

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES

# THE END OF THE WHOLE MESS



# **THE END OF THE WHOLE MESS**

**Stephen King**

I want to tell you about the end of war, the degeneration of mankind, and the death of the Messiah—an epic story, deserving thousands of pages and a whole shelf of volumes, but you (if there are any “you” later on to read this) will have to settle for the freeze-dried version. The direct injection works very fast. I figure I’ve got somewhere between forty-five minutes and two hours, depending on my blood-type. I think it’s A, which should give me a little more time, but I’ll be goddamned if I can remember for sure. If it turns out to be O, you could be in for a lot of blank pages, my hypothetical friend.

In any event, I think maybe I’d better assume the worst and go as fast as I can.

I’m using the electric typewriter—Bobby’s word-processor is faster, but the genny’s cycle is too irregular to be trusted, even with the line suppressor. I’ve only got one shot at this; I can’t risk getting most of the way home and then seeing the whole thing go to data heaven because of an oHm drop, or a surge too great for the suppressor to cope with.

My name is Howard Forno. I was a freelance writer. My brother, Robert Forno, was the Messiah. I killed him by shooting him up with his own discovery four hours ago. He called it The Calmative. A Very Serious Mistake might have been a better name, but what’s done is done and can’t be undone, as the Irish have been saying for centuries ... which proves what assholes they are.

Shit, I can’t afford these digressions.

After Bobby died I covered him with a quilt and sat at the cabin’s single living-room window for some three hours, looking out at the woods. Used to be you could see the orange glow of the hi-intensity arc-sodiums from North Conway, but no more. Now there’s just the White Mountains, looking like dark triangles of crepe paper cut out by a child, and the pointless stars.

I turned on the radio, dialed through four bands, found one crazy guy, and shut it off. I sat there thinking of ways to tell this story. My mind kept sliding away toward all those miles of dark pinewoods, all that nothing. Finally I realized I needed to get myself off the dime and shoot myself up. Shit. I never could work without a deadline.

And I've sure-to-God got one now.

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Our parents had no reason to expect anything other than what they got: bright children. Dad was a history major who had become a full professor at Hofstra when he was thirty. Ten years later he was one of six vice-administrators of the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and in line for the top spot. He was a helluva good guy, too—had every record Chuck Berry ever cut and played a pretty mean blues guitar himself. My dad filed by day and rocked by night.

Mom graduated magna cum laude from Drew. Got a Phi Beta Kappa key she sometimes wore on this funky fedora she had. She became a successful CPA in D.C., met my dad, married him, and took in her shingle when she became pregnant with yours truly. I came along in 1980. By '84 she was doing taxes for some of my dad's associates—she called this her "little hobby." By the time Bobby was born in 1987, she was handling taxes, investment portfolios, and estate-planning for a dozen powerful men. I could name them, but who gives a wad? They're either dead or driveling idiots by now.

I think she probably made more out of "her little hobby" each year than my dad made at his job, but that never mattered—they were happy with what they were to themselves and to each other. I saw them squabble lots of times, but I never saw them fight. When I was growing up, the only difference I saw between my mom and my playmates' moms was that their moms used to read or iron or sew or talk on the phone while the soaps played on the tube, and my mom used to run a pocket calculator and write down numbers on big green sheets of paper while the soaps played on the tube.

I was no disappointment to a couple of people with Mensa Gold Cards in their wallets. I maintained A's and B's through my public-school career (the idea that either I or my brother might go to a private school was never even discussed so far as I know). I also wrote well early, with no effort at all. I sold my first magazine piece when I was twenty—it was on how the Continental Army wintered at Valley Forge. I sold it to an airline magazine for four hundred fifty dollars. My dad, whom I loved deeply, asked me if he could buy that check from me. He gave me his own personal check and had the check from the airline magazine framed and hung it over his desk. A romantic genius, if you will. A romantic blues-playing genius, if you will. Take it from me, a kid could do a lot worse. Of course he and my mother both died raving and pissing in their pants late last year, like almost everyone else on this big round world of ours, but I never stopped loving either of them.

I was the sort of child they had every reason to expect—a good boy with a bright mind, a talented boy whose talent grew to early maturity in an atmosphere of love and confidence, a faithful boy who loved and respected his mom and dad.

Bobby was different. Nobody, not even Mensa types like our folks, ever expects a kid like Bobby. Not ever.

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I potty-trained two full years earlier than Bob, and that was the only thing in which I ever beat him. But I never felt jealous of him; that would have been like a fairly good American Legion League pitcher feeling jealous of Nolan Ryan or Roger Clemens. After a certain point the comparisons that cause feelings of jealousy simply cease to exist. I've been there, and I can tell you: after a certain point you just stand back and shield your eyes from the flashburns.

Bobby read at two and began writing short essays (“Our Dog,” “A Trip to Boston with Mother”) at three. His printing was the straggling, struggling galvanic constructions of a six-year-old, and that was startling enough in itself, but there was more: if transcribed so that

his still-developing motor control no longer became an evaluative factor, you would have thought you were reading the work of a bright, if extremely naive, fifth-grader. He progressed from simple sentences to compound sentences to complex ones with dizzying rapidity, grasping clauses, sub-clauses, and modifying clauses with an intuitiveness that was eerie. Sometimes his syntax was garbled and his modifiers misplaced, but he had such flaws—which plague most writers all their lives—pretty well under control by the age of five.

He developed headaches. My parents were afraid he had some sort of physical problem—a brain-tumor, perhaps—and took him to a doctor who examined him carefully, listened to him even more carefully, and then told my parents there was nothing wrong with Bobby except stress: he was in a state of extreme frustration because his writing-hand would not work as well as his brain.

“You got a kid trying to pass a mental kidney stone,” the doctor said. “I could prescribe something for his headaches, but I think the drug he really needs is a typewriter.” So Mom and Dad gave Bobby an IBM. A year later they gave him a Commodore 64 with WordStar for Christmas and Bobby’s headaches stopped. Before going on to other matters, I only want to add that he believed for the next three years or so that it was Santa Claus who had left that word-cruncher under our tree. Now that I think of it, that was another place where I beat Bobby: I Santa-trained earlier, too.

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There’s so much I could tell you about those early days, and I suppose I’ll have to tell you a little, but I’ll have to go fast and make it brief. The deadline. Ah, the deadline. I once read a very funny piece called “The Essential Gone with the Wind” that went something like this:

” ‘A war?’ laughed Scarlett. ‘Oh, fiddle-de-dee!’

“Boom! Ashley went to war! Atlanta burned! Rhett walked in and then walked out!

” ‘Fiddle-de-dee,’ said Scarlett through her tears, ‘I will think about it tomorrow, for tomorrow is another day.’ “

I laughed heartily over that when I read it; now that I’m faced with doing something similar, it doesn’t seem quite so funny. But here goes:

“A child with an IQ immeasurable by any existing test?” smiled India Forno to her devoted husband, Richard. “Fiddle-de-dee! We’ll provide an atmosphere where his intellect—not to mention that of his not-exactly-stupid older brother—can grow. And we’ll raise them as the normal all-American boys they by gosh are!”

Boom! The Forno boys grew up! Howard went to the University of Virginia, graduated cum laude, and settled down to a freelance writing career! Made a comfortable living! Stepped out with a lot of women and went to bed with quite a few of them! Managed to avoid social diseases both sexual and pharmacological! Bought a Mitsubishi stereo system! Wrote home at least once a week! Published two novels that did pretty well! “Fiddle-de-dee,” said Howard, “this is the life for me!”

And so it was, at least until the day Bobby showed up unexpectedly (in the best mad-scientist tradition) with his two glass boxes, a bees’ nest in one and a wasps’ nest in the other, Bobby wearing a Mumford Phys Ed tee-shirt inside-out, on the verge of destroying human intellect and just as happy as a clam at high tide.

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Guys like my brother Bobby come along only once every two or three generations, I think—guys like Leonardo da Vinci, Newton, Einstein, maybe Edison. They all seem to have one thing in common: they are like huge compasses which swing aimlessly for a long time, searching for some true north and then homing on it with

fearful force. Before that happens such guys are apt to get up to some weird shit, and Bobby was no exception.

When he was eight and I was fifteen, he came to me and said he had invented an airplane. By then I knew Bobby too well to just say “Bullshit” and kick him out of my room. I went out to the garage, where there was this weird plywood contraption sitting on his American Flyer red wagon. It looked a little like a fighter plane, but the wings were raked forward instead of back. He had mounted the saddle from his rocking horse on the middle of it with bolts. There was a lever on the side. There was no motor. He said it was a glider. He wanted me to push him down Carrigan’s Hill, which was the steepest grade in D.C.’s Grant Park—there was a cement path down the middle of it for old folks. That, Bobby said, would be his runway.

“Bobby,” I said, “you got this puppy’s wings on backward.”

“No,” he said. “This is the way they’re supposed to be. I saw something on Wild Kingdom about hawks. They dive down on their prey and then reverse their wings coming up. They’re double-jointed, see? You get better lift this way.”

“Then why isn’t the Air Force building them this way?” I asked, blissfully unaware that both the American and the Russian air forces had plans for such forward-wing fighter planes on their drawing boards.

Bobby just shrugged. He didn’t know and didn’t care.

We went over to Carrigan’s Hill and he climbed into the rocking-horse saddle and gripped the lever. “Push me hard,” he said. His eyes were dancing with that crazed light I knew so well—Christ, his eyes used to light up that way in his cradle sometimes. But I swear to God I never would have pushed him down the cement path as hard as I did if I thought the thing would actually work.

But I didn’t know, and I gave him one hell of a shove. He went freewheeling down the hill, whooping like a cowboy just off a



traildrive and headed into town for a few cold beers. An old lady had to jump out of his way, and he just missed an old geezer leaning over a walker. Halfway down he pulled the handle and I watched, wide-eyed and bullshit with fear and amazement, as his splintery plywood plane separated from the wagon. At first it only hovered inches above it, and for a second it looked like it was going to settle back. Then there was a gust of wind and Bobby's plane took off like someone had it on an invisible cable. The American Flyer wagon ran off the concrete path and into some bushes. All of a sudden Bobby was ten feet in the air, then twenty, then fifty. He went gliding over Grant Park on a steepening upward plane, whooping cheerily.

I went running after him, screaming for him to come down, visions of his body tumbling off that stupid rocking-horse saddle and impaling itself on a tree, or one of the park's many statues, standing out with hideous clarity in my head. I did not just imagine my brother's funeral; I tell you I attended it.

"BOBBY!" I shrieked. "COME DOWN!"

"WHEEEEEEEEE!" Bobby screamed back, his voice faint but clearly ecstatic. Startled chess-players, Frisbee-throwers, book-readers, lovers, and joggers stopped whatever they were doing to watch.

"BOBBY THERE'S NO SEATBELT ON THAT FUCKING THING!" I screamed. It was the first time I ever used that particular word, so far as I can remember.

"Iyyyy'll beeee all riyyyht ..." He was screaming at the top of his lungs, but I was appalled to realize I could barely hear him. I went running down Carrigan's Hill, shrieking all the way. I don't have the slightest memory of just what I was yelling, but the next day I could not speak above a whisper. I do remember passing a young fellow in a neat three-piece suit standing by the statue of Eleanor Roosevelt at the foot of the hill. He looked at me and said conversationally, "Tell you what, my friend, I'm having one hell of an acid flashback."

I remember that odd misshapen shadow gliding across the green floor of the park, rising and rippling as it crossed park benches, litter baskets, and the upturned faces of the watching people. I remember chasing it. I remember how my mother's face crumpled and how she started to cry when I told her that Bobby's plane, which had no business flying in the first place, turned upside down in a sudden eddy of wind and Bobby finished his short but brilliant career splattered all over D Street.

The way things turned out, it might have been better for everyone if things had actually turned out that way, but they didn't.

Instead, Bobby banked back toward Carrigan's Hill, holding nonchalantly onto the tail of his own plane to keep from falling off the damned thing, and brought it down toward the little pond at the center of Grant Park. He went air-sliding five feet over it, then four ... and then he was skiing his sneakers along the surface of the water, sending back twin white wakes, scaring the usually complacent (and overfed) ducks up in honking indignant flurries before him, laughing his cheerful laugh. He came down on the far side, exactly between two park benches that snapped off the wings of his plane. He flew out of the saddle, thumped his head, and started to bawl.

That was life with Bobby.

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Not everything was that spectacular—in fact, I don't think anything was ... at least until *The Calmative*. But I told you the story because I think, this time at least, the extreme case best illustrates the norm: life with Bobby was a constant mind-fuck. By the age of nine he was attending quantum physics and advanced algebra classes at Georgetown University. There was the day he blanked out every radio and TV on our street—and the surrounding four blocks—with his own voice; he had found an old portable TV in the attic and turned it into a wide-band radio broadcasting station. One old black-and-white Zenith, twelve feet of hi-fi flex, a coathanger mounted on the roofpeak of our house, and presto! For about two hours four

blocks of Georgetown could receive only WBOB... which happened to be my brother, reading some of my short stories, telling moron jokes, and explaining that the high sulfur content in baked beans was the reason our dad farted so much in church every Sunday morning. "But he gets most of em off pretty quiet," Bobby told his listening audience of roughly three thousand, "or sometimes he holds the real bangers until it's time for the hymns."

My dad, who was less than happy about all this, ended up paying a seventy-five-dollar FCC fine and taking it out of Bobby's allowance for the next year.

Life with Bobby, oh yeah... and look here, I'm crying. Is it honest sentiment, I wonder, or the onset? The former, I think—Christ knows how much I loved him—but I think I better try to hurry up a little just the same.

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Bobby had graduated high school, for all practical purposes, by the age of ten, but he never got a B.A. or B.S., let alone any advanced degree. It was that big powerful compass in his head, swinging around and around, looking for some true north to point at.

He went through a physics period, and a shorter period when he was nutty for chemistry ... but in the end, Bobby was too impatient with mathematics for either of those fields to hold him. He could do it, but it—and ultimately all so-called hard science—bored him.

By the time he was fifteen, it was archaeology—he combed the White Mountain foothills around our summer place in North Conway, building a history of the Indians who had lived there from arrowheads, flints, even the charcoal patterns of long-dead campfires in the mesolithic caves in the mid-New Hampshire regions.

But that passed, too, and he began to read history and anthropology. When he was sixteen my father and my mother gave their reluctant

approval when Bobby requested that he be allowed to accompany a party of New England anthropologists on an expedition to South America.

He came back five months later with the first real tan of his life; he was also an inch taller, fifteen pounds lighter, and much quieter. He was still cheerful enough, or could be, but his little-boy exuberance, sometimes infectious, sometimes wearisome, but always there, was gone. He had grown up. And for the first time I remember him talking about the news ... how bad it was, I mean. That was 2003, the year a PLO splinter group called the Sons of the Jihad (a name that always sounded to me hideously like a Catholic community service group somewhere in western Pennsylvania) set off a Squirrt Bomb in London, polluting sixty per cent of it and making the rest of it extremely unhealthy for people who ever planned to have children (or to live past the age of fifty, for that matter). The year we tried to blockade the Philippines after the Cedeno administration accepted a “small group” of Red Chinese advisors (fifteen thousand or so, according to our spy satellites), and only backed down when it became clear that (a) the Chinese weren't kidding about emptying the holes if we didn't pull back, and (b) the American people weren't all that crazy about committing mass suicide over the Philippine Islands. That was also the year some other group of crazy motherfuckers—Albanians, I think—tried to air-spray the AIDS virus over Berlin.

This sort of stuff depressed everybody, but it depressed the shit out of Bobby.

“Why are people so goddam mean?” he asked me one day. We were at the summer place in New Hampshire, it was late August, and most of our stuff was already in boxes and suitcases. The cabin had that sad, deserted look it always got just before we all went our separate ways. For me it meant back to New York, and for Bobby it meant Waco, Texas, of all places... he had spent the summer reading sociology and geology texts—how's that for a crazy salad?—and said he wanted to run a couple of experiments down there. He

said it in a casual, offhand way, but I had seen my mother looking at him with a peculiar thoughtful scrutiny in the last couple of weeks we were all together. Neither Dad nor I suspected, but I think my mom knew that Bobby's compass needle had finally stopped swinging and had started pointing.

"Why are they so mean?" I asked. "I'm supposed to answer that?"

"Someone better," he said. "Pretty soon, too, the way things are going."

"They're going the way they always went," I said, "and I guess they're doing it because people were built to be mean. If you want to lay blame, blame God."

"That's bullshit. I don't believe it. Even that doubleX-chromosome stuff turned out to be bullshit in the end. And don't tell me it's just economic pressures, the conflict between the haves and have-nots, because that doesn't explain all of it, either."

"Original sin," I said. "It works for me—it's got a good beat and you can dance to it."

"Well," Bobby said, "maybe it is original sin. But what's the instrument, big brother? Have you ever asked yourself that?"

"Instrument? What instrument? I'm not following you."

"I think it's the water," Bobby said moodily.

"Say what?"

"The water. Something in the water."

He looked at me.

"Or something that isn't."

The next day Bobby went off to Waco. I didn't see him again until he showed up at my apartment wearing the inside-out Mumford shirt and carrying the two glass boxes. That was three years later.

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"Howdy, Howie," he said, stepping in and giving me a nonchalant swat on the back as if it had been only three days.

"Bobby!" I yelled, and threw both arms around him in a bear-hug. Hard angles bit into my chest, and I heard an angry hive-hum.

"I'm glad to see you too," Bobby said, "but you better go easy. You're upsetting the natives."

I stepped back in a hurry. Bobby set down the big paper bag he was carrying and unslung his shoulder-bag. Then he carefully brought the glass boxes out of the bag. There was a beehive in one, a wasps' nest in the other. The bees were already settling down and going back to whatever business bees have, but the wasps were clearly unhappy about the whole thing.

"Okay, Bobby," I said. I looked at him and grinned. I couldn't seem to stop grinning. "What are you up to this time?"

He unzipped the tote-bag and brought out a mayonnaise jar which was half-filled with a clear liquid.

"See this?" he said.

"Yeah. Looks like either water or white lightning."

"It's actually both, if you can believe that. It came from an artesian well in La Plata, a little town forty miles east of Waco, and before I turned it into this concentrated form, there were five gallons of it. I've got a regular little distillery running down there, Howie, but I don't think the government will ever bust me for it." He was grinning, and

now the grin broadened. “Water’s all it is, but it’s still the goddamndest popskull the human race has ever seen.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

“I know you don’t. But you will. You know what, Howie?”

“What?”

“If the idiotic human race can manage to hold itself together for another six months, I’m betting it’ll hold itself together for all time.”

He lifted the mayonnaise jar, and one magnified Bobby-eye stared at me through it with huge solemnity. “This is the big one,” he said. “The cure for the worst disease to which Homo sapiens falls prey.”

“Cancer?”

“Nope,” Bobby said. “War. Barroom brawls. Drive-by shootings. The whole mess. Where’s your bathroom, Howie? My back teeth are floating.”

When he came back he had not only turned the Mumford tee-shirt right-side out, he had combed his hair—nor had his method of doing this changed, I saw. Bobby just held his head under the faucet for awhile then raked everything back with his fingers.

He looked at the two glass boxes and pronounced the bees and wasps back to normal. “Not that a wasps’ nest ever approaches anything even closely resembling ‘normal,’ Howie. Wasps are social insects, like bees and ants, but unlike bees, which are almost always sane, and ants, which have occasional schizoid lapses, wasps are total full-bore lunatics.” He smiled. “Just like us good old Homo saps.” He took the top off the glass box containing the beehive.

“Tell you what, Bobby,” I said. I was smiling, but the smile felt much too wide. “Put the top back on and just tell me about it, what do you say? Save the demonstration for later. I mean, my landlord’s a real

pussycat, but the super's this big bull dyke who smokes Odie Perode cigars and has thirty pounds on me. She—"

"You'll like this," Bobby said, as if I hadn't spoken at all—a habit as familiar to me as his Ten Fingers Method of Hair Grooming. He was never impolite but often totally absorbed. And could I stop him? Aw shit, no. It was too good to have him back. I mean I think I knew even then that something was going to go totally wrong, but when I was with Bobby for more than five minutes, he just hypnotized me. He was Lucy holding the football and promising me this time for sure, and I was Charlie Brown, rushing down the field to kick it. "In fact, you've probably seen it done before—they show pictures of it in magazines from time to time, or in TV wildlife documentaries. It's nothing very special, but it looks like a big deal because people have got these totally irrational prejudices about bees."

And the weird thing was, he was right—I had seen it before.

He stuck his hand into the box between the hive and the glass. In less than fifteen seconds his hand had acquired a living black-and-yellow glove. It brought back an instant of total recall: sitting in front of the TV, wearing footie pajamas and clutching my Paddington Bear, maybe half an hour before bedtime (and surely years before Bobby was born), watching with mingled horror, disgust, and fascination as some beekeeper allowed bees to cover his entire face. They had formed a sort of executioner's hood at first, and then he had brushed them into a grotesque living beard.

Bobby winced suddenly, sharply, then grinned.

"One of em stung me," he said. "They're still a little upset from the trip. I hooked a ride with the local insurance lady from La Plata to Waco—she's got an old Piper Cub—and flew some little commuter airline, Air Asshole, I think it was, up to New Orleans from there. Made about forty connections, but I swear to God it was the cab ride from LaGarbage that got em crazy. Second Avenue's still got more potholes than the Bergenstrasse after the Germans surrendered."



“You know, I think you really ought to get your hand out of there, Bobs,” I said. I kept waiting for some of them to fly out—I could imagine chasing them around with a rolled-up magazine for hours, bringing them down one by one, as if they were escapees in some old prison movie. But none of them had escaped... at least so far.

“Relax, Howie. You ever see a bee sting a flower? Or even hear of it, for that matter?”

“You don’t look like a flower.”

He laughed. “Shit, you think bees know what a flower looks like? Un-uh! No way, man! They don’t know what a flower looks like any more than you or I know what a cloud sounds like. They know I’m sweet because I excrete sucrose dioxin in my sweat ... along with thirty-seven other dioxins, and those’re just the ones we know about.”

He paused thoughtfully.

“Although I must confess I was careful to, uh, sweeten myself up a little tonight. Ate a box of chocolate-covered cherries on the plane—”

“Oh Bobby, Jesus!”

“—and had a couple of MallowCremes in the taxi coming here.”

He reached in with his other hand and carefully began to brush the bees away. I saw him wince once more just before he got the last of them off, and then he eased my mind considerably by replacing the lid on the glass box. I saw a red swelling on each of his hands: one in the cup of the left palm, another high up on the right, near what the palmists call the Bracelets of Fortune. He’d been stung, but I saw well enough what he’d set out to show me: what looked like at least four hundred bees had investigated him. Only two had stung.

He took a pair of tweezers out of his jeans watch-pocket, and went over to my desk. He moved the pile of manuscript beside the Wang Micro I was using in those days and trained my Tensor lamp on the

place where the pages had been—fiddling with it until it formed a tiny hard spotlight on the cherry wood.

“Writin anything good, Bowwow?” he asked casually, and I felt the hair stiffen on the back of my neck. When was the last time he’d called me Bowwow? When he was four? Six? Shit, man, I don’t know. He was working carefully on his left hand with the tweezers. I saw him extract a tiny something that looked like a nostril hair and place it in my ashtray.

“Piece on art forgery for Vanity Fair,” I said. “Bobby, what in hell are you up to this time?”

“You want to pull the other one for me?” he asked, offering me the tweezers, his right hand, and an apologetic smile. “I keep thinking if I’m so goddam smart I ought to be ambidextrous, but my left hand has still got an IQ of about six.”

Same old Bobby.

I sat down beside him, took the tweezers, and pulled the bee stinger out of the red swelling near what in his case should have been the Bracelets of Doom, and while I did it he told me about the differences between bees and wasps, the difference between the water in La Plata and the water in New York, and how, goddam! everything was going to be all right with his water and a little help from me.

And oh shit, I ended up running at the football while my laughing, wildly intelligent brother held it, one last time.

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“Bees don’t sting unless they have to, because it kills them,” Bobby said matter-of-factly. “You remember that time in North Conway, when you said we kept killing each other because of original sin?”

“Yes. Hold still.”

“Well, if there is such a thing, if there’s a God who could simultaneously love us enough to serve us His own Son on a cross and send us all on a rocket-sled to hell just because one stupid bitch bit a bad apple, then the curse was just this: He made us like wasps instead of bees. Shit, Howie, what are you doing?”

“Hold still,” I said, “and I’ll get it out. If you want to make a lot of big gestures, I’ll wait.”

“Okay,” he said, and after that he held relatively still while I extracted the stinger. “Bees are nature’s kamikaze pilots, Bowwow. Look in that glass box, you’ll see the two who stung me lying dead at the bottom. Their stingers are barbed, like fishhooks. They slide in easy. When they pull out, they disembowel themselves.”

“Gross,” I said, dropping the second stinger in the ashtray. I couldn’t see the barbs, but I didn’t have a microscope.

“It makes them particular, though,” he said.

“I bet.”

“Wasps, on the other hand, have smooth stingers. They can shoot you up as many times as they like. They use up the poison by the third or fourth shot, but they can go right on making holes if they like ... and usually they do. Especially wall-wasps. The kind I’ve got over there. You gotta sedate em. Stuff called Noxon. It must give em a hell of a hangover, because they wake up madder than ever.”

He looked at me somberly, and for the first time I saw the dark brown wheels of weariness under his eyes and realized my kid brother was more tired than I had ever seen him.

“That’s why people go on fighting, Bowwow. On and on and on. We got smooth stingers. Now watch this.”

He got up, went over to his tote-bag, rummaged in it, and came up with an eye-dropper. He opened the mayonnaise jar, put the dropper

in, and drew up a tiny bubble of his distilled Texas water.

When he took it over to the glass box with the wasps' nest inside, I saw the top on this one was different—there was a tiny plastic slide-piece set into it. I didn't need him to draw me a picture: with the bees, he was perfectly willing to remove the whole top. With the wasps, he was taking no chances.

He squeezed the black bulb. Two drops of water fell onto the nest, making a momentary dark spot that disappeared almost at once. "Give it about three minutes," he said.

"What—"

"No questions," he said. "You'll see. Three minutes."

In that period, he read my piece on art forgery ... although it was already twenty pages long.

"Okay," he said, putting the pages down. "That's pretty good, man. You ought to read up a little on how Jay Gould furnished the parlor-car of his private train with fake Manets, though—that's a hoot." He was removing the cover of the glass box containing the wasps' nest as he spoke.

"Jesus, Bobby, cut the comedy!" I yelled.

"Same old wimp," Bobby laughed, and pulled the nest, which was dull gray and about the size of a bowling ball, out of the box. He held it in his hands. Wasps flew out and lit on his arms, his cheeks, his forehead. One flew across to me and landed on my forearm. I slapped it and it fell dead to the carpet. I was scared—I mean really scared. My body was wired with adrenaline and I could feel my eyes trying to push their way out of their sockets.

"Don't kill em," Bobby said. "You might as well be killing babies, for all the harm they can do you. That's the whole point." He tossed the nest from hand to hand as if it were an overgrown softball. He lobbed

it in the air. I watched, horrified, as wasps cruised the living room of my apartment like fighter planes on patrol.

Bobby lowered the nest carefully back into the box and sat down on my couch. He patted the place next to him and I went over, nearly hypnotized. They were everywhere: on the rug, the ceiling, the drapes. Half a dozen of them were crawling across the front of my big-screen TV.

Before I could sit down, he brushed away a couple that were on the sofa cushion where my ass was aimed. They flew away quickly. They were all flying easily, crawling easily, moving fast. There was nothing drugged about their behavior. As Bobby talked, they gradually found their way back to their spit-paper home, crawled over it, and eventually disappeared inside again through the hole in the top.

“I wasn’t the first one to get interested in Waco,” he said. “It just happens to be the biggest town in the funny little nonviolent section of what is, per capita, the most violent state in the union. Texans love to shoot each other, Howie—I mean, it’s like a state hobby. Half the male population goes around armed. Saturday night in the Fort Worth bars is like a shooting gallery where you get to plonk away at drunks instead of clay ducks. There are more NRA card-carriers than there are Methodists. Not that Texas is the only place where people shoot each other, or carve each other up with straight-razors, or stick their kids in the oven if they cry too long, you understand, but they sure do like their firearms.”

“Except in Waco,” I said.

“Oh, they like em there, too,” he said. “It’s just that they use em on each other a hell of a lot less often.”

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Jesus. I just looked up at the clock and saw the time. It feels like I’ve been writing for fifteen minutes or so, but it’s actually been over an

hour. That happens to me sometimes when I'm running at white-hot speed, but I can't allow myself to be seduced into these specifics. I feel as well as ever—no noticeable drying of the membranes in the throat, no groping for words, and as I glance back over what I've done I see only the normal typos and strikeouts. But I can't kid myself. I've got to hurry up. "Fiddle-de-dee," said Scarlett, and all of that.

The nonviolent atmosphere of the Waco area had been noticed and investigated before, mostly by sociologists. Bobby said that when you fed enough statistical data on Waco and similar areas into a computer—population density, mean age, mean economic level, mean educational level, and dozens of other factors—what you got back was a whopper of an anomaly. Scholarly papers are rarely jocular, but even so, several of the better than fifty Bobby had read on the subject suggested ironically that maybe it was "something in the water."

"I decided maybe it was time to take the joke seriously," Bobby said. "After all, there's something in the water of a lot of places that prevents tooth decay. It's called fluoride."

He went to Waco accompanied by a trio of research assistants: two sociology grad-students and a full professor of geology who happened to be on sabbatical and ready for adventure. Within six months, Bobby and the sociology guys had constructed a computer program which illustrated what my brother called the world's only calmquake. He had a slightly rumpled printout in his tote. He gave it to me. I was looking at a series of forty concentric rings. Waco was in the eighth, ninth, and tenth as you moved in toward the center.

"Now look at this," he said, and put a transparent overlay on the printout. More rings; but in each one there was a number. Fortieth ring: 471. Thirty-ninth: 420. Thirty-eighth: 418. And so on. In a couple of places the numbers went up instead of down, but only in a couple (and only by a little).

"What are they?"

“Each number represents the incidence of violent crime in that particular circle,” Bobby said. “Murder, rape, assault and battery, even acts of vandalism. The computer assigns a number by a formula that takes population density into account.” He tapped the twenty-seventh circle, which held the number 204, with his finger. “There’s less than nine hundred people in this whole area, for instance. The number represents three or four cases of spouse abuse, a couple of barroom brawls, an act of animal cruelty—some senile farmer got pissed at a pig and shot a load of rock-salt into it, as I recall—and one involuntary manslaughter.”

I saw that the numbers in the central circles dropped off radically: 85, 81, 70, 63, 40, 21, 5. At the epicenter of Bobby’s calmquake was the town of La Plata. To call it a sleepy little town seems more than fair.

The numeric value assigned to La Plata was zero.

“So here it is, Bowwow,” Bobby said, leaning forward and rubbing his long hands together nervously, “my nominee for the Garden of Eden. Here’s a community of fifteen thousand, twenty-four per cent of which are people of mixed blood, commonly called Indios. There’s a moccasin factory, a couple of little motor courts, a couple of scrub farms. That’s it for work. For play there’s four bars, a couple of dance-halls where you can hear any kind of music you want as long as it sounds like George Jones, two drive-ins, and a bowling alley.” He paused and added, “There’s also a still. I didn’t know anybody made whiskey that good outside of Tennessee.”

In short (and it is now too late to be anything else), La Plata should have been a fertile breeding-ground for the sort of casual violence you can read about in the Police Blotter section of the local newspaper every day. Should have been but wasn’t. There had been only one murder in La Plata during the five years previous to my brother’s arrival, two cases of assault, no rapes, no reported incidents of child abuse. There had been four armed robberies, but all four turned out to have been committed by transients ... as the murder and one of the assaults had been. The local Sheriff was a fat old Republican who did a pretty fair Rodney Dangerfield imitation.

He had been known, in fact, to spend whole days in the local coffee shop, tugging the knot in his tie and telling people to take his wife, please. My brother said he thought it was a little more than lame humor; he was pretty sure the poor guy was suffering first-stage Alzheimer's Disease. His only deputy was his nephew. Bobby told me the nephew looked quite a lot like Junior Samples on the old Hee-Haw show.

"Put those two guys in a Pennsylvania town similar to La Plata in every way but the geographical," Bobby said, "and they would have been out on their asses fifteen years ago. But in La Plata, they're gonna go on until they die ... which they'll probably do in their sleep."

"What did you do?" I asked. "How did you proceed?"

"Well, for the first week or so after we got our statistical shit together, we just sort of sat around and stared at each other," Bobby said. "I mean, we were prepared for something, but nothing quite like this. Even Waco doesn't prepare you for La Plata." Bobby shifted restlessly and cracked his knuckles.

"Jesus, I hate it when you do that," I said.

He smiled. "Sorry, Bowwow. Anyway, we started geological tests, then microscopic analysis of the water. I didn't expect a hell of a lot; everyone in the area has got a well, usually a deep one, and they get their water tested regularly to make sure they're not drinking borax, or something. If there had been something obvious, it would have turned up a long time ago. So we went on to submicroscopy, and that was when we started to turn up some pretty weird stuff."

"What kind of weird stuff?"

"Breaks in chains of atoms, subdynamic electrical fluctuations, and some sort of unidentified protein. Water ain't really H<sub>2</sub>O, you know—not when you add in the sulfides, irons, God knows what else happens to be in the aquifer of a given region. And La Plata water—you'd have to give it a string of letters like the ones after a professor



emeritus's name." His eyes gleamed. "But the protein was the most interesting thing, Bowwow. So far as we know, it's only found in one other place: the human brain."

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Uh-oh.

It just arrived, between one swallow and the next: the throat-dryness. Not much as yet, but enough for me to break away and get a glass of ice-water. I've got maybe forty minutes left. And oh Jesus, there's so much I want to tell! About the wasps' nests they found with wasps that wouldn't sting, about the fender-bender Bobby and one of his assistants saw where the two drivers, both male, both drunk, and both about twenty-four (sociological bull moose, in other words), got out, shook hands, and exchanged insurance information amicably before going into the nearest bar for another drink.

Bobby talked for hours—more hours than I have. But the upshot was simple: the stuff in the mayonnaise jar.

"We've got our own still in La Plata now," he said. "This is the stuff we're brewing, Howie; pacifist white lightning. The aquifer under that area of Texas is deep but amazingly large; it's like this incredible Lake Victoria driven into the porous sediment which overlays the Moho. The water is potent, but we've been able to make the stuff I squirted on the wasps even more potent. We've got damn near six thousand gallons now, in these big steel tanks. By the end of the year, we'll have fourteen thousand. By next June we'll have thirty thousand. But it's not enough. We need more, we need it faster ... and then we need to transport it."

"Transport it where?" I asked him.

"Borneo, to start with."

I thought I'd either lost my mind or misheard him. I really did.

“Look, Bowwow ... sorry. Howie.” He was scrumming through his tote-bag again. He brought out a number of aerial photographs and handed them over to me. “You see?” he asked as I looked through them. “You see how fucking perfect it is? It’s as if God Himself suddenly busted through our business-as-usual transmissions with something like ‘And now we bring you a special bulletin! This is your last chance, assholes! And now we return you to Days of Our Lives.’”

“I don’t get you,” I said. “And I have no idea what I’m looking at.” Of course I knew; it was an island—not Borneo itself but an island lying to the west of Borneo identified as Gulantio—with a mountain in the middle and a lot of muddy little villages lying on its lower slopes. It was hard to see the mountain because of the cloud cover. What I meant was that I didn’t know what I was looking for.

“The mountain has the same name as the island,” he said.

“Gulantio. In the local patois it means grace, or fate, or destiny, or take your pick. But Duke Rogers says it’s really the biggest time-bomb on earth ... and it’s wired to go off by October of next year. Probably earlier.”

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The crazy thing’s this: the story’s only crazy if you try to tell it in a speed-rap, which is what I’m trying to do now. Bobby wanted me to help him raise somewhere between six hundred thousand and a million and a half dollars to do the following: first, to synthesize fifty to seventy thousand gallons of what he called “the high-test”; second, to airlift all of this water to Borneo, which had landing facilities (you could land a hang-glider on Gulantio, but that was about all); third, to ship it over to this island named Fate, or Destiny, or Grace; fourth, to truck it up the slope of the volcano, which had been dormant (save for a few puffs in 1938) since 1804, and then to drop it down the muddy tube of the volcano’s caldera. Duke Rogers was actually John Paul Rogers, the geology professor. He claimed that Gulantio was going to do more than just erupt; he claimed that it was going to explode, as Krakatoa had done in the nineteenth

century, creating a bang that would make the Squirt Bomb that poisoned London look like a kid's firecracker.

The debris from the Krakatoa blow-up, Bobby told me, had literally encircled the globe; the observed results had formed an important part of the Sagan Group's nuclear winter theory. For three months afterward sunsets and sunrises half a world away had been grotesquely colorful as a result of the ash whirling around in both the jet stream and the Van Allen Currents, which lie forty miles below the Van Allen Belt. There had been global changes in climate which lasted five years, and nipa palms, which previously had grown only in eastern Africa and Micronesia, suddenly showed up in both South and North America.

"The North American nipas all died before 1900," Bobby said, "but they're alive and well below the equator. Krakatoa seeded them there, Howie... the way I want to seed La Plata water all over the earth. I want people to go out in La Plata water when it rains—and it's going to rain a lot after Gulandio goes bang. I want them to drink the La Plata water that falls in their reservoirs, I want them to wash their hair in it, bathe in it, soak their contact lenses in it. I want whores to douche in it."

"Bobby," I said, knowing he was not, "you're crazy."

He gave me a crooked, tired grin. "I ain't crazy," he said. "You want to see crazy? Turn on CNN, Bow ... Howie. You'll see crazy in living color."

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But I didn't need to turn on Cable News (what a friend of mine had taken to calling The Organ-Grinder of Doom) to know what Bobby was talking about. The Indians and the Pakistanis were poised on the brink. The Chinese and the Afghans, ditto. Half of Africa was starving, the other half on fire with AIDS. There had been border skirmishes along the entire Tex-Mex border in the last five years, since Mexico went Communist, and people had started calling the

Tijuana crossing point in California Little Berlin because of the wall. The saber-rattling had become a din. On the last day of the old year the Scientists for Nuclear Responsibility had set their black clock to fifteen seconds before midnight.

“Bobby, let’s suppose it could be done and everything went according to schedule,” I said. “It probably couldn’t and wouldn’t, but let’s suppose. You don’t have the slightest idea what the long-term effects might be.”

He started to say something and I waved it away.

“Don’t even suggest that you do, because you don’t! You’ve had time to find this calmquake of yours and isolate the cause, I’ll give you that. But did you ever hear about thalidomide? That nifty little acne-stopper and sleeping pill that caused cancer and heart attacks in thirty-year-olds? Don’t you remember the AIDS vaccine in 1997?”

“Howie?”

“That one stopped the disease, except it turned the test subjects into incurable epileptics who all died within eighteen months.”

“Howie?”

“Then there was—”

“Howie?”

I stopped and looked at him.

“The world,” Bobby said, and then stopped. His throat worked. I saw he was struggling with tears. “The world needs heroic measures, man. I don’t know about long-term effects, and there’s no time to study them, because there’s no long-term prospect. Maybe we can cure the whole mess. Or maybe—”

He shrugged, tried to smile, and looked at me with shining eyes from which two single tears slowly tracked.

“Or maybe we’re giving heroin to a patient with terminal cancer. Either way, it’ll stop what’s happening now. It’ll end the world’s pain.” He spread out his hands, palms up, so I could see the stings on them. “Help me, Bowwow. Please help me.”

So I helped him.

And we fucked up. In fact I think you could say we fucked up big-time. And do you want the truth? I don’t give a shit. We killed all the plants, but at least we saved the greenhouse. Something will grow here again, someday. I hope.

Are you reading this?

\*

My gears are starting to get a little sticky. For the first time in years I’m having to think about what I’m doing. The motor-movements of writing. Should have hurried more at the start.

Never mind. Too late to change things now.

We did it, of course: distilled the water, flew it in, transported it to Gulandio, built a primitive lifting system—half motor-winch and half cog railway—up the side of the volcano, and dropped over twelve thousand five-gallon containers of La Plata water—the brain-buster version—into the murky misty depths of the volcano’s caldera. We did all of this in just eight months. It didn’t cost six hundred thousand dollars, or a million and a half; it cost over four million, still less than a sixteenth of one per cent of what America spent on defense that year. You want to know how we razed it? I’d tell you if I had more thyme, but my head’s falling apart so never mend. I raised most of it myself if it matters to you. Some by hoof and some by croof. Tell you the truth, I din’t know I could do it muself until I did. But we did it and somehow the world held together and that volcano—whatever its name wuz, I can’t exactly remember now and there izzunt time to go back over the manuscript—it blue just when it was spo

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Wait

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Okay. A little better. Digitalin. Bobby had it. Heart's beating like crazy but I can think again.

The volcano—Mount Grace, we called it—blue just when Dook Rogers said it would. Everything when skihi and for awhile everyone's attention turned away from whatever and toward the skys. And bimmel-dee-dee, said Strapless!

It happened pretty fast like sex and checks and special effex and everybody got healthy again. I mean

wait

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Jesus please let me finish this.

I mean that everybody stood down. Everybody started to get a little purstective on the situation. The wurld started to get like the wasps in Bobbys nest the one he showed me where they didn't stink too much. There was three yerz like an Indian sumer. People getting together like in that old Youngbloods song that went cmon everybody get together rite now, like what all the hippeez wanted, you no, peets and luv and



wt

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Big blast. Feel like my heart is coming out thru my ears. But if I concentrate every bit of my force, my concentration—

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It was like an Indian summer, that's what I meant to say, like three years of Indian summer. Bobby went on with his resurch. La Plata. Sociological background *etc.* You remember the local Sheriff? Fat old Republican with a good Rodney Youngblood imitashun? How Bobby said he had the preliminary simptoms of Rodney's Disease?

\*

concentrate asshole

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Wasn't just him; turned out like there was a lot of that going around in that part of Texas. All's Hallows Disease is what I mean. For three yerz me and Bobby were down there. Created a new program. New graff of circkles. I saw what was happen and came back here. Bobby and his to asistants stayed on. One shot hissself Boby said when he showed up here.

Wait one more blas

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All right. Last time. Heart beating so fast I can hardly breathe. The new graph, the last graph, really only whammed you when it was laid over the calmquake graph. The calmquake graph showed ax of violence going down as you approached La Plata in the middle; the Alzheimer's graph showed incidence of premature senility going up as you approached La Plata. People there were getting very silly very young.

Me and Bobo were careful as we could be for next three years, drink only Parrier Water and wear big long sleekers in the rain. So no war and when everybody started to get seely we din and I came back here because he my brother I can't remember what his name

Bobby

Bobby when he came here tonight cryeen and I sed Bobby I luv you  
Bobby sed lme sorry Bowwow lme sorry I made the hole world ful of  
foals and dumbbels and I sed better fouls and bells than a big black  
sinder in spaz and he cryed and I cryed Bobby I luv you and he sed  
will you give me a shot of the spacial wadder and I sed yez and he  
said wil you ride it down and I sed yez an I think I did but I cant reely  
remember I see wurds but dont no what they mean

I have a Bobby his nayme is bruther and I theen I an dun riding and I  
have a bocks to put this into thats Bobby sd full of quiyet air to last a  
milyun yrz so gudboy gudboy everybrother, Im goin to stob gudboy  
bobby i love you it wuz not yor falt i love you

forgivyyu

love yu

sinned (for the wurld),