THE EARLY YEARS

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I was born in 1947 and we didn't get our first television until 1958. The first thing I remember watching on it was Robot Monster, a film in which a guy dressed in an ape suit with a goldfish bowl on his head - Ro-Man, he was called - ran around trying to kill the survivors of a nuclear war. I felt this was art of quite a high nature. But TV came relatively late to the King household, and I'm glad. I am, when you stop to think of it, a member of a fairly select group: the final handful of American novelists who learned to read and write before they learned to eat a daily helping of video bullshit. This might not be important. On the other hand, if you're just starting out as a writer, you could do worse than strip your television's electric plug-wire, wrap a spike around it, and then stick it back into the wall. See what blows, and how far. Just an idea.

By the time I was 14 (and shaving twice a week whether I needed to or not), the nail in my wall would no longer support the weight of the rejection slips impaled upon it. I replaced the nail with a spike and went on writing. By the time I was 16 I'd begun to get rejection slips with hand-written notes. The first of these hopeful notes was from Algis Budrys, then the editor of Fantasy and Science Fiction, who read a story of mine called The Night of the Tiger and wrote: 'This is good. Not for us, but good. You have talent. Submit again.' Those four brief sentences, scribbled by a fountain pen that left big ragged blotches in its wake, brightened the dismal winter of my 16th year.

My mother knew I wanted to be a writer, but she encouraged me to get a teacher's credential 'so you'll have something to fall back on'. 'You may want to get married, Stephen, and a garret by the Seine is only romantic if you're a bachelor,' she'd said once. 'It's no place to raise a family.'

I did as she suggested, entering the College of Education at the University of Maine and emerging four years later with a teacher's certificate… sort of like a Golden Retriever emerging from a pond with a dead duck in its jaws. It was dead, all right. I couldn't find a

teaching job and so went to work at New Franklin Laundry for wages not much higher than those I had been making at Worumbo Mills and Weaving four years before. I was keeping my family in a series of garrets which overlooked not the Seine but some of Bangor's less appetising streets.

I never saw personal laundry at New Franklin unless it was a 'fire order' being paid for by an insurance company (most fire orders consisted of clothes that looked OK, but smelled like barbecued monkeymeat). The greater part of what I loaded and pulled were motel sheets from Maine's coastal towns and table linen from Maine's coastal restaurants. The table linen was desperately nasty. When tourists go out to dinner in Maine, they usually want clams and lobster. Mostly lobster. By the time the tablecloths upon which these delicacies had been served reached me, they stank to high heaven and were often boiling with maggots.

I thought I'd get used to them in time, but I never did. The maggots were bad; the smell was even worse. 'Why are people such slobs?' I would wonder, loading feverish linens from Testa's of Bar Harbor into my machines. 'Why are people such fucking slobs?'

Hospital sheets and linens were even worse. There were often little extras in the hospital laundry; those loads were like nasty boxes of Cracker Jacks with weird prizes in them. I found a steel bedpan in one load and a pair of surgical shears in another (the bedpan was of no practical use, but the shears were a damned handy kitchen implement). Ernest 'Rocky' Rockwell, the guy I worked with, found $20 in a load from Eastern Maine Medical Center and punched out at noon to start drinking.

On one occasion I heard a strange clicking from inside one of the Washex. I hit the emergency stop button, thinking the goddam thing was stripping its gears or something. I opened the doors and hauled out a huge wad of dripping surgical tunics and green caps, soaking myself in the process. Below them, lying scattered across the colander-like inner sleeve of the middle pocket, was what looked like a complete set of human teeth. It crossed my mind that they would

make an interesting necklace, then I scooped them out and tossed them in the trash.

From a financial point of view, two kids were probably two too many for college grads working in a laundry and the second shift at Dunkin' Donuts. The only edge we had came courtesy of magazines like Dude, Cavalier, Adam and Swank - what my Uncle Oren used to call 'the titty books'. By 1972 they were showing quite a lot more than bare breasts, and fiction was on its way out, but I was lucky enough to ride the last wave.

I wrote after work; when we lived on Grove Street, which was close to the New Franklin, I would sometimes write a little on my lunch hour, too. I suppose that sounds almost impossibly Abe Lincoln, but it was no big deal - I was having fun. Those stories, grim as some of them were, served as brief escapes from the boss, Mr Brooks, and Harry the floor-man.

Harry had hooks instead of hands as a result of a tumble into the sheet-mangler during the Second World War (he was dusting the beams above the machine and fell off). A comedian at heart, he would sometimes duck into the bathroom and run water from the cold tap over one hook and water from the hot tap over the other. Then he'd sneak up behind you while you were loading laundry and lay the steel hooks on the back of your neck. Rocky and I spent a fair amount of time speculating on how Harry accomplished certain bathroom clean-up activities. 'Well,' Rocky said one day while we were drinking our lunch in his car, 'at least he doesn't need to wash his hands.'

There were times - especially in summer, while swallowing my afternoon salt-pill - when it occurred to me that I was simply repeating my mother's life. Usually this thought struck me as funny. But if I happened to be tired, or if there were extra bills to pay and no money to pay them with, it seemed awful. I'd think, 'This isn't the way our lives are supposed to be going.' Then I'd think, 'Half the world has the same idea.'

The stories I sold to the men's magazines between August 1970, when I got my $200 cheque for Graveyard Shift, and the winter of 1973-4, were just enough to create a rough sliding margin between us and the welfare office (my mother, a Republican all her life, had communicated her deep horror of 'going on the county' to me; Tabby [Tabitha, his wife] had some of that same horror).

I think we had a lot of happiness in those days, but we were scared a lot, too. We weren't much more than kids ourselves, and being friendly helped keep the mean reds away. We took care of ourselves and the kids and each other as best we could. Tabby wore her pink uniform out to Dunkin' Donuts and called the cops when the drunks who came in for coffee got obstreperous.

I washed motel sheets and kept writing one-reel horror movies.

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