

WEEDS

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First published in Cavalier magazine, copyright (c) 1976 by Stephen King.

Jordy Verrill's place was out on Bluebird Creek, and he was alone when the meteor traced low fire across the sky and hit on the creek's east bank. It was twilight, the sky still light in the west, purple overhead, and dark in the east where Venus glowed in the sky like a two-penny sparkler. It was the Fourth of July, and Jordy had been planning to go into town for the real fireworks show when he finished splitting and banding this last smidge of sugar maple.

But the meteor was even better than the two-pound whizzers they set off at the end of the town show. It slashed across the sky in a sullen red splutter, the head afire. When it hit the ground he felt the thump in his feet. Jordy started toward Bluebird Creek on a dead run, knowing what it was immediately, even before the flash of white light from over the hill. A by-God meteor, and some of those fellows from the college might pay a good piece of change for it.

He paused at the top of the rise, his small house with its two outbuildings behind him and the meandering, sunset-colored course of the Bluebird ahead of him. And close to its bank, where the punkies and cattails grew in the soft marshy ground, earth had been flung back from a crater-shaped depression four feet across. The grass on the slope was afire.

Jordy whirled and ran back to his shed. He got a big bucket and an old broom. A faucet jutted out from the side of the shed at the end of a rusty pipe; the ground underneath was the only place grass would grow in Jordy's dooryard, which was otherwise bald and littered with old auto parts.

He filled the bucket and ran back toward the creek, thinking it was good the twilight was so still. Otherwise he might have had bad trouble. Might even have had to call the volunteer fire department. But good luck came in batches. The fire was gaining slowly with no

wind to help it. It moved out from the crater in a semicircle, drawing a crescent of black on the summer-green bank.

Moving slowly, with no wasted motion—he had fought grass fires before—Jordy dipped his broom in the water and beat the flames with it. He worked one end of the fire-front and then the other, narrowing the burn zone to twenty feet, ten, nothing. Panting a little, soot on his thin cheeks like beardshadow, he turned around and saw four or five burning circles that had been lit by sparks. He went to each and slapped them out with his wet broom.

Now for that meteor. He walked down to the crater, leather boots sending up little puffs of ash, and hunkered down. It was in there all right, and it was the size of a volleyball. It was glowing red-white-molten, and Jordy thanked his lucky stars that it had landed here, where it was marshy, and not in the middle of his hayfield.

He poked it with his boot, a roundish hunk of rock melted jagged in places by its superhot ride from the reaches of the universe all the way into Jordy Verrill's New Hampshire farmstead on the Fourth of July.

He picked up his bucket again and doused the meteor with the water that remained. There was a baleful hiss and a cloud of steam. When it cleared away and Jordy saw what had happened, he dropped the bucket and slapped his forehead.

“There, you done it now, Jordy, you lunkhead.”

The meteor had broken neatly in two. And there was something inside.

Jordy bent forward. White stuff had fallen out of a central hollow, white flaky stuff that looked like Quaker Oats.

“Well, beat my ass,” Jordy muttered. He got down on his knees and poked at the white stuff.

“Yeee-ouch!”

He snatched his fingers away and sucked them, his eyes watering. He was going to have a crop of blisters, just as sure as shit grows under a privy.

A series of thunderclaps went off behind him and Jordy leaped to his feet, looking wildly at the sky. Then he relaxed. It was just the one-pound crackers they always started the fireworks show with. He hunkered down again, never minding the green starbursts spreading in the sky behind him. He had his own fireworks to worry about.

Jordy wasn't bright; he had a potato face and large, blocky hands that were as apt to hoe up the carrots as the weeds that grew between them, and he got along as best he could. He fixed cars and sold wood and in the winter he drove Christmas trees down to Boston. Thinking was hard work for him. Thinking hurt, because there was a dead short somewhere inside, and keeping at it for long made him want to take a nap or beat his meat and forget the whole thing.

For Jordy there were three types of thinking: plain thinking, like what you were going to have for supper or the best way to pull a motor with his old and balky chain fall; work thinking; and Big Thinking. Big Thinking was like when all the cows died and he was trying to figure if Mr. Warren down at the bank would give him an extension on his loan. Like when you had to decide which bills to pay at the end of the month. Like what he was going to do about this meteor.

He decided the best way to start would be to have some pictures. He went back to the house, got his Kodak, went back to the creek, and took two flash photos of the thing, lying there cracked open like an egg with Quaker Oats coming out of it instead of yolk. It was still too hot to touch.

That was all right. He would just leave her lie. If he took it up to the college in a towsack, maybe they would say Jordy Verrill, look what you done, you fuckin' lunkhead. You picked her up and bust her all to

hell. Yes, leave her lie, that was the ticket. It was on his land. If any of those college professors tried to take his meteor, he'd sic the county sheriff on them. If they wanted to cart it off and take pictures of it and measure it and feed little pieces of it to their guinea pigs, they'd have to pay him for the privilege.

"Twenty-five bucks or no meteor!" Jordy said. He stood to his full height. He listened. He shoved his chest up against the air. "You heard me! Twenty-five bucks! Cash on the nail!"

Huge, shattering thunderclaps in the sky.

He turned around. Lights glared in the sky over town, each one followed by a cannon report that echoed and vaulted off the hills. These were followed by sprays of iridescent color in fractured starburst patterns. It was the grand finale of the fireworks show, and the first time he'd missed seeing it on the town common, with a hot dog in one hand and a cone of spun sugar in the other, in more than fifteen years.

"It don't matter!" Jordy shouted at the sky. "I got the biggest damn firework Cleaves Mills ever seen! And it's on my land!"

Jordy went back to the house and was preparing to go into town when he remembered the drugstore would be closed because of the holiday. There was no way he could start getting his film developed until tomorrow. It seemed like there was nothing to do tonight but go to bed. That thought made him feel discontented and somehow sure that his luck hadn't changed after all; the gods of chance had been amused to haul him up by the scruff of the neck and show him twenty-five dollars and had then jammed him right back down in the dirt. After all, Verrill luck was Verrill luck, and you spelled that B-A-D. It had always been that way, why should it change? Jordy decided to go back out and look at his meteor, half convinced that it had probably disappeared by now.

The meteor was still there, but the heat seemed to have turned the Quaker Oats stuff to a runny liquid that looked like flour paste with

too much water added in. It was seeping into the ground, and it must have been some kind of hot, too, because steam was rising out of the burned crescent of ground beside the creek in little banners.

He decided to take the meteor halves back to the house after all, then changed his mind back again. He told himself he was afraid he'd break it into still more pieces, being as clumsy as he was, and he told himself that it might stay hot for a long time; it might melt right through whatever he put it in and put the house afire while he was sleeping. But that wasn't it. The truth was that he just didn't like it. Nasty goddamn thing, no telling where it had been or what that white stuff had been, that meteorshit inside it.

As Jordy pulled off his boots and got ready to go to bed, he winced at the pain in his fingers. They hurt like hell, and they had blistered up pretty much the way he had expected. Well, he wasn't going to let this get away, that was all.

He'd take those pictures in to get developed tomorrow and then he'd think about who might know someone at the college. Mr. Warren the banker probably did, except he still owed Mr. Warren seven hundred dollars and he'd probably take anything Jordy made as payment on his bill. Well, somebody else, then. He'd think it over in the morning.

He unbuttoned his shirt, doing it with his left hand because his right was such a misery, and hung it up. He took off his pants and his thermal underwear, which he wore year-round, and then went into the bathroom and took the Corn Huskers Lotion out of the medicine cabinet. He spread some of the pearly-colored fluid on the blisters that had raised up on his right fingers and then turned out the lights and went to bed. He tossed and turned for a long time and when sleep finally did come, it was thin and uneasy.

He woke at dawn, feeling sick and feverish, his throat as dry as an old chip, his head throbbing. His eyes kept wanting to see two of everything.

“God almighty damn,” he muttered, and swung his feet over onto the floor. It felt like he had the gripe. Good thing he had plenty of Bacardi rum and Vicks ointment. He would smear his chest up with Vicks and put a rag around his throat and stay in. Watch TV and drink Bacardi and just sweat her out.

“That’s the ticket,” Jordy said. “That’s—”

He saw his fingers.

The next few minutes were hysteria, and he didn’t come back to his wits until he was downstairs with the phone in his hand, listening to that answering service tell him Doc Condon wouldn’t be back until tomorrow afternoon. He hung up numbly. He looked down at his fingers again.

Green stuff was growing out of them.

They didn’t hurt anymore; they itched. The blisters had broken in the night, leaving raw-looking depressions in the pads of his fingers, and there was this green stuff growing in there like moss. Fuzzy short tendrils, not pale green like grass when it first comes up, but a darker, more vigorous green.

It came from touching that meteor, he thought. “I wisht I never saw it,” he said. “I wish it come down on somebody else’s property.”

But wish in one hand, spit in the other, as his daddy would have said. Things were what they were, and he was just going to have to sit down and do some Big Thinking about it. He would—

God, he had been rubbing his eyes!

That was the first thing he did every morning when he woke up, rubbed the sleepy seeds out of his eyes. It was the first thing anybody did, as far as he knew. You wiped your left eye with your left hand and your right eye with...with...

Jordy bolted for the living room, where there was a mirror bolted on the back of the closet door. He stared into his eyes. He looked for a long time, even going so far as to pull the lids away from the eyeballs. He did it with his left hand.

They were okay.

A little bloodshot, and scared for damn sure, but otherwise they were just Jordy Verrill's blue forty-six-year-old peepers, a little nearsighted now, so he had to wear specs when he read the seed catalog or one of his Louis L'Amour westerns or one of the dirty books he kept in the drawer of his night table.

Uttering a long sigh, he went back upstairs. He used half a package of Red Cross cotton, carefully bandaging his fingers. It took him quite a while, working only with his left hand, which was his dumb hand.

When he was done he knew it was time to sit down for a spell of Big Thinking, but he couldn't face that yet, so he went out to look at his meteor.

He groaned when he saw it; he couldn't help it.

The white stuff was all gone. The steam was gone. So was the burned crescent of ground. Where the burn had been there was now a fresh growth of dark green tendrils, already as high as clipped grass. It had begun to rain in the night, and the rain had brought it along fast.

Jordy shuddered just looking at it. The fingers of his right hand itched insanely, making him want to turn around and run back to the shed and turn on the faucet and rip off the cotton and stick his fingers under its cooling flow...

But that would make it worse. Look what just a little rain had done to this here.

He crept a little closer to the clear line of demarcation between yellow hay stubble and new green growth. He hunkered down and looked at it. He had never seen any plant that grew so thick, not even clover. Even with your nose practically touching the stuff you couldn't see the ground. It was the exact color of a flourishing, well-tended lawn, but the plants weren't blades. They were round instead of flat, and tiny tendrils sprouted from each stalk like branches from the bole of a tree. Except that they were more limber than branches. What they really reminded him of were arms...horrible boneless green arms.

Then Jordy's breath stopped in his throat. If anyone had been close enough to see him, they would have been reminded of that old saying, he had his ear to the ground. In this case it was literally true.

He could hear the stuff growing.

Very faintly the earth was groaning, as if in a sleep filled with pain. He could hear it being pulled apart and riddled by the strong thrust of this thing's root system. Pebbles clunked against pebbles. Clods crumbled into loose particles. And woven through these sounds was another: the rubbing of each tiny round stalk pushing itself up a little farther and a little farther. A grinding, squealing sound.

"Christ have mercy!" Jordy whined, and scrambled to his feet. He backed away. It wasn't the sound of plant growth that frightened him, exactly; once, long ago in his youth, he had heard the corn making. Nowadays the smartasses said that was just a story the rubes told each other, like holding frogs would bring on warts and stump liquor would charm them off. But when the summer was just right, hot every day and heavy showers at night, you could hear it. In August you could hear it for maybe two nights. Jordy's father had fetched him out of bed and they had stood on the back porch of the old place not even breathing, and sure enough, Jordy had heard that low, grinding rumble from their cornpatch.

He could remember the low, red-swollen moon casting dim fire on the broad green leaves, the jumbled scarecrow that fluttered and

dangled on the fence like a horrid and grinning Halloween treasure, the sound of crickets. And that...that other sound. It had scared him then, although his daddy said it was perfectly natural. It had scared him plenty. But it hadn't scared him like this.

This sound was like an earthquake whispering deep down in the earth, working itself up through bedrock, shunting boulders aside, moving the ground, getting ready to make plates waltz off their shelves and coffee cups tap-dance from counters to shatter on the linoleum. It was at the same time the smallest and the biggest sound he had ever heard.

Jordy turned and ran back to his house.

Now, you can explain why a smart man will do something, because a smart man goes by the facts. If a smart man gets car trouble, he goes to a service station. If he gets wasps in his house, he calls the exterminator. And if a smart man gets sick somehow, he calls the doctor.

Jordy Verrill wasn't a smart man. He wasn't feeble or retarded, but he sure wasn't going to win any Quiz Kid award, either. When God hands out the smart pills, he gives some people placebos, and Jordy was one of those. And you can't predict what a man will do in a given situation after he reaches a certain degree of dumbness, because the man himself doesn't know if he's going to shit or put his fingers in the fan.

Jordy didn't call another doctor, not even after lunch when he looked into the mirror on the back of the closet door and saw the green stuff growing out of his right eye.

There was another doctor in Cleaves Mills besides Dr. Condon. But Jordy had never been to Dr. Oakley, because he had heard that Dr. Oakley was a son of a bitch. Dr. Condon never acted that way, and Jordy like him. Also, Oakley was reputed to be fond of giving shots, and Jordy still retained his childhood fear of being injected. Doc Condon was more of a pill man, and usually he would give you the

pills free, from samples. Paying up, that was another thing. Jordy had heard that Doc Oakley had a little sign on his waiting room wall that said IT IS CUSTOMARY TO PAY CASH UNLESS ARRANGEMENTS HAVE BEEN MADE IN ADVANCE. That was hard scripture for an odd-job man like Jordy Verrill, especially with the hay as poor as it had been this year. But Doc Condon sent out bills only when he remembered to, which was rarely.

None of these are smart reasons for not going to the doctor, but Jordy had one other, so deep he could never say it in words. He didn't really want to go to see any doctor, because he was afraid to find out what was wrong with him. And what if it was so bad that Doc Oakley decided to stick him in the hospital? He was deadly afraid of that place, because when you went in it was only a matter of time before they lugged you out in a canvas bag.

Still, he might have gone to Doc Oakley if the answering service had said Doc Condon wasn't going to be back for a week. But just until tomorrow, that wasn't so bad. He could call Doc Condon tomorrow and get him to come out here, and not have to sit in anybody's waiting room where everyone could see that revolting green stuff growing out of his eye.

"That's the ticket," he whispered to himself. "That's what to do."

He went back to the TV, a glass of rum in a water glass by his hand. Tiny green fuzz was visible, growing on the white of his right eye like moss on a stone. Limber tendrils hung over the lower lid. It itched something dreadful.

And so the eye, of course, resorted to its old tried-and-true method of cleansing itself, and that's why Jordy, had he been a smart man, would have gotten over to Doc Oakley's office just as fast as his old Dodge pickup could travel.

His right eye was watering. A regular little sprinkling can.

He fell asleep halfway through the afternoon soap operas. When he woke up at five o'clock he was blind in his right eye. He looked in the mirror and moaned. His faded-blue right eye was gone. What was in the socket now was a waving green jungle of weeds, and some of the little creepers hung halfway down his cheek.

He put one hand up to his face before he could stop himself. He couldn't just rip the stuff out, the way you would hoe up the witchgrass in your tomato sets. He couldn't do that because his eye was still in there someplace.

Wasn't it?

—

Jordy screamed.

The scream echoed through his house, but there was no one to hear it because he was alone. He had never been so dreadfully alone in his life. It was eight o'clock in the evening and he had drunk the whole bottle of Bacardi and he still wasn't schnoekered. He wished he was schnoekered. He had never wanted so badly to be out of sobriety.

He had gone into the bathroom to piss off some of the rum, and that green stuff was growing out of his penis. Of course it was. It was wet down there, wasn't it? Almost always a little bit wet.

Jordy went just the same, but it itched and hurt so much that he couldn't tell which was worse. And maybe next time he wouldn't be able to go at all.

That wasn't what had made him scream. The thought of having that stuff inside him, that had made him scream. It was a million times worse than the time he had gotten the bat caught in his hair while he was insulating old Missus Carver's attic. Somehow the green plants had picked the two best parts of him, his eyes and his pecker. It

wasn't fair, it wasn't fair at all. It seemed like Jordy's luck was always in, and you spelled that kind of luck B-A-D.

He started to cry and made himself stop because that would only make it grow the faster.

He had no more hard liquor, but there was half a bottle of Ripple in the icebox so he filled his tumbler with that and sat down again, dully watching the TV with his good eye. He glanced down at his right hand and saw green tendrils had wriggled out from underneath the cotton...and some stalks had pushed right up through it.

"I'm growin'," he said emptily, and moaned again.

The wine made Jordy sleepy and he dozed off. When he woke up it was ten-thirty and at first he was so muzzy from everything he had drunk that he didn't remember what had happened to him. All he was sure of was that his mouth tasted funny, as if he had been chewing grass. Awful taste. It was like—

Jordy bolted for the mirror. Ran his tongue out. And screamed again.

His tongue was covered with the fuzzy green growth, the insides of his cheeks were downy with it, and even his teeth looked greenish, as if they were rotting.

And he itched. Itched like fire, all over. He remembered once when he had been deer hunting and he had to take a squat right that minute, or else. And he had gone and done it right in a patch of poison sumac—Jordy's luck was always in. That had been a bad itch, the rash he had gotten from that, but this was worse. This was a nightmare. His fingers, his eye, his pecker, and now his mouth.

Cold water!

The thought was so focused, so steely, that it didn't seem like his own at all. Commanding, it came again: Cold water!

He had a vision of filling up the old claw-foot bathtub upstairs with cold water, then ripping off all his clothes and jumping in, drowning the itch forever.

Madness. If he did that it would grow all over him, he would come out looking like a swamp log covered with moss. And yet the thought of cold water wouldn't go away; it was crazy, all right, but it would be so good, so good to just soak in cold water until the itch was all gone.

He started back to his chair and stopped.

Green stuff was sprouting from its overstuffed right arm. It was all over the worn and stringy brown fabric. On the table beside it, where there had been a ring of moisture from his glass, there was now a ring of green stalks and tendrils.

He went out into the kitchen and looked into the trash bag. More of the green stuff was growing all over the Bacardi bottle he had dropped in earlier. And a Del Monte pineapple chunks can next to the Bacardi bottle. And an empty Heinz ketchup bottle next to the Del Monte can. Even his garbage was being overrun.

Jordy ran for the phone, picked it up, then banged it back down. Who could he call? Did he really want anyone to see him like this?

He looked at his arms and saw that his own sweat glands were betraying him. Among the reddish-gold hairs on his forearms, a new growth was sprouting. It was green.

"I'm turnin' into a weed," he said distractedly, and looked around as if the walls would tell him what to do. They didn't, and he sat down in front of the TV again.

It was his eye—what had been his eye—that finally broke him down. The itching just seemed to be going deeper and deeper into his head, and creeping down his nose at the same time.

“I can’t help it,” he groaned. “Oh my Jesus, I can’t!”

He went upstairs, a grotesque, shambling figure with green arms and a forest growing out of one eye socket. He lurched into the bathroom, jammed the plug into the bathtub drain, and turned the cold water faucet on full. His jury-rigged plumbing thumped and groaned and clanked. The sound of cool water splashing into the tub made him tremble all over with eagerness. He tore his shirt off and was not much revolted by the new growth sprouting from his navel. He kicked his boots off, shoved his pants and thermals and skivvies down all at once. His upper thighs were forested with the growth and his pubic hair was twined with the limber green tendrils that sprouted from the plants’ central stalks. When the tub was three-quarters full, Jordy could no longer control himself. He jumped in.

It was heaven.

He rolled and flopped in the tub like some clumsy, greenish porpoise, sending water sheeting onto the floor. He ducked his head and sloshed water over the back of his neck. He shoved his face under and came up blowing water.

And he could feel the new growth spurt, could feel the weeds that had taken root in his body moving forward with amazing, terrifying speed.

Shortly after midnight, a slumped, slowly moving figure topped the rise between Jordy Verrill’s farm and Bluebird Creek. It stood looking down at the place where a meteor had impacted less than thirty hours before.

Jordy’s east pasture was a sea of growing green weeds. The hay was gone for a distance of a hundred and sixty yards in every direction. Already the growth nearest the creek was more than a foot and a half high, and the tendrils that sprouted from the stalks moved with a twisting, writhing movement that was almost sentient. At one point the Bluebird itself was gone; it flowed into a green marsh and

came out four feet farther downstream. A peninsula of green had already marched ten feet up the bank of Arlen McGinty's land.

The figure that stood looking down on this was really not Jordy Verrill anymore. It was hard to say what it might be. It was vaguely humanoid, the way a snowman that had begun to melt is humanoid. The shoulders were rounded. The head was a fuzzy green ball with no sign of a neck between it and the shoulders. Deep down in all that green, one faded-blue iris gleamed like a pale sapphire.

In the field, tendrils suddenly waved in the air like a thousand snakes coming out of a thousand Hindu fakirs' baskets, and pointed, trembling, at the figure standing on the knoll. And on the figure, tendrils suddenly pointed back. Momentarily Jordy had a semblance of humanity again: He looked like a man with his hair standing on end.

Jordy, his thoughts dimming with the tide of greenness that now grew from the very meat of his brain, understood that a kind of telepathy was going on.

Is the food good?

Yes, very good. Rich.

Is he the only food?

No, much food. His thoughts say so.

Does the food have a name?

Two names. Sometimes it is called Jordy-food. Sometimes it is called Cleaves Mills-food.

Jordy-food. Cleaves Mills-food. Rich. Good.

His thoughts say he wants to bang. Can he do that?

Don't know. Some Jordy-thing.

Good. Rich. Let him do what he wants.

The figure, like a badly controlled puppet on frayed strings, turned and lurched back toward the house.

In the glow of the kitchen light, Jordy was a monster. A monster in the true sense, nearly as ludicrous as it was terrifying. He looked like a walking privet hedge.

The hedge was crying.

It had no tears to cry, because the growth was mercilessly absorbing every bit of moisture that Jordy's failing systems could produce. But it cried just the same, in its fashion, as it pulled the .410 Remington from its hooks over the shed door.

It put the gun to what had been Jordy Verrill's head. It could not pull the trigger by itself, but the tendrils helped, perhaps curious to see if the bang would make the Jordy-food more tasty. They curled around the trigger and tightened until the hammer dropped.

A dry click.

Jordy's luck was always in.

Somehow it got the shells from the desk drawer in the living room. The tendrils curled around one of them, lifted it, dropped it into the chamber, and closed the slide mechanism. Again they helped to pull the trigger.

The gun banged. And Jordy Verrill's last thought was: Oh, thank God, lucky at last!

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The weeds reached the edge of the highway by dawn and began to grow around a signpost that said CLEAVES MILLS, TWO MILES. The round stalks whispered and rubbed against each other in a light

dawn breeze. There was a heavy dew and the weeds sucked it up greedily.

Jordy-food.

A fine planet, a wet planet. A ripe planet.

Cleaves Mills-food.

The weeds began to grow toward town.