

STEPHEN KING

FROM HIS LATEST BESTSELLER
FOUR PAST MIDNIGHT



**TWO PAST MIDNIGHT:
SECRET WINDOW,
SECRET GARDEN**

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED ON FOUR AUDIO CASSETTES

READ BY JAMES WOODS

TWO PAST MIDNIGHT:

SECRET WINDOW,

SECRET GARDEN

Stephen King

A note on 'Secret Window, Secret Garden':

I'm one of those people who believe that life is a series of cycles - wheels within wheels, some meshing with others, some spinning alone, but all of them performing some finite, repeating function. I like that abstract image of life as something like an efficient factory machine, probably because actual life, up close and personal, seems so messy and strange. It's nice to be able to pull away every once in awhile and say, 'There's a pattern there after all! I'm not sure what it means, but by God, I see it!'

All of these wheels seem to finish their cycles at roughly the same time, and when they do - about every twenty years would be my guess - we go through a time when we end things. Psychologists have even lifted a parliamentary term to describe this phenomenon - they call it cloture.

I'm forty-two now, and as I look back over the last four years of my life I can see all sorts of cloture. It's as apparent in my work as anywhere else. In It, I took an outrageous amount of space to finish talking about children and the wide perceptions which light their interior lives. Next year I intend to publish the last Castle Rock novel, Needful Things (the last story in this volume, 'The Sun Dog,' forms a prologue to that novel). And this story is, I think, the last story about writers and writing and the strange no man's land which exists between what's real and what's make-believe. I believe a good many of my long-time readers, who have borne my fascination with this subject patiently, will be glad to hear that.

A few years ago I published a novel called Misery which tried, at least in part, to illustrate the powerful hold fiction can achieve over the reader. Last year I published a book called The Dark Half where I tried to explore the converse: the powerful hold fiction can achieve over the writer. While that book was between drafts, I started to think that there might be a way to tell both stories at the same time by approaching some of the plot elements of The Dark Half from a totally different angle. Writing, it seems to me, is a secret act - as

secret as dreaming - and that was one aspect of this strange and dangerous craft I had never thought about much.

I knew that writers have from time to time revised old works - John Fowles did it with *The Magus*, and I have done it myself with *The Stand* - but revision was not what I had in mind. What I wanted to do was to take familiar elements and put them together in an entirely new way. This I had tried to do at least once before, restructuring and updating the basic elements of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to create *'Salem's Lot*, and I was fairly comfortable with the idea.

One day in the late fall of 1987, while these things were tumbling around in my head, I stopped in the laundry room of our house to drop a dirty shirt into the washing machine. Our laundry room is a small, narrow alcove on the second floor. I disposed of the shirt and then stepped over to one of the room's two windows. It was casual curiosity, no more. We've been living in the same house for eleven or twelve years now, but I had never taken a good hard look out this particular window before. The reason is perfectly simple; set at floor level, mostly hidden behind the drier, half blocked by baskets of mending, it's a hard window to look out of.

I squeezed in, nevertheless, and looked out. That window looks down on a little brick-paved alcove between the house and the attached sunporch. It's an area I see just about every day ... but the angle was new. My wife had set half a dozen pots out there, so the plants could take a little of the early-November sun, I suppose, and the result was a charming little garden which only I could see. The phrase which occurred to me was, of course, the title of this story. It seemed to me as good a metaphor as any for what writers - especially writers of fantasy - do with their days and nights. Sitting down at the typewriter or picking up a pencil is a physical act; the spiritual analogue is looking out of an almost forgotten window... a window which offers a common view from an entirely different angle ... an angle which renders the common extraordinary. The writer's job is to gaze through that window and report on what he sees.

But sometimes windows break. I think that, more than anything else, is the concern of this story: what happens to the wide-eyed observer when the window between reality and unreality breaks and the glass begins to fly?

‘You stole my story,’ the man on the doorstep said. ‘You stole my story and something’s got to be done about it. Right is right and fair is fair and something has to be done.’

Morton Rainey, who had just gotten up from a nap and who was still feeling only halfway into the real world, didn’t have the slightest idea what to say. This was never the case when he was at work, sick or well, wide awake or half asleep; he was a writer, and hardly ever at a loss when it became necessary to fill a character’s mouth with a snappy comeback. Rainey opened his mouth, found no snappy comeback there (not even a limp one, in fact), and so closed it again.

He thought: This man doesn’t look exactly real. He looks like a character out of a novel by William Faulkner.

This was of no help in resolving the situation, but it was undeniably true. The man who had rung Rainey’s doorbell out here in the western Maine version of nowhere looked about forty-five. He was very thin. His face was calm, almost serene, but carved with deep lines. They moved horizontally across his high brow in regular waves, cut vertically downward from the ends of his thin lips to his jawline, and radiated outward in tiny sprays from the corners of his eyes. The eyes were bright, unfaded blue. Rainey couldn’t tell what color his hair was; he wore a large black hat with a round crown planted squarely on his head. The underside of the brim touched the tops of his ears. It looked like the sort of hat Quakers wore. He had no sideburns, either, and for all Morton Rainey knew, he might be as bald as Telly Savalas under that round-crowned felt hat.

He was wearing a blue work-shirt. It was buttoned neatly all the way to the loose, razor-reddened flesh of his neck, although he wore no tie. The bottom of the shirt disappeared into a pair of blue-jeans that looked a little too big for the man who was wearing them. They

ended in cuffs which lay neatly on a pair of faded yellow workshoes which looked made for walking in a furrow of played-out earth about three and a half feet behind a mule's ass.

'Well?' he asked when Rainey continued to say nothing.

'I don't know you,' Rainey said finally. It was the first thing he'd said since he'd gotten up off the couch and come to answer the door, and it sounded sublimely stupid in his own ears.

'I know that,' said the man. 'That doesn't matter. I know you, Mr Rainey. That's what matters.' And then he reiterated: 'You stole my story.'

He held out his hand, and for the first time Rainey saw that he had something in it. It was a sheaf of paper. But not just any old sheaf of paper; it was a manuscript. After you've been in the business awhile, he thought, you always recognized the look of a manuscript. Especially an unsolicited one.

And, belatedly, he thought: Good thing for you it wasn't a gun, Mort old kid. You would have been in hell before you knew you were dead.

And even more belatedly, he realized that he was probably dealing with one of the Crazy Folks. It was long overdue, of course; although his last three books had been best-sellers, this was his first visit from one of that fabled tribe. He felt a mixture of fear and chagrin, and his thoughts narrowed to a single point: how to get rid of the guy as fast as possible, and with as little unpleasantness as possible.

'I don't read manuscripts - ' he began.

'You read this one already,' the man with the hard-working sharecropper's face said evenly. 'You stole it.' He spoke as if stating a simple fact. like a man noting that the sun was out and it was a pleasant fall day.

All of Mort's thoughts were belated this afternoon, it seemed; he now realized for the first time how alone he was out here. He had come to the house in Tashmore Glen in early October, after two miserable months in New York; his divorce had become final just last week.

It was a big house, but it was a summer place, and Tashmore Glen was a summer town. There were maybe twenty cottages on this particular road running along the north bay of Tashmore Lake, and in July or August there would be people staying in most or all of them ... but this wasn't July or August. It was late October. The sound of a gunshot, he realized, would probably drift away unheard. If it was heard, the hearers would simply assume someone was shooting at quail or pheasant - it was the season.

'I can assure you - '

'I know you can.' the man in the black hat said with that same unearthly patience. 'I know that.'

Behind him, Mort could see the car the man had come in. It was an old station wagon which looked as if it had seen a great many miles, very few of them on good roads. He could see that the plate on it wasn't from the State of Maine, but couldn't tell what state it was from; he'd known for some time now that he needed to go to the optometrist and have his glasses changed, had even planned early last summer to do that little chore, but then Henry Young had called him one day in April, asking who the fellow was he'd seen Amy with at the mall - some relative, maybe? - and the suspicions which had culminated in the eerily quick and quiet no-fault divorce had begun, the shitstorm which had taken up all his time and energy these last few months. During that time he had been doing well if he remembered to change his underwear, let alone handle more esoteric things like optometrist appointments.

'If you want to talk to someone about some grievance you feel you have,' Mort began uncertainly, hating the pompous, talking-boilerplate sound of his own voice but not knowing how else to reply, 'you could talk to my ag -'

'This is between you and me,' the man on the doorstep said patiently. Bump, Mort's tomcat, had been curled up on the low cabinet built into the side of the house - you had to store your garbage in a closed compartment or the racoons came in the night and pulled it all over hell - and now he jumped down and twined his way sinuously between the stranger's legs. The stranger's bright-blue eyes never left Rainey's face. 'We don't need any outsiders, Mr Rainey. It is strictly between you and me.'

'I don't like being accused of plagiarism, if that's what you're doing,' Mort said. At the same time, part of his mind was cautioning him that you had to be very careful when dealing with people of the Crazy Folks tribe. Humor them? Yes. But this man didn't seem to have a gun, and Mort outweighed him by at least fifty pounds. I've also got five or ten years on him, by the look, he thought. He had read that a bonafide Crazy Guy could muster abnormal strength, but he was damned if he was simply going to stand here and let this man he had never seen before go on saying that he, Morton Rainey, had stolen his story. Not without some kind of rebuttal.

'I don't blame you for not liking it,' the man in the black hat said. He spoke in the same patient and serene way. He spoke, Mort thought, like a therapist whose work is teaching small children who are retarded in some mild way. 'But you did it. You stole my story.'

'You'll have to leave,' Mort said. He was fully awake now, and he no longer felt so bewildered, at such a disadvantage. 'I have nothing to say to you.'

'Yes, I'll go,' the man said. 'We'll talk more later.' He held out the sheaf of manuscript, and Mort actually found himself reaching for it. He put his hand back down to his side just before his uninvited and unwanted guest could slip the manuscript into it, like a process server finally slipping a subpoena to a man who has been ducking it for months.

'I'm not taking that,' Mort said, and part of him was marvelling at what a really accommodating beast a man was: when someone held

something out to you, your first instinct was to take it. No matter if it was a check for a thousand dollars or a stick of dynamite with a lit and fizzing fuse, your first instinct was to take it.

‘Won’t do you any good to play games with me, Mr Rainey,’ the man said mildly. ‘This has got to be settled.’

‘So far as I’m concerned, it is,’ Mort said, and closed the door on that lined, used, and somehow timeless face.

He had only felt a moment or two of fear, and those had come when he first realized, in a disoriented and sleep-befogged way, what this man was saying. Then it had been swallowed by anger - anger at being bothered during his nap, and more anger at the realization that he was being bothered by a representative of the Crazy Folks.

Once the door was closed, the fear returned. He pressed his lips together and waited for the man to start pounding on it. And when that didn’t come, he became convinced that the man was just standing out there, still as a stone and as patient as same, waiting for him to reopen the door ... as he would have to do, sooner or later.

Then he heard a low thump, followed by a series of light steps crossing the board porch. Mort walked into the master bedroom, which looked out on the driveway. There were two big windows in here, one giving on the driveway and the shoulder of hill behind it, the other providing a view of the slope which fell away to the blue and agreeable expanse of Tashmore Lake. Both windows were reflectorized, which meant he could look out but anyone trying to look in would see only his own distorted image, unless he put his nose to the glass and cupped his eyes against the glare.

He saw the man in the work-shirt and cuffed blue-jeans walking back to his old station wagon. From this angle, he could make out the license plate’s state of issue - Mississippi. As the man opened the driver’s-side door, Mort thought: Oh shit. The gun’s in the car. He didn’t have it on him because he believed he could reason with me

... whatever his idea of 'reasoning' is. But now he's going to get it and come back. It's probably in the glove compartment or under the seat

But the man got in behind the wheel, pausing only long enough to take off his black hat and toss it down beside him. As he slammed the door and started the engine, Mort thought, There's something different about him now. But it wasn't until his unwanted afternoon visitor had backed up the driveway and out of sight behind the thick screen of bushes Mort kept forgetting to trim that he realized what it was.

When the man got into his car, he had no longer been holding the manuscript.

2

It was on the back porch. There was a rock on it to keep the individual pages from blowing all over the little dooryard in the light breeze. The small thump he'd heard had been the man putting the rock on the manuscript.

Mort stood in the doorway, hands in the pockets of his khaki pants, looking at it. He knew that craziness wasn't catching (except maybe in cases of prolonged exposure, he supposed), but he still didn't want to touch the goddam thing. He supposed he would have to, though. He didn't know just how long he would be here - a day, a week, a month, and a year all looked equally possible at this point - but he couldn't just let the fucking thing sit there. Greg Carstairs, his caretaker, would be down early this afternoon to give him an estimate on how much it would cost to reshingle the house, for one thing, and Greg would wonder what it was. Worse, he would probably assume it was Mort's, and that would entail more explanations than the damned thing was worth.

He stood there until the sound of his visitor's engine had merged into the low, slow hum of the afternoon, and then he went out on the porch, walking carefully in his bare feet (the porch had needed painting for at least a year now, and the dry wood was prickly with potential splinters), and tossed the rock into the juniper-choked gully to the left of the porch. He picked up the little sheaf of pages and looked down at it. The top one was a title page. It read:

SECRET WINDOW, SECRET GARDEN

By John Shooter

Mort felt a moment's relief in spite of himself. He had never heard of John Shooter, and he had never read or written a short story called 'Secret Window, Secret Garden' in his life.

He tossed the manuscript in the kitchen wastebasket on his way by, went back to the couch in the living room, lay down again, and was asleep in five minutes.

He dreamed of Amy. He slept a great lot and he dreamed of Amy a great lot these days, and waking up to the sound of his own hoarse shouts no longer surprised him much. He supposed it would pass.

3

The next morning he was sitting in front of his word processor in the small nook off the living room which had always served as his study when they were down here. The word processor was on, but Mort was looking out the window at the lake. Two motor-boats were out there, cutting broad white wakes in the blue water. He had thought they were fishermen at first, but they never slowed down - just cut back and forth across each other's bows in big loops. Kids, he decided. Just kids playing games.

They weren't doing anything very interesting, but then, neither was he. He hadn't written anything worth a damn since he had left Amy. He sat in front of the word processor every day from nine to eleven, just as he had every day for the last three years (and for about a thousand years before that he had spent those two hours sitting in front of an old Royal office model), but for all the good he was doing with it, he might as well have traded it in on a motor-boat and gone out grab-assing with the kids on the lake.

Today, he had written the following lines of deathless prose during his two-hour stint:

Four days after George had confirmed to his own satisfaction that his wife was cheating on him, he confronted her. 'I have to talk to you, Abby,' he said.

It was no good.

It was too close to real life to be good.

He had never been so hot when it came to real life. Maybe that was part of the problem.

He turned off the word processor, realizing just a second after he'd flicked the switch that he'd forgotten to save the document. Well, that

was all right. Maybe it had even been the critic in his subconscious, telling him the document wasn't worth saving.

Mrs Gavin had apparently finished upstairs; the drone of the Electrolux had finally ceased. She came in every Tuesday to clean, and she had been shocked into a silence very unlike her when Mort had told her two Tuesdays ago that he and Amy were quits. He suspected that she had liked Amy a good deal more than she had liked him. But she was still coming, and Mort supposed that was something.

He got up and went out into the living room just as Mrs Gavin came down the main staircase. She was holding the vacuum-cleaner hose and dragging the small tubular machine after her. It came down in a series of thumps, looking like a small mechanical dog. If I tried to pull the vacuum downstairs that way, it'd smack into one of my ankles and then roll all the way to the bottom, Mort thought. How does she get it to do that, I wonder?

'Hi there, Mrs G.,' he said, and crossed the living room toward the kitchen door. He wanted a Coke. Writing shit always made him thirsty.

'Hello, Mr Rainey.' He had tried to get her to call him Mort, but she wouldn't. She wouldn't even call him Morton. Mrs Gavin was a woman of her principles, but her principles had never kept her from calling his wife Amy.

Maybe I should tell her I caught Amy in bed with another man at one of Derry's finer motels, Mort thought as he pushed through the swing door. She might go back to calling her Mrs Rainey again, at the very least.

This was an ugly and mean-spirited thought, the kind of thinking he suspected was at the root of his writing problems, but he didn't seem to be able to help it. Perhaps it would also pass ... like the dreams. For some reason this idea made him think of a bumper sticker he'd

seen once on the back of a very old VW beetle. CONSTIPATED - CANNOT PASS, the sticker had read.

As the kitchen door swung back, Mrs Gavin called: 'I found one of your stories in the trash, Mr Rainey. I thought you might want it, so I put it on the counter.'

'Okay,' he said, having no idea what she might be talking about. He was not in the habit of tossing bad manuscripts or frags in the kitchen trash. When he produced a stinker - and lately he had produced more than his share - it went either directly to data heaven or into the circular file to the right of his word-processing station.

The man with the lined face and round black Quaker hat never even entered his mind.

He opened the refrigerator door, moved two small Tupperware dishes filled with nameless leftovers, discovered a bottle of Pepsi, and opened it as he nudged the fridge door closed with his hip. As he went to toss the cap in the trash, he saw the manuscript - its title page was spotted with something that looked like orange juice, but otherwise it was all right - sitting on the counter by the Silex. Then he remembered. John Shooter, right. Charter member of the Crazy Folks, Mississippi Branch.

He took a drink of Pepsi, then picked up the manuscript. He put the title page on the bottom and saw this at the head of the first page.

John Shooter

General Delivery

Dellacourt, Mississippi

30 pages

Approximately 7500 words

Selling 1st serial rights, North America

SECRET WINDOW, SECRET GARDEN

By John Shooter

The manuscript had been typed on a good grade of bond paper, but the machine must have been a sad case - an old office model, from the look, and not very well maintained. Most of the letters were as crooked as an old man's teeth.

He read the first sentence, then the second, then the third, for a few moments clear thought ceased.

Todd Downey thought that a woman who would steal your love when your love was really all you had was not much of a woman. He therefore decided to kill her. He would do it in the deep corner formed when the house and the barn came together at an extreme angle - he would do it where his wife kept her garden.

'Oh shit,' Mort said, and put the manuscript back down. His arm struck the Pepsi bottle. It overturned, foaming and fizzing across the counter and running down the cabinet facings. 'Oh SHIT!' he yelled.

Mrs Gavin came in a hurry, surveyed the situation, and said: 'Oh, that's nothing. I thought from the sound that maybe you'd cut your own throat. Move a little, can't you, Mr Rainey?'

He moved, and the first thing she did was to pick the sheaf of manuscript up off the counter and thrust it back into his hands. It was still okay; the soda had run the other way. He had once been a man with a fairly good sense of humor - he had always thought so,

anyway - but as he looked down at the little pile of paper in his hands, the best he could manage was a sour sense of irony. It's like the cat in the nursery rhyme, he thought. The one that kept coming back.

'If you're trying to wreck that,' Mrs Gavin said, nodding at the manuscript as she got a dishrag from under the sink, 'you're on the right track.'

'It's not mine,' he said, but it was funny, wasn't it? Yesterday, when he had almost reached out and taken the script from the man who had brought it to him, he'd thought about what an accommodating beast a man was. Apparently that urge to accommodate stretched in all directions, because the first thing he'd felt when he read those three sentences was guilt ... and wasn't that just what Shooter (if that was really his name) had wanted him to feel? Of course it was. You stole my story, he'd said, and weren't thieves supposed to feel guilty?

'Pardon me, Mr Rainey,' Mrs Gavin said, holding up the dishrag.

He stepped aside so she could get at the spill. 'It's not mine,' he repeated - insisted, really.

'Oh,' she said, wiping up the spill on the counter and then stepping to the sink to wring out the cloth. 'I thought it was.'

'It says John Shooter,' he said, putting the title page back on top and turning it toward her. 'See?'

Mrs Gavin favored the title page with the shortest glance politeness would allow and then began wiping the cabinet faces. 'Thought it was one of those whatchacallums,' she said. 'Pseudonames. Or nyms. Whatever the word is names.'

'I don't use one,' he said. 'I never have.'

This time she favored him with a brief glance - country shrewd and slightly amused - before getting down on her knees to wipe up the puddle of Pepsi on the floor. 'Don't s'pose you'd tell me if you did,' she said.

'I'm sorry about the spill,' he said, edging toward the door.

'My job,' she said shortly. She didn't look up again. Mort took the hint and left.

He stood in the living room for a moment, looking at the abandoned vacuum cleaner in the middle of the rug. In his head he heard the man with the lined face saying patiently, This is between you and me. We don't need any outsiders, Mr Rainey. It is strictly between you and me.

Mort thought of that face, recalled it carefully to a mind which was trained to recall faces and actions, and thought: It wasn't just a momentary aberration, or a bizarre way to meet an author he may or may not consider famous. He will be back.

He suddenly headed back into his study, rolling the manuscript into a tube as he went.

4

Three of the four study walls were lined with bookshelves, and one of them had been set aside for the various editions, domestic and foreign, of his works. He had published six books in all: five novels and a collection of short stories. The book of short stories and his first two novels had been well received by his immediate family and a few friends. His third novel, *The OrganGrinder's Boy*, had been an instant best-seller. The early works had been reissued after he became a success, and had done quite well, but they had never been as popular as his later books.

The short-story collection was called *Everybody Drops the Dime*, and most of the tales had originally been published in the men's magazines, sandwiched around pictures of women wearing lots of eye make-up and not much else. One of the stories, however, had been published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. It was called 'Sowing Season,' and it was to this story he now turned.

A woman who would steal your love when your love was all you had wasn't much of a woman - that, at least, was Tommy Havelock's opinion. He decided to kill her. He even knew the place he would do it, the exact place: the little patch of garden she kept in the extreme angle formed where the house and the barn came together.

Mort sat down and worked his way slowly through the two stories, reading back and forth. By the time he was halfway through, he understood he really didn't need to go any further. They varied in diction in some places; in many others even that was the same, word for word. Diction aside, they were exactly the same. In both of them, a man killed his wife. In both of them, the wife was a cold, loveless bitch who cared only for her garden and her canning. In both of them, the killer buried his spousal victim in her garden and then tended it, growing a really spectacular crop. In Morton Rainey's version, the crop was beans. In Shooter's, it was corn. In both versions, the killer eventually went crazy and was discovered by the

police eating vast amounts of the vegetable in question and swearing he would be rid of her, that in the end he would finally be rid of her.

Mort had never considered himself much of a horror-story writer - and there was nothing supernatural about 'Sowing Season' - but it had been a creepy little piece of work all the same. Amy had finished it with a little shiver and said, 'I suppose it's good, but that man's mind ... God, Mort, what a can of worms.'

That had summed up his own feelings pretty well. The landscape of 'Sowing Season' wasn't one he would care to travel through often, and it was no 'TellTale Heart,' but he thought he had done a fair job of painting Tom Havelock's homicidal breakdown. The editor at EQ had agreed, and so had the readers - the story had generated favorable mail. The editor had asked for more, but Mort had never come up with another story even remotely like 'Sowing Season.'

'I know I can do it,' Tod Downey said, helping himself to another ear of corn from the steaming bowl. 'I'm sure that in time all of her will be gone.'

That was how Shooter's ended.

'I am confident I can take care of this business,' Tom Havelock told them, and helped himself to another portion of beans from the brimming, steaming bowl. 'I'm sure that, in time, her death will be a mystery even to me.'

That was how Mort Rainey's ended.

Mort closed his copy of Everybody Drops the Dime and replaced it thoughtfully on his shelf of first editions.

He sat down and began to rummage slowly and thoroughly through the drawers of his desk. It was a big one, so big the furniture men had had to bring it into the room in sections, and it had a lot of drawers. The desk was solely his domain; neither Amy nor Mrs G.

had ever set a hand to it, and the drawers were full of ten years' worth of accumulated rick-rack. It had been four years since Mort had given up smoking, and if there were any cigarettes left in the house, this was where they would be. If he found some, he would smoke. just about now, he was crazy for a smoke. If he didn't find any, that was all right, too; going through his junk was soothing. Old letters which he'd put aside to answer and never had, what had once seemed so important now looking antique, even arcane; postcards he'd bought but never mailed; chunks of manuscript in varying stages of completion; half a bag of very elderly Doritos; envelopes; paper-clips; cancelled checks. He could sense layers here which were almost geological - layers of summer life frozen in place. And it was soothing. He finished one drawer and went on to the next, thinking all the while about John Shooter and how John Shooter's story - his story, goddammit! - had made him feel.

The most obvious thing, of course, was that it had made him feel like he needed a cigarette. This wasn't the first time he'd felt that way in the last four years; there had been times when just seeing someone puffing away behind the wheel of a car next to his at a stoplight could set off a raging momentary lust for tobacco. But the key word there, of course, was 'momentary.' Those feelings passed in a hurry, like fierce rainsqualls - five minutes after a blinding silver curtain of rain has dropped out of the sky, the sun is shining again. He'd never felt the need to turn in to the next convenience store on his way for a deck of smokes ... or go rummaging through his glove compartment for a stray or two as he was now rummaging through his desk.

He felt guilty, and that was absurd. Infuriating. He had not stolen John Shooter's story, and he knew he hadn't - if there had been stealing (and there must have been; for the two stories to be that close without prior knowledge on the part of one of the two players was impossible for Mort to believe), then it had been Shooter who had stolen from him.

Of course.

It was as plain as the nose on his face ... or the round black hat on John Shooter's head.

Yet he still felt upset, unsettled, guilty ... he felt at a loss in a way for which there was perhaps no word. And why? Well ... because...

At that moment Mort lifted up a Xerox of The OrganGrinder's Boy manuscript, and there, beneath it, was a package of L & M cigarettes. Did they make L & M's anymore? He didn't know. The pack was old, crumpled, but definitely not flat. He took it out and looked at it. He reflected that he must have bought this particular pack in 1985, according to the informal science of stratification one might call - for want of a better word - Deskology.

He peered inside the pack. He saw three little coffin nails, all in a row.

Time-travellers from another age, Mort thought. He stuck one of the cigarettes in his mouth, then went out into the kitchen to get a match from the box by the stove. Time-travellers from another age, riding up through the years, patient cylindrical voyagers, their mission to wait, to persevere, to bide until the proper moment to start me on the road to lung cancer again finally arrives. And it seems the time has finally come.

'It'll probably taste like shit,' he said aloud to the empty house (Mrs Gavin had long since gone home), and set fire to the tip of the cigarette. It didn't taste like shit, though. It tasted pretty good. He wandered back toward his study, puffing away and feeling pleasantly lightheaded. Ah, the dreadful patient persistence of addiction, he thought. What had Hemingway said? Not this August, nor this September - this year you have to do what you like. But the time comes around again. It always does. Sooner or later you stick something back in your big dumb old mouth again. A drink, a smoke, maybe the barrel of a shotgun. Not this August, nor this September ...

... unfortunately, this was October.

At an earlier point in his prospecting, he had found an old bottle half full of Planter's Peanuts. He doubted if the nuts would be fit to eat, but the lid of the bottle made a fine ashtray. He sat behind his desk, looked out at the lake (like Mrs G., the boats which had been out there earlier were gone), relished his old, vile habit, and found he could think about John Shooter and John Shooter's story with a little more equanimity.

The man was one of the Crazy Folks, of course; that was now proven in brass if any further proof had been needed. As to how it had made him feel, finding that the similarity actually existed ...

Well, a story was a thing, a real thing - you could think of it like that, anyway, especially if someone had paid you for it - but in another, more important, way, it wasn't a thing at all. It wasn't like a vase, or a chair, or an automobile. It was ink on paper, but it wasn't the ink and it wasn't the paper. People sometimes asked him where he got his ideas, and although he scoffed at the question, it always made him feel vaguely ashamed, vaguely spurious. They seemed to feel there was a Central Idea Dump somewhere (just as there was supposed to be an elephant graveyard somewhere, and a fabled lost city of gold somewhere else), and he must have a secret map which allowed him to get there and back, but Mort knew better. He could remember where he had been when certain ideas came to him, and he knew that the idea was often the result of seeing or sensing some odd connection between objects or events or people which had never seemed to have the slightest connection before, but that was the best he could do. As to why he should see these connections or want to make stories out of them after he had ... to that he hadn't a clue.

If John Shooter had come to his door and said 'You stole my car' instead of 'You stole my story,' Mort would have scotched the idea quickly and decisively. He could have done it even if the two cars in question had been the same year, make, model, and color. He would have shown the man in the round black hat his automobile

registration, invited him to compare the number on the pink slip to the one on the doorpost, and sent him packing.

But when you got a story idea, no one gave you a bill of sale. There was no provenance to be traced. Why would there be? Nobody gave you a bill of sale when you got something for free. You charged whoever wanted to buy that thing from you - oh yes, all the traffic would bear, and a little more than that, if you could, to make up for all the times the bastards shorted you - magazines, newspapers, book publishers, movie companies. But the item came to you free, clear, and unencumbered. That was it, he decided. That was why he felt guilty even though he knew he hadn't plagiarized Farmer John Shooter's story. He felt guilty because writing stories had always felt a little bit like stealing, and probably always would. John Shooter just happened to be the first person to show up on his doorstep and accuse him of it right out loud. He thought that, subconsciously, he had been expecting something like this for years.

Mort crushed out his cigarette and decided to take a nap. Then he decided that was a bad idea. It would be better, healthier both mentally and physically, to eat some lunch ' read for half an hour or so, and then go for a nice long walk down by the lake. He was sleeping too much, and sleeping too much was a sign of depression. Halfway to the kitchen, he deviated to the long sectional couch by the window-wall in the living room. The hell with it, he thought, putting a pillow under his neck and another one behind his head. I Am depressed.

His last thought before drifting off was a repeat: He's not done with me yet. Oh no, not this guy. He's a repeater.

5

He dreamed he was lost in a vast cornfield. He blundered from one row to the next, and the sun glinted off the watches he was wearing - half a dozen on each forearm, and each watch set to a different time.

Please help me! he cried. Someone please help me! I'm lost and afraid!

Ahead of him, the corn on both sides of the row shook and rustled. Amy stepped out from one side. John Shooter stepped out from the other. Both of them held knives.

I am confident I can take care of this business, Shooter said as they advanced on him with their knives raised. I'm sure that, in time, your death will be a mystery even to us.

Mort turned to run, but a hand - Amy's, he was sure - seized him by the belt and pulled him back. And when the knives, glittering in the hot sun of this huge secret garden

6

It was the telephone which woke him an hour and a quarter later. He struggled out of a terrible dream - someone had been chasing him, that was all he could clearly remember - to a sitting position on the couch. He was horribly hot; every inch of his skin seemed to be running with sweat. The sun had crept around to this side of the house while he was sleeping and had shone in on him through the window-wall for God knew how long.

Mort walked slowly toward the telephone table in the front hall, plodding like a man in a diver's suit walking in the bed of a river against the current, his head thumping slowly, his mouth tasting like old dead gopher-shit. For every step he took forward, the entrance to the hall seemed to retreat a step, and it occurred to Mort, not for the first time, that hell was probably like the way you felt after sleeping too long and too hard on a hot afternoon. The worst of it wasn't physical. The worst was that dismaying, disorienting sense of being outside yourself, somehow - just an observer looking through dual TV cameras with blurry lenses.

He picked up the phone thinking it would be Shooter.

Yeah, it'll be him, all right - the one person in the whole wide world I shouldn't be talking to with my guard down and one half of my mind feeling unbuttoned from the other half. Sure tell be him - who else?

'Hello?'

It wasn't Shooter, but as he listened to the voice on the other end of the line reply to his greeting, he discovered there was at least one other person to whom he had no business talking while in a physically vulnerable state.

'Hello, Mort,' Amy said. 'Are you all right?'

7

Some time later that afternoon, Mort donned the extra-large red flannel shirt he used as a jacket in the early fall and took the walk he should have taken earlier. Bump the cat followed him long enough to ascertain that Mort was serious, then returned to the house.

He walked slowly and deliberately through an exquisite afternoon which seemed to be all blue sky, red leaves, and golden air. He walked with his hands stuffed into his pockets, trying to let the lake's quiet work through his skin and calm him down, as it had always done before - he supposed that was the reason he had come here instead of staying in New York, as Amy had expected him to do, while they trundled steadily along toward divorce. He had come here because it was a magic place, especially in autumn, and he had felt, when he arrived, that if there was a sad sack anywhere on the planet who needed a little magic, he was that person. And if that old magic failed him now that the writing had turned so sour, he wasn't sure what he would do.

It turned out that he didn't need to worry about it. After awhile the silence and that queer atmosphere of suspension which always seemed to possess Tashmore Lake when fall had finally come and the summer people had finally gone began to work on him, loosening him up like gently kneading hands. But now he had something besides John Shooter to think about; he had Amy to think about as well.

'Of course I'm all right,' he'd said, speaking as carefully as a drunk trying to convince people that he's sober. In truth, he was still so muzzy that he felt a little bit drunk. The shapes of words felt too big in his mouth, like chunks of soft, friable rock, and he had proceeded with great care, groping his way through the opening formalities and gambits of telephone conversation as if for the first time. 'How are you?'

'Oh, fine, I'm fine,' she said, and then trilled the quick little laugh which usually meant she was either flirting or nervous as hell, and Mort doubted that she was flirting with him - not at this point. The realization that she was nervous, too, set him a little more at ease. 'It's just that you're alone down there, and almost anything could happen and nobody would know - ' She broke off abruptly.

'I'm really not alone,' he said mildly. 'Mrs Gavin was here today and Greg Carstairs is always around.'

'Oh, I forgot about the roof repairs,' Amy said, and for a moment he marvelled at how natural they sounded, how natural and undivorced. Listening to us, Mort thought, you'd never guess there's a rogue real-estate agent in my bed ... or what used to be my bed. He waited for the anger to come back - the hurt, jealous, cheated anger - but only a ghost stirred where those lively if unpleasant feelings had been.

'Well, Greg didn't forget,' he assured her. 'He came down yesterday and crawled around on the roof for an hour and a half.'

'How bad is it?'

He told her, and they talked about the roof for the next five minutes or so, while Mort slowly woke up; they talked about that old roof as if things were just the same as they always had been, talked about it as if they would be spending next summer under the new cedar shingles just as they had spent the last nine summers under the old cedar shingles. Mort thought: Gimme a roof, gimme some shingles, and I'll talk to this bitch forever.

As he listened to himself holding up his side of the conversation, he felt a deepening sense of unreality settling in. It felt as if he were returning to the half-waking, half-sleeping zombie state in which he had answered the phone, and at last he couldn't stand it anymore. If this was some sort of contest to see who could go the longest pretending that the last six months had never happened, then he was willing to concede. More than willing.

She was asking where Greg was going to get the cedar shakes and if he would be using a crew from town when Mort broke in. 'Why did you call, Amy?'

There was a moment's silence in which he sensed her trying on responses and then rejecting them, like a woman trying on hats, and that did cause the anger to stir again. It was one of the things - one of the few things, actually - that he could honestly say he detested in her. That totally unconscious duplicity.

'I told you why,' she said at last. 'To see if you were all right.' She sounded flustered and unsure of herself again, and that usually meant she was telling the truth. When Amy lied, she always sounded as if she was telling you the world was round. 'I had one of my feelings - I know you don't believe in them, but I think you do know that I get them, and that I believe in them ... don't you, Mort?' There was none of her usual posturing or defensive anger, that was the thing - she sounded almost as if she were pleading with him.

'Yeah, I know that.'

'Well, I had one. I was making myself a sandwich for lunch, and I had a feeling that you ... that you might not be all right. I held off for awhile - I thought it would go away, but it didn't. So I finally called. You are all right, aren't you?'

'Yes,' he said.

'And nothing's happened?'

'Well, something did happen,' he said, after only a moment of interior debate. He thought it was possible, maybe even likely, that John Shooter (if that's really his name, his mind insisted on adding) had tried to make contact with him in Derry before coming down here. Derry, after all, was where he usually was at this time of year. Amy might even have sent him down here.

'I knew it,' she said. 'Did you hurt yourself with that goddam chainsaw? Or - '

'Nothing requiring hospitalization,' he said, smiling a little. 'Just an annoyance. Does the name John Shooter ring a bell with you, Amy?'

'No, why?'

He let an irritated little sigh escape through his closed teeth like steam. Amy was a bright woman, but she had always had a bit of a dead-short between her brain and her mouth. He remembered once musing that she should have a tee-shirt reading SPEAK NOW, THINK LATER. 'Don't say no right off the bat. Take a few seconds and really think about it. The guy is fairly tall, about six feet, and I'd guess he's in his mid-forties. His face looked older, but he moved like a man in his forties. He has a country kind of face. Lots of color, lots of sun-wrinkles. When I saw him, I thought he looked like a character out of Faulk - '

'What's this all about, Mort?'

Now he felt all the way back; now he could understand again why, as hurt and confused as he had been, he had rejected the urges he felt - mostly at night - to ask her if they couldn't at least try to reconcile their differences. He supposed he knew that, if he asked long enough and hard enough, she would agree. But facts were facts; there had been a lot more wrong with their marriage than Amy's real-estate salesman. The drilling quality her voice had taken on now - that was another symptom of what had killed them. What have you done now? the tone under the words asked ... no, demanded. What kind of a mess have you gotten yourself into now? Explain yourself.

He closed his eyes and hissed breath through his closed teeth again before answering. Then he told her about John Shooter, and Shooter's manuscript, and his own short story. Amy clearly remembered 'Sowing Season,' but said she had never heard of a man named John Shooter - it wasn't the kind of name you forget,

she said, and Mort was inclined to agree - in her life. And she certainly hadn't seen him.

'You're sure?' Mort pressed.

'Yes, I am,' Amy said. She sounded faintly resentful of Mort's continued questioning. 'I haven't seen anyone like that since you left. And before you tell me again not to say no right off the bat, let me assure you that I have a very clear memory of almost everything that's happened since then.'

She paused, and he realized she was speaking with an effort now, quite possibly with real pain. That small, mean part of him rejoiced. Most of him did not; most of him was disgusted to find even a small part of him happy about any of this. That had no effect on the interior celebrant, however. That guy might be outvoted, but he also seemed impervious to Mort's - the larger Mort's - attempts to root him out.

'Maybe Ted saw him,' he said. Ted Milner was the real-estate agent. He still found it hard to believe she had tossed him over for a real-estate agent, and he supposed that was part of the problem, part of the conceit which had allowed things to progress to this point in the first place. He certainly wasn't going to claim, especially to himself, that he had been as innocent as Mary's little lamb, was he?

'Is that supposed to be funny?' Amy sounded angry, ashamed, sorrowful, and defiant all at the same time.

'No,' he said. He was beginning to feel tired again.

'Ted isn't here,' she said. 'Ted hardly ever comes here. I ... I go to his place.'

Thank you for sharing that with me, Amy, he almost said, and choked it off. It would be nice to get out of at least one conversation without a swap of accusations. So he didn't say thanks for sharing and he didn't say that'll change and most of all he didn't ask what in the hell's the matter with you, Amy?

Mostly because she might then have asked the same thing of him.

8

She had suggested he call Dave Newsome, the Tashmore constable - after all, the man might be dangerous. Mort told her he didn't think that would be necessary, at least not yet, but if 'John Shooter' called by again, he would probably give Dave a jingle. After a few more stilted amenities, they hung up. He could tell she was still smarting over his oblique suggestion that Ted might currently be sitting in Mortybear's chair and sleeping in Mortybear's bed, but he honestly didn't know how he could have avoided mentioning Ted Milner sooner or later. The man had become a part of Amy's life, after all. And she had called him, that was the thing. She had gotten one of her funny feelings and called him.

Mort reached the place where the lakeside path forked, the righthand branch climbing the steep bank back up to Lake Drive. He took that branch, walking slowly and savoring the fall color. As he came around the final curve in the path and into sight of the narrow ribbon of blacktop, he was somehow not surprised to see the dusty blue station wagon with the Mississippi plates parked there like an off-whipped dog chained to a tree, nor the lean figure of John Shooter propped against the right front mudguard with his arms folded across his chest.

Mort waited for his heartbeat to speed up, for the surge of adrenaline into his body, but his heart went on maintaining its normal beat, and his glands kept their own counsel - which, for the time being, seemed to be to remain quiet.

The sun, which had gone behind a cloud, came out again, and fall colors which had already been bright now seemed to burst into flame. His own shadow reappeared, dark and long and clearcut. Shooter's round black hat looked blacker, his blue shirt bluer, and the air was so clear the man seemed scissored from a swatch of reality that was brighter and more vital than the one Mort knew as a rule. And he understood that he had been wrong about his reasons

for not calling Dave Newsome - wrong, or practicing a little deception - on himself as well as on Amy. The truth was that he wanted to deal with this matter himself. Maybe just to prove to myself that there are things I still deal with, he thought, and started up the hill again toward where John Shooter was leaning against his car and waiting for him.

9

His walk along the lake path had been both long and slow, and Amy's call hadn't been the only thing Mort had thought about as he picked his way over or around the occasional downed tree or paused to skip the occasional flat stone across the water (as a boy he had been able to get a really good one - what they called 'a flattie' - to skip as many as nine times, but today four was the most he'd been able to manage). He had also thought about how to deal with Shooter, when and if Shooter turned up again.

It was true he had felt a transient - or maybe not-so-transient - guilt when he saw how close to identical the two stories were, but he had worked that one out; it was only the generalized guilt he guessed all writers of fiction felt from time to time. As for Shooter himself, the only feelings he had were annoyance, anger ... and a kind of relief. He was full of an unfocussed rage; had been for months. It was good to finally have a donkey to pin this rotten, stinking tail on.

Mort had heard the old saw about how, if four hundred monkeys banged away on four hundred typewriters for four million years, one of them would produce the complete works of Shakespeare. He didn't believe it. Even if it were true, John Shooter was no monkey and he hadn't been alive anywhere near that long, no matter how lined his face was.

So Shooter had copied his story. Why he had picked 'Sowing Season' was beyond Mort Rainey's powers of conjecture, but he knew that was what had happened because he had ruled out coincidence, and he knew damned well that, while he might have stolen that story, like all his others, from The Great Idea Bank of the Universe, he most certainly had not stolen it from Mr John Shooter of the Great State of Mississippi.

Where, then, had Shooter copied it from? Mort thought that was the most important question; his chance to expose Shooter as a fake

and a cheat might lie buried within the answer to it.

There were only two possible answers, because 'Sowing Season' had only been published twice - first in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, and then in his collection, Everybody Drops the Dime. The dates of publication for the short stories in a collection are usually listed on the copyright page at the front of the book, and this format had been followed in Everybody Drops the Dime. He had looked up the acknowledgement for 'Sowing Season' and found that it had been originally published in the June, 1980, issue of EQMM. The collection, Everybody Drops the Dime, had been issued by St Martin's Press in 1983. There had been subsequent printings since then - all but one of them in paperback - but that didn't matter. All he really had to work with were those two dates 1980 and 1983 ... and his own hopeful belief that, aside from agents and publishing-company lawyers, no one paid much attention to those lines of fine print on the copyright page.

Hoping that this would prove true to John Shooter, hoping that Shooter would simply assume - as most general readers did - that a story he had read for the first time in a collection had no prior existence, Mort approached the man and finally stood before him on the edge of the road.

10

'I guess you must have had a chance to read my story by now,' Shooter said. He spoke as casually as a man commenting on the weather.

'I did.'

Shooter nodded gravely. 'I imagine it rang a bell, didn't it?'

'It certainly did,' Mort agreed, and then, with studied casualness: 'When did you write it?'

'I thought you'd ask that,' Shooter said. He smiled a secret little smile, but said no more. His arms remained crossed over his chest, his hands laid against his sides just below the armpits. He looked like a man who would be perfectly content to remain where he was forever, or at least until the sun sank below the horizon and ceased to warm his face.

'Well, sure,' Mort said, still casually. 'I have to, you know. When two fellows show up with the same story, that's serious.'

'Serious,' Shooter agreed in a deeply meditative tone of voice.

'And the only way to sort a thing like that out,' Mort continued, 'to decide who copied from whom, is to find out who wrote the words first.' He fixed Shooter's faded blue eyes with his own dry and uncompromising gaze. Somewhere nearby a chickadee twittered self-importantly in a tangle of trees and was then quiet again.

'Wouldn't you say that's true?'

'I suppose I would,' Shooter agreed. 'I suppose that's why I came all the way up here from Miss'ippi.'

Mort heard the rumble of an approaching vehicle. They both turned in that direction, and Tom Greenleafs Scout came over the nearest

hill, pulling a little cyclone of fallen leaves behind it. Tom, a hale and healthy Tashmore native of seventy-something, was the caretaker for most of the places on this side of the lake that Greg Carstairs didn't handle. Tom raised one hand in salute as he passed. Mort waved back. Shooter removed one hand from its resting place and tipped a finger at Tom in a friendly gesture which spoke in some obscure way of a great many years spent in the country, of the uncountable and unrecollected number of times he had saluted the passing drivers of passing trucks and tractors and tedders and balers in that exact same casual way. Then, as Tom's Scout passed out of sight, he returned his hand to his ribcage so that his arms were crossed again. As the leaves rattled to rest on the road, his patient, unwavering, almost eternal gaze came back to Mort Rainey's face once more. 'Now what were we saying?' he asked almost gently.

'We were trying to establish provenance,' Mort said. 'That means -'

'I know what it means,' Shooter said, favoring Mort with a glance which was both calm and mildly contemptuous. 'I know I am wearing shitkicker clothes and driving a shitkicker car, and I come from a long line of shitkickers, and maybe that makes me a shitkicker myself, but it doesn't necessarily make me a stupid shitkicker.'

'No,' Mort agreed. 'I don't guess it does. But being smart doesn't necessarily make you honest, either. In fact, I think it's more often apt to go the other way.'

'I could figure that much out from you, had I not known it,' Shooter said dryly, and Mort felt himself flush. He didn't like to be zinged and rarely was, but Shooter had just done it with the effortless ease of an experienced shotgunner popping a clay pigeon.

His hopes of trapping Shooter dropped. Not all the way to zero, but quite a considerable way. Smart and sharp were not the same things, but he now suspected that Shooter might be both. Still, there was no sense drawing this out. He didn't want to be around the man any longer than he had to be. In some strange way he had looked forward to this confrontation, once he had become sure that another

confrontation was inevitable - maybe only because it was a break in a routine which had already become dull and unpleasant. Now he wanted it over. He was no longer sure John Shooter was crazy - not completely, anyway - but he thought the man could be dangerous. He was so goddam implacable. He decided to take his best shot and get it over with - no more dancing around.

'When did you write your story, Mr Shooter?'

'Maybe my name's not Shooter,' the man said, looking faintly amused. 'Maybe that's just a pen name.'

'I see. What's your real one?'

'I didn't say it wasn't; I only said maybe. Either way, that's not part of our business.' He spoke serenely, appearing to be more interested in a cloud which was making its way slowly across the high blue sky and toward the westering sun.

'Okay,' Mort said, 'but when you wrote that story is.'

'I wrote it seven years ago,' he said, still studying the cloud - it had touched the edge of the sun now and had acquired a gold fringe. 'In 1982.'

Bingo, Mort thought. Wily old bastard or not, he stepped right into the trap after all. He got the story out of the collection, all right. And since Everybody Drops the Dime was published in 1983, he thought any date before then had to be safe. Should have read the copyright page, old son.

He waited for a feeling of triumph, but there was none. Only a muted sense of relief that this nut could be sent on his merry way with no further fuss or muss. Still, he was curious; it was the curse of the writing class. For instance, why that particular story, a story which was so out of his usual run, so downright atypical? And if the guy was going to accuse him of plagiarism, why settle for an obscure short story when he could have cobbled up the same sort of almost

identical manuscript of a best-seller like *The OrganGrinder's Bay*? That would have been juicy; this was almost a joke.

I suppose knocking off one of the novels would have been too much like work,

Mort thought.

'Why did you wait so long?' he asked. 'I mean, my book of short stories was published in 1983, and that's six years ago. Going on seven now.'

'Because I didn't know,' Shooter said. He removed his gaze from the cloud and studied Mort with that discomfiting look of faint contempt again. 'A man like you, I suppose that kind of man just assumes that everyone in America, if not everyone in every country where his books are published, reads what he has written.'

'I know better than that, I think,' Mort said, and it was his turn to be dry.

'But that's not true,' Shooter went on, ignoring what Mort had said in his scarily serene and utterly fixated way. 'That is not true at all. I never saw that story until the middle of June. This June.'

Mort thought of saying: Well, guess what, Johnny-me-bay? I never saw my wife in bed with another man until the middle of May! Would it knock Shooter off his pace if he actually did say something like that out loud?

He looked into the man's face and decided not. The serenity had burned out of those faded eyes the way mist burns off the hills on a day which is going to be a real scorcher. Now Shooter looked like a fundamentalist preacher about to ladle a large helping of fire and brimstone upon the trembling, downcast heads of his flock, and for the first time Mort Rainey felt really and personally afraid of the man. Yet he was also still angry. The thought he'd had near the end of his first encounter with 'John Shooter' now recurred: scared or not, he

was damned if he was just going to stand here and take it while this man accused him of theft -especially now that the falsity had been revealed out of the man's own mouth.

'Let me guess,' Mort said. 'A guy like you is a little too picky about what he reads to bother with the sort of trash I write. You stick to guys like Marcel Proust and Thomas Hardy, right? At night, after the milking's done, you like to fire up one of those honest country kerosene lamps, plunk it down on the kitchen table - which is, of course, covered with a homey red-and-whitechecked tablecloth - and unwind with a little Tess or Remembrance of Things Past. Maybe on the weekend you let your hair down a little, get a little funky, and drag out some Erskine Caldwell or Annie Dillard. It was one of your friends who told you about how I'd copied your honestly wrought tale. Isn't that how the story goes, Mr Shooter ... or whatever your name is?'

His voice had taken on a rough edge, and he was surprised to find himself on the edge of real fury. But, he discovered, not totally surprised.

'Nope. I don't have any friends.' Shooter spoke in the dry tone of a man who is only stating a fact. 'No friends, no family, no wife. I've got a little place about twenty miles south of Perkinsburg, and I do have a checked tablecloth on my kitchen table - now that you mention it - but we got electric lights in our town. I only bring out the kerosenes when there's a storm and the lines go down.'

'Good for you,' Mort said.

Shooter ignored the sarcasm. 'I got the place from my father, and added to it with a little money that came to me from my gram. I do have a dairy herd, about twenty milkers, you were right about that, too, and in the evenings I write stories. I suppose you've got one of those fancy computers with a screen, but I make do with an old typewriter.'

He fell silent, and for a moment they could both hear the crisp rustle of the leaves in the light late-afternoon wind that had sprung up.

‘As for your story being the same as mine, I found that out all on my own hook. You see, I’d been thinking about selling the farm. Thinking that with a little more money, I could write days, when my mind’s fresh, instead of just after dark. The realtor in Perkinsburg wanted me to meet a fellow up in Jackson, who owns a lot of dairy farms in Miss’ippi. I don’t like to drive more than ten or fifteen miles at a time - it gives me a headache, especially when some of it’s city driving, because that’s where they let all the fools loose - and so I took the bus. I got ready to get on, and then remembered I hadn’t brought anything to read. I hate a long bus ride without something to read.’

Mort found himself nodding involuntarily. He also hated a ride - bus, train, plane, or car - without something to read, something a little more substantial than the daily paper.

‘There isn’t any bus station in Perkinsburg - the Greyhound just stops at the Rexall for five minutes or so and then it’s down the road. I was already inside the door of that ‘hound and starting up the steps when I realized I was empty-handed. I asked the bus driver if he’d hold it for me and he said he was damned if he would, he was late already, and he was pulling out in another three minutes by his pocket-watch. If I was with him, that would be fine by him, and if I wasn’t, then I could kiss his fanny when we met up again.’

He TALKS like a storyteller, Mort thought. Be damned if he doesn’t. He tried to cancel this thought - it didn’t seem to be a good way to be thinking - and couldn’t quite do it.

‘Well, I ran inside that drugstore. They’ve got one of those old fashioned wire paperback racks in the Perkinsburg Rexall, the ones that turn around and around, just like the one in the little general store up the road from you.’

‘Bowie’s?’

Shooter nodded. 'That's the place, all right. Anyway, I grabbed the first book my hand happened on. Could have been a paperback Bible, for all I saw of the cover. But it wasn't. It was your book of short stories. Everybody Drops the Dime. And for all I know, they were your short stories. All but that one.'

Stop this now. He's working up a head of steam, so spike his boiler right now.

But he discovered. he didn't want to. Maybe Shooter was a writer. He fulfilled both of the main requirements: he told a tale you wanted to hear to the end, even if you had a pretty good idea what the end was going to be, and he was so full of shit he squeaked.

Instead of saying what he should have said - that even if Shooter was by some wild stretch of the imagination telling the truth, he, Mort, had beaten him to that miserable story by two years - he said: 'So you read "Sowing Season" on a Greyhound bus while you were going to Jackson to sell your dairy farm last June.'

'No. The way it happened, I read it on the way back. I sold the farm and went back on the Greyhound with a check for sixty thousand dollars in my pocket. I'd read the first half a dozen stories going down. I didn't think they were any great shakes, but they passed the time.'

'Thank you.'

Shooter studied him briefly. 'Wasn't offering you any real compliment.'

'Don't I know it.'

Shooter thought about this for a moment, then shrugged. 'Anyway, I read two more going back ... and then that one. My story.'

He looked at the cloud, which was now an airy mass of shimmering gold, and then back at Mort. His face was as dispassionate as ever,

but Mort suddenly understood he had been badly mistaken in believing this man possessed even the slightest shred of peace or serenity. What he had mistaken for those things was the iron mantle of control Shooter had donned to keep himself from killing Morton Rainey with his bare hands. The face was dispassionate, but his eyes blazed with the deepest, wildest fury Mort had ever seen. He understood that he had stupidly walked up the path from the lake toward what might really be his own death at this fellow's hands. Here was a man mad enough - in both senses of that word - to do murder.

'I am surprised no one has taken that story up with you before - it's not like any of the others, not a bit.' Shooter's voice was still even, but Mort now recognized it as the voice of a man laboring mightily to keep from striking out, bludgeoning, perhaps throttling; the voice of a man who knows that all the incentive he would ever need to cross the line between talking and killing would be to hear his own voice begin to spiral upward into the registers of cheated anger; the voice of a man who knows how fatally easy it would be to become his own lynch-mob.

Mort suddenly felt like a man in a dark room which is crisscrossed with hair-thin tripwires, all of them leading to packets of high explosive. It was hard to believe that only moments ago he had felt in charge of this situation. His problems - Amy, his inability to write - now seemed like unimportant figures in an unimportant landscape. In a sense, they had ceased to be problems at all. He only had one problem now, and that was staying alive long enough to get back to his house, let alone long enough to see the sun go down.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. There was nothing he dared to say, not now. The room was full of tripwires.

'I am very surprised,' Shooter repeated in that heavy even voice that now sounded like a hideous parody of calmness.

Mort heard himself say: 'My wife. She didn't like it. She said that it wasn't like anything I'd ever written before.'

'How did you get it?' Shooter asked slowly and fiercely. 'That's what I really want to know. How in hell did a big-money scribbling asshole like you get down to a little shitsplat town in Mississippi and steal my goddam story? I'd like to know why, too, unless you stole all the other ones as well, but the how of it'll be enough to satisfy me right now.'

The monstrous unfairness of this brought Mort's own anger back like an unslaked thirst. For a moment he forgot that he was out here on Lake Drive, alone except for this lunatic from Mississippi.

'Drop it,' he said harshly.

'Drop it?' Shooter asked, looking at Mort with a kind of clumsy amazement. 'Drop it? What in hell do you mean, drop it?'

'You said you wrote your story in 1982,' Mort said. 'I think I wrote mine in late 1979. I can't remember the exact date, but I do know that it was published for the first time in June of 1980. In a magazine. I beat you by two years, Mr Shooter or whatever your name is. If anyone here has got a bitch about plagiarism, it's me.'

Mort did not precisely see the man move. At one moment they were standing by Shooter's car, looking at each other; at the next he found himself pressed against the driver's door, with Shooter's hands wrapped around his upper arms and Shooter's face pressed against his own, forehead to forehead. In between his two positions, there was only a blurred sensation of being first grabbed and then whirled.

'You lie,' Shooter said, and on his breath was a dry whiff of cinnamon.

'The fuck I do,' Mort said, and lunged forward against the man's pressing weight.

Shooter was strong, almost certainly stronger than Mort Rainey, but Mort was younger, heavier, and he had the old blue station wagon to

push against. He was able to break Shooter's hold and send him stumbling two or three steps backward.

Now he'll come for me, Mort thought. Although he hadn't had a fight since a schoolyard you-pull-me-and-I'll-push-you scuffle back in the fourth grade, he was astounded to find his mind was clear and cool. We're going to duke it out over that dumb fucking story. Well, okay; I wasn't doing anything else today anyhow.

But it didn't happen. Shooter raised his hands, looked at them, saw they were knotted into fists ... and forced them to open. Mort saw the effort it took for the man to reimpose that mantle of control, and felt a kind of awe. Shooter put one of his open palms to his mouth and wiped his lips with it, very slowly and very deliberately.

'Prove it,' he said.

'All right. Come back to the house with me. I'll show you the entry on the copyright page of the book.'

'No,' Shooter said. 'I don't care about the book, I don't care a pin for the book. Show me the story. Show me the magazine with the story in it, so I can read it for myself.'

'I don't have the magazine here.'

He was about to say something else, but Shooter turned his face up toward the sky and uttered a single bark of laughter. The sound was as dry as an axe splitting kindling wood. 'No,' he said. The fury was still blazing and dancing in his eyes, but he seemed in charge of himself again. 'No, I bet you don't.'

'Listen to me,' Mort said. 'Ordinarily, this is just a place my wife and I come in the summer. I have copies of my books here, and some foreign editions, but I've published in a lot of magazines as well - articles and essays as well as stories. Those magazines are in our year-round house. The one in Derry.'

'Then why aren't you there?' Shooter asked. In his eyes Mort read both disbelief and a galling satisfaction - it was clear that Shooter had expected him to try and squirm his way out of it, and in Shooter's mind, that was just what Mort was doing. Or trying to do.

'I'm here because - ' He stopped. 'How did you know I'd be here?'

'I just looked on the back of the book I bought,' Shooter said, and Mort could have slapped his own forehead in frustration and sudden understanding. Of course - there had been a picture of him on the back of both the hardcover and paperback editions of Everybody Drops the Dime. Amy had taken it herself, and it had been an excellent shot. He was in the foreground; the house was in the middle distance; Tashmore Lake was in the background. The caption had read simply, Morton Rainey at his home in western Maine. So Shooter had come to western Maine, and he probably hadn't had to visit too many small-town bars and/or drugstores before he found someone who said, 'Mort Rainey? Hell, yes! Got a place over in Tashmore. Personal friend of mine, in fact!'

Well, that answered one question, anyway.

'I'm here because my wife and I got a divorce,' he said. 'It just became final. She stayed in Derry. Any other year, the house down here would have been empty.'

'Uh-huh,' Shooter said. His tone of voice infuriated Mort all over again. You're lying, it said, but in this case it doesn't much matter. Because I knew you'd lie. After all, lying is mostly what you're about, isn't it? 'Well, I would have found you, one place or the other.'

He fixed Mort with a flinty stare.

'I would have found you if you'd moved to Brazil.'

'I believe that,' Mort said. 'Nevertheless, you are mistaken. Or conning me. I'll do you the courtesy of believing it's only a mistake, because you seem sincere enough - '

Oh God, didn't he.

' - but I published that story two years before you say you wrote it.'

He saw that mad flash in Shooter's eyes again, and then it was gone. Not extinguished but collared, the way a man might collar a dog with an evil nature.

'You say this magazine is at your other house?'

'Yes.'

'And the magazine has your story in it.'

'Yes.'

'And the date of that magazine is June, 1980.'

'Yes.'

Mort had felt impatient with this laborious catechism (there was a long, thoughtful pause before each question) at first, but now he felt a little hope: it was as if the man was trying to teach himself the truth of what Mort had said ... a truth, Mort thought, that part of 'John Shooter' must have known all along, because the almost exact similarity between the two stories was not coincidence. He still believed that firmly, but he had come around to the idea that Shooter might have no conscious memory of committing the plagiarism. Because the man was clearly mad.

He wasn't quite as afraid as he had been when he first saw the hate and fury dancing in Shooter's eyes, like the reflection of a barn-fire blazing out of control. When he pushed the man, he had staggered backward, and Mort thought that if it came to a fight, he could probably hold his own ... or actually put his man on the ground.

Still, it would be better if it didn't come to that. In an odd, backhand sort of way, he had begun to feel a bit sorry for Shooter.

That gentleman, meanwhile, was stolidly pursuing his course.

'This other house - the one your wife has now - it's here in Maine, too?'

'Yes.'

'She's there?'

'Yes.'

There was a much longer pause this time. In a weird way, Shooter reminded Mort of a computer processing a heavy load of information. At last he said: 'I'll give you three days.'

'That's very generous of you,' Mort said.

Shooter's long upper lip drew back from teeth too even to be anything but mail-order dentures. 'Don't you make light of me, son,' he said. 'I'm trying my best to hold my temper, and doing a pretty good job of it, but -'

'You!' Mort cried at him. 'What about me? This is unbelievable! You come out of nowhere and make just about the most serious accusation a man can make against a writer, and when I tell you I've got proof you're either mistaken or lying through your damned teeth, you start patting yourself on the back for holding your temper! Unbelievable!'

Shooter's eyelids drooped, giving him a sly look. 'Proof?' he said. 'I don't see no proof. I hear you talking, but talking ain't proof.'

'I told you!' Mort shouted. He felt helpless, like a man trying to box cobwebs. 'I explained all that!'

Shooter looked at Mort for a long moment, then turned and reached through the open window of his car.

'What are you doing?' Mort asked, his voice tight. Now he felt the adrenaline dump into his body, readying him for fight or flight ... probably the latter, if Shooter was reaching for the big handgun Mort suddenly saw in the eye of his imagination.

'Just gettin m'smokes,' Shooter said. 'Hold your water.'

When he pulled his arm out of the car, he had a red package of Pall Malls in his hand. He had taken them off the dashboard. 'Want one?'

'I have my own,' Mort said rather sulkily, and took the ancient pack of L & M's from the pocket beneath the red flannel overshirt.

They lit up, each from his own pack.

'If we keep on this way, we're going to have a fight,' Shooter said finally. 'I don't want that.'

'Well, Jesus, neither do I'

'Part of you does,' Shooter contradicted. He continued to study Mort from beneath his dropped lids with that expression of country shrewdness. 'Part of you wants just that. But I don't think it's just me or my story that's making you want to fight. You have got some other bee under your blanket that's got you all riled up, and that is making this harder. Part of you wants to fight, but what you don't understand is that, if we do start to fight, it's not going to end until one or the other of us is dead.'

Mort looked for signs that Shooter was exaggerating for effect and saw none. He suddenly felt cold along the base of his spine.

'So I'm going to give you three days. You call your ex and get her to send down the magazine with your story in it, if there is such a magazine. And I'll be back. There isn't any magazine, of course; I think we both know that. But you strike me as a man who needs to do some long, hard thinking.'

He looked at Mort with a disconcerting expression of stern pity.

'You didn't believe anybody would ever catch you out, did you?' he asked. 'You really didn't.'

'If I show you the magazine, will you go away?' Mort asked. He was speaking more to himself than to Shooter. 'I guess what I really want to know is whether or not it's even worth it.'

Shooter abruptly opened his car door and slid in behind the wheel. Mort found the speed with which the man could move a little creepy. 'Three days. Use it the way you like, Mr Rainey.'

He started the engine. It ran with the low wheeze characteristic of valves which need to be reground, and the tang of oilsmoke from the old tailpipe polluted the air of the fading afternoon. 'Right is right and fair is fair. The first thing is to get you to a place where you see I have really got you, and you can't wiggle out of this mess the way you've probably been wiggling out of the messes you have made all your life. That's the first thing.'

He looked at Mort expressionlessly out of the driver's-side window.

'The second thing,' he said, 'is the real reason I come.'

'What's that?' Mort heard himself say. It was strange and not a little infuriating, but he felt that sensation of guilt creeping relentlessly over him again, as if he really had done the thing of which this rustic lunatic was accusing him.

'We'll talk about it,' Shooter said, and threw his elderly station wagon in gear. 'Meantime, you think about what's right and what's fair.'

'You're nuts!' Mort shouted, but Shooter was already rolling up Lake Drive toward where it spilled out onto Route 23.

He watched until the wagon was out of sight, then walked slowly back to the house. It felt emptier and emptier in his mind as he drew

closer and closer to it. The rage and the fear were gone. He felt only cold, tired, and homesick for a marriage which no longer was, and which, it now began to seem to him, had never been at all.

The telephone started ringing when he was halfway along the driveway which ran down the steep hill from Lake Drive to the house. Mort broke into a run, knowing he wasn't going to make it but running anyway, cursing himself for his foolish reaction. Talk about Pavlov's dogs!

He had opened the screen door and was fumbling with the knob of the inside door when the phone silenced. He stepped in, closed the door behind him, and looked at the telephone, which stood on a little antique desk Amy had picked up at a flea market in Mechanic Falls. He could, in that moment, easily imagine that the phone was looking back at him with studied mechanical impatience: Don't ask me, boss - I don't make the news ' I only report it. He thought that he ought to buy one of those machines that take messages ... or maybe not. When he thought about it carefully, he realized that the telephone was hardly his favorite gadget. If people really wanted you, they eventually called back.

He made himself a sandwich and a bowl of soup and then discovered he didn't want them. He. felt lonely, unhappy, and mildly infected by John Shooter's craziness. He was not much surprised to find that the sum of these feelings was sleepiness. He began to cast longing glances at the couch.

Okay, an interior voice whispered. Remember, though -you can run but you can't hide. This shit is still gonna be here when you wake up.

That was very true, he thought, but in the meantime, it would all be gone, gone, blessedly gone. The one thing you could definitely say for short-term solutions was that they were better than nothing. He decided he would call home (his mind persisted in thinking of the Derry house as home, and he suspected that was a circumstance which would not soon change), ask Amy to pull the copy of EQMM with 'Sowing Season' in it and send it down by express mail. Then

he would sack on the couch for a couple of hours. He would arise around seven or so, go into the study refreshed, and write a little more shit.

And shit i's all you will write, with that attitude, the interior voice reproached him.

'Fuck you,' Mort told it - one of the few advantages to living alone, so far as he could see, was that you could talk to yourself right out loud without having anyone wonder if you were crazy or what.

He picked up the phone and dialled the Derry number. He listened to the customary clicks of the long-distance connection being made, and then that most irritating of all telephone sounds: the dah-dah-dah of a busy signal. Amy was on the telephone with someone, and when Amy really got going, a conversation could go on for hours. Possibly days.

'Oh, fuck, great!' Mort cried, and jacked the handset back into the cradle hard enough to make the bell jingle faintly.

So - what now, little man?

He supposed he could call Isabelle Fortin who lived across the street, but that suddenly seemed like too much work and a pain in the ass besides. Isabelle was already so deeply into his and Amy's breakup that she was doing everything but taking home movies. Also, it was already past five o'clock - the magazine couldn't actually start to move along the postal channel between Derry and Tashmore until tomorrow morning no matter what time it was mailed today. He would try Amy later on this evening, and if the line to the house was busy again (or if Amy was, perchance, still on the same call), he would call Isabelle with the message after all. For the moment, the siren-song of the couch in the living room was too strong to be denied.

Mort pulled the phone jack - whoever had tried to call him just as he was coming down the driveway would have to wait a little longer,

please and thank you - and strolled into the living room.

He propped the pillows in their familiar positions, one behind his head and one behind his neck, and looked out at the lake, where the sun was setting at the end of a long and spectacular golden track. I have never felt so lonely and so utterly horrible in my whole life, he thought with some amazement. Then his lids closed slowly over his slightly bloodshot eyes, and Mort Rainey, who had yet to discover what true horror was all about, fell asleep.

12

He dreamed he was in a classroom.

It was a familiar classroom, although he couldn't have said just why. He was in the classroom with John Shooter. Shooter was holding a grocery bag in the curve of one arm. He took an orange out of the bag and bounced it reflectively up and down in his hand. He was looking in Mort's direction, but not at Mort; his gaze seemed fixed on something beyond Mort's shoulder. Mort turned and saw a cinderblock wall and a blackboard and a door with a frosted-glass upper panel. After a moment he could puzzle out the backward writing on the frosted glass.

WELCOME TO THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

it said. The writing on the blackboard was easier to read.

SOWING SEASON

A Short Story by Morton Rainey

it said.

Suddenly something whizzed over Mort's shoulder, just missing his head. The orange. As Mort cringed back, the orange struck the blackboard, burst open with a rotten squashing sound, and splattered gore across what had been written there.

He turned back to Shooter. Stop that! he cried in a shaky, scolding voice.

Shooter dipped into his bag again. What's the matter? Shooter asked in his calm, stern voice. Don't you recognize blood oranges when you see them? What kind of writer are you?

He threw another one. It splattered crimson across Mort's name and began to drip slowly down the wall.

No more! Mort screamed, but Shooter dipped slowly, implacably, into the bag again. His long, callused fingers sank into the skin of the orange he brought out; blood began to sweat its way onto the orange's skin in pinprick droplets.

No more! No more! Please! No more! I'll admit it, I'll admit anything. everything, if you just stop! Anything, if you'll just stop! If you'll

13

stop, if you'll just stop -

He was falling.

Mort grabbed at the edge of the couch just in time to save himself a short and probably painful trip to the living-room floor. He rolled toward the back of the couch and simply lay there for a moment, clutching the cushions, shivering, and trying to grasp at the ragged tails of the dream.

Something about a classroom, and blood oranges, and the school of hard knocks. Even this was going, and the rest was already gone. It had been real, whatever it was. Much too real.

At last he opened his eyes, but there was precious little to see; he had slept until long past sundown. He was horribly stiff, especially at the base of his neck, and he suspected he had been asleep at least four hours, maybe five. He felt his way cautiously to the living-room light-switch, managing to avoid the octagonal glass-topped coffee table for a change (he had an idea the coffee table was semi-sentient, and given to shifting its position slightly after dark, the better to hack away at his shins), and then went into the front hall to try Amy again. On the way, he checked his watch. It was quarter past ten. He had slept over five hours ... nor was this the first time. And he wouldn't even pay for it by tossing and turning all night, judging by past experience, he would be asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow in the bedroom.

He picked up the phone, was momentarily puzzled by the dead silence in his ear. then remembered he had yanked the damn thing's fang. He pulled the wire through his fingers until he got to the jack, turned around to plug it in ... and paused. From here he could look out the small window to the left of the door. This gave him an angle of vision on the back porch, where the mysterious and unpleasant Mr Shooter had left his manuscript under a rock yesterday. He could

also see the garbage cabinet, and there was something on it - two somethings, actually. A white something and a dark something. The dark something looked nasty; for one frightening second, Mort thought a giant spider was crouched there.

He dropped the phone cord and turned on the porch light in a hurry. Then there was a space of time - he didn't know just how long and didn't care to know -when he was incapable of further movement.

The white thing was a sheet of paper - a perfectly ordinary 8 1/2" x 11" sheet of typing paper. Although the garbage cabinet was a good fifteen feet away from where Mort was standing, the few words on it were printed in large strokes and he could read them easily. He thought Shooter must have used either a pencil with an extremely soft lead or a piece of artist's charcoal. REMEMBER, YOU HAVE 3 DAYS, the message read. I AM NOT JOKING.

The black thing was Bump. Shooter had apparently broken the cat's neck before nailing him to the roof of the garbage cabinet with a screwdriver from Mort's own toolshed.

14

He wasn't aware of breaking the paralysis which held him. At one moment he was standing frozen in the hall by the telephone table, looking out at good old Bump, who seemed to have grown a screwdriver handle in the middle of his chest, where there was a ruff of white fur - what Amy had liked to call Bump's bib. At the next he was standing in the middle of the porch with the chilly night air biting through his thin shirt, trying to look six different ways at once.

He forced himself to stop. Shooter was gone, of course. That's why he had left the note. Nor did Shooter seem like the kind of nut who would enjoy watching Mort's obvious fear and horror. He was a nut, all right, but one which had fallen from a different tree. He had simply used Bump, used him on Mort the way a farmer might use a crowbar on a stubborn rock in his north forty. There was nothing personal in it; it was just a job that had to be done.

Then he thought of how Shooter's eyes had looked that afternoon and shivered violently. No, it was personal, all right. It was all kinds of personal.

'He believes I did it,' Mort whispered to the cold western Maine night, and the words came out in ragged chunks, bitten off by his chattering teeth. 'The crazy son of a bitch really believes I did it.'

He approached the garbage cabinet and his stomach rolled over like a dog doing a trick. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, and he wasn't sure he could take care of what needed taking care of. Bump's head was cocked far to the left, giving him a grotesque questioning look. His teeth, small, neat, and needle-sharp, were bared. There was a little blood around the blade of the screwdriver at the point where it was driven into his

(bib)

ruff, but not very much. Bump was a friendly cat; if Shooter had approached him, Bump would not have shied away. And that was what Shooter must have done, Mort thought, and wiped the sick sweat off his forehead. He had picked the cat up, snapped its neck between his fingers like a Popsicle stick, and then nailed it to the slanting roof of the garbage cabinet, all while Mort Rainey slept, if not the sleep of the just, that of the unheeding.

Mort crumpled up the sheet of paper, stuffed it in his back pocket, then put his hand on Bump's chest. The body, not stiff and not even entirely cold, shifted under his hand. His stomach rolled again, but he forced his other hand to close around the screwdriver's yellow plastic handle and pull it free.

He tossed the screwdriver onto the porch and held poor old Bump in his right hand like a bundle of rags. Now his stomach was in free fall, simply rolling and rolling and rolling. He lifted one of the two lids on top of the garbage cabinet, and secured it with the hook-and-eyelet that kept the heavy lid from crashing down on the arms or head of whoever was depositing trash inside. Three cans were lined up within. Mort lifted the lid from the center one and deposited Bump's body gently inside. It lay draped over the top of an olive-green Hefty bag like a fur stole.

He was suddenly furious with Shooter. If the man had appeared in the driveway at that second, Mort would have charged him without a second thought - driven him to the ground and choked him if he could.

Easy - it really is catching.

Maybe it was. And maybe he didn't care. It wasn't just that Shooter had killed his only companion in this lonely October house by the lake; it was that he had done it while Mort was asleep, and in such a way that good old Bump had become an object of revulsion, something it was hard not to puke over.

Most of all it was the fact that he had been forced to put his good cat in a garbage can like a piece of worthless trash.

I'll bury him tomorrow. Right over in that soft patch to the left of the house. In sight of the lake.

Yes, but tonight Bump would lie in undignified state on top of a Hefty bag in the garbage cabinet because some man - some crazy son of a bitch - could be out there, and the man had a grudge over a story Mort Rainey hadn't even thought of for the last five years or so. The man was crazy, and consequently Mort was afraid to bury Bump tonight, because, note or no note, Shooter might be out there.

I want to kill him. And if the crazy bastard pushes me much more, I might just try to do it.

He went inside, slammed the door, and locked it. Then he walked deliberately through the house, locking all the doors and windows. When that was done, he went back to the window by the porch door and stared pensively out into the darkness. He could see the screwdriver lying on the boards, and the dark round hole the blade had made when Shooter plunged it into the righthand lid of the garbage cabinet.

All at once he remembered he had been about to try Amy again.

He plugged the jack into the wall. He dialled rapidly, fingers tapping the old familiar keys which added up to home, and wondered if he would tell Amy about Bump.

There was an unnaturally long pause after the preliminary clicks. He was about to hang up when there was one final click - so loud it was almost a thud - followed by a robot voice telling him that the number he had dialled was out of service.

'Wonderful,' he muttered. 'What the hell did you do, Amy? Use it until it broke?'

He pushed the disconnect button down, thinking he would have to call Isabelle Fortin after all, and while he was conning his memory for her number, the telephone rang in his hand.

He hadn't realized how keyed up he was until that happened. He gave a squeaky little cry and skipped backward, dropping the telephone handset on the floor and then almost tripping over the goddam bench Amy had bought and put by the telephone table, the bench absolutely no one, including Amy herself, ever used.

He pawed out with one hand, grabbed the bookcase, and kept himself from falling. Then he snatched up the phone and said, 'Hello? Is that you, Shooter?' For in that moment, when it seemed that the whole world was slowly but surely turning topsy-turvy, he couldn't imagine who else it could be.

'Mort?' It was Amy, and she was nearly screaming. He knew the tone very well from the last two years of their marriage. It was either frustration or fury, more likely the latter. 'Mort, is that you? Is it you, for God's sake? Mort? '

'Yes, it's me,' he said. He suddenly felt weary.

'Where in the hell have you been? I've been trying to get you for the last three hours!'

'Asleep,' he said.

'You pulled the jack.' She spoke in the tired but accusatory tone of one who had been down this road before. 'Well, you picked a great time to do it this time, champ.'

'I tried to call you around five -'

'I was at Ted's.'

'Well, somebody was there,' he said. 'Maybe

'What do you mean, someone was there?' she asked, whiplash quick. 'Who was there?'

'How the hell would I know, Amy? You're the one in Derry, remember? You Derry, me Tashmore. All I know is that the line was busy when I tried to call you. If you were over at Ted's, then I assume Isabelle - '

'I'm still at Ted's,' she said, and now her voice was queerly flat. 'I guess I'll be at Ted's for quite awhile to come, like it or not. Someone burned our house down, Mort. Someone burned it right to the ground.' And suddenly Amy began to cry.

15

He had become so fixated on John Shooter that his immediate assumption, as he stood numbly in the hallway of the one remaining Rainey home with the telephone screwed against his ear, was that Shooter had burned the house down. Motive? Why, certainly, officer. He burned the house, a restored Victorian worth about \$800,000, to get rid of a magazine. Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, to be precise; June of 1980 issue.

But could it have been Shooter? Surely not. The distance between Derry and Tashmore was over a hundred miles, and Bump's body had still been warm and flexible, the blood around the screwdriver blade tacky but not yet dry.

If he hurried

Oh, quit it, why don't you? Pretty soon you'll be blaming Shooter for your divorce and thinking you've been sleeping sixteen hours out of every twenty-four because Shooter has been putting Phenobarb in your food. And after that? You can start writing letters to the paper saying that America's cocaine kingpin is a gentleman from Crow's Ass Mississippi named John Shooter. That he killed Jimmy Hoffa and also happened to be the famous second gun who fired at Kennedy from the grassy knoll in November of 1963. The man's crazy, okay ... but do you really think he drove a hundred miles north and massacred your goddam house in order to kill a magazine? Especially when there must be copies of that magazine still in existence all across America? Get serious.

But still ... if he hurried ...

No. It was ridiculous. But, Mort suddenly realized, he wouldn't be able to show the man his goddam proof, would he? Not unless...

The study was at the back of the house; they had converted what had once been the loft of the carriage-barn.

'Amy,' he said.

'It's so horrible!' she wept. 'I was at Ted's and Isabelle called ... she said there were at least fifteen fire trucks there ... hoses spraying ... crowds ... rubbernecks ... gawkers ... you know how I hate it when people come and gawk at the house, even when it's not burning down ...'

He had to bite down hard on the insides of his cheeks to stifle a wild bray of laughter. To laugh now would be the worst thing, the cruellest thing he could possibly do, because he did know. His success at his chosen trade after the years of struggle had been a great and fulfilling thing for him; he sometimes felt like a man who has won his way through a perilous jungle where most other adventurers perish and has gained a fabulous prize by so doing. Amy had been glad for him, at least initially, but for her there had been a bitter downside: the loss of her identity not only as a private person but as a separate person.

'Yes,' he said as gently as he could, still biting at his cheeks to protect against the laughter which threatened. If he laughed, it would be at her unfortunate choice of phrasing, but she wouldn't see it that way. So often during their years together she had misinterpreted his laughter. 'Yes, I know, hon. Tell me what happened.'

'Somebody burned down our house!' Amy cried tearily. 'That's what happened!'

'Is it a total loss?'

'Yes. That's what the fire chief said.' He could hear her gulping, trying to get herself under control, and then her tears stormed out again. 'It b-burned fuh-fuh-flat!'

'Even my study?'

'That's w-where it st-started,' she sniffled. 'At least, that's what the fire chief said they thought. And it fits with what Patty saw.'

'Patty Champion?'

The Champions owned the house next to the Raineys' on the right; the two lots were separated by a belt of yew trees that had slowly run wild over the years.

'Yes. just a second, Mort.'

He heard a mighty honk as she blew her nose, and when she came back on the line, she seemed more composed. 'Patty was walking her dog, she told the firemen. This was a little while after it got dark. She walked past our house and saw a car parked under the portico. Then she heard a crash from inside, and saw fire in your big study window.'

'Did she see what kind of car it was?' Mort asked. He felt sick in the pit of his stomach. As the news sank in, the John Shooter business began to dwindle in size and importance. It wasn't just the goddam June, 1980, issue of EQMM; it was almost all his manuscripts, both those which had been published and those which were incomplete, it was most of his first editions, his foreign editions, his contributors' copies.

Oh, but that was only the start. They had lost their books, as many as four thousand volumes. All of Amy's clothes would have burned, if the damage was as bad as she said it was, and the antique furniture she had collected - sometimes with his help, but mostly on her own - would all be cinders and clinkers now. Her jewelry and their personal papers - insurance policies and so on - would probably be okay (the safe hidden at the back of the upstairs closet was supposed to be fireproof), but the Turkish rugs would be ash, the thousand or so videotapes melted lumps of plastic, the audio-visual equipment ... his clothes ... their photographs, thousands of them ...

Good Christ, and the first thing he'd thought of was that goddam magazine.

'No,' Amy was saying, answering the question he had almost forgotten asking in his realization of how enormous the personal loss must be, 'she couldn't tell what kind of car it was. She said she thought somebody must have used a Molotov cocktail, or something like that. Because of the way the fire came up in the window right after the sound of breaking glass. She said she started up the driveway and then the kitchen door opened and a man ran out. Bruno started to bark at him, but Patty got scared and pulled him back, although she said he just about ripped the leash out of her hand.

'Then the man got into the car and started it up. He turned on the headlights, and Patty said they almost blinded her. She threw her arm up to shield her eyes and the car just roared out from under the portico ... that's what she said ... and she squeezed back against our front fence and pulled Bruno as hard as she could, or the man would have hit him. Then he turned out of the driveway and drove down the street, fast.'

'And she never saw what kind of car it was?'

'No. First it was dark, and then, when the fire started to shine through your study window, the headlights dazzled her. She ran back to the house and called the fire department. Isabelle said they came fast, but you know how old our house is ... was ... and ... and how fast dry wood burns ... especially if you use gasoline ...'

Yes, he knew. Old, dry, full of wood, the house had been an arsonist's wet dream. But who? If not Shooter, who? This terrible news, coming on top of the day's events like a hideous dessert at the end of a loathsome meal, had almost completely paralyzed his ability to think.

'He said it was probably gasoline ... the fire chief, I mean ... he was there first, but then the police came, and they kept asking questions, Mort, most about you ... about any enemies you might have made ... enemies ... and I said I didn't think you h-had any enemies ... I tried to answer all his questions ...'

'I'm sure you did the best job you could,' he said gently.

She went on as if she hadn't heard him, speaking in breathless ellipses, like a telegraph operator relating dire news aloud just as it spills off the wire. 'I didn't even know how to tell them we were divorced ... and of course they didn't know ... it was Ted who had to tell them finally ... Mort ... my mother's Bible ... it was on the nightstand in the bedroom ... there were pictures in it of my family ... and ... and it was the only thing ... only thing of hers I h-h-had ...'

Her voice dissolved into miserable sobs.

'I'll be up in the morning,' he said. 'If I leave at seven, I can be there by nine-thirty. Maybe by nine, now that there's no summer traffic. Where will you stay tonight? At Ted's?'

'Yes,' she said, sniffing. 'I know you don't like him, Mort, but I don't know what I would have done without him tonight ... how I could have handled it ... you know ... all their questions ...'

'Then I'm glad you had him,' he said firmly. He found the calmness, the civilization, in his voice really astounding. 'Take care of yourself. Have you got your pills?' She'd had a tranquilizer prescription for the last six years of their marriage, but only took them when she had to fly ... or, he remembered, when he had some public function to fulfill. One which required the presence of the Designated Spouse.

'They were in the medicine cabinet,' she said dully. 'It doesn't matter. I'm not stressed. just heartsick.'

Mort almost told her he believed they were the same thing, and decided not to.

'I'll be there as soon as I can,' he said. 'If you think I could do something by coming tonight - '

'No,' she said. 'Where should we meet? Ted's?'

Suddenly, unbidden, he saw his hand holding a chambermaid's passkey. Saw it turning in the lock of a motel-room door. Saw the door swinging open. Saw the surprised faces above the sheet, Amy's on the left, Ted Milner's on the right. His blow-dried look had been knocked all aslant and asprawl by sleep, and to Mort he had looked a little bit like Alfalfa in the old Little Rascals short subjects. Seeing Ted's hair in sleep corkscrews like that had also made the man look really real to Mort for the first time. He had seen their dismay and their bare shoulders. And suddenly, almost randomly, he thought: A woman who would steal your love when your love was really all you had

'No,' he said, 'not Ted's. What about that little coffee shop on Witcham Street?'

'Would you prefer I came alone?' She didn't sound angry, but she sounded ready to be angry. How well I know her, he thought. Every move, every lift and drop of her voice, every turn of phrase. And how well she must know me.

'No,' he said. 'Bring Ted. That'd be fine.' Not fine, but he could live with it. He thought.

'Nine-thirty, then,' she said, and he could hear her standing down a little. 'Marchman's.'

'Is that the name of that place?'

'Yes - Marchman's Restaurant.'

'Okay. Nine-thirty or a little earlier. If I get there first, I'll chalk a mark on the door -'

'-and if I get there first, I'll rub it out,' she finished the old catechism, and they both laughed a little. Mort found that even the laugh hurt. They knew each other, all right. Wasn't that what the years together were supposed to be for? And wasn't that why it hurt so goddam bad

when you discovered that, not only could the years end, they really had?

He suddenly thought of the note which had been stuck under one of the garbage cabinet's shake shingles - REMEMBER, YOU HAVE 3 DAYS. I AM NOT JOKING. He thought of saying, I've had a little trouble of my own down here, Amy, and then knew he couldn't add that to her current load of woe. It was his trouble.

'If it had happened later, at least you would have saved your stuff,' she was saying. 'I don't like to think about all the manuscripts you must have lost, Mort. If you'd gotten the fireproof drawers two years ago, when Herb suggested them, maybe - '

'I don't think it matters,' Mort said. 'I've got the manuscript of the new novel down here.' He did, too. All fourteen shitty, wooden pages of it. 'To hell with the rest. I'll see you tomorrow, Amy. I

(love you)

He closed his lips over it. They were divorced. Could he still love her? It seemed almost perverse. And even if he did, did he have any right to say so?

'I'm sorry as hell about this,' he told her instead.

'So am I, Mort. So very sorry.' She was starting to cry again. Now he could hear someone - a woman, probably Isabelle Fortin - comforting her.

'Get some sleep, Amy.'

'You, too.'

He hung up. All at once the house seemed much quieter than it had on any of the other nights he had been here alone; he could hear nothing but the night wind whispering around the eaves and, very far off, a loon calling on the lake. He took the note out of his pocket,

smoothed it out, and read it again. It was the sort of thing you were supposed to put aside for the police. In fact, it was the sort of thing you weren't even supposed to touch until the police had had a chance to photograph it and work their juju on it. It was - ruffle of drums and blast of trumpets, please - EVIDENCE.

Well, fuck it, Mort thought, crumpling it up again. No police. Dave Newsome, the local constable, probably had trouble remembering what he'd eaten for breakfast by the time lunch rolled around, and he couldn't see taking the matter to either the county sheriff or the State Police. After all, it wasn't as though an attempt had been made on his life; his cat had been killed, but a cat wasn't a person. And in the wake of Amy's devastating news, John Shooter simply didn't seem as important anymore. He was one of the Crazy Folks, he had a bee in his bonnet, and he might be dangerous ... but Mort felt more and more inclined to try and handle the business himself, even if Shooter was dangerous. Especially if he was dangerous.

The house in Derry took precedence over John Shooter and John Shooter's crazy ideas. It even took precedence over who had done the deed - Shooter or some other fruitcake with a grudge, a mental problem, or both. The house, and, he supposed, Amy. She was clearly in bad shape, and it couldn't hurt either of them for him to offer her what comfort he could. Maybe she would even ...

But he closed his mind to any speculation of what Amy might even do. He saw nothing but pain down that road. Better to believe that road was closed for good.

He went into the bedroom, undressed, and lay down with his hands behind his head. The loon called again, desperate and distant. It occurred to him again that Shooter could be out there, creeping around, his face a pale circle beneath his odd black hat. Shooter was nuts, and although he had used his hands and a screwdriver on Bump, that did not preclude the possibility that he still might have a gun.

But Mort didn't think Shooter was out there, armed or not.

Calls, he thought. I'll have to make at least two on my way up to Deny. One to Greg Carstairs and one to Herb Creekmore. Too early to make them from here if I leave at seven, but I could use one of the pay phones at the Augusta tollbooths ...

He turned over on his side, thinking it would be a long time before he fell asleep tonight after all ... and then sleep rolled over him in a smooth dark wave, and if anyone came to peer in on him as he slept, he did not know it.

16

The alarm got him up at six-fifteen. He took half an hour to bury Bump in the sandy patch of ground between the house and the lake, and by seven he was rolling, just as planned. He was ten miles down the road and heading into Mechanic Falls, a bustling metropolis which consisted of a textile mill that had closed in 1970, five thousand souls, and a yellow blinker at the intersection of Routes 23 and 7, when he noticed that his old Buick was running on fumes. He pulled into Bill's Chevron, cursing himself for not having checked the gauge before setting out - if he had gotten through Mechanic Falls without noticing how low the gauge had fallen, he might have had a pretty good walk for himself and ended up very late for his appointment with Amy.

He went to the pay phone on the wall while the pump jockey tried to fill the Buick's bottomless pit. He dug his battered address book out of his left rear pocket and dialed Greg Carstairs's number. He thought he might actually catch Greg in this early, and he was right.

'Hello?'

'Hi, Greg - Mort Rainey.'

'Hi, Mort. I guess you've got some trouble up in Derry, huh?'

'Yes,' Mort said. 'Was it on the news?'

'Channel 5.'

'How did it look?'

'How did what look?' Greg replied. Mort winced ... but if he had to hear that from anybody, he was glad it had been Greg Carstairs. He was an amiable, long-haired ex-hippie who had converted to some fairly obscure religious sect - the Swedenborgians, maybe - not long after Woodstock. He had a wife and two kids, one seven and one

five, and so far as Mort could tell, the whole family was as laid back as Greg himself. You got so used to the man's small but constant smile that he looked undressed on the few occasions he was without it.

'That bad, huh?'

'Yes,' Greg said simply. 'It must have gone up like a rocket. I'm really sorry, man.'

'Thank you. I'm on my way up there now, Greg. I'm calling from Mechanic Falls. Can you do me a favor while I'm gone?'

'If you mean the shingles, I think they'll be in by-'

'No, not the shingles. Something else. There's been a guy bothering me the last two or three days. A crackpot. He claims I stole a story he wrote six or seven years ago. When I told him I'd written my version of the same story before he claims to have written his, and told him I could prove it, he got wiggy. I was sort of hoping I'd seen the last of him, but no such luck. Last evening, while I was sleeping on the couch, he killed my cat.'

'Bump?' Greg sounded faintly startled, a reaction that equalled roaring surprise in anyone else. 'He killed Bump?'

'That's right.'

'Did you talk to Dave Newsome about it?'

'No, and I don't want to, either. I want to handle him myself, if I can.'

'The guy doesn't exactly sound like a pacifist, Mort.'

'Killing a cat is a long way from killing a man,' Mort said, 'and I think maybe I could handle him better than Dave.'

'Well, you could have something there,' Greg agreed. 'Dave's slowed down a little since he turned seventy. What can I do for you, Mort?'

'I'd like to know where the guy is staying, for one thing.'

'What's his name?'

'I don't know. The name on the story he showed me was John Shooter, but he got cute about that later on, told me it might be a pseudonym. I think it is - it sounds like a pseudonym. Either way, I doubt if he's registered under that name if he's staying at an area motel.'

'What does he look like?'

'He's about six feet tall and forty-something. He's got a kind of weatherbeaten face - sun-wrinkles around his eyes and lines going down from the corners of the mouth, kind of bracketing the chin.'

As he spoke, the face of 'John Shooter' floated into his consciousness with increasing clarity, like the face of a spirit swimming up to the curved side of a medium's crystal ball. Mort felt gooseflesh prick the backs of his hands and shivered a little. A voice in his midbrain kept muttering that he was either making a mistake or deliberately misleading Greg. Shooter was dangerous, all right. He hadn't needed to see what the man had done to Bump to know that. He had seen it in Shooter's eyes yesterday afternoon. Why was he playing vigilante, then?

Because, another, deeper, voice answered with a kind of dangerous firmness. Just because, that's all.

The midbrain voice spoke up again, worried: Do you mean to hurt him? Is that what this is all about? Do you mean to hurt him?

But the deep voice would not answer. It had fallen silent.

'Sounds like half the farmers around here,' Greg was saying doubtfully.

'Well, there's a couple of other things that may help pick him out,' Mort said. 'He's Southern, for one thing - got an accent on him that sticks out a mile. He wears a big black hat - felt, I think - with a round crown. It looks like the kind of hat Amish men wear. And he's driving a blue Ford station wagon, early or mid-sixties. Mississippi plates.'

'Okay - better. I'll ask around. If he's in the area, somebody'll know where. Outta-state plates stand out this time of year.'

'I know.' Something else crossed his mind suddenly. 'You might start by asking Tom Greenleaf. I was talking to this Shooter yesterday on Lake Drive, about half a mile north of my place. Tom came along in his Scout. He waved at us when he went by, and both of us waved back. Tom must have gotten a damned fine look at him.'

'Okay. I'll probably see him up at Bowie's Store if I drop by for a coffee around ten.'

'He's been there, too,' Mort said. 'I know, because he mentioned the paperback book-rack. It's one of the old-fashioned ones.'

'And if I track him down, what?'

'Nothing,' Mort said. 'Don't do a thing. I'll call you tonight. Tomorrow night I should be back at the place on the lake. I don't know what the hell I can do up in Derry, except scuffle through the ashes.'

'What about Amy?'

'She's got a guy,' Mort said, trying not to sound stiff and probably sounding that way just the same. 'I guess what Amy does next is something the two of them will have to work out.'

'Oh. Sorry.'

'No need to be,' Mort said. He looked over toward the gas islands and saw that the jockey had finished filling his tank and was now

washing the Buick's windshield, a sight he had never expected to witness again in his lifetime.

'Handling this guy yourself ... are you really sure it's what you want to do?'

'Yes, I think so,' Mort said.

He hesitated, suddenly understanding what was very likely going on in Greg's mind: he was thinking that if he found the man in the black hat and Mort got hurt as a result, he, Greg, would be responsible.

'Listen, Greg - you could go along while I talk to the guy, if you wanted to.'

'I might just do that,' Greg said, relieved.

'It's proof he wants,' Mort said, 'so I'll just have to get it for him.'

'But you said you had proof.'

'Yes, but he didn't exactly take my word for it. I guess I'm going to have to shove it in his face to get him to leave me alone.'

'Oh.' Greg thought it over. 'The guy really is crazy, isn't he?'

'Yes indeed.'

'Well, I'll see if I can find him. Give me a call tonight.'

'I will. And thanks, Greg.'

'Don't mention it. A change is as good as a rest.'

'So they say.'

He told Greg goodbye and checked his watch. It was almost seven thirty, and that was much too early to call Herb Creekmore, unless he wanted to pry Herb out of bed, and this wasn't that urgent. A stop

at the Augusta tollbooths would do fine. He walked back to the Buick, replacing his address book and digging out his wallet. He asked the pump jockey how much he owed him.

'That's twenty-two fifty, with the cash discount,' the jockey said, and then looked at Mort shyly. 'I wonder if I could have your autograph, Mr Rainey? I've read all your books.'

That made him think of Amy again, and how Amy had hated the autograph seekers. Mort himself didn't understand them, but saw no harm in them. For her they had seemed to sum up an aspect of their lives which she found increasingly hateful. Toward the end, he had cringed inwardly every time someone asked that question in Amy's presence. Sometimes he could almost sense her thinking: If you love me, why don't you STOP them? As if he could, he thought. His job was to write books people like this guy would want to read ... or so he saw it. When he succeeded at that, they asked for autographs.

He scribbled his name on the back of a credit slip for the pump jockey (who had, after all, actually washed his windshield) and reflected that if Amy had blamed him for doing something they liked - and he thought that, on some level she herself might not be aware of, she had - he supposed he was guilty. But it was only the way he had been built.

Right was right, after all, just as Shooter had said. And fair was fair.

He got back into his car and drove off toward Derry.

17

He paid his seventy-five cents at the Augusta toll plaza, then pulled into the parking area by the telephones on the far side. The day was sunny, chilly, and windy - coming out of the southwest from the direction of Litchfield and running straight and unbroken across the open plain where the turnpike plaza lay, that wind was strong enough to bring tears to Mort's eyes. He relished it, all the same. He could almost feel it blowing the dust out of rooms inside his head which had been closed and shuttered too long.

He used his credit card to call Herb Creekmore in New York - the apartment, not the office. Herb wouldn't actually make it to James and Creekmore, Mort Rainey's literary agency, for another hour or so, but Mort had known Herb long enough to guess that the man had probably been through the shower by now and was drinking a cup of coffee while he waited for the bathroom mirror to unsteam so he could shave.

He was lucky for the second time in a row. Herb answered in a voice from which most of the sleep-fuzz had departed. Am I on a roll this morning, or what? Mort thought, and grinned into the teeth of the cold October wind. Across the four lanes of highway, he could see men stringing snowfence in preparation for the winter which lay just over the calendar's horizon.

'Hi, Herb,' he said. 'I'm calling you from a pay telephone outside the Augusta toll plaza. My divorce is final, my house in Derry burned flat last night, some nut killed my cat, and it's colder than a well-digger's belt buckle - are we having fun yet?'

He hadn't realized how absurd his catalogue of woes sounded until he heard himself reciting them aloud, and he almost laughed. Jesus, it was cold out here, but didn't it feel good! Didn't it feel clean!

'Mort?' Herb said cautiously, like a man who suspects a practical joke.

'At your service,' Mort said.

'What's this about your house?'

'I'll tell you, but only once. Take notes if you have to, because I plan to be back in my car before I freeze solid to this telephone.' He began with John Shooter and John Shooter's accusation. He finished with the conversation he'd had with Amy last night.

Herb, who had spent a fair amount of time as Mort and Amy's guest (and who had been entirely dismayed by their breakup, Mort guessed), expressed his surprise and sorrow at what had happened to the house in Derry. He asked if Mort had any idea who had done it. Mort said he didn't.

'Do you suspect this guy Shooter?' Herb asked. 'I understand the significance of the cat being killed only a short time before you woke up, but -'

'I guess it's technically possible, and I'm not ruling it out completely,' Mort said, 'but I doubt it like hell. Maybe it's only because I can't get my mind around the idea of a man burning down a twenty-four-room house in order to get rid of a magazine. But I think it's mostly because I met him. He really believes I stole his story, Herb. I mean, he has no doubts at all. His attitude when I told him I could show him proof was "Go ahead, motherfucker, make my day." '

'Still ... you called the police, didn't you?'

'Yeah, I made a call this morning,' Mort said, and while this statement was a bit disingenuous, it was not an out-and-out lie. He had made a call this morning. To Greg Carstairs. But if he told Herb Creekmore, whom he could visualize sitting in the living room of his New York apartment in a pair of natty tweed pants and a strap-style tee-shirt, that he intended to handle this himself, with only Greg to lend a hand, he doubted if Herb would understand. Herb was a good friend, but he was something of a stereotype: Civilized Man, late-twentieth-century model, urban and urbane. He was the sort of man

who believed in counselling. The sort of man who believed in meditation and mediation. The sort of man who believed in discussion when reason was present, and the immediate delegation of the problem to Persons in Authority when it was absent. To Herb, the concept that sometimes a man has got to do what a man has got to do was one which had its place ... but its place was in movies starring Sylvester Stallone.

'Well, that's good.' Herb sounded relieved. 'You've got enough on your plate without worrying about some psycho from Mississippi. If they find him, what will you do? Have him charged with harassment?'

'I'd rather convince him to take his persecution act and put it on the road,' Mort said. His feeling of cheery optimism, so unwarranted but indubitably real, persisted. He supposed he would crash soon enough, but for the time being, he couldn't stop grinning. So he wiped his leaking nose with the cuff of his coat and went right on doing it. He had forgotten how good it could feel to have a grin pasted onto your kisser.

'How will you do that?'

'With your help, I hope. You've got files of my stuff, right?'

'Right, but - '

'Well, I need you to pull the June, 1980, issue of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. That's the one with "Sowing Season" in it. I can't very well pull mine because of the fire, so - '

'I don't have it,' Herb said mildly.

'You don't?' Mort blinked. This was one thing he hadn't expected.

'Why not?'

'Because 1980 was two years before I came on board as your agent. I have at least one copy of everything I sold for you, but that's one of

the stories you sold yourself.'

'Oh, shit!' In his mind's eye, Mort could see the acknowledgment for 'Sowing Season' in Everybody Drops the Dime. Most of the other acknowledgments contained the line, 'Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, James and Creekmore.' The one for 'Sowing Season' (and two or three other stories in the collection) read only, 'Reprinted by permission of the author.'

'Sorry,' Herb said.

'Of course I sent it in myself - I remember writing the query letter before I submitted. It's just that it seems like you've been my agent forever.' He laughed a little then and added, 'No offense.'

'None taken,' Herb said. 'Do you want me to make a call to EQMM? They must have back issues.'

'Would you?' Mort asked gratefully. 'That'd be great.'

'I'll do it first thing. Only -' Herb paused.

'Only what?'

'Promise me you're not planning to confront this guy on your own once you have a copy of the printed story in hand.'

'I promise,' Mort agreed promptly. He was being disingenuous again, but what the hell - he had asked Greg to come along when he did it, and Greg had agreed, so he wouldn't be alone. And Herb Creekmore was his literary agent, after all, not his father. How he handled his personal problems wasn't really Herb's concern.

'Okay,' Herb said. 'I'll take care of it. Call me from Derry, Mort - maybe it isn't as bad as it seems.'

'I'd like to believe that.'

'But you don't?'

'Afraid not.'

'Okay.' Herb sighed. Then, diffidently, he added: 'Is it okay to ask you to give Amy my best?'

'It is, and I will.'

'Good. You go on and get out of the wind, Mort. I can hear it shrieking in the receiver. You must be freezing.'

'Getting there. Thanks again, Herb.'

He hung up and looked thoughtfully at the telephone for a moment. He'd forgotten that the Buick needed gas, which was minor, but he'd also forgotten that Herb Creekmore hadn't been his agent until 1982, and that wasn't so minor. Too much pressure, he supposed. It made a man wonder what else he might have forgotten.

The voice in his mind, not the midbrain voice but the one from the deep ranges. spoke up suddenly: What about stealing the story in the first place? Maybe you forgot that.

He snorted a laugh as he hurried back to his car. He had never been to Mississippi in his life, and even now, stuck in a writer's block as he was. he was a long way from stooping to plagiarism. He slid behind the wheel and started the engine, reflecting that a person's mind certainly got up to some weird shit every now and again.

18

Mort didn't believe that people - even those who tried to be fairly honest with themselves - knew when some things were over. He believed they often went on believing, or trying to believe, even when the handwriting was not only on the wall but writ in letters large enough to read a hundred yards away without a spyglass. If it was something you really cared about and felt that you needed, it was easy to cheat, easy to confuse your life with TV and convince yourself that what felt so wrong would eventually come right ... probably after the next commercial break. He supposed that, without its great capacity for self-deception, the human race would be even crazier than it already was.

But sometimes the truth crashed through, and if you had consciously tried to think or dream your way around that truth, the results could be devastating. It was like being there when a tidal wave roared not over but straight through a dike which had been set in its way, smashing it and you flat.

Mort Rainey experienced one of these cataclysmic epiphanies after the representatives of the police and fire departments had gone and he and Amy and Ted Milner were left alone to walk slowly around the smoking ruin of the green Victorian house which had stood at 92 Kansas Street for one hundred and thirty-six years. It was while they were making that mournful inspection tour that he understood that his marriage to the former Amy Dowd of Portland, Maine, was over. It was no 'period of marital stress.' It was no 'trial separation.' It was not going to be one of those cases you heard of from time to time where both parties repented their decision and remarried. It was over. Their lives together were history. Even the house where they had shared so many good times was nothing but evilly smouldering beams tumbled into the cellar-hole like the teeth of a giant.

Their meeting at Marchman's, the little coffee shop on Witcham Street, had gone well enough. Amy had hugged him and he had

hugged her back, but when he tried to kiss her mouth, she turned her head deftly aside so that the lips landed on her cheek instead. Kiss-kiss, as they said at the office parties. So good to see you, darling.

Ted Milner, blow-dried hair perfectly in place this morning and nary an Alfalfa corkscrew in sight, sat at the table in the corner, watching them. He was holding the pipe which Mort had seen clenched in his teeth at various parties over the last three years or so. Mort was convinced the pipe was an affectation, a little prop employed for the sole purpose of making its owner look older than he was. And how old was that? Mort wasn't sure, but Amy was thirty-six, and he thought Ted, in his impeccable stone-washed jeans and open-throated J. Press shirt, had to be at least four years younger than that, possibly more. He wondered if Amy knew she could be in for trouble ten years down the line - maybe even five - and then reflected it would take a better man than he was to suggest it to her.

He asked if there was anything new. Amy said there wasn't. Then Ted took over, speaking with a faintly Southern accent which was a good deal softer than John Shooter's nasal burr. He told Mort the fire chief and a lieutenant from the Derry Police Department would meet them at what Ted called 'the site.' They wanted to ask Mort a few questions. Mort said that was fine. Ted asked if he'd like a cup of coffee - they had time. Mort said that would also be fine. Ted asked how he had been. Mort used the word fine again. Each time it came out of his mouth it felt a little more threadbare. Amy watched the exchange between them with some apprehension, and Mort could understand that. On the day he had discovered the two of them in bed together, he had told Ted he would kill him. In fact, he might have said something about killing them both. His memory of the event was quite foggy. He suspected theirs might be rather foggy, too. He didn't know about the other two corners of the triangle, but he himself found that fogger not only understandable but merciful.

They had coffee. Amy asked him about 'John Shooter.' Mort said he thought that situation was pretty much under control. He did not

mention cats or notes or magazines. And after awhile, they left Marchman's and went to 92 Kansas Street, which had once been a house instead of a site.

The fire chief and police detective were there as promised, and there were questions, also as promised. Most of the questions were about any people who might dislike him enough to have tossed a Texaco cocktail into his study. If Mort had been on his own, he would have left Shooter's name out of it entirely, but of course Amy would bring it up if he didn't, so he recounted the initial encounter just as it had happened.

The fire chief, Wickersham, said: 'The guy was pretty angry?'

'Yes.'

'Angry enough to have driven to Derry and torched your house?' the police detective, Bradley, asked.

He was almost positive Shooter hadn't done it, but he didn't want to delve into his brief dealings with Shooter any more deeply. It would mean telling them what Shooter had done to Bump, for one thing. That would upset Amy; it would upset her a great deal ... and it would open up a can of worms he would prefer to leave closed. It was time, Mort reckoned, to be disingenuous again.

'He might have been at first. But after I discovered the two stories really were alike, I looked up the original date of publication on mine.'

'His had never been published?' Bradley asked.

'No, I'm sure it hadn't been. Then, yesterday, he showed up again. I asked him when he'd written his story, hoping he'd mention a date that was later than the one I had. Do you understand?'

Detective Bradley nodded. 'You were hoping to prove you scooped him.'

'Right. "Sowing Season" was in a book of short stories I published in 1983, but it was originally published in 1980. I was hoping the guy would feel safe picking a date only a year or two before 1983. I got lucky. He said he'd written it in 1982. So you see, I had him.'

He hoped it would end there, but Wickersham, the fire chief, pursued it. 'You see and we see, Mr Rainey, but did he see?'

Mort sighed inwardly. He supposed he had known that you could only be disingenuous for so long - if things went on long enough, they almost always progressed to a point where you had to either tell the truth or carve an outright lie. And here he was, at that point. But whose business was it? Theirs or his? His. Right. And he meant to see it stayed that way.

'Yes,' he told them, 'he saw.'

'What did he do?' Ted asked. Mort looked at him with mild annoyance. Ted glanced away, looking as if he wished he had his pipe to play with. The pipe was in the car. The J. Press shirt had no pocket to carry it in.

'He went away,' Mort said. His irritation with Ted, who had absolutely no business sticking his oar in, made it easier to lie. The fact that he was lying to Ted seemed to make it more all right, too. 'He muttered some bullshit about what an incredible coincidence it all was, then jumped into his car like his hair was on fire and his ass was catching, and took off.'

'Happen to notice the make of the car and the license plate, Mr Rainey?' Bradley asked. He had taken out a pad and a ballpoint pen.

'It was a Ford,' Mort said. 'I'm sorry, but I can't help you with the plate. It wasn't a Maine plate, but other than that ...' He shrugged and tried to look apologetic. Inside, he felt increasingly uncomfortable with the way this was going. It had seemed okay when he was just being cute, skirting around any outright lies - it had seemed a way of sparing Amy the pain of knowing that the man had

broken Bump's neck and then skewered him with a screwdriver. But now he had put himself in a position where he had told different stories to different people. If they got together and did a comparison, he wouldn't look so hot. Explaining his reasons for the lies might be sticky. He supposed that such comparisons were pretty unlikely, as long as Amy didn't talk to either Greg Carstairs or Herb Creekmore, but suppose there was a hassle with Shooter when he and Greg caught up to him and shoved the June, 1980, issue of EQMM in Shooter's face?

Never mind, he told himself, we'll burn that bridge when we come to it, big guy. At this thought, he experienced a brief return of the high spirits he'd felt while talking to Herb at the toll plaza, and almost cackled aloud. He held it in. They would wonder why he was laughing if he did something like that, and he supposed they would be right to wonder.

'I think Shooter must be bound for

(Mississippi.)

' - for wherever he came from by now,' he finished, with hardly a break.

'I imagine you're right,' Lieutenant Bradley said, 'but I'm inclined to pursue this, Mr Rainey. You might have convinced the guy he was wrong, but that doesn't mean he left your place feeling mellow. It's possible that he drove up here in a rage and torched your house just because he was pissed off -pardon me, Mrs Rainey.'

Amy offered a crooked little smile and waved the apology away.

'Don't you think that's possible?'

No, Mort thought, I don't. If he'd decided to torch the house, I think he would have killed Bump before he left for Derry, just in case I woke up before he got back. In that case, the blood would have been dry and Bump would have been stiff when I found him. That isn't the

way it happened ... but I can't say so. Not even if I wanted to. They'd wonder why I held back the stuff about Bump as long as I did, for one thing. They'd probably think I've got a few loose screws.

'I guess so,' he said, 'but I met the guy. He didn't strike me as the house-burning type.'

'You mean he wasn't a Snopes,' Amy said suddenly.

Mort looked at her, startled - then smiled. 'That's right,' he said. 'A Southerner, but not a Snopes.'

'Meaning what?' Bradley asked, a little warily.

'An old joke, Lieutenant,' Amy said. 'The Snopeses were characters in some novels by William Faulkner. They got their start in business burning barns.'

'Oh,' Bradley said blankly.

Wickersham said: 'There is no house-burning type, Mr Rainey. They come in all shapes and sizes. Believe me.'

'Well - '

'Give me a little more on the car, if you can,' Bradley said. He poised a pencil over his notebook. 'I want to make the State Police aware of this guy.'

Mort suddenly decided he was going to lie some more. Quite a lot more, actually.

'Well, it was a sedan. I can tell you that much for sure.'

'Uh-huh. Ford sedan. Year?'

'Somewhere in the seventies, I guess,' Mort said. He was fairly sure Shooter's station wagon had actually been built around the time a fellow named Oswald had elected Lyndon Johnson President of the

United States. He paused, then added: 'The plate was a light color. It could have been Florida. I won't swear to it, but it could have been.'

'Uh-huh. And the man himself?'

'Average height. Blonde hair. Eyeglasses. The round wire-framed ones John Lennon used to wear. That's really all I re - '

'Didn't you say he was wearing a hat?' Amy asked suddenly.

Mort felt his teeth come together with a click. 'Yes,' he said pleasantly. 'That's right, I forgot. Dark gray or black. Except it was more of a cap. With a bill, you know.'

'Okay.' Bradley snapped his book closed. 'It's a start.'

'Couldn't this have been a simple case of vandalism, arson for kicks?' Mort asked. 'In novels, everything has a connection, but my experience has been that in real life, things sometimes just happen.'

'It could have been,' Wickersham agreed, 'but it doesn't hurt to check out the obvious connections.' He dropped Mort a solemn little wink and said, 'Sometimes life imitates art, you know.'

'Do you need anything else?' Ted asked them, and put an arm around Amy's shoulders.

Wickersham and Bradley exchanged a glance and then Bradley shook his head. 'I don't think so, at least not at the present.'

'I only ask because Amy and Mort will have to put in some time with the insurance agent,' Ted said. 'Probably an investigator from the parent company, as well.'

Mort found the man's Southern accent more and more irritating. He suspected that Ted came from a part of the South several states north of Faulkner country, but it was still a coincidence he could have done without.

The officials shook hands with Amy and Mort, expressed their sympathy, told them to get in touch if anything else occurred to either of them, and then took themselves off, leaving the three of them to take another turn around the house.

'I'm sorry about all of this, Amy,' Mort said suddenly. She was walking between them, and looked over at him, apparently startled by something she had heard in his voice. Simple sincerity, maybe. 'All of it. Really sorry.'

'So am I,' she said softly, and touched his hand.

'Well, Teddy makes three,' Ted said with solemn heartiness. She turned back to him, and in that moment Mort could have cheerfully strangled the man until his eyes popped out jittering at the ends of their optic strings.

They were walking up the west side of the house toward the street now. Over here had been the deep corner where his study had met the house, and not far away was Amy's flower-garden. All the flowers were dead now, and Mort reflected that was probably just as well. The fire had been hot enough to crisp what grass had remained green in a twelve-foot border all around the ruin. If the flowers had been in bloom, it would have crisped them, as well, and that would have been just too sad. It would have been

Mort stopped suddenly. He was remembering the stories. The story. You could call it 'Sowing Season' or you could call it 'Secret Window, Secret Garden,' but they were the same thing once you took the geegaws off and looked underneath. He looked up. There was nothing to see but blue sky, at least now, but before last night's fire, there would have been a window right where he was looking. It was the window in the little room next to the laundry. The little room that was Amy's office. It was where she went to write checks, to write in her daily journal, to make the telephone calls that needed to be made ... the room where, he suspected, Amy had several years ago started a novel. And, when it died, it was the room where she had buried it decently and quietly in a desk drawer. The desk had been

by the window. Amy had liked to go there in the mornings. She could start the wash in the next room and then do paperwork while she waited for the buzzer which proclaimed it was time to strip the washer and feed the drier. The room was well away from the main house and she liked the quiet, she said. The quiet and the clear, sane morning light. She liked to look out the window every now and then, at her flowers growing in the deep corner formed by the house and the study ell. And he heard her saying, It's the best room in the house, at least for me, because hardly anybody ever goes there but me. It's got a secret window, and it looks down on a secret garden.

'Mort?' Amy was saying now, and for a moment Mort took no notice, confusing her real voice with her voice in his mind, which was the voice of memory. But was it a true memory or a false one? That was the real question, wasn't it? It seemed like a true memory, but he had been under a great deal of stress even before Shooter, and Bump, and the fire. Wasn't it at least possible that he was having a ... well, a recollective hallucination? That he was trying to make his own past with Amy in some way conform to that goddam story where a man had gone crazy and killed his wife?

Jesus, I hope not. I hope not, because if I am, that's too close to nervousbreakdown territory for comfort.

'Mort, are you okay?' Amy asked. She plucked fretfully at his sleeve, at least temporarily breaking his trance.

'Yes,' he said, and then, abruptly: 'No. To tell you the truth, I'm feeling a little sick.'

'Breakfast, maybe,' Ted said.

Amy gave him a look that made Mort feel a bit better. It was not a very friendly look. 'It isn't breakfast,' she said a little indignantly. She swept her arm at the blackened ruins. 'It's this. Let's get out of here.'

'The insurance people are due at noon,' Ted said.

'Well, that's more than an hour from now. Let's go to your place, Ted. I don't feel so hot myself. I'd like to sit down.'

'All right.' Ted spoke in a slightly nettled no-need-to-shout tone which also did Mort's heart good. And although he would have said at breakfast that morning that Ted Milner's place was the last one on earth he wanted to go, he accompanied them without protest.

19

They were all quiet on the ride across town to the split-level on the east side where Ted hung his hat. Mort didn't know what Amy and Ted were thinking about, although the house for Amy and whether or not they'd be on time to meet the wallahs from the insurance company for Ted would probably be a couple of good guesses, but he knew what he was thinking about. He was trying to decide if he was going crazy or not. Is it real, or is it Memorex?

He decided finally that Amy really had said that about her office next to the laundry room - it was not a false memory. Had she said it before 1982, when 'John Shooter' claimed to have written a story called 'Secret Window' Secret Garden'? He didn't know. No matter how earnestly he coned his confused and aching brain, what kept coming back was a single curt message: answer inconclusive. But if she had said it, no matter when, couldn't the title of Shooter's story still be simple coincidence? Maybe, but the coincidences were piling up, weren't they? He had decided the fire was, must be, a coincidence. But the memory which Amy's garden with its crop of dead flowers had prodded forth ... well, it was getting harder and harder to believe all of this wasn't tied together in some strange, possibly even supernatural fashion.

And in his own way, hadn't 'Shooter' himself been just as confused? How did you get it? he had asked, his voice had been fierce with rage and puzzlement. That's what I really want to know. How in hell did a big-money scribbling asshole like you get down to a little shitsplat town in Mississippi and steal my goddam story? At the time, Mort had thought either that it was another sign of the man's madness or that the guy was one hell of a good actor. Now, in Ted's car, it occurred to him for the first time that it was exactly the way he himself would have reacted, had the circumstances been reversed.

As, in a way, they had been. The one place where the two stories differed completely was in the matter of the title. They both fit, but

now Mort found that he had a question to ask Shooter which was very similar to the one Shooter had already asked him: How did you happen by that title, Mr Shooter? That's what I really want to know. How did you happen to know that, twelve hundred miles away from your shitsplat town in Mississippi . ' the wife of a writer you claim you never heard of before this year had her own secret window, looking down on her own secret garden?

Well, there was only one way to find out, of course. When Greg ran Shooter down Mort would have to ask him.

20

Mort passed on the cup of coffee Ted offered and asked if he had a Coke or a Pepsi. Ted did, and after Mort had drunk it, his stomach settled. He had expected that just being here, here where Ted and Amy played house now that they no longer had to bother with the cheap little town-line motels, would make him angry and restless. It didn't. It was just a house, one where every room seemed to proclaim that the owner was a Swinging Young Bachelor Who Was Making It. Mort found that he could deal with that quite easily, although it made him feel a little nervous for Amy all over again. He thought of her little office with its clear, sane light and the soporific drone of the drier coming through the wall, her little office with its secret window, the only one in the whole place which looked down into the tight little angle of space formed by the house and the ell, and thought how much she had belonged there and how little she seemed to belong here. But that was something she would have to deal with herself, and he thought, after a few minutes in this other house which was not a dreaded den of iniquity at all but only a house, that he could live with that ... that he could even be content with it.

She asked him if he would be staying in Derry overnight.

'Uh-uh. I'll be going back as soon as we finish with the insurance adjustors. If something else pops, they can get in touch with me ... or you can.'

He smiled at her. She smiled back and touched his hand briefly. Ted didn't like it. He frowned out the window and fingered his pipe.

21

They were on time for their meeting with the representatives of the insurance company, which undoubtedly relieved Ted Milner's mind. Mort was not particularly crazy about having Ted in attendance; it had never been Ted's house, after all, not even after the divorce. Still, it seemed to ease Amy's mind to have him there, and so Mort left it alone.

Don Strick, the Consolidated Assurance Company agent with whom they had done business, conducted the meeting at his office, where they went after another brief tour of 'the site.' At the office, they met a man named Fred Evans, a Consolidated field investigator specializing in arson. The reason Evans hadn't been with Wickersham and Bradley that morning or at 'the site' when Strick met them there at noon became obvious very quickly: he had spent most of the previous night poking through the ruins with a ten-cell flashlight and a Polaroid camera. He had gone back to his motel room, he said, to catch a few winks before meeting the Rainey's.

Mort liked Evans very much. He seemed to really care about the loss he and Amy had suffered, while everyone else, including Mr Teddy Makes Three, seemed to have only mouthed the traditional words of sympathy before going on to whatever they considered the business at hand (and in Ted Milner's case, Mort thought, the business at hand was getting him out of Derry and back to Tashmore Lake as soon as possible). Fred Evans did not refer to 92 Kansas Street as 'the site.' He referred to it as 'the house.'

His questions, while essentially the same as those asked by Wickersham and Bradley, were gentler, more detailed, and more probing. Although he'd had four hours' sleep at most, his eyes were bright, his speech quick and clear. After speaking with him for twenty minutes, Mort decided that he would deal with a company other than Consolidated Assurance if he ever decided to burn down a house for the insurance money. Or wait until this man retired.

When he had finished his questions, Evans smiled at them. 'You've been very helpful, and I want to thank you again, both for your thoughtful answers and for your kind treatment of me. In a lot of cases, people's feathers get ruffled the second they hear the words "insurance investigator." They're already upset, understandably so, and quite often they take the presence of an investigator on the scene as an accusation that they torched their own property.'

'Given the circumstances, I don't think we could have asked for better treatment,' Amy said, and Ted Milner nodded so violently that his head might have been on a string - one controlled by a puppeteer with a bad case of nerves.

'This next part is hard,' Evans said. He nodded to Strick, who opened a desk drawer and produced a clipboard with a computer printout on it. 'When an investigator ascertains that a fire was as serious as this one clearly was, we have to show the clients a list of claimed insurable property. You look it over, then sign an affidavit swearing that the items listed still belong to you, and that they were still in the house when the fire occurred. You should put a check mark beside any item or items you've sold since your last insurance overhaul with Mr Strick here, and any insured property which was not in the house at the time of the fire.' Evans put a fist to his lips and cleared his throat before going on. 'I'm told that there has been a separation of residence recently, so that last bit may be particularly important.'

'We're divorced,' Mort said bluntly. 'I'm living in our place on Tashmore Lake. We only used it during the summers, but it's got a furnace and is livable during the cold months. Unfortunately, I hadn't got around to moving the bulk of my things out of the house up here. I'd been putting it off.'

Don Strick nodded sympathetically. Ted crossed his legs, fiddled with his pipe, and generally gave the impression of a man who is trying not to look as deeply bored as he is.

'Do the best you can with the list,' Evans said. He took the clipboard from Strick and handed it across the desk to Amy. 'This can be a bit unpleasant - it's a little like a treasure hunt in reverse.'

Ted had put his pipe down and was craning at the list, his boredom gone' at least for the time being; his eyes were as avid as those of any bystander gleaning the aftermath of a bad accident. Amy saw him looking and obligingly tipped the form his way. Mort, who was sitting on the other side of her, tipped it back the other way.

'Do you mind?' he asked Ted. He was angry, really angry, and they all heard it in his voice.

'Mort - ' Amy said.

'I'm not going to make a big deal of this,' Mort said to her, 'but this was our stuff, Amy. Ours.'

'I hardly think - 'Ted began indignantly.

'No, he's perfectly right, Mr Milner,' Fred Evans said with a mildness Mort felt might have been deceptive. 'The law says you have no right to be looking at the listed items at all. We wink at something like that if nobody minds ... but I think Mr Rainey does.'

'You're damned tooting Mr Rainey does,' Mort said. His hands were tightly clenched in his lap; he could feel his fingernails biting smile-shapes into the soft meat of his palms.

Amy switched her look of unhappy appeal from Mort to Ted. Mort expected Ted to huff and puff and try to blow somebody's house down, but Ted did not. Mort supposed it was a measure of his own hostile feeling toward the man that he'd made such an assumption; he didn't know Ted very well (although he did know he looked a bit like Alfalfa when you woke him up suddenly in a no-tell motel), but he knew Amy. If Ted had been a blowhard, she would have left him already.

Smiling a little, speaking to her and ignoring Mort and the others completely, Ted said: 'Would it help matters if I took a walk around the block?'

Mort tried to restrain himself and couldn't quite do it. 'Why not make it two?' he asked Ted with bogus amiability.

Amy shot him a narrow, dark stare, then looked back at Ted. 'Would you? This might be a little easier ...'

'Sure,' he said. He kissed her high on her cheekbone, and Mort had another dolorous revelation: the man cared for her. He might not always care for her, but right now he did. Mort realized he had come halfway to thinking Amy was just a toy that had captivated Ted for a little while, a toy of which he would tire soon enough. But that didn't jibe with what he knew of Amy, either. She had better instincts about people than that ... and more respect for herself.

Ted got up and left. Amy looked at Mort reproachfully. 'Are you satisfied?'

'I suppose,' he said. 'Look, Amy - I probably didn't handle that as well as I could have, but my motives are honorable enough. We shared a lot over the years. I guess this is the last thing, and I think it belongs between the two of us. Okay?'

Strick looked uncomfortable. Fred Evans did not; he looked from Mort to Amy and then back to Mort again with the bright interest of a man watching a really good tennis match.

'Okay,' Amy said in a low voice. He touched her hand lightly, and she gave him a smile. It was strained, but better than no smile at all, he reckoned.

He pulled his chair closer to hers and they bent over the list, heads close together, like kids studying for a test. It didn't take Mort long to understand why Evans had warned them. He thought he had grasped the size of the loss. He had been wrong.

Looking at the columns of cold computer type, Mort thought he could not have been more dismayed if someone had taken everything in the house at 92 Kansas Street and strewn it along the block for the whole world to stare at. He couldn't believe all the things he had forgotten, all the things that were gone.

Seven major appliances. Four TVs, one with a videotape editing hook-up. The Spode china, and the authentic Early American furniture which Amy had bought a piece at a time. The value of the antique armoire which had stood in their bedroom was listed at \$14,000. They had not been serious art-collectors, but they had been appreciators, and they had lost twelve pieces of original art. Their value was listed at \$22,000, but Mort didn't care about the dollar value; he was thinking about the N. C. Wyeth fine-drawing of two boys putting to sea in a small boat. It was raining in the picture; the boys were wearing slickers and galoshes and big grins. Mort had loved that picture, and now it was gone. The Waterford glassware. The sports equipment stored in the garage - skis, ten-speed bikes, and the Old Town canoe. Amy's three furs were listed. He saw her make tiny check marks beside the beaver and the mink - still in storage, apparently - but she passed the short fox jacket without checking it off. It had been hanging in the closet, warm and stylish outerware for fall, when the fire happened. He remembered giving her that coat for her birthday six or seven years ago. Gone now. His Celestron telescope. Gone. The big puzzle quilt Amy's mother had given them when they were married. Amy's mother was dead and the quilt was now so much ash in the wind.

The worst, at least for Mort, was halfway down the second column, and again it wasn't the dollar value that hurt. 124 BOTS. WINE, the item read. VALUE \$4,900. Wine was something they had both liked. They weren't rabid about it, but they had built the little wine room in the cellar together, stocked it together, and had drunk the occasional bottle together.

'Even the wine,' he said to Evans. 'Even that.'

Evans gave him an odd look that Mort couldn't interpret, then nodded. 'The wine room itself didn't burn, because you had very little fuel oil in the cellar tank and there was no explosion. But it got very hot inside, and most of the bottles burst. The few that didn't ... Well, I don't know much about wine, but I doubt if it would be good to drink. Perhaps I'm wrong.'

'You're not,' Amy said. A single tear rolled down her cheek and she wiped it absently away.

Evans offered her his handkerchief. She shook her head and bent over the fist with Mort again.

Ten minutes later it was finished. They signed on the correct lines and Strick witnessed their signatures. Ted Milner showed up only instants later, as if he had been watching the whole thing on some private viewscreen.

'Is there anything else?' Mort asked Evans.

'Not now. There may be. Is your number down in Tashmore unlisted, Mr Rainey?'

'Yes.' He wrote it down for Evans. 'Please get in touch if I can help.'

'I will.' He rose, hand outstretched. 'This is always a nasty business. I'm sorry you two had to go through it.'

They shook hands all around and left Strick and Evans to write reports. It was well past one, and Ted asked Mort if he'd like to have some lunch with him and Amy. Mort shook his head.

'I want to get back. Do some work and see if I can't forget all this for awhile.' And he felt as if maybe he really could write. That was not surprising. In tough times - up until the divorce, anyway, which seemed to be an exception to the general rule - he had always found it easy to write. Necessary, even. It was good to have those make-believe worlds to fall back on when the real one had hurt you.

He half-expected Amy to ask him to change his mind, but she didn't. 'Drive safe,' she said, and planted a chaste kiss on the corner of his mouth. 'Thanks for coming, and for being so ... so reasonable about everything.'

'Can I do anything for you, Amy?'

She shook her head, smiling a little, and took Ted's hand. If he had been looking for a message, this one was much too clear to miss.

They walked slowly toward Mort's Buick.

'You keepin well enough down there?' Ted asked. 'Anything you need?'

For the third time he was struck by the man's Southern accent - just one more coincidence.

'Can't think of anything,' he said, opening the Buick's door and fishing the car keys out of his pocket. 'Where do you come from originally, Ted? You or Amy must have told me sometime, but I'll be damned if I can remember. Was it Mississippi?'

Ted laughed heartily. 'A long way from there, Mort. I grew up in Tennessee. A little town called Shooter's Knob, Tennessee.'

22

Mort drove back to Tashmore Lake with his hands clamped to the steering wheel, his spine as straight as a ruler, and his eyes fixed firmly on the road. He played the radio loud and concentrated ferociously on the music each time he sensed telltale signs of mental activity behind the center of his forehead. Before he had made forty miles, he felt a pressing sensation in his bladder. He welcomed this development and did not even consider stopping at a wayside comfort-station. The need to take a whizz was another excellent distraction.

He arrived at the house around four-thirty and parked the Buick in its accustomed place around the side of the house. Eric Clapton was throttled in the middle of a full-tilt-boogie guitar solo when Mort shut off the motor, and quiet crashed down like a load of stones encased in foam rubber. There wasn't a single boat on the lake, not a single bug in the grass.

Pissing and thinking have a lot in common, he thought, climbing out of the car and unzipping his fly. You can put them both off... but not forever.

Mort Rainey stood there urinating and thought about secret windows and secret gardens; he thought about those who might own the latter and those who might look through the former. He thought about the fact that the magazine he needed to prove a certain fellow was either a lunatic or a con man had just happened to bum up on the very evening he had tried to get his hands on it. He thought about the fact that his ex-wife's lover, a man he cordially detested, had come from a town called Shooter's Knob and that Shooter happened to be the pseudonym of the aforementioned loony-or-con-man who had come into Mort Rainey's life at the exact time when the aforementioned Mort Rainey was beginning to grasp his divorce not just as an academic concept but as a simple fact of his life forever after. He even thought about the fact that 'John Shooter' claimed to have

discovered Mort Rainey's act of plagiarism at about the same time Mort Rainey had separated from his wife.

Question: Were all of these things coincidences?

Answer: It was technically possible.

Question: Did he believe all these things were coincidences?

Answer: No.

Question: Did he believe he was going mad, then?

'The answer is no,' Mort said. 'He does not. At least not yet.' He zipped up his fly and went back around the corner to the door.

23

He found his housekey, started to put it in the lock, and then pulled it out again. His hand went to the doorknob instead, and as his fingers closed over it, he felt a clear certainty that it would rotate easily. Shooter had been here ... had been, or was still. And he wouldn't have needed to force entry, either. Nope. Not this sucker. Mort kept a spare key to the Tashmore Lake house in an old soap-dish on a high shelf in the toolshed, which was where Shooter had gone to get a screwdriver in a hurry when the time had come to nail poor old Bump to the garbage cabinet. He was in the house now, looking around ... or maybe hiding. He was

The knob refused to move; Mort's fingers simply slid around it. The door was still locked.

'Okay,' Mort said. 'Okay, no big deal.' He even laughed a little as he socked the key home and turned it. Just because the door was locked didn't mean Shooter wasn't in the house. In fact, it made it more likely that he was in the house, when you really stopped to think about it. He could have used the spare key, put it back, then locked the door from the inside to lull his enemy's suspicions. All you had to do to lock it, after all, was to press the button set into the knob. He's trying to psych me out, Mort thought as he stepped in.

The house was full of dusty late-afternoon sunlight and silence. But it did not feel like unoccupied silence.

'You're trying to psych me out, aren't you?' he called. He expected to sound crazy to himself. a lonely, paranoid man addressing the intruder who only exists, after all, in his own imagination. But he didn't sound crazy to himself. He sounded, instead, like a man who has tumbled to at least half the trick. Only getting half a scam wasn't so great, maybe, but half was better than nothing.

He walked into the living room with its cathedral ceiling, its window-wall facing the lake, and, of course, The World-Famous Mort Rainey

Sofa, also known as The Couch of the Comatose Writer. An economical little smile tugged at his cheeks. His balls felt high and tight against the fork of his groin.

'Half a scam's better than none, right, Mr Shooter?' he called.

The words died into dusty silence. He could smell old tobacco smoke in that dust. His eye happened on the battered package of cigarettes he had excavated from the drawer of his desk. It occurred to him that the house had a smell - almost a stink - that was horribly negative: it was an unwoman smell. Then he thought: No. That's a mistake. That's not it. What you smell is Shooter. You smell the man, and you smell his cigarettes. Not yours, his.

He turned slowly around, his head cocked back. A second-floor bedroom looked down on the living room halfway up the cream-colored wall; the opening was lined with dark-brown wooden slats. The slats were supposed to keep the unwary from falling out and splattering themselves all over the living-room floor, but they were also supposed to be decorative. Right then they didn't look particularly decorative to Mort; they looked like the bars of a jail cell. All he could see of what he and Amy had called the guest bedroom was the ceiling and one of the bed's four posts.

'You up there, Mr Shooter?' he yelled.

There was no answer.

'I know you're trying to psych me out!' Now he was beginning to feel just the tiniest bit ridiculous. 'It won't work, though!'

About six years before, they had plugged the big fieldstone fireplace in the living room with a Blackstone jersey stove. A rack of fire-tools stood beside

it. Mort grasped the handle of the ash-shovel, considered it for a moment, then let go of it and took the poker instead. He faced the barred guest-room overlook and held the poker up like a knight

saluting his queen. Then he walked slowly to the stairs and began to climb them. He could feel tension worming its way into his muscles now, but he understood it wasn't Shooter he was afraid of; what he was afraid of was finding nothing.

'I know you're here, and I know you're trying to psych me out! The only thing I don't know is what it's all about, Alfie, and when I find you, you better tell me!'

He paused on the second-floor landing, his heart pumping hard in his chest now. The guest-room door was to his left. The door to the guest bathroom was to the right. And he suddenly understood that Shooter was here, all right, but not in the bedroom. No; that was just a ploy. That was just what Shooter wanted him to believe.

Shooter was in the bathroom.

And, as he stood there on the landing with the poker clutched tightly in his right hand and sweat running out of his hair and down his cheeks, Mort heard him. A faint shuffle-shuffle. He was in there, all right. Standing in the tub, by the sound. He had moved the tiniest bit. Peekaboo, Johnny-boy, I hear you. Are you armed, fuckface?

Mort thought he probably was, but he didn't think it would turn out to be a gun. Mort had an idea that the man's pen name was about as close to firearms as he had ever come. Shooter had looked like the sort of guy who would feel more at home with instruments of a blunter nature. What he had done to Bump seemed to bear this out.

I bet it's a hammer, Mort thought, and wiped sweat off the back of his neck with his free hand. He could feel his eyes pulsing in and out of their sockets in time with his heartbeat. I'm betting it's a hammer from the toolshed.

He had no more thought of this before he saw Shooter, saw him clearly, standing in the bathtub in his black round-crowned hat and his yellow shitkicker workshoes, his lips split over his mail-order dentures in a grin which was really a grimace, sweat trickling down

his own face, running down the deep lines grooved there like water running down a network of galvanized tin gutters, with the hammer from the toolshed raised to shoulder height like a judge's gavel. just standing there in the tub, waiting to bring the hammer down. Next case, bailiff.

I know you, buddy. I got your number. I got it the first time I saw you. And guess what? You picked the wrong writer to fuck with. I think I've been wanting to kill somebody since the middle of May, and you'll do as well as anybody.

He turned his head toward the bedroom door. At the same time, he reached out with his left hand (after drying it on the front of his shirt so his grip wouldn't slip at the crucial moment) and curled it around the bathroom doorknob.

'I know you're in there!' he shouted at the closed bedroom door. If you're under the bed, you better get out! I'm counting to five! If you're not out by the time I get there, I'm coming in ... and I'll come in swinging! You hear me?'

There was no answer ... but, then, he hadn't really expected one. Or wanted one. He tightened his grip on the bathroom doorknob, but would shout the numbers toward the guest-room door. He didn't know if Shooter would hear or sense the difference if he turned his head in the direction of the bathroom, but he thought Shooter might. The man was obviously clever. Hellishly clever.

In the instant before he started counting, he heard another faint movement in the bathroom. He would have missed it, even standing this close, if he hadn't been listening with every bit of concentration he could muster.

'One!'

Christ, he was sweating! Like a pig!

'Two!'

The knob of the bathroom door was like a cold rock in his clenched fist.

‘Thr -‘

He turned the knob of the bathroom door and slammed in, bouncing the door off the wall hard enough to chop through the wallpaper and pop the door’s lower hinge, and there he was, there he was, coming at him with a raised weapon, his teeth bared in a killer’s grin, and his eyes were insane, utterly insane, and Mort brought the poker down in a whistling overhand blow and he had just time enough to realize that Shooter was also swinging a poker, and to realize that Shooter was not wearing his round-crowned black hat, and to realize it wasn’t Shooter at all, to realize it was him, the madman was him, and then the poker shattered the mirror over the washbasin and silver-backed glass sprayed every whichway, twinkling in the gloom, and the medicine cabinet fell into the sink. The bent door swung open like a gaping mouth, spilling bottles of cough syrup and iodine and Listerine.

‘I killed a goddam fucking mirror!’ he shrieked, and was about to sling the poker away when something did move in the tub, behind the corrugated shower door. There was a frightened little squeal. Grinning, Mort slashed sideways with the poker, tearing a jagged gash through the plastic door and knocking it off its tracks. He raised the poker over his shoulder, his eyes glassy and staring, his lips drawn into the grimace he had imagined on Shooter’s face.

Then he lowered the poker slowly. He found he had to use the fingers of his left hand to pry open the fingers of his right so that the poker could fall to the floor.

‘Wee sleekit cowerin’ beastie,’ he said to the fieldmouse scurrying blindly about in the tub. ‘What a panic’s in thy breastie.’ His voice sounded hoarse and flat and strange. It didn’t sound like his own voice at all. It was like listening to himself on tape for the first time.

He turned and walked slowly out of the bathroom past the leaning door with its popped hinge, his shoes gritting on broken mirror glass.

All at once he wanted to go downstairs and lie on the couch and take a nap. All at once he wanted that more than anything else in the world.

24

It was the telephone that woke him up. Twilight had almost become night, and he made his way slowly past the glass-topped coffee table that liked to bite with a weird feeling that time had somehow doubled back on itself. His right arm ached like hell. His back wasn't in much better shape. Exactly how hard had he swung that poker, anyway? How much panic had been driving him? He didn't like to think.

He picked up the telephone, not bothering to guess who it might be. Life has been so dreadfully busy lately, darling, that it might even be the President. 'Hello?'

'How you doin, Mr Rainey?' the voice asked, and Mort recoiled, snatching the telephone away from his ear for a moment as if it were a snake which had tried to bite. He returned it slowly.

'I'm doing fine, Mr Shooter,' he said in a dry, spitless voice. 'How are you doing?'

'I'm-a country fair,' Shooter allowed, speaking in that thick crackerbarrel Southern accent that was somehow as bald and staring as an unpainted barn standing all by itself in the middle of a field. 'But I don't think you're really all that well. Stealing from another man, that don't seem to have ever bothered you none. Being caught up on, though ... that seems to have given you the pure miseries.'

'What are you talking about?'

Shooter sounded faintly amused. 'Well, I heard on the radio news that someone burned down your house. Your other house. And then, when you come back down here, it sounded like you pitched a fit or something once you got into the house. Shouting ... whacking on things ... or maybe it's just that successful writers like you throw tantrums when things don't go the way they expect. Is that it, maybe?'

My God, he was here. He was.

Mort found himself looking out the window as if Shooter still might be out there ... hiding in the bushes, perhaps, while he spoke to Mort on some sort of cordless telephone. Ridiculous, of course.

'The magazine with my story in it is on the way,' he said. 'When it gets here, are you going to leave me alone?'

Shooter still sounded lazily amused. 'There isn't any magazine with that story in it, Mr Rainey. You and me, we know that. Not from 1980, there isn't. How could there be, when my story wasn't there for you to steal until 1982?'

'Goddammit, I did not steal your st-'

'When I heard about your house,' Shooter said, 'I went out and bought an Evening Express. They had a picture of what was left. Wasn't very much. Had a picture of your wife, too.' There was a long, thoughtful pause. Then Shooter said, 'She's purty.' He used the country pronunciation purposely, sarcastically. 'How'd an ugly son of a buck like you luck into such a purty wife, Mr Rainey?'

'We're divorced,' he said. 'I told you that. Maybe she discovered how ugly I was. Why don't we leave Amy out of this? It's between you and me.'

For the second time in two days, he realized he had answered the phone while he was only half awake and nearly defenseless. As a result, Shooter was in almost total control of the conversation. He was leading Mort by the nose, calling the shots.

Hang up, then.

But he couldn't. At least, not yet.

'Between you and me, is it?' Shooter asked. 'Then I don't s'pose you even mentioned me to anyone else.'

'What do you want? Tell me! What in the hell do you want?'

'You want the second reason I came, is that it?'

'Yes!'

'I want you to write me a story,' Shooter said calmly. 'I want you to write a story and put my name on it and then give it to me. You owe me that. Right is right and fair is fair.'

Mort stood in the hallway with the telephone clutched in his aching fist and a vein pulsing in the middle of his forehead. For a few moments his rage was so total that he found himself buried alive inside it and all he was capable of thinking was So THAT'S it! SO THAT'S it! SO THAT'S it! over and over again.

'You there, Mr Rainey?' Shooter asked in his calm, drawling voice.

'The only thing I'll write for you,' Mort said, his own voice slow and syrupy-thick with rage, 'is your death-warrant, if you don't leave me alone.'

'You talk big, pilgrim,' Shooter said in the patient voice of a man explaining a simple problem to a stupid child, 'because you know I can't put no hurtin on you. If you had stolen my dog or my car, I could take your dog or car. I could do that just as easy as I broke your cat's neck. If you tried to stop me, I could put a hurtin on you and take it anyway. But this is different. The goods I want are inside your head. You got the goods locked up like they were inside a safe. Only I can't just blow off the door and torch open the back. I have to find me the combination. Don't I?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Mort said, 'but the day you get a story out of me will be the day the Statue of Liberty wears a diaper. Pilgrim.'

Shooter said meditatively, 'I'd leave her out of it if I could, but I'm startin to think you ain't going to leave me that option.'

All the spit in Mort's mouth was suddenly gone, leaving it dry and glassy and hot. 'What ... what do you -'

'Do you want to wake up from one of your stupid naps and find Amy nailed to your garbage bin?' Shooter asked. 'Or turn on the radio some morning and hear she came off second best in a match with the chainsaw you keep in your garage up there? Or did the garage burn, too?'

'Watch what you say,' Mort whispered. His wide eyes began to prickle with tears of rage and fear.

'You still have two days to think about it. I'd think about it real close, Mr Rainey. I mean I'd really hunker down over her, if I were you. And I don't think I'd talk about this to anyone else. That'd be like standing out in a thunderstorm and tempting the lightning. Divorced or not, I have got an idea you still have some feeling for that lady. It's time for you to grow up a little. You can't get away with it. Don't you realize that yet? I know what you did, and I ain't quitting until I get what's mine.'

'You're crazy!' Mort screamed.

'Good night, Mr Rainey,' Shooter said, and hung up.

25

Mort stood there for a moment, the handset sinking away from his ear. Then he scooped up the bottom half of the Princess-style telephone. He was on the verge of throwing the whole combination against the wall before he was able to get hold of himself. He set it down again and took a dozen deep breaths - enough to make his head feel swimmy and light. Then he dialled Herb Creekmore's home telephone.

Herb's lady-friend, Delores, picked it up on the second ring and called Herb to the telephone.

'Hi, Mort,' Herb said. 'What's the story on the house?' His voice moved away from the telephone's mouthpiece a little. 'Delores, will you move that skillet to the back burner?'

Suppertime in New York, Mort thought, and he wants me to know it. Well, what the hell. A maniac has just threatened to turn my wife into veal cutlets, but life has to go on, right?

'The house is gone,' Mort said. 'The insurance will cover the loss.' He paused. 'The monetary loss, anyway.'

'I'm sorry,' Herb said. 'Can I do anything?'

'Well, not about the house,' Mort said, 'but thanks for offering. About the story, though -'

'What story is that, Mort?'

He felt his hand tightening down on the telephone's handset again and forced himself to loosen up. He doesn't know what the situation up here is. You have to remember that.

'The one my nutty friend is kicking sand about,' he said, trying to maintain a tone which was light and mostly unconcerned. 'Sowing

Season. Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine?'

'Oh, that!' Herb said.

Mort felt a jolt of fear. 'You didn't forget to call, did you?'

'No - I called,' Herb reassured him. 'I just forgot all about it for a minute. You losing your house and all.'

'Well? What did they say?'

'Don't worry about a thing. They're going to send a Xerox over to me by messenger tomorrow, and I'll send it right up to you by Federal Express. You'll have it by ten o'clock day after tomorrow.'

For a moment it seemed that all of his problems were solved, and he started to relax. Then he thought of the way Shooter's eyes had blazed. The way he had brought his face down until his forehead and Mort's were almost touching. He thought of the dry smell of cinnamon on Shooter's breath as he said, 'You lie.'

A Xerox? He was by no means sure that Shooter would accept an original copy ... but a Xerox?

'No,' he said slowly. 'That's no good, Herb. No Xerox, no phone-call from the editor. It has to be an original copy of the magazine.'

'Well, that's a little tougher. They have their editorial offices in Manhattan, of course, but they store copies at their subscription offices in Pennsylvania. They only keep about five copies of each issue - it's really all they can afford to keep, when you consider that EQMM has been publishing since 1941. They really aren't crazy about lending them out.'

'Come on, Herb! You can find those magazines at yard sales and in half the small-town libraries in America!'

'But never a complete run.' Herb paused. 'Not even a phone-call will do, huh? Are you telling me this guy is so paranoid he'd think he was

talking to one of your thousands of stooges?’

From the background: ‘Do you want me to pour the wine, Herb?’

Herb spoke again with his mouth away from the phone. ‘Hold on a couple of minutes, Dee.’

‘I’m holding up your dinner,’ Mort said. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘It goes with the territory. Listen, Mort, be straight with me - is this guy as crazy as he sounds? Is he dangerous?’

I don’t think I’d talk about this to anyone else. That’d be like standing out in a thunderstorm and tempting the lightning.

‘I don’t think so,’ he said, ‘but I want him off my back, Herb.’ He hesitated, searching for the right tone. ‘I’ve spent the last half-year or so walking through a shitstorm. This might be one thing I can do something about. I just want the doofus off my back.’

‘Okay,’ Herb said with sudden decision. ‘I’ll call Marianne Jaffery over at EQMM. I’ve known her for a long time. If I ask her to ask the library curator -that’s what they call the guy, honest, the library curator - to send us a copy of the June, 1980, ish, she’ll do it. Is it okay if I say you might have a story for them at some point in the future?’

‘Sure,’ Mort said, and thought: Tell her it’ll be under the name John Shooter, and almost laughed aloud.

‘Good. She’ll have the curator send it on to you Federal Express, direct from Pennsylvania. just return it in good condition, or you’ll have to find a replacement copy at one of those yard sales you were talking about.’

‘Is there any chance all this could happen by the day after tomorrow?’ Mort asked. He felt miserably sure that Herb would think

he was crazy for even asking ... and he surely must feel that Mort was making an awfully big mountain out of one small molehill.

'I think there's a very good chance,' Herb said. 'I won't guarantee it, but I'll almost guarantee it.'

'Thanks, Herb,' Mort said with honest gratitude. 'You're swell.'

'Aw, shucks, ma'am,' Herb said, doing the bad John Wayne imitation of which he was so absurdly proud.

'Now go get your dinner. And give Delores a kiss for me.'

Herb was still in his John Wayne mode. 'To heck with that. I'll give 'er a kiss fer me, pilgrim.'

You talk big, pilgrim.

Mort felt such a spurt of horror and fear that he almost cried out aloud. Same word, same flat, staring drawl. Shooter had tapped his telephone line' somehow, and no matter who Mort tried to call or what number he dialled. it was John Shooter who answered. Herb Creekmore had become just another one of his pen names, and

'Mort? Are you still there?'

He closed his eyes. Now that Herb had dispensed with the bogus John Wayne imitation, it was okay. It was just Herb again, and always had been. Herb using that word, that had just been

What?

Just another float in the Parade of Coincidences? Okay. Sure. No problem. I'll just stand on the curb and watch it slide past. Why not? I've already watched half a dozen bigger ones go by.

'Right here, Herb,' he said, opening his eyes. 'I was just trying to figure out how do I love thee. You know, counting the ways?'

'You're thilly,' Herb said, obviously pleased. 'And you're going to handle this carefully and prudently, right?'

'Right.'

'Then I think I'll go eat supper with the light of my life.'

'That sounds like a good idea. Goodbye, Herb - and thanks.'

'You're welcome. I'll try to make it the day after tomorrow. Dee says goodbye, too.'

'If she wants to pour the wine, I bet she does,' Mort said, and they both hung up laughing.

As soon as he put the telephone back on its table, the fantasy came back. Shooter. He do the police in different voices. Of course, he was alone and it was dark, a condition which bred fantasies. Nevertheless, he did not believe - at least in his head - that John Shooter was either a supernatural being or a supercriminal. If he had been the former, he would surely know that Morton Rainey had not committed plagiarism - at least not on that particular story - and if he had been the latter, he would have been off knocking over a bank or something, not farting around western Maine, trying to squeeze a short story out of a writer who made a lot more money from his novels.

He started slowly back toward the living room, intending to go through to the study and try the word processor, when a thought

(at least not that particular story)

struck him and stopped him.

What exactly did that mean, not that particular story? Had he ever stolen someone else's work?

For the first time since Shooter had turned up on his porch with his sheaf of pages, Mort considered this question seriously. A good

many reviews of his books had suggested that he was not really an original writer; that most of his works consisted of twice-told tales. He remembered Amy reading a review of *The OrganGrinder's Boy* which had first acknowledged the book's pace and readability, and then suggested a certain derivativeness in its plotting. She'd said, 'So what? Don't these people know there are only about five really good stories, and writers just tell them over and over, with different characters?'

Mort himself believed there were at least six stories: success; failure; love and loss; revenge, mistaken identity; the search for a higher power, be it God or the devil. He had told the first four over and over, obsessively, and now that he thought of it, 'Sowing Season' embodied at least three of those ideas. But was that plagiarism? If it was, every novelist at work in the world would be guilty of the crime.

Plagiarism, he decided, was outright theft. And he had never done it in his life. Never.

'Never,' he said, and strode into his study with his head up and his eyes wide, like a warrior approaching the field of battle. And there he sat for the next one hour, and words he wrote none.

26

His dry stint on the word processor convinced him that it might be a good idea to drink dinner instead of eat it, and he was on his second bourbon and water when the telephone rang again. He approached it gingerly, suddenly wishing he had a phone answering machine after all. They did have at least one sterling quality: you could monitor incoming calls and separate friend from foe.

He stood over it irresolutely, thinking how much he disliked the sound modern telephones made. Once upon a time they had rung - jingled merrily, even. Now they made a shrill ululating noise that sounded like a migraine headache trying to happen.

Well, are you going to pick it up or just stand here listening to it do that?

I don't want to talk to him again. He scares me and he infuriates me, and I don't know which feeling I dislike more.

Maybe it's not him.

Maybe it is.

Listening to those two thoughts go around and around was even worse than listening to the warbling beep-yawp of the phone, so he picked it up and said hello gruffly and it was, after all, no one more dangerous than his caretaker, Greg Carstairs.

Greg asked the now-familiar questions about the house and Mort answered them all again, reflecting that explaining such an event was very similar to explaining a sudden death - if anything could get you over the shock, it was the constant repetition of the known facts.

'Listen, Mort, I finally caught up with Tom Greenleaf late this afternoon,' Greg said, and Mort thought Greg sounded a little funny -

a little cautious. 'He and Sonny Trotts were painting the Methodist Parish Hall.'

'Uh-huh? Did you speak to him about my buddy?'

'Yeah, I did,' Greg said. He sounded more cautious than ever.

'Well?'

There was a short pause. Then Greg said, 'Tom thought you must have been mixed up on your days.'

'Mixed up on my ... what do you mean?'

'Well,' Greg said apologetically, 'he says he did swing down Lake Drive yesterday afternoon and he did see you; he said he waved to you and you waved back. But, Mort -'

'What?' But he was afraid he already knew what.

'Tom says you were alone,' Greg finished.

For a long moment, Mort didn't say anything. He did not feel capable of saying anything. Greg didn't say anything, either, giving him time to think. Tom Greenleaf, of course, was no spring chicken; he was Dave Newsome's senior by at least three and perhaps as many as six years. But neither was he senile.

'Jesus,' Mort said at last. He spoke very softly. The truth was, he felt a little winded.

'My idea,' Greg said diffidently, 'was maybe Tom was the one who got a little mixed up. You know he's not exactly -'

'A spring chicken,' Mort finished. 'I know it. But if there's anybody in Tashmore with a better eye for strangers than Tom, I don't know who it is. He's been remembering strangers all his life, Greg. That's one of the things caretakers do, right?' He hesitated, then burst out: 'He looked at us! He looked right at both of us!'

Carefully, speaking as if he were only joshing, Greg said: 'Are you sure you didn't just dream this fella, Mort?'

'I hadn't even considered it,' Mort said slowly, 'until now. If none of this happened, and I'm running around telling people it did, I guess that would make me crazy.'

'Oh, I don't think that at all,' Greg said hastily.

'I do,' Mort replied. He thought: But maybe that's what he really wants. To make people think you are crazy. And, maybe in the end, to make what people think the truth.

Oh yes. Right. And he partnered up with old Tom Greenleaf to do the job. In fact, it was probably Tom who went up to Derry and burned the house, while Shooter stayed down here and wasted the cat - right?

Now, think about it. Really THINK. Was he there? Was he REALLY?

So Mort thought about it. He thought about it harder than he had ever thought about anything in his life; harder, even, than he had thought about Amy and Ted and what he should do about them after he had discovered them in bed together on that day in May. Had he hallucinated John Shooter?

He thought again of the speed with which Shooter had grabbed him and thrown him against the side of the car.

'Greg?'

'I'm here, Mort.'

'Tom didn't see the car, either? Old station wagon, Mississippi plates?'

'He says he didn't see a car on Lake Drive at all yesterday. just you, standing up by the end of the path that goes down to the lake. He thought you were admiring the view.'

Is it live, or is it Memorex?

He kept coming back to the hard grip of Shooter's hands on his upper arms, the speed with which the man had thrown him against the car. 'You lie,' Shooter had said. Mort had seen the rage chained in his eyes, and had smelled dry cinnamon on his breath.

His hands.

The pressure of his hands.

'Greg, hold the phone a sec.'

'Sure.'

Mort put the receiver down and tried to roll up his shirtsleeves. He was not very successful, because his hands were shaking badly. He

unbuttoned the shirt instead, pulled it off, then held out his arms. At first he saw nothing. Then he rotated them outward as far as they would go, and there they were, two yellowing bruises on the inside of each arm, just above the elbow.

The marks made by John Shooter's thumbs when he grabbed him and threw him against the car.

He suddenly thought he might understand, and was afraid. Not for himself, though.

For old Tom Greenleaf.

28

He picked up the telephone. 'Greg?'

'I'm here.'

'Did Tom seem all right when you talked to him?'

'He was exhausted,' Greg said promptly. 'Foolish old man has got no business crawling around on a scaffold and painting all day in a cold wind. Not at his age. He looked ready to fall into the nearest pile of leaves, if he couldn't get to a bed in a hurry. I see what you're getting at, Mort, and I suppose that if he was tired enough, it could have slipped his mind, but -'

'No, that's not what I'm thinking about. Are you sure exhaustion was all it was? Could he have been scared?'

Now there was a long, thinking silence at the other end of the line. Impatient though he was, Mort did not break it. He intended to allow Greg all the thinking time he needed.

'He didn't seem himself,' Greg said at last. 'He seemed distracted ... off, somehow. I chalked it up to plain old tiredness, but maybe that wasn't it. Or not all of it.'

'Could he have been hiding something from you?'

This time the pause was not so long. 'I don't know. He might have been. That's all I can say for sure, Mort. You're making me wish I'd talked to him longer and pressed him a little harder.'

'I think it might be a good idea if we went over to his place,' Mort said.

'Now. It happened the way I told you, Greg. If Tom said something different, it could be because my friend scared the bejesus out of

him. I'll meet you there.'

'Okay.' Greg sounded worried all over again. 'But, you know, Tom isn't the sort of man who'd scare easy.'

'I'm sure that was true once, but Tom's seventy-five if he's a day. I think that the older you get, the easier to scare you get.'

'Why don't I meet you there?'

'That sounds like a good idea.' Mort hung up the telephone, poured the rest of his bourbon down the sink, and headed for Tom Greenleafs house in the Buick.

29

Greg was parked in the driveway when Mort arrived. Tom's Scout was by the back door. Greg was wearing a flannel jacket with the collar turned up; the wind off the lake was keen enough to be uncomfortable.

'He's okay,' he told Mort at once.

'How do you know?'

They both spoke in low tones.

'I saw his Scout, so I went to the back door. There's a note pinned there saying he had a hard day and went to bed early.' Greg grinned and shoved his long hair out of his face. 'It also says that if any of his regular people need him, they should call me.'

'Is the note in his handwriting?'

'Yeah. Big old-man's scrawl. I'd know it anywhere. I went around and looked in his bedroom window. He's in there. The window's shut, but it's a wonder he doesn't break the damned glass, he's snoring so loud. Do you want to check for yourself?'

Mort sighed and shook his head. 'But something's wrong, Greg. Tom saw us. Both of us. The man got hot under the collar a few minutes after Tom passed and grabbed me by the arms. I'm wearing his bruises. I'll show you, if you want to see.'

Greg shook his head. 'I believe you. The more I think about it, the less I like the way he sounded when he said you were all by yourself when he saw you. There was something ... off about it. I'll talk to him again in the morning. Or we can talk to him together, if you want.'

'That would be good. What time?'

'Why not come down to the Parish Hall around nine-thirty? He'll have had two-three cups of coffee - you can't say boo to him before he's had his coffee - and we can get him down off that damned scaffolding for awhile. Maybe save his life. Sound okay?'

'Yes.' Mort held out his hand. 'Sorry I got you out on a wild goosechase.' Greg shook his hand. 'No need to be. Something's not right here. I'm good and curious to find out what it is.'

Mort got back into his Buick, and Greg slipped behind the wheel of his truck. They drove off in opposite directions, leaving the old man to his exhausted sleep.

Mort himself did not sleep until almost three in the morning. He tossed and turned in the bedroom until the sheets were a battlefield and he could stand it no longer. Then he walked to the living-room couch in a kind of daze. He barked his shins on the rogue coffee table, cursed in a monotone, lay down, adjusted the cushions behind his head, and fell almost immediately down a black hole.

When he woke up at eight o'clock the next morning, he thought he felt fine. He went right on thinking so until he swung his legs off the couch and sat up. Then a groan so loud it was almost a muted scream escaped him and he could only sit for a moment, wishing he could hold his back, his knees, and his right arm all at the same time. The arm was the worst, so he settled for holding that. He had read someplace that people can accomplish almost supernatural acts of strength while in the grip of panic; that they feel nothing while lifting cars off trapped infants or strangling killer Dobermans with their bare hands, only realizing how badly they have strained their bodies after the tide of emotion has receded. Now he believed it. He had thrown open the door of the upstairs bathroom hard enough to pop one of the hinges. How hard had he swung the poker? Harder than he wanted to think about, according to the way his back and right arm felt this morning. Nor did he want to think what the damage up there might look like to a less inflamed eye. He did know that he was going to put the damage right himself - or as much of it as he could, anyway. Mort thought Greg Carstairs must have some serious doubts about his sanity already, his protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. A look at the broken bathroom door, smashed shower-stall door, and shattered medicine cabinet would do little to improve Greg's faith in his rationality. He remembered thinking that Shooter might be trying to make people believe he was crazy. The idea did not seem foolish at all now that he examined it in the light of day; it seemed, if anything, more logical and believable than ever.

But he had promised to meet Greg at the Parish Hall in ninety minutes - less than that, now - to talk to Tom Greenleaf. Sitting here and counting his aches wasn't going to get him there.

Mort forced himself to his feet and walked slowly through the house to the master bathroom. He turned the shower on hot enough to send up billows of steam, swallowed three aspirin, and climbed in.

By the time he emerged, the aspirin had started its work, and he thought he could get through the day after all. It wouldn't be fun, and he might feel as if it had lasted several years by the time it was over, but he thought he could get through it.

This is the second day, he thought as he dressed. A little cramp of apprehension went through him. Tomorrow is his deadline. That made him think first of Amy, and then of Shooter saying, I'd leave her out of it if I could, but I'm startin to think you ain't going to leave me that option.

The cramp returned. First the crazy son of a bitch had killed Bump, then he had threatened Tom Greenleaf (surely he must have threatened Tom Greenleaf), and, Mort had come to realize, it really was possible that Shooter could have torched the Derry house. He supposed he had known this all along, and had simply not wanted to admit it to himself. Torching the house and getting rid of the magazine had been his main mission - of course; a man as crazy as Shooter simply wouldn't think of all the other copies of that magazine that were lying around. Such things would not be part of a lunatic's world view.

And Bump? The cat was probably just an afterthought. Shooter got back, saw the cat on the stoop waiting to be let back in, saw that Mort was still sleeping, and killed the cat on a whim. Making a round trip to Derry that fast would have been tight, but it could have been done. It all made sense.

And now he was threatening to involve Amy.

I'll have to warn her, he thought, stuffing his shirt into the back of his pants. Call her up this morning and come totally clean. Handling the man myself is one thing; standing by while a madman involves the only woman I've ever really loved in something she doesn't know anything about ... that's something else.

Yes. But first he would talk with Tom Greenleaf and get the truth out of him. Without Tom's corroboration of the fact that Shooter was

really around and really dangerous, Mort's own behavior was going to look suspicious or nutty, or both. Probably both. So, Tom first.

But before he met Greg at the Methodist Parish Hall, he intended to stop in at Bowie's and have one of Gerda's famous bacon-and-cheese omelettes. An army marches on its stomach, Private Rainey. Right you are, sir. He went out to the front hallway, opened the little wooden box mounted on the wall over the telephone table, and felt for the Buick keys. The Buick keys weren't there.

Frowning, he walked out into the kitchen. There they were, on the counter by the sink. He picked them up and bounced them thoughtfully on the palm of his hand. Hadn't he put them back in the box when he returned from his run to Tom's house last night? He tried to remember, and couldn't - not for sure. Dropping the keys into the box after returning home was such a habit that one drop-off blended in with another. If you ask a man who likes fried eggs what he had for breakfast three days ago, he can't remember - he assumes he had fried eggs, because he has them so often, but he can't be sure. This was like that. He had come back tired, achy, and preoccupied. He just couldn't remember.

But he didn't like it.

He didn't like it at all.

He went to the back door and opened it. There, lying on the porch boards, was John Shooter's black hat with the round crown.

Mort stood in the doorway looking at it, his car keys clutched in one hand with the brass key-fob hanging down so it caught and reflected a shaft of morning sunlight. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears. It was beating slowly and deliberately. Some part of him had expected this.

The hat was lying exactly where Shooter had left his manuscript. And beyond it, in the driveway, was his Buick. He had parked it

around the corner when he returned last night - that he did remember - but now it was here.

'What did you do?' Mort Rainey screamed suddenly into the morning sunshine, and the birds which had been twittering unconcernedly away in the trees fell suddenly silent. 'What in God's name did you do?'

But if Shooter was there, watching him, he made no reply. Perhaps he felt that Mort would find out what he had done soon enough.

31

The Buick's ashtray was pulled open, and there were two cigarette butts in it. They were unfiltered. Mort picked one of them out with his fingernails, his face contorted into a grimace of distaste, sure it would be a Pall Mall, Shooter's brand. It was.

He turned the key and the engine started at once. Mort hadn't heard it ticking and popping when he came out, but it started as if it were warm, all the same. Shooter's hat was now in the trunk. Mort had picked it up with the same distaste he had shown for the cigarette butt, putting only enough of his fingers on the brim to get a grip on it. There had been nothing under it, and nothing inside it but a very old sweat-stained inner band. It had some other smell, however, one which was sharper and more acrid than sweat. It was a smell which Mort recognized in some vague way but could not place. Perhaps it would come to him. He put the hat in the Buick back seat, then remembered he would be seeing Greg and Tom in a little less than an hour. He wasn't sure he wanted them to see the hat. He didn't know exactly why he felt that way, but this morning it seemed safer to follow his instincts than to question them, so he put the hat in the trunk and set off for town.

32

He passed Tom's house again on the way to Bowie's. The Scout was no longer in the driveway. For a moment this made Mort feel nervous, and then he decided it was a good sign, not a bad one - Tom must have already started his day's work. Or he might have gone to Bowie's himself - Tom was a widower, and he ate a lot of his meals at the lunch counter in the general store.

Most of the Tashmore Public Works Department was at the counter, drinking coffee and talking about the upcoming deer season, but Tom was

(dead he's dead Shooter killed him and guess whose car he used)
not among them.

'Mort Rainey!' Gerda Bowie greeted him in her usual hoarse, Bleacher Creature's shout. She was a tall woman with masses of frizzy chestnut hair and a great rounded bosom. 'Ain't seen you in a coon's age! Writing any good books lately?'

'Trying,' Mort said. 'You wouldn't make me one of your special omelettes, would you?'

'Shit, no!' Gerda said, and laughed to show she was only joking. The PW guys in their olive-drab coveralls laughed right along with her. Mort wished briefly for a great big gun like the one Dirty Harry wore under his tweed sport-coats. Boom-bang-blam, and maybe they could have a little order around here. 'Coming right up, Mort.'

'Thanks.'

When she delivered it, along with toast, coffee, and OJ, she said in a lower voice: 'I heard about your divorce. I'm sorry.'

He lifted the mug of coffee to his lips with a hand that was almost steady. 'Thanks, Gerda.'

'Are you taking care of yourself?'

'Well ... trying.'

'Because you look a little peaky.'

'It's hard work getting to sleep some nights. I guess I'm not used to the quiet yet.'

'Bullshit - it's sleeping alone you're not used to yet. But a man doesn't have to sleep alone forever, Mort, just because his woman don't know a good thing when she has it. I hope you don't mind me talking to you this way -'

'Not at all,' Mort said. But he did. He thought Gerda Bowie made a shitty Ann Landers.

'- but you're the only famous writer this town has got.'

'Probably just as well.'

She laughed and tweaked his ear. Mort wondered briefly what she would say, what the big men in the olive-drab coveralls would say, if he were to bite the hand that tweaked him. He was a little shocked at how powerfully attractive the idea was. Were they all talking about him and Amy? Some saying she didn't know a good thing when she had it, others saying the poor woman finally got tired of living with a crazy man and decided to get out, none of them knowing what the fuck they were talking about, or what he and Amy had been about when they had been good? Of course they were, he thought tiredly. That's what people were best at. Big talk about people whose names they saw in the newspapers.

He looked down at his omelette and didn't want it.

He dug in just the same, however, and managed to shovel most of it down his throat. It was still going to be a long day. Gerda Bowie's opinions on his looks and his love-life wouldn't change that.

When he finished, paid for breakfast and a paper, and left the store (the Public Works crews had decamped en masse five minutes before him, one stopping just long enough to obtain an autograph for his niece, who was having a birthday), it was five past nine. He sat behind the steering wheel long enough to check the paper for a story about the Derry house, and found one on page three. DERRY FIRE INSPECTORS REPORT NO LEADS IN RAINEY ARSON, the headline read. The story itself was less than half a column long. The last sentence read, 'Morton Rainey, known for such best-selling novels as *The OrganGrinder's Boy* and *The Delacourt Family*, could not be reached for comment.' Which meant that Amy hadn't given them the Tashmore number. Good deal. He'd thank her for that if he talked to her later on.

Tom Greenleaf came first. It would be almost twenty past the hour by the time he reached the Methodist Parish Hall. Close enough to nine-thirty. He put the Buick in gear and drove off.

33

When he arrived at the Parish Hall, there was a single vehicle parked in the drive - an ancient Ford Bronco with a camper on the back and a sign reading SONNY TROTTS PAINTING CARETAKING GENERAL CARPENTRY on each of the doors. Mort saw Sonny himself, a short man of about forty with no hair and merry eyes, on a scaffolding. He was painting in great sweeps while the boom box beside him played something Las Vegas by Ed Ames or Tom Jones -one of those fellows who sang with the top three buttons of their shirts undone, anyway.

'Hi, Sonny!' Mort called.

Sonny went on painting, sweeping back and forth in almost perfect rhythm as Ed Ames or whoever it was asked the musical questions what is a man, what has he got. They were questions Mort had asked himself a time or two, although without the horn section.

'Sonny!'

Sonny jerked. White paint flew from the end of his brush, and for an alarming moment Mort thought he might actually topple off the scaffold. Then he caught one of the ropes, turned, and looked down. 'Why, Mr Rainey!' he said. 'You gave me a helluva turn!'

For some reason Mort thought of the doorknob in Disney's Alice in Wonderland and had to suppress a violent bray of laughter.

'Mr Rainey? You okay?'

'Yes Mort swallowed crooked. It was a trick he had learned in parochial school about a thousand years ago, and was the only foolproof way to keep from laughing he had ever found. Like most good tricks that worked, it hurt. 'I thought you were going to fall off.'

'Not me,' Sonny said with a laugh of his own. He killed the voice coming from the boom box as it set off on a fresh voyage of emotion. 'Tom might fall off, maybe, but not me.'

'Where is Tom?' Mort asked. 'I wanted to talk to him.'

'He called early and said he couldn't make it today. I told him that was okay, there wasn't enough work for both of us anyways.'

Sonny looked down upon Mort confidentially.

'There is, a' course, but Tom ladled too much onto his plate this time. This ain't no job for a older fella. He said he was all bound up in his back. Must be, too. Didn't sound like himself at all.'

'What time was that?' Mort asked, trying hard to sound casual.

'Early,' Sonny said. 'Six or so. I was just about to step into the old shitatorium for my morning constitutional. Awful regular, I am.' Sonny sounded extremely proud of this. 'Course Tom, he knows what time I rise and commence my doins.'

'But he didn't sound so good?'

'Nope. Not like himself at all.' Sonny paused, frowning. He looked as if he was trying very hard to remember something. Then he gave a little shrug and went on. 'Wind off the lake was fierce yesterday. Probably took a cold. But Tommy's iron. Give him a day or two and he'll be fine. I worry more about him gettin preoccupied and walkin the plank.' Sonny indicated the floor of the scaffold with his brush, sending a ruffle of white drops marching up the boards past his shoes. 'Can I do anything for you, Mr Rainey?'

'No,' Mort said. There was a dull ball of dread, like a piece of crumpled canvas, under his heart. 'Have you seen Greg, by the way?'

'Greg Carstairs?'

'Yes.'

'Not this morning. Course, he deals with the carriage trade.' Sonny laughed. 'Rises later'n the rest of us, he does.'

'Well, I thought he was going to come by and see Tom, too,' Mort said. 'Do you mind if I wait a little? He might show up.'

'Be my guest,' Sonny said. 'You mind the music?'

'Not at all.'

'You can get some wowser tapes off the TV these days. All you gotta do is give em your MasterCard number. Don't even have to pay for the call. It's a eight-hundred number.' He bent toward the boom box, then looked earnestly down at Mort. 'This is Roger Whittaker,' he said in low and reverent tones.

'Oh.'

Sonny pushed PLAY. Roger Whittaker told them there were times (he was sure they knew) when he bit off more than he could chew. That was also something Mort had done without the horn section. He strolled to the edge of the driveway and tapped absently at his shirt pocket. He was a little surprised to find that the old pack of L & M's, now reduced to a single hardy survivor, was in there. He lit the last cigarette, wincing in anticipation of the harsh taste. But it wasn't bad. It had, in fact, almost no taste at all ... as if the years had stolen it away.

That's not the only thing the years have stolen.

How true. Irrelevant, but true. He smoked and looked at the road. Now Roger Whittaker was telling him and Sonny that a ship lay loaded in the harbor, and that soon for England they would sail. Sonny Trotts sang the last word of each line. No more; just the last word. Cars and trucks went back and forth on Route 23. Greg's Ford Ranger did not come. Mort pitched away his cigarette, looked at his

watch, and saw it was quarter to ten. He understood that Greg, who was almost religiously punctual, was not coming, either.

Shooter got them both.

Oh, bullshit! You don't know that!

Yes I do. The hat. The car. The keys.

You're not just Jumping to conclusions, you're leaping to them.

The hat. The car. The keys.

He turned and walked back toward the scaffold. 'I guess he forgot,' he said, but Sonny didn't hear him. He was swaying back and forth, lost in the art of painting and the soul of Roger Whittaker.

Mort got back into his car and drove away. Lost in his own thoughts, he never heard Sonny call after him.

The music probably would have covered it, anyway.

34

He arrived back at his house at quarter past ten, got out of the car, and started for the house. Halfway there, he turned back and opened the trunk. The hat sat inside, black and final, a real toad in an imaginary garden. He picked it up, not being so choosy of how he handled it this time, slammed the trunk shut, and went into the house.

He stood in the front hallway, not sure what he wanted to do next ... and suddenly, for no reason at all, he put the hat on his head. He shuddered when he did it, the way a man will sometimes shudder after swallowing a mouthful of raw liquor. But the shudder passed.

And the hat felt like quite a good fit, actually.

He went slowly into the master bathroom, turned on the light, and positioned himself in front of the mirror. He almost burst out laughing - he looked like the man with the pitchfork in that Grant Wood painting, 'American Gothic.' He looked like that even though the guy in the picture was bareheaded. The hat covered Mort's hair completely, as it had covered Shooter's (if Shooter had hair - that was yet to be determined, although Mort supposed that he would know for sure the next time he saw him, since Mort now had his chapeau), and just touched the tops of his ears. It was pretty funny. A scream, in fact.

Then the restless voice in his head asked, Why'd you put it on? Who'd you think you'd look like? Him? and the laughter died. Why had he put the hat on in the first place?

He wanted you to, the restless voice said quietly.

Yes? But why? Why would Shooter want Mort to put on his hat?

Maybe he wants you to ...

Yes? he prompted the restless voice again. Wants me to what?

He thought the voice had gone away and was reaching for the light-switch when it spoke again.

... to get confused, it said.

The phone rang then, making him jump. He snatched the hat off guiltily (a little like a man who fears he may be caught trying on his wife's underwear) and went to answer it, thinking it would be Greg, and it would turn out Tom was at Greg's house. Yes, of course, that was what had happened; Tom had called Greg, had told him about Shooter and Shooter's threats, and Greg had taken the old man to his place. To protect him. It made such perfect sense that Mort couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it before.

Except it wasn't Greg. It was Herb Creekmore.

'Everything's arranged,' Herb said cheerfully. 'Marianne came through for me. She's a peach.'

'Marianne?' Mort asked stupidly.

'Marianne Jaffery, at EQMM!' Herb said. 'EQMM? "Sowing Season"? June, 1980? You understand dese t'ings, bwana?'

'Oh,' Mort said. 'Oh, good! Thanks, Herb! Is it for sure?'

'Yep. You'll have it tomorrow - the actual magazine, not just a Xerox of the story. It's coming up from PA Federal Express. Have you heard anything else from Mr Shooter?'

'Not yet,' Mort said., looking down at the black hat in his hand. He could still smell the odd, evocative aroma it held.

'Well, no news is good news, they say. Did you talk to the local law?'

Had he promised Herb he would do that? Mort couldn't remember for sure, but he might have. Best to play safe, anyway. 'Yes. Old Dave

Newsome didn't exactly burst a gasket. He thought the guy was probably just playing games.' It was downright nasty to lie to Herb, especially after Herb had done him such a favor, but what sense would it make to tell him the truth? It was too crazy, too complicated.

'Well you passed it along. I think that's important, Mort - I really do.'

'Yes.'

'Anything else?'

'No - but thanks a million for this. You saved my life.' And maybe, he thought, that wasn't just a figure of speech.

'My pleasure. Remember that in small towns, FedEx usually delivers right to the local post office. Okay?'

'Yeah.'

'How's the new book coming? I've really been wanting to ask.'

'Great!' Mort cried heartily.

'Well, good. Get this guy off your back and turn to it. Work has saved many a better man than you or me, Mort.'

'I know. Best to your lady.'

'Thanks. Best to -' Herb stopped abruptly, and Mort could almost see him biting his lip. Separations were hard to get used to. Amputees kept feeling the foot which was no longer there, they said. '- to you,' he finished.

'I got it,' Mort said. 'Take care, Herbert.'

He walked slowly out to the deck and looked down at the lake. There were no boats on it today. I'm one step up, no matter what else happens. I can show the man the goddam magazine. It may not tame him ... but then again, it may. He's crazy, after all, and you

never know what people from the fabled tribe of the Crazy Folks will or won't do. That is their dubious charm. Anything is possible.

It was even possible that Greg was at home after all, he thought - he might have forgotten their meeting at the Parish Hall, or something totally unrelated to this business might have come up. Feeling suddenly hopeful, Mort went to the telephone and dialled Greg's number. The phone was on the third ring when he remembered Greg saying the week before that his wife and kids were going to spend some time at his in-laws'. Megan starts school next year, and it'll be harder for them to get away, he'd said.

So Greg had been alone.

(the hat)

Like Tom Greenleaf.

(the car)

The young husband and the old widower.

(the keys)

And how does it work? Why, as simple as ordering a Roger Whittaker tape off the TV. Shooter goes to Tom Greenleaf's house, but not in his station wagon - oh no, that would be too much like advertising. He leaves his car parked in Mort Rainey's driveway, or maybe around the side of the house. He goes to Tom's in the Buick. Forces Tom to call Greg. Probably gets Greg out of bed, but Greg has got Tom on his mind and comes in a hurry. Then Shooter forces Tom to call Sonny Trotts and tell Sonny he doesn't feel well enough to come to work. Shooter puts a screwdriver against old Tom's jugular and suggests that if Tom doesn't make it good, he'll be one sorry old coot. Tom makes it good enough ... although even Sonny, not too bright and just out of bed, realizes that Tom doesn't sound like himself at all. Shooter uses the screwdriver on Tom. And when

Greg Carstairs arrives, he uses the screwdriver - or something like it - on him. And ...

You've gone shit out of your mind. This is just a bad case of the screaming meemies and that's all. Repeat: that ... IS ... ALL.

That was reasonable, but it didn't convince him. It wasn't a Chesterfield. It didn't satisfy.

Mort walked rapidly through the downstairs part of the house, tugging and twirling at his hair.

What about the trucks? Tom's Scout, Greg's Ranger? Add the Buick and you're thinking about three vehicles here - four if you count in Shooter's Ford wagon, and Shooter is just one man.

He didn't know ... but he knew that enough was enough.

When he arrived at the telephone again, he pulled the phone book out of its drawer and started looking for the town constable's number. He stopped abruptly.

One of those vehicles was the Buick, my Buick.

He put the telephone down slowly. He tried to think of a way Shooter could have handled all of the vehicles. Nothing came. It was like sitting in front of the word processor when you were tapped for ideas - you got nothing but a blank screen. But he did know he didn't want to call Dave Newsome. Not yet. He was walking away from the telephone, headed toward no place in particular, when it rang.

It was Shooter.

'Go to where we met the other day,' Shooter said. 'Walk down the path a little way. You impress me as a man who thinks the way old folks chew their food, Mr Rainey, but I'm willing to give you all the time you need. I'll call back late this afternoon. Anybody you call between now and then is your responsibility.'

'What did you do?' he asked again. This time his voice was robbed of all force, little more than a whisper. 'What in the world did you do?'

But there was only a dead line.

35

He walked up to the place where the path and the road came together, the place where he had been talking to Shooter when Tom Greenleaf had had the misfortune to see them. For some reason he didn't like the idea of driving the Buick. The bushes on either side of the path were beaten down and skinned-looking, making a rough path. He walked jerkily down this path, knowing what he would find in the first good-sized copse of trees he came to ... and he did find it. It was Tom Greenleaf's Scout. Both men were inside.

Greg Carstairs was sitting behind the wheel with his head thrown back and a screwdriver - a Phillips, this time - buried up to the hilt in his forehead, above his right eye. The screwdriver had come from a cupboard in the pantry of Mort's house. The red plastic handle was badly chipped and impossible not to recognize.

Tom Greenleaf was in the back seat with a hatchet planted in the top of his head. His eyes were open. Dried brains had trickled down around his ears. Written along the hatchet's ash handle in faded but still legible red letters was one word: RAINEY. It had come from the toolshed.

Mort stood silently. A chickadee called. A woodpecker used a hollow tree to send Morse code. A freshening breeze was producing whitecaps on the lake; the water was a dark cobalt today, and the whitecaps made a pretty contrast.

There was a rustling sound behind him. Mort wheeled around so fast he almost fell - would have fallen, if he'd not had the Scout to lean against. It wasn't Shooter. It was a squirrel. It looked down at him with bright hate from where it was frozen halfway up the trunk of a maple which blazed with red fall fire. Mort waited for his galloping heart to slow. He waited for the squirrel to dash up the tree. His heart did; the squirrel did not.

'He killed them both,' he said at last, speaking to the squirrel. 'He went to Tom's in my Buick. Then he went to Greg's in Tom's Scout, with Tom driving. He killed Greg. Then he had Tom drive down here, and killed him. He used my tools to do both of them. Then he walked back to Tom's house ... or maybe he jogged. He looks rugged enough to have jogged. Sonny didn't think Tom sounded like himself, and I know why. By the time Sonny got that call, the sun was getting ready to come up and Tom was already dead. It was Shooter, imitating Tom. And it was probably easy. From the way Sonny had his music cranked this morning, he's a little deaf, anyway. Once he was done with Sonny Trotts, he got in my Buick again and drove it back to the house. Greg's Ranger is still parked in his own driveway, where it's been all along. And that's how -'

The squirrel scurried up the trunk and disappeared into the blazing red leaves.

'-that's how it worked,' Mort finished dully.

Suddenly his legs felt watery. He took two steps back up the path, thought of Tom Greenleafs brains drying on his cheeks, and his legs just gave up. He fell down and the world swam away for awhile.

36

When he came to, Mort rolled over, sat up groggily, and turned his wrist to look at his watch. It said quarter past two, but of course it must have stopped at that time last night; he had found Tom's Scout at mid-morning, and this couldn't be afternoon. He had fainted, and, considering the circumstances, that wasn't surprising. But no one faints for three and a half hours.

The watch's second hand was making its steady little circle, however.

Must have jogged it when I sat up, that's all.

But that wasn't all. The sun had changed position, and would soon be lost behind the clouds which were filling up the sky. The color of the lake had dulled to a listless chrome.

So he had started off fainting, or swooning, and then what? Well, it sounded incredible, but he supposed he must have fallen asleep. The last three days had been nerve-racking, and last night he had been sleepless until three. So call it a combination of mental and physical fatigue. His mind had just pulled the plug. And

Shooter! Christ. Shooter said he'd call!

He tried to get to his feet, then fell back with a little oof! sound of mingled pain and surprise as his left leg buckled under him. It was full of pins and needles, all of them crazily dancing. He must have lain on the goddam thing. Why hadn't he brought the Buick, for Christ's sake? If Shooter called and Mort wasn't there to take the call, the man might do anything.

He lunged to his feet again, and this time made it all the way up. But when he tried to stride on the left leg, it refused his weight and spilled him forward again. He almost hit his head on the side of the truck going down and was suddenly looking at himself in one of the

hubcaps of the Scout. The convex surface made his face look like a grotesque funhouse mask. At least he had left the goddamned hat back at the house; if he had seen that on his head, Mort thought he would have screamed. He wouldn't have been able to help himself.

All at once he remembered there were two dead men in the Scout. They were sitting above him, getting stiff, and there were tools sticking out of their heads.

He crawled out of the Scout's shadow, dragged his left leg across his right with his hands, and began to pound at it with his fists, like a man trying to tenderize a cheap cut of meat.

Stop it! a small voice cried - it was the last kernel of rationality at his command, a little sane light in what felt like a vast bank of black thunderheads between his ears. Stop it! He said he'd call late in the afternoon, and it's only quarter past two! Plenty of time! Plenty of time!

But what if he called early? Or what if 'late afternoon' started after two o'clock in the deep-dish, crackerbarrel South?

Keep beating on your leg like that and you'll wind up with a charley horse. Then you can see how you like trying to crawl back in time to take his call.

That did the trick. He was able to make himself stop. This time he got up more cautiously and just stood for a moment (he was careful to keep his back to Tom's Scout - he did not want to look inside again) before trying to walk. He found that the pins and needles were subsiding. He walked with a pronounced limp at first, but his gait began to smooth out after the first dozen strides .

He was almost clear of the bushes Shooter had stripped and beaten down with Tom's Scout when he heard a car approaching. Mort dropped to his knees without even thinking about it and watched as a rusty old Cadillac swept by. It belonged to Don Bassinger, who owned a place on the far side of the lake. Bassinger, a veteran

alcoholic who spent most of his time drinking up what remained of his once-substantial inheritance, often used Lake Drive as a shortcut to what was known as Bassinger Road. Don was about the only year-round resident down here, Mort thought.

After the Caddy was out of sight, Mort got to his feet and hurried the rest of the way up to the road. Now he was glad he hadn't brought the Buick. He knew Don Bassinger's Cadillac, and Bassinger knew Mort's Buick. It was probably too early in the day for Don to be in a blackout, and he might well have remembered seeing Mort's car, if it had been there, parked not far from the place where, before too much longer, someone was going to make an extremely horrible discovery.

He's busy tying you to this business, Mort thought as he limped along Lake Drive toward his house. He's been doing it all along. If anyone saw a car near Tom Greenleafs last night, it will almost certainly turn out to be your Buick. He killed them with your tools

I could get rid of the tools, he thought suddenly. I could throw them in the lake. I might heave up a time or two getting them out, but I think I could go through with it.

Could you? I wonder. And even if you did ... well, Shooter almost certainly will have thought of that possibility, too. He seems to have thought of all the others. And he knows that if you tried to get rid of the hatchet and the screwdriver and the police dragged the bottom for them and they were found, things would look even worse for you. Do you see what he's done? Do you?

Yes. He saw. John Shooter had given him a present. It was a tar baby. A large, glistening tar baby. Mort had smacked the tar baby in the head with his left hand and it had stuck fast. So he had whopped that old tar baby in the gut with his right hand to make it let go, only his right hand had stuck, too. He had been - what was the word he had kept using with such smug satisfaction? 'Disingenuous,' wasn't it? Yes, that was it. And all the time he had been getting more entangled with John Shooter's tar baby. And now? Well, he had told

lies to all sorts of people, and that would look bad if it came out, and a quarter of a mile behind him a man was wearing a hatchet for a hat and Mort's name was written on the handle, and that would look even worse.

Mort imagined the telephone ringing in the empty house and forced himself into a trot.

37

Shooter didn't call.

The minutes stretched out like taffy, and Shooter didn't call. Mort walked restlessly through the house, twirling and pulling at his hair. He imagined this was what it felt like to be a junkie waiting for the pusher-man.

Twice he had second thoughts about waiting, and went to the phone to call the authorities - not old Dave Newsome, or even the county sheriff, but the State Police. He would hew to the old Vietnam axiom: Kill em all and let God sort em out. Why not? He had a good reputation, after all; he was a respected member of two Maine communities, and John Shooter was a

Just what was Shooter?

The word 'phantom' came to mind.

The word 'will-o-the-wisp' also came to mind.

But it was not this that stopped him. What stopped him was a horrible certainty that Shooter would be trying to call while Mort himself was using the line ... that Shooter would hear the busy signal, hang up, and Mort would never hear from him again.

At quarter of four, it began to rain - a steady fall rain, cold and gentle, sighing down from a white sky, tapping on the roof and the stiff leaves around the house.

At ten of, the telephone rang. Mort leaped for it.

It was Amy.

Amy wanted to talk about the fire. Amy wanted to talk about how unhappy she was, not just for herself, but for both of them. Amy

wanted to tell him that Fred Evans, the insurance investigator, was still in Derry, still picking over the site, still asking . questions about everything from the most recent wiring inspection to who had the keys to the wine cellar, and Ted was suspicious of his motives. Amy wanted Mort to wonder with her if things would have been different if they had had children.

Mort responded to all this as best he could, and all the time he was talking with her, he felt time - prime late-afternoon time - slipping away. He was half mad with worry that Shooter would call, find the line busy, and commit some fresh atrocity. Finally he said the only thing he could think of to get her off the line: that if he didn't get to the bathroom soon, he was going to have an accident.

'Is it booze?' she asked, concerned. 'Have you been drinking?'

'Breakfast, I think,' he said. 'Listen, Amy, I -'

'At Bowie's?'

'Yes,' he said, trying to sound strangled with pain and effort. The truth was, he felt strangled. It was all quite a comedy, when you really considered it. 'Amy, really, I -'

'God, Mort, she keeps the dirtiest grill in town,' Amy said. 'Go. I'll call back later.' The phone went dead in his ear. He put the receiver into its cradle, stood there a moment, and was amazed and dismayed to discover his fictional complaint was suddenly real: his bowels had drawn themselves into an aching, throbbing knot.

He ran for the bathroom, unclasping his belt as he went.

It was a near thing, but he made it. He sat on the ring in the rich odor of his own wastes, his pants around his ankles, catching his breath ... and the phone began to ring again.

He sprang up like a jack released from its box, cracking one knee smartly on the side of the washstand, and ran for it, holding his pants

up with one hand and mincing along like a girl in a tight skirt. He had that miserable, embarrassing I-didn't-have-time-to-wipe feeling, and he guessed it happened to everyone, but it suddenly occurred to him he had never read about it in a book - not one single book, ever.

Oh, life was such a comedy.

This time it was Shooter.

'I saw you down there,' Shooter said. His voice was as calm and serene as ever. 'Down where I left them, I mean. Looked like you had you a heat-stroke, only it isn't summer.'

'What do you want?' Mort switched the telephone to his other ear. His pants slid down to his ankles again. He let them go and stood there with the waistband of his jockey shorts suspended halfway between his knees and his hips. What an author photograph this would make, he thought.

'I almost pinned a note on you,' Shooter said. 'I decided not to.' He paused, then added with a kind of absent contempt: 'You scare too easy.'

'What do you want?'

'Why, I told you that already, Mr Rainey. I want a story to make up for the one you stole. Ain't you ready to admit it yet?'

Yes - tell him yes! Tell him anything, the earth is flat, John Kennedy and Elvis Presley are alive and well and playing banjo duets in Cuba, Meryl Streep's a transvestite, tell him ANYTHING

But he wouldn't.

All the fury and frustration and horror and confusion suddenly burst out of his mouth in a howl.

'I DIDN'T! I DIDN'T! YOU'RE CRAZY, AND I CAN PROVE IT! I HAVE THE MAGAZINE, YOU LOONY! DO YOU HEAR ME? I HAVE

THE GODDAM MAGAZINE!

The response to this was no response. The line was silent and dead, without even the faraway gabble of a phantom voice to break that smooth darkness, like that which crept up to the window-wall each night he had spent here alone.

'Shooter?'

Silence.

'Shooter, are you still there?'

More silence. He was gone.

Mort let the telephone sag away from his ear. He was returning it to the cradle when Shooter's voice, tinny and distant and almost lost, said:

. . . now?'

Mort put the phone back to his ear. It seemed to weigh eight hundred pounds. 'What?' he asked. 'I thought you were gone.'

'You have it? You have this so-called magazine? Now?' He thought Shooter sounded upset for the first time. Upset and unsure.

'No,' Mort said.

'Well, there!' Shooter said, sounding relieved. 'I think you might finally be ready to talk turk -'

'It's coming Federal Express,' Mort interrupted. 'It will be at the post office by ten tomorrow.'

'What will be?' Shooter asked. 'Some fuzzy old thing that's supposed to be a copy?'

'No,' Mort said. The feeling that he had rocked the man, that he had actually gotten past his defenses and hit him hard enough to make it hurt, was strong and undeniable. For a moment or two Shooter had sounded almost afraid, and Mort was angrily glad. 'The magazine. The actual magazine.'

There was another long pause, but this time Mort kept the telephone screwed tightly against his ear. Shooter was there. And suddenly the story was the central issue again, the story and the accusation of plagiarism; Shooter treating him like he was a goddam college kid was the issue, and maybe the man was on the run at last.

Once, in the same parochial school where Mort had learned the trick of swallowing crooked, he had seen a boy stick a pin in a beetle which had been trundling across his desk. The beetle had been caught - pinned, wriggling, and dying. At the time, Mort had been sad and horrified. Now he understood. Now he only wanted to do the same thing to this man. This crazy man.

'There can't be any magazine,' Shooter said finally. 'Not with that story in it. That story is mine!'

Mort could hear anguish in the man's voice. Real anguish. It made him glad. The pin was in Shooter. He was wriggling around on it.

'It'll be here at ten tomorrow,' Mort said, 'or as soon after as FedEx drops the Tashmore stuff. I'll be happy to meet you there. You can take a look. As long a look as you want, you goddamned maniac.'

'Not there,' Shooter said after another pause. 'At your house.'

'Forget it. When I show you that issue of Ellery Queen, I want to be someplace where I can yell for help if you go apeshit.'

'You'll do it my way,' Shooter said. He sounded a little more in control ... but Mort did not believe Shooter had even half the control he'd had previously. 'If you don't, I'll see you in the Maine State Prison for murder.'

'Don't make me laugh.' But Mort felt his bowels begin to knot up again.

'I hooked you to those two men in more ways than you know,' Shooter said, 'and you have told a right smart of lies. If I just disappear, Mr Rainey, you are going to find yourself standing with your head in a noose and your feet in Crisco.'

'You don't scare me.'

'Yeah, I do,' Shooter said. He spoke almost gently. 'The only thing is. you're startin to scare me a little, too. I can't quite figure you out.'

Mort was silent.

'It'd be funny,' Shooter said in a strange, ruminating tone. 'if we had come by the same story in two different places, at two different times.'

'The thought had occurred to me.'

'Did it?'

'I dismissed it,' Mort said. 'Too much of a coincidence. If it was just the same plot, that would be one thing. But the same language? The same goddam diction?'

'Uh-huh,' Shooter said. 'I thought the same thing, pilgrim. It's just too much. Coincidence is out. You stole it from me, all right, but I'm goddamned if I can figure out how or when.'

'Oh, quit it!' Mort burst out. 'I have the magazine! I have proof! Don't you understand that? It's over! Whether it was some nutty game on your part or just a delusion, it is over! I have the magazine!'

After a long silence, Shooter said: 'Not yet, you don't.'

'How true,' Mort said. He felt a sudden and totally unwanted sense of kinship with the man. 'So what do we do tonight?'

'Why, nothing,' Shooter said. 'Those men will keep. One has a wife and kids visiting family. The other lives alone. You go and get your magazine tomorrow morning. I will come to your place around noon.'

'You'll kill me,' Mort said. He found that the idea didn't carry much terror with it - not tonight, anyway. 'If I show you the magazine, your delusion will break down and you'll kill me.'

'No!' Shooter replied, and this time he seemed clearly surprised. 'You? No, sir! But those others were going to get in the way of our business. I couldn't have that ... and I saw that I could use them to make you deal with me. To face up to your responsibility.'

'You're crafty,' Mort said. 'I'll give you that. I believe you're nuts, but I also believe you're just about the craftiest son of a bitch I ever ran across in my life.'

'Well, you can believe this,' Shooter said. 'If I come tomorrow and find you gone, Mr Rainey, I will make it my business to destroy every person in the world that you love and care for. I will burn your life like a canefield in a high wind. You will go to jail for killing those two men, but going to jail will be the least of your sorrows. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' Mort said. 'I understand. Pilgrim.'

'Then you be there.'

'And suppose - just suppose - I show you the magazine, and it has my name on the contents page and my story inside. What then?'

There was a short pause. Then Shooter said, 'I go to the authorities and confess to the whole shooting match. But I'd take care of myself long before the trial, Mr Rainey. Because if things turn out that way, then I suppose I am crazy. And that kind of a crazy man ...' There was a sigh. 'That kind of crazy man has no excuse or reason to live.'

The words struck Mort with queer force. He's unsure, he thought. For the first time, he's really unsure ... which is more than I've ever been.

But he cut that off, and hard. He had never had a reason to be unsure. This was Shooter's fault. Every bit of it was Shooter's fault.

He said: 'How do I know you won't claim the magazine is a fake?'

He expected no response to this, except maybe something about how Mort would have to take his word, but Shooter surprised him.

'If it's real, I'll know,' he said, 'and if it's fake, we'll both know. I don't reckon you could have rigged a whole fake magazine in three days, no matter how many people you have got working for you in New York.'

It was Mort's turn to think, and he thought for a long, long time. Shooter waited for him.

'I'm going to trust you,' Mort said at last. 'I don't know why, for sure. Maybe because I don't have a lot to live for myself these days. But I'm not going to trust you whole hog. You come down here. Stand in the driveway where I can see you, and see that you're unarmed. I'll come out. Is that satisfactory?'

'That'll do her.'

'God help us both.'

'Yessir. I'll be damned if I'm sure what I'm into anymore ... and that is not a comfortable feeling.'

'Shooter?'

'Right here.'

'I want you to answer one question.'

Silence ... but an inviting silence, Mort thought.

'Did you burn down my house in Derry?'

'No,' Shooter said at once. 'I was keeping an eye on you.'

'And Bump,' Mort said bitterly.

'Listen,' Shooter said. 'You got my hat?'

'Yes.'

'I'll want it,' Shooter said, 'one way or the other.'

And the line went dead.

Just like that.

Mort put the phone down slowly and carefully and walked back to the bathroom - once again holding his pants up as he went - to finish his business.

38

Amy did call back, around seven, and this time Mort was able to talk to her quite normally - just as if the bathroom upstairs wasn't trashed and there weren't two dead men sitting behind a screen of bushes on the path down to the lake, stiffening as the twilight turned to dark around them.

She had spoken with Fred Evans herself since her last call, she said, and she was convinced he either knew something or suspected something about the fire he didn't want to tell them. Mort tried to soothe her, and thought he succeeded to some degree, but he was worried himself. If Shooter hadn't started the fire -and Mort felt inclined to believe the man had been telling the truth about that -then it must have been raw coincidence ... right?

He didn't know if it was right or not.

'Mort, I've been so worried about you,' she said suddenly.

That snapped him back from his thoughts. 'Me? I'm okay.'

'Are you sure? When I saw you yesterday, I thought you looked ... strained.' She paused. 'In fact, I thought you looked like you did before you had the ... you know.'

'Amy, I did not have a nervous breakdown.'

'Well, no,' she said quickly. 'But you know what I mean. When the movie people were being so awful about The Delacourt Family.'

That had been one of the bitterest experiences of Mort's life. Paramount had optioned the book for \$75,000 on a pick-up price Of \$750,000 - damned big money. And they had been on the verge of exercising their option when someone had turned up an old script in the files, something called The HomeTeam, which was enough like The Delacourt Family to open up potential legal problems. It was the

only time in his career - before this nightmare, anyway -when he had been exposed to the possibility of a plagiarism charge. The execs had ended up letting the option lapse at the eleventh hour. Mort still did not know if they had been really worried about plagiarism or had simply had second thoughts about his novel's film potential. If they really had been worried, he didn't know how such a bunch of pansies could make any movies. Herb Creekmore had obtained a copy of the Home Team screenplay, and Mort had seen only the most casual similarity. Amy agreed.

The fuss happened just as he was reaching a dead end on a novel he had wanted desperately to write. There had been a short PR tour for the paperback version of *The Delacourt Family* at the same time. All of that at once had put him under a great deal of strain.

But he had not had a nervous breakdown.

'I'm okay,' he insisted again, speaking gently. He had discovered an amazing and rather touching thing about Amy some years before: if you spoke to her gently enough, she was apt to believe you about almost anything. He had often thought that, if it had been a species-wide trait, like showing your teeth to indicate rage or amusement, wars would have ceased millennia ago.

'Are you sure, Mort?'

'Yes. Call me if you hear any more from our insurance friend.'

'I will.'

He paused. 'Are you at Ted's?'

'Yes.'

'How do you feel about him, these days?'

She hesitated, then said simply: 'I love him.'

'Oh.'

'I didn't go with other men,' she said suddenly. 'I've always wanted to tell you that. I didn't go with other men. But Ted ... he looked past your name and saw me, Mort. He saw me.'

'You mean I didn't.'

'You did when you were here,' she said. Her voice sounded small and forlorn. 'But you were gone so much.'

His eyes widened and he was instantly ready to do battle. Righteous battle. 'What? I haven't been on tour since The Delacourt Family! And that was a short one!'

'I don't want to argue with you, Mort,' she said softly. 'That part should be over. All I'm trying to say is that, even when you were here, you were gone a lot. You had your own lover, you know. Your work was your lover.' Her voice was steady, but he sensed tears buried deep inside it. 'How I hated that bitch, Mort. She was prettier than me, smarter than me, more fun than me. How could I compete?'

'Blame it all on me, why not?' he asked her, dismayed to find himself on the edge of tears. 'What did you want me to do? Become a goddam plumber? We would have been poor and I would have been unemployed. There was nothing else I could fucking do, don't you understand that? There was nothing else I could do!' He had hoped the tears were over, at least for awhile, but here they were. Who had rubbed this horrible magic lamp again? Had it been him or her this time?

'I'm not blaming you. There's blame for me, too. You never would have found us ... the way you did ... if I hadn't been weak and cowardly. It wasn't Ted; Ted wanted us to go to you and tell you together. He kept asking. And I kept putting him off. I told him I wasn't sure. I told myself I still loved you, that things could go back to the way they were ... but things never do, I guess. I'll -' She caught her breath, and Mort realized she was crying, too. 'I'll never forget the look on your face when you opened the door of that motel room. I'll carry that to my grave.'

Good! he wanted to cry out at her. Good! Because you only had to see it! I had to wear it!

'You knew my love,' he said unsteadily. 'I never hid her from you. You knew from the start.'

'But I never knew,' she said, 'how deep her embrace could be.'

'Well, cheer up,' Mort said. 'She seems to have left me now.'

Amy was weeping. 'Mort, Mort - I only want you to live and be happy. Can't you see that? Can't you do that?'

What he had seen was one of her bare shoulders touching one of Ted Milner's bare shoulders. He had seen their eyes, wide and frightened, and Ted's hair stuck up in an Alfa corkscrew. He thought of telling her this - of trying, anyway -and let it go. It was enough. They had hurt each other enough. Another time, perhaps, they could go at it again. He wished she hadn't said that thing about the nervous breakdown, though. He had not had a nervous breakdown.

'Amy, I think I ought to go.'

'Yes - both of us. Ted's out showing a house, but he'll be back soon. I have to put some dinner together.'

'I'm sorry about the argument.'

'Will you call if you need me? I'm still worried.'

'Yes,' he said, and said goodbye, and hung up. He stood there by the telephone for a moment, thinking he would surely burst into tears. But it passed. That was perhaps the real horror.

It passed.

39

The steadily falling rain made him feel listless and stupid. He made a little fire in the woodstove, drew a chair over, and tried to read the current issue of Harper's, but he kept nodding off and then jerking awake again as his chin dropped, squeezing his windpipe and producing a snore. I should have bought some cigarettes today, he thought. A few smokes would have kept me awake. But he hadn't bought any smokes, and he wasn't really sure they would have kept him awake, anyway. He wasn't just tired; he was suffering from shock.

At last he walked over to the couch, adjusted the pillows, and lay back. Next to his cheek, cold rain spickle-spackled against the dark glass.

Only once, he thought. I only did it once. And then he fell deeply asleep.

40

In his dream, he was in the world's biggest classroom.

The walls stretched up for miles. Each desk was a mesa, the gray tiles the endless plain which swept among them. The clock on the wall was a huge cold sun. The door to the hallway was shut, but Morton Rainey could read the words on the pebbled glass:

HOME TEAM WRITING ROOM

PROF. DELLACOURT

They spelled it wrong, Mort thought, too many L's.

But another voice told him this was not so.

Mort was standing on the giant blackboard's wide chalk gutter, stretching up. He had a piece of chalk the size of a baseball bat in his hand. He wanted to drop his arm, which ached ferociously, but he could not. Not until he had written the same sentence on the blackboard five hundred times: I will not copy from John Kintner. He must have written it four hundred times already, he thought, but four hundred wasn't enough. Stealing a man's work when a man's work was really all he had was unforgivable. So he would have to write and write and write, and never mind the voice in his mind trying to tell him that this was a dream, that his right arm ached for other reasons.

The chalk squeaked monstrously. The dust, acrid and somehow familiar - so familiar - sifted down into his face. At last he could go on no longer. His arm dropped to his side like a bag filled with lead shot. He turned on the chalk gutter, and saw that only one of the desks in the huge classroom was occupied. The occupant was a young man with a country kind of face; a face you expected to see in the north forty behind the ass end of a mule. His pale-brown hair stuck up in spikes from his head. His country-cousin hands, seemingly all

knuckles, were folded on the desk before him. He was looking at Mort with pale, absorbed eyes.

I know you, Mort said in the dream.

That's right, pilgrim, John Kintner said in his bald, drawling Southern accent. You just put me together wrong. Now keep on writing. It's not five hundred. It's five thousand.

Mort started to turn, but his foot slipped on the edge of the gutter, and suddenly he was spilling outward, screaming into the dry, chalky air, and John Kintner was laughing, and he

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- woke up on the floor with his head almost underneath the rogue coffee table, clutching at the carpet and crying out in high-pitched, whinnying shrieks.

He was at Tashmore Lake. Not in some weird, cyclopean classroom but at the lake ... and dawn was coming up misty in the east.

I'm all right. It was just a dream and I'm all right.

But he wasn't. Because it hadn't just been a dream. John Kintner had been real. How in God's name could he have forgotten John Kintner?

Mort had gone to college at Bates, and had majored in creative writing. Later, when he spoke to classes of aspiring writers (a chore he ducked whenever possible), he told them that such a major was probably the worst mistake a man or woman could make, if he or she wanted to write fiction for a living.

'Get a job with the post office,' he'd say. 'It worked for Faulkner.' And they would laugh. They liked to listen to him, and he supposed he was fairly good at keeping them entertained. That seemed very important, since he doubted that he or anyone else could teach them how to write creatively. Still, he was always glad to get out at the end of the class or seminar or workshop. The kids made him nervous. He supposed John Kintner was the reason why.

Had Kintner been from Mississippi? Mort couldn't remember, but he didn't think so. But he had been from some enclave of the Deep South all the same - Alabama, Louisiana, maybe the toolies of north Florida. He didn't know for sure. Bates College had been a long time ago, and he hadn't thought of John Kintner, who had suddenly dropped out one day for reasons known only to himself, in years.

That's not true. You thought about him last night.

Dreamed about him, you mean, Mort corrected himself quickly, but that hellish little voice inside would not let it go.

No, earlier than that. You thought about him while you were talking to Shooter on the telephone.

He didn't want to think about this. He wouldn't think about this. John Kintner was in the past; John Kintner had nothing to do with what was happening now. He got up and walked unsteadily toward the kitchen in the milky, early light to make strong coffee. Lots and lots of strong coffee. Except the hellish little voice wouldn't let him be. Mort looked at Amy's set of kitchen knives hanging from their magnetized steel runners and thought that if he could cut that little voice out, he would try the operation immediately.

You were thinking that you rocked the man - that you finally rocked him. You were thinking that the story had become the central issue again, the story and the accusation of plagiarism. Shooter treating you like a goddam college kid was the issue. Like a goddam college kid. Like a

'Shut up,' Mort said hoarsely. 'Just shut the fuck up.'

The voice did, but he found himself unable to stop thinking about John Kintner anyway.

As he measured coffee with a shaking hand, he thought of his constant, strident protestations that he hadn't plagiarized Shooter's story, that he had never plagiarized anything.

But he had, of course.

Once.

Just once.

'But that was so long ago,' he whispered. 'And it doesn't have anything to do with this.'

It might be true, but that did not stop his thoughts.

42

He had been a junior, and it was spring semester. The creative-writing class of which he was a part was focussing on the short story that semester. The teacher was a fellow named Richard Perkins, Jr, who had written two novels which had gotten very good reviews and sold very few copies. Mort had tried one, and thought the good reviews and bad sales had the same root cause: the books were incomprehensible. But the man hadn't been a bad teacher - he had kept them entertained, at least.

There had been about a dozen students in the class. One of them was John Kintner. Kintner was only a freshman, but he had gotten special permission to take the class. And had deserved it, Mort supposed. Southern-fried cracker or not, that sucker had been good.

The course required each of them to write either six short stories or three longer ones. Each week, Perkins dittoed off the ones he thought would make for the liveliest discussion and handed them out at the end of the class. The students were supposed, to come the following week prepared to discuss and criticize. It was the usual way to run such a class. And one week Perkins had given them a story from John Kintner. It had been called ... What had it been called?

Mort had turned on the water to fill the coffeemaker, but now he only stood, looking absently out at the fog beyond the window-wall and listening to the running water.

You know damned well what It was called. 'Secret Window, Secret Garden.'

'But it wasn't!' he yelled petulantly to the empty house. He thought furiously, determined to shut the hellish little voice up once and for all ... and suddenly it came to him.

“Crowfoot Mile!” he shrieked. ‘The name of the story was “Crowfoot Mile,” and it doesn’t have anything to do with anything!’

Except that was not quite true, either, and he didn’t really need the little, voice hunkered down someplace in the middle of his aching head to point out the fact.

Kintner had turned in three or maybe four stories before disappearing to wherever he had disappeared to (if asked to guess, Mort would have guessed Vietnam - it was where most of them had disappeared to at the end of the sixties -the young men, anyhow). ‘Crowfoot Mile’ hadn’t been the best of Kintner’s stories ... but it had been good. Kintner was clearly the best writer in Richard Perkins, Jr’s class. Perkins treated the boy almost as an equal, and in Mort Rainey’s not-so-humble estimation, Perkins had been right to do so, because he thought Kintner had been quite a bit better than Richard Perkins, Jr. As far as that went, Mort believed he had been better.

But had he been better than Kintner?

‘Huh-uh,’ he said under his breath as he turned on the coffeemaker. ‘I was second.’

Yes. He had been second, and he had hated that. He knew that most students taking writing courses were just marking time, pursuing a whim before giving up childish things and settling into a study of whatever it was that would be their real life’s work. The creative writing most of them would do in later life would consist of contributing items to the Community Calendar pages of their local newspapers or writing advertising copy for Bright Blue Breeze dish detergent. Mort had come into Perkins’s class confidently expecting to be the best, because it had never been any other way with him. For that reason, John Kintner had come as an unpleasant shock.

He remembered trying to talk to the boy once ... but Kintner, who contributed in class only when asked, had proved to be almost inarticulate. When he spoke out loud, he mumbled and stumbled like a poor-white sharecropper’s boy whose education had stopped at

the fourth-grade level. His writing was the only voice he had, apparently.

And you stole it.

'Shut up,' he muttered. 'Just shut up.'

You were second best and you hated it. You were glad when he was gone, because then you could be first again. Just like you always had been.

Yes. True. And a year later, when he was preparing to graduate, he had been cleaning out the back closet of the sleazy Lewiston apartment he had shared with two other students, and had come upon a pile of offprints from Perkins's writing course. Only one of Kintner's stories had been in the stack. It happened to be 'Crowfoot Mile.'

He remembered sitting on the seedy, beer-smelling rug of his bedroom, reading the story, and the old jealousy had come over him again.

He threw the other offprints away, but he had taken that one with him ... for reasons he wasn't sure he wanted to examine closely.

As a sophomore, Mort had submitted a story to a literary magazine called Aspen Quarterly. It came back with a note which said the readers had found it quite good 'although the ending seemed rather jejune.' The note, which Mort found both patronizing and tremendously exciting, invited him to submit other material.

Over the next two years, he had submitted four more stories. None were accepted, but a personal note accompanied each of the rejection slips. Mort went through an unpublished writer's agony of optimism alternating with deep pessimism. He had days when he was sure it was only a matter of time before he cracked Aspen Quarterly. And he had days when he was positive that the entire editorial staff - pencil-necked geeks to a man - was only playing with

him, teasing him the way a man might tease a hungry dog by holding a piece of meat up over its head and then jerking the scrap out of reach when it leaps. He sometimes imagined one of them holding up one of his manuscripts, fresh out of its manila envelope, and shouting: 'Here's another one from that putz in Maine! Who wants to write the letter this time?' And all of them cracking up, perhaps even rolling around on the floor underneath their posters of Joan Baez and Moby Grape at the Fillmore.

Most days, Mort had not indulged in this sort of sad paranoia. He understood that he was good, and that it was only a matter of time. And that summer, working as a waiter in a Rockland restaurant, he thought of the story by John Kintner. He thought it was probably still in his trunk, kicking around at the bottom. He had a sudden idea. He would change the title and submit 'Crowfoot Mile' to Aspen Quarterly under his own name! He remembered thinking it would be a fine joke on them, although, looking back now, he could not imagine what the joke would have been.

He did remember that he'd had no intention of publishing the story under his own name ... or, if he had had such an intention on some deeper level, he hadn't been aware of it. In the unlikely event of an acceptance, he would withdraw the story, saying he wanted to work on it some more. And if they

rejected it, he could at least take some cheer in the thought that John Kintner wasn't good enough for Aspen Quarterly, either.

So he had sent the story.

And they had accepted it.

And he had let them accept it.

And they sent him a check for twenty-five dollars. 'An honorarium,' the accompanying letter had called it.

And then they had published it.

And Morton Rainey, overcome by belated guilt at what he had done, had cashed the check and had stuffed the bills into the poor box of St Catherine's in Augusta one day.

But guilt hadn't been all he'd felt. Oh no.

Mort sat at the kitchen table with his head propped in one hand, waiting for the coffee to perk. His head ached. He didn't want to be thinking about John Kintner and John Kintner's story. What he had done with 'Crowfoot Mile' had been one of the most shameful events of his life; was it really surprising that he had buried it for so many years? He wished he could bury it again now. This, after all, was going to be a big day - maybe the biggest of his life. Maybe even the last of his life. He should be thinking about going to the post office. He should be thinking about his confrontation with Shooter, but his mind would not let that sad old time alone.

When he'd seen the magazine, the actual magazine with his name in it above John Kintner's story, he felt like a man waking from a horrible episode of sleepwalking, an unconscious outing in which he has done some irrevocable thing. How had he let it go so far? It was supposed to have been a joke, for Christ's sake, just a little giggle

But he had let it go so far. The story had been published, and there were at least a dozen other people in the world who knew it wasn't his - including Kintner himself. And if one of them happened to pick up Aspen Quarterly

He himself told no one - of course. He simply waited, sick with terror. He slept and ate very little that late summer and early fall; he lost weight and dark shadows brushed themselves under his eyes. His heart began to triphammer every time the telephone rang. If the call was for him, he would approach the instrument with dragging feet and cold sweat on his brow, sure it would be Kintner, and the first words out of Kintner's mouth would be, You stole my story, and something has got to be done about it. I think I'll start by telling everybody what kind of thief you are.

The most incredible thing was this: he had known better. He had known the possible consequences of such an act for a young man who hoped to make a career of writing. It was like playing Russian roulette with a bazooka. Yet still ... still ...

But as that fall slipped uneventfully past, he began to relax a little. The issue of Aspen Quarterly had been replaced by a new issue. The issue was no longer lying out on tables in library periodical rooms all across the country; it had been tucked away into the stacks or transferred to microfiche. It might still cause trouble - he bleakly supposed he would have to live with that possibility for the rest of his life - but in most cases, out of sight meant out of mind.

Then, in November of that year, a letter from Aspen Quarterly came.

Mort held it in his hands, looking at his name on the envelope, and began to shake all over. His eyes filled with some liquid that felt too hot and corrosive to be tears, and the envelope first doubled and then trebled.

Caught. They caught me. They'll want me to respond to a letter they have from Kintner ... or Perkins ... or one of the others in the class ... I'm caught.

He had thought of suicide then - quite calmly and quite rationally. His mother had sleeping pills. He would use those. Somewhat eased by this prospect, he tore the envelope open and pulled out a single sheet of stationery. He held it folded in one hand for a long moment and considered burning it without even looking at it. He wasn't sure he could stand to see the accusation held baldly up in front of him. He thought it might drive him mad.

Go ahead, dammit - look. The least you can do is look at the consequences. You may not be able to stand up to them, but you can by-God look at them.

He unfolded the letter.

Dear Mort Rainey,

Your short story, 'Eye of the Crow,' was extremely well received here. I'm sorry this follow-up letter has been so slow in coming, but, frankly, we expected to hear from you. You have been so faithful in your submissions over the years that your silence now that you have finally succeeded in 'making it' is a little perplexing. If there was anything about the way your story was handled - typesetting, design, placement, *etc.* - that you didn't like, we hope you'll bring it up. Meantime, how about another tale?

Respectfully yours,

Charlie

Charles Palmer

Assistant Editor

Mort had read this letter twice, and then began to peal hoarse bursts of laughter at the house, which was luckily empty. He had heard of side-splitting laughter, and this was surely it - he felt that if he didn't stop soon, his sides really would split, and send his guts spewing out all over the floor. He had been ready to kill himself with his mother's sleeping pills, and they wanted to know if he was upset with the way the story had been typeset! He had expected to find that his career was ruined even before it was fairly begun, and they wanted more! More!

He laughed - howled, actually - until his side-splitting laughter turned to hysterical tears. Then he sat on the sofa, reread Charles Palmer's letter, and cried until he laughed again. At last he had gone into his room and lain down with the pillows arranged behind him just the way he liked, and then he had fallen asleep.

He had gotten away with it. That was the upshot. He had gotten away with it, and he had never done anything even remotely like it

again, and it had all happened about a thousand years ago, and so why had it come back to haunt him now?

He didn't know, but he intended to stop thinking about it.

'And right now, too,' he told the empty room, and walked briskly over to the coffeemaker, trying to ignore his aching head.

You know why you're thinking about it now.

'Shut up.' He spoke in a conversational tone which was rather cheery ... but his hands were shaking as he picked up the Silex.

Some things you can't hide forever. You might be ill, Mort.

'Shut up, I'm warning you,' he said in his cheery conversational voice.

You might be very ill. In fact, you might be having a nervous br...

'Shut up!' he cried, and threw the Silex as hard as he could. It sailed over the counter, flew across the room, turning over and over as it went, crunched into the window-wall, shattered, and fell dead on the floor. He looked at the window-wall and saw a long, silvery crack zig-zagging up to the top. It started at the place where the Silex had impacted. He felt very much like a man who might have a similar crack running right through the middle of his brain.

But the voice had shut up.

He walked stolidly into the bedroom, got the alarm clock, and walked back into the living room. He set the alarm for ten-thirty as he walked. At ten-thirty he was going to go to the post office, pick up his Federal Express package, and go stolidly about the task of putting this nightmare behind him.

In the meantime, though, he would sleep.

He would sleep on the couch, where he had always slept best.

'I am not having a nervous breakdown,' he whispered to the little voice, but the little voice was having none of the argument. Mort thought that he might have frightened the little voice. He hoped so, because the little voice had certainly frightened him.

His eyes found the silvery crack in the window-wall and traced it dully. He thought of using the chambermaid's key. How the room had been dim, and it had taken his eyes a moment to adjust. Their naked shoulders. Their frightened eyes. He had been shouting, He couldn't remember what - and had never dared to ask Amy - but it must have been some scary shit, judging from the look in their eyes.

If I was ever going to have a nervous breakdown, he thought, looking at the lightning-bolt senselessness of the crack, it would have been then. Hell, that letter from Aspen Quarterly was nothing compared to opening a motel-room door and seeing your wife with another man, a slick real-estate agent from some shitsplat little town in Tennessee

Mort closed his eyes, and when he opened them again it was because another voice was clamoring. This one belonged to the alarm clock. The fog had cleared, the sun had come out, and it was time to go to the post office.

43

On the way, he became suddenly sure that Federal Express would have come and gone ... and Juliet would stand there at the window with her bare face hanging out and shake her head and tell him there was nothing for him, sorry. And his proof? It would be gone like smoke. This feeling was irrational - Herb was a cautious man, one who did not make promises that couldn't be kept - but it was almost too strong to deny.

He had to force himself out of the car, and the walk from the door of the post office to the window where Juliet Stoker stood sorting mail seemed at least a thousand miles long.

When he got there, he tried to speak and no words came out. His lips moved, but his throat was too dry to make the sounds. Juliet looked up at him, then took a step back. She looked alarmed. Not, however, as alarmed as Amy and Ted had looked when he opened the motel-room door and pointed the gun at them.

'Mr Rainey? Are you all right?'

He cleared his throat. 'Sorry, Juliet. My throat kind of double-clutched on me for a second.'

'You're very pale,' she said, and he could hear in her voice that tone so many of the Tashmore residents used when they spoke to him - it was a sort of pride, but it held an undertaste of irritation and condescension, as though he was a child prodigy who needed special care and feeding.

'Something I ate last night, I guess,' he said. 'Did Federal Express leave anything for me?'

'No, not a thing.'

He gripped the underside of the counter desperately, and for a moment thought he would faint, although he had understood almost immediately that that was not what she had said.

‘Pardon me?’

She had already turned away; her sturdy country bum was presented to him as she shuffled through some packages on the floor.

‘Just the one thing, I said,’ she replied, and then turned around and slid

the package across the counter to him. He saw the return address was EQMM in Pennsylvania, and Pelt relief course through him. It felt like cool water pouring down a dry throat.

‘Thank you.’

‘Welcome. You know, the post office would have a cow if they knew we handle that Federal Express man’s mail.’

‘Well, I certainly appreciate it,’ Mort said. Now that he had the magazine, he felt a need to get away, to get back to the house. This need was so strong it was almost elemental. He didn’t know why - it was an hour and a quarter until noon -but it was there. In his distress and confusion, he actually thought of giving Juliet a tip to shut her up ... and that would have caused her soul, Yankee to its roots, to rise up in a clamor.

‘You won’t tell them, will you?’ she asked archly.

‘No way,’ he said, managing a grin.

‘Good,’ Juliet Stoker said, and smiled. ‘Because I saw what you did.’

He stopped by the door. ‘Pardon me?’

'I said they'd shoot me if you did,' she said, and looked closely at his face. 'You ought to go home and lie down, Mr Rainey. You really don't look well at all.'

I feel like I spent the last three days lying down, Juliet - the time I didn't spend hitting things, that is.

'Well,' he said, 'maybe that's not such a bad idea. I still feel weak.'

'There's a virus going around. You probably caught it.'

Then the two women from Camp Wigmore - the ones everybody in town suspected of being lesbians, albeit discreet ones - came in, and Mort made good his escape. He sat in the Buick with the blue package on his lap, not liking the way everybody kept saying he looked sick, liking the way his mind had been working even less.

It doesn't matter. It's almost over.

He started to pull the envelope open, and then the ladies from Camp Wigmore came back out and looked at him. They put their heads together. One of them smiled. The other laughed out loud. And Mort suddenly decided he would wait until he got back home.

44

He parked the Buick around the side of the house, in its customary place, turned off the ignition ... and then a soft grayness came over his vision. When it drew back, he felt strange and frightened. Was something wrong with him, then? Something physical?

No - he was just under strain, he decided.

He heard something - or thought he did - and looked around quickly.

Nothing there. Get hold of your nerves, he told himself shakily. That's really all you have to do -just get hold of your motherfucking nerves.

And then he thought: I did have a gun. That day. But it was unloaded. I told them that, later. Amy believed me. I don't know about Milner, but Amy did, and

Was it, Mort? Was it really unloaded?

He thought of the crack in the window-wall again, senseless silver lightning-bolt zig-zagging right up through the middle of things. That's how it happens, he thought. That's how it happens in a person's life.

Then he looked down at the Federal Express package again. This was what he should be thinking about, not Amy and Mr Ted Kiss-My-Ass from Shooter's Knob, Tennessee, but this.

The flap was already half-open - everyone was careless these days. He pulled it up and shook the magazine out into his lap. Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, the logo said in bright red letters. Beneath that, in much smaller type, June, 1980. And below that, the names of some of the writers featured in the issue. Edward D. Hoch. Ruth Rendell. Ed McBain. Patricia Highsmith. Lawrence Block.

His name wasn't on the cover.

Well, of course not. He was scarcely known as a writer at all then, and certainly not as a writer of mystery stories; 'Sowing Season' had been a oneer. His name would have meant nothing to regular readers of the magazine, so the editors would not have put it on. He turned the cover back.

There was no contents page beneath.

The contents page had been cut out.

He thumbed frantically through the magazine, dropping it once and then picking it up with a little cry. He didn't find the excision the first time, but on the second pass, he realized that pages 83 to 97 were gone.

'You cut it out!' he screamed. He screamed so loudly that his eyeballs bulged from their sockets. He began to bring his fists down on the steering wheel of the Buick, again and again and again. The horn burped and blared. 'You cut it out, you son of a bitch! How did you do that? You cut it out! You cut it out! You cut it out!'

45

He was halfway to the house before the deadly little voice again wondered how Shooter could have done that. The envelope had come Federal Express from Pennsylvania, and Juliet had taken possession of it, so how, how in God's name

He stopped.

Good, Juliet had said. Good, because I saw what you did.

That was it; that explained it. Juliet was in on it. Except -

Except Juliet had been in Tashmore since forever.

Except that hadn't been what she said. That had only been his mind. A little paranoid flatulence.

'He's doing it, though,' Mort said. He went into the house and once he was inside the door, he threw the magazine as hard as he could. It flew like a startled bird, pages riffling, and landed on the floor with a slap. 'Oh yeah, you bet, you bet your fucking ass, he's doing it. But I don't have to wait around for him.!' -'

He saw Shooter's hat. Shooter's hat was lying on the floor in front of the door to his study.

Mort stood where he was for a moment, heart thundering in his ears, and then walked over to the stove in great cartoon tippy-toe steps. He pulled the poker from the little clutch of tools, wincing when the poker's tip clanged softly against the ash-shovel. He took the poker and walked carefully back to the closed door again, holding the poker as he had held it before crashing into the bathroom. He had to skirt the magazine he'd thrown on the way.

He reached the door and stood in front of it.

'Shooter?'

There was no answer.

'Shooter, you better come out under your own power! If I have to come in and get you, you'll never walk out of anyplace under your own power again !'

There was still no answer.

He stood a moment longer, nerving himself (but not really sure he had the nerve), and then twisted the knob. He hit the door with his shoulder and barrelled in, screaming, waving the poker

And the room was empty.

But Shooter had been here, all right. Yes. The VDT unit of Mort's word cruncher lay on the floor, its screen a shattered staring eye. Shooter had killed it. On the desk where the VDT had stood was an old Royal typewriter. The steel surfaces of this dinosaur were dull and dusty. Propped on the keyboard was a manuscript. Shooter's manuscript, the one he had left under a rock on the porch a million years ago.

It was 'Secret Window, Secret Garden.'

Mort dropped the poker on the floor. He walked toward the typewriter as if mesmerized and picked up the manuscript. He shuffled slowly through its pages, and came to understand why Mrs Gavin had been so sure it was his ... sure enough to rescue it from the trash. Maybe she hadn't known consciously, but her eye had recognized the irregular typeface. And why not? She had seen manuscripts which looked like 'Secret Window, Secret Garden' for years. The Wang word processor and the System Five laser printer were relative newcomers. For most of his writing career he had used this old Royal.

The years had almost worn it out, and it was a sad case now - when you typed on it, it produced letters as crooked as an old man's teeth.

But it had been here all the time, of course - tucked away at the back of the study closet behind piles of old galleys and manuscripts ... what editors called 'foul matter.' Shooter must have stolen it, typed his manuscript on it, and then sneaked it back when Mort was out at the post office. Sure. That made sense, didn't it?

No, Mort. That doesn't make sense. Would you like to do something that does make sense? Call the police, then. That makes sense. Call the police and tell them to come down here and lock you up. Tell them to do it fast, before you can do any more damage. Tell them to do it before you kill anyone else.

Mort dropped the pages with a great wild cry and they seesawed lazily down around him as all of the truth rushed in on him at once like a jagged bolt of silver lightning.

46

There was no John Shooter.

There never had been.

‘No,’ Mort said. He was striding back and forth through the big living room again. His headache came and went in waves of pain. ‘No, I do not accept that. I do not accept that at all.’

But his acceptance or rejection didn’t make much difference. All the pieces of the puzzle were there, and when he saw the old Royal typewriter, they began to fly together. Now, fifteen minutes later, they were still flying together, and he seemed to have no power to will them apart.

The picture which kept coming back to him was of the gas jockey in Mechanic Falls, using a squeegee to wash his windshield. A sight he had never expected to witness again in his lifetime. Later, he had assumed that the kid had given him a little extra service because he had recognized Mort and liked Mort’s books. Maybe that was so, but the windshield had needed washing. Summer was gone, but plenty of stuff still splatted on your windshield if you drove far enough and fast enough on the back roads. And he must have used the back roads. He must have sped up to Derry and back again in record time, only stopping long enough to burn down his house. He hadn’t even stopped long enough to get gas on the way back. After all, he’d had places to go and cats to kill, hadn’t he? Busy, busy, busy.

He stopped in the middle of the floor and whirled to stare at the window wall. ‘If I did all that, why can’t I remember?’ he asked the silvery crack in the glass. ‘Why can’t I remember even now?’

He didn’t know ... but he did know where the name had come from, didn’t he? One half from the Southern man whose story he had stolen in college; one half from the man who had stolen his wife. It was like some bizarre literary in-joke.

She says she loves him, Mort. She says she loves him now.

'Fuck that. A man who sleeps with another man's wife is a thief. And the woman is his accomplice.'

He looked defiantly at the crack.

The crack said nothing.

Three years ago, Mort had published a novel called The Delacourt Family. The return address on Shooter's story had been Dellacourt, Mississippi. It -

He suddenly ran for the encyclopedias in the study, slipping and almost falling in the mess of pages strewn on the floor in his hurry. He pulled out the M volume and at last found the entry for Mississippi. He ran a trembling finger down the list of towns - it took up one entire page - hoping against hope.

It was no good.

There was no Dellacourt or Delacourt, Mississippi.

He thought of looking for Perkinsburg, the town where Shooter had told him he'd picked up a paperback copy of Everybody Drops the Dime before getting on the Greyhound bus, and then simply closed the encyclopedia. Why bother? There might be a Perkinsburg in Mississippi, but it would mean nothing if there was.

The name of the novelist who'd taught the class in which Mort had met John Kintner had been Richard Perkins, Jr. That was where the name had come from.

Yes, but I don't remember any of this, so how -?

Oh, Mort, the small voice mourned. You're very sick. You're a very sick man.

'I don't accept that,' he said again, horrified by the wavery weakness of his voice, but what other choice was there? Hadn't he even thought once that it was almost as if he were doing things, taking irrevocable steps, in his sleep?

You killed two men, the little voice whispered. You killed Tom because he knew you were alone that day, and you killed Greg so he wouldn't find out for sure. If you had just killed Tom, Greg would have called the police. And you didn't want that, COULDN'T have that. Not until this horrible story you've been telling is all finished. You were so sore when you got up yesterday. So stiff and sore. But it wasn't just from breaking in the bathroom door and trashing the shower stall, was it? You were a lot busier than that. You had Tom and Greg to take care of. And you were right about how the vehicles got moved around ... but You were the one who jogged all the way back to Tom's to get the Buick, and You were the one who called up Sonny Trotts and pretended to be Tom. A man who just got into town from Mississippi wouldn't know Sonny was a little deaf, but You would. You killed them, Mort, you **KILLED** those men!

'I do not accept that I did!' he shrieked. 'This is all just Part of his plan! This

I do not

is just part of his little game! His little mind-game! And I do not accept...'

Stop, the little voice whispered inside his head, and Mort stopped.

For a moment there was utter silence in both worlds: the one inside his head, and the one outside of it.

And, after an interval the little voice asked quietly: Why did You do It, Mort? This whole elaborate and homicidal episode? Shooter kept saying he wanted a story, but there is no Shooter. What do You want, Mort? What did you create John Shooter FOR?

Then, from outside, came the sound of a car rolling down the driveway. Mort looked at his watch and saw that the hands were standing straight up at noon. A blaze of triumph and relief roared through him like flames shooting up the neck of a chimney. That he had the magazine but still no proof did not matter. That Shooter might kill him did not matter. He could die happily, just knowing that there was a John Shooter and that he himself was not responsible for the horrors he had been considering.

'He's here!' he screamed joyfully, and ran out of the study. He waved his hands wildly above his head, and actually cut a little caper as he rounded the corner and came into the hall.

He stopped, looking out at the driveway past the sloping roof of the garbage cabinet where Bump's body had been nailed up. His hands dropped slowly to his sides. Dark horror stole over his brain. No, not over it; it came down, as if some merciless hand were pulling a shade. The last piece fell into place. It had occurred to him moments before in the study that he might have created a fantasy assassin because he lacked the courage to commit suicide. Now he realized that Shooter had told the truth when he said he would never kill Mort.

It wasn't John Shooter's imaginary station wagon but Amy's nonsense little Subaru which was just now coming to a stop. Amy was behind the wheel. She had stolen his love, and a woman who would steal your love when your love was really all you had to give was not much of a woman.

He loved her, all the same.

It was Shooter who hated her. It was Shooter who meant to kill her and then bury her down by the lake near Bump. where she would before long be a mystery to both of them.

'Go away, Amy,' he whispered in the palsied voice of a very old man. 'Go away before it's too late.'

But Amy was getting out of the car, and as she closed the door behind her, the hand pulled the shade in Mort's head all the way down and he was in darkness.

47

Amy tried the door and found it unlocked. She stepped in, started to call for Mort, and then didn't. She looked around, wide-eyed and startled.

The place was a mess. The trash can was full and had overflowed onto the floor. A few sluggish autumn flies were crawling in and out of an aluminum pot-pie dish that had been kicked into the corner. She could smell stale cooking and musty air. She thought she could even smell spoiled food.

'Mort?'

There was no answer. She walked further into the house, taking small steps, not entirely sure she wanted to look at the rest of the place. Mrs Gavin had been in only three days ago - how had things gotten so out of hand since then? What had happened?

She had been worried about Mort during the entire last year of their marriage, but she had been even more worried since the divorce. Worried, and, of course, guilty. She held part of the blame for herself. and supposed she always would. But Mort had never been strong ... and his greatest weakness was his stubborn (and sometimes almost hysterical) refusal to recognize the fact. This morning he had sounded like a man on the point of suicide. And the only reason she had heeded his admonition not to bring Ted was because she thought the sight of him might set Mort off if he really was poised on the edge of such an act.

The thought of murder had never crossed her mind, nor did it do so now. Even when he had brandished the gun at them that horrible afternoon at the motel, she had not been afraid. Not of that. Mort was no killer.

'Mort? M -'

She came around the kitchen counter and the word died. She stared at the big living room with wide, stunned eyes. Paper was littered everywhere. It looked as if Mort must at some point have exhumed every copy of every manuscript he had in his desk drawers and in his files and strewn the pages about in here like confetti at some black New Year's Eve celebration. The table was heaped with dirty dishes. The Silex was lying shattered on the floor by the window-wall, which was cracked.

And everywhere, everywhere, everywhere was one word. The word was SHOOTER.

SHOOTER had been written on the walls in colored chalks he must have taken from her drawer of art supplies. SHOOTER was sprayed on the window twice in what looked like dried whipped cream - and yes, there was the Redi-Whip pressure-can, lying discarded under the stove. SHOOTER was written over and over on the kitchen counters in ink, and on the wooden support posts of the deck on the far side of the house in pencil - a neat column like adding that went down in a straight line and said SHOOTER SHOOTER SHOOTER SHOOTER.

Worst of all, it had been carved into the polished cherrywood surface of the table in great jagged letters three feet high, like a grotesque declaration of love: SHOOTER.

The screwdriver he had used to do this last was lying on a chair nearby. There was red stuff on its steel shaft - stain from the cherrywood, she assumed.

'Mort?' she whispered, looking around.

Now she was frightened that she would find him dead by his own hand. And where? Why, in his study, of course. Where else? He had lived all the most important parts of his life in there; surely he had chosen to die there.

Although she had no wish to go in, no wish to be the one to find him, her feet carried her in that direction all the same. As she went, she kicked the issue of EQMM Herb Creekmore had had sent out of her way. She did not look down. She reached the study door and pushed it slowly open.

Mort stood in front of his old Royal typewriter; the screen-and-keyboard unit of his word processor lay overturned in a bouquet of glass on the floor. He looked strangely like a country preacher. It was partly the posture he had adopted, she supposed; he was standing almost primly with his hands behind his back. But most of it was the hat. The black hat, pulled down so it almost touched the tops of his ears. She thought he looked a little bit like the old man in that picture, 'American Gothic,' even though the man in the picture wasn't wearing a hat.

'Mort?' she asked. Her voice was weak and uncertain.

He made no reply, only stared at her. His eyes were grim and glittering. She had never seen Mort's eyes look this way, not even on the horrible afternoon at the motel. It was almost as if this was not Mort at all, but some stranger who looked like Mort.

She recognized the hat, though.

'Where did you find that old thing? The attic?' Her heartbeat was in her voice, making it stagger.

He must have found it in the attic. The smell of mothballs on it was strong, even from where she was standing. Mort had gotten the hat years ago, at a gift shop in Pennsylvania. They had been travelling through Amish country. She had kept a little garden at the Derry house, in the angle where the house and the study addition met. It was her garden, but Mort often went out to weed it when he was stuck for an idea. He usually wore the hat when he did this. He called it his thinking cap. She remembered him looking at himself in a mirror once when he was wearing it and joking that he ought to have a bookjacket photo taken in it. 'When I put this on,' he'd said, 'I look like a

man who belongs out in the north forty, walking plow-furrows behind a mule's ass.'

Then the hat had disappeared. It must have migrated down here and been stored. But...

'It's my hat,' he said at last in a rusty, bemused voice. 'Wasn't ever anybody else's.'

'Mort? What's wrong? What's

'You got you a wrong number, woman. Ain't no Mort here. Mort's dead.' The gimlet eyes never wavered. 'He did a lot of squirming around, but in the end he couldn't lie to himself anymore, let alone to me. I never put a hand on him, Mrs Rainey. I swear. He took the coward's way out.'

'Why are you talking that way?' Amy asked.

'This is just the way I talk,' he said with mild surprise. 'Everybody down in Miss'ippi talks this way.'

'Mort, stop!'

'Don't you understand what I said?' he asked. 'You ain't deaf, are you? He's dead. He killed himself.'

'Stop it, Mort,' she said, beginning to cry. 'You're scaring me, and I don't like it.'

'Don't matter,' he said. He took his hands out from behind his back. In one of them he held the scissors from the top drawer of the desk. He raised them. The sun had come out, and it sent a starfish glitter along the blades as he snicked them open and then closed. 'You won't be scared long.' He began walking toward her.

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For a moment she stood where she was. Mort would not kill her; if there had been killing in Mort, then surely he would have done some that day at the motel.

Then she saw the look in his eyes and understood that Mort knew that, too.

But this wasn't him.

She screamed and wheeled around and lunged for the door.

Shooter came after her, bringing the scissors down in a silver arc. He would have buried them up to the handles between her shoulderblades if his feet had not slid on the papers scattered about the hardwood floor. He fell full-length with a cry of mingled perplexity and anger. The blades stabbed down through page nine of 'Secret Window, Secret Garden' and the tips broke off. His mouth struck the floor and sprayed blood. The package of Pall Malls - the brand John Kintner had silently smoked during the breaks halfway through the writing class he and Mort Rainey had shared - shot out of his pocket and slid along the slick wood like the weight in a barroom shuffleboard game. He got up on his knees, his mouth snarling and smiling through the blood which ran over his lips and teeth.

'Won't do you no help, Mrs Rainey!' he cried, getting to his feet. He looked at the scissors, snicked them open to study the blunted tips a little better, and then tossed them impatiently aside. 'I got a place in the garden for you! I got it all picked out. You mind me, now!'

He ran out the door after her.

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Halfway across the living room, Amy took her own spill. One of her feet came down on the discarded issue of EQMM and she fell sprawling on her side, hurting her hip and right breast. She cried out.

Behind her, Shooter ran across to the table and snatched up the screwdriver he had used on the cat.

'Stay right there, and be still,' he said as she turned over on her back and stared at him with wide eyes which looked almost drugged. 'If you move around, I'm only goin to hurt you before it's over. I don't want to hurt you, missus, but I will if I have to. I've got to have something, you see. I have come all this way, and I've got to have something for my trouble.'

As he approached, Amy propped herself up on her elbows and shoved herself backward with her feet. Her hair hung in her face. Her skin was coated with sweat; she could smell it pouring out of her, hot and stinking. The face above her was the solemn, judgmental face of insanity.

'No, Mort! Please! Please, Mort

He flung himself at her, raising the screwdriver over his head and then bringing it down. Amy shrieked and rolled to the left. Pain burned a line across her hip as the screwdriver blade tore her dress and grooved her flesh. Then she was scrambling to her knees, hearing and feeling the dress shred out a long unwinding strip as she did it.

'No, ma'am,' Shooter panted. His hand closed upon her ankle. 'No, ma'am.' She looked over her shoulder and through the tangles of her hair and saw he was using his other hand to work the screwdriver out of the floor. The round-crowned black hat sat askew on his head.

He yanked the screwdriver free and drove it into her right calf.

The pain was horrid. The pain was the whole world. She screamed and kicked backward, connecting with his nose, breaking it. Shooter grunted and fell on his side, clutching at his face, and Amy got to her feet. She could hear a woman howling. It sounded like a dog howling at the moon. She supposed it wasn't a dog. She supposed it was her.

Shooter was getting to his feet. His lower face was a mask of blood. The mask split open, showing Mort Rainey's crooked front teeth. She could remember licking across those teeth with her tongue.

'Feisty one, ain't you?' he said, grinning. 'That's all right, ma'am. You go right on.'

He lunged for her.

Amy staggered backward. The screwdriver fell out of her calf and rolled across the floor. Shooter glanced at it, then lunged at her again, almost playfully. Amy grabbed one of the living-room chairs and dumped it in front of him. For a moment they only stared at each other over it . and then he snatched for the front of her dress. Amy recoiled.

'I'm about done fussin with you,' he panted.

Amy turned and bolted for the door.

He was after her at once, flailing at her back, his fingertips skating skidding down the nape of her neck, trying to close on the top of the dress, catching it, then just missing the hold which would have coiled her back to him for good.

Amy bolted past the kitchen counter and toward the back door. Her right loafer squelched and smooched on her foot. It was full of blood. Shooter was after her, puffing and blowing bubbles of blood from his nostrils, clutching at her.

She struck the screen door with her hands, then tripped and fell full-length on the porch, the breath whooshing out of her. She fell exactly where Shooter had left his manuscript. She rolled over and saw him coming. He only had his bare hands now, but they looked like they would be more than enough. His eyes were stern and unflinching and horribly kind beneath the brim of the black hat.

'I am so sorry, missus,' he said.

'Rainey!' a voice cried. 'Stop!'

She tried to look around and could not. She had strained something in her neck. Shooter never even tried. He simply came on toward her.

'Rainey! Stop!'

'There is no Rainey h -' Shooter began, and then a gunshot rapped briskly across the fall air. Shooter stopped where he was, and looked curiously, almost casually, down at his chest. There was a small hole there. No blood issued from it - at least, not at first - but the hole was there. He put his hand to it, then brought it away. His index finger was marked by a small dot of blood. It looked like a bit of punctuation - the kind which ends a sentence. He looked at this thoughtfully. Then he dropped his hands and looked at Amy.

'Babe?' he asked, and then fell full-length beside her on the porch boards.

She rolled over, managed to get up on her elbows, and crawled to where he lay, beginning to sob.

'Mort?' she cried. 'Mort? Please, Mort, try to say something!'

But he was not going to say anything, and after a moment she let this realization fill her up. She would reject the simple fact of his death again and again over the next few weeks and months, and would then weaken, and the realization would fill her up again. He

was dead. He was dead. He had gone crazy down here and he was dead.

He, and whoever had been inside him at the end.

She put her head down on his chest and wept, and when someone came up behind her and put a comforting hand on her shoulder, Amy did not look around.

EPILOGUE

Ted and Amy Milner came to see the man who had shot and killed Amy's first husband, the well-known writer Morton Rainey, about three months after the events at Tashmore Lake.

They had seen the man at one other time during the three-month period, at the inquest, but that had been a formal situation, and Amy had not wanted to speak to him personally. Not there. She was grateful that he had saved her life ... but Mort had been her husband, and she had loved him for many years, and in her deepest heart she felt that Fred Evans's finger hadn't been the only one which pulled the trigger.

She would have come in time anyway, she suspected, in order to clarify it as much as possible in her mind. Her time might have been a year, or two, possibly even three. But things had happened in the meanwhile which made her move more quickly. She had hoped Ted would let her come to New York alone, but he was emphatic. Not after the last time he had let her go someplace alone. That time she had almost gotten killed.

Amy pointed out with some asperity that it would have been hard for Ted to 'let her go,' since she had never told him she was going in the first place, but Ted only shrugged. So they went to New York together, rode up to the fifty-third floor of a large skyscraper together, and were together shown to the small cubicle in the offices of the Consolidated Assurance Company which Fred Evans called home during the working day . unless he was in the field, of course.

She sat as far into the corner as she could get, and although the offices were quite warm, she kept her shawl wrapped around her.

Evans's manner was slow and kind - he seemed to her almost like the country doctor who had nursed her through her childhood illnesses - and she liked him. But that's something he'll never know, she thought. I might be able to summon up the strength to tell him,

and he would nod, but his nod wouldn't indicate belief. He only knows that to me he will always be the man who shot Mort, and he had to watch me cry on Mort's chest until the ambulance came, and one of the paramedics had to give me a shot before I would let him go. And what he won't know is that I like him just the same.

He buzzed a woman from one of the outer offices and had her bring in three big, steaming mugs of tea. It was January outside now, the wind high, the temperature low. She thought with some brief longing of how it would be in Tashmore, with the lake finally frozen and that killer wind blowing long, ghostly snakes of powdered snow across the ice. Then her mind made some obscure but nasty association, and she saw Mort hitting the floor, saw the package of Pall Malls skidding across the wood like a shuffleboard weight. She shivered, her brief sense of longing totally dispelled.

'Are you okay, Mrs Milner?' Evans asked.

She nodded.

Frowning ponderously and playing with his pipe, Ted said, 'My wife wants to hear everything you know about what happened, Mr Evans. I tried to discourage her at first, but I've come to think that it might be a good thing. She's had bad dreams ever since

'Of course,' Evans said, not exactly ignoring Ted, but speaking directly to Amy. 'I suppose you will for a long time. I've had a few of my own, actually. I never shot a man before.' He paused, then added, 'I missed Vietnam by a year or so.'

Amy offered him a smile. It was wan, but it was a smile.

'She heard it all at the inquest,' Ted went on, 'but she wanted to hear it again, from you, and with the legalese omitted.'

'I understand,' Evans said. He pointed at the pipe. 'You can light that, if you want to.'

Ted looked at it, then dropped it into the pocket of his coat quickly, as if he were slightly ashamed of it. 'I'm trying to give it up, actually.'

Evans looked at Amy. 'What purpose do you think this will serve?' he asked her in the same kind, rather sweet voice. 'Or maybe a better question would be what purpose do you need it to serve?'

'I don't know.' Her voice was low and composed. 'But we were in Tashmore three weeks ago, Ted and I, to clean the place out - we've put it up for sale - and something happened. Two things, actually.' She looked at her husband and offered the wan smile again. 'Ted knows something happened, because that's when I got in touch with you and made this appointment. But he doesn't know what, and I'm afraid he's put out with me. Perhaps he's right to be.'

Ted Milner did not deny that he was put out with Amy. His hand stole into his coat pocket, started to remove the pipe, and then let it drop back again.

'But these two things - they bear on what happened to your lake home in October?'

'I don't know. Mr Evans ... what did happen? How much do you know?'

'Well,' he said, leaning back in his chair and sipping from his mug, 'if you came expecting all the answers, you're going to be sorely disappointed. I can tell you about the fire, but as for why your husband did what he did ... you can probably fill in more of those blanks than I can. What puzzled us most about the fire was where it started - not in the main house but in Mr Rainey's office, which is an addition. That made the act seem directed against him, but he wasn't even there.'

'Then we found a large chunk of bottle in the wreckage of the office. It had contained wine - champagne, to be exact - but there wasn't any doubt that the last thing it had contained was gasoline. Part of the label was intact, and we sent a Fax copy to New York. It was

identified as Moet et Chandon, nineteen-eighty-something. That wasn't proof indisputable that the bottle used for the Molotov cocktail came from your own wine room, Mrs Milner, but it was very persuasive, since you listed better than a dozen bottles of Moet et Chandon, some from 1983 and some from 1984.

'This led us toward a supposition which seemed clear but not very sensible: that you or your ex-husband might have burned down your own house. Mrs Milner here said she went off and left the house unlocked - '

'I lost a lot of sleep over that,' Amy said. 'I often forgot to lock up when I was only going out for a little while. I grew up in a little town north of Bangor and country habits die hard. Mort used to ...' Her lips trembled and she stopped speaking for a moment, pressing them together so tightly they turned white. When she had herself under control again, she finished her thought in a low voice. 'He used to scold me about it.'

Ted took her hand.

'It didn't matter, of course,' Evans said. 'If you had locked the house, Mr Rainey still could have gained access, because he still had his keys. Correct?'

'Yes,' Ted said.

'It might have sped up the detection end a little if you'd locked the door, but it's impossible to say for sure. Monday-morning quarterbacking is a vice we try to steer clear of in my business, anyway. There's a theory that it causes ulcers, and that's one I subscribe to. The point is this: given Mrs Rainey's - excuse me, Mrs Milner's - testimony that the house was left unlocked, we at first believed the arsonist could have been literally anyone. But once we started playing around with the assumption that the bottle used had come from the cellar wine room, it narrowed things down.'

'Because that room was locked,' Ted said.

Evans nodded. 'Do you remember me asking who held keys to that room, Mrs Milner?'

'Call me Amy, won't you?'

He nodded. 'Do you remember, Amy?'

'Yes. We started locking the little wine closet three or four years ago, after some bottles of red table wine disappeared. Mort thought it was the housekeeper. I didn't like to believe it, because I liked her, but I knew he could be right, and probably was. We started locking it then so nobody else would be tempted.'

Evans looked at Ted Milner.

'Amy had a key to the wine room, and she believed Mr Rainey still had his. So that limited the possibilities. Of course, if it had been Amy, you would have had to have been in collusion with her, Mr Milner, since you were each other's alibis for that evening. Mr Rainey didn't have an alibi, but he was at a considerable distance. And the main thing was this: we could see no motive for the crime. His work had left both Amy and himself financially comfortable. Nevertheless, we dusted for fingerprints and came up with two good ones. This was the day after we had our meeting in Derry. Both prints belonged to Mr Rainey. It still wasn't proof - '

'It wasn't?' Ted asked, looking startled.

Evans shook his head. 'Lab tests were able to confirm that the prints were made before what remained of the bottle was charred in the fire, but not how long before. The heat had cooked the oils in them, you see. And if our assumption that the bottle came from the wine room was correct, why, someone had to physically pick it up out of the bag or carton it came in and store it in its cradle. That someone would have been either Mr or Mrs Rainey, and he could have argued that that was where the prints came from.'

'He was in no shape to argue anything,' Amy said softly. 'Not at the end.'

'I guess that's true, but we didn't know that. All we knew is that when people carry bottles, they generally pick them up by the neck or the upper barrel. These two prints were near the bottom, and the angle was very odd.'

'As if he had been carrying it sideways or even upside down,' Ted broke in. 'Isn't that what you said at the hearing?'

'Yes - and people who know anything about wine don't do it. With most wines, it disturbs the sediment. And with champagne

'It shakes it up,' Ted said.

Evans nodded. 'If you shake a bottle of champagne really hard, it will burst from the pressure.'

'But there was no champagne in it, anyway,' Amy said quietly.

'No. Still, it was not proof. I canvassed the area gas stations to see if anyone who looked like Mr Rainey had bought a small amount of gas that night, but had no luck. I wasn't too surprised; he could have bought the gasoline in Tashmore or at half a hundred service stations between the two places.

'Then I went to see Patricia Champion, our one witness. I took a picture of a 1986 Buick - the make and model we assumed Mr Rainey would have been driving. She said it might have been the car, but she still couldn't be sure. So I was up against it. I went back out to the house to look around, and you came, Amy. It was early morning. I wanted to ask you some questions, but you were clearly upset. I did ask you why you were there, and you said a peculiar thing. You said you were going down to Tashmore Lake to see your husband, but you came by first to look in the garden.'

'On the phone he kept talking about what he called my secret window ... the one that looked down on the garden. He said he'd left something there. But there wasn't anything. Not that I could see, anyway.'

'I had a feeling about the man when we met,' Evans said slowly. 'A feeling that he wasn't ... quite on track. It wasn't that he was lying about some things, although I was pretty sure he was. It was something else. A kind of distance.'

'Yes - I felt it in him more and more. That distance.'

'You looked almost sick with worry. I decided I could do worse than follow you down to the other house, Amy, especially when you told me not to tell Mr Milner here where you'd gone if he came looking for you. I didn't believe that idea was original with you. I thought I might just find something out. And I also thought ...' He trailed off, looking bemused.

'You thought something might happen to me,' she said. 'Thank you, Mr Evans. He would have killed me, you know. If you hadn't followed me, he would have killed me.'

'I parked at the head of the driveway and walked down. I heard a terrific rumpus from inside the house and I started to run. That was when you more or less fell out through the screen door, and he came out after you.'

Evans looked at them both earnestly.

'I asked him to stop,' he said. 'I asked him twice.'

Amy reached out, squeezed his hand gently for a moment, then let it go.

'And that's it,' Evans said. 'I know a little more, mostly from the newspapers and two chats I had with Mr Milner

'Call me Ted.'

'Ted, then.' Evans did not seem to take to Ted's first name as easily as he had to Amy's. 'I know that Mr Rainey had what was probably a schizophrenic episode in which he was two people, and that neither one of them had any idea they were actually existing in the same body. I know that one of them was named John Shooter. I know from Herbert Creekmore's deposition that Mr Rainey imagined this Shooter was hounding him over a story called "Sowing Season," and that Mr Creekmore had a copy of the magazine in which that story appeared sent up so Mr Rainey could prove that he had published first. The magazine arrived shortly before you did, Amy - it was found in the house. The Federal Express envelope it came in was on the seat of your ex-husband's Buick.'

'But he cut the story out, didn't he?' Ted asked.

'Not just the story - the contents page as well. He was careful to remove every trace of himself. He carried a Swiss-army knife, and that was probably what he used. The missing pages were in the Buick's glove compartment.'

'In the end, the existence of that story became a mystery even to him,' Amy said softly.

Evans looked at her, eyebrows raised. 'Beg pardon?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing.'

'I think I've told you everything I can,' Evans said. 'Anything else would be pure speculation. I'm an insurance investigator, after all, not a psychiatrist.'

'He was two men,' Amy said. 'He was himself ... and he became a character he created. Ted believes that the last name, Shooter, was something

Mort picked up and stored in his head when he found out Ted came from a little town called Shooter's Knob, Tennessee. I'm sure he's right. Mort was always picking out character names just that way ... like anagrams, almost.

'I don't know the rest of it - I can only guess. I do know that when a film studio dropped its option on his novel *The Delacourt Family*, Mort almost had a nervous breakdown. They made it clear - and so did Herb Creekmore - that they were concerned about an accidental similarity, and they understood he never could have seen the screenplay, which was called *The Home Team*. There was no question of plagiarism ... except in Mort's head. His reaction was exaggerated, abnormal. It was like stirring a stick around in what looks like a dead campfire and uncovering a live coal.'

'You don't think he created John Shooter just to punish you, do you?' Evans asked.

'No. Shooter was there to punish Mort. I think . She paused and adjusted her shawl, pulling it a little more tightly about her shoulders. Then she picked up her teacup with a hand which wasn't quite steady. 'I think that Mort stole somebody's work sometime in the past,' she said. 'Probably quite far in the past, because everything he wrote from *The OrganGrinder's Boy* on was widely read. It would have come out, I think. I doubt that he even actually published what he stole. But I think that's what happened, and I think that's where John Shooter really came from. Not from the film company dropping his novel, or from my ... my time with Ted, and not from the divorce. Maybe all those things contributed, but I think the root goes back to a time before I knew him. Then, when he was alone at the lake house ...'

'Shooter came,' Evans said quietly. 'He came and accused him of plagiarism. Whoever Mr Rainey stole from never did, so in the end he had to punish himself. But I doubt if that was all, Amy. He did try to kill you.'

'No,' she said. 'That was Shooter.'

He raised his eyebrows. Ted looked at her carefully, and then drew the pipe out of his pocket again.

'The real Shooter.'

'I don't understand you.'

She smiled her wan smile. 'I don't understand myself. That's why I'm here. I don't think telling this serves any practical purpose - Mort's dead, and it's over -but it may help me. It may help me to sleep better.'

'Then tell us, by all means,' Evans said.

'You see, when we went down to clean out the house, we stopped at the little store in town - Bowie's. Ted filled the gas tank - it's always been self-service at Bowie's - and I went in to get some things. There was a man in there, Sonny Trotts, who used to work with Tom Greenleaf. Tom was the older of the two caretakers who were killed. Sonny wanted to tell me how sorry he was about Mort, and he wanted to tell me something else, too, because he saw Mort the day before Mort died, and meant to tell him. So he said. It was about Tom Greenleaf - something Tom told Sonny while they were painting the Methodist Parish Hall together. Sonny saw Mort after that, but didn't think to tell him right away, he said. Then he remembered that it had something to do with Greg Carstairs

'The other dead man?'

'Yes. So he turned around and called, but Mort didn't hear him. And the next day, Mort was dead.'

'What did Mr Greenleaf tell this guy?'

'That he thought he might have seen a ghost,' Amy said calmly.

They looked at her, not speaking.

'Sonny said Tom had been getting forgetful lately, and that Tom was worried about it. Sonny thought it was no more than the ordinary sort of forgetfulness that settles in when a person gets a little older, but Tom had nursed his wife through Alzheimer's disease five or six years before, and he was terrified of getting it himself and going the same way. According to Sonny, if Tom forgot a paintbrush, he spent half the day obsessing about it. Tom said that was why, when Greg Carstairs asked him if he recognized the man he'd seen Mort Rainey talking to the day before, or if he would recognize him if he saw him again, Tom said he hadn't seen anyone with Mort - that Mort had been alone.'

There was the snap of a match. Ted Milner had decided to light his pipe after all. Evans ignored him. He was leaning forward in his chair, his gaze fixed intently on Amy Milner.

'Let's get this straight. According to this Sonny Troots

'Troots.'

'Okay, Troots. According to him, Tom Greenleaf did see Mort with someone?'

'Not exactly,' Amy said. 'Sonny thought if Tom believed that, believed it for sure, he wouldn't have lied to Greg. What Tom said was that he didn't know what he'd seen. That he was confused. That it seemed safer to say nothing about it at all. He didn't want anybody - particularly Greg Carstairs, who was also in the caretaking business - to know how confused he was, and most of all he didn't want anybody to think that he might be getting sick the way his late wife had gotten sick.'

'I'm not sure I understand this - I'm sorry.'

'According to Sonny,' she said, 'Tom came down Lake Drive in his Scout and saw Mort, standing by himself where the lakeside path comes out.'

'Near where the bodies were found?'

'Yes. Very near. Mort waved. Tom waved back. He drove by. Then, according to what Sonny says, Tom looked in his rear-view mirror and saw another man with Mort, and an old station wagon, although neither the man nor the car had been there ten seconds before. The man was wearing a black hat. he said ... but you could see right through him, and the car, too.'

'Oh, Amy,' Ted said softly. 'The man was bullshitting you. Big time.'

She shook her head. 'I don't think Sonny is smart enough to make up such a story. He told me Tom thought he ought to get in touch with Greg and tell him he might have seen such a man after all; that it would be all right if he left out the see-through part. But Sonny said the old man was terrified. He was convinced that it was one of two things: either he was coming down with Alzheimer's disease, or he'd seen a ghost.'

'Well, it's certainly creepy,' Evans said, and it was - the skin on his arms and back had crinkled into gooseflesh for a moment or two. 'But it's hearsay ... hearsay from a dead man, in fact.'

'Yes ... but there's the other thing.' She set her teacup on the desk, picked up her purse, and began to rummage in it. 'When I was cleaning out Mort's office, I found that hat - that awful black hat - behind his desk. It gave me a shock, because I wasn't expecting it. I thought the police must have taken it away as evidence, or something. I hooked it out from behind there with a stick. It came out upside down, with the stick inside it. I used the stick to carry it outside and dump it in the trash cabinet. Do you understand?'

Ted clearly didn't; Evans clearly did. 'You didn't want to touch it.'

'That's right. I didn't want to touch it. It landed right side up on one of the green trash bags - I'd swear to that. Then, about an hour later, I went out with a bag of old medicines and shampoos and things from the bathroom. When I opened the lid of the garbage cabinet to put it

in, the hat was turned over again. And this was tucked into the sweatband.' She pulled a folded sheet of paper from her purse and offered it to Evans with a hand that still trembled minutely. 'It wasn't there when the hat came out from behind the desk. I know that.'

Evans took the folded sheet and just held it for a moment. He didn't like it. It felt too heavy, and the texture was somehow wrong.

'I think there was a John Shooter,' she said. 'I think he was Mort's greatest creation - a character so vivid that he actually did become real.'

'And I think that this is a message from a ghost.'

He took the slip of paper and opened it. Written halfway down was this message:

Missus - I am sorry for all the trouble. Things got out of hand. I am going back to my home now, I got my story, which is all I came for in the first place. It is called 'Crowfoot Mile,' and it is a crackerjack.
Yours truly,

John Shooter

The signature was a bald scrawl below the neat lines of script.

'Is this your late husband's signature, Amy?' Evans asked.

'No,' she said. 'Nothing like it.'

The three of them sat in the office, looking at one another. Fred Evans tried to think of something to say and could not. After awhile, the silence (and the smell of Ted Milner's pipe) became more than any of them could stand. So Mr and Mrs Milner offered their thanks, said their goodbyes, and left his office to get on with their lives as best they could, and Fred Evans got on with his own as best he could, and sometimes, late at night, both he and the woman who had been married to Morton Rainey woke from dreams in which a man in

a round-crowned black hat looked at them from sun-faded eyes caught in nets of wrinkles. He looked at them with no love ... but, they both felt, with an odd kind of stern pity.

It was not a kind expression, and it left no feeling of comfort, but they also both felt, in their different places, that they could find room to live with that look. And to tend their gardens.