
STEPHEN KING'S
SOMETIMES THEY COME BACK

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Stephen King

Jim Norman's wife had been waiting for him since two, and when she saw the car pull up in front of their apartment building, she came out to meet him. She had gone to the store and bought a celebration meal—a couple of steaks, a bottle of Lancer's, a head of lettuce, and Thousand Island dressing. Now, watching him get out of the car, she found herself hoping with some desperation (and not for the first time that day) that there was going to be something to celebrate.

He came up the walk, holding his new briefcase in one hand and four texts in the other. She could see the title of the top one—Introduction to Grammar. She put her hands on his shoulder and asked, "How did it go?"

And he smiled.

But that night, he had the old dream for the first time in a very long time and woke up sweating, with a scream behind his lips.

His interview had been conducted by the principal of Harold Davis High School and the head of the English Department. The subject of his breakdown had come up. He had expected it would.

The principal, a bald and cadaverous man named Fenton, had leaned back and looked at the ceiling. Simmons, the English head, lit his pipe.

"I was under a great deal of pressure at the time," Jim Norman said. His fingers wanted to twist about in his lap, but he wouldn't let them.

"I think we understand that," Fenton said, smiling. "And while we have no desire to pry, I'm sure we'd all agree that teaching is a pressure occupation, especially at the high-school level. You're onstage five periods out of seven, and you're playing to the toughest audience in the world. That's why," he finished with some pride, "teachers have more ulcers than any other professional group, with the exception of air-traffic controllers."

Jim said, “The pressures involved in my breakdown were … extreme.”

Fenton and Simmons nodded noncommittal encouragement, and Simmons clicked his lighter open to rekindle his pipe. Suddenly the office seemed very tight, very close. Jim had the queer sensation that someone had just turned on a heat lamp over the back of his neck. His fingers were twisting in his lap, and he made them stop.

“I was in my senior year and practice teaching. My mother had died the summer before—cancer—and in my last conversation with her, she asked me to go right on and finish. My brother, my older brother, died when we were both quite young. He had been planning to teach and she thought …”

He could see from their eyes that he was wandering and thought: God, I’m making a botch of this.

“I did as she asked,” he said, leaving the tangled relationship of his mother and his brother Wayne—poor, murdered Wayne—and himself behind. “During the second week of my intern teaching, my fiancee was involved in a hit-and-run accident. She was the hit part of it. Some kid in a hot rod … they never caught him.”

Simmons made a soft noise of encouragement.

“I went on. There didn’t seem to be any other course. She was in a great deal of pain—a badly broken leg and four fractured ribs—but no danger. I don’t think I really knew the pressure I was under.”

Careful now. This is where the ground slopes away.

“I interned at Center Street Vocational Trades High,” Jim said.

“Garden spot of the city,” Fenton said. “Switchblades, motor-cycle boots, zip guns in the lockers, lunch-money protection rackets, and every third kid selling dope to the other two. I know about Trades.”

“There was a kid named Mack Zimmerman,” Jim said. “Sensitive boy. Played the guitar. I had him in a composition class, and he had talent. I came in one morning and two boys were holding him while a third smashed his Yamaha guitar against the radiator. Zimmerman was screaming. I yelled for them to stop and give me the guitar. I started for them and someone slugged me.” Jim shrugged. “That was it. I had a breakdown. No screaming meemies or crouching in the corner. I just couldn’t go back. When I got near Trades, my chest would tighten up. I couldn’t breathe right, I got cold sweat—”

“That happens to me, too,” Fenton said amiably.

“I went into analysis. A community therapy deal. I couldn’t afford a psychiatrist. It did me good. Sally and I are married. She has a slight limp and a scar, but otherwise, good as new.” He looked at them squarely. “I guess you could say the same for me.”

Fenton said, “You actually finished your practice teaching requirement at Cortez High School, I believe.”

“That’s no bed of roses, either,” Simmons said.

“I wanted a hard school,” Jim said. “I swapped with another guy to get Cortez.”

“A’s from your supervisor and critic teacher,” Fenton commented.

“Yes.”

“And a four-year average of 3.88. Damn close to straight A’s.”

“I enjoyed my college work.”

Fenton and Simmons glanced at each other, then stood up. Jim got up.

“We’ll be in touch, Mr. Norman,” Fenton said. “We do have a few more applicants to interview—”

“Yes, of course.”

“—but speaking for myself, I’m impressed by your academic records and personal candor.”

“It’s nice of you to say so.”

“Sim, perhaps Mr. Norman would like a coffee before he goes.”

They shook hands.

In the hall, Simmons said, “I think you’ve got the job if you want it. That’s off the record, of course.”

Jim nodded. He had left a lot off the record himself.

Davis High was a forbidding rockpile that housed a remarkably modern plant—the science wing alone had been funded at 1.5 million in last year’s budget. The classrooms, which still held the ghosts of the WPA workers who had built them and the postwar kids who had first used them, were furnished with modern desks and soft-glare blackboards. The students were clean, well dressed, vivacious, affluent. Six out of ten seniors owned their own cars. All in all, a good school. A fine school to teach in during the Sickie Seventies. It made Center Street Vocational Trades look like darkest Africa.

But after the kids were gone, something old and brooding seemed to settle over the halls and whisper in the empty rooms. Some black, noxious beast, never quite in view. Sometimes, as he walked down the Wing 4 corridor toward the parking lot with his new briefcase in one hand, Jim Norman thought he could almost hear it breathing.

He had the dream again near the end of October, and that time he did scream. He clawed his way into waking reality to find Sally sitting up in bed beside him, holding his shoulder. His heart was thudding heavily.

“God” he said, and scrubbed a hand across his face.

“Are you all right?”

“Sure. I yelled, didn’t I?”

“Boy, did you. Nightmare?”

“Yes.”

“Something from when those boys broke that fellow’s guitar?”

“No,” he said. “Much older than that. Sometimes it comes back, that’s all. No sweat.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want a glass of milk?” Her eyes were dark with concern.

He kissed her shoulder. “No. Go to sleep.”

She turned off the light and he lay there, looking into the darkness.

He had a good schedule for the new teacher on the staff. Period one was free. Two and three were freshman comp, one group dull, one kind of fun. Period four was his best class: American Lit with college-bound seniors who got a kick out of bashing the ole masters around for a period each day. Period five was a “consultation period,” when he was supposed to see students with personal or academic problems. There were very few who seemed to have either (or who wanted to discuss them with him), and he spent most of those periods with a good novel. Period six was a grammar course, dry as chalkdust.

Period seven was his only cross. The class was called Living with Literature, and it was held in a small box of a classroom on the third floor. The room was hot in the early fall and cold as the winter approached. The class itself was an elective for what school catalogues coyly call “the slow learner.”

There were twenty-seven “slow learners” in Jim’s class, most of them school jocks. The kindest thing you could accuse them of would be disinterest, and some of them had a streak of outright malevolence. He walked in one day to find an obscene and cruelly accurate caricature of himself on the board, with “Mr. Norman” unnecessarily chalked under it. He wiped it off without comment and proceeded with the lesson in spite of the snickers.

He worked up interesting lesson plans, included a/v materials, and ordered several high-interest, high-comprehension texts—all to no avail. The classroom mood veered between unruly hilarity and sullen silence. Early in November, a fight broke out between two boys during a discussion of Of Mice and Men. Jim broke it up and sent both boys to the office. When he opened his book to where he had left off, the words “Bite It” glared up at him.

He took the problem to Simmons, who shrugged and lit his pipe. “I don’t have any real solution, Jim. Last period is always a bitch. And for some of them, a D grade in your class means no more football or basketball. And they’ve had the other gut English courses, so they’re stuck with it.”

“And me, too,” Jim said glumly.

Simmons nodded. “Show them you mean business, and they’ll buckle down, if only to keep their sports eligibility.”

But period seven remained a constant thorn in his side.

One of the biggest problems in Living with Lit was a huge, slow-moving moose named Chip Osway. In early December, during the brief hiatus between football and basketball (Osway played both), Jim caught him with a crib sheet and ran him out of the classroom.

“If you flunk me, we’ll get you, you son of a bitch!” Osway yelled down the dim third-floor corridor. “You hear me?”

“Go on,” Jim said. “Don’t waste your breath.”

“We’ll get you, creepo!”

Jim went back into the classroom. They looked up at him blandly, faces betraying nothing. He felt a surge of unreality, like the feeling that had washed over him before … before …

We’ll get you, creepo.

He took his grade book out of his desk, opened it to the page titled “Living with Literature,” and carefully lettered an F in the exam slot next to Chip Osway’s name.

That night he had the dream again.

The dream was always cruelly slow. There was time to see and feel everything. And there was the added horror of reliving events that were moving toward a known conclusion, as helpless as a man strapped into a car going over a cliff.

In the dream he was nine and his brother Wayne was twelve. They were going down Broad Street in Stratford, Connecticut, bound for the Stratford Library. Jim’s books were two days overdue, and he had hooked four cents from the cupboard bowl to pay the fine. It was summer vacation. You could smell the freshly cut grass. You could hear a ballgame floating out of some second-floor apartment window, Yankees leading the Red Sox six to nothing in the top of the eighth, Ted Williams batting, and you could see the shadows from the Burrets Building Company slowly lengthening across the street as the evening turned slowly toward dark.

Beyond Teddy’s Market and Burrets, there was a railroad overpass, and on the other side, a number of the local losers hung around a closed gas station—five or six boys in leather jackets and pegged jeans. Jim hated to go by them. They yelled out hey four-eyes and hey shit-heels and hey you got an extra quarter and once they chased them half a block. But Wayne would not take the long way around. That would be chicken.

In the dream, the overpass loomed closer and closer, and you began to feel dread struggling in your throat like a big black bird. You saw everything: the Burrets neon sign, just starting to stutter on and off; the flakes of rust on the green overpass; the glitter of broken glass in the cinders of the railroad bed; a broken bike rim in the gutter.

You try to tell Wayne you've been through this before, a hundred times. The local losers aren't hanging around the gas station this time; they're hidden in the shadows under the trestle. But it won't come out. You're helpless.

Then you're underneath, and some of the shadows detach themselves from the walls and a tall kid with a blond crew cut and a broken nose pushes Wayne up against the sooty cinderblocks and says: Give us some money.

Let me alone.

You try to run, but a fat guy with greasy black hair grabs you and throws you against the wall next to your brother. His left eyelid is jittering up and down nervously and he says: Come on, kid, how much you got?

F-four cents.

You fuckin' liar.

Wayne tries to twist free and a guy with odd, orange-colored hair helps the blond one to hold him. The guy with the jittery eyelid suddenly bashes you one in the mouth. You feel a sudden heaviness in your groin, and a dark patch appears on your jeans.

Look, Vinnie, he wet himself!

Wayne's struggles become frenzied, and he almost—not quite — gets free. Another guy, wearing black chinos and a white T-shirt, throws him back. There is a small strawberry birthmark on his chin.

The stone throat of the overpass is beginning to tremble. The metal girders pick up a thrumming vibration. Train coming.

Someone strikes the books out of your hands and the kid with the birthmark on his chin kicks them into the gutter. Wayne suddenly kicks out with his right foot, and it connects with the crotch of the kid with the jittery face. He screams.

Vinnie, he's gettin' away!

The kid with the jittery face is screaming about his nuts, but even his howls are lost in the gathering, shaking roar of the approaching train. Then it is over them, and its noise fills the world.

Light flashes on switchblades. The kid with the blond crew cut is holding one and Birthmark has the other. You can't hear Wayne, but his words are in the shape of his lips:

Run Jimmy run.

You slip to your knees and the hands holding you are gone and you skitter between a pair of legs like a frog. A hand slaps down on your back, groping for purchase, and gets none. Then you are running back the way you came, with all of the horrible sludgy slowness of dreams. You look back over your shoulder and see—

He woke in the dark, Sally sleeping peacefully beside him. He bit back the scream, and when it was throttled, he fell back.

When he had looked back, back into the yawning darkness of the overpass, he had seen the blond kid and the birthmarked kid drive their knives into his brother—Blondie's below the breastbone, and Birthmark's directly into his brother's groin.

He lay in the darkness, breathing harshly, waiting for that nine-year-old ghost to depart, waiting for honest sleep to blot it all away.

An unknown time later, it did.

The Christmas vacation and semester break were combined in the city's school district, and the holiday was almost a month long. The dream came twice, early on, and did not come again. He and Sally went to visit her sister in Vermont, and skied a great deal. They were happy.

Jim's Living with Lit problem seemed inconsequential and a little foolish in the open, crystal air. He went back to school with a winter tan, feeling cool and collected.

Simmons caught him on the way to his period-two class and handed him a folder. "New student, period seven. Name is Robert Lawson. Transfer."

"Hey, I've got twenty-seven in there right now, Sim. I'm overloaded."

"You've still got twenty-seven. Bill Stearns got killed the Tuesday after Christmas. Car accident. Hit-and-run."

"Billy?"

The picture formed in his mind in black and white, like a senior photograph. William Stearns, Key Club 1, Football 1, 2, Pen & Lance, 2. He had been one of the few good ones in Living with Lit. Quiet, consistent A's and B's on his exams. Didn't volunteer often, but usually summoned the correct answers (laced with a pleasing dry wit) when called on. Dead? Fifteen years old. His own mortality suddenly whispered through his bones like a cold draft under a door.

"Christ, that's awful. Do they know what happened?"

"Cops are checking into it. He was downtown exchanging a Christmas present. Started across Rampart Street and an old Ford sedan hit him. No one got the license number, but the words 'Snake Eyes' were written on the side door … the way a kid would do it."

"Christ," Jim said again.

“There’s the bell,” Simmons said.

He hurried away, pausing to break up a crowd of kids around a drinking fountain. Jim went toward his class, feeling empty.

During his free period he flipped open Robert Lawson’s folder. The first page was a green sheet from Milford High, which Jim had never heard of. The second was a student personality profile. Adjusted IQ of 78. Some manual skills, not many. Antisocial answers to the Barnett-Hudson personality test. Poor aptitude scores. Jim thought sourly that he was a Living with Lit kid all the way.

The next page was a disciplinary history, the yellow sheet. The Milford sheet was white with a black border, and it was depressingly well filled. Lawson had been in a hundred kinds of trouble.

He turned the next page, glanced down at a school photo of Robert Lawson, then looked again. Terror suddenly crept into the pit of his belly and coiled there, warm and hissing.

Lawson was staring antagonistically into the camera, as if posing for a police mug shot rather than a school photographer. There was a small strawberry birthmark on his chin.

By period seven, he had brought all the civilized rationalizations into play. He told himself there must be thousands of kids with red birthmarks on their chins. He told himself that the hood who had stabbed his brother that day sixteen long dead years ago would now be at least thirty-two.

But, climbing to the third floor, the apprehension remained. And another fear to go with it: This is how you felt when you were cracking up. He tasted the bright steel of panic in his mouth.

The usual group of kids was horsing around the door of Room 33, and some of them went in when they saw Jim coming. A few hung around, talking in undertones and grinning. He saw the new boy

standing beside Chip Osway. Robert Lawson was wearing blue jeans and heavy yellow tractor boots—all the rage this year.

“Chip, go on in.”

“That an order?” He smiled vacuously over Jim’s head.

“Sure.”

“You flunk me on that test?”

“Sure.”

“Yeah, that’s …” The rest was an under-the-breath mumble.

Jim turned to Robert Lawson. “You’re new,” he said. “I just wanted to tell you how we run things around here.”

“Sure, Mr. Norman.” His right eyebrow was split with a small scar, a scar Jim knew. There could be no mistake. It was crazy, it was lunacy, but it was also a fact. Sixteen years ago, this kid had driven a knife into his brother.

Numbly, as if from a great distance, he heard himself beginning to outline the class rules and regulations. Robert Lawson hooked his thumbs into his garrison belt, listened, smiled, and began to nod, as if they were old friends.

*

“Jim?”

“Hmmm?”

“Is something wrong?”

“No.”

“Those Living with Lit boys still giving you a hard time?”

No answer.

“Jim?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you go to bed early tonight?”

But he didn’t.

The dream was very bad that night. When the kid with the strawberry birthmark stabbed his brother with his knife, he called after Jim: “You next, kid. Right through the bag.”

He woke up screaming.

He was teaching Lord of the Flies that week, and talking about symbolism when Lawson raised his hand.

“Robert?” he said evenly.

“Why do you keep starin’ at me?” Jim blinked and felt his mouth go dry.

“You see somethin’ green? Or is my fly unzipped?”

A nervous titter from the class.

Jim replied evenly: “I wasn’t staring at you, Mr. Lawson. Can you tell us why Ralph and Jack disagreed over—”

“You were starin’ at me.”

“Do you want to talk about it with Mr. Fenton?”

Lawson appeared to think it over. “Naw.”

“Good. Now can you tell us why Ralph and Jack—”

“I didn’t read it. I think it’s a dumb book.”

Jim smiled tightly. “Do you, now? You want to remember that while you’re judging the book, the book is also judging you. Now can anyone else tell me why they disagreed over the existence of the beast?”

Kathy Slavin raised her hand timidly, and Lawson gave her a cynical once-over and said something to Chip Osway. The words leaving his lips looked like “nice tits.” Chip nodded.

“Kathy?”

“Isn’t it because Jack wanted to hunt the beast?”

“Good.” He turned and began to write on the board. At the instant his back was turned, a grapefruit smashed against the board beside his head.

He jerked backward and wheeled around. Some class members laughed, but Osway and Lawson only looked at Jim innocently.

Jim stooped and picked up the grapefruit. “Someone,” he said, looking toward the back of the room, “ought to have this jammed down his goddamn throat.”

Kathy Slavin gasped.

He tossed the grapefruit in the wastebasket and turned back to the blackboard.

He opened the morning paper, sipping his coffee, and saw the headline about halfway down. “God!” he said, splitting his wife’s easy flow of morning chatter. His belly felt suddenly filled with splinters—

“Teen-Age Girl Falls to Her Death: Katherine Slavin, a seventeen-year-old junior at Harold Davis High School, either fell or was pushed from the roof of her downtown apartment house early yesterday

evening. The girl, who kept a pigeon coop on the roof, had gone up with a sack of feed, according to her mother.

“Police said an unidentified woman in a neighboring development had seen three young boys running across the roof at 6:45 P.M., just minutes after the girl’s body (continued page 3—”

“Jim, was she one of yours?”

But he could only look at her mutely.

Two weeks later, Simmons met him in the hall after the lunch bell with a folder in his hand, and Jim felt a terrible sinking in his belly.

“New student,” he said flatly to Simmons. “Living with Lit.”

Sim’s eyebrows went up. “How did you know that?”

Jim shrugged and held his hand out for the folder.

“Got to run,” Simmons said. “Department heads are meeting on course evaluations. You look a little run-down. Feeling okay?”

That’s right, a little run-down. Like Billy Stearns.

“Sure,” he said.

“That’s the stuff,” Simmons said, and clapped him on the back.

When he was gone, Jim opened the folder to the picture, wincing in advance, like a man about to be hit.

But the face wasn’t instantly familiar. Just a kid’s face. Maybe he’d seen it before, maybe not. The kid, David Garcia, was a hulking, dark-haired boy with rather negroid lips and dark, slumbering eyes. The yellow sheet said he was also from Milford High and that he had spent two years in Granville Reformatory. Car theft.

Jim closed the folder with hands that trembled slightly.

“Sally?”

She looked up from her ironing. He had been staring at a TV basketball game without really seeing it.

“Nothing,” he said. “Forgot what I was going to say.”

“Must have been a lie.”

He smiled mechanically and looked at the TV again. It had been on the tip of his tongue to spill everything. But how could he? It was worse than crazy. Where would you start? The dream? The breakdown? The appearance of Robert Lawson?

No. With Wayne—your brother.

But he had never told anyone about that, not even in analysis. His thoughts turned to David Garcia, and the dreamy terror that had washed over him when they had looked at each other in the hall. Of course, he had only looked vaguely familiar in the picture. Pictures don’t move … or twitch.

Garcia had been standing with Lawson and Chip Osway, and when he looked up and saw Jim Norman, he smiled and his eyelids began to jitter up and down and voices spoke in Jim’s mind with unearthly clarity:

Come on, kid, how much you got?

F-four cents.

You fuckin’ liar … look, Vinnie, he wet himself!”

“Jim? Did you say something?”

“No.” But he wasn’t sure if he had or not. He was getting very scared.

*

One day after school in early February there was a knock on the teachers'-room door, and when Jim opened it, Chip Osway stood there. He looked frightened. Jim was alone; it was ten after four and the last of the teachers had gone home an hour before. He was correcting a batch of American Lit themes.

"Chip?" he said evenly.

Chip shuffled his feet. "Can I talk to you for a minute, Mr. Norman?"

"Sure. But if it's about that test, you're wasting your—"

"It's not about that. Uh, can I smoke in here?"

"Go ahead."

He lit his cigarette with a hand that trembled slightly. He didn't speak for perhaps as long as a minute. It seemed that he couldn't. His lips twitched, his hands came together, and his eyes slitted, as if some inner self was struggling to find expression.

He suddenly burst out: "If they do it, I want you to know I wasn't in on it! I don't like those guys! They're creeps!"

"What guys, Chip?"

"Lawson and that Garcia creep."

"Are they planning to get me?" The old dreamy terror was on him, and he knew the answer.

"I liked them at first," Chip said. "We went out and had a few beers. I started bitchin' about you and that test. About how I was gonna get you. But that was just talk! I swear it!"

"What happened?"

"They took me right up on it. Asked what time you left school, what kind of car you drove, all that stuff. I said what have you got against

him and Garcia said they knew you a long time ago … hey, are you all right?"

"The cigarette," he said thickly. "Haven't ever gotten used to the smoke."

Chip ground it out. "I asked them when they knew you and Bob Lawson said I was still pissin' my didies then. But they're seventeen, the same as me."

"Then what?"

"Well, Garcia leans over the table and says you can't want to get him very bad if you don't even know when he leaves the fuckin' school. What was you gonna do? So I says I was gonna matchstick your tires and leave you with four flats." He looked at Jim with pleading eyes. "I wasn't even gonna do that. I said it because …"

"You were scared?" Jim asked quietly.

"Yeah, and I'm still scared."

"What did they think of your idea?"

Chip shuddered. "Bob Lawson says, is that what you was gonna do, you cheap prick? And I said, tryin' to be tough, what was you gonna do, off him? And Garcia—his eyelids start to go up and down—he takes something out of his pocket and clicked it open and it's a switchknife. That's when I took off."

"When was this, Chip?"

"Yesterday. I'm scared to sit with those guys now, Mr. Norman."

"Okay," Jim said. "Okay." He looked down at the papers he had been correcting without seeing them.

"What are you going to do?"

“I don’t know,” Jim said. “I really don’t.”

On Monday morning he still didn’t know. His first thought had been to tell Sally everything, starting with his brother’s murder sixteen years ago. But it was impossible. She would be sympathetic but frightened and unbelieving.

Simmons? Also impossible. Simmons would think he was mad. And maybe he was. A man in a group encounter session he had attended had said having a breakdown was like breaking a vase and then gluing it back together. You could never trust yourself to handle that vase again with any surety. You couldn’t put a flower in it because flowers need water and water might dissolve the glue.

Am I crazy, then?

If he was, Chip Osway was, too. That thought came to him as he was getting into his car, and a bolt of excitement went through him.

Of course! Lawson and Garcia had threatened him in Chip Osway’s presence. That might not stand up in court, but it would get the two of them suspended if he could get Chip to repeat his story in Fenton’s office. And he was almost sure he could get Chip to do that. Chip had his own reasons for wanting them far away.

He was driving into the parking lot when he thought about what had happened to Billy Stearns and Kathy Slavin.

During his free period, he went up to the office and leaned over the registration secretary’s desk. She was doing the absence list.

“Chip Osway here today?” he asked casually.

“Chip … ?” She looked at him doubtfully.

“Charles Osway,” Jim amended. “Chip’s a nickname.”

She leafed through a pile of slips, glanced at one, and pulled it out. “He’s absent, Mr. Norman.”

“Can you get me his phone number?”

She pushed her pencil into her hair and said, “Certainly.” She dug it out of the O file and handed it to him. Jim dialed the number on an office phone.

The phone rang a dozen times and he was about to hang up when a rough, sleep-blurred voice said, “Yeah?”

“Mr. Osway?”

“Barry Osway’s been dead six years. I’m Gary Denkinger.”

“Are you Chip Osway’s stepfather?”

“What’d he do?”

“Pardon?”

“He’s run off. I want to know what he did.”

“So far as I know, nothing. I just wanted to talk with him. Do you have any idea where he might be?”

“Naw, I work nights. I don’t know none of his friends.”

“Any idea at a—”

“Nope. He took the old suitcase and fifty bucks he saved up from stealin’ car parts or sellin’ dope or whatever these kids do for money. Gone to San Francisco to be a hippie for all I know.”

“If you hear from him, will you call me at school? Jim Norman, English wing.”

“Sure will.”

Jim put the phone down. The registration secretary looked up and offered a quick meaningless smile. Jim didn’t smile back.

Two days later, the words “left school” appeared after Chip Osway’s name on the morning attendance slip. Jim began to wait for Simmons to show up with a new folder. A week later he did.

He looked dully down at the picture. No question about this one. The crew cut had been replaced by long hair, but it was still blond. And the face was the same, Vincent Corey. Vinnie, to his friends and intimates. He stared up at Jim from the picture, an insolent grin on his lips.

When he approached his period-seven class, his heart was thudding gravely in his chest. Lawson and Garcia and Vinnie Corey were standing by the bulletin board outside the door—they all straightened when he came toward them.

Vinnie smiled his insolent smile, but his eyes were as cold and dead as ice floes. “You must be Mr. Norman. Hi, Norm.”

Lawson and Garcia tittered.

“I’m Mr. Norman,” Jim said, ignoring the hand that Vinnie had put out. “You’ll remember that?”

“Sure, I’ll remember it. How’s your brother?”

Jim froze. He felt his bladder loosen, and as if from far away, from down a long corridor somewhere in his cranium, he heard a ghostly voice: Look, Vinnie, he wet himself!

“What do you know about my brother?” he asked thickly.

“Nothin’,” Vinnie said. “Nothin’ much.” They smiled at him with their empty dangerous smiles.

The bell rang and they sauntered inside.

Drugstore phone booth, ten o’clock that night.

“Operator, I want to call the police station in Stratford, Connecticut. No, I don’t know the number.”

Clickings on the line. Conferences.

The policeman had been Mr. Nell. In those days he had been white-haired, perhaps in his mid-fifties. Hard to tell when you were just a kid. Their father was dead, and somehow Mr. Nell had known that.

Call me Mr. Nell, boys.

Jim and his brother met at lunchtime every day and they went into the Stratford Diner to eat their bag lunches. Mom gave them each a nickel to buy milk—that was before school milk programs started. And sometimes Mr. Nell would come in, his leather belt creaking with the weight of his belly and his .38 revolver, and buy them each a pie a la mode.

Where were you when they stabbed my brother, Mr. Nell?

A connection was made. The phone rang once.

“Stratford Police.”

“Hello. My name is James Norman, Officer. I’m calling long-distance.” He named the city. “I want to know if you can give me a line on a man who would have been on the force around 1957.”

“Hold the line a moment, Mr. Norman.”

A pause, then a new voice.

“I’m Sergeant Morton Livingston, Mr. Norman. Who are you trying to locate?”

“Well,” Jim said, “us kids just called him Mr. Nell. Does that—”

“Hell, yes! Don Nell’s retired now. He’s seventy-three or -four.”

“Does he still live in Stratford?”

“Yes, over on Barnum Avenue. Would you like the address?”

“And the phone number, if you have it.”

“Okay. Did you know Don?”

“He used to buy my brother and me apple pie a la mode down at the Stratford Diner.”

“Christ, that’s been gone ten years. Wait a minute.” He came back on the phone and read an address and a phone number. Jim jotted them down, thanked Livingston, and hung up.

He dialed O again, gave the number, and waited. When the phone began to ring, a sudden hot tension filled him and he leaned forward, turning instinctively away from the drugstore soda fountain, although there was no one there but a plump teen-age girl reading a magazine.

The phone was picked up and a rich, masculine voice, sounding not at all old, said, “Hello?” That single word set off a dusty chain reaction of memories and emotions, as startling as the Pavlovian reaction that can be set off by hearing an old record on the radio.

“Mr. Nell? Donald Nell?”

“Yes.”

“My name is James Norman, Mr. Nell. Do you remember me, by any chance?”

“Yes,” the voice responded immediately. “Pie a la mode. Your brother was killed … knifed. A shame. He was a lovely boy.”

Jim collapsed against one of the booth’s glass walls. The tension’s sudden departure left him as weak as a stuffed toy. He found himself

on the verge of spilling everything, and he bit the urge back desperately.

“Mr. Nell, those boys were never caught.”

“No,” Nell said. “We did have suspects. As I recall, we had a lineup at a Bridgeport police station.”

“Were those suspects identified to me by name?”

“No. The procedure at a police showup was to address the participants by number. What’s your interest in this now, Mr. Norman?”

“Let me throw some names at you,” Jim said. “I want to know if they ring a bell in connection with the case.”

“Son, I wouldn’t—”

“You might,” Jim said, beginning to feel a trifle desperate. “Robert Lawson, David Garcia, Vincent Corey. Do any of those—”

“Corey,” Mr. Nell said flatly. “I remember him. Vinnie the Viper. Yes, we had him up on that. His mother alibied him. I don’t get anything from Robert Lawson. That could be anyone’s name. But Garcia … that rings a bell. I’m not sure why. Hell. I’m old.” He sounded disgusted.

“Mr. Nell, is there any way you could check on those boys?”

“Well, of course, they wouldn’t be boys anymore.”

Oh, yeah?

“Listen, Jimmy. Has one of those boys popped up and started harassing you?”

“I don’t know. Some strange things have been happening. Things connected with the stabbing of my brother.”

“What things?”

“Mr. Nell, I can’t tell you. You’d think I was crazy.”

His reply, quick, firm, interested: “Are you?”

Jim paused. “No,” he said.

“Okay, I can check the names through Stratford R&I. Where can I get in touch?”

Jim gave his home number. “You’d be most likely to catch me on Tuesday night.” He was in almost every night, but on Tuesday evenings Sally went to her pottery class.

“What are you doing these days, Jimmy?”

“Teaching school.”

“Good. This might take a few days, you know. I’m retired now.”

“You sound just the same.”

“Ah, but if you could see me!” He chuckled. “D’you still like a good piece of pie a la mode, Jimmy?”

“Sure,” Jim said. It was a lie. He hated pie a la mode.

“I’m glad to hear that. Well, if there’s nothing else, I’ll—”

“There is one more thing. Is there a Milford High in Stratford?”

“Not that I know of.”

“That’s what I—”

“Only thing name of Milford around here is Milford Cemetery out on the Ash Heights Road. And no one ever graduated from there.” He

chuckled dryly, and to Jim's ears it sounded like the sudden rattle of bones in a pit.

"Thank you," he heard himself saying. "Goodbye."

Mr. Nell was gone. The operator asked him to deposit sixty cents, and he put it in automatically. He turned, and stared into a horrid, squashed face plastered up against the glass, framed in two spread hands, the splayed fingers flattened white against the glass, as was the tip of the nose.

It was Vinnie, grinning at him.

Jim screamed.

Class again.

Living with Lit was doing a composition, and most of them were bent sweatily over their papers, putting their thoughts grimly down on the page, as if chopping wood. All but three. Robert Lawson, sitting in Billy Stearns's seat, David Garcia in Kathy Slavin's, Vinnie Corey in Chip Osway's. They sat with their blank papers in front of them, watching him.

A moment before the bell, Jim said softly, "I want to talk to you for a minute after class, Mr. Corey."

"Sure, Norm."

Lawson and Garcia tittered noisily, but the rest of the class did not. When the bell rang, they passed in their papers and fairly bolted through the door. Lawson and Garcia lingered, and Jim felt his belly tighten.

Is it going to be now?

Then Lawson nodded at Vinnie. "See you later."

"Yeah."

They left. Lawson closed the door, and from beyond the frosted glass, David Garcia suddenly yelled hoarsely, “Norm eats it!” Vinnie looked at the door, then back at Jim. He smiled.

He said, “I was wondering if you’d ever get down to it.”

“Really?” Jim said.

“Scared you the other night in the phone both, right, dad?”

“No one says dad anymore, Vinnie. It’s not cool. Like cool’s not cool. It’s as dead as Buddy Holly.”

“I talk the way I want,” Vinnie said.

“Where’s the other one? The guy with the funny red hair.”

“Split, man.” But under his studied unconcern, Jim sensed a wariness.

“He’s alive, isn’t he? That’s why he’s not here. He’s alive and he’s thirty-two or -three, the way you would be if—”

“Bleach was always a drag. He’s nothin’.” Vinnie sat up behind his desk and put his hands down flat on the old graffiti. His eyes glittered. “Man, I remember you at that lineup. You looked ready to piss your little old corduroy pants. I seen you lookin’ at me and Davie. I put the hex on you.”

“I suppose you did,” Jim said. “You gave me sixteen years of bad dreams. Wasn’t that enough? Why now? Why me?”

Vinnie looked puzzled, and then smiled again. “Because you’re unfinished business, man. You got to be cleaned up.”

“Where were you?” Jim asked. “Before.”

Vinnie’s lips thinned. “We ain’t talkin’ about that. Dig?”

“They dug you a hole, didn’t they, Vinnie? Six feet deep. Right in the Milford Cemetery. Six feet of—”

“You shut up!”

He was on his feet. The desk fell over in the aisle.

“It’s not going to be easy,” Jim said. “I’m not going to make it easy for you.”

“We’re gonna kill you, dad. You’ll find out about that hole.”

“Get out of here.”

“Maybe that little wifey of yours, too.”

“You goddamn punk, if you touch her—” He started forward blindly, feeling violated and terrified by the mention of Sally.

Vinnie grinned and started for the door. “Just be cool. Cool as a fool.” He tittered.

“If you touch my wife, I’ll kill you.”

Vinnie’s grin widened. “Kill me? Man, I thought you knew, I’m already dead.”

He left. His footfalls echoed in the corridor for a long time.

“What are you reading, hon?”

Jim held the binding of the book, Raising Demons, out for her to read.

“Yuck.” She turned back to the mirror to check her hair.

“Will you take a taxi home?” he asked.

“It’s only four blocks. Besides, the walk is good for my figure.”

“Someone grabbed one of my girls over on Summer Street,” he lied. “She thinks the object was rape.”

“Really? Who?”

“Dianne Snow,” he said, making a name up at random. “She’s a levelheaded girl. Treat yourself to a taxi, okay?”

“Okay,” she said. She stopped at his chair, knelt, put her hands on his cheeks and looked into his eyes. “What’s the matter, Jim?”

“Nothing.”

“Yes. Something is.”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Is it something … about your brother?”

A draft of terror blew over him, as if an inner door had been opened. “Why do you say that?”

“You were moaning his name in your sleep last night. Wayne, Wayne, you were saying. Run, Wayne.”

“It’s nothing.”

But it wasn’t. They both knew it. He watched her go.

Mr. Nell called at quarter past eight. “You don’t have to worry about those guys,” he said. “They’re all dead.”

“Is that so?” He was holding his place in Raising Demons with his index finger as he talked.

“Car smash. Six months after your brother was killed. A cop was chasing them. Frank Simon was the cop, as a matter of fact. He works out at Sikorsky now. Probably makes a lot more money.”

“And they crashed.”

“The car left the road at more than a hundred miles an hour and hit a main power pole. When they finally got the power shut off and scraped them out, they were cooked medium rare.”

Jim closed his eyes. “You saw the report?”

“Looked at it myself.”

“Anything on the car?”

“It was a hot rod.”

“Any description?”

“Black 1954 Ford sedan with ‘Snake Eyes’ written on the side. Fitting enough. They really crapped out.”

“They had a sidekick, Mr. Nell. I don’t know his name, but his nickname was Bleach.”

“That would be Charlie Sponder,” Mr. Nell said without hesitation. “He bleached his hair with Clorox one time. I remember that. It went streaky-white, and he tried to dye it back. The streaks went orange.”

“Do you know what he’s doing now?”

“Career army man. Joined up in fifty-eight or -nine, after he got a local girl pregnant.”

“Could I get in touch with him?”

“His mother lives in Stratford. She’d know.”

“Can you give me her address?”

“I won’t, Jimmy. Not until you tell me what’s eating you.”

“I can’t, Mr. Nell. You’d think I was crazy.”

“Try me.”

“I can’t.”

“All right, son.”

“Will you—” But the line was dead.

“You bastard,” Jim said, and put the phone in the cradle. It rang under his hand and he jerked away from it as if it had suddenly burned him. He looked at it, breathing heavily. It rang three times, four. He picked it up. Listened. Closed his eyes.

A cop pulled him over on his way to the hospital, then went ahead of him, siren screaming. There was a young doctor with a toothbrush mustache in the emergency room. He looked at Jim with dark, emotionless eyes.

“Excuse me, I’m James Norman and—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Norman. She died at 9:04 P.M.

He was going to faint. The world went far away and swimmy, and there was a high buzzing in his ears. His eyes wandered without purpose, seeing green tiled walls, a wheeled stretcher glittering under the overhead fluorescents, a nurse with her cap on crooked. Time to freshen up, honey. An orderly was leaning against the wall outside Emergency Room No. 1. Wearing dirty whites with a few drops of drying blood splattered across the front. Cleaning his fingernails with a knife. The orderly looked up and grinned into Jim’s eyes. The orderly was David Garcia.

Jim fainted.

Funeral. Like a dance in three acts. The house. The funeral parlor. The graveyard. Faces coming out of nowhere, whirling close, whirling off into the darkness again. Sally’s mother, her eyes

streaming tears behind a black veil. Her father, looking shocked and old. Simmons. Others. They introduced themselves and shook his hand. He nodded, not remembering their names. Some of the women brought food, and one lady brought an apple pie and someone ate a piece and when he went out in the kitchen he saw it sitting on the counter, cut wide open and drooling juice into the pie plate like amber blood and he thought: Should have a big scoop of vanilla ice cream right on top.

He felt his hands and legs trembling, wanting to go across to the counter and throw the pie against the wall.

And then they were going and he was watching himself, the way you watch yourself in a home movie, as he shook hands and nodded and said: Thank you … Yes, I will… Thank you … I'm sure she is … Thank you …

When they were gone, the house was his again. He went over to the mantel. It was cluttered with souvenirs of their marriage. A stuffed dog with jeweled eyes that she had won at Coney Island on their honeymoon. Two leather folders—his diploma from B.U. and hers from U. Mass. A giant pair of styrofoam dice she had given him as a gag after he had dropped sixteen dollars in Pinky Silverstein's poker game a year or so before. A thin china cup she had bought in a Cleveland junk shop last year. In the middle of the mantel, their wedding picture. He turned it over and then sat down in his chair and looked at the blank TV set. An idea began to form behind his eyes.

An hour later the phone rang, jolting him out of a light doze. He groped for it.

"You're next, Norm."

"Vinnie?"

"Man, she was like one of those clay pigeons in a shooting gallery. Wham and splatter."

“I’ll be at the school tonight, Vinnie. Room 33. I’ll leave the lights off. It’ll be just like the overpass that day. I think I can even provide the train.”

“Just want to end it all, is that right?”

“That’s right,” Jim said. “You be there.”

“Maybe.”

“You’ll be there,” Jim said, and hung up.

It was almost dark when he got to the school. He parked in his usual slot, opened the back door with his passkey, and went first to the English Department office on the second floor. He let himself in, opened the record cabinet, and began to flip through the records. He paused about halfway through the stack and took out one called Hi-Fi Sound Effects. He turned it over. The third cut on the A side was “Freight Train: 3:04.” He put the album on top of the department’s portable stereo and took Raising Demons out of his overcoat pocket. He turned to a marked passage, read something, and nodded. He turned out the lights.

Room 33.

He set up the stereo system, stretching the speakers to their widest separation, and then put on the freight-train cut. The sound came swelling up out of nothing until it filled the whole room with the harsh clash of diesel engines and steel on steel.

With his eyes closed, he could almost believe he was under the Broad Street trestle, driven to his knees, watching as the savage little drama worked to its inevitable conclusion …

He opened his eyes, rejected the record, then reset it. He sat behind his desk and opened Raising Demons to a chapter entitled “Malefic Spirits and How to Call Them.” His lips moved as he read, and he

paused at intervals to take objects out of his pocket and lay them on his desk.

First, an old and creased Kodak of him and his brother, standing on the lawn in front of the Broad Street apartment house where they had lived. They both had identical crew cuts, and both of them were smiling shyly into the camera. Second, a small bottle of blood. He had caught a stray alley cat and slit its throat with his pocketknife. Third, the pocketknife itself. Last, a sweatband ripped from the lining of an old Little League baseball cap. Wayne's cap. Jim had kept it in secret hopes that someday he and Sally would have a son to wear it.

He got up, went to the window, looked out. The parking lot was empty.

He began to push the school desks toward the walls, leaving a rough circle in the middle of the room. When that was done he got chalk from his desk drawer and, following the diagram in the book exactly and using a yardstick, he drew a pentagram on the floor.

His breath was coming harder now. He turned off the lights, gathered his objects in one hand, and began to recite.

"Dark Father, hear me for my soul's sake. I am one who promises sacrifice. I am one who begs a dark boon for sacrifice. I am one who seeks vengeance of the left hand. I bring blood in promise of sacrifice."

He screwed the cap off the jar, which had originally held peanut butter, and splashed it within the pentagram.

Something happened in the darkened schoolroom. It was not possible to say exactly what, but the air became heavier. There was a thickness in it that seemed to fill the throat and the belly with gray steel. The deep silence grew, swelled with something unseen.

He did as the old rites instructed.

Now there was a feeling in the air that reminded Jim of the time he had taken a class to visit a huge power station—a feeling that the very air was crammed with electric potential and was vibrating. And then a voice, curiously low and unpleasant, spoke to him.

“What do you require?”

He could not tell if he was actually hearing it or only thinking that he did. He spoke two sentences.

“It is a small boon. What do you offer?”

Jim spoke two words.

“Both,” the voice whispered. “Right and left. Agreed?”

“Yes.”

“Then give me what is mine.”

He opened his pocketknife, turned to his desk, laid his right hand down flat, and hacked off his right index finger with four hard chops. Blood flew across the blotter in dark patterns. It didn’t hurt at all. He brushed the finger aside and switched the pocketknife to his right hand. Cutting off the left finger was harder. His right hand felt awkward and alien with the missing finger, and the knife kept slipping. At last, with an impatient grunt, he threw the knife away, snapped the bone, and ripped the finger free. He picked them both up like breadsticks and threw them into the pentagram. There was a bright flash of light, like an old-fashioned photographer’s flashpowder. No smoke, he noted. No smell of brimstone.

“What objects have you brought?”

“A photograph. A band of cloth that has been dipped in his sweat.”

“Sweat is precious,” the voice remarked, and there was a cold greed in the tone that made Jim shiver. “Give them to me.”

Jim threw them into the pentagram. The light flashed.

“It is good,” the voice said.

“If they come,” Jim said.

There was no response. The voice was gone—if it had ever been there. He leaned closer to the pentagram. The picture was still there, but blackened and charred. The sweatband was gone.

In the street there was a noise, faint at first, then swelling. A hot rod equipped with glasspack mufflers, first turning onto Davis Street, then approaching. Jim sat down, listening to hear if it would go by or turn in.

It turned in.

Footfalls on the stairs, echoing.

Robert Lawson’s high-pitched giggle, then someone going “Shhhhh!” and then Lawson’s giggle again. The footfalls came closer, lost their echo, and then the glass door at the head of the stairs banged open.

“Yoo-hoo, Normie!” David Garcia called, falsetto.

“You there, Normie?” Lawson whispered, and then giggled. “Vas you dere, Cholly?”

Vinnie didn’t speak, but as they advanced up the hall, Jim could see their shadows. Vinnie’s was the tallest, and he was holding a long object in one hand. There was a light snick of sound, and the long object became longer still.

They were standing by the door, Vinnie in the middle. They were all holding knives.

“Here we come, man,” Vinnie said softly. “Here we come for your ass.”

Jim turned on the record player.

“Jesus!” Garcia called out, jumping. “What’s that?”

The freight train was coming closer. You could almost feel the walls thrumming with it.

The sound no longer seemed to be coming out of the speakers but from down the hall, from down tracks someplace far away in time as well as space.

“I don’t like this, man,” Lawson said.

“It’s too late,” Vinnie said. He stepped forward and gestured with the knife. “Give us your money, dad.”

… let us go …

Garcia recoiled. “What the hell—”

But Vinnie never hesitated. He motioned the others to spread out, and the thing in his eyes might have been relief.

“Come on, kid, how much you got?” Garcia asked suddenly.

“Four cents,” Jim said. It was true. He had picked them out of the penny jar in the bedroom. The most recent date was 1956.

“You fuckin’ liar.”

… leave him alone …

Lawson glanced over his shoulder and his eyes widened. The walls had become misty, insubstantial. The freight train wailed. The light from the parking-lot streetlamp had reddened, like the neon Burrets Building Company sign, stuttering against the twilight sky.

Something was walking out of the pentagram, something with the face of a small boy perhaps twelve years old. A boy with a crew cut.

Garcia darted forward and punched Jim in the mouth. He could smell mixed garlic and pepperoni on his breath. It was all slow and painless.

Jim felt a sudden heaviness, like lead, in his groin, and his bladder let go. He looked down and saw a dark patch appear and spread on his pants.

“Look, Vinnie, he wet himself!” Lawson cried out. The tone was right, but the expression on his face was one of horror—the expression of a puppet that has come to life only to find itself on strings.

“Let him alone,” the Wayne-thing said, but it was not Wayne’s voice —it was the cold, greedy voice of the thing from the pentagram. “Run, Jimmy! Run! Run! Run!”

Jim slipped to his knees and a hand slapped down on his back, groping for purchase, and found none.

He looked up and saw Vinnie, his face stretched into a caricature of hatred, drive his knife into the Wayne-thing just below the breastbone … and then scream, his face collapsing in on itself, charring, blackening, becoming awful.

Then he was gone.

Garcia and Lawson struck a moment later, writhed, charred, and disappeared.

Jim lay on the floor, breathing harshly. The sound of the freight train faded.

His brother was looking down at him.

“Wayne?” he breathed.

And the face changed. It seemed to melt and run together. The eyes went yellow, and a horrible, grinning malignancy looked out at him.

“I’ll come back, Jim,” the cold voice whispered.

And it was gone.

He got up slowly and turned off the record player with one mangled hand. He touched his mouth. It was bleeding from Garcia’s punch. He went over and turned on the lights. The room was empty. He looked out into the parking lot and that was empty, too, except for one hubcap that reflected the moon in idiot pantomime. The classroom air smelled old and stale—the atmosphere of tombs. He erased the pentagram on the floor and then began to straighten up the desks for the substitute the next day. His fingers hurt very badly—what fingers? He would have to see a doctor. He closed the door and went downstairs slowly, holding his hands to his chest. Halfway down, something—a shadow, or perhaps only an intuition—made him whirl around.

Something unseen seemed to leap back.

Jim remembered the warning in Raising Demons—the danger involved. You could perhaps summon them, perhaps cause them to do your work. You could even get rid of them.

But sometimes they come back.

He walked down the stairs again, wondering if the nightmare was over after all.