frightened and overwhelmed to think, so his body thought for him. He turned on his knees, which was hard—the side wall of the holding tank, which was now the floor, was slippery—but just possible. He applied his mouth to the split in the floor of the tank and breathed through it. As he did, a memory of some story he'd heard or read in grammar school came back to him: Indians hiding from their enemies by lying on the bottom of a shallow pond. Lying there and breathing through hollow reeds. You could do that. You could do that if you remained calm.

He closed his eyes. He breathed, and the air coming in through the split was blessedly sweet. Little by little, his runaway heartbeat began to slow.

You can go back up. If you can go one way, you can go the other. And going back up will be easier, because now you're ...

"Now I'm greasy," he said, and managed a shaky laugh ... even though the dull, closed-in sound of his own voice frightened him all over again.

When he felt he had some control, he opened his eyes. They had adjusted to the deeper gloom of the tank. He could see his shit-caked arms, and a matted ribbon of paper hanging from his right hand. He plucked it off and dropped it. He supposed he was getting used to such things. He supposed people could get used to anything, if they had to. This wasn't a particularly comforting thought.

He looked at the split. He looked at it for some time, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. It was like a split along the seam of a

badly sewn garment. Because there was a seam here. The tank was plastic after all—a plastic shell—but it wasn't a single piece; it was two. It was held together by a line of screws that glimmered in the dark. They glimmered because they were white. Curtis tried to remember if he had ever seen white screws before. He couldn't. Several of them at the lowest point of the tank had broken off, creating that split. Waste and wastewater must have been dribbling out and onto the ground beneath for some time.

If the EPA knew about this. Motherfucker, you'd have them on your back, too, Curtis thought. He touched one of the screws still holding, the one just to the left of where the split ended. He couldn't be sure, but he thought it was hard plastic rather than metal. The same kind of plastic the toilet-ring flanges were made of, probably.

So. Two-piece construction. The tanks put together on some portable-toilet assembly line in Defiance, Missouri, Magic City, Idaho, or—who knew?—What Cheer, Iowa. Screwed together with hard plastic screws, the seam running across the bottom and up the sides like a big old smile. The screws tightened with some special long-barreled screwdriver, probably air-driven, like the gadget they used in garages to loosen the lug-nuts holding on your tires. And why put these screwheads on the inside? That was easy. So some merry prankster couldn't come along with his own screwdriver and open a full tank from the outside, of course.

The screws were placed about two inches apart along the seam, and the split was about six inches long, causing Curtis to deduce that three of the plastic screws had snapped. Bad materials, or bad design? Who gave a shit?

“To coin a phrase,” he said, and laughed again.

The screws still holding to the left and right of the split were sticking up a little way, but he could neither unscrew them nor snap them off as he had the toilet seat. He couldn't get enough purchase. The one on the right was a little loose, and he supposed that if he worked at it, he might be able to get it started and then unscrew it the rest of

the way. It would take hours, and his fingers would probably be bleeding by the time he managed the job, but it could probably be done. And what would he gain? Another two inches of breathing space through the seam. No more than that.

The screws beyond the ones bordering the split in the seam were firm and tight.

Curtis could stay up on his knees no longer; the muscles in his thighs were burning. He sat down against the curved side of the tank, forearms on his knees, filthy hands dangling. He looked at the brightening oval of the toilet hole. That was the overworld, he supposed, only his share of it had grown very small. It smelled better, though, and when his legs felt a little stronger, he supposed he would clamber back through the hole. He wasn't going to stay in here, sitting in shit, if there was nothing to be gained by it. And it seemed there was not.

A jumbo cockroach, made bold by Curtis's new stillness, scuttled up his filthy pant leg. He flapped a hand at it and it was gone. "That's right," he said, "run. Why don't you squeeze out through the hole? You'd probably fit." He brushed his hair out of his eyes, knowing he was smearing his forehead, not caring. "Nah, you like it in here. You probably think you died and went to cockroach heaven."

He would rest, let his throbbing legs calm a little, then climb out of Wonderland and back into his phone-booth-sized piece of the overworld. Just a short rest; he wasn't staying down here any longer than he had to, that was for sure.

Curtis closed his eyes and tried to center himself.

He saw numbers scrolling up on a computer screen. The stock market wouldn't be open yet in New York, so these numbers must be from overseas. Probably the Nikkei. Most of the numbers were green. That was good.

“Metals and industrials,” he said. “And Takeda Pharmaceutical—that’s a buy. Anyone can see ...”

Curled against the wall in what was almost a fetal position, his drawn face streaked with brown warpaint, his butt sunk almost to the hips in muck, his filth-caked hands still dangling from his drawn-up knees, Curtis slept. And dreamed.

Betsy was alive and Curtis was in his living room. She was lying on her side in her accustomed place between the coffee table and the TV, snoozing with her latest half-chewed tennis ball near to hand. Or paw, in Betsy’s case.

“Bets!” he said. “Wake up and fetch the idiot stick!”

She struggled to her feet—of course she struggled, she was old now—and as she did, the tags on her collar jingled.

The tags jingled.

The tags.

*

He woke up gasping, listing to the left as he leaned against the holding tank’s greasy bottom, one hand outstretched, either to take the TV controller or to touch his dead dog.

He lowered his hand to his knee. He wasn’t surprised to find he was crying. Had probably started even before the dream began to unravel. Betsy was dead and he was sitting in shit. If that wasn’t reason enough to cry, he didn’t know what was.

He looked again at the oval light across from and slightly above him, and saw it was quite a lot brighter. Hard to believe he’d been asleep for any length of time, but it seemed he had been. An hour at least. God knew how much poison he was breathing, but—

“Don’t worry, I can deal with poison air,” he said. “After all, I’m a witch.”

And, bad air or no bad air, the dream had been very sweet. Very vivid. The jingling of those tags—

“Fuck,” he whispered, and his hand flew to his pocket. He was terribly sure he must have lost the Vespa key in his tumble and would have to feel around for it down here, sifting through the shit with nothing but the scant light coming in through the split seam and the toilet hole to help him, but the key was still there. So was his money, but money would do him no good down here and the clip wouldn’t, either. It was gold, and valuable, but too thick to qualify as an escape aid. So was the key to the Vespa. But there was something else on the keyring. Something that made him feel simultaneously bad and good every time he looked at it, or heard it jingle. It was Betsy’s ID tag.

She had worn two, but this was the one he’d slipped off her collar before giving her a final hug goodbye and turning her body over to the vet. The other one, state-required, certified that she’d had all her shots. This one was more personal. It was rectangular, like a GI’s dog tag. Stamped on it was

BETSY

IF LOST CALL 941-555-1954

CURTIS JOHNSON

19 GULF BOULEVARD

TURTLE ISLAND, FLA. 34274

It wasn't a screwdriver, but it was thin, it was made of stainless steel, and Curtis thought it just might serve. He said another prayer—he didn't know if what they said about no atheists in foxholes was true, but there seemed to be none in shitholes—then slipped the end of Betsy's ID tag into the slot of the screw just to the right of where the split ended. The screw that was a little loose to begin with.

He expected resistance, but under the edge of the ID tag the screw turned almost at once. He was so surprised he dropped his keyring and had to feel around for it. He slotted the end of the tag into the screwhead again, and turned it twice. The rest of the length he was able to loosen by hand. He did it with a big, unbelieving grin on his face.

Before beginning on the screw at the left end of the split—a split that was now two inches wider—he wiped the metal tag clean on his shirt (or as clean as he could; the shirt was as filthy as the rest of him, sticking to his skin) and kissed it gently.

“If this works, I'll frame you.” He hesitated, then added: “Please work, okay?”

He slipped the end of the ID tag into the screwhead and turned. This one was tighter than the first ... but not that tight. And once it started turning, it came out in a hurry.

“Jesus,” Curtis whispered. He was crying yet again; he'd turned into a regular leaky faucet. “Am I gonna get out of here, Bets? Am I really?”

He moved back to the right and started on the next screw. He went on that way, right-left, right-left, right-left, resting when his hand got tired, flexing and shaking it until it felt loose again. He had spent going on twenty-four hours in here; he wasn't going to hurry now. He especially didn't want to drop his keyring again. He supposed he could find it, the area was small, but he still didn't want to risk it.

Right-left, right-left, right-left.

And slowly, as the morning passed and the holding tank heated up, making the smell ever thicker and more noisomely rich, the split in the bottom of the tank widened. He was doing it, closing in on getting out, but he refused to hurry. It was important not to hurry, not to bolt like a frightened horse. Because he might fuck up, yes, but also because his pride and self-esteem—his essential sense of self—had taken a beating.

Questions of self-esteem aside, slow and steady won the race.

Right-left, right-left, right-left.

*

Shortly before noon, the seam in the dirt-caked bottom of the Port-O-San bulged open, then closed, then bulged and closed again. There was a pause. Then it split open along four feet of its length, and the crown of Curtis Johnson's head appeared. It drew back, and there were clatters and scratches as he went to work again, removing more screws: three on the left, three on the right.

The next time the seam spread apart, the matted, brown-streaked crown of his head continued to thrust forward. It pushed slowly through, the cheeks and mouth drawn down as if by terrible G-force, one ear scraped and bleeding. He cried out, shoving with his feet, terrified that now he was going to get stuck half in and half out of the holding tank. Still, even in his fear, he registered the sweetness of the air: hot and humid, the best he had ever breathed.

When he was outside to his shoulders, he rested, panting, looking at a crushed beer can twinkling in the weeds not ten feet from his sweating, bleeding head. It looked like a miracle. Then he pushed again, head lifted, mouth snarling, cords on his neck standing out. There was a ripping sound as the gaping split in the tank tore the shirt off his back. He hardly noticed. Just ahead of him was a baby scrub pine no more than four feet high. He stretched, got one hand on the base of its thin and sappy trunk, then the other. He rested for another moment, aware that both of his shoulder blades were scraped and bleeding, then pulled on the tree and pushed one final time with his feet.

He thought he might pull the small pine right out by the roots, but he didn't. There was a searing pain in his buttocks as the seam through which he was wriggling tore his pants down, bunching them around his sneakers. In order to get all the way out, he had to keep pulling and twisting until the sneakers finally came off. And when the tank finally let go of his left foot, he found it almost impossible to believe he was actually free.

He rolled over on his back, naked save for his underpants (askew, the elastic hanging in a limp flap, the seat torn open to reveal badly bleeding buttocks) and one white sock. He stared up at the blue sky, eyes wide. And began to scream. He had screamed himself almost hoarse before he realized he was screaming actual words: I'm alive! I'm alive! I'm alive!

*

Twenty minutes later, he got to his feet and limped to the defunct construction trailer sitting on its concrete blocks, a large puddle from yesterday's shower hiding in its shadow. The door was locked, but there were more blocks lying to one side of the raw wooden steps. One was cracked in two pieces. Curtis picked up the smaller chunk and bashed it against the lock until the door shuddered open, letting out a puff of hot, stale air.

He turned before going in and for a moment surveyed the toilets on the other side of the road, where pothole puddles flashed back the bright blue sky like shards of a dirty mirror. Five Port-O-Sans, three standing, two lying facedown in the ditch. He had almost died in the one on the left. And although he was standing here in nothing but a pair of tattered underpants and one sock, shit-streaked and bleeding in what felt like a hundred places, that idea already seemed unreal. A bad dream.

The office was partially empty—or partially ransacked, probably only a day or two ahead of the final project shutdown. There were no partitions; it was one long room with a desk, two chairs, and a discount-store couch in the front half. In the back half there was a stack of cartons filled with papers, a dusty adding machine sitting on the floor, a small unplugged fridge, a radio, and a swivel chair with a note taped to the back. SAVE FOR JIMMY, the note said.

There was also a closet door standing ajar, but before checking it, Curtis opened the little fridge. Inside were four bottles of Zephyr spring water, one of them opened and three-quarters empty. Curtis seized one of the full bottles and drank the entire thing down. It was warm, but it tasted like the kind of water that might flow in the rivers of heaven. When it was gone, his stomach clenched. He rushed to the door, hung out by the jamb, and vomited the water back up to one side of the steps.

“Look, Ma, no gagging necessary!” he cried, with tears running down his filthy face. He supposed he could have vomited the water right onto the deserted trailer’s floor, but he didn’t want to be in the same room with his own waste. Not after what had happened.

In fact, I intend never to take another dump, he thought. From now on I’m going to empty myself the religious way: immaculate evacuation.

He drank the second bottle of water more slowly, and it stayed down. While he sipped, he looked into the closet. There were two pairs of dirty pants and some equally dirty shirts piled in one corner. Curtis

guessed that at one point there might have been a washer-dryer back there, where the cartons were stacked. Or maybe there had been another trailer, one that had been hitched up and hauled away. He didn't care. What he cared about was the two pair of discount-store overalls, one on a wire hanger, the other dangling from a wall hook. The pair on the hook looked much too big, but the one on the hanger might fit. And did, more or less. He had to roll the cuffs up two turns, and he supposed he looked more like Farmer John after slopping the hogs than a successful stock trader, but they would serve.

He could call the police, but he felt he had a right to more satisfaction than that after what he had been through. Quite a lot more.

"Witches don't call the police," he said. "Especially not us gay ones."

His motor scooter was still out there, but he had no intention of riding back just yet. For one thing, too many people would see the mud-man on the red Vespa Granturismo. He didn't think anyone would call the cops ... but they'd laugh. Curtis didn't want to be noticed, and he didn't want to be laughed at. Not even behind his back.

Also, he was tired. More tired than he'd ever been in his life.

He lay down on the discount-store sofa and put one of the pillows behind his head. He had left the trailer door open and a little breeze frisked through, stroking his dirty skin with delicious fingers. He was wearing nothing but the overalls now. He had stripped off his filthy undershorts and the remaining sock before putting them on.

I don't smell myself at all, he thought. Isn't that amazing?

Then he fell asleep, deeply and completely. He dreamed of Betsy bringing him the idiot stick, the tags on her collar jingling. He took the controller from her, and when he pointed it at the TV, he saw The Motherfucker peering in the window.

*

Curtis woke four hours later, sweating and stiff and stinging all over. Outside, thunder was rumbling as that afternoon's storm approached, right on schedule. He made his way down the makeshift trailer steps sidesaddle, like an old man with arthritis. He felt like an old man with arthritis. Then he sat down, looking alternately at the darkening sky and at the portable toilet from which he had escaped.

When the rain began, he stepped out of the overalls, threw them back into the trailer to keep them dry, and then stood there naked in the downpour, his face turned upward, smiling. That smile didn't falter even when a stroke of lightning forked down on the far side of Durkin Grove Village, close enough to fill the air with the tang of ozone. He felt perfectly, deliciously safe.

The cold rain sluiced him relatively clean, and when it began to let up, he slowly climbed the trailer steps again. When he was dry, he put the overalls back on. And when late-day sun began to spoke through the unraveling clouds, he walked slowly up the hill to where his Vespa was parked. The key was clutched in his right hand, Betsy's now-battered ID tag pressed between the first two fingers.

The Vespa wasn't used to being left out in the rain, but it was a good pony and started after only two cranks of the engine, settling at once into its usual good-natured purr. Curtis mounted up, barefooted and helmetless, a blithe spirit. He rode back to Turtle Island that way, with the wind blowing his filthy hair and belling the overalls out around his legs. He saw few cars, and got across the main road with no problems at all.

He thought he could use a couple of aspirins before going to see Grunwald, but otherwise he had never felt better in his life.

*

By seven o'clock that evening, the afternoon shower was just a memory. The Turtle Island sunsetters would gather on the beach in another hour or so for the usual end-of-day show, and Grunwald expected to be among them. For now, however, he lay in his patio hot tub with his eyes closed, a weak gin and tonic near to hand. He had taken a Percocet prior to climbing into the tub, knowing it would be a help when it came to the short walk down to the beach, but his sense of almost dreamy satisfaction persisted. He hardly needed the painkillers. That might change, but for the time being, he hadn't felt so well in years. Yes, he was facing financial ruin, but he had enough cash socked away to keep him comfortable for the time he had left. More important, he had taken care of the queer who had been the author of all his misery. Ding-dong, the wicked witch was d—

“Hello, Grunwald. Hello, you motherfucker.”

Grunwald's eyes flew open. A dark shape was standing between him and the westering sun, looking cut from black paper. Or funeral crepe. It looked like Johnson, but surely it could not be; Johnson was locked in the overturned toilet, Johnson was a shithouse mouse either dying or dead. Also, a smarmy little bandbox dresser like Johnson would never have been caught dead looking like an extra from that old Hee-Haw show. It was a dream, it had to be. But—

“You awake? Good. I want you to be awake for this.”

“Johnson?” Just a whisper. It was all he could manage. “That's not really you, is it?” But now the figure moved a little—just enough to allow the late-day sun to strike across his scratched face—and Grunwald saw that it was. And what was that he had in his hand?

Curtis saw what The Motherfucker was looking at, and considerately turned a little more, so that the sun struck across it, too. It was a hair dryer, Grunwald realized. It was a hair dryer, and he was sitting chest-deep in a hot tub.

He grabbed the side, meaning to pull himself out, and Johnson stepped on his hand. Grunwald cried out and jerked his hand back.

Johnson's foot was bare, but he had brought it down heel first, and hard.

"I like you right where you are," Curtis said, smiling. "I'm sure you felt the same about me, but I got out, didn't I? And I even brought you a present. Stopped by my house to get it. Don't refuse it on that account; it's only slightly used, and I blew off all the gay-dust on my way over here. By way of the backyard, actually. Convenient that the power's off in the stupid cattle-fence you used to kill my dog. Here you go." And he dropped the hair dryer into the hot tub.

Grunwald screamed and tried to catch it, but he missed. The hair dryer splashed, then sank. One of the water jets turned it over and over on the bottom. It bumped Grunwald's scrawny legs and he jerked away from it, still screaming, sure he was being electrocuted.

"Take it easy," Johnson said. He was still smiling. He unsnapped first one strap of the overalls he was wearing, then the other. They dropped to his ankles. He was naked beneath, with faint streaks of filth from the holding tank still on the insides of his arms and thighs. There was a nasty brown clot of something in his navel. "It wasn't plugged in. I don't even know if that old hair-dryer-in-the-tub thing works. Although I must admit that if I'd had an extension cord, I might have made the experiment."

"Get away from me," Grunwald rasped.

"Nah," Johnson said. "Don't think so." Smiling, always smiling. Grunwald wondered if the man had gone mad. He would have gone mad in circumstances similar to those in which he'd left Johnson. How had he gotten out? How, in God's name?

"The rain shower this afternoon washed off most of the shit, but I'm still quite dirty. As you see." Johnson spied the nasty wad in his navel, pried it out with a finger, and flicked it casually into the hot tub like a booger.

It landed on Grunwald's cheek. Brown and stinking. Starting to run. Good God, it was shit. He cried out again, this time in revulsion.

"He shoots, he scores," Johnson said, smiling. "Not very nice, is it? And although I don't exactly smell it anymore, I'm very tired of looking at it. So be a neighbor, would you, and share your hot tub."

"No! No, you can't—"

"Thanks!" Johnson said, smiling, and jumped in. There was a great splash. Grunwald could smell him. He reeked. Grunwald floundered for the other side of the hot tub, skinny shanks flashing white above the bubbling water, the tan on his equally skinny legs looking like taupe nylon stockings. He flung one arm over the edge of the tub. Then Johnson grabbed him around the neck with one badly scratched but horribly strong arm and hauled him back into the water.

"No no no no no!" Johnson said, smiling. He pulled Grunwald against him. Little brown-black flecks danced on the surface of the bubbling water. "Us gay guys rarely bathe alone. Surely you came across that fact in your Internet researches. And gay witches? Never!"

"Let me go!"

"Maybe." But Johnson hugged him closer, horribly intimate, still stinking of the Port-O-San. "First, though, I think you need to visit the gayboy ducking stool. Kind of a baptism. Wash away your sins." The smile became a grin, the grin a rictus. Grunwald realized he was going to die. Not in his bed, in some misty, medicated future, but right here. Johnson was going to drown him in his own hot tub, and the last thing he'd see would be little particles of filth floating in the previously clean water.

Curtis grabbed Grunwald's naked, scrawny shoulders and shoved him under. Grunwald struggled, his legs kicking, his scant hair floating, little silver bubbles twisting up from his big old beak of a nose. The urge to just hold him there was strong ... and Curtis could

do it because he was strong. Once upon a time, Grunwald would have been able to take him with one hand tied behind his back, age difference or not, but those days were gone. This was one sick Motherfucker. Which was why Curtis let him go.

Grunwald surged for the surface, coughing and choking.

“You’re right!” Curtis cried. “This baby is good for aches and pains! But never mind me; what about you? Want to go under again? Submersion is good for the soul, all the best religions say so.”

Grunwald shook his head furiously. Drops of water flew from his thinning hair and more luxuriant eyebrows.

“Then just sit there,” Curtis said. “Sit there and listen. And I don’t think we need this, do we?” He reached under Grunwald’s leg—Grunwald jerked and uttered a small scream—and snagged the hair dryer. Curtis tossed it over his shoulder. It skittered beneath Grunwald’s patio chair.

“I’ll be leaving you soon,” Curtis said. “Going back to my own place. You can go down and watch the sunset if you still want to. Do you still want to?”

Grunwald shook his head.

“No? I didn’t think so. I think you’ve had your last good sunset, neighbor. In fact, I think you’ve had your last good day, and that’s why I’m letting you live. And do you want to know the irony? If you’d let me alone, you would have gotten exactly what you wanted. Because I was locked in the shithouse already and didn’t even know it. Isn’t that funny?”

Grunwald said nothing, only looked at him with his terrified eyes. His sick and terrified eyes. Curtis could almost have felt sorry for him, if the memory of the Port-O-San was not still so vivid. The lid of the toilet flopping open like a mouth. The turd landing in his lap like a dead fish.

“Answer, or you get another baptismal dunk.”

“It’s funny,” Grunwald rasped. And then began to cough.

Curtis waited until he stopped. He wasn’t smiling anymore.

“Yes, it is,” he said. “It is funny. The whole thing’s funny, if you see it from the right perspective. And I believe I do.”

He boosted himself out of the hot tub, aware that he was moving with a lightheadedness The Motherfucker would never again be able to match. There was a cabinet under the porch overhang. There were towels inside. Curtis took one and began to dry off.

“Here’s the thing. You can call the police and tell them I tried to drown you in your hot tub, but if you do that, everything else comes out. You’ll spend the rest of your life fighting a criminal case as well as dealing with your other woes. But if you let it go, it’s a reset. Odometer back to zero. Only—here’s the thing—I get to watch you rot. There will come a day when you smell just like the shithouse you locked me in. When other people smell you that way, and you smell that way to yourself.”

“I’ll kill myself first,” Grunwald rasped.

Curtis was pulling the overalls on again. He had decided he sort of liked them. They might be the perfect garment to wear while watching the stock quotes on one’s computer in one’s cozy little study. He might go out to Target and buy half a dozen pairs. The new, non-compulsive Curtis Johnson: an overall kind of guy.

He paused in the act of buckling the second shoulder strap. “You could do that. You have that gun, the—what did you call it?—the Hardballer.” He finished with the buckle, then leaned toward Grunwald, who was still marinating in the hot tub and looking at him fearfully. “That would be acceptable, too. You might even have the guts, although, when it comes right down to it ... you might not. In any case, I’ll listen with great interest for the bang.”

He left Grunwald then, but not the way he had come. He went around to the road. A left turn would have taken him back to his house, but he turned right, toward the beach. For the first time since Betsy died, he felt like watching the sunset.

*

Two days later, while sitting at his computer (he was watching General Electric with especial interest), Curtis heard a loud bang from next door. He didn't have his music on, and the sound rolled through the humid, almost-July air with perfect clarity. He sat where he was, head cocked, still listening. Although there would be no second bang.

Us witches just know shit like that, he thought.

Mrs. Wilson came rushing in, holding a dishtowel in one hand. "That sounded like a gunshot!"

"Probably just a backfire," he said, smiling. He had been smiling a lot since his adventure at Durkin Grove Village. He thought it wasn't the same sort of smile as the one he had worn during the Betsy Era, but any smile was better than none. Surely that was true?

Mrs. Wilson was looking at him doubtfully. "Well ... I guess." She turned to go.

"Mrs. Wilson?"

She turned back.

"Would you quit me if I got another dog? A puppy?"

"Me, quit over a puppy? It'd take more than a pup to drive me out."

"They tend to chew, you know. And they don't always—" He broke off for a moment, seeing the dark and nasty landscape of the holding tank. The underworld.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Wilson was looking at him curiously.

“They don’t always use the bathroom,” he finished.

“Once you teach them, they usually go where they’re supposed to,” she said. “Especially in a warm climate like this one. And you need some companionship, Mr. Johnson. I’ve been ... to tell the truth, I’ve been a little worried about you.”

He nodded. “Yes, I’ve kind of been in the shit.” He laughed, saw her looking at him strangely, and made himself stop. “Excuse me.”

She flapped her dishtowel at him to show he was excused.

“Not a purebred, this time. I was thinking maybe the Venice Animal Shelter. Someone’s little castoff. What they call a rescue dog.”

“That would be very nice,” she said. “I look forward to the patter of little feet.”

“Good.”

“Do you really think that was a backfire?”

Curtis sat back in his chair and pretended to consider. “Probably ... but you know, Mr. Grunwald next door has been pretty sick.” He lowered his voice to a sympathetic whisper. “Cancer.”

“Oh, dear,” Mrs. Wilson said.

Curtis nodded.

“You don’t think he’d ... ?”

The marching numbers on his computer screen melted into the screen saver: aerial photos and beach scenes, all featuring Turtle Island. Curtis stood up, walked to Mrs. Wilson, and took the dishtowel from her hand. “No, not really, but we could go next door and check. After all, what are neighbors for?”

WHY WE'RE IN VIETNAM

Stephen King

When someone dies, you think about the past. Sully had probably known this for years, but it was only on the day of Pags's funeral that it formed in his mind as a conscious postulate.

It was twenty-six years since the helicopters took their last loads of refugees (some dangling photogenically from the landing skids) off the roof of the US embassy in Saigon and almost thirty since a Huey evacked John Sullivan, Willie Shearman and maybe a dozen others out of Dong Ha Province. Sully-John and his magically refound childhood acquaintance had been heroes that morning when the choppers fell out of the sky; they'd been something else come afternoon. Sully could remember lying there on the Huey's throbbing floor and screaming for someone to kill him. He could remember Willie screaming as well.

I'm blind was what Willie had been screaming. Ah Jesus-fuck, I'm blind!

Eventually it had become clear to him — even with some of his guts hanging out of his belly in gray ropes and most of his balls blown off — that no one was going to do what he asked and he wasn't going to be able to do the job on his own. Not soon enough to suit him, anyway. So he asked someone to get rid of the mamasan, they could do that much, couldn't they? Land her or just dump her the fuck out, why not? Wasn't she dead already? Thing was, she wouldn't stop looking at him, and enough was enough.

By the time they swapped him and Shearman and half a dozen others — the worst ones —

to a Medevac at the rally-point everyone called Peepee City (the chopper-jockeys were probably damned glad to see them go, all that screaming), Sully had started to realize none of the others could see old mamasan squatting there in the cockpit, old white-haired mamasan in the green pants and orange top and those weird bright Chinese sneakers, the ones that looked like Chuck Taylor hightops, bright red, wow. Old mamasan had been Malenfant's date, old Mr

Card-Shark's big date. Earlier that day Malenfant had run into the clearing along with Sully and Dieffenbaker and Sly Slocum and the others, never mind the gooks firing at them out of the bush, never mind the terrible week of mortars and snipers and ambushes, Malenfant had been hero-bound and Sully had been hero-bound too, and now oh hey look at this, Ronnie Malenfant was a murderer, the kid Sully had been so afraid of back in the old days had saved his life and been blinded, and Sully himself was lying on the floor of a helicopter with his guts waving in the breeze. As Art Linkletter always said, it just proved that people are funny.

Somebody kill me, he had screamed on that bright and terrible afternoon. Somebody shoot me, for the love of God just let me die.

But he hadn't died, the doctors had managed to save one of his mangled testicles, and now there were even days when he felt more or less glad to be alive. Sunsets made him feel that way. He liked to go out to the back of the lot, where the cars they'd taken in trade but hadn't yet fixed up were stored, and stand there watching the sun go down. Corny shit, granted, but it was still the good part.

In San Francisco Willie was on the same ward and visited him a lot until the Army in its wisdom sent First Lieutenant Shearman somewhere else; they had talked for hours about the old days in Harwich and people they knew in common. Once they'd even gotten their picture taken by an AP news photographer — Willie sitting on Sully's bed, both of them laughing.

Willie's eyes had been better by then but still not right; Willie had confided to Sully that he was afraid they never would be right. The story that went with the picture had been pretty dopey, but had it brought them letters? Holy Christ! More than either of them could read!

Sully had even gotten the crazy idea that he might hear from Carol, but of course he never did. It was the spring of 1970 and Carol Gerber was undoubtedly busy smoking pot and giving blowjobs to end-the-war hippies while her old highschool boyfriend was getting

his balls blown off on the other side of the world. That's right, Art, people are funny. Also, kids say the darndest things.

When Willie shipped out, old mamasan stayed. Old mamasan hung right in there. During the seven months Sully spent in San Francisco's Veterans Hospital she had come every day and every night, his most constant visitor in that endless time when the whole world seemed to smell of piss and his heart hurt like a headache. Sometimes she showed up in a muumuu like the hostess at some nutty luau, sometimes she came wearing one of those grisly green golf-skirts and a sleeveless top that showed off her scrawny arms ... but mostly she wore what she had been wearing on the day Malenfant killed her — the green pants, the orange smock, the red sneakers with the Chinese symbols on them.

One day that summer he unfolded the San Francisco Chronicle and saw his old girlfriend had made the front page. His old girlfriend and her hippie pals had killed a bunch of kids and job-recruiters back in Danbury. His old girlfriend was now 'Red Carol.' His old girlfriend was a celebrity. 'You cunt,' he had said as the paper first doubled, then trebled, then broke up into prisms. 'You stupid fucked-up cunt.' He had balled the paper up, meaning to throw it across the room, and there was his new girlfriend, there was old mamasan sitting on the next bed, looking at Sully with her black eyes, and Sully had broken down completely at the sight of her. When the nurse came Sully either couldn't or wouldn't tell her what he was crying about.

All he knew was that the world had gone insane and he wanted a shot and eventually the nurse found a doctor to give him one and the last thing he saw before he passed out was mamasan, old fuckin mamasan sitting there on the next bed with her yellow hands in her green polyester lap, sitting there and watching him.

She made the trip across the country with him, too, had come all the way back to Connecticut with him, deadheading across the aisle in the tourist cabin of a United Airlines 747. She sat next to a businessman who saw her no more than the crew of the Huey had, or Willie Shearman, or the staff at the Pussy Palace. She had been

Malenfant's date in Dong Ha, but she was John Sullivan's date now and never took her black eyes off him. Her yellow, wrinkled fingers always stayed folded in her lap and her eyes always stayed on him.

Thirty years. Man, that was a long time.

But as those years went by, Sully had seen her less and less. When he returned to Harwich in the fall of '70, he still saw old mamasan just about every day — eating a hotdog in Commonwealth Park by Field B, or standing at the foot of the iron steps leading up to the railway station where the commuters ebbed and flowed, or just walking down Main Street.

Always looking at him.

Once, not long after he'd gotten his first post-Vietnam job, (selling cars, of course; it was the only thing he really knew how to do) he had seen old mamasan sitting in the passenger seat of a 1968 Ford LTD with PRICED TO SELL! soaped on the windshield.

You'll start to understand her in time, the headshrinker in San Francisco had told him, and refused to say much more no matter how hard Sully pressed him. The shrink wanted to hear about the helicopters that had collided and fell out of the sky; the headshrinker wanted to know why Sully so often referred to Malenfant as 'that cardplaying bastard' (Sully wouldn't tell him); the headshrinker wanted to know if Sully still had sexual fantasies, and if so, had they become noticeably violent. Sully had sort of liked the guy — Conroy, his name was —

but that didn't change the fact that he was an asshole. Once, near the end of his time in San Francisco, he had come close to telling Dr Conroy about Carol. On the whole he was glad he hadn't. He didn't know how to think about his old girlfriend, let alone talk about her (conflicted was Conroy's word for this state). He had called her a stupid fucked-up cunt, but the whole damned world was sort of fucked-up these days, wasn't it? And if anyone knew how easily violent behavior could break its leash and just run away, John

Sullivan did. All he was sure of was that he hoped the police wouldn't kill her when they finally caught up to her and her friends.

Asshole or not, Dr Conroy hadn't been entirely wrong about Sully coming to understand old mamasan as time went by. The most important thing was understanding — on a gut level — that old mamasan wasn't there. Head-knowledge of that basic fact was easy, but his gut was slower to learn, possibly because his gut had been torn open in Dong Ha and a thing like that just had to slow down the understanding process.

He had borrowed some of Dr Conroy's books, and the hospital librarian had gotten him a couple of others on inter-library loan. According to the books, old mamasan in her green pants and orange top was 'an externalized fantasy' which served as a 'coping mechanism' to help him deal with his 'survivor guilt' and 'post-traumatic stress syndrome.' She was a daydream, in other words.

Whatever the reasons, his attitude about her changed as her appearances became less frequent. Instead of feeling revulsion or a kind of superstitious dread when she turned up, he began to feel almost happy when he saw her. The way you felt when you saw an old friend who had left town but sometimes came back for a little visit.

He lived in Milford now, a town about twenty miles north of Harwich on I-95 and light-years away in most other senses. Harwich had been a pleasant, tree-filled suburb when Sully lived there as a kid, chumming with Bobby Garfield and Carol Gerber. Now his old home town was one of those places you didn't go at night, just a grimy adjunct to Bridgeport. He still spent most of his days there, on the lot or in his office (Sullivan Chevrolet had been a Gold Star dealership four years running now), but he was gone by six o'clock most evenings, seven for sure, tooling north to Milford in his Caprice demonstrator. He usually went with an unacknowledged but very real sense of gratitude.

On this particular summer day he had gone south from Milford on I-95 as usual, but at a later hour and without getting off at Exit 9, ASHER AVENUE HARWICH. Today he had kept the new demo pointed south (it was blue with blackwall tires, and watching people's brakelights go on when they saw him in their rearview mirrors never failed to amuse him — they thought he was a cop) and drove all the way into New York City.

He left the car at Arnie Mossberg's dealership on the West Side (when you were a Chevy dealer there was never a parking problem; that was one of the nice things about it), did some window-shopping on his way across town, had a steak at Palm Too, then went to Pagano's funeral.

Pags had been one of the guys at the chopper crash-site that morning, one of the guys in the Ville that afternoon. Also one of the guys caught in the final ambush on the trail, the ambush which had begun when Sully himself either stepped on a mine or broke a wire and popped a satchel-charge strapped to a tree. The little men in the black pajamas had been in the high toolies and man, they had opened up. On the trail, Pags had grabbed Wollensky when Wollensky got shot in the throat. He got Wollensky into the clearing, but by then Wollensky was dead. Pags would have been covered with Wollensky's blood (Sullivan didn't actually remember seeing that; he had been in his own hell by then), but that was probably something of a relief to the man because it covered up the other blood, still not entirely dry.

Pagano had been standing close enough to get splattered when Slocum shot Malenfant's buddy. Splattered with Clemson's blood, splattered with Clemson's brains.

Sully had never said a word about what happened to Clemson in the Ville, not to Dr Conroy or anyone else. He had dummied up. All of them had dummied up.

Pags had died of cancer. Whenever one of Sully's old Nam buddies died (well okay, they weren't buddies, exactly, most of them dumb as

stone boats and not what Sully would really call buddies, but it was the word they used because there was no word invented for what they had really been to each other), it always seemed to be cancer or drugs or suicide. Usually the cancer started in the lung or the brain and then just ran everywhere, as if these men had left their immune systems back in the green. With Dick Pagano it had been pancreatic cancer —

him and Michael Landon. It was the disease of the stars. The coffin was open and old Pags didn't look too shabby. His wife had had the undertaker dress him in an ordinary business suit, not a uniform. She probably hadn't even considered the uniform option, despite the decorations Pagano had won. Pags had worn a uniform for only two or three years, those years like an aberration, like time spent in some county joint because you did something entirely out of character on one bad-luck occasion, probably while you were drunk. Killed a guy in a barroom fight, say, or took it into your head to burn down the church where your exwife taught Sunday school. Sully couldn't think of a single man he'd served with, including himself, who would want to be buried in an Army uniform.

Dieffenbaker — Sully still thought of him as the new lieutenant — came to the funeral.

Sully hadn't seen Dieffenbaker in a long time, and they had had themselves quite a talk ...

although Dieffenbaker actually did most of the talking. Sully wasn't sure talking ever made a difference, but he kept thinking about the stuff Dieffenbaker said. How mad Dieffenbaker had sounded, mostly. All the way back to Connecticut he kept thinking about it.

He was on the Triborough Bridge heading north again by two o'clock, in plenty of time to beat the rush-hour traffic. 'Smooth movement across the Triborough and at key points along the LIE,' was how the traffic-reporter in the WINS copter put it. That's what copters were for these days; gauging the flow of traffic in and out of America's cities.

When the traffic started to slow just north of Bridgeport, Sully didn't notice. He had switched from news to oldies and had fallen to thinking about Pags and his harmonicas. It was a war-movie cliché, the grizzled GI with the mouth-harp, but Pagano, dear God, Pagano could drive you out of your ever-fuckin mind. Night and day he had played em, until one of the guys — it might have been Hexley or even Garrett Slocum — told him that if he didn't quit it, he was apt to wake up one morning with the world's first whistling rectal implant.

The more he considered it, the more Sully thought Sly Slocum had been the one to threaten the rectal implant. Big black man from Tulsa, thought Sly and the Family Stone was the best group on earth, hence the nickname, and refused to believe that another group he admired, Rare Earth, was white. Sully remembered Deef (this was before Dieffenbaker became the new lieutenant and gave Slocum that nod, probably the most important gesture Dieffenbaker had ever made or ever would make in his life) telling Slocum that those guys were just as white as fuckin Bob Dylan ('the folksingin honky' was what Slocum called Dylan). Slocum thought this over, then replied with what was for him rare gravity. The fuck you say. Rare Earth, man, those guys black. They record on fuckin Motown, and all Motown groups are black, everyone know that. Supremes, fuckin Temps, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. I respect you, Deef, you bad and you nationwide, without a doubt, man, but if you persist in your bullshit, I going to knock you down.

Slocum hated harmonica music. Harmonica music made him think of the folksingin honky.

If you tried to tell him that Dylan cared about the war, Slocum asked then how come the mulebray muthafucka didn't come on over here with Bob Hope one time. I tell you why, Slocum said. He scared, that's why. Fuckin candyass harmonica-blowin mulebray muthafucka!

Musing on Dieffenbaker rapping about the sixties. Thinking of those old names and old faces and old days. Not noticing as the Caprice's speedometer dropped from sixty to fifty to forty, the traffic starting to

stack up in all four northbound lanes. He remembered how Pags had been over there in the green — skinny, black-haired, his cheeks still dotted with the last of his post-adolescent acne, a rifle in his hands and two Hohner harmonicas (one key of C, one key of G) stuffed into the waistband of his camo trousers. Thirty years ago, that had been.

Roll back ten more and Sully was a kid growing up in Harwich, palling with Bobby Garfield and wishing that Carol Gerber would look at him, John Sullivan, just once the way she always looked at Bobby.

In time she had looked at him of course, but never in quite the same way. Was it because she was no longer eleven or because he wasn't Bobby? Sully didn't know. The look itself had been a mystery. It seemed to say that Bobby was killing her and she was glad, she would die that way until the stars fell from the sky and the rivers ran uphill and all the words to 'Louie Louie' were known.

What had happened to Bobby Garfield? Had he gone to Vietnam? Joined the flower children? Married, fathered children, died of pancreatic cancer? Sully didn't know. All he knew for sure was that Bobby had changed somehow in the summer of 1960 — the summer Sully had won a free week at the YMCA camp on Lake George — and had left town with his mother. Carol had stayed through high school, and even if she had never looked at him quite the way she had looked at Bobby, he had been her first, and she his. One night out in the country behind some Newburg dairy-farmer's barnful of lowing cattle. Sully remembered smelling sweet perfume on her throat as he came.

Why that odd cross-connection between Pagano in his coffin and the friends of his childhood? Perhaps because Pags had looked a little bit like Bobby had looked in those bygone days. Bobby's hair had been dark red instead of black, but he'd had that same skinny build and angular face ... and the same freckles. Yeah! Both Pags and Bobby with that Opie Taylor spray of freckles across the cheeks and the bridge of the nose! Or maybe it was just because when someone dies, you think about the past, the past, the fuckin past.

Now the Caprice was down to twenty miles an hour and the traffic stopped dead farther up, just shy of Exit 9, but Sully still didn't notice. On WKND, the oldies station, ? and The Mysterians were singing '96 Tears' and he was thinking about walking down the center aisle of the chapel with Dieffenbaker in front of him, walking up to the coffin for his first look at Pagano while the canned hymns played. 'Abide With Me' was the current ditty wafting through the air above Pagano's corpse — Pags, who had been perfectly happy to sit for hours with the .50-caliber propped up beside him and his pack on his lap and a deck of Winstons parked in the strap of his helmet, playing 'Goin Up the Country' over and over again.

Any resemblance to Bobby Garfield was long gone, Sully saw as he looked into the coffin.

The mortician had done a job good enough to justify the open coffin, but Pags still had the loose-skinned, sharp-chinned look of a fat man who has spent his final months on the Cancer Diet, the one they never write up in the National Enquirer, the one that consists of radiation, injected chemical poisons, and all the potato chips you want.

'Remember the harmonicas?' Dieffenbaker asked.

'I remember,' Sully said. 'I remember everything.' It came out sounding weird, and Dieffenbaker glanced at him.

Sully had a clear, fierce flash of how Deef had looked on that day in the Ville when Malenfant, Clemson, and those other nimrods had all of a sudden started paying off the morning's terror ... the whole last week's terror. They wanted to put it somewhere, the howls in the night and the sudden mortar-shots and finally the burning copters that had fallen with their rotors still turning, dispersing the smoke of their own deaths as they dropped. Down they came, whacko! And the little men in the black pajamas were shooting at Delta two-two and Bravo two-one from the bush just as soon as the Americans ran out into the clearing.

Sully had run with Willie Shearman beside him on the right and Lieutenant Packer in front of him; then Lieutenant Packer took a round in the face and no one was in front of him. Ronnie Malenfant was on his left and Malenfant had been yelling in his high-pitched voice, on and on and on, he was like some mad high-pressure telephone salesman gounded out on amphetamines: Come on, you fuckin ringmeats! Come on, you slopey Joes! Shoot me, ya fucks! You fuckin fucks! Can't shoot fa shit! Pagano was behind them, and Slocum was beside Pags. Some Bravo guys but mostly Delta boys, that was his memory. Willie Shearman yelled for his own guys, but a lot of them hung back. Delta two-two didn't hang back. Clemson was there, and Wollensky, and Hackermeyer, and it was amazing how he could remember their names; their names and the smell of that day. The smell of the green and the smell of the kerosene. The sight of the sky, blue on green, and oh man how they would shoot, how those little fuckers would shoot, you never forgot how they would shoot or the feel of a round passing close beside you, and Malenfant was screaming Shoot me, ya deadass ringmeats!

Can't! Fuckin blind! Come on, I'm right here! Fuckin blindeye homo slopehead assholes, I'm right here! And the men in the downed helicopters were screaming, so they pulled them out, got the foam on the fire and pulled them out, only they weren't men anymore, not what you'd call men, they were screaming TV dinners for the most part, TV dinners with eyes and beltbuckles and these clittery reaching fingers with smoke rising from the melted nails, yeah, like that, not stuff you could tell people like Dr Conroy, how when you pulled them parts of them came off, kind of slid off the way the baked skin of a freshly cooked turkey will slide along the hot liquefied fat just beneath, like that, and all the time you're smelling the green and the kerosene, it's all happening, it's a rilly rilly big shew, as Ed Sullivan used to say, and it's all happening on our stage, and all you can do is roll with it, try to get over.

That was the morning, that was the helicopters, and something like that had to go somewhere. When they got to the shitty little Ville that afternoon they still had the stink of charred helicopter crewmembers

in their noses, the old lieutenant was dead, and some of the men — Ronnie Malenfant and his friends, if you wanted to get right down to particulars —

had gone a little bughouse. Dieffenbaker was the new lieutenant, and all at once he had found himself in charge of crazy men who wanted to kill everyone they saw — children, old men, old mamasans in red Chinese sneakers.

The copters crashed at ten. At approximately two-oh-five, Ronnie Malenfant first stuck his bayonet into the old woman's stomach and then announced his intention of cutting off the fuckin pig's head. At approximately four-fifteen, less than four clicks away, the world blew up in John Sullivan's face. That had been his big day in Dong Ha Province, his rilly big shew.

Standing there between two shacks at the head of the Ville's single street, Dieffenbaker had looked like a scared sixteen-year-old kid. But he hadn't been sixteen, he'd been twenty-five, years older than Sully and most of the others. The only other man there of Deef's age and rank was Willie Shearman, and Willie seemed reluctant to step in. Perhaps the rescue operation that morning had exhausted him. Or perhaps he had noticed that once again it was the Delta two-two boys who were leading the charge. Malenfant was screaming that when the fuckin slopehead Gong saw a few dozen heads up on sticks, they'd think twice about fucking with Delta Lightning. On and on in that shrill, drilling phone-salesman's voice of his. The cardplayer. Mr Card-Shark. Pags had his harmonicas; Malenfant had his deck of fuckin Bikes. Hearts, that was Malenfant's game. A dime a point if he could get it, nickel a point if he couldn't. Come on, boys! he'd yell in that shrill voice of his, a voice Sully swore could cause nosebleeds and kill locusts on the wing. Come on, pony up, we huntin The Bitch!

Sully remembered standing in the street and looking at the new lieutenant's pale, exhausted, confused face. He remembered thinking, He can't do it. Whatever needs to be done to stop this before it really gets going, he can't do it. But then Dieffenbaker got it

together and gave Sly Slocum the nod. Slocum didn't hesitate a moment. Slocum, standing there in the street beside an overturned kitchen chair with chrome legs and a red seat, had shouldered his rifle, sighted in, and had blown Ralph Glemson's head clean off. Pagano, standing nearby and gaping at Malenfant, hardly seemed aware that he had been splattered pretty much from head to toe. Glemson fell dead in the street and that stopped the party.

Game over, baby.

These days Dieffenbaker had a substantial golf-gut and wore bifocals. Also, he'd lost most of his hair. Sully was amazed at this, because Deef had had a pretty full head of it five years ago, at the unit's reunion on the Jersey shore. That was the last time, Sully had vowed to himself, that he would party with those guys. They didn't get better. They didn't fuckin mellow. Each reunion was more like the cast of Seinfeld on a really mean batch of crank.

'Want to come outside and have a smoke?' the new lieutenant asked. 'Or did you give that up when everyone else did?'

'Gave it up like everyone else, that's affirmative.' They had been standing a little to the left of the coffin by then so the rest of the mourners could get a look and then get past them.

Talking in low tones, the taped music rolling easily over their voices, the draggy salvation soundtrack. The current tune was 'The Old Rugged Cross,' Sully believed.

He said, 'I think Pags would've preferred—'

“'Goin' Up the Country” or “Let's Work Together,”” Dieffenbaker finished, grinning.

Sully grinned back. It was one of those unexpected moments, like a brief sunny break in a day-long spell of rain, when it was okay to remember something — one of those moments when you were,

amazingly, almost glad you had been there. ‘Or maybe “Boom Boom,” that one by The Animals,’ he said.

‘Remember Sly Slocum telling Pags he’d stuff that harmonica up his ass if Pags didn’t give it a rest?’

Sully had nodded, still grinning. ‘Said if he shoved it up there far enough, Pags could play “Red River Valley” when he farted.’ He had glanced fondly back at the coffin, as if expecting Pagano would also be grinning at the memory. Pagano wasn’t. Pagano was just lying there with makeup on his face. Pagano had gotten over. ‘Tell you what — I’ll come outside and watch you smoke.’

‘Done deal.’ Dieffenbaker, who had once given the okay for one of his soldiers to kill another of his soldiers, had started up the chapel’s side aisle, his bald head lighting up with mixed colors as he passed beneath each stained-glass window. Limping after him — he had been limping over half his life now and never noticed anymore — came John Sullivan, Gold Star Chevrolet dealer.

The traffic on I-95 slowed to a crawl and then came to a complete stop, except for the occasional forward twitch in one of the lanes. On the radio ? and The Mysterians had given way to Sly and the Family Stone — ‘Dance to the Music.’ Fuckin Slocum would have been seat-bopping for sure, seat-bopping to the max. Sully put the Caprice demonstrator in Park and tapped in time on the steering wheel.

As the song began to wind down he looked to his right and there was old mamasan in the shotgun seat, not seat-bopping but just sitting there with her yellow hands folded in her lap and her crazy-bright sneakers, those Chuck Taylor knockoffs, planted on the disposable plastic floormat with SULLIVAN CHEVROLET APPRECIATES YOUR BUSINESS printed on it.

‘Hello, you old bitch,’ Sully said, pleased rather than disturbed. When was the last time she’d shown her face? The Tacklins’ New Year’s Eve party, perhaps, the last time Sully had gotten really drunk. ‘Why weren’t you at Pags’s funeral? The new lieutenant asked after you.’

She made no reply, but hey, when did she ever? She only sat there with her hands folded and her black eyes on him, a Halloween vision in green and orange and red. Old mamasan was like no ghost in a Hollywood movie, though; you couldn't see through her, she never changed her shape, never faded away. She wore a woven piece of twine on one scrawny yellow wrist like a junior-high-school kid's friendship bracelet. And although you could see every twist of the twine and every wrinkle on her ancient face, you couldn't smell her and the one time Sully tried to touch her she had disappeared on him. She was a ghost and his head was the haunted house she lived in. Only every now and then (usually without pain and always without warning), his head would vomit her out where he had to look at her.

She didn't change. She never went bald or got gallstones or needed bifocals. She didn't die as Clemson and Pags and Packer and the guys in the crashed helicopters had died (even the two they had taken from the clearing covered in foam like snowmen had died, they were too badly burned to live and it had all been for nothing). She didn't disappear as Carol had done, either. No, old mamasan continued to pop in for the occasional visit, and she hadn't changed a bit since the days when 'Instant Karma' was a top-ten hit. She had to die once, that was true, had to lie there in the mud while Malenfant first drove his bayonet into her belly and then announced his intention of removing her head, but since then she had been absolutely cruisin.

'Where you been, darlin?' If anyone in another car happened to look over (his Caprice was surrounded on all four sides now, boxed in) and saw his lips moving, they'd just assume he was singing along with the radio. Even if they thought anything else, who gave a fuck? Who gave a fuck what any of them thought? He had seen things, terrible things, not the least of them a roll of his own intestines lying in the bloody mat of his pubic hair, and if he sometimes saw this old ghost (and talked to her), so fuckin what? Whose business was it but his own?

Sully looked up the road, trying to spy what had plugged the traffic (he couldn't, you never could, you just had to wait and creep forward a little when the guy in front of you crept forward), and then looked back. Sometimes when he did that she was gone. Not this time; this time she had just changed her clothes. The red sneakers were the same but now she was wearing a nurse's uniform: white nylon pants, white blouse (with a small gold watch pinned to it, what a nice touch), white cap with a little black stripe. Her hands were still folded in her lap, though, and she was still looking at him.

'Where you been, Mama? I missed you. I know that's weird but it's true. Mama, you been on my mind. You should have seen the new lieutenant. Really, it's amazing. He's entered the solar sex-panel phase. Totally bald on top, I mean shiny.'

Old mamasan said nothing. Sully wasn't surprised.

There was an alley beside the funeral parlor with a green-painted bench placed against one side. At either end of the bench was a butt-studded bucket of sand. Dieffenbaker sat beside one of the buckets, stuck a cigarette in his mouth (it was a Dunhill, Sully observed, pretty impressive), then offered the pack to Sully.

'No, I really quit.'

'Excellent.' Dieffenbaker lit up with a Zippo, and Sully realized an odd thing: he had never seen anyone who'd been in Vietnam light his cigarette with matches or those disposable butane lighters; Nam vets all seemed to carry Zippos. Of course that couldn't really be true.

Could it?

'You've still got quite a limp on you,' Dieffenbaker said.

'Yeah.'

‘On the whole, I’d call it an improvement. The last time I saw you it was almost a lurch.

Especially after you got a couple of drinks down the hatch.’

‘You still go to the reunions? Do they still have them, the picnics and shit?’

‘I think they still have them, but I haven’t been in three years. Got too depressing.’

‘Yeah. The ones who don’t have cancer are raving alcoholics. The ones who have managed to kick the booze are on Prozac.’

‘You noticed.’

Tucking yeah I noticed.’

‘I guess I’m not surprised. You were never the smartest guy in the world, Sully-John, but you were a perceptive son of a bitch. Even back then. Anyway, you nailed it — booze, cancer, and depression, those’re the main problems, it seems like. Oh, and teeth. I never met a Vietnam vet who wasn’t having the veriest shitpull with his teeth ... if he had any left, that is.

What about you, Sully? How’s the old toofers?’

Sully, who’d had six out since Vietnam (plus root canals almost beyond numbering), wiggled his hand from side to side in a *comme ci, comme ça*, gesture.

‘And the other problem?’ Dieffenbaker asked. ‘How’s that?’

‘Depends,’ Sully said.

‘On what?’

‘On what I described as my problem. We were at three of those fuckin reunion picnics together—’

'Four. There was also at least one I went to that you didn't. The year after the one on the Jersey shore? That was the one where Andy Hackermeyer said he was going to kill himself by jumping from the top of the Statue of Liberty.'

'Did he ever do it?'

Dieffenbaker dragged deeply on his cigarette and gave Sully what was still a Lieutenant Look. Even after all these years he could muster that up. Sort of amazing. 'If he'd done it, you would have read about it in the Post. Don't you read the Post?'

'Religiously.'

Dieffenbaker nodded. 'Vietnam vets all have trouble with their teeth and they all read the Post. If they're in the Post's fallout area, that is. What do you suppose they do if they're not?'

'Listen to Paul Harvey,' Sully said promptly, and Dieffenbaker laughed.

Sully was remembering Hack, who'd also been there the day of the helicopters and the 'ville and the ambush. Blond kid with an infectious laugh. Had a picture of his girlfriend laminated so it wouldn't rot in the damp and then wore it around his neck on a little silver chain. Hackermeyer had been right next to Sully when they came into the Ville and the shooting started. Both of them watching as the old mamasan came running out of her hooch with her hands raised, jabbering six licks to the dozen, jabbering at Malenfant and Clemson and Peasley and Mims and the other ones who were shooting the place up. Minis had put a round through a little boy's calf, maybe by accident. The boy was lying in the dirt outside one of the shitty little shacks, screaming. Old mamasan decided Malenfant was the one in charge — why not? Malenfant was the one doing all the yelling — and ran up to him, still waving her hands in the air. Sully could have told her that was a bad mistake, old Mr Card-Shark had had himself a morning and a half, they all had, but Sully never opened his mouth. He and Hack stood there watching as Malenfant

raised the butt of his rifle and drove it down into her face, knocking her flat and stopping her jabber. Willie Shearman had been standing twenty yards or so away. Willie Shearman from the old home town, one of the Catholic boys he and Bobby had been sort of scared of, and there was nothing readable on Willie's face. Willie Baseball, some of his men called him, and always affectionately. Sully had no idea why.

'So what about your problem, Sully-John?'

Sully came back from the Ville in Dong Ha to the alley beside the funeral parlor in New York ... but slowly. Some memories were like the Tar-Baby in that old story about Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit; you got stuck on them. 'I guess it all depends. What problem did I say I had?'

'You said you got your balls blown off when they hit us outside the 'ville. You said it was God punishing you for not stopping Malenfant before he went all dinky-dau and killed the old lady.'

Dinky-dau didn't begin to cover it, Malenfant standing with his legs planted on either side of the old lady, bringing the bayonet down and still running his mouth the whole time. When the blood started to come out it made her orange top look like tie -dye.

'I exaggerated a trifle,' Sully said, 'as drunks tend to do. Part of the old scrotal sack is still present and accounted for and sometimes the pump still turns on. Especially since Viagra.

God bless that shit.'

'Have you quit the booze as well as the cigarettes?'

'I take the occasional beer,' Sully said.

'Prozac?'

'Not yet.'

'Divorced?'

Sully nodded. 'You?'

'Twice. Thinking about taking the plunge again, though. Mary Theresa Charlton, how sweet she is. Third time lucky, that's my motto.'

'You know something, Loot?' Sully asked. 'We've uncovered some clear legacies of the Vietnam experience here.' He popped up a finger. 'Vietnam vets get cancer, usually of the lung or the brain, but other places, too.'

'Like Pags. Pags was the pancreas, wasn't it?'

'Right.'

'All that cancer's because of the Orange,' Dieffenbaker said. 'Nobody can prove it but we all know it. Agent Orange, the gift that keeps on giving.'

Sully popped up a second finger — yer fuckfinger, Ronnie Malenfant would undoubtedly have called it. 'Vietnam vets get depressed, get drunk at parties, threaten to jump off national landmarks.' Out with the third finger. 'Vietnam vets have bad teeth.' Pinky finger. 'Vietnam vets get divorced.'

Sully had paused at that point, vaguely hearing canned organ music coming through a partially opened window, looking at his four popped fingers and then at the thumb still tucked against his palm. Vets were drug addicts. Vets were bad loan risks, by and large; any bank officer would tell you so (in the years when Sully had been getting the dealership up and running a number of bankers had told him so). Vets maxed out their credit cards, got thrown out of gambling casinos, wept over songs by George Strait and Patty Loveless, knifed each other over shuffleboard bowling games in bars, bought muscle cars on credit and then wrecked them, beat their wives, beat their kids, beat their fuckin dogs, and probably cut

themselves shaving more often than people who had never been closer to the green than Apocalypse Now or that fucking piece of shit The Deer Hunter.

‘What’s the thumb?’ Dieffenbaker asked. ‘Come on, Sully, you’re killing me here.’

Sully looked at his folded thumb. Looked at Dieffenbaker, who now wore bifocals and carried a potbelly (what Vietnam vets usually called ‘the house that Bud built’) but who still might have that skinny young man with the wax-candle complexion somewhere inside of him. Then he looked back at his thumb and popped it out like a guy trying to hitch a ride.

‘Vietnam vets carry Zippos,’ he said. ‘At least until they stop smoking.’

‘Or until they get cancer,’ Dieffenbaker said. ‘At which point their wives no doubt pry em out of their weakening palsied hands.’

‘Except for all the ones who’re divorced,’ Sully said, and they both laughed. It had been good outside the funeral parlor. Well, maybe not good, exactly, but better than inside. The organ music in there was bad, the sticky smell of the flowers was worse. The smel of the flowers made Sully think of the Mekong Delta. ‘In country,’ people said now, but he didn’t remember ever having heard that particular phrase back then.

‘So you didn’t entirely lose your balls after all,’ Dieffenbaker said.

‘Nope, never quite made it into Jake Barnes country.’

‘Who?’

‘Doesn’t matter.’ Sully wasn’t much of a book-reader, never had been (his friend Bobby had been the book-reader), but the rehab librarian had given him The Sun Also Rises and Sully had read it avidly, not once but three times. Back then it had seemed very important — as

important as that book *Lord of the Flies* had been to Bobby when they were kids. Now Jake Barnes seemed remote, a tin man with fake problems. Just one more made-up thing.

‘No?’

‘No. I can have a woman if I really want to have one — not kids, but I can have a woman.

There’s a fair amount of preparation involved, though, and mostly it seems like too much trouble.’

Dieffenbaker said nothing for several moments. He sat looking at his hands. When he looked up, Sully thought he’d say something about how he had to get moving, a quick goodbye to the widow and then back to the wars (Sully thought that in the new lieutenant’s case the wars these days involved selling computers with something magical called Pentium inside them), but Dieffenbaker didn’t say that. He asked, ‘And what about the old lady? Do you still see her, or is she gone?’

Sully had felt dread — unformed but vast — stir at the back of his mind. ‘What old lady?’

He couldn’t remember telling Dieffenbaker, couldn’t remember telling anybody, but of course he must have. Shit, he could have told Dieffenbaker anything at those reunion picnics; they were nothing but liquor-smelling black holes in his memory, every one of them.

‘Old mamasan,’ Dieffenbaker said, and brought out his cigarettes again. ‘The one Malenfant killed. You said you used to see her. “Sometimes she wears different clothes, but it’s always her,” you said. Do you still see her?’

‘Can I have one of those?’ Sully asked. ‘I never had a Dunhill.’

On WKND Donna Summer was singing about a bad girl, bad girl, you’re such a naughty bad girl, beep-beep. Sully turned to old

mamasan, who was in her orange top and her green pants again, and said: 'Malenfant was never obviously crazy. No crazier than anyone else, anyway .

. . . except maybe about Hearts. He was always looking for three guys to play Hearts with him, and that isn't really crazy, would you say? No crazier than Pags with his harmonicas and a lot less than the guys who spent their nights snorting heroin. Also, Ronnie helped yank those guys out of the choppers. There must've been a dozen gooks in the bush, maybe two dozen, all of them shooting away like mad, they wasted Lieutenant Packer and Malenfant must have seen it happen, he was right there, but he never hesitated.' Nor had Fowler or Hack or Slocum or Peasley or Sully himself. Even after Packer went down they had kept going. They were brave kids. And if their bravery had been wasted in a war made by pigheaded old men, did that mean the bravery was of no account? For that matter, was Carol Gerber's cause wrong because a bomb had gone off at the wrong time? Shit, lots of bombs had gone off at the wrong time in Vietnam. What was Ronnie Malenfant, when you got right down to it, but a bomb that had gone off at the wrong time?

Old mamasan went on looking at him, his ancient white-haired date sitting there in the passenger seat with her hands in her lap — yellow hands folded where the orange smock met the green polyester pants.

'They'd been shooting at us for almost two weeks,' Sully said. 'Ever since we left the A Chau Valley. We won at Tam Boi and when you win you're supposed to roll, at least that's what I always thought, but what we were doing was a retreat, not a roll. Shit, one step from a rout is what it was, and we sure didn't feel like winners for long. There was no support, we were just hung out to dry. Fuckin Vietnamization! What a joke that was!'

He fell silent for a moment or two, looking at her while she looked calmly back. Beyond them, the halted traffic glittered like a fever. Some impatient trucker hit his airhorn and Sully jumped like a man suddenly awakened from a doze.

‘That’s when I met Willie Shearman, you know — falling back from the A Shau Valley. I knew he looked familiar and I was sure I’d met him someplace, but I couldn’t think where.

People change a hell of a lot between fourteen and twenty-four, you know. Then one afternoon he and a bunch of the other Bravo Company guys were sitting around and bullshitting, talking about girls, and Willie said that the first time he ever got French-kissed, it was at a St Theresa of Avila Sodality dance. And I think, “Holy shit, those were the St Gabe’s girls.” I walked up to him and said, “You Steadfast guys might have been the kings of Asher Avenue, but we whipped your pansy asses every time you came down to Harwich High to play football.” Hey, you talk about a gotcha! Fuckin Willie jumped up so fast I thought he was gonna run away like the Gingerbread Man. It was like he’d seen a ghost, or something.

Then he laughed and stuck out his hand and I saw he was still wearing his St Gabe’s highschool ring! And you know what it all goes to prove?’

Old mamasan didn’t say anything, she never did, but Sully could see in her eyes that she did know what it all went to prove: people were funny, kids say the darndest things, winners never quit and quitters never win. Also God bless America.

‘Anyway, that whole week they chased us, and it started to get obvious that they were bearing down ... squeezing the sides ... our casualties kept going up and you couldn’t get any sleep because of the flares and the choppers and the howling they’d do at night, back here in the toolies. And then they’d come at you, see ... twenty of them, three dozen of them ...

poke and pull,back, poke and pull back, like that ... and they had this thing they’d do ... ‘

Sully licked his lips, aware that his mouth had gone dry. Now he wished he hadn’t gone to Pags’s funeral. Pags had been a good guy, but not good enough to justify the return of such memories.

'They'd set up four or five mortars in the bush ... on one of our flanks, you know ... and beside each mortar they'd line up eight or nine guys, each one with a shell. The little men in the black pajamas, all lined up like kids at the drinking fountain back in grammar school. And when the order came, each guy would drop his shell into the mortar-tube and then run forward just as fast as he could. Running that way, they'd engage the enemy — us — at about the same time their shells came down. It always made me think of something the guy who lived upstairs from Bobby Garfield told us once when we were playing pass on Bobby's front lawn. It was about some baseball player the Dodgers used to have. Ted said this guy was so fuckin fast he could hit a fungo pop fly at home plate, then run out to shortstop and catch it himself. It was ... sort of unnerving.'

Yes. The way he was sort of unnerved right now, sort of freaked out, like a kid who makes the mistake of telling himself ghost stories in the dark.

'The fire they poured into that clearing where the choppers went down was only more of the same, believe you me.' Except that wasn't exactly true. The Cong had let it all hang out that morning; turned the volume up to eleven and then pulled the knobs off, as Mims liked to say. The shooting from the bush around the burning choppers had been like a steady downpour instead of a shower.

There were cigarettes in the Caprice's glove compartment, an old pack of Winstons Sully kept for emergencies, transferring from one car to the next whenever he switched rides. That one cigarette he'd bummed from Dieffenbaker had awakened the tiger and now he reached past old mamasan, opened the glove-box, pawed past all the paperwork, and found the pack.

The cigarette would taste stale and hot in his throat, but that was okay. That was what sort of what he wanted.

'Two weeks of shooting and squeezing,' he told her, pushing in the lighter. 'Shake and bake and don't look for the fuckin ARVN, baby, because they always seemed to have better things to do. Bitches,

barbecues, and bowling tournaments, Malenfant used to say. We kept taking casualties, the air cover was never there when it was supposed to be, no one was getting any sleep, and it seemed like the more other guys from the A Shau linked up with us the worse it got. I remember one of Willie's guys — Havers or Haber, something like that — got it right in the head. Got it in the fuckin head and then just lay there on the path with his eyes open, trying to talk. Blood pouring out of this hole right here ... ' Sully tapped a finger against his skull just over his ear. ' ... and we couldn't believe he was still alive, let alone trying to talk. Then the thing with the choppers ... that was like something out of a movie, all the smoke and shooting, bup-bup-bup-bup. That was the lead-in for us — you know, into your Ville. We came up on it and boy ... there was this one chair in the street, like a kitchen chair with a red seat and steel legs pointing up at the sky. It just looked crapass, I'm sorry but it did, not worth living in, let alone dying for. Your guys, the ARVN, they didn't want to die for places like that, why would we? The place stank, it smelled like shit, but they all did.

That's how it seemed. I didn't care so much about the smell, anyway. Mostly I think it was the chair that got to me. That one chair said it all.'

Sully pulled out the lighter, started to apply the cherry-red coil to the tip of his cigarette, and then remembered he was in a demonstrator. He could smoke in a demo — hell, it was off his own lot — but if one of the salesmen smelled the smoke and concluded that the boss was doing what was a firing offense for anyone else, it wouldn't be good. You had to walk the walk as well as talk the talk ... at least you did if you wanted to get a little respect.

'Excusez-moi,' he told the old mamasan. He got out of the car, which was still running, lit his cigarette, then bent in the window to slide the lighter back into its dashboard receptacle.

The day was hot, and the four-lane sea of idling cars made it seem even hotter. Sully could sense the impatience all around him, but his was the only radio he could hear; everyone else was under glass,

buttoned into their little air-conditioned cocoons, listening to a hundred different kinds of music, from Liz Phair to William Ackerman. He guessed that any vets caught in the jam who didn't have the Allman Brothers on CD or Big Brother and the Holding Company on tape were probably also listening to WKND, where the past had never died and the future never came. Toot-toot, beep-beep.

Sully hitch-stepped to the hood of his car and stood on tiptoe, shading his eyes against the glare of sun on chrome and looking for the problem. He couldn't see it, of course.

Bitches, barbecues, and bowling tournaments, he thought, and the thought came in Malenfant's squealing, drilling voice. That nightmare voice under the blue and out of the green. Come on, boys, who's got The Douche? I'm down to ninety and a wakeup, time's short, let's get this fuckin show on the fuckin road!

He took a deep drag on the Winston, then coughed out stale hot smoke. Black dots began a sudden dance in the afternoon brightness, and he looked down at the cigarette between his ringers with an expression of nearly comic horror. What was he doing, starting up with this shit again? Was he crazy? Well yes, of course he was crazy, anyone who saw dead old ladies sitting beside them in their cars had to be crazy, but that didn't mean he had to start up with this shit again. Cigarettes were Agent Orange that you paid for. Sully threw the Winston away. It felt like the right decision, but it didn't slow the accelerating beat of his heart or his sense — so well remembered from the patrols he'd been on — that the inside of his mouth was drying out and pulling together, puckering and crinkling like burned skin. Some people were afraid of crowds — agoraphobia, it was called, fear of the marketplace — but the only time Sully ever had that sense of too much and too many was at times like this. He was okay in elevators and crowded lobbies at intermission and on rush-hour train platforms, but when traffic clogged to a stop all around him, he got dinky-dau. There was, after all, nowhere to run, baby, nowhere to hide.

A few other folks were emerging from their air-conditioned lifepods. A woman in a severe brown business suit standing by a severe brown BMW, a gold bracelet and silver earrings summarizing the summer sunlight, all but tapping one cordovan high heel with impatience.

She caught Sully's eye, rolled her own heavenward as if to say Isn't this typical, and glanced at her wristwatch (also gold, also gleaming). A man astride a green Yamaha crotchrocket killed his bike's raving engine, put the bike on its kickstand, removed his helmet, and placed it on the oilstained pavement next to one footpedal. He was wearing black bike-shorts and a sleeveless shirt with PROPERTY OF THE NEW YORK KNICKS printed on the front. Sully estimated this gentleman would lose approximately seventy per cent of his skin if he happened to dump the crotchrocket at a speed greater than five miles an hour while wearing such an outfit.

'Bummer, man,' the crotchrocket guy said. 'Must be an accident. Hope it's nothing radioactive.' And laughed to show he was joking.

Up ahead in the far left lane — what would be the fast lane when traffic was actually moving on this stretch of highway — a woman in tennis whites was standing beside a Toyota with a NO NUKES bumper sticker on the left side of the license plate and one reading HOUSECAT: THE OTHER WHITE MEAT on the right. Her skirt was very short, her thighs were very long and brown, and when she pushed her sunglasses up, propping them in her blondstreaked hair, Sully got a look at her eyes. They were wide and blue and somehow alarmed. It was a look that made you want to stroke her cheek (or perhaps give her a one-armed brotherhug) and tell her not to worry, everything was going to be all right. It was a look Sully remembered well. It was the one that had turned him inside out. It was Carol Gerber up there, Carol Gerber in sneakers and a tennis dress. He hadn't seen her since one night in late 1966

when he'd gone over her house and they'd sat on the sofa (along with Carol's mother, who had smelled strongly of wine) watching TV. They had ended up arguing about the war and he had left. I'll go

back and see her again when I'm sure I can stay cool, he remembered thinking as he drove away in his old Chevrolet (even back then he'd been a Chevrolet man). But he never had. By late '66 she was already up to her ass in antiwar shit — that much she'd learned during her semester in Maine, if nothing else — and just thinking about her was enough to make him furious. Fucking little empty-headed idiot was what she was, she'd swallowed all that communist antiwar propaganda hook, line, and sinker. Then, of course, she'd joined that nutty group, that MSP, and had high-sided it completely.

'Carol!' he called, starting toward her. He passed the snot-green crotchrocket, cut between the rear bumper of a van and a sedan, temporarily lost sight of her as he hurried along the side of a rumbling sixteen-wheeler, then saw her again. 'Carol! Hey Carol!' Yet when she turned toward him he wondered what the hell was wrong with him, what had possessed him. If Carol was still alive she had to be pushing fifty now, just as he was. This woman looked maybe thirty-five.

Sully stopped, still a lane away. Cars and trucks rumbling everywhere. And an odd whickering sound in the air, which he at first thought was the wind, although the afternoon air was hot and perfectly still.

'Carol? Carol Gerber?'

The whicker was louder, a sound like someone flicking his tongue repeatedly through his pursed lips, a sound like a helicopter five clicks away. Sully looked up and saw a lampshade tumbling out of the hazy blue sky, directly at him. He dodged backward in an instinctive startle reflex, but he had spent his entire school career playing athletic sports of one kind or another, and even as he was pulling back his head he was reaching with his hand. He caught the lampshade quite deftly. On it was a paddleboat churning downriver against a lurid red sunset. WE'RE DOING FINE ON THE MISSISSIPPI was written above the boat in scrolly, oldfashioned letters. Below it, in the same scrolly caps: HOW'S BAYOU?

Where the fuck did this come from? Sully thought, and then the woman who looked like an all-grown-up version of Carol Gerber screamed. Her hands rose as if to adjust the sunglasses propped in her hair and then just hung beside her shoulders, shaking like the hands of a distraught symphony conductor. It was how old mamasan had looked as she came running out of her shitty fucked-up hooch and into the shitty fucked-up street of that shitty fucked-up little Ville in Dong Ha Province. Blood spilled down over the shoulders of the tennis woman's white dress, first in spatters, then in a flood. It ran down her tanned upper arms and dripped from her elbows.

'Carol?' Sully asked stupidly. He was standing between a Dodge Ram pickup and a Mack semi, dressed in a dark blue suit, the one he wore to funerals, holding a lampshade souvenir of the Mississippi River (how's bayou) and looking at a woman who now had something sticking out of her head. As she staggered a step forward, blue eyes still wide, hands still shaking in the air, Sully realized it was a cordless phone. He could tell by the stub of aerial, which jiggled with each step she took. A cordless phone had fallen out of the sky, had fallen God knew how many thousands of feet, and now it was in her head.

She took another step, struck the hood of a dark green Buick, and began to sink slowly behind it as her knees buckled. It was like watching a submarine go down, Sully thought, only instead of a periscope all that would be sticking up after she was out of sight would be the stubby antenna of that cordless phone.

'Carol?' he whispered, but it couldn't be her; no one he'd known as a kid, no one he'd ever slept with, had been destined to die from injuries inflicted by a falling telephone, surely.

People were starting to scream and yell and shout. Mostly the shouts seemed to be questions. Horns were honking. Engines were revving, just as if there were someplace to go.

Beside Sully, the driver of the Mack sixteen-wheeler was goosing his power-plant in big, rhythmic snorts. A car alarm began to wobble-

wobble. Someone howled in either pain or surprise.

A single trembling white hand clutched at the hood of the dark green Buick. There was a tennis bracelet on the wrist. Slowly the hand and the bracelet slid away from Sully. The fingers of the woman who had looked like Carol gripped at the edge of the hood for a moment, then disappeared. Something else fell, whistling, out of the sky.

‘Get down!’ Sully screamed. ‘Ah fuck, get down!’

The whistling rose to a shrill, earsplitting pitch, then stopped as the falling object struck the hood of the Buick, bashing it downward like a fist and popping it up from beneath the windshield. The thing poking out of the Buick’s engine compartment appeared to be a microwave oven.

From all around him there now came the sound of falling objects. It was like being caught in an earthquake that was somehow going on above the ground instead of in it. A harmless shower of magazines fell past him — Seventeen and GQ and Rolling Stone and Stereo Review. With their open fluttering pages they looked like shot birds. To his right an office chair dropped out of the blue, spinning on its base as it came. It struck the roof of a Ford station wagon. The wagon’s windshield blew out in milky chunks. The chair rebounded into the air, tilted, and came to rest on the station wagon’s hood. Beyond that a portable TV, a plastic clothes basket, what looked like a clutch of cameras with the straps all tangled together, and a rubber home plate fell on the slow lane and into the breakdown lane. The home plate was followed by what looked like a Louisville Slugger baseball bat. A theatersize popcorn popper shattered into glittering shards when it hit the road.

The guy in the Knicks shirt, the one with the snot-green crotchrocket, had seen enough. He started running up the narrow corridor between the traffic stalled in the third lane and the traffic stalled in the fast lane, twisting like a slalom skier to avoid the jutting side mirrors, holding one hand over his head like a man crossing the street during a spring shower. Sully, still clutching the lampshade,

thought the guy would have done a lot better to have grabbed his helmet and put it back on, but of course when things started falling all around you you got forgetful and the first thing you were apt to forget was where your best interests lay.

Something else was coming down now, falling close and falling big — bigger than the microwave oven that had bashed in the Buick's hood, certainly. This time the sound wasn't a whistle, like a bomb or a mortar-shell, but the sound of a falling plane or helicopter or even a house. In Vietnam Sully had been around when all those things fell out of the sky (the house had been in pieces, granted), and yet this sound was different in one crucial way: it was also musical, like the world's biggest windchime.

It was a grand piano, white with gold chasing, the sort of piano on which you'd expect a long cool woman in a black dress to tinkle out 'Night and Day' — in the traffic's boom, in the silence of my lonely room, toot-toot, beep-beep. A white grand piano falling out of the Connecticut sky, turning over and over, making a shadow like a jellyfish on the jammed-up cars, making windy music in its cables as air blew through its rolling chest, its keys rippling like the keys of a player piano, the hazy sun winking on the pedals.

It fell in lazy revolutions, and the fattening sound of its drop was like the sound of something vibrating endlessly in a tin tunnel. It fell toward Sully, its uneasy shadow now starting to focus and shrink, his upturned face its seeming target.

'INCOMING!' Sully screamed, and began to run. 'INNCOMMING!'

The piano plummeted toward the turnpike, the white bench falling right behind it, and behind the bench came a comet's tail of sheet music, 45-rpm records with fat holes in the middle, small appliances, a flapping yellow coat that looked like a duster, a Goodyear Wide Oval tire, a barbecue grill, a weathervane, a file-cabinet, and a teacup with WORLD'S

GREATEST GRANDMA printed on the side.

‘Can I have one of those?’ Sully had asked Dieffenbaker outside the funeral parlor where Pags was lying in his silk-lined box. ‘I never had a Dunhill.’

‘Whatever floats your boat.’ Dieffenbaker sounded amused, as if he had never been shitscared in his life.

Sully could still remember Dieffenbaker standing in the street by that overturned kitchen chair: how pale he had been, how his lips had trembled, how his clothes still smelled of smoke and spilled copter fuel. Dieffenbaker looking around from Malenfant and the old woman to the others who were starting to pour fire into the hooches to the howling kid Minis had shot; he could remember Deef looking at Lieutenant Shearman but there was no help there. No help from Sully himself, for that matter. He could also remember how Slocum was staring at Deef, Deef the lieutenant now that Packer was dead. And finally Deef had looked back at Slocum. Sly Slocum was no officer — not even one of those bigmouth bush generals who were always second-guessing everything — and never would be. Slocum was just your basic E3 or E4 who thought that a group who sounded like Rare Earth had to be black. Just a grunt, in other words, but one prepared to do what the rest of them weren’t. Never losing hold of the new lieutenant’s distraught eye, Slocum had turned his head back the other way just a little, toward Malenfant and Clemson and Peasley and Minis and the rest, self-appointed regulators whose names Sully no longer remembered. Then Slocum was back to total eyecontact with Dieffenbaker again. There were six or eight men in all who had gone loco, gone trotting down the muddy street past the screaming bleeding kid and into that scurgy little ‘ville, shouting as they went — football cheers, basic-training cadences, the chorus to ‘Hang On Sloopy,’ shit like that — and Slocum was saying with his eyes Hey, what you want? You the boss now, what you want?

And Dieffenbaker had nodded.

Sully wondered if he could have given that nod himself. He thought not. He thought if it had come down to him, Clemson and Malenfant and those other fuckheads would have killed until their ammo ran out

— wasn't that pretty much what the men under Galley and Medina had done? But Dieffenbaker was no William Galley, give him that. Dieffenbaker had given the little nod. Slocum nodded back, then raised his rifle and blew off Ralph Clemson's head.

At the time Sully had thought Clemson got the bullet because Slocum knew Malenfant too well, Slocum and Malenfant had smoked more than a few locoleaves together and Slocum had also been known to spend at least some of his spare time hunting The Bitch with the other Hearts players. But as he sat here rolling Dieffenbaker's Dunhill cigarette between his fingers, it occurred to Sully that Slocum didn't give a shit about Malenfant and his locoleaves; Malenfant's favorite card-game, either. There was no shortage of bhang or card-games in Vietnam. Slocum picked Clemson because shooting Malenfant wouldn't have worked.

Malenfant, screaming all his bullshit about putting heads up on sticks to show the Gong what happened to people who fucked with Delta Lightning, was too far away to get the attention of the men splashing and squashing and shooting their way down that muddy street. Plus old mamasan was already dead, so what the fuck, let him carve on her.

Now Deef was Dieffenbaker, a bald computer salesman who gave Sully a light with his Zippo, then watched as Sully drew the smoke deep and coughed it back out.

'Been awhile, hasn't it?' Dieffenbaker asked.

'Two years, give or take.'

'You want to know the scary thing? How fast you get back into practice.'

'I told you about the old lady, huh?'

'Yeah.'

'When?'

'I think it was the last reunion you came to ... the one on the Jersey shore, the one when Durgin ripped that waitress's top off. That was an ugly scene, man.'

'Was it? I don't remember.'

'You were shitfaced by then.'

Of course he had been, that part was always the same. Come to think of it, all parts of the reunions were always the same. There was a dj who usually left early because someone wanted to beat him up for playing the wrong records. Until that happened the speakers blasted out stuff like 'Bad Moon Rising' and 'Light My Fire' and 'Gimme Some Lovin'" and 'My Girl,' songs from the soundtracks of all those Vietnam movies that were made in the Philippines. The truth about the music was that most of the grunts Sully remembered used to get choked up over The Carpenters or 'Angel of the Morning.' That stuff was the real bush soundtrack, always playing as the men passed around fatties and pictures of their girlfriends, getting stoned and all weepy-goopy over 'One Tin Soldier,' popularly known in the green as 'The Theme from Fuckin Billy Jack.' Sully couldn't remember hearing The Doors once in Vietnam; it was always The Strawberry Alarm Clock singing 'Incense and Peppermints.' On some level he had known the war was lost the first time he heard that fucking piece of shit on the commissary jukebox.

The reunions started with music and the smell of barbecues (a smell that always vaguely reminded Sully of burning helicopter fuel) and with cans of beer in pails of chipped ice and that part was all right, that part was actually pretty nice, but then all at once it was the next morning and the light burned your eyes and your head felt like a tumor and your stomach was full of poison. On one of those mornings-after Sully had had a vague sick memory of making the dj play 'Oh! Carol' by Neil Sedaka over and over again, threatening to kill him if he stopped. On another Sully awoke next to Frank Peasley's ex-wife. She was snoring because her nose was broken.

Her pillow was covered with blood, her cheeks covered with blood too, and Sully couldn't remember if he had broken her nose or if fuckin Peasley had done it. Sully wanted it to be Peasley but knew it could have been him; sometimes, especially in those days BV (Before Viagra) when he failed at sex almost as often as he succeeded, he got mad.

Fortunately, when the lady awoke, she couldn't remember, either. She remembered what he'd looked like with his underwear off, though. 'How come you only have one?' she'd asked him.

'I'm lucky to have that,' Sully had replied. His headache had been bigger than the world.

'What'd I say about the old lady?' he asked Dieffenbaker as they sat smoking in the alley beside the chapel.

Dieffenbaker shrugged. 'Just that you used to see her. You said sometimes she put on different clothes but it was always her, the old mamasan Malenfant wasted. I had to shush you up.'

'Fuck,' Sully said, and put the hand not holding the cigarette in his hair.

'You also said it was better once you got back to the East Coast,' Dieffenbaker said. 'And look, what's so bad about seeing an old lady once in awhile? Some people see flying saucers.'

'Not people who owe two banks almost a million dollars,' Sully said. 'If they knew ... '

'If they knew, what? I'll tell you what. Nothing. As long as you keep making the payments, Sully-John, keep bringing them that fabled monthly cashew, no one cares what you see when you turn out the light ... or what you see when you leave it on, for that matter. They don't care if you dress in ladies' underwear or if you beat your wife and hump the Labrador.

Besides, don't you think there are guys in those banks who spent time in the green?'

Sully took a drag on the Dunhill and looked at Dieffenbaker. The truth was that he never had considered such a thing. He dealt with two loan officers who were the right age, but they never talked about it. Of course, neither did he. Next time I see them, he thought, 'I have to ask if they carry Zippos. You know, be subtle.

'What about you, Deef? Do you have an old lady? I don't mean your girlfriend, I mean an old lady. A mamasan.'

'Hey man, don't call me Deef. Nobody calls me that now. I never liked it.'

'Do you have one?'

'Ronnie Malenfant's my mamasan,' Dieffenbaker said. 'Sometimes I see him. Not the way you said you see yours, like she's really there, but memory's real too, isn't it?'

'Yeah.'

Dieffenbaker shook his head slowly. 'If memory was all. You know? If memory was *a//*.'

Sully sat silent. In the chapel the organ was now playing something that didn't sound like a hymn but just music. The recessional, he thought they called it. A musical way of telling the mourners to get lost. Get back, Jo-Jo. Your mama's waitin.

Dieffenbaker said: 'There's memory and then there's what you actually see in your mind.

Like when you read a book by a really good author and he describes a room and you see that room. I'll be mowing the lawn or sitting at our conference table listening to a presentation or reading a story to my grandson before putting him in bed or maybe even smooching

with Mary on the sofa, and boom, there's Malenfant, goddam little acne-head with that wavy hair.

Remember how his hair used to wave?

'Yeah.'

'Ronnie Malenfant, always talking about the fuckin this and the fuckin that and the fuckin other thing. Ethnic jokes for every occasion. And the poke. You remember that?'

'Sure. Little leather poke he wore on his belt. He kept his cards in it. Two decks of Bikes.

"Hey, we're goin Bitch-huntin, boys! Nickel a point! Who's up for it?" And out they'd come.'

'Yeah. You remember. Remember. But I see him, Sully, right down to the whiteheads on his chin. I hear him, I can smell the fucking dope he smoked ... but mostly I see him, how he knocked her over and she was lying there on the ground, still shaking her fists at him, still running her mouth — '

'Stop it.'

' — and I couldn't believe it was going to happen. At first I don't think Malenfant could believe it, either. He just jabbed the bayonet at her a couple of times to begin with, pricking her with the tip of it like the whole thing was a goof ... but then he went and did it, he stuck it to her. Fuckin A, Sully; I mean fuck-in-A. She screamed and started jerking all around and he had his feet, remember, on either side of her, and the rest of them were running, Ralph Glemson and Mims and I don't know who else. I always hated that little fuck Clemson, even worse than Malenfant because at least Ronnie wasn't sneaky, with him what you saw was what you got. Clemson was crazy and sneaky. I was scared to death, Sully, scared to fucking death. I knew I was supposed to put a stop to it, but I was afraid they'd scrag me if I tried, all of them, all of you, because at that precise moment there

was all you guys and then there was me. Shearman ... nothing against him, he went into that clearing where the copters came down like there was no tomorrow, but in that 'ville ... I looked at him and there was nothing there.'

'He saved my life later on, when we got ambushed,' Sully said quietly.

'I know he did. Picked you up and carried you like fucking Superman. He had it in the clearing, he got it back on the trail but in between, in the Ville ... nothing. In the 'ville it was down to me. It was like I was the only grownup, only I didn't feel like a grownup.'

Sully didn't bother telling him to stop again. Dieffenbaker meant to have his say. Nothing short of a punch in the mouth would stop him from having it.

'You remember how she screamed when he stuck it in? That old lady? And Malenfant standing over her and running his mouth, slopehead this and gook that and slant the other thing. Thank God for Slocum. He looked at me and that made me do something ... except all I did was tell him to shoot.'

No, Sully thought, you didn't even do that, Deef. You just nodded your head. If you're in court they don't let you get away with shit like that', they make you speak out loud. They make you state it for the record.

'I think Slocum saved our souls that day,' Dieffenbaker said. 'You knew he offed himself, didn't you? Yeah. In '86.'

'I thought it was a car accident.'

'If driving into a bridge abutment at seventy miles an hour on a clear evening is an accident, it was an accident.'

'What about Malenfant? Any idea?'

'Well, he never came to any of the reunions, of course, but he was alive the last I knew.

Andy Brannigan saw him in southern California.'

'Hedgehog saw him?'

'Yeah, Hedgehog. You know where it was?'

'No, 'course not.'

'It's going to kill you, Sully-John, it's going to blow your mind. Brannigan's in Alcoholics Anonymous. It's his religion. He says it saved his life, and I suppose it did. He used to drink fiercer than any of us, maybe fiercer than all of us put together. So now he's addicted to AA instead of tequila. He goes to about a dozen meetings a week, he's a GSR — don't ask me, it's some sort of political position in the group — he mans a hotline telephone. And every year he goes to the National Convention. Five years or so ago the drunks got together in San Diego.

Fifty thousand alkies all standing in the San Diego Convention Center, chanting the Serenity Prayer. Can you picture it?'

'Sort of,' Sully said.

'Fucking Brannigan looks to his left and who does he see but Ronnie Malenfant. He can hardly believe it, but it's Malenfant, all right. After the big meeting, he grabs Malenfant and the two of them go out for a drink.' Dieffenbaker paused. 'Alcoholics do that too, I guess.

Lemonades and Cokes and such. And Malenfant tells Hedgehog he's almost two years clean and sober, he's found a higher power he chooses to call God, he's had a rebirth, everything is five by fucking five, he's living life on life's terms, he's letting go and letting God, all that stuff they talk. And Brannigan, he can't help it. He asks Malenfant if he's taken the Fifth Step, which is confessing the stuff you've done wrong and becoming entirely ready to make amends.

Malenfant doesn't bat an eyelash, just says he took the Fifth a year ago and he feels a lot better.'

'Hot damn,' Sully said, surprised at the depth of his anger. 'Old mamasan would certainly be glad to know that Ronnie's gotten past it. I'll tell her the next time I see her.' Not knowing he would see her later that day, of course.

'You do that.'

They sat without talking much for a little while. Sully asked Dieffenbaker for another cigarette and Dieffenbaker gave him one, also another flick of the old Zippo. From around the corner came tangles of conversation and some low laughter. Pags's funeral was over. And somewhere in California Ronnie Malenfant was perhaps reading his AA Big Book and getting in touch with that fabled higher power he chose to call God. Maybe Ronnie was also a GSR, whatever the fuck that was. Sully wished Ronnie was dead. Sully wished Ronnie Malenfant had died in a Viet Cong spiderhole, his nose full of sores and the smell of ratshit, bleeding internally and puking up chunks of his own stomach lining. Malenfant with his poke and his cards, Malenfant with his bayonet, Malenfant with his feet planted on either side of the old mamasan in her green pants and orange top and red sneakers.

'Why were we in Vietnam to begin with?' Sully asked. 'Not to get all philosophical or anything, but have you ever figured that out?'

'Who said "He who does not learn from the past is condemned to repeat it?"'

'Richard Dawson, the host of Family Feud.'

'Fuck you, Sullivan.'

'I don't know who said it. Does it matter?'

‘Fuckin yeah,’ Dieffenbaker said. ‘Because we never got out. We never got out of the green.

Our generation died there.’

‘That sounds a little — ‘

‘A little what? A little pretentious? You bet. A little silly? You bet. A little self-regarding?’

Yes sir. But that’s us. That’s us all over. What have we done since Nam, Sully? Those of us who went, those of us who marched and protested, those of us who just sat home watching the Dallas Cowboys and drinking beer and farting into the sofa cushions?’

Color was seeping into the new lieutenant’s cheeks. He had the look of a man who has found his hobby-horse and is now climbing on, helpless to do anything but ride. He held up his hands and began popping fingers the way Sully had when talking about the legacies of the Vietnam experience.

‘Well, let’s see. We’re the generation that invented Super Mario Brothers, the ATV, laser missile-guidance systems, and crack cocaine. We discovered Richard Simmons, Scott Peck, and Martha Stewart Living. Our idea of a major lifestyle change is buying a dog. The girls who burned their bras now buy their lingerie from Victoria’s Secret and the boys who fucked fearlessly for peace are now fat guys who sit in front of their computer screens late at night, pulling their puddings while they look at pictures of naked eighteen-year-olds on the Internet.

That’s us, brother, we like to watch. Movies, video games, live car-chase footage, fistfights on The Jerry Springer Show, Mark McGwire, World Federation Wrestling, impeachment hearings, we don’t care, we just like to watch. But there was a time ... don’t laugh, but there was a time when it was really all in our hands. Do you know that?’

Sully nodded, thinking of Carol. Not the version of her sitting on the sofa with him and her wine-smelling mother, not the one flipping the peace sign at the camera while the blood ran down the side of her face, either — that one was already too late and too crazy, you could see it in her smile, read it in the sign, where screaming words forbade all discussion. Rather he thought of Carol on the day her mother had taken all of them to Savin Rock. His friend Bobby had won some money from a three-card monte dealer that day and Carol had worn her blue bathing suit on the beach and sometimes she'd give Bobby that look, the one that said he was killing her and death was sweet. It had been in their hands then; he was quite sure of it.

But kids lose everything, kids have slippery fingers and holes in their pockets and they lose everything.

'We filled up our wallets on the stock market and went to the gym and booked therapy sessions to get in touch with ourselves. South America is burning, Malaysia's burning, fucking Vietnam is burning, but we finally got past that self-hating thing, finally got to like ourselves, so that's okay.'

Sully thought of Malenfant getting in touch with himself, learning to like the inner Ronnie, and suppressed a shudder.

All of Dieffenbaker's fingers were held up in front of his face and poked out; to Sully he looked like Al Jolson getting ready to sing 'Mammy.' Dieffenbaker seemed to become aware of this at the same moment Sully did, and lowered his hands. He looked tired and distracted and unhappy.

'I like lots of people our age when they're one by one,' he said, 'but I loathe and despise my generation, Sully. We had an opportunity to change everything. We actually did. Instead we settled for designer jeans, two tickets to Mariah Carey at Radio City Music Hall, frequent flier miles, James Cameron's Titanic, and retirement portfolios. The only generation even close to us in pure, selfish self-indulgence is the so-called Lost Generation of the twenties, and at least most of

them had the decency to stay drunk. We couldn't even do that. Man, we suck.'

The new lieutenant was close to tears, Sully saw. 'Deef — '

'You know the price of selling out the future, Sully-John? You can never really leave the past. You can never get over. My thesis is that you're really not in New York at all. You're in the Delta, leaning back against a tree, stoned and rubbing bug-dope on the back of your neck.'

Packer's still the man because it's still 1969. Everything you think of as 'your later life' is a big fucking pot-bubble. And it's better that way. Vietnam is better. That's why we stay there.'

'You think?'

'Absolutely.'

A dark-haired, brown-eyed woman in a blue dress peeked around the corner and said, 'So there you are.'

Dieffenbaker stood up as she came toward them, walking slow and pretty on her high heels. Sully stood up, too.

'Mary, this is John Sullivan. He served with me and Pags. Sully, this is my good friend Mary Theresa Charlton.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Sully said, and put out his hand.

Her grip was firm and sure, long, cool fingers in his own, but she was looking at Dieffenbaker. 'Mrs Pagano wants to see you, hon. Please?'

'You bet,' Dieffenbaker said. He started toward the Front of the building, then turned back to Sully. 'Hang in a little bit,' he said. 'We'll go for a drink. I promise not to preach.' But his eyes shifted from Sully's when he said this, as if they knew it was a promise he couldn't keep.

'Thanks, Loot, but I really ought to get back. I want to beat the rush-hour traffic.'

But he hadn't beaten the traffic after all and now a piano was falling toward him, gleaming in the sun and humming to itself as it came. Sully fell flat on his stomach and rolled under a car. The piano came down less than five feet away, detonating and throwing up rows of keys like teeth.

Sully slid back out from beneath the car, burning his back on the hot tailpipe, and struggled to his feet. He looked north along the turnpike, eyes wide and unbelieving. A vast rummage sale was falling out of the sky: tape recorders and rugs and a riding lawnmower with the grass-caked blade whirling in its housing and a black lawn-jockey and an aquarium with the fish still swimming in it. He saw an old man with a lot of theatrical gray hair running up the breakdown lane and then a flight of steps fell on him, tearing off his left arm and sending him to his knees. There were clocks and desks and coffee tables and a plummeting elevator with its cable uncoiling into the air behind it like a greasy severed umbilicus. A squall of ledgers fell in the parking lot of a nearby industrial complex; their clapping covers sounded like applause. A fur coat fell on a running woman, trapping her, and then a sofa landed on her, crushing her. The air filled with a storm of light as large panes of greenhouse glass dropped out of the blue. A statue of a Civil War soldier smashed through a panel truck. An ironing board hit the railing of the overpass up ahead and then fell into the stalled traffic below like a spinning propeller. A stuffed lion dropped into the back of a pickup truck. Everywhere were running, screaming people. Everywhere were cars with dented roofs and smashed windows; Sully saw a Mercedes with the unnaturally pink legs of a department-store mannequin sticking up from the sunroof. The air shook with whines and whistles.

Another shadow fell on him and even as he ducked and raised his hand he knew it was too late, if it was an iron or a toaster or something like that it would fracture his skull. If it was something bigger he'd be nothing but a grease-spot on the highway.

The falling object struck his hand without hurting it in the slightest, bounced, and landed at his feet. He looked down at it first with surprise, then with dawning wonder. 'Holy shit,' he said.

Sully bent over and picked up the baseball glove which had fallen from the sky, recognizing it at once even after all these years: the deep scratch down the last finger and the comically tangled knots in the rawhide laces of the webbing were as good as fingerprints. He looked on the side, where Bobby had printed his name. It was still there, but the letters looked fresher than they should have, and the leather here looked frayed and faded and whipsawed, as if other names had been inked in the same spot and then erased.

Closer to his face, the smell of the glove was both intoxicating and irresistible. Sully slipped it onto his hand, and when he did something crackled beneath his little finger — a piece of paper shoved in there. He paid no attention. Instead he put the glove over his face, closed his eyes, and inhaled. Leather and neat's-foot oil and sweat and grass. All the summers that were. The summer of 1960, for instance, when he had come back from his week at camp to find everything changed — Bobby sullen, Carol distant and palely thoughtful (at least for awhile), and the cool old guy who'd lived on the third floor of Bobby's building — Ted —

gone. Everything had changed ... but it was still summer, he had still been eleven, and everything had still seemed ...

'Eternal,' he murmured into the glove, and inhaled deeply of its aroma again as, nearby, a glass case filled with butterflies shattered on the roof of a bread-van and a stop-sign stuck, quivering, into the breakdown lane like a thrown spear. Sully remembered his Bo-lo Bouncer and his black Keds and the taste of Fez straight out of the gun, how the pieces of candy would hit the roof of your mouth and then ricochet onto your tongue; he remembered the way his catcher's mask felt when it sat on his face just right and the hishahisha-hisha of the lawnsprinklers on Broad Street and how mad Mrs Conlan got if you walked too close to her precious flowers and Mrs Godlow at the Asher Empire wanting to see your birth certificate if

she thought you were too big to be still under twelve and the poster of Brigitte Bardot (if she's trash I'd love to be the trashman)

in her towel and playing guns and playing pass and playing Careers and making arm-farts in the back of Mrs Sweetser's fourth-grade classroom and—

'Hey, American.' Only she said it Amellican and Sully knew who he was going to see even before he raised his head from Bobby's Ah/in Dark-model glove. It was old mamasan, standing there between the crotchrocket, which had been crushed by a freezer (wrapped meat was spilling out of its shattered door in frosty blocks), and a Subaru with a lawn-flamingo punched through its roof. Old mamasan in her green pants and orange smock and red sneakers, old mamasan lit up like a bar-sign in hell.

'Hey American, you come me, I keep safe.' And she held out her arms.

Sully walked toward her through the noisy hail of falling televisions and backyard pools and cartons of cigarettes and high-heeled shoes and a great big pole hairdryer and a pay telephone that hit and vomited a jackpot of quarters. He walked toward her with a feeling of relief, that feeling you get only when you are coming home.

'I keep safe.' Holding out her arms now. 'Poor boy, I keep safe.' Sully stepped into the dead circle of her embrace as people screamed and ran and all things American fell out of the sky, blitzing I-95 north of Bridgeport with their falling glitter. She put her arms around him.

'I keep safe,' she said, and Sully was in his car. Traffic was stopped all around him, four lanes of it. The radio was on, tuned to WKND. The Platters were singing 'Twilight Time' and Sully couldn't breathe. Nothing appeared to have fallen out of the sky, except for the traffic tie-up everything seemed to be in good order, but how could that be? How could it be when he still had Bobby Garneld's old baseball glove on his hand? .

'I keep safe,' old mamasan was saying. 'Poor boy, poor American boy, I keep safe.'

Sully wanted to smile at her. He wanted to tell her he was sorry, that some of them had at least meant well, but he had no air and he was very tired. He closed his eyes and tried to raise Bobby's glove one final time, get one final shallow whiff of that oily, summery smell, but it was too heavy.

Dieffenbaker was standing at the kitchen counter the next morning, wearing a pair of jeans and nothing else, pouring himself a cup of coffee, when Mary came in from the living room.

She was wearing her PROPERTY OF THE DENVER BRONCOS sweatshirt and had the New York Post in her hand.

'I think I have some bad news for you,' she said, then seemed to reconsider. 'Moderately bad news.'

He turned to her warily. Bad news should always come after lunch, he thought. At least a person was halfway prepared for bad news after lunch. First thing in the morning everything left a bruise. 'What is it?'

'The man you introduced me to yesterday at your buddy's funeral — you said he was a car dealer in Connecticut, right?'

'Right.'

'I wanted to be sure because John Sullivan isn't, you know, the world's most uncommon —

,

'What are you talking about, Mary?'

She handed him the paper, which was folded open to a page about halfway into the tabloid.

'They say it happened while he was on his way home. I'm sorry, hon.'

She had to be wrong, that was his first thought; people couldn't die just after you'd seen them and talked to them, it seemed like a basic rule, somehow.

But it was him, all right, and in triplicate: Sully in a highschool baseball uniform with a catcher's mask pushed back to the top of his head, Sully in an Army uniform with sergeant's stripes on the sleeve, and Sully in a business suit that had to hail from the late seventies.

Beneath the row of pictures was the sort of headline you found only in the Post: JAMBO!

SILVER STAR VIET VET DIES IN CONN. TRAFFIC JAM

Dieffenbaker scanned the story quickly, feeling the sense of unease and betrayal he always felt these days when he read the death-notice of someone his own age, someone he knew. We are still too young for natural deaths, he always thought, knowing that it was a foolish idea.

Sully had died of an apparent heart attack while stuck in a traffic tieup caused by a jackknifed tractor-trailer truck. He might well have died within sight of his own dealership's Chevrolet sign, the article lamented. Like the JAMBO headline, such epiphanies could be found only in the Post. The Times was a good paper if you were smart; the Post was the newspaper of drunks and poets.

Sully had left an ex-wife and no children. Funeral arrangements were being made by Norman Oliver, of First Connecticut Bank and Trust.

Buried by his bank! Dieffenbaker thought, his hands beginning to shake. He had no idea why this thought filled him with such horror, but it did. By his fucking bank! Oh man!

'Honey?' Mary was looking at him a little nervously. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes,' he said. 'He died in a traffic jam. Maybe they couldn't even get an ambulance to him.'

Maybe they never even found him until the traffic started moving again. Christ.'

'Don't,' she said, and took the paper away from him again. Sully had won the Silver Star for the rescue, of course — the helicopter rescue. The gooks had been shooting but Packer and Shearman had led a bunch of American soldiers, mostly Delta two-twos, in just the same. Ten or twelve of the Bravo Company soldiers had laid down a confused and probably not very effective covering fire as the rescue operation took place ... and for a wonder two of the men from the tangled copters had actually been alive, at least when they came out of the clearing.

John Sullivan had carried one of them to cover all by himself, the chopper guy shrieking in his arms and covered with fire-retardant foam.

Malenfant had gone running into the clearing, too — Malenfant clutching one of the extinguisher cannisters like a big red baby and screaming at the Gong in the bush to shoot him if they could, except they couldn't, he knew they couldn't, they were just a bunch of blind slopehead syphilitic fucks and they couldn't hit him, couldn't hit the broad side of a fuckin barn. Malenfant had also — been put up for the Silver Star, and although Dieffenbaker couldn't say for sure, he supposed the pimply little murdering asshole had won one. Had Sully known or guessed? Wouldn't he have mentioned it while they were sitting together outside the funeral parlor? Maybe; maybe not. Medals had a way of seeming less important as time passed, more and more like the award you got in junior high for memorizing a poem or the letter you got in high school for running track and blocking home plate when the throw came home. Just something you kept on a shelf. They were the things old men used to jazz the

kids. The things they held out to make you jump higher, run faster, fling yourself forward.

Dieffenbaker thought the world would probably be a better place without old men (this revelation coming just as he was getting ready to be one himself). Let the old women live, old women never hurt anyone as a rule, but old men were more dangerous than rabid dogs. Shoot all of them, then douse their bodies with gasoline, then light them on fire. Let the children join hands and dance around the blaze, singing corny old Crosby Stills and Nash songs.

‘Are you really okay?’ Mary asked.

‘About Sully? Sure. I hadn’t seen him in years.’

He sipped his coffee and thought about the old lady in the red sneakers, the one Malenfant had killed, the one who came to visit Sully. She wouldn’t be visiting Sully anymore; there was that much, at least. Old mamasan’s visiting days were done. It was how wars really ended, Dieffenbaker supposed — not at truce tables but in cancer wards and office cafeterias and traffic jams. Wars died one tiny piece at a time, each piece something that fell like a memory, each lost like an echo that fades in winding hills. In the end even war ran up the white flag. Or so he hoped. He hoped that in the end even war surrendered.