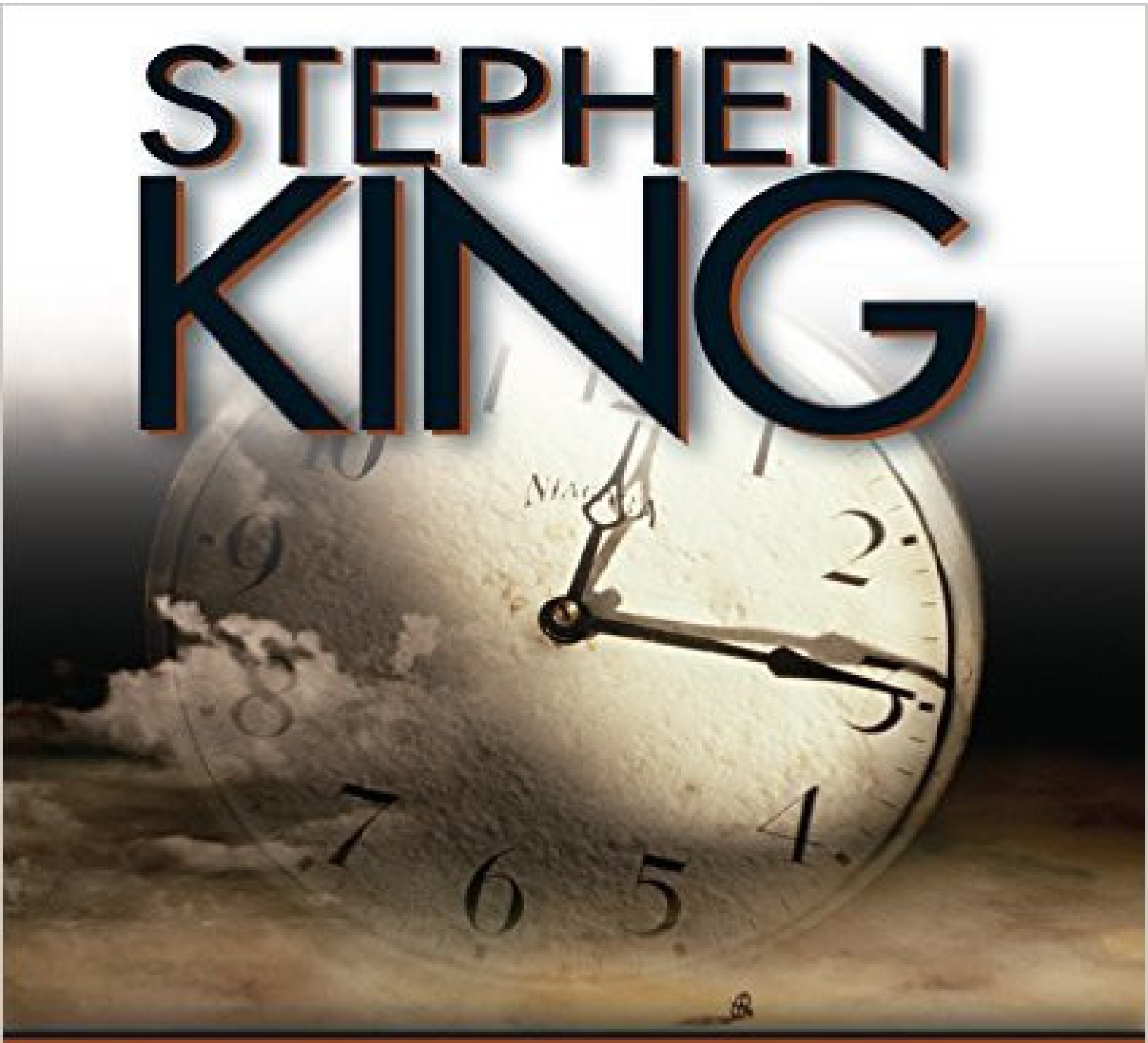
# STEPHEN KING



## THREE PAST MIDNIGHT: THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN

FROM THE BOOK FOUR PAST MIDNIGHT

# THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN

## Stephen King

THIS IS FOR THE STAFF AND PATRONS OF THE PASADENA PUBLIC LIBRARY.

THREE PAST MIDNIGHT

A NOTE ON “THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN”

On the morning when this story started to happen, I was sitting at the breakfast table with my son Owen. My wife had already gone upstairs to shower and dress. Those two vital seven o’clock divisions had been made: the scrambled eggs and the newspaper. Willard Scott, who visits our house five days out of every seven, was telling us about a lady in Nebraska who had just turned a hundred and four, and I think Owen and I had one whole pair of eyes open between us. A typical weekday morning chez King, in other words.

Owen tore himself away from the sports section just long enough to ask me if I’d be going by the mall that day—there was a book he wanted me to pick up for a school report. I can’t remember what it was—it might have been Johnny Tremain or April Morning, Howard Fast’s novel of the American Revolution—but it was one of those tomes you can never quite lay your hands on in a bookshop; it’s always just out of print or just about to come back into print or some damned thing.

I suggested that Owen try the local library, which is a very good one. I was sure they’d have it. He muttered some reply. I only caught two words of it, but, given my interests, those two words were more than enough to pique my interest. They were “library police.”

I put my half of the newspaper aside, used the MUTE button on the remote control to strangle Willard in the middle of his ecstatic report on the Georgia Peach Festival, and asked Owen to kindly repeat himself.

He was reluctant to do so, but I pressed him. Finally he told me that he didn’t like to use the library because he worried about the Library

Police. He knew there were no Library Police, he hastened to add, but it was one of those stories that burrowed down into your subconscious and just sort of lurked there. He had heard it from his Aunt Stephanie when he was seven or eight and much more gullible, and it had been lurking ever since.

I, of course, was delighted, because I had been afraid of the Library Police myself as a kid—the faceless enforcers who would actually come to your house if you didn't bring your overdue books back. That would be bad enough… but what if you couldn't find the books in question when those strange lawmen turned up? What then? What would they do to you? What might they take to make up for the missing volumes? It had been years since I'd thought of the Library Police (although not since childhood; I can clearly remember discussing them with Peter Straub and his son, Ben, six or eight years ago), but now all those old questions, both dreadful and somehow enticing, recurred.

I found myself musing on the Library Police over the next three or four days, and as I mused, I began to glimpse the outlines of the story which follows. This is the way stories usually happen for me, but the musing period usually lasts a lot longer than it did in this case. When I began, the story was titled "The Library Police," and I had no clear idea of where I was going with it. I thought it would probably be a funny story, sort of like the suburban nightmares the late Max Shulman used to bolt together. After all, the idea was funny, wasn't it? I mean, the Library Police! How absurd!

What I realized, however, was something I knew already: the fears of childhood have a hideous persistence Writing is an act of self-hypnosis, and in that state a kind of total emotional recall often takes place and terrors which should have been long dead start to walk and talk again.

As I worked on this story, that began to happen to me. I knew, going in, that I had loved the library as a kid—why not? It was the only place a relatively poor kid like me could get all the books he wanted —but as I continued to write, I became reacquainted with a deeper

truth: I had also feared it. I feared becoming lost in the dark stacks, I feared being forgotten in a dark comer of the reading room and ending up locked in for the night, I feared the old librarian with the blue hair and the cat's-eye glasses and the almost lipless mouth who would pinch the backs of your hands with her long, pale fingers and hiss "Shhhh!" if you forgot where you were and started to talk too loud. And yes, I feared the Library Police.

What happened with a much longer work, a novel called Christine, began to happen here. About thirty pages in, the humor began to go out of the situation. And about fifty pages in, the whole story took a screaming left turn into the dark places I have travelled so often and which I still know so little about. Eventually I found the guy I was looking for, and managed to raise my head enough to look into his merciless silver eyes. I have tried to bring back a sketch of him for you, Constant Reader, but it may not be very good.

My hands were trembling quite badly when I made it, you see.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE STANDIN

1

Everything, Sam Peebles decided later, was the fault of the goddamned acrobat. If the acrobat hadn't gotten drunk at exactly the wrong time, Sam never would have ended up in such trouble.

It is not bad enough, he thought with a perhaps justifiable bitterness, that life is like a narrow beam over an endless chasm, a beam we have to walk blindfolded. It's bad, but not bad enough. Sometimes, we also get pushed.

But that was later. First, even before the Library Policeman, was the drunken acrobat.

2

In Junction City, the last Friday of every month was Speaker's Night at the local Rotarians' Hall. On the last Friday in March of 1990, the Rotarians were scheduled to hear—and to be entertained by—The Amazing Joe, an acrobat with Curry & Trembo's All-Star Circus and Travelling Carnival.

The telephone on Sam Peebles's desk at Junction City Realty and Insurance rang at five past four on Thursday afternoon. Sam picked it up. It was always Sam who picked it up—either Sam in person or Sam on the answering machine, because he was Junction City Realty and Insurance's owner and sole employee. He was not a rich man, but he was a reasonably happy one. He liked to tell people that his first Mercedes was still quite a distance in the future, but he had a Ford which was almost new and owned his own home on Kelton Avenue. "Also, the business keeps me in beer and skittles," he liked to add … although in truth, he hadn't drunk much beer since college

and wasn't exactly sure what skittles were. He thought they might be pretzels.

"Junction City Realty and In—"

"Sam, this is Craig. The acrobat broke his neck."

"What?"

"You heard me!" Craig Jones cried in deeply aggrieved tones. "The acrobat broke his fucking neck!"

"Oh," Sam said. "Gee." He thought about this for a moment and then asked cautiously, "Is he dead, Craig?"

"No, he's not dead, but he might as well be as far as we're concerned. He's in the hospital over in Cedar Rapids with his' neck dipped in about twenty pounds of plaster. Billy Bright just called me. He said the guy came on drunk as a skunk at the matinee this afternoon, tried to do a back-over flip, and landed outside the center ring on the nape of his neck. Billy said he could hear it way up in the bleachers, where he was sitting. He said it sounded like when you step in a puddle that just iced over."

"Ouch!" Sam exclaimed, wincing.

"I'm not surprised. After all—The Amazing Joe. What kind of name is that for a circus performer? I mean, The Amazing Randix, okay. The Amazing Tortellini, still not bad. But The Amazing Joe? It sounds like a prime example of brain damage in action to me."

"Jesus, that's too bad."

"Fucking shit on toast is what it is. It leaves us without a speaker tomorrow night, good buddy."

Sam began to wish he had left the office promptly at four. Craig would have been stuck with Sam the answering machine, and that would have given Sam the living being a little more time to think. He

felt he would soon need time to think. He also felt that Craig Jones was not going to give him any.

“Yes,” he said, “I guess that’s true enough.” He hoped he sounded philosophical but helpless. “What a shame.”

“It sure is,” Craig said, and then dropped the dime. “But I know you’ll be happy to step in and fill the slot.”

“Me? Craig, you’ve got to be kidding! I can’t even do a somersault, let alone a back-over fi—”

“I thought you could talk about the importance of the independently owned business in small-town life,” Craig Jones pressed on relentlessly. “If that doesn’t do it for you, there’s baseball. Lacking that, you could always drop your pants and wag your wing-wang at the audience. Sam, I am not just the head of the Speakers Committee—that would be bad enough. But since Kenny moved away and Carl quit coming, I am the Speakers Committee. Now, you’ve got to help me. I need a speaker tomorrow night. There are about five guys in the whole damn club I feel I can trust in a pinch, and you’re one of them.”

“But—”

“You’re also the only one who hasn’t filled in already in a situation like this, so you’re elected, buddy-boy.”

“Frank Stephens—”

“—pinch-hit for the guy from the trucking union last year when the grand jury indicted him for fraud and he couldn’t show up. Sam—it’s your turn in the barrel. You can’t let me down, man. You owe me.”

“I run an insurance business!” Sam cried. “When I’m not writing insurance, I sell farms! Mostly to banks! Most people find it boring! The ones who don’t find it boring find it disgusting!”

“None of that matters.” Craig was now moving in for the kill, marching over Sam’s puny objection in grim hobnailed boots. “They’ll all be drunk by the end of dinner and you know it. They won’t remember a goddam word you said come Saturday morning, but in the meantime, I need someone to stand up and talk for half an hour and you’re elected!”

Sam continued to object a little longer, but Craig kept coming down on the imperatives, italicizing them mercilessly. Need. Gotta. Owe.

“All right!” he said at last. “All right, all right! Enough!”

“My man!” Craig exclaimed. His voice was suddenly full of sunshine and rainbows. “Remember, it doesn’t have to be any longer than thirty minutes, plus maybe another ten for questions. If anybody has any questions. And you really can wag your wing-wang if you want to. I doubt that anybody could actually see it, but—”

“Craig,” Sam said, “that’s enough.”

“Oh! Sorry! Shet mah mouf !” Craig, perhaps lightheaded with relief, cackled.

“Listen, why don’t we terminate this discussion?” Sam reached for the roll of Turns he kept in his desk drawer. He suddenly felt he might need quite a few Turns during the next twenty-eight hours or so. “It looks as if I’ve got a speech to write.”

“You got it,” Craig said. “Just remember—dinner at six, speech at seven-thirty. As they used to say on Hawaii Five-O, be there! Aloha!”

“Aloha, Craig,” Sam said, and hung up. He stared at the phone. He felt hot gas rising slowly up through his chest and into his throat. He opened his mouth and uttered a sour burp—the product of a stomach which had been reasonably serene until five minutes ago.

He ate the first of what would prove to be a great many Turns indeed.

3

Instead of going bowling that night as he had planned, Sam Peebles shut himself in his study at home with a yellow legal pad, three sharpened pencils, a package of Kent cigarettes, and a six-pack of Jolt. He unplugged the telephone from the wall, lit a cigarette, and stared at the yellow pad. After five minutes of staring, he wrote this on the top line of the top sheet:SMALL-TOWN BUSINESSES: THE LIFEBLOOD OF AMERICA

He said it out loud and liked the sound of it. Well … maybe he didn't exactly like it, but he could live with it. He said it louder and liked it better. A little better. It actually wasn't that good; in fact, it probably sucked the big hairy one, but it beat the shit out of "Communism: Threat or Menace." And Craig was right—most of them would be too hung over on Saturday morning to remember what they'd heard on Friday night, anyway.

Marginally encouraged, Sam began to write.

"When I moved to Junction City from the more or less thriving metropolis of Ames in 1984 …"

4

"… and that is why I feel now, as I did on that bright September morn in 1984, that small businesses are not just the lifeblood of America, but the bright and sparkly lifeblood of the entire Western world."

Sam stopped, crushed out a cigarette in the ashtray on his office desk, and looked hopefully at Naomi Higgins.

"Well? What do you think?"

Naomi was a pretty young woman from Proverbia, a town four miles west of Junction City. She lived in a ramshackle house by the Proverbia River with her ramshackle mother. Most of the Rotarians knew Naomi, and wagers had been offered from time to time on

whether the house or the mother would fall apart first. Sam didn't know if any of these wagers had ever been taken, but if so, their resolution was still pending.

Naomi had graduated from Iowa City Business College, and could actually retrieve whole legible sentences from her shorthand. Since she was the only local woman who possessed such a skill, she was in great demand among Junction City's limited business population. She also had extremely good legs, and that didn't hurt. She worked mornings five days a week, for four men and one woman—two lawyers, one banker, and two realtors. In the afternoons she went back to the ramshackle house, and when she was not caring for her ramshackle mother, she typed up the dictation she had taken.

Sam Peebles engaged Naomi's services each Friday morning from ten until noon, but this morning he had put aside his correspondence —even though some of it badly needed to be answered—and asked Naomi if she would listen to something.

"Sure, I guess so," Naomi had replied. She looked a little worried, as if she thought Sam—whom she had briefly dated—might be planning to propose marriage. When he explained that Craig Jones had drafted him to stand in for the wounded acrobat, and that he wanted her to listen to his speech, she'd relaxed and listened to the whole thing-all twenty-six minutes of it—with flattering attention.

"Don't be afraid to be honest," he added before Naomi could do more than open her mouth.

"It's good," she said. "Pretty interesting."

"No, that's okay—you don't have to spare my feelings. Let it all hang out."

"I am. It's really okay. Besides, by the time you start talking, they'll all be—"

“Yes, they’ll all be hammered, I know.” This prospect had comforted Sam at first, but now it disappointed him a little. Listening to himself read, he’d actually thought the speech was pretty good.

“There is one thing,” Naomi said thoughtfully.

“Oh?”

“It’s kind of … you know … dry.”

“Oh,” Sam said. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. He had been up until nearly one o’clock this morning, first writing and then revising.

“But that’s easy to fix,” she assured him. “Just go to the library and get a couple of those books.”

Sam felt a sudden sharp pain in his lower belly and grabbed his roll of Turns. Research for a stupid Rotary Club speech? Library research? That was going a little overboard, wasn’t it? He had never been to the Junction City Library before, and he didn’t see a reason to go there now. Still, Naomi had listened very closely, Naomi was trying to help, and it would be rude not to at least listen to what she had to say.

“What books?”

“You know—books with stuff in them to liven up speeches. They’re like …” Naomi groped. “Well, you know the hot sauce they give you at China Light, if you want it?”

“Yes—”

“They’re like that. They have jokes. Also, there’s this one book, Best Loved Poems of the American People. You could probably find something in there for the end. Something sort of uplifting.”

“There are poems in this book about the importance of small businesses in American life?” Sam asked doubtfully.

“When you quote poetry, people get uplifted, Naomi said. “Nobody cares what it’s about, Sam, let alone what it’s for.”

“And they really have joke-books especially for speeches?” Sam found this almost impossible to believe, although hearing that the library carried books on such esoterica as small-engine repair and wig-styling wouldn’t have surprised him in the least.

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“When Phil Brakeman was running for the State House, I used to type up speeches for him all the time,” Naomi said. “He had one of those books. I just can’t remember what the name of it was. All I can think of is Jokes for the John, and of course that’s not right.”

“No,” Sam agreed, thinking that a few choice tidbits from Jokes for the John would probably make him a howling success. But he began to see what Naomi was getting at, and the idea appealed to him despite his reluctance to visit the local library after all his years of cheerful neglect. A little spice for the old speech. Dress up your leftovers, turn your meatloaf into a masterpiece. And a library, after all, was just a library. If you didn’t know how to find what you wanted, all you had to do was ask a librarian. Answering questions was one of their jobs, right?

“Anyway, you could leave it just the way it is,” Naomi said. “I mean, they will be drunk.” She looked at Sam kindly but severely and then checked her watch. “You have over an hour left—did you want to do some letters?”

“No, I guess not. Why don’t you type up my speech instead?” He had already decided to spend his lunch hour at the library.

# CHAPTER TWO

## THE LIBRARY (1)

1

Sam had gone by the Library hundreds of times during his years in Junction City, but this was the first time he had really looked at it, and he discovered a rather amazing thing: he hated the place on sight.

The Junction City Public Library stood on the corner of State Street and Miller Avenue, a square granite box of a building with windows so narrow they looked like loopholes. A slate roof overhung all four sides of the building, and when one approached it from the front, the combination of the narrow windows and the line of shadow created by the roof made the building look like the frowning face of a stone robot. It was a fairly common style of Iowa architecture, common enough so Sam Peebles, who had been selling real estate for nearly twenty years, had given it a name: Midwestern Ugly. During spring, summer, and fall, the building's forbidding aspect was softened by the maples which stood around it in a kind of grove, but now, at the end of a hard Iowa winter, the maples were still bare and the Library looked like an oversized crypt.

He didn't like it; it made him uneasy; he didn't know why. It was, after all, just a library, not the dungeons of the Inquisition. Just the same, another acidic burp rose up through his chest as he made his way along the flagstone walk. There was a funny sweet undertaste to the burp that reminded him of something … something from a long time ago, perhaps. He put a Tum in his mouth, began to crunch it up, and came to an abrupt decision. His speech was good enough as it stood. Not great, but good enough. After all, they were talking Rotary Club here, not the United Nations. It was time to stop playing with it. He was going to go back to the office and do some of the correspondence he had neglected that morning.

He started to turn, then thought: That's dumb. Really dumb. You want to be dumb? Okay. But you agreed to give the goddam speech; why not give a good one?

He stood on the Library walk, frowning and undecided. He liked to make fun of Rotary. Craig did, too. And Frank Stephens. Most of the young business types in Junction City laughed about the meetings. But they rarely missed one, and Sam supposed he knew why: it was a place where connections could be made. A place where a fellow like him could meet some of the not-so-young business types in Junction City. Guys like Elmer Baskin, whose bank had helped float a strip shopping center in Beaverton two years ago. Guys like George Candy—who, it was said, could produce three million dollars in development money with one phone call … if he chose to make it.

These were small-town fellows, high-school basketball fans, guys who got their hair cut at Jimmy's, guys who wore boxer shorts and strappy tee-shirts to bed instead of pajamas, guys who still drank their beer from the bottle, guys who didn't feel comfortable about a night on the town in Cedar Rapids unless they were turned out in Full Cleveland. They were also Junction City's movers and shakers, and when you came right down to it, wasn't that why Sam kept going on Friday nights? When you came right down to it, wasn't that why Craig had called in such a sweat after the stupid acrobat broke his stupid neck? You wanted to get noticed by the movers and shakers … but not because you had fucked up. They'll all be drunk, Craig had said, and Naomi had seconded the motion, but it now occurred to Sam that he had never seen Elmer Baskin take anything stronger than coffee. Not once. And he probably wasn't the only one. Some of them might be drunk … but not all of them. And the ones who weren't might well be the ones who really mattered.

Handle this right, Sam, and you might do yourself some good. It's not impossible.

No. It wasn't. Unlikely, of course, but not impossible. And there was something else, quite aside from the shadow politics which might or might not attend a Friday-night Rotary Club speaker's meeting: he

had always prided himself on doing the best job possible. So it was just a dumb little speech. So what?

Also, it's just a dumb little small-town library. What's the big deal? There aren't even any bushes growing along the sides.

Sam had started up the walk again, but now he stopped with a frown creasing his forehead. That was a strange thought to have; it seemed to have come right out of nowhere. So there were no bushes growing along the sides of the Library-what difference did that make? He didn't know … but he did know it had an almost magical effect on him. His uncharacteristic hesitation fell away and he began to move forward once more. He climbed the four stone steps and paused for a moment. The place felt deserted, somehow. He grasped the door-handle and thought, I bet it's locked. I bet the place is closed Friday afternoons. There was something strangely comforting in this thought.

But the old-fashioned latch-plate depressed under his thumb, and the heavy door swung noiselessly inward. Sam stepped into a small foyer with a marble floor in checkerboard black and white squares. An easel stood in the center of this antechamber. There was a sign propped on the easel; the message consisted of one word in very large letters.

SILENCE!

it read. NotSILENCE IS GOLDEN

orQUIET, PLEASE

but just that one staring, glaring word:SILENCE!

"You bet," Sam said. He only murmured the words, but the acoustics of the place were very good, and his low murmur was magnified into a grouchy grumble that made him cringe. It actually seemed to bounce back at him from the high ceiling. At that moment he felt as if he was in the fourth grade again, and about to be called to task by

Mrs. Glasters for cutting up rough at exactly the wrong moment. He looked around uneasily, half-expecting an ill-natured librarian to come swooping out of the main room to see who had dared profane the silence.

Stop it, for Christ's sake. You're forty years old. Fourth grade was a long time ago, buddy.

Except it didn't seem like a long time ago. Not in here. In here, fourth grade seemed almost close enough to reach out and touch.

He crossed the marble floor to the left of the easel, unconsciously walking with his weight thrown forward so the heels of his loafers would not click, and entered the main lobby of the Junction City Library.

There were a number of glass globes hanging down from the ceiling (which was at least twenty feet higher than the ceiling of the foyer), but none of them were on. The light was provided by two large, angled skylights. On a sunny day these would have been quite enough to light the room; they might even have rendered it cheery and welcoming. But this Friday was overcast and dreary, and the light was dim. The comers of the lobby were filled with gloomy webs of shadow.

What Sam Peebles felt was a sense of wrongness. It was as if he had done more than step through a door and cross a foyer; he felt as if he had entered another world, one which bore absolutely no resemblance to the small Iowa town that he sometimes liked, sometimes hated, but mostly just took for granted. The air in here seemed heavier than normal air, and did not seem to conduct light as well as normal air did. The silence was thick as a blanket. As cold as snow.

The library was deserted.

Shelves of books stretched above him on every side. Looking up toward the skylights with their crisscrosses of reinforcing wire made

Sam a little dizzy, and he had a momentary illusion: he felt that he was upside down, that he had been hung by his heels over a deep square pit lined with books.

Ladders leaned against the walls here and there, the kind that were mounted on tracks and rolled along the floor on rubber wheels. Two wooden islands broke the lake of space between the place where he stood and the checkout desk on the far side of the large, high room. One was a long oak magazine rack. Periodicals, each encased in a clear plastic cover, hung from this rack on wooden dowels. They looked like the hides of strange animals which had been left to cure in this silent room. A sign mounted on top of the rack commanded :RETURN ALL MAGAZINES TO THEIR PROPER PLACES!

To the left of the magazine rack was a shelf of brand-new novels and nonfiction books. The sign mounted on top of the shelf proclaimed them to be seven-day rentals.

Sam passed down the wide aisle between the magazines and the seven-day bookshelf, his heels rapping and echoing in spite of his effort to move quietly. He found himself wishing he had heeded his original impulse to just turn around and go back to the office. This place was spooky. Although there was a small, hooded microfilm camera alight and humming on the desk, there was no one manning —or womaning—it. A small plaque readingA. LORTZ

stood on the desk, but there was no sign of A. Lortz or anyone else.

Probably taking a dump and checking out the new issue of Library Journal.

Sam felt a crazy desire to open his mouth and yell, “Everything coming out all right, A. Lortz?” It passed quickly. The Junction City Public Library was not the sort of place that encouraged amusing sallies.

Sam’s thoughts suddenly spun back to a little rhyme from his childhood. No more laughing, no more fun; Quaker meeting has

begun. If you show your teeth or tongue, you may pay a forfeit.

If you show your teeth or tongue in here, does A. Lortz make you pay a forfeit? he wondered. He looked around again, let his nerve endings feel the frowning quality of the silence, and thought you could make book on it.

No longer interested in obtaining a joke-book or Best Loved Poems of the American People, but fascinated by the library's suspended, dreamy atmosphere in spite of himself, Sam walked toward a door to the right of the seven-day books. A sign over the door said this was the Children's Library. Had he used the Children's Library when he had been growing up in St. Louis? He thought so, but those memories were hazy, distant, and hard to hold. All the same, approaching the door of the Children's Library gave him an odd and haunting feeling. It was almost like coming home.

The door was closed. On it was a picture of Little Red Riding Hood, looking down at the wolf in Grandma's bed. The wolf was wearing Grandma's nightgown and Grandma's nightcap. It was snarling. Foam dripped from between its bared fangs. An expression of almost exquisite horror had transfixed Little Red Riding Hood's face, and the poster seemed not just to suggest but to actually proclaim that the happy ending of this story—of all fairy tales—was a convenient lie. Parents might believe such guff, Red Riding Hood's ghastly-sick face said, but the little ones knew better, didn't they?

Nice, Sam thought. With a poster like that on the door, I bet lots of kids use the Children's Library. I bet the little ones are especially fond of it.

He opened the door and poked his head in.

His sense of unease left him; he was charmed at once. The poster on the door was all wrong, of course, but what was behind it seemed perfectly right. Of course he had used the library as a child; it only took one look into this scale-model world to refresh those memories. His father had died young; Sam had been an only child raised by a

working mother he rarely saw except on Sundays and holidays. When he could not promote money for a movie after school—and that was often—the library had to do, and the room he saw now brought those days back in a sudden wave of nostalgia that was sweet and painful and obscurely frightening.

It had been a small world, and this was a small world; it had been a well-lighted world, even on the grimmest, rainiest days, and so was this one. No hanging glass globes for this room; there were shadow-banishing fluorescent lights behind frosted panels in the suspended ceiling, and all of them were on. The tops of the tables were only two feet from the floor; the seats of the chairs were even closer. In this world the adults would be the interlopers, the uncomfortable aliens. They would balance the tables on their knees if they tried to sit at them, and they would be apt to crack their skulls bending to drink from the water fountain which was mounted on the far wall.

Here the shelves did not stretch up in an unkind trick of perspective which made one giddy if one looked up too long; the ceiling was low enough to be cozy, but not low enough to make a child feel cramped. Here were no rows of gloomy bindings but books which fairly shouted with raucous primary colors: bright blues, reds, yellows. In this world Dr. Seuss was king, Judy Blume was queen, and all the princes and princesses attended Sweet Valley High. Here Sam felt all that old sense of benevolent after-school welcome, a place where the books did all but beg to be touched, handled, looked at, explored. Yet these feelings had their own dark undertaste.

His clearest sense, however, was one of almost wistful pleasure. On one wall was a photograph of a puppy with large, thoughtful eyes. Written beneath the puppy's anxious-hopeful face was one of the world's great truths: IT is HARD TO BE GOOD. On the other wall was a drawing of mallards making their way down a riverbank to the reedy verge of the water. MAKE WAY FOR DUCKUNGS! the poster trumpeted.

Sam looked to his left, and the faint smile on his lips first faltered and then died. Here was a poster which showed a large, dark car

speeding away from what he supposed was a school building. A little boy was looking out of the passenger window. His hands were plastered against the glass and his mouth was open in a scream. In the background, a man—only a vague, ominous shape—was hunched over the wheel, driving hell for leather. The words beneath this picture read:NEVER TAKE RIDES FROM STRANGERS!

Sam recognized that this poster and the Little Red Riding Hood picture on the door of the Children's Library both appealed to the same primitive emotions of dread, but he found this one much more disturbing. Of course children shouldn't accept rides from strangers, and of course they had to be taught not to do so, but was this the right way to make the point?

How many kids, he wondered, have had a week's worth of nightmares thanks to that little public-service announcement?

And there was another one, posted right on the front of the checkout desk, that struck a chill as deep as January down Sam's back. It showed a dismayed boy and girl, surely no older than eight, cringing back from a man in a trenchcoat and gray hat. The man looked at least eleven feet tall; his shadow fell on the upturned faces of the children. The brim of his 1940s-style fedora threw its own shadow, and the eyes of the man in the trenchcoat gleamed relentlessly from its black depths. They looked like chips of ice as they studied the children, marking them with the grim gaze of Authority. He was holding out an ID folder with a star pinned to it—an odd sort of star, with at least nine points on it. Maybe as many as a dozen. The message beneath read:AVOID THE LIBRARY POLICE! GOOD BOYS AND GIRLS RETURN THEIR BOOKS ON TIME!

That taste was in his mouth again. That sweet, unpleasant taste. And a queer, frightening thought occurred to him: I have seen this man before. But that was ridiculous, of course. Wasn't it?

Sam thought of how such a poster would have intimidated him as a child—of how much simple, unalloyed pleasure it would have stolen from the safe haven of the library—and felt indignation rise in his

chest. He took a step toward the poster to examine the odd star more closely, taking his roll of Tums out of his pocket at the same time.

He was putting one of them into his mouth when a voice spoke up from behind him. “Well, hello there!”

He jumped and turned around, ready to do battle with the library dragon, now that it had finally disclosed itself.

2

No dragon presented itself. There was only a plump, white-haired woman of about fifty-five, pushing a trolley of books on silent rubber tires. Her white hair fell around her pleasant, unlined face in neat beauty-shop curls.

“I suppose you were looking for me,” she said. “Did Mr. Peckham direct you in here?”

“I didn’t see anybody at all.”

“No? Then he’s gone along home,” she said. “I’m not really surprised, since it’s Friday. Mr. Peckham comes in to dust and read the paper every morning around eleven. He’s the janitor—only part-time, of course. Sometimes he stays until one-one-thirty on most Mondays, because that’s the day when both the dust and the paper are thickest—but you know how thin Friday’s paper is.”

Sam smiled. “I take it you’re the librarian?”

“I am she,” Mrs. Lortz said, and smiled at him. But Sam didn’t think her eyes were smiling; her eyes seemed to be watching him carefully, almost coldly. “And you are … ?”

“Sam Peebles.”

“Oh yes! Real estate and insurance! That’s your game!”

“Guilty as charged.”

“I’m sorry you found the main section of the library deserted—you must have thought we were closed and someone left the door open by mistake.”

“Actually,” he said, “the idea did cross my mind.”

“From two until seven there are three of us on duty,” said Mrs. Lortz. “Two is when the schools begin to let out, you know—the grammar school at two, the middle school at two-thirty, the high school at two-forty-five. The children are our most faithful clients, and the most welcome, as far as I am concerned. I love the little ones. I used to have an all-day assistant, but last year the Town Council cut our budget by eight hundred dollars and …” Mrs. Lortz put her hands together and mimed a bird flying away. It was an amusing charming gesture.

So why, Sam wondered, aren’t I charmed or amused?

The posters, he supposed. He was still trying to make Red Riding Hood, the screaming child in the car, and the grim-eyed Library Policeman jibe with this smiling small-town librarian.

She put her left hand out—a small hand, as plump and round as the rest of her—with perfect unstudied confidence. He looked at the third finger and saw it was ringless; she wasn’t Mrs. Lortz after all. The fact of her spinsterhood struck him as utterly typical, utterly small-town. Almost a caricature, really. Sam shook it.

“You haven’t been to our library before, have you, Mr. Peebles?”

“No, I’m afraid not. And please make it Sam.” He did not know if he really wanted to be Sam to this woman or not, but he was a businessman in a small town—a salesman, when you got right down to it—and the offer of his first name was automatic.

“Why, thank you, Sam.”

He waited for her to respond by offering her own first name, but she only looked at him expectantly.

“I’ve gotten myself into a bit of a bind,” he said. “Our scheduled speaker tonight at Rotary Club had an accident, and—”

“Oh, that’s too bad!”

“For me as well as him. I got drafted to take his place.”

“Oh-oh!” Ms. Lortz said. Her tone was alarmed, but her eyes crinkled with amusement. And still Sam did not find himself warming to her, although he was a person who warmed up to other people quickly (if superficially) as a rule; the kind of man who had few close friends but felt compelled nonetheless to start conversations with strangers in elevators.

“I wrote a speech last night and this morning I read it to the young woman who takes dictation and types up my correspondence—”

“Naomi Higgins, I’ll bet.”

“Yes—how did you know that?”

“Naomi is a regular. She borrows a great many romance novels—Jennifer Blake, Rosemary Rogers, Paul Sheldon, people like that.” She lowered her voice and said, “She says they’re for her mother, but actually I think she reads them herself.”

Sam laughed. Naomi did have the dreamy eyes of a closet romance reader.

“Anyway, I know she’s what would be called an office temporary in a big city. I imagine that here in Junction City she’s the whole secretarial pool. It seemed reasonable that she was the young woman of whom you spoke.”

“Yes. She liked my speech—or so she said—but she thought it was a bit dry. She suggested—”

“The Speaker’s Companion, I’ll bet!”

“Well, she couldn’t remember the exact title, but that sure sounds right.” He paused, then asked a little anxiously: “Does it have jokes?”

“Only three hundred pages of them,” she said. She reached out her right hand—it was as innocent of rings as her left—and tugged at his sleeve with it. “Right this way.” She led him toward the door by the sleeve. “I am going to solve all your problems, Sam. I only hope it won’t take a crisis to bring you back to our library. It’s small, but it’s very fine. I think so, anyway, although of course I’m prejudiced.”

They passed through the door into the frowning shadows of the Library’s main room. Ms. Lortz flicked three switches by the door, and the hanging globes lit up, casting a soft yellow glow that warmed and cheered the room considerably.

“It gets so gloomy in here when it’s overcast,” she said in a confidential we’re-in-thereal-Library-now voice. She was still tugging firmly on Sam’s sleeve. “But of course you know how the Town Council complains about the electricity bill in a place like this … or perhaps you don’t, but I’ll bet you can guess. “

“I can,” Sam agreed, also dropping his voice to a near-whisper.

“But that’s a holiday compared to what they have to say about the heating expenses in the winter.” She rolled her eyes. “Oil is so dear. It’s the fault of those Arabs … and now look what they are up to—hiring religious hit-men to try and kill writers.”

“It does seem a little harsh,” Sam said, and for some reason he found himself thinking of the poster of the tall man again—the one with the odd star pinned to his ID case, the one whose shadow was falling so ominously over the upturned faces of the children. Falling over them like a stain.

“And of course, I’ve been fussing in the Children’s Library. I lose all track of time when I’m in there.”

“That’s an interesting place,” Sam said. He meant to go on, to ask her about the posters, but Ms. Lortz forestalled him. It was clear to Sam exactly who was in charge of this peculiar little side-trip in an otherwise ordinary day.

“You bet it is! Now, you just give me one minute.” She reached up and put her hands on his shoulders—she had to stand on tiptoe to do it—and for one moment Sam had the absurd idea that she meant to kiss him. Instead she pressed him down onto a wooden bench which ran along the far side of the seven-day bookshelf. “I know right where to find the books you need, Sam. I don’t even have to check the card catalogue.”

“I could get them myself—”

“I’m sure,” she said, “but they’re in the Special Reference section, and I don’t like to let people in there if I can help it. I’m very bossy about that, but I always know where to put my hand right on the things I need … back there, anyway. People are so messy, they have so little regard for order, you know. Children are the worst, but even adults get up to didos if you let them. Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll be back in two shakes.”

Sam had no intention of protesting further, but he wouldn’t have had time even if he had wanted to. She was gone. He sat on the bench, once more feeling like a fourth-grader … like a fourth-grader who had done something wrong this time, who had gotten up to didos and so couldn’t go out and play with the other children at recess.

He could hear Ms. Lortz moving about in the room behind the checkout desk, and he looked around thoughtfully. There was nothing to see except books—there was not even one old pensioner reading the paper or leafing through a magazine. It seemed odd. He wouldn’t have expected a small-town library like this to be doing a booming business on a weekday afternoon, but no one at all?

Well, there was Mr. Peckham, he thought, but he finished the paper and went home. Dreadfully thin paper on Friday,

you know. Thin dust, too. And then he realized he only had the word of Ms. Lortz that a Mr. Peckham had ever been here at all.

True enough—but why would she lie?

He didn't know, and doubted very much that she had, but the fact that he was questioning the honesty of a sweet-faced woman he had just met highlighted the central puzzling fact of this meeting: he didn't like her. Sweet face or not, he didn't like her one bit.

It's the posters. You were prepared not to like ANYBODY that would put up posters like that in a children's room. But it doesn't matter, because a side-trip is all it is. Get the books and get out.

He shifted on the bench, looked up, and saw a motto on the wall: If you would know how a man treats his wife and his children, see how he treats his books.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sam didn't care much for that little homily, either. He didn't know exactly why … except that maybe he thought a man, even a bookworm, might be expected to treat his family a little better than his reading matter. The motto, painted in gold leaf on a length of varnished oak, glared down at him nevertheless, seeming to suggest he better think again.

Before he could, Ms. Lortz returned, lifting a gate in the checkout desk, stepping through it, and lowering it neatly behind her again.

"I think I've got what you need," she said cheerfully. "I hope you'll agree."

She handed him two books. One was The Speaker's Companion, edited by Kent Adelmen, and the other was Best Loved Poems of the American People. The contents of this latter book, according to the jacket (which was, in its turn, protected by a tough plastic overjacket), had not been edited, exactly, but selected by one Hazel

Felleman. “Poems of life!” the jacket promised. “Poems of home and mother! Poems of laughter and whimsey! The poems most frequently asked for by the readers of the New York Times Book Review!” It further advised that Hazel Felleman “has been able to keep her finger on the poetry pulse of the American people.”

Sam looked at her with some doubt, and she read his mind effortlessly.

“Yes, I know, they look old-fashioned,” she said. “Especially nowadays, when self-help books are all the rage. I imagine if you went to one of the chain bookstores in the Cedar Rapids mall, you could find a dozen books designed to help the beginning public speaker. But none of them would be as good as these, Sam. I really believe these are the best helps there are for men and women who are new to the art of public speaking.”

“Amateurs, in other words,” Sam said, grinning.

“Well, yes. Take Best Loved Poems, for instance. The second section of the book—it begins on page sixty-five, if memory serves—is called ‘Inspiration.’ You can almost surely find something there which will make a suitable climax to your little talk, Sam. And you’re apt to find that your listeners will remember a well-chosen verse even if they forget everything else. Especially if they’re a little—”

“Drunk,” he said.

“Tight was the word I would have used,” she said with gentle reproof, “although I suppose you know them better than I do.” But the gaze she shot at him suggested that she was only saying this because she was polite.

She held up The Speaker’s Companion. The jacket was a cartoonist’s drawing of a bunting-draped hall. Small groups of men in old-fashioned evening dress were seated at tables with drinks in front of them. They were all yucking it up. The man behind the podium—also in evening dress and clearly the after-dinner speaker

—was grinning triumphantly down at them. It was clear he was a roaring success.

“There’s a section at the beginning on the theory of after-dinner speeches,” said Ms. Lortz, “but since you don’t strike me as the sort of man who wants to make a career out of this—”

“You’ve got that right, ” Sam agreed fervently.

“—I suggest you go directly to the middle section, which is called ‘Lively Speaking.’ There you will find jokes and stories divided into three categories: ‘Easing Them In,’ ‘Softening Them Up,’ and ‘Finishing Them Off.’ “

Sounds like a manual for gigolos, Sam thought but did not say.

She read his mind again. “A little suggestive, I suppose—but these books were published in a simpler, more innocent time. The late thirties, to be exact.”

“Much more innocent, right,” Sam said, thinking of deserted dust-bowl farms, little girls in flour-sack dresses, and rusty, thrown-together Hoovervilles surrounded by police wielding truncheons.

“But both books still work,” she said, tapping them for emphasis, “and that’s the important thing in business, isn’t it, Sam? Results!”

“Yes … I guess it is.”

He looked at her thoughtfully, and Ms. Lortz raised her eyebrows—a trifle defensively, perhaps. “A penny for your thoughts,” she said.

“I was thinking that this has been a fairly rare occurrence in my adult life,” he said. “Not unheard-of, nothing like that, but rare. I came in here to get a couple of books to liven up my speech, and you seem to have given me exactly what I came for. How often does something like that happen in a world where you usually can’t even get a couple

of good lambchops at the grocery store when you've got your face fixed for them?"

She smiled. It appeared to be a smile of genuine pleasure … except Sam noticed once again that her eyes did not smile. He didn't think they had changed expression since he had first come upon her—or she upon him—in the Children's Library. They just went on watching. "I think I've just been paid a compliment!"

"Yes, ma'am. You have."

"I thank you, Sam. I thank you very kindly. They say flattery will get you everywhere, but I'm afraid I'm still going to have to ask you for two dollars."

"You are?"

"That's the charge for issuing an adult library card," she said, "but it's good for three years, and renewal is only fifty cents. Now, is that a deal, or what?"

"It sounds fine to me."

"Then step right this way," she said, and Sam followed her to the checkout desk.

3

She gave him a card to fill out—on it he wrote his name, address, telephone numbers, and place of business.

"I see you live on Kelton Avenue. Nice!"

"Well, I like it."

"The houses are lovely and big—you should be married."

He started a little. "How did you know I wasn't married?"

“The same way you knew I wasn’t,” she said. Her smile had become a trifle sly, a trifle catlike. “Nothing on the third left.”

“Oh,” he said lamely, and smiled. He didn’t think it was his usual sparkly smile, and his cheeks felt warm.

“Two dollars, please.”

He gave her two singles. She went over to a small desk where an aged, skeletal typewriter stood, and typed briefly on a bright-orange card. She brought it back to the checkout desk, signed her name at the bottom with a flourish, and then pushed it across to him.

“Check and make sure all the information’s correct, please.”

Sam did so. “It’s all fine.” Her first name, he noted, was Ardelia. A pretty name, and rather unusual.

She took his new library card back—the first one he’d owned since college, now that he thought about it, and he had used that one precious little—and placed it under the microfilm recorder beside a card she took from the pocket of each book. “You can only keep these out for a week, because they’re from Special Reference. That’s a category I invented myself for books which are in great demand.”

“Helps for the beginning speaker are in great demand?”

“Those, and books on things like plumbing repair, simple magic tricks, social etiquette … You’d be surprised what books people call for in a pinch. But I know.”

“I’ll bet you do.”

“I’ve been in the business a long, long time, Sam. And they’re not renewable, so be sure to get them back by April sixth.” She raised her head, and the light caught in her eyes. Sam almost dismissed what he saw there as a twinkle … but that wasn’t what it was. It was

a shine. A flat, hard shine. For just a moment Ardelia Lortz looked as if she had a nickel in each eye.

“Or?” he asked, and his smile suddenly didn’t feel like a smite—it felt like a mask.

“Or else I’ll have to send the Library Policeman after you,” she said.

4

For a moment their gazes locked, and Sam thought he saw the real Ardelia Lortz, and there was nothing charming or soft or spinster-librarian about that woman at all.

This woman might actually be dangerous, he thought, and then dismissed it, a little embarrassed. The gloomy day—and perhaps the pressure of the impending speech—was getting to him. She’s about as dangerous as a canned peach … and it isn’t the gloomy day or the Rotarians tonight, either. It’s those goddam posters.

He had The Speaker’s Companion and Best Loved Poems of the American People under his arm and they were almost to the door before he realized she was showing him out. He planted his feet firmly and stopped. She looked at him, surprised.

“Can I ask you something, Ms. Lortz?”

“Of course, Sam. That’s what I’m here for—to answer questions.”

“It’s about the Children’s Library,” he said, “and the posters. Some of them surprised me. Shocked me, almost.” He expected that to come out sounding like something a Baptist preacher might say about an issue of Playboy glimpsed beneath the other magazines on a parishioner’s coffee table, but it didn’t come out that way at all. Because, he thought, it’s not just a conventional sentiment. I really was shocked. No almost about it.

“Posters?” she asked, frowning, and then her brow cleared. She laughed. “Oh! You must mean the Library Policeman … and Simple Simon, of course.”

“Simple Simon?”

“You know the poster that says NEVER TAKE RIDES FROM STRANGERS? That’s what the kids call the little boy in the picture. The one who is yelling. They call him Simple Simon—I suppose they feel contempt for him because he did such a foolish thing. I think that’s very healthy, don’t you?”

“He’s not yelling,” Sam said slowly. “He’s screaming.”.

She shrugged. “Yelling, screaming, what’s the difference? We don’t hear much of either in here. The children are very good—very respectful.”

“I’ll bet,” Sam said. They were back in the foyer again now, and he glanced at the sign on the easel, the sign which didn’t saySILENCE IS GOLDEN

orPLEASE TRY TO BE QUIET

but just offered that one inarguable imperative:SILENCE!

“Besides—it’s all a matter of interpretation, isn’t it?”

“I suppose,” Sam said. He felt that he was being maneuvered—and very efficiently—into a place where he would not have a moral leg to stand on, and the field of dialectic would belong to Ardelia Lortz. She gave him the impression that she was used to doing this, and that made him feel stubborn. “But they struck me as extreme, those posters.”

“Did they?” she asked politely. They had halted by the outer door now.

“Yes. Scary.” He gathered himself and said what he really believed. “Not appropriate to a place where small children gather.”

He found he still did not sound prissy or self-righteous, at least to himself, and this was a relief.

She was smiling, and the smile irritated him. “You’re not the first person who ever expressed that opinion, Sam. Childless adults aren’t frequent visitors to the Children’s Library, but they do come in from time to time—uncles, aunts, some single mother’s boyfriend who got stuck with pick-up duty … or people like you, Sam, who are looking for me.”

People in a pinch, her cool blue-gray eyes said. People who come for help and then, once they HAVE been helped, stay to criticize the way we run things here at the Junction City Public Library. The way I run things at the Junction City Public Library.

“I guess you think I was wrong to put my two cents in,” Sam said good-naturedly. He didn’t feel good-natured, all of a sudden he didn’t feel good-natured at all, but it was another trick of the trade, one he now wrapped around himself like a protective cloak.

“Not at all. It’s just that you don’t understand. We had a poll last summer, Sam—it was part of the annual Summer Reading Program. We call our program Junction City’s Summer Sizzlers, and each child gets one vote for every book he or she reads. It’s one of the strategies we’ve developed over the years to encourage children to read. That is one of our most important responsibilities, you see.”

We know what we’re doing, her steady gaze told him. And I’m being very polite, aren’t I? Considering that you, who have never been here in your life before, have presumed to poke your head in once and start shotgunning criticisms.

Sam began to feel very much in the wrong. That dialectical battlefield did not belong to the Lortz woman yet—at least not entirely—but he recognized the fact that he was in retreat.

“According to the poll, last summer’s favorite movie among the children was A Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 5. Their favorite rock group is called Guns n’ Roses—the runner-up was something named Ozzy Osbourne, who, I understand, has a reputation for biting the heads off live animals during his concerts. Their favorite novel was a paperback original called Swan Song. It’s a horror novel by a man named Robert McCammon. We can’t keep it in stock, Sam. They read each new copy to rags in weeks. I had a copy put in Vinabind, but of course it was stolen. By one of the bad children.”

Her lips pursed in a thin line.

“Runner-up was a horror novel about incest and infanticide called Flowers in the Attic. That one was the champ for five years running. Several of them even mentioned Peyton Place!”

She looked at him sternly.

“I myself have never seen any of the Nightmare on Elm Street movies. I have never heard an Ozzy Osbourne record and have no desire to do so, nor to read a novel by Robert McCammon, Stephen King, or V. C. Andrews. Do you see what I’m getting at, Sam?”

“I suppose. You’re saying it wouldn’t be fair to …” He needed a word, groped for it, and found it. “… to usurp the children’s tastes.”

She smiled radiantly—everything but the eyes, which seemed to have nickels in them again.

“That’s part of it, but that’s not all of it. The posters in the Children’s Library—both the nice, uncontroversial ones and the ones which put you off—came to us from the Iowa Library Association. The ILA is a member of the Midwest Library Association, and that is, in turn, a member of The National Library Association, which gets the majority of its funding from tax money. From John Q. Public—which is to say from me. And you.”

Sam shifted from one foot to the other. He didn't want to spend the afternoon listening to a lecture on How Your Library Works for You, but hadn't he invited it? He supposed so. The only thing he was absolutely sure of was that he was liking Ardelia Lortz less and less all the time.

"The Iowa Library Association sends us a sheet every other month, with reproductions of about forty posters," Ms. Lortz continued relentlessly. "We can pick any five free; extras cost three dollars each. I see you're getting restless, Sam, but you do deserve an explanation, and we are finally reaching the nub of the matter."

"Me? I'm not restless," Sam said restlessly.

She smiled at him, revealing teeth too even to be anything but dentures. "We have a Children's Library Committee," she said. "Who is on it? Why, children, of course! Nine of them. Four high-school students, three middle-school students, and two grammar-school students. Each child has to have an overall B average in his schoolwork to qualify. They pick some of the new books we order, they picked the new drapes and tables when we redecorated last fall … and, of course, they pick the posters. That is, as one of our younger Committeemen once put it, 'the funnest part.' Now do you understand?"

"Yes," Sam said. "The kids picked out Little Red Riding Hood, and Simple Simon, and the Library Policeman. They like them because they're scary."

"Correct!" she beamed.

Suddenly he'd had enough. It was something about the Library. Not the posters, not the librarian, exactly, but the Library itself. Suddenly the Library was like an aggravating, infuriating splinter jammed deep in one buttock. Whatever it was, it was … enough.

"Ms. Lortz, do you keep a videotape of A Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 5, in the Children's Library? Or a selection of albums by Guns n'

Roses and Ozzy Osbourne?”

“Sam, you miss the point,” she began patiently.

“What about Peyton Place? Do you keep a copy of that in the Children’s Library just because some of the kids have read it?”

Even as he was speaking, he thought, Does ANYBODY still read that old thing?

“No,” she said, and he saw that an ill-tempered flush was rising in her cheeks. This was not a woman who was used to having her judgments called into question. “But we do keep stories about housebreaking, parental abuse, and burglary. I am speaking, of course, of ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears,’ ‘Hansel and Gretel,’ and ‘Jack and the Beanstalk.’ I expected a man such as yourself to be a little more understanding, Sam.”

A man you helped out in a pinch is what you mean, Sam thought, but what the hell, lady—isn’t that what the town pays you to do?

Then he got hold of himself. He didn’t know exactly what she meant by “a man such as himself,” wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but he did understand that this discussion was on the edge of getting out of hand—of becoming an argument. He had come in here to find a little tenderizer to sprinkle over his speech, not to get in a hassle about the Children’s Library with the head librarian.

“I apologize if I’ve said anything to offend you,” he said, “and I really ought to be going.”

“Yes,” she said. “I think you ought.” Your apology is not accepted, her eyes telegraphed. It is not accepted at all.

“I suppose,” he said, “that I’m a little nervous about my speaking debut. And I was up late last night working on this.” He smiled his old good-natured Sam Peebles smile and hoisted the briefcase.

She stood down—a little—but her eyes were still snapping. “That’s understandable. We are here to serve, and, of course, we’re always interested in constructive criticism from the taxpayers.” She accented the word constructive ever so slightly, to let him know, he supposed, that his had been anything but.

Now that it was over, he had an urge—almost a need—to make it all over, to smooth it down like the coverlet on a well-made bed. And this was also part of the businessman’s habit, he supposed … or the businessman’s protective coloration. An odd thought occurred to him—that what he should really talk about tonight was his encounter with Ardelia Lortz. It said more about the small-town heart and spirit than his whole written speech. Not all of it was flattering, but it surely wasn’t dry. And it would offer a sound rarely heard during Friday-night Rotary speeches: the unmistakable ring of truth.

“Well, we got a little feisty there for a second or two,” he heard himself saying, and saw his hand go out. “I expect I overstepped my bounds. I hope there are no hard feelings.”

She touched his hand. It was a brief, token touch. Cool, smooth flesh. Unpleasant, somehow. Like shaking hands with an umbrella stand. “None at all,” she said, but her eyes continued to tell a different story.

“Well then … I’ll be getting along.”

“Yes. Remember—one week on those, Sam.” She lifted a finger. Pointed a well-manicured nail at the books he was holding. And smiled. Sam found something extremely disturbing about that smile, but he could not for the life of him have said exactly what it was. “I wouldn’t want to have to send the Library Cop after you.”

“No,” Sam agreed. “I wouldn’t want that, either.”

“That’s right,” said Ardelia Lortz, still smiling. “You wouldn’t.”

Halfway down the walk, the face of that screaming child (Simple Simon, the kids call him Simple Simon I think that's very healthy, don't you)

recurred to him, and with it came a thought—one simple enough and practical enough to stop him in his tracks. It was this: given a chance to pick such a poster, a jury of kids might very well do so … but would any Library Association, whether from Iowa, the Midwest, or the country as a whole, actually send one out?

Sam Peebles thought of the pleading hands plastered against the obdurate, imprisoning glass, the screaming, agonized mouth, and suddenly found that more than difficult to believe. He found it impossible to believe.

And Peyton Place. What about that? He guessed that most of the adults who used the Library had forgotten about it. Did he really believe that some of their children—the ones young enough to use the Children's Library—had rediscovered that old relic?

I don't believe that one, either.

He had no wish to incur a second dose of Ardelia Lortz's anger—the first had been enough, and he'd had a feeling her dial hadn't been turned up to anything near full volume—but these thoughts were strong enough to cause him to turn around.

She was gone.

The library doors stood shut, a vertical slot of mouth in that brooding granite face.

Sam stood where he was a moment longer, then hurried down to where his car was parked at the curb.

# CHAPTER THREE

## SAM'S SPEECH

1

It was a rousing success.

He began with his own adaptations of two anecdotes from the "Easing Them In" section of The Speaker's Companion—one was about a farmer who tried to wholesale his own produce and the other was about selling frozen dinners to Eskimos—and used a third in the middle (which really was pretty arid). He found another good one in the subsection titled "Finishing Them Off," started to pencil it in, then remembered Ardelia Lortz and Best Loved Poems of the American People. You're apt to find your listeners remember a well-chosen verse even if they forget everything else, she had said, and Sam found a good short poem in the "Inspiration" section, just as she had told him he might.

He looked down on the upturned faces of his fellow Rotarians and said: "I've tried to give you some of the reasons why I live and work in a small town like Junction City, and I hope they make at least some sense. If they don't, I'm in a lot of trouble."

A rumble of good-natured laughter (and a whiff of mixed Scotch and bourbon) greeted this.

Sam was sweating freely, but he actually felt pretty good, and he had begun to believe he was going to get out of this unscathed. The microphone had produced feedback whine only once, no one had walked out, no one had thrown food, and there had only been a few catcalls—good-natured ones, at that.

"I think a poet named Spencer Michael Free summed up the things I've been trying to say better than I ever could. You see, almost

everything we have to sell in our small-town businesses can be sold cheaper in big-city shopping centers and suburban malls. Those places like to boast that you can get just about all the goods and services you'd ever need right there, and park for free in the bargain. And I guess they're almost right. But there is still one thing the small-town business has to offer that the malls and shopping centers don't, and that's the thing Mr. Free talks about in his poem. It isn't a very long one, but it says a lot. It goes like this.

" 'Tis the human touch in this world that counts,

The touch of your hand and mine,

Which means far more to the fainting heart

Than shelter and bread and wine;

For shelter is gone when the night is o'er,

And bread lasts only a day,

But the touch of the hand and the sound of a voice

Sing on in the soul alway."

Sam looked up at them from his text, and for the second time that day was surprised to find that he meant every word he had just said. He found that his heart was suddenly full of happiness and simple gratitude. It was good just to find out you still had a heart, that the ordinary routine of ordinary days hadn't worn it away, but it was even better to find it could still speak through your mouth.

"We small-town businessmen and businesswomen offer that human touch. On the one hand, it isn't much … but on the other, it's just about everything. I know that it keeps me coming back for more. I want to wish our originally scheduled speaker, The Amazing Joe, a speedy recovery; I want to thank Craig Jones for asking me to sub

for him; and I want to thank all of you for listening so patiently to my boring little talk. So … thanks very much."

The applause started even before he finished his last sentence ; it swelled while he gathered up the few pages of text which Naomi had typed and which he had spent the afternoon amending; it rose to a crescendo as he sat down, bemused by the reaction.

Well, it's just the booze, he told himself. They would have applauded you if you'd told them about how you managed to quit smoking after you found Jesus at a Tupperware party.

Then they started to rise to their feet and he thought he must have spoken too long if they were that anxious to get out. But they went on applauding, and then he saw Craig Jones was flapping his hands at him. After a moment, Sam understood. Craig wanted him to stand up and take a bow.

He twirled a forefinger around his ear: You're nuts!

Craig shook his head emphatically and began elevating his hands so energetically that he looked like a revival preacher encouraging the faithful to sing louder.

So Sam stood up and was amazed when they actually cheered him.

After a few moments, Craig approached the lectern. The cheers at last died down when he tapped the microphone a few times, producing a sound like a giant fist wrapped in cotton knocking on a coffin.

"I think we'll all agree," he said, "that Sam's speech more than made up for the price of the rubber chicken."

This brought another hearty burst of applause.

Craig turned toward Sam and said, "If I'd known you had that in you, Sammy, I would have booked you in the first place!"

This produced more clapping and whistling. Before it died out, Craig Jones had seized Sam's hand and began pumping it briskly up and down.

"That was great!" Craig said. "Where'd you copy it from, Sam?"

"I didn't," Sam said. His cheeks felt warm, and although he'd only had one gin and tonic—a weak one—before getting up to speak, he felt a little drunk. "It's mine. I got a couple of books from the Library, and they helped."

Other Rotarians were crowding around now; Sam's hand was shaken again and again. He started to feel like the town pump during a summer drought.

"Great!" someone shouted in his ear. Sam turned toward the voice and saw it belonged to Frank Stephens, who had filled in when the trucking-union official was indicted for malfeasance. "We shoulda had it on tape, we coulda sold it to the goddam JayCees! Damn, that was a good talk, Sam!"

"Oughtta take it on the road!" Rudy Pearlman said. His round face was red and sweating. "I darn near cried! Honest to God! Where'd you find that pome?"

"At the Library," Sam said. He still felt dazed … but his relief at having actually finished in one piece was being supplanted by a kind of cautious delight. He thought he would have to give Naomi a bonus. "It was in a book called—"

But before he could tell Rudy what the book had been called, Bruce Engalls had grasped him by the elbow and was guiding him toward the bar. "Best damned speech I've heard at this foolish club in two years!" Bruce was exclaiming. "Maybe five! Who needs a goddam acrobat, anyway? Let me buy you a drink, Sam. Hell, let me buy you two!"

Before he was able to get away, Sam consumed a total of six drinks, all of them free, and ended his triumphant evening by puking on his own WELCOME mat shortly after Craig Jones let him out in front of his house on Kelton Avenue. When his stomach vapor-locked, Sam had been trying to get his housekey in the lock of his front door—it was a job, because there appeared to be three locks and four keys—and there was just no time to get rid of it in the bushes at the side of the stoop. So when he finally succeeded in getting the door open, he simply picked the WELCOME mat up (carefully, holding it by the sides so the gunk would pool in the middle) and tossed it over the side.

He got a cup of coffee to stay down, but the phone rang twice while he was drinking it. More congratulations. The second call was from Elmer Baskin, who hadn't even been there. He felt a little like Judy Garland in A Star Is Born, but it was hard to enjoy the feeling while his stomach was still treading water and his head was beginning to punish him for his overindulgence.

Sam put on the answering machine in the living room to field any further calls, then went upstairs to his bedroom, unplugged the phone by the bed, took two aspirin, stripped, and lay down.

Consciousness began to fade fast—he was tired as well as bombed—but before sleep took him, he had time to think: I owe most of it to Naomi … and to that unpleasant woman at the Library. Horst. Borscht. Whatever her name was. Maybe I ought to give her a bonus, too.

He heard the telephone start to ring downstairs, and then the answering machine cut in.

Good boy, Sam thought sleepily. Do your duty—I mean, after all, isn't that what I pay you to do?

Then he was in blackness, and knew no more until ten o'clock Saturday morning.

3

He returned to the land of the living with a sour stomach and a slight headache, but it could have been a lot worse. He was sorry about the WELCOME mat, but glad he'd offloaded at least some of the booze before it could swell his head any worse than it already was. He stood in the shower for ten minutes, making only token washing motions, then dried off, dressed, and went downstairs with a towel draped over his head. The red message light on the telephone answering machine was blinking. The tape only rewound a short way when he pushed the PLAY MESSAGES button; apparently the call he'd heard just as he was drifting off had been the last.

Beep! "Hello, Sam." Sam paused in the act of removing the towel, frowning. It was a woman's voice, and he knew it. Whose? "I heard your speech was a great success. I'm so glad for you."

It was the Lortz woman, he realized.

Now how did she get my number? But that was what the telephone book was for, of course … and he had written it on his library-card application as well, hadn't he? Yes. For no reason he could rightly tell, a small shiver shook its way up his back.

"Be sure to get your borrowed books back by the sixth of April," she continued, and then, archly: "Remember the Library Policeman."

There was the click of the connection being broken. On Sam's answering machine, the ALL MESSAGES PLAYED lamp lit up.

"You're a bit of a bitch, aren't you, lady?" Sam said to the empty house, and then went into the kitchen to make himself some toast.

4

When Naomi came in at ten o'clock on the Friday morning a week after Sam's triumphant debut as an after-dinner speaker, Sam handed her a long white envelope with her name written on the front.

“What’s this?” Naomi asked suspiciously, taking off her cloak. It was raining hard outside, a driving, dismal early-spring rain.

“Open it and see.”

She did. It was a thank-you card. Taped inside was a portrait of Andrew Jackson.

“Twenty dollars!” She looked at him more suspiciously than ever. “Why?”

“Because you saved my bacon when you sent me to the Library,” Sam said. “The speech went over very well, Naomi. I guess it wouldn’t be wrong to say I was a big hit. I would have put in fifty, if I’d thought you would take it.”

Now she understood, and was clearly pleased, but she tried to give the money back just the same. “I’m really glad it worked, Sam, but I can’t take th—”

“Yes you can,” he said, “and you will. You’d take a commission if you worked for me as a salesperson, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t, though. I could never sell anything. When I was in the Girl Scouts, my mother was the only person who ever bought cookies from me.”

“Naomi. My dear girl. No—don’t start looking all nervous and cornered. I’m not going to make a pass at you. We went through all of that two years ago.”

“We certainly did,” Naomi agreed, but she still looked nervous and checked to make sure that she had a clear line of retreat to the door, should she need one.

“Do you realize I’ve sold two houses and written almost two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of insurance since that damn speech? Most of it was common group coverage with a high top-off and a low

commission rate, true, but it still adds up to the price of a new car. If you don't take that twenty, I'm going to feel like shit."

"Sam, please!" she said, looking shocked. Naomi was a dedicated Baptist. She and her mother went to a little church in Proverbia which was almost as ramshackle as the house they lived in. He knew; he had been there once. But he was happy to see that she also looked pleased … and a little more relaxed.

In the summer of 1988, Sam had dated Naomi twice. On the second date, he made a pass. It was as well behaved as a pass can be and still remain a pass, but a pass it was. Much good it had done him; Naomi, it turned out, was a good enough pass deflector to play in the Denver Broncos' defensive backfield. It wasn't that she didn't like him, she explained; it was just that she had decided the two of them could never get along "that way." Sam, bewildered, had asked her why not. Naomi only shook her head. Some things are hard to explain, Sam, but that doesn't make them less true. It could

never work. Believe me, it just couldn't. And that had been all he could get out of her.

"I'm sorry I said the s-word, Naomi," he told her now. He spoke humbly, although he doubted somehow that Naomi was even half as priggish as she liked to sound. "What I mean to say is that if you don't take that twenty, I'll feel like cacapoopie."

She tucked the bill into her purse and then endeavored to look at him with an expression of dignified primness. She almost made it … but the corners of her lips quivered slightly.

"There. Satisfied?"

"Short of giving you fifty," he said. "Would you take fifty, Omes?"

"No," she said. "And please don't call me Omes. You know I don't like it."

“I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted. Now why don’t we just drop the subject?”

“Okay,” Sam said agreeably.

“I heard several people say your speech was good. Craig Jones just raved about it. Do you really think that’s the reason you’ve done more business?”

“Does a bear—” Sam began, and then retraced his steps. “Yes. I do. Things work that way sometimes. It’s funny, but it’s true. The old sales graph has really spiked this week. It’ll drop back, of course, but I don’t think it’ll drop back all the way. If the new folks like the way I do business—and I like to think they witt—there’!! be a carry-over.”

Sam leaned back in his chair, laced his hands together behind his neck, and looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling.

“When Craig Jones called up and put me on the spot, I was ready to shoot him. No joke, Naomi.”

“Yes,” she said. “You looked like a man coming down with a bad case of poison ivy.”

“Did I?” He laughed. “Yeah, I suppose so. It’s funny how things work out sometimes—purest luck. If there is a God, it makes you wonder sometimes if He tightened all the screws in the big machine before He set it going.”

He expected Naomi to scold him for his irreverence (it wouldn’t be the first time), but she didn’t take the gambit today. Instead she said, “You’re luckier than you know, if the books you got at the Library really did help you out. It usually doesn’t open until five o’clock on Fridays. I meant to tell you that, but then I forgot.”

“Oh?”

“You must have found Mr. Price catching up on his paperwork or something.”

“Price?” Sam asked. “Don’t you mean Mr. Peckham? The newspaper-reading janitor?”

Naomi shook her head. “The only Peckham I ever heard of around here was old Eddie Peckham, and he died years ago. I’m talking about Mr. Price. The librarian.” She was looking at Sam as though he were the thickest man on earth … or at least in Junction City, Iowa. “Tall man? Thin? About fifty?”

“Nope,” Sam said. “I got a lady named Lortz. Short, plump, somewhere around the age when women form lasting attachments to bright-green polyester.”

A rather strange mix of expressions crossed Naomi’s face—surprise was followed by suspicion; suspicion was followed by a species of faintly exasperated amusement. That particular sequence of expressions almost always indicates the same thing: someone is coming to realize that his or her leg is being shaken vigorously. Under more ordinary circumstances Sam might have wondered about that, but he had done a land-office business all week long, and as a result he had a great deal of his own paperwork to catch up on. Half of his mind had already wandered off to examine it.

“Oh,” Naomi said and laughed. “Miss Lortz, was it? That must have been fun.”

“She’s peculiar, all right,” Sam said.

“You bet,” Naomi agreed. “In fact, she’s absolutely—”

If she had finished what she had started to say she probably would have startled Sam Peebles a great deal, but tuck—as he had just pointed out—plays an absurdly important part in human affairs, and luck now intervened.

The telephone rang.

It was Burt Iverson, the spiritual chief of Junction City's small legal tribe. He wanted to talk about a really huge insurance deal—the new medical center, comp-group coverage, still in the planning stages but you know how big this could be, Sam—and by the time Sam got back to Naomi, thoughts of Ms. Lortz had gone entirely out of his mind. He knew how big it could be, all right; it could land him behind the wheel of that Mercedes-Benz after all. And he really didn't like to think just how much of all this good fortune he might be able to trace back to that stupid little speech, if he really wanted to.

Naomi did think her leg was being pulled; she knew perfectly well who Ardelia Lortz was, and thought Sam must, too. After all, the woman had been at the center of the nastiest piece of business to occur in Junction City in the last twenty years … maybe since World War II, when the Moggins boy had come home from the Pacific all funny in the head and had killed his whole family before sticking the barrel of his service pistol in his right ear and taking care of himself as well. Ira Moggins had done that before Naomi's time; it did not occur to her that l'affaire Ardelia had occurred long before Sam had come to Junction City.

At any rate, she had dismissed the whole thing from her mind and was trying to decide between Stouffer's lasagna and something from Lean Cuisine for supper by the time Sam put the telephone down. He dictated letters steadily until twelve o'clock, then asked Naomi if she would like to step down to McKenna's with him for a spot of lunch. Naomi declined, saying she had to get back to her mother, who had Failed Greatly over the course of the winter. No more was said about Ardelia Lortz.

That day.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# THE MISSING BOOKS

1

Sam wasn't much of a breakfast-eater through the week—a glass of orange juice and an oat-bran muffin did him just fine— but on Saturday mornings (at least on Saturday mornings when he wasn't dealing with a Rotary-inspired hangover) he liked to rise a little late, stroll down to McKenna's on the square, and work his way slowly through an order of steak and eggs while he really read the paper instead of just scanning it between appointments.

He followed this routine the next morning, the seventh of April. The previous day's rain was gone, and the sky was a pale, perfect blue—the very image of early spring. Sam took the long way home following his breakfast, pausing to check out whose tulips and crocuses were in good order and whose were a little late. He arrived back at his own house at ten minutes past ten.

The PLAY MESSAGES lamp on his answering machine was lit. He pushed the button, got out a cigarette, and struck a match.

"Hello, Sam," Ardelia Lortz's soft and utterly unmistakable voice said, and the match paused six inches shy of Sam's cigarette. "I'm very disappointed in you. Your books are overdue."

"Ah, shit!" Sam exclaimed.

Something had been nagging at him all week long, the way a word you want will use the tip of your tongue for a trampoline, bouncing just out of reach. The books. The goddam books. The woman would undoubtedly regard him as exactly the sort of Philistine she wanted him to be—him with his gratuitous judgments of which posters belonged in the Children's Library and which ones didn't. The only

real question was whether she had put her tongue-lashing on the answering machine or was saving it until she saw him in person.

He shook out the match and dropped it in the ashtray beside the telephone.

“I explained to you, I believe,” she was going on in her soft and just a little too reasonable voice, “that The Speaker’s Companion and Best Loved Poems of the American People are from the Library’s Special Reference section, and cannot be kept out for longer than one week. I expected better things of you, Sam. I really did.”

Sam, to his great exasperation, found he was standing here in his own house with an unlit cigarette between his lips and a guilty flush climbing up his neck and beginning to overrun his cheeks. Once more he had been deposited firmly back in the fourth grade—this time sitting on a stool facing into the comer with a pointed dunce-cap perched firmly on his head.

Speaking as one who is conferring a great favor, Ardelia Lortz went on: “I have decided to give you an extension, however; you have until Monday afternoon to return your borrowed books. Please help me avoid any unpleasantness.” There was a pause. “Remember the Library Policeman, Sam.”

“That one’s getting old, Ardelia-baby,” Sam muttered, but he wasn’t even speaking to the recording. She had hung up after mentioning the Library Policeman, and the machine switched itself quietly off.

2

Sam used a fresh match to light his smoke. He was still exhaling the first drag when a course of action popped into his mind. It might be a trifle cowardly, but it would close his accounts with Ms. Lortz for good. And it also had a certain rough justice to it.

He had given Naomi her just reward, and he would do the same for Ardelia. He sat down at the desk in his study, where he had

composed the famous speech, and drew his note-pad to him. Below the heading (From the Desk of SAMUEL PEEBLES), he scrawled the following note:Dear Ms. Lortz,

I apologize for being late returning your books. This is a sincere apology, because the books were extremely helpful in preparing my speech. Please accept this money in payment of the fine on tardy books. I want you to keep the rest as a token of my thanks.

Sincerely yours

Sam Peebles

Sam read the note over while he fished a paper clip out of his desk drawer. He considered changing"… returning your books" to "… returning the library's books" and decided to leave it as it was. Ardelia Lortz had impressed him very much as the sort of woman who subscribed to the philosophy of l'Etat c'est moi, even if l'etat in this case was just the local library.

He removed a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and used the clip to attach it to the note. He hesitated a moment longer, drumming his fingers restlessly on the edge of the desk.

She's going to look at this as a bribe. She'll probably be offended and mad as hell.

That might be true, but Sam didn't care. He knew what was behind the Lortz woman's arch little call this morning—behind both arch little calls, probably. He had pulled her chain a little too hard about the posters in the Children's Library, and she was getting back at him—or trying to. But this wasn't the fourth grade, he wasn't a scurrying, terrified little kid (not anymore, at least), and he wasn't going to be intimidated. Not by the ill-tempered sign in the library foyer, nor by the librarian's you're-one-whole-day-late-you-bad-boy-you nagging.

"Fuck it!" he said out loud. "If you don't want the goddam money, stick it in the Library Defense Fund, or something."

He laid the note with the twenty paper-clipped to it on the desk. He had no intention of presenting it in person so she could get shirty on him. He would bind the two volumes together with a couple of rubber bands after laying the note and the money into one of them so it stuck out. Then he would simply dump the whole shebang into the book-drop. He had spent six years in Junction City without making Ardelia Lortz's acquaintance; with any luck, it would be six years before he saw her again.

Now all he had to do was find the books.

They were not on his study desk, that was for sure. Sam went out into the dining room and looked on the table. It was where he usually stacked things which needed to be returned. There were two VHS tapes ready to go back to Bruce's Video Stop, an envelope with Paperboy written across the front, two folders with insurance policies in them … but no Speaker's Companion. No Best Loved Poems of the American People, either.

"Crap," Sam said, and scratched his head. "Where the belt—?"

He went out into the kitchen. Nothing on the kitchen table but the morning paper; he'd put it down there when he came in. He tossed it absently in the cardboard carton by the woodstove as he checked the counter. Nothing on the counter but the box from which he had taken last night's frozen dinner.

He went slowly upstairs to check the rooms on the second story, but he was already starting to get a very bad feeling.

3

By three o'clock that afternoon, the bad feeling was a lot worse. Sam Peebles was, in fact, fuming. After going through the house twice from top to bottom (on the second pass he even checked the cellar), he had gone down to the office, even though he was pretty sure he had brought the two books home with him when he left work late last Monday afternoon. Sure enough, he had found nothing there. And

here he was, most of a beautiful spring Saturday shot in a fruitless search for two library books, no further ahead.

He kept thinking of her arch tone—remember the Library Policeman, Sam—and how happy she would feel if she knew just how far under his skin she had gotten. If there really were Library Police, Sam had no doubt at all that the woman would be happy to sic one on him. The more he thought about it, the madder he got.

He went back into his study. His note to Ardelia Lortz, with the twenty attached, stared at him blandly from the desk.

“Balls!” he cried, and was almost off on another whirlwind search of the house before he caught himself and stopped. That would accomplish nothing.

Suddenly he heard the voice of his long-dead mother. It was soft and sweetly reasonable. When you can’t find a thing, Samuel, tearing around and looking for it usually does no good. Sit down and think things over instead. Use your head and save your feet.

It had been good advice when he was ten; he guessed it was just as good now that he was forty. Sam sat down behind his desk, closed his eyes, and set out to trace the progress of those goddamned library books from the moment Ms. Lortz had handed them to him until … whenever.

From the Library he had taken them back to the office, stopping at Sam’s House of Pizza on the way for a pepperoni-and-double-mushroom pie, which he had eaten at his desk while he looked through The Speaker’s Companion for two things: good jokes and how to use them. He remembered how careful he’d been not to get even the smallest dollop of pizza sauce on the book—which was sort of ironic, considering the fact that he couldn’t find either of them now.

He had spent most of the afternoon on the speech, working in the jokes, then rewriting the whole last part so the poem would fit better. When he went home late Friday afternoon, he’d taken the finished

speech but not the books. He was sure of that. Craig Jones had picked him up when it was time for the Rotary Club dinner, and Craig had dropped him off later on—just in time for Sam to baptize the WELCOME mat.

Saturday morning had been spent nursing his minor but annoying hangover; for the rest of the weekend he had just stayed around the house, reading, watching TV, and—let's face it, gang—basking in his triumph. He hadn't gone near the office all weekend. He was sure of it.

Okay, he thought. Here comes the hard part. Now concentrate. But he didn't need to concentrate all that hard after all, he discovered.

He had started out of the office around quarter to five on Monday afternoon, and then the phone had rung, calling him back. It had been Stu Youngman, wanting him to write a large homeowner's policy. That had been the start of this week's shower of bucks. While he was talking with Stu, his eye had happened on the two library books, still sitting on the corner of his desk. When he left the second time, he'd had his briefcase in one hand and the books in the other. He was positive of that much.

He had intended to return them to the Library that evening, but then Frank Stephens had called, wanting him to come out to dinner with him and his wife and their niece, who was visiting from Omaha (when you were a bachelor in a small town, Sam had discovered, even your casual acquaintances became relentless matchmakers). They had gone to Brady's Ribs, had returned late—around eleven, late for a week-night—and by the time he got home again, he had forgotten all about the library books.

After that, he lost sight of them completely. He hadn't thought of returning them—his unexpectedly brisk business had taken up most of his thinking time—until the Lortz woman's call.

Okay—I probably haven't moved them since then. They must be right where I left them when I got home late Monday afternoon.

For a moment he felt a burst of hope—maybe they were still in the car! Then, just as he was getting up to check, he remembered how he'd shifted his briefcase to the hand holding the books when he'd arrived home on Monday. He'd done that so he could get his housekey out of his right front pocket. He hadn't left them in the car at all.

So what did you do when you got in?

He saw himself unlocking the kitchen door, stepping in, putting his briefcase on a kitchen chair, turning with the books in his hand—

"Oh no," Sam muttered. The bad feeling returned in a rush.

There was a fair-sized cardboard carton sitting on the shelf by his little kitchen woodstove, the kind of carton you could pick up at the liquor store. It had been there for a couple of years now. People sometimes packed their smaller belongings into such cartons when they were moving house, but the cartons also made great hold-alls. Sam used the one by the stove for newspaper storage. He put each day's paper into the box after he had finished reading it; he had tossed today's paper in only a short time before. And, once every month or so—

"Dirty Dave!" Sam muttered.

He got up from behind his desk and hurried into the kitchen.

4

The box, with Johnnie Walker's monocled ain't-I-hip image on the side, was almost empty. Sam thumbed through the thin sheaf of newspapers, knowing he would find nothing but looking anyway, the way people do when they are so exasperated they half-believe that just wanting a thing badly enough will make it be there. He found the Saturday Gazette—the one he had so recently disposed of—and the Friday paper. No books between or beneath them, of course. Sam stood there for a moment, thinking black thoughts, then went to the

telephone to call Mary Vasser, who cleaned house for him every Thursday morning.

“Hello?” a faintly worried voice answered.

“Hi, Mary. This is Sam Peebles.”

“Sam?” The worry deepened. “Is something wrong?”

Yes! By Monday afternoon the bitch who runs the local Library is going to be after me! Probably with a cross and a number of very long nails!

But of course he couldn’t say anything like that, not to Mary; she was one of those unfortunate human beings who have been born under a bad sign and live in their own dark cloud of doomish premonition. The Mary Vassers of the world believe that there are a great many large black safes dangling three stories above a great many sidewalks, held by fraying cables, waiting for a destiny to carry the doom-fated into the drop zone. If not a safe, then a drunk driver; if not a drunk driver, a tidal wave (in Iowa? yes, in Iowa); if not a tidal wave, a meteorite. Mary Vasser was one of those afflicted folks who always want to know if something is wrong when you call them on the phone.

“Nothing,” Sam said. “Nothing wrong at all. I just wondered if you saw Dave on Thursday.” The question wasn’t much more than a formality; the papers, after all, were gone, and Dirty Dave was the only Newspaper Fairy in Junction City.

“Yes,” Mary agreed. Sam’s hearty assurance that nothing was wrong seemed to have put her wind up even higher. Now barely concealed terror positively vibrated in her voice. “He came to get the papers. Was I wrong to let him? He’s been coming for years, and I thought —”

“Not at all,” Sam said with insane cheerfulness. “I just saw they were gone and thought I’d check that—”

“You never checked before.” Her voice caught. “Is he all right? Has something happened to Dave?”

“No,” Sam said. “I mean, I don’t know. I just—” An idea flashed into his mind. “The coupons!” he cried wildly. “I forgot to clip the coupons on Thursday, so—”

“Oh!” she said. “You can have mine, if you want.”

“No, I couldn’t do th—”

“I’ll bring them next Thursday,” she overrode him. “I have thousands.” So many I’ll never get a chance to use them all, her voice implied. After all, somewhere out there a safe is waiting for me to walk under it, or a tree is waiting to fall over in a windstorm and squash me, or in some North Dakota motel a hair-dryer is waiting to fall off the shelf and into the bathtub. I’m living on borrowed time, so what do I need a bunch of fucking Folger’s Crystals coupons for?

“All right,” Sam said. “That would be great. Thanks, Mary, you’re a peach.”

“And you’re sure nothing else is wrong?”

“Not a thing,” Sam replied, speaking more heartily than ever. To himself he sounded like a lunatic top-sergeant urging his few remaining men to mount a final fruitless frontal assault on a fortified machine-gun nest. Come on, men, I think they might be asleep!

“All right,” Mary said doubtfully, and Sam was finally permitted to escape.

He sat down heavily in one of the kitchen chairs and regarded the almost empty Johnnie Walker box with a bitter eye. Dirty Dave had come to collect the newspapers, as he did during the first week of every month, but this time he had unknowingly taken along a little bonus: The Speaker’s Companion and Best Loved Poems of the

American People. And Sam had a very good idea of what they were now.

Pulp. Recycled pulp.

Dirty Dave was one of Junction City's functioning alcoholics. Unable to hold down a steady job, he eked out a living on the discards of others, and in that way he was a fairly useful citizen. He collected returnable bottles, and, like twelve-year-old Keith Jordan, he had a paper route. The only difference was that Keith delivered the Junction City Gazette every day, and Dirty Dave Duncan collected it—from Sam and God knew how many other homeowners in the Kelton Avenue section of town—once a month. Sam had seen him many times, trundling his shopping cart full of green plastic garbage bags across town toward the Recycling Center which stood between the old train depot and the small homeless shelter where Dirty Dave and a dozen or so of his compadres spent most of their nights.

He sat where he was for a moment longer, drumming his fingers on the kitchen table, then got up, pulled on a jacket, and went out to the car.

# CHAPTER FIVE

ANGLE STREET(1)

1

The intentions of the sign-maker had undoubtedly been the best, but his spelling had been poor. The sign was nailed to one of the porch uprights of the old house by the railroad tracks, and it read:ANGLE STREET

Since there were no angles on Railroad Avenue that Sam could see —like most Iowa streets and roads, it was as straight as a string—he reckoned the sign-maker had meant Angel Street. Well, so what? Sam thought that, while the road of good intentions might end in hell, the people who tried to fill the potholes along the way deserved at least some credit.

Angle Street was a big building which, Sam guessed, had housed railroad-company offices back in the days when Junction City really had been a railway junction point. Now there were just two sets of working tracks, both going east-west. All the others were rusty and overgrown with weeds. Most of the cross-ties were gone, appropriated for fires by the same homeless people Angle Street was here to serve.

Sam arrived at quarter to five. The sun cast a mournful, failing light over the empty fields which took over here at the edge of town. A seemingly endless freight was rumbling by behind the few buildings which stood out here. A breeze had sprung up, and as he stopped his car and got out, he could hear the rusty squeak of the old JUNCTION CITY sign swinging back and forth above the deserted platform where people had once boarded passenger trains for St. Louis and Chicago—even the old Sunnyland Express, which had made its only Iowa stop in Junction City on its way west to the fabulous kingdoms of Las Vegas and Los Angeles.

The homeless shelter had once been white; now it was a paintless gray. The curtains in the windows were clean but tired and limp. Weeds were trying to grow in the cindery yard. Sam thought they might gain a foothold by June, but right now they were making a bad job of it. A rusty barrel had been placed by the splintery steps leading up to the porch. Opposite the Angle Street sign, nailed to another porch support, was this message:NO DRINKING ALOWED AT THIS SHELTER! IF YOU HAVE A BOTTLE, IT MUST GO HERE BEFORE YOU ENTER!

His luck was in. Although Saturday night had almost arrived and the ginmills and beerjoints of Junction City awaited, Dirty Dave was here, and he was sober. He was, in fact, sitting on the porch with two other winos. They were engaged in making posters on large rectangles of white cardboard, and enjoying varying degrees of success. The fellow sitting on the floor at the far end of the porch was holding his right wrist with his left hand in an effort to offset a bad case of the shakes. The one in the middle worked with his tongue peeking from the comer of his mouth, and looked like a very old nursery child trying his level best to draw a tree which would earn him a gold star to show Mommy. Dirty Dave, sitting in a splintered rocking chair near the porch steps, was easily in the best shape, but all three of them looked folded, stapled, and mutilated.

“Hello, Dave,” Sam said, mounting the steps.

Dave looked up, squinted, and then offered a tentative smile. All of his remaining teeth were in front. The smile revealed all five of them.

“Mr. Peebles?”

“Yes,” he said. “How you doing, Dave?”

“Oh, purty fair, I guess. Purty fair.” He looked around. “Say, you guys! Say hello to Mr. Peebles! He’s a lawyer!”

The fellow with the tip of his tongue sticking out looked up, nodded briefly, and went back to his poster. A long runner of snot depended

from his left nostril.

“Actually,” Sam said, “real estate’s my game, Dave. Real estate and insur—”

“You got me my Slim Jim?” the man with the shakes asked abruptly. He did not look up at all, but his frown of concentration deepened. Sam could see his poster from where he stood; it was covered with long orange squiggles which vaguely resembled words.

“Pardon?” Sam asked.

“That’s Lukey,” Dave said in a low voice. “He ain’t havin one of his better days, Mr. Peebles.”

“Got me my Slim Jim, got me my Slim Jim, got me my Slim Fuckin Slim Jim?” Lukey chanted without looking up.

“Uh, I’m sorry—” Sam began.

“He ain’t got no Slim Jims!” Dirty Dave yelled. “Shut up and do your poster, Lukey! Sarah wants em by six! She’s comin out special!”

“I’ll get me a fuckin Slim Jim,” Lukey said in a low intense voice. “If I don’t, I guess I’ll eat rat-turds.”

“Don’t mind him, Mr. Peebles,” Dave said. “What’s up?”

“Well, I was just wondering if you might have found a couple of books when you picked up the newspapers last Thursday. I’ve misplaced them, and I thought I’d check. They’re overdue at the Library.”

“You got a quarter?” the man with the tip of his tongue sticking out asked abruptly. “What’s the word? Thunderbird!”

Sam reached automatically into his pocket. Dave reached out and touched his wrist, almost apologetically.

“Don’t give him any money, Mr. Peebles,” he said. “That’s Rudolph. He don’t need no Thunderbird. Him and the Bird don’t agree no more. He just needs a night’s sleep.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said. “I’m tapped, Rudolph.”

“Yeah, you and everybody else,” Rudolph said. As he went back to his poster he muttered: “What’s the price? Fifty twice.”

“I didn’t see any books,” Dirty Dave said. “I’m sorry. I just got the papers, like usual. Missus V. was there, and she can tell you. I didn’t do nothing wrong.” But his rheumy, unhappy eyes said he did not expect Sam to believe this. Unlike Mary, Dirty Dave Duncan did not live in a world where doom lay just up the road or around the comer; his surrounded him. He lived in it with what little dignity he could muster.

“I believe you.” Sam laid a hand on Dave’s shoulder. “I just dumped your box of papers into one of my bags, like always,” Dave said.

“If I had a thousand Slim Jims, I’d eat them all,” Lukey said abruptly. “I would snark those suckers right down! That’s chow! That’s chow! That’s chow-de-dow!”

“I believe you,” Sam repeated, and patted Dave’s horribly bony shoulder. He found himself wondering, God help him, if Dave had fleas. On the heels of this uncharitable thought came another: he wondered if any of the other Rotarians, those hale and hearty fellows with whom he had made such a hit a week ago, had been down to this end of town lately. He wondered if they even knew about Angle Street. And he wondered if Spencer Michael Free had been thinking about such men as Lukey and Rudolph and Dirty Dave when he wrote that it was the human touch in this world that counted—the touch of your hand and mine. Sam felt a sudden burst of shame at the recollection of his speech, so full of innocent boosterism and approval for the simple pleasures of small-town life.

“That’s good,” Dave said. “Then I can come back next month?”

“Sure. You took the papers to the Recycling Center, right?”

“Uh-huh.” Dirty Dave pointed with a finger which ended in a yellow, ragged nail. “Right over there. But they’re closed.”

Sam nodded. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Aw, just passin the time,” Dave said, and turned the poster around so Sam could see it.

It showed a picture of a smiling woman holding a platter of fried chicken, and the first thing that struck Sam was that it was good—really good. Wino or not, Dirty Dave had a natural touch. Above the picture, the following was neatly printed:CHICKEN DINNER AT THE 1ST METHODIST CHURCH

TO BENEFIT “ANGEL STREET” HOMELESS SHELTER

SUNDAY APRIL 15TH

6:00 TO 8:00 P.M.

COME ONE COME ALL

“It’s before the AA meeting,” Dave said, “but you can’t put nothing on the poster about AA. That’s because it’s sort of secret.”

“I know,” Sam said. He paused, then asked: “Do you go to AA? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. I know it’s really none of my business.”

“I go,” Dave said, “but it’s hard, Mr. Peebles. I got more white chips than Carter has got liver pills. I’m good for a month, sometimes two, and once I went sober almost a whole year. But it’s hard.” He shook his head. “Some people can’t never get with the program, they say. I must be one of those. But I keep tryin.”

Sam’s eyes were drawn back to the woman with her platter of chicken. The picture was too detailed to be a cartoon or a sketch, but

it wasn't a painting, either. It was clear that Dirty Dave had done it in a hurry, but he had caught a kindness about the eyes and a faint slant of humor, like one last sunbeam at the close of the day, in the mouth. And the oddest thing was that the woman looked familiar to Sam.

"Is that a real person?" he asked Dave.

Dave's smile widened. He nodded. "That's Sarah. She's a great gal, Mr. Peebles. This place would have closed down five years ago except for her. She finds people to give money just when it seems the taxes will be too much or we won't be able to fix the place up enough to satisfy the building inspectors when they come. She calls the people who give the money angels, but she's the angel. We named the place for Sarah. Of course, Tommy St. John spelled part of it wrong when he made the sign, but he meant well." Dirty Dave fell silent for a moment, looking at his poster. Without looking up, he added: "Tommy's dead now, a course. Died this last winter. His liver busted."

"Oh," Sam said, and then he added lamely, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He's well out of it."

"Chow-de-dow!" Lukey exclaimed, getting up. "Chow-de-dow! Ain't that some fuckin chow-de-dow!" He brought his poster over to Dave. Below the orange squiggles he had drawn a monster woman whose legs ended in sharkfins Sam thought were meant to be shoes. Balanced on one hand was a misshapen plate which appeared to be loaded with blue snakes. Clutched in the other was a cylindrical brown object.

Dave took the poster from Lukey and examined it. "This is good, Lukey."

Lukey's lips peeled back in a gleeful smile. He pointed at the brown thing. "Look, Dave! She got her a Slim Fuckin Slim Jim!"

“She sure does. Purty good. Go on inside and turn on the TV, if you want. Star Trek’s on right away. How you doin, Dolph?”

“I draw better when I’m stewed,” Rudolph said, and gave his poster to Dave. On it was a gigantic chicken leg with stick men and women standing around and looking up at it. “It’s the fantasy approach,” Rudolph said to Sam. He spoke with some truculence.

“I like it,” Sam said. He did, actually. Rudolph’s poster reminded him of a New Yorker cartoon, one of the ones he sometimes couldn’t understand because they were so surreal.

“Good.” Rudolph studied him closely. “You sure you ain’t got a quarter?”

“No,” Sam said.

Rudolph nodded. “In a way, that’s good,” he said. “But in another way, it really shits the bed.” He followed Lukey inside, and soon the Star Trek theme drifted out through the open door. William Shatner told the winos and burnouts of Angle Street that their mission was to boldly go where no man had gone before. Sam guessed that several members of this audience were already there.

“Nobody much comes to the dinners but us guys and some of the AA’s from town,” Dave said, “but it gives us something to do. Lukey hardly talks at all anymore, ‘less he’s drawing.”

“You’re awfully good,” Sam told him. “You really are, Dave. Why don’t you—” He stopped.

“Why don’t I what, Mr. Peebles?” Dave asked gently. “Why don’t I use my right hand to turn a buck? The same reason I don’t get myself a regular job. The day got late while I was doin other things.”

Sam couldn’t think of a thing to say.

“I had a shot at it, though. Do you know I went to the Lorillard School in Des Moines on full scholarship? The best art school in the Midwest. I flunked out my first semester. Booze. It don’t matter. Do you want to come in and have a cup of coffee, Mr. Peebles? Wait around? You could meet Sarah.”

“No, I better get back. I’ve got an errand to run.”

He did, too.

“All right. Are you sure you’re not mad at me?”

“Not a bit.”

Dave stood up. “I guess I’ll go in awhile, then,” he said. “It was a beautiful day, but it’s gettin nippy now. You have a nice night, Mr. Peebles.”

“Okay,” Sam said, although he doubted that he was going to enjoy himself very much this Saturday evening. But his mother had had another saying: the way to make the best of bad medicine is to swallow it just as fast as you can. And that was what he intended to do.

He walked back down the steps of Angle Street, and Dirty Dave Duncan went on inside.

2

Sam got almost all the way back to his car, then detoured in the direction of the Recycling Center. He walked across the weedy, cindery ground slowly, watching the long freight disappear in the direction of Camden and Omaha. The red lamps on the caboose twinkled like dying stars. Freight trains always made him feel lonely for some reason, and now, following his conversation with Dirty Dave, he felt lonelier than ever. On the few occasions when he had met Dave while Dave was collecting his papers, he had seemed a jolly, almost clownish man. Tonight Sam thought he had seen behind

the make-up, and what he had seen made him feel unhappy and helpless. Dave was a lost man, calm but totally lost, using what was clearly a talent of some size to make posters for a church supper.

One approached the Recycling Center through zones of litter—first the yellowing ad supplements which had escaped old copies of the Gazette, then the torn plastic garbage bags, finally an asteroid belt of busted bottles and squashed cans. The shades of the small clapboard building were drawn. The sign hanging in the door simply read CLOSED.

Sam lit a cigarette and started back to his car. He had gone only half a dozen steps when he saw something familiar lying on the ground. He picked it up. It was the bookjacket of Best Loved Poems of the American People. The words PROPERTY OF THE JUNCTION CITY-PUBLIC LIBRARY were stamped across it.

So now he knew for sure. He had set the books on top of the papers in the Johnnie Walker box and then forgotten them. He had put other papers—Tuesday's, Wednesday's, and Thursday's—on top of the books. Then Dirty Dave had come along late Thursday morning and had dumped the whole shebang into his plastic collection bag. The bag had gone into his shopping-cart, the shopping-cart had come here, and this was all that was left—a bookjacket with a muddy sneaker-print tattooed on it.

Sam let the bookjacket flutter out of his fingers and walked slowly back to his car. He had an errand to run, and it was fitting that he should run it at the dinner hour.

It seemed he had some crow to eat.

# CHAPTER SIX

THE LIBRARY (II)

11

Halfway to the library, an idea suddenly struck him—it was so obvious he could hardly believe it hadn't occurred to him already. He had lost a couple of library books; he had since discovered they had been destroyed; he would have to pay for them.

And that was all.

It occurred to him that Ardelia Lortz had been more successful in getting him to think like a fourth-grader than he had realized. When a kid lost a book, it was the end of the world; powerless, he cringed beneath the shadow of bureaucracy and waited for the Library Policeman to show up. But there were no Library Police, and Sam, as an adult, knew that perfectly well. There were only town employees like Ms. Lortz, who sometimes got overinflated ideas of their place in the scheme of things, and taxpayers like him, who sometimes forgot they were the dog which wagged the tail, and not the other way around.

I'm going to go in, I'm going to apologize, and then I'm going to ask her to send me a bill for the replacement copies, Sam thought. And that's all. That's the end.

It was so simple it was amazing.

Still feeling a little nervous and a little embarrassed (but much more in control of this teapot tempest), Sam parked across the street from the Library. The carriage lamps which flanked the main entrance were on, casting soft white radiance down the steps and across the building's granite facade. Evening lent the building a kindness and a welcoming air it had definitely been lacking on his first visit—or maybe it was just that spring was clearly on the rise now, something

which had not been the case on the overcast March day when he had first met the resident dragon. The forbidding face of the stone robot was gone. It was just the public library again.

Sam started to get out of the car and then stopped. He had been granted one revelation; now he was suddenly afforded another.

The face of the woman in Dirty Dave's poster came back to him, the woman with the platter of fried chicken. The one Dave had called Sarah. That woman had looked familiar to Sam, and all at once some obscure circuit fired off in his brain and he knew why.

It had been Naomi Higgins.

2

He passed two kids in JCHS jackets on the steps and caught the door before it could swing all the way closed. He stepped into the foyer. The first thing that struck him was the sound. The reading room beyond the marble steps was by no means rowdy, but neither was it the smooth pit of silence which had greeted Sam on Friday noon just over a week ago.

Well, but it's Saturday evening now, he thought. There are kids here, maybe studying for their midterm exams.

But would Ardelia Lortz condone such chatter, muted as it was? The answer seemed to be yes, judging from the sound, but it surely didn't seem in character.

The second thing had to do with that single mute adjuration which had been mounted on the easel.SILENCE!

was gone. In its place was a picture of Thomas Jefferson. Below it was this quotation:"I cannot live without books. " —Thomas Jefferson (in a letter to John Adams) June 10th, 1815

Sam studied this for a moment, thinking that it changed the whole flavor in one's mouth as one prepared to enter the library.SILENCE!

induced feelings of trepidation and disquiet (what if one's belly was rumbling, for instance, or if one felt an attack of not necessarily silent flatulence might be imminent?).“I cannot live without books, “

on the other hand, induced feelings of pleasure and anticipation—it made one feel as hungry men and women feel when the food is finally arriving.

Puzzling over how such a small thing could make such an essential difference, Sam entered the Library … and stopped dead.

3

It was much brighter in the main room than it had been on his first visit, but that was only one of the changes. The ladders which had stretched up to the dim reaches of the upper shelves were gone. There was no need of them, because the ceiling was now only eight or nine feet above the floor instead of thirty or forty. If you wanted to take a book from one of the higher shelves, all you needed was one of the stools which were scattered about. The magazines were placed in an inviting fan on a wide table by the circulation desk. The oak rack from which they had hung like the skins of dead animals was gone. So was the sign readingRETURN ALL MAGAZINES TO THEIR PROPER PLACES!

The shelf of new novels was still there, but the 7-DAY RENTALS sign had been replaced with one which said READ A BEST SELLER—JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT!

People—mostly young people—came and went, talking in low tones. Someone chuckled. It was an easy, unselfconscious sound.

Sam looked up at the ceiling, trying desperately to understand what in hell had happened here. The slanted skylights were gone. The upper reaches of the room had been hidden by a modern suspended

ceiling. The old-fashioned hanging globes had been replaced by panelled fluorescent lighting set into the new ceiling.

A woman on her way up to the main desk with a handful of mystery novels followed Sam's gaze up to the ceiling, saw nothing unusual there, and looked curiously at Sam instead. One of the boys sitting at a long desk to the right of the magazine table nudged his fellows and pointed Sam out. Another tapped his temple and they all snickered.

Sam noticed neither the stares nor the snickers. He was unaware that he was simply standing in the entrance to the main reading room, gawking up at the ceiling with his mouth open. He was trying to get this major change straight in his mind.

Well, they've put in a suspended ceiling since you were here last. So what? It's probably more heat-efficient.

Yes, but the Lortz woman never said anything about changes.

No, but why would she say anything to him? Sam was hardly a library regular, was he?

She should have been upset, though. She struck me as a rock-ribbed traditionalist. She wouldn't like this. Not at all.

That was true, but there was something else, something even more troubling. Putting in a suspended ceiling was a major renovation. Sam didn't see how it could have been accomplished in just a week. And what about the high shelves, and all the books which had been on them? Where had the shelves gone? Where had the books gone?

Other people were looking at Sam now; even one of the library assistants was staring at him from the other side of the circulation desk. Most of the lively, hushed chatter in the big room had stilled.

Sam rubbed his eyes—actually rubbed his eyes—and looked up at the suspended ceiling with its inset fluorescent squares again. It was

still there.

I'm in the wrong libary! he thought wildly. That's what it is!

His confused mind first jumped at this idea and then backed away again, like a kitten that has been tricked into pouncing on a shadow. Junction City was fairly large by central Iowa standards, with a population of thirty-five thousand or so, but it was ridiculous to think it could support two libraries. Besides, the location of the building and the configuration of the room were right … it was just everything else that was wrong.

Sam wondered for just a moment if he might be going insane, and then dismissed the thought. He looked around and noticed for the first time that everyone had stopped what they were doing. They were all looking at him. He felt a momentary, mad urge to say, "Go back to what you were doing—I was just noticing that the whole library is different this week." Instead, he sauntered over to the magazine table and picked up a copy of U.S. News & World Report. He began leafing through it with a show of great interest, and watched out of the comers of his eyes as the people in the room went back to what they had been doing.

When he felt that he could move without attracting undue attention, Sam replaced the magazine on the table and sauntered toward the Children's Library. He felt a little like a spy crossing enemy territory. The sign over the door was exactly the same, gold letters on warm dark oak, but the poster was different. Little Red Riding Hood at the moment of her terrible realization had been replaced by Donald Duck's nephews, Huey, Dewey, and Louie. They were wearing bathing trunks and diving into a swimming pool filled with books. The tag-line beneath read:COME ON IN! THE READING'S FINE!

"What's going on here?" Sam muttered. His heart had begun to beat too fast; he could feel a fine sweat breaking out on his arms and back. If it had been just the poster, he could have assumed that La Lortz had been fired … but it wasn't just the poster. It was everything.

He opened the door of the Children's Library and peeked inside. He saw the same agreeable small world with its low tables and chairs, the same bright-blue curtains, the same water fountain mounted on the wall. Only now the suspended ceiling in here matched the suspended ceiling in the main reading room, and all the posters had been changed. The screaming child in the black sedan (Simple Simon they call him Simple Simon they feel contempt for him I think that's very healthy, don't you)

was gone, and so was the Library Policeman with his trenchcoat and his strange star of many points. Sam drew back, turned around, and walked slowly to the main circulation desk. He felt as if his whole body had turned to glass.

Two library assistants—a college-age boy and girl—watched him approach. Sam was not too upset himself to see that they looked a trifle nervous.

Be careful. No … be NORMAL. They already think you're halfway to being nuts.

He suddenly thought of Lukey and a horrible, destructive impulse tried to seize him. He could see himself opening his mouth and yelling at these two nervous young people, demanding at the top of his voice that they give him a few Slim Fucking Slim Jims, because that was chow, that was chow, that was chow-de-dow.

He spoke in a calm, low voice instead.

"Perhaps you could help me. I need to speak to the librarian."

"Gee, I'm sorry," the girl said. "Mr. Price doesn't come in on Saturday nights."

Sam glanced down at the desk. As on his previous trip to the library, there was a small name-plaque standing next to the microfilm recorder, but it no longer saidA. LORTZ.

Now it saidMR. PRICE.

In his mind he heard Naomi say, Tall man? About fifty? “No,” he said. “Not Mr. Price. Not Mr. Peckham, either. The other one. Ardelia Lortz.”

The boy and girl exchanged a puzzled glance. “No one named Ardelia Lord works here,” the boy said. “You must be thinking of some other library.”

“Not Lord,” Sam told them. His voice seemed to be coming from a great distance. “Lortz.”

“No,” the girl said. “You really must be mistaken, sir.”

They were starting to look cautious again, and although Sam felt like insisting, telling them of course Ardelia Lortz worked here, he had met her only eight days ago, he made himself pull back. And in a way, it all made perfect sense, didn’t it? It was perfect sense within a framework of utter lunacy, granted, but that didn’t change the fact that the interior logic was intact. Like the posters, the skylights, and the magazine rack, Ardelia Lortz had simply ceased to exist.

Naomi spoke up again inside his head. Oh? Miss Lortz, was it? That must have been fun.

“Naomi recognized the name,” he muttered.

Now the library assistants were looking at him with identical expressions of consternation.

“Pardon me,” Sam said, and tried to smile. It felt crooked on his face. “I’m having one of those days.”

“Yes,” the boy said.

“You bet,” the girl said.

They think I'm crazy, Sam thought, and do you know what? I don't blame them a bit.

"Was there anything else?" the boy asked.

Sam opened his mouth to say no—after which he would beat a hasty retreat—and then changed his mind. He was in for a penny; he might as well go in for a pound.

"How long has Mr. Price been the head librarian?"

The two assistants exchanged another glance. The girl shrugged. "Since we've been here," she said, "but that's not very long, Mr.—?"

"Peebles," Sam said, offering his hand. "Sam Peebles. I'm sorry. My manners seem to have flown away with the rest of my mind."

They both relaxed a little—it was an indefinable thing, but it was there, and it helped Sam do the same. Upset or not, he had managed to hold onto at least some of his not inconsiderable ability to put people at ease. A real-estate-and-insurance salesman who couldn't do that was a fellow who ought to be looking for a new line of work.

"I'm Cynthia Berrigan," she said, giving his hand a tentative shake. "This is Tom Stanford."

"Pleased to meet you," Tom Stanford said. He didn't look entirely sure of this, but he also gave Sam's hand a quick shake.

"Pardon me?" the woman with the mystery novels asked. "Could someone help me, please? I'll be late for my bridge game."

"I'll do it," Tom told Cynthia, and walked down the desk to check out the woman's books.

She said, "Tom and I go to Chapelton Junior College, Mr. Peebles. This is a work-study job. I've been here three semesters now—Mr. Price hired me last spring. Tom came during the summer."

“Mr. Price is the only full-time employee?”

“Uh-huh.” She had lovely brown eyes and now he could see a touch of concern in them. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Sam looked up again. He couldn’t help it. “Has this suspended ceiling been here since you came to work?”

She followed his glance. “Well,” she said, “I didn’t know that was what it’s called, but yes, it’s been this way since I’ve been here.”

“I had an idea there were skylights, you see.”

Cynthia smiled. “Well, sure. I mean, you can see them from the outside, if you go around to the side of the building. And, of course, you can see them from the stacks, but they’re boarded over. The skylights, I mean—not the stacks. I think they’ve been that way for years.”

For years.

“And you’ve never heard of Ardelia Lortz.”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. Sorry.”

“What about the Library Police?” Sam asked impulsively.

She laughed. “Only from my old aunt. She used to tell me the Library Police would get me if I didn’t bring my books back on time. But that was back in Providence, Rhode Island, when I was a little girl. A long time ago.”

Sure, Sam thought. Maybe as long as ten, twelve years ago. Back when dinosaurs walked the earth.

“Well,” he said, “thanks for the information. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

“You didn’t.”

“I think I did, a little. I was just confused for a second.”

“Who is this Ardelia Lortz?” Tom Stanford asked, coming back. “That name rings a bell, but I’ll be darned if I know why.”

“That’s just it. I don’t really know,” Sam said.

“Well, we’re closed tomorrow, but Mr. Price will be in Monday afternoon and Monday evening,” he said. “Maybe he can tell you what you want to know.”

Sam nodded. “I think I’ll come and see him. Meantime, thanks again.”

“We’re here to help if we can,” Tom said. “I only wish we could have helped you more, Mr. Peebles.”

“Me too,” Sam said.

4

He was okay until he got to the car, and then, as he was unlocking the driver’s-side door, all the muscles in his belly and legs seemed to drop dead. He had to support himself with a hand on the roof of his car to keep from falling down while he swung the door open. He did not really get in; he simply collapsed behind the wheel and then sat there, breathing hard and wondering with some alarm if he was going to faint.

What’s going on here? I feel like a character in Rod Serling’s old show. “Submitted for your examination, one Samuel Peebles, ex-resident of Junction City, now selling real estate and whole life in … the Twilight Zone.”

Yes, that was what it was like. Only watching people cope with inexplicable happenings on TV was sort of fun. Sam was discovering that the inexplicable lost a lot of its charm when you were the one who had to struggle with it.

He looked across the street at the Library, where people came and went beneath the soft glow of the carriage lamps. The old lady with the mystery novels was headed off down the street, presumably bound for her bridge game. A couple of girls were coming down the steps, talking and laughing together, books held to their blooming chests. Everything looked perfectly normal … and of course it was. The abnormal Library had been the one he had entered a week ago. The only reason the oddities hadn't struck him more forcibly, he supposed, was because his mind had been on that damned speech of his.

Don't think about it, he instructed himself, although he was afraid that this was going to be one of those times when his mind simply wouldn't take instruction. Do a Scarlett O'Hara and think about it tomorrow. Once the sun is up, all this will make a lot more sense.

He put the car in gear and thought about it all the way home.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

# NIGHT TERRORS

1

The first thing he did after letting himself in was to check the answering machine. His heartbeat cranked up a notch when he saw the MESSAGE WAITING lamp was lit.

It'll be her. I don't know who she really is, but I'm beginning to think she won't be happy until she's driven me completely crackers.

Don't listen to it, then, another part of his mind spoke up, and Sam was now so confused he couldn't tell if that was a reasonable idea or not. It seemed reasonable, but it also seemed a little cowardly. In fact—

He realized that he was standing here in a sweat, gnawing his fingernails, and suddenly grunted—a soft, exasperated noise.

From the fourth grade to the mental ward, he thought. Well, I'll be damned if it's going to work that way, hon.

He pushed the button.

"Hi!" a man's whiskey-roughened voice said. "This is Joseph Randowski, Mr. Peebles. My stage name is The Amazing Joe. I just called to thank you for filling in for me at that Kiwanis meeting or whatever it was. I wanted to tell you that I'm feeling a lot better—my neck was only sprained, not broke like they thought at first. I'm sending you a whole bunch of free tickets to the show. Pass em out to your friends. Take care of yourself. Thanks again. Bye."

The tape stopped. The ALL MESSAGES PLAYED lamp came on. Sam snorted at his case of nerves—if Ardelia Lortz wanted him

jumping at shadows, she was getting exactly what she wanted. He pushed the REWIND button, and a new thought struck him. Rewinding the tape that took his messages was a habit with him, but it meant that the old messages disappeared under the new ones. The Amazing Joe's message would have erased Ardelia's earlier message. His only evidence that the woman actually existed was gone.

But that wasn't true, was it? There was his library card. He had stood in front of that goddamned circulation desk and watched her sign her name on it in large, flourishing letters.

Sam pulled out his wallet and went through it three times before admitting to himself that the library card was gone, too. And he thought he knew why. He vaguely remembered tucking it into the inside pocket of Best Loved Poems of the American People.

For safekeeping.

So he wouldn't lose it.

Great. Just great.

Sam sat down on the couch and put his forehead in his hand. His head was starting to ache.

2

He was heating a can of soup on the stove fifteen minutes later, hoping a little hot food would do something for his head, when he thought of Naomi again—Naomi, who looked so much like the woman in Dirty Dave's poster. The question of whether or not Naomi was leading a secret life of some sort under the name of Sarah had taken a back seat to something that seemed a lot more important, at least right now: Naomi had known who Ardelia Lortz was. But her reaction to the name … it had been a little odd, hadn't it? It had startled her for a moment or two, and she'd started to make a joke, and then the phone had rung and it had been Burt Iverson, and—

Sam tried to replay the conversation in his mind and was chagrined at how little he remembered. Naomi had said Ardelia was peculiar, all right; he was sure of that, but not much else. It hadn't seemed important then. The important thing then was that his career seemed to have taken a quantum leap forward. And that was still important, but this other thing seemed to dwarf it. In truth, it seemed to dwarf everything. His mind kept going back to that modern no-nonsense suspended ceiling and the short bookcases. He didn't believe he was crazy, not at all, but he was beginning to feel that if he didn't get this thing sorted out, he might go crazy. It was as if he had uncovered a hole in the middle of his head, one so deep you could throw things into it and not hear a splash no matter how big the things you threw were or how long you waited with your ear cocked for the sound. He supposed the feeling would pass—maybe—but in the meantime it was horrible.

He turned the burner under the soup to LO, went into the study, and found Naomi's telephone number. It rang three times and then a cracked, elderly voice said, "Who is it, please?" Sam recognized the voice at once, although he hadn't seen its owner in person for almost two years. It was Naomi's ramshackle mother.

"Hello, Mrs. Higgins," he said. "It's Sam Peebles."

He stopped, waited for her to say Oh, hello, Sam or maybe How are you? but there was only Mrs. Higgins's heavy, emphysemic breathing. Sam had never been one of her favorite people, and it seemed that absence had not made her heart grow fonder.

Since she wasn't going to ask it, Sam decided he might as well. "How are you, Mrs. Higgins?"

"I have my good days and my bad ones."

For a moment Sam was nonplussed. It seemed to be one of those remarks to which there was no adequate reply. I'm sorry to hear that didn't fit, but That's great, Mrs. Higgins! would sound even worse.

He settled for asking if he could speak to Naomi.

“She’s out this evening. I don’t know when she’ll be back.”

“Could you ask her to call me?”

“I’m going to bed. And don’t ask me to leave her a note, either. My arthritis is very bad.”

Sam sighed. “I’ll call tomorrow.”

“We’ll be in church tomorrow morning,” Mrs. Higgins stated in the same flat, unhelpful voice, “and the first Baptist Youth Picnic of the season is tomorrow afternoon. Naomi has promised to help.”

Sam decided to call it off. It was clear that Mrs. Higgins was sticking as close to name, rank, and serial number as she possibly could. He started to say goodbye, then changed his mind. “Mrs. Higgins, does the name Lortz mean anything to you? Ardelia Lortz?”

The heavy wheeze of her respiration stopped in mid-snuffle. For a moment there was total silence on the line and then Mrs. Higgins spoke in a low, vicious voice. “How long are you Godless heathens going to go on throwing that woman in our faces? Do you think it’s funny? Do you think it’s clever?”

“Mrs. Higgins, you don’t understand. I just want to know—”

There was a sharp little click in his ear. It sounded as if Mrs. Higgins had broken a small dry stick over her knee. And then the line went dead.

3

Sam ate his soup, then spent half an hour trying to watch TV. It was no good. His mind kept wandering away. It might start with the woman in Dirty Dave’s poster, or with the muddy footprint on the cover of Best Loved Poems of the American People, or with the missing poster of Little Red Riding Hood. But no matter where it

started, it always ended up in the same place: that completely different ceiling above the main reading room of the Junction City Public Library.

Finally he gave it up and crawled into bed. It had been one of the worst Saturdays he could remember, and might well have been the worst Saturday of his life. The only thing he wanted now was a quick trip into the land of dreamless unconsciousness.

But sleep didn't come.

The horrors came instead.

Chief among them was the idea that he was losing his mind. Sam had never realized just how terrible such an idea could be. He had seen movies where some fellow would go to see a psychiatrist and say "I feel like I'm losing my mind, doc," while dramatically clutching his head, and he supposed he had come to equate the onset of mental instability with an Excedrin headache. It wasn't like that, he discovered as the long hours passed and April 7 gradually became April 8. It was more like reaching down to scratch your balls and finding a large lump there, a lump that was probably a tumor of some kind.

The Library couldn't have changed so radically in just over a week. He couldn't have seen the skylights from the reading room. The girl, Cynthia Berrigan, had said they were boarded over, had been since she had arrived, at least a year ago. So this was some sort of a mental breakdown. Or a brain tumor. Or what about Alzheimer's disease? There was a pleasant thought. He had read someplace—Newsweek, perhaps—that Alzheimer's victims were getting younger and younger. Maybe the whole weird episode was a signal of creeping, premature senility.

An unpleasant billboard began to fill his thoughts, a billboard with three words written on it in greasy letters the color of red licorice. These words wereLOSING MY MIND.

He had lived an ordinary life, full of ordinary pleasures and ordinary regrets; a pretty-much-unexamined life. He had never seen his name in lights, true, but he had never had any reason to question his sanity, either. Now he found himself lying in his rumpled bed and wondering if this was how you came untethered from the real, rational world. If this was how it started when youLOST YOUR MIND.

The idea that the angel of Junction City's homeless shelter was Naomi—Naomi going under an alias—was another nutso idea. It just couldn't be … could it? He even began to question the strong upsurge in his business. Maybe he had hallucinated the whole thing.

Toward midnight, his thoughts turned to Ardelia Lortz, and that was when things really began to get bad. He began to think of how awful it would be if Ardelia Lortz was in his closet, or even under his bed. He saw her grinning happily, secretly, in the dark, wriggling fingers tipped with long, sharp nails, her hair sprayed out all around her face in a weird fright-wig. He imagined how his bones would turn to jelly if she began to whisper to him.

You lost the books, Sam, so it will have to be the Library Policeman … you lost the books … you looosssst them …

At last, around twelve-thirty, Sam couldn't stand it any longer. He sat up and fumbled in the dark for the bedside lamp. And as he did, he was gripped by a new fantasy, one so vivid it was almost a certainty: he was not alone in his bedroom, but his visitor was not Ardelia Lortz. Oh no. His visitor was the Library Policeman from the poster that was no longer in the Children's Library. He was standing here in the dark, a tall, pale man wrapped in a trenchcoat, a man with a bad complexion and a white, jagged scar lying across his left cheek, below his left eye, and over the bridge of his nose. Sam hadn't seen that scar on the face in the poster, but that was only because the artist hadn't wanted to put it in. It was there. Sam knew it was there.

You were wrong about the bushes, the Library Policeman would say in his lightly lisping voice. There are bushes growing along the

sideth. Loth of bushes. And we're going to ecthplore them. We're going to ecthplore them together.

No! Stop it! Just … STOP it!

As his trembling hand finally found the lamp, a board creaked in the room and he uttered a breathless little scream. His hand clenched, squeezing the switch. The light came on. For a moment he actually thought he saw the tall man, and then he realized it was only a shadow cast on the wall by the bureau.

Sam swung his feet out onto the floor and put his face in his hands for a moment. Then he reached for the pack of Kents on the nightstand.

"You've got to get hold of yourself," he muttered. "What the fuck were you thinking about?"

I don't know, the voice inside responded promptly. Furthermore, I don't want to know. Ever. The bushes were a long time ago. I never have to remember the bushes again. Or the taste. That sweet sweet taste.

He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

The worst thing was this: Next time he might really see the man in the trenchcoat. Or Ardelia. Or Gorgo, High Emperor of Pellucidar. Because if he'd been able to create a hallucination as complete as his visit to the Library and his meeting with Ardelia Lortz, he could hallucinate anything. Once you started thinking about skylights that weren't there, and people who weren't there, and even bushes that weren't there, everything seemed possible. How did you quell a rebellion in your own mind?

He went down to the kitchen, turning on lights as he went, resisting an urge to look over his shoulder and see if anyone was creeping after him. A man with a badge in his hand, for instance. He supposed that what he needed was a sleeping pill, but since he

didn’t have any—not even one of the over-the-counter preparations like Sominex—he would just have to improvise. He splashed milk into a saucepan, heated it, poured it into a coffee mug, and then added a healthy shot of brandy. This was something else he had seen in the movies. He took a taste, grimaced, almost poured the evil mixture down the sink, and then looked at the clock on the microwave. Quarter to one in the morning. It was a long time until dawn, a long time to spend imagining Ardelia Lortz and the Library Policeman creeping up the stairs with knives gripped between their teeth.

Or arrows, he thought. Long black arrows. Ardelia and the Library Policeman creeping up the stairs with long black arrows clamped between their teeth. How about that image, friends and neighbors?

Arrows?

Why arrows?

He didn’t want to think about it. He was tired of thoughts which came whizzing out of the previously unsuspected darkness inside him like horrid, stinking Frisbees.

I don’t want to think about it. I won’t think about it.

He finished the brandy-laced milk and went back to bed.

4

He left the bedside lamp on, and that made him feel a little calmer. He actually began to think he might go to sleep at some point before the heat-death of the universe. He pulled the comforter up to his chin, laced his hands behind his head, and looked at the ceiling.

SOME of it must have really happened, he thought. It can’t ALL have been a hallucination … unless this is part of it, and I’m really in one of the rubber rooms up in Cedar Rapids, wrapped in a straitjacket and only imagining I’m lying here in my own bed.

He had delivered the speech. He had used the jokes from The Speaker's Companion, and Spencer Michael Free's verse from Best Loved Poems of the American People. And since he had neither volume in his own small collection of books, he must have gotten them from the Library. Naomi had known Ardelia Lortz—had known her name, anyway—and so had Naomi's mother. Had she! It was as if he'd set a firecracker off under her easy chair.

I can check around, he thought. If Mrs. Higgins knows the name, other people will, too. Not work-study kids from Chapelton, maybe, but people who've been in Junction City a long time. Frank Stephens, maybe. Or Dirty Dave …

At this point, Sam finally drifted off. He crossed the almost seamless border between waking and sleeping without knowing it; his thoughts never ceased but began instead to twist themselves into ever more strange and fabulous shapes. The shapes became a dream. And the dream became a nightmare. He was at Angle Street again, and the three alkies were on the porch, laboring over their posters. He asked Dirty Dave what he was doing.

Aw, just passin the time, Dave said, and then, shyly, he turned the poster around so Sam could see it.

It was a picture of Simple Simon. He had been impaled on a spit over an open fire. He was clutching a great bundle of melting red licorice in one hand. His clothes were burning but he was still alive. He was screaming. The words written above this terrible image were:CHILDREN DINNER IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY BUSHES

TO BENEFIT THE LIBRARY POLICE FUND

MIDNITE TO 2 A.M.

COME ONE COME ALL

"THAT'S CHOW-DE-DOW!"

Dave, that's horrible, Sam said in the dream.

Not at all, Dirty Dave replied. The children call him Simple Simon. They love to eat him. I think that's very healthy, don't you?

Look! Rudolph cried. Look, it's Sarah!

Sam looked up and saw Naomi crossing the littered, weedy ground between Angle Street and the Recycling Center. She was moving very slowly, because she was pushing a shopping-cart filled with copies of The Speaker's Companion and Best Loved Poems of the American People. Behind her, the sun was going down in a sullen furnace glare of red light and a long passenger train was rumbling slowly along the track, headed out into the emptiness of western Iowa. It was at least thirty coaches long, and every car was black. Crepe hung and swung in the windows. It was a funeral train, Sam realized.

Sam turned back to Dirty Dave and said, Her name isn't Sarah. That's Naomi. Naomi Higgins from Proverbia.

Not at all, Dirty Dave said. It's Death coming, Mr. Peebles. Death is a woman.

Lukey began to squeal then. In the extremity of his terror he sounded like a human pig. She got Slim Jims! She got Slim Jims! Oh my God, she got all Slim Fuckin Slim Jims!

Sam turned back to see what Lukey was talking about. The woman was closer, but it was no longer Naomi. It was Ardelia. She was dressed in a trenchcoat the color of a winter storm-cloud. The shopping cart was not full of Slim Jims, as Lukey had said, but thousands of intertwined red licorice whips. While Sam watched, Ardelia snatched up handfuls of them and began to cram them into her mouth. Her teeth were no longer dentures; they were long and discolored. They looked like vampire teeth to Sam, both sharp and horribly strong. Grimacing, she bit down on her mouthful of candy. Bright blood squirted out, spraying a pink cloud in the sunset air and

dribbling down her chin. Severed chunks of licorice tumbled to the weedy earth, still jetting blood.

She raised hands which had become hooked talons.

“Youuuu losst the BOOOOOKS!” she screamed at Sam, and charged at him.

5

Sam came awake in a breathless jerk. He had pulled all the bedclothes loose from their moorings, and was huddled beneath them near the foot of the bed in a sweaty ball. Outside, the first thin light of a new day was peeking under the drawn shade. The bedside clock said it was 5:53 A.M.

He got up, the bedroom air cool and refreshing on his sweaty skin, went into the bathroom, and urinated. His head ached vaguely, either as a result of the early-morning shot of brandy or stress from the dream. He opened the medicine cabinet, took two aspirin, and then shambled back to his bed. He pulled the covers up as best he could, feeling the residue of his nightmare in every damp fold of the sheet. He wouldn’t go back to sleep again—he knew that—but he could at least lie here until the nightmare started to dissolve.

As his head touched the pillow, he suddenly realized he knew something else, something as surprising and unexpected as his sudden understanding that the woman in Dirty Dave’s poster had been his part-time secretary. This new understanding also had to do with Dirty Dave … and with Ardelia Lortz.

It was the dream, he thought. That’s where I found out.

Sam fell into a deep, natural sleep. There were no more dreams and when he woke up it was almost eleven o’clock. Churchbells were calling the faithful to worship, and outside it was a beautiful day. The sight of all that sunshine lying on all that bright new grass did more than make him feel good; it made him feel almost reborn.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

ANGLE STREET (II)

1

He made himself brunch—orange juice, a three-egg omelette loaded with green onions, lots of strong coffee—and thought about going back to Angle Street. He could still remember the moment of illumination he had experienced during his brief period of waking and was perfectly sure that his insight was true, but he wondered if he really wanted to pursue this crazy business any further.

In the bright light of a spring morning, his fears of the previous night seemed both distant and absurd, and he felt a strong temptation—almost a need—to simply let the matter rest. Something had happened to him, he thought, something which had no reasonable, rational explanation. The question was, so what?

He had read about such things, about ghosts and premonitions and possessions, but they held only minimal interest for him. He liked a spooky movie once in awhile, but that was about as far as it went. He was a practical man, and he could see no practical use for paranormal episodes … if they did indeed occur. He had experienced … well, call it an event, for want of a better word. Now the event was over. Why not leave it at that?

Because she said she wanted the books back by tomorrow—what about that?

But this seemed to have no power over him now. In spite of the messages she had left on his answering machine, Sam no longer exactly believed in Ardelia Lortz.

What did interest him was his own reaction to what had happened. He found himself remembering a college biology lecture. The instructor had begun by saying that the human body had an

extremely efficient way of dealing with the incursion of alien organisms. Sam remembered the teacher saying that because the bad news—cancer, influenza, sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis—got all the headlines, people tended to believe they were a lot more vulnerable to disease than they really were. “The human body,” the instructor had said, “has its own Green Beret force at its disposal. When the human body is attacked by an outsider, ladies and gentlemen, the response of this force is quick and without mercy. No quarter is given. Without this army of trained killers, each of you would have been dead twenty times over before the end of your first year.”

The prime technique the body employed to rid itself of invaders was isolation. The invaders were first surrounded, cut off from the nutrients they needed to live, then either eaten, beaten, or starved. Now Sam was discovering—or thought he was—that the mind employed exactly the same technique when it was attacked. He could remember many occasions when he had felt he was coming down with a cold only to wake up the next morning feeling fine. The body had done its work. A vicious war had been going on even as he slept, and the invaders had been wiped out to the last man … or bug. They had been eaten, beaten, or starved.

Last night he had experienced the mental equivalent of an impending cold. This morning the invader, the threat to his clear, rational perceptions, had been surrounded. Cut off from its nutrients. Now it was only a matter of time. And part of him was warning the rest of him that, by investigating this business further, he might be feeding the enemy.

This is how it happens, he thought. This is why the world isn’t full of reports of strange happenings and inexplicable phenomena. The mind experiences them … reels around for a while … then counterattacks.

But he was curious. That was the thing. And didn’t they say that, although curiosity killed the cat, satisfaction brought the beast back?

Who? Who says?

He didn't know … but he supposed he could find out. At his local library. Sam smiled a little as he took his dishes over to the sink. And discovered he had already made his decision: he would pursue this crazy business just a little further.

Just a little bit.

2

Sam arrived back at Angle Street around twelve-thirty. He was not terribly surprised to see Naomi's old blue Datsun parked in the driveway. Sam parked behind it, got out, and climbed the rickety steps past the sign telling him he'd have to drop any bottles he might have in the trash barrel. He knocked, but there was no answer. He pushed the door open, revealing a wide hall that was barren of furniture … unless the pay telephone halfway down counted. The wallpaper was clean but faded. Sam saw a place where it had been mended with Scotch tape.

"Hello?"

There was no answer. He went in, feeling like an intruder, and walked down the hall. The first door on the left opened into the common room. Two signs had been thumbtacked to this door.FRIENDS OF BILL ENTER HERE!

read the top one. Below this was another, which seemed at once utterly sensible and exquisitely dumb to Sam. It read:TIME TAKES TIME.

The common room was furnished with mismatched, cast-off chairs and a long sofa which had also been mended with tape—electrician's tape, this time. More slogans had been hung on the wall. There was a coffeemaker on a little table by the TV. Both the TV and the coffeemaker were off.

Sam walked on down the hall past the stairs, feeling more like an intruder than ever. He glanced into the three other rooms which opened off the corridor. Each was furnished with two plain cots, and all were empty. The rooms were scrupulously clean, but they told their tales just the same. One smelled of Musterole. Another smelled unpleasantly of some deep sickness. Either someone has died recently in this room, Sam thought, or someone is going to.

The kitchen, also empty, was at the far end of the hall. It was a big, sunny room with faded linoleum covering the floor in uneven dunes and valleys. A gigantic stove, combination wood and gas, filled an alcove. The sink was old and deep, its enamel discolored with rust stains. The faucets were equipped with old-fashioned propeller handles. An ancient Maytag washing machine and a gas-fired Kenmore drier stood next to the pantry. The air smelled faintly of last night's baked beans. Sam liked the room. It spoke to him of pennies which had been pinched until they screamed, but it also spoke of love and care and some hard-won happiness. It reminded him of his grandmother's kitchen, and that had been a good place. A safe place.

On the old restaurant-sized Amana refrigerator was a magnetized plaque which read:GOD BLESS OUR BOOZELESS HOME.

Sam heard faint voices outside. He crossed the kitchen and looked through one of the windows, which had been raised to admit as much of the warm spring day as the mild breeze could coax in.

The back lawn of Angle Street was showing the first touches of green; at the rear of the property, by a thin belt of just-budding trees, an idle vegetable garden waited for warmer days. To the left, a volleyball net sagged in a gentle arc. To the right were two horseshoe pits, just beginning to sprout a few weeds. It was not a prepossessing back yard—at this time of year, few country yards were—but Sam saw it had been raked at least once since the snow had released its winter grip, and there were no cinders, although he could see the steely shine of the railroad tracks less than fifty feet from the garden. The residents of Angle Street might not have a lot

to take care of, he thought, but they were taking care of what they did have.

About a dozen people were sitting on folding camp chairs in a rough circle between the volleyball net and the horseshoe pits. Sam recognized Naomi, Dave, Lukey, and Rudolph. A moment later he realized he also recognized Burt Iverson, Junction City's most prosperous lawyer, and Elmer Baskin, the banker who hadn't gotten to his Rotary speech but who had called later to congratulate him just the same. The breeze gusted, blowing back the homely checked curtains which hung at the sides of the window through which Sam was looking. It also ruffled Elmer's silver hair. Elmer turned his face up to the sun and smiled. Sam was struck by the simple pleasure he saw, not on Elmer's face but in it. At that moment he was both more and less than a small city's richest banker; he was every man who ever greeted spring after a long, cold winter, happy to still be alive, whole, and free of pain.

Sam felt struck with unreality. It was weird enough that Naomi Higgins should be out here consorting with the un-homed winos of Junction City—and under another name, at that. To find that the town's most respected banker and one of its sharpest legal eagles were also here was a bit of a mind-blower.

A man in ragged green pants and a Cincinnati Bengals sweatshirt raised his hand. Rudolph pointed at him. "My name's John, and I'm an alcoholic," the man in the Bengals sweatshirt said.

Sam backed away from the window quickly. His face felt hot. Now he felt not only like an intruder but a spy. He supposed they usually held their Sunday-noon AA meeting in the common room—the coffeepot suggested it, anyway—but today the weather had been so nice that they had taken their chairs outside. He bet it had been Naomi's idea.

We'll be in church tomorrow morning, Mrs. Higgins had said, and the first Baptist Youth Picnic of the season is tomorrow afternoon. Naomi has promised to help. He wondered if Mrs. Higgins knew her daughter was spending the afternoon with the alkies instead of the

Baptists and supposed she did. He thought he also understood why Naomi had abruptly decided two dates with Sam Peebles was enough. He had thought it was the religion thing at the time, and Naomi hadn't ever tried to suggest it was anything else. But after the first date, which had been a movie, she had agreed to go out with him again. After the second date, any romantic interest she'd had in him ceased. Or seemed to. The second date had been dinner. And he had ordered wine.

Well for Christ's sake—how was I supposed to know she's an alcoholic? Am I a mind-reader?

The answer, of course, was he couldn't have known … but his face felt hotter, just the same.

Or maybe it's not booze … or not just booze. Maybe she's got other problems, too.

He also found himself wondering what would happen if Burt Iverson and Elmer Baskin, both powerful men, found out that he knew they belonged to the world's largest secret society. Maybe nothing; he didn't know enough about AA to be sure. He did know two things, however: that the second A stood for Anonymous, and that these were men who could squash his rising business aspirations flat if they chose to do so.

Sam decided to leave as quickly and quietly as he could. To his credit, this decision was not based on personal considerations. The people sitting out there on the back lawn of Angle Street shared a serious problem. He had discovered this by accident; he had no intention of staying—and eavesdropping—on purpose.

As he went back down the hallway again, he saw a pile of cut-up paper resting on top of the pay phone. A stub of pencil had been tacked to the wall on a short length of string beside the phone. On impulse he took a sheet of paper and printed a quick note on it.

Dave,

I stopped by this morning to see you, but nobody was around. I want to talk to you about a woman named Ardelia Lortz. I've got an idea you know who she is, and I'm anxious to find out about her. Will you give me a call this afternoon or this evening, if you get a chance? The number is 555-8699. Thanks very much.

He signed his name at the bottom, folded the sheet in half, and printed Dave's name on the fold. He thought briefly about taking it back down to the kitchen and putting it on the counter, but he didn't want any of them—Naomi most of all—worrying that he might have seen them at their odd but perhaps helpful devotions. He propped it on top of the TV in the common room instead, with Dave's name facing out. He thought about placing a quarter for the telephone beside the note and then didn't. Dave might take that wrong.

He left then, glad to be out in the sun again undiscovered. As he got back into his car, he saw the bumper sticker on Naomi's Datsun.

LET GO AND LET GOD,

it said.

"Better God than Ardelia," Sam muttered, and backed out the driveway to the road.

3

By late afternoon, Sam's broken rest of the night before had begun to tell, and a vast sleepiness stole over him. He turned on the TV, found a Cincinnati-Boston exhibition baseball game wending its slow way into the eighth inning, lay down on the sofa to watch it, and almost immediately dozed off. The telephone rang before the doze had a chance to spiral down into real sleep, and Sam got up to answer it, feeling woozy and disoriented.

"Hello?"

“You don’t want to be talking about that woman,” Dirty Dave said with no preamble whatsoever. His voice was trembling at the far edge of control. “You don’t even want to be thinking about her.”

How long are you Godless heathens going to go on throwing that woman in our faces? Do you think it’s funny? Do you think it’s clever?

All of Sam’s drowsiness was gone in an instant. “Dave, what is it about that woman? Either people react as though she were the devil or they don’t know anything about her. Who is she? What in the hell did she do to freak you out this way?”

There was a long period of silence. Sam waited through it, his heart beating heavily in his chest and throat. He would have thought the connection had been broken if not for the sound of Dave’s broken breathing in his ear.

“Mr. Peebles,” he said at last, “you’ve been a real good help to me over the years. You and some others helped me stay alive when I wasn’t even sure I wanted to myself. But I can’t talk about that bitch. I can’t. And if you know what’s good for you, you won’t talk to anybody else about her, neither.”

“That sounds like a threat.”

“No!” Dave said. He sounded more than surprised; he sounded shocked. “No—I’m just warnin you, Mr. Peebles, same as I’d do if I saw you wanderin around an old well where the weeds were all grown up so you couldn’t see the hole. Don’t talk about her and don’t think about her. Let the dead stay dead.”

Let the dead stay dead.

In a way it didn’t surprise him; everything that had happened (with, perhaps, the exception of the messages left on his answering machine) pointed to the same conclusion: that Ardelia Lortz was no longer among the living. He—Sam Peebles, small-town realtor and

insurance agent—had been speaking to a ghost without even knowing it. Spoken to her? Hell! Had done business with her! He had given her two bucks and she had given him a library card.

So he was not exactly surprised … but a deep chill began to radiate out along the white highways of his skeleton just the same. He looked down and saw pale knobs of gooseflesh standing out on his arms.

You should have left it alone, part of his mind mourned. Didn't I tell you so?

"When did she die?" Sam asked. His voice sounded dull and listless to his own ears.

"I don't want to talk about it, Mr. Peebles!" Dave sounded nearly frantic now. His voice trembled, skipped into a higher register which was almost falsetto, and splintered there. "Please!"

Leave him alone, Sam cried angrily at himself. Doesn't he have enough problems without this crap to worry about?

Yes. And he could leave Dave alone—there must be other people in town who would talk to him about Ardelia Lortz … if he could find a way to approach them that wouldn't make them want to call for the men with the butterfly nets, that was. But there was one other thing, a thing perhaps only Dirty Dave Duncan could tell him for sure.

"You drew some posters for the Library once, didn't you? I think I recognized your style from the poster you were doing yesterday on the porch. In fact, I'm almost sure. There was one showing a little boy in a black car. And a man in a trenchcoat—the Library Policeman. Did you—"

Before he could finish, Dave burst out with such a shriek of shame and grief and fear that Sam was silenced.

"Dave? I—"

“Leave it alone!” Dave wept. “I couldn’t help myself, so can’t you just please leave—”

His cries abruptly diminished and there was a rattle as someone took the phone from him.

“Stop it,” Naomi said. She sounded near tears herself, but she also sounded furious. “Can’t you just stop it, you horrible man?”

“Naomi—”

“My name is Sarah when I’m here,” she said slowly, “but I hate you equally under both names, Sam Peebles. I’m never going to set foot in your office again.” Her voice began to rise. “Why couldn’t you leave him alone? Why did you have to rake up all this old shit? Why?”

Unnerved, hardly in control of himself, Sam said: “Why did you send me to the Library? If you didn’t want me to meet her, Naomi, why did you send me to the goddam Library in the first place?”

There was a gasp on the other end of the line.

“Naomi? Can we—”

There was a click as she hung up the telephone.

Connection broken.

4

Sam sat in his study until almost nine-thirty, eating Tums and writing one name after another on the same legal pad he had used when composing the first draft of his speech. He would look at each name for a little while, then cross it off. Six years had seemed like a long time to spend in one place … at least until tonight. Tonight it seemed like a much shorter period of time—a weekend, say.

Craig Jones, he wrote.

He stared at the name and thought, Craig might know about Ardelia … but he'd want to know why I was interested.

Did he know Craig well enough to answer that question truthfully? The answer to that question was a firm no. Craig was one of Junction City's younger lawyers, a real wannabe. They'd had a few business lunches … and there was Rotary Club, of course—and Craig had invited him to his house for dinner once. When they happened to meet on the street they spoke cordially, sometimes about business, more often about the weather. None of that added up to friendship, though, and if Sam meant to spill this nutty business to someone, he wanted it to be a friend, not an associate that called him ole buddy after the second sloe-gin fizz.

He scratched Craig's name off the list.

He'd made two fairly close friends since coming to Junction City, one a physician's assistant with Dr. Melden's practice, the other a city cop. Russ Frame, his PA friend, had jumped to a better-paying family practice in Grand Rapids early in 1989. And since the first of January, Tom Wycliffe had been overseeing the Iowa State Patrol's new Traffic Control Board. He had fallen out of touch with both men since—he was slow making friends, and not good at keeping them, either.

Which left him just where?

Sam didn't know. He did know that Ardelia Lortz's name affected some people in Junction City like a satchel charge. He knew—or believed he knew—that he had met her even though she was dead. He couldn't even tell himself that he had met a relative, or some nutty woman calling herself Ardelia Lortz. Because—

I think I met a ghost. In fact, I think I met a ghost inside of a ghost. I think that the library I entered was the Junction City Library as it was when Ardelia Lortz was alive and in charge of the place. I think that's why it felt so weird and off-kilter. It wasn't like time-travel, or the way

I imagine time-travel would be. It was more like stepping into limbo for a little while. And it was real. I'm sure it was real.

He paused, drumming his fingers on the desk.

Where did she call me from? Do they have telephones in limbo?

He stared at the list of crossed-off names for a long moment, then tore the yellow sheet slowly off the pad. He crumpled it up and tossed it in the wastebasket.

You should have left it alone, part of him continued to mourn.

But he hadn't. So now what?

Call one of the guys you trust. Call Russ Frame or Tom Wycliffe. Just pick up the phone and make a call.

But he didn't want to do that. Not tonight, at least. He recognized this as an irrational, half-superstitious feeling—he had given and gotten a lot of unpleasant information over the phone just lately, or so it seemed—but he was too tired to grapple with it tonight. If he could get a good night's sleep (and he thought he could, if he left the bedside lamp on again), maybe something better, something more concrete, would occur to him tomorrow morning, when he was fresh. Further along, he supposed he would have to try and mend his fences with Naomi Higgins and Dave Duncan—but first he wanted to find out just what kind of fences they were.

If he could.

# CHAPTER NINE

THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN (1)

He did sleep well. There were no dreams, and an idea came to him naturally and easily in the shower the next morning, the way ideas sometimes did when your body was rested and your mind hadn't been awake long enough to get cluttered up with a load of shit. The Public Library was not the only place where information was available, and when it was local history—recent local history—you were interested in, it wasn't even the best place.

"The Gazette!" he cried, and stuck his head under the shower nozzle to rinse the soap out of it.

Twenty minutes later he was downstairs, dressed except for his coat and tie, and drinking coffee in his study. The legal pad was once more in front of him, and on it was the start of another list.

1. Ardelia Lortz—who is she? Or who was she?

2. Ardelia Lortz—what did she do?

3. Junction City Public Library—renovated? When? Pictures?

At this point the doorbell rang. Sam glanced at the clock as he got up to answer it. It was going on eight-thirty, time to get to work. He could shoot over to the Gazette office at ten, the time he usually took his coffee break, and check some back issues. Which ones? He was still mulling this over—some would undoubtedly bear fruit quicker than others—as he dug in his pocket for the paperboy's money. The doorbell rang again.

"I'm coming as fast as I can, Keith!" he called, stepping into the kitchen entryway and grabbing the doorknob. "Don't punch a hole in the damn d—"

At that moment he looked up and saw a shape much larger than Keith Jordan's bulking behind the sheer curtain hung across the window in the door. His mind had been preoccupied, more concerned with the day ahead than this Monday-morning ritual of paying the newsboy, but in that instant an icepick of pure terror stabbed its way through his scattered thoughts. He did not have to see the face; even through the sheer he recognized the shape, the set of the body … and the trenchcoat, of course.

The taste of red licorice, high, sweet, and sickening, flooded his mouth.

He let go of the doorknob, but an instant too late. The latch had clicked back, and the moment it did, the figure standing on the back porch rammed the door open. Sam was thrown backward into the kitchen. He flailed his arms to keep his balance and managed to knock all three coats hanging from the rod in the entryway to the floor.

The Library Policeman stepped in, wrapped in his own pocket of cold air. He stepped in slowly, as if he had all the time in the world, and closed the door behind him. In one hand he held Sam's copy of the Gazette neatly rolled and folded. He raised it like a baton.

"I brought you your paper," the Library Policeman said. His voice was strangely distant, as if it was coming to Sam through a heavy pane of glass. "I was going to pay the boy as well, but he theemed in a hurry to get away. I wonder why."

He advanced toward the kitchen—toward Sam, who was cowering against the counter and staring at the intruder with the huge, shocked eyes of a terrified child, of some poor fourth-grade Simple Simon.

I am imagining this, Sam thought, or I'm having a nightmare—a nightmare so horrible it makes the one I had two nights ago look like a sweet dream.

But it was no nightmare. It was terrifying, but it was no nightmare. Sam had time to hope he had gone crazy after all. Insanity was no day at the beach, but nothing could be as awful as this man-shaped thing which had come into his house, this thing which walked in its own wedge of winter.

Sam's house was old and the ceilings were high, but the Library Policeman had to duck his head in the entry, and even in the kitchen the crown of his gray felt hat almost brushed the ceiling. That meant he was over seven feet tall.

His body was wrapped in a trenchcoat the leaden color of fog at twilight. His skin was paper white. His face was dead, as if he could understand neither kindness nor love nor mercy. His mouth was set in lines of ultimate, passionless authority and Sam thought for one confused moment of how the closed library door had looked, like the slotted mouth in the face of a granite robot. The Library Policeman's eyes appeared to be silver circles which had been punctured by tiny shotgun pellets. They were rimmed with pinkish-red flesh that looked ready to bleed. They were lashless. And the worst thing of all was this: it was a face Sam knew. He did not think this was the first time he had cringed in terror beneath that black gaze, and far back in his mind, Sam heard a voice with the slightest trace of a lisp say: Come with me, son … I'm a poleethman.

The scar overlaid the geography of that face exactly as it had in Sam's imagination—across the left cheek, below the left eye, across the bridge of the nose. Except for the scar, it was the man in the poster … or was it? He could no longer be sure.

Come with me, son … I'm a poleethman.

Sam Peebles, darling of the Junction City Rotary Club, wet his pants. He felt his bladder let go in a warm gush, but that seemed far away and unimportant. What was important was that there was a monster in his kitchen, and the most terrible thing about this monster was that Sam almost knew his face. Sam felt a triple-locked door far back in his mind straining to burst open. He never thought of running. The

idea of flight was beyond his capacity to imagine. He was a child again, a child who has been caught red-handed

(the book isn't The Speaker's Companion)

doing some awful bad thing. Instead of running

(the book isn't Best Loved Poems of the American People)

he folded slowly over his own wet crotch and collapsed between the two stools which stood at the counter, holding his hands up blindly above his head.

(the book is)

"No," he said in a husky, strengthless voice. "No, please—no, please, please don't do it to me, please, I'll be good, please don't hurt me that way."

He was reduced to this. But it didn't matter; the giant in the fog-colored trenchcoat

(the book is The Black Arrow by Robert Louis Stevenson)

now stood directly over him.

Sam dropped his head. It seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. He looked at the floor and prayed incoherently that when he looked up—when he had the strength to look up—the figure would be gone.

"Look at me," the distant, thudding voice instructed. It was the voice of an evil god.

"No," Sam cried in a shrieky, breathless voice, and then burst into helpless tears. It was not just terror, although the terror was real enough, bad enough. Separate from it was a cold deep drift of childish fright and childish shame. Those feelings clung like poison syrup to whatever it was he dared not remember, the thing that had

something to do with a book he had never read: The Black Arrow, by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Whack!

Something struck Sam's head and he screamed.

"Look at me!"

"No, please don't make me," Sam begged.

Whack!

He looked up, shielding his streaming eyes with one rubbery arm, just in time to see the Library Policeman's arm come down again.

Whack!

He was hitting Sam with Sam's own rolled-up copy of the Gazette, whacking him the way you might a heedless puppy that has piddled on the floor.

"That'th better," said the Library Policeman. He grinned, lips parting to reveal the points of sharp teeth, teeth which were almost fangs. He reached into the pocket of his trenchcoat and brought out a leather folder. He flipped it open and revealed the strange star of many points. It glinted in the clean morning light.

Sam was now helpless to look away from that merciless face, those silver eyes with their tiny birdshot pupils. He was slobbering and knew it but was helpless to stop that, either.

"You have two books which belong to uth," the Library Policeman said. His voice still seemed to be coming from a distance, or from behind a thick pane of glass. "Mith Lorth is very upthet with you, Mr. Peebles."

"I lost them," Sam said, beginning to cry harder. The thought of lying to this man about (The Black Arrow)

the books, about anything, was out of the question. He was all authority, all power, all force. He was judge, jury, and executioner.

Where's the janitor? Sam wondered incoherently. Where's the janitor who checks the dials and then goes back into the sane world? The sane world where things like this don't have to happen?

"I … I … I …"

"I don't want to hear your thick ecthcuses," the Library Policeman said. He flipped his leather folder closed and stuffed it into his right pocket. At the same time he reached into his left pocket and drew out a knife with a long, sharp blade. Sam, who had spent three summers earning money for college as a stockboy, recognized it. It was a carton-slitter. There was undoubtedly a knife like that in every library in America. "You have until midnight. Then …"

He leaned down, extending the knife in one white, corpse-like hand. That freezing envelope of air struck Sam's face, numbed it. He tried to scream and could produce only a glassy whisper of silent air.

The tip of the blade pricked the flesh of his throat. It was like being pricked with an icicle. A single bead of scarlet oozed out and then froze solid, a tiny seed-pearl of blood.

" … then I come again," the Library Policeman said in his odd, lisp-rounded voice. "You better find what you lotht, Mr. Peebles."

The knife disappeared back into the pocket. The Library Policeman drew back up to his full height.

"There is another thing," he said. "You have been athking questions, Mr. Peebles. Don't athk any more. Do you underthand me?"

Sam tried to answer and could only utter a deep groan.

The Library Policeman began to bend down, pushing chill air ahead of him the way the flat prow of a barge might push a chunk of river-

ice. “Don’t pry into things that don’t conthern you. Do you underthand me?”

“Yes!” Sam screamed. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

“Good. Because I will be watching. And I am not alone.”

He turned, his trenchcoat rustling, and recrossed the kitchen toward the entry. He spared not a single backward glance for Sam. He passed through a bright patch of morning sun as he went, and Sam saw a wonderful, terrible thing: the Library Policeman cast no shadow.

He reached the back door. He grasped the knob. Without turning around he said in a low, terrible voice: “If you don’t want to thee me again, Mr. Peebles, find those bookth.”

He opened the door and went out.

A single frantic thought filled Sam’s mind the minute the door closed again and he heard the Library Policeman’s feet on the back porch: he had to lock the door.

He got halfway to his feet and then grayness swam over him and he fell forward, unconscious.

# CHAPTER TEN

## CHRON-O-LODGE-ICK-A-LEE SPEAKING

1

“May I … help you?” the receptionist asked. The slight pause came as she took a second look at the man who had just approached the desk.

“Yes,” Sam said. “I want to look at some back issues of the Gazette, if that’s possible.”

“Of course it is,” she said. “But—pardon me if I’m out of line—do you feel all right, sir? Your color is very bad.”

“I think I may be coming down with something, at that,” Sam said.

“Spring colds are the worst, aren’t they?” she said, getting up. “Come right through the gate at the end of the counter, Mr.—?”

“Peebles. Sam Peebles.”

She stopped, a chubby woman of perhaps sixty, and cocked her head. She put one red-tipped nail to the corner of her mouth. “You sell insurance, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“I thought I recognized you. Your picture was in the paper last week. Was it some sort of award?”

“No, ma’am,” Sam said, “I gave a speech. At the Rotary Club.” And would give anything to be able to turn back the clock, he thought. I’d tell Craig Jones to go fuck himself.

“Well, that’s wonderful,” she said … but she spoke as if there might be some doubt about it. “You looked different in the picture.”

Sam came in through the gate.

“I’m Doreen McGill,” the woman said, and put out a plump hand.

Sam shook it and said he was pleased to meet her. It took an effort. He thought that speaking to people—and touching people, especially that—was going to be an effort for quite awhile to come. All of his old ease seemed to be gone.

She led him toward a carpeted flight of stairs and flicked a light-switch. The stairway was narrow, the overhead bulb dim, and Sam felt the horrors begin to crowd in on him at once. They came eagerly, as fans might congregate around a person offering free tickets to some fabulous sold-out show. The Library Policeman could be down there, waiting in the dark. The Library Policeman with his dead white skin and red-rimmed silver eyes and small but hauntingly familiar lisp.

Stop it, he told himself. And if you can’t stop it, then for God’s sake control it. You have to. Because this is your only chance. What will you do if you can’t go down a flight of stairs to a simple office basement? Just cower in your house and wait for midnight?

“That’s the morgue,” Doreen McGill said, pointing. This was clearly a lady who pointed every chance she got. “You only have to—”

“Morgue?” Sam asked, turning toward her. His heart had begun to knock nastily against his ribs. “Morgue?”

Doreen McGill laughed. “Everyone says it just like that. It’s awful, isn’t it? But that’s what they call it. Some silly newspaper tradition, I guess. Don’t worry, Mr. Peebles—there are no bodies down there; just reels and reels of microfilm.”

I wouldn’t be so sure, Sam thought, following her down the carpeted stairs. He was very glad she was leading the way.

She flicked on a line of switches at the foot of the stairs. A number of fluorescent lights, embedded in what looked like oversized inverted ice-cube trays, went on. They lit up a large low room carpeted in the same dark blue as the stairs. The room was lined with shelves of small boxes. Along the left wall were four microfilm readers that looked like futuristic hair-driers. They were the same blue as the carpet.

“What I started to say was that you have to sign the book,” Doreen said. She pointed again, this time at a large book chained to a stand by the door. “You also have to write the date, the time you came in, which is”—she checked her wristwatch—” twenty past ten, and the time you leave.”

Sam bent over and signed the book. The name above his was Arthur Meecham. Mr. Meecham had been down here on December 27th, 1989. Over three months ago. This was a well-lighted, well-stocked, efficient room that apparently did very little business.

“It’s nice down here, isn’t it?” Doreen asked complacently. “That’s because the federal government helps subsidize newspaper morgues—or libraries, if you like that word better. I know I do.”

A shadow danced in one of the aisles and Sam’s heart began to knock again. But it was only Doreen McGill’s shadow; she had bent over to make sure he had entered the correct time of day, and—

—and HE didn’t cast a shadow. The Library Policeman. Also …

He tried to duck the rest and couldn’t.

Also, I can’t live like this. I can’t live with this kind of fear. I’d stick my head in a gas oven if it went on too long. And if it does, I will. It’s not just fear of him—that man, or whatever he is. It’s the way a person’s

mind feels, the way it screams when it feels everything it ever believed in slipping effortlessly away.

Doreen pointed to the right wall, where three large folio volumes stood on a single shelf. “That’s January, February, and March of 1990,” she said. “Every July the paper sends the first six months of the year to Grand Island, Nebraska, to be microfilmed. The same thing when December is over.” She extended the plump hand and pointed a red-tipped nail at the shelves, counting over from the shelf at the right toward the microfilm readers at the left. She appeared to be admiring her fingernail as she did it. “The microfilms go that way, chronologically,” she said. She pronounced the word carefully, producing something mildly exotic: chron-o-lodge-ick-a-lee. “Modem times on your right; ancient days on your left.”

She smiled to show that this was a joke, and perhaps to convey a sense of how wonderful she thought all this was. Chron-o-lodge-ick-a-lee speaking, the smile said, it was all sort of a gas.

“Thank you,” Sam said.

“Don’t mention it. It’s what we’re here for. One of the things, anyway.” She put her nail to the corner of her mouth and gave him her peek-a-boo smile again. “Do you know how to run a microfilm reader, Mr. Peebles?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“All right. If I can help you further, I’ll be right upstairs. Don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Are you—” he began, and then snapped his mouth shut on the rest: —going to leave me here alone?

She raised her eyebrows.

“Nothing,” he said, and watched her go back upstairs. He had to resist a strong urge to pelt up the stairs behind her. Because, cushy

blue carpet or not, this was another Junction City library.

And this one was called the morgue.

2

Sam walked slowly toward the shelves with their weight of square microfilm boxes, unsure of where to begin. He was very glad that the overhead fluorescents were bright enough to banish most of the troubling shadows in the corners.

He hadn't dared ask Doreen McGill if the name Ardelia Lortz rang a bell, or even if she knew roughly when the city Library had last undergone renovations. You have been athking questions, the Library Policeman had said. Don't pry into things that don't concern you. Do you underthand?

Yes, he understood. And he supposed he was risking the Library Policeman's wrath by prying anyway … but he wasn't asking questions, at least not exactly, and these were things that concerned him. They concerned him desperately.

I will be watching. And I am not alone.

Sam looked nervously over his shoulder. Saw nothing. And still found it impossible to move with any decision. He had gotten this far, but he didn't know if he could get any further. He felt more than intimidated, more than frightened. He felt shattered.

"You've got to," he muttered harshly, and wiped at his lips with a shaking hand. "You've just got to."

He made his left foot move forward. He stood that way a moment, legs apart, like a man caught in the act of fording a small stream. Then he made his right foot catch up with his left one. He made his way across to the shelf nearest the bound folios in this hesitant, reluctant fashion. A card on the end of the shelf read:1987-1989.

That was almost certainly too recent—in fact, the Library renovations must have taken place before the spring of 1984, when he had moved to Junction City. If it had happened since, he would have noticed the workmen, heard people talking about it, and read about it in the Gazette. But, other than guessing that it must have happened in the last fifteen or twenty years (the suspended ceilings had not looked any older than that), he could narrow it down no further. If only he could think more clearly! But he couldn't. What had happened that morning screwed up any normal, rational effort to think the way heavy sunspot activity screwed up radio and TV transmissions. Reality and unreality had come together like vast stones, and Sam Peebles, one tiny, screaming, struggling speck of humanity, had had the bad luck to get caught between them.

He moved two aisles to the left, mostly because he was afraid that if he stopped moving for too long he might freeze up entirely, and walked down the aisle marked1981-1983.

He picked a box almost at random and took it over to one of the microfilm readers. He snapped it on and tried to concentrate on the spool of microfilm (the spool was also blue, and Sam wondered if there was any reason why everything in this clean, well-lighted place was color coordinated) and nothing else. First you had to mount it on one of the spindles, right; then you had to thread it, check; then you had to secure the leader in the core of the take-up reel, okay. The machine was so simple an eight-year-old could have executed these little tasks, but it took Sam almost five minutes; he had his shaking hands and shocked, wandering mind to deal with. When he finally got the microfilm mounted and scrolled to the first frame, he discovered he had mounted the reel backward. The printed matter was upside down.

He patiently rewound the microfilm, turned it around, and rethreaded it. He discovered he didn't mind this little setback in the least; repeating the operation, one simple step at a time, seemed to calm him. This time the front page of the April 1, 1981, issue of the Junction city Gazette appeared before him, right side up. The

headline bannered the surprise resignation of a town official Sam had never heard of, but his eyes were quickly drawn to a box at the bottom of the page. Inside the box was this message:RICHARD PRICE AND THE ENTIRE STAFF OF

THE JUNCTION CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY

REMIND YOU THAT

APRIL 6TH-13TH IS

NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK

COME AND SEE US!

Did I know that? Sam wondered. Is that why I grabbed this particular box? Did I subconsciously remember that the second week of April is National Library Week?

Come with me, a tenebrous, whispering voice answered. Come with me, son … I'm a poleethman.

Gooseflesh gripped him; a shudder shook him. Sam pushed both the question and that phantom voice away. After all, it didn't really matter why he had picked the April, 1981, issues of the Gazette; the important thing was that he had, and it was a lucky break.

Might be a lucky break.

He advanced the reel quickly to April 6th, and saw exactly what he had hoped for. Over the Gazette masthead, in red ink, it said:SPECIAL LIBRARY SUPPLEMENT ENCLOSED!

Sam advanced to the supplement. There were two photos on the first page of the supplement. One was of the Library's exterior. The other showed Richard Price, the head librarian, standing at the circulation desk and smiling nervously into the camera. He looked exactly as Naomi Higgins had described him—a tall, bespectacled man of about forty with a narrow little mustache. Sam was more

interested in the background. He could see the suspended ceiling which had so shocked him on his second trip to the Library. So the renovations had been done prior to April of 1981.

The stories were exactly the sort of self-congratulatory puff-pieces he expected—he had been reading the Gazette for six years now and was very familiar with its ain't-we-a-jolly-bunch-of-JayCees editorial slant. There were informative (and rather breathless) items about National Library Week, the Summer Reading Program, the Junction County Bookmobile, and the new fund drive which had just commenced. Sam glanced over these quickly. On the last page of the supplement he found a much more interesting story, one written by Price himself. It was titledTHE JUNCTION CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY

One Hundred Years of History

Sam's eagerness did not last long. Ardelia's name wasn't there. He reached for the power switch to rewind the microfilm and then stopped. He saw a mention of the renovation project—it had happened in 1970—and there was something else. Something just a little off-key. Sam began to read the last part of Mr. Price's chatty historical note again, this time more carefully.

With the end of the Great Depression our Library turned the corner. In 1942, the Junction City Town Council voted $5,000 to repair the extensive water damage the Library sustained during the Flood of '32, and Mrs. Felicia Culpepper took on the job of Head Librarian, donating her time without recompense. She never lost sight of her goal: a completely renovated Library, serving a Town which was rapidly becoming a City.

Mrs. Culpepper stepped down in 1951, giving way to Christopher Lavin, the first Junction City Librarian with a degree in Library Science. Mr. Lavin inaugurated the Culpepper Memorial Fund, which raised over $15,000 for the acquisition of new books in its first year, and the Junction City Public Library was on its way into the modern age!

Shortly after I became Head Librarian in 1964, I made major renovations my number one goal. The funds needed to achieve this goal were finally raised by the end of 1969, and while both City and Federal money helped in the construction of the splendid building Junction City “bookworms” enjoy today, this project could not have been completed without the help of all those volunteers who later showed up to swing a hammer or run a bench-saw during “Build Your Library Month” in August of 1970!

Other notable projects during the 1970’s and 1980’s included …

Sam looked up thoughtfully. He believed there was something missing from Richard Price’s careful, droning history of the town Library. No; on second thought, missing was the wrong word. The essay made Sam decide Price was a fussbudget of the first water—probably a nice man, but a fussbudget just the same—and such men did not miss things, especially when they were dealing with subjects which were clearly close to their hearts.

So—not missing. Concealed.

It didn’t quite add up, chron-o-lodge-ick-a-lee speaking. In 1951, a man named Christopher Lavin had succeeded that saint Felicia Culpepper as head librarian. In 1964, Richard Price had become city librarian. Had Price succeeded Lavin? Sam didn’t think so. He thought that at some point during those thirteen blank years, a woman named Ardelia Lortz had succeeded Lavin. Price, Sam thought, had succeeded her. She wasn’t in Mr. Price’s fussbudgety account of the Library because she had done … something. Sam was no closer to knowing what that something might have been, but he had a better idea of the magnitude. Whatever it was, it had been bad enough for Price to make her an unperson in spite of his very obvious love of detail and continuity.

Murder, Sam thought. It must have been murder. It’s really the only thing bad enough to f—

At that second a hand dropped on Sam’s shoulder.

3

If he had screamed, he would undoubtedly have terrified the hand's owner almost as much as she had already terrorized him, but Sam was unable to scream. Instead, all the air whooshed out of him and the world went gray again. His chest felt like an accordion being slowly crushed under an elephant's foot. All of his muscles seemed to have turned to macaroni. He did not wet his pants again. That was perhaps the only saving grace.

"Sam?" he heard a voice ask. It seemed to come from quite a distance—somewhere in Kansas, say. "Is that you?"

He swung around, almost falling out of his chair in front of the microfilm reader, and saw Naomi. He tried to get his breath back so he could say something. Nothing but a tired wheeze came out. The room seemed to waver in front of his eyes. The grayness came and went.

Then he saw Naomi take a stumble-step backward, her eyes widening in alarm, her hand going to her mouth. She struck one of the microfilm shelves almost hard enough to knock it over. It rocked, two or three of the boxes tumbled to the carpet with soft thumps, and then it settled back again.

"Omes," he managed at last. His voice came out in a whispery squeak. He remembered once, as a boy in St. Louis, trapping a mouse under his baseball cap. It had made a sound like that as it scurried about, looking for an escape hatch.

"Sam, what's happened to you?" She also sounded like someone who would have been screaming if shock hadn't whipped the breath out of her. We make quite a pair, Sam thought, Abbott and Costello Meet the Monsters.

"What are you doing here?" he said. "You scared the living shit out of me!"

There, he thought. I went and used the s-word again. Called you Omes again, too. Sorry about that. He felt a little better, and thought of getting up, but decided against it. No sense pressing his luck. He was still not entirely sure his heart wasn't going to vapor-lock.

"I went to the office to see you," she said. "Cammy Harrington said she thought she saw you come in here. I wanted to apologize. Maybe. I thought at first you must have played some cruel trick on Dave. He said you'd never do a thing like that, and I started to think that it didn't seem like you. You've always been so nice …"

"Thanks," Sam said. "I guess."

"… and you seemed so … so bewildered on the telephone. I asked Dave what it was about, but he wouldn't tell me anything else. All I know is what I heard … and how he looked when he was talking to you. He looked like he'd seen a ghost."

No, Sam thought of telling her. I was the one who saw the ghost. And this morning I saw something even worse.

"Sam, you have to understand something about Dave … and about me. Well, I guess you already know about Dave, but I'm—"

"I guess I know," Sam told her. "I said in my note to Dave that I didn't see anyone at Angle Street, but that wasn't the truth. I didn't see anyone at first, but I walked through the downstairs, looking for Dave. I saw you guys out back. So … I know. But I don't know on purpose, if you see what I mean."

"Yes," she said. "It's all right. But … Sam … dear God, what's happened? Your hair …"

"What about my hair?" he asked her sharply.

She fumbled her purse open with hands that shook slightly and brought out a compact. "Look," she said.

He did, but he already knew what he was going to see.

Since eight-thirty this morning, his hair had gone almost completely white.

4

“I see you found your friend,” Doreen McGill said to Naomi as they climbed back up the stairs. She put a nail to the corner of her mouth and smiled her cute-little-me smile.

“Yes.”

“Did you remember to sign out?”

“Yes,” Naomi said again. Sam hadn’t, but she had done it for both of them.

“And did you return any microfilms you might have used?”

This time Sam said yes. He couldn’t remember if either he or Naomi had returned the one spool of microfilm he had mounted, and he didn’t care. All he wanted was to get out of here.

Doreen was still being coy. Finger tapping the edge of her lower lip, she cocked her head and said to Sam, “You did look different in the newspaper picture. I just can’t put my finger on what it is.”

As they went out the door, Naomi said: “He finally got smart and quit dyeing his hair.”

On the steps outside, Sam exploded with laughter. The force of his bellows doubled him over. It was hysterical laughter, its sound only half a step removed from the sound of screams, but he didn’t care. It felt good. It felt enormously cleansing.

Naomi stood beside him, seeming to be bothered neither by Sam’s laughing fit nor the curious glances they were drawing from passersby on the street. She even lifted one hand and waved to

someone she knew. Sam propped his hands on his upper thighs, still caught in his helpless gale of laughter, and yet there was a part of him sober enough to think: She has seen this sort of reaction before. I wonder where? But he knew the answer even before his mind had finished articulating the question. Naomi was an alcoholic, and she had made working with other alcoholics, helping them, part of her own therapy. She had probably seen a good deal more than a hysterical laughing fit during her time at Angle Street.

She'll slap me, he thought, still howling helplessly at the image of himself at his bathroom mirror, patiently combing Grecian Formula into his locks. She'll slap me, because that's what you do with hysterical people.

Naomi apparently knew better. She only stood patiently beside him in the sunshine, waiting for him to regain control. At last his laughter began to taper off to wild snorts and runaway snickers. His stomach muscles ached and his vision was water-wavery and his cheeks were wet with tears.

"Feel better?" she asked.

"Oh, Naomi—" he began, and then another hee-haw bray of laughter escaped him and galloped off into the sunshiny morning. "You don't know how much better."

"Sure I do," she said. "Come on—we'll take my car."

"Where …" He hiccupped. "Where are we going?"

"Angel Street," she said, pronouncing it the way the sign-painter had intended it to be pronounced. "I'm very worried about Dave. I went there first this morning, but he wasn't there. I'm afraid he may be out drinking."

"That's nothing new, is it?" he asked, walking beside her down the steps. Her Datsun was parked at the curb, behind Sam's own car.

She glanced at him. It was a brief glance, but a complex one: irritation, resignation, compassion. Sam thought that if you boiled that glance down it would say You don't know what you're talking about, but it's not your fault.

"Dave's been sober almost a year this time, but his general health isn't good. As you say, falling off the wagon isn't anything new for him, but another fall may kill him."

"And that would be my fault." The last of his laughter dried up.

She looked at him, a little surprised. "No," she said. "That would be nobody's fault … but that doesn't mean I want it to happen. Or that it has to. Come on. We'll take my car. We can talk on the way."

5

"Tell me what happened to you," she said as they headed toward the edge of town. "Tell me everything. It isn't just your hair, Sam; you look ten years older."

"Bullshit," Sam said. He had seen more than his hair in Naomi's compact mirror; he had gotten a better look at himself than he wanted. "More like twenty. And it feels like a hundred."

"What happened? What was it?"

Sam opened his mouth to tell her, thought of how it would sound, then shook his head. "No," he said, "not yet. You're going to tell me something first. You're going to tell me about Ardelia Lortz. You thought I was joking the other day. I didn't realize that then, but I do now. So tell me all about her. Tell me who she was and what she did."

Naomi pulled over to the curb beyond Junction City's old granite firehouse and looked at Sam. Her skin was very pale beneath her light make-up, and her eyes were wide. "You weren't? Sam, are you trying to tell me you weren't joking?"

“That’s right.”

“But Sam …” She stopped, and for a moment she seemed not to know how she should go on. At last she spoke very softly, as though to a child who has done something he doesn’t know is wrong. “But Sam, Ardelia Lortz is dead. She has been dead for thirty years.”

“I know she’s dead. I mean, I know it now. What I want to know is the rest.”

“Sam, whoever you think you saw—”

“I know who I saw.”

“Tell me what makes you think—”

“First, you tell me.”

She put her car back in gear, checked her rear-view mirror, and began to drive toward Angle Street again. “I don’t know very much,” she said. “I was only five when she died, you see. Most of what I do know comes from overheard gossip. She belonged to The First Baptist Church of Proverbia—she went there, at least—but my mother doesn’t talk about her. Neither do any of the older parishioners. To them it’s like she never existed.”

Sam nodded. “That’s just how Mr. Price treated her in the article he wrote about the Library. The one I was reading when you put your hand on my shoulder and took about twelve more years off my life. It also explains why your mother was so mad at me when I mentioned her name Saturday night.”

Naomi glanced at him, startled. “That’s what you called about?”

Sam nodded.

“Oh, Sam—if you weren’t on Mom’s s-list before, you are now.”

“Oh, I was on before, but I’ve got an idea she’s moved me up.” Sam laughed, then winced. His stomach still hurt from his fit on the steps of the newspaper office, but he was very glad he had had that fit—an hour ago he never would have believed he could have gotten so much of his equilibrium back. In fact, an hour ago he had been quite sure that Sam Peebles and equilibrium were going to remain mutually exclusive concepts for the rest of his life. “Go ahead, Naomi.”

“Most of what I’ve heard I picked up at what AA people call ‘the real meeting,’ ” she said. “That’s when people stand around drinking coffee before and then after, talking about everything under the sun.”

He looked at her curiously. “How long have you been in AA, Naomi?”

“Nine years,” Naomi said evenly. “And it’s been six since I had to take a drink. But I’ve been an alcoholic forever. Drunks aren’t made, Sam. They’re born.”

“Oh,” he said lamely. And then: “Was she in the program? Ardelia Lortz?”

“God, no—but that doesn’t mean there aren’t people in AA who remember her. She showed up in Junction City in 1956 o‘57, I think. She went to work for Mr. Lavin in the Public Library. A year or two later, he died very suddenly—it was a heart attack or a stroke, I think—and the town gave the job to the Lortz woman. I’ve heard she was very good at it, but judging by what happened, I’d say the thing she was best at was fooling people.”

“What did she do, Naomi?”

“She killed two children and then herself,” Naomi said simply. “In the summer of 1960. There was a search for the kids. No one thought of looking for them in the Library, because it was supposed to be closed that day. They were found the next day, when the Library was supposed to be open but wasn’t. There are skylights in the Library roof—”

“I know.”

“—but these days you can only see them from the outside, because they changed the Library inside. Lowered the ceiling to conserve heat, or something. Anyway, those skylights had big brass catches on them. You grabbed the catches with a long pole to open the skylights and let in fresh air, I guess. She tied a rope to one of the catches—she must have used one of the track-ladders that ran along the bookcases to do it—and hanged herself from it. She did that after she killed the children.”

“I see.” Sam’s voice was calm, but his heart was beating slowly and very hard. “And how did she … how did she kill the children?”

“I don’t know. No one’s ever said, and I’ve never asked. I suppose it was horrible.”

“Yes. I suppose it was.”

“Now tell me what happened to you.”

“First I want to see if Dave’s at the shelter.”

Naomi tightened up at once. “I’ll see if Dave’s at the shelter,” she said. “You’re going to sit tight in the car. I’m sorry for you, Sam, and I’m sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion last night. But you won’t upset Dave anymore. I’ll see to that.”

“Naomi, he’s a part of this!”

“That’s impossible,” she said in a brisk this-closes-the-discussion tone of voice.

“Dammit, the whole thing is impossible!”

They were nearing Angle Street now. Ahead of them was a pick-up truck rattling toward the Recycling Center, its bed full of cardboard cartons filled with bottles and cans.

“I don’t think you understand what I told you,” she said. “It doesn’t surprise me; Earth People rarely do. So open your ears, Sam. I’m going to say it in words of one syllable. If Dave drinks, Dave dies. Do you follow that? Does it get through?”

She tossed another glance Sam’s way. This one was so furious it was still smoking around the edges, and even in the depths of his own distress, Sam realized something. Before, even on the two occasions when he had taken Naomi out, he had thought she was pretty. Now he saw she was beautiful.

“What does that mean, Earth People?” he asked her.

“People who don’t have a problem with booze or pills or pot or cough medicine or any of the other things that mess up the human head,” she nearly spat. “People who can afford to moralize and make judgments.”

Ahead of them, the pick-up truck turned off onto the long, rutted driveway leading to the redemption center. Angle Street lay ahead. Sam could see something parked in front of the porch, but it wasn’t a car. It was Dirty Dave’s shopping-cart.

“Stop a minute,” he said.

Naomi did, but she wouldn’t look at him. She stared straight ahead through the windshield. Her jaw was working. There was high color in her cheeks.

“You care about him,” he said, “and I’m glad. Do you also care about me, Sarah? Even though I’m an Earth Person?”

“You have no right to call me Sarah. I can, because it’s part of my name—I was christened Naomi Sarah Higgins. And they can, because they are, in a way, closer to me than blood relatives could ever be. We are blood relatives, in fact—because there’s something in us that makes us the way we are. Something in our blood. You, Sam—you have no right.”

“Maybe I do,” Sam said. “Maybe I’m one of you now. You’ve got booze. This Earth Person has got the Library Police.”

Now she looked at him, and her eyes were wide and wary. “Sam, I don’t underst—”

“Neither do I. All I know is that I need help. I need it desperately. I borrowed two books from a library that doesn’t exist anymore, and now the books don’t exist, either. I lost them. Do you know where they ended up?”

She shook her head.

Sam pointed over to the left, where two men had gotten out of the pick-up’s cab and were starting to unload the cartons of returnables. “There. That’s where they ended up. They’ve been pulped. I’ve got until midnight, Sarah, and then the Library Police are going to pulp me. And I don’t think they’ll even leave my jacket behind.”

6

Sam sat in the passenger seat of Naomi Sarah Higgins’s Datsun for what seemed like a long, long time. Twice his hand went to the door-handle and then fell back. She had relented … a little. If Dave wanted to talk to him, and if Dave was still in any condition to talk, she would allow it. Otherwise, no soap.

At last the door of Angle Street opened. Naomi and Dave Duncan came out. She had an arm around his waist, his feet were shuffling, and Sam’s heart sank. Then, as they stepped out into the sun, he saw that Dave wasn’t drunk … or at least not necessarily. Looking at him was, in a weird way, like looking into Naomi’s compact mirror all over again. Dave Duncan looked like a man trying to weather the worst shock of his life … and not doing a very good job of it.

Sam got out of the car and stood by the door, indecisive.

“Come up on the porch,” Naomi said. Her voice was both resigned and fearful. “I don’t trust him to make it down the steps.”

Sam came up to where they stood. Dave Duncan was probably sixty years old. On Saturday he had looked seventy or seventy-five. That was the booze, Sam supposed. And now, as Iowa turned slowly on the axis of noon, he looked older than all the ages. And that, Sam knew, was his fault. It was the shock of things Dave had assumed were long buried.

I didn’t know, Sam thought, but this, however true it might be, had lost its power to comfort. Except for the burst veins in his nose and cheeks, Dave’s face was the color of very old paper. His eyes were watery and stunned. His lips had a bluish tinge, and little beads of spittle pulsed in the deep pockets at the corners of his mouth.

“I didn’t want him to talk to you,” Naomi said. “I wanted to take him to Dr. Melden, but he refuses to go until he talks to you.”

“Mr. Peebles,” Dave said feebly. “I’m sorry, Mr. Peebles, it’s all my fault, isn’t it? I—”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Sam said. “Come on over here and sit down.”

He and Naomi led Dave to a rocking chair at the corner of the porch and Dave eased himself into it. Sam and Naomi drew up chairs with sagging wicker bottoms and sat on either side of him. They sat without speaking for some little time, looking out across the railroad tracks and into the flat farm country beyond.

“She’s after you, isn’t she?” Dave asked. “That bitch from the far side of hell.”

“She’s sicced someone on me,” Sam said. “Someone who was in one of those posters you drew. He’s a … I know this sounds crazy, but he’s a Library Policeman. He came to see me this morning. He did …” Sam touched his hair. “He did this. And this.” He pointed to

the small red dot in the center of his throat. “And he says he isn’t alone.”

Dave was silent for a long time, looking out into the emptiness, looking at the flat horizon which was broken only by tall silos and, to the north, the apocalyptic shape of the Proverbia Feed Company’s grain elevator. “The man you saw isn’t real,” he said at last. “None of them are real. Only her. Only the devil-bitch.”

“Can you tell us, Dave?” Naomi asked gently. “If you can’t, say so. But if it will make it better for you … easier … tell us.”

“Dear Sarah,” Dave said. He took her hand and smiled. “I love you—have I ever told you so?”

She shook her head, smiling back. Tears glinted in her eyes like tiny specks of mica. “No. But I’m glad, Dave.”

“I have to tell,” he said. “It isn’t a question of better or easier. It can’t be allowed to go on. Do you know what I remember about my first AA meeting, Sarah?”

She shook her head.

“How they said it was a program of honesty. How they said you had to tell everything, not just to God, but to God and another person. I thought, ‘If that’s what it takes to live a sober life, I’ve had it. They’ll throw me in a plot up on Wayvem Hill in that part of the boneyard they set aside for the drunks and all-time losers who never had a pot to piss in nor a window to throw it out of. Because I could never tell all the things I’ve seen, all the things I’ve done.’ “

“We all think that at first,” she said gently.

“I know. But there can’t be many that’ve seen the things I have, or done what I have. I did the best I could, though. Little by little I did the best I could. I set my house in order. But those things I saw and did back then … those I never told. Not to any person, not to no

man's God. I found a room in the basement of my heart, and I put those things in that room and then I locked the door."

He looked at Sam, and Sam saw tears rolling slowly and tiredly down the deep wrinkles in Dave's blasted cheeks.

"Yes. I did. And when the door was locked, I nailed boards across it. And when the boards was nailed, I put sheet steel across the boards and riveted it tight. And when the riveting was done, I drawed a bureau up against the whole works, and before I called it good and walked away, I piled bricks on top of the bureau. And all these years since, I've spent telling myself I forgot all about Ardelia and her strange ways, about the things she wanted me to do and the things she told me and the promises she made and what she really was. I took a lot of forgetting medicine, but it never did the job. And when I got into AA, that was the one thing that always drove me back. The thing in that room, you know. That thing has a name, Mr. Peebles—its name is Ardelia Lortz. After I was sobered up awhile, I would start having bad dreams. Mostly I dreamed of the posters I did for her—the ones that scared the children so bad—but they weren't the worst dreams."

His voice had fallen to a trembling whisper.

"They weren't the worst ones by a long chalk."

"Maybe you better rest a little," Sam said. He had discovered that no matter how much might depend on what Dave had to say, a part of him didn't want to hear it. A part of him was afraid to hear it.

"Never mind resting," he said. "Doctor says I'm diabetic, my pancreas is a mess, and my liver is falling apart. Pretty soon I'm going on a permanent vacation. I don't know if it'll be heaven or hell for me, but I'm pretty sure the bars and package stores are closed in both places, and thank God for that. But the time for restin isn't now. If I'm ever goin to talk, it has to be now." He looked carefully at Sam. "You know you're in trouble, don't you?"

Sam nodded.

“Yes. But you don’t know just how bad your trouble is. That’s why I have to talk. I think she has to … has to lie still sometimes. But her time of bein still is over, and she has picked you, Mr. Peebles. That’s why I have to talk. Not that I want to. I went out last night after Sarah was gone and bought myself a jug. I took it down to the switchin yard and sat where I’ve sat many times before, in the weeds and cinders and busted glass. I spun the cap off and held that jug up to my nose and smelled it. You know how that jug wine smells? To me it always smells like the wallpaper in cheap hotel rooms, or like a stream that has flowed its way through a town dump somewhere. But I have always liked that smell just the same, because it smells like sleep, too.

“And all the time I was holdin that jug up, smellin it, I could hear the bitch queen talkin from inside the room where I locked her up. From behind the bricks, the bureau, the sheet steel, the boards and locks. Talkin like someone who’s been buried alive. She was a little muffled, but I could still hear her just fine. I could hear her sayin, ‘That’s right, Dave, that’s the answer, it’s the only answer there is for folks like you, the only one that works, and it will be the only answer you need until answers don’t matter anymore.’

“I tipped that jug up for a good long drink, and then at the last second it smelled like her … and I remembered her face at the end, all covered with little threads … and how her mouth changed … and I threw that jug away. Smashed it on a railroad tie. Because this shit has got to end. I won’t let her take another nip out of this town!”

His voice rose to a trembling but powerful old man’s shout. “This shit has gone on long enough!”

Naomi laid a hand on Dave’s arm. Her face was frightened and full of trouble. “What, Dave? What is it?”

“I want to be sure,” Dave said. “You tell me first, Mr. Peebles. Tell me everything that’s been happening to you, and don’t leave out

nothing."

"I will," Sam said, "on one condition."

Dave smiled faintly. "What condition is that?"

"You have to promise to call me Sam … and in return, I'll never call you Dirty Dave again."

His smile broadened. "You got a deal there, Sam."

"Good." He took a deep breath. "Everything was the fault of the goddam acrobat," he began.

7

It took longer than he had thought it would, but there was an inexpressible relief—a joy, almost—in telling it all, holding nothing back. He told Dave about The Amazing Joe, Craig's call for help, and Naomi's suggestion about livening up his material. He told them about how the Library had looked, and about his meeting with Ardelia Lortz. Naomi's eyes grew wider and wider as he spoke. When he got to the part about the Red Riding Hood poster on the door to the Children's Library, Dave nodded.

"That's the only one I didn't draw," he said. "She had that one with her. I bet they never found it, either. I bet she still has that one with her. She liked mine, but that one was her favorite."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

Dave only shook his head and told Sam to go on.

He told them about the library card, the books he had borrowed, and the strange little argument they had had on Sam's way out.

"That's it," Dave said flatly. "That's all it took. You might not believe it, but I know her. You made her mad. Goddam if you didn't. You made her mad … and now she's set her cap for you."

Sam finished his story as quickly as he could, but his voice slowed and nearly halted when he came to the visit from the Library Policeman in his fog-gray trenchcoat. When Sam finished, he was nearly weeping and his hands had begun to shake again.

“Could I have a glass of water?” he asked Naomi thickly.

“Of course,” she said, and got up to get it. She took two steps, then returned and kissed Sam on the cheek. Her lips were cool and soft. And before she left to get his water, she spoke three blessed words into his ear: “I believe you.”

8

Sam raised the glass to his lips, using both hands to be sure he wouldn’t spill it, and drank half of it at a draught. When he put it down he said, “What about you, Dave? Do you believe me?”

“Yeah,” Dave said. He spoke almost absently, as if this were a foregone conclusion. Sam supposed that, to Dave, it was. After all, he had known the mysterious Ardelia Lortz firsthand, and his ravaged, too-old face suggested that theirs had not been a loving relationship.

Dave said nothing else for several moments, but a little of his color had come back. He looked out across the railroad tracks toward the fallow fields. They would be green with sprouting corn in another six or seven weeks, but now they looked barren. His eyes watched a cloud shadow flow across that Midwestern emptiness in the shape of a giant hawk.

At last he seemed to rouse himself and turned to Sam.

“My Library Policeman—the one I drew for her—didn’t have no scar,” he said at last.

Sam thought of the stranger’s long, white face. The scar had been there, all right—across the cheek, under the eye, over the bridge of

the nose in a thin flowing line.

“So?” he asked. “What does that mean?”

“It don’t mean nothing to me, but I think it must mean somethin to you, Mr.—Sam. I know about the badge … what you called the star of many points. I found that in a book of heraldry right there in the Junction City Library. It’s called a Maltese Cross. Christian knights wore them in the middle of their chests when they went into battle durin the Crusades. They were supposed to be magical. I was so taken with the shape that I put it into the picture. But … a scar? No. Not on my Library Policeman. Who was your Library Policeman, Sam?”

“I don’t … I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sam said slowly, but that voice—faint, mocking, haunting—recurred: Come with me, son … I’m a poleethman. And his mouth was suddenly full of that taste again. The sugar-slimy taste of red licorice. His tastebuds cramped; his stomach rolled. But it was stupid. Really quite stupid. He had never eaten red licorice in his life. He hated it.

If you’ve never eaten it, how do you know you hate it?

“I really don’t get you,” he said, speaking more strongly.

“You’re getting something,” Naomi said. “You look like someone just kicked you in the stomach.”

Sam glanced at her, annoyed. She looked back at him calmly, and Sam felt his heart rate speed up.

“Let it alone for now,” Dave said, “although you can’t let it alone for long, Sam—not if you want to hold onto any hope of getting out of this. Let me tell you my story. I’ve never told it before, and I’ll never tell it again … but it’s time.”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## DAVE'S STORY

1

"I wasn't always Dirty Dave Duncan," he began. "In the early fifties I was just plain old Dave Duncan, and people liked me just fine. I was a member of that same Rotary Club you talked to the other night, Sam. Why not? I had my own business, and it made money. I was a sign-painter, and I was a damned good one. I had all the work I could handle in Junction City and Proverbia, but I sometimes did a little work up in Cedar Rapids, as well. Once I painted a Lucky Strike cigarette ad on the right-field wall of the minor-league ballpark all the way to hell and gone in Omaha. I was in great demand, and I deserved to be. I was good. I was just the best sign-painter around these parts.

"I stayed here because serious painting was what I was really interested in, and I thought you could do that anywhere. I didn't have no formal art education—I tried but I flunked out—and I knew that put me down on the count, so to speak, but I knew that there were artists who made it without all that speed-shit bushwah—Gramma Moses, for one. She didn't need no driver's license; she went right to town without one.

"I might even have made it. I sold some canvases, but not many—I didn't need to, because I wasn't married and I was doing well with my sign-painting business. Also, I kept most of my pitchers so I could put on shows, the way artists are supposed to. I had some, too. Right here in town at first, then in Cedar Rapids, and then in Des Moines. That one was written up in the Democrat, and they made me sound like the second coming of James Whistler."

Dave fell silent for a moment, thinking. Then he raised his head and looked out at the empty, fallow fields again.

“In AA, they talk about folks who have one foot in the future and the other in the past and spend their time pissin all over today because of it. But sometimes it’s hard not to wonder what might have happened if you’d done things just a little different.”

He looked almost guiltily at Naomi, who smiled and pressed his hand.

“Because I was good, and I did come close. But I was drinkin heavy, even back then. I didn’t think much of it—hell, I was young, I was strong, and besides, don’t all great artists drink? I thought they did. And I still might have made it—made something, anyway, for awhile—but then Ardelia Lortz came to Junction City.

“And when she came, I was lost.”

He looked at Sam.

“I recognize her from your story, Sam, but that wasn’t how she looked back then. You expected to see an old-lady librarian, and that suited her purpose, so that’s just what you did see. But when she came to Junction City in the summer of ‘57, her hair was ash-blonde, and the only places she was plump was where a woman is supposed to be plump.

“I was living out in Proverbia then, and I used to go to the Baptist Church. I wasn’t much on religion, but there were some fine-looking women there. Your mom was one of em, Sarah.”

Naomi laughed in the way women do when they are told something they cannot quite believe.

“Ardelia caught on with the home folks right away. These days, when the folks from that church talk about her—if they ever do—I bet they say things like ‘I knew from the very start there was somethin funny about that Lortz woman’ or ‘I never trusted the look in that woman’s eye,’ but let me tell you, that wasn’t how it was. They buzzed around her—the women as well as the men—like bees around the first

flower of spring. She got a job as Mr. Lavin's assistant before she was in town a month, but she was teachin the little ones at the Sunday School out there in Proverbia two weeks before that.

"Just what she was teachin em I don't like to think—you can bet your bottom dollar it wasn't the Gospel According to Matthew—but she was teachin em. And everyone swore on how much the little ones loved her. They swore on it, too, but there was a look in their eyes when they said so … a far-off look, like they wasn't really sure where they were, or even who they were.

"Well, she caught my eye … and I caught hers. You wouldn't know it from the way I am now, but I was a pretty good-lookin fella in those days. I always had a tan from workin outdoors, I had muscles, my hair was faded almost blonde from the sun, and my belly was as flat as your ironin board, Sarah.

"Ardelia had rented herself a farmhouse about a mile and a half from the church, a tight enough little place, but it needed a coat of paint as bad as a man in the desert needs a drink of water. So after church the second week I noticed her there—I didn't go often and by then it was half-past August—I offered to paint it for her.

"She had the biggest eyes you've ever seen. I guess most people would have called them gray, but when she looked right at you, hard, you would have sworn they were silver. And she looked at me hard that day after church. She was wearin some kind of perfume that I never smelled before and ain't never smelled since. Lavender, I think. I can't think how to describe it, but I know it always made me think of little white flowers that only bloom after the sun has gone down. And I was smitten. Right there and then.

"She was close to me—almost close enough for our bodies to touch. She was wearin this dowdy black dress, the kind of dress an old lady would wear, and a hat with a little net veil, and she was holdin her purse in front of her. All prim and proper. Her eyes weren't prim, though. Nossir. Nor proper. Not a bit.

” ‘I hope you don’t want to put advertisements for bleach and chewing tobacco all over my new house,’ she says.

” ‘No ma’am,’ I says back. ‘I thought just two coats of plain old white. Houses aren’t what I do for a livin, anyway, but with you bein new in town and all, I thought it would be neighborly—’

” ‘Yes indeed,’ she says, and touches my shoulder.”

Dave looked apologetically at Naomi.

“I think I ought to give you a chance to leave, if you want to. Pretty soon I’m gonna start tellin some dirty stuff, Sarah. I’m ashamed of it, but I want to clean the slate of my doins with her.”

She patted his old, chapped hand. “Go ahead,” she told him quietly. “Say it all.”

He fetched in a deep breath and went on again.

“When she touched me, I knew I had to have her or die tryin. Just that one little touch made me feel better—and crazier—than any woman-touch ever made me feel in my whole life. She knew it, too. I could see it in her eyes. It was a sly look. It was a mean look, too, but somethin about that excited me more than anything else.

” ‘It would be neighborly, Dave,’ she says, ‘and I want to be a very good neighbor.’

“So I walked her home. Left all the other young fellows standin at the church door, you might say, fumin and no doubt cursin my name. They didn’t know how lucky they were. None of them.

“My Ford was in the shop and she didn’t have no car, so we were stuck with shank’s mare. I didn’t mind a bit, and she didn’t seem to, neither. We went out the Truman Road, which was still dirt in those days, although they sent a town truck along to oil it every two or three weeks and lay the dust.

“We got about halfway to her place, and she stopped. It was just the two of us, standin in the middle of Truman Road at high noon on a summer’s day, with about a million acres of Sam Orday’s corn on one side and about two million of Bill Humpe’s corn on the other, all of it growin high over our heads and rustlin in that secret way corn has, even when there’s no breeze. My granddad used to say it was the sound of the corn growin. I dunno if that’s the truth or not, but it’s a spooky sound. I can tell you that.

” ‘Look!’ she says, pointin to the right. ‘Do you see it?’

“I looked, but I didn’t see nothing—only corn. I told her so.

” ‘I’ll show you!’ she says, and runs into the corn, Sunday dress and high heels and all. She didn’t even take off that hat with the veil on it.

“I stood there for a few seconds, sorta stunned. Then I heard her laughin. I heard her laughin in the corn. So I ran in after her, partly to see whatever it was she’d seen, but mostly because of that laugh. I was so randy. I can’t begin to tell you.

“I seen her standin way up the row I was in, and then she faded into the next one, still laughin. I started to laugh, too, and went on through myself, not carin that I was bustin down some of Sam Orday’s plants. He’d never miss em, not in all those acres. But when I got through, trailin cornsilk off my shoulders and a green leaf stuck in my tie like some new kind of clip, I stopped laughin in a hurry, because she wasn’t there. Then I heard her on the other side of me. I didn’t have no idea how she could have got back there without me seein her, but she had. So I busted back through just in time to see her runnin into the next row.

“We played hide n seek for half an hour, I guess, and I couldn’t catch her. All I did was get hotter and randier. I’d think she was a row over, in front of me, but I’d get there and hear her two rows over, behind me. Sometimes I’d see her foot, or her leg, and of course she left tracks in the soft dirt, but they weren’t no good, because they seemed to go every which way at once.

“Then, just when I was startin to get mad—I’d sweat through my good shirt, my tie was undone, and my shoes was full of dirt—I come through to a row and seen her hat hangin off a corn-plant with the veil flippin in the little breeze that got down there into the corn.

” ‘Come and get me, Dave!’ she calls. I grabbed her hat and busted through to the next row on a slant. She was gone—I could just see the corn waverin where she’d went through—but both her shoes were there. In the next row I found one of her silk stockins hung over an ear of corn. And still I could hear her laughin. Over on my blind side, she was, and how the bitch got there, God only knows. Not that it mattered to me by then.

“I ripped off my tie and tore after her, around and around and dosey-doe, pantin like a stupid dog that don’t know enough to lie still on a hot day. And I’ll tell you somethin—I broke the corn down everywhere I went. Left a trail of trampled stalks and leaners behind me. But she never busted a one. They’d just waver a bit when she passed, as if there was no more to her than there was to that little summer breeze.

“I found her dress, her slip, and her garter-belt. Then I found her bra and step-ins. I couldn’t hear her laughin no more. There wasn’t no sound but the corn. I stood there in one of the rows, puffin like a leaky boiler, with all her clothes bundled up against my chest. I could smell her perfume in em, and it was drivin me crazy.

” ‘Where are you?’ I yelled, but there wasn’t no answer. Well, I finally lost what little sanity I had left … and of course, that was just what she wanted. ‘Where the fuck are you?’ I screamed, and her long white arm reached through the corn-plants right beside me and she stroked my neck with one finger. It jumped the shit out of me.

” ‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ she said. ‘What took you so long? Don’t you want to see it?’ She grabbed me and drawed me through the corn, and there she was with her feet planted in the dirt, not a stitch on her, and her eyes as silver as rain on a foggy day.”

2

Dave took a long drink of water, closed his eyes, and went on.

“We didn’t make love there in the corn—in all the time I knew her, we never made love. But we made somethin. I had Ardelia in just about every way a man can have a woman, and I think I had her in some ways you’d think would be impossible. I can’t remember all the ways, but I can remember her body, how white it was; how her legs looked; how her toes curled and seemed to feel along the shoots of the plants comin out of the dirt; I can remember how she pulled her fingernails back and forth across the skin of my neck and my throat.

“We went on and on and on. I don’t know how many times, but I know I didn’t never get tired. When we started I felt horny enough to rape the Statue of Liberty, and when we finished I felt the same way. I couldn’t get enough of her. It was like the booze, I guess. Wasn’t any way I could ever get enough of her. And she knew it, too.

“But we finally did stop. She put her hands behind her head and wriggled her white shoulders in the black dirt we was layin in and looked up at me with those silvery eyes of hers and she says, ‘Well, Dave? Are we neighbors yet?’

“I told her I wanted to go again and she told me not to push my luck. I tried to climb on just the same, and she pushed me off as easy as a mother pushes a baby off’n her tit when she don’t want to feed it no more. I tried again and she swiped at my face with her nails and split the skin open in two places. That finally damped my boiler down. She was quick as a cat and twice as strong. When she saw I knew playtime was over, she got dressed and led me out of the corn. I went just as meek as Mary’s little lamb.

“We walked the rest of the way to her house. Nobody passed us, and that was probably just as well. My clothes were all covered with dirt and cornsilk, my shirttail was out, my tie was stuffed into my back pocket and flappin along behind me like a tail, and every place that the cloth rubbed I felt raw. Her, though—she looked as smooth and

cool as an ice-cream soda in a drugstore glass. Not a hair out of place, not a speck of dirt on her shoes, not a strand of cornsilk on her skirt.

“We got to the house and while I was lookin it over, tryin to decide how much paint it would take, she brought me a drink in a tall glass. There was a straw in it, and a sprig of mint. I thought it was iced tea until I took a sip. It was straight Scotch.

” ‘Jesus!’ I says, almost chokin.

” ‘Don’t you want it?’ she asks me, smilin in that mockin way she had. ‘Maybe you’d prefer some iced coffee.’

” ‘Oh, I want it,’ I says, but it was more than that. I needed it. I was tryin not to drink in the middle of the day back then, because that’s what alcoholics do. But that was the end of that. For the rest of the time I knew her, I drank pretty near all day, every day. For me, the last two and a half years Ike was President was one long souse.

“While I was paintin her house—and doin everything she’d let me do to her whenever I could—she was settlin in at the Library. Mr. Lavin hired her first crack outta the box, and put her in charge of the Children’s Library. I used to go there every chance I got, which was a lot, since I was self-employed. When Mr. Lavin spoke to me about how much time I was spendin there, I promised to paint the whole inside of the Library for free. Then he let me come and go as much as I wanted. Ardelia told me it would work out just that way, and she was right—as usual.

“I don’t have any connected memories of the time I spent under her spell—and that’s what I was, an enchanted man livin under the spell of a woman who wasn’t really a woman at all. It wasn’t the blackouts that drunks sometimes get; it was wantin to forget things after they were over. So what I have is memories that stand apart from each other but seem to lie in a chain, like those islands in the Pacific Ocean. Archie Pelligos, or whatever they call em.

“I remember she put the poster of Little Red Ridin Hood up on the door to the Children’s Room about a month before Mr. Lavin died, and I remember her takin one little boy by the hand and leadin him over to it. ‘Do you see that little girl?’ Ardelia asked him. ‘Yes,’ he says. ‘Do you know why that Bad Thing is getting ready to eat her?’ Ardelia asks. ‘No,’ the kid says back, his eyes all big and solemn and full of tears. ‘Because he forgot to bring back his library book on time,’ she says. ‘You won’t ever do that, Willy, will you?’ ‘No, never,’ the little boy says, and Ardelia says, ‘You better not.’ And then she led him into the Children’s Room for Story Hour, still holdin him by the hand. That kid—it was Willy Klemmart, who got killed in Vietnam—looked back over his shoulder at where I was, standin on my scaffold with a paintbrush in my hand, and I could read his eyes like they were a newspaper headline. Save me from her, his eyes said. Please, Mr. Duncan. But how could I? I couldn’t even save myself.”

Dave produced a clean but badly wrinkled bandanna from the depths of one back pocket and blew a mighty honk into it.

“Mr. Lavin began by thinkin Ardelia just about walked on water, but he changed his mind after awhile. They got into a hell of a scrap over that Red Ridin Hood poster about a week before he died. He never liked it. Maybe he didn’t have a very good idea of what went on durin Story Hour—I’ll get to that pretty soon—but he wasn’t entirely blind. He saw the way the kids looked at that poster. At last he told her to take it down. That was when the argument started. I didn’t hear it all because I was on the scaffold, high above them, and the acoustics were bad, but I heard enough. He said somethin about scaring the children, or maybe it was scarring the children, and she said somethin back about how it helped her keep ‘the rowdy element’ under control. She called it a teachin tool, just like the hickory stick.

“But he stuck to his guns and she finally had to take it down. That night, at her house, she was like a tiger in the zoo after some kid has spent all day pokin it with a stick. She went back and forth in great big long strides, not a stitch on, her hair flyin out behind her. I was in bed, drunk as a lord. But I remember she turned around and her

eyes had gone from silver to bright red, as if her brains had caught afire, and her mouth looked funny, like it was tryin to pull itself right out of her face, or somethin. It almost scared me sober. I hadn't ever seen nothin like that, and never wanted to see it again.

" 'I'm going to fix him,' she said. 'I'm going to fix that fat old whoremaster, Davey. You wait and see.'

"I told her not to do anything stupid, not to let her temper get the best of her, and a lot of other stuff that didn't stand knee-high to jack shit. She listened to me for awhile and then she ran across the room so fast that … well, I don't know how to say it. One second she was standin all the way across the room by the door, and the next second she was jumpin on top of me, her eyes red and glaring, her mouth all pooched out of her face like she wanted to kiss me so bad she was stretchin her skin somehow to do it, and I had an idea that instead of just scratchin me this time, she was gonna put her nails into my throat and peel me to the backbone.

"But she didn't. She put her face right down to mine and looked at me. I don't know what she saw—how scared I was, I guess—but it must have made her happy, because she tipped her head back so her hair fell all the way down to my thighs, and she laughed. 'Stop talking, you damned souse,' she said, 'and stick it in me. What else are you good for?'

"So I did. Because stickin it in her—and drinkin—was all I was good for by then. I surely wasn't paintin pitchers anymore, I lost my license after I got clipped for my third OUI—in '58 or early '59, that was—and I was gettin bad reports on some of my jobs. I didn't care much how I did them anymore, you see; all I wanted was her. Talk started to circulate about how Dave Duncan wasn't trustworthy no more … but the reason they said I wasn't was always the booze. The word of what we were to each other never got around much. She was careful as the devil about that. My reputation went to hell in a handbasket, but she never got so much as a splash of mud on the hem of her skirts.

“I think Mr. Lavin suspected. At first he thought I just had a crush on her and she never so much as knew I was makin calf’s eyes at her from up on my scaffold, but I think that in the end he suspected. But then Mr. Lavin died. They said it was a heart attack, but I know better. We were in the hammock on her back porch that night after it happened, and that night it was her that couldn’t get enough of it. She screwed me until I hollered uncle. Then she lay down next to me and looked at me as content as a cat that’s had its fill of cream, and her eyes had that deep-red glow again. I am not talking about something in my imagination; I could see the reflection of that red glow on the skin of my bare arm. And I could feel it. It was like sittin next to a woodstove that’s been stoked and then damped down. ‘I told you I’d fix him, Davey,’ she says all at once in this mean, teasin voice.

“Me, I was drunk and half killed with fuckin—what she said hardly registered on me. I felt like I was fallin asleep in a pit of quicksand. ‘What’d you do to him?’ I asked, half in a doze.

” ‘I hugged him,’ she said. ‘I give special hugs, Davey—you don’t know about my special hugs, and if you’re lucky, you never will. I got him in the stacks and put my arms around him and showed him what I really looked like. Then he began to cry. That’s how scared he was. He began to cry his special tears, and I kissed them away, and when I was done, he was dead in my arms.’

” ‘His special tears.’ That’s what she called them. And then her face … it changed. It rippled, like it was underwater. And I seen something … “

Dave trailed off, looking out into the flatlands, looking at the grain elevator, looking at nothing. His hands had gripped the porch rail. They flexed, loosened, flexed again.

“I don’t remember,” he said at last. “Or maybe I don’t want to remember. Except for two things: it had red eyes with no lids, and there was a lot of loose flesh around its mouth, lyin in folds and flaps, but it wasn’t skin. It looked … dangerous. Then that flesh around its

mouth started to move somehow and I think I started to scream. Then it was gone. All of it was gone. It was only Ardelia again, peepin up at me and smilin like a pretty, curious cat.

" 'Don't worry,' she says. 'You don't have to see, Davey. As long as you do what I tell you, that is. As long as you're one of the Good Babies. As long as you behave. Tonight I'm very happy, because that old fool is gone at last. The Town Council is going to appoint me in his place, and I'll run things the way I want.'

"God help us all, then, I thought, but I didn't say it. You wouldn't've, either, if you'd looked down and seen that thing with those starin red eyeballs curled up next to you in a hammock way out in the country, so far out nobody would hear you screamin even if you did it at the top of your lungs.

"A little while later she went into the house and come back out with two of those tall glasses full of Scotch, and pretty soon I was twenty thousand leagues under the sea again, where nothing mattered.

"She kept the Library closed for a week … 'out of respect for Mr. Lavin' was how she put it, and when she opened up again, Little Red Ridin Hood was back on the door of the Children's Room. A week or two after that, she told me she wanted me to make some new posters for the Children's Room."

He paused, then went on in a lower, slower voice.

"There's a part of me, even now, that wants to sugarcoat it, make my part in it better than it was. I'd like to tell you that I fought with her, argued, told her I didn't want nothin to do with scarin a bunch of kids … but it wouldn't be true. I went right along with what she wanted me to do. God help me, I did. Partly it was because I was scared of her by then. But mostly it was because I was still besotted with her. And there was something else, too. There was a mean, nasty part of me —I don't think it's in everyone, but I think it's in a lot of us—that liked what she was up to. Liked it.

“Now, you’re wonderin what I did do, and I can’t really tell you all of it. I really don’t remember. Those times is all jumbled up, like the broken toys you send to the Salvation Army just to get the damned things out of the attic.

“I didn’t kill anyone. That’s the only thing I’m sure of. She wanted me to … and I almost did … but in the end I drew back. That’s the only reason I’ve been able to go on livin with myself, because in the end I was able to crawl away. She kept part of my soul with her—the best part, maybe—but she never kept all of it.”

He looked at Naomi and Sam thoughtfully. He seemed calmer now, more in control; perhaps even at peace with himself, Sam thought.

“I remember going in one day in the fall of 1959—I think it was ‘59—and her telling me that she wanted me to make a poster for the Children’s Room. She told me exactly what she wanted, and I agreed willingly enough. I didn’t see nothing wrong with it. I thought it was kind of funny, in fact. What she wanted, you see, was a poster that showed a little kid flattened by a steamroller in the middle of the street. Underneath it was supposed to say HASTE MAKES WASTE! GET YOUR LIBRARY BOOKS BACK IN PLENTY OF TIME!

“I thought it was just a joke, like when the coyote is chasing the Road Runner and gets flattened by a freight train or something. So I said sure. She was pleased as Punch. I went into her office and drew the poster. It didn’t take long, because it was just a cartoon.

“I thought she’d like it, but she didn’t. Her brows drew down and her mouth almost disappeared. I’d made a cartoon boy with crosses for eyes, and as a joke I had a word-balloon comin out of the mouth of the guy drivin the steamroller. ‘If you had a stamp, you could mail him like a postcard,’ he was saying.

“She didn’t even crack a smile. ‘No, Davey,’ she says, ‘you don’t understand. This won’t make the children bring their books back on time. This will only make them laugh, and they spend too much time doing that as it is.’

” ‘Well,’ I says, ‘I guess I didn’t understand what you wanted.’

“We were standin behind the circulation desk, so nobody could see us except from the waist up. And she reached down and took my balls in her hand and looked at me with those big silver eyes of hers and said, ‘I want you to make it realistic.’

“It took me a second or two to understand what she really meant. When I did, I couldn’t believe it. ‘Ardelia,’ I says, ‘you don’t understand what you’re sayin. If a kid really did get run over by a steamroller—’

“She gave my balls a squeeze, one that hurt—as if to remind me just how she had me—and said: ‘I understand, all right. Now you understand me. I don’t want them to laugh, Davey; I want them to cry. So why don’t you go on back in there and do it right this time?’

“I went back into her office. I don’t know what I meant to do, but my mind got made up in a hurry. There was a fresh piece of posterboard on the desk, and a tall glass of Scotch with a straw and a sprig of mint in it, and a note from Ardelia that said ‘D.—Use a lot of red this time.’ “

He looked soberly at Sam and Naomi. “But she’d never been in there, you see. Never for a minute.”

3

Naomi brought Dave a fresh glass of water, and when she came back, Sam noticed that her face was very pale and that the corners of her eyes looked red. But she sat down very quietly and motioned for Dave to go on.

“I did what alcoholics do best,” he said. “I drank the drink and did what I was told. A kind of … of frenzy, I suppose you’d say … fell over me. I spent two hours at her desk, workin with a box of five-and-dime watercolors, sloppin water and paint all over her desk, not givin a shit what flew where. What I came out with was somethin I don’t

like to remember … but I do remember. It was a little boy splattered all over Rampole Street with his shoes knocked off and his head all spread out like a pat of butter that's melted in the sun. The man drivin the steamroller was just a silhouette, but he was lookin back, and you could see the grin on his face. That guy showed up again and again in the posters I did for her. He was drivin the car in the poster you mentioned, Sam, the one about never takin rides from strangers.

"My father left my mom about a year after I was born, just left her flat, and I got an idea now that was who I was tryin to draw in all those posters. I used to call him the dark man, and I think it was my dad. I think maybe Ardelia prodded him out of me somehow. And when I took the second one out, she liked it fine. She laughed over it. 'It's perfect, Davey!' she said. 'It'll scare a whole mountain of do-right into the little snotnoses! I'll put it up right away!' She did, too, on the front of the checkout desk in the Children's Room. And when she did, I saw somethin that really chilled my blood. I knew the little boy I'd drawn, you see. It was Willy Klemmart. I'd drawn him without even knowin it, and the expression on what was left of his face was the one I'd seen that day when she took his hand and led him into the Children's Room.

"I was there when the kids came in for Story Hour and saw that poster for the first time. They were scared. Their eyes got big, and one little girl started to cry. And I liked it that they were scared. I thought, 'That'll pound the do-right into em, all right. That'll teach em what'll happen if they cross her, if they don't do what she says.' And part of me thought, You're gettin to think like her, Dave. Pretty soon you'll get to be like her, and then you'll be lost. You'll be lost forever.

"But I went on, just the same. I felt like I had a one-way ticket and I wasn't goin to get off until I rode all the way to the end of the line. Ardelia hired some college kids, but she always put em in the circulation room and the reference room and on the main desk. She kept complete charge of the kids … they were the easiest to scare, you see. And I think they were the best scares, the ones that fed her

the best. Because that's what she lived on, you know—she fed on their fright. And I made more posters. I can't remember them all, but I remember the Library Policeman. He was in a lot of them. In one—it was called LIBRARY POLICEMEN GO ON VACATION, Too—he was standin on the edge of a stream and fishin. Only what he'd baited his hook with was that little boy the kids called Simple Simon. In another one, he had Simple Simon strapped to the nose of a rocket and was pullin the switch that would send him into outer space. That one said LEARN MORE ABOUT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY AT THE LIBRARY—BUT BE SURE TO DO RIGHT AND GET YOUR BOOKS BACK ON TIME.

"We turned the Children's Room into a house of horrors for the kids who came there," Dave said. He spoke slowly, and his voice was full of tears. "She and I. We did that to the children. But do you know what? They always came back. They always came back for more. And they never, never told. She saw to that."

"But the parents!" Naomi exclaimed suddenly, and so sharply that Sam jumped. "Surely when the parents saw—"

"No!" Dave told her. "Their parents never saw nothing. The only scary poster they ever saw was the one of Little Red Ridin Hood and the wolf. Ardelia left that one up all the time, but the others only went up during Story Hour—after school, on Thursday nights, and Saturday mornings. She wasn't a human bein, Sarah. You've got to get that straight in your mind. She was not human. She knew when grownups was comin, and she always got the posters I'd drawn off the walls and other ones—regular posters that said things like READ BOOKS JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT—up before they came.

"I can remember times when I'd be there for Story Hour—in those days I never left her if I could stay close, and I had lots of time to stay close, because I'd quit paintin pictures, all my regular jobs had fell through, and I was livin on the little I'd managed to save up. Before long the money was gone, too, and I had to start sellin things—my TV, my guitar, my truck, finally my house. But that don't matter. What matters is that I was there a lot, and I saw what went on. The

little ones would have their chairs drawn up in a circle with Ardelia sittin in the middle. I'd be in the back of the room, sittin in one of those kid-sized chairs myself, wearing my old paint-spotted duster more often than not, drunk as a skunk, needin a shave, reekin of Scotch. And she'd be readin—readin one of her special Ardelia-stories—and then she'd break off and cock her head to one side, like she was listenin. The kids would stir around and look uneasy. They looked another way, too—like they was wakin out of a deep sleep she'd put em into.

" 'We're going to have company,' she'd say, smiling. 'Isn't that special, children? Do I have some Good-Baby volunteers to help me get ready for our Big People company?' They'd all raise their hands when she said that, because they all wanted to be Good Babies. The posters I'd made showed em what happened to Bad Babies who didn't do right. Even I'd raise my hand, sittin drunk in the back of the room in my filthy old duster, lookin like the world's oldest, tiredest kid. And then they'd get up and some would take down my posters and others would take the regular posters out of the bottom drawer of her desk. They'd swap em. Then they'd sit down and she'd switch from whatever horrible thing she'd been tellin em to a story like 'The Princess and the Pea,' and sure enough, a few minutes later some mother'd poke her head in and see all the do-right Good Babies listenin to that nice Miss Lortz readin em a story, and they'd smile at whatever kid was theirs, and the kid would smile back, and things would go on."

"What do you mean, 'whatever horrible thing she'd been telling them'?" Sam asked. His voice was husky and his mouth felt dry. He had been listening to Dave with a mounting sense of horror and revulsion.

"Fairy tales," Dave said. "But she'd change em into horror stories. You'd be surprised how little work she had to do on most of em to make the change."

"I wouldn't," Naomi said grimly. "I remember those stories."

“I’ll bet you do,” he said, “but you never heard em like Ardelia told em. And the kids liked them—part of them liked the stories, and they liked her, because she drew on them and fascinated them the same way she drew on me. Well, not exactly, because there was never the sex thing—at least, I don’t think so—but the darkness in her called to the darkness in them. Do you understand me?”

And Sam, who remembered his dreadful fascination with the story of Bluebeard and the dancing brooms in Fantasia, thought he did understand. Children hated and feared the darkness … but it drew them, didn’t it? It beckoned to them,

(come with me, son)

didn’t it? It sang to them,

(I’m a poleethman)

didn’t it?

Didn’t it?

“I know what you mean, Dave,” he said.

He nodded. “Have you figured it out yet, Sam? Who your Library Policeman was?”

“I still don’t understand that part,” Sam said, but he thought part of him did. It was as if his mind was some deep, dark body of water and there was a boat sunk at the bottom of it—but not just any boat. No—this was a pirate schooner, full of loot and dead bodies, and now it had begun to shift in the muck which had held it so long. Soon, he feared, this ghostly, glaring wreck would surface again, its blasted masts draped with black seaweed and a skeleton with a million-dollar grin still lashed to the rotting remains of the wheel.

“I think maybe you do,” Dave said, “or that you’re beginning to. And it will have to come out, Sam. Believe me.”

“I still don’t really understand about the stories,” Naomi said.

“One of her favorites, Sarah—and it was a favorite of the children, too; you have to understand that, and believe it—was ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears.’ You know the story, but you don’t know it the way some people in this town—people who are grownups now, bankers and lawyers and big-time farmers with whole fleets of John Deere tractors—know it. Deep in their hearts, it’s the Ardelia Lortz version they keep, you see. It may be that some of them have told those same stories to their own children, never knowing there are other ways to tell them. I don’t like to think that’s so, but in my heart I know it is.

“In Ardelia’s version, Goldilocks is a Bad Baby who won’t do right. She comes into the house of the Three Bears and wrecks it on purpose—pulls down Mamma Bear’s curtains and drags the washin through the mud and tears up all of Papa Bear’s magazines and business papers and uses one of the steak-knives to cut holes in his favorite chair. Then she tears up all their books. That was Ardelia’s favorite part, I think, when Goldilocks spoiled the books. And she don’t eat the porridge, oh no! Not when Ardelia told the story! The way Ardelia told it, Goldilocks got some rat poison off a high shelf and shook it all over the porridge like powdered sugar. She didn’t know anything about who lived in the house, but she wanted to kill them anyway, because that’s the kind of Bad Baby she was.”

“That’s horrible!” Naomi exclaimed. She had lost her composure—really lost it—for the first time. Her hands were pressed over her mouth, and her wide eyes regarded Dave from above them.

“Yes. It was. But it wasn’t the end. Goldilocks was so tired from wreckin the house, you see, that when she went upstairs to tear their bedrooms apart, she fell asleep in Baby Bear’s bed. And when the Three Bears came home and saw her, they fell upon her—that was just how Ardelia used to say it—they fell upon her and ate that wicked Bad Baby alive. They ate her from the feet up, while she screamed and struggled. All except for her head. They saved that, because they knew what she had done to their porridge. They

smelled the poison. ‘They could do that, children, because they were bears,’ Ardelia used to say, and all the children—Ardelia’s Good Babies—would nod their heads, because they saw how that could be. ‘They took Goldilocks’ head down to the kitchen and boiled it and ate her brains for their breakfast. They all agreed it was very tasty … and they lived happily ever after.’ “

4

There was a thick, almost deathly silence on the porch. Dave reached for his glass of water and almost knocked it off the railing with his trembling fingers. He rescued it at the last moment, held it in both hands, and drank deeply. Then he put it down and said to Sam, “Are you surprised that my boozing got a little bit out of control?”

Sam shook his head.

Dave looked at Naomi and said, “Do you understand now why I was never able to tell this story? Why I put it in that room?”

“Yes,” she said in a trembling, sighing voice that was not much more than a whisper. “And I think I understand why the kids never told, either. Some things are just too … too monstrous.”

“For us, maybe,” Dave said. “For kids? I don’t know, Sarah. I don’t think kids know monsters so well at first glance. It’s their folks that tell em how to recognize the monsters. And she had somethin else goin for her. You remember me tellin you about how, when she told the kids a parent was comin, they looked like they were wakin up from a deep sleep? They were sleepin, in some funny way. It wasn’t hypnosis—at least, I don’t think it was—but it was like hypnosis. And when they went home, they didn’t remember, in the top part of their minds, anyway, about the stories or the posters. Down underneath, I think they remembered plenty … just like down underneath Sam knows who his Library Policeman is. I think they still remember today—the bankers and lawyers and big-time farmers who were once Ardelia’s Good Babies. I can still see em, wearin pinafores and short pants, sittin in those little chairs, lookin at Ardelia in the middle of the

circle, their eyes so big and round they looked like pie-plates. And I think that when it gets dark and the storms come, or when they are sleepin and the nightmares come, they go back to bein kids. I think the doors open and they see the Three Bears—Ardelia's Three Bears—eatin the brains out of Goldilocks' head with their wooden porridge-spoons, and Baby Bear wearin Goldilocks' scalp on his head like a long golden wig. I think they wake up sweaty, feelin sick and afraid. I think that's what she left this town. I think she left a legacy of secret nightmares.

"But I still haven't got to the worst thing. Those stories, you see—well, sometimes it was the posters, but mostly it was the stories—would scare one of them into a crying fit, or they'd start to faint or pass out or whatever. And when that happened, she'd tell the others, 'Put your heads down and rest while I take Billy … or Sandra … or Tommy … to the bathroom and make him feel better.'

"They'd all drop their heads at the same instant. It was like they were dead. The first time I seen it happen, I waited about two minutes after she took some little girl out of the room, and then I got up and went over to the circle. I went to Willy Klemmart first.

" 'Willy!' I whispered, and poked him in the shoulder. 'You okay, Will?'

"He never moved, so I poked him harder and said his name again. He still didn't move. I could hear him breathin—kinda snotty and snory, the way kids are so much of the time, always runnin around with colds like they do—but it was still like he was dead. His eyelids were partway open, but I could only see the whites, and this long thread of spit was hangin off his lower lip. I got scared and went to three or four of the others, but wouldn't none of them look up at me or make a sound."

"You're saying she enchanted them, aren't you?" Sam asked. "That they were like Snow White after she ate the poisoned apple."

"Yes," Dave agreed. "That's what they were like. In a different kind of way, that's what I was like, too. Then, just as I was gettin ready to

take hold of Willy Klemmart and shake the shit out of him, I heard her comin back from the bathroom. I ran to my seat so she wouldn't catch me. Because I was more scared of what she might do to me than anything she might have done to them.

"She came in, and that little girl, who'd been as gray as a dirty sheet and half unconscious when Ardelia took her out, looked like somebody had just filled her up with the finest nerve-tonic in the world. She was wide awake, with roses in her cheeks and a sparkle in her eye. Ardelia patted her on the bottom and she ran for her seat. Then Ardelia clapped her hands together and said, 'All Good Babies lift your heads up! Sonja feels much better, and she wants us to finish the story, don't you, Sonja?'

" 'Yes, ma'am,' Sonja pipes up, just as pert as a robin in a birdbath. And their heads all came up. You never would have known that two seconds before that room looked like it was full of dead kids.

"The third or fourth time this happened, I let her get out of the room and then I followed her. I knew she was scarin them on purpose, you see, and I had an idea there was a reason for it. I was scared almost to death myself, but I wanted to see what it was.

"That time it was Willy Klemmart she'd taken down to the bathroom. He'd started havin hysterics during Ardelia's version of 'Hansel and Gretel.' I opened the door real easy and quiet, and I seen Ardelia kneelin in front of Willy down by where the washbasin was. He had stopped cryin, but beyond that I couldn't tell anything. Her back was to me, you see, and Willy was so short she blocked him right out of my view, even on her knees. I could see his hands were on the shoulders of the jumper she was wearin, and I could see one sleeve of his red sweater, but that was all. Then I heard somethin—a thick suckin sound, like a straw makes when you've gotten just about all of your milkshake out of the glass. I had an idea then she was … you know, molestin him, and she was, but not the way I thought.

"I walked in a little further, and slipped over to the right, walkin high up on the toes of my shoes so the heels wouldn't clack. I expected

her to hear me just the same, though … she had ears like goddam radar dishes, and I kept waitin for her to turn around and pin me with those red eyes of hers. But I couldn't stop. I had to see. And little by little, as I angled over to the right, I began to.

"Willy's face came into my sight over her shoulder, a little piece at a time, like a moon coming out of a 'clipse. At first all I could see of her was her blonde hair—there was masses of it, all in curls and ringlets—but then I began to see her face, as well. And I seen what she was doin. All the strength ran out of my legs just like water down a pipe. There was no way they were goin to see me, not unless I reached up and started hammerin on one of the overhead pipes. Their eyes were closed, but that wasn't the reason. They were lost in what they were doin, you see, and they were both lost in the same place, because they were hooked together.

"Ardelia's face wasn't human anymore. It had run like warm taffy and made itself into this funnel shape that flattened her nose and pulled her eyesockets all long and Chinese to the sides and made her look like some kind of insect … a fly, maybe, or a bee. Her mouth was gone again. It had turned into that thing I started to see just after she killed Mr. Lavin, the night we were layin in the hammock. It had turned into the narrow part of the funnel. I could see these funny red streaks on it, and at first I thought it was blood, or maybe veins under her skin, and then I realized it was lipstick. She didn't have lips anymore, but that red paint marked where her lips had been.

"She was usin that sucker thing to drink from Willy's eyes."

Sam looked at Dave, thunderstruck. He wondered for a moment if the man had lost his mind. Ghosts were one thing; this was something else. He didn't have the slightest idea what this was. And yet sincerity and honesty shone on Dave's face like a lamp, and Sam thought: If he's lying, he doesn't know it.

"Dave, are you saying Ardelia Lortz was drinking his tears?" Naomi asked hesitantly.

“Yes … and no. It was his special tears she was drinkin. Her face was all stretched out to him, it was beatin like a heart, and her features were drawn out flat. She looked like a face you might draw on a shoppin bag to make a Halloween mask.

“What was comin out of the comers of Willy’s eyes was gummy and pink, like bloody snot, or chunks of flesh that have almost liquefied. She sucked it in with that slurpin sound. It was his fear she was drinkin. She had made it real, somehow, and made it so big that it had to come out in those awful tears or kill him.”

“You’re saying that Ardelia was some kind of vampire, aren’t you?” Sam asked.

Dave looked relieved. “Yes. That’s right. When I’ve thought of that day since—when I’ve dared to think of it—I believe that’s just what she was. All those old stories about vampires sinking their teeth into people’s throats and drinkin their blood are wrong. Not by much, but in this business, close is not good enough. They drink, but not from the neck; they grow fat and healthy on what they take from their victims, but what they take isn’t blood. Maybe the stuff they take is redder, bloodier, when the victims are grownups. Maybe she took it from Mr. Lavin. I think she did. But it’s not blood.

“It’s fear.”

5

“I dunno how long I stood there, watchin her, but it couldn’t have been too long—she was never gone much more than five minutes. After awhile, the stuff comin from the corners of Willy’s eyes started to get paler and paler, and there was less and less of it. I could see that … you know, that thing of hers … “

“Proboscis,” Naomi said quietly. “I think it must have been a proboscis.”

“Is it? All right. I could see that probos-thing stretchin further and further out, not wanting to miss any, wanting to get every last bit, and I knew she was almost done. And when she was, they’d wake up and she’d see me. And when she did, I thought she’d probably kill me.

“I started to back up, slow, one step at a time. I didn’t think I was going to make it, but at last my butt bumped the bathroom door. I almost screamed when that happened, because I thought she’d got behind me somehow. I was sure of that even though I could see her kneelin there right in front of me.

“I clapped my hand over my mouth to keep the scream in and pushed out through the door. I stood there while it swung shut on the pneumatic hinge. It seemed to take forever. When it was closed, I started for the main door. I was half crazy; all I wanted to do was get out of there and never go back. I wanted to run forever.

“I got down into the foyer, where she’d put up that sign you saw, Sam—the one that just said SILENCE!—and then I caught hold of myself. If she led Willy back to the Children’s Room and saw I was gone, she’d know I’d seen. She’d chase me, and she’d catch me, too. I didn’t even think she’d have to try hard. I kept rememberin that day in the corn, and how she’d run rings all around me and never even worked up a sweat.

“So I turned around and walked back to my seat in the Children’s Room instead. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life, but somehow I managed to do it. My ass wasn’t on the chair two seconds before I heard them coming. And of course Willy was all happy and smilin and full of beans, and so was she. Ardelia looked ready to go three fast rounds with Carmen Basilio and whip him solid.

” ‘All Good Babies lift your heads up!’ she called, and clapped her hands. They all raised their heads and looked at her. ‘Willy feels lots better, and he wants me to finish the story. Don’t you, Willy?’

” ‘Yes, ma’am,’ Willy said. She kissed him and he ran back to his seat. She went on with the story. I sat there and listened. And when that Story Hour was done, I started drinkin. And from then until the end, I never really stopped.”

6

“How did it end?” Sam asked. “What do you know about that?”

“Not as much as I would have known if I hadn’t been so dog-drunk all the time, but more than I wish I knew. That last part of it, I’m not even sure how long it was. About four months, I think, but it might have been six, or even eight. By then I wasn’t even noticin the seasons much. When a drunk like me really starts to slide, Sam, the only weather he notices is inside of a bottle. I know two things, though, and they are really the only two things that matter. Somebody did start to catch onto her, that was one thing. And it was time for her to go back to sleep. To change. That was the other.

“I remember one night at her house—she never came to mine, not once—she said to me, ‘I’m getting sleepy, Dave. All the time now I’m sleepy. Soon it will be time for a long rest. When that time comes, I want you to sleep with me. I’ve grown fond of you, you see.’

“I was drunk, of course, but what she said still gave me a chill. I thought I knew what she was talkin about, but when I asked her, she only laughed.

” ‘No, not that,’ she said, and gave me a scornful, amused kind of look. ‘I’m talking about sleep, not death. But you’ll need to feed with me.’

“That sobered me up in a hurry. She didn’t think I knew what she was talkin about, but I did. I’d seen.

“After that, she began to ask me questions about the kids. About which ones I didn’t like, which ones I thought were sneaky, which ones were too loud, which ones were the brattiest. ‘They’re Bad

Babies, and they don't deserve to live,' she'd say. 'They're rude, they're destructive, they bring their books back with pencil marks in them and ripped pages. Which ones do you think deserve to die, Davey?'

"That was when I knew I had to get away from her, and if killin myself was the only way, I'd have to take that way out. Something was happenin to her, you see. Her hair was gettin dull, and her skin, which had always been perfect, started to show up with blemishes. And there was something else—I could see that thing, that thing her mouth turned into—all the time, just under the surface of her skin. But it was starting to look all wrinkled and dewlapped, and there were strings like cobwebs on it.

"One night while we were in bed she saw me lookin at her hair and said, 'You see the change in me, don't you, Davey?' She patted my face. 'It's all right; it's perfectly natural. It's always this way when I'm getting ready to go to sleep again. I will have to do it soon, and if you mean to come with me, you will have to take one of the children soon. Or two. Or three. The more the merrier!' She laughed in the crazy way she had, and when she looked back at me, her eyes had gone red again. 'In any case, I don't mean to leave you behind. All else aside, it wouldn't be safe. You know that, don't you?'

"I said I did.

" 'So if you don't want to die, Davey, it has to be soon. Very soon. And if you've made up your mind not to, you should tell me now. We can end our time together pleasantly and painlessly, tonight.'

"She leaned over me and I could smell her breath. It was like spoiled dogfood, and I couldn't believe I'd ever kissed the mouth that smell was coming out of, sober or drunk. But there was some part of me—some little part—that must have still wanted to live, because I told her I did want to come with her, but I needed a little more time to get ready. To prepare my mind.

” ‘To drink, you mean,’ she said. ‘You ought to get down on your knees and thank your miserable, unlucky stars for me, Dave Duncan. If not for me, you’d be dead in the gutter in a year, or even less. With me, you can live almost forever.’

“Her mouth stretched out for just a second, stretched out until it touched my cheek. And somehow I managed to keep from screaming.”

Dave looked at them with his deep, haunted eyes. Then he smiled. Sam Peebles never forgot the eldritch quality of that smile; it haunted his dreams ever after.

“But that’s all right,” he said. “Somewhere, down deep inside of me, I have been screaming ever since.”

7

“I’d like to say that in the end I broke her hold over me, but that’d be a lie. It was just happenstance—or what Program people call a higher power. You have to understand that by 1960, I was entirely cut off from the rest of the town. Remember me tellin you that once I was a member of the Rotary Club, Sam? Well, by February of ‘60, those boys wouldn’t have hired me to clean the urinals in their john. As far as Junction City was concerned, I was just another Bad Baby livin the life of a bum. People I’d known all my life would cross the street to get out of my way when they saw me comin. I had the constitution of a brass eagle in those days, but the booze was rustin me out just the same, and what the booze wasn’t takin, Ardelia Lortz was.

“I wondered more’n once if she wouldn’t turn to me for what she needed, but she never did. Maybe I was no good to her that way … but I don’t really think that was it. I don’t think she loved me—I don’t think Ardelia could love anybody—but I do think she was lonely. I think she’s lived, if you can call what she does living, a very long time, and that she’s had …”

Dave trailed off. His crooked fingers drummed restlessly on his knees and his eyes sought the grain elevator on the horizon again, as if for comfort.

“Companions seems like the word that comes closest to fittin. I think she’s had companions for some of her long life, but I don’t think she’d had one for a very long time when she came to Junction City. Don’t ask what she said to make me feel that way, because I don’t remember. It’s lost, like so much of the rest. But I’m pretty sure it’s true. And she had me tapped for the job. I’m pretty sure I would have gone with her, too, if she hadn’t been found out.”

“Who found her out, Dave?” Naomi asked, leaning forward. “Who?”

“Deputy Sheriff John Power. In those days, the Homestead County sheriff was Norman Beeman, and Norm’s the best argument I know for why sheriffs should be appointed rather than elected. The voters gave him the job when he got back to Junction City in ‘45 with a suitcase full of medals he’d won when Patton’s army was drivin into Germany. He was a hell of a scrapper, no one could take that away from him, but as county sheriff he wasn’t worth a fart in a windstorm. What he had was the biggest, whitest smile you ever saw, and a load of bullshit two mules wide. And he was a Republican, of course. That’s always been the most important thing in Homestead County. I think Norm would be gettin elected still if he hadn’t dropped dead of a stroke in Hughie’s Barber Shop in the summer of 1963. I remember that real clear; by then Ardelia had been gone awhile and I’d come around a little bit.

“There were two secrets to Norm’s success—other than that big grin and the line of bullshit, I mean. First, he was honest. So far as I know, he never took a dime. Second, he always made sure he had at least one deputy sheriff under him who could think fast and didn’t have no interest in runnin for the top job himself. He always played square with those fellows; every one of them got a rock-solid recommendation when he was ready to move on and move up. Norm took care of his own. I think, if you looked, you’d find there are six or eight town police chiefs and State Police colonels scattered

across the Midwest who spent two or three years here in Junction City, shovelling shit for Norm Beeman.

“Not John Power, though. He’s dead. If you looked up his obituary, it’d say he died of a heart attack, although he wasn’t yet thirty years old and with none of the bad habits that cause people’s tickers to seize up early sometimes. I know the truth—it wasn’t a heart attack killed John any more than it was a heart attack that killed Lavin. She killed him.”

“How do you know that, Dave?” Sam asked.

“I know because there were supposed to be three children killed in the Library on that last day.”

Dave’s voice was still calm, but Sam heard the terror this man had lived with so long running just below the surface like a low-voltage electrical charge. Supposing that even half of what Dave had told them this afternoon was true, then he must have lived these last thirty years with terrors beyond Sam’s capacity to imagine. No wonder he had used a bottle to keep the worst of them at bay.

“Two did die—Patsy Harrigan and Tom Gibson. The third was to be my price of admission to whatever circus it is that Ardelia Lortz is ringmaster of. That third was the one she really wanted, because she was the one who turned the spotlight on Ardelia just when Ardelia most needed to operate in the dark. That third had to be mine, because that one wasn’t allowed to come to the Library anymore, and Ardelia couldn’t be sure of gettin near her. That third Bad Baby was Tansy Power, Deputy Power’s daughter.”

“You aren’t talking about Tansy Ryan, are you?” Naomi asked, and her voice was almost pleading.

“Yeah, I am. Tansy Ryan from the post office, Tansy Ryan who goes to meetins with us, Tansy Ryan who used to be Tansy Power. A lot of the kids who used to come to Ardelia’s Story Hours are in AA around these parts, Sarah—make of it what you will. In the summer of 1960,

I came very close to killin Tansy Power … and that's not the worst of it. I only wish it were."

8

Naomi excused herself, and after several minutes had dragged by, Sam got up to go after her.

"Let her be," Dave said. "She's a wonderful woman, Sam, but she needs a little time to put herself back in order. You would, too, if you found out that one of the members of the most important group in your life once came close to murderin your closest friend. Let her abide. She'll be back—Sarah's strong."

A few minutes later, she did come back. She had washed her face—the hair at her temples was still wet and slick—and she was carrying a tray with three glasses of iced tea on it.

"Ah, we're getting down to the hard stuff at last, ain't we, dear?" Dave said.

Naomi did her best to return his smile. "You bet. I just couldn't hold out any longer."

Sam thought her effort was better than good; he thought it was noble. All the same, the ice was talking to the glasses in brittle, chattery phrases. Sam rose again and took the tray from her unsteady hands. She looked at him gratefully.

"Now," she said, sitting down. "Finish, Dave. Tell it to the end."

9

"A lot of what's left is stuff she told me," Dave resumed, "because by then I wasn't in a position to see anything that went on first hand. Ardelia told me sometime late in '59 that I wasn't to come around the Public Library anymore. If she saw me in there, she said she'd turn me out, and if I hung around outside, she'd sic the cops on me. She

said I was gettin too seedy, and talk would start if I was seen goin in there anymore.

" 'Talk about you and me?' I asked. 'Ardelia, who'd believe it?'

" 'Nobody,' she said. 'It's not talk about you and me that concerns me, you idiot.'

" 'Well then, what does?'

" 'Talk about you and the children,' she said. I guess that was the first time I really understood how low I'd fallen. You've seen me low in the years since we started goin to the AA meetins together, Sarah, but you've never seen me that low. I'm glad, too.

"That left her house. It was the only place I was allowed to see her, and the only time I was allowed to come was long after dark. She told me not to come by the road any closer than the Orday farm. After that I was to cut through the fields. She told me she'd know if I tried to cheat on that, and I believed her—when those silver eyes of hers turned red, Ardelia saw everything. I'd usually show up sometime between eleven o'clock and one in the morning, dependin on how much I'd had to drink, and I was usually frozen almost to the bone. I can't tell you much about those months, but I can tell you that in 1959 and 1960 the state of Iowa had a damned cold winter. There were lots of nights when I believe a sober man would have frozen to death out there in those cornfields.

"There wasn't no problem on the night I want to tell you about next, though—it must have been July of 1960 by then, and it was hotter than the hinges of hell. I remember how the moon looked that night, bloated and red, hangin over the fields. It seemed like every dog in Homestead County was yarkin up at that moon.

"Walkin into Ardelia's house that night was like walkin under the skirt of a cyclone. That week—that whole month, I guess—she'd been slow and sleepy, but not that night. That night she was wide awake, and she was in a fury. I hadn't seen her that way since the night after

Mr. Lavin told her to take the Little Red Ridin Hood poster down because it was scarin the children. At first she didn't even know I was there. She went back and forth through the downstairs, naked as the day she was born—if she ever was born—with her head down and her hands rolled into fists. She was madder'n a bear with a sore ass. She usually wore her hair up in an old-maidy bun when she was at home, but it was down when I let myself in through the kitchen door and she was walkin so fast it went flyin out behind her. I could hear it makin little crackly sounds, like it was full of static electricity. Her eyes were red as blood and glowin like those railroad lamps they used to put out in the old days when the tracks were blocked someplace up the line, and they seemed to be poppin right out of her face. Her body was oiled with sweat, and bad as I was myself, I could smell her; she stank like a bobcat in heat. I remember I could see big oily drops rollin down her bosom and her belly. Her hips and thighs shone with it. It was one of those still, muggy nights we get out here in the summer sometimes, when the air smells green and sits on your chest like a pile of junk iron, and it seems like there's cornsilk in every breath you pull in. You wish it would thunder and lightnin and pour down a gusher on nights like that, but it never does. You wish the wind would blow, at least, and not just because it would cool you off if it did, but because it would make the sound of the corn a little easier to bear … the sound of it pushin itself up out of the ground all around you, soundin like an old man with arthritis tryin to get out of bed in the mornin without wakin his wife.

"Then I noticed she was scared as well as mad this time—someone had really looped the fear of God into her. And the change in her was speedin up. Whatever it was that happened to her, it had knocked her into a higher gear. She didn't look older, exactly; she looked less there. Her hair had started to look finer, like a baby's hair. You could see her scalp through it. And her skin looked like it was startin to grow its own skin—this fine, misty webbing over her cheeks, around her nostrils, at the corners of her eyes, between her fingers. Wherever there was a fold in the skin, that was where you could see it best. It fluttered a little as she walked. You want to hear something crazy? When the County Fair comes to town these days, I can't bear

to go near the cotton-candy stands on the midway. You know the machine they make it with? Looks like a doughnut and goes round and round, and the man sticks in a paper cone and winds the pink sugar up on it? That's what Ardelia's skin was starting to look like—those fine strands of spun sugar. I think I know now what I was seein. She was doin what caterpillars do when they go to sleep. She was spinnin a cocoon around herself.

"I stood in the doorway for some time, watchin her go back and forth. She didn't notice me for a long while. She was too busy rollin around in whatever bed of nettles it was she'd stumbled into. Twice she hammered her fist against a wall and smashed all the way through it—paper, plaster, and lath. It sounded like breakin bones, but it didn't seem to do her no hurt at all, and there was no blood. She screamed each time, too, but not with pain. What I heard was the sound of a pissed-off she-cat … but, like I said, there was fear underneath her anger. And what she screamed was that deputy's name.

" 'John Power!' she'd scream, and whack! Right through the wall her fist would go. 'God damn you, John Power! I'll teach you to stay out of my business! You want to look at me? Fine! But I'll teach you how to do it! I'll teach you, little baby of' mine!' Then she'd walk on, so fast she was almost runnin, and her bare feet'd come down so hard they shook the whole damn house, it seemed like. She'd be mutterin to herself while she walked. Then her lip would curl, her eyes would glare redder'n ever, and whack! would go her fist, right through the wall and a little puff of plaster dust comin out through the hole. 'John Power, you don't dare!' she'd snarl. 'You don't dare cross me!'

"But you only had to look into her face to know she was afraid he did dare. And if you'd known Deputy Power, you'd have known she was right to be worried. He was smart, and he wasn't afraid of nothing. He was a good deputy and a bad man to cross.

"She got into the kitchen doorway on her fourth or fifth trip through the house, and all at once she saw me. Her eyes glared into mine, and her mouth began to stretch out into that horn shape—only now it was all coated with those spidery, smoky threads—and I thought I

was dead. If she couldn't lay hands on John Power, she'd have me in his place.

"She started toward me and I slid down the kitchen door in a kind of puddle. She saw that and she stopped. The red light went out of her eyes. She changed in the wink of an eye. She looked and spoke as if I'd come into a fancy cocktail party she was throwin instead of walking into her house at midnight to find her rammin around naked and smashin holes in the walls.

" 'Davey!' she says. 'I'm so glad you're here! Have a drink. In fact, have two!'

"She wanted to kill me—I saw it in her eyes—but she needed me, and not just for a companion no more, neither. She needed me to kill Tansy Power. She knew she could take care of the cop, but she wanted him to know his daughter was dead before she did him. For that she needed me.

" 'There isn't much time,' she said. 'Do you know this Deputy Power?'

"I said I ought to. He'd arrested me for public drunkenness half a dozen times.

" 'What do you make of him?' she asked.

" 'He's got a lot of hard bark on him,' I says.

" 'Well, fuck him and fuck you, too!'

"I didn't say nothing to that. It seemed wiser not to.

" 'That goddam squarehead came into the Library this afternoon and asked to see my references. And he kept asking me questions. He wanted to know where I'd been before I came to Junction City, where I went to school, where I grew up. You should have seen the way he

looked at me, Davey—but I'll teach him the right way to look at a lady like me. You see if I don't.'

" 'You don't want to make a mistake with Deputy Power,' I said. 'I don't think he's afraid of anything.'

" 'Yes, he is—he's afraid of me. He just doesn't know it yet,' she said, but I caught the gleam of fear in her eyes again. He had picked the worst possible time to start askin questions, you see—she was gettin ready for her time of sleeping and change, and it weakened her somehow."

"Did Ardelia tell you how he caught on?" Naomi asked.

"It's obvious," Sam said. "His daughter told him."

"No," Dave said. "I didn't ask—I didn't dare, not with her in the mood she was in—but I don't think Tansy told her dad. I don't think she could have—not in so many words, at least. When they left the Children's Room, you see, they'd forget all about what she'd told them … and done to them in there. And it wasn't just forgetting, either—she put other memories, false memories, into their heads, so they'd go home just as jolly as could be. Most of their parents thought Ardelia was just about the greatest thing that ever happened to the Junction City Library.

"I think it was what she took from Tansy that put her father's wind up, and I think Deputy Power must have done a good deal of investigating before he ever went to see Ardelia at the Library. I don't know what difference he noticed in Tansy, because the kids weren't all pale and listless, like the people who get their blood sucked in the vampire movies, and there weren't any marks on their necks. But she was takin something from them, just the same, and John Power saw it or sensed it."

"Even if he did see something, why did it make him suspicious of Ardelia?" Sam asked.

“I told you his nose was keen. I think he must have asked Tansy some questions—nothing direct, all on the slant, if you see what I mean—and the answers he got must have been just enough to point him in the right direction.. When he came to the Library that day he didn’t know anything … but he suspected something. Enough to put Ardelia on her mettle. I remember what made her the maddest—and scared her the most—was how he looked at her. ‘I’ll teach you how to look at me,’ she said. Over and over again. I’ve wondered since how long it had been since anyone looked at her with real suspicion … how long since anyone got into sniffin distance of what she was. I bet it scared her in more ways than one. I bet it made her wonder if she wasn’t finally losin her touch.”

“He might have talked to some of the other children, too,” Naomi said hesitantly. “Compared stories and got answers that didn’t quite jibe. Maybe they even saw her in different ways. The way you and Sam saw her in different ways.”

“It could be—any of those things could be. Whatever it was, he scared her into speedin up her plans.

” ‘I’ll be at the Library all day tomorrow,’ she told me. ‘I’ll make sure plenty of people see me there, too. But you—you’re going to pay a visit to Deputy Power’s house, Davey. You’re going to watch and wait until you see that child alone—I don’t think you’ll have to wait long—and then you’re going to snatch her and take her into the woods. Do whatever you want to her, but you make sure that the last thing you do is cut her throat. Cut her throat and leave her where she’ll be found. I want that bastard to know before I see him.’

“I couldn’t say nothing. It was probably just as well for me that I was tongue-tied, because anything I said she would have taken wrong, and she probably would have ripped my head off. But I only sat at her kitchen table with my drink in my hand, starin at her, and she must have taken my silence for agreement.

“After that we went into the bedroom. It was the last time. I remember thinkin I wouldn’t be able to have it off with her; that a

scared man can't get it up. But it was fine, God help me. Ardelia had that kind of magic, too. We went and went and went, and at some point I either fell asleep or just went unconscious. The next thing I remember was her pushin me out of bed with her bare feet, dumpin me right into a patch of early-morning sun. It was quarter past six, my stomach felt like an acid bath, and my head was throbbin like a swollen gum with an abscess in it.

" 'It's time for you to be about your business,' she said. 'Don't let anybody see you on your way back to town, Davey, and remember what I told you. Get her this morning. Take her into the woods and do for her. Hide until dark. If you're caught before then, there's nothing I can do for you. But if you get here, you'll be safe. I'll make sure today that there'll be a couple of kids at the Library tomorrow, even though it's closed. I've got them picked out already, the two worst little brats in town. We'll go to the Library together … they'll come … and when the rest of the fools find us, they'll think we're all dead. But you and I won't be dead, Davey; we'll be free. The joke will be on them, won't it?'

"Then she started to laugh. She sat naked on her bed with me grovellin at her feet, sick as a rat full of poison bait, and she laughed and laughed and laughed. Pretty soon her face started to change into the insect face again, that probos-thing pushin out of her face, almost like one of those Viking horns, and her eyes drawin off to the side. I knew everything in my guts was going to come up in a rush so I beat it out of there and puked into her ivy. Behind me I could her laughin … laughin … and laughin.

"I was puttin on my clothes by the side of the house when she spoke to me out the window. I didn't see her, but I heard her just fine. 'Don't let me down, Davey,' she said. 'Don't let me down, or I'll kill you. And you won't die fast.'

" 'I won't let you down, Ardelia,' I said, but I didn't turn around to see her hangin out of her bedroom window. I knew I couldn't stand to see her even one more time. I'd come to the end of my string. And still … part of me wanted to go with her even if it meant goin mad first, and

most of me thought I would go with her. Unless it was her plan to set me up somehow, to leave me holdin the bag for all of it. I wouldn't have put it past her. I wouldn't have put nothin past her.

"I set off through the corn back toward Junction City. Usually those walks would sober me up a little, and I'd sweat out the worst of the hangover. Not that day, though. Twice I had to stop to vomit, and the second time I didn't think I was goin to be able to quit. I finally did, but I could see blood all over the corn I'd stopped to kneel in, and by the time I got back to town, my head was achin worse than ever and my vision was doubled. I thought I was dyin, but I still couldn't stop thinkin about what she'd said: Do whatever you want to her, but you make sure that the last thing you do is cut her throat.

"I didn't want to hurt Tansy Power, but I thought I was goin to, just the same. I wouldn't be able to stand against what Ardelia wanted … and then I would be damned forever. And the worst thing, I thought, might be if Ardelia was tellin the truth, and I just went on livin … livin almost forever with that thing on my mind.

"In those days, there was two freight depots at the station, and a loading dock that wasn't much used on the north side of the second one. I crawled under there and fell asleep for a couple of hours. When I woke up, I felt a little better. I knew there wasn't any way I could stop her or myself, so I set out for John Power's house, to find that little girl and snatch her away. I walked right through downtown, not lookin at anyone, and all I kept thinkin over and over was, 'I can make it quick for her—I can do that, at least. I'll snap her neck in a wink and she'll never know a thing.' "

Dave produced his bandanna again and wiped his forehead with a hand which was shaking badly.

"I got as far as the five-and-dime. It's gone now, but in those days it was the last business on O'Kane Street before you got into the residential district again. I had less than four blocks to go, and I thought that when I got to the Power house, I'd see Tansy in the yard. She'd be alone … and the woods weren't far.

“Only I looked into the five-and-dime show window and what I saw stopped me cold. It was a pile of dead children, all staring eyes, tangled arms, and busted legs. I let out a little scream and clapped my hands against my mouth. I closed my eyes tight. When I looked again, I saw it was a bunch of dolls old Mrs. Seger was gettin ready to make into a display. She saw me and flapped one of em at me—get away, you old drunk. But I didn’t. I kept lookin in at those dolls. I tried to tell myself dolls were all they were; anyone could see that. But when I closed my eyes tight and then opened em again, they were dead bodies again. Mrs. Seger was settin up a bunch of little corpses in the window of the five-and-dime and didn’t even know it. It came to me that someone was tryin to send me a message, and that maybe the message was that it wasn’t too late, even then. Maybe I couldn’t stop Ardelia, but maybe I could. And even if I couldn’t, maybe I could keep from bein dragged into the pit after her.

“That was the first time I really prayed, Sarah. I prayed for strength. I didn’t want to kill Tansy Power, but it was more than that—I wanted to save them all if I could.

“I started back toward the Texaco station a block down—it was where the Piggly Wiggly is now. On the way I stopped and picked a few pebbles out of the gutter. There was a phone booth by the side of the station—and it’s still there today, now that I think of it. I got there and then realized I didn’t have a cent. As a last resort, I felt in the coin return. There was a dime in there. Ever since that morning, when somebody tells me they don’t believe there’s a God, I think of how I felt when I poked my fingers into that coin-return slot and found that tencent piece.

“I thought about calling Mrs. Power, then decided it’d be better to call the Sheriff’s Office. Someone would pass the message on to John Power, and if he was as suspicious as Ardelia seemed to think, he might take the proper steps. I closed the door of the booth and looked up the number—this was back in the days when you could sometimes still find a telephone book in a telephone booth, if you

were lucky—and then, before I dialled it, I stuck the pebbles I'd picked up in my mouth.

"John Power himself answered the phone, and I think now that's why Patsy Harrigan and Tom Gibson died … why John Power himself died … and why Ardelia wasn't stopped then and there. I expected the dispatcher, you see—it was Hannah Verrill in those days—and I'd tell her what I had to say, and she'd pass it on to the deputy.

"Instead, I heard this hard don't-fuck-with-me voice say, 'Sheriff's Office, Deputy Power speaking, how can I help you?' I almost swallowed the mouthful of pebbles I had, and for a minute I couldn't say anything.

"He goes 'Damn kids,' and I knew he was gettin ready to hang up.

" 'Wait!' I says. The pebbles made it sound like I was talkin through a mouthful of cotton. 'Don't hang up, Deputy!'

" 'Who is this?' he asked.

" 'Never mind,' I says back. 'Get your daughter out of town, if you value her, and whatever you do, don't let her near the Library. It's serious. She's in danger.'

"And then I hung up. Just like that. If Hannah had answered, I think I would have told more. I would have spoken names—Tansy's, Tom's, Patsy's … and Ardelia's, too. But he scared me—I felt like if I stayed on that line, he'd be able to look right through it and see me on the other end, standin in that booth and stinkin like a bag of used-up peaches.

"I spat the pebbles out into my palm and got out of the booth in a hurry. Her power over me was broken—makin the call had done that much, anyway—but I was in a panic. Did you ever see a bird that's flown into a garage and goes swoopin around, bashin itself against the walls, it's so crazy to get out? That's what I was like. All of a sudden I wasn't worryin about Patsy Harrigan, or Tom Gibson, or

even Tansy Power. I felt like Ardelia was the one who was lookin at me, that Ardelia knew what I'd done, and she'd be after me.

"I wanted to hide—hell, I needed to hide. I started walkin down Main Street, and by the time I got to the end, I was almost runnin. By then Ardelia had gotten all mixed up in my mind with the Library Policeman and the dark man—the one who was drivin the steamroller, and the car with Simple Simon in it. I expected to see all three of them turn onto Main Street in the dark man's old Buick, lookin for me. I got out to the railway depot and crawled under the loadin platform again. I huddled up in there, shiverin and shakin, even cryin a little, waitin for her to show up and do for me. I kept thinkin I'd look up and I'd see her face pokin under the platform's concrete skirt, her eyes all red and glaring, her mouth turnin into that horn thing.

"I crawled all the way to the back, and I found half a jug of wine under a pile of dead leaves and old spiderwebs. I'd stashed it back there God knows when and forgot all about it. I drank the wine in about three long swallows. Then I started to crawl back to the front of that space under the platform, but halfway there I passed out. When I woke up again, I thought at first that no time at all had gone by, because the light and the shadows were just about the same. Only my headache was gone, and my belly was roarin for food."

"You'd slept the clock around, hadn't you?" Naomi guessed.

"No—almost twice around. I'd made my call to the Sheriff's Office around ten o'clock on Monday mornin. When I came to under the loadin platform with that empty jug of wine still in my hand, it was just past seven on Wednesday morning. Only it wasn't sleep, not really. You have to remember that I hadn't been on an all-day drunk or even a week-long toot. I'd been roaring drunk for the best part of two years, and that wasn't all—there was Ardelia, and the Library, and the kids, and Story Hour. It was two years on a merry-go-round in hell. I think the part of my mind that still wanted to live and be sane decided the only thing to do was to pull the plug for awhile and shut down. And when I woke up, it was all over. They hadn't found the

bodies of Patsy Harrigan and Tom Gibson yet, but it was over, just the same. And I knew it even before I poked my head out from under the loadin platform. There was an empty place in me, like an empty socket in your gum after a tooth falls out. Only that empty place was in my mind. And I understood. She was gone. Ardelia was gone.

“I crawled out from under and almost fainted again from hunger. I saw Brian Kelly, who used to be freightmaster back in those days. He was countin sacks of somethin on the other loadin platform and makin marks on a clipboard. I managed to walk over to him. He saw me, and an expression of disgust came over his face. There had been a time when we’d bought each other drinks in The Domino—a roadhouse that burned down long before your time, Sam—but those days were long gone. All he saw was a dirty, filthy drunk with leaves and dirt in his hair, a drunk that stank of piss and Old Duke.

” ‘Get outta here, daddy-0, or I’ll call the cops,’ he says.

“That day was another first for me. One thing about bein a drunk—you’re always breakin new ground. That was the first time I ever begged for money. I asked him if he could spare a quarter so I could get a cuppa joe and some toast at the Route 32 Diner. He dug into his pocket and brought out some change. He didn’t hand it to me; he just tossed it in my general direction. I had to get down in the cinders and grub for it. I don’t think he threw the money to shame me. He just didn’t want to touch me. I don’t blame him, either.

“When he saw I had the money he said, ‘Get in the wind, daddy-0. And if I see you down here again, I will call the cops.’

” ‘You bet,’ I said, and went on my way. He never even knew who I was, and I’m glad.

“About halfway to the diner, I passed one of those newspaper boxes, and I seen that day’s Gazette inside. That was when I realized I’d been out of it two days instead of just one. The date didn’t mean much to me—by then I wasn’t much interested in catendars—but I knew it was Monday morning when Ardelia booted me out of her bed

for the last time and I made that call. Then I saw the headlines. I'd slept through just about the biggest day for news in Junction City's history, it seemed like. SEARCH FOR MISSING CHILDREN CONTINUES, it said on one side. There was pictures of Tom Gibson and Patsy Harrigan. The headline on the other side read COUNTY CORONER SAYS DEPUTY DIED OF HEART ATTACK. Below that one there was a picture of John Power.

"I took one of the papers and left a nickel on top of the pile, which was how it was done back in the days when people still mostly trusted each other. Then I sat down, right there on the curb, and read both stories. The one about the kids was shorter. The thing was, nobody was very worried about em just yet—Sheriff Beeman was treatin it as a runaway case.

"She'd picked the right kids, all right; those two really were brats, and birds of a feather flock together. They was always chummin around. They lived on the same block, and the story said they'd gotten in trouble the week before when Patsy Harrigan's mother caught em smokin cigarettes in the back shed. The Gibson boy had a no-account uncle with a farm in Nebraska, and Norm Beeman was pretty sure that's where they were headed—I told you he wasn't much in the brains department. But how could he know? And he was right about one thing—they weren't the kind of kids who fall down wells or get drownded swimmin in the Proverbia River. But I knew where they were, and I knew Ardelia had beaten the clock again. I knew they'd find all three of them together, and later on that day, they did. I'd saved Tansy Power, and I'd saved myself, but I couldn't find much consolation in that.

"The story about Deputy Power was longer. It was the second one, because Power had been found late Monday afternoon. His death'd been reported in Tuesday's paper, but not the cause. He'd been found slumped behind the wheel of his cruiser about a mile west of the Orday farm. That was a place I knew pretty well, because it was where I usually left the road and went into the corn on my way to Ardelia's.

“I could fill in the blanks pretty well. John Power wasn’t a man to let the grass grow under his feet, and he must have headed out to Ardelia’s house almost as soon as I hung up that pay telephone beside the Texaco station. He might have called his wife first, and told her to keep Tansy in the house until she heard from him. That wasn’t in the paper, of course, but I bet he did.

“When he got there, she must have known that I’d told on her and the game was up. So she killed him. She … she hugged him to death, the way she did Mr. Lavin. He had a lot of hard bark on him, just like I told her, but a maple tree has hard bark on it, too, and you can still get the sap to run out of it, if you drive your plug in deep enough. I imagine she drove hers plenty deep.

“When he was dead, she must have driven him in his own cruiser out to the place where he was found. Even though that road—Carson Road—wasn’t much travelled back then, it still took a heap of guts to do that. But what else could she do? Call the Sheriff’s Office and tell em John Power’d had a heart attack while he was talkin to her? That would have started up a lot more questions at the very time when she didn’t want nobody thinkin of her at all. And, you know, even Norm Beeman would have been curious about why John Power had been in such a tearin hurry to talk to the city librarian.

“So she drove him out Garson Road almost to the Orday farm, parked his cruiser in the ditch, and then she went back to her own house the same way I always went—through the corn.”

Dave looked from Sam to Naomi and then back to Sam again.

“I’ll bet I know what she did next, too. I’ll bet she started lookin for me.

“I don’t mean she jumped in her car and started drivin around Junction City, pokin her head into all my usual holes; she didn’t have to. Time and time again over those years she would show up where I was when she wanted me, or she would send one of the kids with a folded-over note. Didn’t matter if I was sittin in a pile of boxes behind

the barber shop or fishin out at Grayling's Stream or if I was just drunk behind the freight depot, she knew where I was to be found. That was one of her talents.

"Not that last time, though—the time she wanted to find me most of all—and I think I know why. I told you that I didn't fall asleep or even black out after makin that call; it was more like goin into a coma, or being dead. And when she turned whatever eye she had in her mind outward, lookin for me, it couldn't see me. I don't know how many times that day and that night her eye might have passed right over where I lay, and I don't want to know. I only know if she'd found me, it wouldn't have been any kid with a folded-over note that showed up. It would have been her, and I can't even imagine what she would have done to me for interfering with her plans the way I did.

"She probably would have found me anyway if she'd had more time, but she didn't. Her plans were laid, that was one thing. And then there was the way her change was speedin up. Her time of sleep was comin on, and she couldn't waste time lookin for me. Besides, she must have known she'd have another chance, further up the line. And now her chance has come."

"I don't understand what you mean," Sam said.

"Of course you do," Dave replied. "Who took the books that have put you in this jam? Who sent em to the pulper, along with your newspapers? I did. Don't you think she knows that?"

"Do you think that she still wants you?" Naomi asked.

"Yes, but not the way she did. Now she only wants to kill me." His head turned and his bright, sorrowful eyes gazed into Sam's. "You're the one she wants now."

Sam laughed uneasily. "I'm sure she was a firecracker thirty years ago," he said, "but the lady has aged. She's really not my type."

“I guess you don’t understand after all,” Dave said. “She doesn’t want to fuck you, Sam; she wants to be you.”

10

After a few moments Sam said, “Wait. Just hold on a second.”

“You’ve heard me, but you haven’t taken it to heart the way you need to,” Dave told him. His voice was patient but weary; terribly weary. “So let me tell you a little more.

“After Ardelia killed John Power, she put him far enough away so she wouldn’t be the first one to fall under suspicion. Then she went ahead and opened the Library that afternoon, just like always. Part of it was because a guilty person looks more suspicious if they swerve away from their usual routines, but that wasn’t all of it. Her change was right upon her, and she had to have those children’s lives. Don’t even think about asking me why, because I don’t know. Maybe she’s like a bear that has to stuff itself before it goes into hibernation. All I can be sure of is that she had to make sure there was a Story Hour that Monday afternoon … and she did.

“Sometime during that Story Hour, when all the kids were sittin around her in the trance she could put em into, she told Tom and Patsy that she wanted em to come to the Library on Tuesday morning, even though the Library was closed Tuesdays and Thursdays in the summer. They did, and she did for em, and then she went to sleep … that sleep that looks so much like death. And now you come along, Sam, thirty years later. You know me, and Ardelia still owes me a settling up, so that is a start … but there’s something a lot better than that. You also know about the Library Police.”

“I don’t know how—”

“No, you don’t know how you know, and that makes you even better. Because secrets that are so bad that we even have to hide them from ourselves … for someone like Ardelia Lortz, those are the best

secrets of all. Plus, look at the bonuses—you're young, you're single, and you have no close friends. That's true, isn't it?"

"I would have said so until today," Sam said after a moment's thought. "I would have said the only good friends I made since I came to Junction City have moved away. But I consider you and Naomi my friends, Dave. I consider you very good friends indeed. The best."

Naomi took Sam's hand and squeezed it briefly.

"I appreciate that," Dave said, "but it doesn't matter, because she intends to do for me and Sarah as well. The more the merrier, as she told me once. She has to take lives to get through her time of change … and waking up must be a time of change for her, too."

"You're saying that she means to possess Sam somehow, aren't you?" Naomi asked.

"I think I mean a little more than that, Sarah. I think she means to destroy whatever there is inside Sam that makes him Sam—I think she means to clean him out the way a kid cleans out a pumpkin to make a Halloween jack-o-lantern, and then she's going to put him on like you'd put on a suit of new clothes. And after that happens—if it does—he'll go on lookin like a man named Sam Peebles, but he won't be a man anymore, no more than Ardelia Lortz was ever a woman. There's somethin not human, some it hidin inside her skin, and I think I always knew that. It's inside … but it's forever an outsider. Where did Ardelia Lortz come from? Where did she live before she came to Junction City? I think, if you checked, you'd find that everything she put on the references she showed Mr. Lavin was a lie, and that nobody in town really knew. I think it was John Power's curiosity about that very thing that sealed his fate. But I think there was a real Ardelia Lortz at one time … in Pass Christian, Mississippi … or Harrisburg, Pennsylvania … or Portland, Maine … and the it took her over and put her on. Now she wants to do it again. If we let that happen, I think that later this year, in some other town, in San Francisco, California … or Butte, Montana … or

Kingston, Rhode Island … a man named Sam Peebles will show up. Most people will like him. Children in particular will like him … although they may be afraid of him, too, in some way they don't understand and can't talk about.

"And, of course, he will be a librarian."

# CHAPTER TWELVE

# BY AIR TO DES MOINES

1

Sam looked at his wristwatch and was astounded to see it was almost 3:00 P.M. Midnight was only nine hours away, and then the tall man with the silver eyes would be back. Or Ardelia Lortz would be back. Or maybe both of them together.

“What do you think I should do, Dave? Go out to the local graveyard and find Ardelia’s body and pound a stake through her heart?”

“A good trick if you could do it,” he replied, “since the lady was cremated.”

“Oh,” Sam said. He settled back into his chair with a little helpless sigh.

Naomi took his hand again. “In any case, you won’t be doing anything alone,” she said firmly. “Dave says she means to do us as well as you, but that’s almost beside the point. Friends stand by when there’s trouble. That’s the point. What else are they for?”

Sam lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Thank you—but I don’t know what you can do. Or me, either. There doesn’t seem to be anything to do. Unless …” He looked at Dave hopefully. “Unless I ran?”

Dave shook his head. “She—or it—sees. I told you that. I guess you could drive most of the way to Denver before midnight if you really put your foot down and the cops didn’t catch you, but Ardelia Lortz would be right there to greet you when you got out of your car. Or you’d look over in some dark mile and see the Library Policeman sittin next to you on the seat.”

The thought of that—the white face and silver eyes, illuminated only by the green glow of the dashboard lights—made Sam shiver.

“What, then?”

“I think you both know what has to be done first,” Dave said. He drank the last of his iced tea and then set the glass on the porch. “Just think a minute, and you’ll see.”

Then they all looked out toward the grain elevator for awhile. Sam’s mind was a roaring confusion; all he could catch hold of were isolated snatches of Dave Duncan’s story and the voice of the Library Policeman, with his strange little lisp, saying I don’t want to hear your sick ecthcuses … You have until midnight … then I come again.

It was on Naomi’s face that light suddenly dawned.

“Of course!” she said. “How stupid! But …”

She asked Dave a question, and Sam’s own eyes widened in understanding.

“There’s a place in Des Moines, as I recall,” Dave said. “Pell’s. If any place can help, it’ll be them. Why don’t you make a call, Sarah?”

2

When she was gone, Sam said: “Even if they can help, I don’t think we could get there before the close of business hours. I can try, I suppose …”

“I never expected you’d drive,” Dave said. “No—you and Sarah have to go out to the Proverbia Airport.”

Sam blinked. “I didn’t know there was an airport in Proverbia.”

Dave smiled. “Well … I guess that is stretchin it a little. There’s a half-mile of packed dirt Stan Soames calls a runway. Stan’s front

parlor is the office of Western Iowa Air Charter. You and Sarah talk to Stan. He's got a little Navajo. He'll take you to Des Moines and have you back by eight o'clock, nine at the latest."

"What if he's not there?"

"Then we'll try to figure out something else. I think he will be, though. The only thing Stan loves more than flyin is farm-in, and come the spring of the year, farmers don't stray far. He'll probably tell you he can't take you because of his garden, come to that—he'll say you shoulda made an appointment a few days in advance so he could get the Carter boy to come over and babysit his back ninety. If he says that, you tell him Dave Duncan sent you, and Dave says it's time to pay for the baseballs. Can you remember that?"

"Yes, but what does it mean?"

"Nothing that concerns this business," Dave said. "He'll take you, that's the important thing. And when he lands you again, never mind comin here. You and Sarah drive straight into town."

Sam felt dread begin to seep into his body. "To the Library."

"That's right."

"Dave, what Naomi said about friends is all very sweet—and maybe even true—but I think I have to take it from here. Neither one of you has to be a part of this. I was the one responsible for stirring her up again—"

Dave reached out and seized Sam's wrist in a grip of surprising strength. "If you really think that, you haven't heard a word I've said. You're not responsible for anything. I carry the deaths of John Power and two little children on my conscience—not to mention the terrors I don't know how many other children may have suffered—but I'm not responsible, either. Not really. I didn't set out to be Ardelia Lortz's companion any more than I set out to be a thirty-year drunk. Both things just happened. But she bears me a grudge, and she will be

back for me, Sam. If I'm not with you when she comes, she'll visit me first. And I won't be the only one she visits. Sarah was right, Sam. She and I don't have to stay close to protect you; the three of us have to stay close to protect each other. Sarah knows about Ardelia, don't you see? If Ardelia don't know that already, she will as soon as she shows up tonight. She plans to go on from Junction City as you, Sam. Do you think she'll leave anybody behind who knows her new identity?"

"But—"

"But nothin," Dave said. "In the end it comes down to a real simple choice, one even an old souse like me can understand: we share this together or we're gonna die at her hands."

He leaned forward.

"If you want to save Sarah from Ardelia, Sam, forget about bein a hero and start rememberin who your Library Policeman was. You have to. Because I don't believe Ardelia can take just anyone. There's only one coincidence in this business, but it's a killer: once you had a Library Policeman, too. And you have to get that memory back."

"I've tried," Sam said, and knew that was a lie. Because every time he turned his mind toward

(come with me, son … I'm a poleethman)

that voice, it shied away. He tasted red licorice, which he had never eaten and always hated—and that was all.

"You have to try harder," Dave said, "or there's no hope."

Sam drew in a deep breath and let it out. Dave's hand touched the back of his neck, then squeezed it gently.

“It’s the key to this,” Dave said. “You may even find it’s the key to everything that has troubled you in your life. To your loneliness and your sadness.”

Sam looked at him, startled. Dave smiled.

“Oh yes,” he said. “You’re lonely, you’re sad, and you’re closed off from other people. You talk a good game, but you don’t walk what you talk. Up until today I wasn’t nothing to you but Dirty Dave who comes to get your papers once a month, but a man like me sees a lot, Sam. And it takes one to know one.”

“The key to everything,” Sam mused. He wondered if there really were such conveniences, outside of popular novels and movies-of-the-week populated with Brave Psychiatrists and Troubled Patients.

“It’s true,” Dave persisted. “Such things are dreadful in their power, Sam. I don’t blame you for not wantin to search for it. But you can, you know, if you want to. You have that choice.”

“Is that something else you learn in AA, Dave?”

He smiled. “Well, they teach it there,” he said, “but that’s one I guess I always knew.”

Naomi came out onto the porch again. She was smiling and her eyes were sparkling.

“Ain’t she some gorgeous?” Dave asked quietly.

“Yes,” Sam said. “She sure is.” He was clearly aware of two things: that he was falling in love, and that Dave Duncan knew it.

3

“The man took so long checking that I got worried,” she said, “but we’re in luck.”

“Good,” Dave said. “You two are goin out to see Stan Soames, then. Does the Library still close at eight during the school year, Sarah?”

“Yes—I’m pretty sure it does.”

“I’ll be payin a visit there around five o’clock, then. I’ll meet you in back, where the loadin platform is, between eight and nine. Nearer eight would be better—n safer. For Christ’s sake, try not to be late.”

“How will we get in?” Sam asked.

“I’ll take care of that, don’t worry. You just get goin.”

“Maybe we ought to call this guy Soames from here,” Sam said. “Make sure he’s available.”

Dave shook his head. “Won’t do no good. Stan’s wife left him for another man four years ago—claimed he was married to his work, which always makes a good excuse for a woman who’s got a yen to make a change. There aren’t any kids. He’ll be out in his field. Go on, now. Daylight’s wastin.”

Naomi bent over and kissed Dave’s cheek. “Thank you for telling us,” she said.

“I’m glad I did it. It’s made me feel ever so much better.”

Sam started to offer Dave his hand, then thought better of it. He bent over the old man and hugged him.

4

Stan Soames was a tall, rawboned man with angry eyes burning out of a gentle face, a man who already had his summer sunburn although calendar spring had not yet run its first month. Sam and Naomi found him in the field behind his house, just as Dave had told them they would. Seventy yards north of Soames’s idling, mud-splashed Rototiller, Sam could see what looked like a dirt road … but since there was a small airplane with a tarpaulin thrown over it at

one end and a windsock fluttering from a rusty pole at the other, he assumed it was the Proverbia Airport's single runway.

"Can't do it," Soames said. "I got fifty acres to turn this week and nobody but me to do it. You should have called a couple-three days ahead."

"It's an emergency," Naomi said. "Really, Mr. Soames."

He sighed and spread his arms, as if to encompass his entire farm. "You want to know what an emergency is?" he asked. "What the government's doing to farms like this and people like me. That's a dad-ratted emergency. Look, there's a fellow over in Cedar Rapids who might—"

"We don't have time to go to Cedar Rapids," Sam said. "Dave told us you'd probably say—"

"Dave?" Stan Soames turned to him with more interest than he had heretofore shown. "Dave who?"

"Duncan. He told me to say it's time to pay for the baseballs."

Soames's brows drew down. His hands rolled themselves up into fists, and for just a moment Sam thought the man was going to slug him. Then, abruptly, he laughed and shook his head.

"After all these years, Dave Duncan pops outta the woodwork with his IOU rolled up in his hand! Goddam!"

He began walking toward the Rototiller. He turned his head to them as he did, yelling to make himself heard over the machine's enthusiastic blatting. "Walk on over to the airplane while I put this goddam thing away! Mind the boggy patch just on the edge of the runway, or it'll suck your damned shoes off!"

Soames threw the Rototiller into gear. It was hard to tell with all the noise, but Sam thought he was still laughing. "I thought that drunk

old bastard was gonna die before I could quit evens with him!”

He roared past them toward his barn, leaving Sam and Naomi looking at each other.

“What was.that all about?” Naomi asked.

“I don’t know—Dave wouldn’t tell me.” He offered her his arm. “Madam, will you walk with me?”

She took it. “Thank you, sir.”

They did their best to skirt the mucky place Stan Soames had told them about, but didn’t entirely make it. Naomi’s foot went in to the ankle, and the mud pulled her loafer off when she jerked her foot back. Sam bent down, got it, and then swept Naomi into his arms.

“Sam, no!” she cried, startled into laughter. “You’ll break your back!”

“Nope,” he said. “You’re light.”

She was … and his head suddenly felt light, too. He carried her up the graded slope of the runway to the airplane and set her on her feet. Naomi’s eyes looked up into his with calmness and a sort of luminous clarity. Without thinking, he bent and kissed her. After a moment, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

When he looked at her again, he was slightly out of breath. Naomi was smiling.

“You can call me Sarah anytime you want to,” she said. Sam laughed and kissed her again.

5

Riding in the Navajo behind Stan Soames was like riding piggyback on a pogo stick. They bounced and jounced on uneasy tides of spring air, and Sam thought once or twice that they might cheat

Ardelia in a way not even that strange creature could have foreseen: by spreading themselves all over an Iowa cornfield.

Stan Soames didn't seem to be worried, however; he bawled out such hoary old ballads as "Sweet Sue" and "The Sidewalks of New York" at the top of his voice as the Navajo lurched toward Des Moines. Naomi was transfixed, peering out of her window at the roads and fields and houses below with her hands cupped to the sides of her face to cut the glare.

At last Sam tapped her on the shoulder. "You act like you've never flown before!" he yelled over the mosquito-drone of the engine.

She turned briefly toward him and grinned like an enraptured schoolgirl. "I haven't!" she said, and returned at once to the view.

"I'll be damned," Sam said, and then tightened his seatbelt as the plane took another of its gigantic, bucking leaps.

6

It was twenty past four when the Navajo skittered down from the sky and landed at County Airport in Des Moines. Soames taxied to the Civil Air Terminal, killed the engine, then opened the door. Sam was a little amused at the twinge of jealousy he felt as Soames put his hands on Naomi's waist to help her down.

"Thank you!" she gasped. Her cheeks were now deeply flushed and her eyes were dancing. "That was wonderful!"

Soames smiled, and suddenly he looked forty instead of sixty. "I've always liked it myself," he said, "and it beats spendin an afternoon abusin my kidneys on that Rototiller … I have to admit that." He looked from Naomi to Sam. "Can you tell me what this big emergency is? I'll help if I can—I owe Dave a little more'n a puddle-jump from Proverbia to Des Moines and back again."

“We need to go into town,” Sam said. “To a place called Pell’s Book Shop. They’re holding a couple of books for us.”

Stan Soames looked at them, eyes wide. “Come again?”

“Pell’s—”

“I know Pell’s,” he said. “New books out front, old books in the back. Biggest Selection in the Midwest, the ads say. What I’m tryin to get straight is this: you took me away from my garden and got me to fly you all the way across the state to get a couple of books?”

“They’re very important books, Mr. Soames,” Naomi said. She touched one of his rough farmer’s hands. “Right now, they’re just about the most important things in my life … or Sam’s.”

“Dave’s, too,” Sam said.

“If you told me what was going on,” Soames asked, “would I be apt to understand it?”

“No,” Sam said.

“No,” Naomi agreed, and smiled a little.

Soames blew a deep sigh out of his wide nostrils and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his pants. “Well, I guess it don’t matter that much, anyway. I’ve owed Dave this one for ten years, and there have been times when it’s weighed on my mind pretty heavy.” He brightened. “And I got to give a pretty young lady her first airplane ride. The only thing prettier than a girl after her first plane ride is a girl after her first—”

He stopped abruptly and scuffed at the tar with his shoes. Naomi looked discreetly off toward the horizon. Just then a fuel truck drove up. Soames walked over quickly and fell into deep conversation with the driver.

Sam said, “You had quite an effect on our fearless pilot.”

“Maybe I did, at that,” she said. “I feel wonderful, Sam. Isn’t that crazy?”

He stroked an errant lock of her hair back into place behind her ear. “It’s been a crazy day. The craziest day I can ever remember.”

But the inside voice spoke then—it drifted up from that deep place where great objects were still in motion—and told him that wasn’t quite true. There was one other that had been just as crazy. More crazy. The day of The Black Arrow and the red licorice.

That strange, stifled panic rose in him again, and he closed his ears to that voice.

If you want to save Sarah from Ardelia, Sam, forget about bein a hero and start rememberin who your Library Policeman was.

I don’t! I can’t! I … I mustn’t!

You have to get that memory back.

I mustn’t! It’s not allowed!

You have to try harder or there’s no hope.

“I really have to go home now,” Sam Peebles muttered.

Naomi, who had strolled away to look at the Navajo’s wing-flaps, heard him and came back.

“Did you say something?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter.”

“You look very pale.”

“I’m very tense,” he said edgily.

Stan Soames returned. He cocked a thumb at the driver of the fuel truck. “Dawson says I can borrow his car. I’ll run you into town.”

“We could call a cab—” Sam began.

Naomi was shaking her head. “Time’s too short for that,” she said. “Thank you very much, Mr. Soames.”

“Aw, hell,” Soames said, and then flashed her a little-boy grin. “You go on and call me Stan. Let’s go. Dawson says there’s low pressure movin in from Colorado. I want to get back to Junction City before the rain starts.”

7

Pell’s was a big barnlike structure on the edge of the Des Moines business district—the very antithesis of the mall-bred chain bookstore. Naomi asked for Mike. She was directed to the customer-service desk, a kiosk which stood like a customs booth between the section which sold new books and the larger one which sold old books.

“My name is Naomi Higgins. I talked to you on the telephone earlier?”

“Ah, yes,” Mike said. He rummaged on one of his cluttered shelves and brought out two books. One was Best Loved Poems of the American People; the other was The Speaker’s Companion, edited by Kent Adelmen. Sam Peebles had never been so glad to see two books in his life, and he found himself fighting an impulse to snatch them from the clerk’s hands and hug them to his chest.

“Best Loved Poems is easy,” Mike said, “but The Speaker’s Companion is out of print. I’d guess Pell’s is the only bookshop between here and Denver with a copy as nice as this one … except for library copies, of course.”

“They both look great to me,” Sam said with deep feeling.

“Is it a gift?”

“Sort of.”

“I can have it gift-wrapped for you, if you like; it would only take a second.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Naomi said.

The combined price of the books was twenty-two dollars and fifty-seven cents.

“I can’t believe it,” Sam said as they left the store and walked toward the place where Stan Soames had parked the borrowed car. He held the bag tightly in one hand. “I can’t believe it’s as simple as just … just returning the books.”

“Don’t worry,” Naomi said. “It won’t be.”

8

As they drove back to the airport, Sam asked Stan Soames if he could tell them about Dave and the baseballs.

“If it’s personal, that’s okay. I’m just curious.”

Soames glanced at the bag Sam held in his lap. “I’m sorta curious about those, too,” he said. “I’ll make you a deal. The thing with the baseballs happened ten years ago. I’ll tell you about that if you’ll tell me about the books ten years from now.”

“Deal,” Naomi said from the back seat, and then added what Sam himself had been thinking. “If we’re all still around, of course.”

Soames laughed. “Yeah … I suppose there’s always that possibility, isn’t there?”

Sam nodded. “Lousy things sometimes happen.”

“They sure do. One of em happened to my only boy in 1980. The doctors called it leukemia, but it’s really just what you said—one of those lousy things that sometimes happens.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Naomi said.

“Thanks. Every now and then I start to think I’m over it, and then it gets on my blind side and hits me again. I guess some things take a long time to shake out, and some things don’t ever shake out.”

Some things don’t ever shake out.

Come with me, son … I’m a poleethman.

I really have to go home now … is my fine paid?

Sam touched the comer of his mouth with a trembling hand.

“Well, hell, I’d known Dave a long time before it ever happened,” Stan Soames said. They passed a sign which read AIRPORT 3 MI. “We grew up together, went to school together, sowed a mess of wild oats together. The only thing was, I reaped my crop and quit. Dave just went on sowin.”

Soames shook his head.

“Drunk or sober, he was one of the sweetest fellows I ever met. But it got so he was drunk more’n he was sober, and we kinda fell out of touch. It seemed like the worst time for him was in the late fifties. During those years he was drunk all the time. After that he started goin to AA, and he seemed to get a little better … but he’d always fall off the wagon with a crash.

“I got married in ‘68, and I wanted to ask him to be my best man, but I didn’t dare. As it happened, he turned up sober—that time—but you couldn’t trust him to turn up sober.”

“I know what you mean,” Naomi said quietly.

Stan Soames laughed. “Well, I sort of doubt that—a little sweetie like you wouldn’t know what miseries a dedicated boozehound can get himself into—but take it from me. If I’d asked Dave to stand up for me at the weddin, Laura—that’s my ex—would have shit bricks. But Dave did come, and I saw him a little more frequently after our boy Joe was born in 1970. Dave seemed to have a special feeling for all kids during those years when he was tryin to pull himself out of the bottle.

“The thing Joey loved most was baseball. He was nuts for it—he collected sticker books, chewing-gum cards … he even pestered me to get a satellite dish so we could watch all the Royals games—the Royals were his favorites—and the Cubs, too, on WGN from Chicago. By the time he was eight, he knew the averages of all the Royals starting players, and the won-lost records of damn near every pitcher in the American League. Dave and I took him to games three or four times. It was a lot like takin a kid on a guided tour of heaven. Dave took him alone twice, when I had to work. Laura had a cow about that—said he’d show up drunk as a skunk, with the boy left behind, wandering the streets of K.C. or sittin in a police station somewhere, waitin for someone to come and get him. But nothing like that ever happened. So far as I know, Dave never took a drink when he was around Joey.

“When Joe got the leukemia, the worst part for him was the doctors tellin him he wouldn’t be able to go to any games that year at least until June and maybe not at all. He was more depressed about that than he was about having cancer. When Dave came to see him, Joe cried about it. Dave hugged him and said, ‘If you can’t go to the games, Joey, that’s okay; I’ll bring the Royals to you.’

“Joe stared up at him and says, ‘You mean in person, Uncle Dave?’ That’s what he called him—Uncle Dave.

“‘I can’t do that,’ Dave said, ‘but I can do somethin almost as good.’ “

Soames drove up to the Civil Air Terminal gate and blew the horn. The gate rumbled back on its track and he drove out to where the

Navajo was parked. He turned off the engine and just sat behind the wheel for a moment, looking down at his hands.

“I always knew Dave was a talented bastard,” he said finally. “What I don’t know is how he did what he did so damned fast. All I can figure is that he must have worked days and nights both, because he was done in ten days—and those suckers were good.

“He knew he had to go fast, though. The doctors had told me and Laura the truth, you see, and I’d told Dave. Joe didn’t have much chance of pulling through. They’d caught onto what was wrong with him too late. It was roaring in his blood like a grassfire.

“About ten days after Dave made that promise, he comes into my son’s hospital room with a paper shopping-bag in each arm. ‘What you got there, Uncle Dave?’ Joe asks, sitting up in bed. He had been pretty low all that day—mostly because he was losin his hair, I think; in those days if a kid didn’t have hair most of the way down his back, he was considered to be pretty low-class-but when Dave came in, he brightened right up.

” ‘The Royals, a course,’ Dave says back. ‘Didn’t I tell you?’

“Then he put those two shopping-bags down on the bed and spilled em out. And you never, ever, in your whole life, saw such an expression on a little boy’s face. It lit up like a Christmas tree … and … and shit, I dunno …”

Stan Soames’s voice had been growing steadily thicker. Now he leaned forward against the steering wheel of Dawson’s Buick so hard that the horn honked. He pulled a large bandanna from his back pocket, wiped his eyes with it, then blew his nose.

Naomi had also leaned forward. She pressed one of her hands against Soames’s cheek. “If this is too hard for you, Mr. Soames—”

“No,” he said, and smiled a little. Sam watched as a tear Stan Soames had missed ran its sparkling, unnoticed course down his

cheek in the late-afternoon sun. “It’s just that it brings him back so. How he was. That hurts, miss, but it feels good, too. Those two feelings are all wrapped up together.”

“I understand,” she said.

“When Dave tipped over those bags, what spilled out was baseballs—over two dozen of them. But they weren’t just baseballs, because there was a face painted on every one, and each one was the face of a player on the 1980 Kansas City Royals baseball team. They weren’t those whatdoyoucallums, caricatures, either. They were as good as the faces Norman Rockwell used to paint for the covers of the Saturday Evening Post. I’ve seen Dave’s work—the work he did before he got drinkin real heavy—and it was good, but none of it was as good as this. There was Willie Aikens and Frank White and U. L. Washington and George Brett … Willie Wilson and Amos Otis … Dan Quisenberry, lookin as fierce as a gunslinger in an old Western movie … Paul Splittorff and Ken Brett … I can’t remember all the names, but it was the whole damned roster, including Jim Frey, the field manager.

“And sometime between when he finished em and when he gave em to my son, he took em to K.C. and got all the players but one to sign em. The one who didn’t was Darrell Porter, the catcher. He was out with the flu, and he promised to sign the ball with his face on it as soon as he could. He did, too.”

“Wow,” Sam said softly.

“And it was all Dave’s doing—the man I hear people in town laugh about and call Dirty Dave. I tell you, sometimes when I hear people say that and I remember what he did for Joe when Joey was dying of the leukemia, I could—”

Soames didn’t finish, but his hands curled themselves into fists on his broad thighs. And Sam—who had used the name himself until today, and laughed with Craig Jones and Frank Stephens over the

old drunk with his shopping-cart full of newspapers—felt a dull and shameful heat mount into his cheeks.

“That was a wonderful thing to do, wasn’t it?” Naomi asked, and touched Stan Soames’s cheek again. She was crying.

“You shoulda seen his face,” Soames said dreamily. “You wouldn’t have believed how he looked, sittin up in his bed and lookin down at all those faces with their K.C. baseball caps on their round heads. I can’t describe it, but I’ll never forget it.

“You shoulda seen his face.

“Joe got pretty sick before the end, but he didn’t ever get too sick to watch the Royals on TV—or listen to em on the radio—and he kept those balls all over his room. The windowsill by his bed was the special place of honor, though. That’s where he’d line up the nine men who were playin in the game he was watchin or listenin to on the radio. If Frey took out the pitcher, Joe would take that one down from the windowsill and put up the relief pitcher in his place. And when each man batted, Joe would hold that ball in his hands. So—”

Stan Soames broke off abruptly and hid his face in his bandanna. His chest hitched twice, and Sam could see his throat locked against a sob. Then he wiped his eyes again and stuffed the bandanna briskly into his back pocket.

“So now you know why I took you two to Des Moines today, and why I would have taken you to New York to pick up those two books if that’s where you’d needed to go. It wasn’t my treat; it was Dave’s. He’s a special sort of man.”

“I think maybe you are, too,” Sam said.

Soames gave him a smile—a strange, crooked smile—and opened the door of Dawson’s Buick. “Well, thank you,” he said. “Thank you kindly. And now I think we ought to be rolling along if we want to beat the rain. Don’t forget your books, Miss Higgins.”

“I won’t,” Naomi said as she got out with the top of the bag wrapped tightly in one hand. “Believe me, I won’t.”

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE LIBRARY POLICEMAN (II)

1

Twenty minutes after they took off from Des Moines, Naomi tore herself away from the view—she had been tracing Route 79 and marvelling at the toy cars bustling back and forth along it—and turned to Sam. What she saw frightened her. He had fallen asleep with his head resting against one of the windows, but there was no peace on his face; he looked like a man suffering some deep and private pain.

Tears trickled slowly from beneath his closed lids and ran down his face.

She leaned forward to shake him awake and heard him say in a trembling little-boy's voice: "Am I in trouble, sir?"

The Navajo arrowed its way into the clouds now massing over western Iowa and began to buck, but Naomi barely noticed. Her hand paused just above Sam's shoulder for a moment, then withdrew.

Who was YOUR Library Policeman, Sam?

Whoever it was, Naomi thought, he's found him again, I think. I think he's with him now. I'm sorry, Sam … but I can't wake you. Not now. Right now I think you're where you're supposed to be … where you have to be. I'm sorry, but dream on. And remember what you dreamed when you wake up. Remember.

Remember.

2

In his dream, Sam Peebles watched as Little Red Riding Hood set off from a gingerbread house with a covered basket over one arm; she was bound for Gramma's house, where the wolf was waiting to eat her from the feet up. It would finish by scalping her and then eating her brains out of her skull with a long wooden spoon.

Except none of that was right, because Little Red Riding Hood was a boy in this dream and the gingerbread house was the two-story duplex in St. Louis where he had lived with his mother after Dad died and there was no food in the covered basket. There was a book in the basket, The Black Arrow by Robert Louis Stevenson, and he had read it, every word, and he was not bound for Gramma's house but for the Briggs Avenue Branch of the St. Louis Public Library, and he had to hurry because his book was already four days overdue.

This was a watching dream.

He watched as Little White Walking Sam waited at the corner of Dunbar Street and Johnstown Avenue for the light to change. He watched as he scampered across the street with the book in his hand … the basket was gone now. He watched as Little White Walking Sam went into the Dunbar Street News and then he was inside, too, smelling the old mingled smells of camphor, candy, and pipe tobacco, watching as Little White Walking Sam approached the counter with a nickel package of Bull's Eye red licorice—his favorite. He watched as the little boy carefully removed the dollar bill his mother had tucked into the card-pocket in the back of The Black Arrow. He watched as the clerk took the dollar and returned ninety-five cents … more than enough to pay the fine. He watched as Little White Walking Sam left the store and paused on the street outside long enough to put the change in his pocket and tear open the package of licorice with his teeth. He watched as Little White Walking Sam went on his way—only three blocks to the Library now—munching the long red whips of candy as he went.

He tried to scream at the boy.

Beware! Beware! The wolf is waiting, little boy! Beware the wolf! Beware the wolf!

But the boy walked on, eating his red licorice; now he was on Briggs Avenue and the Library, a great pile of red brick, loomed ahead.

At this point Sam—Big White Plane-Riding Sam—tried to pull himself out of the dream. He sensed that Naomi and Stan Soames and the world of real things were just outside this hellish egg of nightmare in which he found himself. He could hear the drone of the Navajo's engine behind the sounds of the dream: the traffic on Briggs Avenue, the brisk brrrinnng!-brrrinnng! of some kid's bike-bell, the birds squabbling in the rich leaves of the midsummer elms. He closed his dreaming eyes and yearned toward that world outside the shell, the world of real things. And more: he sensed he could reach it, that he could hammer through the shell—

No, Dave said. No, Sam, don't do that. You mustn't do that. If you want to save Sarah from Ardelia, forget about breaking out of this dream. There's only one coincidence in this business, but it's a killer: once you had a Library Policeman, too. And you have to get that memory back.

I don't want to see. I don't want to know. Once was bad enough.

Nothing is as bad as what's waiting for you, Sam. Nothing.

He opened his eyes—not his outer eyes but the inside ones; the dreaming eyes.

Now Little White Walking Sam is on the concrete path which approaches the east side of the Public Library, the concrete path which leads to the Children's Wing. He moves in a kind of portentous slow motion, each step the soft swish of a pendulum in the glass throat of a grandfather clock, and everything is clear: the tiny sparks of mica and quartz gleaming in the concrete walk; the cheerful roses which border the concrete walk; the thick drift of green bushes along the side of the building; the climbing ivy on the red brick wall; the

strange and somehow frightening Latin motto, Fuimus, non sumus, carved in a brief semicircle over the green doors with their thick panes of wire-reinforced glass.

And the Library Policeman standing by the steps is clear, too.

He is not pale. He is flushed. There are pimples on his forehead, red and flaring. He is not tall but of medium height with extremely broad shoulders. He is wearing not a trenchcoat but an overcoat, and that's very odd because this is a summer day, a hot St. Louis summer day. His eyes might be silver; Little White Walking Sam cannot see what color they are, because the Library Policeman is wearing little round black glasses—blind man's glasses.

He's not a Library Policeman! He's the wolf! Beware! He's the wolf! The Library WOLF!

But Little White Walking Sam doesn't hear. Little White Walking Sam isn't afraid. It is, after all, bright daylight, and the city is full of strange—and sometimes amusing—people. He has lived all his life in St. Louis, and he's not afraid of it. That is about to change.

He approaches the man, and as he draws closer he notices the scar: a tiny white thread which starts high on the left cheek, dips beneath the left eye, and peters out on the bridge of the nose.

Hello there, son, the man in the round black glasses says.

Hello, says Little White Walking Sam.

Do you mind telling me thomething about the book you have before you go inthide? the man asks. His voice is soft and polite, not a bit threatening. A faint lisp clips lightly along the top of his speech, turning some of his s-sounds into diphthongs. I work for the Library, you thee.

It's called The Black Arrow, Little White Walking Sam says politely, and it's by Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson. He's dead. He died of

toober-clue-rosis. It was very good. There were some great battles.

The boy waits for the man in the little round black glasses to step aside and let him go in, but the man in the little round black glasses does not stand aside. The man only bends down to look at him more closely. Grandpa, what little round black eyes you have.

One other quethion, the man says. Is your book overdue?

Now Little White Walking Sam is more afraid.

Yes … but only a little. Only four days. It was very long, you see, and I have Little League, and day camp, and—

Come with me, son… I'm a poleethman.

The man in the black glasses and the overcoat extends a hand. For a moment Sam almost runs. But he is a kid; this man is an adult. This man works for the Library. This man is a policeman. Suddenly this man—this scary man with his scar and his round black glasses—is all Authority. One cannot run from Authority; it is everywhere.

Sam timidly approaches the man. He begins to lift his hand—the one holding the package of red licorice, which is now almost empty—and then tries to pull it back at the last second. He is too late. The man seizes it. The package of Bull's Eye licorice falls to the walk. Little White Walking Sam will never eat red licorice again.

The man pulls Sam toward him, reels him in the way a fisherman would reel in a trout. The hand clamped over Sam's is very strong. It hurts. Sam begins to cry. The sun is still out, the grass is still green, but suddenly the whole world seems distant, no more than a cruel mirage in which he was for a little while allowed to believe.

He can smell Sen-Sen on the man's breath. Am I in trouble, sir? he asks, hoping with every fiber of his being that the man will say no.

Yes, the man says. Yes, you are. In a Lot of trouble. And if you want to get out of trouble, son, you have to do ecthactly as I thay. Do you underthand?

Sam cannot reply. He has never been so afraid. He can only look up at the man with wide, streaming eyes.

The man shakes him. Do you underthand or not?

Ye—yes! Sam gasps. He feels an almost irresistible heaviness in his bladder.

Let me tell you exthactly who I am, the man says, breathing little puffs of Sen-Sen into Sam's face. I am the Briggth Avenue Library Cop, and I am in charge of punishing boyth and girlth who bring their books back late.

Little White Walking Sam begins to cry harder. I've got the money! he manages through his sobs. I've got ninety-five cents! You can have it! You can have it all!

He tries to pull the change out of his pocket. At the same moment the Library Cop looks around and his broad face suddenly seems sharp, suddenly the face of a fox or wolf who has successfully broken into the chicken house but now smells danger.

Come on, he says, and jerks Little White Walking Sam off the path and into the thick bushes which grow along the side of the library. When the poleethman tellth you to come, you COME! It is dark in here; dark and mysterious. The air smells of pungent juniper berries. The ground is dark with mulch. Sam is crying very loudly now.

Thut up! the Library Policeman grunts, and gives Sam a hard shake. The bones in Sam's hand grind together painfully. His head wobbles on his neck. They have reached a little clearing in the jungle of bushes now, a cove where the junipers have been smashed flat and the ferns broken off, and Sam understands that this is more than a place the Library Cop knows; it is a place he has made.

Thut up, or the fine will only be the beginning! I'll have to call your mother and tell her what a bad boy you've been! Do you want that?

No! Sam weeps. I'll pay the fine! I'll pay it, mister, but please don't hurt me!

The Library Policeman spins Little White Walking Sam around.

Put your hands up on the wall! Thpread your feet! Now! Quick!

Still sobbing, but terrified that his mother may find out he has done something bad enough to merit this sort of treatment, Little White Walking Sam does as the Library Cop tells him. The red bricks are cool, cool in the shade of the bushes which lie against this side of the building in a tangled, untidy heap. He sees a narrow window at ground level. It looks down into the Library's boiler room. Bare bulbs shaded with rounds of tin like Chinese coolie hats hang over the giant boiler; the duct-pipes throw weird octopus-tangles of shadow. He sees a janitor standing at the far wall, his back to the window, reading dials and making notes on a clipboard.

The Library Cop seizes Sam's pants and pulls them down. His underpants come with them. He jerks as the cool air strikes his bum.

Thdeady, the Library Policeman pants. Don't move. Once you pay the fine, son, it's over … and no one needth to know.

Something heavy and hot presses itself against his bottom. Little White Walking Sam jerks again.

Thdeady, the Library Policeman says. He is panting harder now; Sam feels hot blurts of breath on his left shoulder and smells Sen-Sen. He is lost in terror now, but terror isn't all that he feels: there is shame, as well. He has been dragged into the shadows, is being forced to submit to this grotesque, unknown punishment, because he has been late returning The Black Arrow. If he had only known that fines could run this high—!

The heavy thing jabs into his bottom, thrusting his buttocks apart. A horrible, tearing pain laces upward from Little White Walking Sam's vitals. There has never been pain like this, never in the world.

He drops The Black Arrow and shoves his wrist sideways into his mouth, gagging his own cries.

Thdeady, the Library Wolf pants, and now his hands descend on Sam's shoulders and he is rocking back and forth, in and out, back and forth, in and out. Thdeady … thdeaady … oooh! Thdeeeaaaaaaddyyyyy—

Gasping and rocking, the Library Cop pounds what feels like a huge hot bar of steel in and out of Sam's bum; Sam stares with wide eyes into the Library basement, which is in another universe, an orderly universe where gruesome things like this don't ever happen. He watches the janitor nod, tuck his clipboard under his arm, and walk toward the door at the far end of the room. If the janitor turned his head just a little and raised his eyes slightly, he would see a face peering in the window at him, the pallid, wide-eyed face of a little boy with red licorice on his lips. Part of Sam wants the janitor to do just that—to rescue him the way the woodcutter rescued Little Red Riding Hood—but most of him knows the janitor would only turn away, disgusted, at the sight of another bad little boy submitting to his just punishment at the hands of the Briggs Avenue Library Cop.

Thdeadeeeeeeeeeee! the Library Wolf whisper-screams as the janitor goes out the door and into the rest of his orderly universe without looking around. The Wolf thrusts even further forward and for one agonized second the pain becomes so bad Little White Walking Sam is sure his belly will explode, that whatever it is the Library Cop has stuck up his bottom will simply come raving out the front of him, pushing his guts ahead of it.

The Library Cop collapses against him in a smear of rancid sweat, panting harshly, and Sam slips to his knees under his weight. As he does, the massive object—no longer quite so massive—pulls out of him, but Sam can feel wetness all over his bottom. He is afraid to put

his hands back there. He is afraid that when they come back he will discover he has become Little Red Bleeding Sam.

The Library Cop suddenly grasps Sam's arm and pulls him around to face him. His face is redder than ever, flushed in puffy, hectic bands like warpaint across his cheeks and forehead.

Look at you! the Library Cop says. His face pulls together in a knot of contempt and disgust. Look at you with your panth down and your little dingle out! You liked it, didn't you? You LIKED it!

Sam cannot reply. He can only weep. He pulls his underwear and his pants up together, as they were pulled down. He can feel mulch inside them, prickling his violated bottom, but he doesn't care. He squirms backward from the Library Cop until his back is to the Library's red brick wall. He can feel tough branches of ivy, like the bones of a large, fleshless hand, poking into his back. He doesn't care about this, either. All he cares about is the shame and terror and the sense of worthlessness that now abide in him, and of these three the shame is the greatest. The shame is beyond comprehension.

Dirty boy! the Library Cop spits at him. Dirty little boy!

I really have to go home now, Little White Walking Sam says, and the words come out minced into segments by his hoarse sobs: Is my fine paid?

The Library Cop crawls toward Sam on his hands and knees, his little round black eyes peering into Sam's face like the blind eyes of a mole, and this is somehow the final grotesquerie. Sam thinks, He is going to punish me again, and at this idea something in his mind, some overstressed strut or armature, gives way with a soggy snap he can almost hear. He does not cry or protest; he is now past that. He only looks at the Library Cop with silent apathy.

No, the Library Cop says. I'm letting you go, thatth all. I'm taking pity on you, but if you ever tell anyone … ever … I'll come back and do it

again. I'll do it until the fine is paid. And don't you ever let me catch you around here again, son. Do you underthand?

Yes, Sam says. Of course he will come back and do it again if Sam tells. He will be in the closet late at night; under the bed; perched in a tree like some gigantic, misshapen crow. When Sam looks up into a troubled sky, he will see the Library Policeman's twisted, contemptuous face in the clouds. He will be anywhere; he will be everywhere.

This thought makes Sam tired, and he closes his eyes against that lunatic mole-face, against everything.

The Library Cop grabs him, shakes him again. Yeth, what? he hisses. Yeth what, son?

Yes, I understand, Sam tells him without opening his eyes.

The Library Policeman withdraws his hand. Good, he says. You better not forget. When bad boys and girls forget, I kill them.

Little White Walking Sam sits against the wall with his eyes closed for a long time, waiting for the Library Cop to begin punishing him again, or to simply kill him. He wants to cry, but there are no tears. It will be years before he cries again, over anything. At last he opens his eyes and sees he is alone in the Library Cop's den in the bushes. The Library Cop is gone. There is only Sam, and his copy of The Black Arrow, lying open on its spine.

Sam begins to crawl toward daylight on his hands and knees. Leaves tickle his sweaty, tear-streaked face, branches scrape his back and spank against his hurt bottom. He takes The Black Arrow with him, but he will not bring it into the Library. He will never go into the Library, any library, ever again: this is the promise he makes to himself as he crawls away from the place of his punishment. He makes another promise, as well: nobody will ever find out about this terrible thing, because he intends to forget it ever happened. He

senses he can do this. He can do it if he tries very, very hard, and he intends to start trying very, very hard right now.

When he reaches the edge of the bushes, he looks out like a small hunted animal. He sees kids crossing the lawn. He doesn't see the Library Cop, but of course this doesn't matter; the Library Cop sees him. From today on, the Library Cop will always be close.

At last the lawn is empty. A small, dishevelled boy, Little White Crawling Sam, wriggles out of the bushes with leaves in his hair and dirt on his face. His untucked shirt billows behind him. His eyes are wide and staring and no longer completely sane. He sidles over to the concrete steps, casts one cringing, terrified look up at the cryptic Latin motto inscribed over the door, and then lays his book down on one of the steps with all the care and terror of an orphan girl leaving her nameless child on some stranger's doorstep. Then Little White Walking Sam becomes Little White Running Sam: he runs across the lawn, he sets the Briggs Avenue Branch of the St. Louis Public Library to his back and runs, but it doesn't matter how fast he runs because he can't outrun the taste of red licorice on his tongue and down his throat, sweet and sugar-slimy, and no matter how fast he runs the Library Wolf of course runs with him, the Library Wolf is just behind his shoulder where he cannot see, and the Library Wolf is whispering Come with me, son … I'm a poleethman, and he will always whisper that, through all the years he will whisper that, in those dark dreams Sam dares not remember he will whisper that, Sam will always run from that voice screaming Is it paid yet? Is the fine paid yet? Oh dear God please, is MY FINE PAID YET? And the answer which comes back is always the same: It will never be paid, son; it will never be paid.

Never.

Nev—

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE LIBRARY (III)

1

The final approach to the dirt runway which Stan called the Proverbia Airport was bumpy and scary. The Navajo came down, feeling its way through stacks of angry air, and landed with a final jarring thump. When it did, Sam uttered a pinched scream. His eyes flew open.

Naomi had been waiting patiently for something like this. She leaned forward at once, ignoring the seatbelt which cut into her middle, and put her arms around him. She ignored his raised arms and first instinctive drawing away, just as she ignored the first hot and unpleasant outrush of horrified breath. She had comforted a great many drunks in the grip of the d.t.‘s; this wasn’t much different. She could feel his heart as she pressed against him. It seemed to leap and skitter just below his shirt.

“It’s okay. Sam, it’s okay—it’s just me, and you’re back. It was a dream. You’re back.”

For a moment he continued trying to push himself into his seat. Then he collapsed, limp. His hands came up and hugged her with panicky tightness.

“Naomi,” he said in a harsh, choked voice. “Naomi, oh Naomi, oh dear Jesus, what a nightmare I had, what a terrible dream.”

Stan had radioed ahead, and someone had come out to turn on the runway landing lights. They were taxiing between them toward the end of the runway now. They had not beaten the rain after all; it drummed hollowly on the body of the plane. Up front, Stan Soames was bellowing out something which might have been “Camptown Races.”

“Was it a nightmare?” Naomi asked, drawing back from Sam so she could look into his bloodshot eyes.

“Yes. But it was also true. All true.”

“Was it the Library Policeman, Sam? Your Library Policeman?”

“Yes,” he whispered, and pressed his face into her hair.

“Do you know who he is? Do you know who he is now, Sam?”

After a long, long moment, Sam whispered: “I know.”

## 2

Stan Soames took a look at Sam’s face as he and Naomi stepped from the plane and was instantly contrite. “Sorry it was so rough. I really thought we’d beat the rain. It’s just that with a headwind—”

“I’ll be okay,” Sam said. He was, in fact, looking better already.

“Yes,” Naomi said. “He’ll be fine. Thank you, Stan. Thank you so much. And Dave thanks you, too.”

“Well, as long as you got what you needed—”

“We did,” Sam assured him. “We really did.”

“Let’s walk around the end of the runway,” Stan told them. “That boggy place’d suck you right in to your waist if you tried the shortcut this evening. Come on into the house. We’ll have coffee. There’s some apple pie, too, I think.”

Sam glanced at his watch. It was quarter past seven.

“We’ll have to take a raincheck, Stan,” he said. “Naomi and I have to get these books into town right away.”

“You ought to at least come in and dry off. You’re gonna be soaked by the time you get to your car.”

Naomi shook her head. “It’s very important.”

“Yeah,” Stan said. “From the look of you two, I’d say it is. Just remember that you promised to tell me the story.”

“We will, too,” Sam said. He glanced at Naomi and saw his own thought reflected in her eyes: If we’re still alive to tell it.

3

Sam drove, resisting an urge to tromp the gas pedal all the way to the floor. He was worried about Dave. Driving off the road and turning Naomi’s car over in the ditch wasn’t a very effective way of showing concern, however, and the rain in which they had landed was now a downpour driven by a freshening wind. The wipers could not keep up with it, even on high, and the headlights petered out after twenty feet. Sam dared drive no more than twenty-five. He glanced at his watch, then looked over at where Naomi sat, with the bookshop bag in her lap.

“I hope we can make it by eight,” he said, “but I don’t know.”

“Just do the best you can, Sam.”

Headlights, wavery as the lights of an undersea diving bell, loomed ahead. Sam slowed to ten miles an hour and squeezed left as a ten-wheeler rumbled by—a half-glimpsed hulk in the rainy darkness.

“Can you talk about it? The dream you had?”

“I could, but I’m not going to,” he said. “Not now. It’s the wrong time.”

Naomi considered this, then nodded her head. “All right.”

“I can tell you this much—Dave was right when he said children made the best meal, and he was right when he said that what she

really lives on is fear."

They had reached the outskirts of town. A block further on, they drove through their first light-controlled intersection. Through the Datsun's windshield, the signal was only a bright-green smear dancing in the air above them. A corresponding smear danced across the smooth wet hide of the pavement.

"I need to make one stop before we get to the Library," Sam said. "The Piggly Wiggly's on the way, isn't it?"

"Yes, but if we're going to meet Dave behind the Library at eight, we really don't have much time to spare. Like it or not, this is go-slow weather."

"I know—but this won't take long."

"What do you need?"

"I'm not sure," he said, "but I think I'll know it when I see it."

She glanced at him, and for the second time he found himself amazed by the foxlike, fragile quality of her beauty, and unable to understand why he had never seen it before today.

Well, you dated her, didn't you? You must have seen SOMETHING.

Except he hadn't. He had dated her because she was pretty, presentable, unattached, and approximately his own age. He had dated her because bachelors in cities which were really just overgrown small towns were supposed to date … if they were bachelors interested in making a place for themselves in the local business community, that was. If you didn't date, people … some people … might think you were

(a poleethman)

a little bit funny.

I WAS a little funny, he thought. On second thought, I was a toT funny. But whatever I was, I think I'm a little different now. And I am seeing her. There's that. I'm really SEEING her.

For Naomi's part, she was struck by the strained whiteness of his face and the look of tension around his eyes and mouth. He looked strange … but he no longer looked terrified. Naomi thought: He looks like a man who has been granted the opportunity to return to his worst nightmare … with some powerful weapon in his hands.

She thought it was a face she might be falling in love with, and this made her deeply uneasy.

"This stop … it's important, isn't it?"

"I think so, yes."

Five minutes later he stopped in the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly store. Sam was out at once and dashing for the door through the rain.

Halfway there, he stopped. A telephone booth stood at the side of the parking lot—the same booth, undoubtedly, where Dave had made his call to the Junction City Sheriff's Office all those years before. The call made from that booth had not killed Ardelia … but it had driven her off for a good long while.

Sam stepped into it. The light went on. There was nothing to see; it was just a phone booth with numbers and graffiti scribbled on the steel walls. The telephone book was gone, and Sam remembered Dave saying, This was back in the days when you could sometimes still find a telephone book in a telephone booth, if you were lucky.

Then he glanced at the floor, and saw what he had been looking for. It was a wrapper. He picked it up, smoothed it out, and read what was written there in the dingy overhead light: Bull's Eye Red Licorice.

From behind him, Naomi beat an impatient tattoo on the Datsun's horn. Sam left the booth with the wrapper in his hand, waved to her, and ran into the store through the pouring rain.

4

The Piggly Wiggly clerk looked like a young man who had been cryogenically frozen in 1969 and thawed out just that week. His eyes had the red and slightly glazed look of the veteran dope-smoker. His hair was long and held with a raw-hide Jesus thong. On one pinky he wore a silver ring beaten into the shape of the peace sign. Beneath his Piggly Wiggly tunic was a billowy shirt in an extravagant flower-print. Pinned to the collar was a button which readMY FACE IS LEAVING IN 5 MINUTES

BE ON IT!

Sam doubted if this was a sentiment of which the store manager would have approved … but it was a rainy night, and the store manager was nowhere in sight. Sam was the only customer in the place, and the clerk watched him with a bemused and uninvolved eye as he went to the candy rack and began to pick up packages of Bull's Eye Red Licorice. Sam took the entire stock—about twenty packages.

"You sure you got enough, dude?" the clerk asked him as Sam approached the counter and laid his trove upon it. "I think there might be another carton or two of the stuff out back in the storeroom. I know how it is when you get a serious case of the munchies."

"This should do. Ring it up, would you? I'm in a hurry."

"Yeah, it's a hurry-ass world," the clerk said. His fingers tripped over the keys of the NCR register with the dreamy slowness of the habitually stoned.

There was a rubber band lying on the counter beside a baseball-card display. Sam picked it up. "Could I have this?"

“Be my guest, dude—consider it a gift from me, the Prince of Piggly Wiggly, to you, the Lord of Licorice, on a rainy Monday evening.”

As Sam slipped the rubber band over his wrist (it hung there like a loose bracelet), a gust of wind strong enough to rattle the windows shook the building. The lights overhead flickered.

“Whoa, dude,” the Prince of Piggly Wiggly said, looking up. “That wasn’t in the forecast. Just showers, they said.” He looked back down at the register. “Fifteen forty-one.”

Sam handed him a twenty with a small, bitter smile. “This stuff was a hell of a lot cheaper when I was a kid.”

“Inflation sucks the big one, all right,” the clerk agreed. He was slowly returning to that soft spot in the ozone where he had been when Sam came in. “You must really like that stuff, man. Me, I stick to good old Mars Bars.”

“Like it?” Sam laughed as he pocketed his change. “I hate it. This is for someone else.” He laughed again. “Call it a present.”

The clerk saw something in Sam’s eyes then, and suddenly took a big, hurried step away from him, almost knocking over a display of Skoal Bandits.

Sam looked at the clerk’s face curiously and decided not to ask for a bag. He gathered up the packages, distributed them at random in the pockets of the sport-coat he had put on a thousand years ago, and left the store. Cellophane crackled busily in his pockets with every stride he took.

5

Naomi had slipped behind the wheel, and she drove the rest of the way to the Library. As she pulled out of the Piggly Wiggly’s lot, Sam took the two books from the Pell’s bag and looked at them ruefully for a moment. All this trouble, he thought. All this trouble over an

outdated book of poems and a self help manual for fledgling public speakers. Except, of course, that wasn't what it was about. It had never been about the books at all.

He stripped the rubber band from his wrist and put it around the books. Then he took out his wallet, removed a five-dollar bill from his dwindling supply of ready cash, and slipped it beneath the elastic.

"What's that for?"

"The fine. What I owe on these two, and one other from a long time ago—The Black Arrow, by Robert Louis Stevenson. This ends it."

He put the books on the console between the two bucket seats and took a package of red licorice out of his pocket. He tore it open and that old, sugary smell struck him at once, with the force of a hard slap. From his nose it seemed to go directly into his head, and from his head it plummeted into his stomach, which immediately cramped into a slick, hard fist. For one awful moment he thought he was going to vomit in his own lap. Apparently some things never changed.

Nonetheless, he continued opening packages of red licorice, making a bundle of limber, waxy-textured candy whips. Naomi slowed as the light at the next intersection turned red, then stopped, although Sam could not see another car moving in either direction. Rain and wind lashed at her little car. They were now only four blocks from the Library. "Sam, what on earth are you doing?"

And because he didn't really know what on earth he was doing, he said: "If fear is Ardelia's meat, Naomi, we have to find the other thing—the thing that's the opposite of fear. Because that, whatever it is, will be her poison. So … what do you think that thing might be?"

"Well, I doubt if it's red licorice."

He gestured impatiently. "How can you be so sure? Crosses are supposed to kill vampires—the blood-sucking kind—but a cross is only two sticks of wood or metal set at right angles to each other.

Maybe a head of lettuce would work just as well … if it was turned on."

The light turned green. "If it was an energized head of lettuce," Naomi said thoughtfully, driving on.

"Right!" Sam held up half a dozen long red whips. "All I know is that this is what I have. Maybe it's ludicrous. Probably is. But I don't care. It's a by-God symbol of all the things my Library Policeman took away from me—the love, the friendship, the sense of belonging. I've felt like an outsider all my life, Naomi, and never knew why. Now I do. This is just another of the things he took away. I used to love this stuff. Now I can barely stand the smell of it. That's okay; I can deal with that. But I have to know how to turn it on."

Sam began to roll the licorice whips between his palms, gradually turning them into a sticky ball. He had thought the smell was the worst thing with which the red licorice could test him, but he had been wrong. The texture was worse … and the dye was coming off on his palms and fingers, turning them a sinister dark red. He went on nevertheless, stopping only to add the contents of another fresh package to the soft mass every thirty seconds or so.

"Maybe I'm looking too hard," he said. "Maybe it's plain old bravery that's the opposite of fear. Courage, if you want a fancier word. Is that it? Is that all? Is bravery the difference between Naomi and Sarah?"

She looked startled. "Are you asking me if quitting drinking was an act of bravery?"

"I don't know what I'm asking," he said, "but I think you're in the right neighborhood, at least. I don't need to ask about fear; I know what that is. Fear is an emotion which encloses and precludes change. Was it an act of bravery when you gave up drinking?"

"I never really gave it up," she said. "That isn't how alcoholics do it. They can't do it that way. You employ a lot of sideways thinking

instead. One day at a time, easy does it, live and let live, all that. But the center of it is this: you give up believing you can control your drinking. That idea was a myth you told yourself, and that's what you give up. The myth. You tell me—is that bravery?"

"Of course. But it's sure not foxhole bravery."

"Foxhole bravery," she said, and laughed. "I like that. But you're right. What I do—what we do—to keep away from the first one … it's not that kind of bravery. In spite of movies like The Lost Weekend, I think what we do is pretty undramatic."

Sam was remembering the dreadful apathy which had settled over him after he had been raped in the bushes at the side of the Briggs Avenue Branch of the St. Louis Library. Raped by a man who had called himself a policeman. That had been pretty undramatic, too. Just a dirty trick, that was all it had been—a dirty, brainless trick played on a little kid by a man with serious mental problems. Sam supposed that, when you counted up the whole score, he ought to call himself lucky; the Library Cop might have killed him.

Ahead of them, the round white globes which marked the Junction City Public Library glimmered in the rain. Naomi said hesitantly, "I think the real opposite of fear might be honesty. Honesty and belief. How does that sound?"

"Honesty and belief," he said quietly, tasting the words. He squeezed the sticky ball of red licorice in his right hand. "Not bad, I guess. Anyway, they'll have to do. We're here."

6

The glimmering green numbers of the car's dashboard clock read 7:57. They had made it before eight after all.

"Maybe we better wait and make sure everybody's gone before we go around back," she said.

“I think that’s a very good idea.”

They cruised into an empty parking space across the street from the Library’s entrance. The globes shimmered delicately in the rain. The rustle of the trees was a less delicate thing; the wind was still gaining strength. The oaks sounded as if they were dreaming, and all the dreams were bad.

At two minutes past eight, a van with a stuffed Garfield cat and a MOM’S TAXI sign in its rear window pulled up across from them. The horn honked, and the Library’s door—looking less grim even in this light than it had on Sam’s first visit to the Library, less like the mouth in the head of a vast granite robot—opened at once. Three kids, junior-high-schoolers by the look of them, came out and hurried down the steps. As they ran down the walk to MOM’S TAXI, two of them pulled their jackets up to shield their heads from the rain. The van’s side door rumbled open on its track, and the kids piled into it. Sam could hear the faint sound of their laughter, and envied the sound. He thought about how good it must be to come out of a library with laughter in your mouth. He had missed that experience, thanks to the man in the round black glasses.

Honesty, he thought. Honesty and belief. And then he thought again: The fine is paid. The fine is paid, goddammit. He ripped open the last two packages of licorice and began kneading their contents into his sticky, nasty-smelling red ball. He glanced at the rear of MOM’S TAXI as he did so. He could see white exhaust drifting up and tattering in the windy air. Suddenly he began to realize what he was up to here.

“Once, when I was in high school,” he said, “I watched a bunch of kids play a prank on this other kid they didn’t like. In those days, watching was what I did best. They took a wad of modelling clay from the Art Room and stuffed it in the tailpipe of the kid’s Pontiac. You know what happened?”

She glanced at him doubtfully. “No—what?”

“Blew the muffler off in two pieces,” he said. “One on each side of the car. They flew like shrapnel. The muffler was the weak point, you see. I suppose if the gases had backflowed all the way to the engine, they might have blown the cylinders right out of the block.”

“Sam, what are you talking about?”

“Hope,” he said. “I’m talking about hope. I guess the honesty and belief have to come a little later.”

MOM’S TAXI pulled away from the curb, its headlights spearing through the silvery lines of rain.

The green numbers on Naomi’s dashboard clock read 8:06 when the Library’s front door opened again. A man and a woman came out. The man, awkwardly buttoning his overcoat with an umbrella tucked under his arm, was unmistakably Richard Price; Sam knew him at once, even though he had only seen a single photo of the man in an old newspaper. The girl was Cynthia Berrigan, the Library assistant he had spoken to on Saturday night.

Price said something to the girl. Sam thought she laughed. He was suddenly aware that he was sitting bolt upright in the bucket seat of Naomi’s Datsun, every muscle creaking with tension. He tried to make himself relax and discovered he couldn’t do it.

Now why doesn’t that surprise me? he thought.

Price raised his umbrella. The two of them hurried down the walk beneath it, the Berrigan girl tying a plastic rain-kerchief over her hair as they came. They separated at the foot of the walk, Price going to an old Impala the size of a cabin cruiser, the Berrigan girl to a Yugo parked half a block down. Price U-turned in the street (Naomi ducked down a little, startled, as the headlights shone briefly into her own car) and blipped his horn at the Yugo as he passed it. Cynthia Berrigan blipped hers in return, then drove away in the opposite direction.

Now there was only them, the Library, and possibly Ardelia, waiting for them someplace inside.

Along with Sam's old friend the Library Policeman.

7

Naomi drove slowly around the block to Wegman Street. About halfway down on the left, a discreet sign marked a small break in the hedge. It readLIBRARY DELIVERIES ONLY.

A gust of wind strong enough to rock the Datsun on its springs struck them, rattling rain against the windows so hard that it sounded like sand. Somewhere nearby there was a splintering crack as either a large branch or a small tree gave way. This was followed by a thud as whatever it was fell into the street.

"God!" Naomi said in a thin, distressed voice. "I don't like this!"

"I'm not crazy about it myself," Sam agreed, but he had barely heard her. He was thinking about how that modelling clay had looked. How it had looked bulging out of the tailpipe of the kid's car. It had looked like a blister.

Naomi turned in at the sign. They drove up a short lane into a small paved loading/unloading area. A single orange arc-sodium lamp hung over the little square of pavement. It cast a strong, penetrating light, and the moving branches of the oaks which ringed the loading zone danced crazy shadows onto the rear face of the building in its glow. For a moment two of these shadows seemed to coalesce at the foot of the platform, making a shape that was almost manlike: it looked as if someone had been waiting under there, someone who was now crawling out to greet them.

In just a second or two, Sam thought, the orange glare from that overhead light will strike his glasses—his little round black glasses—and he will look through the windshield at me. Not at Naomi; just at me. He'll look at me and he'll say, "Hello, son; I've been waiting for

you. All theeth yearth, I've been waiting for you. Come with me now. Come with me, because I'm a poleethman. "

There was another loud, splintering crack, and a tree-branch dropped to the pavement not three feet from the Datsun's trunk, exploding chunks of bark and rot-infested wood in every direction. If it had landed on top of the car, it would have smashed the roof in like a tomato-soup can.

Naomi screamed.

The wind, still rising, screamed back.

Sam was reaching for her, meaning to put a comforting arm around her, when the door at the rear of the loading platform opened partway and Dave Duncan stepped into the gap. He was holding onto the door to keep the wind from snatching it out of his grasp. To Sam, the old man's face looked far too white and almost grotesquely frightened. He made frantic beckoning gestures with his free hand.

"Naomi, there's Dave."

"Where—? Oh yes, I see him." Her eyes widened. "My God, he looks horrible!"

She began to open her door. The wind gusted, ripped it out of her grasp, and whooshed through the Datsun in a tight little tornado, lifting the licorice wrappers and dancing them around in dizzy circles.

Naomi managed to get one hand down just in time to keep from being struck—and perhaps injured—by the rebound of her own car door. Then she was out, her hair blowing in its own storm about her head, her skirt soaked and painted against her thighs in a moment.

Sam shoved his own door open—the wind was blowing the wrong way for him, and he did literally have to put his shoulder to it—and struggled out. He had time to wonder where in the hell this storm had come from; the Prince of Piggly Wiggly had said there had been no

prediction for such a spectacular capful of wind and rain. Just showers, he'd said.

Ardelia. Maybe it was Ardelia's storm.

As if to confirm this, Dave's voice rose in a momentary lull. "Hurry up! I can smell her goddam perfume everywhere!"

Sam found the idea that the smell of Ardelia's perfume might somehow precede her materialization obscurely terrifying.

He was halfway to the loading-platform steps before he realized that, although he still had the snot-textured ball of red licorice, he had left the books in the car. He turned back, muscled the door open, and got them. As he did, the quality of the light changed—it went from a bright, penetrating orange to white. Sam saw the change on the skin of his hands, and for a moment his eyes seemed to freeze in their sockets. He backed out of the car in a hurry, the books in his hand, and whirled around.

The orange arc-sodium security lamp was gone. It had been replaced by an old-fashioned mercury-vapor streetlight. The trees dancing and groaning around the loading platform in the wind were thicker now; stately old elms predominated, easily overtopping the oaks. The shape of the loading platform had changed, and now tangled runners of ivy climbed the rear wall of the Library—a wall which had been bare just a moment ago.

Welcome to 1960, Sam thought. Welcome to the Ardelia Lortz edition of the Junction City Public Library.

Naomi had gained the platform. She was saying something to Dave. Dave replied, then looked back over his shoulder. His body jerked. At the same moment, Naomi screamed. Sam ran for the steps to the platform, the tail of his coat billowing out behind him. As he climbed the steps, he saw a white hand float out of the darkness and settle on Dave's shoulder. It yanked him back into the Library.

“Grab the door!” Sam screamed. “Naomi, grab the door! Don’t let it lock!”

But in this the wind helped them. It blew the door wide open, striking Naomi’s shoulder and making her stagger backward. Sam reached it in time to catch it on the rebound.

Naomi turned horrified dark eyes on him. “It was the man who came to your house, Sam. The tall man with the silvery eyes. I saw him. He grabbed Dave!”

No time to think about it. “Come on.” He slipped an arm around Naomi’s waist and pulled her forward into the Library. Behind them, the wind dropped and the door slammed shut with a thud.

8

They were in a book-cataloguing area which was dim but not entirely dark. A small table-lamp with a red-fringed shade stood on the librarian’s desk. Beyond this area, which was littered with boxes and packing materials (the latter consisted of crumpled newspapers, Sam saw; this was 1960, and those polyethylene popcorn balls hadn’t been invented yet), the stacks began. Standing in one of the aisles, walled in with books on both sides, was the Library Policeman. He had Dave Duncan in a half-nelson, and was holding him with almost absent ease three inches off the floor.

He looked at Sam and Naomi. His silver eyes glinted, and a crescent grin rose on his white face. It looked like a chrome moon.

“Not a thtep closer,” he said, “or I’ll thnap his neck like a chicken bone. You’ll hear it go.”

Sam considered this, but only for a moment. He could smell lavender sachet, thick and cloying. Outside the building, the wind whined and boomed. The Library Policeman’s shadow danced up the wall, as gaunt as a gantry. He didn’t have a shadow before, Sam realized. What does that mean?

Maybe it meant the Library Policeman was more real now, more here … because Ardelia and the Library Policeman and the dark man in the old car were really the same person. There was only one, and these were simply the faces it wore, putting them on and taking them off again with the ease of a kid trying on Halloween masks.

“Am I supposed to think you’ll let him live if we stand away from you?” he asked. “Bullshit.”

He began to walk toward the Library Policeman.

An expression which sat oddly on the tall man’s face now appeared. It was surprise. He took a step backward. His trenchcoat flapped around his shins and dragged against the folio volumes which formed the sides of the narrow aisle in which he stood.

“I’m warning you!”

“Warn and be damned,” Sam said. “Your argument isn’t with him. You’ve got a bone to pick with me, don’t you? Okay—let’s pick it.”

“The Librarian has a score to thettle with the old man!” the Policeman said, and took another step backward. Something odd was happening to his face, and it took Sam an instant to see what it was. The silver light in the Library Policeman’s eyes was fading.

“Then let her settle it,” Sam said. “My score is with you, big boy, and it goes back thirty years.”

He passed beyond the pool of radiance thrown by the table lamp.

“All right, then!” the Library Cop snarled. He made a half-turn and threw Dave Duncan down the aisle. Dave flew like a bag of laundry, a single croak of fear and surprise escaping him. He tried to raise one arm as he approached the wall, but it was only a dazed, half-hearted reflex. He collided with the fire-extinguisher mounted by the stairs, and Sam heard the dull crunch of a breaking bone. Dave fell, and the heavy red extinguisher fell off the wall on top of him.

“Dave!” Naomi shrieked, and darted toward him.

“Naomi, no!”

But she paid no attention. The Library Policeman’s grin reappeared; he grabbed Naomi by the arm as she tried to go past and curled her to him. His face came down and was for a moment hidden by the chestnut-colored hair at the nape of her neck. He uttered a strange, muffled cough against her flesh and then began kissing her—or so it appeared. His long white hand dug into her upper arm. Naomi screamed again, and then seemed to slump a little in his grip.

Sam had reached the entrance to the stacks now. He seized the first book his hand touched, yanked it off the shelf, cocked his arm back, and threw it. It flew end over end, the boards spreading, the pages riffling, and struck the Library Policeman on the side of the head. He uttered a cry of rage and surprise and looked up. Naomi tore free of his grasp and staggered sideways into one of the high shelves, flagging her arms for balance. The shelf rocked backward as she rebounded, and then fell with a gigantic, echoing crash. Books flew off shelves where they might have stood undisturbed for years and struck the floor in a rain of slaps that sounded oddly like applause.

Naomi ignored this. She reached Dave and fell on her knees beside him, crying his name over and over. The Library Policeman turned in that direction.

“Your argument isn’t with her, either,” Sam said.

The Library Policeman turned back to him. His silver eyes had been replaced with small black glasses that gave his face a blind, molelike look.

“I should have killed you the firtht time,” he said, and began to walk toward Sam. His walk was accompanied by a queer brushing sound. Sam looked down and saw the hem of the Library Cop’s trenchcoat was now brushing the floor. He was growing shorter.

“The fine is paid,” Sam said quietly. The Library Policeman stopped. Sam held up the books with the five-dollar bill beneath the elastic. “The fine is paid and the books are returned. It’s all over, you bitch … or bastard … or whatever you are.”

Outside, the wind rose in a long, hollow cry which ran beneath the eaves like glass. The Library Policeman’s tongue crept out and slicked his lips. It was very red, very pointed. Blemishes had begun to appear on his cheeks and forehead. There was a greasy lens of sweat on his skin.

And the smell of lavender sachet was much stronger. “Wrong!” the Library Policeman cried. “Wrong! Those aren’t the bookth you borrowed! I know! That drunk old cockthucker took the bookth you borrowed! They were—”

“—destroyed,” Sam finished. He began to walk again, closing in on the Library Policeman, and the lavender smell grew stronger with every step he took. His heart was racing in his chest. “I know whose idea that was, too. But these are perfectly acceptable replacements. Take them.” His voice rose into a stern shout. “Take them, damn you!”

He held the books out, and the Library Policeman, looking confused and afraid, reached for them.

“No, not like that,” Sam said, raising the books above the white, grasping hand. “Like this.”

He brought the books down in the Library Policeman’s face—brought them down hard. He could not remember ever feeling such sublime satisfaction in his life as that which he felt when Best Loved Poems of the American People and The Speaker’s Companion struck and broke the Library Policeman’s nose. The round black glasses flew off his face and fell to the floor. Beneath them were black sockets lined with a bed of whitish fluid. Tiny threads floated up from this oozy stuff, and Sam thought about Dave’s story—looked like it was startin to grow its own skin, he had said.

The Library Policeman screamed.

“You can’t!” it screamed. “You can’t hurt me! You’re afraid of me! Besides, you liked it! You LIKED it! YOU DIRTY LITTLE BOY, YOU LIKED IT!”

“Wrong,” Sam said. “I fucking hated it. Now take these books. Take them and get out of here. Because the fine is paid.”

He slammed the books into the Library Policeman’s chest. And, as the Library Policeman’s hands closed on them, Sam hoicked one knee squarely into the Library Policeman’s crotch.

“That’s for all the other kids,” he said. “The ones you fucked and the ones she ate.”

The creature wailed with pain. His flailing hands dropped the books as he bent to cup his groin. His greasy black hair fell over his face, mercifully hiding those blank, thread-choked sockets.

Of course they are blank, Sam had time to think. I never saw the eyes behind the glasses he wore that day… so SHE couldn’t see them, either.

“That doesn’t pay your fine,” Sam said, “but it’s a step in the right direction, isn’t it?”

The Library Policeman’s trenchcoat began to writhe and ripple, as if some unimaginable transformation had begun beneath it. And when he—it—looked up, Sam saw something which drove him back a step in horror and revulsion.

The man who had come half from Dave’s poster and half from Sam’s own mind had become a misshapen dwarf. The dwarf was becoming something else, a dreadful hermaphroditic creature. A sexual storm was happening on its face and beneath the bunching, twitching trenchcoat. Half the hair was still black; the other half was ash-

blonde. One socket was still empty; a savage blue eye glittered hate from the other.

“I want you,” the dwarfish creature hissed. “I want you, and I’ll have gou.”

“Try me, Ardelia,” Sam said. “Let’s rock and r—”

He reached for the thing before him, but screamed and withdrew his hand as soon as it snagged in the trenchcoat. It wasn’t a coat at all; it was some sort of dreadful loose skin, and it was like trying to grip a mass of freshly used teabags.

It scuttered up the canted side of the fallen bookshelf and thumped into the shadows on the far side. The smell of lavender sachet was suddenly much stronger.

A brutal laugh drifted up from the shadows.

A woman’s laugh.

“Too late, Sam,” she said. “It’s already too late. The deed is done.”

Ardelia’s back, Sam thought, and from outside there was a tremendous, rending crash. The building shuddered as a tree fell against it, and the lights went out.

9

They were in total darkness only for a second, but it seemed much longer. Ardelia laughed again, and this time her laughter had a strange, hooting quality, like laughter broadcast through a megaphone.

Then a single emergency bulb high up on one wall went on, throwing a pallid sheaf of light over this section of the stacks and flinging shadows everywhere like tangles of black yarn. Sam could hear the light’s battery buzzing noisily. He made his way to where Naomi still

knelt beside Dave, twice almost falling as his feet slid in piles of books which had spilled from the overturned case.

Naomi looked up at him. Her face was white and shocked and streaked with tears. “Sam, I think he’s dying.”

He knelt beside Dave. The old man’s eyes were shut and he was breathing in harsh, almost random gasps. Thin trickles of blood spilled from both nostrils and from one ear. There was a deep, crushed dent in his forehead, just above the right eyebrow. Looking at it made Sam’s stomach clench. One of Dave’s cheekbones was clearly broken, and the fire-extinguisher’s handle was printed on that side of his face in bright lines of blood and bruise. It looked like a tattoo.

“We’ve got to get him to a hospital, Sam!”

“Do you think she’d let us out of here now?” he asked, and, as if in answer to this question, a huge book—the T volume of The Oxford English Dictionary—came flying at them from beyond the rough circle of light thrown by the emergency unit mounted on the wall. Sam pulled Naomi backward and they both went sprawling in the dusty aisle. Seven pounds of tabasco, tendril, tomcat, and trepan slammed through the space where Naomi’s head had been a moment before, hit the wall, and splashed to the floor in an untidy, tented heap.

From the shadows came shrill laughter. Sam rose to his knees in time to see a hunched shape flit down the aisle beyond the fallen bookcase. It’s still changing, Sam thought. Into what, God only knows. It buttonhooked to the left and was gone.

“Get her, Sam,” Naomi said hoarsely. She gripped one of his hands. “Get her, please get her.”

“I’ll try,” he said. He stepped over Dave’s sprawled legs and entered the deeper shadows beyond the overturned bookcase.

10

The smell freaked him out—the smell of lavender sachet mixed with the dusty aroma of books from all those latter years. That smell, mingled with the freight-train whoop of the wind outside, made him feel like H. G. Wells's Time Traveller … and the Library itself, bulking all around him, was his time machine.

He walked slowly down the aisle, squeezing the ball of red licorice nervously in his left hand. Books surrounded him, seemed to frown down at him. They climbed to a height that was twice his own. He could hear the click and squeak of his shoes on the old linoleum.

"Where are you?" he shouted. "If you want me, Ardelia, why don't you come on and get me? I'm right here!"

No answer. But she would have to come out soon, wouldn't she? If Dave was right, her change was upon her, and her time was short.

Midnight, he thought. The Library Policeman gave me until midnight, so maybe that's how long she has. But that's over three and a half hours away… Dave can't possibly wait that long.

Then another thought, even less pleasant, occurred: suppose that, while he was mucking around back here in these dark aisles, Ardelia was circling her way back to Naomi and Dave?

He came to the end of the aisle, listened, heard nothing, and slipped over into the next. It was empty. He heard a low whispering sound from above him and looked up just in time to see half a dozen heavy books sliding out from one of the shelves above his head. He lunged backward with a cry as the books fell, striking his thighs, and heard Ardelia's crazy laughter from the other side of the bookcase.

He could imagine her up there, clinging to the shelves like a spider bloated with poison, and his body seemed to act before his brain could think. He slewed around on his heels like a drunken soldier trying to do an about face and threw his back against the shelf. The

laughter turned to a scream of fear and surprise as the stack tilted under Sam's weight. He heard a meaty thud as the thing hurled itself from its perch. A second later the stack went over.

What happened then was something Sam had not foreseen: the stack he had pushed toppled across the aisle, shedding its books in a waterfall as it went, and struck the next one. The second fell against a third, the third against a fourth, and then they were all falling like dominoes, all the way across this huge, shadowy storage area, crashing and clanging and spilling everything from Marryat's works to The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales. He heard Ardelia scream again and then Sam launched himself at the tilted bookcase he had pushed over. He climbed it like a ladder, kicking books out of his way in search of toe-holds, yanking himself upward with one hand.

He threw himself down on the far side and saw a white, hellishly misshapen creature pulling itself from beneath a jack-straw tumble of atlases and travel volumes. It had blonde hair and blue eyes, but any resemblance to humanity ceased there. Its illusions were gone. The creature was a fat, naked thing with arms and legs that appeared to end in jointed claws. A sac of flesh hung below its neck like a deflated goiter. Thin white fibers stormed around its body. There was something horridly beetlelike about it, and Sam was suddenly screaming inside—silent, atavistic screams which seemed to radiate out along his bones. This is it. God help me, this is it. He felt revulsion, but suddenly his terror was gone; now that he could actually see the thing, it was not so bad.

Then it began to change again, and Sam's feeling of relief faded. It did not have a face, exactly, but below the bulging blue eyes, a horn shape began to extrude itself, pushing out of the horror-show face like a stubby elephant's trunk. The eyes stretched away to either side, becoming first Chinese and then insectile. Sam could hear it sniffing as it stretched toward him.

It was covered with wavering, dusty threads.

Part of him wanted to pull back—was screaming at him to pull back—but most of him wanted to stand his ground. And as the thing's fleshy proboscis touched him, Sam felt its deep power. A sense of lethargy filled him, a feeling that it would be better if he just stood still and let it happen. The wind had become a distant, dreamy howl. It was soothing, in a way, as the sound of the vacuum cleaner had been soothing when he was very small.

"Sam?" Naomi called, but her voice was distant, unimportant. "Sam, are you all right?"

Had he thought he loved her? That was silly. Quite ridiculous, when you thought about it … when you got right down to it, this was much better.

This creature had … stories to tell.

Very interesting stories.

The white thing's entire plastic body now yearned toward the proboscis; it fed itself into itself, and the proboscis elongated. The creature became a single tube-shaped thing, the rest of its body hanging as useless and forgotten as that sac below its neck had hung. All its vitality was invested in the horn of flesh, the conduit through which it would suck Sam's vitality and essence into itself.

And it was nice.

The proboscis slipped gently up Sam's legs, pressed briefly against his groin, then rose higher, caressing his belly.

Sam fell on his knees to give it access to his face. He felt his eyes sting briefly and pleasantly as some fluid—not tears, this was thicker than tears—began to ooze from them.

The proboscis closed in on his eyes; he could see a pink petal of flesh opening and closing hungrily inside there. Each time it opened, it revealed a deeper darkness beyond. Then it clenched, forming a

hole in the petal, a tube within a tube, and it slipped with sensual slowness across his lips and cheek toward that sticky outflow. Misshapen dark-blue eyes gazed at him hungrily.

But the fine was paid.

Summoning every last bit of his strength, Sam clamped his right hand over the proboscis. It was hot and noxious. The tiny threads of flesh which covered it stung his palm.

It jerked and tried to draw back. For a moment Sam almost lost it and then he closed his hand in a fist, digging his fingernails into the meat of the thing.

“Here!” he shouted. “Here, I’ve got something for you, bitch! I brought it all the way from East St. Louis!”

He brought his left hand around and slammed the sticky ball of red licorice into the end of the proboscis, plugging it the way the kids in that long-ago parking lot had plugged the tailpipe of Tommy Reed’s Pontiac. It tried to shriek and could produce only a blocked humming sound. Then it tried again to pull itself away from Sam. The ball of red licorice bulged from the end of its convulsing snout like a blood-blister.

Sam struggled to his knees, still holding the twitching, noisome flesh in his hand, and threw himself on top of the Ardelia-thing. It twisted and pulsed beneath him, trying to throw him off. They rolled over and over in the heaped pile of books. It was dreadfully strong. Once Sam was eye to eye with it, and he was nearly frozen by the hate and panic in that gaze.

Then he felt it begin to swell.

He let go and scrambled backward, gasping. The thing in the book-littered aisle now looked like a grotesque beachball with a trunk, a beachball covered with fine hair which wavered like tendrils of seaweed in a running tide. It rolled over in the aisle, its proboscis

swelling like a firehose which has been tied in a knot. Sam watched, frozen with horror and fascination, as the thing which had called itself Ardelia Lortz strangled on its own fuming guts.

Bright red roadmap lines of blood popped out on its straining hide. Its eyes bulged, now staring at Sam in an expression of dazed surprise. It made one final effort to expel the soft blob of licorice, but its proboscis had been wide open in its anticipation of food, and the licorice stayed put.

Sam saw what was going to happen and threw an arm over his face an instant before it exploded.

Chunks of alien flesh flew in every direction. Ropes of thick blood splattered Sam's arms, chest, and legs. He cried out in mingled revulsion and relief.

An instant later the emergency light winked out, plunging them into darkness again.

11

Once more the interval of darkness was very brief, but it was long enough for Sam to sense the change. He felt it in his head—a clear sensation of things which had been out of joint snapping back into place. When the emergency lights came back on, there were four of them. Their batteries made a low, self-satisfied humming sound instead of a loud buzz, and they were very bright, banishing the shadows to the furthest comers of the room. He did not know if the world of 1960 they had entered when the arc-sodium light became a mercury-vapor lamp had been real or an illusion, but he knew it was gone.

The overturned bookcases were upright again. There was a litter of books in this aisle—a dozen or so—but he might have knocked those off himself in his struggle to get on his feet. And outside, the sound of the storm had fallen from a shout to a mutter. Sam could hear what sounded like a very sedate rain falling on the roof.

The Ardelia-thing was gone. There were no splatters of blood or chunks of flesh on the floor, on the books, or on him.

There was only one sign of her: a single golden earring, glinting up at him.

Sam got shakily to his feet and kicked it away. Then a grayness came over his sight and he swayed on his feet, eyes closed, waiting to see if he would faint or not.

“Sam!” It was Naomi, and she sounded as if she were crying. “Sam, where are you?”

“Here!” He reached up, grabbed a handful of his hair, and pulled it hard. Stupid, probably, but it worked. The wavery grayness didn’t go away entirely, but it retreated. He began moving back toward the cataloguing area, walking in large, careful strides.

The same desk, a graceless block of wood on stubby legs, stood in the cataloguing area, but the lamp with its old-fashioned, tasselled shade had been replaced with a fluorescent bar. The battered typewriter and Rolodex had been replaced by an Apple computer. And, if he had not already been sure of what time he was now in, a glance at the cardboard cartons on the floor would have convinced him: they were full of poppers and plastic bubble-strips.

Naomi was still kneeling beside Dave at the end of the aisle, and when Sam reached her side he saw that the fire-extinguisher (although thirty years had passed, it appeared to be the same one) was firmly mounted on its post again … but the shape of its handle was still imprinted on Dave’s cheek and forehead.

His eyes were open, and when he saw Sam, he smiled. “Not … bad,” he whispered. “I bet you … didn’t know you had it … in you.”

Sam felt a tremendous, buoyant sense of relief. “No,” he said. “I didn’t.” He bent down and held three fingers in front of Dave’s eyes. “How many fingers do you see?”

“About … seventy-four,” Dave whispered.

“I’ll call the ambulance,” Naomi said, and started to get up. Dave’s left hand grasped her wrist before she could.

“No. Not yet.” His eyes shifted to Sam. “Bend down. I need to whisper.”

Sam bent over the old man. Dave put a trembling hand on the back of his neck. His lips tickled the cup of Sam’s ear and Sam had to force himself to hold steady—it tickled. “Sam,” he whispered. “She waits. Remember … she waits.”

“What?” Sam asked. He felt almost totally unstrung. “Dave, what do you mean?”

But Dave’s hand had fallen away. He stared up at Sam, through Sam, his chest rising shallowly and rapidly.

“I’m going,” Naomi said, clearly upset. “There’s a telephone down there on the cataloguing desk.”

“No,” Sam said.

She turned toward him, eyes glaring, mouth pulled back from neat white teeth in a fury. “What do you mean, no? Are you crazy? His skull is fractured, at the very least! He’s—”

“He’s going, Sarah,” Sam said gently. “Very soon. Stay with him. Be his friend.”

She looked down, and this time she saw what Sam had seen. The pupil of Dave’s left eye had drawn down to a pinpoint; the pupil of his right was huge and fixed.

“Dave?” she whispered, frightened. “Dave?”

But Dave was looking at Sam again. “Remember,” he whispered. “She w …”

His eyes grew still and fixed. His chest rose once more … dropped … and did not rise again.

Naomi began to sob. She put his hand against her cheek and closed his eyes. Sam knelt down painfully and put his arm around her waist.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ANGLE STREET (III)

1

That night and the next were sleepless ones for Sam Peebles. He lay awake in his bed, all the second-floor lights turned on, and thought about Dave Duncan's last words: She waits.

Toward dawn of the second night, he began to believe he understood what the old man had been trying to say.

2

Sam thought that Dave would be buried out of the Baptist Church in Proverbia, and was a little surprised to find that he had converted to Catholicism at some point between 1960 and 1990. The services were held at St. Martin's on April 11th, a blustery day that alternated between clouds and cold early-spring sunshine.

Following the graveside service, there was a reception at Angle Street. There were almost seventy people there, wandering through the downstairs rooms or clustered in little groups, by the time Sam arrived. They had all known Dave, and spoke of him with humor, respect, and unfailing love. They drank ginger ale from Styrofoam cups and ate small finger sandwiches. Sam moved from group to group, passing a word with someone he knew from time to time but not stopping to chat. He rarely took his hand from the pocket of his dark coat. He had made a stop at the Piggly Wiggly store on his way from the church, and now there were half a dozen cellophane packages in there, four of them long and thin, two of them rectangular.

Sarah was not here.

He was about to leave when he spotted Lukey and Rudolph sitting together in a comer. There was a cribbage board between them, but they didn't seem to be playing.

"Hello, you guys," Sam said, walking over. "I guess you probably don't remember me—"

"Sure we do," Rudolph said. "Whatcha think we are? Coupla feebs? You're Dave's friend. You came over the day we was making the posters."

"Right!" Lukey said.

"Did you find those books you were lookin for?" Rudolph asked.

"Yes," Sam said, smiling. "I did, eventually."

"Right!" Lukey exclaimed.

Sam brought out the four slender cellophane packages. "I brought you guys something," he said.

Lukey glanced down, and his eyes lit up. "Slim Jims, Dolph!" he said, grinning delightedly. "Look! Sarah's boyfriend brought us all fuckin Slim Jims! Beautiful!"

"Here, gimme those, you old rummy," Rudolph said, and snatched them. "Fuckhead'd eat em all at once and then shit the bed tonight, you know," he told Sam. He stripped one of the Slim Jims and gave it to Lukey. "Here you go, dinkweed. I'll hang onto the rest of em for you."

"You can have one, Dolph. Go ahead."

"You know better, Lukey. Those things burn me at both ends."

Sam ignored this byplay. He was looking hard at Lukey. "Sarah's boyfriend? Where did you hear that?"

Lukey snatched down half a Slim Jim in one bite, then looked up. His expression was both good-humored and sly. He laid a finger against the side of his nose and said, “Word gets around when you’re in the Program, Sunny Jim. Oh yes indeed, it do.”

“He don’t know nothing, mister,” Rudolph said, draining his cup of ginger ale. “He’s just beating his gums cause he likes the sound.”

“That ain’t nothin but bullshit!” Lukey cried, taking another giant bite of Slim Jim. “I know because Dave told me! Last night! I had a dream, and Dave was in it, and he told me this fella was Sarah’s sweetie!”

“Where is Sarah?” Sam asked. “I thought she’d be here.”

“She spoke to me after the benediction,” Rudolph said. “Told me you’d know where to find her later on, if you wanted to see her. She said you’d seen her there once already.”

“She liked Dave awful much,” Lukey said. A sudden tear grew on the rim of one eye and spilled down his cheek. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. “We all did. Dave always tried so goddam hard. It’s too bad, you know. It’s really too bad.” And Lukey suddenly burst into tears.

“Well, let me tell you something,” Sam said. He hunkered beside Lukey and handed him his handkerchief. He was near tears himself, and terrified by what he now had to do … or try to do. “He made it in the end. He died sober. Whatever talk you hear, you hold onto that, because I know it’s true. He died sober.”

“Amen,” Rudolph said reverently.

“Amen,” Lukey agreed. He handed Sam his handkerchief. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it, Lukey.”

“Say—you don’t have any more of those fuckin Slim Jims, do you?”

“Nope,” Sam said, and smiled. “You know what they say, Lukey—one’s too many and a thousand are never enough.”

Rudolph laughed. Lukey smiled … then laid the tip of his finger against the side of his nose again.

“How about a quarter … wouldn’t have an extra quarter, wouldja?”

3

Sam’s first thought was that she might have gone back to the Library, but that didn’t fit with what Dolph had said … he had been at the Library with Sarah once, on the terrible night that already seemed a decade ago, but they had been there together; he hadn’t “seen” her there, the way you saw someone through a window, or—

Then he remembered when he had seen Sarah through a window, right here at Angle Street. She had been part of the group out on the back lawn, doing whatever it was they did to keep themselves sober. He now walked through the kitchen as he had done on that day, saying hello to a few more people. Burt Iverson and Elmer Baskin stood in one of the little groups, drinking ice-cream punch as they listened gravely to an elderly woman Sam didn’t know.

He stepped through the kitchen door and out onto the rear porch. The day had turned gray and blustery again. The backyard was deserted, but Sam thought he saw a flash of pastel color beyond the bushes that marked the yard’s rear boundary.

He walked down the steps and crossed the back lawn, aware that his heart had begun to thud very hard again. His hand stole back into his pocket, and this time came out with the remaining two cellophane packages. They contained Bull’s Eye Red Licorice. He tore them open and began to knead them into a ball, much smaller than the one he’d made in the Datsun on Monday night. The sweet, sugary smell was just as sickening as ever. In the distance he could hear a train coming, and it made him think of his dream—the one where Naomi had turned into Ardelia.

Too late, Sam. It's already too late. The deed is done.

She waits. Remember, Sam—she waits.

There was a lot of truth in dreams, sometimes.

How had she survived the years between? All the years between? They had never asked themselves that question, had they? How did she make the transition from one person to another? They had never asked that one, either. Perhaps the thing which looked like a woman named Ardelia Lortz was, beneath its glamours and illusions, like one of those larvae that spin their cocoons in the fork of a tree, cover them with protective webbing, and then fly away to their place of dying. The larvae in the cocoons lie silent, waiting … changing …

She waits.

Sam walked on, still kneading his smelly little ball made of that stuff the Library Policeman—his Library Policeman—had stolen and turned into the stuff of nightmares. The stuff he had somehow changed again, with the help of Naomi and Dave, into the stuff of salvation.

The Library Policeman, curling Naomi against him. Placing his mouth on the nape of her neck, as if to kiss her. And coughing instead.

The bag hanging under the Ardelia-thing's neck. Limp. Spent. Empty.

Please don't let it be too late.

He walked into the thin stand of bushes. Naomi Sarah Higgins was standing on the other side of them, her arms clasped over her bosom. She glanced briefly at him and he was shocked by the pallor of her cheeks and the haggard look in her eyes. Then she looked back at the railroad tracks. The train was closer now. Soon they would see it.

"Hello, Sam."

“Hello, Sarah.”

Sam put an arm around her waist. She let him, but the shape of her body against his was stiff, inflexible, ungiving. Please don’t let it be too late, he thought again, and found himself thinking of Dave.

They had left him there, at the Library, after propping the door to the loading platform open with a rubber wedge. Sam had used a pay phone two blocks away to report the open door. He hung up when the dispatcher asked for his name. So Dave had been found, and of course the verdict had been accidental death, and those people in town who cared enough to assume anything at all would make the expected assumption: one more old sot had gone to that great ginmill in the sky. They would assume he had gone up the lane with a jug, had seen the open door, wandered in, and had fallen against the fire-extinguisher in the dark. End of story. The postmortem results, showing zero alcohol in Dave’s blood, would not change the assumptions one bit—probabty not even for the police. People just expect a drunk to die like a drunk, Sam thought, even when he’s not.

“How have you been, Sarah?” he asked.

She looked at him tiredly. “Not so well, Sam. Not so well at all. I can’t sleep … can’t eat … my mind seems full of the most horrible thoughts … they don’t feel like my thoughts at all … and I want to drink. That’s the worst of it. I want to drink … and drink … and drink. The meetings don’t help. For the first time in my life, the meetings don’t help.”

She closed her eyes and began to cry. The sound was strengthless and dreadfully lost.

“No,” he agreed softly. “They wouldn’t. They can’t. And I imagine she’d like it if you started drinking again. She’s waiting … but that doesn’t mean she isn’t hungry.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him. “What … Sam, what are you talking about?”

“Persistence, I think,” he said. “The persistence of evil. How it waits. How it can be so cunning and so baffling and so powerful.”

He raised his hand slowly and opened it. “Do you recognize this, Sarah?”

She flinched away from the ball of red licorice which lay on his palm. For a moment her eyes were wide and fully awake. They glinted with hate and fear.

And the glints were silver.

“Throw that away!” she whispered. “Throw that damned thing away!” Her hand jerked protectively toward the back of her neck, where her brownish-red hair hung against her shoulders.

“I’m talking to you,” he said steadily. “Not to her but to you. I love you, Sarah.”

She looked at him again, and that look of terrible weariness was back. “Yes,” she said. “Maybe you do. And maybe you should learn not to.”

“I want you to do something for me, Sarah. I want you to turn your back to me. There’s a train coming. I want you to watch that train and not look back at me until I tell you. Can you do that?”

Her upper lip lifted. That expression of hate and fear animated her haggard face again. “No! Leave me alone! Go away!”

“Is that what you want?” he asked. “Is it really? You told Dolph where I could find you, Sarah. Do you really want me to go?”

Her eyes closed again. Her mouth drew down in a trembling bow of anguish. When her eyes opened again, they were full of haunted terror and brimming with tears. “Oh, Sam, help me! Something is wrong and I don’t know what it is or what to do!”

“I know what to do,” he told her. “Trust in me, Sarah, and trust in what you said when we were on our way to the Library Monday night. Honesty and belief. Those things are the opposite of fear. Honesty and belief.”

“It’s hard, though,” she whispered. “Hard to trust. Hard to believe.”

He looked at her steadily.

Naomi’s upper lip lifted suddenly, and her lower lip curled out, turning her mouth momentarily into a shape that was almost like a horn. “Fuck yourself!” she said. “Go on and fuck yourself, Sam Peebles!”

He looked at her steadily.

She raised her hands and pressed them against her temples. “I didn’t mean it. I don’t know why I said it. I … my head … Sam, my poor head! It feels like it’s splitting in two.”

The oncoming train whistled as it crossed the Proverbia River and rolled into Junction City. It was the mid-afternoon freight, the one that charged through without stopping on its way to the Omaha stockyards. Sam could see it now.

“There’s not much time, Sarah. It has to be now. Turn around and look at the train. Watch it come.”

“Yes,” she said suddenly. “All right. Do what you want to do, Sam. And if you see … see it isn’t going to work … then push me. Push me in front of the train. Then you can tell the others that I jumped … that it was suicide.” She looked at him pleadingly—deathly-tired eyes staring into his from her exhausted face. “They know I haven’t been feeling myself—the people in the Program. You can’t keep how you feel from them. After awhile that’s just not possible. They’ll believe you if you say I jumped, and they’d be right, because I don’t want to go on like this. But the thing is … Sam, the thing is, I think that before long I will want to go on.”

“Be quiet,” he said. “We’re not going to talk about suicide. Look at the train, Sarah, and remember I love you.”

She turned toward the train, less than a mile away now and coming fast. Her hands went to the nape of her neck and lifted her hair. Sam bent forward … and what he was looking for was there, crouched high on the clean white flesh of her neck. He knew that her brain-stem began less than half an inch below that place, and he felt his stomach twist with revulsion.

He bent forward toward the blistery growth. It was covered in a spiderweb skein of crisscrossing white threads, but he could see it beneath, a lump of pinkish jelly that throbbed and pulsed with the beat of her heart.

“Leave me alone!” Ardelia Lortz suddenly screamed from the mouth of the woman Sam had come to love. “Leave me alone, you bastard!” But Sarah’s hands were steady, holding her hair up, giving him access.

“Can you see the numbers on the engine, Sarah?” he murmured.

She moaned.

He drove his thumb into the soft glob of red licorice he held, making a well a little bigger than the parasite which lay on Sarah’s neck. “Read them to me, Sarah. Read me the numbers.”

“Two … six … oh Sam, oh my head hurts … it feels like big hands pulling my brain into two pieces …”

“Read the numbers, Sarah,” he murmured, and brought the Bull’s Eye licorice down toward that pulsing, obscene growth.

“Five … nine … five …”

He closed the licorice gently over it. He could feel it suddenly, wriggling and squirming under the sugary blanket. What if it breaks?

What if it just breaks open before I can pull it off her? It's all Ardelia's concentrated poison … what if it breaks before I get it off?

The oncoming train whistled again. The sound buried Sarah's shriek of pain.

"Steady—"

He simultaneously pulled the licorice back and folded it over. He had it; it was caught in the candy, pulsing and throbbing like a tiny sick heart. On the back of Sarah's neck were three tiny dark holes, no bigger than pinpricks.

"It's gone!" she cried. "Sam, it's gone!"

"Not yet," Sam said grimly. The licorice lay on his palm again, and a bubble was pushing up its surface, straining to break through—

The train was roaring past the Junction City depot now, the depot where a man named Brian Kelly had once tossed Dave Duncan four bits and then told him to get in the wind. Less than three hundred yards away and coming fast.

Sam pushed past Sarah and knelt by the tracks.

"Sam, what are you doing?"

"Here you go, Ardelia," he murmured. "Try this." He slapped the pulsing, stretching blob of red licorice down on one of the gleaming steel rails.

In his mind he heard a shriek of unutterable fury and terror. He stood back, watching the thing trapped inside the licorice struggle and push. The candy split open … he saw a darker red inside trying to push itself out … and then the 2:20 to Omaha rushed over it in an organized storm of pounding rods and grinding wheels.

The licorice disappeared, and inside of Sam Peebles's mind, that drilling shriek was cut off as if with a knife.

He stepped back and turned to Sarah. She was swaying on her feet, her eyes wide and full of dazed joy. He slipped his arms around her waist and held her as the boxcars and flatcars and tankers thundered past them, blowing their hair back.

They stood like that until the caboose passed, trailing its small red lights off into the west. Then she drew away from him a little … but not out of the circle of his arms—and looked at him.

“Am I free, Sam? Am I really free of her? It feels like I am, but I can hardly believe it.”

“You’re free,” Sam agreed. “Your fine is paid, too, Sarah. Forever and ever, your fine is paid.”

She brought her face to his and began to cover his lips and cheeks and eyes with small kisses. Her own eyes did not close as she did this; she looked at him gravely all the while.

He took her hands at last and said, “Why don’t we go back inside, and finish paying our respects? Your friends will be wondering where you are.”

“They can be your friends, too, Sam … if you want them to be.”

He nodded. “I do. I want that a lot.”

“Honesty and belief,” she said, and touched his cheek.

“Those are the words.” He kissed her again, then offered his arm. “Will you walk with me, lady?”

She linked her arm through his. “Anywhere you want, sir. Anywhere at all.”

They walked slowly back across the lawn to Angle Street together, arm in arm.