

A black and white close-up portrait of Stephen King. He is wearing thick-rimmed glasses and has dark, slightly messy hair. He is looking off to the left with a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

STEPHEN KING

THE
COLLECTIVE

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**A collection of Poems, Short Stories, and other
Works by Stephen King**

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2000**

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This collection is a work in progress. As more items are discovered, they will be added. All items in this book are short stories, poems, and other items published by Stephen king, but not found in any book released by his publishing company at this point in time. The purpose of this book is to have one archive for all of the material.

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THIS COPY IS DATED:

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FOR
PATTY

STEPHEN KING

An Evening at GODs

A one minit play, 1990

DARK STAGE. Then a spotlight hits a papier-mache globe, spinning all by itself in the middle of darkness. Little by little, the stage lights COME UP, and we see a bare-stage representation of a living room: an easy chair with a table beside it (there's an open bottle of beer on the table), and a console TV across the room. There's a picnic cooler-full of beer under the table. Also, a great many empties. GOD is feeling pretty good. At stage left, there's a door.

GOD – a big guy with a white beard – is sitting in the chair, alternately reading a book (When Bad Things Happen to Good People) and watching the tube. He has to crane whenever he wants to look at the set, because the floating globe (actually hung on a length of string, I imagine) is in his line of vision. There's a sitcom on TV. Every now and then GOD chuckles along with the laugh-track.

There is a knock at the door.

GOD (big amplified voice)

Come in! Verily, it is open unto you!

The door opens. In comes ST. PETER, dressed in a snazzy white robe. He's also carrying a briefcase.

GOD

Peter! I thought you were on vacation!

ST. PETER

Leaving in half an hour, but I thought I'd bring the papers for you to sign.

How are you, GOD?

GOD

Better. I should know better than to eat those chili peppers. They burn me at both ends. Are those the letters of transmission from hell?

ST. PETER

Yes, finally. Thank GOD. Excuse the pun.

He removes some papers from his briefcase. GOD scans them, then holds out his hand impatiently, ST PETER has been looking at the floating globe. He looks back, sees GOD is waiting, and puts a pen in his out-stretched hand. GOD scribbles his signature. As he does, ST. PETER goes back to gazing at the globe.

ST. PETER

So Earth's still there, Huh? After All these years.

GOD hands the papers back and looks up at it. His gaze is rather irritated.

GOD

Yes, the housekeeper is the most forgetful bitch in the universe.

An EXPLOSION OF LAUGHTER from the TV. GOD cranes to see. Too late.

GOD

Damm, was that Alan Alda?

ST. PETER

It may have been, sir – I really couldn't see.

GOD

Me, either.

He leans forward and crushes the floating globe to powder.

GOD (immensely satisfied)

There. Been meaning to do that for a long time. Now I can see the TV..

ST. PETER looks sadly at the crushed remains of the earth.

ST. PETER

Umm... I believe that was Alan Alda's world, GOD.

GOD

So? (Chuckles at the TV) Robin Williams! I LOVE Robin Williams!

ST. PETER

I believe both Alda and Williams were on it when you..umm...passed Judgement, sir.

GOD

Oh, I've got all the videotapes. No problem. Want a beer?

As ST. PETER takes one, the stage-lights begin to dim. A spotlight come up on the remains on the globe.

ST. PETER

I actually sort of liked that one, GOD – Earth, I mean.

GOD

It wasn't bad, but there's more where that came from. Now – let's Drink to your vacation!

They are just shadows in the dimness now, although it's a little easier to see GOD, because there's a faint nimbus of light around his head. They clink bottles. A roar of laughter from the TV.

GOD

Look! It's Richard Pryor! That guy kills me! I suppose he was...

ST. PETER

Ummm... yessir.

GOD

Shit. (Pause) Maybe I better cut Down on my drinking. (Pause)
Still... It WAS in the way.

Fade to black, except for the spotlight on the ruins of the floating globe.

ST. PETER

Yessir.

GOD (muttering)

My son got back, didn't he?

ST. PETER

Yessir, some time ago.

GOD

Good. Everything's hunky-dory, then.

THE SPOTLIGHT GOES OUT.

(Author's note: GOD'S VOICE should be as loud as possible.)

Before The Play

Stephen King

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A BEDROOM IN THE WEE HOURS OF THE MORNING

Coming here had been a mistake, and Lottie Kilgallon didn't like to admit her mistakes.

And I won't admit this one, she thought with determination as she stared up at the ceiling that glimmered overhead

Her husband of 10 days slumbered beside her. Sleeping the sleep of the just was how some might have put it. Others, more honest, might have called it the sleep of the monumentally stupid. He was William Pillsbury of the Westchester Pillsburys, only son and heir of Harold M. Pillsbury, old and comfortable money. Publishing was what they liked to talk about because publishing was a gentleman's profession, but there was also a chain of New England textile mills, a foundry in Ohio, and extensive agricultural holdings in the South - cotton and citrus and fruit. Old money was always

better than nouveau riche, but either way they had money falling out of their assholes. If she ever said that aloud to Bill, he would undoubtedly go pale and might even faint dead away. No fear, Bill. Profanation of the Pillsbury family shall never cross my lips.

It had been her idea to honeymoon at the Overlook in Colorado, and there had been two reasons for this. First, although it was tremendously expensive (as the best resorts were), it was not a "hep" place to go, and Lottie did not like to go to the hep places. Where did you go on your honeymoon. Lottie? Oh, this perfectly, wonderful resort hotel in Colorado - the Overlook. Lovely place. Quite out of the way but so romantic. And her friends - whose stupidity was exceeded in most cases only by that of William Pillsbury - himself - would look at her in dumb - literally! - wonder. Lottie had done it again.

Her second reason had been of more personal importance. She had wanted to honeymoon at the Overlook because Bill wanted to go to Rome. It was imperative to find out certain things as soon as possible. Would she be able to have her own way immediately? And if not, how long would it take to grind him down? He was stupid, and he had followed her around like a dog with its tongue hanging out since her debutante ball, but would he be as malleable after the ring was slipped on as he had been before?

Lottie smiled a little in the dark despite her lack of sleep and the bad dreams she had had since they arrived here. Arrived here, that was the key phrase. "Here" was not the American Hotel in Rome but the Overlook in Colorado. She was going to be able to manage him just fine, and that was the important thing. She would only make him stay another four days (she had originally planned on three weeks, but the bad dreams had changed that), and then they could go back to New York. After all, that was where the action was in this August of 1929. The stock market was going crazy, the sky was the limit, and Lottie expected to be an heiress to multimillions instead of just one or two million by this time next

year. Of course there were some weak sisters who claimed the market was riding for a fall, but no one had ever called Lottie Kilgallon a weak sister.

Lottie Kilgallon. Pillsbury now at least that's the way I'll have to sign my checks, of course. But inside I'll always be Lottie Kilgallon. Because he's never going to touch me Not inside where it counts.

The most tiresome thing about this first contest of her marriage was that Bill actually liked the Overlook. He was up even, day at two minutes past the crack of dawn, disturbing what ragged bits of sleep she had managed after the restless nights, staring eagerly out at the sunrise like some sort of disgusting Greek nature boy. He had been hiking two or three times, he had gone on several nature rides with other guests, and bored her almost to the point of screaming with stories about the horse he rode on these jaunts, a bay mare named Tessie. He had tried to get her to go on these outings with him, but Lottie refused. Riding meant slacks, and her posterior was just a trifle too-wide for slacks. The idiot had also suggested that she go hiking with him and some of the others - the caretaker's son doubled as a guide, Bill enthused, and he knew a hundred trails. The amount of game you saw, Bill said, would make you think it was 1829, instead of a hundred years later. Lottie had dumped cold water on this idea too.

"I believe, darling, that all hikes should be one-way, you see."

"One-way?" His wide Anglo-Saxon brow crippled and croggled into its usual expression of befuddlement. "How can you have a one-way hike, Lottie?"

"By hailing a taxi to take you home when your feet begin to hurt," she replied coldly,

The barb was wasted. He went without her, and came back glowing. The stupid bastard was getting a tan.

She had not even enjoyed their evenings of bridge in the downstairs recreation room, and that was most unlike her. She was something of a barracuda at bridge, and if it had been ladylike to play for stakes in mixed company, she could have brought a cash dowry to her marriage (not that she would have, of course). Bill was a good bridge partner, too; he had both qualifications: He understood the basic rules and he allowed Lottie to dominate him. She thought it was poetic justice that her new husband spent most of their bridge evenings as the dummy.

Their partners at the Overlook were the Compsons occasionally, the Vereckers more frequently. Dr. Verecker was in his early 70s, a surgeon who had retired after a near-fatal heart attack. His wife smiled a lot, spoke softly, and had eyes like shiny nickels. They played only adequate bridge, but they kept beating Lottie and Bill. On the occasions when the men played against the women, the men ended up trouncing Lottie and Malvina Verecker. When Lottie and Dr. Verecker played Bill and Malvina, she and the doctor usually won, but there was no pleasure in it because Bill was a dullard and Malvina, could not see the game of bridge as anything but a social tool.

Two nights before, after the doctor and his wife had made a bid of four clubs that, they had absolutely no right to make, Lottie had mussed the cards in a sudden flash of pique that was very unlike her. She usually kept her feelings under much better control.

"You could have led into my spades on that third trick!" she rattled at Bill. "That would have put a stop to it right there!"

"But dear," said Bill, flustered, "I thought you were thin in spades."

"If I had been thin in spades, I shouldn't have bid two of them, should I? Why I continue to play this game with you I don't know!"

The Vereckers blinked at them in mild surprise. Later that evening Mrs. Verecker, she of the nickel-bright eyes, would tell her husband that she had thought them such a nice couple, so loving, but when she rumbled the cards like that she had looked just like a shrew.

Bill was staring at her with jaws agape.

"I'm very sorry," said Lottie, gathering up the reins of her control and giving them an inward shake. "I'm off my feed a little, I suppose. I haven't been sleeping well."

"That's a pity," said the doctor. "Usually this mountain air—we're almost 12,000 feet above sea level, you know is very conducive to good rest. Less oxygen, you know. The body doesn't—"

"I've had bad dreams," Lottie told him shortly.

And so she had. Not just bad dreams but nightmares. She had never been much of one to dream (which said something disgusting and Freudian about, her psyche, no doubt), even as a child. Oh, yes, there had been some pretty humdrum affairs, mostly the only one she could remember that, came even close to being a nightmare was one in which she had been delivering a Good Citizenship speech at the school assembly and had looked down to discover she had forgotten to put on her dress. Later someone had told her almost everyone had a dream like that at some point or another.

The dreams she had had at the Overlook were much worse. It was not a case of one dream or two repeating themselves with variations; they were all different. Only the setting of each was similar: In each one she found herself in a different part of the Overlook Hotel. Each dream would begin with an awareness on her part that she was dreaming and that something terrible and frightening was going to happen to her in the course of the dream. There was an inevitability about it that was particularly awful.

In one of them she had been hurrying for the elevator because she was late for dinner, so late that Bill had already gone down before her in a temper.

She rang for the elevator, which came promptly and was empty except for the operator. She thought too late that it was odd; at mealtimes you could barely wedge yourself in. The stupid hotel was only half full, but the elevator had a ridiculously small capacity. Her unease heightened as the elevator descended and continued to descend ... for far too long a time. Surely they must have reached the lobby or even the basement by now, and still the operator did not open the doors, and still the sensation of downward motion continued. She tapped him on the shoulder with mixed feelings of indignation and panic, aware too late of how spongy he felt, how strange, like a scarecrow stuffed with rotten straw. And as he turned his head and grinned at her she saw that the elevator was being piloted by a dead man, his face a greenish-white corpselike hue, his eyes sunken, his hair under his cap lifeless and sere. The fingers wrapped around the switch were fallen away to bones.

Even as she filled her lungs to shriek, the corpse threw the switch over and uttered, "Your floor, madam," in a husky, empty voice. The door drew open to reveal flames and basalt plateaus and the stench of brimstone. The elevator operator had taken her to hell.

In another dream it was near the end of the afternoon and she was on the playground. The light was curiously golden, although the sky overhead was black with thunderheads. Membranes of shower danced between two of the saw-toothed peaks further west. It was like a Brueghel, a moment of sunshine and low pressure. And she felt something beside her. Moving. Something in the topiary. And she turned to see with frozen horror that it was the topiary: The hedge animals had left their places and were creeping toward her, the lions, the buffalo, even the rabbit that usually looked so comic and friendly. Their horrid hedge features were bent on her as they

moved slowly toward the playground on their hedge paws, green and silent and deadly under the black thunderheads.

In the one she had just awakened from, the hotel had been on fire. She had awakened in their room to find Bill gone and smoke drifting slowly through the apartment. She fled in her nightgown but lost her direction in the narrow halls, which were obscured by smoke. All the numbers seemed to be gone from the doors, and there was no way to tell if you were running toward the stairwell and elevator or away from them. She rounded a corner and saw Bill standing outside the window at the end, motioning her forward. Somehow she had run all the way to the back of the hotel; he was standing out there on the fire escape landing. Now there was heat baking into her back through the thin, filmy stuff of her nightgown. The place must be in flames behind her, she thought. Perhaps it had been the boiler. You had to keep an eye on the boiler, because if you didn't, she would creep on you. Lottie started forward and suddenly something wrapped around her arm like a python, holding her back. It was one of the fire hoses she had seen along the corridor walls, white canvas hose in a bright red frame. It had come alive somehow, and it writhed and coiled around her, now securing a leg, now her other arm. She was held fast and it was getting hotter, hotter. She could hear the angry crackle of the flames now only feet behind her. The wallpaper was peeling and blistering. Bill was gone from the fire-escape landing. And then she had been-

She had been awake in the big double bed, no smell of smoke, with Bill Pillsbury sleeping the sleep of the justly stupid beside her. She was running sweat, and if it weren't so late she would get up to shower. It was quarter past three in the morning.

Dr. Verecker had offered to give her a sleeping medicine, but Lottie had refused. She distrusted any concoction you put in your body to knock out your mind. It was like giving up command of

your ship voluntarily, and she had sworn to herself that she would never do that.

But what would she do for the next four days? Well, Verecker played shuffleboard in the mornings with his nickle-eyed wife. Perhaps she would look him up and get the prescription after all.

Lottie looked up at the white ceiling high above her, glimmering ghostlike, and admitted again that the Overlook had been a very bad mistake. None of the ads for the Overlook in the *New Yorker* or *The American Mercury* mentioned that the place's real specialty seemed to be giving people the whims. Four more days, and that was plenty. It had been a mistake, all right, but a mistake she would never admit, or have to admit. In fact, she was sure she could.

You had to keep an eye on the boiler, because if you didn't., she would creep up on you. What did that mean, anyway? Or was it just one of those nonsensical things that sometimes came to you in dreams, so much gibberish? Of course, there was undoubtedly a boiler in the basement or somewhere to heat the place; even summer resorts had to have heat, sometimes, didn't they? If only to supply hot water. But creep? Would a boiler creep?

You had to keep an eye on, the boiler.

It was like one of those crazy riddles:

Why is a mouse when it runs, when is a raven like a writing desk, what is a creeping boiler? Was it, like the hedges, maybe? She'd had a dream where the hedges crept. And the fire hose that had what - what? - slithered?

A chill touched her. It was not good to think much about the dreams in the night, in the dark. You could ... well, you could bother yourself. It was better to think about the things you would be doing when you got back to New York, about how you were going to convince Bill that a baby was a bad idea for a while, until

he got firmly settled in the vice presidency his father had awarded him as a wedding present-

She'll creep on you.

- and how you were going to encourage him to bring his work home so he would get used to the idea that she was going to be involved with it, very much involved.

Or did the whole hotel, creep? Was that the answer?

I'll make him a good wife, Lottie thought frantically. We'll work at it the same way we always worked at being bridge partners. He knows the rules of the game and he knows enough to let me run him. It will be just like the bridge, just like that, and if we've been off our game up here that, doesn't mean anything, it's just the hotel, the dreams-

An affirming voice: That's it. The whole place. It... creeps.

"Oh, shit," Lottie Kilgallon whispered in the dark. It was dismaying for her to realize just how badly her nerves were shot. As on the other nights, there would be no more sleep for her now. She would lie here in bed until the sun started to come up and then she would get an uneasy hour or so.

Smoking in bed was a bad habit, a terrible habit., but she had begun to leave her cigarettes in an ashtray on the floor by the bed in case of the dreams. Sometimes it calmed her. She reached down to get the ashtray and the thought burst on her like a revelation:

It does creep, the whole place - like it's alive!

And that was when the hand reached out unseen from under the bed and gripped her wrist firmly ... almost lecherously. A fingerlike canvas scratched suggestively against her palm and something was under there, something had been under there the whole time, and Lottie began to scream. She screamed until her

throat was raw and hoarse and her eyes were bulging from her face and Bill was awake and pallid with terror beside her.

When he put on the lamp she leaped from the bed, retreated into the farthest corner of the room and curled up with her thumb in her mouth.

Both Bill and Dr. Verecker tried to find out what was wrong; she told them but she was still sucking her thumb, so it was some time before they realized she was saying, "It crept under the bed. It crept under the bed."

And even though they flipped up the coverlet and Bill actually lifted up the whole bed by its foot off the floor to show her there was nothing under there, not even a litter of dust kitties, she would not come out of the corner. When the sun came up, she did at last come out of the corner. She took her thumb out of her mouth. She stayed away from the bed. She stared at, Bill Pillsbury from her clown-white face.

"We're going back to New York," she said. "This morning."

"Of course," Bill muttered. "Of course, dear."

Bill Pillsbury's father died of a heart attack two weeks after the stock-market crash. Bill and Lottie could not keep the company's head above water. Things went from bad to worse. In the years that followed she thought often of their honeymoon at the Overlook Hotel, and the dreams, and the canvas hand that had crept out from under the bed to squeeze her own. She thought about those things more and more. She committed suicide in a Yonkers motel room in 1949, a woman who was prematurely gray and prematurely lined. It had been 20 years and the hand that had gripped her wrist when she reached down to get her cigarettes had never really let go. She left a one-sentence suicide note written on Holiday Inn stationery. The note said: "I wish we had gone to Rome."

AND NOW THIS WORD FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE

In that long, hot summer of 1953, the summer Jacky Torrance turned 6, his father came home one night from the hospital and broke Jacky's arm. He almost killed the boy. He was drunk.

Jacky was sitting on the front porch reading a Combat Casey comic book when his father came down the street, listing to one side, torpedoed by beer somewhere down the line. As he always did, the boy felt a mixture of love-hate-fear rise in his chest at the sight of the old man, who looked like a giant, malevolent ghost in his hospital whites. Jacky's father was an orderly at the Berlin Community Hospital. He was like God, like Nature-sometimes lovable, sometimes terrible. You never knew which it would be. Jacky's mother feared and served him. Jacky's brothers hated him. Only Jacky, of all of them, still loved him in spite of the fear and the hate, and sometimes the volatile mixture of emotions made him want to cry out at the sight of his father coming, to simply cry out: "I love you, Daddy! Go away! Hug me! I'll kill you! I'm so afraid of you! I need you!" And his father seemed to sense in his stupid way-he was a stupid man, and selfish - that all of them had gone beyond him but Jacky, the youngest, knew that the only way he could touch the others was to bludgeon them to attention. But with Jacky there was still love, and there had been times when he had cuffed the boy's mouth into running blood and then hugged him with a frightful force, the killing force just, barely held back by some other thing, and Jackie would let himself be hugged deep into the atmosphere of malt and hops that hung around his old man forever, quailing, loving, fearing.

He leaped off the step and ran halfway down the path before something stopped him.

"Daddy?" he said. "Where's the car?"

Torrance came toward him, and Jacky saw how very drunk he was. "Wrecked it up," he said thickly.

"Oh..." Careful now. Careful what you say. For your life, be careful. "That's too bad"

His father stopped and regarded Jacky from his stupid pig eyes. Jacky held his breath. Somewhere behind his father's brow, under the lawn-mowed brush of his crew cut, the scales were turning. The hot, afternoon stood still while Jacky waited, staring up anxiously into his father's face to see if his father would throw a rough bear arm around his shoulder, grinding Jacky's cheek against the rough, cracked leather of the belt that held up his white pants and say, "Walk with me into the house, big boy." in the hard and contemptuous way that was the only way he could even approach love without destroying himself - or if it would be something else.

Tonight it was something else.

The thunderheads appeared on his father's brow. "What do you mean, 'That's too bad'? What kind of shit is that?"

"Just...too bad, Daddy. That's all I meant. it's-"

Torrance's hand swept out at the end of his arm, huge hand, hamhock arm, but speedy, yes, very speedy, and Jacky went down with church bells in his head and a split lip.

"Shutup" his father said, giving it a broad A.

Jacky said nothing. Nothing would do any good now. The balance had swung the wrong way.

"You ain't gonna sass me," said Torrance. "You won't sass your daddy. Get up here and take your medicine."

There was something in his face this time, some dark and blazing thing. And Jacky suddenly knew that this time there might be no hug at the end of the blows, and if there was he might, be unconscious and unknowing ... maybe even dead.

He ran.

Behind him, his father let out a bellow of rage and chased him., a flapping specter in hospital whites, a juggernaut of doom following his son from the front yard to the back.

Jacky ran for his life. The tree house, he was thinking. He can't get up there; the ladder nailed to the tree won't hold him. I'll get up there, talk to him; maybe he'll go to sleep - Oh, God, please let him go to sleep - he was weeping in terror as he ran.

"Come back here, goddammit!" His father was roaring behind him. "Come back here and take your medicine! Take it like a man!"

Jacky flashed past the back steps. His mother, that thin and defeated woman, scrawny in a faded housedress, had come out through the screen door from the kitchen, just as Jacky ran past with his father in pursuit. She opened her mouth as if to speak or cry out, but her hand came up in a fist and stopped whatever she might have said, kept it safely behind her teeth. She was afraid for her son, but more afraid that her husband would turn on her.

"No, you don't! Come back here!"

Jacky reached the large elm in the backyard, the elm where last year his father had smoke-drugged a colony of wasps then burned their nest with gasoline. The boy went up the haphazardly hung nailed-on rungs like greased lightning, and still he was nearly not fast enough. His father's clutching, enraged hand grasped the boy's ankle in a grip like flexed steel, then slipped a little and succeeded only in pulling off Jacky's loafer. Jacky went up the last, three rungs and crouched on the floor of the tree house, 12 feet above the ground, panting and crying on his hands and knees.

His father seemed to go crazy. He danced around the tree like an Indian, Bellowing his rage. He slammed his fists into the tree, making bark fly and bringing lattices of blood to his knuckles. He kicked it. His huge moon face was white with frustration and red with anger.

"Please, Daddy," Jacky moaned. "Whatever I said ... I'm sorry I said it..."

"Come down! You come down out of there take your fucking medicine, you little cur! Right now!"

"I Will ... I will If you promise not to ... to hit me too hard ... not hurt me... just spank me but not hurt me..."

"Get out of that tree!" his father screamed.

Jacky looked toward the house but that was hopeless. His mother had retreated somewhere far away, to neutral ground.

"GET OUT RIGHT NOW!"

"Oh, Daddy, I don't dare!" Jacky cried out, and that was the truth. Because now his father might kill him.

There was a period of stalemate. A minute, perhaps, or perhaps two. His father circled the tree, puffing and blowing like a whale. Jacky turned around and around on his hands and knees, following the movements. They were like parts of a visible clock.

The second or third time he came back to the ladder nailed to the tree, Torrance stopped. He looked speculatively at the ladder. And laid his hands on the rung before his eyes. He began to climb.

"No, Daddy, it won't hold you," Jacky whispered.

But his father came on relentlessly, like fate, like death, like doom. Up and up, closer to the tree house. One rung snapped off under his hands and he almost fell but caught the next one with a grunt and a lunge. Another one of the rungs twisted around from the horizontal to the perpendicular under his weight with a rasping scream of pulling nails, but it did not give way, and then the working, congested face was visible over the edge of the tree-house floor, and for that one moment of his childhood Jack Torrance had his father at bay; if he could have kicked that face

with the foot that still wore its loafer, kicked it where the nose terminated between the piggy eyes, he could have driven his father backward off the ladder, perhaps killed him (If he had killed him, would anyone have said anything but Thanks, Jacky"?) But it was love that stopped him, and love that, let him just his face in his hands and give up as first one of his father's pudgy, short-fingered hands appeared on the boards and then the other.

"Now, by God," his father breathed. He stood above his huddled son like a giant.

"Oh, Daddy," Jacky mourned for both of them. And for a moment his father paused, his face sagged into lines of uncertainty, and Jacky felt a thread of hope.

Then the face drew up. Jacky could smell the beer, and his father said, "I'll teach you to sass me," and all hope was gone as the foot swung out, burying itself in Jacky's belly, driving the wind from his belly in a whoosh. as he flew from the tree-house platform and fell to the ground, turning over once and landing on the point of his left elbow, which snapped with a greenstick crack. He didn't even have breath enough to scream. The last thing he saw before he blacked out was his father's face, which seemed to be at the end of a long, dark tunnel. It, seemed to be filling with surprise, the way a vessel may fill with some pale liquid.

He's just starting to know what he did, Jacky thought incoherently.

And on the heels of that, a thought with no meaning at all, coherent or otherwise, a thought, that chased him into the blackness as he fell back on the chewed and tattered grass of the back lawn in a faint:

What you see is what you'll be, what YOU see is what you'll be, what you-

The break in his arm was cleanly healed in six months. The nightmares went, on much longer. In a way, they never stopped.

THE OVERLOOK HOTEL, THIRD FLOOR, 1958

The murderers came up the stairs in their stocking feet.

The two men posted outside the door of the Presidential Suite never heard them. They were young, dressed in Ivy League suits with the cut of the jackets a little wider than the fashion of the day decreed. You couldn't wear a .357 Magnum concealed in a shoulder holster and be quite in fashion. They were discussing whether or not the Yankees could take yet another pennant. It was lacking two days of September, and as usual, the pinstripers looked formidable. Just talking about the Yankees made them feel a little better. They were New York boys, on loan from Walt Abruzzi, and they were a long way from home.

The man inside was a big wheel in the Organization. That was all they knew all they wanted to know. "You do your job, we all get well," Abruzzi had told them. "What's to know?"

They had heard things,, of course. That there was a place in Colorado that was completely neutral ground. A place where even a crazy little West Coast hood like Tony Giorgio could sit down and have a fancy brandy in a balloon glass with the Gray Old Men who saw him as some sort of homicidal stinging insect to be crushed. A place where guys from Boston who had been used to putting each other in the trunks of cars behind bowling alleys in Malden or into garbage cans in Roxbury could get together and play gin and tell jokes about the Polacks. A place where hatchets could be buried or unearthed, pacts made, plans laid. A place where warm people could sometimes cool off.

Well, here they were, and it wasn't so much - in fact, both of them were homesick for New York, which was why they were talking about the Yankees. But they never saw New York or the Yankees again.

Their voices reached down the hall to the stairwell where the murderers stood six risers down, with their stocking-covered heads just below line of sight, if you happened to be looking down the hall from the door of the Presidential Suite. There were three of them on the stairs, dressed in dark pants and coats, carrying shotguns with the barrels sawed off to six inches. The shotguns were loaded with expanding buckshot.

One of the three motioned and they walked up the stairs to the hall.

The two outside the door never even saw them until the murderers were almost on top of them. One of them was saying animatedly, "Now you take Ford. Who's better in the American League than Whitey Ford? No, I want to ask you that sincerely, because when it comes to the stretch he just

The speaker looked up and saw three black shapes with no discernable faces standing not 10 paces away. For a moment he could not believe it. They were just standing there. He shook his head, fully expecting them to go away like the floating black specks you sometimes saw in the darkness. They didn't. Then he knew.

"What's the matter?" his buddy said.

The young man who had been speaking about Whitey Ford clawed under his jacket for his gun. One of the murderers placed the butt of his shotgun against a leather pad strapped to his belly beneath his dark turtleneck. And pulled both triggers. The blast in the narrow hallway was deafening. The muzzle flash was like summer lightning, purple in its brilliance. A stink of cordite. The young man was blown backward down the hall in a disintegrating cloud of Ivy League jacket, blood, and hair. His arm looped over backward, spilling the Magnum from his dying fingers, and the pistol thumped harmlessly to the carpet with the safety still on.

The second young man did not even make an effort to go for his gun. He stuck his hands high in the air and wet his pants at the same time.

"I give up, don't shoot me, it's OK-!"

"Say hello to Albert Anastasia when you get down there, punk", one of the murderers said, and placed the butt of his shotgun against his belly.

"I ain't a. problem, I ain't a problem!" the young man screamed in a thick Bronx accent, and then the blast of the shotgun lifted him out of his shoes and he slammed back against the silk wallpaper with its delicate raised pattern. He actually stuck for a moment before collapsing to the hall floor.

The three of them walked to the door of the suite. One of them tried the knob. "Locked."

"OK."

The third man, who hadn't shot yet, stood in front of the door, leveled his weapon slightly above the knob, and pulled both triggers. A jagged hole appeared in the door, and light rayed through. The third man reached through the hole and grasped the deadbolt on the other side. There was a pistol shot, then two more. None of the three flinched.

There was a snap as the deadbolt gave, and then the third man kicked the door open. Standing in the wide sitting room in front of the picture window, which now showed a view only of darkness, was a man of about 35 wearing only jockey shorts. He held a pistol in each hand and as the murderers walked in he began to fire at them, spraying bullets wildly. Slugs peeled splinters from the door frame, dug furrows in the rug, dusted plaster down from the ceiling. He fired five times, and the closest he came to any of his assassins was a bullet that twitched the pants of the second man at the left knee.

They raised their shotguns with almost military precision.

The man in the sitting room screamed, threw both guns on the floor, and ran for the bedroom. The triple blast caught him just outside the door and a wet fan of blood, brains, and bits of flesh splashed across the cherrystriped wallpaper. He fell through the open bedroom doorway, half in and half out.

"Watch the door," the first man said, and dropped his smoking shotgun to the rug. He reached into his coat pocket, brought out a bone-handled switchblade, and thumbed the chrome button. He approached the dead man, who was lying in the doorway on his side. He squatted beside the corpse and yanked down the front of the man's jockey shorts.

Down the hall the door to one of the other suites opened and a pallid face peered out. The third man raised his shotgun and the face jerked back in. The door slammed. A bolt rattled frantically.

The first man rejoined them.

'All right," he said. "Down the stairs and out the back door. Let's go."

They were outside and climbing into the parked car three minutes later. They left the Overlook behind them, standing gilded in mountain moonlight, white as bone under high stars. The hotel would stand long after the three of them were as dead as the three they had left behind.

The Overlook was at home with the dead.

Before the Play

From: "Whispers", 1982

By Stephen King

Scene I: The Third Floor of a Resort Hotel Fallen Upon Hard Times

IT WAS OCTOBER 7, 1922, and the Overlook Hotel had closed its doors on the end of another season. When it re-opened in mid-May of 1923, it would be under new management. Two brothers named Clyde and Cecil Brandywine had bought it, good old boys from Texas with more old cattle money and new oil money than they knew what to do with.

Bob T. Watson stood at the huge picture window of the Presidential Suite and stared out at the climbing heights of the Rockies, where the aspens had now shaken most of their leaves, and hoped the Brandywine brothers would fail. Since 1915 the hotel had been owned by a man named James Parris. Parris had begun his professional life as a common shyster in 1880. One of his close friends rose to the presidency of a great western railroad, a robber baron among robber barons. Parris grew rich on his friend's spoils, but had none of his friends' colorful flamboyancy. Parris was a gray little man with an eye always turned to an inward set of accounting books. He would have sold the Overlook anyway, Bob T. Watson thought as he continued to stare out the window. The little shyster bastard just happened to drop dead before he got a chance.

The man who had sold the Overlook to James Parris had been Bob T. Watson himself. One of the last of the Western giants that arose in the years 1870-1905, Bob T. came from a family that had made a staggering fortune in silver around Placer, Colorado. They lost the fortune, rebuilt it in land speculation to the railroads, and lost most of it again in the depression of '93-'94, when Bob T.'s father was gunned down in Denver by a man suspected of organizing.

Bob T. had rebuilt the fortune himself, single-handedly, in the years 1895 to 1905, and had begun searching then for something, some perfect thing, to cap his achievement. After two years of careful thought (during the interim he had bought himself a

governor and a representative to the US. Congress), he had decided, in modest Watson fashion, to build the grandest resort hotel in America. It would stand at the roof of America, with nothing in the country at a higher altitude except the sky. It would be a playground of the national and international rich - the people that would be known three generations later as the super-rich.

Construction began in 1907, forty miles west of Sidewinder, Colorado, and supervised by Bob T. himself.

"And do you know what?" Bob T. said aloud in the third-floor suite, which was the grandest set of apartments in the grandest resort hotel in America. "Nothing ever went right after that. Nothing."

The Overlook had made him old. He had been forty-three when ground was broken in 1907, and when construction was completed two years later (but too late for them to be able to open the hotel's doors until 1910), he was bald. He had developed an ulcer. One of his two sons, the one he had loved best, the one that had been destined to carry the Watson banner forward into the future, had died in a stupid riding accident. Boyd had tried to jump his pony over a pile of lumber where the topiary now was, and the pony had caught its back feet and broken its leg. Boyd had broken his neck.

There had been financial reverses on other fronts. The Watson fortune, which had looked so secure in 1905, had begun to look decidedly shaky in that autumn of 1909. There had been a huge investment in munitions in anticipation of a foreign War that did not happen, and had not happened until 1914. There had been a dishonest accountant in the timbering end of the Watson operation, and although he had been sent to jail for twenty long years, he had done half a million dollars worth of damage first.

Perhaps disheartened by the death of his oldest son, Bob T. had become unwisely convinced that the way to recoup was the way that his father had couped in the first place: silver. There were advisers who contended against this, but after the calumny of the head accountant, who was the son of one of his father's best friends, Bob T. trusted his advisers less and less. He had refused to believe that Colorado's mining days were over. A million dollars in dry investments hadn't convinced him. Two million had. And by the time the Overlook opened its doors in the late spring of 1910, Bob T. realized that he was precariously close to being in shirt-sleeves

again ... and building on the ruins at the age of forty-five might be an impossibility.

The Overlook was his hope.

The Overlook Hotel, built against the roof of the sky, with its topiary of hedge animals to enchant the children, its playground, its long and lovely croquet course, its putting green for the gentlemen, its tennis courts outside and shuffleboard courts inside, its dining room with the western exposure looking out over the last rising jagged peaks of the Rockies, its ballroom facing east, where the land dropped into green valleys of spruce and pine. The Overlook with its one hundred and ten rooms, its staff of specially trained domestics, and not one but two French chefs. The Overlook with its lobby as wide and grand as three Pullman cars, the grand staircase rising to the second floor, and its ponderous neo-Victorian furniture, all capped by the huge crystal chandelier which hung over the stairwell like a monster diamond.

Bob T. had fallen in love with the hotel as an idea, and his love had deepened as the hotel took shape, no longer a mental thing but an actual edifice with strong, clean lines and infinite possibility. His wife had grown to hate it - at one point in 1908 she told him that she would have preferred competing with another woman, that at least she would have known how to cope with - but he had dismissed her hate as a hysterical female reaction to Boyd's death on the grounds.

"You're not natural on the subject," Sarah had told him. "When you look at that there, it's like there was no sense left in you. No one can talk to you about what it's costing, or how people are going to get here when the last sixty miles of road aren't even paved-."

"They'll be paved," he said quiet "I'll pave them."

"And how much will that cost?" Sarah asked hysterically. "Another million?"

"Nowhere near," Bob T. said. "But if it did, I'd pay it."

"You see? Can't you see? You're just not natural on the subject. It's taken your wits, Bob T.!"

Perhaps it had at that.

The Overlook's premier season had been a nightmare. Spring came late, and the roads were not passable until the first of June, and even then they were a nightmare of washboards and axle-smashing chuckholes and hastily-laid corduroy over stretches of jellied mud. There was more rain that year than Bob T. had ever seen before or since, climaxed by a day of snow flurries in August ... black snow, the old women called it, a terrible omen for the winter ahead. In September he had hired a contractor to pave the last twenty miles of the road that led west from Estes Park to Sidewinder, and the forty miles from Sidewinder to the hotel itself, and it had turned into an expensive, round-the-clock operation to finish the two roads before the snow covered them for the long, long winter. The winter his wife had died.

But the roads and the abbreviated season had not been the worst of the Overlook's first year. No. The hotel had been officially opened on June 1, 1910 at a ribbon-cutting ceremony presided over by Bob T's pet congressman. That day had been hot and clear and bright, the kind of day the Denver Post must have had in mind when they took "Tis a privilege to live in Colorado" as their motto. And when the pet congressman cut the ribbon, the wife of one of the first guests fainted dead away. The applause that had begun at the cutting of the ribbon dried up in little exclamations of alarm and concern. Smelling salts had brought her around, of course, but she had come back to the world with such an expression of dazed terror on her vapid little face that Bob T. could cheerfully have strangled her.

"I thought I saw something in the lobby," she said. "It didn't look like a man."

Later she admitted that it must have been the unexpected heat after all the chilly weather, but of course by then the damage had been done.

Nor was the tale of that days reverses all told.

One of the two chefs had scalded his arm while preparing lunch and had to be taken to the hospital closest by, far away in Boulder. Mrs. Arkinbauer, the wife of the meat-packing king had slipped while towelling herself dry after her bath and had broken her wrist. And finally, the crowning touch, at dinner that night. Bob T.'s pet congressman swallowed a piece of heavy Western sirloin strip steak

the wrong way and choked to death in the full and horrified view of two hundred guests, nearly all of them there at Bob T. Watson's personal invitation.

The pet congressman had clawed and clutched at his throat, he had turned first red and then purple, he had actually begun to stagger among the assembled company in his death-throes, bouncing from table to table, his wildly swinging arms knocking over wine-glasses and vases full of freshly cut flowers, eyes bulging hideously at the assembled revellers. It was as if, one Bob T.'s friends told him much later in private, Poe's story about the Red Death had come to life in front of all of them. And perhaps Bob T.'s chance to make his beloved hotel a success had died on that very first night, had died a jittering, twitching, miserable death right alongside the pet congressman and in full view of those assembled.

The son of one of the guests who had been invited for the gratis opening week was a second-year med student, and he had performed an emergency tracheotomy in the kitchen. Either he was too late to begin with or his hand shook at a critical moment; in either case the results were the same. The man was dead, and before the end of the week, half the guests had departed.

Bob T. mourned to his wife that he had never seen or heard a spectacular run of bad luck.

"Are you so sure that bad luck is all it is?" She responded, only six months away from her own death now.

"What else, Sarah? What else?"

"You've put that hotel up in the tabernacle of your heart!" She assured him in a shrill voice. "Built it on the bones of your first-born son!"

Mention of Boyd still made his throat roughen, even a year later. "Sarah, Boyd is buried in Denver, next to your own mother."

"But he died here! He died here! And how much is it costing you, Bob T.? How much have you sunk into the wretched place that we'll never get back?"

"I'll get it back."

Then his unlettered wife, who had once kept house for him in a one-room log cabin, had spoken prophecy to him:

"You'll die a poor an sorry man, Bob T. Watson, before you see the first pennyworth of profit from that place."

She had died of influenza, and took her place between her son and her mother.

The season of 1911 had begun just as badly. Spring and then summer had come at more normal times, but Bob T.'s younger son, a fourteen-year-old boy named Richard, had brought him the bad news in mid-April, still a full month before the hotel was due to open.

"Daddy," Richard said, "that bastard Grondin has diddled you."

Grondin was the contractor who had paved the sixty miles of road, at a total cost of seventy thousand dollars. He had cut corners and had used substandard material. After an autumn of frost, a winter of freeze, and a spring of thaw, the paving was breaking up in great, rotted chunks. The last sixty miles of the trip to the Overlook would be impassable by buggy, let alone by one of the new flivvers.

The worst thing about it to Bob T.'s mind, the most frightening thing, was that he had spent at least two days of every week supervising Grondin's work. How could Grondin have slipped the substandard materials past him? How could he have been so blind?

Grondin, of course, was nowhere to be found.

Repaving the roads was more expensive than the original paving had been, because the original paving had to be taken up. It would not serve even as a foundation for the new road. Once again work had to proceed around the clock, entailing overtime wages. There were holdups and snags and confusions. Wagons drawing the materials up from the railhead in Estes Park lost their wheels. Horses burst their hearts trying to draw overloaded wagons up the steep grades. There was a week of rain at the beginning of May. The road was not re-completed until the first week of July, and by then most of the people Bob T. had hoped to draw had made their summer plans and less than half of the Overlook's one hundred and ten rooms were occupied.

In spite of the panicked clamorings of his accountants - and even his son Richard - Bob T. had refused to lay off any of the hotel's staff. He would not even let one of the two expensive chefs go (two new chefs; neither of the two from the previous year had come back), although there was barely enough work for one. He was stubbornly convinced that in late July ... or August ... or

even in September when the aspens had begun to turn ... that the guests would come, the rich would come with their retainers and their hangers-on and their careless money. The statesmen would come, the machine politicians, the actors and actresses who aced the Broadway stage, the foreign nobility who were always in search of a new and diverting place. They would hear about the gorgeous hotel that had been built for their pleasure at the roof of America, and they would come. But they never came. And when

winter put finishes to the Overlook's second season, only one hundred and six guests had signed the register in three months.

Bob T. sighed and continued to stare out the wide window of the Presidential Suite, where in 1922, only one President had actually stayed - Woodrow Wilson. And he had come he had already been a man broken in all the ways a man could be broken - in body, in spirit, in his believability with the people. When Wilson had come here he had been a sorry joke. There had been talk in the country that his wife was actually the President of the United States.

If Sarah hadn't died, Bob T. thought, tracing aimlessly on the window with the tip of his finger, I might have laid them off, some of them at least. she might have badgered me into it. She might have ... but I don't believe it.

You've put that hotel up in the tabernacle of your heart.

The 1912 season had been better. In a manner of speaking, at least, the Overlook had only run eighty thousand dollars in the red. The two previous seasons had cost him over a quarter of a million, not counting the paving of that double ... no, triple-damned road. When the 1912 season ended he had been hopefully convinced that the pump had finally been primed, that his whining accountants could finally put away their pots of red ink and begin writing with black.

The 1913 season had been better still - only fifty thousand dollars in losses. He became convinced that they would turn the corner in 1914. That the Overlook was gradually coming into its own.

His head accountant had come to him in September of 1914, while the season still had three weeks to run, and advised he filed for bankruptcy.

"What in the name of God are you talking about?" Bob T. asked.

"I'm talking about nearly two hundred thousand dollars in debts which you cannot hope to repay." The accountant's name was Rutherford and he was a fussy little man, an Easterner.

"That's ridiculous," Bob T. said. "Get out of here." His head cook Geroux, would be in soon. They were going to plan the menu for the closing three nights, what Bob T. had conceived of as the Overlook Festival.

The accountant put a thin sheaf of papers down on Bob T.'s desk and left.

Three hours later, after the cook had left, Bob T. found himself looking at the papers. Never mind them, he told himself. Into the wastebasket with them. I'll pink the little bastard, him with his Boston accent and his three piece suits. He was nothing but an incompetent tenderfoot. And did you keep folks on our payroll after they advised you to go into bankruptcy? It was laughable.

He had picked up the papers Rutherford had left, to file them in the circular file, and found himself looking at them. What he saw was enough to make his blood stop in his veins.

On top was a bill from the Keystone Paving Works of Golden. Principal plus interest in the sum of seventy thousand dollars. Account due on receipt of bill. Below that, a bill from the Denver Electrical Outfitters, Inc., who had wired the Overlook for electricity and had installed not one but two gigantic power generators in the cavernous basement. All of this had happened in the

late fall of 1913 when his son Richard had assured him that electricity was not going to go away, and that soon his guests would come to expect it, not as a luxury but a necessity. That bill was in the sum of eighteen thousand dollars.

Bob T. flicked through the remainder of the papers with growing horror. A building maintenance bill, a landscaping bill, the second

well he had sunk, the contractors who were even now putting in a health room, the contractors who had just finished the two greenhouses, and last ... last, an itemization in Rutherford's neat and ruthless hand of salaries outstanding.

Fifteen minutes later, Rutherford was standing before him again.

"It can't be this bad," Bob T. whispered hoarsely.

"It is worse," Rutherford said. "If my estimates are correct, you will finish this season twenty thousand dollars or better in the red."

"Only twenty? If we can hold out until next year, we can turn the corner-."

"There is no way we can do that," Rutherford said patiently. "The Overlook's accounts are not depleted, Mr. Watson, they are empty. I even closed out the petty cash account last Thursday afternoon so I could finish making up the staff's pay envelopes. The checking accounts are likewise empty. Your mining interest in Haggie Notch is closed out, as per your order this July. That is everything ... Rutherford's eyes gleamed with brief hope. "That is, everything I know of."

"It's everything!" Bob T. agreed dully, and the hope in Rutherford's eyes was extinguished. Bob T. sat up a little straighter. "I'll go to Denver tomorrow. I'll see about a second mortgage on the hotel."

"Mr. Watson," Rutherford said with a curious gentleness. "You took the second mortgage last winter."

And so he had. How could he have forgotten a thing like that? Bob T. wondered with real fright. The same way he had forgotten two hundred thousand dollars worth of payment due? Just forgotten it? When a man started "just forgetting" things like that, it was time for that man to get out of business before he was pushed out.

But he would not let the Overlook go.

"I'll get a third," he said. "Bill Steeves will give me a third."

"No, I don't believe he will," Rutherford said.

"What do you mean, you don't believe he will, you little Boston bean?" Bob T. had roared. "Billy Steeves and me go back to 1890 together! I got him his start in business ... helped to capitalize his bank ... kept my money in with him in '94 when everybody west of the Mississippi was shitting in their drawers! Hell give me a *tenth* mortgage, or I'll know the reason why!"

Rutherford looked at Bob T. and wondered what he should say, what he *could* say that the old man didn't already know. Could he tell him that William Steeves had put his position as President of the First Mercantile Bank of Denver in severe Jeopardy by granting the second mortgage when the situation at the Overlook was clearly hopeless? That Steeves had done it anyway under the ridiculous conviction that he owed Bob T. Watson a debt (to Rutherford's precision-balanced mind the only real debt was a debt that had been contracted for in triplicate)? Could he tell Watson that even if Steeves cut his own throat and agreed to try and get him a third mortgage that he would succeed in doing nothing but putting himself on the severely depressed executive job market? That even if the unthinkable happened and the mortgage were issued, it would not be even enough to clear the outstanding debts?

Surely the old man must know those things.

Old man, Rutherford mused. Surely he can't be more than fifty, but right at this minute he looks more like seventy-five. What is there to tell him? That his wife was right, maybe, that the creditors were right. The hotel had sucked him dry. It had stolen his business acumen, his savvy, even his common sense. You needed a special kind of sense to survive in American business, a special kind of sight. And now Bob T. Watson was blind. It was the hotel that had blinded him and made him old.

Rutherford said, "I believe the time has come for me to thank you for my two years of employment and give my notice, Mr. Watson. I'll waive any further emolument." That was a bitter joke.

"Go on, then," Bob T. said. His face was gray and drawn. "You don't belong in the west anyway. You don't understand what the west is all about. You are just a cheap tin Eastern chamberpot with a time-clock for a mind. Get out of here."

Bob T. took the stack of accounts due, tipped them in half, in fourths, and with a clench that went all the way up his arms to his shoulders, in eighths. He threw the pieces in Rutherford's face.

"Get out!" He yelled. "Go on back to Baaston! I'll still be running this hotel in 1940! Me and my son Richard! Get out! Get out!"

Bob T. turned away from the window and looked thoughtfully at the large double bed where President Wilson and his wife had slept ... if they *had* slept. It seemed to Bob T. that a great many people who came to the Overlook slept very poorly.

I'll still be running this hotel in 1940!

Well, in a way that might be true. I just might. He went into the living room, a tall, stooped man, mostly bald now, wearing carpenter's overalls and heavy workshoes instead of the expensive Western boots he had once worn. There was a hammer in one pocket and a keychain in the other, and on the ring attached to the chain were all the keys to the hotel. Better than fifty in all, including a different passkey for each wing of each floor, but none of them were labelled. He knew them all by sight and by touch.

The Overlook had not wanted for a buyer, and Bob T. supposed it never would. There was something about the place that reminded him of that old Greek story about Homer and the sirens on the rock. Businessmen (the Homers of the 20th century) who were otherwise sane and hardheaded, became irrationally convinced that they could take the place over and over beyond their wildest dreams. This pleased Bob T. to no end. It was finding out that he wasn't alone in his craziness, it seemed. Or maybe it was just knowing that the Overlook would never stand empty and deserted. He didn't think he could have borne that.

Despite Rutherford's protests that he could only salvage something declaring bankruptcy and letting the bank sell the Overlook, Bob T. had it himself. He had grown more and more fond of his son Richard - perhaps he would never be able to fill Boyd's shoes but he was a good, hardworking boy and now that his mother was dead they only had each other - and he was not going to let the boy grow up with the stigma of a bankruptcy case hanging over his head.

There had been three interested parties and Bob T. had held on grimly until he got his price, always staying just one jump ahead of

the baying creditors who wanted to bring him down and divide the spoils up among themselves. He had called a hundred old debts, some of them going back to his father's time. To keep the Overlook out of the bank's hands and in his own he had browbeaten a widow into hysteria, he had threatened an Albuquerque newspaper publisher with exposure (the news publisher had a penchant for young, pre-pubescent, actually - girls), he had gotten down on his knees and once begged a man who had been so revolted that he had given Bob T. a check for ten thousand dollars just to get him off his knees and out of his office.

None of it was enough to blot away the rising tide of red ink - nothing could do that, he recognized - but he mustered enough in that winter of 1914-15 to keep his hotel out of receivership.

In the spring he had dealt with James Parris, the man who had begun life as a common shyster. Bob T.'s price - a ridiculously low one - had been one hundred and eighty thousand dollars plus lifetime jobs for himself and his son ... as the Overlook's maintenance men.

"You're insane, man," Parris had said. "Is that what you want to avoid bankruptcy for? So the Denver papers can report you're working as a janitor in the hotel you once owned?" And he reiterated: "You're insane."

Bob T. was adamant. He would not leave the hotel. And for all his cold businessman's talk, he knew that Parris would give in. The cold talk did not hide the funny, eager look in Parris's eyes. Didn't Bob T. know that look well enough? Hadn't he seen it in his own mirror every day for the last six years?

:I don't have to dicker with you over it," Parris had replied, affecting indifference. "If I wait another two months, perhaps only three weeks, you'll crash. And then I can deal with the First Mercantile."

"And they'll charge you a quarter of a million if they charge you a penny," Bob T. replied.

For that Parris had no answer. He could pay the two Watsons' salaries for the rest of their lives out of the money he would save by dealing with this lunatic instead of the bank.

So the deal was made. The one hundred and eighty thousand dollars at last mopped up the red ink. The road was paid for, and the electricity, and the landscaping, and all the rest. Bankruptcy was avoided. James Parris took over in the manager's office upstairs. Bob T. and Dick Watson moved downstairs from their suite in the west wing of the third floor to an apartment in the huge cellar. Their domain was behind a door that said Maintenance Only - Keep Out!

If James Parris had ever thought that Bob T.'s insanity would extend to his work, he was wrong. He was the ideal maintenance man, and his son, who was more fitted for this life than one of affluence and college and business things that made his head hurt to think of them, was his eager apprentice. "If we're janitors," Bob T. had once told his son, "then that thing going on over in France is nothing but a barroom squabble."

They kept the place clean, yes, Bob T. was something of a fanatic about that. But they did more. They kept the generators in perfect running condition. From June of 1915 to this day, October 7th, 1922, there had never been a power outage. When the telephones had been installed, Bob T. and his son Richard had put in the switchboard themselves, working from manuals they had pored over night after late night in preparation. They kept the roof in perfect condition, replaced broken panes of glass, turned the rug in the dining room once a month, painted, plastered, and oversaw the Installation of the elevator in 1917.

And they lived there in the winter.

"Not too exciting up there in the winter, is it?" The bell-captain had asked them once while they were on coffee break. "What do you do, hibernate?"

"We keep busy," Bob T. had answered shortly. And Richard had only offered an uneasy grin, uneasy, yes, because every Hotel had a skeleton or two in the closet, and sometimes the skeletons rattled their bones.

One late January afternoon when Bob T. had been putting a piece of glass over the top of the reception desk, a terrible noise had come from the dining room, a horrible choking noise that had encased him in horror and had taken him back over the years to

that first night, when his pet congressman had choked to death on a piece of steak.

He stood stock-still, willing the noise to stop, but the terrible strangling noises went on and on and he thought, *if I went in there now I'd see him, staggering around from table to table like some awful beggar at a king's feast, his eyes bulging, begging someone to help him.*

His entire body broke out in gooseflesh - even the thin skin on his back knobbed up into bumps. And as suddenly as it had begun, the choking sound sank to a breathless, gargling moan, and then to nothing.

Bob T. broke the paralysis that had gripped him and lunged for the big double doors that gave on the dining room. Surely time had taken some sort of twist, and when he got inside he would see the congressman stretched out on the floor with the guests gathered helplessly around him. Bob T. would call out as he had on that long-ago day, "Is there a doctor in the house?" and the second-year med student would brush through the crowd and say, "Let's take him into the kitchen."

But when he pushed through the double doors, the dining room was empty, all the tables in one corner with their chairs upturned on them, and there was no sound but the wind singing high around the eaves. Outside it was snowing, obscuring the mountains for a moment and then revealing them for another moment, like the flap of ragged curtains.

There had been other things. Dick reported hearing knocking noises from inside the elevator, as if somebody had been caught in there and was rapping to be let out. Only when he opened the door with the special key and slid back the brass gate, the elevator was empty. One night they had both awakened thinking they heard a woman sobbing somewhere above them, in the lobby it sounded like, and went up to find nothing.

These things had all happened in the off-season, and Bob T. didn't have to tell Dick not to talk about them. There were enough folks, Mr.-High-and-Mighty-Parris among them, who thought they were crazy already.

But sometimes Bob T. wondered if things didn't sometimes happen in season. If some of the staff and some of the guests hadn't heard things themselves ... or seen things. Parris had maintained the quality of the service, and had even added a feature to it that Bob T. had never thought of - a limousine which made a run from The Longhorn House in downtown Denver right up to the Overlook once every three days. He had kept prices low in spite of the inflation the Kaiser's war had brought on, hoping to build the trade. Hoping to build a name. He had added a swimming pool to the hotel's other formidable recreation features.

The people who came to the Overlook to enjoy these features rarely re-booked for a second season, though. Nor did they give the Overlook benefit of that best and cheapest advertising, word-of-mouth, by recommending it to their friends. Some of them would book for a month and then leave in two weeks, shaking their heads in an almost embarrassed way and brushing aside Parris's earnest questions: Was something wrong with the food? You were treated poorly? The service was slow? The housekeeping was sloppy ? It seemed it was none of those things. The people left and rarely came back.

Bob T. had been pleased to see the Overlook become something of an obsession with Parris. The man was going gray over it, trying to figure out what was wrong and having no luck.

Had the Overlook ever had a season in the black between 1915 and 1922? Bob T. wondered now, as he sat in the Presidential Suite living room and looked at his reflection. That was between Parris and his accountant, of course, and they had been a couple of close ones. But it was Bob T.'s guess that it never had. Maybe Parris had never let his obsession get out of hand as the Overlook's owner and builder had done (Bob T. sometimes thought these days that he had tried to ride and break whatever jinx had been built into his hotel the way his grandfather would have ridden and broken a wild mustang pony), but he was quite sure that Parris had pumped large amounts of money into the hotel every season without getting anything back, as Bob T. himself had done.

You'll die a poor and sorry man before you see the first pennyworth of profit from that place.

Sarah had told him that. Sarah had been right. She had been right for Parris, too. The shyster might not have been stony broke, but he

surely must have been sorry he had ever hooked up to this combination when he died of an apparent heart attack while strolling the grounds this August past.

Bob T.'s boy (although Dick wasn't such a boy now, old enough to drink and smoke and vote, old enough to plan on getting married this December) had himself found Parris early in the morning. Dick had been down in the topiary by the playground with his hedge-trimmers at seven AM and there Parris had been, stretched out stone dead between two of the hedge lions.

It was funny about that topiary; it had become the Overlook's trademark in a way, and it had come into being in a very offhand fashion. It had been the landscaper's idea to fringe the playground with hedge animals. He had submitted a sketch to Bob T. showing the playground area surrounded by lions, buffalo, a rabbit, a cow, and so on. Bob T. had scratched a go-ahead on the memo accompanying the sketch without a pause. He couldn't remember that he had even thought twice about it, one way or another. But it had often been the playground topiary that that the guests went away talking about instead of the meals or the spare-no-expense decor of the rooms 29 suites. Bob T. supposed it was just another example of how nothing at the Overlook had gone as he had expected.

Parris, they figured, must have gone out for a late evening stroll across the front lawn and the putting green and through the playground to the road. On the way back the heart attack had struck him down. There had been no one to miss him, because his wife had left him in 1920.

In a way, that had been the Overlook's fault, too. In the years 1915-1917, Parris had spent no more than two weeks of the season here. His wife, a sulky, pretty thing who had been something on Broadway, didn't like the place - or so it was rumored. In 1918 they had spent a month and according to the gossip there had been several bitter fights over it. She saying that she wanted to go to the Bahamas or to Cuba. He asking sarcastically if she wanted to catch some kind of jungle rot. She saying that if he didn't take her she would go on her own. He saying that if she did that she could find someone else to support her expensive tastes. She stayed. That year.

In 1919, Parris and his wife stayed for six weeks, occupying a suite on the third floor. The hotel was getting hold of him, Bob T. thought with some satisfaction. After awhile it got so you felt like a gambler who couldn't leave the table.

Anyway, Parris had been planning on a longer stay, and then, at the end of their sixth week, the woman had gone into hysterics. Two of the upstairs maids had heard her, weeping and screaming and begging for him to take her away, to take her anyplace. They had left that same afternoon, Parris's brow like thunder, his wife's pretty face pale and devoid of make-up, her eyes resting like dark raisins in the hollows of her eyesockets, as if she had been sleeping badly or not at all. Parris had not even stopped to confer with his manager or with Bob T. And when he had shown up in June of 1921, it had been sans wife. The head housekeeper's sister lived in New Jersey, and she sent out one of those gossip papers saying that Parris's wife had asked for a divorce on the grounds of "mental cruelty," whatever that meant.

"What I guess it means," Harry Durker, the groundskeeper told Bob T. over bourbon, "is that she couldn't pan out the gold as fast as she thought she could."

Or was it the Overlook? Bob T. wondered. Anyway, didn't matter. Parris had been up here on opening day of the season just past, the Overlook's thirteenth, and he hadn't left until they carried him off in the Sidewinder funeral hack. The little shyster's will was still in probate, but that matter was going to be quite straightforward. Parris's hotel manager had gotten a letter from the firm of New York lawyers acting as executors, and the letter had mentioned the Brandywine brothers from Texas, who were expected to buy. They wanted to keep Parris's manager on if he wanted to stay, and at a substantially higher salary. But the manager had already told Bob T. (also over bourbon) that he was going to turn the offer down.

"This place is never going to make a go," he told Bob T. "I don't care if Jesus Christ Himself bought the place and got John the Baptist to manage it. I feel more like a cemetery caretaker than a hotel manager. It's like something died up in the walls and everybody who comes here can smell it from time to time."

Yes, Bob T. thought, that's exactly what it's like. Only ain't it funny how something like that can sometimes get a hold on a man?

He stood up and stretched. Sitting here and thinking over old times was all very well and good, but it wasn't getting the work done. And there was a lot of it this winter. New elevator cables to be put in. A new service shed to be built out back, and that had to be done before the snow flew and cut them off. The shutters had to be put up, of course, and-

Bob T., on his way to the door, stopped dead still.

He heard, or thought he heard, Boyd's voice, high and young and full of joy. It was faint with distance, but unmistakably Boyd's. Coming from the direction of what was now the topiary.

"Come on. Rascal! Come on! Come on! Go it!"

Rascal? The name of Boyd's pony.

Like a man in a dream, like a man caught in some slow and slushy delirium, Bob T. turned to the wide window. Again that curious feeling of time doubling back on itself. When he reached the window and looked out he would not see the hedge animals because the year was 1908 and the topiary had not yet been set in. Instead he would see a buddy stretch of hill clumped and clotted with building materials, he would see a pile of new lumber where the entrance to the playground would later be, he would see Boyd racing toward that pile of lumber on board Rascal, he would see them go up together, he would see Rascal's rear feet catch the top of the pile, and he would see them tumble down, together with all grace gone, and hope of life with it.

Bob T. staggered toward the window where he would see these things, his face dough-pale, his mouth a slack wound. He could hear- surely it was not only in his mind? - hoofbeats drumming on muddy ground.

"Go it, Rascal! Get up, boy! Get-"

A thudding, flat crack. And then the screaming began, the high, unhuman scream of the pony, the rattle of boards, the final thud.

"Boyd!" Bob T. screamed. *"Oh my God, Boyd! BOYD!"*

He struck the window forcibly, shattering three of the six panes of glass. Drawing a jagged though shallow cut across the back of his

right hand. The glass fell outward, turning over and over, twinkling in the sun, to strike and shatter on the outsloping second floor roof below.

He saw the lawn, green and manicured, sloping smoothly down to the putting green and beyond it to the topiary. The three hedge lions that guarded the gravelled path were crouched in their usual half-threatening, half-playful postures. The hedge rabbit stood on its hind legs with its ears perked up cockily. The hedge cow stood as was its wont, cropping at the grass, now with a few autumn-yellow aspen leaves caught on its head and stuck to its sides.

No pile of lumber. No Boyd. No Rascal.

Running footsteps up the hall. Bob T. turned to the door just as it opened and Dick hurried in with his tool box in one hand.

"Dad , are you all right?"

"Fine."

"You're bleeding."

"Cut my hand," Bob T. said. "Tripped over my own stupid feet and hit that window. Guess I made us some work."

"But you're all right?"

"Fine, I told you," he said testily.

"I was down at the end of the hall, looking at those elevator cables. I thought I heard someone outside."

Bob T. looked at his son sharply.

"You didn't hear anyone, did you, daddy""

"No," Bob T. said. He took his handkerchief out of his back pocket and wrapped it around his bleeding hand. "Who'd be up here this time of year?"

"That's right," Dick said. And his eyes and his father's eyes met with kind of electric shock, and in that second they both saw more

than they might perhaps have wished. They dropped their eyes simultaneously.

"Come on," Bob T. said gruffly. "Let's see if we've got the glass to fix this bastard."

They went out together and Bob T. spared a single backward glance at the living room of the Presidential Suite with its silk wallpaper and its heavy furnishings dreaming in the late afternoon sun.

Guess *they'll have to carry me out in the meatwagon, the same as they did Parris*, he thought. *Only way they'll get me to leave*. He looked with love at his son, who had drawn ahead of him.

Dick, too. This place has got us, I guess.

It was a thought that made him feel loathing and love at the same time.

Scene II. A Bedroom in the Wee Hours of the Morning

Coming here had been a mistake, and Lottie Kilgallon didn't like to admit her mistakes.

And I won't admit this one, she thought with determination as she stared up at the ceiling that glimmered overhead.

Her husband of ten days slumbered beside her. Sleeping the sleep of the wise was what some might have called it. Others, more honest, might have called it the sleep of the monumentally' stupid. He was William Pillsbury of the Westchester Pillsbury's only son and heir of Harold M. Pillsbury, old and comfortable money. Publishing was what they liked to talk about, because publishing was a gentleman's profession, but there was also a chain of New England textile a foundry in Ohio, and extensive agricultural holdings in the south - cotton and citrus and fruit. Old money was always better than *nouveau riche*, but either way they had money falling out of their assholes. If she ever said that aloud to Bill, he would undoubtedly go pale and might even faint dead away. No fear, Bill. Profanation of the Pillsbury family shall never cross my lips.

It had been her idea to honeymoon at the Overlook in Colorado, and there had been two reasons for this. First, although it was tremendously expensive (as the best resorts were), it was not a "hep" place to go, and Lottie did not *like to go to* the hep places. Where did you go on your honeymoon, Lottie? Oh, this *perfectly wonderful resort* hotel in Colorado - the Overlook. Lovely place. Quite out of the way but so romantic. And her friends - whose stupidity was exceeded in most cases only by that of William Pillsbury himself - would look at her in dumb - literally! - wonder. Lottie had done it again.

Her second reason had been of more personal importance. She had wanted to honeymoon at the Overlook because Bill wanted to go to Rome. It was imperative to find out certain things as soon as possible. Would she be able to have her own way immediately? And if not, how long would it take to grind him down? He was stupid, and he had followed her around like a dog with its tongue hanging out since her debutante ball, but would he be as malleable after the ring was slipped on as he had been before?

Lottie smiled a little in the dark in spite of her lack of sleep and the bad dreams she had had since they arrived here. *Arrived here*, that was the key phrase. "Here" was not the American Hotel in Rome but the Overlook in Colorado. She was going to be able to manage him just fine, and that was the important thing. She would only make him stay another four days (she had originally planned on three weeks, but the bad dreams had changed that), and then could go back to New York. After all, that was where the action was in this August of 1929. The stock market was going crazy, the sky was the limit, and Lottie expected to be an heiress to multi-millions instead of just one or two millions by this time next year. Of course there were some weak sisters who claimed the market was riding for a fall, but no one had ever called Lottie Kilgallon a weak sister.

Lottie Kilgallon Pillsbury now, at least that's the way I'll have to sign my letters ... and my checks, of course. But inside I'll always be Lottie Kilgallon. Because he's never going to touch me. Not inside where it counts.

The most tiresome thing about this first contest of her marriage was that Bill actually *liked* the Overlook. He was up every day at two minutes past the crack of dawn, disturbing what ragged bits of sleep she had managed after the restless nights, staring eagerly out at the sunrise like some sort of disgusting Greek nature boy. He had

been hiking two or three times, he had gone on several nature rides with other guests, and bored her almost to the point of screaming with stories about the horse he rode on these jaunts, a bay mare named Tessie. He had tried to get her to go on these outings with him, but Lottie refused. Riding meant slacks, and her posterior was just a trifle too wide for slacks. The idiot had also suggested that she go hiking with him and some of the others - the caretaker's son doubled as a guide, Bill enthused, and he knew a hundred trails. The amount of game you saw, Bill said, would make you think it was 1829 instead of a hundred years later. Lottie had dumped cold water on this idea, too.

"I believe, darling, that all hikes should be one-way, you see."

"One way?" His wide anglo-saxon brow criggled and croggled into its usual expression of befuddlement. "How can you have a one-way hike, Lottie?"

"By hailing a taxi to take you home when your feet begin to hurt," she replied coldly. The barb was wasted. He went without her, and came back glowing. The stupid bastard was getting a tan.

She had not even enjoyed their evenings of bridge in the downstairs recreation room, and that was most unlike her. She was something of a barracuda at bridge, and if it had been ladylike to play for stakes in mixed company, she could have brought a cash dowry to her marriage (not that she would have, of course). Bill was a good bridge partner, too, he had both qualifications. He understood the basic rules and he allowed Lottie to dominate him. She thought it was poetic justice that her new husband spent most of their bridge evenings as the dummy.

Their partners at the Overlook were the Compsons occasionally, the Vereckers more frequently. Verecker was in his early seventies, a surgeon who had retired following a near-fatal heart attack. His wife smiled a lot, spoke softly, and had eyes like shiny nickles. They played only adequate bridge, but they kept beating Lottie and Bill. On the occasions when the men played against the women, the men ended up trouncing Lottie and Malvina Verecker. When Lottie and Dr. Verecker played Bill and Malvina, she and the doctor usually won but there was no pleasure in it because Bill was a dullard and Malvina could not see the game of bridge as anything but a social tool.

Two nights ago, after the doctor and his wife had made a bid of four clubs that they had absolutely no right to make, Lottie had mussed the cards in a sudden flash of pique that was very unlike her. She usually kept her feelings under much better control.

"You could have led into my spades on that third trick!" She rattled at Bill. "That would have put a stop to it right there!"

"But dear," Bill said, flustered, "I thought you were thin in spades-"

"If I had been thin in spades, I shouldn't have bid two of them, should I? Why I continue to play this game with you I don't know!"

The Vereckers blinked at them in mild surprise. Later that evening Mrs. Verecker, she of the nickle-bright eyes, would tell her husband that she had thought them such a nice couple, so loving, but when she rumped the cards like that she had looked just like a female shrew ... or was that a shrewess?

Bill was staring at her with his jaw agape.

"I'm very sorry," she said, gathering up the reins of her control and giving them an inward shake. "I'm off my feed a little, I suppose. I haven't been sleeping well."

"That's a pity," the doctor said. "Usually this mountain air ... we're almost twelve thousand feet above sea level, you know ... is very conducive to good rest. Less oxygen, you know. The body doesn't-"

"I've had bad dreams," Lottie told him shortly.

And so she had. Not just bad dreams but nightmares. She had never been much of a one to dream (which said something disgusting and Freudian about her psyche, no doubt), even as a child. Oh yes, there had been some, pretty humdrum affairs, mostly. The only one she could remember that came even close to being a nightmare was one in which she had been delivering a Good Citizenship speech at the school assembly and had looked down to discover she had forgotten to put on her dress. Later someone had told her almost everyone had a dream like that at sometime or another.

The dreams that she had had at the Overlook were much worse. It was not a case of one dream or two repeating themselves with

variations; they were all different. Only the setting of each was similar: in each one she found herself in a different part of the Overlook Hotel. Each dream would begin with an awareness on her part that she was dreaming, and that something terrible and frightening was going to happen to her in the course of the dream. There was an inevitability about it that was particularly awful.

In one of them she had been hurrying for the elevator because she was late for dinner, so late that Bill had already gone down before her in a temper.

She rang for the elevator which came promptly and was empty except for the operator. She thought too late that it was odd; at mealtimes you could barely wedge yourself in. Even though the stupid hotel was only half-full, the elevator had a ridiculously small capacity. Her unease heightened as the elevator descended and continued to descend ... for far too long a time. Surely they must have reached the lobby or even the basement by now, and still the operator did not open the doors and still the sensation of downward motion continued. She tapped him on the shoulder with mixed feelings of indignation and panic, aware too late of how spongy he felt, how strange, like a scarecrow stuffed with rotten straw. And as he turned his head and grinned at her she saw that the elevator was being piloted by a dead man, his face a greenish-white corpse-hue, his eyes sunken, the hair under his cap lifeless and sere. The fingers wrapped around the switch were fallen away to bones.

Even as she filled her lungs to shriek, the corpse threw the switch over and uttered, "Your floor, madam," in a husked and empty voice. The doors drew open to reveal flames and basalt plateaus and the stench of brimstone. The elevator operator had taken her to hell.

In another near the end of the afternoon she was on the playground. The light was curiously golden although the sky overhead was black with thunderheads. Membranes of shower danced between two of the saw-toothed peaks further west. It was like a Breughel landscape, a moment of sunshine and low pressure. And she felt something behind her, moving. Something in the topiary. And she turned to see with frozen horror that it was the topiary: the hedge animals had left their places and were creeping toward her, the green lions, the buffalo, even the rabbit that usually looked so comic and friendly. Their horrid hedge features were bent on her as they moved slowly toward the playground on

their hedge paws, green and silent and deadly under the black thunderheads.

In the one she had just awakened from, the hotel had been on fire. She had awakened in their room to find Bill gone and smoke drifting slowly through the apartment. She fled in her nightdress but lost her direction in the narrow halls, which were obscured by smoke. All the numbers seemed to be gone from the doors, and there was no way to tell if you were running toward the stairwell and the elevator or away from it. She had rounded a corner and had seen Bill standing outside the window at the end, motioning her forward. Somehow she had run all the way to the back of the hotel and he was standing out there on the fire escape landing. Now there was heat baking into her back through the thin filmy stuff of her nightgown. The place must be in flames behind her, she thought. Perhaps it had been the boiler. You had to keep an eye on the boiler because if you didn't, she would creep on you.

Lottie started forward and suddenly something wrapped around her arm like a python, holding her back. It was one of the fire hoses that she had seen spotted along the corridor walls, white canvas hose in a bright red frame. It had come alive somehow. It writhed and coiled around her, now securing a leg, now her other arm. She was held fast and it was getting hotter, hotter. She could hear the hungry crackle of the flames now only feet behind her. The wallpaper was peeling and blistering. Bill was gone from the fire escape landing. And then she had been-

She had been awake in the big double bed, no smell of smoke, and Bill Pillsbury sleeping the sleep of the justly stupid beside her. She had been running sweat, and if it hadn't been so late she would have gotten up to shower. It was quarter past three in the morning.

Dr. Verecker had offered to give her a sleeping medicine, but Lottie had refused. She distrusted any concoction you put in your body to knock out your mind. It was like giving up the command of your ship voluntarily, and she had sworn to herself that she would never do that.

But for the next four days ... well, he played shuffleboard in the mornings with his nickle-eyed wife. Perhaps she would look him up and get the prescription after all.

Lottie looked up at the white ceiling high above her, glimmering ghostlike, and admitted again that the Overlook had been a very

bad mistake. None of the ads for the Overlook in the *New Yorker* or *The American Mercury* mentioned that the place's real specialty seemed to be giving people the whim-whams. Four more days, and that was plenty. It had been a mistake, all right, but it was a mistake she would never admit, or have to admit. In fact, she was sure that she could

You had to keep an eye on the boiler because if you didn't, she would creep on you. What did that mean, anyway? Or was it just one of those nonsensical things that sometimes came to you in dreams, so much gibberish? Of course there was undoubtedly a boiler in the basement or *somewhere* to heat the place, even summer resorts had to have heat sometimes, didn't they (if only to supply hot water)? But creep? Would a boiler creep?

You had to keep an eye on the boiler.

It was like one of those crazy riddles, why is a mouse when it runs, when is a raven like a writing desk, what is a creeping boiler? Is that like the hedges, maybe? She'd had a dream where the hedges crept. And a firehose that had - what? - slithered?

A chill touched her. It was not good to think much about the dreams in the night, in the dark. You could ... well, you could bother yourself. It was better to think about the things you would be doing when you got back to New York, about how you were going to convince Bill that a baby was a bad idea for awhile, until he got firmly settled in the vice presidency his father had awarded him as a wedding present

She'll creep on you.

- and how you were going to encourage him to bring his work home so he would get used to the idea that she was going to be involved with it, very much involved.

Or did the whole hotel creep? Was that the answer?

I'll make him a good wife, Lottie thought frantically. We'll work it the same way we always worked being bridge partners. He knows the rules of the game, and he knows enough to let me run him. It will be just like the bridge, just like that, and if we've been off our game up here that doesn't mean anything, it's just the hotel, the dreams-

An affirming voice: *That's it. The whole place. It ... creeps.*

"Oh shit," Lottie Kilgallon whispered in the dark. It was dismaying for her to realize just how badly her nerves were shot. Like the other nights, there would be no more sleep for her now. She would lie here in bed until the sun started to come up and then she would get an uneasy hour or so.

Smoking in bed was a bad habit, a terrible habit, but she had begun to leave her cigarettes in an ashtray on the floor by the bed in case of the dreams. Sometimes it calmed her. She reached down to get the ashtray and the thought burst on her like a revelation:

It does creep, the whole place- like it was alive!

And that was when the hand reached out *unseen from* under the bed and gripped her wrist firmly ... almost lecherously. A finger-like canvas scratched suggestively against her palm and something was under there, something had been under there all the time, and Lottie began to scream. She screamed until her throat was raw and hoarse and her eyes were bulging from her face and Bill was awake and pallid with terror beside her.

When he put on the lamp she leaped from the bed, retreated into the farthest corner of the room and curled up with her thumb in her mouth.

Both Bill and Dr. Verecker tried to find out what was wrong; she told them, but it was past her thumb, and it was some time before she realized she was saying, "It crept under the bed. It crept under the bed."

And even though they flipped up the coverlet and Bill had actually lifted the whole bed by its foot off the floor to show her there was nothing under there, not even a litter of dust kitties, she would not come out of the corner. When the sun came up, she did at last come out of the corner. She took her thumb out of her mouth. She stayed away from the bed. She stared at Bill Pillsbury from her clown-white face.

"We're going back to New York," she said. "This morning."

"Of course," Bill muttered. "Of course, dear."

Bill Pillsbury's father died of a heart attack two weeks after the stock market crash. Bill and Lottie could not keep the company's head above water. Things went from bad to worse. In the years that followed she thought often of their honeymoon at the Overlook Hotel, and the dreams, and the canvas hand that had crept out from under the bed to squeeze her own. She thought about these things more and more. She committed suicide in a Yonkers motel room in the year 1949, a woman who was prematurely gray and prematurely lined. It had been twenty years and the hand that had gripped her wrist when she reached down to get her had never really let go. She left a one-sentence suicide note written on Holiday Inn stationery. The note said: *I wish we had gone to Rome.*

Scene III: On the Night of the Grand Masquerade

Downstairs, upstairs, in corners and hallways, the party went on and on. The music was louder, the laughter was louder, the shrieks were louder and sounded less and less like cries of pleasure and amusement to Lewis Toner's ears and more like cries of agony, the sound of death-throes. Perhaps they were. There was a monster in the hotel. As a matter of fact, a monster *owned* the hotel now. His name was Horace Derwent.

Lewis Toner, who had come to the ball as a dog (at Horace's request, of course), reached the second floor and began to walk down the hall toward his room, his shoulders slumped inside the hot costume. The dog's head, its muzzle set in a snarling rictus, was under arm.

He turned a corner and there was a couple entwined by one of the fire extinguisher hoses, one of the Derwent Enterprises secretaries - Patty? Sherry? Merry? - and one of Derwent's bright young subalterns, a fellow named Norman something. At first he thought the girl was wearing a skin-tight ballerina's leotard and then he realized it *was* skin - she was naked from the waist down. Norman was wearing some sort of Arabian nights thing, complete with slippers that came to upturned points. His little toothbrush moustache, grown in imitation of the boss, looked ridiculous in contrast.

Patty-Sherry-Merry giggled when she saw him and made no attempt to cover herself. She was openly caressing Norman. The thing was turning into an orgy.

"It's Lewis," she said. "Woof-woof, doggie."

"Do a trick," Norman said thickly, breathing scotch fumes into his face "Up, boy, up! Roll over! Shake hands."

Lewis broke into a run, chased by their drunken laughter. You'll find out, he thought. You'll find out when he turns on you like he turned on me tonight.

At first he couldn't get into his room because the door was locked and the key was in his pants pocket and his pants were under the dog costume and the costume's zipper was in the back. He reached and clutched and got it started and finally managed to get it down, knowing that he must look to them grotesquely like a woman wriggling out of her evening dress, and at last the hot, wolly dog costume slipped off his shoulders and pooled around his feet. Behind him their laughter went on and on grinding and mechanical, reminding him of a date he had gone on with his first lover, a career sailor originally from San Diego. Ronnie his name had been, and he always had been called San Diego Dago. Just Dago. They had gone to a carnival, and there had been a funhouse, and to the left of the stage out front, under a huge canvas sign that said House of a Thousand Thrills, there had been a mechanical clown that laughed on and on the way they were laughing at him now as he fumbled his room key from his pocket, on and on the clown had laughed, prisoner of some circulating tape loop in its guts, cackling into an uneasy night of shrieking carnival rides and cruising men and beer and unshaded bulbs. Its mechanical body had leaned back and forth as it laughed, and it had seemed to Lewis then that it was laughing at him, a slight boy of nineteen, wearing spectacles and walking close enough to the heavy-set, thirtyish sailor so that their hips brushed from time to time with some miserable electricity. The clown shrieked hoarse laughter, laughing at him the way the half-naked couple down the hall was laughing, laughing the way all of them had laughed downstairs in the ballroom when Horace Derwent put him through his paces.

Woof-woof, do Roll over. Shake hands.

The key turned-in the lock, he was inside, it was locked behind him.

"Thank God," Lewis murmured, and put his forehead against the door. He fumbled at the bolt and shot it. He put on the safety chain. At last he sat on the floor and pulled off the dog costume, pulled it all the way off. He threw the head onto the sofa, where it snarled at itself in the dressing table mirror.

He had been Horace's lover for how long? Since 1939. Could it really be seven years now? It could. It was. People had told him that Derwent could go both ways and Lewis hadn't believed them. Hadn't believed, that wasn't quite right.

It was immaterial to you, the room seemed to whisper to him.

He looked around gratefully. That was it, that was just it. He had joined the Derwent organization as a bookkeeper ten years ago, in 1936, just after Derwent had picked up the movie studio on the depression market. Derwent's Folly, people had called it then. They didn't know Horace Derwent, Lewis reflected.

Horace wasn't like the others, the quick fumbles in the park, the sailors, the fat and sweaty high school boys who spent too much time in the movie theater bathrooms.

I know what I am, he had told Lewis, and locks and chains of fear, long rusted, had fallen from Lewis's heart, as if Horace had touched some secret place in him with a magic wand. *I choose to accept what I am. Life is too short to let the world tell a man what he should do and what he shouldn't.*

Lewis had been the head accountant of Derwent Enterprises since early 1940. He had an apartment on the East Side of New York City, and a bungalow in Hollywood. Horace Derwent had a key to each. And some nights he would lie awake beside the big man (Lewis weighed 135, and Horace Derwent lacked eleven pounds of weighing twice that) until gray dawn was prying at the curtains, listening as Derwent poured out everything ... his plans to become the richest individual on planet Earth.

The war is coming, Derwent said. *We'll be in it by April of 1942 and if we're lucky it will go on until 1948. Derwent Enterprises can plan on making three million dollars a year on the aircraft side*

alone. You figure it out, Lew. When the war ends, Derwent is going to be the biggest company in America.

It was not always business. It was a hundred other things. Derwent speculating on how much could be made on a World Series if you could pocket two of the umpires. Derwent talking about Las Vegas and the plans he and some of his business associates had for it - Vegas will *be the playground of America in the 1960s if things go right, Lew*. His obsessional fear of cancer, which had killed his mother at forty-six and all four of his grandparents. His interest in geology, in long-range weather prediction, photo-copying machines, and a possible something called 3-D movies. Lewis had listened to these long rambling monologues enthralled, rarely speaking, thinking: *He tells me these things. Only me.*

And so when people told him that Horace made it a practice to lay any new female studio acquisitions before signing them, when they told him that he kept a woman who was the current toast of Broadway in a 5th Avenue penthouse apartment, when they told him that Horace was a perfect study in amorality, a man who honestly thought himself the only totally alive being in the world, Lewis laughed them off. They didn't know the man the way he did, they had not listened to him talk the night away, leaping from subject to subject like a ballet dancer ... or like something rather more deadly, a fencer perhaps, the greatest natural fencer of his time.

He dragged himself to his feet and went into the bathroom to draw a tub of hot water. His body was slicked with sour sweat. His head ached. His stomach was upset. And he knew that even with a hot tub there would be no sleep for him tonight. And he hadn't brought his sleeping pills. He had even been lucky to get a seat on a connecting flight from New York to Denver. He hadn't been invited on Horace's chartered planeload of revellers. Even his invitation had arrived late. Another studied insult.

The bathroom was spare white tile, old fashioned, hopeless. Lewis put the plug in the tub and turned it on. He would lie sleepless in his bed all night, listening to the shrieks of merriment from below, playing the evening's waking nightmare over again and again ... why had he forgotten his pills?

Roll over, doggie. Play dead. Woof-woof.

Horace had put on the golden chain in 1939, and when it served his purpose he had knocked it off. That had happened tonight. Lewis had been savaged in front of the whole crowd.

But didn't you know it was coming? He asked himself wretchedly as the water roared into the tub, smoking. The keys to the apartment and the bungalow had come back to him in a Derwent Enterprises envelope with an impersonal note from Horace's personal secretary saying that Lewis must have misplaced these. It suddenly became very difficult to see the boss, who was often tied up. Lewis was passed over for the board position that opened up when old Hanneman had a heart attack ... a board position that Horace had practically promised him in the spring of 1943. Horace had been seen around New York squiring the Broadway actress, which did not bother Lewis, and also with his new social secretary, which definitely did. The new social secretary was British, a small compact man who was ten years younger than Lewis. And of course Lewis had never been that handsome. Worst, Horace had purchased the Overlook without even telling him, his own head accountant. It had been Burrey, one of the execs in the aircraft division, who had taken enough pity on Lewis to tell him that he was head accountant now in name only, by contract only.

"He's out to get you, boyo," Burrey said. "He's got a sharp stick with your name on it. He won't fire you or demote you, it's not his style. That's not how our Fearless Leader has his fun. Hell poke you with that sharp stick. In the legs, in the belly, in the neck, in the balls. Hell poke you and poke you until you run away. And if you stay on after he's gotten tired of the game, hell poke your eyes out with his stick."

"But why?" Lewis cried. "What did I do? My work has been perfect, my ... my ..." But there was no way to talk about that to Burrey.

"You didn't do anything," Burrey said patiently. "He's not like other people, Lew. He's like a big, smart bab with a lot of pretty toys. He plays with one until he gets tired of it, then he throws it away and plays with a new one. That limey Hart is the new one. You got the toss. And I in warning you. Don't push it. He'll make you the sorriest man alive if you do."

"Has he talked to you? Is that it?"

"No. And I'm not going to talk to you anymore. Because the walls around here have ears and I like my job. I like to eat even better. Good morning, Lew."

But he hadn't been able to leave it alone. Even when the invitation to the masked ball had arrived late (with no accompanying letter about the Derwent charter flight from New York to Colorado) he hadn't been able to leave it alone. He had been invited by Horace's commanding scrawl across the bottom of the invitation, written in draftsman's pencil as so much of his personal and inter-office correspondence was: *If you come, come as a dog.*

Even then, even though the truth of everything Burrey had said was borne out in that one scrawled sentence, he had not been able to let go of it. He had preferred to see it as Horace's own personal request, albeit brusque, that he attend. He had gone to the most expensive costumer in New York and even as he walked out with it wrapped in brown paper under his arm, he had refused to see it the other way. He had wanted to see it as *Come home, Hon, all is forgiven* and not *If you come, I'll poke your eyes out, Lewis - this is your only warning.*

And now he knew. Oh yes, he knew. Everything.

The tub was full. Lewis turned off the water and slowly stripped off his clothes. A hot tub was supposed to relax you, they said. Help you to sleep. But nothing would help him tonight except his pills. Which were in the medicine cabinet of his apartment, two thousand miles east of here.

He turned his eyes to the bathroom medicine cabinet without much hope. There was never anything in a hotel medicine cabinet except maybe a box of tissues. Nevertheless he opened it and stared in, hardly believing it. There was a hotel-sized box of Kleenex, a water glass wrapped in waxed paper, and a small bottle labelled simply Seconal. He took the bottle out and opened it. The pills inside were large and pink. They looked like no Seconals Lewis had ever seen before.

I'll only take one, he thought. Stupid to take someone else's medicine anyway. Stupid and dangerous. And the hotel had stood vacant since 1936, he reminded himself, when the last owner had gone broke and shot himself. Surely those pills couldn't have been

there since 1936? An uncomfortable thought. Maybe he'd better not take any.

Up, boy, up! Woof- Woof! Good doggy ... here's a bone, doggy.

Well , just one then. And a hot tub. Maybe I will sleep.

But it was two of the pills he shook out into his hand, and after he had unwrapped the water glass and taken them, he decided to take a third. Then into the bathtub. A quick soak. Things would look better in the morning

They found him at just past three o'clock the next afternoon. He had apparently fallen asleep in the tub and drowned, although the coroner, who was from Sidewinder, wasn't exactly sure how an accident like that could have happened, unless the man had been drunk or drugged. The postmortem showed no sign of either. The coroner asked for a private audience with Horace Derwent, and the audience was granted.

"Listen here," the coroner said. "You said on the stand that there was quite a party going on that night."

Horace Derwent agreed that that was so.

"Could it have been that somebody might have gone up to this fella Toner's room and sort of held his head underwater? For a joke, I mean. The kind of joke that sometimes can go too far."

Derwent demurred strongly.

"Well, I know you are a busy man," the coroner said, "and the last I want to do is to cause any trouble for a man who helped us to win the war or the man who is planning to reopen the Overlook Hotel ... the Overlook always drew a lot of its chambermaids and busboys and so on from right here in Sidewinder, you know ..."

Derwent thanked him for the compliment and assured him that the Overlook would continue to make use of the Sidewinder work force.

"But," the coroner said, "you have to understand the position I am in."

Derwent said he would do his best.

"With the water in Toner's lungs, the county pathologist says drowning was the cause of death. But a man don't just *drown* in the bathtub. If he falls asleep and his mouth and nose slip under, he will wake up unless his reflexes are severely depressed. But this man had only a trace of alcohol in him, no barbituates, no nothing. There was no bump on his head to indicate he might have slipped getting out. You see what a cat's cradle I am in?"

Derwent agreed it was purely a puzzle.

"Now I have to at least think someone might have murdered him," the coroner went on. "Suicide's out. You can kill yourself by drowning, but I just don't think you can do it in your bathtub. But murder! Well."

Derwent enquired about fingerprints.

"Now that's sharp," the coroner said admiringly. "You're probably thinking of the cleaning that place took in the month before you had your party. The chief of police, he thought of that too, since his sister was one of the girls from Sidewinder that helped to do the job. Why, there was thirty of them up there if there was one, scrubbing that place from stem to stem. And since there was no other help there when your party was held, our chief had a man from the State Police come up and dust the whole room. They only found Toner's fingerprints."

Derwent suggested that went a long way toward disproving the murder theory.

"Oh, but it don't," the coroner said, fetching a deep sigh from the foundations of his large belly. "It might, if you folks had been having any sort of a regular party. But it wasn't a regular party; it was a costume party. And God knows how many people were wearing gloves or false hands as part of their outfits. You know that fella Hart? The limey?"

Derwent admitted knowing his social secretary.

"That guy said he came as a devil and you came as a circus ringmaster. So you were both wearing gloves. In a manner of speaking, Toner himself was wearing gloves, when you think of his dog costume. So you see the bind we're in?"

Derwent said he saw.

"It don't make me happy to have to instruct that jury to bring in an 'unknown causes' verdict. That will make every goddam paper in the country. Millionaire Industrialist. Mysterious Death. All-Night Orgy in Mountain Resort."

Derwent protested with some asperity that it had been a party, not an orgy.

"Oh, but it's all the same to those guys on the yellow sheets," the coroner said. "They could find a do turd in a basket of easter lillies. It puts a black mark beside your name before you even get the place opened up again. It makes it so you have to start out under a cloud. What a bitter bitch."

Horace Derwent leaned forward and began to talk. He discussed a great many aspects of life and finance in the small mountain community of Sidewinder, Colorado. He discussed various contracts that might be drawn between the Overlook Hotel and the Municipal Board of Sidewinder. He discussed the town's need for a library and for a school addition. He commiserated with the coroner on the coroner's own salary, so inadequate for a retired G.P. The coroner began to smile and nod. And when Horace Derwent stood up, looking a little paler than usual, the coroner stood with him.

"I believe it might have been some sort of seizure," the coroner said. "Accidental death. Unfortunate."

The story made no more than page two, even in the Colorado papers. The Overlook opened on schedule, and nearly fifty percent of the staff came from Sidewinder. It was good for the town. The new library, donated by the Automatic Service Company of Colorado (which was in turn owned by the Automatic Service Company of America, which was in turn owned by Derwent Enterprises), was good for the town. The police chief got a new cruiser and was able to buy a ski-lodge in Aspen two years later. And the coroner retired to St. Petersburg.

The Overlook eventually proved too much for Horace Derwent, too, although it was never able to bankrupt him. But he had conceived it as a glorious sort of toy for him to play with, and the toy had gone sour for him when Lewis had, in a way, turned the

tables on Derwent's revenge by dying so inexplicably in the bathtub. He had been forced to buy a whole town to even commence operations at his hotel, but that was not the humiliation, that was not what made him hate Lewis for the way he had died. It was being held up for common blackmail by a grinning small-town coroner and having to give in. Years later, long after he had washed his hands of the Overlook, Derwent would wake up the night from a dream of that coroner's voice as he slowly and efficiently beat him into a corner that he would have to pay to get out of.

He would lie in the dark aftermath of the dream thinking: *Cancer. My mother was dead of cancer at my age.*

And of course, he had never really been able to wash his hands of the Overlook, not entirely. His relationship with it ceased, but not its relationship with him. It only went underground. It existed in secret books kept behind vault doors in places like Las Vegas and Reno. It belonged to people who had done him favors, to whom he owed favors in return. The kind of people that sometimes surfaced in the bright are of some Senate subcommittee's publicity. Ownership shuffles. Laundered money. Hiding places and secret sex. No, he had never really gotten shut of the Overlook. Murder had been done there - somehow - and would be done there again.

Scene IV. And Now this Word from New Hampshire

In that long hot summer of 1953, the summer Jacky Torrance turned six, his father came home drunk one night from the hospital and broke Jacky's arm. He almost killed the boy. He was drunk.

Jacky was sitting on the front step of the porch and reading a Combat Casey comic book when his father came down the street, listing to one side, torpedoed by beer somewhere down the line. As he always did, the boy felt a mixture of love-hate-fear rise in his chest at the sight of his old man, who looked like a giant malevolent ghost in his hospital whites. He was an orderly at the Berlin Community Hospital. His father was like God, like Nature, sometimes lovable, sometimes terrible. You never knew which it would be. Jacky's mother feared and served him. His brothers hated him. Only Jacky of all of them still loved him in spite of the fear and the hate, and sometimes the volatile mixture of emotions made him want to cry out at the sight of his father coming, to simply cry out: *I love you, daddy! Go away! Hug me! I'll kill you! I'm so afraid*

of you! I need you! And his father seemed to sense in his stupid way - he was a stupid man, and selfish - that all of them had gone beyond him but Jacky, the youngest, that the only way he could touch the others was to bludgeon them to attention. But with Jacky there was still love, and there had been times when he had cuffed the boy's mouth into running blood and then hugged him with frightful force, the killing force just barely held back by some other thing, and Jacky would let himself be hugged deep into the atmosphere of malt and hops that hung around his old man forever, quailing, loving, fearing.

He leaped off the step and ran halfway down the path before something stopped him.

"Daddy?" he said. "Where's the car?"

Torrance came toward him, and Jacky saw how very drunk he was. "Wrecked it up," he said thickly.

"Oh ..." Careful now. Careful what you say. For your life, be careful. "That's too bad."

His father stopped and regarded Jacky from his stupid pig eyes. Jacky held his breath. Somewhere behind his father's brow, under the, lawnmowed brush of his crewcut, the scales were turning. The hot afternoon stood still while Jacky waited, staring up anxiously into his father's face to see if his father would throw a rough bear arm around his shoulder, grinding Jacky's cheek against the cracked rough leather of the belt that held up his white pants and say *Walk me into the house, big boy* in the hard and contemptuous way that was the only way he could even approach love without destroying himself, or if it would be something else.

Tonight it was something else.

The thunderheads appeared on his father's brow. "What do you mean that's too bad? What kind of shit is that?"

"Just ... too bad, daddy. That's all I meant. It's-"

Torrance's hand swept out at the end of his arm, huge hand, hammock arm, but speedy, yes, very speedy, and Jacky went on his ass with churchbells in his head and a split lip.

"Shitass," his father said, giving it the broad A.

Jacky said nothing. Nothing would do any good now. The balance had swung the wrong way.

"You ain't gonna sass me," Torrance said. "You won't sass your daddy. Get up here and take your medicine."

Something in his face this time, some dark and blazing thing. And Jacky suddenly knew that this time there might be no hug at the end of the blows, and if there was he might be unconscious and unknowing ... maybe even dead.

He ran.

Behind him, his father let out a bellow of rage and chased him, a flapping specter in his hospital whites, a juggernaut of doom following his son from the front yard to the back.

Jacky ran for his life. The treehouse, he was thinking. He can't get up there, the ladder nailed to the tree won't hold him, I'll get up there, talk to him, maybe he'll go to sleep, - Oh God. Oh please let him go to sleep - he was weeping in terror as he ran.

"Come back here, goddammit!" His father was roaring behind him. "Come back here and take your medicine! Take it like a man!"

Jacky flashed past the back steps. His mother, that thin and defeated woman, scrawny in a faded housedress, had come out through the screen door from the kitchen, just as Jacky ran past with his bellowing father in pursuit. She opened her mouth as if to speak or cry out, but her hand came up in a fist and stopped whatever she might have said, kept it safe behind her teeth. She was afraid for her son, more afraid that her husband would turn on her.

"No you don't Come back here!"

Jacky reached the large elm in the back yard, the elm where last year his father had smoke-drugged a colony of wasps and then burned their nest with gasoline. The boy went up the haphazardly nailed-on rungs like greased lightning and still he was nearly not fast enough. His father's clutching, enraged hand grasped the boy's ankle in a grip like flexed steel, then slipped a little and only

succeeded in pulling off Jacky's loafer. Jacky went up last three rungs and crouched on the floor of the treehouse twelve feet above the ground, panting and crying on his hands and knees.

His father seemed to go crazy. He danced around the tree like an Indian, bellowing his rage. He slammed his fists into it, making bark fly and bringing lattices of blood to his knuckles. He kicked it. His huge moon face was white with frustration and red with anger.

"Please, daddy," Jacky moaned. "Whatever I said ... I'm sorry I said it..."

"Come down! You come down out of there and take your fucking medicine, you little cur! *Right now!*"

"I will ... I will if you promise not to ... to hit me too hard ... not hurt me ... just spank me but not hurt me ..."

"Get out of that tree!" his father screamed.

Jacky looked toward the house but that was hopeless. His mother had retreated somewhere far away, to neutral ground.

"GET OUT RIGHT NOW!"

"Oh, daddy, I don't dare!" he cried out, and that was the truth. Because now his father might kill him.

There was a period of stalemate. A minute, perhaps, or perhaps two. His father circled the tree, puffing and blowing like whale. Jacky turned around and around on his hands and knees, following the movement. They were like parts of a visible clock.

The second or third time he came back to the ladder nailed to the tree, Torrance stopped. He looked speculatively at the ladder. And laid his hands on the rung before his eyes. He began to climb.

"No, daddy, it won't hold you," Jacky whispered.

But his father came on relentlessly, like fate, like death, like doom. Up and up, closer to the treehouse, one rung snapped off under his hands and he almost fell but caught the next one up with a grunt and a lunge, and one of the rungs twisted around from the horizontal to the perpendicular under his weight with a rasping

scream of pulling nails, but it did not give way, and then his working, congested face was visible over the edge of the treehouse floor, and for that one moment of his childhood Jack Torrance had his father at bay, if he could have kicked that face with the foot that still wore its loafer, kicked it where the nose terminated between the piggy eyes) he could have driven his father off the ladder backwards, perhaps killed him (but if he had killed him, would anyone have said anything but "Thanks, Jacky"?), but it was love that stopped him, and love that would not let him just put his face in his hands and give up as first one of his father's pudgy, short-fingered hands appeared on the boards and then the other.

"Now, by God -" his father breathed. He stood above his huddled son like a giant.

"Oh daddy, " Jacky mourned for both of them. And for a moment his father paused, his face sagged into lines of uncertainty, and Jacky felt a thread of hope.

Then the face drew up, he could smell the beer, and his father said, "I'll teach you to sass me," and all hope was gone as the foot swung out, burying itself in his belly, driving the wind from his body in a whoosh as he flew from the treehouse platform and fell to the ground, turning over once and on the point of his left elbow, which snapped with a greenstick crack. He didn't even have breath enough to scream. The last thing he saw before he blacked out was his father's face, which seemed to be at the end of a long dark tunnel. It seemed to be filling with surprise, the way a vessel may fill with some pale liquid.

He is just starting to know what he did, Jacky thought incoherently.

And on the heels of that a thought with no meaning at all, coherent or otherwise, a thought that chased him into blackness as he fen back on the chewed and tattered grass of the back lawn in a faint:

What you see is what you'll be, what you see is what you'll be, what you-

The break in his arm was cleanly healed in six months. The nightmares went on much longer. In a way, they never stopped.

Scene V. The Overlook Hotel, Third Floor, 1958

The murderers came up the stairs in their stocking feet.

The two men posted outside the door of the Presidential Suite never heard them. They were young, dressed in Ivy League suits with the cut of the jackets a little wider than the fashion of the day decreed. You couldn't wear a .357 Magnum concealed in a shoulder holster and be quite in fashion. They were discussing whether or not the Yankees could take yet another pennant. It was lacking two days of September, and as usual, the pinstripers looked formidable. Just talking about the Yankees made them feel a little better. They were New York boys, on loan from Walt Abruzzi, and they were a long way from home.

The man inside was a big wheel in the Organization. That was all they knew, all they wanted to know. "You do your job, we all get well," Abruzzi had told them. "What's to know?"

They had heard things, of course. That there was a place in Colorado that was completely neutral ground. A place where even a crazy little West Coast hood like Tony Giorgio could sit down and have a fancy brandy in a balloon glass with the Gray Old Men who saw him as some sort of homicidal stinging insect to be crushed. A place where guys from, Boston who had been used to putting each other in the trunks of cars behind bowling allies in Malden or into garbage cans in Roxbury could get together and play gin and tell jokes about the Polocks. A place where hatchets could be buried or unearthed, pacts made, plans laid. A place where warm people could sometimes cool off.

Well, they were here, and it wasn't so much - in fact, both of them were homesick for New York, which was why they were talking about the Yankees. But they never saw New York or the Yankees again.

Their voices reached down the hall to the stairwell where the murderers stood six risers down, with their stocking-covered heads just below line-of-sight if you happened to be looking down the hall from the door of the Presidential Suite. There were three of them on the stairs, dressed in dark pants and coats, carrying shotguns with the barrels sawed off to six inches. The shotguns were loaded with expanding buckshot.

One or me three beckoned and they walked up the stairs to the hall.

The two outside the door never even saw them until the murderers were almost on top of them. One of them was saying animatedly, "Now you take Ford. Who's better in the American League than Whitey Ford? No, I want to ask you that sincerely, because when it comes to the stretch he just-"

The speaker looked up and saw three black shapes with no discernable faces standing not ten paces away. For a moment he could not believe them. They were just standing there. He shook his head, fully expecting them to go away like the floating black specks you sometimes saw in the darkness. They didn't. Then he knew.

"What's the matter?" His buddy said. "What-"

The young man who had been speaking about Whitey Ford clawed under his jacket for his gun. One of the murderers placed the butt of his shotgun against a leather pad strapped to his belly beneath his dark turtleneck and pulled both triggers. The blast in the narrow hallway was deafening. The muzzle flash was like summer lightning, purple in its brilliance. A stink of cordite. The young man was blown backwards down the hall in a disintegrating cloud of Ivy League jacket, blood and hair. His arm looped over backwards, spilling the Magnum from his dying fingers, and the pistol thumped harmlessly to the carpet with the safety still on.

The second young man did not even make an effort to go for his gun. He stuck his hands high in the air and wet his pants at the same time.

"I give up, don't shoot me, it's okay-"

"Say hello to Albert Anastasia when you get down there, punk," one of the murderers said, and placed the butt of his shotgun against his belly.

"I ain't a problem, I ain't a problem!" The young man screamed in a thick Bronx accent, and then the blast of the shotgun lifted him out of his shoes and slammed him back against the silk wallpaper with its delicate raised pattern. He actually *stuck* for a moment before collapsing to the hall floor.

The three of them walked to the door of the suite. One of them tried the knob. "Locked."

"Okay."

The third man, who hadn't shot yet, stood in front of the door, levelled his weapon slightly above the knob, and pulled both triggers. A jagged hole appeared in the door, and light rayed through. The third man reached through the hole and grasped the deadbolt on the other side. There was a pistol shot, then two more. None of the three flinched.

There was a snap as the deadbolt gave, and then the third man kicked the door open. Standing in the wide sitting room in front of the picture window which now showed a view only of darkness was a man of about thirty-five wearing only jockey shorts. He held a pistol in each hand and as the murderers walked in he began to fire at them, spraying bullets wildly. Slugs peeled splinters from the doorframe, dug furrows in the rug, dusted plaster down from the ceiling. He fired five times, and the closest he came to any of his assassins was a bullet that twitched the pants of the second man at the left knee.

They raised their shotguns with almost military precision.

The man in the sitting room screamed, threw both guns to the floor, and ran for the bedroom. The triple blast caught him just outside the door and a wet fan of blood, brains, and bits of flesh splashed across the cherry striped wallpaper. He fell in the open bedroom doorway, half in and out.

"Watch the door," the first man said, and dropped his smoking shotgun to the rug. He reached in his coat pocket, brought out a bone-handled switchblade, and thumbed the chrome button. He approached the dead man, who was lying in the doorway on his side. He squatted beside the corpse and yanked down the front of the man's jockey shorts.

Down the hall the door to one of the other suites opened and a pallid face peered out. The third man raised his shotgun and the face jerked back in. The door slammed. A bolt rattled frantically.

The first man rejoined them.

"All right," he said. "Down the stairs and out the back door. Let's go."

They were outside and climbing into the parked car three minutes later. They left the Overlook behind them, standing gilded in mountain moonlight, white as bone under high stars. It would stand long after the three of them were as dead as the three they had left behind.

The Overlook was at home with the dead.

Stephen
KING

BLIND WILLIE

(As published in the Anteaus: The Final Issue 1994)

6:15 A.M.

He wakes to music, always to music; the shrill *beep-beep-beep* of the clock-radio's alarm is too much for his mind to cope with during those first blurry moments of the day. It sounds like a dump truck backing up. The radio is bad enough at this time of year, though; the easy-listening station he keeps the clock-radio tuned to is wall-to-wall Christmas carols, and this morning he wakes up to one of the two or three on his Most Hated List, something full of breathy voices and phony wonder. The Hare Krishna Chorale or the Andy Williams Singers or some such. Do you hear what I hear, the breathy voices sing as he sits up in bed, blinking groggily, hair sticking out in every direction. Do you see what I see, they sing as he swings his legs out, grimaces his way across the cold floor to the radio, and bangs the button that turns it off. When he turns around, Sharon has assumed her customary defensive posture — pillow folded over her head, nothing showing but he creamy curve of one shoulder, a lacy nightgown strap, and a fluff of blonde hair.

He goes into the bathroom, closes the door, slips off the pajama bottoms he sleeps in, drops them into the hamper, clicks on his electric razor. As he runs it over his face he thinks, Why not run through the rest of the sensory catalogue while you're at it, boys? Do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste, do you feel what I feel. I mean, hey, go for it.

'Humbug,' he says as he turns on the shower. 'All humbug.'

Twenty minutes later, while he's dressing (the dark grey suit from Paul Stuart this morning, plus his favorite Sulka tie), Sharon wakes up a little. Not enough for him to fully understand what she's telling him, though.

'Come again?' he asks. 'I got eggnog, but the rest was just ugga-wugga.'

'I asked if you'd pick up two quarts of eggnog on your way home,' she says. 'We've got the Allens and the Dubrays coming over tonight, remember?'

'Christmas,' he says, checking his hair carefully in the mirror. He no longer looks like the glaring, bewildered man who sits up in bed to the sound of music five mornings a week — sometimes six. Now he looks like all the other people who will ride into New York with him on the 7:40, and that is just what he wants.

'What about Christmas?' she asks with a sleepy smile. 'Humbug, right?'

'Right,' he agrees. 'All humbug.'

'If you remember, get some cinnamon too—'

'Okay.'

'— but if you forget the eggnog, I'll *slaughter* you, Bill.'

'I'll remember.'

'I know. You're very dependable. Look nice too.'

'Thanks.'

She flops back down, then props herself up on one elbow as he makes a final minute adjustment to the tie, which is a dark blue. He has never worn a red tie in his life, and hopes he can go to his grave untouched by that particular virus. 'I got the tinsel you wanted,' she says.

'Mmmmm?'

'the *tinsel*,' she says. 'It's on the kitchen table.'

'Oh.' Now he remembers. 'Thanks.'

'Sure.' She's back down and already starting to drift off again. He doesn't envy the fact that she can stay in bed until nine — hell, until eleven, if she wants — but he envies that ability of hers to wake up, talk, then drift off again. She says something else, but now she's back to ugga-wugga. He knows what it is just the same, though: have a good day hon.

'Thanks,' he says, kissing her cheek. 'I will.'

'Look very nice,' she mumbles again, although her eyes are closed. 'Love you, Bill.'

'Love you too,' he says and goes out.

His briefcase — Mark Cross, not quite top of the line but almost — is standing in the front hall, by the coat tree where his topcoat (from Barney's on Madison) hangs. He grabs the case on his way by and takes it into the kitchen. The coffee is all made — God bless solid state electronics and microchips — and he pours himself a cup. He opens the briefcase, which is entirely empty, and picks up the ball of tinsel on the kitchen table. He holds it up for a moment, watching the way it sparkles under the light of the kitchen fluorescents, then puts it in his briefcase.

'Do you hear what I hear,' he says to no one at all and snaps the briefcase shut.

8:15 A.M.

Outside the dirty window to his left, he can see the city drawing closer. The grime on the glass makes it look like some filthy, gargantuan ruin — Atlantis, maybe, just heaved back to the

surface. It's a grey day with a load of snow caught in its throat, but that doesn't worry him much; it is just eight days until Christmas, and business will be good.

The car reeks of morning coffee, morning deodorant, morning aftershave, morning perfume, and morning stomachs. There is a tie in almost every seat — even the women wear them these days it seems. The faces have that puffy eight o'clock look, the eyes both introspective and defenseless, the conversations halfhearted. This is the hour at which even people who don't drink look hung over. Most people just stick to their newspapers. He himself has the *Times* crossword open in front of him, and although he's filled in a few squares, it's mostly a defensive measure. He doesn't like to talk to people on the train, doesn't like loose conversation of any sort, and the last thing in the world he wants is a commuter buddy. When he starts seeing the same faces in any given car, when people start to nod to him or say 'How you doin today?' as they go to their seats, he changes cars. It's not that hard to remain unknown, just another commuter, one who is conspicuous only in his adamant refusal to wear a red tie. Not that hard at all.

'All ready for Christmas?' the man in the aisle seat asks him.

He looks up, almost frowning, then decides it's not a substantive remark, but only the sort of empty time-passer some people seem to feel compelled to make. The man beside him is fat and will undoubtedly stink by noon no matter how much Speed Stik he used this morning . . . but he's hardly even looking at his seatmate, so that's all right.

'Yes, well, you know,' he says, looking down at the briefcase between his shoes — the briefcase that contains a ball of tinsel and nothing else. 'I'm getting in the spirit, little by little.'

8:40 A.M.

He comes out of Penn Station with a thousand other topcoated commuters and commuterettes, mid-level executives for the most part, sleek gerbils who will be running full tilt on their exercise wheels by noon. He stands still for a moment, breathing deep of the cold grey air. Madison Square Garden has been tricked out with greenery and Christmas lights, and a little distance away a Santa Claus who looks Puerto Rican is ringing a bell. He's got a pot for contributions with an easel set up beside it. HELP THE HOMELESS THIS CHRISTMAS, the sign on the easel says, and the man in the blue tie thinks, How about a little truth in advertising, Santa? How about a sign that says, HELP ME SUPPORT MY CRACK

HABIT THIS CHRISTMAS? Nevertheless, he drops a couple of dollar bills into the pot as he walks past. He has a good feeling about today. He's glad Sharon remembered the tinsel — he would have forgotten, himself; he always forgets stuff like that, the grace notes.

He walks five short blocks and then comes to his building. Standing outside the door is a young black man — a youth, actually, surely no more than seventeen — wearing black jeans and a dirty red sweater with a hood. He jives from foot to foot, blowing puffs of steam out of his mouth, smiling frequently, showing a gold tooth. In one hand he holds a partly crushed Styrofoam coffee cup. There's some change in it, which he rattles constantly.

'Spare a little?' he asks the passersby as they stream toward the revolving doors. 'Spare a little, sir? Spare a little, ma'am? Just trying to get lil spot of breffus. Than you, gobless you, merry Christmas. Spare a little, sir? Quarter, maybe? Than you. Spare a little, ma'am?'

As he passes, Bill drops a nickel and two dimes into the young black man's cup.

'Thank you, sir, gobless, merry Christmas.'

'You, too,' he says.

The woman next to him frowns. 'You shouldn't encourage them,' she says.

He gives her a shrug and a small, shamefaced smile. 'It's hard for me to say no to anyone at Christmas,' he tells her.

He enters the lobby with a stream of others, stares briefly after the opinionated bitch as she heads for the newsstand, then goes to the elevators with their old-fashioned floor dials and their art deco numbers. Here several people nod to him, and he exchanges a few words with a couple of them as they wait — it's not like the train, after all, where you can change cars. Plus, the building is an old one, only fifteen stories high, and the elevators are cranky.

'How's the wife, Bill?' a scrawny, constantly grinning man from the fifth floor asks.

'Andi? She's fine.'

'Kids?'

'Both good.' He has no kids, of course — he wants kids about as much as he wants a hiatal hernia — and his wife's name isn't Andi, but those are things the scrawny, constantly grinning man will never know.

'Bet they can't wait for the big day,' the scrawny man says,

his grin widening and becoming unspeakable. Now he looks like an editorial cartoonist's conception of Famine, all big eyes and huge teeth and shiny skin.

'That's right,' he says, 'but I think Sarah's getting kind of suspicious about the guy in the red suit.' Hurry up, elevator he thinks, Jesus, hurry up and save me from these stupidities. 'Yeah, yeah, it happens,' the scrawny man says. His grin fades for a moment, as if they are discussing cancer instead of Santa. 'How old's she now?' 'Eight.' 'Boy, the time sure flies when you're having fun, doesn't it? Seems like she was just born a year or two ago.' 'You can say that again,' he says, fervently hoping the scrawny man *won't* say it again. At that moment one of the four elevators finally gasps open its doors and they herd themselves inside. Bill and the scrawny man walk a little way down the fifth floor hall together, and then the scrawny man stops in front of a set of old-fashioned double doors with the words CONSOLIDATED INSURANCE written on one frosted-glass panel and ADJUSTORS OF AMERICA on the other. From behind these doors comes the muted clickety-click of computer keyboards and the slightly louder sound of ringing phones.

'Have a good day, Bill.'

'You too.'

The scrawny man lets himself into his office, and for a moment Bill sees a big wreath hung on the far side of the room. Also, the windows have been decorated with the kind of snow that comes in a spray can. He shudders and thinks, God save us, every one.

9:05 A.M

His office — one of two he keeps in this building — is at the far end of the hall. The two offices up from it are dark and vacant, a situation that has held for the last six months and one he likes just fine. Printed on the frosted glass of his own office door are the words WESTERN STATES LAND ANALYSTS. There are three locks on the door: the one that was on it when he moved into the building nine years ago, plus two he has put on himself. He lets himself in, closes the door, turns the bolt, then engages the police lock.

A desk stands in the center of the room, and it is cluttered with papers, but none of them mean anything; they are simply window dressing for the cleaning service. Every so often he throws them all out and redistributes a fresh batch. In the center of the desk is a telephone on which he makes occasional random calls so that

the phone company won't register the line as totally inactive. Last year he purchased a fax, and it looks very businesslike over in its corner by the door to the office's little second room, but it has never been used.

'Do you hear what I hear, do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste,' he murmurs, and crosses to the door leading to the second room. Inside are shelves stacked high with more meaningless paper, two large file cabinets (there is a Walkman on top of one, his excuse on the few occasions when someone knocks on the locked door and gets no answer), a chair, and a stepladder.

Bill takes the stepladder back to the main room and unfolds it to the left of the desk. He puts his briefcase on top of it. Then he mounts the first three steps of the ladder, reaches up (the bottom half of his coat bells out around his legs as he does), and carefully moves aside one of the suspended ceiling panels.

Above is a dark area which cannot quite be called a utility space, although a few pipes and wires do run through it. There's no dust up here, at least not in this immediate area, and no rodent droppings, either — he uses D-Con Mouseprufe once a month. He wants to keep his clothes nice as he goes back and forth, of course, but that's not really the important part. the important part is to respect your work and your field. This he learned in the Marines, and he sometimes thinks it is the most important thing he did learn there. He stayed alive, of course, but he thinks now that was probably more luck than learning. Still, a person who respects his work and his field — the place where the work is done, the tools with which it is done — has a leg up in life. No doubt about that.

Above this narrow space (a ghostly, gentle wind hoots endlessly through it, bringing a smell of dust and the groan of the elevators) is the bottom of the sixth floor, and here is a square trap door about thirty inches on a side. Bill installed it himself; he's handy with tools, which is one of the things Sharon most appreciates about him.

He flips the trap door up, letting in muted light from above, then grabs his briefcase by the handle. As he sticks his head into the space between the floors, water rushes gustily down the fat bathroom conduit twenty or thirty feet north of his present position. An hour from now, when the people in the building start their coffee breaks, that sound will be as constant and as rhythmic as waves breaking on a beach. Bill hardly notices this or any of the other interfloor sounds; he's used to them.

He climbs carefully to the top of the stepladder, then boosts

himself through into his sixth floor office, leaving Bill down on five. Up here he is Willie. This office has a workshop look, with coils and motors and vents stacked neatly on metal shelves and what looks like a filter of some kind squatting on one corner of the desk. It is an office, however; there's a computer terminal, an IN/OUT basket full of papers (also window dressing, which he periodically rotates like a farmer rotating crops), and file cabinets. On one wall is a framed Norman Rockwell print showing a family praying over Thanksgiving dinner. Next to it is a blowup of his honorable discharge from the marines, also framed; the name on the sheet is William Teale, and his decorations, including the Bronze Star, are duly noted. On another wall is a poster from the sixties. It shows the peace sign. Below it, in red, white, and blue, is this punchline: TRACK OF THE GREAT AMERICAN CHICKEN.

Willie puts Bill's briefcase on the desk, then lies down on his stomach. He pokes his head and arms into the windy, oil-smelling darkness between the floors and replaces the ceiling panel of the fifth-floor office. It's locked up tight, he doesn't expect anyone anyway (he never does; Western States Land Analysts has never had a single customer), but it's better to be safe. Always safe, never sorry.

With his fifth floor office set to rights, Willie lowers the trapdoor in this one. Up here the trap is hidden by a small rug which is Superglued to the wood, so it can go up and down without too much flopping or sliding around.

He gets to his feet, dusts off his hands, then turns to the briefcase and opens it. He takes out the ball of tinsel and puts it on top of the laser printer which stand next to the computer terminal.

'Good one,' he says, thinking again that Sharon can be a real peach when she sets her mind to it . . . and she often does. He relatches the briefcase and then begins to undress, doing it carefully and methodically, reversing the steps he took at six-thirty, running the film backward. He strips off everything, even his undershorts and his black, knee-high socks. Naked, he hangs his topcoat, suit jacket, and shirt carefully in the closet where only one other item hangs — a bulky red thing, a little too bulky to be termed a briefcase. Willie puts his mark Cross case next to it, then places his slacks in the pants press, taking pains with the crease. The tie goes on the rack screwed to the back of the closet door, where it hangs all by itself like a long blue tongue.

He pads barefoot-naked across to one of the file cabinets. On top of it is an ashtray embossed with a pissed-off-looking eagle

and the Marine motto. In it are a pair of dogtags on a chain. Willie slips the chain over his head, then slides out the bottom drawer of the cabinet stack. Inside are underclothes. Neatly folded on top are a pair of khaki boxer shorts. He slips them on. Next come white athletic socks, followed by a white cotton T-shirt — roundneck, not strappy. The shapes of his dog-tags stand out against it as do his biceps and quads. They aren't as good as they were in '67, under the triple canopy, but they aren't bad. As he slides the drawer back in and opens the next, he begins to hum under his breath — not 'Do You Hear What I Hear' but the Doors, the one about how the day destroys the night, the night divides the day.

He slips on a plain blue chambray shirt, then a pair of fatigue pants. He rolls this middle drawer back in and opens the top one. Here there is a pair of black boots, polished to a high sheen and looking as if they might last until the trump of judgement. Maybe even longer. They aren't standard Marine issue, not these — these are jumpboots, 101st Airborne stuff. But that's all right. He isn't actually trying to dress like a soldier. If he wanted to dress like a soldier, he would.

Still, there is no more reason to look sloppy than there is to allow dust to collect in the pass-through, and he's careful about the way he dresses. He does not tuck his pants into his boots, of course — he's headed for Fifth Avenue in December, not the Mekong in August — but he intends to look squared away. Looking god is as important to him as it is to Bill, maybe even more important. Respecting one's work and one's field begins, after all, with respecting one's self.

The last two items are in the back of the top drawer: a tube of makeup and a jar of hair gel. He squeezes some of the makeup into the palm of his left hand, then begins applying it, working from forehead to the base of his neck. He moves with the unconcerned speed of long experience, giving himself a moderate tan. With that done, he works some of the gel into his hair and then recombs it, getting rid of the part and sweeping it straight back from his forehead. It is the last touch, the smallest touch, and perhaps the most telling touch. There is no trace of the commuter who walked out of Penn Station an hour ago; the man in the mirror mounted on the back of the door to the small storage annex looks like a washed-up mercenary. There is a kind of silent, half-humbled pride in the tanned face, something people won't look at too long. It hurts them if they do. Willie knows this is so; he has seen it. He doesn't ask why it should be so. He has made himself a

life pretty much without questions, and that's the way he likes it.

'All right,' he says, closing the door to the storage room.

'Lookin good, trooper.'

He goes back to the closet for the red jacket, which is the reversible type, and the boxy case. He slips the jacket over his desk chair for the time being and puts the case on the desk. He unlatches it and swings the top up on sturdy hinges; now it looks a little like the cases the street salesmen use to display their cheap watches and costume jewelry. There are only a few items in Willie's, one of them broken down into two pieces so it will fit. He takes out a pair of gloves (he will want them today, no doubt about that), and then a sign on a length of stout cord. The cord has been knotted through holes in the cardboard at either side, so Willie can hang the sign over his neck. He closes the case again, not bothering to latch it, and puts the sign on top of it — the desk is so cluttery, it's the only good surface he has to work on.

Humming (we chased our pleasure here, dug our treasures there), he opens the wide drawer above the knee-hole, paws past the pencils and Chapsticks and paper clips and memo pads, and finally finds his stapler. He then unrolls the ball of tinsel, places it carefully around the rectangle of his sign, snips off the extra, and staples the shiny stuff firmly into place. He holds it up for a moment, first assessing the effect, then admiring it.

'Perfect!' he says. 'Wonderful! Sharon, you're a geni — '

The telephone rings and he stiffens, turning to look at it with eyes which are suddenly very small and hard and totally alert. One ring. Two. Three. On the fourth, the machine kicks in, answering in his voice — the version of it that goes with this office, anyway.

'Hi, you've reached Midtown Heating and Cooling,' Willie Teale says. 'No one can take your call right now, so leave a message at the beep.'

Bee-eep

He listens tensely, standing over his just-decorated sign with his hands balled into fists. 'Hi, this is Ed, from the Nynex Yellow Pages,' the voice from the machine says, and Willie lets out breath he hasn't known he was holding. His hands begin to loosen. 'Please have your company rep call me at 555-1000 for information on how you can increase your ad space in both versions of the Yellow Pages, and at the same time save big money on your yearly bill. Thanks.'

Click

Willie looks at the answering machine a moment longer, almost as if he expects it to speak again.

— to threaten him, perhaps, or to accuse him of some crime — but nothing happens.

'Squared away,' he murmurs, putting the decorated sign back into the case. This time when he closes it, he latches it. Across the front is a bumper sticker, its message flanked by small American flags. I WAS PROUD TO SERVE, it reads. And below that: SEMPER FI.

'Squared away, baby, you better believe it.' He leaves the office, closing the door with MIDTOWN HEATING AND COOLING printed on the frosted-glass panel behind him, and turning all three of the locks.

9:40 A.M.

Halfway down the hall, he sees Ralph Williamson, one of the tubby accountants from Garowicz Financial Planning (all the accountants at Garowicz are tubby, from what Willie has been able to observe). There's a key chained to an old wooden paddle in one of Ralph's pink hands, and from this Willie deduces that he is looking at an accountant in need of a wee. Key on a paddle, just like in grade school, he thinks, and you know what? That's probably a comfort to him.

'Hey, Ralphie, what's doin?'

Ralph turns, sees Willie, brightens. 'Hey, hi, merry Christmas!' Willie grins at the look in Ralph's eyes. Tubby little fucker worships him, and why not? Just why the fuck not? If I were Ralph, I'd worship me too. Last of the fucking pioneers.

'Same to you, bro.' He holds out his hand (now gloved so he doesn't have to worry about it not matching his face), palm up. 'Gimme five!'

Smiling shyly, Ralph does.

'Gimme ten!'

Ralph turns his pink, pudgy hand over and allows Willie to slap it.

'So goddamn good I gotta do it again!' Willie exclaims, and give Ralph five more. 'Got your Christmas shopping done, Ralphie?'

'Almost,' Ralph says, grinning and jingling the bathroom key. 'Yes, almost. How about you, Willie?' Willie tips him a wink. 'Oh, you know how it is, brother-man; I got two-three women, and I just let each of em buy me a little keep-sake.' Ralph's admiring smile suggest he does not, in fact, know how it is, but rather wishes he did. 'Got

a service call?'

'A whole day's worth,' Willie says. 'Tis the season, you know.'

'Seems like it's always the season for you. Business must be good. You're hardly ever in your office.' 'That's why God gave us answering machines, Ralphie-baby. Believe it. You better go on, now, or you're gonna be dealin with a wet spot on your best gabardine slacks.' Laughing (blushing a little too), Ralph heads for the men's room.

Willie goes on down to the elevators, carrying his case in one hand and checking to make sure his glasses are still in his jacket pocket with the other. They are. The envelope is in there, too, thick and crackling with twenty-dollar bills. Fifteen of them. It's time for a little visit from Officer Wheelock; Willie expected him yesterday. Maybe he won't show until tomorrow, but Willie is betting on today . . . not that he likes it. He knows it's the way of the world, you have to grease the wheels if you want your wagon to roll, but he still has a resentment. There are lots of days when he thinks about how pleasant it would be to put a bullet in Jasper Wheelocks's head. Rip his tongue out as a trophy, too, maybe — he could hang it in the closet next to Bill Teale's tie.

When the elevator comes, Willie gets in with a smile.

It doesn't stop on five, but the thought of that happening no longer makes him nervous. He has ridden down to the lobby many times with people who work on the same floor as Bill Teale — including the scrawny drink of water from Consolidated insurance — and they don't recognize him. They should, he know they *should*, but they don't. He used to think it was the change of clothes and the makeup, then he decided it was the hair, but in his hear he knows that none of those things can account for it. Not even their droning, numb-hearted insensitivity to the world they live in can account for it. What he's doin just isn't that radical — fatigue pants, billyhop boots, and a little brown makeup don't make a disguise. No way to they make a disguise. He doesn't know exactly how to explain it, and so mostly leaves it alone. He learned this technique, as he learned so many other things, in the Nam.

The young black man is still standing outside the lobby door (he's flipped up the hood of his grungy old sweater now), and he shakes his crumpled Styrofoam cup at Willie. He sees that the dude carrying the Mr. Repairman case in one hand is smiling, and so his own smile widens.

'Spare a little?' he asks Mr. Repairman. 'What do you say, my man?'

'Get the fuck out of my way, you worthless, lazy dickhead, that's what I say,' Willie tells him, still smiling. The young man falls back a step, the Styrofoam cup still at last, looking at Willie with

shocked, wide eyes. Before he can think of anything to say, Mr. Repairman is halfway down the block and almost lost in the throngs of shoppers, his big, blocky case swinging from one gloved hand.

9:55 A.M

He goes into the Whitmore Hotel, crosses the lobby, and takes the escalator up to the mezzanine, where the public restrooms are. This is the only part of the day he ever feels nervous about, and he can't say why; certainly nothing has ever happened before, during, or after one of his hotel bathroom stops (he rotates among roughly two dozen of them in the midtown area), but he is somehow certain that if things every *do* turn dinky-dau on him, it will happen in a hotel shithouse. Because it's not like transforming from Bill Teale to Willie Teale; that feels clean and perfectly normal. the workday's final transformation, however — from Willie Teale to Blind Willie — has never felt that way. The last morph always feels murky and furtive, and until it's done and he's back on the street again, tapping his white cane in front of him, he feels as a snake must feel after it has shed its old skin and before the new one has grown back.

He looks around and sees the restroom is empty except for a pair of feet under the door of the second stall in a long row of them — a dozen in all. A throat clears softly. A newspaper rattles. There is the *fffft* sound of a polite little midtown fart.

Willie goes all the way down the line to the last stall. He puts down his case, latches the door shut, and takes off his red jacket. He turns it inside-out as he does so, reversing it. The other side is olive green. It has become an old soldier's field jacket with a single pull of the arms. Sharon, who really does have a touch of genius, bought this side of his coat in an army surplus store and tore out the lining so she could sew it easily into the red jacket. Before sewing, however, she put a staff sergeant's stripes on it, plus black strips of cloth where the name-and-unit slugs would have gone. She then washed the garment thirty or forty times. The stripes and the rest are gone now, of course, but the places where they were stand out clearly — the cloth is greener on the sleeves and the left breast, fresher in patterns any veteran of the armed services must recognize at once.

Willie hangs the coat on the hook, drops trout, sits, then picks up his case and settles it on his thighs. He opens it, takes out the two pieces of his cane, and quickly screw them together. Holding it

far down the shaft, he reaches up from his sitting position and hooks the handle over the top of his jacket. Then he relatches the case, pulls a little paper off the roll in order to create the proper business-is-finished sound effect (probably unnecessary, but always safe, never sorry), and flushes the john.

Before stepping out of the stall he takes his glasses from the jacket pocket which also holds the payoff envelope. They're big wraparounds, retro shades he associates with lava lamps and outlaw biker movies starring Peter Fonda. They're good for business, though, partly because they somehow say veteran to people, and partly because no one can peek in at his eyes, even from the sides.

Willie Teale stays behind in the mezzanine restroom of the Whitmore just as Bill Teals stays behind in the fifty-floor office of Western States Land Analysts. The man who comes out — a man wearing an old fatigue jacket, shades, and tapping a white cane lightly before him — is Blind Willie, a Fifth avenue fixture since Reagan's first term.

As he crosses the smaller upstairs lobby toward the stairs (unaccompanied blind men never use escalators), he sees a woman in a red blazer coming toward him. With the heavily tinted lenses between them, she looks like some sort of exotic fish swimming in muddy waters. And of course it is not just the glasses; he is Blind Willie now, and by two this afternoon he really *will* be blind, just as he was blind when he and Bernard Hogan, his best friend, were medivacked out of the DMZ back in '67. Only then he had been damned near deaf too. I'm blind, he kept telling the guy who was kneeling between him and Bernard. He could hear himself talking, but faintly, as if his mind had come loose from his head and blown like a balloon into another room while his stupid mouth just went on quacking. I'm blind, oh Christ, kid, the whole world blew up in our fucking faces and now I'm blind. The kid had cheek. You look okay around the eyes to me, he said. If you're lucky, maybe it's just concussion blindness. And that was what it turned out to be, although it hadn't worn off for nearly a week (well, three days, but he'd never let on until he was back in the States). Bernard hadn't been so lucky. Bernard had died, and so far as Willie knows, that doesn't wear off.

'Can I help you, sir?' the woman in the red blazer asks him.

'No, ma'am,' Blind Willie says. The ceaselessly moving cane stops tapping floor and quests over emptiness. It pendulums back and forth, tapping the sides of the staircase. Blind Willie nods, then moves carefully but confidently forward until he can touch

the railing with the hand which holds the bulky case. He switches the case to his cane-hand so he can grasp the railing, then turns toward the woman. He's careful not to smile directly at her but a little to her left. 'No, thank you — I'm fine.'

He starts downstairs, tapping ahead of him as he goes, big case held easily in spite of the cane — it's light, almost empty. Later, of course, it will be a different story.

10:10 A.M.

Fifth Avenue is dressed up and decked out for the holiday season — glitter and finery he can only see dimly. Streetlamps wear garlands of holly. Trump Tower has become a garish Christmas package, complete with gigantic red bow. A wreath which must be forty feet across graces the staid grey facade of Bonwit Teller. Lights twinkle in show windows. In the Warner Brothers store, the Tasmanian Devil which usually sits astride the Harley-Davidson has been temporarily replaced by a Santa Claus in a black leather jacket. Bells jingle. Somewhere nearby, carolers are singing 'Silent Night,' not exactly Blind Willie's favorite tune, but a good deal better than 'Do You Hear What I Hear.'

He stops where he always stops, in front of St. Patrick's across the street from Saks, allowing the package-laden shoppers to flood past in front of him. His movements now are simple and dignified. His discomfort in the men's room — that feeling of gawky and undignified nakedness about to be exposed — has passed. Now he feels like a man in the heart of some ritual, a private mass for both the living and the dead.

He squats, unlatches the case, and turns it so those approaching from uptown will be able to read the sticker on the top. He takes out the sign with its brave skirting of tinsel, and ducks under the string. The sign comes to rest against the front of his field jacket.

S/SGT WILLIAM J. TEALE, USMC RET
SERVED DMZ, 1966-1967
LOST MY SIGHT CON THIEN, 1967
ROBBED OF BENEFITS BY A GRATEFUL GOVERNMENT, 1979
LOST HOME, 1985
ASHAMED TO BEG BUT HAVE A SON IN SCHOOL
THINK WELL OF ME IF YOU CAN

He raises his head so that the white light of this cold, almost-ready-to-snow day slides across the blind bulbs of his dark glasses. Now the work begins, and it is harder work than anyone will ever know. There is a way to stand, not quite the military posture which is called parade rest, but close to it. The head must stay up, looking both at and through the people who pass back and forth in their thousands and tens of thousands. The hands must hang straight down in their black gloves, never fiddling with the sign or with the fabric of his pants or with each other. The feeling he projects must continue to be that sense of hurt and humbled pride. There must be no cringing, no sense of shame or shaming, and most of all no taint of insanity. He never speaks unless spoken to, and only then when he is spoken to in kindness. He does not respond to people who ask him angrily why he doesn't get a real job, or ask him what he means about being robbed of his benefits, or accuse him of faking, or what to know what kind of son allows his father to put him through school by begging on a street corner. He remembers breaking this ironclad rule only once, on a sweltering summer afternoon in 1990. What school does your son go to? a woman asked him angrily. He doesn't know what she looked like, by then it was almost four and he had been as blind as a bat for three hours, but he had felt anger exploding out of her in all directions, like bedbugs exiting an old mattress. Tell me which one, I want to mail him a dog turd. Don't bother, he replied, turning toward the sound of her voice. If you've got a dog turd you want to mail somewhere send it to LBJ. Federal express must deliver to hell, they deliver everywhere else.

'God bless you, man,' a guy in a cashmere overcoat says, and his voice trembles with surprising emotion. Except Blind Willie is not surprised. He's heard it all, he reckons, and if he hasn't, he soon will. The guy in the cashmere coat drops a bill into the open case. A five. The workday has begun.

10:45 A.M.

So far, so good. He lays his cane down carefully behind the case, drops to one knee, and sweeps a hand back and forth through the bills, although he can still see them pretty well. He picks them up — there's four or five hundred dollars in all, which puts him on the way to a three-thousand-dollar day, not great for this time of year, but not bad, either — then rolls them up and slips a rubber band around them. He then pushes a button on the inside of the case,

and the false bottom drops down on springs, dumping the load of change all the way to the bottom. He adds the roll of bills, making no attempt to hide what he's doing, but feeling no qualms about it either; in all the years he has been doing this his case has never been stolen. God help the asshole who ever tries.

He lets go of the button, allowing the false bottom to snap back into place, and stands up. A hand immediately presses into the small of his back. 'Merry Christmas, Willie,' the owner of the hand says. Blind Willie recognizes him by the smell of his cologne.

'Merry Christmas, Officer Wheelock,' Willie responds. His head remains tilted upward in a faintly questioning posture; his hands hang at his sides; his feet in their brightly polished jumpboots remain apart in a stance not quite wide enough to be parade rest but nowhere near tight enough to pass as attention. 'How are you today, sir?'

'In the pink, motherfucker,' Wheelock says. 'You know me, always in the pink.'

Here comes a man in a topcoat hanging open over a bright red ski sweater. His hair is short, black on top, gray on the sides. His face has got a stern, carved look Blind Willie recognizes at once. He's got a couple of handle-top bags — one from Saks, one from Bally — in his hands. He stops and reads the sign.

'Con Thien?' he asks suddenly, speaking not as a man does when naming a place but as one does when recognizing an old acquaintance on a busy street.

'Yes, sir,' Blind Willie says.

'Who was your CO?'

'Lieutenant Bob Grissom — with a 'u,' not an 'o' — and above him, Colonel Andrew Shelf, sir.'

'I heard of Shelf,' says the man in the open coat. His face suddenly looks different. As he walked toward the man on the corner, it looked as if it belonged on Fifth Avenue. Now it doesn't. 'Never met him, though.'

Blind Willie says nothing. He can smell Wheelocks' cologne, though, stronger than ever, and the man is practically panting in his ear, sounding like a horny kid at the end of a hot date. Wheelock has never bought his act, and although Blind Willie pays for the privilege of being left alone on this corner, and quite handsomely by going rates, he knows that part of Wheelock is still cop enough to hope he'll fuck up. Part of Wheelock is actively rooting for that. But what the Wheelocks of the world never understand is that what looks fake isn't always fake. Sometimes the issues are a little more complicated than they look at first

glance. That was something else the Nam had to teach him, back in the years before it became a political joke and a crutch for hack filmwriters.

'Sixty-seven was a hard year,' the gray-haired man says. He speaks in a slow, heavy voice. 'I was at Loc Ninh when the regulars tried to overrun the place. Up by the 'Bodian border. Do you remember Loc Ninh?'

'Ah, yes, sir,' Blind Willie says. 'I lost two friends on Tory Hill.'

'Tory Hill,' the man in the open coat says, and all at once he looks a thousand years old, the bright red ski sweater an obscenity, like something hung on a museum mummy by vandals who believe they are exhibiting a sense of humor. His eyes are off over a hundred horizons. Then they come back here, to this street where a nearby carillon is playing the one that goes I hear those sleighbells jingling, ring-ting tingling too. He sets his bags down between his expensive shoes and takes a pigskin wallet out from an inner pocket. He opens it, riffles through a neat thickness of bills.

'Son all right, Teale?' he asks. 'Making good grades?'

'Yes sir.'

'How old?'

'Twenty one, sir.'

'God willing, he'll never know what it's like to see his friends die and then get spit on in an airport concourse,' the man in the open top-coat says. He takes a bill out of his wallet. Blind Willie feels as well as hears Wheelock's little gasp and hardly has to look at the bill to know it is a hundred.

'Yes, sir, God willing, sir.'

The man in the topcoat touches Willie's hand with the bill, looks surprised when the gloved hand pulls back, as if it were bare and had been touched by something hot.

'Put it in my case, sire, if you would,' Blind Willie says.

The man in the topcoat looks at him for a moment, eyebrows raised, frowning slightly, then seems to understand. He stoops, puts the bill in the case, then reaches into his front pocket and brings out a small handful of change. This he scatters across the face of old Ben Franklin, in order to hold the bill down. Then he stands up. His eyes are wet and bloodshot.

'Do you any good to give you my card?' he asks Blind Willie. 'I can put you in touch with several veterans' organizations.'

'Thank you, sir, I'm sure you could, but I must respectfully decline.'

'Tried most of them?'

'Tried some, yes sir.'

'Where'd you V.A.?'

'San Francisco, sir.' He hesitates, then adds, 'The Pussy Palace, sir.'

The man in the topcoat laughs heartily at this, and when his face crinkles, the tears which have been standing in his eyes run down his weathered cheeks. 'Pussy Palace! he cries. 'I haven't heard that in fifteen years! Christ! A bedpan in every bed, and a naked nurse to hold it in place, right? Except for the lovebeads, which they left on.'

'Yes, sir, that about covers it, sir.' 'Or uncovers it. Merry Christmas, soldier.' The man in the top-coat ticks off a little one-finger salute. 'Merry Christmas to you, sir.' The man in the topcoat picks up his bags again and walks off. He doesn't look back. Blind Willie would not have seen him do so if he had; his vision is now down to ghosts and shadows.

'That was beautiful,' Wheelock murmurs. The feeling of Wheelocks freshly used air puffing into the cup of his ear is hateful to Blind Willie — gruesome, in fact — but he will not give the man the pleasure of moving his head so much as an inch. 'The old fuck was actually *crying*. As I'm sure you saw. But can talk the talk, Willie, I'll give you that much.'

Willie said nothing.

'Some V.A. hospital called the Pussy Palace, huh?' Wheelock asks. 'Sounds like my kind of place. Where'd you read about it, *Soldier of Fortune*?'

The shadow of a woman, a dark shape in a darkening day, bends over the open case and drops something in. A gloved hand touches Willies glove hand and squeezes briefly. 'God bless you.' she says.

'Thank you, ma'am.'

The shadow moves off. The little puffs of breath in Blind Willie's ear do not.

'You got something for me, pal?' Wheelock asks.

Blind Willie reaches into his jacket pocket. He brings out the envelope and holds it out, jabbing the chilly, unseen air with it. It is snatched from his fingers as soon as Wheelock can track it down and get hold of it.

'You asshole!' There's a touch of panic as well as anger in the cop's voice. 'How many times have I told you, palm it, *palm* it!'

Blind Willie says a lot more nothing — he is giving a sermon of silence this morning.

'How much?' Wheelock asks after a moment.

'Three hundred.' Blind Willie says. 'Three hundred dollars, Officer Wheelock.'

This is greeted by a little thinking silence, but he takes a step back from Blind Willie, and the puffs of breath in his ear diffuse a little. Blind Willie is grateful for small favors.

'That's okay,' Wheelock says at last. '*This* time. But a new year's coming, pal, and your friend Jasper the Police-Smurf has a piece of land in upstate New York that he wants to build a little cabaña on. You understand? The price of poker is going up.'

Blind Willie says nothing, but he is listening very, very carefully now. If this were all, all would be well. But Wheelock's voice suggests it isn't all.

'Actually, the cabaña isn't the important part,' Wheelock goes on, confirming Blind Willie's assessment of the situation. 'The important thing is I need a little better compensation if I have to deal with a lowlife fuck like you.' Genuine anger is creeping into his voice. 'How you can do this every day — even at *Christmas* — man, I don't know. People who beg, that's one thing, but a guy like you . . . you're no more blind than I am.'

Oh, you're *lots* blinder than me, Blind Willie thinks, but still he holds his peace. 'And you're doing okay, aren't you? Probably not as good as that PTL fuck they busted and sent to the *callabozo*, but you must clear what? A grand a day, this time a year? Two grand?'

He is way low, but Blind Willie does not, of course, correct him. The miscalculation is actually music to his ears. It means that his silent partner is not watching him too closely or frequently . . . not yet, anyway. But he doesn't like the anger in Wheelock's voice. Anger is like a wild card in a poker game.

'And you're no more blind than I am,' Wheelock repeats. Apparently this is the part that really gets him. 'Hey, pal, you know what? I ought to follow you some night when you get off work, you know? See what you do.' He pauses. 'Who you turn into.'

For a moment Blind Willie actually stops breathing . . . then he starts again.

'You wouldn't want to do that Officer Wheelock,' he says.

I wouldn't, huh? Why not, Willie? Why not? You lookin out for my welfare, is that it? Afraid I might kill the shitass who lays the golden turds? Hey, thirty six hundred a year ain't all that much when you weigh it against a commendation, maybe a promotion.' He pauses. When he speaks again, his voice has a dreamy quality which Willie finds especially alarming. 'I could be in the *Post*. HERO COP BUSTS HEARTLESS SCAM ARTIST ON FIFTH AVENUE.'

'You'd be in the *Post* all right, but there wouldn't be any commendation,' Blind Willie says. 'No promotion, either. In fact, you'd be out on the street, Officer Wheelock, looking for a job. You could skip applying for one with the security companies, though — a man who'll take a payoff can't be bonded.'

It is Wheelock's turn to stop breathing. When he starts again, the puffs of breath in Blind Willie's ear have become a hurricane; the cop's moving mouth is almost on his skin. 'What do you mean?' he whispers. A hand settles on the arm of Blind Willie's field jacket. 'You just tell me what the fuck you mean.'

But Blind Willie is silent, hands at his sides, head slightly raised, looking attentively into the darkness that will not clear until daylight is almost gone, and on his face is that lack of expression which so many passersby read as ruined pride, bruised grace, courage brought low but still somehow intact. It is that, not the sign or the dark glasses, which has allowed him to do so well over the years . . . and Wheelock is wrong: he *is* blind. They both are blind.

The hand on his arm shakes him slightly. It is almost a claw now. 'You got a friend? Is that it, you son of a bitch? Is that why you hold the envelope out that way half the damned time? You got a friend taking my picture? Is that it?'

Blind Willie says nothing, has to say nothing. People like Jasper Wheelock will always think the worst if you let them. You only have to give them time to do it.

'You don't want to fuck with me, pal' Wheelock says viciously, but there is a subtle undertone of worry in his voice, and the hand on Blind Willie's jacket loosens. 'We're going up to four hundred a month starting next week, and if you try playing any games with me, I'm going to show you where the real playground is. You understand me?'

Blind Willie says nothing. The puffs of air stop hitting his ear, and he knows Wheelock is going. But not yet; the nasty little puffs come back.

'You'll burn in hell for what you're doing,' Wheelock tells him. He speaks with great, almost fervent, sincerity. 'What I'm doing when I take your dirty money is a venial sin — I asked the priest, so I'm sure — but yours is mortal. You're going to hell, see how many handouts you get down there.'

He walks away then, and Willie's thought — that he is glad to see him go — causes a rare smile to touch his face. It comes and goes like an errant ray of sunshine on a cloudy day.

1:40 P.M.

Three times he has banded the bills into rolls and dumped the change into the bottom of the case (this is really a storage function, and not an effort at concealment), now working completely by touch. He can no longer see the money, doesn't know a one from a hundred, but he senses he is having a very good day, indeed. There is no pleasure in the knowledge, however. There's never very much, pleasure is not what Blind Willie is about, but even the sense of accomplishment he might have felt on another day has been muted by his conversation with Officer Wheelock.

At quarter to twelve, a young woman with a pretty voice — to Blind Willie she sounds like Whitney Houston — comes out of Saks and gives him a cup of hot coffee, as she does most days at this time. At quarter past, another woman — this one not so young, and probably white — brings him a cup of steaming chicken noodle soup. He thanks them both. The white lady kisses his cheek, calls him Will instead of Willie, and wishes him the merriest of merry Christmases.

There is a counterbalancing side to the day, though; there almost always is. Around one o'clock a teenage kid with his unseen posse laughing and joking and skylarking all around him speaks out of the darkness to Blind Willie's left, says he is one ugly motherfuck, then asks if he wears those gloves because he burned his fingers off trying to read the waffle iron. He and his friends charge off, howling with laughter at this ancient jape. Fifteen minutes or so later, someone kicks him, although that might have been an accident. Every time he bends over to the case, however, the case is right there. It is a city of hustlers, muggers, and thieves, but the case is right there, just as it has always been right there.

And through it all, he thinks about Wheelock.

The cop before Wheelock was easy; the one who comes when Wheelock either quits the force or gets moved out of Midtown North may also be easy. Wheelock will not last forever — something else he has learned in the Nam — and in the meantime, he, Blind Willie, must bend like a reed in a windstorm. Except that sometimes even the reed that bends is broken . . . if the wind blows hard enough.

Wheelock wants more money, but that isn't what bothers the man in the dark glasses and the army coat. Sooner or later they *all* want more money: when he started on this corner, he paid Officer Hanratty a hundred and a quarter, and although Hanratty was

easy, he had Blind Willie up to two hundred a month by the time he retired in 1989. But Wheelock was angry this morning, *angry*, and Wheelock talked about having consulted a priest. These things worry him, but what worries him most of all is what Wheelock said about following him. *See what you do. Who you turn into.*

It would be easy, God knows — what could be simpler than shadowing a blind man, or even one who can see little more than shadows? Watching him turn into some hotel (one on the uptown side, this time), watching him go into the public men's room, watching him go into a stall? Watching him change from Blind Willie into plain old Willie, maybe even from Willie into Bill?

Thinking this brings back his morning jitters, his feeling of being a snake between skins. The fear that he has been photographed taking a bribe will hold Wheelock for a while, but if he is angry enough, there is no predicting what he may do. And that is scary.

'God love you, soldier,' says a voice out of the darkness. 'I wish I could do a few bucks more.'

'Not necessary, sir,' Blind Willie says, but his mind is still on Jasper Wheelock, who smells of cheap cologne and talked to a priest about the blind man with the sign, the blind man who is not, Wheelock thinks, blind at all. What had he said? *You're going to hell, see how many handouts you get down there.* 'Have a very merry Christmas, sir, thank you for helping me.'

And the day goes on.

4:25 P.M.

His sight has started to resurface — dim, distant, but there. It is his cue to pack up and go.

He kneels, back ramrod stiff, and lays his cane behind the case again. He bands the last of the bills, dumps them and the last coins into the bottom of the case one more time, then puts the tinsel-decorated sign inside. He latches the case and stands up, holding his cane in the other hand. Now the case is heavy, dragging at his arm with the dead-weight of well-meant metal. There is a heavy rattling crunch as the coins avalanche into a new position, and then they are as still as ore plugged deep in the ground..

He sets off down Fifth, dangling the case at the end of his left arm like an anchor (after all these years he's used to the weight of it, could carry it much further than he'll need to this afternoon, if circumstances demanded), holding the cane in his right hand and

tapping it delicately on the paving in front of him. The cane is magic, opening a pocket of empty space before him on the crowded, jostling sidewalk in a teardrop shaped wave. By the time he gets to Fifth and Forty-third, he can actually see this space. He can also see the DON'T WALK sign at Forty-second stop flashing and hold solid, but he keeps walking anyway, letting a well-dressed man with long hair and gold chains reach out and grasp his shoulder to stop him.

'Watch it, big fella,' the longhair says. 'Traffic in a sec.'

'Thank you, sir,' Blind Willie says.

'Don't mention it — merry Christmas.'

Blind Willie crosses, goes down two more blocks, then turns toward Broadway. No one accosts him; no one has loitered, watching him collect all day long, and then followed, waiting for the opportunity to bag the case and run (not that many thieves *could* run with it, not *this* case). Once, back in the summer of '91, two or three young guys, maybe black (he couldn't say for sure; they *sounded* black, but his vision had been slow coming back that day, it was always slower in warm weather, when the days stayed bright longer), had accosted him and began talking to him in a way he didn't quite like. It wasn't like the kids this afternoon, with their jokes about reading the waffle iron and what does a *Playboy* centerfold look like in braille. It was softer than that, and in some weird fashion almost kind — questions about how much he took in by St. Pat's back there, and would he perchance be generous enough to make a contribution to something called the Polo Recreational League and did he want a little protection getting to his bus stop or train station or whatever. One, perhaps a budding sexologist, had asked if he liked a little young pussy once in a while. 'It pep you up,' the voice on his left said softly, almost longingly. 'Yessir, you must believe *that* shit.'

He had felt the way he imagined a mouse must feel when the cat is still just pawing at it, claws not out yet, curious about what the mouse will do, and how fast it can run, and what sorts of noises it will make as its terror grows. Blind Willie had not been terrified, however. He is *never* terrified. That is his advantage, and it had been their mistake. He had simply raised his voice, speaking as a man might speak to a large room filled with old friends. 'Say!' he had exclaimed to the shadowy phantoms all around him on the sidewalk. 'Say, does anyone see a policeman? I believe these young fellow here mean to take me off.' And that did it, easy as pulling a segment off a peeled orange; the fellows who had been bracketing him were suddenly gone like a cool breeze.

He only wishes he could solve the problem of Officer Wheelock that easily.

4:40 P.M.

The Sheraton Gotham, at Fortieth and Broadway, is one of the largest first-class hotels in the world, and in the cave of its lobby thousands of people school back and forth beneath the gigantic chandelier. They chase their pleasures here, and dig their treasures there, oblivious of the Christmas music flowing from the speakers, of the chatter from three different restaurants and five bars, of the scenic elevators sliding up and down in their notched shafts like pistons powering some exotic glass engine . . . and of the blind man who taps among the, working his way toward a public men's room almost the size of a subway station. He walks with the sticker on the case turned inward now, and he is as anonymous as a blind man can be. In this city, that's very anonymous.

Still, he thinks as he enters one of the stalls and takes off his jacket turning it inside-out as he does so, how is it that in all these years no one has ever followed me? No one has ever noticed that the blind man who goes in and the sighted man who comes out are the same size, and carrying the same case?

Well, in New York, hardly anyone notices anything that isn't his or her own business — in their own way, they are all as blind as Blind Willie. Out of their offices, flooding down the sidewalks, thronging in the subway stations and cheap restaurants, there is something both repulsive and sad about them; they are like nests of moles turned up by a farmer's harrow. He has seen this blindness over and over again, and he knows that this is one reason for his success . . . but surely not the only reason. They are not *all* moles, and he has been rolling the dice for a long time now. He takes precautions, of course he does, many of them, but there are still those moments (like now, sitting here with his pants down, unscrewing the white cane and stowing it back in his case) when he would be easy to catch, easy to rob . . . easy to expose. Wheelock is right about the *Post*; they would love him. The *News* would too. They would hang him higher than Haman, higher than O.J. Simpson. They would never understand, never even *want* to understand, or hear his side of it. *What* side?

He leaves the stall, leaves the bathroom, leaves the echoing confusion of the Sheraton Gotham, and no one walks up to him and says, 'Excuse me, sir, but weren't you just blind?' No one looks

at him twice as he walks out into the street, carrying the bulky case as if it weighed twenty pounds instead of a hundred. It has started to snow.

He walks slowly, Willie Teale again now, switching the case frequently from hand to hand, just one more tired guy at the end of the day. He continues to think about his inexplicable success as he goes. There's a verse from the Book of Matthew which he has committed to memory. They be blind leaders of the blind, it goes. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch. Then there's the old saw that says that in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. Is *he* the one-eyed man? Has that been the secret of his success all these years?

He doesn't think so. In his heart of hearts he believes he has been protected. Not by God, exactly (he doesn't think he quite believes in God, certainly not the one advertised by the church in front of which he stands most days), but maybe by some half-sentient force that has *always* seen him as Blind Willie. Fate, you could call it that if you liked, or you could call it a higher power — Generic Brand God — as the alkies do. Or maybe it's only blind justice, balancing her scales. Most likely it doesn't matter. All he knows for sure is that he has never been caught or taken off.

Of course, there has never been a Jasper Wheelock in his life, either..

Maybe I ought to follow you some night, Officer Wheelock whispers in his ear as Willie shifts the increasingly heavy case from one hand to the other. Both arms ache now; he will be glad to reach his building. *See what you do. See who you turn into.*

What, exactly, was he going to do about Officer Wheelock? What *could* he do?

He doesn't know.

5:15 P.M.

The young panhandler in the dirty red sweatshirt is long gone. His place taken by yet another streetcorner Santa. Willie has no trouble recognizing the tubby young fellow currently dropping a dollar into Santa's pot.

'Hey, Ralphie!' he cries.

Ralph Williamson turns, and his face lights up when he sees Willie, and he raises one gloved hand. It's snowing harder now; with the bright lights around him and Santa Claus beside him, Ralph looks suspiciously like the central figure in a holiday greeting card. Or maybe a modern-day Bob Cratchet.

'Hey, Willie! How's it goin?'

'Goin like a house afire,' he says, approaching the other man with an easy grin on his face. He sets his case down with a grunt, feels in his pants pocket, and finds a buck for Santa's pot. Probably just another crook, and he looks like shit, but what the hell.

'What you got in there?' Ralph asks, looking down at Willie's case as he fiddles with his scarf. 'Sounds like you busted open some little kid's piggy bank.'

'Nah, just heating coils,' Willie says. '"Bout a damn thousand of 'em.'

'You working right up until Christmas?'

'Yeah,' he says, and suddenly knows what he is going to do about Wheelock. Not how, not yet, but that's okay; how is just a technicality. What is where the creative work is done. There's no burst of revelation, no feeling of eureka; it is as if part of him knew all along. He supposes part of him did. 'Yeah, right up until Christmas. No rest for the wicked, you know.'

Ralph's wide and pleasant face creases in a smile. 'I doubt if you're very wicked, though.'

Willie smiles back. 'You don't know what evil lurks in the heart of the heatin-n-coolin man, that's all. I'll probably take a few days off after Christmas, though. I'm thinking that might be a really good idea.'

'Go south?'

'South?' Willie looks startled, then laughs. 'Oh, no,' he says. 'Not *this* kid. Plenty to do around my house, you know. A person's got to keep their house in order, Ralphie. Else it might just come down around their ears some day.'

'I suppose.' Ralph bundles the scarf higher around his ears. 'See you tomorrow?'

'You bet,' Willie says and holds out his gloved hand. 'Gimme five.'

Ralphie gives him five, then turns his hand over. His smile is shy but eager. 'Give me ten, Willie.'

Willie gives him ten. 'How good is that, Ralphie-baby?'

The man's shy smile becomes a gleeful boy's grin. 'So goddamn good I gotta do it again!' he cries, and slaps Willie's hand with real authority. Willie laughs. 'You the man, Ralph.'

'You the man, too, Willie,' Ralph replies, speaking with a prissy earnestness that's really sort of funny. 'Merry Christmas.' 'Right back atcha.'

He stands where he is for a moment, watching Ralph trudge off into the snow. Beside him, the streetcorner Santa rings his bell monotonously. Willie picks up his case and starts for the door of

his building. Then something catches his eye, and he pauses.

'Your beard's on crooked,' he says to the Santa. 'If you want people to believe in you, fix your goddamn beard.' He goes inside.

5:25 P.M.

There's a big carton in the storage annex of Midtown Heating and Cooling. It is full of the cloth bags, the sort banks use to hold loose coins. Such bags usually have various banks' names printed on them, but these don't — Willie orders them direct from the company in Moundsville, West Virginia, that makes them.

He opens the case, quickly sets aside the rolls of bills (these he will carry home in his Mark Cross briefcase), then fills four bags with coins. In a far corner of the storage room is a battered old metal cabinet simply marked PARTS. Willie swings it open — there is no lock to contend with — and reveals another two or three hundred coin-stuffed bags. A dozen times a year he and Sharon tour the midtown churches, pushing these bags through the contribution slots where they will fit, simply leaving them by the door where they won't. The lion's share always goes to St. Pat's, the vast church in front of which Blind Willie can be found most days, wearing his dark glasses and his sign.

But not every day, he thinks, I don't have to be there every day, and he thinks again that maybe both Blind Willie and Willie Teale will take the week after Christmas off. There might be work for Bill, though, and why not? Bill has it easy, as a rule. He wakes up to the clock radio, shaves, dresses, goes into the city . . . and then disappears until it's time to go home. Maybe it's time for Bill to do a little work, pitch in and do his share. There is stuff he could do in the week or so before New Year's Ever, when he and Sharon will once more tour the churches, leaving off the coins that are too bulky and troublesome to deal with.

I ought to follow you some night . . . see what you do. Who you turn into.

But maybe, he thinks, taking off Willie and putting on Bill (Paul Stuart, J. Press, Mark Cross, Sulka, Bally), maybe it's I who ought to follow *you* Officer Wheelock. The part of me you'd never recognize in a million years, any more than Ralph Williamson would recognize Bill . . . or Blind Willie, for that matter. Maybe Bill needs to follow *you*, see what *you* do, who *you* turn into when you go home and take off your day along with your uniform.

Yes, I could do that, Bill thinks. He's used cold cream to

remove his makeup and now steps carefully through the trap door and finds his footing on top of the stepladder. He takes the handle of his briefcase and pulls it through. He descends to the third step, then lowers the trap door into place and slides the ceiling panel back where it belongs. Yes, I could do that very easily. And . . .

Well, accidents sometimes happen. Sad but true. Even to big, brave fellows like Jasper the Police-Smurf, accidents sometimes happen. 'Do you hear what I hear,' he sings softly as he folds the stepladder and puts it back, 'do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste?'

Five minutes later he closes the door of Western States Land Analysts firmly behind him and triple locks it. Then he goes down the hallway. When the elevator comes and he steps in, he thinks, Eggnog. Don't forget. The Allens and the Dubrays.

'Also cinnamon,' he says out loud. The three people in the elevator car with him look around, and Bill Teale grins self-consciously. Outside, he turns toward Penn Station, registering only one thought as the snow beats full into his face and he flips up his coat collar: the Santa outside the building has fixed his beard.

11:35 P.M.

'Share?'

'Hmmm?'

'Her voice is sleepy, distant. They have made long, slow love after the Dubrays finally left at eleven o'clock, and now she is drifting away. That's all right, though; he is drifting too. He has a feeling that all of his problems are solving themselves . . . or that the higher power upon whom he sometimes speculates, that savior of temporarily skinless snakes, is solving them for him.

'I may take a week or so off after Christmas. Do some inventory. Poke around some new sites. I'm thinking about changing locations.' There is no need for her to know what he may really be doing in the week before New Year's, he reasons; she couldn't do anything but worry and — perhaps, perhaps not, he sees no reason to find out for sure — feel guilty.

'Good,' she says. 'See a few movies while you're at it, why don't you?' Her hand gropes out of the dark and touches his arm briefly. 'You work so hard.' Pause. 'Also, you remembered the eggnog. I really didn't think you would. I'm very pleased with you.'

He grins in the dark at that, helpless not to. It is so perfectly Sharon.

'The Allens are all right, but the Dubrays are boring, aren't they?' she asks.

'A little,' he allows.

'If that dress of hers had been cut any lower, she could have gotten a job in a topless bar.'

He says nothing to that, but grins again.

'It was good tonight, wasn't it?' she asks him. 'It's not their little party that she's talking about.'

'Yes, excellent.'

'Did you have a good day? I didn't have a chance to ask.'

'Fine day, Share.'

'I love you, Bill.'

'Love you, too.'

'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

He lies on his side, drifting into sleep while thinking about the man in the open topcoat and the bright red ski sweater. He crosses over without knowing it, thought melting effortlessly into dream. 'Sixty-seven was a hard year,' the man in the red sweater says. 'I was at Loc Ninh, you know. Tory Hill. We lost a lot of good men.' Then he brightens. 'But I got this.' From the lefthand pocket of his topcoat he takes a white beard hanging on a string. 'And this.' From the righthand pocket he takes a crumpled Styrofoam cup, which he shakes. A few loose coins rattle in the bottom like teeth. 'So you see,' he says, fading now, 'there are compensations to even the blindest life.'

Then the dream fades and he sleeps deeply until 6:15 the next morning, when the clock-radio wakes him to the sound of 'The Little Drummer Boy.'

The Blue Air Compressor

Stephen King

first appeared in

Onan, 1971

The house was tall, with an incredible slope of shingled roof. As he walked up toward it from the shore road, Gerald Nately thought it was almost a country in itself, geography in microcosm. The roof dipped and rose at varying angles above the main building and two strangely-angled wings; a widow's walk skirted a mushroom-shaped cupola which looked toward the sea; the porch, facing the dunes and lusterless September scrubgrass was longer than a Pullman car and screened in. The high slope of roof made the house seem to beetle its brows and loom above him. A Baptist grandfather of a house.

He went to the porch and after a moment of hesitation, through the screen door to the fanlighted one beyond. There was only a wicker chair, a rusty porch swing, and an old discarded knitting basket to watch him go. Spiders had spun silk in the shadowy upper corners. He knocked.

There was silence, inhabited silence. He was about to knock again when a chair someplace inside wheezed deeply in its throat. It was a tired sound. Silence. Then the slow, dreadfully patient sound of old, overburdened feet finding their way up the hall. Counterpoint of cane: Whock... whock... whock...

The floorboards creaked and whined. A shadow, huge and unformed in the pearled glass, bloomed on the fanlight. Endless sound of fingers laboriously solving the riddle of chain, bolt, and hasp lock. The door opened. "Hello," the nasal voice said flatly. "You're Mr. Nately. You've rented the cottage. My husband's cottage."

"Yes." Gerald said, his tongue swelling in his throat. "That's right. And you're-"

"Mrs. Leighton," the nasal voice said, pleased with either his quickness or her name, though neither was remarkable. "I'm Mrs. Leighton."

* * *

this woman is so goddam fucking big and old she looks like oh
jesus christ print dress she must be six-six and fat my god Shes fat
as a hog can't smell her white hair long white hair her legs those
redwood trees ill that movie a Lank she could be a tank she could
kill me her voice is out of any context like a kazoo jesus if i laugh i
can't laugh can she be seventy god how does she walk and the cane
her hands are bigger than my feet like a goddam tank she could go
through oak oak for christs sake.

* * *

"You write." She hadn't offered him in.

"That's about the size of it," he said, and laughed to cover his own sudden shrinking from that metaphor.

"Will you show me some after you get settled?" she asked. Her eyes seemed perpetually luminous and wistful. They were not touched by the age that had run riot in the rest of her

* * *

wait get that written down

* * *

image: "age had run riot in her with luxuriant fleshiness: she was like a wild sow let loose in a great and dignified house to shit on the carpet, gore at the welsh dresser and send the crystal goblets and wine-glasses all crash-atumble, to trample the wine colored divans to lunatic puffs of springs and stuffing, to spike the mirrorbright finish of the great hall floor with barbarian hoofprints and flying puddles of urine"

okay Shes there its a story i feel her

* * *

body, making it sag and billow.

"If you like," he said. "I didn't even see the cottage from the Shore Road, Mrs. Leighton. Could you tell me where--"

"Did you drive in?"

"Yes. I left my car over there." He pointed beyond the dunes, toward the road.

A smile, oddly one-dimensional, touched her lips. "That's why. You can only see a blink from the road: unless you're walking, you miss it." She pointed west at a slight angle away from the dunes and the house. "There. Right over that little hill."

"All right," he said, then stood there smiling. He really had no idea how to terminate the interview.

"Would you like to come in for some coffee? Or a Coca-Cola?"

"Yes," he said instantly.

She seemed a little taken back by his instant agreement. He had, after 211, been her husband's friend, not her own. The face loomed above Gerald, moonlike, disconnected, undecided. Then she led him into the elderly, waiting house.

She had tea. He had Coke, Millions of eyes seemed to watch them. He felt like a burglar, stealing around the hidden fiction he could Make of her, carrying only his own youthful winsomeness and a psychic flashlight.

* * *

My own name, of course, is Steve King, and you'll pardon my intrusion on your mind-or I hope you will. I could argue that the drawing-aside of the curtain of presumption between reader and author is permissible because I am the writer; i.e., since it's my story I'll do any goddam thing I please with it-but since that leaves the reader out of it completely, that is not valid. Rule One for all writers is that the teller is not worth a tin tinker's fart when compared to the listener. Let us drop the matter, if we may. I am intruding for the same reason that the Pope defecates: we both have to.

You should know that Gerald Nately was never brought to the dock; his crime was not discovered. He paid all the same. After writing four twisted, monumental, misunderstood novels, he cut his own head off with an ivory-figured guillotine purchased in Kowloon.

I invented him first during a moment of eight o'clock boredom in a class taught by Carroll F. Terrell of the University of Maine English faculty. Dr. Terrell was speaking of Edgar A. Poe, and I thought

ivory guillotine Kowloon

twisted woman of shadows, like a pig
some big house

The blue air compressor did not come until later. It is desperately important that the reader be made cognizant of these facts.

* * *

He did show her some of his writing. Not the important part, the story he was writing about her, but fragments of poetry, the spine of a novel that had ached in his mind for a year like embedded shrapnel, four essays. She was a perceptive critic, and addicted to marginal notations with her black felt-tip pen. Because she sometimes dropped in when he was gone to the village, he kept the story hidden in the back shed.

September melted into cool October, and the story was completed, mailed to a friend, returned with suggestions (bad ones), rewritten. He felt it was good, but not quite right. Some indefinable was missing. The focus was a shade fuzzy. He began to toy, with the idea of giving it to her for Criticism, rejected it, toyed with it again. After all, the story was her; he never doubted she could supply the final vector.

His attitude concerning her became increasing]]- unhealthy; he was fascinated by her huge, animalistic bulk, by the slow, tortoise-like way she trekked across the space between the house and the cottage.

* * *

image: "mammoth shadow of decay swaying across the shadowless sand, cane held in one twisted hand, feet clad in huge canvas shoes which pump and push at the coarse grains, face like a serving platter, puffy dough arms, breasts like drumlins, a geography in herself, a country of tissue"

* * *

by her reedy, vapid voice; but at the same time he loathed her, could not stand her touch. lie began to feel like the young man in "The Tell-Tale Heart, " by Edgar A. Poe. He felt lie could stand at her bedroom door for endless midnights, shining one Tay of light on her sleeping eye, ready to pounce and rip the instant it flashed open.

The urge to show her the story itched at him maddeningly. He had decided, by the first day of December, that he would do it. The decision-making did not relieve him, as it is supposed to do in the novels, but it did leave him with a feeling of antiseptic pleasure. It was right that it should be so-an omega that quite dovetailed with he alpha. And it was omega; he was vacating the cottage on he fifth of December. On this day he had just returned from the Stowe Travel Agency in Portland, where he had booked passage for the Far East. He had done this almost on the spur of the moment: the decision to go and the decision to show his manuscript to Mrs. Leighton had come together, almost as if he had been guided by an invisible hand.

* * *

In truth, he was guide; by an invisible hand-mine.

* * *

The day was white with overcast and the promise of snow lurked in its throat. The dunes seemed to foreshadow the winter already, as Gerald crossed them between the slate-roofed house of her dominion and the low stone cottage of his. The sea, sullen and gray, curled on the shingle of beach. Gulls rode the slow swells like buoys.

He Crossed the top of the last dune and knew she it-as there-her cane, with its white bicycle handgrip at the base, stood against the side of the door. Smoke rifted from the toy chimney.

Gerald went up the board steps, kicked sand from his high-topped shoes to make her aware of his presence, and then went in.

"Hi, Mrs. Leighton!"

But the tiny living room and the kitchen both stood empty. The ship's clock on the mantle ticked only for itself and for Gerald. Her gigantic fur coat lay draped over the rocker like Some animal sail. A small fire had been laid in the fireplace, and it glowed and crackled busily. The teapot was on the gas range in the kitchen, and one teacup stood on the counter, still waiting for water. He peered into the narrow hall which led to the bedroom.

"Mrs. Leighton?"

Hall and bedroom both empty.

He was about to turn back to the kitchen when the mammoth chuckles began. They were large, helpless shakings of laughter, the kind that stays hidden for years and ages like wine. (There is also an Edgar A. Poe story about wine.)

The chuckles evolved into large bellows of laughter. They came from behind the door to the right of Gerald's bed, the last door in the cottage. From the tool-shed.

* * *

my balls are crawling like in grammar school the old bitch shes laughing she found it the old fat shebitch goddam her goddam her goddam her you old whore youre doing that cause im out here you old she bitch whore you piece of shit

* * *

He went to the door in one step and pulled it open. She was sitting next to the small space-heater in the sh ed, her dress pulled up over oak-stump knees to allow her to sit cross-legged, and his manuscript was held, dwarfed, in her bloated hands.

Her laughter roared and racketed around him. Gerald Nately saw bursting colors in front of his eyes. She it-as a slug, a maggot, a gigantic crawling thing evolved in the cellar of the shadowy house by the sea. a dark bug that had swaddled itself in grotesque human form.

In the flat light from the one cobwebbed window her face became a hanging graveyard moon, pocked by the Sterile craters of her eyes and the Tagged earthquake rift of her mouth.

"Don't you laugh," Gerald said stiffly.

"Oh Gerald," she said, laughing all the same. "This is such a bad story. I don't blame you for using a penname. it's-" she wiped tears of laughter from her eyes "it's *abominable!*"

He began to walk toward her stiffly.

"You haven't made me big enough, Gerald. That's the trouble. I'm too big for you. Perhaps Poe, or Dosteyevsky, or Melville. . . but not you, Gerald. Not even under your royal pen-name. Not you. Not you.

She began to laugh again, huge racking explosions of sound.

"Don't you laugh," Gerald said stiffly.

* * *

The tool-shed, after the manner of Zola:

Wooden walls, which showed occasional chinks of light, surrounded rabbit-traps hung and slung in corners; a pair of dusty, unstrung snow-shoes; a rusty spaceheater showing flickers of yellow flame like cat's eyes; Tales; 2 shovel; hedgeclippers; an ancient green hose coiled like a garter-snake; four bald tires stacked like doughnuts; a rust), Winchester rifle with no bolt; a twohanded saw; a dusty work-bench covered with nails, screws, bolts, washers, two hammers, a plane, a broken level, a dismantled

carburetor which one sat inside a 1949 Packard convertible; a 4 hp. air-compressor painted electric blue, plugged into an extension cord running back into the house.

* * *

"Don't you laugh," Gerald said again, but she continued to rock back and forth, holding her stomach and flapping the manuscript with her wheezing breath like a white bird.

His hand found the rusty Winchester rifle and he pole-axed her with it.

* * *

Most horror stories are sexual in nature.

I'm sorry to break in with this information, but feel I must in order to make the way clear for the grisly conclusion of this piece, which is (at least psychologically) a clear metaphor for fears of sexual impotence on in), part. Mrs. Leighton's large mouth is symbolic of the vagina; the hose of the compressor is a penis. Her female bu Ik huge and overpowering, is a mythic representation of the sexual fear that lives in every male, to a greater or lesser degree: that the woman, with her opening, is a devouter.

* * *

In the works of Edgar A. Poe, Stephen King, Gerald Nately, and others who practice this particular literary form, we are apt to find locked rooms, dungeons. empty mansions (all symbols of the womb); scenes of living burial (sexual impotence); the dead returned from the grave (necrophilia); grotesque monsters or human be ings (externalized fear of the sexual act itself); torture and/or murder (a viable alternativ e to the sexual act).

These possibilities are not always valid, but the postfreild reader and writer must take them into consideration when attempting the genre.

Abnormal psychology has become a part of the human experience.

* * *

She made thick, unconscious noises in her throat as he whirled around madly, looking for an instrument; her head lolled brokenly on the thick stalk of her neck.

* * *

He seized the hose of the air-compressor.

"All right," he said thickly. "All right, now. All Tight."

* * *

bitch fat old bitch youve had yours not big enough is that right well youll be bigger youll be bigger still

* * *

He ripped her head back by the hair and rammed the hose into her mouth, into her gullet. She screamed around it, a scund like a cat.

* * *

Part of the inspiration for this story came from an old E. C. horror comic boo), which I bought in a Lisbon Falls drugstore. In one particular story, a husband and wife murdered each other simultaneous))- in mutually ironic (and brilliant) fashion. He was very fat; she was very thin. He shoved the hose of an aircompressor down her throat and blew her up to dirigible size. On his way downstairs a booby-trap she had rigged fell on him and squashed him to a shadow.

Any author who tells you he has never plagiarized is 2 liar. A good author begins with bad ideas and improbabilities and fashions them into comments on the human condition.

In a horror story, it is imperative that the grotesque be elevated to the status of the abnormal.

* * *

The compressor turned on with a whoosh and a chug. The hose flew out of Mrs. Leighton's mouth. Giggling and gibbering, Gerald stuffed it back in. Her feet drummed and thumped on the floor. The flesh of her cheeks and diaphragm began to swell rhythmically. Her eyes bulged, and became glass marbles. Her torso began to expand.

* * *

here it is here it is you lousy louse are you big enough yet are you big enough

* * *

The compressor wheezed and racketed. Mrs. Leighton swelled like a beachball. Her lungs became Straining blowfish.

* * *

Fiends! Devils' Dissemble no more! Here! Here! It is the beating of his hideous heart!

* * *

She seemed to explode all at once.

* * *

Sitting in a boilin hotel room in Bombay, Gerald re-wrote the story he had begun at the cottage on the other side of the world. The original title had been "The Hog." After some deliberation he retitled it "The Blue Air Compressor."

He had resolved it to his own satisfaction. There was a certain lack of motivation concerning the final scene where the fat old woman was murdered, but he did not see that as a fault. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," Edgar A. Poe's finest story, there is no real motivation for

the murder of the old man, and that was as it should be. The motive is not the point.

* * *

She got very big just before the end: even her legs swelled up to twice their normal size. At the very end, her tongue popped out of her mouth like a party-favor.

* * *

After leaving Bombay, Gerald Nately went on to Hong Kong, then to Kowloon. The ivory guillotine caught his fancy immediately.

* * *

As the author, I can see only one correct omega to this story, and that is to tell you how Gerald Nately got rid of the body. He tore up the floor boards of the shed, dismembered Mrs. Leighton, and buried the sections in the sand beneath.

When he notified the police that she had been missing for a week, the local constable and a State Policeman came at once. Gerald entertained them quite naturally, even offering them coffee. He heard no beating heart, but then--the interview was conducted in the big house.

On the following day he flew away, toward Bombay, Hong Kong, and Kowloon.

The Cat from Hell

By STEPHEN KING

*First appeared in
Cavalier Magazine, 1971*

Halston thought the old man in the wheelchair looked sick, terrified, and ready to die. He had experience in seeing such things. Death was Halston's business; he had brought it to eighteen men and six women in his career as an independent hitter. He knew the death look.

The house - mansion, actually - was cold and quiet. The only sounds were the low snap of the fire on the big stone hearth and the low whine of the November wind outside.

"I want you to make a kill," the old man said. His voice was quavery and high, peevish. "I understand that is what you do."

"Who did you talk to?" Halston asked.

"With a man named Saul Loggia. He says you know him."

Halston nodded. If Loggia was the go-between, it was all right. And if there was a bug in the room, anything the old man - Drogan - said was entrapment.

"Who do you want hit?"

Drogan pressed a button on the console built into the arm of his wheelchair and it buzzed forward. Closeup, Halston could smell the yellow odors of fear, age, and urine all mixed.

They disgusted him, but he made no sign. His face was still and smooth. "Your victim is right behind you," Drogan said softly.

Halston moved quickly. His reflexes were his life and they were always set on a filed pin. He was off the couch, falling to one knee, turning, hand inside his specially tailored sport coat, gripping the handle of the short-barreled .45 hybrid that hung below his armpit in a spring-loaded holster that laid it in his palm at a touch. A moment later it was out and pointed at ... a cat.

For a moment Halston and the cat stared at each other. It was a strange moment for Halston, who was an unimaginative man with no superstitions. For that one moment as he knelt on the floor with the gun pointed, he felt that he knew this cat, although if he had ever seen one with such unusual markings he surely would have remembered.

Its face was an even split: half black, half white. The dividing line ran from the top of its flat skull and down its nose to its mouth, straight-arrow. Its eyes were huge in the gloom, and caught in each nearly circular black pupil was a prism of firelight, like a sullen coal of hate.

And the thought echoed back to Halston: We know each other, you and I. Then it passed. He put the gun away and stood up. "I ought to kill you for that, old man. I don't take a joke."

"And I don't make them," Drogan said. "Sit down. Look in here." He had taken a fat envelope out from beneath the blanket that covered his legs.

Halston sat. The cat, which had been crouched on the back of the sofa, jumped lightly down into his lap. It looked up at Halston for a moment with those huge dark eyes, the pupils surrounded by thin green-gold rings, and then it settled down and began to purr.

Halston looked at Drogan questioningly.

"He's very friendly," Drogan said. "At first. Nice friendly pussy has killed three people in this household. That leaves only me. I am old, I am sick ... but I prefer to die in my own time."

"I can't believe this," Halston said. "You hired me to hit a cat?"

"Look in the envelope, please."

Halston did. It was filled with hundreds and fifties, all of them old.

"How much is it?"

"Six thousand dollars. There will be another six when you bring me proof that the cat is dead. Mr. Loggia said twelve thousand was your usual fee?"

Halston nodded, his hand automatically stroking the cat in his lap. It was asleep, still purring. Halston liked cats. They were the only animals he did like, as a matter of fact. They got along on their own. God - if there was one - had made them into perfect, aloof killing machines. Cats were the hitters of the animal world, and Halston gave them his respect.

"I need not explain anything, but I will," Drogan said. "Forewarned is forearmed, they say, and I would not want you to go into this lightly. And I seem to need to justify myself. So you'll not think I'm insane."

Halston nodded again. He had already decided to make this peculiar hit, and no further talk was needed. But if Drogan wanted to talk, he would listen. "First of all, you know who I am? Where the money comes from?"

"Drogan Pharmaceuticals."

"Yes. One of the biggest drug companies in the world. And the cornerstone of our financial success has been this." From the pocket of his robe he handed Halston a small, unmarked vial of pills. "Tri-Dormal-phenobarbin, compound G. Prescribed almost exclusively for the terminally ill. It's extremely habit-forming, you see. It's a combination painkiller, tranquilizer, and mild hallucinogen. It is remarkably helpful in helping the terminally ill face their conditions and adjust to them."

"Do you take it?" Halston asked.

Drogan ignored the question. "It is widely prescribed throughout the world. It's a synthetic, was developed in the fifties at our New Jersey labs. Our testing was confined almost solely to cats, because of the unique quality of the feline nervous system."

"How many did you wipe out?"

Drogan stiffened. "That is an unfair and prejudicial way to put it."

Halston shrugged.

"In the four-year testing period which led to FDA approval of Tri-Dormal-G, about fifteen thousand cats ... uh, expired."

Halston whistled. About four thousand cats a year. "And now you think this one's back to get you, huh?"

"I don't feel guilty in the slightest," Drogan said, but that quavering, petulant note was back in his voice. "Fifteen thousand test animals died so that hundreds of thousands of human beings -"

"Never mind that," Halston said. Justifications bored him.

"That cat came here seven months ago. I've never liked cats. Nasty, disease-bearing animals ... always out in the fields ... crawling around in barns ... picking up God knows what germs in their fur ... always trying to bring something with its insides falling out into the house for you to look at ... it was my sister who wanted to take it in. She found out. She paid." He looked at the cat sleeping on Halston's lap with dead hate.

"You said the cat killed three people."

Drogan began to speak. The cat dozed and purred on Halston's lap under the soft, scratching strokes of Halston's strong and expert killer's fingers.

Occasionally a pine knot would explode on the hearth, making it tense like a series of steel springs covered with hide and muscle. Outside the wind whined around the big stone house far out in the Connecticut countryside. There was winter in that wind's throat. The old man's voice droned on and on.

Seven months ago there had been four of them here-Drogan, his sister Amanda, who at seventy-four was two years Drogan's elder, her lifelong friend Carolyn Broadmoor ("of the Westchester Broadmoors," Drogan.said), who was badly afflicted with emphysema, and Dick Gage, a hired man who had been with the Drogan family for twenty years. Gage, who was past sixty himself, drove the big Lincoln Mark IV, cooked, served the evening sherry. A day maid came in. The four of them had lived this way for nearly two years, a dull collection of old people and their family retainer. Their only pleasures were The Hollywood Squares and waiting to see who would outlive whom.

Then the cat had come.

"It was Gage who saw it first, whining and skulking around the house. He tried to drive it away He threw sticks and small rocks at

it, and hit it several times. But it wouldn't go. It smelled the food, of course. It was little more than a bag of bones. People put them out beside the road to die at the end of the summer season, you know. A terrible, inhumane thing."

"Better to fry their nerves?" Halston asked.

Drogan ignored that and went on. He hated cats. He always had. When the cat refused to be driven away, he had instructed Gage to put out poisoned food. Large, tempting dishes of Calo cat food spiked with Tri-Dormal-G, as a matter of fact. The cat ignored the food. At that point Amanda Drogan had noticed the cat and had insisted they take it in. Drogan had protested vehemently, but Amanda - had gotten her way. She always did, apparently.

"But she found out," Drogan said. "She brought it inside herself, in her arms. It was purring, just as it is now. But it wouldn't come near me. It never has ... yet. She poured it a saucer of milk. 'Oh, look at the poor thing, it's starving,' she cooed. She and Carolyn both cooed over it. Disgusting. It was their way of getting back at me, of course. They knew the way I've felt about felines ever since the Tri-Dormal-G testing program twenty years ago. They enjoyed teasing me, baiting me with it." He looked at Halston grimly. "But they paid."

In mid-May, Gage had gotten up to set breakfast and found Amanda Drogan lying at the foot of the main stairs in a litter of broken crockery and Little Friskies. Her eyes bulged sightlessly up at the ceiling. She had bled a great deal from the mouth and nose. Her back was broken, both legs were broken, and her neck had been literally shattered like glass.

"It slept in her room," Drogan said. "She treated it like a baby ... 'Is oo hungwy, darwing? Does oo need to go out and do poopooos!' Obscene, coming from an old baffle-ax like my sister. I think it woke her up, meowing. She got his dish. She used to say that Sam didn't really like his Friskies unless they were wetted down with a

little milk. So she was planning to go downstairs. The cat was rubbing against her legs. She was old, not too steady on her feet. Half asleep. They got to the head of the stairs and the cat got in front of her ... tripped her .. ."

Yes, it could have happened that way, Halston thought. In his mind's eye he saw the old woman falling forward and outward, too shocked to scream. The Friskies spraying out as she tumbled head over heels to the bottom, the bowl smashing. At last she comes to rest at the bottom, the old bones shattered, the eyes glaring, the nose and ears trickling blood. And the purring cat begins to work its way down the stairs, contentedly munching Little Friskies ...

"What did the coroner say?" he asked Drogan. "Death by accident, of course. But I knew."

"Why didn't you get rid of the cat then? With Amanda gone?"

Because Carolyn Broadmoor had threatened to leave if he did, apparently. She was hysterical, obsessed with the subject. She was a sick woman, and she was nutty on the subject of spiritualism. A Hartford medium had told her (for a mere twenty dollars) that Amanda's soul had entered Sam's feline body. Sam had been Amanda's, she told Drogan, and if Sam went, she went.

Halston, who had become something of an expert at reading between the lines of human lives, suspected that Drogan and the old Broadmoor bird had been lovers long ago, and the old dude was reluctant to let her go over a cat.

"It would have been the same as suicide," Drogan said. "In her mind she was still a wealthy woman, perfectly capable of packing up that cat and going to New York or London or even Monte Carlo with it. In fact she was the last of a great family, living on a pittance as a result of a number of bad investments in the sixties. She lived on the second floor here in a specially controlled, superhumidified room. The woman was seventy, Mr. Halston. She

was a heavy smoker until the last two years of her life, and the emphysema was very bad. I wanted her here, and if the cat had to stay ..."

Halston nodded and then glanced meaningfully at his watch.

"Near the end of June, she died in the night. The doctor seemed to take it as a matter of course ... just came and wrote out the death certificate and that was the end of it. But the cat was in the room. Gage told me."

"We all have to go sometime, man," Halston said.

"Of course. That's what the doctor said. But I knew. I remembered. Cats like to get babies and old people when they're asleep. And steal their breath."

"An old wives' tale."

"Based on fact, like most so-called old wives' tales," Drogan replied.

"Cats like to knead soft things with their paws, you see. A pillow, a thick shag rug... or a blanket. A crib blanket or an old person's blanket. The extra weight on a person who's weak to start with ..."

Drogan trailed off, and Halston thought about it. Carolyn Broadmoor asleep in her bedroom, the breath rasping in and out of her damaged lungs, the sound nearly lost in the whisper of special humidifiers and air conditioners. The cat with the queer black-and-white markings leaps silently onto her spinster's bed and stares at her old and wrinkle-grooved face with those lambent, black-and-green eyes. It creeps onto her thin chest and settles its weight there, purring.., and the breathing slows ... slows ... and the cat purrs as the old woman slowly smothers beneath its weight on her chest.

He was not an imaginative man, but Halston shivered a little.

"Drogan," he said, continuing to stroke the purring cat. "Why don't you just have it put away? A vet would give it the gas for twenty dollars."

Drogan said, "The funeral was on the first day of July, I had Carolyn buried in our cemetery plot next to my sister. The way she would have wanted it. On July third I called Gage to this room and handed him a wicker basket.., a picnic hamper sort of thing. Do you know what I mean?"

Halston nodded.

"I told him to put the cat in it and take it to a vet in Milford and have it put to sleep. He said, 'Yes, sir,' took the basket, and went out. Very like him. I never saw him alive again. There was an accident on the turnpike. The Lincoln was driven into a bridge abutment at better than sixty miles an hour. Dick Gage was killed instantly. When they found him there were scratches on his face."

Halston was silent as the picture of how it might have been formed in his brain again. No sound in the room but the peaceful crackle of the fire and the peaceful purr of the cat in his lap. He and the cat together before the fire would make a good illustration for that Edgar Guest poem, the one that goes: "The cat on my lap, the hearth's good fire/ ... A happy man, should you enquire."

Dick Gage moving the Lincoln down the turnpike toward Milford, beating the speed limit by maybe five miles an hour. The wicker basket beside him - a picnic hamper sort of thing. The chauffeur is watching traffic, maybe he's passing a big cab-over Jimmy and he doesn't notice the peculiar black-on-one-side, white-on-the-other face that pokes out of one side of the basket. Out of the driver's side. He doesn't notice because he's passing the big trailer truck and that's when the cat jumps onto his face, spitting and clawing, its talons raking into one eye, puncturing it, deflating it, blinding it. Sixty and the hum of the Lincoln's big motor and the other paw is hooked over the bridge of the nose, digging in with exquisite,

damning pain - maybe the Lincoln starts to veer right, into the path of the Jimmy, and its airhorn blares ear-shatteringly, but Gage can't hear it because the cat is yowling, the cat is spread-eagled over his face like some huge furry black spider, ears laid back, green eyes glaring like spotlights from hell, back legs jittering and digging into the soft flesh of the old man's neck. The car veers wildly back the other way. The bridge abutment looms. The cat jumps down and the Lincoln, a shiny black torpedo, hits the cement and goes up like a bomb.

Halston swallowed hard and heard a dry click in his throat. "And the cat came back?"

Drogan nodded. "A week later. On the day Dick Gage was buried, as a matter of fact. Just like the old song says. The cat came back."

"It survived a car crash at sixty? Hard to believe."

"They say each one has nine lives. When it comes back ... that's when I started to wonder if it might not be a...a..."

"Hellcat?" Halston suggested softly.

"For want of a better word, yes. A sort of demon sent ..."

"To punish you."

"I don't know. But I'm afraid of it. I feed it, or rather, the woman who comes in to do for me feeds it. She doesn't like it either. She says that face is a curse of God. Of course, she's local." The old man tried to smile and failed. "I want you to kill it. I've lived with it for the last four months. It skulks around in the shadows. It looks at me. It seems to be ... waiting. I lock myself in my room every night and still I wonder if I'm going to wake up one early and find it ... curled up on my chest ... and purring."

The wind whined lonesomely outside and made a strange hooting noise in the stone chimney.

"At last I got in touch with Saul Loggia. He recommended you. He called you a stick, I believe."

"A one-stick. That means I work on my own."

"Yes. He said you'd never been busted, or even suspected. He said you always seem to land on your feet.... like a cat."

Halston looked at the old man in the wheelchair. And his long-fingered, muscular hands were lingering above the cat's neck.

"I'll do it now, if you want me to," he said softly. "I'll snap its neck. It won't even know-"

"No!" Drogan cried. He drew in a long, shuddering breath. Color had come up in his sallow cheeks. "Not... not here. Take it away."

Halston smiled humorlessly. He began to stroke the sleeping cat's head and shoulders and back very gently again. "All right," he said. "I accept the contract. Do you want the body?"

"No. Kill it. Bury it." He paused. He hunched forward in the wheelchair like some ancient buzzard. "Bring me the tail," he said. "So I can throw it in the fire and watch it burn."

Halston drove a 1973 Plymouth with a custom Cyclone Spoiler engine. The car was jacked and blocked, and rode with the hood pointing down at the road at a twenty degree angle. He had rebuilt the differential and the rear end himself. The shift was a Pensy, the linkage was Hearst. It sat on huge Bobby Unser Wide Ovals and had a top end of a little past one-sixty.

He left the Drogan house at a little past 9:30. A cold rind of crescent moon rode overhead through the tattering November clouds. He rode with all the windows open, because that yellow stench of age and terror seemed to have settled into his clothes and he didn't like it. The cold was hard and sharp, eventually numbing, but it was good. It was blowing that yellow stench away. He got off the turnpike at Placer's Glen and drove through the silent town,

which was guarded by a single yellow blinker at the intersection, at a thoroughly respectable thirty-five. Out of town, moving up S.R. 35, he opened the Plymouth up a little, letting her walk. The tuned Spoiler engine purred like the cat had purred on his lap earlier this evening. Halston grinned at the simile. They moved between frost-white November fields full of skeleton cornstalks at a little over seventy.

The cat was in a double-thickness shopping bag, tied at the top with heavy twine. The bag was in the passenger bucket seat. The cat had been sleepy and purring when Halston put it in, and it had purred through the entire ride. It sensed, perhaps, that Halston liked it and felt at home with it. Like himself, the cat was a one-stick.

Strange hit, Halston thought, and was surprised to find that he was taking it seriously as a hit. Maybe the strangest thing about it was that he actually liked the cat, felt a kinship with it. If it had managed to get rid of those three old crocks, more power to it ... especially Gage, who had been taking it to Milford for a terminal date with a crew-cut veterinarian who would have been more than happy to bundle it into a ceramic-lined gas chamber the size of a microwave oven. He felt a kinship but no urge to renege on the hit. He would do it the courtesy of killing it quickly and well. He would park off the road beside one of those November-barren fields and take it out of the bag and stroke it and then snap its neck and sever its tail with his pocketknife. And, he thought, the body I'll bury honorably, saving it from the scavengers. I can't save it from the worms, but I can save it from the maggots.

He was thinking these things as the car moved through the night like a dark blue ghost and that was when the cat walked in front of his eyes, up on the dashboard, tail raised arrogantly, its black-and-white face turned toward him, its mouth seeming to grin at him.

"Sssshhhh-" Halston hissed. He glanced to his right and caught a glimpse of the double-thickness shopping bag, a hole chewed - or

clawed - in its side. Looked ahead again...,and the cat lifted a paw and batted playfully at him. The paw skidded across Halston's forehead. He jerked away from it and the Plymouth's big tires wailed on the road as it swung erratically from one side of the narrow blacktop to the other.

Halston batted at the cat on the dashboard with his fist. It was blocking his field of vision. It spat at him, arching its back, but it didn't move. Halston swung again, and instead of shrinking away, it leaped at him.

Gage, he thought. Just like Gage -

He stamped the brake. The cat was on his head, blocking his vision with its furry belly, clawing at him, gouging at him. Halston held the wheel grimly. He struck the cat once, twice, a third time. And suddenly the road was gone, the Plymouth was running down into the ditch, thudding up and down on its shocks. Then, impact, throwing him forward against his seat belt, and the last sound he heard was the cat yowling inhumanly, the voice of a woman in pain or in the throes of sexual climax.

He struck it with his closed fists and felt only the springy, yielding flex of its muscles.

Then, second impact. And darkness.

* * *

The moon was down. It was an hour before dawn.

The Plymouth lay in a ravine curdled with groundmist. Tangled in its grille was a snarled length of barbed wire. The hood had come unlatched, and tendrils of steam from the breached radiator drifted out of the opening to mingle with the mist.

No feeling in his legs.

He looked down and saw that the Plymouth's firewall had caved in with the impact. The back of that big Cyclone Spoiler engine block had smashed into his legs, pinning them.

Outside, in the distance, the predatory squawk of an owl dropping onto some small, scurrying animal.

Inside, close, the steady purr of the cat.

It seemed to be grinning, like Alice's Cheshire had in Wonderland.

As Halston watched it stood up, arched its back, and stretched. In a sudden limber movement like rippled silk, it leaped to his shoulder. Halston tried to lift his hands to push it off.

His arms wouldn't move.

Spinal shock, he thought. Paralyzed. Maybe temporary. More likely permanent.

The cat purred in his ear like thunder.

"Get off me," Halston said. His voice was hoarse and dry. The cat tensed for a moment and then settled back. Suddenly its paw batted Halston's cheek, and the claws were out this time. Hot lines of pain down to his throat.

And the warm trickle of blood.

Pain.

Feeling.

He ordered his head to move to the right, and it complied. For a moment his face was buried in smooth, dry fur. Halston snapped at the cat. It made a startled, disgruntled sound in its throat - yowk! - and leaped onto the seat. It stared up at him angrily, ears laid back.

"Wasn't supposed to do that, was I?" Halston croaked. The cat opened its mouth and hissed at him. Looking at that strange,

schizophrenic face, Halston could understand how Drogan might have thought it was a hellcat. It-

His thoughts broke off as he became aware of a dull, tingling feeling in both hands and forearms.

Feeling. Coming back. Pins and needles.

The cat leaped at his face, claws out, spitting.

Halston shut his eyes and opened his mouth. He bit at the cat's belly and got nothing but fur. The cat's front claws were clasped on his ears, digging in. The pain was enormous, brightly excruciating. Halston tried to raise his hands.

They twitched but would not quite come out of his lap.

He bent his head forward and began to shake it back and forth, like a man shaking soap out of his eyes. Hissing and squalling, the cat held on. Halston could feel blood trickling down his cheeks. It was hard to get his breath. The cat's chest was pressed over his nose. It was possible to get some air in by mouth, but not much. What he did get came through fur. His ears felt as if they had been doused with lighter fluid and then set on fire.

He snapped his head back and cried out in agony - he must have sustained a whiplash when the Plymouth hit. But the cat hadn't been expecting the reverse and it flew off. Halston heard it thud down in the back seat.

A trickle of blood ran in his eye. He tried again to move his hands, to raise one of them and wipe the blood away.

They trembled in his lap, but he was still unable to actually move them. He thought of the .45 special in its holster under his left arm.

If I can get to my piece, kitty, the rest of your nine lives are going in a lump sum.

More tingles now. Dull throbs of pain from his feet, buried and surely shattered under the engine block, zips and tingles from his legs - it felt exactly the way a limb that you've slept on does when it's starting to wake up. At that moment Halston didn't care about his feet. It was enough to know that his spine wasn't severed, that he wasn't going to finish out his life as a dead lump of body attached to a talking head.

Maybe I had a few lives left myself.

Take care of the cat. That was the first thing. Then get out of the wreck - maybe someone would come along, that would solve both problems at once. Not likely at 4:30 in the morning on a back road like this one, but barely possible. And-

And what was the cat doing back there?

He didn't like having it on his face, but he didn't like having it behind him and out of sight, either. He tried the rearview mirror, but that was useless. The crash had knocked it awry and all it reflected was the grassy ravine he had finished up in.

A sound from behind him, like low, ripping cloth.

Purring.

Hellcat my ass. It's gone to sleep back there.

And even if it hadn't, even if it was somehow planning murder, what could it do? It was a skinny little thing, probably weighed all of four pounds soaking wet. And soon ... soon he would be able to move his hands enough to get his gun. He was sure of it.

Halston sat and waited. Feeling continued to flood back into his body in a series of pins-and-needles incursions. Absurdly (or maybe in instinctive reaction to his close brush with death) he got an erection for a minute or so. Be kind of hard to beat off under present circumstances, he thought.

A dawn-line was appearing in the eastern sky. Somewhere a bird sang.

Halston tried his hands again and got them to move an eighth of an inch before they fell back.

Not yet. But soon.

A soft thud on the seatback beside him. Halston turned his head and looked into the black-white face, the glowing eyes with their huge dark pupils.

Halston spoke to it.

"I have never blown a hit once I took it on, kitty. This could be a first. I'm getting my hands back. Five minutes, ten at most. You want my advice? Go out the window. They're all open. Go out and take your tail with you."

The cat stared at him.

Halston tried his hands again. They came up, trembling wildly. Half an inch. An inch. He let them fall back limply. They slipped off his lap and thudded to the Plymouth's seat. They glimmered there palely, like large tropical spiders.

The cat was grinning at him.

Did I make a mistake?, he wondered confusedly. He was a creature of hunch, and the feeling that he had made one was suddenly overwhelming. Then the cat's body tensed, and even as it leaped, Halston knew what it was going to do and he opened his mouth to scream.

The cat landed on Halston's crotch, claws out, digging.

At that moment, Halston wished he had been paralyzed. The pain was gigantic, terrible. He had never suspected that there could be such pain in the world. The cat was a spitting coiled spring of fury, clawing at his balls.

Halston did scream, his mouth yawning open, and that was when the cat changed direction and leaped at his face, leaped at his mouth. And at that moment Halston knew that it was something more than a cat. It was something possessed of a malign, murderous intent.

He caught one last glimpse of that black-and-white face below the flattened ears, its eyes enormous and filled with lunatic hate. It had gotten rid of the three old people and now it was going to get rid of John Halston.

It rammed into his mouth, a furry projectile. He gagged on it. Its front claws pinwheeled, tattering his tongue like a piece of liver. His stomach recoiled and he vomited. The vomit ran down into his windpipe, clogging it, and he began to choke.

In this extremity, his will to survive overcame the last of the impact paralysis. He brought his hands up slowly to grasp the cat. Oh my God, he thought.

The cat was forcing its way into his mouth, flattening its body, squirming, working itself farther and farther in. He could feel his jaws creaking wider and wider to admit it.

He reached to grab it, yank it out, destroy it ...and his hands clasped only the cat's tail.

Somehow it had gotten its entire body into his mouth. Its strange, black-and-white face must be crammed into his very throat.

A terrible thick gagging sound came from Halston's throat, which was swelling like a flexible length of garden hose.

His body twitched. His hands fell back into his lap and the fingers drummed senselessly on his thighs. His eyes sheened over, then glazed. They stared out through the Plymouth's windshield blankly at the coming dawn.

Protruding from his open mouth was two inches of bushy tail ... half black, half white. It switched lazily back and forth.

It disappeared.

A bird cried somewhere again. Dawn came in breathless silence then, over the frost-rimmed fields of rural Connecticut.

The farmer's name was Will Reuss.

He was on his way to Placer's Glen to get the inspection sticker renewed on his farm truck when he saw the late-morning sun twinkle on something in the ravine beside the road. He pulled over and saw the Plymouth lying at a drunken, canted angle in the ditch, barbed wire tangled in its grille like a snarl of steel knitting.

He worked his way down and then sucked in his breath sharply. "Holy moley," he muttered to the bright November day. There was a guy sitting bolt upright behind the wheel, eyes open and glaring emptily into eternity. The Roper organization was never going to include him in its presidential poll again. His face was smeared with blood. He was still wearing his seat belt.

The driver's door had been crimped shut, but Reuss managed to get it open by yanking with both hands. He leaned in and unstrapped the seat belt, planning to check for ID. He was reaching for the coat when he noticed that the dead guy's shirt was rippling, just above the belt buckle. Rippling ... and bulging. Splotches of blood began to bloom there like sinister roses.

"What the Christ?" He reached out, grasped the dead man's shirt, and pulled it up.

Will Reuss looked - and screamed.

Above Halston's navel, a ragged hole had been clawed in his flesh. Looking out was the gore-streaked black-and-white face of a cat, its eyes huge and glaring.

Reuss staggered back, shrieking, hands clapped to his face. A score of crows took cawing wing from a nearby field.

The cat forced its body out and stretched in obscene languor.

Then it leaped out the open window. Reuss caught sight of it moving through the high dead grass and then it was gone.

It seemed to be in a hurry, he later told a reporter from the local paper.

As if it had unfinished business.

Dave's Rag

In *On Writing*; Stephen King talked about his contributions to his older brother Dave's own neighborhood newspaper, *Dave's Rag*. Here, from the winter of 1959-60, are two of young Stephen's stories: "Jumper," a three-part serial, and "Rush Call." The stories are transcribed without benefit of copyediting. Only the spelling has been corrected.

— • —

Jumper

A Story in Three Parts

I'm supposed to write a column for *Dave's Rag* every issue from now on, and this week I am supposed to write an introduction. I hope, when you prepare to read the column, you will remember one word: Variety. This week, and in the following two issues, I'm preparing a serial story in three installments called "Jumper." Maybe some week you will read an editorial, maybe a progress report. Whatever it is, I hope you will look forward to Steve's Column.

Thanks,
Steve

Part One

My name is Jeff Davis. I live and work in the city of New York. I'm a police counselor, or in simple terms, I try to determine what's wrong with people who try to do somebody else--or themselves--in.

Robert Steppes was a compulsive jumper. He had tried to jump off a building six times. He was committed, but showed ingenious escape ability. Misguided genius.

He had escaped again, and was on a ledge above the street. Fifteen stories up the Chrysler Building, to be exact. Since I had been treating him, they took me there to try to coax him down.

As I leaned out the window through which he had climbed onto the ledge, he started, and looked down, down, down. An excited crowd was gathering, but to me they looked like pinheads.

Steppes regained his balance, and then he saw me. He cackled. "Hello, Dr. Castle. I see you've come to see me jump. Why?" Robert said. "Why did you come?"

"Why do you want to jump?" I asked. Although we had been through the point many times, I was trying desperately to divert his attention. The many times I had asked him, he had confessed he did not know. It could have been frustration--anything.

A puzzled look came into his eyes. He frowned. But he decided to ignore the question. Once again the mad light danced in his eyes.

"You'll not get me this time," he screamed, and for an eternal instant he hovered on the brink.

He pulled himself back.

"Not yet," he said. "Not yet, Doctor Castle. But soon."

Just then a policeman summoned me into the room, and whispered: "We're lowering a cable with a heavy iron hook on it. We hope to snare him. But you'll have to keep him occupied," he said.

"Right."

I can't remember what I talked to him about, but it was a tiring and tense job. I can remember I told him repeatedly not to jump. I was both physically and mentally exhausted when I saw the cable with its cast-iron hook swing out of a window a story above.

I talked faster now. "C'mon in, Robert. You don't really, really, want to jump, do you?"

It was almost there now, and I was sure that soon the thing would be over.

Lower--lower--

Then something went wrong!

Steppes turned toward the wall, just as the cable swung out of control. He screamed as the cable, now out of control completely, plunged toward him, and knocked him off the ledge.

Part Two

With a wild scream he fell over the edge--and clutched wildly at the ledge. Somehow, somehow, he held on to it. He pulled himself up but nervous fingers slipped, and he had to clutch wildly. He made it, and

pulled himself up. The crane hook was already back. He grinned at me wolfishly.

"It's not time, Doctor--not yet--but soon. Soon." "Robert," I said quietly, "you don't want to jump. You don't want to. You know it. Now c'mon in, and we'll all go home."

He laughed wildly. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, Doctor? You would like that satisfaction." He stared down at the toy--like people staring up at us. "No, Doctor. I'm going to jump. Soon."

A notion was forming in my brain, but it was still too early to be sure about it. Sweat popped out but I could not wipe it off. Before I tried my idea, I would have to try to talk him back once again. I leaned out of the window.

This time I decided to try a different tack. I made my voice as callous as I could. "O.K., Bud. You've had your fun. Now get in here you *#%/--*#. You're a fool. Get in here before I push you.

"Who do you think cares if you jump? I'll be glad to be rid O' ya. Jump? Ga wan!" He looked at me, hesitantly. "Watcha scared of, Stack? Jump! You jump? You don't dare. So get in here! I'm tired of watching you."

"I'll just do that," he snarled. "In exactly fifteen seconds."

He looked at his watch.

15 . . . 14 . . . 13 . . . 12 . . . 11 . . . 10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . .
7 . . . 6 . . .

Part Three

5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1! Robert leaned out, and for a moment, he hung on eternity. He pulled himself back in. "I'll wait. Just ten minutes, Doctor. Ten minutes to see you squirm."

It was time to use my plan! I jumped out on the ledge, and began walking toward him.

For the first time he looked scared. "G-get away, I tell you! I--if you come three steps closer, I'll jump and my death will be on your hands! I--I mean it, Doctor."

I kept coming, not daring to look down.

He started to back away from me now, and I was sure that I was right. Although theoretically, any man can take his own life, few men really could commit suicide, and Robert was not one of these men. Then he reached the edge, and the ledge petered out. He looked at me with defiance a minute, and then began to sob uncontrollably. I led him in. It was one of the most harrowing jumper cases I've handled--"The Case of the Jumper That Could Not Jump."

Rush Call

By Stephen King

Dr. Thorpe was a grouch. Although in his day he had done enough for two, he was getting old and was of little use.

It was rumored that at the end of the year they would let him go. Dr. Spickerman would cluck his tongue and say, "He was one of the best--in his day. But now--" and then he would trail off.

Thorpe was on the graveyard shift the night of the 24th.

Christmas Eve. As he clicked through the hall of the hospital, his footsteps echoing back to him through the semi-lit hall, he laughed without humor to the walls. "Merry Christmas, Dr. Thorpe. Merry, Merry Christmas. You're a tired old man with nothing to turn to but another patient. Ha, ha! Happy First, too!"

He knocked on the door of room 472. He knew every case. His mind read like a file-card: "Mrs. Carl Simmons. Age, 43. Broken leg; multiple fracture. Slightly injured celbrium medulla. Fell from a ladder. Doing nicely."

Sighing, he knocked softly. "Come in." Mrs. Simmons admitted him. "I can't sleep," she told him. "I keep thinking about my Carol marrying that tramp. The fortune hunter! I simply can't--" She talked on, and, although Dr. Thorpe smiled and nodded and agreed, her voice became only a background hum.

"Coming fine," he said finally. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He turned to walk out.

"Oh, Doctor." "Yes?"

"Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," he echoed without feeling. "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Simmons." He walked on down the hall. He opened the door to the next room. Then, harsh and resounding, the rush call buzzer sounded. It was an emergency. It said, "Get to the hospital president right away." He closed the door softly and rushed down the hall. In the president's office he was filled in.

There were the other doctors in the room of course, but Thorpe concentrated on the president. "There's a boy pinned under a car," he began. "He was with his mother and father at the same time. They were wrecked by some fool blind man. It wasn't a serious crash, but it pinned the boy under the car and brought on the last stage of appendix trouble that has been building up for some time.

"He must be taken care of, but if moved, it could prove fatal. In short, I want a volunteer to take out this boy's appendix by worming inside the car and operating. May I have a volunteer?"

For ten seconds all was silent. Then Dr. Thorpe stepped forward. "I'll do it," he said. "Let's go"

With siren wailing, the ambulance screamed down the street, until it screeched to a stop next to the overturned car. Slowly, painfully, Thorpe crawled into the partially caved-in car.

The boy was in a bad way, but still conscious. Someone handed in his bag, and he took it automatically. "Does it hurt in your tummy?" he asked.

"Yes," the tot said. "Hurts here." He indicated a place over his appendix. "Want Momma. It hurts--hurts."

"You'll get Momma soon," he promised.

He went to work, and time stood still. It was hard to move. He had to work on his knees, doubled over. There were blankets over the boy, but he still shivered. Dr. Thorpe was bent over double. And there were always people calling to him. "How is he?"

"The boy still alive?"

"Getting tired, Doctor?"

He cut himself twice on projecting harpoons of metal, but didn't bother looking at them. His arm throbbed painfully from the cuts. Sweat dribbled down his forehead into his eyes, but he was afraid to brush it off.

And he prayed. He prayed for the boy. And he prayed for himself. Prayed that he'd have enough nerve to last him through the ordeal, and somehow, somehow he won.

The boy would live.

After the fanfare, the reporters, the crying, the thanks, and the praise, he walked home, shift over. Now the sky was getting pink, the forerunner of a gloriously beautiful Christmas Morn. And, somehow, he wasn't the same man he had been four hours ago. Something had happened in that car--something in the small hours of Christmas morning. Something had been washed out of him. Call it bitterness. Call it irony.

Somewhere, on the frosty air, the strains of "Silent Night" came to him. But he was hearing it--REALLY hearing it for the first time. He heard its meaning. Then, he stopped, and stared a moment at the dawn sky, now rose red. God had sent his son for a million times the ordeal he had faced that morning. Suddenly, he was happier than he had ever been before.

And, as the sun blazed over the horizon in full glory, Dr. Thorpe knew the meaning of Christmas.

THE BEGINNING

--*Dave's Rag*
1959-60

The Dark Man

Stephen King

Published in

"Ubris", 1969 and later in Moth, 1970.

I have stridden the fuming way
of sun-hammered tracks and
smashed cinders;

I have ridden rails
and bumed sterno in the
gantry silence of hob jungles:

I am a dark man.

I have ridden rails
and passed the smuggery
of desperate houses with counterfeit chimneys
and heard from the outside
the inside clink of cocktail ice
while closed doors broke the world -
and over it all a savage sickle moon
that bummed my eyes with bones of light.

I have slept in glaring swamps
where musk-reek rose
to mix with the sex smell of rotting cypress stumps
where witch fire clung in sunken
psycho spheres of baptism -
and heard the suck of shadows

where a gutted columned house
leeches with vines
speaks to an overhung mushroom sky
I have fed dimes to cold machines
in all night filling stations
while traffic in a mad and flowing flame
streaked red in six lanes of darkness,
and breathed the cleaver hitchhike wind
within the breakdown lane with thumb levelled
and saw shadowed faces made complacent
with heaters behind safety glass
faces that rose like complacent moons
in riven monster orbits.
and in a sudden jugular flash
cold as the center of a sun
I forced a girl in a field of wheat
and left her sprawled with the virgin bread
a savage sacrifice
and a sign to those who creep in
fixed ways:
I am a dark man.

DINO

BY STEPHEN KING
(Salt Hill Journal, 1994)

Dino is dying.
“Tragic last days!” say the tabloids,
and when the tabloids speak of death
they always speak the truth.

Dino Martini, we called him when we were kids,
as if even at ten we understood he was a soldier of booze,
the point-man of the highball generation.

Dino is dying,
bladder’s bad
eyes’re bad,
kidneys failing,
prolapsed here,
fused over there.

Dino is getting a little soft upstairs:
got on stage in Atlantic City,
dark Italian eyes glowing,
forgot the words to “ ‘at’s Amore”
and went hobbling from place to place
in the pink cage of the spotlight,
confused, seeming to look for something,
and finally begin to weep.

A man helped him from the stage.
Whenna da moon hitsa yew eye
Like-a da big pizza pie
‘at’s Amore:

Remember?
Dino headed after Peter,

after Sammy,
and will probably discover
an afterlife where these hepcat scouts
have already set out the
cigarettes and whiskey,
not from him but for Frank.
They'll have "You make Me Feel So Young"
Cued up on heaven's starry stereo -
That Nina Simone version, which is the one
Frank mostly likes.

In the meantime, however, there's this
little job to get out of the way,
these final dues to pay.

Dino is dying,
Jerry's old pal,
The host of Hollywood Palace;
him who looked so good in black in white
in a helmet with net and camouflage on it,
fighting a movie war he never saw at
first hand, any more than The Duke,
with whom he rode horses in
Rio Bravo.

Dino is dying,
him who used to be able to make people
laugh just by hoisting his martini glass
and making a sound like *Buh-buh-buh*,
Dino has finished singing
"Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime"
 "Me and My Shadow"
 "That Old Black Magic"
 and "I've Got You Under My Skin".

Dino has finished snapping the fingers of one hand

with a cigarette smoldering between the first two fingers
of the other hand
while he sings “Mack the Life”
so cool and nonchalant at the Palladium.

Dino’s tux has been packed away.
Dino’s passport has expired.
Dino’s eaten his last steak in Lutece,
Dino’s screwed his last starlet,
given his last concert,
made his last movie,
done his last TV special.
Dino’s in bed
and almost dead.

“Tragic last days!” say the tabloids,
and when the tabloids speak of death,
they always speak the truth.

Donovan's Brain

Stephen King

Published in "Moth", 1970

Shratt came on limping
obsessed
he tried to run down a little girl
and there was a drag of pain
in his left
kidney

horror

he signed checks with Donovan's name
and made mad love with Donovan's woman.
poor Shratt!
warped and sucked by desert wine
raped by the brain of that monstrous man
shadowed by his legless shadow

Shratt, driven by a thing
(you know about that Thing, don't you?)
in an electric tank:
(AMPS-AMPS-AMPS-AMPS-)
demented paranoia
from "BEYOND THE GRAVE! !"
but the tragedy
was Shratt -oh,
I could weep for Shratt.

For The Birds

Stephen King

From

"Bred Any Good Rooks Lately?"

Okay, this is a science fiction joke.

It seems like in 1995 or so the pollution in the atmosphere of London has started to kill off all the rooks. And the city government is very concerned because the rooks roosting on the cornices and the odd little crannies of the public buildings are a big attraction. The Yanks with their Kodaks, if you get it. So they say, "What are we going to do?"

They get a lot of brochures from places with climates similar to London's so they can raise the rooks until the pollution problem is finally licked. One place with a similar climate, but low pollution count, turns to be Bangor, Maine. So they put an ad in the paper soliciting bird fanciers and talk to a bunch of guys in the trade. Finally, they engage this one guy at the rate of \$50,000 a year to raise rooks. They send an ornithologist over on the concord with two cases of rook eggs packed in these shatterproof cases - they keep the shipping compartment constantly heated and all that stuff.

So this guy has a new business - North American Rook Farms, Inc. He goes to work right off incubating new rooks so London will not become a rookless city. The only thing is, the London City Council is really impatient, and every day they send him a telegram that says: "Bred Any Good Rooks lately?"

HARVEY'S DREAM

From: "THE NEW YORKER"

Issue of 2003-06-30

By Stephen King

Janet turns from the sink and, boom; all at once her husband of nearly thirty years is sitting at the kitchen table in a white T-shirt and a pair of Big Dog boxers, watching her.

More and more often she has found this weekday commodore of Wall Street in just this place and dressed in just this fashion come Saturday morning: slumped at the shoulder and blank in the eye, a white scruff showing on his cheeks, man-tits sagging out the front of his T, hair standing up in back like Alfalfa of the Little Rascals grown old and stupid. Janet and her friend Hannah have frightened each other lately (like little girls telling ghost stories during a sleepover) by swapping Alzheimer's tales: who can no longer recognize his wife, who can no longer remember the names of her children.

But she doesn't really believe these silent Saturday-morning appearances have anything to do with early-onset Alzheimer's; on any given weekday morning Harvey Stevens is ready and raring to go by six-forty-five, a man of sixty who looks fifty (well, fifty-four) in either of his best suits, and who can still cut a trade, buy on margin, or sell short with the best of them.

No, she thinks, this is merely practicing to be old, and she hates it. She's afraid that when he retires it will be this way every morning, at least until she gives him a glass of orange juice and asks him (with an increasing impatience she won't be able to help) if he wants cereal or just toast. She's afraid she'll turn from whatever she's doing and see him sitting there in a bar of far too brilliant morning sun, Harvey in the morning, Harvey in his T-shirt and his boxer shorts, legs spread apart so she can view the meagre bulge of his basket (should she care to) and see the yellow calluses on his great toes, which always make her think of Wallace Stevens having on about the Emperor of Ice Cream. Sitting there silent and dopily contemplative instead of ready and raring, psyching himself up for the day. God, she hopes she's wrong. It makes life seem so thin, so stupid somehow. She can't help wondering if this is what they fought through for, raised and married off their three girls for, got past his inevitable middle-aged affair for, worked for and sometimes (let's face it) grabbed for. If this is where you come out

of the deep dark woods, Janet thinks, this . . . this parking lot . . . then why does anyone do it?

But the answer is easy. Because you didn't know. You discarded most of the lies along the way but held on to the one that said life *mattered*. You kept a scrapbook devoted to the girls, and in it they were still young and still interesting in their possibilities: Trisha, the eldest, wearing a top hat and waving a tinfoil wand over Tim, the cocker spaniel; Jenna, frozen in mid-jump halfway through the lawn sprinkler, her taste for dope, credit cards, and older men still far over the horizon; Stephanie, the youngest, at the county spelling bee, where 'cantaloupe' turned out to be her Waterloo. Somewhere in most of these pictures (usually in the background) were Janet and the man she had married, always smiling, as if it were against the law to do anything else.

Then one day you made the mistake of looking over your shoulder and discovered that the girls were grown and that the man you had struggled to stay married to was sitting with his legs apart, his fish-white legs, staring into a bar of sun, and by God maybe he looked fifty-four in either of his best suits, but sitting there at the kitchen table like that he looked seventy. Hell, seventy-five. He looked like what the goons on 'The Sopranos' called a mope.

She turns back to the sink and sneezes delicately, once, twice, a third time.

'How are they this morning?' he asks, meaning her sinuses, meaning her allergies. The answer is not very good, but, like a surprising number of bad things, her summer allergies have their sunny side. She no longer has to sleep with him and fight for her share of the covers in the middle of the night; no longer has to listen to the occasional muffled fart as Harvey soldiers ever deeper into sleep. Most nights during the summer she gets six, even seven hours, and that's more than enough. When fall comes and he moves back in from the guest room, it will drop to four, and much of that will be troubled.

One year, she knows, he won't move back in. And although she doesn't tell him so — it would hurt his feelings, and she still doesn't like to hurt his feelings; this is what now passes for love between them, at least going from her direction to his — she will be glad.

She sighs and reaches into the pot of water in the sink. Gropes around in it. 'Not so bad,' she says.

And then, just when she is thinking (and not for the first time) about how this life holds no more surprises, no unplumbed marital depths, he says in a strangely casual voice, 'It's a good thing you weren't sleeping with me last night, Jax. I had a bad dream. I actually screamed myself awake.'

She's startled. How long has it been since he called her Jax instead of Janet or Jan? The last is a nickname she secretly hates. It makes her think of that syrupy-sweet actress on 'Lassie' when she was a kid, the little boy (Timmy, his name was Timmy) always fell down a well or got bitten by a snake or trapped under a rock, and what kind of parents put a kid's life in the hands of a fucking collie?

She turns to him again, forgetting the pot with the last egg still in it, the water now long enough off the boil to be lukewarm. He had a bad dream? Harvey? She tries to remember when Harvey has mentioned having had any kind of dream and has no luck. All that comes is a vague memory of their courtship days, Harvey saying something like 'I dream of you,' she herself young enough to think it sweet instead of lame.

'You what?'

'Screamed myself awake,' he says. 'Did you not hear me?'

'No.' Still looking at him. Wondering if he's kidding her. If it's some kind of bizarre morning joke. But Harvey is not a joking man. His idea of humor is telling anecdotes at dinner about his Army days. She has heard all of them at least a hundred times.

'I was screaming words, but I wasn't really able to say them. It was like . . . I don't know . . . I couldn't close my mouth around them. I sounded like I'd had a stroke. And my voice was lower. Not like my own voice at all.' He pauses. 'I heard myself, and made myself stop. But I was shaking all over, and I had to turn on the light for a little while. I tried to pee, and I couldn't. These days it seems like I can always pee — a little, anyway — but not this morning at two-forty-seven.' He pauses, sitting there in his bar of sun. She can see dust motes dancing in it. They seem to give him a halo.

'What was your dream?' she asks, and here is an odd thing: for the first time in maybe five years, since they stayed up until midnight discussing whether to hold the Motorola stock or sell it (they wound up selling), she's interested in something he has to say.

'I don't know if I want to tell you,' he says, sounding uncharacteristically shy. He turns, picks up the pepper mill, and begins to toss it from hand to hand.

'They say if you tell your dreams they won't come true,' she says to him, and here is Odd Thing No. 2: all at once Harvey looks there, in a way he hasn't looked to her in years. Even his shadow on the wall above the toaster oven looks somehow more there. She thinks, He looks as though he matters, and why should that be? Why, when I was just thinking that life is thin, should it seem thick? This is a summer morning in late June. We are in Connecticut. When June

comes we are always in Connecticut. Soon one of us will get the newspaper, which will be divided into three parts, like Gaul.

'Do they say so?' He considers the idea, eyebrows raised (she needs to pluck them again, they are getting that wild look, and he never knows), tossing the pepper mill from hand to hand. She would like to tell him to stop doing that, it's making her nervous (like the exclamatory blackness of his shadow on the wall, like her very beating heart, which has suddenly begun to accelerate its rhythm for no reason at all), but she doesn't want to distract him from whatever is going on in his Saturday-morning head. And then he puts the pepper mill down anyway, which should be all right but somehow isn't, because it has its own shadow — it runs out long on the table like the shadow of an oversized chess piece, even the toast crumbs lying there have shadows, and she has no idea why that should frighten her but it does. She thinks of the Cheshire Cat telling Alice, 'We're all mad here,' and suddenly she doesn't want to hear Harvey's stupid dream, the one from which he awakened himself screaming and sounding like a man who has had a stroke. Suddenly she doesn't want life to be anything but thin. Thin is O.K., thin is good, just look at the actresses in the movies if you doubt it.

Nothing must announce itself, she thinks feverishly. Yes, feverishly; it's as if she's having a hot flash, although she could have sworn all that nonsense ended two or three years ago. Nothing must announce itself, it's Saturday morning and nothing must announce itself.

She opens her mouth to tell him she got it backward, what they really say is that if you tell your dreams they will come true, but it's too late, he's already talking, and it occurs to her that this is her punishment for dismissing life as thin. Life is actually like a Jethro Tull song, thick as a brick, how could she have ever thought otherwise?

'I dreamed it was morning and I came down to the kitchen,' he says. 'Saturday morning, just like this, only you weren't up yet.'

'I'm always up before you on Saturday morning,' she says.

'I know, but this was a dream,' he says patiently, and she can see the white hairs on the insides of his thighs, where the muscles are wasted and starved. Once he played tennis, but those days are done. She thinks, with a viciousness that is entirely unlike her, You will have a heart attack, white man, that's what will finish you, and maybe they'll discuss giving you an obit in the *Times*, but if a B-movie actress from the fifties died that day, or a semi-famous ballerina from the forties, you won't even get that.

'But it was like this,' he says. 'I mean, the sun was shining in.' He raises a hand and stirs the dust motes into lively life around his

head and she wants to scream at him not to do that, not to disturb the universe like that.

'I could see my shadow on the floor and it never looked so bright or so thick.' He pauses, then smiles, and she sees how cracked his lips are. "Bright" 's a funny word to use for a shadow, isn't it? "Thick," too.'

'Harvey — '

'I crossed to the window,' he says, 'and I looked out, and I saw there was a dent in the side of the Friedmans' Volvo, and I knew — somehow — that Frank had been out drinking and that the dent happened coming home.'

She suddenly feels that she will faint. She saw the dent in the side of Frank Friedman's Volvo herself, when she went to the door to see if the newspaper had come (it hadn't), and she thought the same thing, that Frank had been out at the Gourd and scraped something in the parking lot. How does the other guy look? had been her exact thought.

The idea that Harvey has also seen this comes to her, that he is goofing with her for some strange reason of his own. Certainly it's possible; the guest room where he sleeps on summer nights has an angle on the street. Only Harvey isn't that sort of man. 'Goofing' is not Harvey Stevens's 'thing.'

There is sweat on her cheeks and brow and neck, she can feel it, and her heart is beating faster than ever. There really is a sense of something looming, and why should this be happening now? Now, when the world is quiet, when prospects are tranquil? If I asked for this, I'm sorry, she thinks . . . or maybe she's actually praying. Take it back, please take it back.

'I went to the refrigerator,' Harvey is saying, 'and I looked inside, and I saw a plate of devilled eggs with a piece of Saran wrap over them. I was delighted — I wanted lunch at seven in the morning!'

He laughs. Janet — Jax that was — looks down into the pot sitting in the sink. At the one hard-boiled egg left in it. The others have been shelled and neatly sliced in two, the yolks scooped out. They are in a bowl beside the drying rack. Beside the bowl is the jar of mayonnaise. She has been planning to serve the devilled eggs for lunch, along with a green salad.

'I don't want to hear the rest,' she says, but in a voice so low she can barely hear it herself. Once she was in the Dramatics Club and now she can't even project across the kitchen. The muscles in her chest feel all loose, the way Harvey's legs would if he tried to play tennis.

'I thought I would have just one,' Harvey says, 'and then I thought, No, if I do that she'll yell at me. And then the phone rang.'

I dashed for it because I didn't want it to wake you up, and here comes the scary part. Do you want to hear the scary part?"

No, she thinks from her place by the sink. I don't want to hear the scary part. But at the same time she does want to hear the scary part, everyone wants to hear the scary part, we're all mad here, and her mother really did say that if you told your dreams they wouldn't come true, which meant you were supposed to tell the nightmares and save the good ones for yourself, hide them like a tooth under the pillow. They have three girls. One of them lives just down the road, Jenna the gay divorcée, same name as one of the Bush twins, and doesn't Jenna hate that; these days she insists that people call her Jen. Three girls, which meant a lot of teeth under a lot of pillows, a lot of worries about strangers in cars offering rides and candy, which had meant a lot of precautions, and oh how she hopes her mother was right, that telling a bad dream is like putting a stake in a vampire's heart.

'I picked up the phone,' Harvey says, 'and it was Trisha.' Trisha is their oldest daughter, who idolized Houdini and Blackstone before discovering boys. 'She only said one word at first, just "Dad," but I knew it was Trisha. You know how you always know?'

Yes. She knows how you always know. How you always know your own, from the very first word, at least until they grow up and become someone else's.

'I said, "Hi, Trish, why you calling so early, hon? Your mom's still in the sack." And at first there was no answer. I thought we'd been cut off, and then I heard these whispering whimpering sounds. Not words but half-words. Like she was trying to talk but hardly anything could come out because she wasn't able to muster any strength or get her breath. And that was when I started being afraid.'

Well, then, he's pretty slow, isn't he? Because Janet — who was Jax at Sarah Lawrence, Jax in the Dramatics Club, Jax the truly excellent French-kisser, Jax who smoked Gitanes and affected enjoyment of tequila shooters — Janet has been scared for quite some time now, was scared even before Harvey mentioned the dent in the side of Frank Friedman's Volvo. And thinking of that makes her think of the phone conversation she had with her friend Hannah not even a week ago, the one that eventually progressed to Alzheimer's ghost stories. Hannah in the city, Janet curled up on the window seat in the living room and looking out at their one-acre share of Westport, at all the beautiful growing things that make her sneeze and water at the eyes, and before the conversation turned to Alzheimer's they had discussed first Lucy Friedman and then Frank, and which one of them had said it? Which one of them had

said, 'If he doesn't do something about his drinking and driving, he's eventually going to kill somebody'?

'And then Trish said what sounded like "lees" or "least," but in the dream I knew she was . . . eliding? . . . is that the word? Eliding the first syllable, and that what she was really saying was "police." I asked her what about the police, what was she trying to say about the police, and I sat down. Right there.' He points to the chair in what they call the telephone nook. 'There was some more silence, then a few more of those half-words, those whispered half-words. She was making me so mad doing that, I thought, Drama queen, same as it ever was, but then she said, "number," just as clear as a bell. And I knew — the way I knew she was trying to say "police" — that she was trying to tell me the police had called her because they didn't have our number.'

Janet nods numbly. They decided to unlist their number two years ago because reporters kept calling Harvey about the Enron mess. Usually at dinnertime. Not because he'd had anything to do with Enron per se but because those big energy companies were sort of a specialty of his. He'd even served on a Presidential commission a few years earlier, when Clinton had been the big kahuna and the world had been (in her humble opinion, at least) a slightly better, slightly safer place. And while there were a lot of things about Harvey she no longer liked, one thing she knew perfectly well was that he had more integrity in his little finger than all those Enron sleazebags put together. She might sometimes be bored by integrity, but she knows what it is.

But don't the police have a way of getting unlisted numbers? Well, maybe not if they're in a hurry to find something out or tell somebody something. Plus, dreams don't have to be logical, do they? Dreams are poems from the subconscious.

And now, because she can no longer bear to stand still, she goes to the kitchen door and looks out into the bright June day, looks out at Sewing Lane, which is their little version of what she supposes is the American dream. How quiet this morning lies, with a trillion drops of dew still sparkling on the grass! And still her heart hammers in her chest and the sweat rolls down her face and she wants to tell him he must stop, he must not tell this dream, this terrible dream. She must remind him that Jenna lives right down the road — Jen, that is, Jen who works at the Video Stop in the village and spends all too many weekend nights drinking at the Gourd with the likes of Frank Friedman, who is old enough to be her father. Which is undoubtedly part of the attraction.

'All these whispered little half-words,' Harvey is saying, 'and she would not speak up. Then I heard "killed," and I knew that one of

the girls was dead. I just knew it. Not Trisha, because it was Trisha on the phone, but either Jenna or Stephanie. And I was so scared. I actually sat there wondering which one I wanted it to be, like Sophie's fucking Choice. I started to shout at her. "Tell me which one! Tell me which one! For God's sake, Trish, tell me which one!" Only then the real world started to bleed through . . . always assuming there is such a thing. . . .'

Harvey utters a little laugh, and in the bright morning light Janet sees there is a red stain in the middle of the dent on the side of Frank Friedman's Volvo, and in the middle of the stain is a dark smutch that might be dirt or even hair. She can see Frank pulling up crooked to the curb at two in the morning, too drunk even to try the driveway, let alone the garage — strait is the gate, and all that. She can see him stumbling to the house with his head down, breathing hard through his nose. Viva ze bool.

'By then I knew I was in bed, but I could hear this low voice that didn't sound like mine at all, it sounded like some stranger's voice, and it couldn't put corners on any of the words it was saying. "Ell-ee itch-un, ell-ee itch-un," that's what it sounded like. "Ell-ee itch-un, lsh!" '

Tell me which one. Tell me which one, Trish.

Harvey falls silent, thinking. Considering. The dust motes dance around his face. The sun makes his T-shirt almost too dazzling to look at; it is a T-shirt from a laundry-detergent ad.

'I lay there waiting for you to run in and see what was wrong,' he finally says. 'I lay there all over goosebumps, and trembling, telling myself it was just a dream, the way you do, of course, but also thinking how real it was. How marvellous, in a horrible way.'

He stops again, thinking how to say what comes next, unaware that his wife is no longer listening to him. Jax-that-was is now employing all her mind, all her considerable powers of thought, to make herself believe that what she is seeing is not blood but just the Volvo's undercoating where the paint has been scraped away. "Undercoating" is a word her subconscious has been more than eager to cast up.

'It's amazing, isn't it, how deep imagination goes?' he says finally. 'A dream like that is how a poet — one of the really great ones — must see his poem. Every detail so clear and so bright.'

He falls silent and the kitchen belongs to the sun and the dancing motes; outside, the world is on hold. Janet looks at the Volvo across the street; it seems to pulse in her eyes, thick as a brick. When the phone rings, she would scream if she could draw breath, cover her ears if she could lift her hands. She hears Harvey get up and cross to the nook as it rings again, and then a third time.

It is a wrong number, she thinks. It has to be, because if you tell your dreams they don't come true.

Harvey says, 'Hello?'

**THE
HARDCASE
SPEAKS**

STEPHEN KING

*From
Contraband #2*

In fields and christless allies the psalter is handed
greedily around with purple bottles of cheap port
punctuated by the sodium lightness glare of freights
rising past hobo cinder gantries and pitless bramble
hollows:

Dukane, Grand Rapids, Cedar Forks, Harlow, Dover-
Foxcroft,

names from the back platform of the A-train

so don't gimme that shit don't gimme that crap

I'll put the hoodoo on you, I can do it, it comes in a can

in 1954 in a back alley behind a bar they

found a lady cut in four pieces and written in her juice on
the bricks above

he had scrawled PLEASE STOP ME BEFORE I KILL
AGAIN in letters that leaned and

draggled so they called him The Cleveland Torso Murderer
and never caught him,

it figures

all these liberals are brainless

if you want to see jeans just peak into any alabaster
gravel pit in Mestalinas

all these liberals have hairy shirts

Real life is in the back row of a 2nd run movie house in
Utica, have you been
there

this guy with his hair greased back was drunk
and getting drunker when I sat down and his face kept
twisting; he cried I'm a

goddamn stupid sonofabitch but doan choo try to tell me
nothin I didn't he

might have come from Cleveland

if the stars are right I can witch you I can make your hair
fall out

You don't need hairy jeans to stand outside a Safeway
store in Smalls Falls and watch a cloud under the high
blue sky ripple the last shadows of summer over the asphalt
parking lot two
acres wide

A real hack believes blackboards are true
for myself I would turn them all soft like custard scoop
them feed them to blackbirds save corn for murderers
in huge and ancient Buicks sperm grows on seatcovers
and flows upstream toward the sound of Chuck Berry
once I saw a drunk in Redcliff and he had stuffed a
newspaper in his mouth he

jigged jubilantly

around a two shadowed light pole

I could gun you down with magic nose bullets

There are still drugstore saints

Still virgins pedalling bikes with playing cards affixed to
the rear spokes

with clothespins

The students have made things up

The liberals have shit themselves and produced a satchel-
load of smelly

numbers

Radicals scratch secret sores and pore over back numbers

bore a little hole in your head sez I insert a candle

light a light for Charlie Starkweather and let

your little light shine shine shine

play bebop

buy styrofoam dice on 42nd street

eat sno-cones and read Lois Lane

Learn to do magic like me and we will drive to Princeton

in an old Ford with four retread skins and a loose manifold
that boils up the

graphite stink of freshcooked

exhaust we will do hexes with Budweiser pentagrams and
old

Diamond matchboxes

chew some Red Man and let the juice down your chin when
you spit

sprinkle sawdust on weird messes

buy some plastic puke at Atlantic City

throw away your tape player and gobble Baby Ruths

Go now. I think you are ready.

Harrison State Park '68

Stephen King

Published in "Ubris", 1968

*"All mental disorders are simply detective strategies
for handling difficult life situations."*

---Thomas Szasz

"And I feel like homemade shit."

---Ed Sanders

- Can you do it ?

She asked shrewdly

From the grass where her nylon legs

in gartered splendor

made motions.

- Can you do it ?

Ah!

What do I say?

What are the cools?

Jimmy Dean?

Robert Mitchum?

Soupy Sales?

Modern Screen Romances is a tent on the grass

Over a dozen condoms in a quiet box

and the lady used to say

(before she passed away)

- If you can't be an athlete,

be an athletic supporter.

The moon is set.

A cloud scum has covered the stars.

A man with a gun has passed
this way

BUT -

we do not need your poets.

Progressed beyond them to

Sony

Westinghouse

Cousin Brucie

the Doors

and do I dare

mention Sonny and Cher ?

I remember Mickey Rooney

as Pretty Boy Floyd

and he was the shortest Pretty Boy Floyd

on record

coughing his enthusiastic

guts out in the last

reel.

We have not spilt the blood.

They have spilt the blood.

A little girl lies dead

On the hopscotch grid

No matter

- Can you do it?

She asked shrewdly

With her Playtex living bra

cuddling breasts

softer than a handful of wet Fig Newtons.

Old enough to bleed

Old enough to slaughter

The old farmer said

And grinned at the white

Haystack sky

With sweaty teeth

(radiation radiation

your grandchildren will be monsters)

I remember a skeleton

In Death Valley

A cow in the sunbleached throes of antiseptic death

and someone said:

- Someday there will be skeletons
on the median strip of the Hollywood Freeway
staring up at exhaust-sooty pigeons
amidst the flapping ruins of
Botany 500

call me Ishmael.

I am a semen.

- Can you do it?

She asked shrewdly
When the worms begin
their midnight creep
and the dew has sunk white to
milk the grass...

And the bitter tears

Have no ducts

The eyes have fleshed in.

Only the nose knows that

A loser is always the same.

There is a sharp report.

It slices the night cleanly

And thumps home with a tincan spannnng!

Against the Speed Limit sign down the road.

Laughter

The clean clear sound of a bolt levered back...

Silence...

Spannnng!

"Aileen, if poachers poached peaches, would the
poachers peel the peaches to eat with poached eggs
poached before peaches?"

oh don't

don't

please touch me

but don't

don't

and I reach for your hand

but touch only the radiating live pencils

of your bones:

-- Can you do it?

IN A HALF WORLD OF TERROR

Stephen King

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Stories Of Suspense, a.k.a.

I Was A Teenage Graverobber 1966

It was like a nightmare. Like some unreal dream that you wake up from the next morning. Only this nightmare was happening. Ahead of me I could see Rankin's flashlight; a large yellow eye in the sultry summer darkness. I tripped over a gravestone and almost went sprawling. Rankin whirled on me with a hissed oath.

"Do you want to wake up the caretaker, you fool?"

I muttered a reply and we crept forward. Finally, Rankin stopped and shone the flashlight's beam on a freshly chiseled gravestone. On it, it read:

DANILE WHEATHERBY

1899 – 1962

He has joined his beloved wife in a better land.

I felt a shovel thrust into my hands and suddenly I was sure that I couldn't go through with it. But I remembered the bursar shaking his head and saying, "I'm afraid we can't give you any more time, Dan. You'll have to leave today. If I could help in any way, I would, believe me ..."

I dug into the still soft earth and lifted it over my shoulder. Perhaps fifteen minutes later my shovel came in contact with wood. The two of us quickly excavated the hole until the coffin stood revealed under Rankin's flashlight. We jumped down and heaved the coffin up.

Numbed, I watched Rankin swing the spade at the locks and seals. After a few blows it gave and we lifted the lid. The body of Daniel Weatherby looked up at us with glazed eyes. I felt horror gently wash over me. I had always thought that the eyes closed when one died.

"Don't just stand there," Rankin whispered, "it's almost four. We've got to get out of here!"

We wrapped the body in a sheet and lowered the coffin back into the earth. We shoveled rapidly and carefully replaced the sod. The dirt we had missed was scattered.

By the time we picked up the white-sheeted body, the first traces of dawn were beginning to lighten the sky in the east. We went through the hedge that skirted the cemetery and entered the woods that fronted it on the west. Rankin expertly picked his way through it for a quarter of a mile until we came to the car, parked where we had left it on an overgrown and unused wagon track that had once been a road. The body was put into the trunk. Shortly thereafter, we joined the stream of commuters hurrying for the 6.00 train.

I looked at my hands as if I had never seen them before. The dirt under my fingernails had been piled up on top of a man's final resting place not twenty-four hours ago. It felt unclean.

Rankin's attention was directed entirely on his driving. I looked at him and realized that he didn't mind the repulsive act that we had just performed. To him it was just another job. We turned off the main road and began to climb the twisting, narrow dirt road. And then we came out into the open and I could see it, the huge rambling Victorian mansion that sat on the summit of the steep grade. Rankin drove around back and wordlessly up to the steep rock face of a bluff that rose another forty feet upward, slightly to the right of the house.

There was a hideous grinding noise and a portion of the hill large enough to carve an entrance for the car slid open. Rankin drove in and killed the engine. We were in a small, cube-like room that served as a hidden garage. Just then, a door at the far end slid open and a tall, rigid man approached us.

Steffen Weinbaum's face was much like a skull; his eyes were deep-set and the skin was stretched so tautly over his cheekbones that his flesh was almost transparent.

"Where is it?" His voice was deep, ominous.

Wordlessly, Rankin got out and I followed his lead. Rankin opened the trunk and we pulled the sheet-swaddled figure out.

Weinbaum nodded slowly.

"Good, very good. Bring him into the lab."

CHAPTER TWO

When I was thirteen, my parents were killed in an automobile crash. It left me an orphan and should have landed me in an orphan's home. But my father's will disclosed the fact that he had left me a substantial sum of money and I was self-reliant. The welfare people never came around and I was left in the somewhat bizarre role as the sole tenant of my own house at thirteen. I paid the mortgage out of the bank account and tried to stretch a dollar as far as possible.

By the time I was eighteen and was out of school, the money was low, but I wanted to go to college. I sold the house for \$10,000.00 through a real estate buyer. In early September, the roof fell in. I received a very nice letter from Erwin, Erwin and Bradstreet, attorneys at law. To put it in layman's language, it said that the department store at which my father had been employed had just got around to a general audit of their books. It seemed that there was \$15,000.00 missing and that they had proof that my father had stolen it. The rest of the letter merely stated that if I didn't pay up the \$15,000.00 we'd got to court and they would try to get double the amount.

It shook me up and a few questions that should have stood out in my mind just didn't register as a result. Why didn't they uncover the error earlier? Why were they offering to settle out of court?

I went down to the office of Erwin, Erwin, & Bradstreet and talked the matter over. To make a long story short, I paid the sum there were asking, I had no more money.

The next day I looked up the firm of Erwin, Erwin & Bradstreet in the phone book. It wasn't listed. I went down to their office and found a For Rent sign on the door. It was then that I realized that I had been conned like gullible kid – which, I reflected miserably was what I was.

I bluffed my way through the first for months of college but finally they discovered that I hadn't been properly registered.

That same day I met Rankin at a bar. It was my first experience in a tavern. I had a forged driver's license and I bought enough whiskey to get drunk. I figured that it would take about two straight whiskeys since I had never had anything but a bottle of beer now and then prior to that night.

One felt good, two made my trouble seem rather inconsequential. I was nursing my third when Rankin entered the bar.

He sat on the stool next to me and looked attentively at me.

"You got troubles?" I asked rudely.

Rankin smiled. "Yes, I'm out to find a helper."

"Oh, yeah?" I asked, becoming interested. "You mean you want to hire somebody?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm your man."

He started to say something and then changed his mind.

"Let's go over to a booth and talk it over, shall we?"

We walked over to a booth and I realized that I was listing slightly. Rankin pulled the curtain.

"That's better. Now, you want a job?"

I nodded.

"Do you care what it is?"

"No. Just how much does it pay?"

"Five hundred a job."

I lost a little bit of the rosy fog that encased me. Something was wrong here. I didn't like the way he used the word "job".

"Who do I have to kill?" I asked with a humorless smile.

"You don't'. But before I can tell you what it is, you'll have to talk with Mister Weinbaum."

"Who's he?"

"A – scientist."

More fog evaporated. I got up.

"Uh-uh. No making a human guinea pig out of yours truly. Get yourself another boy."

"Don't be silly," he said, "No harm will come to you."

Against my better judgement, I said, "Okay, let's go."

CHAPTER 3

Weinbaum approached the subject of my duties after a tour of the house, including the laboratory. He wore a white smock and there was something about him that made me crawl inside. He sat down in the living room and motioned me into a seat. Rankin had disappeared. Weinbaum stared at me with fixed eyes and once again I felt a blast of icy coldness sweep over me.

"I'll put it to you bluntly," he said, "my experiments are too complicated to explain in any detail, but they concern human flesh. Dead human flesh."

I was becoming intensely aware that his eyes burnt with flickering fires. He looked like a spider ready to engulf a fly, and this whole house was his web. The sun was striking fire to the west and deep pools of shadows were spreading across the room, hiding his face, but leaving the glittering eyes as they shifted in the creeping darkness.

He was still speaking. "Often, people bequeath their bodies to scientific institutes for study. Unfortunately, I'm only one man, so I have to resort to other methods."

Horror leapt grinning from the shadows and across my mind there flitted the black picture of two men digging by the light of an uncertain moon. A shovel struck wood – the noise chilled my soul. I rose quickly.

"I think I can find my own way out, Mr. Weinbaum."

He laughed softly. "Did Rankin tell you how much this job pays?"

"I'm not interested."

"Too bad. I was hoping you could see it my way. It wouldn't take a year before you would make enough money to return to college."

I started, and got the uncanny feeling that this man was searching my soul.

"How much do you know about me? How did you find out?"

"I have my ways." He chuckled again. "Will you reconsider?"

I hesitated.

"Shall we put it on a trial basis?" he asked softly. "I'm quite sure that we can both reach a mutual satisfaction."

I got the eerie feeling that I was talking to the devil himself, that somehow I had been tricked into selling my soul.

"Be here at 8.00 sharp, the night after next," he said.

That was how it started.

As Rankin and I laid the sheeted body of Daniel Whetherby on the lab table, lights flashed on behind sheeted oblongs that looked like glass tanks.

"Weinbaum –" I had dropped the title, Mister, without thinking, "I think –"

"Did you say something?" he asked, his eyes boring into mine. The laboratory seemed far away. There were only the two of us, sliding through a half-world peopled with horrors beyond the imagination.

Rankin entered in a white smock coat and broke the spell by saying, "All ready, professor."

At the door, Rankin stopped me. "Friday, at eight."

A shudder, cold and terrible raced up my spine as I looked back. Weinbaum had produced a scalpel and the body was unsheeted. They looked at me strangely and I hurried out.

I took the car and quickly drove down the narrow dirt road. I didn't look back. The air was fresh and warm with a promise of budding

summer. The sky was blue with fluffy white clouds fleeting along in the warm summer breeze. The night before seemed like a nightmare, a vague dream, that, as all nightmares, is unreal and transparent when the bright light of day shines upon it. But as I drove past the wrought iron gates of the Crestwood Cemetery I realized that this was no dream. Four hours ago my shovel had removed the dirt that covered the grave of Daniel Wheatherby.

For the first time a new thought occurred to me. What was the body of Daniel Wheatherby being used for at that moment? I shoved the thought into a deep corner of my mind and let out onto the go-pedal. The care screamed ahead I put my thoughts into driving, glad to put the terrible thing I had done out of my mind, for a short time, anyway.

CHAPTER FOUR

The California countryside blurred by as I tried for the maximum speed. The tyres sang on the curve and, as I came out of it, several things happened in rapid succession.

I saw a panel truck crazily parked right on the broken white line, a girl of about eighteen running right toward my car, an older man running after her. I slammed on the brakes and they exploded like bombs. I jockeyed the wheel and the California sky was suddenly under me. Then everything was right-side up and I realized that I had flipped right over and up. For a moment I was dazed, then a scream, shrill and high, piercing, slit my head.

I opened the door and sprinted toward the road. The man had the girl and was yanking her toward the panel truck. He was stronger than her and winning, but she was taking an inch of skin for every foot he made.

He saw me.

"You stay out of this, buddy. I'm her legal guardian."

I halted and shook the cobwebs out of my brain. It was exactly what he had been waiting for. He let go with a haymaker that got me on the corner of the chin and knocked me sprawling. He grabbed the girl and practically threw her into the cab.

By the time that I was on me feet he was around to the driver's side and peeling out. I took a flying leap and made the roof just as he took off. I was almost thrown off, but I clawed through about five layers of paint to stay on. Then I reached through the open window and got him by the neck. He cursed and grabbed my hand. He yanked, the truck spun crazily off the ledge of a steep embankment.

The last thing I remember is the nose of the truck pointing straight down. Then my enemy saved my life by viciously yanking my arm. I tumbled off just as the truck plunged over the cliff.

I landed hard, but the rock I landed on was harder. Everything slid away.

Something cool touched my brow as I came to. The first thing I saw was the flashing red light on top of the official looking car parked by the embankment. I sat bolt upright and soft hands pushed me down. Nice hands, the hands of the girl who had landed me into this mess.

Then there was a Highway Patrolman over me and an official voice said, "The ambulance is coming. How do you feel?"

"Bruised," I said and sat up again. "But tell the ambulance to go away. I'm all right."

I tried to sound flippant. The last thing I needed after last night's 'job' was the police.

"How about telling me about it?" the policeman said, producing a notebook. Before I answered, I walked over to the embankment. My stomach flipped over backwards. The panel truck was nose-deep in California dirt and my sparring partner was turning that good California soil into a reddish mud with his own blood. He lay grotesquely, sprawled half in, half out of the cab. The photographers were getting their pictures. He was dead.

I turned back. The patrolman looked at me as if he expected me to throw up, but, after my new job, my stomach was admirably strong.

"I was driving out of the Belwood district," I said, "I came around that curve ..."

I told the rest of the story with the girl's help. Just as I finished the ambulance came to a halt. Despite my protestations and those of my still-unnamed girl friend, we were hustled into the back.

Two hours later we had a clean bill of health from the patrolman and the doctors and we were requested to be witnesses at the inquest set for the next week.

I saw my car at the curb. It was a little worse for wear, but the flats had been replaced. There was a witnessed bill on the dash for a wrecker, tires, and clean-up squad! It came to about \$250.00 – half of the last night's pay-check.

"You look preoccupied," the girl said.

I turned to her. "Um, yeah. Well, we almost got killed together this morning, how about telling me your name and having lunch together?"

"Okay," she said. "The name's Vicki Pickford. Yours?"

"Danny," I said unemotionally as we pulled away from the curb. I switched the subject rapidly. "What was going on this morning? Did I hear that guy say that he was your legal guardian?"

"Yes" she replied.

I laughed. "The name is Danny Gerad. You'll get that out of the afternoon papers."

She smiled gravely. "All right. He was my guardian. He was also a drunkard and an all-around crumb."

Her cheeks flamed red. The smile was gone. "I hated him and I'm glad he's dead."

She gave me a sharp glance and for a moment I saw fear shine wetly in her eyes; then she recovered her self-control. We parked and ate lunch.

Forty minutes later I paid the check out of my newly acquired cash and walked back out to the car.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Bonaventure Motel," she said. "That's where I'm staying."

She saw curiosity jump into my eyes and sighed, "All right, I was running away. My Uncle David caught up with me and tried to drag me back to the house. When I told him I wouldn't go, he dragged me out to the truck. We were going around that curve when I wrenched the wheel out of his hands. Then you came along."

She closed up like a clam and I didn't try to get any more out of her. There was something wrong about her story. I didn't press her. I drove her into the parking lot and killed the engine.

"When can I see you again?" I asked. "A movie tomorrow?"

"Sure," she replied.

"I'll pick you up at 7.30," I said and drove out, thoughtfully pondering the events that had befallen me in the last twenty-four hours.

CHAPTER FIVE

When I entered the apartment the phone was ringing. I picked it up and Vicki, accident and the bright workaday world of suburban California faded into the half-world of phantom-people shadows. The voice that whispered coldly out of the receiver was Weinbaum's

"Troubles?" He spoke softly, but there was an ominous tone in his voice.

"I had an accident," I replied.

"I read about it in the paper ..." Weinbaum's voice trailed off. Silence hung between us for a moment and then I said, "Does this mean you're canning me?"

I hoped that he would say yes; I didn't have the guts to resign.

"No," he said softly, "I just wanted to make sure that you didn't reveal anything about the – work – you're doing for me."

"Well, I didn't" I told him curtly.

"The night after this," he reminded me, "At eight."

There was a click and then the dial tone. I shivered and hung up the receiver. I had the oddest feeling that I had just broken connection with the grave.

The next morning at 7.30 sharp, I picked up Vicki at the Bonaventure Motel. She was all decked out in an outfit that made her look stunning. I made a low whistle; she flushed prettily. We didn't talk about the accident.

The movie was good and we held hands part of the time, ate popcorn part of the time and kissed once or twice. All in all, a pleasant evening.

The second feature was just drawing to the climax when an usher came down the aisle.

He was stopping at every row and looked peeved. Finally, he stopped at ours. He swept the flashlight down the row and asked* "Mr. Gerad? Daniel Gerad?"

"Yes" I asked, feeling guilt and fear run through me. "There's a gentleman on the phone, sir. He says it's a matter of life or death."

Vicki gave me a startled look and I followed the usher hurriedly. That let out the police. I mentally took stock of my only remaining relatives. Aunt Polly, Grandma Phibbs and my great-uncle Charlie. They were all healthy as far as I knew.

You could have knocked me over with a feather when I picked up the telephone and heard Rankin's voice.

He spoke rapidly and a raw note of fear was in his voice. "Get out here, right now! We need – "

There were sounds of a a scuffle, a muffled scream, then a click and the empty dial tone.

I hung, up and hurried back for Vicki. "Come on," I said.

She followed without questioning me. At first I wanted to drive her back to the motel but the muffled scream made me decide that this was an emergency. I didn't like either Rankin or Weinbaum, but I knew I would have to help them.

We took off.

"What is it?" Vicki asked anxiously as I stamped on the go-pedal and let the car unwind.

"Look," I said, "something tells me that you've got your secrets about your guardian. I've got some of my own. Please, don't ask." She didn't say another word.

I took possession of the passing lane. The speedometer climbed from seventy-five to eighty-five, kept rising and trembled on the verge of ninety. I pulled into the turnoff on two wheels and the car bounced, clung and exploded up the road.

Grim and gaunt against the overcast sky, I could see the house. I pulled the car to a stop and was out in a second.

"Wait here," I cried over my shoulder to Vicki.

There was a light on in the laboratory and I flung the door open. It was empty but ransacked. The place was a mess of broken test tubes, smashed apparatus, and, yes, bloodstains that trailed through the half-open door that led to the darkened garage. Then I noticed the green liquid that was flowing over the floor in sticky rivulets. For the first time I noticed that one of the several sheeted tanks had been broken. I walked over to the other three. The lights inside them were off and the sheets that draped them let by no hint of what might have been under them - or, for that matter, what was under them.

I had no time to see. I didn't like the looks of blood, still fresh and uncoagulated, that led out of the front door into the garage. I swung open the door and entered the garage. It was dark and I didn't know where the light switch was. I cursed myself for not bringing the flashlight that was in the glove compartment. I advanced a few steps and realized that there was a cold draft blowing against my face. I advanced toward it.

The light from the lab threw a golden shaft of light along the garage floor, but it was next to nothing, in the Styngan blackness of the garage. All my childish fears of the dark returned. Once again I entered the realms of terror that only a child can know. I realized that the shadow that leered at me from out of the dark might not be dispelled by bright light.

Suddenly, my right foot went down. I realized that the draft was coming from a stairway I had almost fallen down. For a moment I debated, then turned and hurried back through the lab and out to the car.

Chapter Six

Vicki pounced on me as soon as I opened the door. "Danny, what are you doing here?"

Her tone of voice made me look at her. In the sickly yellow glow of the light her face was terrified.

"I'm working here," I said shortly.

"At first I didn't realize where we were," she said softly. I was only here once before.

"You've been here?" I exclaimed. "When? "Why?"

"One night," she said quietly "I brought Uncle David his lunch. He forgot it."

The name rang a bell. She saw me grasping for it. "My guardian," she said. "Perhaps I'd better tell you the whole story. Probably, you know that people don't get appointed guardians when they drink. Well, Uncle David didn't always do those things. When my mother and father were killed in a train-wreck four years ago, my Uncle David was the kindest person you could imagine. The court appointed him my guardian until I came of age, with my complete support."

For a moment she was quiet, living in memories and the expression that flitted rapidly through her eyes was not pretty. Then she went on.

"Two years ago the company he was working for as a night watchman folded up and my uncle was out of a job. He was out of work for almost half a year. We were getting desperate, with

only unemployment checks to feed us and college looming up for me. Then he got a job. It was a good paying one and it brought in fabulous sums. I used to joke with him about the banks be robbed. One night he looked at me and said, 'Not banks.'"

I felt fear and guilt tap me on the shoulder with cold fingers. Vicki went on.

"He started to get mean. He started bringing home whisky and getting drunk. The times I asked him about his job he evaded me. One night he told me point-blank to mind my own business."

"I watched him decay before my very eyes. Then one night he let a name slip — Weinbaum, Steffen Weinbaum. A couple of weeks later he forgot his midnight lunch. I looked up the name in the telephone book and took it out to him. He flew into the most terrible rage I have ever seen."

"In the weeks that followed he was away more and more at this terrible house. One night, when he came home he beat me. I decided to run away. To me, the Uncle David I knew was dead. He caught me - and you came along." She fell silent.

I was shaken right down to my boots. I had a very good idea what Vicki's uncle did for a living. The time Rankin had signed me up coincided with the time Vicki's guardian would have been cracking up. I almost drove away then, despite the wild shambles the lab was in, despite the secret stairway, despite the blood trail on the floor. But then a faraway, thin scream reached us. I thumbed the glove compartment button, and reached in, fumbled around and got the flashlight.

Vicki's hand went to my arm "No, Danny. Please, Don't. I know that there's something terrible going on here. Drive away from it!"

The scream sounded again, this time fainter, and I made up my mind. I grabbed the flashlight. Vicki saw my intention. "All right, I'm coming with you."

"Uh-uh," I said. "You stay here. I've got a feeling that there's something ... loose out there. You stay here."

She unwillingly sat back. I shut the door and ran back to the lab. I didn't pause, but went back into the garage. The flashlight illuminated the dark hole where the wall had slid away to reveal the staircase. My blood pounding thickly in my temples, I ventured down into it. I counted the steps, shining the flashlight at the featureless walls, at the impenetrable darkness below. "Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three –"

At thirty, the stairway suddenly became a short passage. I started cautiously along it, wishing that I had a revolver, or even a knife to make me feel a little less naked and vulnerable.

Suddenly a scream, terrible and thick with fear soon sounded in the darkness ahead of me. It was the sound of terror, the sound of a man confronted with something out of the deepest pits of horror. I broke into a run. As I ran I realized that the draft was blowing coldly against my face. I reasoned that the tunnel must come out in the outdoors. I stumbled over something.

It was Rankin, lying in a pool of his own blood, his eyes staring in glazed horror at the ceiling. The back of his head was bashed in.

Ahead of me I heard a pistol shot, a curse, and another scream. I ran on and almost fell on my face as I stumbled over more stairs. I climbed and saw stairs framed vaguely in an opening screened with underbrush above me. I pushed it aside and came upon a startling tableau: a tall figure silhouetted against the sky that could only be Weinbaum, a revolver hanging in his hand, looking down at the shadowed ground. Even the starlight was blotted out as the hanging clouds that had parted briefly, closed together again.

He heard me and wheeled quickly, his eyes glazing like red lanterns in the dark.

"Oh, it you Gerad."

"Rankin's dead." I told him.

"I know." he said, "You could have prevented it if you had come a little quicker"

"Now just hold on," I said, becoming angry. "I hurried –"

I was cut off by a sound that has hounded me through nightmares ever since, a hideous mewling sound, like that of some gigantic rat in pain. I saw calculation, fear, and finally decision flicker across Weinbaum's face in a matter of seconds. I fell back in terror.

"What is it?" I choked.

He casually shone the light down into the pit, for all his affected casualness, I noticed that his eyes were averted by something.

The thing mewed again and I felt another spasm of fear. I craned to see what horror lay in that pit, the horror that made even Weinbaum scream in abject terror. And just before I saw, a horrible wall of terror rose and fell from the vague outline of the house.

Weinbaum jerked his flashlight from the pit and shone it in my face.

"Who was that? Whom did you bring up here?"

But I had my own flashlight trained as I ran through the passage way, Weinbaum close behind. I had recognized the scream. I had heard it before, when a frightened girl almost ran into my car as she fled her maniac of a guardian.

Vicki!

CHAPTER SEVEN

I heard Weinbaum gasp as we entered the lab. The place was swimming in the green, liquid. The other two cases were broken!. I didn't pause, but ran past the shattered, empty cases and out the door. Weinbaum did not follow me.

The car was empty, the door on the passengers side open. I shone my light over the ground. Here and there were footprints of a girl wearing high heels, a girl who had to be Vicki. The rest of the tracks were blotted out by a monstrous something – I hesitate to call it a track. It was more as if something huge had dragged itself into the woods. Its hugeness was testified, too, as I noticed the broken saplings and crushed underbrush.

I ran back into the lab where Weinbaum was sitting, face pale and drawn, regarding the three shattered empty tanks. The revolver was on the table and I grabbed it and made for the door.

"Where do you think you're going with that?" he demanded, rising.

"Out to hunt for Vicki," I snarled. "And if she's hurt or –" I didn't finish.

I hurried out into the velvet darkness of the night. Gun in hand, flashlight in the other, I plunged into the woods, following the trail blazed by something that I didn't want to think about. The vital question that burned in my mind was whether it had Vicki or was still trailing her. If it had her...

My question was answered by a piercing scream not too far away from me.

Faster now, I ran and suddenly burst into a clearing.

Perhaps it is because I want to forget, or perhaps it is only because the night was dark and beginning to become foggy, but I can only

remember how Vicki caught sight of my flashlight, ran to me, buried her head against my shoulder and sobbed.

A huge shadow moved toward me, mewling horribly, driving me almost mad with terror. Stumblingly, we fled from the horror in the dark, back toward the comforting lights of the lab, away from the unseen terror that lurked in the dark. My fear-crazed brain was putting two and two together and coming up with five.

The three cases had contained three something from the darkest pits of a twisted mind. One had broken loose. Rankin and Weinbaum had been after it. It had killed Rankin, but Weinbaum had trapped it in the concealed pit. The second one was floundering in the woods now and I suddenly remembered that whatever-it-was, was huge and that it had a hard time lifting itself along. Then I realized that it had trapped Vicki in a gully. It had started down – easy enough! But getting up? I was almost positive that it couldn't.

Two were out of commission. But where was the third? My question was answered very suddenly but a scream from the lab. And ... mewling.

CHAPTER EIGHT

We ran up to the lab door and threw it open. It was empty. The screams and the terrible mewling sounds came from the garage. I ran through, and ever since have been glad that Vicki stayed in the lab and was spared the sight that had wakened me from a thousand awful nightmares.

The lab was darkened and all that I could make out was a huge shadow moving sluggishly. And the screams! Screams of terror, the screams of a man faced with a monster from the pits of hell. It mewed horribly and seemed to pant in delight.

My hand moved around for a light switch. There, I found it! Light flooded the room, illuminating a tableau of horror that was the result of the grave thing I had performed, I and the dead uncle.

A huge, white maggot twisted on the garage floor, holding Weinbaum with long suckers, raising him towards its dripping, pink mouth from which horrid mewling sounds came. Veins, red and pulsating, showed under its slimy flesh and millions of squirming tiny maggots - in the blood vessels, in the skin, even forming a huge eye that stared out at me. A huge maggot, made up of hundreds of millions of maggots, the feasters on the dead flesh that Weinbaum had used so freely.

In a half-world of terror I fired the revolver again and again. It mewled and twitched.

Weinbaum screamed something as he was dragged inexorably toward the waiting mouth. Incredibly, I made it out over the hideous sound that the creature was making.

"Fire it! In the name of heaven, fire it!"

Then I saw the sticky pools of green liquid which had trickled over the floor from the laboratory. I fumbled for my lighter, got it and frantically thumbed it. Suddenly I remembered that I had forgotten to put a flint in. I reached for matches, got one and fired the others. I threw the pack just as Weinbaum screamed his last. I saw his body through the translucent skin of the creature, still twitching as thousands of maggots leeches onto it. Retching, I threw the now flaring matches into the green ooze. It was flammable, just as I had thought. It burst into bright flames. The creature was twisted into a horrid ball of pulsing, putrid flesh.

I turned and stumbled out to where Vicki stood, shaking and white faced.

"Come on!" I said, "Let's get out of here! The whole place is going to go up!"

We ran out to the car and drove away rapidly.

CHAPTER NINE

There isn't too much left to say. I'm sure that you have all read about the fire that swept the residential Belwood District of California, leveling fifteen square miles of woods and residential homes. I couldn't feel too badly about that fire. I realize that hundreds might have been killed by the gigantic maggot-things that Weinbaum and Rankin were breeding. I drove out there after the fire. The whole place was smoldering ruins. There was no discernable remains of the horror that we had battled that final night, and, after some searching, I found a metal cabinet. Inside there were three ledgers.

One of them was Weinbaum's diary. It clears up a lot. It revealed that they were experimenting on dead flesh, exposing it to gamma rays. One day they observed a strange thing. The few maggots that had crawled over the flesh were growing, becoming a group. Eventually they grew together, forming three separate large maggots. Perhaps the radioactive bomb had speed up the evolution.

I don't know.

Furthermore, I don't want to know.

In a way, I suppose, I assisted in Rankin's death; the flesh of the body whose grave I had robbed had fed perhaps the very creature that had killed him.

I live with that thought. But I believe that there can be forgiveness. I'm working for it. Or, rather, we're working for it.

Vicki and I. Together.

THE END

IN THE KEY CHORD OF DAWN

STEPHEN KING

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In the key-chords of dawn
all waters are depthless.
The fish flash recalls
timberline clefts where water
pours between the rocks of frost.
We live the night and wait
for the day dream
(we fished the Mississippi with
Norville as children
catching mostly crawdaddies from
the brown silk water)
when we say "love is responsibility";
our poles are adrift in a sea of compliments.
Now you fish for me and I for you.
The line, the red bobber, the worm on the hook: the fishing more
than the
eating: bones and scales and gutting knife make a loom of
complexity so we are
forced to say "fishing is responsibility"
and put away our poles.

Jhonathan and the Witches

Stephen King

From

First Words 1993, King wrote this 1956

Once upon a time there was a boy named Jhonathan. He was smart, handsome, and very brave. But, Jhonathan was cobbler's son.

One day his father said, "Jhonathan, you must go and seek your fortune. You are old enough."

Jhonathan, being a smart boy knew he better ask the king for work. So, he set out.

On the way, he met a rabbit who was a fairy in disguise. The scared thing was being pursued by hunters and jumped into Jhonathan's arms. When the hunters came up Jhonathan pointed excitedly and shouts, "That way, that way !"

After the hunters had gone, the rabbit turned into a fairy and said, "you have helped me. I will give you three wishes. What are they?"

But Jhonathan could not think of anything, so the fairy agreed to give him when he needed them.

So Jhonathan kept walking until he made the kingdom without incident.

So he went to the king and asked for work.

But, as luck would have it, the king was in a very bad mood that day. So he vented his mood on Jhonathan.

"Yes there is something you can do. On yonder Mountain there are three witches. If you can kill them, I will give you 5,000 crowns. If you cannot do it I will have your head! You have 20 days." With this he dismissed Jhonathan.

"Now what am I to do?", thought Jhonathan. Well I shall try.

The he remembered the three wishes granted him and set out door the mountain.

* * *

Now Jhonathan was at the mountain and was just going to wish for a knife to kill the witch, when he heard a voice in his ear, "The first witch cannot be pierced."

The second witch cannot be pierced or smothered.

The third cannot be pierced, smothered and is invisible.

With this knowledge Jhonathan looked about and saw no one. Then he remembered the fairy, and smile.

He then went in search of the first witch.

At last he found her. She was in a cave near the foot of the mountain, and was a mean looking hag.

He remembered the fairy words, and before the witch could do anything but give him an ugly look, he wished she should be smothered. And Lo! It was done.

Now he went higher in search of the second witch. There was a second cave higher up. There he found the second witch. He was about to wish her smothered when he remembered she could not be smothered. And the before the witch could do anything but give him an ugly look, he had wished her crushed. And Lo! It was done

Now he had only to kill the third witch and he would have the 5,000 crowns. But on the way up, he was plagued with thoughts of how?

Then he it upon a wonderful plan.

The, he saw the last cave. He waited outside the entrance until he heard the witches footsteps. He then picked up a couple of big rocks and wishes.

He the wished the witch a normal women and Lo! She became visible and then Jhonathan struck her head with the rocks he had.

Jhonathan collected his 5,000 crowns and he and his father lived happily ever after.

The End

MAN WITH A BELLY

By
Stephen King

*First published in:
Cavalier
December 1978*

John Bracken sat on the park bench and waited to make his hit. The bench was one of the many on the outskirts of James Memorial Park, which borders the south side of Hammond Street. In the daytime the park is overrun by kids, mother wheeling prams, and old men with bags of crumbs for the pigeons. At night it belongs to the junkies and muggers. Respectable citizens, women in particular, avoided Hammond Street after dark. But Norma Correzente was not most women.

He heard her approach on the stroke of eleven, as always. He had been there since quarter of. The beat-cop wasn't due until 11:20, and everything was on top.

He was calm, as he always was before a hit. He was a cold and efficient workman, and that was why Vittorio had hired him. Bracken was not a button-man in the Family sense; he was an independent, a journeyman. His family resided completely within his wallet. This was why he had been hired.

There was a pause in the footfalls as she paused at the intersection of Hammond and Pardis Avenue. Then she crossed, probably thinking of nothing but covering the last block, going up to her penthouse suite, and pouring a large Scotch and water.

Bracken got ready, thinking it was a strange contract. Norma Correzente, formerly Norma White of the Boston Whites, was the wife of Vito Correzente. The marriage had been headline material -- rich society bitch weds notorious Vito ("I'm just a businessman"). The Wop. It was not a novelty to the clan; aging Don marries a young woman of blood. Murder by contract was not new, either. The Sicilians could put in for a patent on that if it ever became legal.

But Bracken had not been hired to kill. He tensed, ready for her.

The phone call had been long-distance; he could tell by the clickings on the line.

"Mr. Bracken?"

"Yes."

"I have word from Mr. Sills that you are available for work."

"I could be," Bracken answered. Benny Sills was one of several contact men who passed information from one end of a potential contract to the other, a kind of booking agent. He ran a hock-shop in a large eastern city where he also bankrolled independent smash-and-grab teams of proven reputation and sold heavy-caliber weapons to dubious political groups. "My name is Benito Torreos. Do you know it?"

"Yes." Torreos was the right-hand man--consigliare was the word, Bracken thought --- of Vito Correzente.

"Good. There is a letter for you in your hotel box, Mr. Bracken. It contains a round-trip plane ticket and a check for a thousand dollars. If you are indeed available, please take both. If not, the money is yours for calling the airport and canceling the reservation."

"I'm available."

"Good," Torreos repeated. "My employer is anxious to speak to you at nine tomorrow evening, if convenient. The address is 400 Meegan Boulevard."

"I'll be there."

"Goodbye. Mr. Bracken." The phone clicked.

Bracken went downstairs to get his mail.

Men who remain active and take care of themselves all their lives can remain incredibly fit even into their late years, but... there comes a time when the clock begins to run down. Tissues fail in spite of walks, workouts, massages. The cheeks dewlap. The eyelids crenellate into wrinkled accordions. Vito Correzzente had begun to enter that stage of his life. He looked to be a well preserved seventy. Bracken put him at seventy-eight. His handshake was firm, but palsy lurked beneath, biding its time. 400 Meegan was the Graymoor Arms, and the top floor had been two \$1,000-a-month suites which Correzzente had convened into a single monolith, strewn with grotesque knickknacks and Byzantine antiques. Bracken thought he could smell just a whiff of pasta and oregano.

Benny the Bull admitted him, looking like an overweight pug who had found his way into his manager's wardrobe by mistake. and he stood watchfully at the door of the sunken living room until Correzzente waved him away with one driftwood hand. The door closed decorously, and Don Vittorio offered Bracken a cigar. "No thank you."

Correzzente nodded and lit one for himself. He was dressed in black pants and a white turtleneck; his hair, thick and rich and the color of iron, was brushed back elegantly. A large ruby glittered on his fourth finger.

"I want you to make a hit," he said. "I pay you t'irty t'ousan' before and twenty t'ousan' after."

"That's an agreeable price." He thought: too agreeable.

"You doan have to make no bones."

"No bones? You said a hit. A hit means I have to make bones."

Correzente smiled a wintery smile. For a moment he looked even older than seventy-eight. He looked older than all the ages. His accent was faint, mellow, agreeable, a mere rounding of the hard English plosive and glottal stops.

"It's my wife. I want you to rape her. Bracken waited.

"I want you to hurt her." He smiled. One gold tooth glittered mellowly in the indirect lighting.

The story was simple, and yet there was a beautiful circularity to it which Bracken appreciated. Correzente had married Norma White because he had an itch. She had accepted his suit for the same reason. But while his itch was for her body, her bloodline, and the heat of her youth, hers was a much colder thing: money. A seamy compulsion often forces a seamy liaison, and Norma White was a compulsive gambler.

Doll Vittorio was being laughed at. It could not be borne. The matter could have been remedied simply and suddenly if he had been cuckolded by some young tony in tight pants, but to be cuckolded by his own wealth was more complex and contained a bitter irony which perhaps only a Sicilian could fully grasp. Her white Protestant family had cut her off, and so she had joined the family of Vito The Wop.

He had been one of the masters coping easily with the changes from bootleg to gambling and vice to full white-collar organization, never afraid to invest where it seemed that investiture would bring a profit, never afraid to show the iron fist inside the glove. He was a man with a belly, in the Sicilian argot.

Until now.

He had struck upon the solution because it was fitting. It was pure, object lesson, and vengeance all in one. He had chosen Bracken because he was an independent and unlike many hit men, he was neither homosexual nor impotent.

Bracken took the job.

It took him two weeks to prepare. During the first, he shadowed her for brief, unconnected periods of time, watching her go to the beauty parlor, buy dresses, play golf. She was a fine, aristocratic-looking woman with dark hair, a self-confident way of moving, and sleek body lines. He took a gestalt of her personality from the way she drove (fast, cutting in and out of traffic, jumping lights), the way she spoke (clear enunciation, Back Bay accent brooking no nonsense or waste of time), her manner of dress, a hundred other personal characteristics. When he felt that he had her fairly well ticketed, he dropped her daytime activities and concentrated on her nights, which were nearly as regular as clockwork. She left the Graymoor at seven and walked (he had never seen her take a taxi or bus) the four blocks to Jarvis's, the most opulent gambling den in the city. She always went as if dressed for a lover. She left Jarvis's promptly at ten-forty-five and walked back home. She left checks of varying amounts behind her. The pitman whom Bracken bribed said that an average week at the tables was costing Vito Correzente from eight to ten thousand dollars.

Bracken began to think that he had been bought cheaply at that. He admired Norma Correzente in a personal yet detached way. She had found her horse and was riding him. She was not cheating or sneaking. She was an aggressive woman who was taking what she needed. There were no lies involved.

Admiration aside, he prepared to do his job. He reflected that it would be the first contract in his career where the weapon would need no getting rid of.

Now, on the bench, he felt a sudden surge of adrenaline that made his muscles tighten almost painfully. Then they relaxed and all his concentration focused in white light on the job ahead.

Her shadow trailed behind her, elongating as she left the last streetlight behind and approached the next.

She glanced at him, not in a fearful way, but with a quick appraisal that dismissed him as a pointless loiterer. When she was directly opposite him, he spoke once, sharply: "Norma."

It had the desired effect. It put her off balance. She did not reach immediately for her purse, where she carried a caliber pistol of Swedish make.

He came off the bench in an explosion. One moment he slouched, a sleepy head lost in a heroin haze. The next he had hooked a hard arm around her throat, choking the yell (not a scream; not her) in her throat. He pulled her off the sidewalk. Her purse dropped and he kicked it into darkness. A pencil, a notebook, the pistol, and a few Kleenex spilled from it. She tried to knee his crotch and he turned his thigh muscle into it. One hand raked his cheek. He had bent the other back and away.

Bushes. The night breeze made faint nets of shadow through them. He tripped her and she went down behind them, sprawled in the grass and gum wrappers.

When he came down on top she met him with a fist. The birthstone ring she wore gouged the bridge of his nose, bringing blood. He yanked her skin up. The inner lining ripped. No girdle. Thank God.

She brought her heel down on the muscle of his calf and he let out a grunt. A rabbit punch caught him. He drove his fist into the

softness of her belly and she wheezed her breath out. Her mouth opened, not to cry out but to find air, and her shadowed face was an unreal map of eye and lip and plane of cheek. He tore at her underpants, missed his grip, tore at them again. They stretched but didn't give.

Fists, feet. She was hammering at him, not trying to yell anymore, saving her breath. He tried to get her chin with his left and she slipped the punch. Her dark hair was a fan on the grass. She bit his neck like a dog, going for the big vein there. He brought his knee up and her intake of breath became a small shriek.

He grabbed her pants again and this time there was a pop as the waistband let go. She almost scratched her way out from under and he drove the top of his head into the shelf of her chin. There was an ivory click as her teeth came together. Her body went slack and he jackknifed atop her. breathing in great lurches .

She was shamming. Both hands came down in a clap, catching his ears squarely between them. Red pain exploded in his head, and for the first time, he felt the strain of emotion while doing a job. He butted her savagely, and again.

This time she was not playing possum. Blood trickled slowly from one white nostril. He raped her.

He had thought her unconscious, but when he finished he saw her looking up at him in the dark. One of her eyes was rapidly puffing shut. Her clothes were tattered. Not that he had come out so well; his entire body felt raw and frayed.

"I am told to tell you that this is how your husband pays a debt to his honor. I am told to tell you that he is a man with a belly. I am told to tell you that all debts are paid and there is honor again."

He spoke expressionlessly. His contract was fulfilled. He got up on one knee, warily, then gained his feet. The cop would be by in seven minutes. It was time to be gone. Her one open eye glittered up at him in the dark, a pirate's gem.

Site said one word: "Wait."

Her second apartment, the one not even Benny Torreos knew about, was a walk-down nine blocks away. Bracken had given her his coat to hide her tom dress. They had only one exchange of conversation during the walk.

"I will give you twice what my husband paid you if you will do a job for me. "

"No. You don't have the money, and I have never crossed an employer. It's bad for business."

"I have the money. Not from him. From my family. And I don't want you to kill him."

Bracken said sardonically: "Rape is out. "

She found her apartment key after a hunt through her jumbled purse and let him in. The living room was done in varying, tasteful shades of green, a low-slung, modern decor that avoided the livid tastelessness of many trusting places. The only clashing, aggressive note was an impressionistic painting of a huge, canted roulette wheel which was hung over the lime-colored couch. It was done in hectic shades of red.

She crossed beneath it, reached into the next room, and turned on "light". There was a round bed with the covers turned back. When he walked through he saw that there were a number of mirrors,

She dropped his coat and stood in the ragged remnants of her dress. One rose-tinted nipple, dumbly erotic, peeped through shattered chiffon.

"Now, she said calmly, "we'll do it in a civilized way.

After, in the time of talking, she poured out her virulence toward the man she had married. There was a restful rise and fall to the cadence of her curses, and Bracken listened contentedly enough, poised on the dark knife-edge of sleep.

He was a wop, a stinking spic, a lover of sheep, a crude bludgeoner who went to chic restaurants and ate pie with his fingers; a grabber and a twister, a black-and-bluer of flesh; a lover of junk shop gimcracks; an aficionado of Norman Rockwell; a pederast; a man who would not treat her as a diadem but rather as a brace for his sagging manhood; not as a proud woman but as a dirty backstain joke to bolster the admiration of his pasta-eating, sweaty associates.

"A man with a belly," she whispered into the darkness just before Bracken dropped off "I am his belly. I am his guts. I am his honor." It occurred to him, as his mind fled to sleep, that the conflict of their honor had formed a bridge of hate between them that he now walked on, across oceans of darkness.

While they sat in the breakfast nook the following morning, eating doughnuts and watching legs pass in the tiny window above, she made her proposition: "Make me pregnant. I will pay you to do this."

Bracken put down his doughnut and looked at her.

She smiled and brushed her hair back. "He wants a child. Could he make one?" She shrugged. "Perhaps lasagna is good for potency. I, however, take pills. He knows I take them."

Bracken sipped his coffee. "Stud service?"

Norma laughed, a tinkly sound. "I suppose. I go to him today. No makeup. Black eye. Scratched face. Tears. How ! wish to be a good wife." The, black charring note of score began to creep in. "How I want to learn the recipe for his favorite greasy noodles. How I want to give him a son."

Her Face had become alive, lovely. "He will be prideful and forgiving... in short, blind. I'll get what I want, which is freedom of the tables. And he will get what he want!: which is an heir. "Perhaps not" She was lying, and when she looked into his eyes she saw his knowledge and smiled with slow, shy guile. "And perhaps, at the right time, I will kill him with the truth."

"You won't tell him?"

"Would it kill him?" Bracken leaned forward with mild professional interest.

"If. someone cut open your belly, would it kill you?"

"It would cost one hundred thousand dollars, Bracken said. "Forty before conception and sixty after. Have you got that kind of money?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "All right." He paused. "It's a funny hit, you know that? A funny hit."

She laughed.

He returned to the Graymoor that afternoon and collected the rest of his money. Correzzente was smiling and robust.

Bracken was thanked profusely. More business would be thrown his way. Bracken nodded, and Correzzente leaned toward him in a fatherly way.

"Can you keep your mouth shut about all this?"

"I always keep my mouth shut." Bracken said, and left.

Benny the Bull gave him a handshake and an envelope containing a plane ticket to Cleveland. Once there, Bracken bought a used car and drove back.

He took up residence in Norma Correzzente's second apartment. She brought him a carton of paperback novels. He read them and watched old movies on TV. He did not go out even when it would have been safe to go out. They made sex regularly. It was like being in a very plush jail. Ten weeks after the contract with Dan Vittorio had, been fulfilled, she killed the rabbit.

Bracken left town again.

He was in Palm Springs, and the phone connection was very bad. "Mr. Bracken?"

"Yes. Talk louder, please." Bracken was dressed in sweaty tennis whites; the girl on the bed wore only her skin. Tennis racket dangled from one hand. She swished at the air with it idly watching Bracken with the nearly expressionless eyes of experienced desire.

"This is Benito Torreos, Mr. Bracken.

"Yes. "

"You did a job for my Don seven months ago. You remember?"

"Yes." New sweat began to crawl down his back.

"He wants to see you. He's dying."

Bracken thought carefully, knowing his life almost certainly depended on his next words. He did not see what he had done as a double-cross: he had fulfilled two separate and exclusive contracts, and had been able to vacation from then until now on his earnings. But the old man would see it as a cross, a stain on his pride and good faith. He was a man with a belly.

"Why does he want to see me?"

"To ask a question."

The connection was very bad, and Bracken knew that to simply replace the instrument in its cradle would likely mean death. The family has a long arm. It was either to go Vito or run, and the connection was very bad.

"How is Mrs. Correzente?" He asked politely.

"Dead," Benny Torreos said flatly. "She died last month, in childbirth."

The bedroom was gothic shades of white on white - rug, walls, ceiling, curtains, even the sky beyond the windows. A steady drizzle was falling outside the Graymoor. Don Vito, shrunken to

the size of a jockey twisted from the back of his horse, lay immured in his deathbed, which was also white.

He lifted one hand to Bracken. It shook briefly in the air, then dropped to the snowy coverlet again. There was a soft click as Torreos left them, closing the door to rejoin the relatives in the front room. The women out there were dressed in black, and shawled. Even the business suits of their men seemed old fashioned, as if death had dragged Sicily back into the fabric of the clothes and of the wearers by force.

Bracken went to the bed. The old man's face had fallen away to a skull. There was a sour smell that seemed to come from the folds of his flesh. His mouth had been twisted down cruelly on the left side, and the left hand was claw-fingered and frozen.

"Bracken," Correzente said. His voice was blurred and cottony. The operative side of his face lifted in a grotesque smile while the other side remained impassive. "I must tell you."

"Benny said you had a question."

"Yes." The word came out yeth. "But I must... tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"They told me you did a good job. You do. You have killed my wife and me."

"I did my job."

"Pride", the old man said, and smiled apologetically. "Pride ... He seemed to gather himself. "She promised to be a good wife, a dutiful wife. She said she had been taking pills but these pills were no more. She said she would bear me a son.

"We made love together. But I am old. She asked if it was too much for me." The skull smile again. "Should I tell my chastened wife that I am no more a man? No, I say. No too much.

"We make love more. And I, I have a stroke. A little blood vessel up here" -- he tapped his head gravely-- "goes pop, like a balloon. The doctor comes and says, No more, Vito. You will kill yourself. And I say, yes, more. Until I have put a child in her."

"Pride ...

"Then the doctor say, You have done this. You have made a baby at seventy-eight. He say, I would give you a cigar, Vito, but you must smoke no more cigars. "

Bracken shifted his legs. The whiteness of the room was oppressive, creeping.

"I am overjoyed. I am a man, much man. I have a belly. The house is filled with my family. We have, oh, the word is for much food --
--"

"Banquet," Bracken said.

"Yes. and I sit at the head of the table, then rise. My wife, she rises. I toast her with wine and tell them. I say, I have given my belly to my wife!" "I am the happiness of the world. I am beyond laughings and dirty jokes. I give her money for the wheels and tables. I give her what she wants. Then one night, we argue. Much hard words pass. And then ... I have this. Pain. One eye goes blind. She saw it and screamed. She runs for the telephone in the living room with her belly before her. I try to call but am down a dark hole. when I wake up, they tell me she has fallen on the steps going down from hen to the living room. They tell me she is in the

hospital. Then they tell me . . . " The hand rose again. "Fut." Don Vito said. The dreadful smile came and went.

Correzente was visibly tired now. His eyes closed, then opened slowly, as if weighted.

"You see?" he whispered. "The irony?"

"Benny said you had a question." Bracken said.

The dead face looked up at him steadily. "The baby lives," he said. "They tell me this. In a glass house."

"Incubator."

"They say the baby has pretty blue eyes.

Bracken said nothing.

"You made one of Norma's eyes black. But they were brown. And then is no blue-eyed Sicilian."

"Benny said you had a question," Bracken said.

"I have ask my question. My doctor say, it's genes. I do not know genes. I only know what a dying man lies in bed and thinks. How she was prideful and how she could wait."

Bracken looked down at him, his mind a thousand miles away. He thought of the blonde, how she served, the brown flesh of her legs below the blinding white of her skirt, the flickering glimpse of her panties, the fan of her hair on the pillow, her trained tennis muscles.

"How stupid you are," he said to the old man, softly. He leaned forward, breathing in the scent of Correzente's doom. "Death has made you senile. I have my own belly. Do you think I would take my own leavings?"

A line of spittle was making a slow trek down from the corner of the old man's mouth to his chin.

"The baby's eyes will go brown. Too bad you won't see it.

Goodbye, stupid old man." He got up. The room was white and full of death. He left and went back to Palm Springs.

MEMORY

by Stephen King

Stephen King's short story "Memory" appeared in Volume 7, Number 4 of *Tin House*, the Summer 2006 issue. It is the seed from which has grown a much longer tale, *Duma Key*, which Scribner will publish in early 2008.

MEMORY

Memories are contrary things; if you quit chasing them and turn your back, they often return on their own. That's what Kamen says. I tell him I never chased the memory of my accident. Some things, I say, are better forgotten.

Maybe, but that doesn't matter, either. That's what Kamen says.

My name is Edgar Freemantle. I used to be a big deal in building and construction. This was in Minnesota, in my other life. I was a genuine American-boy success in that life, worked my way up like a motherfucker, and for me, everything worked out. When Minneapolis–St. Paul boomed, The Freemantle Company boomed. When things tightened up, I never tried to force things. But I played my hunches, and most of them played out well. By the time I was fifty, Pam and I were worth about forty million dollars. And what we had together still worked. I looked at other women from time to time but never strayed. At the end of our particular Golden Age, one of our girls was at Brown and the other was teaching in a foreign exchange program. Just before things went wrong, my wife and I were planning to go and visit her.

I had an accident at a job site. That's what happened. I was in my pickup truck. The right side of my skull was crushed. My ribs were broken. My right hip was shattered. And although I retained sixty per cent of the sight in my right eye (more, on a good day), I lost almost all of my right arm.

I was supposed to lose my life, but I didn't. Then I was supposed to become one of the Vegetable Simpsons, a Coma Homer, but that didn't happen, either. I was one confused American when I came around, but the worst of that passed. By the time it did, my wife had passed, too. She's remarried to a fellow who owns bowling alleys. My older daughter likes him. My younger daughter thinks he's a yank-off. My wife says she'll come around.

Maybe *sí*, maybe *no*. That's what Kamen says.

When I say I was confused, I mean that at first I didn't know who people were, or what had happened, or why I was in such awful pain. I can't remember the quality and pitch of that pain now. I know it was excruciating, but it's all pretty academic. Like a picture of a mountain in *National Geographic* magazine. It wasn't academic at the time. At the time it was more like climbing a mountain.

Maybe the headache was the worst. It wouldn't stop. Behind my forehead it was always midnight in the world's biggest clock-shop. Because my right eye was fucked up, I was seeing the world through a film of blood, and I still hardly knew what the world was. Few things had names. I remember one day when Pam was in the room—I was still in the hospital, this was before the convalescent home—and she was standing by my bed. I knew who she was, but I was extremely pissed that she should be standing when there was the thing you sit in right over in the cornhole.

"Bring the friend," I said. "Sit in the friend."

"What do you mean, Edgar?" she asked.

"The *friend*, the *buddy*!" I shouted. "Bring over the fucking *pal*, you dumb bitch!" My head was killing me and she was starting to cry. I hated her for starting to cry. She had no business crying, because she wasn't the one in the cage, looking at everything through a red blur. She wasn't the monkey in the cage. And then it came to me. "Bring over the chum and for Christ's sake sick *down*!" It was the closest my rattled-up, fucked-up brain could come to *chair*.

I was angry all the time. There were two older nurses that I called Dry Fuck One and Dry Fuck Two, as if they were characters in a dirty Dr. Seuss story. There was a candystriper I called Pilch Lozenge—I have no idea why, but that nickname also had some sort of sexual connotation. To me, at least. As I grew stronger, I tried to hit people. Twice I tried to stab Pam, and on the first of those two occasions I succeeded, although only with a plastic knife. She still needed stitches in her forearm. I had to be tied down that day.

Here is what I remember most clearly about that part of my other life: a hot afternoon toward the end of my stay in the expensive convalescent home, the air conditioning broken, tied down in my bed, a soap opera on the television, a thousand bells ringing in my head, pain burning my right side like a poker, my missing right arm itching, my missing right fingers twitching, the morphine pump beside the bed making the hollow BONG that meant you couldn't get any more for awhile, and a nurse swims out of the red, a creature coming to look at the monkey in the cage, and the nurse says: "Are you ready to visit with your wife?" And I say: "Only if she brought a gun to shoot me with."

You don't think that kind of pain will pass, but it does. They shipped me home, the red began to drain from my vision, and Kamen showed up. Kamen's a psychologist who specializes in hypnotherapy. He showed me some neat tricks for managing phantom aches and itches in

my missing arm. And he brought me Reba.

“This is not approved psychological therapy for anger management,” Dr. Kamen said, although I suppose he might have been lying about that to make Reba more attractive. He told me I had to give her a hateful name, so I named her after an aunt who used to pinch my fingers when I was small if I didn’t eat all of my vegetables. Then, less than two days after getting her, I forgot her name. I could only think of boy names, each one making me angrier: Randall, Russell, Rudolph, even River-fucking-Phoenix.

Pam came in with my lunch and I could see her steeling herself for an outburst. But even though I’d forgotten the name of the fluffy blond rage-doll, I remembered how I was supposed to use it in this situation.

“Pam,” I said, “I need five minutes to get myself under control. I can do this.”

“Are you sure—”

“Yes, just get that hamhock out of here and stick it up your face-powder. I can do this.”

I didn’t know if I could or not, but that was what I was supposed to say—I *can do this*. I couldn’t remember the fucking doll’s name, but I could remember *I can do this*. That is clear about the convalescent part of my other life, how I kept saying *I can do this* even when I knew I was fucked, double-fucked, I was dead-ass-fucked in the pouring rain.

“I can do this,” I said, and she backed out without a word, the tray still in her hands and the cup chattering against the plate.

When she was gone, I held the doll up in front of my face, staring into its stupid blue eyes as my thumbs disappeared into its stupid yielding body. “What’s your name, you bat-faced bitch?” I shouted at it. It never once occurred to me that Pam was listening on the kitchen intercom, her and the day-nurse both. But if the intercom had been broken they could have heard me through the door. I was in good voice that day.

I shook the doll back and forth. Its head flopped and its dumb hair flew. Its blue cartoon eyes seemed to be saying *Oouuu, you nasty man!*

“What’s your name, bitch? What’s your name, you cunt? What’s your name, you cheap plastic toe-rag? Tell me your name or I’ll kill you! Tell me your name or I’ll kill you! *Tell me your name or I’ll cut out your eyes and chop off your nose and rip off your—*”

My mind cross-connected then, a thing that still happens now, four years later, although far less often. For a moment I was in my pickup

truck, clipboard rattling against my old steel lunchbucket in the passenger footwell (I doubt if I was the only working millionaire in America to carry a lunch-bucket, but you probably could have counted us in the dozens), my PowerBook beside me on the seat. And from the radio a woman's voice cried "*It was RED!*" with evangelical fervor. Only three words, but three was enough. It was the song about the poor woman who turns out her pretty daughter as a prostitute. It was "Fancy," by Reba McIntire.

I hugged the doll against me. "You're Reba. Reba-Reba-Reba. I'll never forget again." I did, but I didn't get angry next time. No. I held her against me like a little love, closed my eyes, and visualized the pickup that had been demolished in the accident. I visualized my steel lunchbucket rattling against the steel clip on my clipboard, and the woman's voice came from the radio once more, exulting with that same evangelical fervor: "*It was RED!*"

Dr. Kamen called it a breakthrough. My wife seemed a good deal less excited, and the kiss she put on my cheek was of the dutiful variety. It was about two months later that she told me she wanted a divorce.

By then the pain had either lessened considerably or my mind had made certain crucial adjustments when it came to dealing with it. The headaches still came, but less often and rarely with the same violence. I was always more than ready for Vicodin at five and OxyContin at eight—could hardly hobble on my bright red Canadian crutch until I'd had them—but my rebuilt hip was starting to mend.

Kathi Green the Rehab Queen came to Casa Freemantle on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. I was allowed an extra Vicodin before our sessions, and still my screams filled the house by the time we finished the leg-bends that were our grand finale. Our basement rec room had been converted into a therapy suite, complete with a hot tub I could get in and out of on my own. After two months of physical therapy—this would have been almost six months after the accident—I started to go down there on my own in the evenings. Kathi said working out a couple of hours before bed would release endorphins and I'd sleep better. I don't know about the endorphins, but I did start getting a little more sleep.

It was during one of these evening workouts that my wife of a quarter-century came downstairs and told me she wanted a divorce.

I stopped what I was doing—crunches—and looked at her. I was sitting on a floor-pad. She was standing at the foot of the stairs, prudently across the room. I could have asked her if she was serious, but

the light down there was very good—those racked fluorescents—and I didn't have to. I don't think it's the sort of thing women joke about six months after their husbands have almost died in accidents, anyway. I could have asked her why, but I knew. I could see the small white scar on her arm where I had stabbed her with the plastic knife from my hospital tray, and that was really the least of it. I thought of telling her, not so long ago, to get the hamhock out of here and stick it up her face-powder. I thought of asking her to think about it, but the anger came back. In those days what Dr. Kamen called the *inappropriate anger* often did. And what I was feeling right then did not seem all that inappropriate.

My shirt was off. My right arm ended three and a half inches below the shoulder. I twitched it at her—a twitch was the best I could do with the muscle that was left. "This is me," I said, "giving you the finger. Get out of here if that's how you feel. Get out, you quitting birch."

The first tears had started rolling down her face, but she tried to smile. "Bitch, Edgar," she said. "You mean bitch."

"The word is what I say it is," I said, and began to do crunches again. It's harder than hell to do them with an arm gone; your body wants to pull and corkscrew to that side. "I wouldn't have left *you*, that's the point. I wouldn't have left *you*. I would have gone on through the mud and the blood and the piss and the spilled beer."

"It's different," she said. She made no effort to wipe her face. "It's different and you know it. I couldn't break you in two if I got into a rage."

"I'd have a hell of a job breaking you in two with only one arm," I said, doing crunches faster.

"You stuck me with a knife." As if that were the point.

"A plastic fife is all it was, I was half out of my mind, and it'll be your last words on your fucking beth-dead, 'Eddie staffed me with a plastic fife, goodbye cruel world.'"

"You choked me," she said in a voice I could barely hear.

I stopped doing crunches and gaped at her. "I choked you? I never choked you!"

"I know you don't remember, but you did."

"Shut up," I said. "You want a divorce, you can have a divorce. Only go do the alligator somewhere else. Get out of here."

She went up the stairs and closed the door without looking back. And it wasn't until she was gone that I realized what I'd meant to say: crocodile tears. Go cry your crocodile tears somewhere else.

Oh, well. Close enough for rock and roll. That's what Kamen says. And I was the one who ended up getting out.

Except for the former Pamela Gustafson, I never had a partner in my other life. I did have an accountant I trusted, however, and it was Tom Riley who helped me move the few things I needed from the house in Mendota Heights to the smaller place we kept on Lake Phalen, twenty miles away. Tom, who had been divorced twice, worried at me all the way out. "You don't give up the house in a situation like this," he said. "Not unless the judge kicks you out. It's like giving up home field advantage in a playoff game."

Kathi Green the Rehab Queen only had one divorce under her belt, but she and Tom were on the same wavelength. She thought I was crazy to move out. She sat cross-legged on the lakeporch in her leotard, holding my feet and looking at me with grim outrage.

"What, because you poked her with a plastic hospital knife when you could barely remember your own name? Mood-swings and short-term memory loss following accident trauma are *common*. You suffered three subdural hematomas, for God's sake!"

"Are you sure that's not hematomae?" I asked her.

"Blow me," she said. "And if you've got a good lawyer, you can make her pay for being such a wimp." Some hair had escaped from her Rehab Gestapo ponytail and she blew it back from her forehead. "She *ought* to pay for it. Read my lips, Edgar, *none of this is your fault*."

"She says I tried to choke her."

"And if so, being choked by a one-armed invalid must have been very upsetting. Come on, Eddie, make her pay. I'm sure I'm stepping way out of my place, but I don't care. She should not be doing what she's doing. Make her pay."

Not long after I relocated to the place on Lake Phalen, the girls came to see me—the young women. They brought a picnic hamper and we sat on the piney-smelling lakeporch and looked out at the water and nibbled at the sandwiches. It was past Labor Day by then, most of the floating toys put away for another year. There was also a bottle of wine in the hamper, but I only drank a little. On top of the pain medication, alcohol hit me hard; a single glass could turn me into a slurring drunk. The girls—the *young women*—finished the rest between them, and it loosened them up. Melissa, back from France for the second time since

my unfortunate argument with the crane and not happy about it, asked me if all adults in their fifties had these unpleasant regressive interludes, did she have that to look forward to. Ilse, the younger, began to cry, leaned against me, and asked why it couldn't be like it was, why couldn't we— meaning her mother and me—be like *we* were.

Lissa's temper and Ilse's tears weren't exactly pleasant, but at least they were honest, and I recognized both reactions from all the years the girls had spent growing up in the house where I lived with them; those responses were as familiar to me as the mole on Ilse's chin or the faint vertical frown-line, which in time would deepen into a groove like her mother's, between Lissa's eyes.

Lissa wanted to know what I was going to do. I told her I didn't know, and in a way that was true. I'd come a long distance toward deciding to end my own life, but I knew that if I did it, it must absolutely look like an accident. I would not leave these two, just starting out in their lives with nothing but fresh tickets on their belts, carrying the residual guilt of their father's suicide. Nor would I leave a load of guilt behind for the woman with whom I had once shared a milkshake in bed, both of us naked and laughing and listening to the Plastic Ono Band on the stereo.

After they'd had a chance to vent—after a *full and complete exchange of feelings*, in Kamen-speak—things calmed down, and my memory is that we actually had a pleasant afternoon, looking at old photo albums Ilse found in a drawer and reminiscing about the past. I think we even laughed a time or two, but not all memories of my other life are to be trusted. Kamen says when it comes to the past, we all stack the deck.

Maybe *sí*, maybe *no*.

Speaking of Kamen, he was my next visitor at Casa Phalen. Three days later, this would have been. Or maybe six. Like many other aspects of my memory during those post-accident months, my time-sense was pretty much *hors de fucky*. I didn't invite him; I had my rehabilitation dominatrix to thank for that.

Although surely no more than forty, Xander Kamen walked like a much older man and wheezed even when he sat, peering at the world through thick glasses and over an enormous pear of a belly. He was very tall and very Afro-American, with features carved so large they seemed unreal. Those great staring eyeballs, that ship's figurehead of a nose,

and those totemic lips were awe-inspiring. Kamen looked like a minor god in a suit from Men's Wearhouse. He also looked like a prime candidate for a fatal heart attack or stroke before his fiftieth birthday.

He refused my offer of coffee or a Coke, said he couldn't stay, then put his briefcase aside on the couch as if to contradict that. He sat sunk full fathom five beside the couch's armrest (and going deeper all the time—I feared for the thing's springs), looking at me and wheezing benignly.

"What brings you out this way?" I asked him.

"Oh, Kathi tells me you're planning to off yourself," he said. It was the tone he might have used to say *Kathi tells me you're having a lawn party and there are fresh Krispy Kremes on offer*. "Any truth to that?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Once, when I was ten and growing up in Eau Claire, I took a comic book from a drugstore spin-around, put it down the front of my jeans, then dropped my tee-shirt over it. As I was strolling out the door, feeling clever, a clerk grabbed me by the arm. She lifted my shirt with her other hand and exposed my ill-gotten treasure. "How did *that* get there?" she asked me. Not in the forty years since had I been so completely stuck for an answer to a simple question.

Finally—long after such a response could have any weight—I said, "That's ridiculous. I don't know where she could have gotten such an idea."

"No?"

"No. Sure you don't want a Coke?"

"Thanks, but I'll pass."

I got up and got a Coke from the kitchen fridge. I tucked the bottle firmly between my stump and my chest-wall—pos-sible but painful, I don't know what you may have seen in the movies, but broken ribs hurt for a long time—and spun off the cap with my left hand. I'm a southpaw. Caught a break there, *muchacho*, as Kamen says.

"I'm surprised you'd take her seriously in any case," I said as I came back in. "Kathi's a hell of a physical therapist, but a headshrinker she's not." I paused before sitting down. "Neither are you, actually. In the technical sense."

Kamen cupped one hand behind an ear that looked roughly the size of a desk drawer. "Do I hear . . . a ratcheting noise? I believe I do!"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's the charmingly medieval sound a person's defenses make when they go up." He tried an ironic wink, but the size of the man's face made

irony impossible; he could only manage burlesque. Still, I took the point. “As for Kathi Green, you’re right, what does she know? All she does is work with paraplegics, quadriplegics, accident-related amps like you, and people recovering from traumatic head injuries—again, like you. For fifteen years Kathi Green’s done this work, she’s had the opportunity to watch a thousand maimed patients reflect on how not even a single second of time can ever be called back, so how could she *possibly* recognize the signs of pre-suicidal depression?”

I sat down in the lumpy easy chair across from the couch, listing to the left as I did it to favor my bad hip, and stared at him sullenly. Here was trouble. No matter how carefully I crafted my suicide, here was trouble. And Kathi Green was more.

He leaned forward . . . but, given his girth, a few inches was all he could manage. “You have to wait,” he said.

I gaped at him. It was the last thing I had expected.

He nodded. “You’re surprised. Yes. But I’m not a Christian, let alone a Catholic, and on the subject of suicide my mind is quite open. Yet I’m a believer in responsibilities, and I tell you this: if you kill yourself now . . . or even six months from now . . . your wife and daughters will know. No matter how cleverly you do it, they’ll know.”

“I don’t—”

“And the company that insures your life—for a very large sum, I have no doubt—they’ll know, too. They may not be able to prove it . . . but they will try very, very hard. The rumors they start will hurt your children, no matter how well-armored against such things you may think they are.”

Melissa was well-armored. Ilse, however, was a different story.

“And in the end, they may prove it.” He shrugged his enormous shoulders. “How much of a death-duty that would mean I wouldn’t venture to guess, but I know it might erase a great deal of your life’s treasure.”

I wasn’t even thinking about the money. I was thinking about a team of insurance investigators sniffing around whatever I set up, trying to overturn it. And all at once I began to laugh.

Kamen sat with his huge dark hands on his doorstep knees, looking at me with his little *I’ve-seen-everything* smile. Except on his face nothing was little. He let my laughter run its course and when it had, he asked me what was so funny.

“You’re telling me I’m too rich to kill myself,” I said.

“I’m telling you to give it time. I have a very strong intuition in your

case—the same sort of intuition that caused me to give you the doll you named... what did you name her?”

For a second I couldn't remember. Then I thought, *It was RED!*, and told him what I had named my fluffy blond anger-doll.

He nodded. “Yes. The same sort of intuition that caused me to give you Reba. My intuition is that in your case, time may soothe you. Time and memory.”

I didn't tell him I remembered everything I wanted to. He knew my position on that. “How much time are we talking about, Kamen?”

He sighed as a man does before saying something he may regret. “At least a year.” He studied my face. “It seems a very long time to you. The way you are now.”

“Yes,” I said. “Time's different for me now.”

“Of course it is,” he said. “Pain-time is different. Alone-time is different. Put them together and you have something very different. So pretend you're an alcoholic and do it as they do.”

“A day at a time.”

He nodded. “A day at a time.”

“Kamen, you are so full of bullshit.”

He looked at me from the depths of the old couch, not smiling. He'd never get out of there without help.

“Maybe *sí*, maybe *no*,” he said. “In the meantime . . . Edgar, does anything make you happy?”

“I don't know . . . I used to sketch.”

“When?”

I realized I hadn't done more than doodle while taking telephone calls since an art class for extra credit in high school. I considered lying about this—I was ashamed to seem like such a fixated drudge—and then told the truth. One-armed men should tell the truth whenever possible. Kamen doesn't say that; I do.

“Take it up again,” Kamen said. “You need hedges.”

“Hedges,” I said, bemused.

“Yes, Edgar.” He looked surprised and a little disappointed, as if I had failed to understand a very simple concept. “Hedges against the night.”

It might have been a week after Kamen's visit that Tom Riley came to see me. The leaves had started to turn color, and I remember the clerks putting up Halloween posters in the Wal-Mart where I bought sketchpads and various drawing implements a few days before my

former accountant's visit; that's the best I can do.

What I remember most clearly about that visit is how embarrassed and ill-at-ease Tom seemed. He was on an errand he didn't want to run.

I offered him a Coke and he took me up on it. When I came back from the kitchen, he was looking at a pen-and-ink I'd done—three palm trees silhouetted against an expanse of water, a bit of tiled roof jutting into the left foreground. "This is pretty good," he said. "You do this?"

"Nah, the elves," I said. "They come in the night. Cobble my shoes and draw the occasional picture."

He laughed too hard and set the picture back down on the desk. "Don't look much like Minnesota, dere," he said, doing a Swedish accent.

"I copied it out of a book," I said. "What can I do for you, Tom? If it's about the business—"

"Actually, Pam asked me to come out." He ducked his head. "I didn't much want to, but I didn't feel I could say no."

"Tom," I said, "go on and spit it out. I'm not going to bite you."

"She's got herself a lawyer. She's going ahead with this divorce business."

"I never thought she wouldn't." It was the truth. I still didn't remember choking her, but I remembered the look in her eyes when she told me I had. I remembered telling her she was a quitting birch and feeling that if she dropped dead at that moment, right there at the foot of the cellar stairs, that would be all right with me. Fine, in fact. And setting aside how I'd felt then, once Pam started down a road, she rarely turned around.

"She wants to know if you're going to be using Bozie."

I had to smile at that. William Bozeman III was the wheel-dog of the Minneapolis law-firm the company used, and if he knew Tom and I had been calling him Bozie for the last twenty years, he would probably have a hemorrhage.

"I hadn't thought about it. What's the deal, Tom? What exactly does she want?"

He drank off half his Coke, put the glass on a bookshelf beside my half-assed sketch, and looked at his shoes. "She said she hopes it doesn't have to be mean. She said, 'I don't want to be rich, and I don't want a fight. I just want him to be fair to me and the girls, the way he always was, will you tell him that?' So I am." He shrugged, still looking down at his shoes.

I got up, went to the big window between the living room and the

porch, and looked out at the lake. When I turned back, Tom Riley didn't look himself at all. At first I thought he was sick to his stomach. Then I realized he was struggling not to cry.

"Tom, what's the matter?" I asked.

He shook his head, tried to speak, and produced only a watery croak. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Boss, I can't get used to seeing you with just the one arm. I'm so sorry."

It was artless, unrehearsed, and sweet. A straight shot to the heart, in other words. I think there was a moment when we were both close to bawling, like a couple of Sensitive Guys on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. All we needed was Dr. Phil, nodding avuncular approval.

"I'm sorry, too," I said, "but I'm getting along. Really. And I'm going to give you an offer to take back to her. If she likes the shape of it, we can hammer out the details. No lawyers needed. Do-it-yourself deal."

"Are you serious, Eddie?"

"I am. You do a comprehensive accounting so we have a bottom-line figure to work with. Nothing hidden. Then we divide the swag into four shares. She takes three—seventy-five per cent—for her and the girls. I take the rest. The divorce itself . . . hey, Minnesota's a no-fault state, she and I can go to lunch and then buy *Divorce for Dummies* at Borders."

He looked dazed. "Is there such a book?"

"I haven't researched it, but if there isn't, I'll eat your shirts."

"I think the saying's 'eat my shorts.'"

"Isn't that what I said?"

"Never mind. Eddie, that kind of deal is going to trash the estate."

"Ask me if I give a shit. Or a shirt, for that matter. All I'm proposing is that we dispense with the ego that usually allows the lawyers to swallow the cream. There's plenty for all of us, if we're reasonable."

He drank some of his Coke, never taking his eyes off me. "Sometimes I wonder if you're the same man I used to work for," he said.

"That man died in his pickup truck," I said.

If you've been picturing my convalescent retreat as a lakeside cottage standing in splendid isolation at the end of a lonely dirt road in the north woods, you better think again—this is suburban St. Paul we're talking about. Our place by the lake stands at the end of Aster Lane, a paved street running from East Hoyt Avenue to the water. In the middle of October I finally took Kathi Green's advice and began walking. They were only short outings up to East Hoyt Avenue, but I always came

back with my bad hip crying for mercy and often with tears standing in my eyes. Yet I also almost always came back feeling like a conquering hero—I'd be a liar if I didn't admit it. I was returning from one of these walks when Mrs. Fevereau hit Gandalf, the pleasant Jack Russell terrier who belonged to the little girl next door.

I was three-quarters of the way home when the Fevereau woman went past me in her ridiculous mustard-colored Hummer. As always, she had her cell phone in one hand and a cigarette in the other; as always she was going too fast. I barely noticed, and I certainly didn't see Gandalf dash into the street up ahead, concentrating only on Monica Goldstein, coming down the other side of the street in full Girl Scout uniform. I was concentrating on my reconstructed hip. As always near the end of these short strolls, this so-called medical marvel felt packed with roughly ten thousand tiny points of broken glass. My clearest memory before the scream of the Hummer's tires was thinking that the Mrs. Fevereaus of the world now lived in a different universe than the one I inhabited, one where all sensations were turned down to half-strength.

Then the tires yowled, and a little girl's scream joined them: "*GANDALF, NO!*" For a moment I had a clear and unearthly vision of the crane that had almost killed me filling the right window of my pickup truck, the world I'd always lived in suddenly eaten up by a yellow much brighter than Mrs. Fevereau's Hummer, and black letters floating in it, swelling, getting larger.

Then Gandalf began to scream, too, and the flashback— what Dr. Kamen would no doubt have called *a recovered memory*—was gone. Until that afternoon in October four years ago, I hadn't known dogs *could* scream.

I broke into a lurching, crabwise run, pounding the sidewalk with my red crutch. I'm sure it would have appeared ludicrous to an onlooker, but no one was paying any attention to me. Monica Goldstein was kneeling in the middle of the street beside her dog, which lay in front of the Hummer's high, boxy grille. Her face was white above her forest-green uniform, from which a sash of badges and medals hung. The end of this sash was soaking in a spreading pool of Gandalf's blood. Mrs. Fevereau half-jumped and half-fell from the Hummer's ridiculously high driver's seat. Ava Goldstein came running from the front door of the Goldstein house, crying her daughter's name. Mrs. Goldstein's blouse was half-buttoned and her feet were bare.

“Don’t touch him, honey, don’t touch him,” Mrs. Fevereau said. She was still holding her cigarette and she puffed nervously at it. “He could bite.”

Monica paid no attention. She touched Gandalf’s side. The dog screamed again when she did—it *was* a scream—and Monica covered her eyes with the heels of her hands. She began to shake her head. I didn’t blame her.

Mrs. Fevereau reached out for the girl, then changed her mind. She took two steps back, leaned against the high side of her ridiculous yellow mode of transport, and looked up at the sky.

Mrs. Goldstein knelt beside her daughter. “Honey, oh honey please don’t . . .”

Gandalf began to howl. He lay in the street, in a pool of his spreading blood, howling. And now I could also remember the sound the crane had made. Not the *meep-meep-meep* it was supposed to make, because its backup warning had been broken, but the juddering stutter of its diesel engine and the sound of its treads eating up the earth.

“Get her inside, Ava,” I said. “Get her in the house.”

Mrs. Goldstein got her arm around her daughter’s shoulders and urged her up. “Come on, honey. Come inside.”

“Not without *Gandalf*!” Monica screamed. She was eleven, and mature for her age, but in those moments she had regressed to three. “Not without my *doggy*!” Her sash, the last three inches now sodden with blood, thwapped the side of her skirt and a long line of blood spattered down her calf.

“Go in and call the vet,” I told her. “Say Gandalf’s been hit by a car. Say he has to come right away. I’ll stay with him.”

Monica looked at me with eyes that were more than shocked. They were crazy. I had no trouble holding her gaze, though; I’d seen it often enough in my own mirror. “Do you promise? Big swear? Mother’s name?”

“Big swear, mother’s name,” I said. “Go on, Monica.”

She went, casting one more look back and uttering one more bereft wail before starting up the steps to her house. I knelt beside Gandalf, holding onto the Hummer’s fender and going down as I always did, painfully and listing severely to the left, trying to keep my right knee from bending any more than it absolutely had to. Still, I voiced my own little cry of pain, and I wondered if I’d be able to get up again without help. It might not be forthcoming from Mrs. Fevereau; she walked over to the lefthand side of the street with her legs stiff and wide apart, then

bent at the waist as if bowing to royalty, and vomited in the gutter. She held the hand with the cigarette in it off to one side as she did it.

I turned my attention to Gandalf. He had been struck in the hindquarters. His spine was crushed. Blood and shit oozed sluggishly from between his broken rear legs. His eyes turned up to me and in them I saw a horrible expression of hope. His tongue crept out and licked my inner left wrist. His tongue was dry as carpet, and cold. Gandalf was going to die, but maybe not soon enough. Monica would come out again soon, and I didn't want him alive to lick her wrist when she did.

I understood what I had to do. There was no one to see me do it. Monica and her mother were inside. Mrs. Fevereau's back was still turned. If others on this little stub of a street had come to their windows (or out on their lawns), the Hummer blocked their view of me sitting beside the dog with my bad right leg awkwardly outstretched. I had a few moments, but only a few, and if I stopped to consider, my chance would be lost.

So I took Gandalf's upper body in my good arm and without a pause I'm back at the Sutton Avenue site, where The Freemantle Company is getting ready to build a forty-story bank building. I'm in my pickup truck. Pat Green's on the radio, singing "Wave on Wave." I suddenly realize the crane's too loud even though I haven't heard any backup beeper and when I look to my right the world in that window is gone. The world on that side has been replaced by yellow. Black letters float there: **LINK-BELT**. They're swelling. I spin the Ram's wheel to the left, all the way to the stop, knowing I'm already too late as the scream of crumpling metal starts, drowning out the song on the radio and shrinking the inside of the cab right to left because the crane's invading my space, *stealing* my space, and the pickup is tipping. I'm trying for the driver's side door but it's no good. I should have done that right away but it got too late real early. The world in front of me disappears as the windshield turns to milk shot through with a million cracks. Then the building site is back, still turning on a hinge as the windshield pops out, *flies* out bent in the middle like a playing-card, and I'm laying on the horn with the points of both elbows, my right arm doing its last job. I can barely hear the horn over the crane's engine. **LINK-BELT** is still moving in, pushing the passenger-side door, closing the passenger-side footwell, eating up the dashboard, splintering it in jagged hunks of plastic. The shit from the glove-compartment floats around like confetti, the radio goes dead, my lunchbucket is tangling against my clipboard, and here comes **LINK-BELT**. **LINK-BELT** is right on top of me, I could stick out my tongue and lick that fucking hyphen. I start

screaming because that's when the pressure starts. The pressure is my right arm first pushing against my side, then spreading, then splitting open. Blood douses my lap like a bucket of hot water and I hear something breaking. Probably my ribs. It sounds like chickenbones under a bootheel.

I held Gandalf against me and thought Bring the friend, sit in the friend, sit in the fucking PAL, you dumb bitch!

Now I'm in sitting in the chum, sitting in the fucking *pal*, it's at home but all the clocks of the world are still ringing inside my cracked head and I can't remember the name of the doll Kamen gave me, all I can remember are boy names: Randall, Russell, Rudolph, even River-fucking-Phoenix. I tell her to leave me alone when she comes in with the lunch I don't want, to give me five minutes to get myself under control. *I can do this*, I say, because it's the phrase Kamen has given me, it's the out, it's the *meep-meep-meep* that says watch out, Pamela, I'm backing up. But instead of leaving she takes the napkin from the lunch tray to wipe the sweat off my forehead and while she's doing that I grab her by the throat because in that moment it seems to me it's her fault I can't remember my doll's name, *everything* is her fault, including **LINK-BELT**. I grab her with my good left hand, caught a break there, *muchacho*. For a few seconds I want to kill her, and who knows, maybe I almost do. What I do know is I'd rather remember all the accidents in the world than the look in her eyes as she struggles in my grip like a fish stuck on a gaff. Then I think *It was RED!* and let her go.

I held Gandalf against my chest as I once held my infant daughters and thought, *I can do this. I can do this. I can do this*. I felt Gandalf's blood soak through my pants like hot water and thought, *Go on, you sad fuck, get out of Dodge*.

I held Gandalf and thought of how it felt to be crushed alive as the cab of your truck ate the air around you and the breath left your body and the blood blew out of your nose and mouth and those snapping sounds as consciousness fled, those were the bones breaking inside your own body: your ribs, your arm, your hip, your leg, your cheek, your fucking skull.

I held Monica's dog and thought, in a kind of miserable triumph: *It was RED!*

For a moment I was in a darkness shot with that red, and I held

Gandalf's neck in the crook of my left arm, which was now doing the work of two and very strong. I flexed that arm as hard as I could, flexed the way I did when I was doing my curls with the ten-pound weight. Then I opened my eyes. Gandalf was silent, staring past my face and past the sky beyond.

"Edgar?" It was Hastings, the old guy who lived two houses up from the Goldsteins. There was an expression of dismay on his face. "You can let go now. That dog is dead."

"Yes," I said, relaxing my grip on Gandalf. "Would you help me get up?"

"I'm not sure I can," Hastings said. "I'd be more apt to pull us both down."

"Then go in and see the Goldsteins," I said.

"It is her dog," he said. "I wasn't sure. I was hoping..." He shook his head.

"It's hers. And I don't want her to see him like this."

"Of course not, but—"

"I'll help him," Mrs. Fevereau said. She looked a little better, and she had ditched the cigarette. She reached for my right armpit, then hesitated. "Will that hurt you?"

It would, but less than staying the way I was. As Hastings went up the Goldsteins' walk, I took hold of the Hummer's bumper. Together we managed to get me on my feet.

"I don't supposed you've got anything to cover the dog with?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact, there's a rug remnant in the back." She started around to the rear—it would be a long trek, given the Hummer's size—then turned back. "Thank God it died before the little girl got back."

"Yes," I said. "Thank God."

"Still—she'll never forget it, will she?"

"Well," I said, "you're asking the wrong person about that, Mrs. Fevereau. I'm just a retired general contractor." But when I asked Kamen, he was surprisingly optimistic. He says it's the bad memories that wear thin first. Then, he says, they tear open and let the light through. I told him he was full of shit and he just laughed.

Maybe *sí*, he says. Maybe *no*.

Silence

Stephen King

Published in "Moth", 1970

Nothing
but the insect whine of
chemicals moving between
refrigerator walls:
the mind becomes CONFSSIONAL
(enamel)
murder
lurks
I stand with books in hand
the feary silence of fury
waiting
for the furnace to kick on

Skybar

by Brian Hartz & Stephen King

The following story was written from a contest with Doubleday books to promote the 1982 "Do it Yourself Bestseller" book edited by Tom Silberkleit and Jerry Biederman.

There were many authors featured in the book, including Belva Plain and Isaac Asimov. Each writer provided the beginning and ending to a story.

It was up to the reader to provide the middle, hence the name "Do It Yourself Bestseller."

As part of the promotion, Doubleday books held a national contest to see who could write the best middle portion.

Each winner was chosen by the individual writer - in this case, Stephen King. Brian Hartz was 18 at the time it was written.

This story contains strong language and material that may be unsuitable for younger readers.

There were twelve of us when we went in that night, but only two of us came out - my friend Kirby and me. And Kirby was insane. All of the things I'm going to tell you about happened twelve years ago. I was eleven then, in the sixth grade. Kirby was ten and in the fifth. In those days, before gas shot up to \$1.40 a gallon or more (as I recall the best deal in town was at Dewey's Sunoco, where you could get hi-test for 31.9 cents, plus double S&H Green stamps), Skybar Amusement Park was still a growing concern; its great double Ferris wheel turned endlessly against a summer sky, and you could hear the great, grinding mechanical laugh of the fun-house clown even at my house, five miles inland, when the wind was right

Yeah, Skybar was the place to go, all right - you could blast away with the .22 of your choice at Pop Dupree's Dead Eye Shootin' Gallery, you could ride the Whip until you puked, wander into the Mirror Labyrinth, or look at the Adults Only freak tent and wonder what was in there...you especially wondered when the people came out, white-faced, some of the women crying, or hysterical. Brant Callahan said it was all just a fake, whatever it was, but sometimes I saw the doubt even in Brant's tough gray eyes.

Then, of course, the murders started, and eventually Skybar was shut down. The double Ferris stood frozen against the sky, and the only sound the mechanical clown's mouth produced was the lunatic hooting of the sea breeze. We went in, the twelve of us, and. . .but I'm getting ahead of myself. It began just after school let out that June; it began when Randy Stayner, a seventh-grader from the junior high school, was thrown from the highest point of the SkyCoaster. I was there that day - Kirby was with me, in fact - and we both heard his scream as he came down.

It was one of the strangest ways for a person to die - the shadowed Ferris wheel turned in the sunlight, the bumper cars honked and sparked the roof and walls of Spunky's Dodge 'Em, the carousel

spun wildly to the rise and fall of horses and lions, and the steady beat of its repeating tune echoed throughout the park. A man balancing his screaming son in one hand, ice cream cones in the other, little kids with cotton candy racing to see who's first to get on Sandee's Spinning Sombrero, and in the midst of all the peaceful confusion, Randy Stayner performing a one-time solo swan dive 100 feet into the solid steel tracks of the SkyCoaster.

For a while, I wasn't all too sure the people around me weren't thinking it was just an act - a Saturday afternoon performance by a skilled diver. When blood and bone hit, however, it was clear the act was over. And then, as if to clear the whole thing up with a final attempt to achieve his original goal, he rolled lazily over the bottom rails of the SkyCoaster into the brown murky water of Skybar Pond, swirls of red and grey following him.

The SkyCoaster was shut down the day of Randy's dive, and despite weeks of dragging the pond's bottom, his body was never found. Authorities concluded that his remains had drifted under a sandbar or some unmarked passageway, and all search ceased after four weeks.

Skybar lost a lot of customers after that. Most people were afraid to go there, and other businesses in the town began to boom because of it. In fact, Starboard Cinema, which showed horror movies to an audience of four or five during the parks better days now showed repeats of "I was a Teen Age Werewolf" to sell-out crowds. More and more, people drifted away from Skybar until it was shut down for good.

It was during those last few weeks that the worst accidents started happening. A morning worker, reaching under a car on the Whip for a paper cup, caught his arm on the supporting bar between two clamps just as a faulty circuit started the machine. He was crushed between two cars. Another worker was fixing a bottom rail on the Ferris wheel when a 500 pound car dropped off the top and smeared him onto the asphalt below. These and several other rides

were shut down, and when the only thing left open was Pop Dupree's .22 gallery and the Adults Only freak tent, the spark ran out of Skybar's amusement, and it was forced to shut down after its third year in operation.

It had only been closed for two months when Brant Callahan came up with his plan that night. We were in a group of five camping in back of John Wilkenson's dad's workshop, in a single five-man Sportsman pup tent illuminated by four flashlights shining on back issues of Famous Detective Stories, when he stood up (or rather scuffled on his knees, due to the height of the tent) and proposed we all do something to separate the pussies from the men.

I tossed aside my Mystery of the Haunted Hearse, leaned teach in the glow of Dewey Howardson's light, and squinted halfway at the hulking shadow crouching by the double-flap zipper door. No one else appeared to pay any attention to him.

"Come on, lard-asses!" he shouted. "Are ya all just going to sit around playing Dick-fucking-Tracy all night?"

Kirby slapped at the bugs attacking his glowing arm and looked from Brant, to me, to the rest of the guys still gazing with mild interest at their Alfred Hitchcock tales of suspense, unaware of any other activities going on in their presence. I gazed at my watch. It was 11:30.

"What the hell are you raving about, Brant?" His face came to life now that he was being noticed, and he looked at me with great excitement, like some dumb little kid who was about to tell some terrible secret and was getting the great flood of details together to form a top-confidential plan.

"The SkyCoaster."

Dewey looked over the top of his magazine and shot Brant a look of mild interest.

"Skybar's SkyCoaster?"

"Course, ya damn idiot. What other roller coaster ya gonna find in Starboard? Now the way I figger it, we could make it over the barbed wire and inside to the SkyCoaster easy enough."

"What the fuck for?" I asked. Brant was always pulling stunts like this, and it was no telling what the crazy bastard was up to this time. I remember one year when we were out smashing coins on the BY&W tracks by Harrow's Point, Brant got tired of watching trains run over his pennies and dimes and dared us to take on a real challenge. Whenever Brant came up with a real challenge, you could almost always count on calling up the You Asked For It or Ripleys Believe It or Not crews for live coverage. Not that the challenge was anything like that man from Brazil who swallowed strips of razor blades, or that fat lady from Ohio who balanced fire sticks on her forehead - Brant's dares were far more challenging than those. And, as young volunteers from his reluctant audience, we were obligated to take part in them or kiss our reputation for bravery goodbye.

Brant reached into his pants pocket that day and pulled out a small cardboard box wrapped tightly with a red rubber band.

Unwrapping it, he revealed four or five shiny copper bullets, the kind I used to see on reruns of Mannix when Mike Connors would stop blasting away at crime rings long enough to load up his revolver again. They were different from T.V., though. On the tube they appeared to be no more than tiny pieces of dull plastic jammed into a Whamco Cap Pistol. In front of me then, they sat mystically in Brant's hand, the shells glittering bright rays of light in the late afternoon sun, the tip of greyish lead heavily refusing to reflect any light at all.

Then Brant clapped them all together in a fist and headed up the bank toward the tracks. I started after him, half expecting him to wheel out a gun for them at any minute, hoping he was just going to relieve himself rather than starting to open fire on something, or

trying some other dangerous stunt. It was dangerous, as it turned out, but I didn't say anything. I just stood there by the rails, taking a plug off the chewing tobacco Dewey brought along, my mind watching from some faraway place as he set them up single file on the left rail.

"The train wheels should set 'em off the second they hit," he smiled smugly, eagerly forming his plan. "All we have to do is stand here by the rails until they do. How's that for a challenge, huh? Oh, and the first one to jump is pussy of the year."

I didn't say anything. but I thought a lot about it. About how stupid it was, how dangerous it was, and how weird a persons brain had to be to think things like that up. I thought about how I should bug out right then, just yell "Screw you, Brant!" and take off for home. But that would have made me green. And if it was one thing we all had to show each other back then, it was that we were no cowards.

So there we were, Brant, John, Dewey, me, and Kirby, although Kirby wouldn't set foot near the tracks, bullets or no bullets, with a train coming (he began to conveniently get sick on the tobacco and had to lie down). We lined up next to the rails, determination in our eyes as the bullets gleamed in front of us. John was the first one to hear the train, and as we stepped closer to Brant's orders, I could hear him softly muttering a short prayer over and over to himself. Dewey stood on the far right side of me, the last person in our Fearless Freddy Fan Club

Then the first heavy rumbling of the cars came, John reeled as it got louder, and I thought surely he was going to collapse over the tracks, but he didn't, and we all stood still as the train came on. The churning squeak of the wheels hit our ears, and I stared blankly at the bullets in front of us, thinking how small they seemed under the wheels of the 4:40. But the more I looked, the larger they began to appear, until it seemed they were almost the size of cannonballs. I shut my eyes and prayed with John.

In the distance. the whistle rang out a terrifyingly loud Hooooo-HOO Hoooo, and I was sure it was on top of us, sure that I would feel the cracks of lead pounding in my ears any second, feel the hot metal in my legs. Then the steady thud-thud-thud of its wheels grinding closer bit into my ears, and I screamed. turned, and fell down the slope to where the black gravel ended and the high meadowy grass began. I ran and didn't stop or look back until I was what felt like at least a mile away, and then collapsed in the stickery high grass, my hands and knees filling with sharp pain.

Behind me, five or six bullets roared into the air consecutively, and I wondered vaguely how Mike Connors could stand such a loud sound every time he squeezed the trigger. My ears filled up with a steady EEEEEEEEEEEE, and I lay back in the grass, my hair full of stickers, my pride full of shame.

Then Kirby was in front of me, telling me I was all right. I sat up in the grass, and down the hm about ten or fifteen feet from me, Brant, Dewey, and John sat puffing loudly, laughing, out of breath. The air filled with smoke and I collapsed again into the high sea of shrub and stickers, feeling fine.

Brant admitted time after time that we were all brave for going along with him that day, but he never brought up the fact that we all had run away, he and Dewey in the lead. Somewhere in my mind, the fact appeared to me that somewhere in Brant, his ego ended and his brains began. That's why I listened along with the others, and why we all wound up going with him that night when he began scheming up another mastermind stunt.

"First we make it over the fence. When we do, we head for the SkyCoaster. Here's the trick: we'll all meet in the station and start up the tracks - not the wooden beams - the tracks, and, in single file, climb to the King drop, then back down." "You're fuckin nuts, Brant." "Maybe. But at least I'm not fuckin' pussy." "Who's pussy?" I asked, pulling my Converse All-Star tennis shoes on. "You in?" asked Kirby, his lower jaw shaking. It was almost like

that shaking jaw and those glassy, scared deer eyes of his were trying to pull me back, to help me forget about the dare and get back to reading another chapter in Amazing Detective Stories - as if that once shaking jaw were a sonar, bouncing off waves of detection and coming up with the same reading: Dangerous Barrier Ahead.

"Don't be ridiculous, Kirb. 'Course I'm goin'" I shot a glance at John and Dewey, who both gave me nods of bravery and confidence, mixed highly with regrets of Brant's ever being with us that night. We left the flashlights on in the tent in case John's dad peeked out the back windows of his house to check on us. It turned out he never did.

Skybar can be pretty damn dark at night with no lights on. Few people know that like I do since most have only seen it in the daytime with sunlight bouncing off of the metal roofs of Pop Dupree's and the Adults Only freak tent or at night with the magical lights blazing lazily around on the Ferris wheel and bulbs flashing crazily in single file, creating a racing form of neon display up and down the hills of the 100 foot high SkyCoaster.

There were no lights that night, however. No lights, no moon, no light clouds, zilchamundo. Brant had stopped on the way to pick up a couple of his friends from the White Dragons. The Dragons were a street gang that held a high position in the field of respect with all wise kids back then, and luckily they brought spare flashlights, matches for their cigarettes, and 5-inch steel Randell switchblades (in case some maniacal drunk or thug was claiming the park space as a home base for his operations).

Both of the White Dragon members appeared to be gods in the eyes of all of us that evening - their hair slicked back to their scalps James Dean style, black leather jackets with pale, fire breathing dragons on them, a general air of confidence and security beaming off them as if they were more protective beacons for us than general good company joining us in the daredevil fun.

Five more members of the Dragons were to meet us after a field party they were having up on Grange's Point. Brant hadn't let us in on that fact at first, but when I found out they were supposed to meet us at the front gate at 12:30. more confidence rose in me, and it began to feel more like we were heading toward a late game of craps or penny ante poker instead of a 100 foot climb on slick poles. What we didn't know was that they were practically carrying the party with them, each with a bottle of Jack Daniel's Black label, or Southern Comfort, or Everclear, and each was singing in rackety unison the agonizing 75th stanza to "99 Bottles of Beer."

Excitement heaved up my chest to my throat as we approached the outer gate, and I can still remember how mystic and strange the park looked in the dark night air. The chain fence stretched onward in both directions to what seemed infinity, sealing us out from its unknown hidden powers, and I recall that it almost seemed that it was shielding Skybar inside, preventing it from wielding its wrath on the innocent people living outside its domain. Once you crossed the barrier, however, there was no turning back. Here was where the two worlds divided, and the choice was made - pussy or man.

Everybody was anxious to get inside the park's gates to prove where he stood. With the gang you felt cold and nervous while awaiting the wrath of whatever might be lurking inside-but outside, the chances of surviving any lurking danger alone made you even more nervous- jittery enough to crawl up into a ball and piss your pants at every crack of a twig.

So, you see, it's not that we all wanted to go inside. But even if we were scared to death of climbing the cold rails of the SkyCoaster, staying alone while the rest of the bunch climbed over and ventured inside was even worse than the original dare itself.

Surprisingly enough, Kirby was the first one up the fence to lay his jacket across the barbed wire and hop to the soft asphalt of Skybar on the other side. The rest of us followed, thud, sputt, thud sounding through the night air as we each dropped to the ground

on the other side. We were in now. Eddie Frachers, the shorter of the two White Dragons, lit up a smoke, flicked on the flashlight, and led the way with Brant.

The station was empty when we got to the steel rails of the coaster, and climbing the steps to the gate station was an unusual experience in itself since there was no waiting in line for an hour while an old man standing in front of you blew cigarette fumes in your face in the riding hot sun as your stomach turned putred, your facial skin pale. Now it was home free between the coaster and us, free space all the way.

Hurry hurry step right up!

The metal floor thundered hundreds of beats under our feet as we made our way across the vacant station to the terminal gates, and I looked several times over my shoulder as we walked the deserted leading board, my senses ready for anything that might decide to go more than "bump" in the night. I was the first one to hear it, in fact, and my body grew limp, my bowels limp with it when I heard the direction it was coming from - the coaster cars.

They all sat in front of us, grey and orange from rust and age, their silent features corrupting the night with an evil air, and I recall standing there as the others began to hear it too, my hands shaking, legs drooping, mouth hanging open stupidly as I attempted to say something - I don't know what - and nothing would come out.

I don't know how long we all stood there, waiting for something, anything to happen. The cars seemed mystic in their own way as they stood their ground and refused to let us any nearer by chanting some evil spell among themselves to keep us back. A spell is one thing, but if you've ever thought you heard a car (or possibly some dangerous lunatic hiding behind a car) singing something, you'd understand how we all felt that night. Even Brant and the two White Dragons appeared motionless in the soft glow from the

flashlight, but somehow Eddie brought the flashlight up to meet whatever was occupying the first car.

"Hey! Turn it off damnit!"

A surge of relief at its at least being human swelled up in me, but I still stood there, motionless and quivering, even as Eddie and the rest of the bunch, even Kirby, started toward the coaster. I must have still been in a daze, because I found myself wanting to stop them, to pull them back to me, to end it all, turn around and get the hell back over the fence. But I still stood there as fog rolled around my eyes and my sight blurred, leaving only my ears to tell me the horrible fate of our party.

"What the hell are you..." ". . . are you sure that it's them . . ." "What are they doing here like this..." A long, ear-piercing scream followed, the kind women usually scream in those horror movies at Starboard Cinema when the vampire wraps his cape around his victim and starts sucking the living blood out of her. It rose to almost unbelievable splitting levels then faded away with suppressed laughter followed by "59 bottles of beer on the wall, 59 bottles of beer..."

A hand touched my shoulder and I reeled to find Kirby at my feet, telling me that the other guys had gone ahead without me and I'd better hurry up. I ran and caught up with them by the main track, where they had already begun the climb. Brant was first, then the White Dragons, and then Dewey and John, clinging tightly to the steel tracks behind them. I ran the 20 feet to the final, highest 100 foot drop, and started up after them.

The cold steel rails clapped clamily into my skin as I started shinnying up, looking to where Brant and the Dragons were perched high above. I couldn't weigh the amount of energy I had left to figure how I was gonna climb 100 fucking feet barehanded. It's kind of like that joke about the little ant crawling up the

elephant's hind leg with rape on its mind. I probably wouldn't make it, but I had high hopes.

Kirby never touched the rails. I couldn't blame him after the train event, maybe something happened to him when he was younger, or something. Kirby told me a lot of things best left confidential, but he never told me anything about it either. He may not have wanted to climb, but to me he was no pussy.

A lot of things go through your mind when you're 45 feet off the ground climbing rail by rail on a ladder without rungs. One hundred feet of sheer pole climbing with occasional crosspieces to hang on to isn't much, and you begin to wonder, What if Dewey slips and falls into me? What if I lose my grip and sail to the bottom? How will I get down once I'm up there? Can drunk Dragons fly? And then you look at the bottom, and all of your fears are summed up in one phrase:

Don't look down.

Hand over hand, pull over pull, I made my way upward, trusting that the pace of those above me wasn't too slow. I never really looked up to where Brant and his friends were while I was climbing. Even to this day I remember the blackness of the night sky mixing well with my own blackout as I shut my eyes tightly to the things around me. I was climbing to the top, and I just couldn't stop. Hand over hand. That's when the screaming started, loud and forceful, over and over, with an occasional splashing behind it as if someone below were enjoying a late night swim and horseplay in the murky pond. Ignoring my own rule, I shot a glance down.

God, how weird it looked. If you've ever been on a roller coaster right as it goes down the steepest slope, you can understand the feeling; the depth, the rails shooting together as they plummet below right as you drop over the top. Imagine yourself frozen in that position. Below, the rails meet and your stomach assumes a new position in your throat. And standing on those gleaming rails,

still holding Eddie's flashlight and stained with the dark was Kirby, gazing back up at me, a look of confusion, horror and what to do next? written across his face. He scared the hell out of me the way he just stood there, arms at his side, staring at me but saying nothing.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" I shouted down with extra force. No answer. "Kirby, what's wrong?" By then I knew damn well what was wrong. The tracks had begun to drum under my hands, and the frame of the SkyCoaster itself had begun to sway rhythmically from side to side. Then the awful sound of the roar of a coaster car spinning around some distant bend, fading out, then coming back in, fading out again-and coming back with thunderous racket that sent my stomach and my heart both jumping on top of my tonsils.

Then Brant screamed. It was like the scream of a woman's that I described earlier, but louder, blending in with the steady clack-clack-clack of a chain-dragged coaster car on an electrified track. I didn't ask any questions, but simply locked both hands together, swung both feet together and slid down the rail to the bottom.

If you've ever been on a roller car as it plummets the final hill - the Granddaddy drop - you'll probably know the feeling of fear that builds up in you. There's always a chance that you may fly from the car to the steel tracks below as the force presses your spine against the back cover and shakes you with head-splitting strength to the bottom. There was no car for me to ride in that night -no seat, no belt, no safety bar to pull against my slumped torso. And as I sailed to the bottom, my mind made a different rule that I was forced to follow - Don't look.

The wind stopped suddenly in my hair, and I realized that I was down on the bottom rails of the coaster, hanging dreadfully close to the murky waters of Skybar Pond. And as I hung there momentarily I could picture Randy Stayner waiting below, a mossy green hand beginning to emerge to the surface, and as I

imagined this, I also visualized others like him in a sea of arms, reaching for my dangling shirt tail as I hung there, all of them coming up to the surface to get me, or desperately reaching out as they were dragged down. A splurge of violent bubbling water popped to the surface, jolting me back to Skybar and, getting to my feet, I pulled myself to the shore and somehow managed to pull Kirby with me. He was still standing in a daze, eyes fixed on the tracks where the coaster car was falling toward us.

And as we ran through the depot station past the empty coaster cars, I could hear the steady thud-thud-thud of the one car advancing on us. I shot a glance over my shoulder as we both ran on, my feet and eyes growing with every step.

Then I let go of Kirby. I can't clearly remember when, but I remember all that ran through my mind was Run Like Hell! I flew up the chain link fence behind Pop Dupree's, cutting my hands severely on the barbed wire. After jumping to the safe ground on the other side, I didn't stop running until I was almost a mile away on Granges Point, where I could still hear the soft screaming laughter of the seabreeze through the Funhouse clown, and could see the vague form of the SkyCoaster winding through the trees. Somewhere behind one of the tents - I can still swear it was the freak tent - a light glowed softly. I sat there, staring at it, wondering if it was Kirby trying to find his way out of the dark. Then I heard the cracking grass of footsteps behind me and whirled to find Kirby standing in front of me. My legs were shaking, and my teeth began to chatter softly, and he walked up to me and put his arm around me.

"It's okay. We made it. We're pretty brave, huh? Right up and right down those rails. We're far away from it now, though. We're not there now" I stared at him and wondered how the hell he got there. I couldn't recall dragging him with me. I couldn't believe how calm he stood there-how he acted like it was all a scary movie at Starboard Cinema and we were walking home in the dark trying to

calm ourselves down. Then he turned me toward the park and started to walk away.

"Coming?" "Kirb, you're headin' the wrong way."

I turned toward home and started to run again. After a while. Kirby came running up to me, and we didn't stop until we were five miles away from Skybar and on my front porch. I can still see the horror in poor Kirby's eyes as he saw his best friends and the Dragons drop to death before him. Even after seeing that smiling, rotting freak clambering from behind the safety bar of the coaster car that had rolled over Brant and the others, he stuck with me at the bottom and didn't run. The only ones who acted as bravely as Kirby were the drunk Dragons who jumped at the first sight of the coaster car coming toward them. Maybe it was bravery, maybe it was the liquor, but it doesn't matter because the 100 foot dive to the pond was a mistake either way. Brant and the rest may have tried to slide, but they never made it to safety and the authorities still haven't pulled their bodies from the murky pond waters to this day.

And still, in my dreams, I feel Kirby taking my hand and telling me it was okay; we were safe, we were home free. And then I heard the thud-thud-thud of a single SkyCoaster car rolling toward us. I want to tell Kirby not to look - "Don't look, man!" I scream, but the words won't come out. He does look. And as the car rolls up to the deserted station, we see Randy Stayner lolling behind the safety bar, his head driven almost into his chest. The fun-house clown begins to scream laughter somewhere behind us, and Kirby begins to scream with it. I try to run, but my feet tangle in each other and I fall, sprawling. Behind me I can see Randy's corpse pushing the safety bar back and he begins to stumble toward me, his dead, shredded fingers hooked into seeking claws. I see these things in my dreams, and in the moments before I wake, screaming, in my wife's arms, I know what the grown-ups must have seen that summer in the freak tent that was for Adults Only. I

see these things in my dreams, yes, but when I visit Kirby in that place where he still lives, that place where all the windows are cross-hatched with heavy mesh, I see them in his eyes. I take his hand and his hand is cold, but I sit with him and sometimes I think: These things happened to me when I was young.

SLADE

Stephen King

"Slade." The Maine Campus June-August 1970. "Slade" is in some ways the most exciting of King's uncollected juvenalia, an engaging explosion of off the wall humor, literary pastiche, and cultural criticism, all masquerading as a Western - the adventures of Slade and his quest for Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka. Published in several installments in the UMO college newspaper during the summer following King's graduation, the story is most important in showing King reveling in the joy of writing.

-excerpt from "The Annotated Guide to Stephen King, p.45.

It was almost dark when Slade rode into Dead Steer Springs. He was tall in the saddle, a grim faced man dressed all in black. Even the handles of his two sinister .45s, which rode low on his hips, were black. Ever since the early 1870s, when the name of Slade had begun to strike fear into the stoutest of Western hearts, there had been many whispered legends about his dress. One story had it that he wore black as a perpetual emblem of mourning for his Illinois sweetheart, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, who passed tragically from this vale of tears when a flaming Montgolfer balloon crashed into the Peachtree barn while Polly was milking the cows. But some said he wore black because Slade was the Grim Reaper's agent in the American Southwest - the devil's handyman. And then there were some who thought he was queerer than a three-dollar bill. No one, however, advanced this last idea to his face.

Now Slade halted his huge black stallion in front of the Brass Cuspidor Saloon and climbed down. He tied his horse and pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his breast pocket. He lit it and let the acrid smoke drift out onto the twilight air. From inside the bat-wing doors of the Brass Cuspidor came noises of drunken revelry. A honkytonk piano was beating out "Oh, Them Golden Slippers."

A faint shuffling noise came to Slade's keen ears, and he wheeled around, drawing both of his sinister .45s in a single blur of motion

"Watch it there, mister!"

Slade shovelled his pistols back into their holsters with a snarl of contempt. It was an old man in a battered Confederate cap, dusty jeans and suspenders. Either the town drunk or the village idiot, Slade surmised. The old man cackled, sending a wave of bad breath over to Slade. "Thought you wuz gonna hole me fer sure, Stranger."

Slade smoked and looked at him.

"Yore Jack Slade, ain'tchee, Pard?" The old man showed his toothless gums in another smile. "Reckon Miss Sandra of the Bar-T hired you, that right? She's been havin' a passel of trouble with Sam Columbine since her daddy died an' left her to run the place."

Slade smoked and looked at him. - The old man suddenly rolled his eyes. "Or mebbe yore workin' fer Sam Columbine hisseif - that it? I heer he's been hiring a lot of real hardcases to help pry Miss Sandra off'n the Bar-T. Is that-"

"Old man," Slade said, "I hope you run as fast as you talk. Because if you don't, you're gonna be takin' from a plot six feet long an' three wide."

The old sourdough grimaced with sudden fear. "You-you wouldn't-"

Slade drew one sinister.⁴⁵

The old geezer started to run in grotesque flying hops. Slade sighted carefully along the barrel of his sinister.⁴⁵ and winged him once for luck. Then he dropped his gun back into its holster, turned and strode into the Brass Cuspidor, pushing the bat-wing doors wide.

Every eye in the place turned to stare at him. Faces went white. The bartender dropped the knife he was using to cut off the foamy beer heads. The fancy dan gambler at the back table dropped three aces out of his sleeve - two of them were clubs. The piano player fell off his stool, scrambled up, and ran out the back door. The bartender's dog, General Custer, whined and crawled under the card table. And standing at the bar, calmly downing a straight shot of whiskey, was John "The Backshooter" Parkinan, one of Sam Columbine's top guns.

A horrified whisper ran through the crowd. "Slade!" "It's Jack Slade!" "It's Slade!"

There was a sudden general rush for the doors. Outside someone ran down the street, screaming.

"Slade's in town! Lock yore doors! Jack Slade is in town an' God help whoever he's after!"

"Parkman!" Slade gritted.

Parkman turned to face Slade. He was chewing a match between his ugly snagged teeth, and one hand hovered over the notched butt of his sinister .41.

"What're you doin' in Dead Steer, Slade?"

"I'm working fer a sweet lady name of Sandra Dawson," Slade said laconically. "How about yoreself, 'Backshooter'?"

"Workin' fer Sam Columbine, an' go to hell if you don't like the sound of it, Pard."

"I don't," Slade growled, and threw away his cigar. The bartender, who was trying to dig a hole in the floor, moaned.

"They say yer fast, Slade."

"Fast enough."

Backshooter grinned evilly. "They also say yore queerer'n a three dollar bill."

"Fill yore hand, you slimy, snaky son of a bitch!" Slade yelled

'The Backshooter' went for his gun, but before he had even touched the handle both of Slade's sinister .45s were out and belching lead. 'Backshooter' was thrown back against the bar, where he crumpled.

Slade re-holstered his guns and walked over to Parkman, his spurs jingling. He looked down at him. Slade was a peace-loving man at heart, and what was more peace-loving than a dead body? The

thought filled him with quiet joy and a sad yearning for his childhood sweetheart, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois.

The bartender hurried around the bar and looked at the earthly remains of John 'The Backshooter' Parkman.

"It ain't possible!" He breathed. "Shot in the heart six times and you could cover all six holes with a twenty-dollar gold piece!"

Slade pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his breast pocket and lit up. "Better call the undertaker an' cart him out afore he stinks."

The bartender gave Slade a nervous grin and rushed out through the bat-wings. Slade went behind the bar, poured himself a shot of Digger's Rye(190 proof), and thought about the lonely life of a gun for hire. Every man's hand turned against you, never sure if the deck was loaded, always expecting a bullet in the back or the gall bladder, which was even worse. It was sure hard to do your business with a bullet in the gall bladder. The batwing doors of the Brass Cuspidor were thrown open, and Slade drew both of his sinister.45s with a quick, flowing motion. But it was a girl - a beautiful blonde with a shape which would have made Ponce de Leon forget about the fountain of youth - Hubba-hubba, Slade thought to himself. His lips twisted into a thin, lonely smile as he re-holstered his guns. Such a girl was not for him, he was true - to the memory of Polly Peachtree, his one true love.

"Are you Jack Slade?" The blonde asked, parting her lovely red lips, which were the color of cherry blossoms in the month of May.

"Yes ma'am," Slade said, knocking off his shot of Digger's Rye and pouring another.

"I'm Sandra Dawson," she said, coming over to the bar.

"I figgered," Slade said.

Sandra came forward and looked down at the sprawled body of John "The Backshooter" Parkman with burning eyes. "This is one of the men that murdered my father!" She cried "One of the low, murdering swine that Sam Columbine hired!"

"I reckon," Slade said.

Sandra Dawson's bosom heaved. Slade was keeping an eye on it, just for safety's sake. "Did you dispatch him, Mr. Slade?"

"I shore did, ma'am. And it was my pleasure."

Sandra threw her arms around Slade's neck and kissed him, her full lips burning against his own. "You're the man I've been looking for," she breathed, her heart racing. "Anything I can do to help you, Slade, anything -"

Slade shoved her away and drew deeply on his famous Mexican cigar to regain his composure. "Reckon you took me wrong, ma'am. I'm bein' true to the memory of my one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois. But anything I can do to help you -"

"You can, you can!" She breathed. "That's why I wrote you. Sam Columbine is trying to take over my ranch, the Bar-T! He murdered my father, and now he's trying to scare me off the land so he can buy it cheap and sell it dear when the Great Southwestern Railroad decides to put a branch line through here! He's hired a lot of hardcases like this one-" she prodded "The Backshooter" with the toe of of her shoe- "and he's trying to scare me out!" She looked at Slade pleadingly. "Can you help me?"

"I reckon so," Slade said. "Just don't get yore bowels in an uproar, ma'am."

"Oh, Slade!" She whispered. She was just melting into his arms when the bartender rushed back into the saloon, with the undertaker in tow. By this time the bartender's dog, General

Custer, had crawled out from under the card table and was eating John "The Backshooter" Parkman's vest.

"Miss Dawson! Miss Dawson!" The bartender yelled. "Mose Hart, yore top hand, just rode into town! He says the Bar-T bunkhouse is on fire!"

But before Sandra Dawson could reply, Slade was on his way. Before a minute had passed, he was galloping toward the fire at Sandra Dawson's Bar-T ranch.

Slade's huge black stallion, Stokely, carried him rapidly up Winding Bluff Road toward the sinister fire glow on the horizon. As he rode, a grim determination settled over him like warm butter. To find Sam Columbine and put a crimp in his style!

When he arrived at Sandra Dawson's Bar-T ranch the bunkhouse was a red ball of flame. And standing in front of it, laughing evilly, were three of Sam Columbine's gunmen--Sunrise Jackson, Shifty Jack Mulloy, and Doc Logan. Doc Logan himself was rumored to have sent twelve sheep-ranchers to Boot Hill in the bloody Abelenne range war. But at that time Slade had been spending his days in a beautiful daze with his one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois. She had since been killed in a dreadful accident, and now Slade was cold steel and hot blood - not to mention his silk underwear with the pretty blue flowers.

He climbed down from his stallion and pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his pocket. "What're you boys doin' here?" He asked calmly.

"Havin' a little clambake!" Sunrise Jackson said, dropping one hand to the butt of his sinister .50 caliber horse-pistol. "Maw, haw-, haw!",

A wounded cowpoke ran out of the red-flickering shadows. "They put fire to the bunkhouse!" He said. "That one--" he pointed at Doc

Logan--"said they wuz doin'it on the orders of that murderin' skunk Sam Columbine!"

Doc Logan pulled leather and blew three new holes in the wounded cowpoke, who flopped. "Thought he looked hot from all that fire," Doc told Slade, "so I ventilated him. Haw','haw,haw!"

"You can always tell a low murderin' puckerbelly by the way he laughs,"Slade said, dropping his hands over the butts of his sinister.45s.

"Is that right?" Doe said. "How do they laugh?"

"Haw, haw, haw," Slade gritted.

"Pull leather, you Republican skunk!" Shifty Jack Mulloy yelled, and went for his gun, Slade yanked both of his sinister.45s out in a smooth sweep and blasted Shifty Jack before Mulloy's

piece had even cleared leather. Sunrise Jackson was already blasting away, and Slade felt a bullet shave by his temple. Slade hit the dirt and let Jackson have it. He took two steps backward and fell over, dead as a turtle with smallpox.

But Doc Logan was running. He vaulted into the saddle of an Indian pony with a shifty eye and slapped its flank. Slade squeezed off two shots at him, but the light was tricky, Logan's pony jumped the shakepole fence and was gone into the darkness - to report back to Sam Columbine, no doubt.

Slade walked over to Sunrise Jackson and rolled him over with his boot. Jackson had a hole right between the eyes. Then he went over to Shifty Jack Mulloy, who was gasping his last.

"You got me, Pard!" Shifty Jack gasped. "I feel worse'n a turtle with smallpox"

'You never shoulda called me a Republican." Slade snarled down at him. He showed Shifty Jack his Gene McCarthy button and then blasted him.

Slade holstered his sinister.45 and threw away the smoldering butt of his famous Mexican cigar. He started toward the darkened ranch-house to make sure that no more of Sam Columbine's men were lurking within. He was almost there when the front door was ripped open and someone ran out.

Slade drew in one lightning movement and blasted away, the gunflashes from the barrels of his sinister.45 lighting the dark with bright flashes. Slade walked over and lit a match. He had bagged Sing-Loo, the Chinese cook.

"Well," Slade said sadly, holstering his gun and feeling a great wave of longing for his one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, "I guess you can't win them all."

He started to reach for another famous Mexican cigar, changed his mind and rolled a joint. After he had begun to see all sorts of interesting blue and green lights in the sky, he climbed back on his sinister black scallion and started towards Dead Steer Springs.

When he got back to the Brass Cuspidor saloon, Mose Hart, the top hand at the Bar-T rushed out, holding a bottle of Digger's Rye in one hand, with which he had been soothing his jangled nerves.

"Slade!" He yelled. "Miss Dawson's been kidnapped by Sam Columbine!"

Slade got down from his huge black stallion, Stokely, and lit up a famous Mexican cigar. He was still brooding over Sing-Loo, the Chinese cook at the Bar-T, who he had drilled by mistake.

"Ain't you going after her?" Hart asked, his eyes rolling wildly. "Sam Columbine may try to rape her - or even rob her! Ain't you gonna get on their trail?"

"Right now," Slade snarled, "I'm gonna check into the Dead Steer Springs Hotel and catch a good night's sleep. Since I got to this damn town I have had to blast three gunslingers and one Chinese cook and I'm mighty tired."

'Yeah," Hart said sympathetically, "It must really make you feel turrible, havin' snuffed out four human lives in the space of six hours."

"That's right," Slade said, tying Stokely to the hitching rack, "And I got blisters on my trigger finger. Do you know where I could get some Solarcaine?"

Hart shook his head, and so Slade started down towards the hotel, his spurs jingling below the heels of his Bonanza cowboy boots (they had elevator lifts inside the heels, Slade was very sensitive about his height). When old men and pregnant ladies saw him coming they took to the other side of the street. One small boy came up and asked for his autograph. Slade, who didn't want to encourage that sort of thing, shot him in the leg and walked on.

At the hotel he asked for a room, and the trembling clerk said the second floor suite was available, and Slade went up. He undressed, then put his boots on again, and climbed into bed. He was asleep in moments.

Around one in the morning, while Slade was dreaming sweetly of his chldhood sweetheart Miss Polly Paduka of Peachtree, Illinois, the window was eased up little by little, without even a squeak to alert Slade's keen ears. The shape that crept in was frightful indeed - for if Jack Slade was the most feared gunslinger in the American Southwest, the Hunchback Fred Agnew was the most detested killer. He was a two foot three inch midget with a hump big enough for a camel halfway down his crooked back. In one hand he held a three foot Arabian skinning knife (and although Hunchback Fred had never skinned an Arab with it, he was known to have put it to work changing the faces of three U.S. marshals,

two county sheriffs and an old lady from Boston on the way to Arizona to recuperate from Parkinson's disease). In the other hand he held a large box made of woven river reeds.

He slid across the floor in utter silence, holding his Arabian skinning knife ready, should Slade awake. Then he carefully put the box down on the chair by the bed. Grinning fiendishly, he opened the lid and pulled out a twelve-foot python named Sadie Hawkins. Sadie had been Hunchback Fred's bosom companion for the last twelve years, and had saved the terrifying little man from death many times.

"Do your stuff, hon." Fred whispered affectionately. Sadie seemed to almost grin at him as Hunchback Fred kissed her on her dead black mouth. The snake slid onto the bed and began to crawl towards Slade's head. Giggling fiendishly, Hunchback Fred retreated to the corner to watch the fun.

Sadie wiggled in slow S-curves up the side of the bed, and drew back to strike. In that instant, the faint hiss of scales on the sheet came to Slade's ears.

A woman was in bed with him! That was his first thought as he rolled off the bed and onto the floor, grabbing for the sinister derringer that was always strapped to his right calf. Sadie struck at the pillow where his head had been only a second before. Hunchback Fred screamed with disappointment and threw his three-foot Arabian skinning knife, which nicked the corner of one of Slade's earlobes and quivered in the floor.

Slade fired the derringer and Hunchback Fred fell back against the wall, knocking the picture Niagara Falls off the dresser. His sinister career was at an end.

Carefully avoiding the python (which seemed to have gone to sleep on the bed), Slade got dressed. It was time to go out to Sam

Columbine's ranch and put an end to that slimy coyote once and for all.

Strapping on the twin gunbelts of his sinister.45s, Slade went downstairs. The desk clerk looked at him even more nervously than before. "D-did I hear a shot?" He asked.

"Don't think so," Slade said, "But you better go up and close the window by the bed. I left it open -"

"Yessir, Mr. Slade. Of course. Of course."

And then Slade was off, grimly determined to find Sam Columbine and put a crimp in his style once and for all.

Slade shoved his way into the Brass Cuspidor where the foreman of Sandra Dawson's Bar-T, Mose Hart, was leaning over the bar with a bottle of Digger's Rye (206 proof) in one hand.

"Okay, you slimy drunkard," Slade gritted, pulling Hart around and yanking the bottle out of his hand. "Where is Sam Columbine's ranch? I'm going to get that rotten liver-eater, he just sent Hunchback Fred Agnew up against me."

"Hunchback Fred?!" Hart gasped, going white as a sheet. "And you're still alive?"

"I filled him full of lead," Slade said grimly. "He should have known that putting a snake in my bed was a no-no."

"Hunchback Fred Agnew," Hart whispered, still awed, "There was talk that he might be the next Vice President of the American Southwest."

Slade let go of a grating laugh that even made the bartender's dog, General Custer, cringe.

"Well I reckon that now he can be Vice President of Hell!" Slade proclaimed. He motioned to the bartender, who was standing at the far end of the bar reading a western novel.

"Bartender! What have you got for mixed drinks?"

The bartender approached cautiously, tucking the dog-eared copy of Blood Brides of Sitting Bull into his back pocket. "

Wal, Mr. Slade, we got about the usual - The Geronimo, The Fort Bragg Backbreaker, Popskull Pete, Sourdough Armpit -"

"How about a shot of Digger's Rye (206 proof)?" Mose Hart said with a glassy grin.

"Shut up," Slade growled. He turned to the bartender and drew one of his sinister.45s.

"If you don't produce a drink that I ain't never had before, friend, you're gonna be pushing up daisies before dawn."

The bartender went white, "W-well, we do have drink of my own invention, Mr. Slade. But it's so potent that I done stopped serving them. I got plumb tired of having people pass out on the roulette wheel"

"What's it called?"

"We call it a zombie," the bartender said.

"Well mix me up three of them and make it fast!" Slade commanded.

"Three zombies?" Mose Hart said with popping eyes. "M'God, are you crazy?"

Slade turned to him coldly "Friend, smile when you say that."

Hart smiled and took another drink of Digger's Rye.

"Okay," Slade said, when the three drinks had been placed in front of him. They came in huge beer steins and smelled like the wrath of God. He drained the first one at a single draught, blew out his breath, staggered a little, and lit one of his famous Mexican cigars. Then he turned to Mose.

"Now just where is Sam Columbine's ranch?" He asked.

"Three miles west and across the ford," Mose said. "It's called the Rotten Vulture Ranch"

"That figursh," Slade said, draining his second drink to the ice-cubes. He was beginning to feel a trifle woozy. It probably had something to do with the lateness of the hour, he thought, and began to work on his third drink.

"Say –" Mose Hart said timidly, "I don't really think you're in any shape to go up against Sam Columbine, Slade. He's apt to put a crimp in your style."

"Doan tell me w'hat to do," Slade, swaggering over to pat General Custer. He breathed in the dog's face and General Custer promptly went to sleep. "If there'sh one thing that I can do, it's lick my holder, I mean hold my liquor. Ho get out of my way before I blon you in tno."

"The door's out the other way," the bartender said cautiously.

"Coursh it is. You think I doan tinow where I'm goin'?"

Slade staggered across the bar, stepping on General Custer's tail (the dog didn't wake up) and managed to make his way out through the batwing doors where he almost fell off the sidewalk. Just then a steely arm clamped his elbow. Slade looked around blearily.

"I'm Deputy Marshall Hoagy Charmichael," the stranger said, "and rm taking yuh in-"

"On what charge?" Slade asked.

"Public intoxication. Now let's go."

Slade burped. "Everything happen'sh to me," he groaned. The two of them started off for the Dead Steer Springs jail.

After Slade was sprung from the pokey, Sandra Dawson's top hand, Mose Hart, went his bail. Slade filled both Hart and Deputy Marshall Hoagy Charmichael full of lead (blame it on his terrible hangover). Then, mounting his huge black stallion, Stokely, Slade made it out to the Rotten Vulture Ranch to have it out once and for all with Sam Columbine.

But Columbine was not there. He was off torturing ex border guards, leaving Sandra Dawson under the watch of three trusted henchmen - Big Fran Nixon, "Quick Draw" John Mitchell, and Shifty Ron Ziegfeld. After a heated shootout, Slade dropped all three of them in their slimy tracks and freed the fair Sandra.

The acrid, choking smell of gunsmoke filled the room where the lovely Sandra Dawson had been held prisoner. As she saw Slade standing tall and victorious, with a sinister.45 in each hand and a Mexican cigar clenched between his teeth, her eyes filled with love and passion.

"Slade!" she cried, jumping to her feet and running to him. "'I'm saved! Thank heaven! When Sam Columbine got back from torturing the Mexican border guards, he was going to feed me to his alligators! You came just in time!"

"Damn right," Slade gritted. "I always do. Steve King sees to that."

Her firm, supple, silken fleshed body swooned into his arms, and her lush lips sought Slade's mouth with ripe humid passion. Slade promptly clubbed her over the head with one sinister.45 and threw his Mexican cigar away, a snarl pulling at his lips.

"Watch it," he growled "my mom told me about girls like you."

And he strode off to find Sam Columbine.

Slade strode out of the bunk-room leaving Sandra Dawson in the smoke-filled chamber to rub the bump on her head where he had clouted her with the barrel of his sinister.⁴⁵ He mounted his huge black stallion, Stokely, and headed for the border, where Sam Columbine was torturing Mexican customs men with the help of his A No.1 Top Gun - "Pinky" Lee. The only two men in the American Southwest that could ever approach "Pinky" for pure, dad-ratted evil were Hunchback Fred Agnew (who Slade gunned down three weeks ago) and Sam Columbine himself. "Pinky" had gotten his infamous nickname during the Civil War when he rode with Captain Quantrill and his Regulators. While passed out in the kitchen of a fancy bordello in Bleeding Heart, Kansas, a Union officer named Randolph P. Sorghum dropped a homemade bomb down the kitchen chimney. "Pinky" lost all his hair, his eyebrows, and all the fingers on his left hand, except for the forth, and smallest. His hair and eyebrows grew back. His fingers did not. He has, however, still faster than greased lightning and meaner than hell. He had sworn to find Randolph P. Sorghum some day and stake him over the nearest anthill.

But Slade was not worried about Lee, because his heart was pure and his strength was as ten.

In a short time the agonized screams of the Mexican customs officials told him he was nearing the border. He dismounted, tied Stokely to a parking-meter and advanced through the sagebrush as noiselessly as a cat. The night was dark and moonless.

"No More! amigo!" The guard was screaming. "I confess! I confess! I am - who am I?"

"Fergetful bastid, ain't ye?" Pinky said. "Yore Randolph P. Sorghum, the sneakun' low life that blew off 90% 0' my hand durin' the Civil War."

"I admit it! I admit it!"

Slade had crept close enough now to see what was happening. Lee had the customs official tied to a straight-backed chair, with his bare feet on a hassock. Both feet were coated with honey and Lee's trained bear, Whomper, was licking it off with his long tongue.

"I can't stand it!" The guard screamed. "I am theese whatyoumacalluma, Sorghum!"

"Caught you at last!" Lee gloated. He pulled out his sinister Buntline Special and prepared to blow the poor old fellow all the way to Trinidad. Sam Columbine, who was standing far back in the shadows, was ready to bring in the next guard.

Slade stood up suddenly. "Okay, you two skulkin' varmits! Hold it right there!"

Pinky Lee dropped to his chest, fanning the hammer of his sinister Buntline Special. Slade felt bullets race all around him. He fired back twice, but curse it - the hammers of his two sinister .45s only clicked on empty chambers. He had forgotten to load up after downing the three badmen back at the Rotten Vulture.

Lee rolled to cover behind a barrel of taco chips. Columbine was already crouched behind a giant bottle of mayonnaise that had been air-dropped a month before after the worst flood disaster in American Southwest history (why drop mayonnaise after a disaster? None of your damn business).

"Who's that out there?" Lee yelled.

Slade thought quickly. "It's Randolph P. Sorghum" Hh cried. "The real McCoy, Lee! And this time I'm gunna blow off more than three fingers!"

His crafty challenge had the desired effect. Pinky rushed rashly (or rashly rushed if you preferred) from cover, his sinister Buntline Special blazing. "I'll blow ya apart!" he yelled "I'll -"

But at that moment Slade carefully put a bullet through his head. Pinky Lee flopped, his evil days done.

"Lee?" Sam Columbine called. "Pinky: You out there:" A craven cowardly note had crept into his voice. "I just dropped him, Columbine!" Slade yelled. "And now it's just you and me...and I'm comin' to get you!"

Sinister.45s blazing, a Mexican cigar clamped between his teeth, Slade started down the hill after Sam Columbine.

Halfway down the slope, Sam Columbine let loose such a volley of shots that Slade had to duck behind a barrel cactus. He could not get off a clear shot at Columbine because the wily villain had hidden behind a convenient, giant bottle of mayonnaise.

"Slade!" Columbine yelled. "It's time we settled this like men! Holster yore gun and I'll holster mine! Then we'll come out an' draw! The better man will walk away!"

"Okay, you lowdown sidewinder!" Slade yelled back. He holstered his sinister.45s and stepped out from behind the barrel cactus. Columbine stepped out from behind the bottle of mayonnaise. He was a tall man with an olive complexion and an evil grin. His hand hovered over the barrel of the sinister Smith & Wesson pistol that hung on his hip.

"Well, this is it, pard!" Slade sneered. There was a Mexican cigar clamped between his teeth as he started to walk toward Columbine. "Say hello to everyone in hell for me, Columbine!"

"We'll see," Columbine sneered back, but his knees were knocking as he halted, ready for the showdown.

"Okay!" Slade called. "Go fer yore gun!"

"Wait," Someone screamed. "Wait, wait, WAIT!"

They both stared. It was Sandra Dawson! She was running toward them breathless.

"Slade!" She cried. "Slade!"

"Get down!" Slade growled. "Sam Columbine is-"

"I had to tell you, Slade! I couldn't let you go off, maybe to get killed! And you'd never know!"

"Know what?" Slade asked.

"That I'm Polly Peachtree!"

Slade gaped at her. "But you can't be Polly Peachtree! She was my one true love and she was killed by a flaming Montgolfier balloon while milking the cows!"

"I escaped but I had amnesia!" She cried. "It's all just come back to me tonight. Look!" And she pulled off a blond wig she had been wearing. She was indeed the beautiful Polly Peachtree of Paduka, returned from the dead!

"POLLY!!!"

"SLADE!!!"

Slade rushed to her and they embraced, Sam Columbine forgotten. Slade was just about to ask her how things were going when Sam Columbine, evil rat that he was, crept up behind him and shot Slade in the back three times.

"Thank God!" Polly whispered as she and Sam embraced "At last. he's gone and we are free, my darling!"

Yeah," Sam growled "How are things going Polly?"

"You don't know how terrible it's been," she sobbed "Not only was he killing everybody, but he was queerer than a three-dollar bill."

"Well it's over," Sam said.

"Like fun!" Slade said. He sat up and blasted them both. "Good thing I was wearing my bullet proof underwear," he said lighting a new Mexican cigar. He stared at the cooling bodies of Sam Columbine and Polly Peachtree, and a great wave of sadness swept over him. He threw away his cigar and lit a joint. Then he walked over to where he had tethered Stokely, his black stallion. He wrapped his arms around Stokely's neck and held him close.

"At last, darling," Slade whispered. "We're alone."

After a long while, Slade and Stokely rode off into the sunset in search of new adventures.

THE END

Squad D

Stephen King

Written for

Dangerous Visions #3

Billy Clewson died all at once, with nine of the ten other members of D Squad on April 8, 1974. It took his mother two years, but she got started right away on the afternoon the telegram announcing her son's death came, in fact. Dale Clewson simply sat on the bench in the front hall for five minutes, the sheet of yellow flimsy paper dangling from his fingers, not sure if he was going to faint or puke or scream or what. When he was able to get up, he went into the living room. He was in time to observe Andrea down the last swallow of the first drink and pour the post-Billy era's second drink. A good many more drinks followed - it was really amazing, how many drinks that small and seemingly frail woman had been able to pack into a two-year period. The written cause - that which appeared on her death certificate - was liver dysfunction and renal failure. Both Dale and the family doctor knew that was formalistic icing on an extremely alcoholic cake - baba au rum, perhaps. But

only Dale knew there was a third level. The Viet Cons had killed their son in a place called Ky Doe, and Billy's death had killed his mother.

It was three years - three years almost to the day - after Billy's death on the bridge that Dale Clewson began to believe that he must be going mad.

Nine, he thought. There were nine. There were always nine. Until now.

Were there? His mind replied to itself. Are you sure? Maybe you really counted - the lieutenant's letter said there were nine, and Bortman's letter said there were nine. So just how can you be so sure? Maybe you just assumed.

But he hadn't just assumed, and he could be sure because he knew how many nine was, and there had been nine boys in the D Squad photograph which had come in the mail, along with Lieutenant Anderson's letter.

You could be wrong, his mind insisted with an assurance that was slightly hysterical. You're been through a lot these last couple of years, what with losing first Billy and then Andrea. You could be wrong.

It was really surprising, he thought, to what insane lengths the human mind would go to protect its own sanity.

He put his finger down on the new figure - a boy of Billy's age, but with blonde crewcut hair, looking no more than sixteen, surely too young to be on the killing ground. He was sitting cross-legged in front of Gibson, who had, according to Billy's letters, played the guitar, and Kimberley, who told lots of dirty Jokes. The boy with the blonde hair was squinting slightly into the sun - so were several of the others, but they had always been there before. The new boy's fatigue shirt was open, his dog tags lying against his hairless chest.

Dale went into the kitchen, sorted through what he and Andrea had always called "the jumble drawers," and came up with an old, scratched magnifying glass. He took it and the picture over the living room window, tilted the picture so there was no glare, and held the glass over the new boy's dog-tags. He couldn't read them. Thought, in fact, that the tags were both turned over and lying face down against the skin.

And yet, a suspicion had dawned in his mind - it ticked there like the clock on the mantle. He had been about to wind that clock when he had noticed the change in the picture. Now he put the picture back in its accustomed place, between a photograph of Andrea and Billy's graduation picture, found the key to the clock. And wound it.

Lieutenant's Anderson's letter had been simple enough. Now Dale found it in his study desk and read it again. Typed lines on Army stationary. The prescribed follow-up to the telegram, Dale had supposed. First: Telegram. Second: Letter of Condolence from Lieutenant. Third: Coffin, One Boy Enclosed. He had noticed then and noticed again now that the typewriter Anderson used had a Flying "o". Clewson kept coming out Clews^on.

Andrea had wanted to tear the letter up. Dale insisted that they keep it. Now he was glad.

Billy's squad and two others had been involved in a flank sweep of a jungle quadrant of which Ky Doe was the only village. Enemy contact had been anticipated, Anderson's letter said, but there hadn't been any. The Cong which had been reliably reported to be in the area had simply melted away into the jungle - it was a trick with which the American soldiers had become very familiar over the previous ten years or so.

Dale could imagine them heading back to their base at Homan, happy, relieved. Squads A and C had waded across the Ky River, which was almost dry. Squad D used the bridge. Halfway across, it

blew up. Perhaps it had been detonated from downstream. More likely, someone - perhaps even Billy himself - had stepped on the wrong board. All nine of them had been killed. Not a single survivor.

God - if there really is such a being - is usually kinder than that, Dale thought. He put Lieutenant Anderson's letter back and took out Josh Bortman's letter. It had been written on blue-lined paper from what looked like a child's tablet. Bortman's handwriting was nearly illegible, the scrawl made worse by the writing implement - a soft-lead pencil. Obviously blunt to start with, it must have been no more than a nub by the time Bortman signed his name at the bottom. In several places Bortman had borne down hard enough with his instrument to tear the paper.

It had been Bortman, the tenth man, who sent Dale and Andrea the squad picture, already framed, the glass over the photo miraculously unbroken in its long trip from Homan to Saigon to San Francisco and finally to Binghamton, New York.

Bortman's letter was anguished. He called the other nine "the best friends I ever had in my life, I loved them all like they was my brothers."

Dale held the blue-lined paper in his hand and looked blankly through his study door and toward the sound of the ticking clock on the mantelpieces. When the letter came, in early May of 1974, he had been too full of his own anguish to really consider Bortman's. Now he supposed he could understand it - a little, anyway. Bortman had been feeling a deep and inarticulate guilt. Nine letters from his hospital bed on the Homan base, all in that pained scrawl, all probably written with that same soft-lead pencil. The expense of having nine enlargements of the Squad D photograph made, and framed, and mailed off. Rites Of atonement with a soft-lead pencil, Dale thought, folding the letter again and putting it back In the drawer with Anderson's. As if he had killed them by taking their picture. That's really what was between the

lines, wasn't it? "Please don't hate me, Mr. Clewson, please don't think I killed your son and the other's by--"

In the other room the mantelpiece clock softly began to chime the hour of five.

Dale went back into the living room, and took the picture down again.

What you're talking about is madness.

Looked at the boy with the short blonde hair again.

I loved them all like they was my brothers.

Turned the picture over.

Please don't think I killed your son - all of your sons - by taking their picture. Please don't hate me because I was in the Homan base hospital with bleeding haemorrhoids instead of on the Ky Doe bridge with the best friends I ever had in my life. Please don't hate me, because I finally caught up, it took me ten years of trying, but I finally caught up.

Written on the back, in the same soft-lead pencil, was this notation:

Jack Bradley Omaha, Neb.

Billy Clewson Binghamton, NY.

Rider Dotson Oneonta, NY

Charlie Gibson Payson, ND

Bobby Kale Henderson, IA

Jack Kimberley Truth or Consequences. NM

Andy Moulton Faraday, LA Staff Sgt. I

Jimmy Oliphant Beson, Del.

Asley St. Thomas Anderson, Ind.

*Josh Bortman Castle Rock, Me.

He had put his own name last, Dale saw - he had seen all of this before, or course, and had noticed it... but had never really noticed it until now, perhaps. He had put his name last, out of alphabetical order, and with an asterisk.

The asterisk means "still alive." The asterisk means "don't hate me."

Ah, but what you're thinking is madness, and you damned well know it.

Nevertheless, he went to the telephone, dialled 0, and ascertained that the area code for Maine was 207. He dialed Maine directory assistance, and ascertained that there was a single Bortman family in Castle Rock.

He thanked the operator, wrote the number down, and looked at the telephone.

You don't really intend to call those people, do you?

No answer - only the sound of the ticking clock. He had put the picture on the sofa and now he looked at it - looked first at his own son, his hair pulled back behind his head, a bravo little moustache trying to grow on his upper lip, frozen forever at the age of twenty-one, and then at the new boy in that old picture, the boy with the short blonds hair, the boy whose dog-tags were twisted so they lay face-down and unreadable against his chest. He thought of the way Josh Bortman had carefully segregated himself from the others, thought of the asterisk, and suddenly his eyes filled with warm tears.

I never hated you, son, he thought. Nor did Andrea, for all her grief. Maybe I should have picked up a pen and dropped you a note saying so, but honest to Christ, the thought never crossed my mind.

He picked up the phone now and dialled the Bortman number in Castle Rock, Maine.

Busy.

He hung up and sat for five minutes, looking out at the street where Billy had learned to ride first a trike, then a bike with trainer wheels, then a two-wheeler. At eighteen he had brought home the final improvement - a Yamaha 500. For just a moment he could see Billy with paralysing clarity, as if he might walk through the door and sit down.

He dialled the Bortman number again. This time it rang. The voice on the other end managed to convey an unmistakable impression of wariness in just two syllables. "Hello?" At that same moment, Dale's eyes fell on the dial of his wristwatch and read the date - not for the first time that day, but it was the first time it really sunk in. It was April 9th. Billy and the others had died eleven years ago yesterday. They -

"Hello?" the voice repeated sharply. "Answer me, or I'm hanging up! Which one are you?"

Which one are you? He stood in the ticking living room, cold, listening to words croak out of him mouth.

"My name is Dale Clewson, Mr. Bortman. My son--"

"Clewson. Billy Clewson's father." Now the voice was flat, inflectionless.

"Yes, that's--"

"So you say."

Dale could find no reply. For the first time in his life, he really was tongue-tied.

"And has your picture of Squad D changed, too?"

"Yes." It came out in a strangled little gasp.

Bortman's voice remained inflectionless, but it was nonetheless filled with savagery. "You listen to me, and tell the others. There's going to be tracer equipment on my phone by this afternoon. If it's some kind of joke, you fellows are going to be laughing all the way to jail, I can assure you."

"Mr. Bortman--"

"Shut up! First someone calling himself Peter Moulton calls, supposedly from Louisiana, and tells my wife that our boy has suddenly showed up in a picture Josh sent them of Squad D. She's still having hysterics over that when a woman purporting to be Bobby Kale's mother calls with the same insane story. Next, Oliphant! Five minutes ago, Rider Dotson's brother! He says. Now you."

"But Mr. Bortman--"

"My wife is Upstairs sedated, and if all of this is a case or 'Have you got Prince Albert in a can,' I swear to God -"

"You know it isn't a joke," Dale whispered. His fingers felt cold and numb - ice cream fingers. He looked across the room at the photograph. At the blonde boy. Smiling, squinting into the camera.

Silence from the other end.

"You know it isn't a joke, so what happened?"

"My son killed himself yesterday evening," Bortman said evenly.

"If you didn't know It."

"I didn't. I swear."

Bortman signed. "And you really are calling from long distance, aren't you?"

"From Binghamton, New York."

"Yes. You can tell the difference--local from long distance, I mean. Long distance has a sound...a...a hum..."

Dale realized, belatedly, that expression had finally crept into that voice. Bortman was crying.

"He was depressed off and on, ever since he got back from Nam, in late 1974," Bortman said. "it always got worse in the spring, it always peaked around the 8th of April when the other boys ... and your son..."

"Yes," Dale said.

"This year, it just didn't ... didn't peak."

There was a muffled honk-Bortman using his handkerchief.

"He hung himself in the garage, Mr. Clewson."

"Christ Jesus," Dale muttered. He shut his eyes very tightly, trying to ward off the image. He got one which was arguably even worse - that smiling face, the open fatigue shirt, the twisted dog-tags. "I'm sorry."

"He didn't want people to know why he wasn't with the others that day, but of course the story got out." A long, meditative pause from Bortman's end. "Stories like that always do."

"Yes. I suppose they do."

"Joshua didn't have many friends when he was growing up, Mr. Clewson. I don't think he had any real friends until he got to Nam. He loved your son, and the others."

Now it's him. comforting me.

"I'm sorry for your loss;" Dale said. "And sorry to have bothered you at a time like this. But you'll understand ... I had to."

"Yes. Is he smiling, Mr. Clewson? The others ... they said he was smiling."

Dale looked toward the picture beside the ticking clock. "He's smiling."

"Of course he is. Josh finally caught up with them."

Dale looked out the window toward the sidewalk where Billy had once ridden a bike with training wheels. He supposed he should say something, but he couldn't seem to think of a thing. His stomach hurt. His bones were cold.

"I ought to go, Mr. Clewson. In case my wife wakes up." He paused. "I think I'll take the phone off the hook."

"That might not be a bad idea."

"Goodbye, Mr. Clewson."

"Goodbye. Once again, my sympathies."

"And mine, too."

Click.

Dale crossed the room and picked up the photograph of Squad D. He looked at the smiling blonde boy, who was sitting cross-legged in front of Kimberley and Gibson, sitting casually and comfortably on the ground as if he had never had a haemorrhoid in his life, as if he had never stood atop a stepladder in a shadowy garage and slipped a noose around his neck.

Josh finally caught up with them.

He stood looking fixedly at the photograph for a long time before realizing that the depth of silence in the room had deepened. The clock had stopped.

Stud City

From: "Greenspun Quarterly", issue 45, Fall, 1970
by Stephen King

March.

Chico stands at the window, arms crossed, elbows on the ledge that divides upper and lower panes, naked, looking out, breath fogging the glass. A draught against his belly. Bottom right pane is gone. Blocked by a piece of cardboard.

'Chico.'

He doesn't turn. She doesn't speak again. He can see a ghost of her in the glass, in his bed, sitting, blankets pulled up in apparent defiance of gravity. Her eye makeup has smeared into deep hollows under her eyes.

Chico shifts his gaze beyond her ghost, out beyond the house. Raining. Patches of snow sloughed away to reveal the bald ground underneath. He sees last year's dead grass, a plastic toy--Billy's--a rusty rake. His brother Johnny's Dodge is up on blocks, the de-tired wheels sticking out like stumps. He remembers times he and Johnny worked on it, listening to the superhits and boss oldies from WLAM in Lewiston pour out of Johnny's old transistor radio--a couple of times Johnny would give him a beer. *She gonna run fast, Chico, Johnny would say. She gonna eat up everything on this road from Gates Falls to Castle Rock. Wait till we get that Hearst shifter in her!*

But that had been then, and this was now.

Beyond Johnny's Dodge was the highway. Route 14, goes to Portland and New Hampshire south, all the way to Canada north, if you turned left on US 1 at Thomaston. 'Stud city,' Chico says to the glass. He smokes his cigarette.

'What?'

'Nothing, babe.'

'Chico?' Her voice is puzzled. He will have to change the sheets before Dad gets back. She bled.

'What?'

'I love you, Chico.' 'That's right.'

Dirty March. *You're some old whore, Chico thinks. Dirty, staggering old baggy-tits March with rain in her face.*

'This room used to be Johnny's,' he says suddenly. 'Who?'

'My brother.'

'Oh. Where is he?'

'In the Army,' Chico says, but Johnny isn't in the Army. He had been working the summer before at Oxford Plains Speedway and a car went out of control and skidded across the infield towards the pit area, where Johnny had been changing the back tires on a Chevy charger-class stocker. Some guys shouted at him to look out, but Johnny never heard them. One of the guys who shouted was Johnny's brother Chico.

'Aren't you cold?' she asks.

'No. Well, my feet. A little.'

And he thinks suddenly: *Well, my God. Nothing happened to Johnny that isn't going to happen to you too, sooner or later.* He sees it again, though: the skidding, skating Ford Mustang, the knobs of his brother's spine picked out in a series of dimpled shadows against the white of his Haines T-shirt; he had been hunkered down, pulling one of the Chevy's back tires. There had been time to see rubber flaying off the tires of the runaway Mustang, to see its hanging muffler scraping up sparks from the infield. It had struck Johnny even as Johnny tried to get to his feet. Then the yellow shout of flame.

Well, Chico thinks, *It could have been slow,* and he thinks of his grandfather. Hospital smells. Pretty young nurses bearing bedpans. A last papery breath. Were there any good ways?

He shivers and wonders about God. He touches the small silver St Christopher's medal that hangs on a chain around his neck. He is not a Catholic and he's surely not a Mexican: his real name is Edward May and his friends all call him Chico because his hair is black and he greases it back with Brylcreem and he wears boots with pointed toes and Cuban heels. Not Catholic, but he wears this medallion. Maybe if Johnny had been wearing one, the runaway Mustang would have missed him. *You* never knew.

He smokes and stares out the window and behind him the girl gets out of bed and comes to him quickly, almost mincing, maybe afraid he will turn around and look at her. She puts a warm hand on his back. Her breasts push against his side. Her belly touches his buttock.

'Oh. It *is* cold.' 'It's this place.'

'Do you love me, Chico?'

'*You* bet!' he says offhandedly, and then, more seriously: '*You* were cherry.' 'What does that--'

'*You* were a virgin.'

The hand reaches higher. One finger traces the skin on the nape of his neck. 'I said, didn't I?'

'Was it hard? Did it hurt?'

She laughs. 'No. But I was scared.'

They watch the rain. A new Oldsmobile goes by on 14, spraying up water. 'Stud City,' Chico says.

'What?'

'That guy. He's going Stud City. In his new stud car.'

She kisses the place her finger has been touching gently and he brushes at her as if she were a fly.

'What's the matter?'

He turns to her. Her eyes flick down to his penis and then up again hastily. Her arms twitch to cover herself, and then she remembers that they never do stuff like that in the movies and she drops them to her sides again. Her hair is black and her skin is winter white, the color of cream. Her breasts are firm, her belly perhaps a little too soft. One flaw to remind, Chico thinks, that this isn't the movies.

"Jane?"

'What?' He can feel himself getting ready. Not beginning, but getting ready.

'It's all right,' he said. 'We're friends.' He eyes her deliberately, letting himself reach at her in all sorts of ways. When he looks at her face again, it is flushed. 'Do you mind me looking at you?'

'I . . . no. No, Chico.'

She steps back, closes her eyes, sits on the bed, and leans back, legs spread. He sees all of her. The muscles, the little muscles on the inside of her thighs . . . they're jumping, uncontrolled, and this suddenly excites him more than the taut cones of her breasts or the mild pink pearl of her cunt. Excitement trembles in him, some stupid Bozo on a spring. Love may be as divine as the poets say, he thinks, but sex is Bozo the clown bouncing around on a spring. How could a woman look at an erect penis without going off into mad gales of laughter?

The rain beats against the roof, against the window, against the sodden cardboard patch blocking the glassless lower pane. He presses his hand against his chest, looking for a moment like a stage Roman about to orate. His hand is cold. He drops it to his side.

'Open your eyes. We're friends, I said.'

Obediently, she opens them. She looks at him. Her eyes appear violet now. The rainwater running down the window makes rippling patterns on her face, her neck, her breasts. Stretched across the bed, her belly has been pulled tight. She is perfect in her moment. 'Oh,' she says. 'Oh Chico, it feels so *funny*,' A shiver goes through her. She has curled her toes involuntarily. He can see the insteps of her feet. Her insteps are pink. 'Chico. Chico.'

He steps towards her. His body is shivering and her eyes widen. She says something, one word, but he can't tell what it is. This isn't the time to ask. He half-kneels before her for just a second, looking at the floor with frowning concentration, touching her legs just above the knees. He measures the tide within himself. Its pull is thoughtless, fantastic. He pauses a little longer.

The only sound is the tinny tick of the alarm clock on the bedtable, standing brassy-legged atop a pile of Spiderman comic books. Her

breathing flutters faster and faster. His muscles slide smoothly as he dives upward and forward. They begin. It's better this time. Outside, the rain goes on washing away the snow.

A half-hour later Chico shakes her out of a light doze. 'We gotta move,' he says. 'Dad and Virginia will be home pretty quick.'

She looks at her wristwatch and sits up. This time she makes no attempt to shield herself. Her whole tone--her body English--has changed. She has not matured (although she probably believes she has) nor learned anything more complex than tying a shoe, but her tone has changed just the same. He nods and she smiles tentatively at him. He reaches for the cigarettes on the bedtable. As she draws on her panties, he thinks of a line from an old novelty song: *Keep playin' till I shoot through, Blue ... play your digeree, do.* 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down', by Rolf Harris. He grins. That was a song Johnny used to sing. It ended, *So we tanned his hide when he died, Clyde, and that's it hanging on the shed.*

She hooks her bra and begins buttoning her blouse. 'What are you smiling about, Chico?'

'Nothing,' he says.

'Zip me up?'

He goes to her, still naked, and zips her up. He kisses her cheek. 'Go on in the bathroom and do your face if you want,' he says. 'Just don't take too long, okay?'

She goes up the hall gracefully, and Chico watches her, smoking. She is a tall girl--taller than he--and she has to duck her head a little going through the bathroom door. Chico finds his underpants under the bed. He puts them in the dirty clothes bag hanging just inside the closet door, and gets another pair from the bureau. He puts them on, and then, while walking back to the bed, he slips and almost falls in a patch of wetness the square of cardboard has let in.

'Goddam,' he whispers resentfully.

He looks around at the room, which had been Johnny's until Johnny died (*why did I tell her he was in the Army, for Christ's sake?* he wonders . . . a little uneasily). Fiberboard walls, so thin he can hear Dad and Virginia going at it at night, that don't quite make it all the way to the ceiling. The floor has a slightly crazy hipshot angle so that the room's door will only stay open if you block it open - if you forget, it swings stealthily closed as soon as your back is turned. On the far wall is a movie poster from *Easy Rider - Two Men Went Looking for America and Couldn't Find it Anywhere*. The room had more life when Johnny lived here. Chico doesn't know how or why; only that it's true. And he knows something else, as well. He knows that sometimes the room spooks him at night. Sometimes he thinks that the closet door will swing open and Johnny will be standing there, his body charred and twisted and blackened, his teeth yellow dentures poking out of wax that has partially melted and re-hardened; and Johnny will be whispering: *Get out of my room, Chico. And if you lay a hand on my Dodge, I'll fuckin kill you. Got it?*

Got it, bro, Chico thinks.

For a moment he stands still, looking at the rumpled sheet spotted with the girl's blood, and then he spreads the blankets up in one quick gesture. Here. Right here. How do you like that, Virginia? How does that grab your snatch? He puts on his pants, his engineer boots, finds a sweater.

He's dry-combing his hair in front of the mirror when she comes out of the John. She looks classy. Her too-soft stomach doesn't show in the jumper. She looks at the bed, does a couple of things to it, and it comes out looking made instead of just spread up.

'Good,' Chico says.

She laughs a little self-consciously and pushes a lock of hair behind her ear. It is an evocative, poignant gesture.

'Let's go,' he says.

They go out through the hall and the living room. Jane pauses in front of the tinted studio photograph on top of the TV. It shows his father and Virginia, a high-school-age Johnny, a grammar-school-age Chico, and an infant Billy--in the picture, Johnny is holding Billy. All of them have fixed, stoned grins . . . all except Virginia, whose face is its sleepy, indecipherable self. That picture, Chico remembers, was taken less than a month after his Dad married the bitch.

That your mother and father?

'It's my father,' Chico said. 'She's my step-mother, Virginia. Come on.'

'Is she still that pretty?' Jane asks, picking up her coat and handing Chico his windbreaker.

'I guess my old man thinks so,' Chico says.

They step out into the shed. It's a damp and draughty place--the wind hoots through the cracks in its slapstick walls. There is a pile of old bald tires, Johnny's old bike that Chico inherited when he was ten and which he promptly wrecked, a pile of detective magazines, returnable Pepsi bottles, a greasy monolithic engine block, an orange crate full of paperback books, an old paint-by-the-numbers of a horse standing on dusty green grass. Chico helps her pick her way outside. The rain is falling with disheartening steadiness. Chico's old sedan stands in a driveway puddle, looking downhearted. Even up on blocks and with a red piece of plastic covering the place where the windshield should go, Johnny's Dodge has more class. Chico's car is a Buick. The paint is dull and flowered with spots of rust. The front seat upholstery has been covered with a brown Army Blanket. A large button pinned to the sun visor on the passenger side says: I WANT IT EVERY DAY. There is a rusty starter assembly on the back seat; if it ever stops raining he will clean it, he thinks, and maybe put it into the Dodge. Or maybe not

The Buick smells musty and his own starter grinds a long time before the Buick starts up. 'Is it your battery?' she asks.

'Just the goddam rain, I guess.' He backs out onto the road, flicking on the windshield wipers and pausing for a moment to look at the house. It is a completely unappetizing aqua color. The shed sticks off from it at a ragtag, double-jointed angle, tarpaper and peeled-looking shingles.

The radio comes on with a blare and Chico shuts it off at once. There is the beginning of a Sunday afternoon headache behind his forehead. They ride past the Grange hall and the Volunteer Fire Department and Brownie's Store. Sally Morrison's T-Bird is parked by Brownie's hi-test pump, and Chico raises a hand to her as he turns off onto the old Lewiston road.

'Who's that?'

'Sally Morrison.'

'Pretty lady.' Very neutral.

He feels for his cigarettes. 'She's been married twice and divorced twice. Now she's the town pump, if you believe half the talk that goes on in this shitass little town.'

'She looks young.'

'She is.'

'Have you ever--'

He slides his hand up her leg and smiles. 'No,' he says. 'My brother, maybe, but not me. I like Sally, though. She's got her alimony and her big white Bird, and she doesn't care what people say about her.'

It starts to seem like a long drive. The Androscoggin, off to the right, is slaty and sullen. The ice is all out of it now. Jane has grown quiet and thoughtful. The only sound is the steady snap of the windshield wipers. When the car rolls through the dips in the road there is groundfog, waiting for evening when it will creep out of these pockets and take over the whole River Road.

They cross into Auburn and Chico drives the cutoff and swings onto Minot Avenue. The four lanes are nearly deserted, and all the suburban homes look packaged. They see one little boy in a yellow plastic raincoat walking up the sidewalk, carefully stepping in all the puddles.

'Go, man,' Chico says softly. 'What?' Jane asks.

'Nothing, babe. Go back to sleep.' She laughs a little doubtfully.

Chico turns up Keston Street and into the driveway of one of the packaged houses. He doesn't turn off the ignition.

'Come in and I'll give you cookies,' she says. He shakes his head. 'I have to get back.'

'I know.' She puts her arms around him and kisses him. "Thank you for the most wonderful time of my life.'

He smiles suddenly. His face shines. It is nearly magical. 'I'll see you Monday, Jane. Still friends, right?'

'You know we are,' she says, and kisses him again ... but when he cups a breast through her jumper, she pulls away. 'Don't. My father might see.'

He lets her go, only a little of the smile left. She gets out of the car quickly and runs through the rain to the back door. A second later she's gone. Chico pauses for a moment to light a cigarette and then he backs out of the driveway. The Buick stalls and the starter seems to grind forever before the engine manages to catch. It is a long ride home.

When he gets there, Dad's station wagon is parked in the driveway. He pulls in beside it and lets the engine die. For a moment he sits inside silently, listening to the rain. It is like being inside a steel drum.

Inside, Billy is watching Carl Stormer and his Country Buckaroos on the TV set. When Chico comes in, Billy jumps up, excited. 'Eddie, hey Eddie, you know what Uncle Pete said? He said him and a whole mess of other guys sank a Kraut sub in the war! Will you take me to the show next Saturday?'

'I don't know,' Chico says, grinning. 'Maybe if you kiss my shoes every night before supper all week.' He pulls Billy's hair. Billy hollers and laughs and kicks him in the shins. 'Cut it out, now,' Sam May says, coming into the room. 'Cut it out you two. *You* know how your mother feels about the roughhousing.' He has pulled his tie down and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. He's got a couple -three red hotdogs on a plate. The hotdogs are wrapped in white bread, and Sam May has put the old mustard right to them. 'Where you been, Eddie?'

'At Jane's.'

The toilet flushes in the bathroom. Virginia. Chico wonders briefly if Jane has left any hairs in the sink, or a lipstick, or a bobby pin.

'*You* should have come with us to see your Uncle Pete and Aunt Ann,' his father says. He eats a frank in three quick bites. 'You're getting to be like a stranger around here, Eddie. I don't like that. Not while we provide the bed and board.'

'Some bed,' Chico says. 'Some board.'

Sam looks up quickly, hurt at first, then angry. When he speaks, Chico sees that his teeth are yellow with French's mustard. He feels vaguely nauseated. 'Your lip. Your goddam lip. *You* aren't too big yet, snotnose.'

Chico shrugs, peels a slice of Wonder Bread off the loaf standing on the TV tray by his father's chair, and spreads it with ketchup. 'In three months I'm going to be gone anyway.' 'What the hell are you talking about?'

'I'm gonna fix up Johnny's car and go out to California. Look for work.'

'Oh yeah. Right.' He is a big man, big in a shambling way, but Chico thinks now that he got smaller after he married Virginia, and smaller again after Johnny died. And in his mind he hears himself saying to Jane: *My brother, maybe, but not me*. And on the heels of that: *Play your digeree, do, Blue*. 'You ain't never going to get that car as far as Castle Rock, let alone Canada.'

'You don't think so? Just watch my fucking dust.'

For a moment his father only looks at him and then he throws the frank he has been holding. It hits Chico in the chest, spraying mustard on his sweater and on the chair.

'Say that word again and I'll break your nose for you, smartass.'

Chico picks up the frank and looks at it. Cheap red frank, smeared with French's mustard. Spread a little sunshine. He throws it back at his father. Sam gets up, his face the color of an old brick, the vein in the middle of his forehead pulsing. His thigh connects with the TV tray and it overturns. Billy stands in the kitchen doorway watching them. He's gotten himself a plate of franks and beans and the plate has tipped and bean-juice runs onto the floor. Billy's eyes are wide, his mouth trembling. On the TV, Carl Stormer and his Country Buckaroos are tearing through Long Black Veil at a breakneck pace.

'You raise them up best you can and they spit on you,' his father says thickly. 'Ayuh. That's how it goes. He gropes blindly on the seat of his chair and comes up with the half-eaten hotdog. He holds it in his fist like a severed phallus. Incredibly, he begins to eat it . . . at the same time, Chico sees that he has begun to cry. 'Ayuh, they spit on you, that's just how it goes.'

'Well, why in the hell did you have to marry her?' he bursts out, and then has to bite down on the rest of it: *If you hadn't married her, Johnny would still be alive*.

That's none of your goddam business!' Sam May roars through his tears. 'That's my business!'

'Oh?' Chico shouts back. 'Is that so? I only have to live with her! Me and Billy, we have to live with her! Watch her grind you down! And you don't even know--'

'What?' his father says, and his voice is suddenly low and ominous. The chunk of hotdog left in his closed fist is like a bloody chunk of bone. 'What don't I know?'

'You don't know shit from Shinola,' he says, appalled at what has almost come out of his mouth.

'You want to stop it now,' his father says. 'Or I'll beat the hell out of you, Chico.' He only calls him this when he is very angry indeed.

Chico turns and sees that Virginia is standing at the other side of the room, adjusting her skirt minutely, looking at him with her large, calm, brown eyes. Her eyes are beautiful; the rest of her is not so beautiful, so self-renewing, but those eyes will carry her for years yet, Chico thinks, and he feels the sick hate come back--*So we tanned his hide when he died, Clyde, and that's it hanging on the shed.*

'She's got you pussywhipped and you don't have the guts to do anything about it!'

All of this shouting has finally become too much for Billy--he gives a great wail of terror, drops his plate of franks and beans, and covers his face with his hands. Bean-juice splatters his Sunday shoes and sprays across the rug.

Sam takes a single step forward and then stops when Chico makes a curt beckoning gesture, as if to say: *Yeah, come on, let's get down to it, what took you so fuckin long?* They stand like statues until Virginia speaks--her voice is low, as calm as her brown eyes.

'Have you had a girl in your room, Ed? You know how your father and I feel about that.' Almost as an afterthought: 'She left a handkerchief.'

He stares at her, savagely unable to express the way he feels, the way she is dirty, the way she shoots unerringly at the back, the way she clips in behind you and cuts at your hamstrings.

You could hurt me if you wanted to, the calm brown eyes say. / know you know what was going on before he died. But that's the only way you can hurt me, isn't it, Chico? And only then if your father believed you. And if he believed you, it would kill him.

His father lunges at the new gambit like a bear. 'Have you been screwing in my house, you little bastard?'

'Watch your language, please, Sam,' Virginia says calmly.

'Is that why you didn't want to come with us? So you could scr--so you could -' 'Say it!' Chico weeps. 'Don't let her do it to you! Say it! Say what you mean!'

'Get out,' he says dully. 'Don't you come back until you can apologize to your mother and me.'

'Don't you dare!' he cries. 'Don't you dare call that bitch my mother! I'll kill you!'

'Stop it, Eddie!' Billy screams. The words are muffled, blurred, through his hands, which still cover his face. 'Stop yelling at daddy! Stop it, please!'

Virginia doesn't move from the doorway. Her calm eyes remain on Chico.

Sam blunders back a step and the back of his knees strike the edge of his easy-chair. He sits down in it heavily and averts his face against a hairy forearm. 'I can't even look at you when you got words like that in your mouth, Eddie. *You* are making me feel so bad.'

'*She* makes you feel bad! Why won't you admit it?'

He does not reply. Still not looking at Chico, he fumbles another frank wrapped in bread from the plate on the TV tray. He fumbles for the mustard. Billy goes on crying. Carl Stormer and his Country Buckaroos are singing a truck-driving song. 'My rig is old, but that don't mean she's slow,' Carl tells all his western Maine viewers.

'The boy doesn't know what he's saying, Sam,' Virginia says gently. 'It's hard, at his age. It's hard to grow up.'

She's whipped him. That's the end, all right.

He turns and heads for the door which leads first into the shed and then outdoors. As he opens it he looks back at Virginia, and she gazes at him tranquilly when he speaks her name.

'What is it, Ed?'

'The sheets are bloody.' He pauses. 'I broke her in.'

He thinks something has stirred in her eyes, but that is probably only his wish. 'Please go now, Ed. You're scaring Billy.'

He leaves. The Buick doesn't want to start and he has almost resigned himself to walking in the rain when the engine finally catches. He lights a cigarette and backs out onto 14, slamming the clutch back in and racing the mill when it starts to jerk and splutter. The generator light blinks balefully at him twice, and then the car settles into a rugged die. At last he is on his way, creeping up the road towards Gates Falls.

He spares Johnny's Dodge one last look.

Johnny could have had steady work at Gates Mills & Weaving, but only on the night shift. Night work didn't bother him, he had told Chico, and the pay was better than at the Plains, but their father worked days, and working nights at the mill would have meant Johnny would have been home with her, home alone or with Chico in the next room . . . and the walls were thin. / *can't stop and she won't let me try*, Johnny said. *Yeah, I know what it would do to him. But she's . . . she Just won't stop and it's like I can't stop . . . she's always at me, you know what I mean, you've seen her, Billy's too young to understand, but you've seen her . . .*

Yes. He had seen her. And Johnny had gone to work at the Plains, telling their father it was because he could get parts for the Dodge on the cheap. And that's how it happened that he had been changing a tire when the Mustang came skidding and skating across the infield

with its muffler dragging up sparks; that was how his stepmother had killed his brother, so just keep playing until I shoot through, Blue, 'cause we goin Stud City right here in this shit-heap Buick, and he remembers how the rubber smelled, and how the knobs of Johnny's spine cast small crescent shadows on the bright white of his tee-shirt, he remembers seeing Johnny get halfway up from the squat he had been working in when the Mustang hit him, squashing him between it and the Chevy, and there had been a hollow bang as the Chevy came down off its jacks, and then the bright yellow flare of flame, the rich smell of gasoline--

Chico strikes the brakes with both feet, bringing the sedan to a crunching, juddering halt on the sodden shoulder. He leans widely across the seat, throws open the passenger door, and sprays yellow puke onto the mud and snow. The sight of it makes him puke again, and the thought of it makes him dry-heave one more time. The car almost stalls, but he catches it in time. The generator light winks out reluctantly when he guns the engine. He sits, letting the shakes work their way out of him. A car goes by fast, a new Ford, white, throwing up great dirty fans of water and slush.

'Stud City,' Chico says. 'In his new stud car. Funky.'

He tastes puke on his lips and in his throat and coating his sinuses. He doesn't want a cigarette. Danny Carter will let him sleep over. Tomorrow will be time enough for further decisions. He pulls back into Route 14 and gets rolling.

Weeds

by Stephen King

Cavalier Magazine (May 1976)

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 the 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 out-buildings 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 semi-circle, 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, 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, laying 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 lay. 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 lay, that was the ticket. It was on his land. If any of those college professors tried to take his meteor, he'd sick 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 hotdog in one hand and a cone of spun sugar in the other, in over 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 goddam thing, no telling where it had been or what that white stuff had been, that meteor shit 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 Cornhusker's 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 grippe. 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 owing 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 catalogue 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 awhile, 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 further and a little further. 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 liked 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 only sent out bills 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 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 schnockered. He wished he *was* schnockered. 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 ice box 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 wiggled 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 clawfoot 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 catsup 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 over 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 further downstream. A peninsula of green had already marched ten feet up the bank on 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 has 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?

What bang?

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!*

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.

THE FURNACE

by Stephen King

(Weekly Reader, 2005)

Like the earlier works “Skybar” and “The Cat From Hell,” this is a story fragment rather than an actual story. King wrote only the first two paragraphs, with the indication that readers will finish the tale. Unlike “The Cat From Hell,” but very much like “Skybar,” King intends not to “finish” this story himself.

Tommy’s job was to get wood for the fire from the box at the bottom of the cellar stairs. His mother said he wouldn’t be afraid of the cellar when he got older, but now he was ten, and he hated it more than ever.

Tommy was sure something was behind the furnace. He sometimes thought he could hear it breathing back there, and he knew it was watching him. Then one day when Tommy was getting the wood, the door at the top of the stairs swung shut and the cellar light went out. ¹

A cold ripple of fear swept over him as he stood there, stock still as if frozen to the spot, when he heard a voice that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. “Come to me,” said the horrible voice. “Come.” Tommy tried to run up the stairs but he couldn’t. He was drawn by that horrible voice and however much he tried to free himself he found his feet moving closer to it. ²

For a moment, Tommy just stood there, blinking his eyes. This could not seriously be happening. Then, as he frantically groped his hands around for the wooden banister, he heard it.

A breath. The shuddering whistle sounded like a pot of tea finished boiling, only deeper and softer.

It sent a shiver of chills up Tommy’s spine, and it spread throughout his body uncontrollably, making him twitch in cold fear. ³

During his twitching, he managed to muster to his voice: “Who are you and why are you here?” ⁴

“I’ve always been here, dropping you hints, but you didn’t figure it out,” the despicable creature replied in a matter-of-fact manner. “I’ve watched you for years, wondering when you would figure it out. I assumed you would have by now but that’s alright, this has given me time to perfect my scheme.” [5](#)

In an instant, Tommy’s paranoia of the cellar was no longer imagined; it crossed the barrier of reality.

That matter-of-fact voice overwhelmed him with a sense of danger. Reverberating through his thoughts like a never-ending mantra was the phrase, “Scheme? What scheme?”

Tommy tried to figure out a game plan. He thought about trying to escape, but as he grappled with his odds of making it out of the cellar alive, he nixed the idea immediately.

Slowly sinking to his knees, Tommy cried, “What’s happening to me? I’m only 10-years-old. And I never hurt anybody before. Why are you, the gruesome creature of the cellar scheming to get me?” [6](#)

The Voice laughed. “Gruesome? No, no, I’m not gruesome ...I’m just tired. I’ve been around for a long, long time.”

Still shuddering, Tommy whispered, “W-what d-d-do you w-want?”

Once again the Voice laughed its deep bellowing laugh. “It’s not what I want Tommy ... it’s what you want. Do you want to live ...or die? It all depends on how well you can ... live up to my standards.” [7](#)

The creature then stood up. Tommy saw it. It was a stone lion; its body armor plated in stone. Its eyes were blue glowing stones.

“You are the chosen one,” said the lion.

“Chosen for what? Who are you? What are you doing here?” asked Tommy.

“Come here,” ordered the lion.

Tommy felt cold. His instincts told him to run so he did. [8](#)

He dashed toward the great stone lion and through a portal.

“Turn!” screamed the great beast.

Tommy had no choice. He turned into a hole of darkness. ⁹

Tommy fell for a long moment into what seemed like thick, black nothingness. His screaming left his throat craving the thick air around him. He could see the glow of the lion’s eyes to his right and he could feel the heat of the furnace fade behind him.

He landed heavily in a pile of tangled tree roots. Dizzy from the impact of the cold earth underneath him, he stood up and turned to the lion. ¹⁰

“Get on,” the beast instructed, indicating his back with his head. He lay down, low enough for Tommy to mount easily.

Tommy hesitated. Should I get on? he wondered. How do I know I can trust him? The question was, though, how did he know he couldn’t? The creature growled, impatient and Tommy made up his mind.

Cautiously, he swung a foot up and over the lion’s back. As he got comfortable, he found that the lion’s stone fur didn’t feel like stone at all. More like actual fur. It was warm, yet unpleasant to touch. It stuck to his skin slightly. However, before he could ponder this further, the lion’s legs tensed underneath them. A second later they went flying. ¹¹

Tommy rushed through the cold air on the lion’s back. Below him, he saw nothing but vast amounts of debris. He examined the ruins of buildings and homes.

What is this? he thought to himself. What’s going on?

As the lion continued to soar gracefully through the sky, his gleaming blue eyes glanced up at the bewildered expression on Tommy’s young face.

“Rubbish,” uttered the lion. “It’s been nothing but since he came into power.”

“Who’s he?” asked Tommy.

The lion directed Tommy’s puzzled eyes to a magnificent palace towering high above the ash. “He,” said the lion. “And only you can stop him.” [12](#)

The castle stood, towering above him and the lion. Tommy felt drawn to the castle, somehow. He felt this was his home, and it had his life’s meaning to come here. The lion turned his head slightly, observing Tommy’s reaction. As if forewarning him, the Lion’s eyes pierced him, making Tommy turn his head away from the castle.

“It looks so wonderful, doesn’t it? That’s what we thought about him, too, at first. Then we discovered that he was only here to destroy and take what he thinks is rightfully his; it makes us feel cold inside.” [13](#)

The ground began to shake and something came up from the ground. It looked like a shriveled up creature lacking eyes. The lion said, “That is one of his minions. You see what happens to them that follow him. You must not follow him.”

The shriveled up creature said, “It is not as easy as you think. He, the GREAT ONE is more powerful than can be believed.” The creature gave a hiss and a screech and vanished in a puff of smoke and a blowing of the wind.

The ground shook again. Standing at the door of the palace was a large man who looked very nice. “That is him,” the lion said.

The man shot lightning from his fingers and sent the lion flying. He then turned to Tommy and said, “Come in. You look tired and we have much to eat.” [14](#)

“Welcome Thomas, please sit down and try some of this delicious pie.” The man pointed towards a steaming apple pie.

“No, thank you,” said Tommy.

“Very well. You may not know who I am, but I know who you are because I have been searching for you my entire life,” he said.

“Who are you, how do you know my name, and why have you brought me here?” said Tommy.

“I cannot reveal that information at this moment, but I can tell you that you are not who you think you are,” said the man coldly.

“Then who am I?” said Tommy now more frightened than ever, his knees trembling.

“You are me...” [15](#)

“Excuse me?” Tommy said.

“You are me,” the man repeated. “Well, I’m you. From the future.”

“What? That’s not possible!” Tommy said gaping at this strange man.

“Here, let me prove it to you....” [16](#)

The man pulled, from his pocket, a locket.

A heart-shaped locket.

Tommy gasped. It was the same necklace his grandmother had given him a year ago before she passed away. Tommy reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out the locket.

The man that was “him from the future” answered, “That lion has been trying to destroy me for years.” After a long while he said, “You have two choices, Tommy. You can be on my side, or the lion’s. It’s your decision.”

Tommy thought about it. Who was really the hero?

There was only one solution. Tommy had to give the man a test. Just to be sure it was really himself from the future. [17](#)

Tommy just stood there. He couldn’t believe this at all. He didn’t want this; none of this. “If you’re really me,” he said. “Then let me ask you some questions about myself you should know.”

The man stood there looking at Tommy with a smile on his face. What a devilish face he had. “Fine, go ahead. And don’t go easy young one.”

What should I ask him? What should I say? Tommy thought.

As the man stared at him, he started to feel sick. “OK, when is my birthday or what is my favorite food? And tell me something that no one else knows about me.” Tommy spoke so fast that he wasn’t even sure the man heard him.

He had a blank face and started to say, “Your birthday is April 18th and your favorite food is pizza. One thing that you have not let anyone know is that you are really sad. You’re very angry and you will soon take it out on your loved ones. Your suppression of all these painful thoughts caused you to warp.” [18](#)

Tommy stood there not knowing what to do next. How could this stranger possibly know these things?

Then Tommy grinned and said, “You’re wrong! You’re wrong! I would never take anything out on my family. I love them too much to hurt them.”

The stranger emitted a sound so frightening that Tommy shook with fear. “I’m sorry, child. I never meant to make you cower. Please come here and I will prove to you that you will hurt them unless you stay with me!”

Tommy approached, in an almost hypnotic way. As he reached for the stranger’s hand, the doors shot open behind them and with that, a mighty roar. [19](#)

With the roar came a blast of icy wind [that] blew the stranger backwards several feet, but, strangely, Tommy’s slight figure didn’t even budge.

He turned, expecting to see the bizarre lion he’d ridden to the castle but he saw instead... his mother!

She almost looked like a witch or a demon-lady. Instead of her usual jeans and rolled-up sleeve work shirt, she wore a long, royal purple velvet gown. Her hair? which Tommy had only seen pulled back into a hasty, untidy little

housekeeper's bun—was long, flowing, and golden. The wind that had emanated from her also seemed, oddly, to be blowing fiercely at her, making it almost as if she was flying.

Her eyes, normally a dull grey, were as fierce and bright green as a cat's, and her normally short, unkempt fingernails had grown long and elegant, and shone as if they were painted with liquid diamonds.

“M-m-mommy?” Tommy asked tremulously. She reached out her arms lovingly, and Tommy had no hesitation in running into their safety.

As he began to run, however, he could feel the icy cold fingers of the stranger grabbing at the cloth of his shirt, but the evil gnome shrank away as Tommy heard the voice of his mother boom, “Leave my child alone!” with the voice of ten thousand women.

Tommy began to run faster than ever, determined to reach the one thing he knew for sure was real. [20](#)

The ground split open

“CRRRAAAAACK!”

A wide chasm opened between Tommy and his mother.

“Jump!” His mother screamed.

Tommy teetered on the edge of the gap. “I can't!” He screamed back.

“Yes, you can!”

The space between Tommy and his mother widened with every breath he took.

“Courage, Tommy! Jump!”

Tommy jumped, but it was too late. Is this what I was chosen for? Tommy thought as he fell into the infinite blackness. [21](#)

Cautiously Tommy opened his eyes. He saw nothing but blackness and felt

nothing but the stiff thrum of wings around him. Again the lion had found him, and the creature had torn him from the fate that Tommy had predicted for himself. Logic told him that certain death awaited him at the end of that fall, and the lion had saved him. The boy began to regard the lion as a savior of sorts. At least he had ended that terrifying fall, which was more than anyone else had done for him.

Fingers gripping his ride's dank fur, Tommy asked him shakily, "W-where are you taking me?" [22](#)

Tommy landed with a thud on the cold ground.

"Where am I?" he whispered as he gazed around. He shakily stood up.

"Don't move!" a deep voice screamed. Tommy was frozen in fear.

"W-Where are you?" Tommy managed to say.

"I'm right here. Stay still," the voice said calmly.

"Where am I?" Tommy asked the voice.

"You are in the coal pits. We work hours serving for him."

"Who?"

"Him. The Old One" [23](#)

"Down here we mine for coal day in and day out," said the lion.

"Why would he do something so harsh?" asked Tommy.

"Why? He has no heart, he is an evil, evil man, the old one," said the lion.

"Everyone else who works down here has hoped for him to die or for you to come. That is why you are here. To stop him and take away his power," said the lion.

"But how?" asked Tommy. [24](#)

“That is for you to find out. But for now, you should just lay low. You need to hide when I tell you, and run when I tell you,” answered the lion.

“What if he catches up to me? Or finds me?” Tommy inquired.

“That is when you keep your eyes and your mouth shut. His powers of sorcery, however, may put you under his control. Then, you think of me. Call me with your mind and I will help you if I can,” the lion answered. “And my name is Denz. You may call me Menz, or Lion, or anything, or maybe even nothing. I don’t really care. Hop on now.”

Tommy mounted himself onto Denz and held onto his mane. Denz then jumped forward into another hole of darkness he had created once before. There was darkness for a few seconds, and then there was a flood of color. It was the same barren, dull color as in front of the castle.

“We are behind the castle now. I suggest you fall asleep, because then you will have no conscious thoughts. We don’t want to be detected.”

“Well, I can’t just sleep! I need time!”

“I can’t help you with the time, but with the sleep, I can,” explained Denz. He breathed on Tommy once. It was a warm, rosy-smelling breath, and Tommy slept.

This is a dream, Tommy thought. I’m not being carried anywhere by a stone lion. I don’t have a future occupation as an evil sorcerer. I’m ten, and that’s that!

“Exactly. About the dream part, I mean. And about the ‘evil’...I’m not evil, just straightforward and stern.” Tommy woke up in a daze, with his future self staring straight at him, and Denz frozen in time. [25](#)

The fierce eyes pierced into Tommy’s soul.

“What will you choose, Thomas? The mangy lion or me? Your future? Your friend?” he said, with a saddened look on his face, “Will you help me rule the world in peace and happiness?”

Tommy was petrified with fear. What decision should he make?

Then he remembered something... [26](#)

He heard a piercing screech, and slowly turned towards the furnace. He took a deep breath and tried to exhale. Cautiously, he peered behind the furnace. A young girl was staring up at him with lonely eyes that were empty like the sky on a cloudless day. Her skin was milky and she had thick dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was matted to her head and was light brown, like worn out leather. Her frail frame was encased by a faded white nightgown and her feet were cold and bare. Tears had streaked her face and had rushed into her nightgown.

She whispered, "I've been watching you."

An icy feeling shot through his back like a knife. She started to speak again. "I'm going to tell you my story." [27](#)

Then, as suddenly as she appeared, the young girl disappeared, leaving Tommy alone in the darkness.

He froze. Rooted to the spot, Tommy only allowed his eyes to roam the room. Each shadow caused him to jolt in fear. His imagination went wild, coming up with all the possibilities of what happened to the lights.

"M-m-maybe we just blew a fuse..." he stuttered, "And the dog could have hit the door...I'm safe....I'm safe..."

He then felt cold wisps of wind wrap around his body, but looking around, he realized that there were no windows. The hairs on the back of his nape stood on end, cold sweat appeared on his forehead, he shut his eyes still repeating: "I'm safe...I'm safe...I'm safe..."

He began to doubt that, as he could soon hear inaudible voices around the room. They seemed to be chanting, but what?

Tommy began to shake, debating whether it was safer staying where he was, or making a mad dash for the door at the top of the stairs. He could just

barely see the outline of the door, as the only light was coming from the dimly lit furnace.

The furnace. He gulped. “I’m safe...I’m safe...” He heard creaking somewhere in the room. But from where?

The creaking grew in strength; Tommy’s eye fixated themselves on the furnace. The light from the embers danced across the floor. But they stopped, only for a second, as something moved in front of it.

Tommy let out a small scream. His breathing sped up, he could hear the strong, swift beating of his heart.

The chanting voices reached their crescendo, sweat was leaking out of his every pore. His stomach lurched as the shadow this time froze in front of the furnace, almost extinguishing all of the light, leaving only enough to show Tommy the outline of its contorted form.

It towered over Tommy, a good three feet. Its hands and head were disproportionate to its body, its long fingernails curled down to the floor. Something that resembled hair draped itself over the disfigured head. It let out long...low...raspy breaths. It whispered one word. One, taunting word.

“Tooommmmy....”

[28](#)

Tommy fell to the floor, squatting and cupping his hands over his ears, unable to tell if the warm liquid draping his face and head like a curtain was terrified perspiration, fearful tears, or the bleeding of his ears caused by this seemingly eternal, deafening sound of the hellish voices.

“No, no, NO!!” Tommy screamed, “Just stop it!! Go away!! What do you want from me?!?!”

“Tooommmmyyy,” the voices echoed again, grating like nails on a chalkboard, “Do you not recognize me?”

Through his sobbing hyperventilation, Tommy strained to sift through his memory and find a match to such a hideous voice, but found none. The twisted creature outstretched a contorted limb and pointed it directly at Tommy, ominously gliding toward him. “Answer me!!” it boomed, the

reverberations shaking the very foundation of the ground on which they were standing.

Tommy shrieked as the deformed creature flashed toward him in a streak of black, tattered cloth, locking its withered hand into a death grip around his throat. It cackled with glee.

“Oh Tommy,” its coarse voice coaxed, emitting a vile odor from the gash in its face it apparently used for a mouth, “I’m hurt. After all I’ve done to help you, you don’t even recognize your own MOTHER!!!”

And as if the savage demon’s temper and the furnace were connected, a great flare of bright white fire burst forth from it and Tommy became engulfed in the blinding flames. Even as Tommy was hurled through the air and into the furnace, his vast horror and confusion overshadowed the searing pain from the cauterization of his flesh. It seemed as if his senses had gone into remission due to the beast’s obvious lie, but a strange, concealed reason compelled him to believe it, even though he didn’t want to.

As he tumbled through some unknown chasm, Tommy felt as if his last drops of sanity were being rapidly evaporated by the demonic fires. Just when he felt he could endure no longer, he hit solid ground with what seemed like a fatal thud. Teetering on the brink of unconsciousness, he arose, having no memory of what had just occurred, clutching his throbbing temples.

“Tommy?” a worried, familiar voice chimed.

“What Mom?” he replied groggily, the single, bare light bulb in the middle of the basement ceiling slightly swaying, flickering on and off. Tommy glanced at the furnace and turned around to face it. Then, he gathered all the courage his headache would allow him to muster, puffed out his chest, and started for behind the furnace. He edged his way along the ancient heater and with one swift turn of his head, looked behind the furnace. He took his hands off his eyes. He unclenched his teeth. He lifted his two-ton eyelids, and confronted... a completely empty, bare, basement corner.

After sighing out his life-long fear of something so insignificant, he called

out to his mother, tired yet eager. “Hey Mom! I’m not afraid of the furnace anymore!”

“That’s great honey!! Come up for supper!”

As he started up the stairs Tommy took one last look at the furnace and laughed at his now-petty former fear. The light bulb was still flickering. Just as he was reaching the top, his golden retriever trotted through the door.

“Hey boy!! Want a treat?” Tommy asked rhetorically.

And in a familiar matter-of-fact manner, his dog replied, “No I don’t you bothersome dolt.”

In a flood of flashbacks, Tommy’s memory returned to him, causing a terrified expression to take to his face.

“I see you’ve remembered,” the dog commented smugly, the bare light bulb now pulsing like a strobe light. “I’m insulted, quite frankly, that you could forget a character such as me in so short a time. And I don’t know how you pulled off that little Houdini act, but I’m hurt that you’d want to get away from me, of all people. No matter, though. You’ll serve out the rest of your days in agony to make up for it.”

With every flash the dog was a different creature, from the sapphire-eyed stone lion to the shriveled minion to the kind obese man, to his future self, to the witch form of his mother, to the sorrowful young girl, quickly changing between them all until Tommy’s eyes could no longer follow. Then, he blinked.

And his dog wasn’t the lion.

Or the minion.

Or his future self.

He wasn't his mother, or even the girl.

The dog was a dark, ominous, deformed shape, with limbs disproportionate to its body, and long, jagged fingernails. Tommy closed his eyes and threw up his hands in reflexive defense as he opened up his mouth to scream, but a slash of the creature's long fingernails snatched the breath out of his throat. He unfolded his eyelids to the sight of his fingers severed at the half way point of his hands and as the malevolent being glided toward him, Tommy fell down the stairs out of shock. He scrambled to his feet, adrenaline and pure terror numbing his gushing hand, and turned tail to run, but found himself trapped with nowhere to go except for the corner behind the furnace.

"Oh the irony," the demon chuckled as Tommy turned around to face it.

"N-!!" Tommy began to exclaim before he was cut off and enveloped in pitch darkness.

When he awoke, Tommy was standing in the corner behind the furnace. He attempted to walk out, but dumbly hit an invisible barrier.

"Tommy! Would you help me get the laundry?" he heard his mother yell.

Before he could response, Tommy heard, "OK Mom!" And there they were, hopping down the stairs; his mother and him, but not really him.

His clone goofed around, just beyond where Tommy's reach would have been without the force field. His mother opened the dryer, gathered the clothes, put them in a basket, and continued up the stairs, but not before looking directly at him and winking a sapphire eye and waving a contorted finger at him. The other Tommy merrily skipped up the stairs, waved a now-shriveled hand to him, and continued on his merry way out the basement.

As Tommy watched, his mother closed the door; condemning him to the place he feared most—the furnace. ²⁹

THE END

THE GLASS FLOOR

From: "Weird Tales" Fall, 1990

INTRODUCTION

In the novel *Deliverance*, by James Dickey, there is a scene where a country fellow who lives way up in the back of beyond whangs his hand with a tool while repairing a car. One of the city men who are looking for a couple of guys to drive their cars downriver asks this fellow, Griner by name, if he's hurt himself. Griner looks at his bloody hand, then mutters: "Naw - it ain't as bad as I thought." That's the way I felt after re-reading "The Glass Floor," the first story for which I was ever paid, after all these years. Darrell Schweitzer, the editor of *Weird Tales* invited me to make changes if I wanted to, but I decided that would probably be a bad idea. Except for two or three word-changes and the addition of a paragraph break (which was probably a typographical error in the first place), I've left the tale just as it was. If I really did start making changes, the result would be an entirely new story.

"The Glass Floor" was written, to the best of my recollection, in the summer of 1967, when I was about two months shy of my twentieth birthday. I had been trying for about two years to sell a story to Robert A.W. Lowndes, who edited two horror/fantasy magazines for *Health Knowledge* (*The Magazine of Horror* and *Startling Mystery Stories*) as well as a vastly more popular digest called *Sexology*. He had rejected several submissions kindly (one of them, marginally better than "The Glass Floor," was finally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* under the title "Night of the Tiger"), then accepted this one when I finally got around to submitting it. That first check was for thirty-five dollars. I've cashed many bigger ones since then, but none gave me more satisfaction; someone had finally paid me some real money for something I had found in my head!

The first few pages of the story are clumsy and badly written - clearly the product of an unformed story-teller's mind - but the last bit pays off better than I

remembered; there is a genuine frisson in what Mr. Wharton finds waiting for him in the East Room. I suppose that's at least part of the reason I agreed to allow this mostly unremarkable work to be reprinted after all these years. And there is at least a token effort to create characters which are more than paper-doll cutouts; Wharton and Reynard are antagonists, but neither is "the good guy" or "the bad guy." The real villain is behind that plastered-over door. And I also see an odd echo of "The Glass Floor" in a very recent work called "The Library Policeman." That work, a short novel, will be published as part of a collection of short novels called Four Past Midnight this fall, and if you read it, I think you'll see what I mean. It was fascinating to see the same image coming around again after all this time.

Mostly I'm allowing the story to be republished to send a message to young writers who are out there right now, trying to be published, and collecting rejection slips from such magazines as F&SF Midnight Graffiti, and, of course, Weird Tales, which is the granddaddy of them all. The message is simple: you can learn, you can get better, and you can get published.

If that Little spark is there, someone will probably see it sooner or later, gleaming faintly in the dark. And, if you tend the spark nestled in the kindling, it really can grow into a large, blazing fire. It happened to me, and it started here.

I remember getting the idea for the story, and it just came as the ideas come now - casually, with no flourish of trumpets. I was walking down a dirt road to see a friend, and for no reason at all I began to wonder what it would be like to stand in a room whose floor was a mirror. The image was so intriguing that writing the story became a necessity. It wasn't written for money; it was written so I could see better. Of course I did not see it as well as I had hoped; there is still that shortfall between what I hope I will accomplish and what I actually manage. Still, I came away from it with two valuable things: a salable story after five years of rejection slips, and a bit of experience. So here it is, and as that fellow Griner says in Dickey's novel, it ain't really as bad as I thought.

-Stephen King

Wharton moved slowly up the wide steps, hat in hand, craning his neck to get a better look at the Victorian monstrosity that his sister had died in. It wasn't a house at all, he reflected, but a mausoleum - a huge, sprawling mausoleum. It seemed to grow out of the top of the hill like an outsized, perverted toadstool, all gambrels and gables and jutting, blank-windowed cupolas. A brass weather-vane surmounted the eighty degree slant of shake-shingled roof, the tarnished effigy of a leering little boy with one hand shading eyes. Wharton was just as glad he could not see.

Then he was on the porch, and the house as a whole was cut off from him. He twisted the old-fashioned bell, and listened to it echo hollowly through the dim recesses within. There was a rose-tinted fanlight over the door, and Wharton could barely make out the date 1770 chiseled into the glass. Tomb is right, he thought. The door suddenly swung open. "Yes, sir?" The housekeeper stared out at him. She was old, hideously old. Her face hung like limp dough on her skull, and the hand on the door above the chain was grotesquely twisted by arthritis.

"I've come to see Anthony Reynard," Wharton said. He fancied he could even smell the sweetish odor of decay emanating from the rumpled silk of the shapeless black dress she wore.

"Mr Reynard isn't seein' anyone. He's mournin'."

"He'll see me," Wharton said. "I'm Charles Wharton. Janine's brother."

"Oh." Her eyes widened a little, and the loose bow of her mouth worked around the empty ridges of her gums. "Just a minute." She disappeared, leaving the door ajar. Wharton stared into the dim mahogany shadows, making out high-backed easy chairs, horse-hair upholstered divans, tall narrow-shelved bookcases, curlicued, floridly carven wainscoting.

Janine, he thought. Janine, Janine, Janine. How could you live here? How in hell could you stand it?

A tall figure materialized suddenly out of the gloom, slope-shouldered, head thrust forward, eyes deeply sunken and downcast.

Anthony Reynard reached out and unhooked the door-chain. "Come in, Mr. Wharton," he said heavily.

Wharton stepped into the vague dimness of the house, looking up curiously at the man who had married his sister. There were rings beneath the hollows of his eyes, blue and bruised-looking. The suit he wore was wrinkled and hung limp on him, as if he had lost a great deal of weight. He looks tired, Wharton thought. Tired and old.

"My sister has already been buried?" Wharton asked.

"Yes." He shut the door slowly, imprisoning Wharton in the decaying gloom of the house. "My deepest sorrow, sir. Wharton. I loved your sister dearly." He made a vague gesture. "I'm sorry."

He seemed about to add more, then shut his mouth with an abrupt snap. When he spoke again, it was obvious he had bypassed whatever had been on his lips.

"Would you care to sit down? I'm sure you have questions."

"I do. Somehow it came out more curtly than he had intended."

Reynard sighed and nodded slowly. He led the Way deeper into the living room and gestured at a chair. Wharton sank deeply into it, and it seemed to gobble him up rather than give beneath him. Reynard sat next to the fireplace and dug for cigarettes. He offered them wordlessly to Wharton, and he shook his head.

He waited until Reynard lit his cigarette, then asked, "Just how did she die? Your letter didn't say much."

Reynard blew out the match and threw it into the fireplace. It landed on one of the ebony iron fire-dogs, a carved gargoyle that stared at Wharton with toad's eyes.

"She fell," he said. "She was dusting in one of the other rooms, up along the eaves. We were planning to paint, and she said it would have to be well-dusted before we could begin. She had the ladder. It slipped. Her neck was broken." There was a clicking sound in his throat as he swallowed.

"She died - instantly?"

"Yes." He lowered his head and placed a hand against his brow. "I was heartbroken."

The gargoyle leered at him, squat torso and flattened, sooty head. Its mouth was twisted upward in a weird, gleeful grin, and its eyes seemed turned inward at some private joke. Wharton looked away from it with an effort. "I want to see where it happened."

Reynard stubbed out his cigarette half-smoked. "You can't."

"I'm afraid I must," Wharton said coldly. "After all, she was my .. ."

"It's not that," Reynard said. "The room has been partitioned off. That should have been done a long time ago."

"If it's just a matter of prising a few boards off a door..."

"You don't understand. The room has been plastered off completely. There's nothing but a wall there."

Wharton felt his gaze being pulled inexorably back to the fire-dog. Damn the thing, what did it have to grin about?

"I can't help it. I want to see the room."

Reynard stood suddenly, towering over him. "Impossible."

Wharton also stood. "I'm beginning to wonder if you don't have something to hide in there," he said quietly.

"Just what are you implying?"

Wharton shook his head a little dazedly. What was he implying? That perhaps Anthony Reynard had murdered his Sister in this Revolutionary War-vintage crypt? That there might be Something more sinister here than shadowy corners and hideous iron fire-dogs?

"I don't know what I'm implying, " he said slowly, "except that Janine was shoveled under in a hell of a hurry, and that you're acting damn strange now." For moment the anger blazed brighter, and then it died away, leaving only hopelessness and dumb sorrow. "Leave me alone," he mumbled. "Please leave me alone, Mr. Wharton."

"I can't. I've got to know .. ."

The aged housekeeper appeared, her face thrusting from the shadowy cavern of the hall. "Supper's ready, Mr. Reynard."

"Thank you, Louise, but I'm not hungry. Perhaps Mr. Wharton ... ?" Wharton shook his head.

"Very well, then. Perhaps we'll have a bite later."

"As you say, sir." She turned to go. "Louise?" "Yes, sir?"

"Come here a moment.

Louise shuffled slowly back into the room, her loose tongue slopping wetly over her lips for a moment and then disappearing. "Sir?"

"Mr. Wharton seems to have some questions about his sister's death. Would you tell him all you know about it?"

"Yes, sir." Her eyes glittered with alacrity. "She was dustin', she was. Dustin' the East Room. Hot on paintin' it, she was. Mr. Reynard here, I guess he wasn't much interested, because ...

"Just get to the point, Louise," Reynard said impatiently.

"No," Wharton said. "Why wasn't he much interested?"

Louise looked doubtfully from one to the other.

"Go ahead," Reynard said tiredly. "He'll find out in the village if he doesn't up here.

"Yes, sir." Again he saw the glitter, caught the greedy purse of the loose flesh of her mouth as she prepared to impart the precious story. "Mr. Reynard didn't like no one goin' in the East Room. Said it was dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"The floor," she said. "The floor's glass. It's a mirror. The whole floor's a mirror. " Wharton turned to Reynard, feeling dark blood suffuse his face. "You mean to tell me you let her go up on a ladder in a room with a glass floor?"

"The ladder had rubber grips," Reynard began. "That wasn't why ... "You damned fool," Wharton whispered. "You damned, bloody fool.

"I tell you that wasn't the reason!" Reynard shouted suddenly. "I loved your sister! No one is sorrier than I that she is dead! But I warned her! God knows I warned her about that floor!"

Wharton was dimly aware of Louise staring greedily at them, storing up gossip like a squirrel stores up nuts. "Get her out of here," he said thickly.

"Yes," Reynard said. "Go see to supper. "

"Yes, sir." Louise moved reluctantly toward the hall, and the shadows swallowed her.

"Now," Wharton said quietly. "It seems to me that you have some explaining to do, Reynard. This whole thing sounds funny to me. Wasn't there even an inquest?"

"No," Reynard said. He slumped back into his chair suddenly, and he looked blindly into the darkness of the vaulted overhead ceiling. "They know around here about the - East Room."

"And just what is there to know?" Wharton asked tightly

"The East Room is bad luck," Reynard said. "Some people might even say it's cursed."

"Now listen," Wharton said, his ill temper and unalloyed grief building up like steam in a teakettle, "I'm not going to be put off, Reynard. Every word that comes out of your mouth makes me more determined to see that room. Now are you going to agree to it or do I have to go down to that village and ... ?"

"Please." Something in the quiet hopelessness of the word made Wharton look up. Reynard looked directly into his eyes for the first time and they were haunted, haggard eyes. "Please, Mr. Wharton. Take my word that your sister died naturally and go away. I don't want to see you die!" His voice rose to a wail. "I didn't want to see anybody die!"

Wharton felt a quiet chill steal over him. His gaze skipped from the grinning fireplace gargoyle to the dusty, empty-eyed bust of Cicero in the corner to the strange wainscoting carvings. And a voice came from within him: Go away from here. A thousand living yet insentient eyes seemed to stare at him from the darkness, and again the voice spoke... "Go away from here."

Only this time it was Reynard.

"Go away from here," he repeated. "Your sister is beyond caring and beyond revenge. I give you my word..."

"Damn your word!" Wharton said harshly. "I'm going down to the sheriff, Reynard. And if the sheriff won't help me, I'll go to the county commissioner. And if the county commissioner won't help me ..."

"Very well." The words were like the faraway tolling of a churchyard bell.

"Come."

Reynard led the way into the hall, down past the kitchen, the empty dining room with the chandelier catching and reflecting the last light of day, past the pantry, toward the blind plaster of the corridor's end.

This is it, he thought, and suddenly there was a strange crawling in the pit of his stomach.

"I..." he began involuntarily.

"What?" Reynard asked, hope glittering in his eyes.

"Nothing. "

They stopped at the end of the hall, stopped in the twilight gloom. There seemed to be no electric light. On the floor Wharton could see the still-damp plasterer's trowel Reynard had used to wall up the doorway, and a straggling remnant of Poe's "Black Cat" clanged through his mind:

"I had walled the monster up within the tomb...

Reynard handed the trowel to him blindly. "Do whatever you have to do, Wharton. I won't be party to it. I wash my hands of it.

Wharton watched him move off down the hall with misgivings, his hand opening and closing on the handle of the trowel. The faces of the Little-boy weathervane, the fire-dog gargoyle, the wizened housemaid all seemed to mix and mingle before him, all grinning at something he could not understand. Go away from here ...

With a sudden bitter curse he attacked the wall, hacking into the soft, new plaster until the trowel scraped across the door of the East Room. He dug away plaster until he could reach the doorknob. He twisted, then yanked on it until the veins stood out in his temples .

The plaster cracked, schismed, and finally split. The door swung ponderously open, shedding plaster like a dead skin.

Wharton stared into the shimmering quicksilver pool.

It seemed to glow with a light of its own in the darkness, ethereal and fairy-like.

Wharton stepped in, half-expecting to sink into warm, pliant fluid.

But the floor was solid.

His own reflection hung suspended below him, attached only by the feet, seeming to stand on its head in thin air. It made him dizzy just to look at it.

Slowly his gaze shifted around the room. The ladder was still there, stretching up into the glimmering depths of the mirror. The room was high, he saw. High enough for a fall to he winced - to kill.

It was ringed with empty bookcases, all seeming to lean over him on the very threshold of imbalance. They added to the room's strange, distorting effect.

He went over to the ladder and stared down at the feet. They were rubbershod, as Reynard had said, and seemed solid enough. But if the ladder had not slid, how had Janine fallen?

Somehow he found himself staring through the floor again. No, he corrected himself. Not through the floor. At the mirror; into the mirror . . .

He wasn't standing on the floor at all he fancied. He Was poised in thin air halfway between the identical ceiling and floor, held up only by the stupid idea that he was on the floor. That was silly, as anyone could see, for there was the floor, way down there.. . .

Snap out of it!" he yelled at himself suddenly. He was on the floor, and that was nothing but a harmless reflection of the ceiling. It would only be the floor if I was standing on my head, and I'm not; the other me is the one standing on his head... . He began to feel vertigo, and a sudden lump of nausea rose in his throat. He tried to look away from the glittering quicksilver depths of the mirror, but he couldn't. The door.. where was the door? He suddenly wanted out very badly.

Wharton turned around clumsily, but there were only crazily-tilted bookcases and the jutting ladder and the horrible chasm beneath his feet.

"Reynard!" He screamed. "I'm falling! "

Reynard came running, the sickness already a gray lesion on his heart. It was done; it had happened again.

He stopped at the door's threshold, Staring in at the Siamese twins staring at each other in the middle of the two-roofed, no-floored room.

"Louise," he croaked around the dry ball of sickness in his throat.

"Bring the pole."

Louise came shuffling out of the darkness and handed the hook-ended pole to Reynard. He slid it out across the shining quicksilver pond and caught the body sprawled on the glass. He dragged it slowly toward the door, and when he could reach it, he pulled it out. He stared down into the contorted face and gently shut the staring eyes.

"I'll want the plaster," he said quietly.

"Yes, sir."

She turned to go, and Reynard stared somberly into the room. Not for the first time he wondered if there was really a mirror there at all. In the room, a small pool of blood showed on the floor and ceiling, seeming to meet in the center, blood which hung there quietly and one could wait forever for it to drip.

The Killer

From: "Famous Monsters of Filmland #202", Spring '94

By Stephen King

Suddenly he snapped awake, and realized he didn't know who he was, or what he was doing here, in a munitions factory. He couldn't remember his name, or what he had been doing. He couldn't remember anything.

The factory was a large one, with assembly lines, conveyor belts, and the click-clack sound of parts being snapped together.

He took one of the finished guns out of a box where they were being automatically packed. Evidently he had been operating the machine, but it was stopped now.

It seemed reflex for him to pick up the gun, natural. He walked slowly over to another part of the factory, along the catwalk. There, another man was packing bullets.

"Who am I?" He said slowly, hesitantly.

The man went on working. He did not look up, he made no motion that he had heard.

"Who *am* I? *Who am I?*" He screamed it, but although the whole domelike factory room echoed with his wild yells, nothing changed. The men went on working, without looking up.

He swung the gun at the bullet-packer's head. It hit with a crunch, and the packer fell forward on his face, spilling bullets all over the floor.

He picked up one. It happened to be the right caliber. He jammed in several more.

There was the click-click of footfalls above him, and he turned to see another man walking along a high catwalk above him. "*Who am I?*" he screamed up, not really expecting to get an answer.

But the man looked down, and began to run.

He jerked the gun upward and fired twice. The man stopped, and he fell to his knees, but before he fell, he pressed a red button on the wall.

A siren began to wail, loud and clear.

"*Killer! Killer! Killer!*" The loudspeaker screamed.

The workers did not look up. They toiled on.

He ran, trying to get away from the siren, from the loudspeaker. He saw a door, and ran toward it. It opened, and four uniformed men stood there. They fired at him with queer energy guns. The bolts sped by him. He fired three times more, and one of the uniformed men fell, his energy gun clattering to the floor.

He ran the other way, but more of them were coming from another door.

He looked wildly around. They were coming in on him from all sides!

He had to get away!

He climbed, higher and higher, toward the upper story. But there were more of them up there. They had him trapped. He fired until his gun was empty.

They came toward him, some from above, some from below. "Please! Don't shoot! Can't you see I just want to know who I am?"

They fired, and energy beams slammed into him. Everything went black...

They watched them slam the door on him, and then the truck rolled away. “One of them turns killer every now and then,” The guard said.

“I just don’t understand it,” the second said, scratching his head.

“Take *that* one. What’d he say—“I just want to know *who I am*.” That was it. Seemed almost *human*. I’m beginning to think they’re making these robots *too* good.”

They watched the robot repair truck disappear around the curve.

The King Family & The Wicked Witch

STEPHEN KING

Illustrated by King's children

Flint Magazine

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Stephen King and I went to college together. No, we were not the best of friends, but we did share a few brews together at University Motor Inn. We did work for the school newspaper at the same time. No, Steve and I are not best friends. But I sure am glad he made it. He worked hard and believed in himself. After eight million book sales, it's hard to remember him as a typically broke student. We all knew he'd make it through.

Last January I wrote of a visit with Steve over the holiday vacation. We talked about his books, *Carrie* - *Salems Lot*. *The Shinning*. and the soon to be released, *The Stand*. We talked about how Stanley Kubrick wants to do the film versions of his new books. We didn't talk about the past much though. We talked of the future - his kids, FLINT ...

He gave me a copy of a story he had written for his children. We almost ran it then, but there was much concern on the staff as to how it would be received by our readers. We didn't run it. Well, we've debated long enough. It's too cute for you not to read it. We made the final decision after spending in evening watching TV last week. There were at least 57 more offensive things said, not to mention all the murders, rapes, and wars...we decided to let you be the judge. If some of you parents might be offended by the word 'fart', you'd better not read it - but don't stop your kids, they'll love it!

On the Secret Road in the town of Bridgton, there lived a wicked witch. Her name was Witch Hazel.

How wicked was Witch Hazel? Well, once she had changed a Prince from the Kingdom of New Hampshire into a woodchuck. She turned a little kid's favorite kitty into whipped cream. And she liked to turn mommies' baby carriages into big piles of horse-turds while the mommies and their babies were shopping.

She was a mean old witch.

The King family lived by Long Lake In Bridgton, Maine. They were nice people.

There was a daddy who wrote books. There was a mommy who wrote poems and cooked food. There was a girl named Naomi who was six years old. She went to school. She was tall and straight and brown. There was a boy named Joe who was four years old. He went to school too, although he only went two days a week. He was short and blonde with hazel eyes.

And Witch Hazel hated the Kings more than anyone else In Bridgton. Witch Hazel especially hated the Kings because they were the happiest family In Bridgton. She would peer out at their bright red Cadillac when it passed her dirty, falling down haunted house with mean hateful eyes. Witch Hazel hated bright colors. She would see the mommy reading Joe a story on the bench outside the drug store and her bony fingers would itch to cast a spell. She would see the daddy talking to Naomi on their way home from school in the red Cadillac or the blue truck, and she would want to reach out her awful arms and catch them and pop into her witches cauldron.

And finally, she cast her spell.

One day Witch Hazel put on a nice dress. She went to the Bridgton Beauty Parlor and had her hair permed. She put on a pair of

Rockers from Fayva (an East Coast shoe store chain). She looked almost pretty.

She bought some of daddy's books at the Bridgton Pharmacy. Then she drove out to the Kings' house and pretended she wanted daddy to sign his books. She drove in a car. She could have ridden her broom, but she didn't want the Kings to know she was a witch.

And in her handbag were four magic cookies. Four evil. magic cookies.

Four cookies! Four cookies full of black magic!

The banana cookie, the milk bottle cookie, and worst of all, two crying cookies. Don't let her in Kings!' Oh please don't let her in!

But she looked so nice. . . and she **was** smiling. . . and she had the daddy's books. soooo....they let her in. Daddy signed her book, mommy offered her tea. Naomi asked if she would like to see her room.

Joe asked if she would like to see him write his name. Witch Hazel smiled and smiled. It almost broke her face to smile.

"You have been so nice to me that I would like to be nice to you." said Witch Hazel. "I have baked four cookies. A cookie for each King."

"Cookies"" Shouted Naomi "Hooray!"

"Cookies" Shouted Joe. "Cookies!"

That was awfully nice," laid mommy. "You shouldn't have."

"But we're glad you did." said the daddy.

They took the cookies. Witch Hazel smiled. And when she was in her car she shrieked and cackled with laughter. She laughed so hard that her cat Basta hissed and shrank away from her. Witch Hazel was happy when her wicked plan succeeded.

"I will like this banana cookie." Daddy said. He ate it and what a terrible thing happened. His nose turned into a banana and when he went down to his office to work on his book much later that terrible day the only word he could write was banana.

It was Witch Hazel's wicked magic Banana Cookie.

Poor Daddy!

"I will like this milk-bottle cookie." Mommy said. "What a funny name for a cookie. She ate it and (the evil cookie turned her hands into milk-bottles.

What an awful thing. Could she fix the food with Milk-bottles for hands? Could she type? No! She could not even pick her nose.

Poor Mommy!

"We will like these crying cookies." Naomi and Joe said. What a funny name for a cookie." They each ate one and they began to cry! They cried and cried and could not stop! The tears streamed out of their eyes. There were puddles on the rug. Their clothes got all wet. They couldn't eat good meals because they were crying. They even cried in their sleep.

It was all because of Witch Hazel's evil crying cookies.

The Kings were not the happiest family in Bridgton anymore. Now they were the saddest family in Bridgton. Mommy didn't want to go shopping because everybody laughed at her milk-bottle hands. Daddy couldn't write books because all the words came out banana and it was hard to see the typewriter anyway because his nose was a banana. And Joe and Naomi just cried and cried and cried.

Witch Hazel was as happy as wicked witch ever gets. It was her greatest spell.

One day, about a month after the horrible day of the four cookies Mommy was walking in the woods. It was about the only thing she

liked to do with her milk-bottle hands. And in the woods she found a woodchuck caught in a trap.

Poor thing! It was almost dead from fright and pain. There was blood all over the trap.

"Poor old thing," Mommy said. "I'll get you out of that nasty trap." But could she open the trap with milk bottles for hands? No.

So she ran for Daddy and Naomi and Joe. Fifteen minutes later all four Kings were standing around the poor bloody woodchuck in the trap. The Kings were not bloody, but what a strange, sad sight they were! Daddy had a banana In the middle of his face. Mommy had milk-bottle hands. And the two children could not stop crying.

"I think we can get him out." Daddy said. "Yes. " Mummy said. "I think we can get him out if we all work together. And I will start. I will give the poor thing a drink of milk from my hands " And she gave him a drink. She felt a little better. Naomi and Joe were trying to open the jaws of the cruel trap while the woodchuck looked at them hopefully. But the trap would not open. It was an old trap, and its hinges and mean sharp teeth were clogged with rust.

"It will not open." Naomi said and cried harder than ever. "No. it will not open at all!"

"I can't open it." Joe said and cried his eyes. The tears streamed out of his eyes and down his cheeks. "I can't open it either."

And Daddy said. "I know what to do. I think." Daddy bent over the hinge of the trap with his funny banana nose. He squeezed the end of it with both hands. Ouch! It hurt! But out came six drops of banana oil. They fell onto the rusty hinge of the trap, one drop at a time.

"Now try," said Daddy.

This time the trap opened easily.

"Hooray!" shouted Naomi.

"He's out! He's out!" Shouted Joe.

"We have all worked together." said Mommy. "I gave the woodchuck milk. Daddy oiled the trap with his banana nose. And Naomi and Joe opened the trap to let him out."

And then they all felt a little better, for the first time since Witch Hazel cast he wicked spell.

And have you guessed yet? Oh, I bet you have. The woodchuck was really not a woodchuck at all. He was the Prince of the Kingdom of New Hampshire who had also fallen under the spell of Wicked Witch Hazel.

When the trap was opened the spell was broken, and instead of a woodchuck, a radiant Prince In a Brooks Brothers suit stood before the King family.

"You have been kind to me even, in your own sadness." said the Prince, "and that is the most difficult thing of all. And so through the power vested in me, the spell of the wicked witch is broken and you are free!"

Oh, happy day.

Daddy's banana nose disappeared and was replaced with his own nose, which was not too handsome but certainly better than a slightly squeezed banana. Mommy's milk-bottles were replaced with her own pink hands.

Best of all, Naomi and Joe stopped crying. They began to smile, then they began to laugh! Then the Prince of New Hampshire began to laugh Then Daddy and Mommy began to laugh The Prince danced with Mommy and Naomi and carried Joe on his shoulders. He shook hands with Daddy and said he had admired Daddy's books before he had been turned into a woodchuck.

All five of them went back to the nice house by the lake, and Mommy made tea for everyone. They all sat at the table and drank their tea.

"We ought to do something about that witch," Mommy said. "So the can't do something wicked to someone else." . -

"I think that is true." said the Prince. "And it so happens that I know one spell myself. It will get rid of her."

He whispered to Daddy. Ha whispered to Mommy. He whispered to Naomi and Joe, and they nodded and giggled and laughed.

That very afternoon they drove up to Witch Hazel's haunted house on the Secret Road. Basta, the cat, looked at them with his big yellow eyes, hissed, and ran away.

They did not drive up in the Kings' pretty red Cadillac, or in the Prince's Mist Grey Mercedes 390SL. They drove up in an old, old car that wheezed and blew oil.

They were wearing old clothes with fleas jumping out of them. They wanted to look poor to fool Witch Hazel.

They went up and the Prince knocked on the door.

Witch Hazel ripped the door open. She was wearing a tall black hat. There was a wart on the end of her nose. She smelled of frog's blood and owls' hearts and ant's eyeballs, because she had been whipping up horrible brew to make more black magic cookies.

"What do you want?" she rasped at them. She didn't recognize them in their old clothes. "Get out. I'm busy!"

"We are a poor family on our way to California to pick oranges." the Prince said. "What has that to do with me?" The witch shrieked. "I ought to turn you into oranges for disturbing me! Now good day!"

She tried to close the door but the Prince put his foot in it. Naomi and Joe shoved it

back open.

"We have something to sell you." Daddy said. "It is the wickedest cookie in the world. If you eat it. It will make you the wickedest witch in the world, even wickeder than Witch Indira in India. We will sell it to you for one thousand dollars."

"I don't buy what I can steal!" Witch Hazel shrieked. She snatched the cookie and gobbled it down "Now I will be the wickedest witch in the whole world!" And she cackled so loudly that the shutters fell off her house.

But the Prince wasn't sorry. He was glad. And Mommy wasn't sorry, because she had baked the cookie. And Daddy wasn't sorry, because he had gone to New Hampshire to get the 300 year-old baked beans that went into the cookie.

Naomi and Joe? They just laughed and laughed, because they knew that it wasn't a Wicked Cookie that Witch Hazel had just eaten.

It was a Farting Cookie.

Witch Hazel felt something funny.

She felt it building in her tummy and her behind. It felt like a of gas. It felt like an explosion looking for a place to happen.

"What have you done to me!" she shrieked. "Who are you?"

"I am the Prince of New Hampshire." The Prince cried, raising his face to she could see it clearly for the first time.

"And we are the Kings." Daddy said. "Shame on you for turning my wife's hands into milk bottles! Double shame on you for turning my nose into a banana. Triple shame on you for making

my Naomi and my Joe cry all day and all night. But we've fixed you now, Wicked Witch Hazel!"

"You won't be casting anymore spells." said Naomi. "Because you are going to the moon!"

"I'm not going to the moon!" Witch Hazel screeched so loudly that the chimney fell on the lawn. "I'm going to turn you all into cheap antiques that not even tourists will buy!"

"No you're not." said Joe, "because you ate the magic cookie. You ate the magic farting cookie."

The wicked witch foamed and frothed. She tried to cast her spell. But it was too late: the Farting Cookie had done its work. She felt a big fart coming on. She squeezed her butt to keep it in until she could cast her spell, but it was too late.

WHONK! Went the fart. It blew all the fur off her cat, Basta. It blew in the windows. And Witch Hazel went up in the air like a rocket.

"Get me down!" Witch Hazel screamed. Witch Hazel came down all right. She came down on her fanny. And when she came down, she let another fart.

DRRRRRRAPPP! Went the fart. It was so windy it knocked down the witch's home and the Bridgton Trading Post. You could see Dom Cardozl sitting on the toilet where he had been pooping. It was all that was left of the Trading Post except for one bureau that had been made in Grand Rapids

The witch went flying up into the sky. She flew up and up until she was as small as a speck of coal dust.

"Get me down. " Witch Hazel called, sounding very small and far away.

"You'll come down all right." Naomi said.

Down came Witch Hazel.

"Yeeaaaahhhh" she screamed falling out of the sky.

Just before she could hit the ground and be crushed (as maybe she deserved), she cut another fart, the biggest one of all the smell was like two million egg salad sandwiches. And the sound was KA-HIONK!!!

Up she went again

"Goodbye, Witch Hazel " yelled Mommy waving. "Enjoy the moon."

"Hope you stay a long time" called Joe.

Up and up went Witch Hazel until she was out of sight. During the news that night the Kings and the Prince of New Hampshire heard Barbara Walters report that a UFW had been seen by a 74 7 airplane over Bridgton. Maine - an unidentified flying witch.

And that was the end of wicked Witch Hazel. She is on the moon now, and probably still farting.

And the Kings are the happiest family in Bridgton again. They often exchange visits with the Prince of New Hampshire, who is now now King. Daddy writes books and never uses the word banana. Mommy uses her hands more than ever. And Joe and Naomi King hardly ever cry.

As for Witch Hazel, she was never seen again, and considering those terrible farts she was letting when she left, that is probably a good thing!

THE END

The New Lieutenant's Rap

From: "The Philtrim Press" 1999
By Stephen King

"The New Lieutenant's Rap" is from *Hearts in Atlantis*, to be published by Scribner's in the fall of 1999. This version, which differs considerably from the one which will appear in the book (it's longer, for one thing), is offered as a little keepsake—my way of marking twenty-five fruitful (a little *too* fruitful, some critics would say) years as a novelist and freelance writer. It is limited to no more than 500 copies, each of which has been signed by me and numbered or lettered by Michael Alpert, who has so brilliantly executed all the Philtrum Press books, from *The Plant* to *The Ideal Genuine Man*. The printing is my own. So are the mistakes and scratch-outs.

I hope what follows makes you as uncomfortable as it does me.
Stephen King

Can I have one of those?" Sully asked the new lieutenant once they were safely out of the funeral parlor and down the alley which ran along the side. Here was a bench and a couple of sand-filled ashtrays. The new lieutenant had taken his cigarettes out as soon as they were around the corner. Dunhills. How Spiff. Sully had never had a Dunhill.

"Whatever floats your boat." Dieffenbaker sounded amused... but he hadn't been amused on the day old mamasan died. That day he had been shit scared. They had all been shit scared. And today the new lieutenant smoked Dunhills, sold computers, and looked as if he had never been shit scared in his life. Say goddam. But Dieffenbaker had stood tall on that day in Dong Ha Province. He had done what needed doing, had given the order that needed giving. Sully thought if it had come down to him, Clemson and Malenfant and those other fuckheads would have killed until their

ammo ran out—wasn't that pretty much what the men under Calley and Medina had done? But Dieffenbaker was no William Calley, give him that. Dieffenbaker had given the little nod. Slocum nodded back, then raised his rifle—goddam, I say goddam— and blew off the back of Ralph Clemson's head.

Now Deef—the new lieutenant—was Dieffenbaker, a bald computer salesman who had quit going to the reunions. He gave Sully a light with his Zippo, then watched as Sully drew back the smoke deep and coughed it back out.

"Been a while, hasn't it?" Dieffenbaker asked.

"Two years, give or take."

"You want to know the scary thing? How fast you get back into practice."

Sully took another drag and reflected that that was true of a lot of things, none of them good. Pagano, dead inside the funeral parlor, lying there in a wash of canned hymns—that wasn't a good thing, either. Pags's dead, fucking Pags, he thought. Can you say goddam, my brothers?

"Why is it that a fairly decent guy like Pagano—no angel but a fairly decent guy— goes down with cancer of the pancreas and a guy like Ronnie Malenfant gets a second chance? What do you thing, loot?"

Dieffenbaker voiced a sour laugh. "A good question, and original as hell. Why don't you jot it down on a postcard and send it to Paul Harvey? He can answer it on the radio, after Page Three and before Today's Bumper Snicker.

Me, I just build computers."

"And smoke Dunhills."

"Smoke Dunhills, that's affirmative."

They sat without talking much for awhile. Sully asked Dieffenbaker for another cigarette and Dieffenbaker gave him one, also another flick of that old Zippo. From around the corner came tangles of conversation and some low laughter. Pags's funeral was over. Another one bites the dust.

"Why were we in Vietnam to begin with?" Sully asked. "Not to get all philosophical or anything, but have you ever figured that out?"

"Who said, 'He who does not learn from the past is

condemned to repeat it?' "

"Richard Dawson, the host of Family Feud."

"Fuck you, Sullivan."

"Well... maybe it was Kasey Kasem."

"And fuck your mother."

"I don't know who said it. Does it matter?"

"Fuckin' yeah, it matters," Dieffenbaker said. "Because we never got out. We never got out of the green. Our generation died there."

"That sounds a little—"

"A little what? Pretentious? You bet. A little silly? Yes sir. A little self-regarding? That's affirmative. But that's us. That's us back to front and right up the gut. What have we done since Nam, Sully? Those of us who went, those of us who ran north to Toronto, those of us who marched and protested, those of us who just sat at home watching the Dallas Cowboys and drinking beer and farting into the sofa cushions?"

Color was seeping into the new lieutenant's cheeks. He had the look of a man who has found his hobby-horse and is now climbing on, helpless to do anything but ride. He held up his hands and began popping his fingers to emphasize his points. To Sully he looked like a maniacal carpet salesman on high-number cable TV.

"Well, let's see. We're the generation that pioneered the videogaming revolution, voyaging bravely from Pong to Myst in a mere twenty-five years. We invented the ATV, the Feva-Strip, laser missile-guidance systems, Super-8 video cameras, and crack cocaine. We discovered Richard Simmons, Scott Peck, and Martha Stewart Living. Our idea of history was to reinvent Kiss and go to Bob Dylan shows and put Greatful Dead stickers on our Japanese cars and our Beamers. Our idea of a major lifestyle change is buying a dog. We gave up Eldridge Cleaver for Eddie Murphy and Lenny Bruce for Andrew Dice Clay. The girls who burned their bras in 1969 now buy their lingerie from Victoria's Secret and the boys who fucked fearlessly for peace are now fat men who sit in front of their computer screens late at night, spanking the monkey while looking at pictures of naked eighteen-year-olds on the Internet. That's us, Sully—we like

to watch. Movies, video games, live car-chase footage from the WJKL Sky-Cam Chopper, fistfights on The Jerry Springer Show, Mark McGwire, John Elway, World Federation Wrestling. We're the Weather Channel generation, Sully. We can accept the idea that God is dead just as long as we know what travel conditions are going to be like on I-80 this weekend. We finally got a guy from our generation in the White House and the best he could do was stick a panatella up some needy little girl's twat. Talk about dirty deeds done dirt cheap—say goddam!"

"Deef—"

"Don't call me that, nobody calls me that now, I told you. We're a joke, Sully our generation is a joke. Every name they put on us ends in -ie, like a kid's nickname—yuppie, yippie, buppie, Butchie, Petie, Patty come in, it's time for supper. But there was a time... don't laugh, but there was a time when it was all in our hands. Do you know that?"

Sully nodded, thinking of Carol. Not the version of her sitting on the sofa with him and her wine-smelling mother, not the one flipping the peace-sign at the camera while the blood ran down the side of her face—at the peace-march in Bridgeport, that had been, just before he went into the service—that one was already too late and too crazy, you could see it in her smile, read it in the sigh, where screaming words forbade all discussion. Rather he thought of Carol on the day her mother had taken a whole bunch of them to Savin Rock Amusement Park. 1960, that would have been. Carol had worn her blue bathing suit and sometimes she'd give Sully's friend Bobby that look, the one that said Bobby was killing her and death was sweet. It had been in their hands then, he was quite sure of it. But kids lose everything, kids have slippery fingers and holes in their pockets and they lose everything.

Meanwhile, the new lieutenant went on. The new lieutenant was rapping—he was full out and pumped, can you say oh yeah.

"We filled up our wallets on the stock market and we went to the gym and booked therapy sessions to get in touch with ourselves.

We bought sneakers made by uneducated, malnourished

twelve-year-olds and put them on our feet and never thought twice about it because Michael Jordan said we should, and we want to be like Mike. South America is burning, Malaysia's burning, fucking Vietnam is burning, but we finally got past that self-hating thing, we got the appointment for the liposuction and the reservations at Palms of the Sea, so fuck the rest of the world, I'm okay, you're okay, John Glenn got back okay, and none of the credit-cards are currently maxed out, so what the fuck? As for the future we all used to talk about... that's in the past."

Dieffenbaker's fingers were held up in front of his face and poked out, to Sully he looked like Al Jolson getting ready to sing "Mammy." Dieffenbaker seemed to become aware of this at the same moment Sully did, and lowered his hands. He looked tired and distracted and unhappy.

"I like lots of people our age where they're one by one," he said. "Some I actually admire. But I loathe and despise my generation, Sully. We had an opportunity to change everything. We actually did."

"If you're talking about selling out—"

"Shit, every generation sells out, it's part of growing up. But we had it in our hands, man, we had it in our fucking hands, and we never sold it at all. We gave it away, like that Bible guy that gave up his birthright for a mess of pottage. Our mess of potage was designer jeans, tickets to see Mariah Carey, and Celine Dion at Radio City Music Hall, premium cable, frequent flier miles, James Cameron's Titanic, and those all-important Retirement Portfolios. The only generation even close to us in pure, selfish self-indulgence is the so-called Lost Generation of the twenties, and at least most of them had the decency to stay drunk. We, on the other hand, have made a self-congratulatory fetish of staying sober, helped along by some vague, non-punishing deity who seems to have no other purpose. A Tupperware God for a Tupperware generation. Basically, Sully, we suck."

"Hey, man—"

"You know the price of selling out the future, Sully-John? You never really leave the past. You can never get over. My Thesis is that you're not really in New York City at all. You're in the Delta, leaning back against a tree, stoned

and rubbing bug-dope on the back of your neck. Packer's still C.O. because it's still 1969. The big tune on ASR is still 'Willie and the Poorboys' by Creedence. Everything you think of as 'your later life' is nothing but a pot-bubble. And it's better that way. Vietnam is better. The later life of a sellout isn't pleasant."

"Vietnam is better."

"That's affirmative, soldier." Dieffenbaker lit a fresh cigarette with his Zippo. "That's why we stay there. We don't love out Tupperware God, but we love Vietnam."

"You think?"

"Absolutely." Dieffenbaker looked at his watch. "Like the old Wolfman used to say—too hip, gotta split."

"Me too."

Dieffenbaker started toward the front of the building, then turned back to Sully. "I'm sorry." He said. "I guess it was the shock of seeing Pags in a box. He was too young, you know?"

"I know." Sully said, but what he knew was that none of them were too young. Not anymore.

"Hang in a little bit. We'll go for a drink. I promise not to preach." But his eyes shifted from Sully's when he said this, as if they knew this was a promise he couldn't keep.

"Thanks, loot, but I really ought to get back. Another time, huh?"

They looked at each other across the years—it felt like years, not space, and Sully thought: 'Willy and the Poorboys' is still on the ASR. It's still clicks instead of miles and Dieffenbaker is still the new lieutenant. We stay because it's better. He's right. We stay.

"You bet, Sully, that's affirmative. Another time."

The Night of The Tiger

STEPHEN KING

From

Fantasy & Science Fiction, 1978

I first saw Mr. Legere when the circus swung through Steubenville, but I'd only been with the show for two weeks; he might have been making his irregular visits indefinitely. No one much wanted to talk about Mr. Legere, not even that last night when it seemed that the world was coming to an end -- the night that Mr. Indrasil disappeared.

But if I'm going to tell it to you from the beginning, I should start by saying that I'm Eddie Johnston, and I was born and raised in Sauk City. Went to school there, had my first girl there, and worked in Mr. Lillie's five-and-dime there for a while after I graduated from high school. That was a few years back... more than I like to count, sometimes. Not that Sauk City's such a bad place; hot, lazy summer nights sitting on the front porch is all right for some folks, but it just seemed to itch me, like sitting in the same chair too long. So I quit the five-and-dime and joined Farnum & Williams' All-American 3-Ring Circus and Side Show. I did it in a moment of giddiness when the calliope music kind of fogged my judgment, I guess.

So I became a roustabout, helping put up tents and take them down, spreading sawdust, cleaning cages, and sometimes selling cotton candy when the regular salesman had to go away and bark for Chips Baily, who had malaria and sometimes had to go someplace far away, and holler. Mostly things that kids do for free passes -- things I used to do when I was a kid. But times change. They don't seem to come around like they used to.

We swung through Illinois and Indiana that hot summer, and the crowds were good and everyone was happy. Everyone except Mr. Indrasil. Mr. Indrasil was never happy. He was the lion tamer, and he looked like old pictures I've seen of Rudolph Valentine. He was tall, with handsome, arrogant features and a shock of wild black hair. And strange, mad eyes -- the maddest eyes I've ever seen. He was silent most of the time; two syllables from Mr. Indrasil was a

sermon. All the circus people kept a mental as well as a physical distance, because his rages were legend. There was a whispered story about coffee spilled on his hands after a particularly difficult performance and a murder that was almost done to a young roustabout before Mr. Indrasil could be hauled off him. I don't know about that. I do know that I grew to fear him worse than I had cold-eyed Mr. Edmont, my high school principal, Mr. Lillie, or even my father, who was capable of cold dressing-downs that would leave the recipient quivering with shame and dismay.

When I cleaned the big cats' cages, they were always spotless. The memory of the few times I had the vituperative wrath of Mr. Indrasil called down on me still have the power to turn my knees watery in retrospect.

Mostly it was his eyes - large and dark and totally blank. The eyes, and the feeling that a man capable of controlling seven watchful cats in a small cage must be part savage himself.

And the only two things he was afraid of were Mr. Legere and the circus's one tiger, a huge beast called Green Terror.

As I said, I first saw Mr. Legere in Steubenville, and he was staring into Green Terror's cage as if the tiger knew all the secrets of life and death.

He was lean, dark, quiet. His deep, recessed eyes held an expression of pain and brooding violence in their green-flecked depths, and his hands were always crossed behind his back as he stared moodily in at the tiger.

Green Terror was a beast to be stared at. He was a huge, beautiful specimen with a flawless striped coat, emerald eyes, and heavy fangs like ivory spikes. His roars usually filled the circus grounds - fierce, angry, and utterly savage. He seemed to scream defiance and frustration at the whole world.

Chips Baily, who had been with Farnum & Williams since Lord knew when, told me that Mr. Indrasil used to use Green Terror in his act, until one night when the tiger leaped suddenly from its perch and almost ripped his head from his shoulders before he could get out of the cage. I noticed that Mr. Indrasil always wore, his hair long down the back of his neck.

I can still remember the tableau that day in Steubenville. It was hot, sweatingly hot, and we had a shirtsleeve crowd. That was why Mr. Legere and Mr. Indrasil stood out. Mr. Legere, standing silently by the tiger cage, was fully dressed in a suit and vest, his face unmarked by perspiration. And Mr. Indrasil, clad in one of his beautiful silk shirts and white whipcord breeches, was staring at them both, his face dead-white, his eyes bulging in lunatic anger, hate, and fear. He was carrying a currycomb and brush, and his hands were trembling as they clenched on them spasmodically.

Suddenly he saw me, and his anger found vent. "You!" He shouted. "Johnston!"

"Yes sir?" I felt a crawling in the pit of my stomach. I knew I was about to have the wrath of Indrasil vented on me, and the thought turned me weak with fear. I like to think I'm as brave as the next, and if it had been anyone else, I think I would have been fully determined to stand up for myself. But it wasn't anyone else. It was Mr. Indrasil, and his eyes were mad.

"These cages, Johnston. Are they supposed to be clean?" He pointed a finger, and I followed it. I saw four errant wisps of straw and an incriminating puddle of hose water in the far corner of one.

"Y-yes, sir," I said, and what was intended to be firmness became palsied bravado.

Silence, like the electric pause before a downpour. People were beginning to look, and I was dimly aware that Mr. Legere was staring at us with his bottomless eyes.

"Yes, sir?" Mr. Indrasil thundered suddenly. "Yes, sir? Yes, sir? Don't insult my intelligence, boy! Don't you think I can see? Smell? Did you use the disinfectant?"

"I used disinfectant yes----"

"Don't answer me back!" He screeched, and then the sudden drop in his voice made my skin crawl. "Don't you dare answer me back." Everyone was staring now. I wanted to retch, to die. "Now you get the hell into that tool shed, and you get that disinfectant and swab out those cages," he whispered, measuring every word. One hand suddenly shot out, grasping my shoulder. "And don't you ever, ever, speak back to me again."

I don't know where the words came from, but they were suddenly there, spilling off my lips. "I didn't speak back to you, Mr. Indrasil, and I don't like you saying I did. I-- resent it. Now let me go."

His face went suddenly red, then white, then almost saffron with rage. His eyes were blazing doorways to hell.

Right then I thought I was going to die.

He made an inarticulate gagging sound, and the grip on my shoulder became excruciating. His right hand went up...up...up, and then descended with unbelievable speed.

If that hand had connected with my face, it would have knocked me senseless at best. At worst, it would have broken my neck.

It did not connect.

Another hand materialized magically out of space, right in front of me. The two straining limbs came together with a flat Smacking sound. It was Mr. Legere.

"Leave the boy alone," he said emotionlessly.

Mr. Indrasil stared at him for a long second, and I think there was nothing so unpleasant in the whole business as watching the fear of

Mr. Legere and the mad lust to hurt (or to kill!) mix in those terrible eyes.

Then he turned and stalked away.

I turned to look at Mr. Legere. "Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me." And it wasn't a "don't thank me," but a "don't thank me." Not a gesture of modesty but a literal command. In a sudden flash of intuition – empathy if you will – I understood exactly what he meant by that comment. I was a pawn in what must have been a long combat between the two of them. I had been captured by Mr. Legere rather than Mr. Indrasil. He had stopped the lion tamer not because he felt for me, but because it gained him an advantage, however slight, in their private war.

"What's your name?" I asked, not at all offended by what I had inferred. He had, after all, been honest with me.

"Legere," he said briefly. He turned to go.

"Are you with a circus?" I asked, not wanting to let him go so easily. "You seemed to know --- him."

A faint smile touched his thin lips, and warmth kindled in his eyes for a moment; "No. You might call me a-policeman." And before I could reply, he had disappeared into the surging throng passing by.

The next day we picked up stakes and moved on.

I saw Mr. Legere again in Danville and, two weeks later, in Chicago. In the time between I tried to avoid Mr. Indrasil as much as possible and kept the cat cages spotlessly clean. On the day before we pulled out for St. Louis, I asked Chips Baily and Sally O'Hara, the red-headed wire walker, if Mr. Legere and Mr. Indrasil knew each other. I was pretty sure they did, because Mr. Legere was hardly following the circus to eat our fabulous lime ice.

Sally and Chips looked at each other over their coffee cups. "No one knows much about what's between those, two," she said. "But it's been going on for a long time maybe twenty years. Ever since Mr. Indrasil came over from Ringling Brothers, and maybe before that."

Chips nodded. "This Legere guy picks up the circus almost every year when we swing through the Midwest and stays with us until we catch the train for Florida in Little Rock. Makes old Leopard Man touchy as one of his cats."

"He told me he was a police-man," I said. "What do you suppose he looks for around here? You don't suppose Mr. Indrasil--?"

Chips and Sally looked at each other strangely, and both just about broke their backs getting up. "Got to see those weights and counter weights get stored right," Sally said, and Chips muttered something not too convincing about checking on the rear axle of his U-Haul.

And that's about the way any conversation concerning Mt. Indrasil or Mr. Legere usually broke up--- hurriedly, with many hard-forced excuses.

We said farewell to Illinois and comfort at the same time. A killing hot spell came on, seemingly at the very instant we crossed the border, and it stayed with us for the next month and a half, as we moved slowly across Missouri and into Kansas. Everyone grew short of temper, including the animals. And that, of course, included the cats, which were Mr. Indrasil's responsibility. He rode the roustabouts unmercifully, and myself in particular. I grinned and tried to bear it, even though I had my own case of prickly heat. You just don't argue with a crazy man, and I'd pretty well decided that was what Mr. Indrasil was.

No one was getting any sleep, and that is the curse of all circus performers. Loss of sleep slows up reflexes, and slow reflexes make for danger. In Independence Sally O'Hara fell seventy-five

feet into the nylon netting and fractured her shoulder. Andrea Solienni, our bareback rider, fell off one of her horses during rehearsal and was knocked unconscious by a flying hoof. Chips Baily suffered silently with the fever that was always with him, his face a waxen mask, with cold perspiration clustered at each temple.

And in many ways, Mr. Indrasil had the roughest row to hoe of all. The cats were nervous and short-tempered, and every time he stepped into the Demon Cat Cage, as it was billed, he took his life in his hands. He was feeding the lions ordinate amounts of raw meat right before he went on, something that lion tamers rarely do, contrary to popular belief. His face grew drawn and haggard, and his eyes were wild.

Mr. Legere was almost always there, by Green Terror's cage, watching him. And that, of course, added to Mr. Indrasil's load. The circus began eyeing the silk-shirted figure nervously as he passed, and I knew they were all thinking the same thing I was: He's going to crack wide open, and when he does ---

When he did, God alone knew what would happen.

The hot spell went on, and temperatures were climbing well into the nineties every day. It seemed as if the rain gods were mocking us. Every town we left would receive the showers of blessing. Every town we entered was hot, parched, sizzling.

And one night, on the road between Kansas City and Green Bluff, I saw something that upset me more than anything else.

It was hot -- abominably hot. It was no good even trying to sleep. I rolled about on my cot like a man in a fever-delirium, chasing the sandman but never quite catching him. Finally I got up, pulled on my pants, and went outside.

We had pulled off into a small field and drawn into a circle. Myself and two other roustabouts had unloaded the cats so they could catch whatever breeze there might be. The cages were there now,

painted dull silver by the swollen Kansas moon, and a tall figure in white whipcord breeches was standing by the biggest of them. Mr. Indrasil.

He was baiting Green Terror with a long, pointed pike. The big cat was padding silently around the cage, trying to avoid the sharp tip. And the frightening thing was, when the staff did punch into the tiger's flesh, it did not roar in pain and anger as it should have. It maintained an ominous silence, more terrifying to the person who knows cats than the loudest of roars.

It had gotten to Mr. Indrasil, too. "Quiet bastard, aren't you?" He grunted. Powerful arms flexed, and the iron shaft slid forward. Green Terror flinched, and his eyes rolled horribly. But he did not make a sound. "Yowl!" Mr. Indrasil hissed. "Go ahead and yowl, you monster Yowl!" And he drove his spear deep into the tiger's flank.

Then I saw something odd. It seemed that a shadow moved in the darkness under one of the far wagons, and the moonlight seemed to glint on staring eyes -- green eyes.

A cool wind passed silently through the clearing, lifting dust and rumpling my hair.

Mr. Indrasil looked up, and there was a queer listening expression on his face. Suddenly he dropped the bar, turned, and strode back to his trailer.

I stared again at the far wagon, but the shadow was gone. Green Tiger stood motionlessly at the bars of his cage, staring at Mr. Indrasil's trailer. And the thought came to me that it hated Mr. Indrasil not because he was cruel or vicious, for the tiger respects these qualities in its own animalistic way, but rather because he was a deviate from even the tiger's savage norm. He was a rogue. That's the only way I can put it. Mr. Indrasil was not only a human tiger, but a rogue tiger as well.

The thought jelled inside me, disquieting and a little scary. I went back inside, but still I could not sleep.

The heat went on.

Every day we fried, every night we tossed and turned, sweating and sleepless. Everyone was painted red with sunburn, and there were fistfights over trifling affairs. Everyone was reaching the point of explosion.

Mr. Legere remained with us, a silent watcher, emotionless on the surface, but, I sensed, with deep-running currents of - what? Hate? Fear? Vengeance? I could not place it. But he was potentially dangerous, I was sure of that. Perhaps more so than Mr. Indrasil was, if anyone ever lit his particular fuse.

He was at the circus at every performance, always dressed in his nattily creased brown suit, despite the killing temperatures. He stood silently by Green Terror's cage, seeming to commune deeply with the tiger, who was always quiet when he was around.

From Kansas to Oklahoma, with no letup in the temperature. A day without a heat prostration case was a rare day indeed. Crowds were beginning to drop off; who wanted to sit under a stifling canvas tent when there was an air-conditioned movie just around the block?

We were all as jumpy as cats, to coin a particularly applicable phrase. And as we set down stakes in Wildwood Green, Oklahoma, I think we all knew a climax of some sort was close at hand. And most of us knew it would involve Mr. Indrasil. A bizarre occurrence had taken place just prior to our first Wildwood performance. Mr. Indrasil had been in the Demon Cat Cage, putting the ill-tempered lions through their paces. One of them missed its balance on its pedestal, tottered and almost regained it.

Then, at that precise moment, Green Terror let out a terrible, ear-splitting roar.

The lion fell, landed heavily, and suddenly launched itself with rifle-bullet accuracy at Mr. Indrasil. With a frightened curse, he heaved his chair at the cat's feet, tangling up the driving legs. He darted out just as the lion smashed against the bars.

As he shakily collected himself preparatory to re-entering the cage, Green Terror let out another roar -- but this one monstrously like a huge, disdainful chuckle.

Mr. Indrasil stared at the beast, white-faced, then turned and walked away. He did not come out of his trailer all afternoon.

That afternoon wore on interminably. But as the temperature climbed, we all began looking hopefully toward the west, where huge banks of thunderclouds were forming.

"Rain, maybe," I told Chips, stopping by his barking platform in front of the sideshow.

But he didn't respond to my hopeful grin. "Don't like it," he said. "No wind. Too hot. Hail or tornadoes." His face grew grim. "It ain't no picnic, ridin' out a tornado with a pack of crazy-wild animals all over the place, Eddie. I've thanked God mor'n once when we've gone through the tornado belt that we don't have no elephants.

"Yeah" he added gloomily, "you better hope them clouds stay right on the horizon."

But they didn't. They moved slowly toward us, cyclopean pillars in the sky, purple at the bases and awesome blue-black through the cumulonimbus. All air movement ceased, and the heat lay on us like a woolen winding-shroud. Every now and again, thunder would clear its throat further west.

About four, Mr. Farnum himself, ringmaster and half-owner of the circus, appeared and told us there would be no evening performance; just batten down and find a convenient hole to crawl into in case of trouble. There had been corkscrew funnels spotted in several places between Wildwood and Oklahoma City, some within forty miles of us.

There was only a small crowd when the announcement came, apathetically wandering through the sideshow exhibits or ogling the animals. But Mr. Legere had not been present all day; the only person at Green Terror's cage was a sweaty high-school boy with clutch of books. When Mr. Farnum announced the U.S. Weather Bureau tornado warning that had been issued, he hurried quickly away.

I and the other two roustabouts spent the rest of the-afternoon working our tails off, securing tents, loading animals back into their wagons, and making generally sure that everything was nailed down.

Finally only the cat cages were left, and there was a special arrangement for those. Each cage had a special mesh "breezeway" accordioned up against it, which, when extended completely, connected with the Demon Cat Cage. When the smaller cages had to be moved, the felines could be herded into the big cage while they were loaded up. The big cage itself rolled on gigantic casters and could be muscled around to a position where each cat could be let back into its original cage. It sounds complicated, and it was, but it was just the only way.

We did the lions first, then Ebony Velvet, the docile black panther that had set the circus back almost one season's receipts. It was a tricky business coaxing them up and then back through the breezeways, but all of us preferred it to calling Mr. Indrasil to help.

By the time we were ready for Green Terror, twilight had come --- a queer, yellow twilight that hung humidly around us. The sky above had taken on a flat, shiny aspect that I had never seen and which I didn't like in the least.

"Better hurry," Mr. Farnum said, as we laboriously trundled the Demon Cat Cage back to where we could hook it to the back of Green Terror's show cage. "Barometer's falling off fast." He shook his head worriedly. "Looks bad, boys. Bad." He hurried on, still shaking his head.

We got Green Terror's breezeway hooked up and opened the back of his cage. "In you go," I said encouragingly.

Green Terror looked at me menacingly and didn't move.

Thunder rumbled again, louder, closer, sharper. The sky had gone jaundice, the ugliest color I have ever seen. Wind-devils began to pick jerkily at our clothes and whirl away the flattened candy wrappers and cotton-candy cones that littered the area.

"Come on, come on," I urged and poked him easily with the blunt-tipped rods we were given to herd them with.

Green Terror roared ear-splittingly, and one paw lashed out with blinding speed. The hardwood pole was jerked from my hands and splintered as if it had been a greenwood twig. The tiger was on his feet now, and there was murder in his eyes.

"Look," I said shakily. "One of you will have to go get Mr. Indrasil, that's all. We can't wait around."

As if to punctuate my words, thunder cracked louder, the clapping of mammoth hands.

Kelly Nixon and Mike McGregor flipped for it; I was excluded because of my previous run-in with Mr. Indrasil. Kelly drew the task, threw us a wordless glance that said he would prefer facing the storm and then started off.

He was gone almost ten minutes. The wind was picking up velocity now, and twilight was darkening into a weird six o'clock night. I was scared, and am not afraid to admit it. That rushing, featureless sky, the deserted circus grounds, the sharp, tugging wind-vortices all that makes a memory that will stay with me always, undimmed.

And Green Terror would not budge into his breezeway.

Kelly Nixon came rushing back, his eyes wide. "I pounded on his door for 'most five minutes!" He gasped. "Couldn't raise him!"

We looked at each other, at a loss. Green Terror was a big investment for the circus. He couldn't just be left in the open. I turned bewilderedly, looking for Chips, Mr. Farnum, or anybody who could tell me what to do. But everyone was gone. The tiger was our responsibility. I considered trying to load the cage bodily into the trailer, but I wasn't going to get my fingers in that cage.

"Well, we've just got to go and get him," I said. "The three of us. Come on." And we ran toward Mr. Indrasil's trailer through the gloom of coming night.

We pounded on his door until he must have thought all the demons of hell were after him. Thankfully, it finally jerked open. Mr. Indrasil swayed and stared down at us, his mad eyes rimmed and oversheened with drink. He smelled like a distillery.

"Damn you, leave me alone," he snarled.

"Mr. Indrasil --" I had to shout over the rising whine of the wind. It was like no storm I had ever heard of or read about, out there. It was like the end of the world .

"You," he gritted softly. He reached down and gathered my shirt up in a knot. "I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never forget."

He glared at Kelly and Mike, cowering back in the moving storm shadows. "Get out!"

They ran. I didn't blame them; I've told you -- Mr. Indrasil was crazy. And not just ordinary crazy -- he was like a crazy animal, like one of his own cats gone bad.

"All right," he muttered, staring down at me, his eyes like hurricane lamps. "No juju to protect you now. No grisgris." His lips twitched in a wild, horrible smile. "He isn't here now, is he? We're two of a kind, him and me. Maybe the only two left. My nemesis -- and I'm his." He was rambling, and I didn't try to stop him. At least his mind was off me.

"Turned that cat against me, back in '58. Always had the power more'n me. Fool could make a million -- the two of us could make a million if he wasn't so damned high and mighty...what's that?"

It was Green Terror, and he had begun to roar ear-splittingly.

"Haven't you got that damned tiger in?" He screamed, almost falsetto. He shook me like a rag doll.

"He won't go!" I found myself yelling back. "You've got to --"

But he flung me away. I stumbled over the fold-up steps in front of his trailer and crashed into a bone-shaking heap at the bottom. With something between a sob and a curse, Mr. Indrasil strode past me, face mottled with anger and fear.

I got up, drawn after him as if hypnotized. Some intuitive part of me realized I was about to see the last act played out.

Once clear of the shelter of Mr. Indrasil's trailer, the power of the wind was appalling. It screamed like a runaway freight train. I was an ant, a speck, an unprotected molecule before that thundering, cosmic force.

And Mr. Legere was standing by Green Terror's cage.

It was like a tableau from Dante. The near-empty cage-clearing inside the circle of trailers; the two men, facing each other silently, their clothes and hair rippled by the shrieking gale; the boiling sky above; the twisting wheatfields in the background, like damned souls bending to the whip of Lucifer.

"It's time, Jason," Mr. Legere said, his words flayed across the clearing by the wind.

Mr. Indrasil's wildly whipping hair lifted around the livid scar across the back of his neck. His fists clenched, but he said nothing. I could almost feel him gathering his will, his life force, his id. It gathered around him like an unholy nimbus.

And, then, I saw with sudden horror that Mr. Legere was unhooking Green Terror's breezeway -- and the back of the cage was open!

I cried out, but the wind ripped my words away.

The great tiger leaped out and almost flowed past Mr. Legere. Mr. Indrasil swayed, but did not run. He bent his head and stared down at the tiger.

And Green Terror stopped.

He swung his huge head back to Mr. Legere, almost turned, and then slowly turned back to Mr. Indrasil again. There was a terrifyingly palpable sensation of directed force in the air, a mesh of conflicting wills centered around the tiger. And the wills were evenly matched.

I think, in the end, it was Green Terror's own will -- his hate of Mr. Indrasil -- that tipped the scales.

The cat began to advance, his eyes hellish, flaring beacons. And something strange began to happen to Mr. Indrasil. He seemed to be folding in on himself, shriveling, accordioneing. The silk-shirt

lost shape, the dark, whipping hair became a hideous toadstool around his collar.

Mr. Legere called something across to him, and, simultaneously, Green Terror leaped.

I never saw the outcome. The next moment I was slammed flat on my back, and the breath seemed to be sucked from my body. I caught one crazily tilted glimpse of a huge, towering cyclone funnel, and then the darkness descended.

When I awoke, I was in my cot just aft of the grainery bins in the all-purpose storage trailer we carried. My body felt as if it had been beaten with padded Indian clubs.

Chips Baily appeared, his face lined and pale. He saw my eyes were open and grinned relievedly. "Didn't know as you were ever gonna wake up. How you feel?"

"Dislocated," I said. "What happened? How'd I get here?"

"We found you piled up against Mr. Indrasil's trailer. The tornado almost carried you away for a souvenir, m'boy."

At the mention of Mr. Indrasil, all the ghastly memories came flooding back. "Where is Mr. Indrasil? And Mr. Legere?"

His eyes went murky, and he started to make some kind of an evasive answer.

"Straight talk," I said, struggling up on one elbow. "I have to know, Chips. I have to."

Something in my face must have decided him. "Okay. But this isn't exactly what we told the cops -- in fact we hardly told the cops any of it. No sense havin' people think we're crazy. Anyhow, Indrasil's gone. I didn't even know that Legere guy was around."

"And Green Tiger?"

Chips' eyes were unreadable again. "He and the other tiger fought to death."

"Other tiger? There's no other ---"

"Yeah, but they found two of 'em, lying in each other's blood. Hell of a mess. Ripped each other's throats out."

"What -- where --"

"Who knows? We just told the cops we had two tigers. Simpler that way." And before I could say another word, he was gone.

And that's the end of my story -- except for two little items. The words Mr. Legere shouted just before the tornado hit: "When a man and an animal live in the same shell, Indrasil, the instincts determine the mold!"

The other thing is what keeps me awake nights. Chips told me later, offering it only for what it might be worth. What he told me was that the strange tiger had a long scar on the back of its neck.

The Old Dude's Ticker

In the two years after I was married (1971-1972), I sold nearly a dozen stories to various men's magazines. Most were purchased by Nye Willden, the fiction editor at Cavalier. Those stories were important supplements to the meager income I was earning in my two day jobs, one as a high school English teacher and the other as an employee of The New Franklin Laundry where I washed motel sheets. These were not good times for short horror fiction (there have really been no good times for genre fiction in America since the pulps died), but I sold an almost uninterrupted run of mine—no mean feat for an unknown, unagented scribbler from Maine and of least I had the sense to be grateful.

Two of them however did not sell. Both were pastiches. The first was a modern-day revision of Nikolai Gogol's story, "The Ring" (my version was called "The Spear," I think). That one is lost. The second was the one that follows, a crazed revisionist telling of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." I thought the idea was a natural: crazed Vietnam vet kills elderly benefactor as a result of post-traumatic stress syndrome. I'm not sure what Nye's problem with it might have been; I loved it, but he shot it back at me with a terse "not for us" note. I gave it a final sad look, then put it in a desk drawer and went on to something else. It stayed in said drawer until rescued by Marsha DeFilippo, who found it in a pile of old manuscripts consigned to a collection of my stuff in the Raymond Fogler Library at the University of Maine.

I was tempted to tinker with it—the seventies slang is pretty out of date—but resisted the impulse, deciding to let it be what it was then: partly satire and partly affectionate homage. This is its first publication, and no better place than Necon, which has been the best horror convention since its inception, folksy, laid-back, and an all-around good time. If you have half as much fun reading it as I had writing it, we'll both be well off, I think. I hope some of Poe's feverish intensity comes through there... and I hope the master isn't rolling in his grave too much.

—Steve King

Yeah... spooked... I'm pretty fuckin' spooked. I been that way ever since I came back from Nam. You dig it? But I'm no section eight. What happened over there, it didn't screw up my head. I came back from Nam with my head on straight for the first time in my life. Dig it. My ears are like radar. I've always had good hearing, but since Nam... I hear everything. I hear the angels in heaven. I hear the devils in the deepest pits of hell. So how can you say I'm some kind of fuckin' psycho case? Listen, I'll tell you the whole story. Think I'm crazy? Just listen to how cooled out I am.

I can't tell you how I got the idea, but once it was there, I couldn't shoot it down. I thought about it day and night. There was really nothing to pin it on. I had no case against the old dude. I dug him. He never short-dicked me or ranked me out. Yeah, he had bucks, but I'm not into that. Not since Nam. I think it might have been his... yeah, his eye. Jesus, like a vulture's eye. Pale blue, with a cataract on it. And it bulged. You dig what I'm saying? When he looked at me, my blood ran cold. That's how bad it freaked me. So little by little, I made up my mind to waste him and get rid of the eye forever.

Okay, now dig this. You think I'm nuts, okay? And crazy people don't know anything. Run around with drool slobbering out of their mouths, stabbing wetbacks like that guy Corona, stuff like that. But you should have dug me. You should have seen how cool I was. I was always one step ahead, man. I had that

old dude jacked up nine miles. I was super-kind to him the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the knob of his door and opened it. Quiet? You better believe it! And when it was just wide enough for me to stick my head in. I put in this penlite with the glass all taped up except for one little place in the middle. You follow? Then I poked my head in. You would have cracked up to see how careful I was, poking my head in. I moved it real slow, so I wouldn't roust the old dude. It took me an hour, I guess, to get my head in far enough so I could see him laying there on his rack. So tell me... you think any section eight would have been able to carry that off? Huh? But dig this! When my head was in the room, I turned on the penlite. It put out one single ray, and I put it four-oh on that vulture eye. I did that seven nights in a row, man, seven nights! Can you dig that action? I did it every night at midnight, but the eye was always closed and I couldn't get it on. Because it was the eye. And every morning I went right into his bedroom and clapped him on the back and asked him how he slept. All that good bullshit. So I guess you see he would have to have been some heavy dude to guess that every night I was checkin' him out while he was asleep. So dig it.

The eighth night I was even more cooled out. The minute hand on my watch was trucking along faster than mine was. And I felt... sharp. You know? Ready. Like in Nam, when it was our turn for night patrol. I was like a cat. I felt ace-high. There I was, opening the door, little by little, and he's laying there, probably dreaming he's balling his granddaughter. I mean, he didn't even know! Funny? Shit, sometimes I laugh until I scream, just thinking of it. I started to laugh at the idea. Maybe he heard me, because he started to move around. Probably think I split out of there, right? No way. His room was black as a cat's asshole—he always drew the shutters because he was afraid of junkies—and I knew he couldn't see through the door, so I kept pushing it open, a little at a time.

I had my head in and I was getting ready to turn on the old penlite when it knocked against the side of the door. The old guy sits up in bed, yelling, "Who's there?"

I stayed still and kept my mouth shut. You dig it? For a whole hour I didn't move. But I didn't hear him lie down, either. He was sitting up in bed, scared shitless, just listening. The way I used to get sometimes in Nam. A lot of guys used to get that way, thinking those guys in the black pajamas were coming, creeping through the jungle, through the dark.

I heard him groan, just a little one, but I knew how scared he was. It wasn't the way you groan when you just hurt yourself, or the way old folks sometimes groan at funerals. Uh-uh. It was the sound you make when your head is totally fucked up and you're starting to blow your circuits. I knew that sound. In Nam, at night, I used to get that way sometimes. Nothing wrong with that, a lot of guys did. Nothing section eight about it. It would come up from your guts like acid, getting worse in your throat, scaring you so bad that you had to put your hand in your mouth and chew it like a chicken drumstick to keep from screaming. Yeah, I knew the sound. I know how that old dude was feeling and I felt sorry for him, but I was laughing, too, inside. I knew he'd been awake since the first sound. He'd been getting more and more scared. He was trying to, you know, blow them down, but he couldn't do it. He was saying to himself, "It was the wind around the eaves. Or maybe a mouse. Or a cricket. Yeah, it was a cricket." You dig? He was trying to cool himself out with all

kinds of shit. But no good. Because Death was in the room with him. Me! Death was sniffing right up his old man's nightdress. Me! He was feeling that. He didn't see me or hear me, but he dug me.

After I marked time for a long while without hearing him flop back down. I decided to give him the light. So I turned it on and that single ray shot out from the masking tape and landed square on that fucking eye.

It was wide open and I got more and more pissed off, just looking at it. I saw every detail of it. This dull dusty blue with that gross-out white stuff over it so it looked like the bulging yolk of a poached egg. It froze me out, man, I kid you not. But, see, I couldn't see anything else of his face or body. Because I held the light straight on that goddamned eye.

And didn't I tell you that what you call crazy is just how together I am? Didn't I tell you how sharp my hearing has been since Nam? And what came to my ears was this low, quick noise. You know what that sound was like? Have you ever seen a squad of MPs oil a parade ground? They all wear white gloves, and they all carry these little short sticks on their belts. And if one of them takes his stick out and starts tapping it into his palm, it makes a sound like that. I remember that from Nam, and from Fort Benning where I trained, and from that hospital where they put me after I came home. Sure, they had MPs there. White gloves. Short sticks. Slapping those short sticks into those white palms... white, like the cataract on the old dude's eye. I knew what that sound was, there in the dark. It wasn't any GI head-bopper. It was the old dude's ticker. It made me even madder, the way beating a drum will make a GI feel ballsier.

But I still kept cool. I hardly breathed. I held the flashlight still. I tried to see how steady I could hold that one thread of light on the eye. His heart was beating even faster. I could hear it, are you digging me? Sure I could. Quicker and quicker, louder and louder, it got so it sounded like a whole regiment of MPs beating their sticks into their palms. The old dude must have been scared green! It got louder, you dig what I'm saying? Louder every second! You follow me? I told you I'm spooked, and I am. And in the middle of the night, in the creepy quiet of that big old house, that sound really got to me. But I still held off. It got louder... louder! I thought his ticker would bust wide open. And then I thought, "Hey, dig, the neighbors are going to hear it. They got to. I got to shut him the fuck up!" I let out a yell and threw the flashlight at him and, went across the room like O.J. Simpson. He screamed once, but that was all. I dragged him onto the floor and yanked the bed over on top of him. Dig what I'm saying. I started to grin at how good it was going. I could still hear his heart, but that didn't get on my case, not at all. No one was going to hear it, not with that bed on top of him. Finally it quit. I pushed the bed off and looked at the body. Yeah, he was dead. Stone dead. I put my hand on his and held it there for five, ten minutes. Nothing. His eye wasn't going to bother me anymore.

If you still think I'm a section eight, dig on how cool I was getting rid of his body. The night was getting on, and I worked fast, but I kept it quiet. Quiet was the password. You got it? Quiet. I cut him up. I cut off his head and arms and legs.

I pried up three of the planks on the bedroom floor and stuffed the pieces of him down inside. I put the boards back so carefully that no eye in the world—not even his—could have spotted anything wrong. There was nothing to

wash out, not a single bloodstain. I was too cool for that. I cut him up in the shower, you dig it? Ha! You dig that scene? Ha! Ha! Far fucking out, am I right?

By then it was four in the morning still dark as midnight. The doorbell rang. I went down to open it, and I was feeling good. Why not? It was the fuzz. Three of them. They were cool. One of the neighbors had heard a yell.

Sounded like someone had been cut or something. The guy called the cops. They had no search warrant, but would I mind if they took a look around?

I grinned. I had no worries, right? I told them to come on in. The scream was from me, I said. Bad dream. Had a lot of them. War veteran, and blah-blah-blah. You're digging it, I see you are. I said the old dude had gone up to his country house for awhile. I took them all over the house. Told them to look anyplace they wanted. No sweat. After a little while I took them into his bedroom. I opened his desk, showed them that the cash he kept in the lockbox was still there. Also his watch, and the cat's eye ruby pinky ring he wore sometimes. Nothing touched, nothing even out of place. I dragged in some chairs and told them to sit down and rest their feet. Me. I was really flying. I was ace-high. Dig this. I put my own chair right over the spot where the old dude had gone to pieces, you might say. Ha! Ha!

The piggies were satisfied. They were getting my good vibes, I think. They sat and we shot the shit, where was I stationed in Nam, oh is that so, we were there, how many years were you in, man, what a bitch, you know the scene. I was everything a good Boy Scout is supposed to be, brave, reverent, cheerful. But before too long. I started to crash out and wished they'd split. My head was starting to ache, my ears ringing. The way I was when they shipped me back stateside, back to that hospital. Combat fatigue, they said. Fuck that bullshit! And they just sat there, the cops, I mean, shooting the shit, Dong Ha, Saigon, Da Nang, all that creepy crap. The ringing in my ears got sharper. Even sharper. I talked more and more to get rid of it, but it was getting more and more together, more and more like... like it wasn't in my ears at all.

I could feel myself getting pale. But I talked even faster, and louder too. Yet the sound got louder. It was this low, quick sound... like a bunch of MPs slipping their nightsticks into their white-gloved palms. I was having trouble catching my breath, but the cops didn't seem to notice. I talked more quickly, but the sound got worse. A whole battalion of MPs now—whap! whap! whap! Jesus! I started arguing about all kinds of small shit with them, which hill was where, who commanded what, I don't know. The noise still got worse. Why didn't they just get the fuck out? I started pacing the floor, stamping up and down as if something one of the cops said had pissed me off—but the noise got worse. Oh, Christ! What could I do? I raved. I swore at them. I told them their mothers were whores, that their uncles were also their fathers. I started whirling the chair I was sitting on, grinding it on the boards, but I could still hear it in spite of all the noise I was making. A meaty, pulsing sound, like nightsticks whacking into palms covered with white duck cotton gloves. It got louder—louder—louder! And the cops just kept on smiling, shooting the shit. You think maybe they didn't hear it? God!—no, no way! They heard it!—they suspected!—they knew!—they were putting me on!—I thought that then and I think it now. Nothing could be worse than the way they were smiling at me! I couldn't take it! If I didn't scream I'd die!—and I could still hear it. MPs, like the ones stationed at the hospital, the hospital where they took me after I scragged the lieutenant, the place I crashed out of—MPs—millions of them—short sticks—

whacking—whacking—louder—louder—white cotton gloves—that dull quick meaty sound—louder—

“Stop it!” I screamed at them. “Stop it! I admit it!—I did it!—rip up the boards!—here, here!—it’s his heart! It’s the beating of his hideous heart!”

Statement taken August 14, 1976. Investigation has confirmed that the suspect, going under the name of Richard Drogan, is in fact Robert S. Deisenhoff, who escaped from the Quigly (Ohio) Veterans Hospital on April 9, 1971.

Hotel at the End of the Road

By
Stephen King

Appeared in
People, Places, and Things 1963

"Faster !" Tommy Riviera said. "Faster !"

"I'm hitting 85 now," Kelso Black said.

"The cops are right behind us," Riviera said. "Put it up to 90." He leaned out the window. Behind the fleeing car was a police car, with siren wailing and red light flashing.

"I'm hitting the side road ahead," Black grunted. He turned the wheel and the car turned into the winding road-spraying gravel. The uniformed policeman scratched his head. "Where did they go ?".

His partner frowned. "I don't know. They just - disappeared ."

"Look," Black said. "Lights ahead."

"It's a hotel," Riviera said wonderingly. "Out on this wagon track, a hotel ! If that don't beat all ! The police'll never look for us there."

Black, unheeding of the car's tires, stamped on the brake. Riviera reached into the back seat and got a black bag. They walked in. The hotel looked just like a scene out of the early 1900s.

Riviera rang the bell impatiently. An old man shuffled out. "We want a room," Black said.

The man stared at them silently.

"A room," Black repeated.

The man turned around to go back into his office.

"Look, old man," Tommy Riviera said. "I don't take that from anybody." He pulled out his thirty-eight. "Now you give us a room."

The man looked ready to keep going, but at last he said : "Room five. End of the hall."

He gave them no register to sign, so they went up. The room was barren except for an iron double bed, a cracked mirror, and soiled wallpaper.

"Aah, what a crummy joint," Black said in disgust. "I'll bet there's enough cockroaches here to fill a five-gallon can."

The next morning when Riviera woke up, he couldn't get out of bed. He couldn't move a muscle. He was paralyzed. Just then the

old man came into view. He had a needle wich he put into Black's arms.

"So you're awake," he said. "My, my, you two are the first additions to my museum in twenty-five years. But you'll be well preserved. And you won't die.

"You'll go with the rest of my collection of living museum. Nice specimens."

Tommy Riviera couldn't even express his horror.

I'VE GOT TO GET AWAY

By
Stephen King

Appeared in
People, Places, and Things 1963

"What am I doing here?" Suddenly I wondered. I was terribly frightened. I could remember nothing, but here I was, working in an atomic factory assembly line. All I knew was that I was Denny Phillips. It was as if I had just awakened from a slumber. The place was guarded and the guards had guns. They looked like they meant business. There were others working and they looked like zombies. They looked like they were prisoners.

But it didn't matter. I had to find out who I was ... what I was was doing.

I had to get away!

I started across the floor. One of the guards yelled, "Get back there!"

I ran across the room, bowled over a guard and ran out the door. I heard gun blasts and knew they were shooting at me. But the driving thought persisted:

I've got to get away!

There was another set of guards blocking the other door. It looked like I was trapped, until I saw a boom swing down. I grabbed it and was pulled over three hundred feet to the next landing. But it was no good. There was a guard there. He shot at me. I felt all weak and dizzy ... I fell into a great dark pit ...

One of the guards took off his hat and scratched his head.

"I dunno Joe, I just dunno. Progress is a great thing ... but that x-238A ... Denny Phillips, name ... they' re great robots ... but they go haywire, now and then, and it seems like they was looking for something ... almost human. Oh well."

A truck drove away, and the sign on its side said: ACME ROBOT REPAIR".

Two weeks later, Denny Phillips was back on the job ... blank look in his eyes. But suddenly...

His eyes become clear ... and, the overwhelming thought comes to him: I'VE GOT TO GET AWAY!!

Never Look Behind You

By
Stephen King

Appeared in
People, Places, and Things 1963

George Jacobs closing his office, when an old woman felt free to walk right in.

Hardly anyone walked through his door these days. The people hated him. For fifteen years he'd picked the people's pockets clean of money. No one had ever been able to hook him on a charge. But back to our little story.

The old woman that came in had an ugly scar on her left cheek. Her clothes were mostly filthy rags and other crude material.

Jacobs was counting his money.

"There! Fifty-thousand, nine hundred and seventy-three dollars and sixty-two cents."

Jacobs always liked to be precise.

"Indeed a lot of money," she spoke up. "Too bad you won't be able to spend it."

Jacobs turned around.

"Why - who are you?" he asked in half surprise. "What right have you to spy on me?"-

The woman didn't answer. She held up her bony hand. There was a flash of fire on his throat - and a scream. Then, with a final gurgle, George Jacobs died.

"I wonder what - or who - could have killed him?" said a young man.

"I'm glad he's gone." said another.

That one was lucky.

He didn't look behind him.

THE END

The Thing at the Bottom of the Well

By
Stephen King

Appeared in
People, Places, and Things 1963

Oglethorpe Crater was an ugly, mean little wretch. He dearly loved plaguing the dog and cat, pulling the wings from flies and watching worms squirm as he slowly pulled them apart. (This lost its fun when he heard worms feel no pain).

But his mother, fool as she was, was blind to his faults and sadistic traits. One day the cook threw open the door in near hysterics and Oglethorpe and Mommy came home from a movie.

"That awful little boy tied a rope across the cellar stairs so when I went down to get potatoes, I fell and almost killed myself!" she screamed.

"Don't believe her! Don't believe her! She hates me!" cried

Oglethorpe, tears springing into his eyes. And poor little

Oglethorpe began sobbing as if his little heart would break.

Mommy fired the cook and Oglethorpe, dear little Oglethorpe, went up to his room where he poked pins in his dog, Spotty. When mommy asked why Spotty was crying, Oglethorpe said he got some glass in his foot. He said he would pull it out. Mommy thought dear little Oglethorpe a good Samaritan.

Then one day, while Oglethorpe was in the field looking for more things to torture, he spied a deep, dark well. He called down, thinking he'd hear an echo.

"Hello!"

But a soft voice called up, "Hello, Oglethorpe"

Oglethorpe looked down, but he could see nothing. "Who are you" Oglethorpe asked.

"Come on down," said the voice, "And we'll have jolly fun."

So Oglethorpe went down.

The day passed and Oglethorpe didn't come back. Mommy called the police and a manhunt was formed. For over a month they hunted for dear little Oglethorpe. Just when they were about to give up, they found Oglethorpe in a well, dead as a door-nail.

But how he must have died!

His arms were pulled out, like people pull flies' wings. Pins had been stuck in his eyes and there were other tortures too horrible to mention.

As they covered his body (what was left of it), and trouped away, it actually seemed that they heard laughter coming from the bottom of the well.

The Stranger

By
Stephen King

Appeared in
People, Places, and Things 1963

Kelso Black laughed.

He laughed until his sides were splitting and the bottle of cheap whiskey he held clenched in his hands slopped on the floor.

Dumb cops! It had been so easy. And now he had fifty grand in his pockets. The guard was dead – but it was his fault! He got in the way

With a laugh, Kelso Black raised the bottle to his lips. That was when he heard it. Footsteps on the stairs that led to the attic where he was holed up.

He drew his pistol. The door swung open.

The stranger wore a black coat and a hat pulled over his eyes.

"Hello, hello." he said. "Kelso, I've been watching you. You please me immensely." The stranger laughed and it sent a thrill of horror through him.

"Who are you?"

The man laughed again. "You know me. I know you. We made a pact about an hour ago, the moment you shot that guard."

"Get out!" Black's voice rose shrilly. "Get out!" Get out!"

"It's time for you to come, Kelso" the stranger said softly "After all – we have a long way to go."

The stranger took off his coat and hat. Kelso Black looked into that Face.

He screamed.

Kelso Black screamed and screamed and screamed.

But the stranger just laughed and in a moment, the room was silent. And empty.

But it smelled strongly of brimstone.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FOG

By
Stephen King

Appeared in
People, Places, and Things 1963

An Pete Jacob's stepped out, the fog immediately swallowed up his house and he could see nothing but the white blanket all around him. It gave him the weird feeling of being the last man in the world.

Suddenly Pete felt dizzy. His stomach did a flip-flop. He felt like a person in a falling elevator. Then it passed and he walked on. The fog began to clear and Pete's eyes opened wide with fright, awe and wonder.

He was in the middle of the city.

But the nearest city was forty miles away!

But what a city! Pete had never seen anything like it.

Graceful buildings with high spires seemed to reach to the sky.

People walked along on moving conveyer belts.

The cornerstone on a skyscraper read April, 17, 2007. Pete had walked into the future. But how?

Suddenly Pete was frightened. Horribly, terribly, frightened.

He didn't belong here. He couldn't stay. He ran after the receding fog.

A policeman in a strange uniform called angrily. Strange cars that rode six inches or so off the ground narrowly missed hitting him. But Pete succeeded. He ran back into the fog and soon everything was blanked out.

Then the feeling came again. That weird feeling of falling ... then the fog began to clear.

It looked like home ...

Suddenly there was an earsplitting screech. He turned to see a huge prehistoric brontasaurus lumbering toward him. The desire to kill was in his small beady eyes.

Terrified, he ran into the fog again ...

The next time the fog closes in on you and you hear hurried footsteps running through the whiteness ... call out.

That would be Pete Jacobs, trying to find his side of the Fog ...

Help the poor guy.

THE CURSED EXPEDITION

By
Stephen King

Appeared in
People, Places, and Things 1963

"Well," said Jimmy Keller, looking across to the gantry to where the rocket rested in the middle of the desert. A lonely wind blew across the desert, and Hugh Bullford said, "Yeah. It's about time to leave for Venus. Why? Why do we want to go to Venus?"

"I don't know," Keller said. "I just don't know."

The rocket ship touched down on Venus. Bullford checked the air and said in amazed tones, "Why, it's good old type Earth air! Perfectly breathable."

They went out, and it was Keller's turn for amazement. "Why, it's just like spring on earth! Everything's lush and green and beautiful. Why ... it's Paradise!"

They ran out. The fruits were exotic and delicious, the temperature perfect. When night fell, they slept outside.

"I'm going to call it the Garden of Eden," said Keller enthusiastically.

Bullford stared into the fire. "I don't like this place, Jimmy.' It feels all wrong. There's something ... evil about it."

"You're space happy." Keller scoffed. "Sleep it off."

The next morning James Keller was dead.

There was a look of horror on his face that Bullford never hoped to see again.

After the burial, Bullford called Earth. He got no reply. The radio was dead. Bullford took it apart and put it together. There was nothing wrong with it, but the fact remained: it didn't work.

Bullford's worry doubled itself. He ran outside. The landscape was the same pleasant and happy. But Bullford could see the evil in it.

"You killed him!" he cried. "I know it!"

Suddenly the ground opened up and it slithered toward him. In near panic, he ran back to the ship. But not before he got a piece of soil. .

He analyzed the soil and then panic took him. Venus was alive.

Suddenly the space ship tilted and went over. Bullford screamed.

But the soil closed over it and almost seemed to lick its lips.

Then it reset itself, waiting for the next victim...

THE REPLOIDS

Stephen King

*Appeared in
Night Visions #5, 1988*

No one knew exactly how long it had been going on. Not long. Two days, two weeks; it couldn't have been much longer than that, Cheyney reasoned. Not that it mattered. It was just that people got to watch a little more of the show with the added thrill of knowing the show was real. When the United States - the whole world - found out about the Reploids, it was pretty spectacular. just as well, maybe. These days, unless it's spectacular, a thing can go on damned near forever. It is neither believed nor disbelieved. It is simply part of the weird Godhead mantra that made up the accelerating flow of events and experience as the century neared its end. It's harder to get peoples' attention. It takes machine-guns in a crowded airport or a live grenade rolled up the aisle of a bus load of nuns stopped at a roadblock in some Central American country overgrown with guns and greenery. The Reploids became national - and international - news on the morning of November 30, 1989, after what happened during the first two chaotic minutes of the Tonight Show taping in Beautiful Downtown Burbank, California, the night before.

The floor manager watched intently as the red sweep secondhand moved upward toward the twelve. The studio audience clockwatched as intently as the floor manager. When the red sweep second-hand crossed the twelve, it would be five o'clock and taping of the umpty-umptieth Tonight Show would commence.

As the red second-hand passed the eight, the audience stirred and muttered with its own peculiar sort of stage fright. After all, they represented America, didn't they? Yes!

"Let's have it quiet, people, please," the floor manager said pleasantly, and the audience quieted like obedient children. Doc Severinsen's drummer ran off a fast little riff on his snare and then held his sticks easily between thumbs and fingers, wrists loose, watching the floor manager instead of the clock, as the show - people always did. For crew and performers, the floor manager

was the clock. When the second-hand passed the ten, the floor manager counted down aloud to four, and then held up three fingers, two fingers, one finger ... and then a clenched fist from which one finger pointed dramatically at the audience. An APPLAUSE sign lit up, but the studio audience was primed to whoop it up; it would have made no difference if it had been written in Sanskrit.

So things started off just as they were supposed to start off: dead on time. This was not so surprising; there were crewmembers on the Tonight Show who, had they been LAPD officers, could have retired with full benefits. The Doc Severinsen band, one of the best showbands in the world, launched into the familiar theme: Ta-da-da-Da-da ... and the large, rolling voice of Ed

McMahon cried enthusiastically: "From Los Angeles, entertainment capital of the world, it's The Tonight Show, live, with Johnny Carson! Tonight, Johnny's guests are actress Cybill Shepherd of Moonlighting!" Excited applause from the audience. "Magician Doug Henning!" Even louder applause from the audience. "Pee Wee Herman!" A fresh wave of applause, this time including hoots of joy from Pee Wee's rooting section. "From Germany, the Flying Schnauzers, the world's only canine acrobats!" Increased applause, with a mixture of laughter from the audience. "Not to mention Doc Severinsen, the world's only Flying Bandleader, and his canine band!"

The band members not playing horns obediently barked. The audience laughed harder, applauded harder.

In the control room of Studio C, no one was laughing.

A man in a loud sport-coat with a shock of curly black hair was standing in the wings, idly snapping his fingers and looking across the stage at Ed, but that was all.

The director signaled for Number Two Cam's medium shot on Ed for the umpty-umptieth time, and there was Ed on the ON SCREEN monitors. He barely heard someone mutter, "Where the hell is he?" before Ed's rolling tones announced, also for the umpty-umptieth time: "And now heeeere's JOHNNY!"

Wild applause from the audience.

"Camera Three," the director snapped.

"But there's only that-"

"Camera Three, goddammit!"

Camera Three came up on the ON SCREEN monitor, showing every TV director's private nightmare, a dismally empty stage ... and then someone, some stranger, was striding confidently into that empty space, just as if he had every right in the world to be there, filling it with unquestionable presence, charm, and authority. But, whoever he was, he was most definitely not Johnny Carson. Nor was it any of the other familiar faces TV and studio audiences had grown used to during Johnny's absences. This man was taller than Johnny, and instead of the familiar silver hair, there was a luxuriant cap of almost Pan-like black curls. The stranger's hair was so black that in places it seemed to glow almost blue, like Superman's hair in the comic-books. The sport-coat he wore was not quite loud enough to put him in the Pleesda-Meetcha-Is-This-The-Missus? car salesman category, but Carson would not have touched it with a twelve-foot pole.

The audience applause continued, but it first seemed to grow slightly bewildered, and then clearly began to thin.

"What the fuck's going on?" someone in the control room asked. The director simply watched, mesmerized.

Instead of the familiar swing of the invisible golf-club, punctuated by a drum-riff and high-spirited hoots of approval from the studio

audience, this dark-haired, broad-shouldered, loud-jacketed, unknown gentleman began to move his hands up and down, eyes flicking rhythmically from his moving palms to a spot just above his head - he was miming a juggler with a lot of fragile items in the air, and doing it with the easy grace of the long-time showman. It was only something in his face, something as subtle as a shadow, that told you the objects were eggs or something, and would break if dropped. It was, in fact, very like the way Johnny's eyes followed the invisible ball down the invisible fairway, registering one that had been righteously stroked ... unless, of course, he chose to vary the act, which he could and did do from time to time, and without even breathing hard.

He made a business of dropping the last egg, or whatever the fragile object was, and his eyes followed it to the floor with exaggerated dismay. Then, for a moment, he froze. Then he glanced toward Cam Three Left ... toward Doc and the orchestra, in other words.

After repeated viewings of the videotape, Dave Cheyney came to what seemed to him to be an irrefutable conclusion, although many of his colleagues - including his partner - questioned it.

"He was waiting for a sting," Cheyney said. "Look, you can see it on his face. It's as old as burlesque."

His partner, Pete Jacoby, said, "I thought burlesque was where the girl with the heroin habit took off her clothes while the guy with the heroin habit played the trumpet."

Cheyney gestured at him impatiently. "Think of the lady that used to play the piano in the silent movies, then. Or the one that used to do schmaltz on the organ during the radio soaps."

Jacoby looked at him, wide-eyed. "Mid they have those things when you were a kid, daddy?" he asked in a falsetto voice.

"Will you for once be serious?" Cheyney asked him. "Because this is a serious thing we got here, I think."

"What we got here is very simple. We got a nut."

"No," Cheyney said, and hit rewind on the VCR again with one hand while he lit a fresh cigarette with the other. "What we got is a seasoned performer who's mad as hell because the guy on the snare dropped his cue." He paused thoughtfully and added: "Christ, Johnny does it all the time. And if the guy who was supposed to lay in the sting dropped his cue, I think he'd look the same way."

By then it didn't matter. The stranger who wasn't Johnny Carson had time to recover, to look at a flabbergasted Ed McMahon and say, "The moon must be full tonight, Ed - do you think - " And that was when the NBC security guards came out and grabbed him.

"Hey! What the fuck do you think you're - "

But by then they had dragged him away.

In the control room of Studio C, there was total silence. The audience monitors picked up the same silence. Camera Four was swung toward the audience, and showed a picture of one hundred and fifty stunned, silent faces. Camera Two, the one medium-close on Ed McMahon, showed a man who looked almost cosmically befuddled.

The director took a package of Winstons from his breast pocket, took one out, put it in his mouth, took it out again and reversed it so the filter was facing away from him, and abruptly bit the cigarette in two. He threw the filtered half in one direction and spat the unfiltered half in another.

"Get up a show from the library with Rickles," he said. "No Joan Rivers. And if I see Totie Fields, someone's going to get fired." Then he strode away, head down. He shoved a chair with such violence on his way out of the control room that it struck the wall,

rebounded, nearly fractured the skull of a white-faced intern from USC, and fell on its side.

One of the PA's told the intern in a low voice, "Don't worry; that's just Fred's way of committing honorable seppuku."

The man who was not Johnny Carson was taken, bellowing loudly not about his lawyer but his team of lawyers, to the Burbank Police Station. In Burbank, as in Beverly Hills and Hollywood Heights, there is a wing of the police station which is known simply as "special security functions." This may cover many aspects of the sometimes crazed world of Tinsel-Town law enforcement. The cops don't like it, the cops don't respect it ... but they ride with it. You don't shit where you eat. Rule One.

"Special security functions" might be the place to which a coke-snorting movie-star whose last picture grossed seventy million dollars might be conveyed; the place to which the battered wife of an extremely powerful film producer might be taken; it was the place to which the man with the dark crop of curls was taken.

The man who showed up in Johnny Carson's place on the stage of Studio C on the afternoon of November 29th identified himself as Ed Paladin, speaking the name with the air of one who expects everyone who hears it to fall on his or her knees and, perhaps, genuflect. His California driver's license, Blue Cross - Blue Shield card, Amex and Diners' Club cards, also identified him as Edward Paladin.

His trip from Studio C ended, at least temporarily, in a room in the Burbank PD's "special security" area. The room was panelled with tough plastic that almost did look like mahogany and furnished with a low, round couch and tasteful chairs. There was a cigarette box on the glass-topped coffee table filled with Dunhills, and the magazines included Fortune and Variety and Vogue and Billboard and GQ. The wall-to-wall carpet wasn't really ankle-deep but looked it, and there was a CableView guide on top of the large-

screen TV. There was a bar (now locked), and a very nice neo-Jackson Pollock painting on one of the walls. The walls, however, were of drilled cork, and the mirror above the bar was a little bit too large and a little bit too shiny to be anything but a piece of one-way glass.

The man who called himself Ed Paladin stuck his hands in his just-too-loud sport-coat pockets, looked around disgustedly, and said: "An interrogation room by any other name is still an interrogation room."

Detective 1st Grade Richard Cheyney looked at him calmly for a moment. When he spoke, it was in the soft and polite voice that had earned him the only halfkidding nickname "Detective to the Stars." Part of the reason he spoke this way was because he genuinely liked and respected show people. Part of the reason was because he didn't trust them. Half the time they were lying they didn't know it.

"Could you tell us, please, Mr Paladin, how you got on the set of The Tonight Show, and where Johnny Carson is?"

"Who's Johnny Carson?"

Pete Jacoby - who wanted to be Henny Youngman when he grew up, Cheyney often thought - gave Cheyney a momentary dry look every bit as good as a Jack Benny deadpan. Then he looked back at Edward Paladin and said, "Johnny Carson's the guy who used to be Mr Ed. You know, the talking horse? I mean, a lot of people know about Mr Ed, the famous talking horse, but an awful lot of people don't know that he went to Geneva to have a species-change operation and when he came back he was-

Cheyney often allowed Jacoby his routines (there was really no other word for them, and Cheyney remembered one occasion when Jacoby had gotten a man charged with beating his wife and infant son to death laughing so hard that tears of mirth rather than

remorse were rolling down his cheeks as he signed the confession that was going to put the bastard in jail for the rest of his life), but he wasn't going to tonight. He didn't have to see the flame under his ass; he could feel it, and it was being turned up. Pete was maybe a little slow on the uptake about some things, and maybe that was why he wasn't going to make Detective 1st for another two or three years ... if he ever did.

Some ten years ago a really awful thing had happened in a little nothing town called Chowchilla. Two people (they had walked on two legs, anyway, if you could believe the newsfilm) had hijacked a busload of kids, buried them alive, and then had demanded a huge sum of money. Otherwise, they said, those kiddies could just stay where they were and swap baseball trading cards until their air ran out. That one had ended happily, but it could have been a nightmare. And God knew Johnny Carson was no busload of schoolkids, but the case had the same kind of fruitcake appeal: here was that rare event about which both the Los Angeles Times-Mirror and The National Enquirer would hobnob on their front pages. What Pete didn't understand was that something extremely rare had happened to them: in the world of day-to-day police work, a world where almost everything came in shades of gray, they had suddenly been placed in a situation of stark and simple contrasts: produce within twenty-four hours, thirty-six at the outside, or watch the Feds come in ... and kiss your ass goodbye.

Things happened so rapidly that even later he wasn't completely sure, but he believed both of them had been going on the unspoken presumption, even then, that Carson had been kidnapped and this guy was part of it.

"We're going to do it by the numbers, Mr Paladin," Cheyney said, and although he was speaking to the man glaring up at him from one of the chairs (he had refused the sofa at once), his eyes flicked briefly to Pete. They had been partners for nearly twelve years, and a glance was all it took.

No more Comedy Store routines, Pete.

Message received.

"First comes the Miranda Warning," Cheyney said pleasantly. "I am required to inform you that you are in the custody of the Burbank City Police. Although not required to do so immediately, I'll add that a preliminary charge of trespassing-"

"Trespassing!" An angry flush burst over Paladin's face.

"-on property both owned and leased by the National Broadcasting Company has been lodged against you. I am Detective 1st Grade Richard Cheyney. This man with me is my partner, Detective 2nd Grade Peter Jacoby. We'd like to interview you."

"Fucking interrogate me is what you mean."

"I only have one question, as far as interrogation goes," Cheyney said. "Otherwise, I only want to interview you at this time. In other words, I have one question relevant to the charge which has been lodged; the rest deal with other matters."

"Well, what's the fucking question?"

"That wouldn't be going by the numbers," Jacoby said.

Cheyney said:. "I am required to tell you that you have the right-"

"To have my lawyer here, you bet," Paladin said. "And I just decided that before I answer a single fucking question, and that includes where I went to lunch today and what I had, he's going to be in here. Albert K. Dellums."

He spoke this name as if it should rock both detectives back on their heels, but Cheyney had never heard of it and could tell by Pete's expression that he hadn't either.

Whatever sort of crazy this Ed Paladin might turn out to be, he was no dullard. He saw the quick glances which passed between the

two detectives and read them easily. You know him? Cheyney's eyes asked Jacoby's, and Jacoby's replied, Never heard of him in my life.

For the first time an expression of perplexity - it was not fear, not yet - crossed Mr Edward Paladin's face.

"Al Dellums," he said, raising his voice like some Americans overseas who seem to believe they can make the waiter understand if they only speak loudly enough and slowly enough. "Al Dellums of Dellums, Carthage, Stoneham, and Tayloe. I guess I shouldn't be all that surprised that you haven't heard of him. He's only one of the most important, well-known lawyers in the country." Paladin shot the left cuff of his just-slightly-too-loud sport-coat and glanced at his watch. "If you reach him at home, gentlemen, he'll be pissed. If you have to call his club - and I think this is his club-night - he's going to be pissed like a bear."

Cheyney was not impressed by bluster. If you could sell it at a quarter a pound, he never would have had to turn his hand at another day's work. But even a quick peck had been enough to show him that the watch Paladin was wearing was not just a Rolex but a Rolex Midnight Star. It might be an imitation, of course, but his gut told him it was genuine. Part of it was his clear impression that Paladin wasn't trying to make an impression - he'd wanted to see what time it was, no more or less than that. And if the watch was the McCoy ... well, there were cabin-cruisers you could buy for less. What was a man who could afford a Rolex Midnight Star doing mixed up in something weird like this?

Now he was the one who must have been showing perplexity clear enough for Paladin to read it, because the man smiled - a humorless skinning-back of the lips from the capped teeth. "The air-conditioning in here's pretty nice," he said, crossing his legs and flicking the crease absently. "You guys want to enjoy it while you can. It's pretty muggy walking a beat out in Watts, even this time of year."

In a harsh and abrupt tone utterly unlike his bright pitter-patter Comedy Store voice, Jacoby said: "Shut your mouth, jag-off."

Paladin jerked around and stared at him, eyes wide. And again Cheyney would have sworn it had been years since anyone had spoken to this man in that way. Years since anyone would have dared.

"What did you say?"

"I said shut your mouth when Detective Cheyney is talking to you. Give me your lawyer's number. I'll see that he is called. In the meantime, I think you need to take a few seconds to pull your head out of your ass and look around and see exactly where you are and exactly how serious the trouble is that you are in. I think you need to reflect on the fact that, while only one charge has been lodged against you, you could be facing enough to put you in the slam well into the next century ... and you could be facing them before the sun comes up tomorrow morning."

Jacoby smiled. It wasn't his howaya-folks-anyone-here-from-Duluth Comedy Store smile, either. Like Paladin's, it was a brief pull of the lips, no more.

"You're right - the air-conditioning in here isn't halfbad. Also, the TV works and for a wonder the people on it don't look like they're seasick. The coffee's good - perked, not instant. Now, if you want to make another two or three wisecracks, you can wait for your legal talent in a holding cell on the fifth floor. On Five, the only entertainment consists of kids crying for their mommies and winos puking on their sneakers. I don't know who you think you are and I don't care, because as far as I'm concerned, you're nobody. I never saw you before in my life, never heard of you before in my life, and if you push me enough I'll widen the crack in your ass for you."

"That's enough," Cheyney said quietly.

"I'll retool it so you could drive a Ryder van up there, Mister Paladin - you understand me? Can you grok that?"

Now Paladin's eyes were all but hanging from their sockets on stalks. His mouth was open. Then, without speaking, he removed his wallet from his coat pocket (some kind of lizard-skin, Cheyney thought, two months' salary ... maybe three). He found his lawyer's card (the home number was jotted on the back, Cheyney noted it was most definitely not part of the printed matter on the front) and handed it to Jacoby. His fingers now showed the first observable tremor.

"Pete?"

Jacoby looked at him and Cheyney saw it was no act; Paladin had actually succeeded in pissing his easy-going partner off. No mean feat.

"Make the call yourself."

"Okay." Jacoby left.

Cheyney looked at Paladin and was suddenly amazed to find himself feeling sorry for the man. Before he had looked perplexed; now he looked both stunned and frightened, like a man who wakes from a nightmare only to discover the nightmare is still going on.

"Watch closely," Cheyney said after the door had closed, "and I'll show you one of the mysteries of the West. West LA, that is."

He moved the neo-Pollock and revealed not a safe but a toggle switch. He flicked it, then let the painting slide back into place.

"That's one-way glass," Cheyney said, cocking a thumb at the too-large mirror over the bar.

"I am not terribly surprised to hear that," Paladin said, and Cheyney reflected that, while the man might have some of the shitty egocentric habits of the Veddy Rich and Well-Known in LA,

he was also a near-superb actor: only a man as experienced as he was himself could have told how really close Paladin was to the ragged edge of tears.

But not of guilt, that was what was so puzzling, so goddamn-maddening.

Of perplexity.

He felt that absurd sense of sorrow again, absurd because it presupposed the man's innocence: he did not want to be Edward Paladin's nightmare, did not want to be the heavy in a Kafka novel where suddenly nobody knows where they are, or why they are there.

"I can't do anything about the glass," Cheyney said. He came back and sat down across the coffee table from Paladin, "but I've just killed the sound. So it's you talking to me and vice-versa." He took a pack of Kents from his breast pocket, stuck one in the corner of his mouth, then offered the pack to Paladin. "Smoke?"

Paladin picked up the pack, looked it over, and smiled. "Even my old brand. I haven't smoked one since night Yul Brynner died, Mr Cheyney. I don't think ant to start again now."

Cheyney put the pack back into his pocket. "Can we talk?" he asked.

Paladin rolled his eyes. "Oh my God, it's Joan Raiford."

"Who?"

"Joan Raiford. You know, "I took Elizabeth Taylor to Marine World and when she saw Shamu the Whale she asked me if it came with vegetables?" I repeat, Detective Cheyney: grow up. I have no reason in the world to believe that switch is anything but a dummy. My God, how innocent do you think I am?"

Joan Raiford? Is that what he really said?, Joan Raiford?

"What's the matter?" Paladin asked pleasantly. He crossed his legs the other way. "Did you perhaps think you saw a clear path? Me breaking down, maybe saying I'd tell everything, everything, just don't let 'em fry me, copper?"

With all the force of personality he could muster, Cheyney said: "I believe things are very wrong here, Mr Paladin. You've got them wrong and I've got them wrong. When your lawyer gets here, maybe we can sort them out and maybe we can't. Most likely we can't. So listen to me, and for God's sake use your brain. I gave you the Miranda Warning. You said you wanted your lawyer present. If there was a tape turning, I've bugged my own case. Your lawyer would have to say just one word - enticement - and you'd walk free, whatever has happened to Carson. And I could go to work as a security guard in one of those flea-bitten little towns down by the border."

"You say that," Paladin said, "but I'm no lawyer.

But ... Convince me, his eyes said. Yeah, let's talk about this, lees see if we can't get together, because you're right, something is weird. So ... convince me.

"Is your mother alive?" Cheyney asked abruptly.

"What - yes, but what does that have to-"

"You talk to me or I'm going to personally take two CHP motorcycle cops and the three of us are going to rape your mother tomorrow!" Cheyney screamed. "I'm personally going to take her up the ass! Then we're going to cut off her tits and leave them on the front lawn! So you better talk!"

Paladin's face was as white as milk: a white so white it is nearly blue.

"Now are you convinced?" Cheyney asked softly. 'I'm not crazy. I'm not going to rape your mother. But with a statement like that

on a reel of tape, you could say you were the guy on the grassy knoll in Dallas and the Burbank police wouldn't produce the tape. I want to talk to you, man. What's going on here?"

Paladin shook his head dully and said, "I don't know."

In the room behind the one-way glass, Jacoby joined Lieutenant McEachern, Ed McMahon (still looking stunned), and a cluster of technical people at a bank of high-tech equipment. The LAPD chief of police and the mayor were rumored to be racing each other to Burbank.

"He's talking?" Jacoby asked.

"I think he's going to," McEachern said. His eyes had moved toward Jacoby once, quickly, when he came in. Now they were centered only on the window. The men seated on the other side, Cheyney smoking, relaxed, Paladin tense but trying to control it, looked slightly lowish through the one-way glass. The sound of their voices was clear and undistorted through the overhead speakers - a top-of-the-line Bose in each corner.

Without taking his eyes off the men, McEachern said: "You get his lawyer?"

Jacoby said: "The home number on the card belongs to a cleaning woman named Howlanda Moore."

McEachern flicked him another fast glance.

"Black, from the sound, delta Mississippi at a guess. Kids yelling and fighting in the background. She didn't quite say I'se gwine whup you if you don't quit!, but it was close. She's had the number three years. I re-dialed twice.

"Jesus," McEachern, said. "Try the office number?"

"Yeah," Jacoby replied. "Got a recording. You think ConTel's a good buy, Loot?"

McEachern flicked his gray eyes in Jacoby's direction again.

"The number on the front of the card is that of a fairly large stock brokerage," Jacoby said quietly. "I looked under lawyers in the Yellow Pages. Found no Albert K. Dellums. Closest is an Albert Dillon, no middle initial. No law firm like the one on the card."

"Jesus please us," McEachern said, and then the door banged open and a little man with the face of a monkey barged in. The mayor had apparently won the race to Burbank.

"What's going on here?" he said to McEachern.

"I don't know," McEachern said.

"All right," Paladin said wearily. "Let's talk about it. I feel, Detective Cheyney, like a man who had just spent two hours or so on some disorienting amusement park ride. Or like someone slipped some LSD into my drink. Since we're not on the record, what was your one interrogatory? Let's start with that."

"All right," Cheyney said. "How did you get into the broadcast complex, and how did you get into Studio C?"

"Those are two questions."

"I apologize."

Paladin smiled faintly.

"I got on the property and into the studio," he said, "the same way I've been getting on the property and into the studio for over twenty years. My pass. Plus the fact that I know every security guard in the place. Shit, I've been there longer than most of them."

"May I see that pass?" Cheyney asked. His voice was quiet, but a large pulse beat in his throat.

Paladin looked at him warily for a moment, then pulled out the lizard-skin wallet again. After a moment of rifling, he tossed a perfectly correct NBC Performer's Pass onto the coffee table.

Correct, that was, in every way but one.

Cheyney crushed out his smoke, picked it up, and looked at it. The pass was laminated. In the corner was the NBC peacock, something only long-timers had on their cards. The face in the photo was the face of Edward Paladin. Height and weight were correct. No space for eye-color, hair-color, or age, of course; when you were dealing with ego. Walk softly, stranger, for here there be tygers.

The only problem with the pass was that it was salmon pink.

NBC Performer's Passes were bright red.

Cheyney had seen something else while Paladin was looking for his pass. "Could you put a one-dollar bill from your wallet on the coffee table there?" he asked softly.

"Why?"

"I'll show you in a moment," Cheyney said. "A five or a ten would do as well."

Paladin studied him, then opened his wallet again. He took back his pass, replaced it, and carefully took out a one-dollar bill. He turned it so it faced Cheyney. Cheyney took his own wallet (a scuffed old Lord Buxton with its seams unravelling; he should replace it but found it easier to think of than to do) from his jacket pocket, and removed a dollar bill of his own. He put it next to Paladin's, and then turned them both around so Paladin could see them right-side-up-so Paladin could study them.

Which Paladin did, silently, for almost a full minute. His face slowly flushed dark red ... and then the color slipped from it a little at a time. He'd probably meant to bellow WHAT THE FUCK IS

GOING ON HERE? Cheyney thought later, but what came out was a breathless little gasp: -what-

"I don't know," Cheyney said.

On the right was Cheyney's one, gray-green, not brand-new by any means, but new enough so that it did not yet have that rumpled, limp, shopworn look of a bill which has changed hands many times. Big number 1's at the top corners, smaller 1's at the bottom corners. FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE in small caps between the top 1's and THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA in larger ones. The letter A in a seal to the left of Washington, along with the assurance that THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER, FOR ALL DEBTS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE. It was a series 1985 bill, the signature that of James A. Baker III.

Paladin's one was not the same at all.

The 1's in the four corners were the same; THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA was the same; the assurance that the bill could be used to pay all public and private debts was the same.

But Paladin's one was a bright blue.

Instead of FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE it said CURRENCY OF GOVERNMENT.

Instead of the letter A was the letter F.

But most of all it was the picture of the man on the bill that drew Cheyney's attention, just as the picture of the man on Cheyney's bill drew Paladin's.

Cheyney's gray-green one showed George Washington.

Paladin's blue one showed James Madison.

#5X10 – Chinga

From: “X-Files”, February 8, 1998

By Stephen King

THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

SCENE 1 (Car with Maine license plate # 384M 95. MELISSA TURNER walks to the passenger side of the car and opens the door for her young daughter POLLY who is holding a large doll.)

MELISSA: Okay, sweetheart. We’re just going in for a few things. We won’t be long, okay. Polly? Mommy needs some groceries, okay?

(POLLY does not respond. MELISSA unbuckles the seatbelt and helps her out. As they enter the grocery store, an older woman, JANE FROELICH glares at them. MELISSA ignores her. POLLY looks back at her.)

(Inside the store, MELISSA wheels the cart quickly and nervously down the aisle. POLLY sits in the child seat of the cart with her doll. People watch them suspiciously. They pass by the butcher’s counter. DAVE, the butcher watches them pass.)

POLLY: I don’t like this store, Mommy.

MELISSA: We’re only going to be a minute.

POLLY: I want to go home.

(The doll’s eyes open.)

DOLL: (high-pitched creepy voice) Let’s have fun.

(As they pass the refrigerated section, MELISSA sees an image of DAVE in the glass. He has a knife through his right eye.)

DAVE’S IMAGE: Help, Melissa.

(MELISSA quickly wheels the cart to the front of the store. The cart has a bad wheel.)

MELISSA: (picking up POLLY) We’re going home, Polly. Please, don’t do this to Mommy.

(Nearby, there is the sound of breaking glass as a woman drops her basket and begins clawing at her eyes. MELISSA runs out of the store with POLLY as everyone in the store begins clawing at their eyes. DAVE comes out of the back of the store and sees what is happening. He suddenly claws at his eyes, then runs back to his phone and dials 911.)

DAVE: It's Dave, down at the Super Saver. Send whoever you got on duty.

(Dave sees a fuzzy reflection of the doll in the metal door of a meat locker.)

DOLL'S IMAGE: I want to play.

(DAVE pulls out a knife as if to attack the doll, but then aims the knife at his own eye. He is struggling against himself, but the knife moves closer to his right eye. The camera cuts away just as we hear him scream. Doll is still reflected on locker, watching.)

Opening Credits

SCENE 2 (A convertible drives down a street in the small Maine harbor town. SCULLY pulls the convertible into a gas station, gets out and begins filling the tank <litres, not gallons>. She is wearing a Maine tourist T-shirt <The Way Life Should Be> and jeans and very cool shades. She hears her cell phone ringing. She gets the keys out of the ignition, opens the trunk of the car and pulls out her phone.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Scully.

(MULDER is in the office rocking on the back of a chair, obviously very bored.) MULDER: (on phone) Hey, Scully, it's me.

SCULLY: (on phone, voice) Mulder, I thought we had an agreement. We were both going to take the weekend off.

MULDER: (on phone) Right, right. I know. But I - I just received some information about - about a case. A classic X-files --- classic. I wanted to share it with you.

SCULLY: (on phone) Mulder, I'm on vacation. The weather is clear. I'm looking forward to hitting the road and breathing in some of this fine New England air.

MULDER: (on phone) You didn't rent a convertible, did you?

SCULLY: (on phone) Why?

MULDER: (on phone) Are you aware of the statistics of decapitation?

SCULLY: (on phone) Mulder, I'm hanging up. I'm turning off my cell phone. I'm back in the office on Monday.

MULDER: (on phone) You shouldn't talk and drive at the same time. Are you aware of the statistics? Hello?

(SCULLY has hung up. She drives the car into the grocery store lot, almost hitting MELISSA'S car as MELISSA speeds away. SCULLY looks slightly disgusted. Then she sees an OLD MAN staggering out of the store with bloody eyes. She gets out of the car.)

SCULLY: Sir ... Sir, what happened?

OLD MAN: (disoriented) I .. I think we need a doctor.

(SCULLY walks into store. People are moaning and crying and have horribly scratched eyes)

STORE MANAGER: (in pain) Who are you?

SCULLY: I'm .. my name is Scully. I'm an FBI agent. What happened to you?

STORE MANAGER: I don't know. But Dave, the butcher .. I think he's dead.

(SCULLY goes to the back and looks at DAVE'S body, knife sticking out of his eye socket.)

SCENE 3 (X-Files office. Mulder is eating sunflower seeds and watching television. Lots of groaning and moaning from a male and a female voice. Empty video cassette box on MULDER'S desk reads "Alien Probe." Phone rings.)

MULDER: (on phone) Mulder.

SCULLY: (on phone, voice) Mulder, it's me.

MULDER: (on phone) I thought you said you were on vacation.

SCULLY: (on phone, voice) I am. I'm up in Maine.

MULDER: (on phone) I thought you said you didn't want to be disturbed. You wanted to get out of your head for a few days.

SCULLY: (on phone, voice) I don't ... I mean, I do. I (moaning from TV is loud) What are you watching, Mulder?

MULDER: (on phone) It's the World's Deadliest Swarms. (Fumbles with remote to stop the tape.) Um .. you said you were going to be unreachable. What's going on?

SCULLY: (on phone) I, uh ... I'm at a market here. I'm just trying to give the local PD a handle here.

MULDER: (on phone, voice) A handle on what?

(SCULLY is in store office watching security tape footage of people clawing at their eyes.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Well, I'm not quite sure how to describe it, Mulder. I didn't witness it myself but there seems to be some kind of an outbreak of people acting in a violent, involuntary way.

MULDER: (on phone) Towards who?

(MULDER switches off TV, which now shows man being attacked by bugs. Remember, tape has already been stopped.)

SCULLY: (on phone, voice) Toward themselves.

MULDER: (on phone) Themselves?

SCULLY: (on phone) Yeah. Beating at their faces, clawing at their eyes. One man is dead.

MULDER: (on phone, voice) Dead? How?

SCULLY: (on phone) Self-inflicted, it appears.

MULDER: (on phone) Huh ... it sounds to me like that's witchcraft or maybe some sorcery that you're looking for there.

(Local PD Captain, JACK BONSAINT watches SCULLY strangely throughout conversation with MULDER.)

SCULLY: (on phone) No, I don't think it's witchcraft, Mulder, or sorcery. I've had a look around and I don't see any evidence that warrants that kind of suspicion.

MULDER: (on phone) Maybe you don't know what you're looking for.

SCULLY: (on phone) Like evidence of conjury or the black arts or shamanism, divination, Wicca or any kind of pagan or neo-Pagan practice. Charms, cards

(MULDER is listening, spellbound.)

SCULLY: (on phone) ... familiars, bloodstones, or hex signs or any of the ritual tableaux associated with the occult, Santeria, Voudoun, Macumba, or any high or low magic?

MULDER: (on phone) Scully ...

SCULLY: (on phone) Yes?

MULDER: (on phone) Marry me.

SCULLY: (on phone) I was hoping for something a little more helpful.

MULDER: (on phone) Well, you know, short of looking for a lady wearing a pointy hat riding a broomstick, I think you pretty much got it covered there.

SCULLY: (on phone) Thanks anyway. (hangs up, looks at tape again) (to OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS) Who's that woman right there?

BUDDY: Melissa Turner.

SCULLY: She's the only one I've seen who looks unaffected.

BUDDY: What's your point?

SCULLY: You might want to talk to her.

(SCULLY leaves the store office. Captain JACK BONSAINT follows her.)

BONSAINT: (smiling, very friendly) Ms. Scully ... you staying in town?

SCULLY: Yes. I'm on vacation. Why?

BONSAINT: Well, what you said back there about Melissa Turner kind of put a spin on this whole business here today.

SCULLY: How's that?

BONSAINT: Well, Melissa's caused some stir. People here say she's a witch.

SCULLY: Well, that's not the first time for that accusation in these parts.

BONSAINT: Ayuh.

SCULLY: Look, to be honest with you, Captain Bonsaint, um, I'm not much of a believer in witchcraft.

BONSAINT: Well, you know, I'm not either. I used to just think it's 'cause Melissa was pretty and single. Threatening, you know?

SCULLY: But now you're not convinced?

BONSAINT: Well, you know, I appreciate the trouble you went to, and I sure do hope there's a reasonable explanation like you said – just this one thing going to make it hard to persuade folks to your thinking.

SCULLY: What one thing is that?

BONSAINT: Who she's been carrying on with.

SCULLY: Who she's been carrying on with?

BONSAINT: Ayuh. With Dave, the butcher.

SCENE 4 (Back in store office, OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS calls MELISSA.)

MELISSA: (on phone) Hello?

(At MELISSA'S house, the HOKEY POKEY song is playing on POLLY'S record player. POLLY, holding her doll, watches MELISSA.)

BUDDY: (on phone) Hey. It's Buddy.

MELISSA: Oh, hi.

BUDDY: (on phone) Are you okay, Melissa?

MELISSA: (on phone) I'm fine. Why do you ask?

POLLY: Who's that, Mommy?

BUDDY: (on phone) I know you were here, Melissa. Down at the Super Saver.

MELISSA: (on phone) I don't know what you're talking about, Buddy.

POLLY: Hang up. Mommy.

BUDDY: (on phone) Melissa, turn the music down. There's some talk that you're involved in what happened here today.

MELISSA: (on phone, going downstairs and outside) I'm not involved in anything.

BUDDY: (on phone) I know that. Would you listen to me? I'm not saying that you are.

MELISSA: (on phone) What are you saying?

POLLY: (from inside) Mommy!

BUDDY: (on phone) I want to help you, but you've got to keep it a secret or we're both going to be answering questions. Now, I've got something to tell you.

MELISSA: (on phone) What?

BUDDY: (on phone) Something bad.

MELISSA: (on phone) What is it, Buddy?

BUDDY: (on phone) Dave's dead.

MELISSA: (on phone) Oh, my God!

BUDDY: (on phone) I've got to see you right away, Melissa.

MELISSA: (on phone) I can't.

BUDDY: (on phone) You need a friend more than ever.

(Upstairs, POLLY sits with the doll, listening to the Hokey Pokey. Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: Let's have fun.

MELISSA: (on phone) You can't come here, Buddy.

BUDDY: (on phone) Why? Tell me why?

MELISSA: (on phone) I can't explain it to you now.

BUDDY: (on phone) I'm coming over there, Melissa. You shouldn't be alone.

(Behind MELISSA outside, we see the shadow of the doll on a sheet hanging to dry on a clothesline. Its eyes blink.)

(Commercial 1.)

SCENE 5 MELISSA TURNER RESIDENCE 2:08 PM

(BONSAINT and SCULLY drive up in a patrol car and get out. BONSAINT knocks on front door. No answer. SCULLY looks in a window.)

SCULLY: Back door's wide open.

(They go around to back.)

BONSAINT: Melissa! (to SCULLY) Sheets are still wet.

(SCULLY enters house, goes up to POLLY'S room and looks at windows which are nailed shut.)

SCULLY: Chief? Take a look at this.

BONSAINT: What the devil's this for?

SCULLY: It looks like she was afraid of something.

BONSAINT: Whatever it is, she's run off in a hurry. Laundry's out. Door's unlocked. Beats me.

SCULLY: You know her?

BONSAINT: Melissy Turner?

SCULLY: Mm-hmm.

BONSAINT: About as local as you can get. Born and raised here. Married a fisherman. Widowed last year after a boating accident. Don't know if the little girl, Polly ever really understood. Toys in the attic.

SCULLY: The daughter's autistic?

BONSAINT: That's what they say. There was the incident last year over at the daycare center? Proprietor slapped Polly across the face.

SCULLY: Slapped her? What for?

BONSAINT: Well, she said Polly threw a tantrum so fierce there was nothing else she could do. Next thing she knew, she's on the ground. Little girl knocked her silly.

SCULLY: The little girl did?

BONSAINT: Well, that's her story. Polly never touched her, far as I could figure. Oh, it was a real drama, though. The lady who ran the school lost her license. People calling the kid all manner of names saying Melissa's a witch. Polly never went back to school a day since.

SCULLY: This ah, this affair that the mother was having with the butcher ...?

BONSAINT: Dave. Oh, I might have given you the wrong impression. That wasn't really an affair. Although Dave did make quite a fool of himself and his wife.

SCULLY: So, it was unrequited.

BONSAINT: You could say that.

SCULLY: To the extent that she'd have to nail her windows shut?

BONSAINT: Oh, he wasn't that big a fool. You know, maybe she wasn't afraid of something getting in. Maybe she's afraid of something getting out.

SCULLY: Like what?

BONSAINT: Just a thought.

SCENE 6 (Fast food restaurant. OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS sets a chocolate sundae in front of POLLY who is holding her doll.)

BUDDY: What do you think of that, huh?

(POLLY does not answer. She eats the cherry, then begins eating the sundae. OFFICER BRIGGS pats her on the head and goes to sit with MELISSA. They talk quietly.)

BUDDY: Why don't you leave town?

MELISSA: I've got nowhere to go, Buddy. I live on a shoestring as it is.

BUDDY: Listen to me. I've got some money put away.

MELISSA: Buddy, I can't!

BUDDY: I've had my eye on you, Melissa, for more years than I care to remember. You know, I missed my chance the first time around. I've been waiting in the wings. Now, I'm sorry about things, truly I am, but you need somebody who can provide.

MELISSA: Don't, Buddy, please!

BUDDY: "Don't" because you don't want to, or just because you're too proud?

MELISSA: You don't understand!

(They watch POLLY take her sundae up to the counter.)

BUDDY: What don't I understand?

MELISSA: What happened in the Super Saver, what happened to Dave ... I couldn't stop it.

BUDDY: What do you mean?

MELISSA: I've seen things.

(POLLY has gone up to the counter.)

POLLY: I want more cherries.

(WAITRESS with really long ponytail answers her.)

WAITRESS: What's that, sweetie?

POLLY: (not sweet) I want more cherries!

(MELISSA and OFFICER BRIGGS still talking at table.)

MELISSA: I saw Dave dead. Before he was dead. I saw him in frozen foods all cut and bloody and it's not the first time. My husband ... I saw him in a window dead before it happened. You know, with a hook?

(At counter)

POLLY: I want more cherries, now!

WAITRESS: You'll have to go ask your Mommy for some more money, hon. I just can't give them away.

WAITER: Window order.

(Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: Let's have fun.

POLLY: Mommy, I want more cherries.

MELISSA: We got to go now, Polly.

OFFICER BRIGGS: (holding up a key) Take this, Melissa. It's a place we use for hunting up near Schoodic Lake ...

POLLY: Mommy!

OFFICER BRIGGS: ...or else there's going to be trouble. More than you need.

POLLY: Mommy! Mommy!

(WAITRESS' long hair gets caught in the milkshake mixing machine. She begins screaming as blood appears at her hairline. OFFICER BRIGGS rushes to help her. MELISSA and POLLY run out the door.)

SCENE 7 (JANE FROELICH'S house. JANE looks through door window.)

JANE: Is that you, Jack?

BONSAINT: Uh, yeah, it's me, Jane. Come in?

JANE: (opens door, hostile) Who've you got with you?

SCULLY: Miss Froelich, my name's Dana Scully. I'm with the FBI. I just happen to be here on vacation , and uh ...

JANE: So?

SCULLY: So, I just am helping out the chief here.

JANE: You talked to her?

SCULLY: Who?

JANE: Oh, please. Melissa Turner. That whore's a witch sure as I'm standing here. She's descended from the Hawthornes in Salem and the Englishes, too. She comes from a cursed lineage and now she's passing it on to the whelp. God save that little girl if somebody don't do something. Lord knows I tried.

BONSAINT: Jane, if we could just come in for a few minutes and talk.

JANE: I found out last year how much good talking to you does, Jack Bonsaint. I explained everything and the city closed me down anyway. Our great-great-grandfathers knew how to treat witches. They would have driven

the demon out of that little girl and given that slattern of a mother just what she's got coming! (slams door)

SCULLY: New England hospitality. Heard about it my whole life. Finally got a chance to experience it for myself.

(JANE watches them walk to the car.)

BONSAINT: Well, you see what I'm up against here, public sentiment and all.

SCULLY: This family tree of Melissa Turner's...

BONSAINT: Ayuh..

SCULLY: It's all talk, isn't it?

BONSAINT: Oh, I never really asked. Why?

SCULLY: Well, I think you need to bring her in to straighten this out.

BONSAINT: Under what pretext?

SCULLY: That she might know something.

BONSAINT: About what?

SCULLY: Well, about what I'm sure is a perfectly reasonable explanation for all of this.

BONSAINT: Ayuh.

SCULLY: Well, I wish I could help you out. You know, I'm just ... on vacation.

(They get in car. SCULLY watches JANE standing in the window, watching them.)

SCENE 8 SHOODIC LAKE RANGER'S STATION 11:06 PM (MELISSA drives up to the ranger's station. POLLY is asleep beside her. RANGER comes out to greet them.)

MELISSA: Hi.

RANGER: Where are you headed this time of night?

MELISSA: We were invited up to a place near the lake.

RANGER: Uh-huh.

MELISSA: A friend gave us the key.

RANGER: You got gear? Food and water?

MELISSA: We'll be all right.

RANGER: I just want to make sure of that, ma'am. Winter's in full force up there. Power's iffy. Just you and the little one?

MELISSA: For now.

POLLY: I want to go home, Mommy.

MELISSA: We're going to go camping, Polly.

POLLY: I want my bed! I want my records!

(Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: Let's have fun.

RANGER: I'll just take your license number, then.

(RANGER walks around back. MELISSA looks at rear window and sees reflection of JANE FROELICH, throat slit.)

JANE'S IMAGE: Help me

(MELISSA accelerates quickly, forcing RANGER to jump out of the way, then she speeds back the way she came.)

SCENE 9 (JANE FROELICH'S house. Hokey Pokey is playing. JANE is dressed in bathrobe. She turns on light and starts down hall toward sound of the music.)

JANE: Hello?

(She enters living room.)

JANE: Who's there? Is there anyone there?

(Light switch doesn't work. 45s are spread around the floor next to an old record player. JANE raises plastic covering the record player and lifts needle off the record. Music stops. Shadow moves behind JANE.)

DOLL'S VOICE: I want to play.

(JANE drops needle and music starts again. JANE'S hand begins to shake. She bends down and picks up a broken record that she just stepped on. Hokey Pokey begins skipping - "That's what it's all about" over and over. JANE holds broken record in front of her.)

JANE: I'm not afraid of you.

(She tries to resist, but brings the broken record to her neck. Camera pans away just before she cuts herself. We hear her gurgle in pain. Hokey Pokey stops skipping and finishes the song.)

(Commercial 2.)

SCENE 10 (SCULLY'S hotel room. Classical music. SCULLY is in a bubble bath, very relaxed. Hotel phone rings. SCULLY opens one eye, sighs, then reaches a bubbly leg out of the tub to slam the bathroom door. Camera pans across room showing used room service tray and CD boom box playing the classical music. SCULLY comes out of the bathroom wearing a black velour lounging outfit and a towel around her head. She turns down the CD player. Beside the phone is a copy of Affirmations for Women Who Do Too Much. The message light on the phone is blinking. SCULLY sighs, probably thinking "Mulder," and ignores the flashing light. She goes to the window and flings open the curtain obviously expecting sunshine and escapism.. Outside, CAPTAIN JACK BONSAINT gets out of his patrol car and smiles and waves at her. SCULLY smiles tightly, then heads for the door with a resigned expression.)

SCENE 11 (Coroners wheel JANE'S body out of her house. BONSAINT and SCULLY drive up and enter the house.)

BONSAINT: Looks like she died by her own hand. A big slice under the chin opened up the artery.

SCULLY: With what?

BONSAINT: Buddy, show her the thing.

(A cell phone begins ringing.)

(OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS shows her a bloody broken record in an evidence bag.)

BONSAINT: (on phone) Jack Bonsaint.... Ayuh. ... Who? ... Oh, okay. Put him through. (to SCULLY) It's for you.

(SCULLY is surprised.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Hello?

MULDER: (on phone, voice) Hey, morning, sunshine.

(There is a repetitive banging sound from MULDER'S end. He speaks loudly to compensate.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Mulder?

MULDER: (on phone, voice) Yeah. I was a little worried about you. I was wondering if you needed my help up there.

SCULLY: (on phone) Needed your help on what?

MULDER: (on phone, voice) I left you a message at the motel. You didn't get it?

SCULLY: (on phone) I was up and out this morning. Mulder?

MULDER: (on phone, voice) Yeah?

SCULLY: (on phone) What's that noise? Where are you?

MULDER: (on phone) I'm at home. They're doing construction right out the window. Hold on a second. (to imaginary construction workers) Hey fellas! Can you just keep it down for a second, maybe? (He bounces his basketball twice more and tosses it away from him. It crashes into some piece of

furniture. MULDER pauses then picks up phone again.) Thank you. (to SCULLY) Yeah, hey. I was - I was thinking about this case. You know, maybe it's not witchcraft after all. Maybe there's a scientific explanation.

SCULLY: (on phone) A scientific explanation? MULDER: (on phone) Yeah, a medical cause. Something called chorea.

SCULLY: (on phone) Dancing sickness.

MULDER: (on phone) Yeah, St. Vitus's dance.

(MULDER opens his refrigerator. It contains absolutely nothing besides a jug of orange juice.)

MULDER: (on phone) It affect groups of people causing unexplained outbursts of uncontrollable jerks and spasms.

(MULDER takes a swig of the juice straight from the bottle.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Yeah, and hasn't been diagnosed since the Middle Ages.

(MULDER makes a face at the taste of the juice and looks at the date on the bottle. OCT. 97)

MULDER: (on phone) Oh. (Spits juice back into bottle.) You're obviously not a fan of American Bandstand, Scully.

SCULLY: (on phone) Mulder?

MULDER: (on phone) Yeah?

SCULLY: (on phone) Thanks for the help. (Hangs up.)

MULDER: (on phone) Hello?

BONSAINT: That your partner?

SCULLY: Yep.

BONSAINT: I'm sorry for eavesdropping but has he maybe got some insight on this?

SCULLY: (definitive) No.

BONSAINT: I see.

(OFFICER RIGGS plays the record that was on the player - Hokey Pokey. Privately, RIGGS seems to remember it was playing in the background when he last spoke on the phone to MELISSA. He turns it off.)

SCULLY: You know, Chief Bonsaint – Jack – can I call you Jack? I've been thinking that maybe ... maybe we need to explore other possibilities.

BONSAINT: I'm not sure I understand.

SCULLY: Well, maybe we need to keep our minds open to ... extreme possibilities.

BONSAINT: Okay, but aren't you on vacation?

(SCULLY sort of nods, then looks away.)

SCENE 12 (Turner house. Hokey Pokey is playing. Polly is napping with the doll. As song ends, MELISSA enters and begins to take doll away from POLLY. Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: Let's have fun.

(MELISSA backs away in horror. Record player starts over on its own. MELISSA goes back down stairs to kitchen and begins crying. She looks up and sees reflection of OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS in her kitchen window holding his bloody nightstick.)

BUDDY'S IMAGE: Melissa ... help me.

MELISSA: No!

SCENE 13 (Restaurant. SCULLY and BONSAINT at a table. Waitress places a very large lobster in front of them. BONSAINT sighs with pleasure.)

SCULLY: Oh, my god! That looks like something out of Jules Verne. We're supposed to eat that?

BONSAINT: (ripping off a piece) A little late for anything else. You said you had some other directions you were looking at?

SCULLY: I've been thinking about Melissa Turner. Now, you said that her husband died in a boating accident?

BONSAINT: (eating lobster with much cracking) Ayuh.

SCULLY: Well, was there anything strange about that? About the way that it happened?

BONSAINT: Well... it was never quite explained to anyone's satisfaction, actually.

SCULLY: How's that?

BONSAINT: (rips off more lobster) How the man got a grappling hook poked clean through his skull.

SCULLY: Was Melissa ever questioned about that?

BONSAINT: Melissa? No. I don't see how she'd be involved. The boat he died on is right over there if you're at all wondering.

(They look out window and see the OLD MAN on a small fishing boat, named "Working Girl".)

SCULLY: I saw that man at the market.

(Outside, OLD MAN throws a bucket of water over the side of the boat.)

SCENE 14 (Turner house. POLLY, holding her doll, puts a record on her record player.)

POLLY: I want popcorn, Mommy.

(MELISSA looks in the room as POLLY starts her record player. Hokey Pokey.)

MELISSA: Okay.

(MELISSA turns and is started to see OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS.)

BUDDY: What are you doing here?

MELISSA: Buddy!

BUDDY: How come you're back in town?

MELISSA: You've got to get out of here, Buddy.

BUDDY: You know, I called the rangers. They said you tried to kill a man. You almost ran him over. You came back to kill her, too, didn't you?

MELISSA: I didn't try to kill anybody.

BUDDY: Jane Froelich.

MELISSA: It isn't me, Buddy.

BUDDY: Well, we're going to see about that. You're coming in with me. You and your little brat.

(POLLY turns the doll to face BUDDY. Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: I want to play.

SCENE 15 (Night. On the boat, SCULLY and BONSAINT interviewing the OLD MAN. OLD MAN still has scratches around his eyes.)

OLD MAN: What happened? You ask that question around here, you get as many stories as ... as fishermen.

SCULLY: You were on board the night that he died. What do you think?

OLD MAN: I told my story to the Chief.

SCULLY: People's stories change.

OLD MAN: Folks blame the widow.

SCULLY: Who do you blame?

OLD MAN: He was wild for her.

CUT TO: (Flashback, before the father died. As OLD MAN tells the story, FATHER pulls up a trap and finds the doll.)

OLD MAN: (voiceover) He worked very hard to build that little house for her and when that daughter came, you'd need a mop to wipe that smile off his face. We'd set out to sea on the girl's last birthday. He was counting the hours before he'd be home again.

FATHER: Hey, look what Davy Jones sent my little Polly. Catch of the day.

OLD MAN: Ayuh.

CUT TO: (Present.)

OLD MAN: Three days later, he was dead.

SCULLY: And you know what killed him.

OLD MAN: The eyes play tricks at night, water up against the hull making noises.

CUT TO: (Night FATHER died. FATHER is alone on deck.)

OLD MAN: (voiceover) Sometimes you hear things.

DOLL'S VOICE: Let's have fun.

FATHER: What the hell was that?

(FATHER picks up a long curved grappling hook. He opens cabin door, waking the OLD MAN.)

OLD MAN: What is it?

(FATHER doesn't answer, just goes back outside. OLD MAN hears the voice.)

DOLL'S VOICE: I want to play.

(OLD MAN gets up and goes outside. He sees the FATHER with the hook through his head.)

OLD MAN: Oh, my God.

CUT TO: (Present.)

OLD MAN: Like I said, the eyes play tricks.

SCULLY: But you saw something in that grocery store. That little girl and her dolly.

OLD MAN: Moment I saw them, I knew.

SCENE 16 (SCULLY and BONSAINT are getting back in the car.
SCULLY'S phone rings.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Scully.

MULDER: (on phone) Hey. I thought you weren't answering your cell phone.

(MULDER, tie undone, is sitting at a desk <SCULLY'S?!> which has an upside down map of Kentucky behind it. He is playing with the phone cord. Still bored.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Then why'd you call?

MULDER: (on phone) I, uh, I had a new thought about this case you're on. There's a viral infection that's spread by simple touch ...

SCULLY: (on phone) Mulder, are there any references in occult literature to objects that have the power to direct human behavior?

(BONSAINT gives SCULLY an odd look.)

MULDER: (on phone) What types of objects?

SCULLY: (on phone) Um, like a doll, for instance.

MULDER: (on phone) You mean like Chuckie?

SCULLY: (on phone) Yeah, kind of like that. (MULDER gets up and crosses to his desk)

MULDER: (on phone) Yeah, the talking doll myth is well established in literature, especially in New England. The-the fetish or Juju is believed to pass on magical powers onto its possessor. Some of the early witches were

condemned for little more than proclaiming that these objects existed. The supposed witch having premonitory visions and things Why do you ask?

SCULLY: (on phone) I was just curious.

MULDER: (on phone) You didn't find a talking doll, did you, Scully?

SCULLY: (on phone) No, no. Of course not.

MULDER: (on phone) I would suggest that you check the back of the doll for a - a plastic ring with a string on it.

(SCULLY shakes her head and hangs up.)

MULDER: (on phone) That would be my first Hello?

SCULLY: Let's go talk to Melissa Turner.

SCENE 17 (Turner house. Sound of metal scraping.)

POLLY: (in her room, yelling) Where's my popcorn?!

(MELISSA is in the kitchen making popcorn on the stove. She is very upset.)

MELISSA: It's coming, Polly.

(Camera shows that OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS is dead. In his hand is his bloody nightstick.)

POLLY: Where's my popcorn?!

MELISSA: (crying) It's coming.

(Commercial 3.)

SCENE 18 (POLLY is in bed sleeping with the doll. MELISSA looks in the room, then goes to a cabinet and gets a hammer and a handful of nails. Later, MELISSA is frantically hammering nails into all the door frames and windows.)

POLLY: (calling from upstairs) Mommy ... I can't sleep.

MELISSA: You go back to bed, Polly. It's way past your bedtime.

POLLY: No more pounding.

MELISSA: Go back to bed, sweetheart.

(Doll's eyes pop open.)

DOLL: Let's have fun.

(MELISSA sees her own image in the window, a hammer stuck in her bloody forehead.)

MELISSA'S IMAGE: Help me ...

MELISSA: Everything's going to be all right, Sweetie. Just go back to bed.

(Outside, BONSAINT and SCULLY drive up. They see a car parked close by.)

BONSAINT: That's Buddy's car.

(Inside, MELISSA closes the door to POLLY'S bedroom. She puts the hammer back in the cabinet and padlocks it. Then she goes to the kitchen and tips a portable heater over, spilling kerosene on the floor next to the dead body of BUDDY RIGGS. She gets a box of matches then hears BONSAINT and SCULLY outside knocking.)

BONSAINT: Melissa!

(SCULLY looks in a window.)

BONSAINT: You see anything?

SCULLY: Unh-uh.

BONSAINT: (knocking) Melissa.

(Inside, Melissa tries to strike a match. She is shaking. Finally, the third match lights)

BONSAINT: (outside) Melissa!

POLLY: (watching MELISSA, frightened) Mommy?!

(Doll's eyes open. Match goes out.)

DOLL: Don't play with matches.

MELISSA: (crying, and trying to strike another match) You go back to bed, Polly!

(MELISSA strikes more matches. They each get blown out.)

BONSAINT: (outside knocking) Melissa?!

MELISSA: Go on now.

(Outside, SCULLY sees the nails holding the door closed. As BONSAINT continues to knock on the door, SCULLY looks in the window again and sees MELISSA striking matches. SCULLY begins knocking on the window.)

SCULLY: Melissa? Melissa? Bonsaint!

(MELISSA gives up on the matches and begins trying to open drawers. They snap back closed.)

DOLL: Don't play with knives.

POLLY: Mommy!

SCULLY: (outside) She's got the door nailed shut. She's trying to kill herself.

(BONSAINT begins breaking down the door. SCULLY keeps knocking on the window.)

SCULLY: Melissa! Melissa!

POLLY: Mommy! Mommy, no more pounding!

(Hardware cabinet bursts open on its own.)

DOLL: Let's play with the hammer.

(SCULLY and BONSAINT take turns hitting the door.)

SCULLY: Melissa!

(Door finally crashes open. BONSAINT and SCULLY enter. MELISSA is holding the hammer in front of her face.)

MELISSA: Get away from me!

SCULLY: Put it down, Melissa.

DOLL: I don't like you anymore.

(MELISSA hits herself on the forehead with the hammer.)

SCULLY: (kneels next to POLLY.) Give me the doll, Polly.

DOLL: I want to play.

(POLLY shakes her head and holds onto the doll. MELISSA hits herself again. Her head is now bloody.)

SCULLY: Polly, give me the doll.

DOLL: I want to play.

(MELISSA hits herself again. POLLY watches in horror. SCULLY takes the doll which keeps repeating "I want to play." She takes it down to the kitchen and stuffs the doll into the microwave and turns it on. Doll catches fire. Must be one of those oxygenated microwaves. POLLY walks over to MELISSA who is bloody and crying. SCULLY and BONSAINT watch the doll burn.)

SCENE 19 (X-Files office. Mulder finishes sharpening a pencil in an electric sharpener, and delicately blows the dust off the tip. He places it on the desk and carefully lines it up with about 20 more sharpened pencils. Door opens and SCULLY enters.)

MULDER: Oh, hey, Scully. How you doing? (Laces his fingers together smoothly to hide the row of pencils.) How are you feeling? Rested?

SCULLY: I feel fine.

(SCULLY is focused on the I Want to Believe Poster behind MULDER.)

MULDER: What?

SCULLY: That poster ... Where'd you get it?

MULDER: Oh, I got it down on "M" Street at some head shop about five years ago.

SCULLY: Hmm.

MULDER: Why?

SCULLY: No. I just ... wanted to send one to somebody.

MULDER: You do?

SCULLY: Mm-hmm.

MULDER: Who?

(As SCULLY passes him, MULDER opens his desk drawer and coughs to cover the sound of the pencils being pushed into the drawer and the drawer being closed.)

MULDER: Who?

SCULLY: Oh, just ... some guy. (pause) Jack. "M" Street?

MULDER: Yeah. Hey, does this have something to do with that case you were working on?

SCULLY: What case? Uh, yeah. Yes it does.

MULDER: Did you solve it?

SCULLY: Me? No. No. I was, uh, I was on vacation. Just ... getting out of my own head for a few days. What about you? Did you, uh, did you get anything done while I was gone?

MULDER: Oh, God. It's amazing what I can accomplish without incessant meddling or questioning into everything I do. It's just ...

(MULDER is interrupted by a pencil dropping down on him. He looks up and another falls on him. SCULLY slowly raises her eyes to the ceiling. About thirty pencils are stuck into the ceiling tiles above MULDER'S desk.)

MULDER: (embarrassed, but charming) There's ... got to be an explanation.

SCULLY: Oh, I don't know. I think some things are better left unexplained.

(Another pencil falls and hits MULDER on the top of the head. He looks innocently at SCULLY. She looks at him with exasperation.)

SCENE 20 (Night. Fishing boat in Maine. Fisherman pulls a lobster out of a trap.)

FISHERMAN: Ah.

(He pulls the burned doll out of the trap. Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: I want to play.

The End US Airdate: February 8, 1998

Writers: Stephen King and Chris Carter director: Kim Manners

STARRING: David Duchovny	as Special Agent Fox Mulder
Gillian Anderson	as Special Agent Dana Scully

Guest Cast: Susannah Hoffman	as Melissa Turner
Jenny Lynn Hutcheson	as Polly Turner
Carolyn Tweedle	as Jane Froelich
Gordon Tipple	as Assistant Manager
Harrison R. Coe	as Dave the Butcher
Larry Musser	as Jack Bonsaint
William MacDonald	as Buddy Riggs
Dean Wray	as Rich Turner

Stephen King

The Crate

First appeared in:

Gallery magazine 1979

Available in comic book form in:

Creepshow

Dexter Stanley was scared. More; he felt as if that central axle that binds us to the state we call sanity were under a greater strain than it had ever been under before. As he pulled up beside Henry Northrup's house on North Campus Avenue that August night, he felt that if he didn't talk to someone, he really, would go crazy.

There was no one to talk to but Henry Northrup. Dex Stanley was the head of the zoology department, and once might have been university president if he had been better at academic politics. His wife had died twenty years before, and they had been childless. What remained of his own family was all west of the Rockies. He was not good at making friends.

Northrup was an exception to that. In some ways, they were two of a kind; both had been disappointed in the mostly meaningless, but always vicious, game of university politics. Three years before, Northrup had made his run at the vacant English department chairmanship. He had lost, and one of the reasons had undoubtedly been his wife, Wilma, an abrasive and unpleasant woman. At the few cocktail parties Dex had attended where English people and zoology people could logically mix, it seemed he could always recall the harsh mule-bray of her voice, telling some new faculty wife to "call me Billie, dear everyone does!"

Dex made his way across the lawn to Northrup's door at a stumbling run. It was Thursday, and Northrup's unpleasant spouse took two classes on Thursday nights. Consequently, it was Dex and Henry's chess night. The two men had been playing chess together for the last eight years.

Dex rang the bell beside the door of his friend's house; leaned on it. The door opened at last and Northrup was there.

"Dex," he said. I didn't expect you for another--"

Dex pushed in past him. "Wilma," he said. "Is she here?"

"No, she left fifteen minutes ago. I was just making myself some chow. Dex, you look awful."

They had walked under the hall light, and it illuminated the cheesy pallor of Dex's face and seemed to outline wrinkles as deep and dark as fissures in the earth. Dex was sixty-one, but on the hot August night, he looked more like ninety.

"I ought to." Dex wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Well, what is it?"

"I'm afraid I'm going crazy, Henry. Or that I've already gone."

"You want something to eat? Wilma left cold ham."

"I'd rather have a drink. A big one."

"All right."

"Two men dead, Henry," Dex said abruptly. "And I could be blamed. Yes, I can see how I could be blamed. But it wasn't me. It was the crate. And I don't even know what's in there!" He uttered a wild laugh.

"Dead?" Northrup said. "What is this, Dex?"

"A janitor. I don't know his name. And Gereson. A graduate student. He just happened to be there. In the way of... whatever it was."

Henry studied Dex's face for a long moment and then said, "I'll get us both a drink."

He left. Dex wandered into the living room, past the low table where the chess table had already been set up, and stared out the graceful bow window. That thing in his mind, that axle or whatever it was, did not feel so much in danger of snapping now. Thank God for Henry.

Northrup came back with two pony glasses choked with ice. Ice from the fridge's automatic icemaker, Stanley thought randomly. Wilma "just call me Billie, everyone does" Northrup insisted on all the modern conveniences... and when Wilma insisted on a thing, she did so savagely.

Northrup filled both glasses with Cutty Sark. He handed one of them to Stanley, who slopped Scotch over his fingers, stinging a small cut he'd gotten in the lab a couple of days before. He hadn't realized until then that his hands were shaking. He emptied half the glass and the Scotch boomed in his stomach, first hot, then spreading a steadyling warmth.

"Sit down, man," Northrup said.

Dex sat, and drank again. Now it was a lot better. He looked at Northrup, who was looking levelly back over the rim of his own glass. Dex looked away, out at the bloody orb of moon sitting over the rim of the horizon, over the university, which was supposed to be the seat of rationality, the forebrain of the body politic. How did that jibe with the matter of the crate? With the screams? With the blood?

"Men are dead?" Northrup said at last.

"Are you sure they're dead?"

"Yes. The bodies are gone now. At least, I think they are. Even the bones... the teeth... but the blood... the blood, you know..."

"No, I don't know anything. You've got to start at the beginning." Stanley took another drink and set his glass down. "Of course I do," he said. "Yes. It begins just where it ends. With the crate. The janitor found the crate..."

Dexter Stanley had come into Amberson Hall, sometimes called the Old Zoology Building, that afternoon at three o'clock. It was a blaringly hot day, and the campus looked listless and dead, in spite

of the twirling sprinklers in front of the fraternity houses and the Old Front dorms.

The Old Front went back to the turn of the century, but Amberson Hall was much older than that. It was one of the oldest buildings on a university campus that had celebrated its tricentennial two years previous. It was a tall brick building, shackled with ivy that seemed to spring out of the earth like green, clutching hands. Its narrow windows were more like gun slits than real windows, and Amberson seemed to frown at the newer buildings with their glass walls and curvy, unorthodox shapes.

The new zoology building, Cather Hall, had been completed eight months before, and the process of transition would probably go on for another eighteen months. No one was completely sure what would happen to Amberson then. If the bond issue to build the new gym found favor with the voters, it would probably be demolished.

He paused a moment to watch two young men throwing a Frisbee back and forth. A dog ran back and forth between them, glumly chasing the spinning disc. Abruptly the mutt gave up and flopped in the shade of a poplar. A VW with a NO NUKES sticker on the back deck trundled slowly past, heading for the Upper Circle. Nothing else moved. A week before, the final summer session had ended and the campus lay still and fallow, dead ore on summer's anvil.

Dex had a number of files to pick up, part of the seemingly endless process of moving from Amberson to Cather. The old building seemed spectrally empty. His footfalls echoed back dreamily as he walked past closed doors with frosted glass panels, past bulletin boards with their yellowing notices and toward his office at the end of the first-floor corridor. The cloying smell of fresh paint hung in the air.

He was almost to his door, and jingling his keys in his pocket, when the janitor popped out of Room 6, the big lecture hall, startling him.

He grunted, then smiled a little shamefacedly, the way people will when they've gotten a mild zap. "You got me that time," he told the janitor.

The janitor smiled and twiddled the gigantic key ring clipped to his belt. "Sorry, Perfesser Stanley," he said. "I was hopin' it was you. Charlie said you'd be in this afternoon."

"Charlie Gereson is still here?" Dex frowned. Gereson was a grad student who was doing an involved--and possibly very important--paper on negative environmental factors in long-term animal migration. It was a subject that could have a strong impact on area farming practices and pest control. But Gereson was pulling almost fifty hours a week in the gigantic (and antiquated) basement lab. The new lab complex in Cather would have been exponentially better suited to his purposes, but the new labs would not be fully equipped for another two to four months... if then.

"Think he went over the Union for a burger," the janitor said. "I told him myself to quit a while and go get something to eat. He's been here since nine this morning. Told him myself. Said he ought to get some food. A man don't live on love alone."

The janitor smiled, a little tentatively, and Dex smiled back. The janitor was right; Gereson was embarked upon a labor of love. Dex had seen too many squadrons of students just grunting along and making grades not to appreciate that... and not to worry about Charlie Gereson's health and well-being from time to time.

"I would have told *him*, if he hadn't been so busy," the janitor said, and offered his tentative little smile again. "Also, I kinda wanted to show you myself."

"What's that?" Dex asked. He felt a little impatient. It was chess night with Henry; he wanted to get this taken care of and still have time for a leisurely meal at the Hancock House.

"Well, maybe it's nothin," the janitor said. "But... well, this buildin is some old, and we keep turnin things up, don't we?"

Dex knew. It was like moving out of a house that has been lived in for generations. Halley, the bright young assistant professor who had been here for three years now, had found half a dozen antique clips with small brass balls on the ends. She'd had no idea what the clips, which looked a little bit like spring-loaded wishbones, could be. Dex had been able to tell her. Not so many years after the Civil War, those clips had been used to hold the heads of white mice, who were then operated on without anesthetic. Young Halley, with her Berkeley education and her bright spill of Farrah Fawcett-Majors golden hair, had looked quite revolted. "No anti-vivisectionists in those days," Dex had told her jovially. "At least not around here." And Halley had responded with a blank look that probably disguised disgust or maybe even loathing. Dex had put his foot in it again. He had a positive talent for that, it seemed.

They had found sixty boxes of *The American Zoologist* in a crawlspace, and the attic had been a maze of old equipment and mouldering reports. Some of the impedimenta no one--not even Dexter Stanley--could identify.

In the closet of the old animal pens at the back of the building, Professor Viney had found a complicated gerbil-run with exquisite glass panels. It had been accepted for display at the Musuem of Natural Science in Washington.

But the finds had been tapering off this summer, and Dex thought Amberson Hall had given up the last of its secrets. "What have you found?" he asked the janitor.

"A crate. I found it tucked right under the basement stairs. I didn't open it. It's been nailed shut, anyway."

Stanly couldn't believe that anything very interesting could have escaped notice for long, just by being tucked under the stairs. Tens of thousands of people went up and down them every week during the academic year. Most likely the janitor's crate was full of department records dating back twenty-five years. Or even more prosaic, a box of *National Geographics*.

"I hardly think--"

"It's a real crate," the janitor broke in earnestly. "I mean, my father was a carpenter, and this crate is built tile way he was buildin 'em back in the twenties. And he learned from *his* father."

"I really doubt if--"

"Also, it's got about four inches of dust on it. I wiped some off and there's a date. Eighteen thirty-four."

That changed things. Stanley looked at his watch and decided he could spare half an hour.

In spite of the humid August heat outside, the smooth tile-faced throat of the stairway was almost cold. Above them, yellow frosted globes cast a dim and thoughtful light. The stair levels had once been red, but in the centers they shaded to a dead black where the feet of years had worn away layer after layer of resurfacing. The silence was smooth and nearly perfect.

The janitor reached the bottom first and pointed under the staircase. "Under here," he said.

Dex joined him in staring into a shadowy, triangular cavity under the wide staircase. He felt a small tremor of disgust as he saw where the janitor had brushed away a gossamer veil of cobwebs. He supposed it was possible that the man had found something a

little older than postwar records under there, now that he acutally looked at the space. But 1834?

"Just a second," the janitor said, and left momentarily. Left alone, Dex hunkered down and peered in. He could make out nothing but a deeper patch of shadow in there. Then the janitor returned with a hefty four-cell flashlight. "This'll show it up."

"What were you doing under there anyway?" Dex asked.

The janitor grinned. "I was only standin here tryin to decide if I should buff that second-floor hallway first or wash the lab windows. I couldn't make up my mind, so I flipped a quarter. Only I dropped it and it rolled under there." He pointed to the shadowy, triangular cave. "I prob'ly would have let it go, except that was my only quarter for the Coke machine. So I got my flash and knocked down the cobwebs, and when I crawled under to get it, I saw that crate. Here, have a look."

The janitor shone his light into the hole. Motes of disturbed dust preened and swayed lazily in the beam. The light struck the far wall in a spotlight circle, rose to the zigzag undersides of the stairs briefly, picking out an ancient cobweb in which long-dead bugs hung mumified, and then the light dropped and centered on a crate about five feet long and two-and-a-half wide. It was perhaps three feet deep. As the janitor had said, it was no knocked-together affair made out of scrap-boards. It was neatly constructed of a smooth, dark heavy wood. *A coffin*, Dexter thought uneasily. *It looks like a child's coffin.*

The dark color of the wood showed only a fan-shaped swipe on the side. The rest of the crate was the uniform dull gray of dust. Something was written on the side-stenciled there.

Dex squinted but couldn't read it. He fumbled his glasses out of his breast pocket and still couldn't. Part of what had been stenciled on

was obscured by the dust--not four inches of it, by any means, but an extraordinarily thick coating, all the same.

Not wanting to crawl and dirty his pants, Dex duck-walked under the stairway, stifling a sudden and amazingly strong feeling of claustrophobia. The spit dried in his mouth and was replaced by a dry, woolly taste, like an old mitten. He thought of the generations of students trooping up and down these stairs, all male until 1888, then in coeducational platoons, carrying their books and papers and anatomical drawings, their bright faces and clear eyes, each of them convinced that a useful and exciting future lay ahead ... and here, below their feet, the spider spun his eternal snare for the fly and the trundling beetle, and here this crate sat impassively, gathering dust, waiting...

A tendril of spidersilk brushed across his forehead and he swept it away with a small cry of loathing and an uncharacteristic inner cringe.

"Not very nice under there, is it?" the janitor asked sympathetically, holding his light centered on the crate. "God, I hate tight places."

Dex didn't reply. He had reached the crate. He looked at the letters that were stenciled there and then brushed the dust away from them. It rose in a cloud, intensifying that mitten taste, making him cough dryly. The dust hung in the beam of the janitor's light like old magic, and Dex Stanley read what some long-dead chief of lading had stenciled on this crate.

SHIP TO HORLICKS UNIVERSITY, the top line read. VIA JULIA CARPENTER, read the middle line. The third line read simply: ARCTIC EXPEDITION.

Below that, someone had written in heavy black charcoal strokes: JUNE 19, 1834. That was the one line the janitor's hand-swipe had completely cleared.

ARCTIC EXPEDITION, Dex read again. His heart began to thump. "So what do you think?" the janitor's voice floated in.

Dex grabbed one end and lifted it. Heavy. As he let it settle back with a mild thud, something shifted inside--he did not hear it but felt it through the palms of his hands, as if whatever it was had moved of its own volition. Stupid, of course. It had been an almost liquid feel, as if something not quite jelled had moved sluggishly.

ARCTIC EXPEDITION.

Dex felt the excitement of an antiques collector happening upon a neglected armoire with a twenty-five dollar price tag in the back room of some hick-town junk shop ... an armoire that just might be a Chippendale. "Help me get it out," he called to the janitor.

Working bent over to keep from slamming their heads on the underside of the stairway, sliding the crate along, they got it out and then picked it up by the bottom. Dex had gotten his pants dirty after all, and there were cobwebs in his hair.

As they carried it into the old-fashioned, train-terminal-sized lab, Dex felt that sensation of shift inside the crate again, and he could see by the expression on the janitor's face that he had felt it as well. They set it on one of the formica-topped lab tables. The next one over was littered with Charlie Gereson's stuff--notebooks, graph paper, contour maps, a Texas Instruments calculator.

The janitor stood back, wiping his hands on his double-pocket gray shirt, breathing hard. "Some heavy mother," he said. "That bastard must weigh two hunnert pounds. You okay, Perfesser Stanley?"

Dex barely heard him. He was looking at the end of the box, where there was yet another series of stencils:

PAELLA/SANTIAGO/SAN FRANCISCO/CHICAGO/NEW
YORK/HORLICKS

"Perfesser--"

"Paella," Dex muttered, and then said it again, slightly louder. He was seized with an unbelieving kind of excitement that was held in check only by the thought that it might be some sort of hoax.

"Paella!"

"Paella, Dex?" Henry Northrup asked. The moon had risen in the sky, turning silver.

"Paella is a very small island south of Tierra del Fuego," Dex said. "Perhaps the smallest island ever inhabited by the race of man. A number of Easter Island-type monoliths were found there just after World War II. Not very interesting compared to their bigger brothers, but every bit as mysterious. The natives of Paella and Tierra del Fuego were Stone-Age people. Christian missionaries killed them with kindness."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's extremely cold down there. Summer temperatures rarely range above the mid-forties. The missionaries gave them blankets, partly so they would be warm, mostly to cover their sinful nakedness. The blankets were crawling with fleas, and the natives of both islands were wiped out by European diseases for which they had developed no immunities. Mostly by smallpox."

Dex drank. The Scotch had lent his cheeks some color, but it was hectic and flaring--double spots of flush that sat above his cheekbones like rouge.

"But Tierra del Fuego--and this Paella--that's not the Arctic, Dex. It's the Antarctic."

"It wasn't in 1834," Dex said, setting his glass down, careful in spite of his distraction to put it on the coaster Henry had provided. If Wilma found a ring on one of her end tables, his friend would have hell to pay. "The terms subarctic, Antarctic and Antarctica weren't invented yet. In those days there was only the north arctic and the south arctic."

"Okay."

"Hell, I made the same kind of mistake. I couldn't figure out why Frisco was on the itinerary as a port of call. Then I realized I was figuring on the Panama Canal, which wasn't built for another eighty years or so.

"An Arctic expedition? In 1834?" Henry asked doubtfully.

"I haven't had a chance to check the records yet," Dex said, picking up his drink again. "But I know from my history that there were 'Arctic expeditions' as early as Francis Drake. None of them made it, that was all. They were convinced they'd find gold, silver, jewels, lost civilizations, God knows what else. The Smithsonian Institution outfitted an attempted exploration of the North Pole in, I think it was 1881 or '82. They all died. A bunch of men from the Explorers' Club in London tried for the South Pole in the 1850's. Their ship was sunk by icebergs, but three or four of them survived. They stayed alive by sucking dew out of their clothes and eating the kelp that caught on their boat, until they were picked up. They lost their teeth. And they claimed to have seen sea monsters."

"What happened, Dex?" Henry asked softly.

Stanley looked up. "We opened the crate," he said dully. "God help us, Henry, we opened the crate."

He paused for a long time, it seemed, before beginning to speak again.

"Paella?" the janitor asked. "What's that?"

"An island off the tip of South America," Dex said. "Never mind. Let's get this open." He opened one of the lab drawers and began to rummage through it, looking for something to pry with."

"Never mind that stuff," the janitor said. He looked excited himself now. "I got a hammer and chisel in my closet upstairs. I'll get 'em. Just hang on."

He left. The crate sat on the table's formica top, squat and mute. *It sits squat and mute*, Dex thought, and shivered a little. Where had that thought come from? Some story? The words had a cadenced yet unpleasant sound. He dismissed them. He was good at dismissing the extraneous. He was a scientist.

He looked around the lab just to get his eyes off the crate. Except for Charlie's table, it was unnaturally neat and quiet--like the rest of the university. White-tiled, subway-station walls gleamed freshly under the overhead globes; the globes themselves seemed to be double--caught and submerged in the polished formica surfaces, like eerie lamps shining from deep quarry water. A huge, old-fashioned slate blackboard dominated the wall opposite the sinks. And cupboards, cupboards everywhere. It was easy enough--too easy, perhaps--to see the antique, sepia-toned ghosts of all those old zoology students, wearing their white coats with the green cuffs, their hairs marcelled or pomaded, doing their dissections and writing their reports...

Footfalls clattered on the stairs and Dex shivered, thinking again of the crate sitting there--yes, squat and mute--under the stairs for so many years, long after the men who had pushed it under there had died and gone back to dust.

Paella, he thought, and then the janitor came back in with a hammer and chisel.

"Let me do this for you, perfesser?" he asked, and Dex was about to refuse when he saw the pleading, hopeful look in the man's eyes.

"Of course," he said. After all, it was this man's find.

"Prob'ly nothin in here but a bunch of rocks and plants so old they'll turn to dust when you touch 'em. But it's funny; I'm pretty hot for it."

Dex smiled noncommittally. He had no idea what was in the crate, but he doubted if it was just plant and rock specimens. There was that slightly liquid shifting sensation when they had moved it.

"Here goes," the janitor said, and began to pound the chisel under the board with swift blows of the hammer. The board hiked up a bit, revealing a double row of nails that reminded Dex absurdly of teeth. The janitor levered the handle of his chisel down and the board pulled loose, the nails shrieking out of the wood. He did the same thing at the other end, and the board came free, clattering to the floor. Dex set it aside, noticing that even the nails looked different, somehow--thicker, squarer at the tip, and without that blue-steel sheen that is the mark of a sophisticated alloying process.

The janitor was peering into the crate through the long, narrow strip he had uncovered. "Can't see nothin," he said. "Where'd I leave my light?"

"Never mind," Dex said. "Go on and open it."

"Okay." He took off a second board, then a third. Six or seven had been nailed across the top of the box. He began on the fourth, reaching across the space he had already uncovered to place his chisel under the board, when the crate began to whistle.

It was a sound very much like the sound a teakettle makes when it has reached a rolling boil, Dex told Henry Northrup; no cheerful whistle this, but something like an ugly, hysterical shriek by a tantrumy child. And this suddenly dropped and thickened into a low, hoarse growling sound. It was not loud, but it had a primitive, savage sound that stood Dex Stanley's hair up on the slant. The janitor stared around at him, his eyes widening... and then his arm

was seized. Dex did not see what grabbed it; his eyes had gone instinctively to the man's face.

The janitor screamed, and the sound drove a stiletto of panic into Dex's chest. The thought that came unbidden was: *This is the first time in my life that I've heard a grown man scream--what a sheltered life I've led!*

The janitor, a fairly big guy who weighed maybe two hundred pounds, was suddenly yanked powerfully to one side. Toward the crate. "*Help me!*" He screamed. "*Oh help doc it's got me it's biting me it's biting meeeee--*"

Dex told himself to run forward and grab the janitor's free arm, but his feet might as well have been bonded to the floor. The janitor had been pulled into the crate up to his shoulder. That crazed snarling went on and on. The crate slid backwards along the table for a foot or so and then came firmly to rest against a bolted instrument mount. It began to rock back and forth. The janitor screamed and gave a tremendous lunge away from the crate. The end of the box came up off the table and then smacked back down. Part of his arm came out of the crate, and Dex saw to his horror that the gray sleeve of his shirt was chewed and tattered and soaked with blood. Smiling crescent bites were punched into what he could see of the man's skin through the shredded flaps of cloth.

Then something that must have been incredibly strong yanked him back down. The thing in the crate began to snarl and gobble. Every now and then there would be a breathless whistling sound in between.

At last Dex broke free of his paraiysis and lunged creakily forward. He grabbed the janitor's free arm. He yanked ... with no result at all. It was like trying to pull a man who has been handcuffed to the bumper of a trailer truck.

The janitor screamed again--a long, ululating sound that rolled back and forth between the lab's sparkling, white-tiled walls. Dex could see the gold glimmer of the fillings at the back of the man's mouth. He could see the yellow ghost of nicotine on his tongue.

The janitor's head slammed down against the edge of the board he had been about to remove when the thing had grabbed him. And this time Dex did see something, although it happened with such mortal, savage speed that later he was unable to describe it adequately to Henry. Something as dry and brown and scaly as a desert reptile came out of the crate--something with huge claws. It tore at the janitor's straining, knotted throat and severed his jugular vein. Blood began to pump across the table, pooling on the formica and jetting onto the white-tiled floor. For a moment, a mist of blood seemed to hang in the air.

Dex dropped the janitor's arm and blundered backward, hands clapped flat to his cheeks, eyes bulging.

The janitor's eyes rolled wildly at the ceiling. His mouth dropped open and then snapped closed. The click of his teeth was audible even below that hungry growling. His feet, clad in heavy black work shoes, did a short and jittery tap dance on the floor.

Then he seemed to lose interest. His eyes grew almost benign as they looked raptly at the overhead light globe, which was also blood-spattered. His feet splayed out in a loose V. His shirt pulled out of his pants, displaying his white and bulging belly.

"He's dead," Dex whispered. "Oh, Jesus."

The pump of the janitor's heart faltered and lost its rhythm. Now the blood that flowed from the deep, irregular gash in his neck lost its urgency and merely flowed down at the command of indifferent gravity. The crate was stained and splashed with blood. The snarling seemed to go on endlessly. The crate rocked back and forth a bit, but it was too well-braced against the instrument mount

to go very far. The body of the janitor lolled grotesquely, still grasped firmly by whatever was in there. The small of his back was pressed against the lip of the lab table. His free hand dangled, sparse hair curling on the fingers between the first and second knuckles. His big key ring glimmered chrome in the light.

And now his body began to rock slowly this way and that. His shoes dragged back and forth, not tap dancing now but waltzing obscenely. And then they did not drag. They dangled an inch off the floor... then two inches..., then half a foot above the floor. Dex realized that the janitor was being dragged into the crate.

Tile nape of his neck came to rest against the board fronting the far side of the hole in the top of the crate. He looked like a man resting in some weird Zen position of contemplation. His dead eyes sparkled. And Dex heard, below the savage growling noises, a smacking, rending sound. And the crunch of a bone.

Dex ran.

He blundered his way across the lab and out the door and up the stairs. Halfway up, he fell down, clawed at the risers, got to his feet, and ran again. He gained the first floor hallway and sprinted down it, past the closed doors with their frosted-glass panels, past the bulletin boards. He was chased by his own footfalls. In his ears he could hear that damned whistling.

He ran right into Charlie Gereson's arms and almost knocked him over, and he spilled the milk shake Charlie had been drinking all over both of them.

"Holy hell, what's wrong?" Charlie asked, comic in his extreme surprise. He was short and compact, wearing cotton chinos and a white tee shirt. Thick spectacles sat grimly on his nose, meaning business, proclaiming that they were there for a long haul.

"Charlie," Dex said, panting harshly. "My boy... the janitor... the crate... it whistles... *it whistles when it's hungry and it whistles*

again when it's full... my boy ... we have to ... campus security ... we We..."

"Slow down, Professor Stanley," Charlie said. He looked concerned and a little frightened. You don't expect to be seized by the senior professor in your department when you had nothing more aggressive in mind yourself than charting the continued outmigration of sandflies. "Slow down, I don't know what you're talking about."

Stanley, hardly aware of what he was saying, poured out a garbled version of what had happened to the janitor. Charlie Gerson looked more and more confused and doubtful. As upset as he was, Dex began to realize that Charlie didn't believe a word of it. He thought, with a new kind of horror, that soon Charlie would ask him if he had been working too hard, and that when he did, Stanley would burst into mad cackles of laughter.

But what Charlie said was, "That's pretty far out, Professor Stanley."

"It's true. We've got to get campus security over here. We--"

"No, that's no good. One of them would stick his hand in there, first thing." He saw Dex's stricken look and went on. "If *I'm* having trouble swallowing this, what are *they* going to think?"

"I don't know," Dex said. "I... I never thought..."

"They'd think you just came off a helluva toot and were seeing Tasmanian devils instead of pink elephants," Charlie Gerson said cheerfully, and pushed his glasses up on his pug nose. "Besides, from what you say, the responsibility has belonged with zo all along... like for a hundred and forty years."

"But..." He swallowed, and there was a click in his throat as he prepared to voice his worst fear. "But it may be out."

"I doubt that," Charlie said, but didn't elaborate. And in that, Dex saw two things: that Charlie didn't believe a word he had said, and that nothing he could say would dissuade Charlie from going back down there.

Henry Northrup glanced at his watch. They had been sitting in the study for a little over an hour; Wilma wouldn't be back for another two. Plenty of time. Unlike Charlie Gereson, he had passed no judgment at all on the factual basis of Dex's story. But he had known Dex for a longer time than young Gereson had, and he didn't believe his friend exhibited the signs of a man who has suddenly developed a psychosis. What he exhibited was a kind of bug-eyed fear, no more or

less than you'd expect to see a man who has had an extremely close call with... well, just an extremely close call.

"He went down, Dex?"

"Yes. He did."

"You went with him?"

"Yes."

Henry shifted position a little. "I can understand why he didn't want to get campus security until he had checked the situation himself. But Dex, you knew you were telling the flat-out truth, even if he didn't. Why didn't *you* call?"

"You believe me?" Dex asked. His voice trembled. "You believe me, don't you, Henry?"

Henry considered briefly. The story was mad, no question about that. The implication that there could be something in that box big enough and lively enough to kill a man after some one hundred and forty years was mad. He didn't believe it. But this was Dex... and he didn't *disbelieve* it either.

"Yes," he said.

"Thank God for that," Dex said. He groped for his drink. "Thank God for that, Henry."

"It doesn't answer the question, though. Why didn't you call the campus cops?"

"I thought... as much as I did think... that it might not want to come out of the crate, into the bright light. It must have lived in the dark for so long... so very long... and ... grotesque as this sounds... I thought it might be pot-bound, or something. I thought ... well, he'll see it... he'll see the crate... the janitor's body... he'll see the *blood*... and then we'd call security. You see?" Stanley's eyes pleaded with him to see, and Henry did. He thought that, considering the fact that it had been a snap judgment in a pressure situation, that Dex had thought quite clearly. The blood. When the young graduate student saw the blood, he would have been happy to call in the cops.

"But it didn't work out that way."

"No." Dex ran a hand through his thinning hair.

"Why not?"

"Because when we got down there, the body was *gone*."

"It was gone?"

"That's right. And the crate was gone, too."

When Charlie Gerson saw the blood, his round and good-natured face went very pale. His eyes, already magnified by his thick spectacles, grew even huger. Blood was puddled on the lab table. It had run down one of the table legs. It was pooled on the floor, and beads of it clung to the light globe and to the white tile wall. Yes, there was plenty of blood.

But no janitor. No crate.

Dex Stanley's jaw dropped. "What the *fuck*!" Charlie whispered. Dex saw something then, perhaps the only thing that allowed him to keep his sanity. Already he could feel that central axle trying to pull free. He grabbed Charlie's shoulder and said, "Look at the blood on the table!"

"I've seen enough," Charlie said.

His Adam's apple rose and fell like an express elevator as he struggled to keep his lunch down.

"For God's sake, get hold of yourself," Dex said harshly. "You're a zoology major. You've seen blood before."

It was the voice of authority, for that moment anyway. Charlie did get a hold of himself, and they walked a little closer. The random pools of blood on the table were not as random as they had first appeared. Each had been neatly straight-edged on one side.

"The crate sat there," Dex said. He felt a little better. The fact that the crate really *had* been there steadied him a good deal. "And look there." He pointed at the floor. Here the blood had been smeared into a wide, thin trail. It swept toward where the two of them stood, a few paces inside the double doors. It faded and faded, petering out altogether about halfway between the lab table and the doors. It was crystal clear to Dex Stanley, and the nervous sweat on his skin went cold and clammy.

It had gotten out.

It had gotten out and pushed the crate off the table. And then it had pushed the crate... where? Under the stairs, of course. Back under the stairs. Where it had been safe for so long.

"Where's the... the..." Charlie couldn't finish.

"Under the stairs," Dex said numbly. "It's gone back to where it came from."

"No. The..." He jerked it out finally. "The body."

"I don't know," Dex said. But he thought he did know. His mind would simply not admit the truth.

Charlie turned abruptly and walked back through the doors.

"Where are you going?" Dex called shrilly, and ran after him.

Charlie stopped opposite the stairs. The triangular black hole beneath them gaped. The janitor's big four-cell flashlight still sat on the floor. And beside it was a bloody scrap of gray cloth, and one of the pens that had been clipped to the man's breast pocket.

"Don't go under there, Charlie! Don't." His heartbeat whammed savagely in his ears, frightening him even more.

"No," Charlie said. "But the body..."

Charlie hunkered down, grabbed the flashlight, and shone it under the stairs. And the crate was there, shoved up against the far wall, just as it had been before, squat and mute. Except that now it was free of dust and three boards had been pried off the top.

The light moved and centered on one of the janitor's big, sensible work shoes. Charlie drew breath in a low, harsh gasp. The thick leather of the shoe had been savagely gnawed and chewed. The laces hung, broken, from the eyelets. "It looks like somebody put it through a hay baler," he said hoarsely.

"Now do you believe me?" Dex asked.

Charlie didn't answer. Holding onto the stairs lightly with one hand, he leaned under the overhang--presumably to get the shoe. Later, sitting in Henry's study, Dex said he could think of only one reason why Charlie would have done that--to measure and perhaps categorize the bite of the thing in the crate. He was, after all, a zoologist, and a damned good one.

"Don't!" Dex screamed, and grabbed the back of Charlie's shirt. Suddenly there were two green gold eyes glaring over the top of

the crate. They were almost exactly the color of owls' eyes, but smaller. There was a harsh, chattering growl of anger. Charlie recoiled, startled, and slammed the back of his head on the underside of the stairs. A shadow moved from the crate toward him at projectile speed. Charlie howled. Dex heard the dry purr of his shirt as it ripped open, the click as Charlie's glasses struck the floor and spun away. Once more Charlie tried to back away. The thing began to snarl--then the snarls suddenly stopped. And Charlie Gereson began to scream in agony.

Dex pulled on the back of his white tee shirt with all his might. For a moment Charlie came backwards and he caught a glimpse of a furry, writhing shape spread-eagled on the young man's chest, a shape that appeared to have not four but six legs and the flat bullet head of a young lynx. The front of Charlie Gereson's shirt had been so quickly and completely tattered that it now looked like so many crepe streamers hung around his neck.

Then the thing raised its head and those small green gold eyes stared balefully into Dex's own. He had never seen or dreamed such savagery. His strength failed. His grip on the back of Charlie's shirt loosened momentarily.

A moment was all it took. Charlie Gereson's body was snapped under the stairs with grotesque, cartoonish speed. Silence for a moment. Then the growling, smacking sounds began again.

Charlie screamed once more, a long sound of terror and pain that was abruptly cut off... as if something had been clapped over his mouth.

Or stuffed into it.

Dex fell silent. The moon was high in the sky. Half of his third drink--an almost unheard-of phenomenon--was gone, and he felt the reaction setting in as sleepiness and extreme lassitude.

"What did you do then?" Henry asked. What he hadn't done, he knew, was to go to campus security; they wouldn't have listened to such a story and then released him so he could go and tell it again to his friend Henry.

"I just walked around, in utter shock, I suppose. I ran up the stairs again, just as I had after... after it took the janitor, only this time there was no Charlie Gereson to run into. I walked... miles, I suppose. I think I was mad. I kept thinking about Ryder's Quarry. You know that place?"

"Yes," Henry said.

"I kept thinking that would be deep enough. If... if there would be a way to get that crate out there. I kept... kept thinking..." He put his hands to his face. "I don't know. I don't know anymore. I think I'm going crazy."

"If the story you just told is true, I can understand that," Henry said quietly. He stood up suddenly. "Come on. I'm taking you home."

"Home?" Dex looked at this friend vacantly. "But--"

"I'll leave a note for Wilma telling her where we've gone and then we'll call... who do you suggest, Dex? Campus security or the state police?"

"You believe me, don't you? You believe me? Just say you do."

"Yes, I believe you," Henry said, and it was the truth. "I don't know what that thing could be or where it came from, but I believe you." Dex Stanley began to weep.

"Finish your drink while I write my wife," Henry said, apparently not noticing the tears. He even grinned a little. "And for Christ's sake, let's get out of here before she gets back."

Dex clutched at Henry's sleeve. "But we won't go anywhere near Amberson Hall, will we? Promise me, Henry! We'll stay away from there, won't we?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?" Henry Northrup asked. It was a three-mile drive to Dex's house on the outskirts of town, and before they got there, he was half-asleep in the passenger seat.

"The state cops, I think," Henry said. His words seemed to come from a great distance. "I think Charlie Gerson's assessment of the campus cops was pretty accurate. The first one there would happily stick his arm into that box."

"Yes. All right." Through the drifting, lassitudinous aftermath of shock, Dex felt a dim but great gratitude that his friend had taken over with such efficiency. Yet a deeper part of him believed that Henry could not have done it if he had seen the things he had seen. "Just... the importance of caution ..."

"I'll see to that," Henry said grimly, and that was when Dex fell asleep.

He awoke the next morning with August sunshine making crisp patterns on the sheets of his bed. Just a dream, he thought with indescribable relief. All some crazy dream.

But there was a taste of Scotch in his mouth--Scotch and something else. He sat up, and a lance of pain bolted through his head. Not the sort of pain you got from a hangover, though; not even if you were the type to get a hangover from three Scotches, and he wasn't.

He sat up, and there was Henry, sitting across the room. His first thought was that Henry needed a shave. His second was that there was something in Henry's eyes that he had never seen before--something like chips of ice. A ridiculous thought came to Dex; it passed through his mind and was gone. *Sniper's eyes. Henry*

Northrup, whose specialty is the earlier English poets, has got sniper's eyes.

"How are you feeling, Dex?"

"A slight headache," Dex said. "Henry... the police... what happened?"

"The police aren't coming," Northrup said calmly. "As for your head, I'm very sorry. I put one of Wilma's sleeping powders in your third drink. Be assured that it will pass."

"Henry, what are you saying?"

Henry took a sheet of notepaper from his breast pocket. "This is the note I left my wife. It will explain a lot, I think. I got it back after everything was over. I took a chance that she'd leave it on the table, and I got away with it."

"I don't know what you're--"

He took the note from Henry's fingers and read it, eyes widening.

Dear Billie,

I've just had a call from Dex Stanley. He's hysterical. Seems to have committed some sort of indiscretion with one of his female grad students. He's at Amberson Hall. So is the girl. For God's sake, come quickly. I'm not sure exactly what the situation is, but a woman's presence may be imperative, and under the circumstances, a nurse from the infirmary just won't do. I know you don't like Dex much, but a scandal like this could ruin his career. Please come.

Henry.

"What in God's name have you done?" Dex asked hoarsely.

Henry plucked the note from Dex's nerveless fingers, produced his Zippo, and set flame to the corner. When it was burning well, he dropped the charring sheet of paper into an ashtray on the windowsill.

"I've killed Wilma," he said in the same calm voice. "Ding-dong, the wicked bitch is dead." Dex tried to speak and could not. That central axle was trying to tear loose again. The abyss of utter insanity was below. "I've killed my wife, and now I've put myself into your hands."

Now Dex did find his voice. It had a sound that was rusty yet shrill. "The crate," he said. "What have you done with the crate?"

"That's the beauty of it," Henry said. "You put the final piece in the jigsaw yourself. The crate is at the bottom of Ryder's Quarry."

Dex groped at that while he looked into Henry's eyes. The eyes of his friend. Sniper's eyes. You can't knock off your own queen, that's not in anyone's rules of chess, he thought, and restrained an urge to roar out gales of rancid laughter. The quarry, he had said. Ryder's Quarry. It was over four hundred feet deep, some said. It was perhaps twelve miles east of the university. Over the thirty years that Dex had been here, a dozen people had drowned there, and three years ago the town had posted the place.

"I put you to bed," Henry said. "Had to carry you into your room. You were out like a light. Scotch, sleeping powder, shock. But you were breathing normally and well. Strong heart action. I checked those things. Whatever else you believe, never think I had any intention of hurting you, Dex."

"It was fifteen minutes before Wilma's last class ended, and it would take her another fifteen minutes to drive home and another fifteen minutes to get over to Amberson Hall. That gave me forty-five minutes. I got over to Amberson in ten. It was unlocked. That was enough to settle any doubts I had left."

"What do you mean?"

"The key ring on the janitor's belt. It went with the janitor."

Dex shuddered.

"If the door had been locked--forgive me, Dex, but if you're going to play for keeps, you ought to cover every base--there was still time enough to get back home ahead of Wilma and burn that note.

"I went downstairs--and I kept as close to the wall going down those stairs as I could, believe me..."

Henry stepped into the lab and glanced around. It was just as Dex had left it. He slicked his tongue over his dry lips and then wiped his face with his hand. His heart was thudding in his chest. *Get hold of yourself, man. One thing at a time. Don't look ahead.*

The boards the janitor had pried off the crate were still stacked on the lab table. One table over was the scatter of Charlie Gereson's lab notes, never to be completed now. Henry took it all in, and then pulled his own flashlight--the one he always kept in the glovebox of his car for emergencies--from his back pocket. If this didn't qualify as an emergency, nothing did.

He snapped it on and crossed the lab and went out the door. The light bobbed uneasily in the dark for a moment, and then he trained it on the floor. He didn't want to step on anything he shouldn't. Moving slowly and cautiously, Henry moved around to the side of the stairs and shone the light underneath. His breath paused, and then resumed again, more slowly. Suddenly the tension and fear were gone, and he only felt cold. The crate was under there, just as Dex had said it was. And the janitor's ballpoint pen. And his shoes. And Charlie Gereson's glasses.

Henry moved the light from one of these artifacts to the next slowly, spotlighting each. Then he glanced at his watch, snapped

the flashlight off and jammed it back in his pocket. He had half an hour. There was no time to waste.

In the janitor's closet upstairs he found buckets, heavy-duty cleaner, rags... and gloves. No prints. He went back downstairs like the sorcerer's apprentice, a heavy plastic bucket full of hot water and foaming cleaner in each hand, rags draped over his shoulder. His footfalls clacked hollowly in the stillness. He thought of Dex saying, *It sits squat and mute*. And still he was cold.

He began to clean up.

"She came," Henry said. "Oh yes, she came. And she was... excited and happy."

"What?" Dex said.

"Excited," he repeated. "She was whining and carping the way she always did in that high, unpleasant voice, but that was just habit, I think. All those years, Dex, the only part of me she wasn't able to completely control, the only part she could never get completely under her thumb, was my friendship with you. Our two drinks while she was at class. Our chess. Our... companionship."

Dex nodded. Yes, companionship was the right word. A little light in the darkness of loneliness. It hadn't just been the chess or the drinks; it had been Henry's face over the board, Henry's voice recounting how things were in his department, a bit of harmless gossip, a laugh over something.

"So she was whining and bitching in her best 'just call me Billie' style, but I think it was just habit. She was excited and happy, Dex. Because she was finally going to be able to get control over the last ... little..., bit." He looked at Dex calmly. "I knew she'd come, you see. I knew she'd want to see what kind of mess you gotten yourself into, Dex."

"They're downstairs," Henry told Wilma. Wilma was wearing a bright yellow sleeveless blouse and green pants that were too tight for her. "Right downstairs." And he uttered a sudden, loud laugh.

Wilma's head whipped around and her narrow face darkened with suspicion. "What are you laughing about?" She asked in her loud, buzzing voice. "Your best friend gets in a scrape with a girl and you're laughing?"

No, he shouldn't be laughing. But he couldn't help it. It was sitting under the stairs, sitting there squat and mute, just try telling that thing in the crate to call you Billie, Wilma--and another loud laugh escaped him and went rolling down the dim first-floor hall like a depth charge.

"Well, there is a funny side to it," he said, hardly aware of what he was saying. "Wait'll you see. You'll think--"

Her eyes, always questing, never still, dropped to his front pocket, where he had stuffed the rubber gloves.

"What are those? Are those gloves?"

Henry began to spew words. At the same time he put his arm around Wilma's bony shoulders and led her toward the stairs.

"Well, he's passed out, you know. He smells like a distillery. Can't guess how much he drank. Threw up all over everything. I've been cleaning up. Hell of an awful mess, Billie. I persuaded the girl to stay a bit. You'll help me, won't you? This is Dex, after all."

"I don't know," she said, as they began to descend the stairs to the basement lab. Her eyes snapped with dark glee. "I'll have to see what the situation is. You don't know anything, that's obvious. You're hysterical. Exactly what I would have expected."

"That's right," Henry said. They had reached the bottom of the stairs. "Right around here. Just step right around here."

"But the lab's that way--"

"Yes... but the girl..." And he began to laugh again in great, loonlike bursts.

"Henry, what is wrong with you?" And now that acidic contempt was mixed with something else--something that might have been fear.

That made Henry laugh harder. His laughter echoed and rebounded, filling the dark basement with a sound like laughing banshees or demons approving a particularly good jest. "The girl, Billie," Henry said between bursts of helpless laughter. "That's what's so funny, the girl, the girl has crawled under the stairs and won't come out, that what's so funny, *ah-heh-heh-hahahahaa--*"

And now the dark kerosene of joy lit in her eyes; her lips curled up like charring paper in what the denizens of hell might call a smile. And Wilma whispered, "What did he do to her?"

"You can get her out," Henry babbled, leading her to the dark, triangular, gaping maw. "I'm sure you can get her out, no trouble, no problem." He suddenly grabbed Wilma at the nape of the neck and the waist, forcing her down even as he pushed her into the space under the stairs.

"What are you doing?" she screamed querulously. "What are you doing, Henry?"

"What I should have done a long time ago," Henry said, laughing. "Get under there, Wilma. Just tell it to call you Billie, you bitch."

She tried to turn, tried to fight him. One hand clawed for his wrist--he saw her spade-shaped nails slice down, but they clawed only air. "Stop it, Henry!" She cried. "Stop it right now! Stop this foolishness! I--I'll scream!"

"Scream all you want!" he bellowed, still laughing. He raised one foot, planted it in the center of her narrow and joyless backside, and pushed. "I'll help you, Wilma! Come on out! Wake up,

whatever you are! Wake up! Here's your dinner! Poison meat! Wake up! Wake up!"

Wilma screamed piercingly, an inarticulate sound that was still more rage than fear.

And then Henry heard it.

First a low whistle, the sound a man might make while working alone without even being aware of it. Then it rose in pitch, sliding up the scale to an earsplitting whine that was barely audible. Then it suddenly descended again and became a growl... and then a hoarse yammering. It was an utterly savage sound. All his married life Henry Northrup had gone in fear of his wife, but the thing in the crate made Wilma sound like a child doing a kindergarten tantrum. Henry had time to think: *Holy God, maybe it really is a Tasmanian devil... it's some kind of devil, anyway.*

Wilma began to scream again, but this time it was a sweeter tune--at least to the ear of Henry Northrup. It was a sound of utter terror. Her yellow blouse flashed in the dark under the stairs, a vague beacon. She lunged at the opening and Henry pushed her back, using all his strength.

"Henry!" She howled. "*Henreeeee!*"

She came again, head first this time, like a charging bull. Henry caught her head in both hands, feeling the tight, wiry cap of her curls squash under his palms. He Pushed. And then, over Wilma's shoulder, he saw something that might have been the gold-glinting eyes of a small owl. Eyes that were infinitely cold and hateful. The yammering became louder, reaching a crescendo. And when it struck at Wilma, the vibration running through her body was enough to knock him backwards.

He caught one glimpse of her face, her bulging eyes, and then she was dragged back into the darkness. She screamed once more. Only once.

"Just tell it to call you Billie," he whispered.

Henry Northrup drew a great, shuddering breath.

"It went on ... for quite a while," he said. After a long time, maybe twenty minutes, the growling and the... the sounds of its feeding... that stopped, too. And it started to whistle. Just like you said, Dex. As if it were a happy teakettle or something. It whistled for maybe five minutes, and then it stopped. I shone my light underneath again. The crate had been pulled out a little way. There was... fresh blood. And Wilma's purse had spilled everywhere. But it got both of her shoes. That was something, wasn't it?"

Dex didn't answer. The room basked in sunshine. Outside, a bird sang.

"I finished cleaning the lab," Henry resumed at last. "It took me another forty minutes, and I almost missed a drop of blood that was on the light globe ... saw it just as I was going out. But when I was done, the place was as neat as a pin. Then I went out to my car and drove across campus to the English department. It was getting late, but I didn't feel a bit tired. In fact, Dex, I don't think I ever felt more clear-headed in my life. There was a crate in the basement of the English department. I flashed on that very early in your story. Associating one monster with another, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"Last year when Badlinger was in England--you remember Badlinger, don't you?"

Dex nodded. Badlinger was the man who had beaten Henry out for the English department chair... partly because Badlinger's wife was bright, vivacious and sociable, while Henry's wife was a shrew. Had been a shrew.

"He was in England on sabbatical," Henry said. "Had all their things crated and shipped back. One of them was a giant stuffed

animal. Nessie, they call it. For his kids. That bastard bought it for his kids. I always wanted children, you know. Wilma didn't. She said kids get in the way.

"Anyway, it came back in this gigantic wooden crate, and Badlinger dragged it down to the English department basement because there was no room in the garage at home, he said, but he didn't want to throw it out because it might come in handy someday. Meantime, our janitors were using it as a gigantic sort of wastebasket. When it was full of trash, they'd dump it into the back of the truck on trash day and then fill it up again.

"I think it was the crate Badlinger's damned stuffed monster came back from England in that put the idea in my head. I began to see how your Tasmanian devil could be gotten rid of. And that started me thinking about something else I wanted to be rid of. That I wanted so badly to be rid of.

"I had my keys, of course. I let myself in and went downstairs. The crate was there. It was a big, unwieldy thing, but the janitors' dolly was down there as well. I dumped out the little bit of trash that was in it and got the crate onto the dolly by standing it on end. I pulled it upstairs and wheeled it straight across the mall and back to Amberson."

"You didn't take your car?"

"No, I left my car in my space in the English department parking lot. I couldn't have gotten the crate in there, anyway."

For Dex, new light began to break. Henry would have been driving his MG, of course--an elderly sportscar that Wilma had always called Henry's toy. And if Henry had the MG, then Wilma would have had the Scout--a jeep with a fold-down back seat. Plenty of storage space, as the ads said.

"I didn't meet anyone," Henry said. "At this time of year--and at no other--the campus is quite deserted. The whole thing was almost

hellishly perfect. I didn't see so much as a pair of headlights. I got back to Amberson Hall and took Badlinger's crate downstairs. I left it sitting on the dolly with the open end facing under the stairs. Then I went back upstairs to the janitors' closet and got that long pole they use to open and close the windows. They only have those poles in the old buildings now. I went back down and got ready to hook the crate--your Paella crate--out from under the stairs. Then I had a bad moment. I realized the top of Badlinger's crate was gone, you see. I'd noticed it before, but now I *realized* it. In my guts."

"What did you do?"

"Decided to take the chance," Henry said. "I took the window pole and pulled the crate out. I *eased* it out, as if it were full of eggs. No ... as if it were full of Mason jars with nitroglycerine in them."

Dex sat up, staring at Henry. "What... what..."

Henry looked back somberly. "It was my first good look at it, remember. It was horrible." He paused deliberately and then said it again: "It was horrible, Dex. It was splattered with blood, some of it seemingly grimed right into tile wood. It made me think of... do you remember those joke boxes they used to sell? You'd push a little lever and tile box would grind and shake, and then a pale green hand would come out of the top and push the lever back and snap inside again. It made me think of that."

"I pulled it out--oh, so carefully--and I said I wouldn't look down inside, no matter what. But I did, of course. And I saw..." His voice dropped helplessly, seeming to lose all strength. "I saw Wilma's face, Dex. Her *face*."

"Henry, don't--"

"I saw her eyes, looking up at me from that box. Her glazed eyes. I saw something else, too. Something white. A bone, I think. And a black something. Furry. Curled up. Whistling, too. A very low whistle. I think it was sleeping."

"I hooked it out as far as I could, and then I just stood there looking at it, realizing that I couldn't drive knowing that thing could come out at any time... come out and land on the back of my neck. So I started to look around for something--anything--to cover the top of Badlinger's crate.

"I went into the animal husbandry room, and there were a couple of cages big enough to hold the Paella crate, but I couldn't find the goddamned keys. So I went upstairs and I still couldn't find anything. I don't know how long I hunted, but there was this continual feeling of time... slipping away. I was getting a little crazy. Then I happened to poke into that big lecture room at the far end of the hall--"

"Room 6?"

"Yes, I think so. They had been painting the walls. There was a big canvas dropcloth on the floor to catch the splatters. I took it, and then I went back downstairs, and I pushed the Paella crate into Badlinger's crate. Carefully!... you wouldn't believe how carefully I did it, Dex."

When the smaller crate was nested inside the larger, Henry uncinched the straps on the English department dolly and grabbed the end of the dropcloth. It rustled stiffly in the stillness of Amberson Hall's basement. His breathing rustled stiffly as well. And there was that low whistle. He kept waiting for it to pause, to change. It didn't. He had sweated his shirt through; it was plastered to his chest and back.

Moving carefully, refusing to hurry, he wrapped the dropcloth around Badlinger's crate three times, then four, then five. In the dim light shining through from the lab, Badlinger's crate now looked mummified. Holding the seam with one splayed hand, he wrapped first one strap around it, then the other. He cinched them tight and then stood back a moment. He glanced at his watch. It was just past one o'clock. A pulse beat rhythmically at his throat.

Moving forward again, wishing absurdly for a cigarette (he had given them up sixteen years before), he grabbed the dolly, tilted it back, and began pulling it slowly up the stairs.

Outside, the moon watched coldly as he lifted the entire load, dolly and all, into the back of what he had come to think of as Wilma's Jeep--although Wilma had not earned a dime since the day he had married her. It was the biggest lift he had done since he had worked with a moving company in Westbrook as an undergraduate. At the highest point of the lift, a lance of pain seemed to dig into his lower back. And still he slipped it into the back of the Scout as gently as a sleeping baby.

He tried to close the back, but it wouldn't go up; the handle of the dolly stuck out four inches too far. He drove with the tailgate down, and at every bump and pothole, his heart seemed to stutter. His ears felt for the whistle, waiting for it to escalate into a shrill scream and then descend to a guttural howl of fury waiting for the hoarse rip of canvas as teeth and claws pulled their way through it.

And overhead the moon, a mystic silver disc, rode the sky.

"I drove out to Ryder's Quarry," Henry went on. "There was a chain across the head of the road, but I geared the Scout down and got around. I backed right up to the edge of the water. The moon was still up and I could see its reflection way down in the blackness, like a drowned silver dollar. I went around, but it was a long time before I could bring myself to grab the thing. In a very real way, Dex, it was three bodies... the remains of three human beings. And I started wondering...where did they go? I saw Wilma's face, but it looked ... God help me, it looked all *flat*, like a Halloween mask. How much of them did it eat, Dex? How much *could* it eat? And I started to understand what you meant about that central axle pulling loose."

"It was still whistling. I could hear it, muffled and faint, through that canvas dropcloth. Then I grabbed it and I *heaved*... I really

believe it was do it then or do it never. It came sliding out... and I think maybe it suspected, Dex... because, as the dolly started to tilt down toward the water it started to growl and yammer again ... and the canvas started to ripple and bulge ... and I yanked it again. I gave it all I had ... so much that I almost fell into the damned quarry myself. And it went in. There was a splash ... and then it was gone. Except for a few ripples, it was gone. And then the ripples were gone, too."

He fell silent, looking at his hands.

"And you came here," Dex said.

"First I went back to Amberson Hall. Cleaned under the stairs. Picked up all of Wilma's things and put them in her purse again. Picked up the janitor's shoe and his pen and your grad student's glasses. Wilma's purse is still on the seat. I parked the car in our--in my--driveway. On the way there I threw the rest of the stuff in the river."

"And then did what? Walked here?"

"Yes."

"Henry, what if I'd waked up before you got here? Called the police?"

Henry Northrup said simply: "You didn't."

They stared at each other, Dex from his bed, Henry from the chair by the window.

Speaking in tones so soft as to be nearly inaudible, Henry said, "The question is, what happens now? Three people are going to be reported missing soon. There is no one element to connect all three. There are no signs of foul play; I saw to that. Badlinger's crate, the dolly, the painters' dropcloth--those things will be reported missing too, presumably. There will be a search. But the

weight of the dolly will carry the crate to the bottom of the quarry, and ... there are really no bodies, are there, Dex?"

"No," Dexter Stanley said. "No, I suppose there aren't."

"But what are you going to do, Dex? What are you going to say?"

"Oh, I could tell a tale," Dex said. "And if I told it, I suspect I'd end up in the state mental hospital. Perhaps accused of murdering the janitor and Gereson, if not your wife. No matter how good your cleanup was, a state police forensic unit could find traces of blood on the floor and walls of that laboratory. I believe I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Thank you," Henry said. "Thank you, Dex."

Dex thought of that elusive thing Henry had mentioned companionship. A little light in the darkness. He thought of playing chess perhaps twice a week instead of once. Perhaps even three times a week... and if the game was not finished by ten, perhaps playing until midnight if neither of them had any early morning classes, instead of having to put the board away (and, as likely as not, Wilma would just "accidentally" knock over the pieces "while dusting," so that the game would have to be started all over again the following Thursday evening). He thought of his friend, at last free of that other species of Tasmanian devil that killed more slowly but just as surely--by heart attack, by stroke, by ulcer, by high blood pressure, yammering and whistling in the ear all the while.

Last of all, he thought of the janitor, casually flicking his quarter, and of the quarter coming down and rolling under the stairs, where a very old horror sat squat and mute, covered with dust and cobwebs, waiting... biding its time...

What had Henry said? The whole thing was almost hellishly perfect.

"No need to thank me, Henry," he said.

Henry stood up. "If you got dressed," he said, "you could run me down to the campus. I could get my MG and go back home and report Wilma missing."

Dex thought about it. Henry was inviting him to cross a nearly invisible line, it seemed, from bystander to accomplice. Did he want to cross that line?

At last he swung his legs out of bed. "All right, Henry."

"Thank you, Dexter."

Dex smiled slowly. "That's all right," he said. "After all, what are friends for?"

STEPHEN KING

The Revelations Of 'Becka Paulson

From
Rolling Stone Magazine 1984
An excerpt from The Tommyknockers

What happened was simple enough – at least, at the start. What happened was that Rebecca Paulson shot herself in the head with her husband Joe's .22-caliber pistol. This occurred during her annual spring cleaning, which took place this year (as it did most years) around the middle of June. 'Becka had a way of falling behind in such things.

She was standing on a short stepladder and rummaging through the accumulated junk on the high shelf in the downstairs hall closet while the Paulson cat, a big brindle tom named Ozzie Nelson, sat in the living-room doorway, watching her. From behind Ozzie came the anxious voices of *Another World*, blaring out of the Paulsons' big old Zenith TV – which would later become something much more than a TV.

'Becka pulled stuff down and examined it, hoping for something that was still good, but not really expecting to find such a thing. There were four or five knitted winter caps, all moth-eaten and unraveling. She tossed them behind her onto the hall floor. Here was a Reader's Digest Condensed Book from the summer of 1954, featuring *Run Silent*, *Run Deep* and *Here's Goggle*. Water damage had swelled it to the size of a Manhattan telephone book. She tossed it behind her. Ah! Here was an umbrella that looked salvageable ... and a box with something in it.

It was a shoebox. Whatever was inside was heavy. When she tilted the box, it shifted. She took the lid off, also tossing this behind her (it almost hit Ozzie Nelson, who decided to split the scene). Inside the box was a gun with a long barrel and imitation wood-grip handles.

"Oh," she said. "That." She took it out of the box, not noticing that it was cocked, and turned it around to look into the small beady eye of the muzzle, believing that if there was a bullet in there she would see it.

She remembered the gun. Until five years ago, Joe had been a member of Derry Elks. Some ten years ago (or maybe it had been fifteen), Joe had bought fifteen Elks raffle tickets while drunk. 'Becka had been so mad she had refused to let him put his manthing in her for two weeks. The first prize had been a Bombardier Skidoo, second prize an Evinrude motor. This .22 target pistol had been the third prize.

He had shot it for a while in the backyard, she remembered plinking away at cans and bottles until 'Becka complained about the noise. Then he had taken it up to the gravel pit at the dead end of their road, although she had sensed he was losing interest, even then – he'd just gone on shooting for a while to make sure she didn't think she had gotten the better of him. Then it had disappeared. She had thought he had swapped it for something – a set of snow tires, maybe, or a battery – but here it was.

She held the muzzle of the gun up to her eye, peering into the darkness, looking for the bullet. She could see nothing but darkness. Must be unloaded, then.

I'll make him get rid of it just the same, she thought, backing down the stepladder. Tonight. When he gets back from the post office. I'll stand right up to him. "Joe" I'll say, "it's no good having a gun sitting around the house even if there's no kids around and it's unloaded. You don't even use it to shoot bottles anymore." That's what I'll say.

This was a satisfying thing to think, but her undermind knew that she would of course say no such thing. In the Paulson house, it was Joe who mostly picked the roads and drove the horses. She supposed that it would be best to just dispose of it herself – put it in a plastic garbage bag under the other rickrack from the closet shelf. The gun would go to the dump with everything else the next time Vinnie Margolies stopped by to pick up their throw-out. Joe would not miss what he had already forgotten – the lid of the box had been thick with undisturbed dust. Would not miss it, that was, unless she was stupid enough to bring it to his attention.

'Becka reached the bottom of the ladder. Then she stepped backward onto the Reader's Digest Condensed Book with her left foot. The front board of the book slid backward as the rotted binding gave way. She tottered, holding the gun with one hand and flailing with the other. Her right foot came down on the pile of knitted caps, which also slid backward. As she fell she realised that she looked more like a woman bent on suicide than on cleaning.

Well, it ain't loaded, she had time to think, but the gun was loaded, and it had been cocked; cocked for years, as if waiting for her to come along. She sat down hard in the hallway and when she did the hammer of the pistol snapped forward. There was a flat, unimportant bang not much louder than a baby firecracker in a tin cup, and a .22 Winchester short entered 'Becka Paulson's brain just above the left eye. It made a small black hole what was the faint blue of just-bloomed irises around the edges.

Her head thumped back against the wall, and a trickle of blood ran from the hole into her left eyebrow. The gun, with a tiny thread of white smoke rising from its muzzle, fell into her lap. Her hands drummed lightly up and down on the floor for a period of about five seconds, her right leg flexed, then shot straight out. Her loafer flew across the hall and hit the far wall. Her eyes remained open for the next thirty minutes, the pupils dilating and constricting, dilating and constricting.

Ozzie Nelson came to the living-room door, miaowed at her, and then began washing himself.

She was putting supper on the table that night before Joe noticed the Band-Aid over her eye. He had been home for an hour and a half, but just lately he didn't notice much at all around the house – he seemed preoccupied with something, far away from her a lot of the time. This didn't bother her as much as it might have once – at least he wasn't always after her to let him put his manthing into her ladyplace.

"What'd you do to your head?" he asked as she put a bowl of beans and a plate of red hot dogs on the table.

She touched the Band-Aid vaguely. Yes – what exactly had she done to her head? She couldn't really remember. The whole middle of the day had a funny dark place in it, like an inkstain. She remembered feeding Joe his breakfast and standing on the porch as he headed off to the post office in his Wagoneer – that much was crystal clear. She remembered doing the white load in the new Sears washer while Wheel of Fortune blared from the TV. That was also clear. Then the inkstain began. She remembered putting in the colors and starting the cold cycle. She had the faintest, vaguest recollection of putting a couple of Swanson's Hungary man frozen dinners in the oven for herself – 'Becka Paulson was a hefty eater – but after that there was nothing. Not until she had awakened sitting on the living-room couch. She had changed from slacks and her flowed smock into a dress and high heel; she had put her hair in braids. There was something heavy in her lap and on her shoulders and her forehead tickled. It was Ozzie Nelson. Ozzie was standing with his hind legs in her crotch and his forepaws on her shoulders. He was busily licking blood off her forehead and out of her eyebrow. She swotted Ozzie away from her lap and then looked at the clock. Joe would be home in an hour and she hadn't even started dinner. Then she had touched her head, which throbbed vaguely.

"Becka?"

"What?" She sat down at her place and began to spoon beans onto her plate.

"I asked you what you did to your head?"

"Bumped it," she said ... although, when she went down to the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror, it hadn't looked like a bump; it had looked like a hole. "I just bumped it."

"Oh," he said, losing interest. He opened the new issue of Sports Illustrated which had come that day and immediately fell into a daydream. In it he was running his hands slowly over the body of Nancy Voss – an activity he had been indulging in the last six weeks or so. God bless the United States Postal Authority for sending Nancy Voss from Falmouth to Haven, that was all he could say. Falmouth's

loss was Joe Paulson's gain. He had whole days when he was quite sure he had died and gone to heaven, and his pecker hadn't been so frisky since he was nineteen and touring West Germany with the U.S. Army. It would have taken more than a Band-Aid on his wife's forehead to engage his full attention.

'Becka helped herself to three hot dogs, paused to debate a moment, and then added a fourth. She doused the dogs and the beans with ketchup and then stirred everything together. The result looked a bit like the aftermath of a bad motorcycle accident. She poured herself a glass of grape Kool-Aid from the pitcher on the table (Joe had a beer) and then touched the Band-Aid with the tips of her fingers – she had been doing that ever since she put it on. Nothing but a cool plastic strip. That was okay ... but she could feel the circular indentation beneath. The hole. That wasn't so okay.

"Just bumped it," she murmured again, as if saying would make it so. Joe didn't look up and 'Becka began to eat.

Hasn't hurt my appetite any, whatever it was, she thought. Not that much ever does – probably nothing ever will. When they say on the radio that all those missiles are flying and it's the end of the world. I'll probably go right on eating until one of those rockets lands on Haven.

She cut herself a piece of bread from the homemade loaf and began mopping up bean juice with it.

Seeing that ... that mark on her forehead had unnerved her at the time, unnerved her plenty. No sense kidding about that, just as there was no sense kidding that it was just a mark, like a bruise. And in case anyone ever wanted to know, 'Becka thought, she would tell them that looking into the mirror and seeing that you had an extra hole in your head wasn't one of life's cheeriest experiences. Your head, after all, was where your brains were. And as for what she had done next –

She tried to shy away from that, but it was too late.

Too late, 'Becka, a voice tolled in her mind – it sounded like her dead father's voice.

She had stared at the hole, stared at it and stared at it, and then she had pulled open the drawer to the left of the sink and had pawed through her few meager items of makeup with hands that didn't seem to belong to her. She took out her eyebrow pencil and then looked into the mirror again.

She raised the hand holding the eyebrow pencil with the blunt end towards her, and slowly began to push it into the hole in her forehead. No, she moaned to herself, stop it, 'Becka, you don't want to do this –

But apparently part of her did, because she went right on doing it. There was no pain and the eyebrow pencil was a perfect fit. She pushed it in an inch, then two, then three. She looked at herself in the mirror, a woman in a flowered dress who had a pencil sticking out of her head. She pushed it in a fourth inch.

Not much left, 'Becka, be careful, wouldn't want to lose it in there, I'd rattle when you turned over in the night, wake up Joe –

She tittered hysterically.

Five inches in and the blunt end of the eyebrow pencil had finally encountered resistance. It was hard, but a gentle push also communicated a feeling of sponginess. At the same moment the whole world turned a brilliant, momentary green and an interlacing of memories jiggled through her mind – sledding at four in her older brother's snowsuit, washing high school blackboards, a '59 Impala her Uncle Bill had owned, the smell of cut hay.

She pulled the eyebrow pencil out of her head, shocked back to herself, terrified that blood would come gushing out of the hole. But no blood came, nor was there any blood on the shiny surface of the eyebrow pencil. Blood or ... or ...

But she would not think of that. She threw the pencil back into the drawer and slammed the draw shut. Her first impulse, to cover the hole, came back, stronger than ever.

She swung the mirror away from the medicine cabinet and grabbed the tin box of Band-Aids. It fell from her trembling fingers and cluttered into the basin. 'Becka had cried out at the sound and then told herself to stop it, just stop it. Cover it up, make it gone. That

was the thing to do; that was the ticket. Never mind the eyebrow pencil, just forget that – she had none of the signs of brain injury she had seen on the afternoon stories and Marcus Welby, M.D., that was the important thing. She was all right. As for the eyebrow pencil, she would just forget that part.

And so she had, at least until now. She looked at her half-eaten dinner and realized with a sort of dull humor that she had been wrong about her appetite – she couldn't eat another bite.

She took her plate over to the garbage and scrapped what was left into the can, while Ozzie wound restlessly around her ankles. Joe didn't look up from his magazine. In his mind, Nancy Voss was asking him again if that tongue of his was as long as it looked.

She woke up in the middle of the night from some confusing dream in which all the clocks in the house had been talking in her father's voice. Joe lay beside her, flat on his back in his boxer shorts, snoring.

Her hand went to the Band-Aid. The hole didn't hurt, didn't exactly throb, but it itched. She rubbed at it gently, afraid of another of those dazzling green flashes. None came.

She rolled over on her side and thought: You got to go to the doctor, 'Becka. You got to get that seen to. I don't know what you did, but –

No, she answered herself. No doctor. She rolled to her other side, thinking she would be awake for hours now, wondering, asking herself frightened questions. Instead, she was asleep again in moments.

In the morning the hole under the Band-Aid hardly itched at all, and that made it easier not to think about. She made Joe his breakfast and saw him off to work. She finished washing the dishes and took out the garbage. They kept it in a little shed beside the house that Joe had built, a structure not much bigger than a doghouse. You had to lock it up or the coons came out of the woods and made a mess.

She stepped in, wrinkling her nose at the smell, and put the green bag down with the others. Vinnie would be by in Friday or

Saturday and then she would give the shed a good airing. As she was backing out, she saw a bag that hadn't been tied up like the others. A curved handle, like the handle of a cane protruded from the top.

Curious, she pulled it out and saw it was an umbrella. A number of moth-eaten, unraveling hats came out with the umbrella.

A dull warning sound in her head. For a moment she could almost see through the inkstain to what was behind it, to what had happened to her

(bottom it's in the bottom something heavy something in a box what Joe don't remember won't)

yesterday. But did she want to know?

No.

She didn't.

She wanted to forget.

She backed out of the little shed and rebolted the door with hands that trembled the slightest bit.

A week later (she still changed the band-Aid each morning, but the wound was closing up – she could see the pink new tissue filling it when she shone Joe's flashlight into it and peered into the bathroom mirror) 'Becka found out what half of have already either knew or surmised – that Joe was cheating on her. Jesus told her. In the last three days or so, Jesus had told her the most amazing, terrible, distressing things imaginable. They sickened her, they destroyed her sleep, they were destroying her sanity ... but were they wonderful? Weren't they just! And would she stop listening, simply tip Jesus over on His face, perhaps scream at Him to shut up? Absolutely not. For one thing, he was the Savior. For another thing, there was a grisly sort of compulsion in knowing the things Jesus told her.

Jesus was on top of the Paulsons' Zenith television and He had been in that same spot for just about twenty years. Before resting atop the Zenith, He had rested atop two RCAs (Joe Paulson had always bought American). This was a beautiful 3-D picture of Jesus that Rebecca's sister, who lived in Portsmouth, had sent her. Jesus was dressed in a simple white robe, and He was holding a Shepard's staff.

Because the picture had been created ('Becka considered "made" much too mundane a word for a likeness which seemed so real you could almost stick your hand into it) before the Beatles and the changes they had wreaked on male hairstyles, His hair was not too long, and perfectly neat. The Christ on 'Becka Paulson's TV combed His hair a little bit like Elvis Presley after Elvis got out of the army. His eyes were brown and mild and kind. Behind Him, in perfect perspective, sheep as white as the linens in TV soap commercials trailed away into the distance. 'Becka and her sister Corinne and her brother Roland had grown up on a sheep farm in New Gloucester, and 'Becka knew from personal experience that sheep were never that white and uniformly woolly, like little fair weather clouds that had fallen to earth. But, she reasoned, if Jesus could turn water into wine and bring the dead back to life, there was no reason at all why He couldn't make the shit caked around a bunch of lambs' rumps disappear if He wanted to.

A couple of times Joe had tried to move that picture off the TV, and she supposed that now she new why, oh yessirree Bob, oh yes indeedy. Joe of course, had his trumped-up tales. "it doesn't seem right to have Jesus on top of the television while we're watching Three's Company or Charlie's Angels" he'd say. "Why don't you put it up on your bureau, 'Becka? Or ... I'll tell you what! Why not put it up on your bureau until Sunday, and then you can bring it down and out it back on the TV while you watch Jimmy Swaggart and Rex Humbard and Jerry Falwell? I'll bet Jesus likes Jerry Falwell one hell of a lot better than he likes Charlie's Angels."

She refused.

"When it's my turn to have the Thursday-night poker game, the guys don't like it," he said another time. "No one wants to have Jesus Christ looking at them while He tries to fill a flush or draw to an inside straight."

"Maybe they feel uncomfortable because they know gambling's the Devil's work," 'Becka said.

Joe, who was a good poker player, bridled. "then it was the Devil's work that bought you your hair dryer and that garnet ring you

like so well," he said. "better take 'em back for refunds and give the money to the Salvation Army. Wait, I think I got the receipts in my den."

She allowed as how Joe could turn the 3-D picture of Jesus around to face the wall on the one Thursday night a month that he had his dirty-talking, beer-swilling friends in to play poker ... but that was all.

And now she knew the real reason he wanted to get rid of that picture. He must have had an idea all along that that picture was a magic picture. Oh ... she supposed sacred was a better word, magic was for pagans – headhunters and Catholics and people like that – but the came almost to one and the same, didn't they? All along Joe must have sensed that picture was special, that it would be the means by which his sin would be found out.

Oh, she supposed she must have had some idea of what all his recent preoccupation had meant, must have known there was a reason why he was never after her at night anymore. But the truth was, that had been a relief – sex was just as her mother had told her it would be, nasty and brutish, sometimes painful and always humiliating. Had she also smelled perfume on his collar from time to time? If so, she had ignored that, too, and she might have gone on ignoring it indefinitely if the picture of Jesus on the Sony hadn't begun to speak on July 7th. She realized now that she had ignored a third factor, as well; at about the same time the pawings had stopped the perfume smells had begun, old Charlie Estabrooke had retired and a woman named Nancy Voss had come up from the Falmouth post office to take his place. She guessed that the Voss woman (whom, 'Becka had now come to think of simply as The Hussy) was perhaps five years older than her and Joe, which would make her around fifty, but she was a trim, well-kept and handsome fifty. 'Becka herself had put on a little weight during her marriage, going from one hundred and twenty-six to a hundred and ninety-three, most of that since Byron, their only chick and child, had flown from the nest.

She could have gone on ignoring it, and perhaps what would even have been for the best. If The Hussey really enjoyed the

animalism of sexual congress, with its gruntings and thrustings and that final squirt of sticky stuff that smelled faintly like codfish and looked like cheap dish detergent, then it only proved that The Hussy was little more than an animal herself – and of course it freed 'Becka of a tiresome, if ever more occasional, obligation. But when the picture of Jesus spoke up, telling her exactly what was going on, it became impossible to ignore. She knew that something would have to be done.

The picture first spoke at just past three in the afternoon on Thursday. This was eight days after shooting herself in the head and about four days after her resolution to forget it was a hole and not just a mark had begun to take effect. 'Becka was coming back into the living room from the kitchen with a little snack (half a coffeecake and a beer stein filled with Kool-Aid) to watch General Hospital. She no longer really believed that Luke would ever find Laura, but she could not quite find it in her heart to completely give up hope.

She was bending down to turn on the Zenith when Jesus said, "'Becka, Joe is putting the boots to that Hussey down at the pee-oh just about every lunch hour and sometimes after punching out time in the afternoon. Once he was so randy he drove it to her while he was supposed to be helping her sort the mail. And do you know what? She never even said 'At least wait until I get the first-class into the boxes.' "

'Becka screamed and spilled her Kool-Aid down the front of the TV. It was a wonder, she thought later, when she was able to think at all, that the picture tube didn't blow. Her coffeecake went on the rug.

"And that's not all," Jesus told her. He walked halfway across the picture, His robe fluttering around His ankles, and sat down on a rock that jutted out of the ground. He held His staff between his knees and looked at her grimly. "There's a lot going on in Haven. Why, you wouldn't believe the half of it."

'Becka screamed again and fell on her knees. One of them landed squarely on her coffeecake and squirted raspberry filling into the face of Ozzie Nelson, who had crept into the living room to see what was going on. "My Lord! My Lord!" 'Becka shrieked. Ozzie

ran, hissing, for the kitchen, where he crawled under the stove with red goo dripping from his whiskers. He stayed under there the rest of the day.

"Well, none of the Paulsons was ever any good," Jesus said. A sheep wandered towards Him and He whacked it away, using His staff with an absentminded impatience that reminded 'Becka, even in her current frozen state, of her long-dead father. The sheep went, rippling slightly through the 3-D effect. It disappeared from the picture, actual seeming to curve as it went off the edge ... but that was just an optical illusion, she felt sure. "No good at all, "Jesus went on. "Joe's granddad was a whoremaster of the purest sense, as you well know, 'Becka. Spent his whole life pecker-led. And when he came up here, do you know what we said? 'No room!' that's what we said." Jesus leaned forward, still holding His staff. "'Go see Mr. Splitfoot down below,' we said. 'You'll find your haven-home, all right. But you may find you new landlord a hard taskmaster,' we said." Incredibly, Jesus winked at her ... and that was when 'Becka fled, shrieking, from the house.

She stopped in the backyard, panting, her hair, a mousy blond that was really not much of any color at all, hanging in her face. Her heart was beating so fast in her chest that it frightened her. No one had heard her shriekings and carryings-on, thank the Lord; she and Joe lived far out on the Nista Road, and their nearest neighbors were the Brodskys were half a mile away. If anyone had heard her, they would have thought there was a crazywoman down at Joe and 'Becka Paulson's.

Well there *is* a crazywoman at the Paulsons', isn't there? she thought. If you really think that picture of Jesus started to talk to you, why, you really must be crazy. Daddy'd beat you three shades of blue for thinking such a thing – one shade for lying, another shade for believing the lie, and a third for raising your voice. 'Becka, you *are* crazy. Pictures don't talk.

No ... and it didn't, another voice spoke up suddenly. That voice came out of your own head, 'Becka. I don't know how it could

be ... how you could know such things ... but that's what happened. Maybe it had something to do with what happened to you last week, or maybe not, but you made that picture of Jesus talk your own self. It didn't really no more than that little rubber Topo Gigio mouse on the Ed Sullivan Show.

But somehow the idea that it might have something to do with that ... that

(hole)

other thing was scarier than the idea that the picture itself had spoken, because that was the sort of thing they sometimes had on Marcus Welby, like that show about the fellow who had the brain tumor and it was making him wear his wife's nylon stockings and step-ins. She refused to allow it mental houseroom. It might be a miracle. After all, miracles happened every day. There was the Shroud of Turin, and the cures at Lourdes, and that Mexican fellow who had a picture of the Virgin Mary burned into the surface of a taco or an enchilada or something. Not to mention those children that had made the headlines of one of the tabloids – children who cried rocks. Those were all bona fide miracles (the children who wept rocks was, admittedly, a rather gritty one), as uplifting as a Jimmy Swaggart sermon. Hearing voices was only crazy.

But that's what happened. And you've been hearing voices for quite a little while now, haven't you? You've been hearing His voice. Joe's voice. And that's where it came from, not from Jesus but from Joe, from Joe's head –

"No," 'Becka whimpered. "No, I ain't heard any voices in my head."

She stood by her clothesline in the hot backyard, looking blankly off toward the woods on the other side of the Nista Road, blue-gray-hazy in the heat. She wrung her hands in front of her and begun to weep.

"I ain't no heard no voices in my head."

Crazy, her dead father's implacable voice replied. *Crazy with the heat. You come on over here, 'Becka Bouchard, I'm gonna beat you three shades of blister-blue for that crazy talk.*

"I ain't heard no voices in my head," 'Becka moaned. "That picture really did talk, I swear, I can't do ventriloquism!"

Better believe the picture. If it was the hole, it was a brain tumor, sure. If it was the picture, it was a miracle. Miracles came from God. Miracles came from Outside. A miracle could drive you crazy – and the dear God knew she felt like she was going crazy now – but it didn't mean you were crazy, or that your brains were scrambled. As for believing that you could hear other people's thoughts ... that was just crazy.

'Becka looked down at her legs and saw blood gushing from her left knee. She shrieked again and ran back into the house to call the doctor, MEDIX, somebody. She was in the living room again, pawing at the dial with the phone to her ear, when Jesus said:

"That's raspberry filling from your coffeecake, 'Becka. Why don't you just relax, before you have a heart attack?"

She looked at the TV, the telephone receiver falling to the table with a clunk. Jesus was still sitting on the rock outcropping. It looked as though He had crossed His legs. It was really surprising how much He looked like her own father ... only He didn't seem forbidding, ready to be hitting angry at a moment's notice. He was looking at her with a kind of exasperated patience.

"Try it and see if I'm not right," Jesus said.

She touched her knee gently, wincing, expecting pain. There was none. She saw the seeds in the red stuff and relaxed. She licked the raspberry filling off her fingers.

"Also," Jesus said, "you have got to get these ideas about hearing voices and going crazy out of your head. It's just Me. And I can talk to anyone I want to, any way I want to."

"Because you're the Savior," 'Becka whispered.

"That's right," Jesus said, and looked down. Below Him, a couple of animated salad bowls were dancing in appreciation of the hidden Valley Ranch Dressing which they were about to receive.

"And I'd like you to please turn that crap off, if you don't mind. We don't need that thing running. Also, it makes My feet tingle."

'Becka approached the TV and turned it off.

"My Lord," she whispered.

Now it was Sunday, July 10th. Joe was lying fast asleep out in the backyard hammock with Ozzie lying limply across him ample stomach like a black and white fur stole. She stood in the living room, holding the curtain back with her left hand and looking out at Joe. Sleeping in the hammock, dreaming of The Hussy, no doubt – dreaming of throwing her down in a great big pile of catalogs from Carroll Reed and fourth-class junk mail and then – how would Joe and his piggy poker-buddies out it? – "putting the boots to her."

She was holding the curtain with her left hand because she had a handful of square nine-volt batteries in her right. She had bought them yesterday down at the town hardware store. Now she let the curtain drop and took the batteries into the kitchen, where she was assembling a little something on the counter. Jesus had told her how to make it. She told Jesus she couldn't build things. Jesus told her not to be a cussed fool. If she could follow a recipe, she could build this little gadget. She was delighted to find that Jesus was absolutely right. It was not only easy, it was fun. A lot more fun than cooking, certainly; she had never really had the knack for that. Her cakes almost always fell and her breads almost never rose. She had begun this little thing yesterday, working with the toaster, the motor from her old Hamilton-Beach blender, and a funny board full of electronic things which had come from the back of an old radio in the shed. She thought she would be done long before Joe woke up and came in to watch the Red Sox on TV at two o'clock.

Actually, it was funny how many ideas she'd had in the last few days. Some Jesus had told her about; others just seemed to come to her at odd moments.

Her sewing machine, for instance – she'd always wanted one of those attachments that made the zigzag stitches, but Joe had told her she would have to wait until he could afford to buy her a new machine (and that would probably be along about the twelfth of Never, if she knew Joe). Just four days ago she had seen how, if she just moved the button stitcher and added a second needle where it had

been at an angle of forty-five degrees to the first needle, she could make all the zigzags she wanted. All it took was a screwdriver – even a dummy like her could use one of those – and it worked just as well as you could want. She saw that the camshaft would probably warp out of true before long because of the weight differential, but there were ways to fix that, too, when it happened.

Then there was the Electrolux. Jesus had told her about that one. Getting her ready for Joe, maybe. It had been Jesus who told her how to use Joe's little butane welding torch, and that made it easier. She had gone over to Derry and bought three of those electronic Simon games at KayBee Toys. Once she was back home she broke them open and pulled out the memory boards. Following Jesus' instructions, she connected the boards and wired Eveready dry cells to the memory circuits she had created. Jesus told her how to program the Electrolux and power it (she had in fact, already figured this out for herself, but she was much too polite to tell Him so). Now it vacuumed the kitchen, living room, and downstairs bathroom all by itself. It had a tendency to get caught under the piano bench or in the bathroom (where it just kept on butting its stupid self against the toilet until she came running to turn it around), and it scared the granola out of Ozzie, but it was still an improvement over dragging a thirty-pound vac around like a dead dog. She had much more time to catch up on the afternoon stories – and now these included true stories Jesus told her. Her new, improved Electrolux used juice awfully fast, though, and sometimes it got tangled in its own electrical cord. She thought she might just scratch the dry cells and hook up a motorcycle battery to it one day soon. There would be time – after this problem of Joe and The Hussy had been solved.

Or ... just last night. She had lain awake in bed long after Joe was snoring beside her, thinking about numbers. It occurred to 'Becka (who had never gotten beyond Business Math in high school) that if you gave numbers letter values, you could un-freeze them – you could turn them into something that was like Jell-O. When they – the numbers – were letters, you could pour them into any old mold you liked. Then you could turn the letters back into numbers, and

that was like putting the Jell-O into the fridge so it would set, and keep the shape of the mold when you turned it out onto a plate later on.

That way you could always figure things out, 'Becka had thought, delighted. She was unaware that her fingers had gone to the spot above her left eye and were rubbing, rubbing, rubbing. For instance, just look! You could make things fall into a line every time by saying $ax + bx + c = 0$, and that proves it. It always works. It's like Captain Marvel saying Shazam! Well, there is the zero factor; you can't let "a" be zero or that spoils it. But otherwise –

She had lain awake a while longer, considering this, and then had fallen asleep, unaware that she had just reinvented the quadratic equation, and polynomials, and the concept of factoring.

Ideas. Quite a few of them just lately.

'Becka picked up Joe's little blowtorch and lit it deftly with a kitchen match. She would have laughed last month if you'd told her she would ever be working with something like this. But it was easy. Jesus had told her exactly how to solder the wires to the electronics board from the old radio. It was just like fixing up the vacuum cleaner, only this idea was even better.

Jesus had told her a lot of other things in the last three days or so. They had murdered her sleep (and what little sleep she had gotten was nightmare-driven), they had made her afraid to show her face in the village itself (*I'll always know when you've done something wrong*, 'Becka, her father had told her, *because your face just can't keep a secret*), they had made her lose her appetite. Joe, totally bound up in his work, the Red Sox, and his Hussy, noticed none of these tings ... although he had noticed the other night as he watched television that 'Becka was gnawing her fingernails, something she had never done before – it was, in fact, one of the many things she nagged him about. But she was doing it now, all right; they were bitten right down to the quick. Joe Paulson considered this for all of twelve seconds before looking back at the Sony TV and losing himself in dreams of Nancy Voss's billowy white breasts.

Here were just a few of the afternoon stories Jesus had told her which had caused 'Becka to sleep poorly and to begin biting her fingernails at the advanced age of forty-five:

In 1973, Moss Harlingen, one of Joe's poker buddies, had murdered his father. They had been hunting deer up in Greenville and it had supposedly been one of those tragic accidents, but the shooting of Abel Harlingen had been no accident. Moss simply lay up behind a fallen tree with his rifle and waited until his father splashed towards him across a small stream about fifty yards down the hill from where Moss was. Moss shot his father carefully and deliberately through the head. Moss thought he had killed his father for money. His (Moss's) business, Big Ditch Construction, had two notes falling due with two different banks, and neither bank would extend because of the other. Moss went to Abel, but Abel refused to help, although he could afford to. So Moss shot his father and inherited a lot of money as soon as the county coroner handed down his verdict of death by misadventure. The note was paid and Moss Harlingen really believed (except perhaps in his deepest dreams) that he had committed the murder for gain. The real motive had been something else. Far in the past, when Moss was ten and his little brother Emery but seven, Abel's wife went south to Rhode Island for one whole winter. Moss's and Emery's uncle had died suddenly, and his wife needed help getting on her feet. While their mother was gone, there were several incidents of buggery in the Harlingens' Troy home. The buggery stopped when the boy's mother came back, and the incidents were never repeated. Moss had forgotten all about them. He never remembered lying awake in the dark anymore, lying awake in mortal terror and watching the doorway for the shadow of his father. He had absolutely no recollection of lying with his mouth pressed against his forearm, hot salty tears of shame and rage squeezing out of his eyes and coursing down his face to his mouth as Abel

Harlingen slathered lard onto his cock and then slid it up his son's back door with a grunt and a sigh. It had all made so little impression on Moss that he could not remember biting his arm until it bled to keep from crying out, and he certainly could not remember Emery's breathless little cries from the next bed – "Please, no, daddy, please not me tonight, please, daddy, please no." Children, of course, forget very easily. But some subconscious memory must have lingered, because when Moss Harlingen actually pulled the trigger, as he had dreamed of doing every night for the last thirty-two years of his life, as the echoes first rolled away and then rolled back, finally disappearing into the great forested silence of the up-Maine wilderness, Moss whispered: "Not you, Em, not tonight." That Jesus had told her this not two hours after Moss had stopped in to return a fishing rod which belonged to Joe never crossed 'Becka's mind.

- 1 Alice Kimball, who taught at the Haven Grammar School, was a lesbian. Jesus told 'Becka this Friday, not long after the lady herself, looking large and solid and respectable in a green pant suit, had stopped by, collecting for the American Cancer Society.
- 2 Darla Gaines, the pretty seventeen-year-old girl who brought the Sunday paper, had half an ounce of "bitchin' reefer" between the mattress and box spring of her bed. Jesus told 'Becka not fifteen minutes after Darla had come by on Saturday to collect for the last five weeks (three dollars plus a fifty-cent tip 'Becka now wished she had withheld). That she and her boyfriend smoked the reefer in Darla's bed after doing what they called "the horizontal bop." They did the horizontal bop and smoked reefer almost every weekday from two until three o'clock or so. Darla's parents both worked at Splended Shoe in Derry and they didn't get home until well past four.
- 3 Hank Buck, another of Joe's poker buddies, worked at a large supermarket in Bangor and hated his boss so much that a year ago he had put half a box of Ex-Lax in the man's chocolate

shake when he, the boss, sent Hank out to McDonald's to get his lunch one day. The boss had shit his pants promptly at quarter past three in the afternoon, as he was slicing luncheon meat in the deli of Paul's Down-East Grocery Mart. Hank managed to hold on until punching-out time, and then he sat in his car, laughing until he almost shit his pants. "He laughed," Jesus told 'Becka. "He laughed. Can you believe that?"

And these things were only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. It seemed that Jesus knew something unpleasant or upsetting about everyone – everyone 'Becka herself came in contact with, anyway. She couldn't live with such an awful outpouring.

But she didn't know if she could live without it anymore, either.

One thing was certain – she had to do something. Something.

"You are doing something," Jesus said. He spoke from behind her, from the picture on top of the TV – of course He did – and the idea that the voice was coming from inside her own head, and that it was a cold mutation of her own thoughts ... that was nothing but a dreadful passing illusion. "In fact, you're almost done with this part, 'Becka. Just solder that red wire to that point beside the long doohickey ... not that one, the one next to it ... that's right. Not too much solder! It's like Brylcreem, 'Becka. A little dab'll do ya."

Strange, hearing Jesus Christ talk about Brylcreem.

Joe woke up at quarter of two, tossed Ozzie off his lap, strolled to the back of his lawn, had a comfortable whizz into the poison ivy back there, then headed into the house to watch the Yankees and the Red Sox. He opened the refrigerator in the kitchen, glancing briefly at the little snips of wire on the counter and wondering just what the hell his wife had been up to. Then he dismissed it and grabbed a quart of Bud.

He padded into the living room. 'Becka was sitting in her rocking chair, pretending to read a book. Just ten minutes before Joe came in, she had finished wiring her little gadget into the Zenith console television, following Jesus' instructions to the letter.

"You got to be careful, taking the back off a television, 'Becka," Jesus had told her. "More juice back there than there is in a Bird's Eye warehouse."

"Thought you'd have this all warmed up for me," Joe said.

"I guess you can do it," 'Becka said.

"Ayuh, guess I can," Joe said, completing the last conversational exchange the two of them would ever have.

He pushed the button that made the TV come on and better than two thousand volts of electricity slammed into him. His eyes popped wide open. When the electricity hit him, his hand clenched hard enough to break the bottle in his hand and drive brown glass into his palm and fingers. Beer foamed and ran.

"EEEEEEEOOOOOOOOOAARRRRRRRRRUMMMMMMMMM!" Joe screamed.

His face began to turn black. Blue smoke began to pour from his hair. His finger appeared nailed to the Zenith's ON button. A picture popped up on the TV. It showed Joe and Nancy Voss screwing on the post office floor in a litter of catalogues and Congressional newsletters and sweepstakes announcements from Publishers' Clearing House.

"No!" 'Becka screamed, and the picture changed. Now she saw Moss Harlingen behind a fallen pine, slightly down the barrel of a .30-.30. the picture changed and she saw Darla Gaines and her boyfriend doing the horizontal bop in Darla's upstairs bedroom while Rick Springfield stared at them from the wall.

Joe Paulson's clothes burst into flames.

The living room was filled with the hot smell of cooking beer.

A moment later, the 3-D picture of Jesus exploded.

"No!" 'Becka shrieked, suddenly understanding that it had been her all along, her, her, her, she had thought everything up, she had read their thoughts, somehow read their thoughts, it had been the hole in her head and it had done something to her mind – had suped it up somehow. The picture on the TV changed again and she saw herself backing down the stepladder with the .22 pistol in her hand, pointed

toward her – she looked like a woman bent on suicide rather than on cleaning.

Her husband was turning black before her very eyes.

She ran to him, seized his shredded, wet hand and ... and was herself galvanized by electricity. She was no more able to let go than Brer Rabbit had been after he slapped the tar baby for insolence.

Jesus oh Jesus, she thought as the current slammed into her, driving her up on her toes.

And a mad, cackling voice, the voice of her father, rode in her brain: Fooled you, 'Becka! Fooled you, didn't I? Fooled you good!

The back of the television, which she had screwed back on after she had finished with her alterations (on the off-chance that Joe might look back there), exploded backward in a mighty blue flash of light. Joe and 'Becka Paulson tumbled to the carpet. Joe was already dead. And by the time the smouldering wallpaper behind the TV had ignited the, 'Becka was dead, too.

The Revenge of Lard Ass Hogan

From: "Cavalier magazine", March, 1975

by Stephen King

They came up onto the platform one by one and stood behind a long trestle table covered with a linen cloth. The table was stacked high with pies and stood at the edge of the platform. Above it were looped necklaces of bare 100-watt bulbs, moths and night-fliers banging softly against them and haloing them. Above the platform, bathed in spotlights, was a long sign which read: THE GREAT GREYNA PIE-EAT OF 1960! To either side of this sign hung battered loudspeakers, supplied by Chuck Day of the Great Day Appliance Shop. Bill Travis, the reigning champion, was Chuck's cousin.

As each contestant came up, his hands bound behind him and his shirtfront open, like Sidney Carton on his way to the guillotine, Mayor Charbonneau would announce his name over Chuck's PA system and tie a large white bib around his neck. Calvin Spier received token applause only; in spite of his belly, which was the size of a twenty-gallon waterbarrel, he was considered an underdog second only to the Hogan kid (most considered Lard Ass a comer, but too young and inexperienced to do much this year).

After Spier, Bob Cormier was introduced. Cormier was a disc jockey who did a popular afternoon program at WLAM in Lewiston. He got a bigger hand, accompanied by a few screams from the teenaged girls in the audience. The girls thought he was 'cute'. John Wiggins, principal of Greytna Elementary School, followed Cormier. He received a hearty cheer from the older section of the audience - and a few scattered boos from fractious members of his student body. Wiggins managed to beam paternally and frown sternly down on the audience at the same time.

Next, Mayor Charbonneau introduced Lard Ass.

"A new participant in the annual Great Greytna Pie-Eat, but one we expect great things from in the future ... young *master David Hogan!*" Lard Ass got a big round of applause as Mayor Charbonneau tied on his bib, and as it was dying away, a rehearsed Greek chorus just beyond the reach of the 100-watt bulbs cried out in wicked unison: "*Go-get-'em-Lard Ass!*"

There were muffled shrieks of laughter, running footsteps, a few shadows that no one could (or would) identify, some nervous laughter, some judicial frowns (the largest from Hizzoner Charbonneau, the most visible figure of authority). Lard Ass himself appeared to not even notice. The small smile greasing his thick lips and creasing his thick chops did not change as the Mayor, still frowning largely, tied his bib around his neck and told him not to pay any attention to fools in the audience (as if the Mayor had even the faintest inkling of what monstrous fools Lard Ass Hogan had suffered and would continue to suffer as he rumbled through life like a Nazi Tiger Tank).

The Mayor's breath was warm and smelled of beer.

The last contestant to mount the bunting-decorated stage drew the loudest and most sustained applause; this was the legendary Bill Travis, six feet five inches tall, gangling, voracious. Travis was a mechanic at the local Amoco station down by the railyard, a likeable fellow if there ever was one.

It was common knowledge around town that there was more involved in the Great Gretna Pie-Eat than a mere five dollars - at least, for Bill Travis there was. There were two reasons for this. First, people always came by the station to congratulate Bill after he won the contest, and most everyone who came to congratulate stayed to get his gas-tank filled. And the two garage-bays were sometimes booked up for a solid month after the contest. Folks would come in to get a muffler replaced or their wheel-bearings greased, and would sit in the theatre chairs ranged along one wall (Jerry Mating, who owned the Amoco, had salvaged them from the old Gem Theatre when it was torn down in 1957), drinking Cokes and Moxies from out of the machine and gassing with Bill about the contest as he changed sparkplugs or rolled around on a crawlie-wheelie under someone's International Harvester pickup, looking for holes in the exhaust system. Bill always seemed willing to talk, which was one of the reasons he was so well-liked in Gretna.

There was some dispute around town as to whether Jerry Maling gave Bill a flat bonus for the extra business his yearly feat (or yearly eat, if you prefer) brought in, or if he got an out-and-out raise. Whatever way it was, there could be no doubt that Travis did much better than most small-town wrench jokeys. He had a nice-looking two-storey ranch out on the Sabbatus Road, and certain snide people referred to it as 'the house that pies built'. That was probably an exaggeration, but Bill had it coming another way ... which brings us to the second reason there was more in it for Travis than just five dollars.

The pie-eat was a hot wagering event in Gretna. Perhaps most people only came to laugh, but a goodly minority also came to lay their money down. Contestants were observed and discussed by these betters as ardently as thoroughbreds are observed and discussed by racing touts. The wagerers accosted contestants' friends, relatives, even mere acquaintances. They pried out any and all details concerning the contestants' eating habits. There was always a lot of discussion about that year's official pie - apple was considered a 'heavy' pie, apricot a 'light' one (although a contestant had to resign himself to a day or two of the trots after downing three or four apricot pies). That year's official pie, blueberry, was considered a happy medium. Betters, of course, were particularly interested in their man's stomach for blueberry dishes. How did he do on blueberry buckle? Did he favor blueberry jam over strawberry preserve? Had he been known to sprinkle blueberries on his breakfast cereal, or was he strictly a bananas-and-cream sort of fellow?

There were other questions of some moment. Was he a fast eater who

slowed down or a slow eater who started to speed up as things got serious or just a good steady all-around trencher-man? How many hot dogs could he put away while watching a Babe Ruth League game down at the St Dom's baseball field? Was he much of a beer-drinker, and, if so, how many bottles did he usually put away in the course of an evening? Was he a belcher? It was believed that a good belcher was a bit tougher to beat over the long haul.

All of this and other information was sifted, the odds laid, the bets made. How much money actually changed hands during the week or so following pie-night I have no way of knowing, but if you held a gun to my head and forced me to guess, I'd put it at close to a thousand dollars - that probably sounds like a pretty paltry figure, but it was a lot of money to be passing around in such a small town fifteen years ago.

And because the contest was honest and a strict time-limit of ten minutes was observed, no one objected to a competitor betting on himself, and Bill Travis did so every year. Talk was, as he nodded, smiling, to his audience on that summer night in 1960, that he had bet a substantial amount on himself again, and that the best he had been able to do this year was one-for-five odds. If you're not the betting type, let me explain it this way: he'd have to put two hundred and fifty dollars at risk to win fifty. Not a good deal at all, but it was the price of success - and as he stood there, soaking up the applause and smiling easy, he didn't look too worried about it.

'And the defending champeen,' Mayor Charbonneau trumpeted, 'Gretna's own *Bill Travis!*'

'Hoo, Bill!' 'How many you goin' through tonight, Bill?'

'You goin' for ten, Billy-boy?'

'I got a two-spot on you, Bill! Don't let me down, boy!'

'Save me one of those pies, Trav!'

Nodding and smiling with all proper modesty, Bill Travis allowed the Mayor to tie his bib around his neck. Then he sat down at the far right end of the table, near the place where Mayor Charbonneau would stand during the contest. From right to left, then, the eaters were Bill Travis, David 'Lard Ass' Hogan, Bob Cormier, principal John Wiggins, and Calvin Spier holding down the stool on the far left.

Mayor Charbonneau introduced Sylvia Dodge, who was even more of a contest figure than Bill Travis himself. She had been President of the Gretna Ladies' Auxiliary for years beyond telling (since the First Manassas, according to some town wits), and it was she who oversaw the baking of each year's pies, strictly subjecting each to her own rigorous quality control, which included a weigh-in ceremony on Mr Bancicheck's butcher's scales down at the Freedom Market -this to make sure that each pie weighed within an ounce of the others.

Sylvia smiled regally down at the crowd, her blue hair twinkling under the hot glow of the light-bulbs. She made a short speech about how glad she was that so much of the town had turned out to celebrate their hardy pioneer forebears, the people who made this country great, for it was

great, not only on the grassroots level where Mayor Charbonneau would be leading the local Republicans to the hallowed seats of town government again in November, but on the national level where the team of Nixon and Lodge would take the torch of freedom from Our Great and Beloved General and hold it high for –

Calvin Spier's belly rumbled noisily--*Goinnnngg!* There was laughter and even some applause. Sylvia Dodge, who knew perfectly well that Calvin was both a Democrat and a Catholic (either would have been forgivable alone, but the two combined, never), managed to blush, smile, and look furious all at the same time. She cleared her throat and wound up with a ringing exhortation to every boy and girl in the audience, telling them to always hold the red, white, and blue high, both in their hands and in their hearts, and to remember that smoking was a dirty, evil habit which made you cough. The boys and girls in the audience, most of whom would be wearing peace medallions and smoking not Camels but marijuana in another eight years, shuffled their feet and waited for the action to begin.

'Less talk, more eatin'!' someone in the back row called, and there was another burst of applause - it was heartier this time.

Mayor Charbonneau handed Sylvia a stopwatch and a silver police whistle, which she would blow at the end of the ten minutes of all-out pie-eating. Mayor Charbonneau would then step forward and hold up the hand of the winner.

'Are you *ready??*' Hizzoner's voice rolled triumphantly through the Great Day PA and off down Main Street.

The five pie-eaters declared they were ready.

'Are you *SET??*' Hizzoner enquired further.

The eaters growled that they were indeed set. Downstreet, a boy set off a rattling skein of firecrackers.

Mayor Charbonneau raised one pudgy hand and then dropped it '*GO!!!*'

Five heads dropped into five pie-plates. The sound was like five large feet stamping firmly into mud. Wet chomping noises rose on the mild night air and then were blotted out as the betters and partisans in the crowd began to cheer on their favorites. And no more than the first pie had been demolished before most people realized that a possible upset was in the making.

Lard Ass Hogan, a seven-to-one underdog because of his age and inexperience, was eating like a boy possessed. His jaws machine-gunned up crust (the contest rules required that only the top crust of the pie be eaten, not the bottom), and when that had disappeared, a huge sucking sound issued from between his lips. It was like the sound of an industrial vacuum cleaner going to work. Moments later his whole head disappeared into the pie-plate. He raised it fifteen seconds later to indicate he was done. His cheeks and forehead were smeared with blueberry juice, and he looked like an extra in a minstrel show. He was done - done before the legendary Bill Travis had finished *half* of *his* first pie.

Startled applause went up as the Major examined Lard Ass's pie-plate

and pronounced it clean enough. He whipped a second pie into place before the pace-maker. Lard Ass had gobbled a regulation-size pie in just forty-two seconds. It was a contest record.

He went at the second pie even more furiously yet, his head bobbing and smooching in the soft blueberry filling and Bill Travis threw him a worried glance as he called for his second blueberry pie. As he told friends later, he felt he was in a real contest for the first time since 1957, when George Gamache gobbled three pies in four minutes and then fainted dead away. He had to wonder, he said, if he was up against a boy or a demon. He thought of the money he had riding on this and redoubled his efforts.

But if Travis had redoubled, Lard Ass had trebled. Blueberries flew from his second pie-dish, staining the tablecloth around him like a Jackson Pollock painting. There were blueberries in his hair, blueberries in his bib, blueberries standing out on his forehead as if, in an agony of concentration, he had actually begun to *sweat* blueberries.

'*Done!*' he cried, lifting his head from his second pie dish before Bill Travis had even consumed the crust on his new pie.

'Better slow down, boy,' Hizzoner murmured. Charbonneau himself had ten dollars riding on Bill Travis. 'You got to pace yourself if you want to hold out.'

It was as if Lard Ass hadn't heard. He tore into his third pie with lunatic speed, jaws moving with lightning rapidity. And then –

But I must interrupt for a moment to tell you that there was an empty bottle in the medicine cabinet at Lard Ass Hogan's house. Earlier, that bottle had been three-quarters full of pearl-yellow castor oil, perhaps the most noxious fluid that the good Lord, in His infinite wisdom, ever allowed upon or beneath the face of the earth. Lard Ass had emptied that bottle himself, drinking every last drop and then licking the rim, his mouth twisting, his belly gagging sourly, his brain filled with thoughts of sweet revenge.

And as he rapidly worked his way through his third pie (Calvin Spier, dead last as predicted, had not yet finished his first), Lard Ass began to deliberately torture himself with grisly fantasies. He was not eatin' pies at all; he was eating cowflops. He was eating great big gobs of greasy grimy gopher-guts. He was eating diced-up woodchuck intestines with blueberry sauce poured over them. *Rancid* blueberry sauce.

He finished his third pie and called for his fourth, now one full pie ahead of the legendary Bill Travis. The fickle crowd, sensing a new and unexpected champ in the making, began to cheer him on lustily.

But Lard Ass had no hope or intention of winning. He could not have continued at the pace he was currently setting if his own mother's life had been the prize. And besides, winning for him was losing; revenge was the only blue ribbon he sought. His belly groaning with castor oil, his throat opening and closing sickly, he finished his fourth pie and called for his fifth, the Ultimate Pie - Blueberries Become Electra, so to speak. He dropped his head into the dish, breaking the crust, and snuffled blueberries up his

nose. Blueberries went down his shirt. The contents of his stomach seemed to suddenly gain weight. He chewed up pastry crust and swallowed it. He inhaled blueberries.

And suddenly the moment of revenge was at hand. His stomach, loaded beyond endurance, revolted. It clenched like a strong hand encased in a slick rubber glove. His throat opened.

Lard Ass raised his head.

He grinned at Bill Travis with blue teeth.

Puke rumbled up his throat like a six-ton Peterbilt shooting through a tunnel.

It roared out of his mouth in a huge blue-and-yellow glurt, warm and gaily steaming. It covered Bill Travis, who only had time to utter one nonsense syllable – “Goog!” was what it sounded like. Women in the audience screamed. Calvin Spier, who had watched this unannounced event with a numb and surprised expression on his face, leaned conversationally over the table as if to explain to the gaping audience just what was happening, and puked on the head of Marguerite Charbonneau, the Mayor's wife. She screamed and backed away, pawing futilely at her hair, which was now covered with a mixture of crushed berries, baked beans, and partially digested frankfurters (the latter two had been Cal Spier's dinner). She turned to her good friend Maria Lavin and threw up on the front of Maria's buckskin jacket.

In rapid succession, like a replay of the firecrackers: Bill Travis blew a great - and seemingly supercharged -jet of vomit out over the first two rows of spectators, his stunned face proclaiming to one and all, *Man, I just can't believe I'm doing this;*

Chuck Day, who had received a generous portion of Bill Travis's surprise gift, threw upon his Hush Puppies and then blinked at them wonderingly, knowing full well that stuff would *never* come off suede;

John Wiggins, principal of Gretna Elementary, opened his blue-lined mouth and said reprovingly: 'Really, this has ... *YURRK!*' As befitted a man of his breeding and position, he did it in his own pie-plate;

Hizzoner Charbonneau, who found himself suddenly presiding over what must have seemed more like a stomach-flu hospital ward than a pie-eating contest, opened his mouth to call the whole thing off and upchucked all over the microphone.

“*Jesus save us*” moaned Sylvia Dodge, and then her outraged supper - fried clams, cole slaw, butter-and-sugar corn (two ears' worth), and a generous helping of Muriel Harrington's Bosco chocolate cake - bolted out the emergency exit and landed with a large wet splash on the back of the Mayor's Robert Hall suitcoat.

Lard Ass Hogan, now at the absolute apogee of his young life, beamed happily out over the audience. Puke was everywhere. People staggered around in drunken circles, holding their throats and making weak cawing noises. Somebody's pet Pekinese ran past the stage, yapping crazily, and a man wearing jeans and a Western-style silk shirt threw upon it, nearly

drowning it. Mrs Brockway, the Methodist minister's wife, made a long, basso belching noise which was followed by a gusher of degenerated roast beef and mashed potatoes and apple cobbler. The cobbler looked as if it might have been quite good when it first went down. Jerry Maling, who had come to see his pet mechanic walk away with all the marbles again, decided to get the righteous fuck out of this madhouse. He got about fifteen yards before tripping over a kid's little red wagon and realizing he had landed in a puddle of warm bile, Jerry tossed his cookies in his own lap and told folks later he only thanked Providence he had been wearing his coveralls. And Miss Norman, who taught Latin and English Fundamentals at the Gretna Consolidated High School, vomited into her own purse in an agony of propriety.

Lard Ass Hogan watched it all, his large face calm and beaming, his stomach suddenly sweet and steady with a warm balm it might never know again - that balm was a feeling of utter and complete satisfaction. He stood up, took the slightly tacky microphone from the trembling hand of Mayor Charbonneau, and said...

“ ‘I declare this contest a draw.’ Then he puts the mike down, walks off the back of the platform, and goes straight home. His mother's there, on account of she couldn't get a babysitter for Lard Ass's little sister, who was only two. And as soon as he comes in, all covered with puke and pie drool, still wearin' his bib, she says, ‘Davie, did you win?’ But he doesn't say a fuckin' word, you know. Just goes upstairs to his room, locks the door, and lays down on his bed.”

Will We Close the Book on Books?

BY STEPHEN KING

From: Visions of the 21st Century
Time Magazine, June 2000

Book lovers are the Luddites of the intellectual world. I can no more imagine their giving up the printed page than I can imagine a picture in the New York Post showing the Pope technoboogieing the night away in a disco. My adventure in cyberspace ("Riding the Bullet", available on any computer near you) has confirmed this idea dramatically. My mail and the comments on my website (www.stephenking.com) reflect two things: first, readers enjoyed the story; second, most didn't like getting it on a screen, where it appeared and then disappeared like Aladdin's genie.

Books have weight and texture; they make a pleasant presence in the hand. Nothing smells as good as a new book, especially if you get your nose right down in the binding, where you can still catch an acrid tang of the glue. The only thing close is the peppery smell of an old one. The odor of an old book is the odor of history, and for me, the look of a new one is still the look of the future.

I suspect that the growth of the Internet has actually been something of a boon when it comes to reading: people with more Beanie Babies than books on their shelves spend more time reading than they used to as they surf from site to site. But it's not a book, dammit, that perfect object that speaks without speaking, needs no batteries and never crashes unless you throw it in the corner. So, yes, there'll be books. Speaking personally, you can have my gun, but you'll take my book when you pry my cold, dead fingers off the binding.

My Little Serrated Security Blanket

From:
Outside Magazine
December 1995

The blacksmith of horror rejoices in the potentialities of an ice ax

By Stephen King

This is not the sort of gadget to inspire nursery rhymes. I look at the DMM Predator ice ax and I think of murder. I take it out into the garage, find a piece of scrap wood, and drive the pick end into the grain, trying not to envision how easily this same tip could penetrate the skull and skewer the soft gray matter beneath. It

makes a solid, satisfying *chuk*. This, I believe, makes the electroshock devices, the cans of pepper gas, and the ninja throwing stars in the pawnshop window look minor league. You could do some big damage with this. Real big damage.

The pick end is sharpened along the top and pointed at the tip. It is serrated beneath, presumably to keep it from slipping out once it's been plunged in, and when I examine the holes in the wood, I see that they are not the punch-points I expected--like a child's oversize, drawn periods, but lozenge-shaped--like cough drops.



Looking at these holes, I am helpless not to imagine them peppered over the human body. I keep seeing the ax swung at the gut, the throat, the forehead. I keep seeing it buried all the way to its 11th serration in the nape of the neck or the orbit of an eyeball.

Boy, I think, you are one sick American.

Or maybe I'm not. Like many tools--hammers, screwdrivers, drills, augers, and chisels come to mind--the Predator ice ax has a certain gallows fascination, a bleak beauty with a sternness so extreme that it seems almost neurotic. But study it and you see that there's no part of the ax that doesn't work, from the rough-hewn butt end with its wrist-loop strap to the arched line of the handle to its wicked, burrowing tip. I'm not sure what the thing on the other end is for, the piece of metal that looks like Paul Bunyan's bottle opener, but I'm sure it has a clear purpose, which those dedicated enough--and mad enough--to put their lives at risk climbing mountains and ice falls readily understand and utilize.

This brings me to a new conclusion: What I really feel when I hold this in my hand isn't so much the possibility of murder as the gravity of mortal things. It speaks to me of the vulnerability of human flesh, but also of the resilience and determination of the human mind: Lying on my desk, it whispers, "If you need me, I'll be there. If you need to hang all 215 pounds of you off me, I won't let go--if, that is, you plant me deep."

I have no plans to go climbing; I get vertigo when I ascend to the top of a stepladder. But I keep the Predator under my bed. Why not? One never knows when one might need a good tool, the sort of thing that might make the difference between life and death.

Among Stephen King's works of fright are The Shining, Tommyknockers, The Dark Half and Dolores Claiborne. His 29th and most recent novel is Rose Madder.

THE ACCIDENT

Stephen King

The Observer
Extracted from *On Writing*
September 24, 2000

When we're at our summer house in western Maine, I walk four miles every day, unless it's pouring down with rain. Three miles of this walk are on dirt roads which wind through the woods; a mile of it is on Route 5, a two-lane blacktop highway which runs between Bethel and Fryeburg.

The third week in June of 1999 was an extraordinarily happy one for my wife and me; our kids, now grown and scattered across the country, were all home. It was the first time in nearly six months that we'd all been under the same roof. As an extra bonus, our first grandchild was in the house, three months old and happily jerking at a helium balloon tied to his foot.

On 19 June, I drove our younger son to the Portland Jetport, where he caught a flight back to New York City. I drove home, had a brief nap, and then set out on my usual walk. We were planning to go en famille to see The General's Daughter in nearby North Conway, New Hampshire that evening, and I thought I just had time to get my walk in before packing everybody up for the trip.

I set out on that walk around four o'clock in the afternoon, as well as I can remember. Just before reaching the main road (in western Maine, any road with a white line running down the middle of it is a main road), I stepped into the woods and urinated. It was two months before I was able to take another leak standing up.

When I reached the highway I turned north, walking on the gravel shoulder, against traffic. One car passed me, also headed north. About three-quarters of a mile farther along, the woman driving the car observed a light-blue Dodge van heading south. The van was looping from one side of the road to the other, barely under the driver's control. The woman in the car turned to her passenger when they were safely past the wandering van and said, 'That was Stephen King walking back there. I sure hope that guy in the van doesn't hit him.'

Most of the sightlines along the mile of Route 5 which I walk are good, but there is one stretch, a short, steep hill, where a pedestrian walking north can see very little of what might be coming his way. I was three-quarters of the way up this hill when Bryan Smith, the owner and operator of the light-blue Dodge van, came over the crest.

He wasn't on the road; he was on the shoulder. My shoulder. I had perhaps three-quarters of a second to register this. It was just time enough to think, My God, I'm going to be hit by a school bus . I started to turn to my left. There is a break in my memory here. On the other side of it, I'm on the ground, looking at the back of the van, which is now pulled off the road and tilted to one side.

This recollection is very clear and sharp, more like a snapshot than a memory. There is dust around the van's tail-lights. The licence plate and the back windows are dirty. I register these things with no thought that I have been in an accident, or of anything else. It's a snapshot, that's all. I'm not thinking; my head has been swopped clean.

There's another little break in my memory here, and then I am very carefully wiping palmfuls of blood out of my eyes with my left hand. When my eyes are reasonably clear, I look around and see a man sitting on a nearby rock. He has a cane drawn across his lap. This is Bryan Smith, 42 years of age, the man who hit me with his van. Smith has got quite a driving record; he has racked up nearly a dozen vehicle-related offences.

Smith wasn't looking at the road on the afternoon our lives came together, because his Rottweiler had jumped from the very rear of his van into the back-seat area, where there was an Igloo cooler with some meat stored inside. The Rottweiler's name is Bullet (Smith has another Rottweiler at home; that one is named Pistol). Bullet started to nose at the lid of the cooler. Smith turned around and tried to push Bullet away. He was still looking at Bullet and pushing his head away from the cooler when he came over the top of the knoll; still looking and pushing when he struck me.

Smith told friends later that he thought he'd hit 'a small deer' until he noticed my bloody spectacles lying on the front seat of his van. They were knocked from my face when I tried to get out of Smith's way. The frames were bent and twisted, but the lenses were unbroken. They are the lenses I'm wearing now, as I write this.

Smith sees I'm awake and tells me help is on the way. He speaks calmly, even cheerily. His look, as he sits on his rock with his cane drawn across his lap, is one of pleasant commiseration: Ain't the two of us just had the shittiest luck? it says. He and Bullet left the campground where they were staying, he later tells an investigator, because he wanted 'some of those Marzes-bars they have up to the store'. When I hear this little detail some weeks later, it occurs to me that I have nearly been killed by a character right out of one of my own novels. It's almost funny.

Help is on the way, I think, and that's probably good because I've been in a hell of an accident. I'm lying in the ditch and there's blood all over my face and my right leg hurts. I look down and see something I don't like: my lap now appears to be on sideways, as if my whole lower body had been wrenched half a turn to the right. I look back up at the man with the cane and say, 'Please tell me it's just dislocated.'

'Nah,' he says. Like his face, his voice is cheery, only mildly interested. He could be watching all this on TV while he noshes on one of those Marzes-bars. 'It's broken in five I'd say maybe six places.' 'I'm sorry,' I tell him - God knows why - and then I'm gone again for a little while. It isn't like blacking out; it's more as if the film of memory has been spliced here and there.

When I come back this time, an orange-and-white van is idling at the side of the road with its flashers going. An emergency medical technician - Paul Fillebrown is his name - is kneeling beside me. He's doing something. Cutting off my jeans, I think, although that might have come later.

I ask him if I can have a cigarette. He laughs and says not hardly. I ask him if I'm going to die. He tells me no, I'm not going to die, but I need to go to the hospital, and fast. I ask Fillebrown again if I'm going to die, and he tells me

again that I'm not. Then he asks me if I can wiggle the toes on my right foot. 'My toes, did they move?' I ask Paul Fillebrown. He says they did, a good healthy wiggle. 'Do you swear to God?' I ask him, and I think he does. I'm starting to pass out again. Fillebrown asks me, very slowly and loudly, bending down into my face, if my wife is at the big house on the lake. I can't remember. I can't remember where any of my family is, but I'm able to give him the telephone numbers of both our big house and the cottage on the far side of the lake where my daughter sometimes stays. Hell, I could give him my Social Security number, if he asked. I've got all my numbers. It's just everything else that's gone.

Other people are arriving now. Somewhere a radio is crackling out police calls. I'm put on a stretcher. It hurts, and I scream. I'm lifted into the back of the EMT truck, and the police calls are closer. The doors shut and someone up front says, 'You want to really hammer it.' Then we're rolling.

Paul Fillebrown sits down beside me. He has a pair of clippers and tells me he's going to have to cut the ring off the third finger of my right hand - it's a wedding ring Tabby gave me in 1983, 12 years after we were actually married. I try to tell Fillebrown that I wear it on my right hand because the real wedding ring is still on the third finger of my left - the original two-ring set cost me \$15.95 at Day's Jewelers in Bangor. That first ring only cost eight bucks, in other words, but it seems to have worked.

Some garbled version of this comes out, probably nothing Paul Fillebrown can actually understand, but he keeps nodding and smiling as he cuts that second, more expensive, wedding ring off my swollen right hand. Two months or so later, I call Fillebrown to thank him; by then I understand that he probably saved my life by administering the correct on-scene medical aid and then getting me to the hospital at a speed of roughly 110mph, over patched and bumpy back roads.

Fillebrown assures me that I'm more than welcome, then suggests that perhaps someone was watching out for me. 'I've been doing this for 20 years,' he tells me over the phone, 'and when I saw the way you were lying in the

ditch, plus the extent of the impact injuries, I didn't think you'd make it to the hospital. You're a lucky camper to still be with the program.'

The extent of the impact injuries is such that the doctors at Northern Cumberland Hospital decide they cannot treat me there; someone summons a LifeFlight helicopter to take me to Central Maine Medical Center in Lewiston. At this point my wife, older son, and daughter arrive. The kids are allowed a brief visit; my wife is allowed to stay longer. The doctors have assured her that I'm banged up, but I'll make it.

The lower half of my body has been covered. She isn't allowed to look at the interesting way my lap has shifted around to the right, but she is allowed to wash the blood off my face and pick some of the glass out of my hair. There's a long gash in my scalp, the result of my collision with Bryan Smith's windshield. This impact came at a point less than two inches from the steel, driver's-side support post. Had I struck that, I likely would have been killed or rendered permanently comatose, a vegetable with legs. Had I struck the rocks jutting out of the ground beyond the shoulder of Route 5, I likely also would have been killed or permanently paralysed. I didn't hit them; I was thrown over the van and 14ft in the air, but landed just shy of the rocks. 'You must have pivoted to the left just a little at the last second,' Dr David Brown tells me later. 'If you hadn't, we wouldn't be having this conversation.' The LifeFlight helicopter lands in the parking lot of Northern Cumberland Hospital, and I am wheeled out to it. The sky is very bright, very blue. The clatter of the helicopter's rotors is very loud. Someone shouts into my ear, 'Ever been in a helicopter before, Stephen?' The speaker sounds jolly, all excited for me. I try to answer yes, I've been in a helicopter before - twice, in fact - but I can't. All at once, it's very tough to breathe.

They load me into the helicopter. I can see one brilliant wedge of blue sky as we lift off; not a cloud in it. Beautiful. There are more radio voices. This is my afternoon for hearing voices, it seems. Meanwhile, it's getting even harder to breathe. I gesture at someone, or try to, and a face bends upside down into my field of vision.

'Feel like I'm drowning,' I whisper.

Somebody checks something, and someone else says, 'His lung has collapsed.'

There's a rattle of paper as something is unwrapped, and then the someone else speaks into my ear, loudly so as to be heard over the rotors. 'We're going to put a chest tube in you, Stephen. You'll feel some pain, a little pinch. Hold on.'

It's like being thumped very high up on the right side of the chest by someone holding a short sharp object. Then there's an alarming whistle in my chest, as if I've sprung a leak. In fact, I suppose I have. A moment later, the soft in-out of normal respiration, which I've listened to my whole life (mostly without being aware of it, thank God), has been replaced by an unpleasant shloop-shloop-shloop sound. The air I'm taking in is very cold, but it's air, at least, air, and I keep breathing it. I don't want to die. I love my wife, my kids, my afternoon walks by the lake. I also love to write. I don't want to die, and as I lie in the helicopter looking out at the bright blue summer sky, I realise that I am actually lying in death's doorway. Someone is going to pull me one way or the other pretty soon; it's mostly out of my hands. All I can do is lie there, look at the sky, and listen to my thin, leaky breathing: shloop-shloop-shloop.

Ten minutes later, we set down on the concrete landing pad at CMMC. To me, it seems to be at the bottom of a concrete well. The blue sky is blotted out and the whap-whap-whap of the helicopter rotors becomes magnified and echoey, like the clapping of giant hands.

Still breathing in great leaky gulps, I am lifted out of the helicopter. Someone bumps the stretcher and I scream. 'Sorry, sorry, you're okay, Stephen,' someone says - when you're badly hurt, everyone calls you by your first name, everyone is your pal.

'Tell Tabby I love her very much,' I say as I am first lifted and then wheeled, very fast, down some sort of descending concrete walkway. All at once I feel like crying.

'You can tell her that yourself,' the someone says. We go through a door; there is air-conditioning and lights flowing past overhead. Speakers issue pages. It occurs to me, in a muddled sort of way, that an hour before I was taking a walk and planning to pick some berries in a field that overlooks Lake Kezar. I wouldn't pick for long, though; I'd have to be home by 5.30 because we were all going to the movies. *The General's Daughter*, starring John Travolta. Travolta was in the movie made out of *Carrie*, my first novel. He played the bad guy. That was a long time ago.

'When?' I ask. 'When can I tell her?'

'Soon,' the voice says, and then I pass out again. This time it's no splice but a great big whack taken out of the memory-film; there are a few flashes, confused glimpses of faces and operating rooms and looming X-ray machinery; there are delusions and hallucinations fed by the morphine and Dilaudid being dripped into me; there are echoing voices and hands that reach down to paint my dry lips with swabs that taste of peppermint. Mostly, though, there is darkness.

Bryan Smith's estimate of my injuries turned out to be conservative. My lower leg was broken in at least nine places - the orthopaedic surgeon who put me together again, the formidable David Brown, said that the region below my right knee had been reduced to 'so many marbles in a sock.' The extent of those lower-leg injuries necessitated two deep incisions - they're called medial and lateral fasciotomies - to release the pressure caused by the exploded tibia and also to allow blood to flow back into the lower leg. Without the fasciotomies (or if the fasciotomies had been delayed), it probably would have been necessary to amputate the leg. My right knee itself was split almost directly down the middle; the technical term for the injury is 'comminuted intra-articular tibial fracture'. I also suffered an acetabular cup fracture of the right hip - a serious derailment, in other words - and an open femoral intertrochanteric fracture in the same area. My spine was chipped in

eight places. Four ribs were broken. My right collarbone held, but the flesh above it was stripped raw. The laceration in my scalp took 20 or 30 stitches. Yeah, on the whole, I'd say Bryan Smith was a tad conservative.

Mr Smith's driving behaviour in this case was eventually examined by a grand jury, who indicted him on two counts: driving to endanger (pretty serious) and aggravated assault (very serious, the kind of thing that means jail time). After due consideration, the District Attorney responsible for prosecuting such cases in my little corner of the world allowed Smith to plead out to the lesser charge of driving to endanger. He received six months of county jail time (sentence suspended) and a year's suspension of his privilege to drive. He was also put on probation for a year with restrictions on other motor vehicles, such as snowmobiles and ATVs. It is conceivable that Bryan Smith could be legally back on the road in the fall or winter of 2001.

David Brown put my leg back together in five marathon surgical procedures that left me thin, weak and nearly at the end of my endurance. They also left me with at least a fighting chance to walk again. A large steel and carbon-fibre apparatus called an external fixator was clamped to my leg. Eight large steel pegs called Schanz pins run through the fixator and into the bones above and below my knee. Five smaller steel rods radiate out from the knee. These look sort of like a child's drawing of sunrays. The knee itself was locked in place. I entered the hospital on 19 June. Around the 25th, I got up for the first time, staggering three steps to a commode, where I sat with my hospital johnny in my lap and my head down, trying not to weep and failing. You try to tell yourself that you've been lucky, most incredibly lucky, and usually that works because it's true. Sometimes it doesn't work, that's all. Then you cry.

A day or two after those initial steps, I started physical therapy. During my first session, I managed 10 steps in a downstairs corridor, lurching along with the help of a walker. One other patient was learning to walk again at the same time, a wispy 80-year-old woman named Alice who was recovering from a stroke. We cheered each other on when we had enough breath to do

so. On our third day in the downstairs hall, I told Alice that her slip was showing.

'Your ass is showing, sonnyboy,' she wheezed, and kept going.

I came home to Bangor on 9 July, after a hospital stay of three weeks. I began a daily rehab program which includes stretching, bending, and crutch-walking. I tried to keep my courage and my spirits up. On 4 August, I went back to CMMC for another operation. When I woke up this time, the Schanz pins in my upper thigh were gone. I could bend my knee again. Dr Brown pronounced my recovery 'on course' and sent me home for more rehab and physical therapy. And in the midst of all this, something else happened. On 24 July, five weeks after Bryan Smith hit me with his Dodge van, I began to write again.

Carrie: **the bestseller I threw** **in the bin**

Stephen King

The Observer
Extracted from *On Writing*
September 17, 2000

My wife made a crucial difference during those two years I spent teaching at Hampden. If she had suggested that the time I spent writing stories was wasted time, I think a lot of the heart would have gone out of me.

Two unrelated ideas, adolescent cruelty and telekinesis, came together, and I had an idea. The story remained on the back burner for a while, and I had started my teaching career before I sat down one night to give it a shot.

I did three single-spaced pages of a first draft, then crumpled them up in disgust and threw them away.

The next night, when I came home from school, Tabby had the pages. She'd spied them while emptying my waste-basket, had shaken the cigarette ashes off the crumpled balls of paper, smoothed them out, and sat down to read them. She wanted me to go on with it, she said. She wanted to know the rest of the story. I told her I didn't know jack-shit about high school girls. She said she'd help me with that part. She was smiling in that severely cute way of hers. 'You've got something here,' she said. 'I really think you do.'

The manuscript of Carrie went off to Doubleday, where I had made a friend named William Thompson. I pretty much forgot about it and moved on with my life - teaching school, raising kids, loving my wife, getting drunk on Friday afternoons, and writing stories. My free period that semester was five, right after lunch. I usually spent it in the teachers' room, grading papers and wishing I could stretch out on the couch and take a nap. The intercom came on. I had a phone call. My wife, sounding out of breath, but deliriously happy, read me a telegram. Bill Thompson (who would later go on to discover a Mississippi scribbler named John Grisham) had sent it after trying to call and discovering the Kings no longer had a

phone. 'Congratulations,' it read. 'Carrie officially a Doubleday book. Is \$2,500 advance OK? The future lies ahead. Love, Bill.'

We spent the advance on a new car and I signed a teaching contract for the 1973-4 academic year. Carrie had fallen off my radar screen almost completely. Then one Sunday, I got a call from Bill Thompson at Doubleday.

'Are you sitting down?' Bill asked.

'No,' I said. Our phone hung on the kitchen wall. 'Do I need to?' 'You might,' he said. 'The paperback rights to Carrie went to Signet Books for \$400,000.'

I was completely speechless. Bill asked if I was still there, kind of laughing as he said it. He knew I was.

When the conversation was over, I tried to call Tabby at her mother's. Her youngest sister, Marcella, said Tab had already left. I walked back and forth through the apartment, shaking all over. At last I pulled on my shoes and walked downtown. The only store that was open on Bangor's Main Street was the LaVerdiere's Drug. I suddenly felt that I had to buy Tabby a Mother's Day present, something wild and extravagant. I tried, but here's one of life's true facts: there's nothing really wild and extravagant for sale at LaVerdiere's. I did the best I could.

I got her a hairdryer.

When I got back home she was in the kitchen, unpacking the baby bags and singing along with the radio. I gave her the hairdryer. She looked at it as if she'd never seen one before. 'What's this for?' she asked.

I took her by the shoulders. I told her about the paperback sale. She didn't appear to understand. I told her again. Tabby looked over my shoulder at our shitty little four-room apartment, just as I had, and began to cry.

And Furthermore, Part II: A Booklist

Stephen King

The Observer
Extracted from *On Writing*
September 17, 2000

When I talk about writing, I usually offer my audiences an abbreviated version of the "On Writing" section which forms the second half of this book. That includes the Prime Rule, of course: Write a lot and read a lot. In the Q-and-A period which follows, someone invariably asks: "What do you read?"

I've never given a very satisfactory answer to that question, because it causes a kind of circuit overload in my brain. The easy answer-"Everything I can get my hands on"-is true enough, but not helpful. The list that follows provides a more specific answer to that question. These are the best books I've read over the last three or four years, the period during which I wrote *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *On Writing*, and the as-yet-unpublished *From a Buick Eight*. In some way or other, I suspect each book in the list had an influence on the books I wrote.

As you scan this list, please remember that I'm not Oprah and this isn't my book club. These are the ones that worked for me, that's all. But you could do worse, and a good many of these might show you some new ways of doing your work. Even if they don't, they're apt to entertain you. They certainly entertained me.

Abrahams, Peter: *A Perfect Crime*
Abrahams, Peter: *Lights Out*
Abrahams, Peter: *Pressure Drop*
Abrahams, Peter: *Revolution #9*
Agee, James: *A Death in the Family*
Bakis, Kirsten: *Lives of the Monster Dogs*
Barker, Pat: *Regeneration*
Barker, Pat: *The Eye in the Door*
Barker, Pat: *The Ghost Road*
Bausch, Richard: *In the Night Season*
Blauner, Peter: *The Intruder*
Bowles, Paul: *The Sheltering Sky*
Boyle, T. Coraghessan: *The Tortilla Curtain*
Bryson, Bill: *A Walk in the Woods*

Buckley, Christopher: Thank You for Smoking
Carver, Raymond: Where I'm Calling From
Chabon, Michael: Werewolves in Their Youth
Chorlton, Windsor: Latitude Zero
Connelly, Michael: The Poet
Conrad, Joseph: Heart of Darkness
Constantine, K. C.: Family Values
DeLillo, Don: Underworld
DeMille, Nelson: Cathedral
DeMille, Nelson: The Gold Coast
Dickens, Charles: Oliver Twist
Dobyns, Stephen: Common Carnage
Dobyns, Stephen: The Church of Dead Girls
Doyle, Roddy: The Woman Who Walked into Doors
Elkin, Stanley: The Dick Gibson Show
Faulkner, William: As I Lay Dying
Garland, Alex: The Beach
George, Elizabeth: Deception on His Mind
Gerritsen, Tess: Gravity
Golding, William: Lord of the Flies
Gray, Muriel: Furnace
Greene, Graham: A Gun for Sale (aka This Gun for Hire)
Greene, Graham: Our Man in Havana
Halberstam, David: The Fifties
Hamill, Pete: Why Sinatra Matters
Harris, Thomas: Hannibal
Haruf, Kent: Plainsong
Hoeg, Peter: Smilla's Sense of Snow
Hunter, Stephen: Dirty White Boys
Ignatius, David: A Firing Offense
Irving, John: A Widow for One Year
Joyce, Graham: The Tooth Fairy
Judd, Alan: The Devil's Own Work
Kahn, Roger: Good Enough to Dream
Karr, Mary: The Liars' Club
Ketchum, Jack: Right to Life

King, Tabitha: Survivor
King, Tabitha: The Sky in the Water (unpublished)
Kingsolver, Barbara: The Poisonwood Bible
Krakauer, Jon: Into Thin Air
Lee, Harper: To Kill a Mockingbird
Lefkowitz, Bernard: Our Guys
Little, Bentley: The Ignored
Maclean, Norman: A River Runs Through It and Other Stories
Maugham, W. Somerset: The Moon and Sixpence
McCarthy, Cormac: Cities of the Plain
McCarthy, Cormac: The Crossing
McCourt, Frank: Angela's Ashes
McDermott, Alice: Charming Billy
McDevitt, Jack: Ancient Shores
McEwan, Ian: Enduring Love
McEwan, Ian: The Cement Garden
McMurtry, Larry: Dead Man's Walk
McMurtry, Larry, and Diana Ossana: Zeke and Ned
Miller, Walter M.: A Canticle for Leibowitz
Oates, Joyce Carol: Zombie
O'Brien, Tim: In the Lake of the Woods
O'Nan, Stewart: The Speed Queen
Ondaatje, Michael: The English Patient
Patterson, Richard North: No Safe Place
Price, Richard: Freedomland
Proulx, Annie: Close Range: Wyoming Stories
Proulx, Annie: The Shipping News
Quindlen, Anna: One True Thing
Rendell, Ruth: A Sight for Sore Eyes
Robinson, Frank M.: Waiting
Rowling, J. K.: Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets
Rowling, J. K.: Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban
Rowling, J. K.: Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone
Russo, Richard: Mohawk
Schwartz, John Burnham: Reservation Road
Seth, Vikram: A Suitable Boy

Shaw, Irwin: The Young Lions
Slotkin, Richard: The Crater
Smith, Dinitia: The Illusionist
Spencer, Scott: Men in Black
Stegner, Wallace: Joe Hill
Tartt, Donna: The Secret History
Tyler, Anne: A Patchwork Planet
Vonnegut, Kurt: Hocus Pocus
Waugh, Evelyn: Brideshead Revisited
Westlake, Donald E.: The Ax

The early years...

Stephen King

The Observer
Extracted from *On Writing*
September 17, 2000

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

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

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

I did as she suggested, entering the College of Education at the University of Maine and emerging four years later with a teacher's certificate... sort of like a Golden Retriever emerging from a pond with a dead duck in its jaws. It was dead, all right. I couldn't find a teaching job and so went to work at New Franklin Laundry for wages not much higher than those I had been making at Worumbo Mills and Weaving four years before. I was keeping my family in a series of garrets which overlooked not the Seine but some of Bangor's less appetising streets.

I never saw personal laundry at New Franklin unless it was a 'fire order' being paid for by an insurance company (most fire orders consisted of clothes that looked OK, but smelled like barbecued monkeymeat). The greater part of what I loaded and pulled ¼ » were motel sheets from Maine's coastal towns and table linen from Maine's coastal restaurants. The table linen was desperately nasty. When tourists go out to dinner in Maine, they usually want clams and lobster. Mostly lobster. By the time the tablecloths upon which these delicacies had been served reached me, they stank to high heaven and were often boiling with maggots.

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

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

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

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

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

Harry had hooks instead of hands as a result of a tumble into the sheet-mangler during the Second World War (he was dusting the beams above the machine and fell off). A comedian at heart, he would sometimes duck into the bathroom and run water from the cold tap over one hook and water from the hot tap over the other. Then he'd sneak up behind you while you were loading laundry and lay the steel hooks on the back of your neck. Rocky and I spent a fair amount of time speculating on how Harry accomplished certain bathroom clean-up activities. 'Well,' Rocky

said one day while we were drinking our lunch in his car, 'at least he doesn't need to wash his hands.'

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

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

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

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

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