

In the distance the sound of sirens grew.

Trickman swore. 'The cops. Took them long enough.'

They stood in a circle around the Thing on the floor.

'Burn it,' the Professor said.

The red beams converged on the Thing, charring it, reducing it to fragments. Tommy stood to one side, staring. Something twisted inside him to see it. It was always this way. What was wrong with him? Was he really sorry to see one of the Things get blasted?

The Professor said, 'Power off.'

He kicked over the fragments. 'That's enough. The rest will turn to powder once daylight hits them.'

They shouldered their guns and moved away. Tommy stared down at the blackened, smoking remains.

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- II. Black Spear Tamer
- III. Black Spear Rulers
- IV. Black Spear Betrayer

'You see, I enjoy it. You will, too.'

Crawlspace

by asotir

Eartherea Books



Here and Beyond



Eartherea Books

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Two Weeks Ago

The Man in the Motel

Water was swirling down a white porcelain sink. Drops of red blood were spilling down the drain. The movement seemed oddly distorted, unnatural.

A moth was fluttering around a bare bulb on the wall, beating against it.

In the sink, two hands were washing themselves of blood. The hands were a man's hands, the fingers long and dancing with an odd rapidity, a delicacy, a precision. There was something unnatural about the fingers and the way their joints moved.

The hands were reaching for a white towel and drying themselves, leaving bloody stains on the cotton.

The man was leaving the bathroom and moving into the bedroom of a small, cheap motel room. The TV was on; a lamp was burning at the foot of the bed. The man was shaking his hands dry. Young, handsome, flushed. But there was something about his eyes.

They weren't quite sane. Not quite human.

A woman's body was lying on the bed. It was naked and mutilated. Half of it had been torn away. The torso seemed crumpled up on itself. Blood was everywhere.

From somewhere else a whistling sound was rising.

The moth was beating its wings against the bulb.

The whistling was growing louder, turning into the scream of a train—

It started to go dark. The train whistle seemed to blur and dim the picture. For a second he didn't know who he was or where. Was he the killer in the motel room? Was he the moth dreaming of the killer? Was he the killer dreaming of the moth?

Then something came to him – a word – a name: Tommy. That sounded right. Tommy. His name was Tommy.

And with that knowledge, Tommy lost the dream of the motel room and the killer. It slipped off a cliff in the cold, wide dark, and tumbled down like a bright window, smaller and farther until it was gone.

It felt like he was sitting somewhere. Somewhere cold. He smelled cigarette smoke. He heard the sound of traffic. It felt like he was leaning against something hard.

I'll open my eyes in a second, he thought. I'll wake up and look around and find out where I am.

Tommy opened his eyes.

The train whistle shifted and died into the distance. He found he was sitting in the rear seat of a van. The van was the fifteen-year-old Dodge mini-van that they were using out here. It was parked at the edge of the street between the train tracks and the town.

At the wheel sat a man in his 20's, good-looking, well groomed. A real dude. He was the one they all called him Styles. Another man, a man in his 50's with a strong face, climbed out of the car. They called him the Professor.

The Professor checked his watch. 'All right. It's time.'

Another man got out of the van. 'Right, Professor,' he said, and walked across the street toward a motel. He was in his 30's, a fat hairball in ketchup stains. They called him Trickman.

Styles folded his newspaper and stepped out of the van. He headed for the motel coffee shop. Another man, tall, gangly, awkward, 40's, moved to join Trickman. What did they call him? Oh yeah, Papers.

Tommy slid over and got out behind Papers. In the van's window he could see his reflection, dark and distorted, but clear enough to tell he was skinny and about 15 years old. That felt right too.

The Professor gave him a look. 'Watch the car, Tommy. We'll call you when we're ready.'

The Professor joined Papers and Trickman. They moved together like a veteran commando unit. Tommy slumped back against the van and watched them go.

Even from across the street, he could smell the stink. And he was starting to feel it again, too, the prickling all up and down his skin.

The motel across the street must be the one from his dream. The killer must be in one of those rooms.

Papers joined Trickman at the door to room No. 6.

Tommy looked back to the coffee shop. Through the shop windows he saw Styles walk in and sit on a stool by the pay phone and the door. That way nobody could come in or get out without going by him.

Outside Room No. 6, Trickman pulled a long metal blade from his coat. He slipped the bar into the door jamb.

The Professor moved between cars.

Tommy felt restless. The stink and the prickling wouldn't let him alone. He paced by the van. 'Watch the car, Tommy,' he told himself. 'Just watch the car. You're just a kid. So just watch the car.'

He looked back. Trickman was working the metal blade. Suddenly gunfire blasted from inside No. 6. Papers and Trickman ducked and the door smashed open. The Man in the Motel kicked the door aside and fired shots all over the place and scuttled with unbelievable speed into his car. The car fired up burned rubber and screeched off.

By the door Trickman and Papers recovered. They signaled they were okay.

The Professor gestured from the sidewalk. 'Tommy!' 'Coming.'

Inside the diner, the customers crowded by the window, pointing.

One said, 'Holy Jesus, what the heck was that?'

'It isn't my room is it?'

From a third, 'Gang stuff. I thought all that gang stuff only happened in Los Angeles.'

'My room's at the end. It isn't my room is it?'

'It's not just LA. Believe me, lady, I heard stories. It's all over. Something weird's been going on.'

'It's only the depression, people losing their heads, is all.'

'No. Worse than that. I heard stories. I told you.'

The first one shook his head. 'What the heck is going on out there?'

Styles stood beside the old pay phone and watched them.

He moved outside and looked up and down the street.

Tommy reached the kicked-open door to room No. 6 and peeked inside.

Trickman and Papers were searching the room.

Papers said, 'There's some, some here, Trickman.'

Trickman frowned. 'No, Papers – not enough of it—'

Tommy pulled back from the door. The sight was gruesome but it wasn't the blood or the corpse that upset him. It was the smell – the strange, sickening stench that only he could smell. The prickling grew worse, like a thousand ants crawling and stinging under his skin, with a flush like heat, making him sweat. It was always like this when he was close to where something like the young man had been. Sometimes lately it was getting too much for him. He felt like he was about to puke, like his stomach was about to turn inside-out.

He took hold on the door jamb and forced himself back. The other guys on the Team were absorbed in their search. Not even the Professor glanced back at Tommy. Tommy hung onto the door jamb and made himself look inside the room. His skin was on fire and the stink almost made him pass out.

The woman's dead body stared at the ceiling. The Professor pulled a bloody sheet to cover her. He checked his watch. 'Two minutes. Another three before the police are going to be here. We need a smear, Papers!'

'It's too cuh, clean. This one was care, careful.'

Trickman growled. 'Fucking Crawlers!'

The Professor's cellphone chirped. He flipped it to his ear. 'Styles?'

Out in the lot, Styles was on his cell, listening. He kept one eye on the customers inside the coffee shop. From far away came the whine of sirens.

'Professor. They're on their way.'

* * *

The Professor glared at his watch. 'Right. One minute, no more. Come on, guys.'

Trickman rushed about, scattering everything his hands flip through. 'Okay okay okay okay!'

Papers called out, 'Something here – under the buh, bed.'

The Professor moved to the bed. 'Trickman, get the door. Is it enough for a smear, Papers?'

'Not, not too much.'

'Okay, Tommy?'

Trickman stood to at the door. He slid his hand inside his coat.

Tommy shook his head. The sweat was in his eyes, stinging. But somehow he could stand it better now. He unbuttoned his shirt. 'I'm ready, Professor.'

Papers emerged from under the bed holding a slide. There was a strange, sticky Jelly on it. The Jelly was grayish-green. It didn't look healthy. The Professor snapped open a leather pocket case and took out a modified hypodermic needle.

Papers scraped the Jelly into the needle.

The Professor said, 'Almost out of time.' He diluted the Jelly with some cloudy liquid from a vial he took from the leather case.

Tommy gritted his teeth. This was the bad part. As bad as the rest of it was, this was always the worst. He looked into the Professor's eyes. He nodded. 'Give it to me.'

The Professor tightened the needle and a drop of the stuff oozed from the tip. He swabbed Tommy's bare chest and jabbed the needle in. Tommy's teeth locked – his eyes shut – his head snapped back—

The voice of the Professor came to him from far away: 'Dose twenty-three,' it said. Then Papers said something Tommy couldn't catch.

Tommy wasn't in the motel anymore. He was ... somewhere else. Green black orange red flashed all around him, hot cold ice grease cascaded over his body. Then a sort of order emerged.

Streetlights – telephone poles – moonlight – a RIVER–

Outside the Motel, two Police cruisers screeched to a halt.

Styles strolled away from the coffee shop. He crossed the street to the van.

Two cops, guns drawn, converged on the motel. The motel manager was standing in front of the office. He was in his pajamas, about 50, balding, fat. He gestured.

‘It was over there – room six!’

Styles slipped into the Dodge. He eased her into gear and pulled around back of the motel.

The Professor held Tommy in his arms. Tommy was rigid, shaking, in a seizure.

The Professor said, ‘Tommy! Tommy, can you hear me? Do you have enough? Did you get a Trace? Is it all right?’

Trickman looked back from the door. ‘Getting kind of hot outside, Professor.’

Papers said, ‘Got to go—’

‘Not without Tommy!’ the Professor snapped.

He pulled the needle out of Tommy’s skin, leaving a small red wound. Tommy collapsed in the Professor’s arms.

Trickman eased back from the door. He drew a gun out of his coat.

‘They’re here,’ he said gently.

The cops converged on the door to No 6, guns ready. They signaled each other – moved forward – barged into Room No. 6—

But it was empty.

In the alley behind the motel, Trickman squeezed his huge haunches out through the bathroom window. He grunted and swore.

‘Blasted – tiny – motel – windows – ugh!’

He gave a last twist and fell with a grunt from the window. He piled into the front of the Dodge and Styles gunned it as the cops’ faces appeared in the bathroom window.

The Dodge barreled down a flat country road, dead-empty in the night.

Styles drove. Trickman rode shotgun. In the back seat Tommy slumped between the Professor and Papers.

Trickman rummaged through some fast food bags behind the front seat. 'I think we're clear. Any of those donuts left back there?'

Styles groaned. 'Give it a rest, Trickman. Didn't your little tango with the bathroom window give you a hint?'

The Professor flashed a penlight into Tommy's eyes. 'Tommy, did you get enough of a flash on it? Where did it go? Where's its lair?'

Tommy's eyes wandered across the ceiling. He still seemed out of it.

He said, 'There was a river ... I think...'

His eyes rolled back in his head. He lost sight of the car and the Team. He couldn't hear the car engine. He heard something else instead. Soft and rhythmic, like the lapping of water along a lake or riverbank...

The Professor's voice came from far away.

'Tommy. Can you hear me?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Where are you now? What can you see?'

Moonlight was gleaming off the river. A long low building was standing on one bank. Its windows were dark and broken. One light was burning.

'I see a river ... a warehouse...'

'Is it up ahead, Tommy? Are we on the right road?'

Now he was looking down on the warehouse and the river.

'It's way off the main road.'

He was drifting high over the drive. It was cracked and weedy and broken in stretches of bare dirt. It looked like the warehouse had been abandoned a long time ago.

Higher he went, higher still. He could see a long way up and down the river. There was a lamp on the telephone pole where the drive hooked into the main road. A long, long way off, a tiny point of light was moving along the road.

‘Tommy. Tell me what you see.’

‘Professor, I see a car coming. I think it’s us. Yeah. We’re on the right road. About a mile up, I guess. Tell Styles the drive is on the left.’

The headlights came closer and the dream leaped to meet them. When the van turned onto the warehouse drive Tommy could see inside it. He saw himself lying in the back seat. His head was thrown back and his eyes were closed. He looked like he was hurting.

And just like that he lost the dream and sank back in pain and darkness, inside himself once more.

‘Tommy,’ said the Professor. He felt hands shaking him. ‘Tommy. Don’t quit now. What’s he doing? What’s inside the warehouse?’

The sick, hot taste of the Jelly was in his mouth. He felt like he was burning up with fever. With an effort he tore out of himself again.

Down the warehouse drive, faster than the van – to the warehouse – to the one bright window—

Inside the warehouse office, the Man from the Motel was stuffing various items into a metal box. Something about the way he was moving seemed unnatural. Something about the way everything was moving seemed unnatural.

All at once the Man from the Motel stopped. He was cocking his head and listening.

But all Tommy could hear was Trickman’s voice from the front seat. ‘Slow down, dude. No reason to let him know we’re here.’

‘Too late,’ Tommy moaned.

The Man from the Motel was already walking to the window, moving with delicate, unnatural speed. He was looking out through the corner of the window.

Through the window, Tommy saw the Dodge pull up, stop, and kill its lights. At the same time he heard the crunch of the tires

braking and the soft rumble die when Styles killed the motor.

In the warehouse office, the Man from the Motel was already back beside the desk. He was snapping off the desk lamp. Darkness was ... *flowing* ... back into the office, like a sluggish, syrupy flood.

Something seized Tommy. It gripped at his chest like a big iron vise.

The darkness was rising up to the ceiling of the warehouse office and everything was going.

For a second he didn't know who he was or where. Was he the killer in the warehouse office? Was he the sick kid in the van? Was he one of the things that crept and crawled all over the riverbank?

Then something came to him – a word – a name: Tommy. That sounded right. Tommy. His name was Tommy.

It felt like he was sitting somewhere. Somewhere cold. He smelled cigarette smoke. He heard the sound of a river.

He felt cold air on the back of his neck. Then he heard metal sounds and voices outside.

I'll open my eyes in a second, he thought. I'll wake up and look around and find out where I am.

He opened his eyes.

It was night. The Dodge was parked on a broken concrete drive in the long rank grass by a river. The concrete had weeds springing up through the cracks. It was the way he'd imagined it. At the end of the concrete stood the warehouse from his dream.

The Professor appeared in the open door. He felt Tommy's wrist. 'Welcome back.'

Tommy managed a weak smile.

'Pulse strengthening. Want to sit this one out?'

Tommy shook his head. He didn't trust himself to say anything yet. Dose twenty-three had been a bad one – he didn't want to let on yet just how bad. The foul hot taste was still in his mouth, like he'd licked the dirty floor in front of a furnace.

He tried to climb out of the van. The Professor gave him a hand down.

Behind him the other members of the Team stood behind the Dodge. They held strange guns in their hands – things that looked like paint guns only with bulbs or nozzles instead of barrels. Burners, the special guns they used.

‘One to a customer,’ said Trickman.

Styles eyed the one he held with disdain. ‘I trust the tanks are full this time.’

‘Just don’t get your suit dirty, pal.’

Trickman cocked a lever on his Burner. ‘Showtime, boys.’

The big outer doors to the warehouse banged open. Flashlights stabbed the dark. The Team stood in the opening, ready for anything.

‘Tommy, how many are there? Could you tell?’

Tommy peered into the darkness. He felt better now. But the stink and the prickles, were bad here. This place was a meeting-point for the Crawlers. Lots of them used this place. How many were here now? Not that many. He could tell from the stink. It was mostly stale. Only one whiff of it was fresh. Probably from the killer of his dreams.

‘Only one,’ he said at last. ‘Only the one from the motel.’

‘Right. No civilians involved,’ the Professor said. ‘So if it’s here, it’s alone – or with others of its kind.’

Trickman hawked and spat on the wall. ‘Right. So shoot first and think later. Kansas City all over again.’

‘Trickman, Styles, you know what to do. Papers, let’s see if we can find blueprints, a floor plan, in the office.’

Tommy leaned against the side of the door. The others were already moving away from him. ‘I can help.’

The Professor gave him the kindly-father look again. He shook his head. ‘Watch the car, Tommy.’

Trickman and Styles moved off into the dark. Papers and the Professor headed toward the office. Tommy stood alone at the door.

‘Sure. Watch the car. I can do that. I got that.’

From the belly of the warehouse came faint sounds – steel echoes, gravel crunch, water splash. He thought he could sense where the fresh whiff was coming from. Tommy shook his head.

‘I gotta do something.’

He moved off on his own, into the dark.

* * *

In the warehouse office, the Professor turned on the desk lamp. The office contained a chairs, file cabinet, old leather couch. A small lavatory opened at one end.

Papers grimaced. 'Puh, pretty shabby.'

'Dirty, like everything the things touch,' the Professor said. 'Let's find those plans.'

Trickman moved to the right down the main floor, gun ready. The warehouse was a forest of machinery, trash, and broken parts.

Styles moved to the left, and cocked his gun under a steel girder. He brushed off his shoulder. The girder left rust marks on it.

'Shit,' he muttered.

Tommy heard the exasperation in Styles' voice from across the warehouse space. The sound echoed and threaded everywhere. He came to a halt against a concrete pillar and shut his eyes. Listening. Smelling for the one fresh ugly whiff of the killer.

There it was. He opened his eyes. Looked straight up.

The Team's flashlight beams swept over the girders and conveyors. They flashed over a conveyor belt just where Tommy was looking.

The Man from the Motel crouched on the belt in the light of two beams. His hand gripped a lever.

Styles' voice shouted, 'Trickman! Over here!'

The Man from the Motel jerked the lever. Lights flashed on – the machinery banged to life – conveyors turned. The warehouse came alive.

Trickman bellowed, 'Coming!'

The Man from the Motel scuttled onto the conveyor belt – it tore him away beyond the light into darkness. Tommy followed him by smell. He saw the muzzle-flashes from the pistol firing down at them.

Off to the left, Styles ducked behind the girder. Bullets panged off the steel.

Tommy moved slowly through the storage space, picking through the broken glass and discarded objects. He was follow-

ing the smell. He knew he was on the right path. The prickling was painful now.

On the wall beside him was a steel ladder. One of the rungs was gooey with Jelly. Tommy shouldered his Burner and started up.

More shots flashed from the conveyor belt.

Trickman opened up his Burner and a red beam burst out of the muzzle. It caught the conveyor belt – scattering sparks and flames and bits of molten metal.

The Man from the Motel rolled off the conveyor belt, caught a steel support column and raced up it like a giant cockroach.

In the office, the Professor and Papers checked a blueprint.

Papers gestured. 'There. You see?'

The Professor nodded. 'It can get out there.'

'Th-that's right, Professor.'

'Once it gains the river we'll never catch it. Come on!'

They raced out of the office into the main floor. The Professor shouted, 'Styles! Trickman!'

Tommy reached the top of the ladder. High under the ceiling a catwalk stretched around the perimeter of the building. At one end a skylight opened onto the roof. Tommy got up on the catwalk and started toward the skylight.

But something dark moved into his way:

The Man from the Motel.

The Man from the Motel raised his gun. Tommy cocked the lever of his Burner and aimed. He glanced down below.

Far below, the other members of the Team were climbing the ladders. He could see them all. They could see him too.

'Shoot, Tommy – shoot!' the Professor shouted.

The Man from the Motel halted. Tommy stood in front of the skylight. The killer locked eyes with him. Tommy's finger tightened on the trigger. But he didn't fire.

The Man from the Motel stepped forward. His mouth opened as if to speak – when a red ray splayed across him.

Hanging from the ladder, Trickman blazed his Burner like a blast furnace.

'Hang on, Tommy!'

The beam sparked on the catwalk. The Man from the Motel burst in flames – raged and struggled – began to *Change*:

Bumps rippled under his skin – tentacles burst out of his sides – his head melded with his trunk and his legs fused and his skin roughened like bark, oozing with Jelly, and his body closed into beetle like plates – its bulbous black insect eyes glaring at Tommy as it burned—

— and the catwalk split and fell and Tommy held on but the Thing fell down, all the way down to the concrete floor.

Tommy twisted on the catwalk, dangling, staring down. The stink had become a burning smell but it was cleansed of whatever was worst in it. The prickling was gone. It had snapped off like an electric light.

Above Tommy, the Professor stood on the catwalk. He reached down and took Tommy's hand and pulled him up to safety.

On the concrete floor, the Thing was a broken, smoking mess. The Team gathered round it.

Styles patted Tommy on his shoulder. 'You all right, Tommy?'

'Jeez, that was a gutsy thing to do.' The admiration in Trickman's voice made Tommy feel good.

But the Professor shook his head. 'No. It was reckless and foolish.'

Tommy felt the good feeling collapse out of him.

'Wh, what happened?' Papers asked.

'Yeah, pal,' said Trickman, 'why didn't you blast the Thing?'

'You had Trickman scared shitless!' Styles laughed at Trickman's glare.

Tommy didn't know what to say. Why hadn't he fired? He had to say something. The Professor was looking at him. 'It wouldn't work. My Burner. It – it jammed or something.'

'Probably nothing in the tank – again,' said Styles. He took Tommy's Burner and toyed with it.

Trickman glared at him. 'Are you ever going to get Duluth out of your mind?'

Styles worked the levers of the gun. Suddenly it came on and a red beam flashed across Trickman's coat.

'Shit! Power off! *Power off!*' Trickman bellowed, dancing backward.

Styles snapped off the Burner. 'Sorry.'

'Damn fool *dude!*' Trickman said. He looked down at the skirt of his coat and struck it, damping the smolder. 'Don't you know? *Never point that thing at anybody human!*'

'One Burn and you're done for,' the Professor said. 'Remember that. Even a slight singe in your flesh, the ray will go on working. It'll end up eating through you.'

'And,' Papers said, 'there, there is no known cuh, cure.'

Styles shrugged. He handed the gun to Trickman. 'At least it seems to be full – this time.'

Trickman snatched the gun and jammed its levers. 'Goddamn ignorant *dude,*' he muttered.

The Professor said, 'Cut it. Papers. Get your kit.'

Papers knelt beside the Thing and unrolled a pack of surgical instruments. He chose one and began slicing through the beetle plates, into through the membrane sacs underneath.

Styles gagged.

Trickman grinned. 'I could go for some good barbecue about now.'

Out of the body cavity spilled hundreds of small pearly eggs.

'Shit,' said Styles. 'This one was ready to pop!'

'I've never seen a Cuh, Crawler so fully developed.' Papers sealed the largest in a plastic bag.

The Professor took it. 'One for Central. We'll burn the rest.'

In the distance the sound of sirens grew.

Trickman swore. 'The cops. Took them long enough.'

The Professor checked his watch, nodded. 'Make a ring.'

They stood in a circle around the Thing on the floor.

'Burn it,' the Professor said.

The red beams converged on the Thing, charring it, reducing it to fragments. Tommy stood to one side, staring. Something twisted inside him to see it. It was always this way. What was wrong with him? Was he really sorry to see one of the Things get blasted?

The Professor said, 'Power off.'

He kicked over the fragments. 'That's enough. The rest will turn to powder once daylight hits them.'

They shouldered their guns and moved away. Tommy stared down at the blackened, smoking remains.

'Tommy!'

Tommy looked at the Professor.

‘Come on, son.’

Tommy nodded. He tried to laugh but the sound came out like he was strangling and he knew he better cut it out on account of the look the Professor was giving him.

They walked outside into the predawn light. They piled into the Dodge and Styles revved the engine and started backing out, tires spraying dirt.

In the back seat Tommy closed his eyes and felt himself drifting away, back inside the warehouse far behind.

Through one open, broken window, the dawn was shining down upon the remnants of the Thing. The sirens’ screams were growing louder. Smoke was flushing from the remnants, and they were crumbling into powder and leaving only the scorch marks of the Burners on the concrete. . .

Thursday – May 12

11:36 a.m.
Crossroads

‘Tuh, Tommy.’

He was being shaken. He woke up from a dream, a wild dream he instantly forgot and wanted back. What had he been doing in the dream?

‘Tommy, wa, wake up. We’re here.’

He opened his eyes. Papers was leaning over him. He pushed Papers back. ‘Off!’ – and the nervous little man fell back half out of the van. Tommy sat up and looked out the window.

Outside was nothing but flat prairie and cornfields. The Dodge was pulled up at a crossroads. Across the road a beat-up old Ford station wagon waited. The man in suit and sunglasses leaned against it.

Tommy never knew what to call him. He was the same and different every time – that is, it was never the same man, but they all dressed the same and Tommy could never tell them apart. Who knew, maybe it was the same guy all the time. The Professor just called him the Man from Central.

The Team got out of the Dodge and stretched their legs. Tommy did, too, but what he really wanted was to go back to sleep and get the dream back. Only he still couldn’t remember what it was.

The Professor walked to the Ford. A grin stretched the thin lips of the Man from Central.

‘Afternoon, Professor. Got anything for me?’

The Professor handed him the bag with the egg.

The Man from Central glanced inside. ‘Nice one.’

‘There were hundreds of them in this one.’

‘That time of year again, huh?’

The Man from Central tossed the Professor a bunch of car keys.

‘She’s tanked up. I’ll take the Dodge.’

‘Where do we go next? Any reports?’

The Man from Central opened the Dodge. Flashed a smile like a used-car salesman.

‘Isn’t that what you got the kid for? Try up North. Exit 702. A little place name of Briggsville. Seems like they got enough going on there to keep you boys busy for a year. Happy hunting.’

The Ford rambled up the lanes. Styles was driving and he had his Italian leather driving gloves on. Trickman was telling Styles to slow down, but Styles seemed intent on pushing the Ford as fast as he could make it go.

‘I thought you were the ace gadget-man, don’t you know Central mods all these wrecks? Get out of my way, I’m going to etch rubber all down the road!’

Trickman turned back. ‘Professor, can’t you do anything with this damn dude?’

‘Just don’t get us pulled over, Styles.’

‘Professor, they won’t even see us, I’ll be going so fast. Just a blur, kids, just a blur.’

Tommy pulled his ball cap down over his eyes and curled over against the door. He just wanted to sleep and forget all the bickering. But he couldn’t sleep.

In the back of his mind he smelled the Crawler stink again, and felt the prickling. Sometimes he wondered how it was that the other guys on the Team couldn’t smell the stink or even feel the prickly sensation when a Thing was near. It was almost unbearable to Tommy. With him it was like a toothache; he had to rub it and make it hurt every now and then. Like scratching an itch. He had to close his eyes and smell deep, feel his skin, check if a Crawler was anywhere around.

But he couldn’t sense any of the Things in the open empty farmland they drove through.

A long time later, Tommy sat up and stretched. The sun was lower in the sky. He must’ve slept again. No dreams though.

The Professor jotted notes in a small leather journal. Papers pecked a laptop computer perched on his bony knees.

Trickman slurped the end of a chocolate shake. He hunted through the discarded wrappers on the seat, retrieved a french fry bag and salvaged the last fry. 'Ah, the gold of the gods.'

Styles groaned. 'You're disgusting, you know that?'

Trickman leaned over close to Styles. 'Come here. Listen.' He put his face up to Styles' ear and belched. 'Ah, good one!'

Styles pushed him back. 'You pig.'

Trickman laughed. 'Hey Tommy. You catch that one, pal?'

Tommy didn't answer. He leaned his head back. He looked out the window. The miles blurred past.

All of a sudden, there it was:

EXIT 702
BRIGGSVILLE

'Slow down, you're gonna miss it, dude!'

'Miss this, slobbo.'

Styles jerked the wheel and the Ford squealed across the lanes onto the off-ramp.

The off-ramp curled to the bad end of a small town. Up atop a steep rise sat the *Bright Dayz Motel*.

The Ford pulled into the motor-port.

3:12 p.m.
Bright Dayz Motel

In the motel parking lot Styles was waxing the Ford. He stepped back and admired the job he'd done. He took the rag and went into room No. 8.

Inside Room No. 8 Trickman squatted over the pieces of Tommy's Burner. He popped M&M's and scowled.

'You fix that piece of crap yet?' Styles asked.

Trickman grunted. 'Go back and clean the ash trays.'

'Just make sure that this works next time. I don't want Tommy getting gutted just because your paint gun won't paint.'

'Was that some kind of a crack?'

Next door in Room No. 9, a fly was trapped in the corner of the window. Tommy watched it. Out the window stretched a grassy lot with a bent tree and the Interstate below. Lazy daytime traffic passed.

Tommy looked over his shoulder. Behind him the TV showed a basketball playoff game. 'Professor? What town are we in?'

'Hm. Briggsville, it says.'

'Oh.'

'Just another town.'

'Professor, is what we're doing right? I mean – I know the Crawlers are bad, and all. And what they do. There's no excuse for it. But why do we have to be the ones to, you know.'

'You mean, why don't we just let the local police handle them?'

'Yeah, I guess so. Yeah.'

The Professor set aside his journal. An ant traversed the desk. The Professor glanced at it.

'Tommy, sometimes this job can get to you. A few years ago I had doubts, too. It isn't easy. Seeing the things we see, doing

what we do. Knowing – what we know. What do you think would happen if they published what we know? If it became public?’

Papers said, ‘Puh, panic. Worldwide panic.’

The Professor nodded. ‘Tommy, there’s no telling how many of the Things are out there. Or how they breed. There’s so much we don’t know yet about them, don’t understand. But one thing is clear. It’s war, Tommy. Us against them. And they keep on coming.’

‘But, why can’t the government tell everybody? If everybody knew...’

‘If they knew their neighbors, their bosses, their librarians, their waitresses, weren’t like us? If instead they were secretly, monstrously, different?’

Tommy looked out the window into the sunlight. The day seemed so normal there.

‘How long would it be, do you think, before the suspicions ground the world’s economies to a standstill? How long before vigilante mobs swarmed those fields out there? If they knew the truth?’

Tommy shook his head. He tried to imagine it. It was like something out of a horror movie. ‘I guess you’re right, Professor.’

The ant trailed across the desk. The Professor looked at it mildly. ‘It isn’t easy killing. The few Teams across the country – and across the world – we’ve been chosen to bear the burden of this darkness. It’s heavy, Tommy, I know. But remember this. The Things we burn, though they may wear the faces of men and women, are really no more human than this ant.’

The Professor squashed the ant and held up his thumb.

‘You see? No remorse. No regrets. Just a job that’s got to be done. Until the last of them are exterminated.’

‘Ex, extinguished,’ Papers said.

‘Extinct. Sometimes, Tommy, lying is the best way the government can tell the truth.’

A knock sounded at the door and Trickman came in.

‘Professor, I don’t find nothing wrong with Tommy’s gun. Tommy, are you sure it jammed?’

‘I pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.’ He lied with his very best lying voice, which wasn’t very good. It made him feel awful to lie to Trickman. The big hairy slob was just about the

nicest guy in the whole Team. But what else could Tommy say? He wasn't going to admit he was squeamish or soft. Especially after what the Professor just said.

The Professor watched Tommy. He knew Tommy was lying; Tommy could see it on his face. But all he said was, 'All right, Trickman. Just make sure the gun is working.'

'Okay, Professor.'

Trickman noticed an open can of Coke by the TV. He picked it up, swirled it in his big hand. Trickman swigged it and left.

The Professor opened his little zippered case. 'Tommy, time for your pills.' He held out a glass of milk and three yellow pills.

'Do I have to?'

'Yes. It's the only antidote we've got for the Jelly. You know that.'

The Professor was giving him a suspicious kind of look. Tommy swallowed the pills and milk. He felt his guts bunch up. 'Can I go out with Styles and Trickman tonight?'

'Tommy, are you feeling all right these days? Do you feel hot spells? Dizzy?'

'You mean from the injections?'

'I'm concerned. We need you, Tommy.'

'I'm okay. The pills help. I'm just sorry about – you know, my gun didn't jam.'

'It didn't?'

He had just blurted it out and now he had to go and tell the rest. Why couldn't he ever stick to a lie? 'Uh-uh. The truth is, I looked at him – at the Crawler – and I couldn't shoot. I just froze up. I guess I'm a coward.'

'Tommy, the bravest men were once the most afraid. They learned how to overcome it. That's all.'

'Really?'

'Really. I'll teach you.'

'I'll try, Professor. I'll learn how to face them.'

'Good boy, Tommy. Now go take a walk. The sun's the best medicine. But take care. There were bad reports in this town. I think there may be quite a nest of the things in Briggsville.'

'Okay, Professor.' He went to the door and looked out. He felt the outside air wash over his face. He had to get out now, all of a sudden, even though he didn't know why.

'Don't stay out after dark.'

‘Okay, Professor.’

The Professor watched Tommy leave. Tommy looked back into the room as he made his way past the cars. He saw the Professor turn off the TV and make the whole room dark.

A tall, gaunt, crooked tree stood waiting on the bank over the Interstate. Tommy touched the bark – then pulled back his hand.

Hundreds of ants and beetles were coursing over and under the bark. Tommy was staring at them. The sound of a scream made him look away.

Past the Motel, on the other side from the Interstate, several kids were playing basketball on an outdoor court on a school-yard. They laughed and screamed and raced off. The basketball, round and green, rolled to a stop behind them.

Tommy climbed the fence and picked up the ball. The yard was empty now. Tommy’s shadow was long on the cracked asphalt. He dribbled the ball – shot – it went through. He got the ball and put it back in play.

Tommy made out like he was the announcer on the TV. ‘“Wow, he’s really hungry today, Jim!” “He’s hot, too, Bob! The Rookie’s hands are on fire!” “Swish – and it’s another jumper for the Rookie!”’

A girl’s voice shouted out, ‘Yay! Go, Rookie!’

Tommy stopped dead. A girl was watching. She looked about his age, in ripped jeans and sweatshirt.

Tommy bounced the ball and looked at her. ‘Who are you?’

‘Me? I’m Little Aggie, of course!’

She took the ball, dribbled past, laid it up. ‘“Little Aggie is in – driving hard – and it’s another big one for the little hotshot, Jim!”’

Tommy in-bounded the ball.

The girl moved to defend. ‘“Little Aggie on defense now – good use of the hands, Bob!”’

Tommy scoffed. ‘“No way, Jim, that was a foul!”’

The girl giggled. ‘“What the refs don’t see doesn’t even count – it’s getting more intense down there now, Bob. The seconds tick down–”’

Tommy stumbled. The girl stole the ball and went in.

‘“Swish! Score! The buzzer sounds! Little Aggie’s done it again!”’

But Tommy hardly heard her. He was bending over, staring down. Out of the cracks in the asphalt was a mound of sand – an ant hill.

The girl dribbled up behind him. 'Hey – what's up with you?'

'I have these – nothing – leave it. Attacks sometimes. The Professor says I have to watch myself.'

A woman's voice said, 'Perhaps I can help.'

Tommy looked up. In the same spot the girl appeared in, in the same pose, stood a woman. She must've been at least 27. Hair bound back, squarish glasses, gray suit. Which didn't hide the fact that she was beautiful, and very desirable.

The girl went over to her. 'Miss Quinn, help!'

Tommy waved them off. 'I'm all right.'

But the woman leaned over him. 'Do you feel hot? What's your name?'

She laid her cool, smooth palm on Tommy's brow. He could smell her perfume. There was something odd about it. Something familiar. Under the wild melange of scents lurked something dangerous and potent.

'Tommy Q. I should go – the Professor—'

'Nonsense, my car's right here. You come too, Agnes.'

Together, the woman and the girl got Tommy into an Alfa Romeo Spyder. Tommy and the girl crushed together in the bucket seat. Miss Quinn had said the girl's name was Agnes. Agnes. Tommy rolled the word around in his head.

'We're at the Bright Dayz Motel,' Tommy said. But the deep, full-bodied roar of the engine made it hard to be heard. 'Ask for the Professor—'

Miss Quinn laughed. She gunned them down the street.

The Spyder braked to a hard stop. Tommy, crushed beside Agnes, all too aware of her body squirming against his, and still dizzy from sitting in the front seat and driving so fast and tight around the curves, could barely stand up to get out. Plus there was a knot in his pants and he was having a hard time hiding it.

'I'll wait here,' Miss Quinn said.

'We won't be long, Miss Quinn,' said Agnes. 'Can you walk okay, Tommy?'

'Uh-huh. I'm better now.'
They left the car, started across the lot.
'Sunset – my time. The Witching hour. What's your time, Tommy?'
'I don't know. Dawn, I guess.'
'Why dawn?'
'It feels safer when the night ends.'
They reached the tree over the Interstate.
'What a great tree!'
She jumped onto one of the roots and grabbed a branch. She leaned back and her eyes filled with dark leaves.
She hummed and began to recite, in a sing-song voice.

*They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,
Young virgins might have visions of delight,
And soft adorings from their loves receive,
Upon the honey'd middle of the night.*

Tommy looked at her blankly.
The girl dropped from the branch and shrugged off her backpack. 'That's Keats. *The Eve Of St. Agnes*. See?'
She pulled a worn book out of her backpack.
Tommy read the cover page. *The Eve of St. Agnes. By John Keats.*

The girl leaned over his shoulder. Why did she always have to stand so close? He was having a harder and harder time hiding his condition. He twisted his hips, trying to shift his jeans and make a little more room.

'Ever read it?' she asked. She was just about breathing the words in his ear.

'No, I don't read poetry.'

'You're missing a lot.'

'I guess I should be getting back.'

In the sky the blood-red sun drifted down. On the Interstate the trucks floated down the lanes. The branches turned in the wind.

'Tommy,' Agnes said.

Tommy looked at her. She was watching the Interstate. Her profile was red in the sunlight. Slowly her head turned and her eyes took him in, all dreamy. Tommy could see the truck lights

moving in her eyes. Her eyes seemed like mirrors for every light and wonderful thing in the world.

She smiled. 'I liked playing against you.'

'Yeah.'

'What's your birthday?'

'May 13.'

'That's tomorrow!'

'I guess so.'

'You guess so? How old?'

'Sixteen.'

'We'll have to have a party. That's it – after the play. What cake do you like? How come we never met before? Do you think my name is weird?'

'I'm not even sure what it is.' It was true. He thought he remembered now that Miss Quinn had called her something. But he couldn't remember. She was fogging up his brain.

She leaned close to him again. Their lips were even closer.

'Agnes.'

Tommy remembered now. 'Agn—'

She kissed him before he could say it all. Then she broke it and went on.

'Yeah, Agnes. After the saint. I used to hate that name, it's so dorky, but now I like it. It's kind of cool, you know?'

She kissed him again, longer. Tommy kissed back this time. He felt her tongue trying to get in between his lips and let it. Her tongue slid over his and wow was it slippery. The knot in his pants felt like it was just about to bust. It was almost as bad as the prickling the Things made him feel.

Agnes broke off the kiss, sucked in air, and smiled. What a great smile, Tommy thought. 'After all, how many Agnesses do you know?'

'You're the first—'

They kissed again. Tommy's arms went around her waist. But his forearms were Changing. The skin was rippling with bumps – tentacles were erupting – plunging into Agnes' body – her eyes went wide – blood filled her mouth—

8:25 p.m.
Bright Dayz Motel

Tommy tossed and shouted in the small cot. The Professor held him down. Papers snapped on the light.

The Professor barked into his face: 'Tommy! Tommy! Wake up!'

Tommy opened his eyes. He saw the Professor and calmed down. There was a knock at the door and Papers let in Styles and Trickman. Trickman had his Burner.

Styles asked, 'What's up? What was that shouting?'

'Tommy had a ni, nightmare.'

Trickman uncocked the gun. 'Shit kid, is that all?'

The Professor still held him down. 'It was only another bad dream, Tommy. All right?'

Tommy nodded. The Professor got off him and Tommy sat up. He felt his arms and face. The Professor offered him a glass and three of the yellow pills.

'Take these. Just to be safe.'

Trickman looked at the milk. 'You got any more of that?'

Tommy swallowed the pills and half the milk. He handed the glass to Trickman.

Trickman tipped the glass to him. 'Thanks, pal.'

Tommy felt a surge of nausea. It was the usual reaction to the pills. But this time there was a buzzing in his head, too. It felt like it was about to turn into a nasty headache.

'Right,' the Professor said. 'That's enough excitement for tonight.'

Trickman and Styles left. Papers locked the door and wedged a chair under it and went back to bed. Tommy went into the bathroom. As he was shutting the door, he looked back out into the room and saw the Professor watching him.

He didn't close the door all the way. Safer to leave it half open.

In the open bathroom Tommy felt his face and arms – felt them for the telltale bumps.

What happened? He'd been dreaming. He must've had a bad nightmare. He must've been screaming in his sleep again. But what was the dream? What time was it anyway? Dark already, maybe even way after dark. Crawler time. The last thing he could remember was going out of the motel room. He stood and watched the traffic on the interstate. There was a gnarled old tree. Where had he been in the meantime? What had he been doing?

He called back into the room: 'Professor, what happened tonight?' He snuck a look – sure enough the Professor was still studying him.

'Tonight? You went for a walk. Came back before dark.'

'Was there anyone with me? I mean, a girl?'

A girl. Yes. Wasn't there a girl? Or was that part of the dream?

'Trickman and Styles kept watch as usual. They didn't report anyone.'

In the mirror Tommy's cheek turned dark; bumps raced under his forearms. He clamped his hands over them – closed his eyes – opened them again. Nothing. Normal.

'No girl?'

'Not even a puppy.'

Tommy came back out. He sat on the cot. Vaguely he noticed that it seemed small. Was this just a small one, or was he growing?

'I imagined it,' he said. 'It was a dream.'

'A nightmare.'

The headache was worse. He hated those pills. He'd never realized it before.

'Tommy, how does it feel to you, when you're close on the track of one of the Things? Does it still feel as bad as ever? As painful?'

'Even worse, Professor.'

'Oh?'

Right away from the way the Professor's face changed, Tommy knew he'd answered wrong. Should he have told the

truth and said it was easier to take now? Even admit the secret stab of pleasure he sometimes felt? No, that couldn't be right. He figured he better take it back. Safest way was the old way.

'No, Professor, I'm just kidding. It feels the same, really. I really couldn't say if there was any difference from the way it always was. I mean, it's bad but it's not worse.'

'Not too much for you, then?'

'Oh no, Professor. I can stand it. I mean, for the Team. How else could we trace the Things?'

The Professor nodded but Tommy didn't like the way the Professor kept on looking at him. It was like little math problems were going on in the Professor's head.

Tommy picked up one of his books, the home schooling texts the Professor made him read. For a long time he could feel the Professor's eyes on him. It was tough not to look up. He felt hot, cold, hot. At last he heard the Professor turned in his chair. The beat of the look left him.

Man, that was a close call. Got to be more careful. But careful of what? The Professor was a nice guy, after all. He was the closest Tommy ever had to a father. What's the problem if the Professor knew Tommy felt – those feelings? The Professor wouldn't hurt him. Maybe the Professor could even help.

But no. The Professor's kind of help, if it came, would be more pills, or maybe some worse kind of medicine to make the feeling seem bad again. And Tommy really didn't want to give up those new feelings, the ones that crept up under the nausea and the pain, the ones that felt strangely, wickedly good, the smells that were bad but somehow irresistible. Maybe Tommy would have to give them up, or maybe he could control them all on his own. But he didn't want to have to take more pills now. He didn't like pills. The truth was it was the pills were starting to taste nastier, and now if they were going to give him these headaches– No, he didn't want to have to take any more pills.

Tommy shut the book and pulled out a pack of green cards. Somehow he managed a grin, but it felt weak on his mouth.

'Play some gin, Professor? I'll give you a chance to catch up.'

'Not tonight, Tommy. Think you can sleep now?'

'I guess so. The pills help. Thanks, Professor.'

'Good night, Tommy.'

'Night, Professor.'

The Professor sat at the desk and wrote in his journal. Tommy lay in his cot. He stared at the ceiling.

‘Professor?’

‘Yes, Tommy?’

‘How did you find out about the Crawlers? I mean, how was it you first got to learn about them?’

The Professor half turned in the chair. A funny sort of look came over his face like Tommy had never seen before. ‘I was alone with my studies. A bachelor. And I fell in love with one of my students. Alicia. She was bright and full of life. On the night before our wedding, she was at her final fitting. A Crawler got to her.’

The Professor wiped his brow. His eyes looked like torture. He stood up and paced the room.

‘I found her in the morning. What was left of her. In her bridal gown. It looked like one of those serial murders you hear about. It was later that the Director found me. He told me the truth. And that’s how I discovered that there are such things as Crawlers in the world.’

The Professor stood over the cot. Tommy closed his eyes. The Professor leaned over and tucked him in.

‘That’s right, Tommy. Sleep. Sleep, and wash your mind clean of nightmares...’

Tommy lay quietly. He made out like he was asleep, but his thoughts were turning over and over. He thought about the girl he’d dreamed about. What was her name. Agnes.

He saw her again, leaning in to kiss him. He felt her body tight against his. Somewhere in back of it he heard the Professor dialing his cellphone:

‘Hello? This is the Professor. Yes. Put me through, please. Hello? It’s about Tommy.’

Tommy didn’t want to leave Agnes. He wanted to go on kissing her. But as his shorts got tight again, he rolled over to ease the pressure and his eyes opened half way, enough to see the Professor lift out of a drawer the little leather case with the orange ampules and hypodermic needle.

‘Yes. He’ll be 16 soon. That age... Twenty-three doses so far. But he should be good for another seven at least. And yet I’m afraid it might be happening to him already.’

The Professor put the needle back and looked back at the cot. Tommy shut his eyes fast but he was all ears, listening with dread.

The Professor said, 'We'll watch him. But we'll need another Tracer soon. Tommy? That's all right. We'll take care of him.'

Friday – May 13

7:16 a.m.
Bright Dayz Motel

The morning was bright and cold. Only a couple clouds darkened the sky. The clouds were all stretched out by the wind that streamed down out of the middle of Canada, cold still with winter. The wind shook the branches of the gnarled old tree. Tommy walked up to the it. There were dark stains, like blood, on the roots. And something caught down between them: a book.

The Eve of St. Agnes
By John Keats

Tommy read the inscription on the flyleaf:

To Agnes from Miss Quinn

Beneath that was scrawled in pencil, in big girlish loops:

This book belongs to Agnes Renfield!
Don't anybody steal it!

A car horn honked. On the curb where Miss Quinn had parked was now a beat-up Chevy pickup truck. Agnes stepped out. She wore a little dress with her hair loose and she looked like a total girl today. She leaned against the Chevy door. She acted nervous.

Tommy stared at her. She was real. She was really there. Somehow he worked up enough spit in his mouth to say something lame, like, 'Hi, Agnes.'

She smiled back at him. 'Hi.'

'You left something.' He held out the book.

'Oh, you found it! Great!'

She hugged him. The awkward spell broke just like that.

'It was under the tree.' He laughed; her fingers were tickling him in his ribs.

'Thank you thank you thank you! You don't know what this means to me, to get this back! Anyway, here. For you.'

She held out a small package in gift wrapping.

'What's this?'

'Birthday present. Go on, open it!'

He did. It was a book just like hers – *The Eve of St. Agnes*. On the flyleaf was an inscription in the big loops, but written carefully in ink:

To Tommy from Agnes

'I told you it's my fave, right? You can read it now. You can, you know, think of me. When you read it.'

'I don't know what to say.'

'“Thanks” is what people usually say. Or so I've heard.'

'Thanks.'

Agnes spun on her heels. She lifted her arms up to the sky. 'You're welcome. Hey, you haven't met my big brother yet, have you? Andrew, this is Tommy – you know.'

A tall, rangy, arrogantly handsome boy who looked about 18 years old, climbed around out of the driver's side, leaned against the hood. He shook hands with Tommy.

'Hey.'

'Hey.'

'Andrew's in a play tonight at school,' Agnes said. 'You should come see him, he's really good. Show him, Andrewz.'

'Cut it out, Little Aggie.'

'You'll have to forgive Andrewz, he's a jerk sometimes. But look!'

Agnes showed Tommy Andrew's hand. A thick silver ring shone on one finger.

'Aggie likes to show off,' Andrew said.

'Andrewz, shut up, will you? I gave it to him. For good luck in the play tonight. He's going to be an actor – he's going to be a *great* actor.'

'Cut it out, will you?'

'Well? It's true, isn't it?'

'Hey – wear the white dress tonight.'

'Oh that's too much for school!'

'Okay. Wear it for me another time.'

Tommy glanced back at the motel. Styles was polishing the chrome of the Ford. Trickman loaded the gym bags into the trunk. The Professor stood by and watched Tommy.

Tommy said, 'I ought to be going.'

Agnes looked back. 'Is that the Professor staring at us?'

'Uh-huh. Thanks for the book.'

'Read it. And come to the play tonight! Oedipus – Andrew's Oedipus!'

Brother and sister got back into the pickup. Andrew fired the motor and pulled out. Tommy dropped the wrapping paper and it rolled along the edge of the asphalt and a big black beetle crawled toward it.

9:23 a.m.
Briggsville

Later, in the Ford, they were cruising the town. They sat in the usual seats. Papers checked a map.

'In the past muh, month,' he said, 'there were incidents here, here, and, uh, here.'

The Professor pointed. 'And last night – here.'

Tommy asked, 'So, we're staying here awhile?'

From the wheel, Trickman said, "'Jeri's Diner & Fresh Coffee." I like the sound of that.'

Papers started folding up the map. 'Puh-plenty of work for us here, Tuh – Tommy.'

Styles combed his hair while he drove. 'Can't you ever think about anything else?'

Tommy looked sideways out the window. He thought about Agnes. She must be in school by now. He wondered where she was. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine her in some class, maybe Miss Quinn's science class. . .

. . . But all he could see was darkness. Then something was moving in the dark, growing brighter, clearer. . .

Cockroaches. Swarming and climbing all over each other, inside glass walls. It looked like a terrarium only it was full of roaches, a hundred of them or more, crawling the sides and under the lid. Next to the terrarium was a jar with a praying mantis. Then an ant farm, a glass jar filled with a hornet's nest, and others – a thousand insects on display. They were all sitting in a room that looked like a school science lab.

Miss Quinn was leaning over the glass with the roaches. She was saying something, but he could only see her mouth moving.

Miss Quinn was wearing more formal clothes today, a jacket and tight dark skirt. Her hair was up and she was wearing glasses. She didn't look like a teacher like on TV. More like one of the executive women from movies. She was lecturing her science class.

He strained his ears and looked closer at Miss Quinn's mouth, and the sound of her voice started coming through, a few words here and there:

'Insects,' she was saying, then he couldn't hear her, then her voice sounded close and breathy as if she were talking right to him: 'Bugs. Six legged, egg-bearing creatures. There are over a million distinct species of them we know of. Some entomologists speculate there could be as many as thirty million species they don't even know about.'

In the Ford, Tommy shook his head and blinked. The things he imagined he could see seemed too real. They were sucking him in, and he felt like he was falling and falling.

What was happening to him these days? What was wrong with him? Something was going really bad but he couldn't even tell the Professor about it – not since he heard what the Professor said on the phone last night. What did *that* mean anyway?

He squinted against the sun and fought to stay with the other guys in the car, to be part of the Team and not look back into the science lab.

He tried to keep his voice casual, careless. 'Professor? What are the Crawlers?'

Trickman guffawed. 'Oh, you don't want to ask that, pal.'

Tommy wondered if he could ask Trickman for help. No. Trickman was part of the Team and the Team hung tight. If Tommy told Trickman anything, Trickman would tell the Professor. He'd have to.

Better keep quiet about it for now. Just go along and make believe nothing was wrong. 'I mean, what are they, really?'

Trickman was saying something. All Tommy could catch was, '... came from the flying saucers, pal.'

'No, no, no. They came out of the sewers,' Styles said.

Trickman volleyed back, 'From the atomic bomb!'

Tommy faked a laugh to go along with the other guys. But his eyes were blurring, and even with his eyes still open he started

seeing the science lab again.

Miss Quinn was continuing her lecture. The students were listening from lab benches. He looked around, searching . . . Agnes was sitting with a girl in the back. Somehow he knew this was her best friend; anyway they were looking pretty tight. On the other girl's lab book was a name drawn in ballpoint and markers, all flowery: *Angeline*. That must have been her name.

Angeline looked older than Agnes, maybe, 17 or older. She looked like a live wire. Angeline was pushing her lab book in front of Agnes – a note was written there and he craned just enough to make it out:

So he just drives around the country? No school?

Agnes was reading the note. She looked at Angeline and nodded. Agnes was writing:

!!!

Angeline wrote and pushed the lab book back:

Lucky prick!

Tommy snapped his head back and sucked in his breath.

He stared out the window. He made his eyes focus on the buildings of the town, the sunlight, the other cars. He didn't know if the Professor was watching or not. But he gave a big yawn just in case.

He heard Papers say, 'Knock it off, you guh, guys. The tuh, truth is, Tommy, we don't know what the Crawlers are. Nobody does. They've been chase, chasing them since 1954, but, but were they here before then?'

Tommy tried to focus on the Team. But again the dream of Miss Quinn's science class started crowding back, pushing away the guys, filling his eyes and ears. . .

Miss Quinn was leaning over the specimen jars. She was smiling down on the bugs and crawling things as if they were fuzzy puppies and kittens and human babies.

'The earliest fossilized remains of insects,' she was saying, 'date from 570 million years ago.'

The dream was swinging around behind Miss Quinn's figure and looking into the back of the room. Agnes was taking the lab book back. She was reading Angeline's note:

Is he coming to the play tonight?

Agnes was frowning. Then she was writing:

???

The Professor's voice broke the dream. Tommy was back in the Ford again.

'Papers is right, Tommy. Someday we'll find out. For now, all we have to know is that they burn. And we burn them and go on burning them until they're exterminated.'

'Extinguished,' Trickman added.

'Extinct,' said Styles.

Tommy opened his book. His fingers drummed on the lines of poetry. The sound of drums got louder and louder in his ears, drowning out what the men were saying. He tried to clear his eyes and focus on his study guide but the print blurred and he saw instead the last lines from Angeline's lab book there in the book on his lap:

Is he coming to the play tonight?

???

The sound of drums got louder until they were all he could hear.

7:30 p.m.
Briggsville High

Drums beat a primitive dirge. The drummers wore masks and robes. On center stage one man knelt on the floor, in torn robes, almost naked. He was Andrew, playing Oedipus. He recited some lines.

*'No, let me be a dweller on the hills,
On yonder mount Cithaeron, famed as mine,
My tomb predestined for me by my sire
And mother, while they lived, that I may die
Slain as they sought to slay me, when alive.'*

Agnes sat by Angeline. Angeline passed her program to Agnes: by Andrew's name she had drawn:



Tommy entered in the back and looked for Agnes. He passed a tall black man who was staring raptly at the stage as Andrew exited.

The tall man looked like he was in his late 40's. He wore a tight, too-conservative suit, bow tie, carnation. There was something shifty about him. But maybe Tommy was just suspicious of everybody. Being on the Team was like that. But Tommy didn't smell the stink or feel any prickling from the man in the suit. He walked past Tommy out into the hall.

The Man in the Suit walked down the empty hall. Halfway down he neared a classroom whose door was marked with a paper sign:

Dressing Room – Cast Only!
No Peeking!

The Man in the Suit shifted the door ajar and looked inside.

Andrew sat at the makeup table and peeled away his makeup. From the shadows of the wardrobe racks, Miss Quinn emerged and started to rub his shoulders.

Andrew basked in the shoulder rub and groaned in contentment. ‘I was good tonight. Even you have to admit it. They were eating out of my hand.’

Miss Quinn bent close and murmured into his ear. ‘Yes. You were delicious. Irresistible, even.’

Out in the hall, the Man in the Suit deflated. Disappointment showed on his face. He moved away from the door and walked back up the hall.

In the makeshift dressing room, Andrew looked in the mirror at Miss Quinn’s face. Her hand lay on his bare shoulder. He put his hand on hers.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I was okay. . . ’

She pulled her hand back. Andrew looked at his hand – at the Jelly sticking there—

He looked in the mirror – at the Thing reflected there—

Back in the auditorium, Tommy started. He felt sick. Something was happening – he could feel it. He leaned against the back wall.

What was it? What was happening? He checked for the stink and the prickles. Nothing. But *something* bad was going on.

Up on stage, the Chorus of Drummers was led by a tall gangly boy who looked very nervous. A born clown trying to play it straight. He gave his lines in a nasal whiny voice.

*‘Wait till life ends ere thou count one mortal blest;
Wait till freed from pain, he gains his final rest.’*

They stopped drumming. The lights went out. Applause crashed over the dark auditorium. Then the house lights came up, and the cast came back on stage.

Angeline rose on tiptoes to see over the jocks in front of them. 'Where's Andrew? Why didn't he come for his bows?'

Agnes was trying to see through the jocks too. She frowned. 'I don't know!'

Miss Quinn was standing beside Agnes.

'Miss Quinn! Where's Andrew?'

Miss Quinn widened her eyes. 'You mean he's not here? You better go get him. This is his shining hour!'

'Come on, Angie.'

But Angeline shook her head, suddenly seeming shy. 'I'll wait here.'

Tommy moved against the streams of the crowds leaving. He saw Agnes go out the side door. She didn't seem to notice him. He pushed out into the hall, and looked over the crowd. He caught just a glimpse of Agnes down the hall. She was fighting her way to the dressing room door. Then she went in and he lost her.

Agnes pushed the door open and entered the room. It was empty. On the door was a mirror.

'Excuse me?' she called. 'Andrewz?'

In the mirror as the door opened she glimpsed the makeup table – splashed with blood, and all the rest.

Agnes opened her mouth but her scream was drowned in the wail of sirens.

9:13 p.m.
Briggsville High

Another police cruiser screamed into the school parking lot. Crowds gathered outside the school. At one end the Team had gathered.

Trickman belched. 'Think it was one of them?'

Styles sneered. 'Not every murder is committed by them.'

'I know that, smart ass.'

The Professor turned to Tommy. 'Tommy. You saw the end of the performance. Did you get a Trace on one of them?'

Tommy looked away. He was still having those bad feelings even though the worst of it was over. He shook his head and dodged the Professor's gaze. 'There were a lot of people there.' The truth was he still didn't know what had happened. Was it a Crawler, or not? Every bit of his training told him No. But something in his gut said Yes.

He breathed in. He wanted to smell the stink again. At least he'd be sure that way. But he didn't smell anything like it.

'Well,' the Professor said, 'you're about the age of these youngsters. Think you could blend in and get us more information?'

'I'll try, Professor.'

Far beyond the crowds, he could see Miss Quinn move back inside the building. He headed after her.

Behind him he could hear the voices of the Team. They carried back to him quite clearly, in spite of the other voices and the sirens and shouts from the cops. It was Trickman's voice that said, 'Don't they usually have parties after these school play jobs? With food, and stuff?'

'So what?' Styles said.

'Nothing. Just wondering.'

* * *

Tommy closed the door to the building. The hall before him was empty. Tommy moved down it. Hand-made signs drew his eye:

Cheerleading Squad Tryouts

Hall Passes Required during all Class Periods

French Club meeting

Beat Luther Hills!

To Tommy, the signs were from another world.

'Tommy!' Miss Quinn's voice sounded right next to him.

He started. Miss Quinn was a dark shape in the bright doorway to a classroom. He saw it was the Science Lab from the dreams he had in the car.

'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'Miss Quinn. I was looking for Agnes.'

'You'd better come in.'

Tommy hesitated.

Miss Quinn arched her eyebrow. It almost looked like she was laughing at him. 'Well?'

He followed her into the Science Lab.

Outside, the Man in the Suit talked to the policemen beyond the crowds. He looked shaken, nervous.

Styles pointed at him.

'That one.'

Trickman snorted. 'Who? You mean the Vice-Principal type?'

Papers consulted a sheet of paper. 'Puh, Principal Phineas Otis.'

Styles snickered. 'Phineas. What kind of name is that? Phineas.'

Trickman grinned. 'Yeah, like Otis wasn't bad enough.'

'Definitely something sneaky about him. I'll pin the tail on that donkey,' Styles said. 'Okay, Professor?'

'We don't know anything yet.'

'We might dis, discover something,' Papers said.

Styles asked the Professor, 'How many Crawler incidents did you say they had here?'

‘Incidents that *look* like they involve Crawlers.’

‘Styles is right, Professor,’ Trickman said. ‘Or what else are we doing here? My stomach’s growling.’

‘What else is new, big gut?’

‘All right,’ the Professor said. ‘But be discreet.’

Trickman grinned. ‘Hot dog!’

They split up. The Professor stood alone.

He looked over the school buildings. The crowds of students and parents were thinner and the buildings stood bare in the moonlight. The Professor shuddered and moved away.

A basketball lay by a puddle of rainwater shining with the stars. The Professor picked it up, bounced it. The sound echoed off the buildings.

On their edges – against the sky – black shapes crawled down the bricks. Like huge cockroaches crawling down, leaving faint slimy trails—

The Professor froze – looked around—

The black shapes melted back into bricks and windows. On the edge of one building, one black shape stopped still – quivering. It was no bigger than a beetle. Its antenna twitched.

Miss Quinn walked to the table in the middle of the science lab, to the cases and jars of the insect display. It was just like Tommy had imagined it.

‘Come on in, Tommy. Agnes, you have a visitor.’

Agnes was sitting on her stool in back. Angeline sat beside her. Tommy went over to her and Agnes clung to him.

‘Agnes. Hey.’

‘Tommy...’

‘You okay?’

‘Tommy – Andrew...’

‘Yeah. Shhh.’

Miss Quinn looked up from her desk. ‘Feeling better, dear?’

She filled a beaker with water at a sink. She took some pills out of her purse.

‘Take these.’

Tommy looked from Agnes and Miss Quinn to Angeline. It felt really awkward: as if he knew her, only he’d never spoken to her before. As if he’d been spying on her. He blushed, thinking about

the notes in the lab book. But Angeline didn't seem embarrassed at all. She stuck out her hand. 'Hi, I'm Angeline.'

Tommy shook with her. 'Tommy.'

'I know.'

Miss Quinn drifted past the displays. They were all there – all the bugs in the jars.

'Did you ever think about these, Agnes? Angeline? Tommy?'

Agnes turned a ring in her hand.

Angeline asked, 'Is that Andrew's ring?'

'Uh-huh.'

Miss Quinn went on lecturing. 'Notice the variety. All different, yet somehow all alike.' It was like class again. Tommy stood next to Agnes and her friend and felt his attention split between them. 'Ants, mantises, flies, beetles – insects have been toiling and struggling for 300 million years.'

Something about what Miss Quinn was saying sounded important, vitally important. But he could smell the scent Agnes was wearing. He looked at the little hairs curling on her nape.

Agnes whispered to Angeline, 'The police let me keep it. It was the only way I could – recognize him. The rest – the rest—'

'Even now,' Miss Quinn went on, 'insects outnumber people on a vast scale. Scientists don't even dare speculate how many insects there might be in the world. The numbers are so enormous, they're meaningless.'

Agnes was starting to sob. 'But, who could have done it? Why?'

'There are about 4,000,000 insects in one acre of farmland outside town. Four million insects in every acre, hunted and poisoned and slaughtered at every turn. What do you think our little problems seem like, compared with all those savage millennia and all those pitiless trillions?'

Tommy couldn't stand it any more. 'Miss Quinn, stop it!'

Agnes was shuddering. Tommy felt mad – really mad for the first time he could ever recall. Miss Quinn smiled.

'Yes. You're right. Come on.'

'Where?'

'We're taking Agnes home.'

Tommy felt something like a warning. He knew he shouldn't go with them. 'I should check with the Professor—'

'Agnes, wouldn't you like Tommy to come with us? Or would you rather be alone tonight?'

'Alone? No, I don't ... I mean ... I mean, we were going to have a party after the play. And it's your birthday...'

Tommy looked Agnes in the eye. Even with her makeup smeared with crying, and her nose red and runny, she was the most beautiful girl he could imagine.

He heard himself saying, 'I'll come.'

He looked down. Her hand, pale and small, squeezed his.

He felt the knot get tight in his pants again.

10:21 p.m.
Renfield House

Tommy looked back up from Agnes' hand.

They were sitting on the edge of her bed. Her room was small and pink and girly-mad, with posters of dark Romantic paintings and basketball players. Agnes lay in bed in a cotton floral nightdress, looking beautiful and dreamy-sleepy.

'Tommy?'

'What?'

'Nothing. I'm glad you're here, that's all.'

He looked at the window. It was so dark outside. It must be deep into Crawler hours. 'I ought to be going. It's late...'

'Stay until I fall asleep. Okay?'

'Okay.'

'Okay.'

'So ... this is what your room looks like.'

'What did you expect?'

'I don't know.'

'Didn't you ever have a home of your own?'

'I grew up in institutions. It was like jail. When the Professor came and tested me, and my score turned out so high, I grabbed at the chance.'

'And you just travel the country making polls? And you get paid?'

'Yeah.'

'Wow, what a cool job.'

'The Professor, he says I have a gift.'

'A gift for what?'

'Huh?'

'A gift for what?'

Tommy suddenly realized what he was saying. He had been about to tell her everything about the Team, all the things nobody ever could tell. 'I don't know. They like having me around, I guess.'

'Fine, keep your secrets.'

She rolled over and something fell to the floor. Tommy picked it up. It was Andrew's ring.

Tommy handed it back to her. 'You dropped it.'

When she saw the ring, Agnes forgot her pretend anger. All the grief and sorrow blushed back over her face again. 'Oh.' The sight hurt Tommy to the quick.

He slipped the ring on her finger. 'You won't drop it now.'

She looked at it. Then her big, sad eyes swam up to his. It was almost like they were engaged now, married even. He scratched at his collar.

'Tommy – what's that?'

She opened his collar and bared some of the skin. He knew she was staring at one of the small bright wounds the Professor's needle left.

He put up his collar. 'It's not anything.'

'No, really – were you vaccinated or something?'

'No. Leave it.'

'Tommy, are you a junkie?'

He looked at her. She was serious. He smiled and they both started laughing. She could laugh even through tears. Tommy didn't know how he kept from jumping her right then.

Agnes giggled. 'Yeah, I can really see you with a needle, shooting up.'

'You never know. . . '

'I know. I know you, Tommy. I know your secret.'

Tommy felt cold again. 'What do you mean?'

'Your secrets. I know them. Doesn't it seem like we've known each other for a long time? More than a day.'

'Almost two days.'

'Seems like years.'

'I guess.'

'Read me to sleep.'

'*The Eve of St. Agnes*. Don't you ever get tired of this?'

'Shut up and read.'

Tommy opened the book to a page somewhere in the middle.

*Into her dream he melted, as the rose
Blendeth its odour with the violet,
Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows;
Like Love's alarum patters the sharp sleet
Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set.*

He stopped reading. Agnes lay asleep beside him. Under her chin her nightdress hung open and the soft curve of her breast rose and fell . . . and he could see the darker spot of her nipple rub against the cloth. . .

Tommy gasped.

Water was swirling down a white porcelain sink.

Tommy was rinsing his face. He was looking at himself in the mirror. He was scratching his neck. The skin was flaking off, showing brown rough barklike scales. Something was racing under the skin of his forearm. Bumps were starting to form.

'No. Stop it. Stop!'

He clamped his hands over the spots. The bumps subsided. Tommy leaned against the wall, his face and arms bloody.

In the sink, drops of red blood were swirling down the drain.

Downstairs, the living room was all set up for the canceled party. The Renfield house was small and poor but tried to be respectable. The walls were decorated with streamers and balloons and banners:

Party! Party! Party!

Angeline swayed over the stereo. Trance music played, pulsing, deep, amorous.

Angeline swayed with it. 'Mrs Renfield must still be waitressing at the club.'

Miss Quinn sipped her punch and said, 'They probably haven't even called her yet. Maybe it's better to get news like this in the morning.'

'I guess,' Angeline said. 'Hey, Tommy, how's Agnes?'

Tommy came downstairs. He still felt shaken from the nightmare. He tried to sound normal. But he was starting to wonder if he would ever be normal again.

'She's asleep.'

Angeline frowned. 'You okay?'

Miss Quinn moved between them. 'How do you like your birthday party, Tommy?'

Tommy sat down on the couch. He looked at his forearm. Scratched at it.

'I never had a birthday party before.'

'Never?' Angeline scoffed. 'You've got to be kidding.'

'I never missed them. The Professor is pretty serious.'

Miss Quinn said 'Your Professor sounds like a serious bore.'

Miss Quinn handed Angeline a drink out of the punchbowl.

Angeline sipped with delight. 'Mmm, yummy!'

Miss Quinn poured another. 'Tommy.'

'No, I shouldn't, Miss Quinn. I mean—'

'Oh, Tommy, go ahead!' Angeline said. 'It's good! Party up!'

Miss Quinn pressed the cup into his hand. 'It's only a drink, Tommy. What are you afraid of?'

Tommy tasted the punch. It was sick and sweet but underneath the juices he could taste something bitter and biting. There was something real strong in the punch, something like the Professor had always told him was bad for him.

The school parking lot was almost empty now. The cruisers had gone. The school was dark and closed.

Principal Otis unlocked his Volvo. The guys of the Team watched him.

Styles nodded. 'He's the one.'

The Professor said, 'Don't judge him yet. We haven't heard what Tommy has to say.'

Trickman seemed to agree with Styles for a change. 'It was a Crawler did the kid, all right. What else would have made that kind of a mess outside of a meat tenderizer?'

Papers shook his head. 'If only Tuh, Tommy were here. He's the one with the, the gift.'

'Well, with this one,' Styles said, 'you can take my word for it.'

Trickman looked around. 'Where is Tommy, anyway?'

'You know how tired he gets. Puh, probably he got a ride back to the motel.'

The Professor frowned. 'I hope so.'

Miss Quinn smiled at Tommy. It was an arch, knowing smile.

Suddenly he realized they were alone together, just him and Miss Quinn. The room had been set up for a big party with lots of bottles of soda and bowls with chips and dip. But after what happened at school, the parents must have all taken their kids back home.

He looked at Miss Quinn again. Could she be—? But no, it was impossible. He didn't smell the stink from her. His skin wasn't prickling at all. She *couldn't* be . . . one of Them.

Angeline burst out of the kitchen with a cake written with icing:

Tommy – happy 16!

'Voilà! Aggie made it for you, Tommy. Doesn't it look scrumptious? Blow and make a wish!'

He bent over the cake on the table. He felt like a dork, but he blew the candles out anyway. All of them.

Angeline cheered. 'You get your wish now.'

Miss Quinn said, close to his ear, 'What did you wish for, Tommy?'

'Come on, dig in!' Angeline said. 'Oh, darn it, I forgot the forks.'

'Well, we won't let that stop us.' Miss Quinn took a piece of cake and offered it to Angeline. Angeline licked the cake out of Miss Quinn's hand. The frosting smeared her mouth.

She giggled. 'Now I'm a mess!'

'I'll fix that. Stand still, stop dancing,' Miss Quinn ordered. She daubed the frosting off Angeline's mouth and licked her fingers clean.

Angeline swayed and leaned back. She took another big gulp of punch. Tommy realized that Angeline was seriously smashed. 'I love parties! All the time I have to diet and watch myself. A party's my only chance to kick loose and live.'

Miss Quinn smiled indulgently. 'Go ahead, Angeline. Take as much as you want.'

'I have to dance, Miss Quinn. I have to! Aggie and I dance together a lot, boys never like to dance, that's why us girls have to dance with each other all the time.'

Miss Quinn started swaying and dancing with Angeline to the beat. 'Boys can be so boring sometimes. Girls are much more fun. Don't you think so, Tommy?'

Tommy was sitting on the couch. He didn't answer her. He barely heard her. He clamped his fist over his forearm. Little bumps were bubbling there.

Miss Quinn sat down next to him. 'Tommy, are you all right? You seem upset.'

'Miss Quinn, don't you ever get scared? Of the things you could do?'

'Tommy, that's normal. Everybody feels that way one time or another.'

'Really?'

'Really. Even your Professor.'

Miss Quinn seemed like she took Tommy seriously. He relaxed and sipped at his drink. Miss Quinn leaned in closer.

'Taste good?'

'Uh-huh. Like pop. Only, there's something else—'

'Have another cup.'

Tommy took it and drank a little. He could feel the music Angeline was dancing to. It was in his bloodstream sort of. 'I like talking to you, Miss Quinn. I feel safe with you.'

'That's the way I want it.'

Angeline moved right in front of him. She reached down with both arms even though both hands had half-empty punch cups in them. 'Tommy, get up and dance with me!'

'I don't know how.'

Miss Quinn slid up off the couch. 'I'll dance with you, Angeline.'

Miss Quinn danced with Angeline. Tommy drank his drink.

'There's liquor in the punch,' he said, and it sounded stupid even to him. Somehow he didn't care. 'I never drank liquor before. Did I tell you that?'

Angeline leaned back her head so her hair fell down her back. 'Never? Didn't you want to? I love it, it makes me feel so shuddery all over, like I could – I don't know what!'

Miss Quinn said, 'I know.'

Tommy leaned back on the couch. He closed his eyes... He heard the two of them talking. First it was Miss Quinn's voice. 'Tommy, wake up. Don't you want to see?'

He opened his eyes. Angeline was dancing in Miss Quinn's arms. On the back of Miss Quinn's arms, little bumps were forming.

'I want you to see,' Miss Quinn said.

Tommy's head was swimming. He didn't know what he was looking at. But something was urging him. He had to warn Angeline. 'Angeline . . . don't . . . look . . .'

But he could barely hear his own voice. He tried again. 'Angeline – don't – look—'

Miss Quinn's body sprouted a thousand arms. It was Changing – like the Man from the Motel – into a Thing like a centipede, like a cocoon, like a cockroach. It was crazy, it made no sense—

Tommy lunged forward but he was too drunk and tripped on the coffee table and sprawled on the floor. He lay there, stupid, drooling on the carpet and looking up at a crazy angle. Everything was turning around, it felt like the floor was moving under him.

A thousand insect arms and probes drove into Angeline's body – sucking blood and fluids. Blood coursed through yellow translucent tubes – Angeline's body crumpled inward. A thing like a Scorpion's tail curled round from the Thing and dug into Angeline's body cavity—

The door to Room No. 9 opened. The Team came in through the door.

The Professor called, 'Tommy? Tommy?'

'I hope the buh, boy's all right,' Papers said.

Trickman looked more than worried. He looked mad. 'He better be, pal.'

The Professor came back out of the bathroom. He shook his head. 'We better go back to the school.'

Styles asked, 'You don't think one of the Crawlers got him, do you?'

Tommy staggered to his feet. He looked down.

Beside his feet were Miss Quinn's clothes, or what was left of them after she had Changed and torn free. Just in front of his left shoe lay her silk lace underpants.

The Thing was huddling over Angeline's remains. It shifted back into the form of Miss Quinn – nude, slimy with gobs of Jelly over her. She looked back and gave Tommy a wicked grin. She held got a gob of Jelly in her hand. She licked at it.

Tommy moved past her – to the door – but it was locked.

Miss Quinn's voice called from the living room. 'Wait. Tommy, wait!'

He looked back from the hall. She pulled the table cloth over her body. She rose and stretched, satisfied, the table cloth draped over the shape of her naked body. She looked almost human.

'I'll take you back,' she said.

She held out her hand. He took it.

3:42 a.m.
Briggsville High

The Ford pulled up to the curb of the school parking lot.

Trickman rolled down his window and aimed a flashlight around. 'No sign of life. Want me to get out, Professor?'

The Professor looked at his watch. 'No. Styles, cruise around. Then head back to the motel.'

Trickman rolled up his window and they started off. 'Poor kid,' he said. 'If anything happened to that kid – if any of those Things hurt him—'

'We'll hurt them back,' Styles said. He looked over and met Trickman's gaze.

'Promise,' they said together.

In the back seat, the Professor pulled out his journal and began to jot down some notes. He checked his watch again and frowned.

The Ford's wheels spun and raced over the asphalt in the night.

Across town, the Alfa Romeo Spyder's tires squealed on the street.

Miss Quinn drove. The wind blew in her hair. She had put on a dress she'd gotten from her bag. She had dressed again in the Renfield's downstairs lavatory, and left the door open so Tommy could almost watch her doing it.

Tommy crouched against the car door. He was looking at her legs. Her short skirt had ridden up on the car seat and he could see above her knees. She was talking, lecturing him like she was in class again, but he kept looking at her legs.

‘The tree of life isn’t really a tree, Tommy,’ she said. ‘It’s more like a web, with lines going from branch to branch. In every one of us there are fragments of code, of DNA, that belong to viruses that swam the oceans billions of years ago. Also DNA-bits of bacteria. There’s fish in us and birds, beasts of all kinds, reptiles, serpents . . . even insects.’

She down-shifted into a red light. Her feet worked the clutch and the gas pedals and he glimpsed a bit more of her inner thigh.

‘Yes, we carry even insect DNA in the millions of bits of so-called junk DNA.’

The light turned green and her legs flashed again and the sports car kicked Tommy back against the seat with a powerful forward thrust.

‘With some perhaps the Change is permanent, a one-way street. Others can control the Change, and pass from one state to the other. And with such ones, who can say except they themselves, whether one state will come to rule over the other? Would they prefer to exist as one state? Would they come to define themselves as the other state? Perhaps some might even prefer to call themselves no longer human, but Other? Maybe there are better things you could call yourself – than human?’

She looked at him like she was daring him to do something.

‘You can’t stop me, Miss Quinn.’

‘Why, Tommy! Why on earth would I ever want to stop you? And my name’s Tia. Don’t you think you should call me Tia now? After all!’

She laughed. The throaty tones made Tommy’s flesh go all prickly, in a new way that felt both exciting and dangerous.

He blurted out, ‘But you can’t be one of them. You *can’t be!* You don’t smell. I mean, you don’t smell—’

‘You mean I don’t smell bad, is that it? Isn’t that how you Tracers usually work it? No, Tommy, I don’t smell bad. I smell good, don’t I? Or do I?’

She looked at him straight in the eye. She was still driving fast and her hands turned the wheel but she didn’t look at the road at all.

‘Perhaps,’ she said, soothingly, ‘I do smell bad. Perhaps I smell just as bad as all the others – only your tastes have changed. After all, you’re growing up, Tommy. You’re not a little boy anymore. You’re almost a grownup now. Almost a man.’

He felt himself blushing. Miss Quinn laughed again and glanced at the road. She said, quite freely and gaily, 'I feel good, too. If you care to find out for yourself?'

She glanced back at him and he blushed fire-hot and she leaned back and shook out her hair in the wind.

'Do you wonder why you never got those feelings around me, Tommy? It's because I can hide myself, and seem like a human thing, better than almost any other of us that I know. I can make anybody think that I'm human, even you – until I don't want to pretend anymore – until I get bored and tired of it – until I get ... hungry?'

She smiled at him and it was such a movie-star smile that he almost forgot for a second that she was a Thing after all. And then she did something very odd.

She shifted in her seat, parting her knees. She reached under her skirt and when she drew out her hand, two fingers foremost, Tommy could see something on her fingertips. It was a gob of Jelly ... but Miss Quinn's Jelly wasn't stale and acrid and greenish-gray like the Jelly Tommy was used to. Her Jelly was golden, a rich honey yellow brown, oozing sweet, warm and sticky, straight from the source.

She held it out to him. The smell was stronger than the liquor in the punch. Tommy breathed it in. He couldn't help himself. There was a rich melange of odors steaming from Miss Quinn's Jelly, and underneath them all lurked another odor, stronger, a little bitter, like the liquor in the punch. But it didn't smell bad, not really. It was kind of like the stink of the other Things' Jelly, but somehow, this smelled good.

Tommy caught himself leaning forward, his head bent low, her fingers right up under his nose, almost touching his mouth. He fell back against the car door.

'I'm going to tell the Professor the truth about you.'

'Are you? But what about the rest of it? Don't you want to learn the truth about Tommy?'

'You'd say anything now – I saw you – how could you—'

'You mean back at the party? Oh, that was easy. Angeline wanted it so bad, and I fed her all the cake and punch she wanted, and she never had to gain weight or break out or anything.'

She tasted the slime on her fingers. 'I don't have to do it, Tommy. I don't have to do any of it. I want to.'

She put on her glasses, and resumed her teacher mask.

'You see, I enjoy it. You will, too.'

The first streaks of dawn ignited the sky beyond the Interstate when the Spyder pulled up on the corner outside the Bright Dayz motel.

Tommy fumbled with the door handle. He almost had it open when Miss Quinn's words stopped him.

'Tommy, what do you remember about your parents?'

'My parents?'

'Yes, your parents – you had parents didn't you?'

'I don't remember them.'

'Tommy, you don't remember your parents because you didn't have any. You were stolen before birth. By your Professor, or the people behind him. Don't you get it?'

'Get what?'

'They're using you, Tommy. You aren't like them. They had parents. You didn't.'

'You're lying—'

'Tommy. Tommy Q. What does the Q stand for, Tommy?'

'Nothing. It's just Q.'

'Don't you have a last name, Tommy Q? Why not?'

'I'm an orphan—'

'No, that doesn't do it for me. There's another reason. The real reason. You're one of us, Tommy Q. You're a Crawler.' She leaned across the seat. 'Just like me.'

'No! No!'

Miss Quinn leaned nearer. Her hair fell across his face, breathing out her scent. She whispered, 'Still want to tell on me to your Professor? You won't. Because if he found out the truth about you, he'd burn you with those nasty guns of his. And anyway – could you face him? With the truth? No. You won't. You don't even want to.'

Just then the door handle twisted under his hand and Tommy fell out of the car.

6:05 a.m.
Bright Dayz Motel

The Ford drove past them and pulled into the motel parking lot. The faces of the Team looked out the windows of the Ford at Tommy as it passed.

Tommy started toward them. He could hear Miss Quinn's high heels clicking on the pavement right behind him. The faces of the Team were hard and closed.

'The way they look at me—'

Miss Quinn said softly, 'They keep you drugged, don't they? What is it? What do they give you?'

'Some kind of pills. . . '

'They're poison, Tommy. Don't take them anymore.'

They came up to the Ford.

Styles was the first to say anything. He grinned and opened his arms. 'Tommy!'

Trickman took Tommy by the shoulders, whisking him away from Styles' embrace. 'Hey, pal, where you been?'

The Professor, who seemed to be looking only at Miss Quinn, said, 'Are you all right? We were concerned.'

'He was with me,' Miss Quinn answered. She walked in front of the Professor, between him and Tommy.

'Hello,' the Professor said.

Trickman whistled. 'Yeah – hell-o!'

'Tommy, I'm ashamed of you,' Miss Quinn said.

Tommy stared at her. She winked at him.

'Aren't you goes to introduce me to your friends?'

'Yeah, Tommy, who's the lady?' Styles said. 'Looks like you scored tonight better than old Styles himself.'

'Professor, guys – this is Miss Quinn. She's one of the teachers at the school.'

'Pleased to meet you,' the Professor said.

Miss Quinn took his hand. They stood facing each other like sworn enemies in old dueling movies. 'The pleasure's been all mine, frankly. We drove the murdered boy's sister home. She was fairly distraught and Tommy helped look after her.'

Papers squeezed Tommy's shoulder. 'Guh, good for you, Tuh, Tommy.'

'Way to go, pal,' Trickman said, and punched him in the side.

Miss Quinn went on, lying as smoothly as if it were God's own truth. 'The boy's murder upset both of them. It's a good thing I had some sedatives on hand. Tommy fell asleep on the living room couch.'

The Professor looked at Tommy. It was like he was expecting Tommy to tell him what a bunch of lies it was. But Tommy looked at Miss Quinn and kept quiet. After a moment, the Professor said to her, 'Well, thanks for looking after him.'

Trickman, Styles and Papers headed back to their rooms. The Professor made a move to take Tommy in but Miss Quinn was already next to Tommy. Or had he moved closer to her? She held him firmly. She looked deep in his eyes.

'It was a nasty, brutal death,' she said. 'Whoever did it deserves the worst sort of punishment.'

He heard the Professor's voice answer, 'Well, these kind of things don't go unpunished for long.'

'Don't you think so, Tommy?' she asked. 'Whoever did this ought to be just plain killed?'

'Yes. That's right,' he said, and he kept his voice firm and steady. Already she was teaching him how to lie better.

She leaned down and hugged him. 'Good-bye, Tommy,' she said. 'I hope you'll be feeling better soon.'

The Professor turned away toward the motel and Miss Quinn drew her hand from under her skirt and stuck her fingers in Tommy's mouth.

And she whispered to him, with a wild light in her eyes, 'Go on – taste it – you never had it like this, did you? No, they only injected you – pitiful little doses, too – too dangerous for them to let you *taste* it!'

Tommy lurched back. His eyes started to pop—

Miss Quinn walked away to her car. Her long legs leaned over crazy against the dawn.

From far away, he heard the Professor's voice saying, 'Come on, Tommy. Here. Better late than never.'

Tommy stared at him. In the Professor's hand lay three of the yellow pills. They were swarming with red fire-ants.

A burst of white light blasted his eyes like a flash—

Water was swirling down a white porcelain sink.

Hands were washing under the water. The hands of a Kid. He couldn't be any older than twelve years old. The Kid was drying his hands and walking into the bedroom of another cheap motel room.

Flash—

The dark shape of a huge cockroach was scuttling across the school building, its eyes bulging.

Flash—

The Man from the Motel was burning and charring.

Flash—

The wires and boards of a crawlspace were passing overhead.

Flash—

Agnes was standing over an open grave – bloodstains on the breast of her white dress.

Flash—

The Kid was going to the outer door and opening it.

Flash—

It went dark. For a second he didn't know who he was or where. Was he the Kid in the motel room? Was he the Thing crawling under the building? Was he the boy beside Agnes in the cemetery?

Then something came to him – a word – a name: Tommy. That sounded right. Tommy. His name was Tommy.

It felt like he was standing somewhere. He could feel the sun on his cheek. He heard the sound of traffic.

I'll open my eyes in a second, he thought. I'll wake up and look around and find out where I am.

* * *

But he didn't want to wake up because he knew there was no getting better for him. From now on everything was only going to get worse.

Saturday – May 14

7:02 a.m.
Bright Dayz Motel

Tommy opened his eyes. He blinked against the bright sky. The sun hung high up overhead. The men of the Team stood all around him.

Trickman roared. 'Hey, look who's back! Hey di do, pal.'

The Professor never smiled. But now he grinned and said, 'Tommy, there's someone I'd like you to meet.'

He pointed to the motel. In the door to Room No. 9 a kid was standing.

The Kid.

Tommy blinked and squinted in the sunlight. Was he really standing here, or was it another one of the flashes? He looked back. The Kid was about twelve years old with short hair and an institutional uniform. He held himself back in a shy way.

The Professor said, 'Tommy, this is Eddie. The newest member of the Team.'

Papers said, 'Duh, doesn't he look like Tommy did when he first joined us?'

Styles patted the Kid on his head. 'A real Gift they say he's got.'

Eddie, the Kid, said, 'Hi.'

He held out his hand to shake.

Flash-

The warehouse on the river at night.

Flash-

Blood draining into a white sink under a naked bulb.

Flash-

* * *

Tommy was shaking. His eyes were rolling in his head. It felt like he was in the middle of a seizure, only the others didn't seem to notice.

Weren't they going back to their rooms? Why were they all dressed different? Why was the sun so high in the sky? How long had he been standing here, anyway? It was later. It had to be later. How much later?

Styles opened the driver's door to the Ford. He glanced dubiously at Trickman who was climbing in the other side. 'Looks like I'm stuck with you in the front again – did you really eat three burritos for breakfast?'

'Every beanful, pal.'

Eddie asked, 'Burrito?'

Styles made a bad face and said, 'Great. You'll get used to it, kid. We all had to.'

Flash–

The open muzzle of a Burner was aiming dead at him. It was starting to blaze.

Flash–

Tommy twisted up and crumpled to the ground. His face landed next to an anthill on the pavement. The ants marched over him. The members of the Team stood over him like stern pallbearers around an open grave.

And it seemed to him as though he lifted off his own body, and flew up like a moth out of its cocoon, high and far away.

What was happening to him? Something to do with Miss Quinn's Jelly. Would it never end?

A final flash of white light blinded him. And then there was blackness.

11:02 a.m.
Otis House

He heard voices from somewhere far away. He heard the Professor's voice. It spoke in the flat dead tones the Professor always used when he talked about Crawlers.

'Wake it up,' it said. 'Wake the damned dirty Thing up.'

A hand came down hard and slapped Tommy's face. He was seized by the shoulders and shaken.

Tommy came to. They were in the Ford but it wasn't moving. It was parked on a side street somewhere in Briggsville. Or had they moved on to some other town already?

'What happened?' he asked. He felt so odd and far away. It felt dirty and vile and shameful. It was a little like what Trickman sometimes talked about – like a hangover.

He could still taste Miss Quinn's Jelly on his tongue.

Trickman leaned in from the front seat, huge and hairy like a bear. 'You passed out, pal. Out cold.'

'Probably overcome by the gas,' Styles said. 'Did you have to have three burritos? Roll down the window at least.'

Tommy looked around. He was in the back seat. The others were staring at him. The Professor looked suspicious. The Kid gaped.

'Did the pills help, Tommy?' the Professor asked.

'Yes, sir. I feel better now.'

Tommy noticed his fist locked tight between his thighs. He unclenched it. In the hollow of his palm, gooey with his sweat, lay the three yellow pills. He stuffed them under the seat.

'There he goes!' Styles said.

Through the Ford's windows Tommy looked up the quiet, shabby suburban street. At the corner was a small white house.

The back door of the house was open. The tall black man Tommy had seen at the play was locking his door.

Styles said softly, 'Good morning, Principal Otis.'

The Professor pulled Tommy upright. 'Tommy, do you sense anything about him?'

Tommy looked at the Professor.

'Is he one of Them?' the Professor said. 'How about you, Eddie? Can you get a Flash on something?'

The Kid nodded. 'Yes. I feel something. It's awful. A kind of prickling, all over. And hot too – it's been like this for a while. I think – I think one of the Things is really close!'

Tommy looked at the Kid. Eddie was dutifully searching inside himself. Tommy knew the signs. Tommy wondered what Agnes was doing this morning. She couldn't have gone to school. He wished he were with her now.

Absently he scratched his hands ... under the skin, small bumps were forming ... from far away came the sound of screaming—

In a narrow alley the metal arms of the garbage truck were screaming as they raised the dumpster aloft. The dumpster lid was falling open – garbage was tumbling out – among it the half-corpses of Angeline – and the screaming carried on—

—Agnes was tossing in bed and screaming. The door was opening and a handsome woman in a cocktail waitress outfit and makeup entered. She was a little too brassy and blonde but the resemblance was there. She must have been Agnes' mother, Mrs Renfield.

Agnes screamed, 'Andrewz! Andrewz!'

Mrs Renfield sat on the bed and took her daughter's shoulders. 'Agnes, wake up – wake up, honey! It's all right, it was only a nightmare.'

Agnes opened her eyes. It took her a moment before she woke up all the way. Then she knew Mrs Renfield and hugged her, hugged her and held on tight. 'Mom. I dreamed – Where's Andy?'

Tommy leaned against the side of the Ford. He felt sick. He was sweating and his mouth hung open. He felt the Professor's eyes

on him, watching, studying, evaluating – judging.

Tommy managed to nod and jerk his head down the street. 'Yeah, Professor,' he breathed. 'I can feel it now too.'

The Kid, Eddie, smiled gratefully at him. Tommy wanted to smash his face in.

Principal Otis walked down off his porch to the silver blue Volvo in the drive.

Trickman reached under his seat. 'I got my Burner right here, Professor.'

'Way to go, Trickster,' Styles said.

The Professor turned to the Kid. 'Eddie – what do you feel?'

'There's one of them close. I feel it!'

The Professor turned back to Tommy. 'Tommy, what do you think? Is Otis the one?'

'My door's unlocked and my hand's on the release,' Trickman said.

'Come on, you slime factory,' Styles said. 'Come closer, will you?'

Eddie tugged on the Professor's sleeve. 'I know it, Professor! I can feel it!'

But the Professor was still watching Tommy. 'Concentrate, Tommy. You've never let us down.'

Tommy leaned back. A new wave of sickness washed over him.

In the upstairs hall, Agnes was pushing past Mrs Renfield and knocking on Andrew's bedroom door.

'Andrew? Andrewz? You 'wake?'

She was pushing the door open. Inside the room was empty, the bed unslept-in.

Mrs Renfield was saying something from her bedroom where she was taking off the waitress uniform. 'Sorry I missed his big night. I just got home. I suppose he's still out celebrating?'

Agnes was touching her finger. Andrew's ring was still there. 'It's true, then,' she whispered. 'It really is. . .'

Mrs Renfield came out in the hall, cinching her robe. 'What is, dear?'

'Mom. Do you mean they didn't even tell you yet?'

* * *

Trickman's fist rattled the door handle.

'Ready to take it,' he said. 'Any time now.'

The Professor said, 'Tommy?'

'It is!' the Kid said. 'I know it! I can feel it!'

Tommy dragged himself back upright. He shook his head.

'No,' he said. 'It isn't. He's not one of Them.'

Principal Otis reached the Volvo and got in.

Trickman asked, 'Professor?'

The Professor hesitated – looked from Eddie on one side to Tommy on the other. Then he sighed and shook his head. 'Stand down, Trickman. Let him be for now.'

'Shit,' Styles said. 'Well, there he goes.'

The Volvo drove past them. It stopped at the corner and turned and drove down the side street and out of sight.

The Team watched the Volvo disappear. They seemed to deflate as the tension and excitement of the kill left them. It was funny, Tommy thought. He had never considered the Team as murderers before. But hadn't they always been?

The Professor reached over past Tommy and unlocked the door. 'Let's check out the house.'

12:20 p.m.
Otis House

In the blackness, a beam of light skated over dirt ground, support boards, cobwebs. The light shone through a grill. In the grill, Trickman's face showed by the flashlight.

Trickman squatted by the house. He aimed his flashlight through a grill half-buried in the grass.

'What's down there?' the Professor asked.

Tommy blinked. He and the Kid were watching from the sidewalk, far back from the Team. But now and then he'd get a flash and it was like he was under the house in the crawlspace looking out. He shifted his shoulders, feeling trapped and boxed in.

'Crawlspace under the house,' Trickman said. 'I see some cans, trash. Doesn't look like it's been used for years. Grill's rusted shut.'

'Then it's tuh, true,' Papers said. 'Only the front door and back – those are the only ways in and out?'

Trickman snapped off the flashlight. 'That's about it.'

Tommy turned away. He walked so the Ford shielded him from sight of the Team. He dug in his pocket and pulled out Miss Quinn's silk lace underpants. They lay in his hand, stinging a little. He felt little prickling thrills race up and down his forearm.

He brought the underpants to his nose and breathed in.

'This is my first Chase,' Eddie said right behind him. 'Isn't it great?'

Tommy started. He shoved Miss Quinn's underpants back in his pocket and turned to the Kid. 'How old are you, anyway?'

'Twelve. Almost thirteen.'

Tommy thought back. 'That's how old I was, too.'

'Why – how old are you?'

'Sixteen yesterday.'

'You don't look that old.'

'What do you remember about your parents?'

The Kid blinked. 'My parents?'

'Yeah, your parents – you had parents didn't you?'

'I was in group home. The Commander came for me. That's all I remember.'

Tommy turned away. He felt angry. 'You don't have any idea what you're getting into.'

The Team were walking around to the back porch. Tommy left the sidewalk and moved halfway down the side yard, keeping to the bushes. To his annoyance, the Kid tagged along.

The Professor looked at his watch and glanced casually at the neighboring houses. 'I'd like to look around inside. Trickman, think you can get us in?'

'Nothing easier.'

Trickman pulled his metal blade out of his coat and levered the door. The lock snapped and opened. He stepped out of the way and bowed.

'After you, Alphonse.'

'We'll go through the house,' the Professor said. 'Styles, Trickman, you go after our Principal. Think you can put the squeeze on him?'

'Like a lemon,' Styles said. 'Phineas, he's my lemonade.'

The Professor didn't smile. 'He'll come back here before he bolts. Tommy! Eddie!'

Trickman put back his blade. 'See you tonight.'

Trickman and Styles passed Tommy and Eddie on the way to the Ford. Styles looked over Trickman's apparel.

'I hope you pressed your suit,' Styles said.

Trickman groaned. 'Oh, no! Not the suit again!'

Tommy and Eddie walked up onto the back porch.

The Kid was beside himself with excitement. 'What's it going to be like – inside?'

Tommy pushed him forward. 'You'll find out.'

He followed the Kid through the door.

In the town's central park water splashed and kids screamed.

Children ran around screaming their heads off, delighted in the sun and spring warmth. The park was crowded; it was a busy Saturday. A troop of Cub Scouts jogged by. Principal Otis

watched them furtively from a bench. On a hill by some bushes, Styles and Trickman watched Principal Otis.

They both wore severe dark suits and sunglasses. They looked mean and official and cheap.

Styles gestured. 'Saturday afternoon in the park with Phineas. When are you going to make a move, Phineas?'

Trickman sniffed and looked behind them. 'I smell barbecue.'

'You look like a Secret Service thug in that getup.'

'Same to you, FBI goon,' Trickman shot back.

'I still can't believe you shaved.'

'And, I had onions and peppers for a snack from one of the vendors.'

'God, Trickman.'

'Hey, I gotta have some defense against that perfume your use.'

'Shut up – our Phineas is taking off. And it's cologne, Garlic Breath.'

'Call a rose a rose. And shut up yourself.'

Styles stood up. 'Let's go.'

Late in the afternoon, the sunlight turned Principal Otis' white house gold. Tommy was inside.

He stood in the back hall. He still felt woozy from Miss Quinn's Jelly. He had to lean against the wall to keep from falling. How long was this going to last? Through one door he saw into a dim, shuttered room. A lamp burned on the desk. Papers rifled through the desk drawers.

The Professor searched the kitchen. Eddie stood at the window of the living room. He was playing with a shaft of golden sunlight. He stuck his hand in it.

From the kitchen, the Professor called, 'Eddie? You okay?'

'Professor, what is it about sunset?'

'What do you mean, Eddie?'

'I don't know. It's just, when the sun goes down, it kind of gives me shivers.'

The Professor looked out the kitchen window. 'Night's coming. God, the night is an evil place.'

The red sun bled in the west.

The red light slanted across the living room. Tommy stood very still and watched it. The Kid had gone into the kitchen with the Professor. Papers was going over the bedroom now. Tommy moved into the empty living room. Absently he scratched his arm.

The living room was ordinary. TV, stereo, sofa, chairs, bookcase. Tommy quietly shut both doors. He leaned against the wall. He was sweating. He breathed hard. His fingers clawed at the wall.

Up and down his forearms rippled little bumps.

Tommy choked. He whispered fiercely, 'No! Not here! Not now!'

Trickman shoved a hot dog into his face. It left onions and sauerkraut and mustard on his face. Already his beard was showing.

Styles looked away in disgust.

The late afternoon sunset gilded the park. The light was golden and mild here, not bloody, not sick or dirty or wicked.

Some athletic young men were playing basketball. The ball squibbed away from them and landed by Principal Otis' shoes. As Principal Otis picked up the ball, a young athlete ran up. He was shirtless and his sweaty dark chest gleamed. He stopped before Principal Otis.

'It's mine,' the tall boy said.

Principal Otis seemed struck dumb by the boy's beauty. He flipped him the ball. The athlete grinned and ran back to the game. Principal Otis looked away.

Across the basketball court, Styles was watching. Principal Otis moved away.

Trickman picked bits of onion off his chin and popped them in his mouth. 'What's up with our boy now?'

'It seems,' said Styles, 'that being a Crawler is not Principal Phineas Otis' only vice. It seems he also likes to use young boys for his feedings.'

Trickman belched.

In the kitchen a casserole smashed on the floor. Tommy leaned against the living room door.

Through the door he could hear the Kid starting to mutter and shake.

He heard the Professor's voice asking, 'Eddie – what is it? What's wrong?'

The Kid whispered. Tommy could barely hear him. 'Professor – the Thing – it's here – it's in the house!'

The Professor's voice said, 'Eddie, we saw it leave. How could it get back in?'

'It's here! It's right over in there! Why don't you believe me?'

'All right, Eddie. Stay calm. Where is it?'

'There! There – in the living room!'

Tommy stuck frozen to the wall. The bumps on his arms and neck were back. They were growing bigger than ever. His whole body seemed awake and alive, tingling with pain that felt somehow wonderful.

From far away he heard the Professor's voice. 'Papers! Tommy! You hear? The Thing is in the house!'

'Yes, Professor!' answered Papers' voice. 'I hear you!'

'In the living room! Tommy, do you hear me?'

'This way,' squeaked Eddie's voice, 'here, here!'

Tommy looked around. The window was no good, they were all nailed and painted shut. Besides, he didn't feel like going out into the light. But there below his feet, in the floor, was a grill. A grill like the one outside the house.

There were some vendors next to the central fountain in the park.

Some young men were buying ice cream cones. Principal Otis handed across a bill for a cone. He stared at the young men.

Around the corner of the stand Trickman appeared, scowling. Principal Otis moved away.

The ice cream man shouted after Principal Otis, 'Hey, man – your cone!'

A familiar *click* focused Tommy back inside the house. He heard the sounds but he couldn't see anything – everything was black around him. He smelled dirt and must and mold clinging to him, choking him.

Again the *click* came as Papers cocked his Burner at the living room door.

In the kitchen, the Professor had his Burner out as well. He stood at one of the two doors to the living room and Papers was at the other. The Professor gestured to the Kid.

‘Eddie, stand over there. Tommy! Tommy, are you all right?’

Papers called out, ‘I’m ready, Puh-Professor!’

‘Then go!’

Papers and the Professor burst into the room from either end, Burners ready. But the room was empty.

Papers blinked and looked around. He pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. ‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ the Professor said. ‘There’s nothing here.’

The Kid, in the doorway behind the Professor, pointed. ‘There! There! That’s where it went!’

He was pointing at the grill lying on the rug by a black opening in the floor.

That was where he was. With the knowledge came sight. He lay in the crawlspace underneath the house.

Half human, half Thing, he scuttled across the dirt. Over his head the floor creaked with the men’s shoes.

He heard Papers’ voice say, ‘It must have slipped into the cuh, crawlspace under the house.’

‘But Tommy!’ said the Professor’s voice. ‘Where is he? Tommy! Tommy, can you hear me?’

Tommy kept on crawling. Far away he could make out a square of light – the grill opening onto freedom.

Downtown next to the park, Principal Otis walked across a parking lot. He glanced over his shoulder. At one end Trickman was coming. At the other end – Styles. Principal Otis climbed in his Volvo.

Trickman and Styles watched Principal Otis drive away.

‘Why, Phineas,’ Styles joked. ‘Leaving so soon?’

‘He’s bacon now, frying on the pan,’ Trickman said. ‘Better call the Professor.’

Styles shook his head. ‘Let’s stay on the rabbit’s tail.’

Trickman gazed longingly back at the fountain. 'Can't we get an ice cream first?'

'No.'

'Man, don't you ever get hungry?'

Tommy – the being that was half-Tommy and half-Thing – looked back. He could see something move in the opening he had squeezed through. It was the Kid's face.

The Kid was kneeling over the opening, staring down into it. Smelling it. Tommy knew what the Kid was smelling. He was smelling it himself, all over and out of himself.

It didn't smell bad to him now. It smelled rich and wonderful, fresh and sweet like Miss Quinn's smell, only male, not female.

'Professor!' the Kid's voice cried out. 'The Thing – it's going – that way!'

His hand, trailing tentacles, scrabbled at the support boards, pulling him closer to the outside grill.

He heard the Professor's voice. 'It's going for the grill we saw outside. It can get out that way!'

The light from the outside grill was fading, going away. He was losing it.

7:28 p.m.
Otis House

The crawlspace was alive with dust and insect leavings, shook up and cast about by Tommy's frantic efforts to escape. He pulled himself closer to the outside grill. But he heard shoes clump-clump at the back door. The Professor must be there, holding his Burner at the ready. Tommy heard their voices:

'Eddie, you stay here.'

'But I want to see it!'

'You don't understand. These Things have fantastic strength—'

With a last surge Tommy reached the grill and banged against it. The metal bent and broke and tore free from the foundations.

Tommy put his arm out, twisted one shoulder through and paused. He was gasping. His tentacles writhed out of his arm – a sick, disgusting sight. He was stuck.

From the front of the house he could hear Papers come out. From the back he heard the Professor step down off the porch.

He wished with all his heart. He glared at his arm, at the oozing, slimy tentacles. 'Change!' he whispered. 'Change back!'

The tentacles seemed to recede a little into his arm. Back in the crawlspace, his trunk felt like it was shrinking. He felt more human now. He was sure he was smaller. He crawled out on the ground. Weak. Gasping. In pain.

He heard the Professor's voice. 'Papers!'

'Here!'

Tommy gathered himself up. He started to limp across the yard. From the back yard he could hear the Professor cock his Burner and give the order to Papers:

'Now! Go!'

Tommy put on a burst of speed and scuttled across the yard to a delivery truck parked at the street. He crouched behind it.

He saw Papers and the Professor meet at the grill. The Professor shoved the twisted wreck of the grill with the muzzle of his Burner. 'It got away. Damn!'

'Muh, mightn't it still be under there?'

'Doubt it.'

The Professor lay down his Burner and knelt at the opening. He touched the frame and brought his fingers to his nose. Tommy looked down at his arm. He saw traces of his own Jelly on his skin. It made him sick to his stomach.

The professor showed Papers the Jelly from the frame. They put their heads into the opening. *Bang!* They jumped.

Eddie appeared at the corner.

'Eddie!' the Professor shouted.

Eddie lowered his head. 'Sorry. The door slipped.'

'Never mind, Eddie. Come here. You did a good job before, tracing it. Tell me, is it still under there?'

Tommy watched the Kid bend over the opening. He was smelling at it. He stepped back suddenly, bending over.

'Ugh – gross—' The Kid turned away and started puking.

Behind the delivery truck, Tommy studied his right hand. Some of the tentacles still showed. And some Jelly was oozing out from his pores. Absently he licked at it, feeling the buzz swirling into his head and the blood, or something else, surging through him. It felt as good as jerking off.

He loped away, past the houses. At the end of the street he made it to some woods. He slipped into the shadows of the trees and looked back.

At the Otis house, Papers bent over the Kid. The Professor shut his phone.

'It's Trickman,' he said. Tommy could hear him, just barely. He never could have heard him if he only had measly human hearing. 'Otis is on his way. They got to him.'

'Then it isn't the Puh, Principal who's here.'

The Professor shook his head and looked around warily. 'No. This must be another one. Maybe,' he said, 'more than one.'

Papers patted the Kid on the back. 'Eddie, are you okay?'

'You'll be all right, son,' said the Professor. 'Sometimes the stink of the things' Jelly – it always made Tommy sick, too.'

Papers looked up and met the Professor's gaze. 'Tuh, Tommy. You don't think the, the Thing – it didn't, guh, get Tommy?'

'We better take a last look through the house. Quick, before Otis gets here.'

Across town, Principal Otis' Volvo burned down the road. The Ford followed.

Trickman bit into his ice cream cone and moaned.

'Mmm, Rocky Road.'

Styles didn't rise to the bait. He focused on the Volvo up ahead. 'Yeah, Phineas, go on, we know where you're headed.'

'Slow down,' Trickman said. 'Let him think we lost him.'

'You just don't want to spill any of that ice cream.'

Down the street from the Otis house, Papers and the Professor and Eddie watched from a bus bench. They watched the silver blue Volvo turn a corner and pull into the Otis driveway. Principal Otis glanced back from the door. He rushed inside.

The Ford pulled up. Papers, the Professor and Eddie stood up from the bench and greeted it.

'You get him?' Styles asked, climbing out.

The Professor nodded at the house. 'He went inside.'

'Hey, where's Tommy?' Trickman asked.

Papers shook his head.

'Something happened inside the house,' the Professor said. 'There was another one. We lost Tommy.'

'Shit . . . poor kid. . . ' Trickman looked upset.

Styles grimaced. 'Fucking Crawlers.'

The Professor checked his watch. 'Yes.'

Trickman hauled out the gym bag with the Burners. 'Well?' he asked. 'What are we waiting for?'

In his bedroom, Principal Otis packed in a hurry. Some magazines fell to the floor, glossy with pictures of half-naked young men. Principal Otis stopped and looked out the window. Through the window he saw the Team – Trickman, Papers, the Professor, Styles – walking up the drive. Principal Otis crossed to the dresser and pulled out a small, ugly pistol.

* * *

At the street, Eddie crouched behind the delivery truck. He watched the Team approach the house.

The Professor gestured and they split up. Styles and Trickman took the front door. Papers and the Professor headed around back.

Eddie looked at the side of the truck. There was a bit of Jelly on the bumper. Eddie touched it and sniffed his fingers. Against his will, not wanting to, full of disgust and nausea, he brought the strange substance closer to his lips. His tongue slipped through his lips all on its own.

He licked the Jelly.

Flash-

Eddie lost touch with the delivery truck. He had slipped somewhere else. He was still on the street and could see the house they had searched. But it was different somehow. He saw everything in an odd way. Everything was moving a little strangely. He was peering through trees in the dusk. Something was moving through the woods over there. The red sky was dimming overhead.

Flash-

Trickman kicked in the front door to the Otis house. Around back the Professor shouldered in the kitchen door.

In the bedroom Principal Otis heard the doors breaking. He froze. Sweat gleamed on his face. He licked his lips and grimaced. His fingers twitched as he loaded the pistol.

Papers and the Professor crossed the kitchen into the back hall.

Styles and Trickman cocked their Burners as they moved through the living room.

The Team sighted one another down the length of the back hall. Trickman lifted his Burner. Down the hall, the Professor nodded.

In the middle of the back hall were two doors. The door to the bathroom hung open. The door to the bedroom was closed.

Styles shouted, 'Otis! Principal Phineas Otis! We've come for you!'

In the bedroom, terrified, Principal Otis swung the pistol about. He aimed at the door, the walls, back at the door. He opened fire.

Bullets tore through the wood and punched into the hall walls.

'Burn it!' the Professor snapped.

Styles and Trickman and Papers and the Professor blazed their Burners. The red rays burned holes through the bedroom door like Swiss cheese.

Eddie reeled against the side of the truck. He blinked. His eyes were rolling back in his head. Then his hand hit the side of the truck and he blinked again. He saw again the delivery truck, the street, the houses. It all looked normal again.

He was back.

In a choked voice he whispered, 'The Thing – it was right here!'

Four red rays sliced through the bedroom door and walls toward Principal Phineas Otis. The rays found him and converged. His body charred in the heat. His limbs jerked – the pistol shook in his hand and fired until it ran out.

Through the holes in the wall the men of the Team fired steadily.

The Professor gave the order. 'All right. Cut it!'

The room was engulfed in smoke. The men kicked through the smoldering wreckage. They poked the muzzles of their Burners through the bones that had been Principal Otis.

'Oh, shit,' Trickman groaned. 'Springfield all over again.'

'It's not possible!' Styles said. 'He was one of them! He had to be!'

'Look for yourself, cologne breath! He didn't Change! They always Change! But he didn't! Face it! He wasn't a Crawler!'

The Otis house exploded with flames. The Team stood by the bus bench and watched it collapse on itself. From far away the

sirens wailed.

'We just muh, murdered a human being,' Papers said. 'But then ... the, the Thing Eddie sensed...'

The Professor paced back and forth. 'There was one of Them here. It wasn't Otis. It was somebody else. Otherwise it doesn't make any sense.'

Papers asked, 'Could Otis have been shuh, sheltering one of Them?'

'It never happened before.'

Styles said, 'Those sirens are getting closer. Maybe we should be getting back to the motel. Pity about Tommy though.'

The Professor stopped and looked at him. 'That's it. I should have known. It was Tommy!'

Trickman gaped. 'Tommy?'

'Of course! Tommy! He's the killer! He's one of Them!'

'No way!' Styles scoffed.

'He fooled all of us, pal. It happens.'

Eddie ran to them. 'Professor, it was here! The Thing! I smelled it!'

'Eddie – are you sure?'

The Kid held up his fingers – sticky with Jelly. He pointed past the houses up into the dark woods. 'It went – that way.'

8:40 p.m.
Woods

Tommy loped up through the trees, his right arm dangling, still trailing tentacles and oddly-jointed insectoid limbs.

He reached the top of the hill. He leaned on a tree. He looked back. He had lost track of them. Maybe he'd given them the slip. Maybe not. He ran on.

He staggered down the thinning trees. From up ahead he could hear the sound of drumming.

He pushed on until he could see down the woods into a small cemetery, hemmed in by trees on three sides.

Far below him, through the trees, candles and hurricane lamps illuminated a bare patch of ground at one corner of the cemetery. A few figures clustered there – some teachers, parents, and the cast of the high school production of *Oedipus Tyrannos*.

A priest stood before a new headstone. Behind him the boy from the Drum Chorus beat on his drum.

The priest concluded the ceremony. 'Ashes to ashes...'

Agnes stood at the edge of the grave. She wore a white dress and a white veil. She held a white rose in one hand. The other mourners all wore black. Agnes looked more a woman now. Sadness had ripened her beauty and dulled the edge of her tomboy spirits.

She sprinkled dirt into the grave.

'Dust to dust... Good-bye, Andrew.'

The priest droned on: 'Resquiat in pace, rest in peace, Andrew Renfield, amen.'

Agnes repeated, 'Amen.'

And the others sounded, 'Amen.'

A shovel bit into the pile of dirt and strewed it into the grave. The mourners started to drift away.

Agnes brought a handful of dirt to her mother. She held it out. 'Mom.'

Mrs Renfield made no move to take it. 'I don't know,' she said. 'I don't know.'

Mrs Renfield's face was blank and clean of tears. The veteran cocktail waitress choked back all her grief.

Agnes took her mother's hand and pressed the dirt into it. 'Here, Mom. You should throw some dirt in.'

'I guess I wasn't too good a mother to you kids,' Mrs Renfield said. 'I guess I should have stayed home and not gone working three different jobs at once. Only then who would we have gotten the money for apples and milk and those oatmeal cookies he had to have all the time?'

'Mom, you should throw some dirt in.'

Agnes held out her mother's hand and turned it over. She shook the dirt at the grave.

'Oatmeal cookies. I guess I shouldn't have kicked David out. I guess I should have just put up with his shit.'

Mrs Renfield shook her head and turned away. A man in a black cowboy hat and expensive suit came up. He bared his head and took Agnes by the hand.

'Agnes, I'm so sorry.'

'Thanks, Mr Gianni. Could you – I don't know what to do with Mom—'

'That's all right. I'll take her home. I've got Bruno watching the club tonight.'

'Thanks, Mr Gianni.'

The man took Mrs Renfield away. The gravedigger finished filling the grave. He went away after the Priest.

Only Agnes and a few of the high school kids remained. The drummer carried on drumming. One of the girls lit another candle.

Agnes knelt in the dirt. She rubbed the snot from her nose and left a dirt smear there but she didn't try to clean it off. She said in a low voice, her words in rhythm to the drum:

*'But no – already had his deathbell rung
The joys of all his life were said and sung:
His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve.'*

Miss Quinn emerged from the dark woods. She was the picture of necrophile chic, a black widow spider in veils and velvet. She stroked Agnes' shoulder and cooed in her ear.

'It's fine, baby, it's okay, girl. We'll stay just as long as you need.'

She stared down at Agnes' hands. The thorns of the white rose had cut Agnes' palm, drawing blood. A drop of red stained the breast of her white dress.

Even from up the slope and through the trees, Tommy could see Miss Quinn's hand rippling with small, insistent bumps.

He knew he had to stop her somehow. Even from up here he could smell the essence of Miss Quinn dripping out of her pores. It was funny how he focused on that smell, and on the prickling feeling she gave him. It still hurt, but it was pain he needed now, pain he couldn't do without. Shit, he had to admit it, he was getting drugged and addicted to the stink and prickling the Things made.

He brought his right hand in front of his face. He managed to move his fingers a little. But the skin was still dark, oozing Jelly, and a few vestigial tentacles dangled from his wrist. He shoved the hand into his pocket and headed down toward the cemetery.

The white veils and dress blew around Agnes' face and body in the nightwind. Miss Quinn hovered by her. The drummer beat his drum.

Tommy staggered into the candle light. He went to Agnes. She moved from Miss Quinn and shrank into him.

'Tommy...'

'I'm here, Little Aggie. I'm here.'

'Tommy, I'm cursed. First Andy. Now Angeline. She's gone, Tommy – since last night. Where is she, Tommy? Do you know?'

Tommy looked at Miss Quinn. 'No, Agnes. I don't know what happened to Angeline,' he said. God how easy it was to lie.

'And you won't go away with the Professor?'

He stroked her hair. He breathed in her scent. She hadn't put on any perfume today. He could smell only the scent of the bath soaps and her shampoo and the flowering essence of her girl-flesh. 'No, I won't go with him. Not any more.'

She moaned a little and her body settled in closer to his. 'Tommy... I'm glad you're here...'

But something tore at his awareness and made him look away. At the edge of the light the Kid, Eddie, appeared. He pointed at Tommy.

‘There it is! There! *There’s the Thing!*’

Tommy pulled back. But Agnes whimpered and clung to him. He couldn’t leave her.

Behind the Kid the Team stepped out of the woods. The Professor walked up to Tommy and yanked his right hand out of his pocket. The hand, scaly and dark, trailed tentacles – a thing not human at all.

Something else tumbled out of his pocket too, almost lost in the twilight: a pair of silk lace underpants.

Agnes saw only the monstrosity that had been his hand. Her face crumpled up in disgust and shock and horror. ‘Oh, God! Tommy!’

‘Agnes,’ he said – ‘you got to believe me—’

But the Kid shrieked, ‘Get it! Kill it!’

The Professor twisted Tommy’s arm in a crushing grip. He drove Tommy to his knees.

The Professor spoke in a calm and deadly voice. ‘Papers. The ampules.’

Papers took out the small leather case. He removed one orange ampule and the modified needle. He pumped the substance into the needle and handed it to the Professor.

‘I’ll do it,’ the Professor said.

‘Stop it,’ Agnes cried. ‘What are you doing to him?’

‘Quiet, girl,’ the Professor said.

He plunged the needle into Tommy’s forearm.

Tommy pleaded with Agnes. He wanted to explain so much to her, to tell her everything. ‘Agnes – I never wanted to hurt anybody...’

The night swirled round and round and the candles sputtered and went out.

The Professor let Tommy fall to the ground.

In his eyes she looked like she was standing on the side of a motel pool and he was pinned to the bottom. She was rippling and waving and getting dimmer. ‘Agnes,’ he called, but his voice sounded small and faint even in his own ears. ‘Agnes ... Little Aggie...’

‘Tommy!’

'Shut up,' said the Professor in his hard flat voice. 'This Thing here killed your brother. It killed your friend Angeline, too. They found her body in the dumpster, Tommy. Can you still hear me? And we murdered an innocent man. Because of you. Trickman. Get the Burners.'

'Puh, please, Professor,' Papers said. 'It still has some value. As a spuh, specimen.'

Tommy writhed on the ground, trying to stay conscious.

The Professor shook off Papers' arm. 'Do you realize what you're saying?'

'It's been duh, done before.'

'I know, but. . .'

'Puh, please. Professor. For science.'

Tommy felt himself being lifted. He felt two strong arms cradling him. And then the Professor's voice, but bitter, so bitter, with only a dying trace of compassion or of pity.

'Come on, son.'

Behind him, as the Professor bore him away, Miss Quinn stooped and caught up her underpants. She slipped them into her bag and let Agnes lean against her.

He heard Miss Quinn saying in her sweetest lying tones, 'It's all right, girl. We hardly knew him. And if it's true – if he really did kill Andrew—'

'I need him, Miss Quinn! He didn't do it, he isn't bad, not really, not in his heart. He can't be!'

He mustered all his strength to shout back to her, to warn her. 'Agnes. . . ' It was only a moan that the nightwind stole away.

That was all he could manage. The grave, the candles, and Agnes drifted into darkness. It was only in his imagination or his mind's eye that he could see Miss Quinn cradle Agnes and gaze back at him, her eyes grinning and leering.

9:35 p.m.
Briggsville High

He came to screaming.

—Or did the screams sound only in his head?

Duct tape strapped his wrist to a corner of a lab table. In the terrarium the cockroaches scattered. The tape strapped Tommy's other wrist and the mantises cowered. The tape bound his ankles and the ants marched and the wasps beat against the glass sides of their jars.

Papers bound Tommy's neck so his head hung down into the table sink. His eyes closed again. He decided he wasn't screaming after all. He knew what was happening. But he was still out of it.

The Professor stood at another lab table. He had a deck of green playing cards and he laid out eight cards face up. Four were hearts. The other four were spades.

'I hoped it would never come to this,' he said. 'I knew about Tommy, of course. But I hoped the pills would keep the Crawler in him from getting out. Damn it! We only gave him twenty-three doses! They don't start to Change until they get to thirty, or more! How could it happen so soon?'

Papers checked the tape bonds. He tore off a length and strengthened the bond on Tommy's ankle. 'To, to tell you the truth, this should be interesting.'

Styles and Trickman stood by. They looked at Tommy's body, stretched out on the table, obscene, naked but for torn white briefs.

The Professor looked away. He drew a deep breath and took back self-control. 'For four years now Tommy was one of the Team. So I won't decide this. It has to come from all of us.'

He handed them each a pair of cards.

'You each have one heart and one spade. Now, we can either go ahead and Burn Tommy and get out of this forsaken town. Or Papers can go ahead and – examine Tommy – before he dies.'

Papers faced the others. 'It cuh, could give us valuable information about the Crawlers – what they are, what makes them tick, how they can ma, mimic human beings so successfully.'

'But it's Tommy,' the Professor said. 'And it will cause him dreadful pain.'

'Unavoidable, really,' Papers murmured.

The Professor handed Styles the last card. 'Hearts for mercy and a quick burn. Spades means vivisection. We won't do this if any one of us disagrees. If there's a single heart out of four – we stop now.'

Out in the hallway the Kid, Eddie, drank from a water fountain. The hall was long and empty and dark except for the Exit lights. The Kid looked at the door marked *Science Lab*. He listened at the door. Faint voices came through.

Tommy lay naked on the table. His head turned a little and he opened his eyes. Blinked against the light.

He saw the fluorescent school lights overhead. He saw the tall shapes of the men of the Team. One by one they stepped up and laid the cards down on the table beside him.

Papers came first. 'Never a que, question for me.'

Papers laid down on the table a spade.

Styles took his place. 'We have to. Maybe we don't like it. But it's the job we took.'

Styles put a spade next to the one Papers left.

Trickman was the only one who addressed Tommy directly. 'Sorry, pal. You were a good kid.'

Trickman added his card. Another spade.

The Professor stood with his back to them. He looked at the specimen jars – the insects crawling in their jars. He looked at the cards.

'Three cards,' he said. His voice sounded strange to Tommy. He didn't know him any more. He didn't know any of them. 'Three spades. So it's down to me after all.'

He stepped up to the table. He looked down at the Thing there – at Tommy. Tommy stared back, eyes big with fear.

The Professor said, 'I want you all to know I'm proud of you. You chose principle over personality. You didn't allow your affection or your . . . love . . . for what used to be Tommy to get in the way of your duty. And you were right.'

The Professor put down a spade.

And he said, turning his back: 'Go ahead, Papers.'

Papers pulled on latex surgical gloves. They made a squishy snapping sound as he tightened them. He pushed aside the cards and unfolded surgical instruments. He selected a scalpel. It gleamed in the cold fluorescent light.

'No anesthetics, I'm afraid, Tommy,' Papers said. 'Your reactions are important. But I will try to be delicate. . . '

At the far end of the room the Professor raised the blinds and looked up at the night sky. At the moon.

He said, softly, 'I used to look at the sky at night. I liked to watch the stars, before Alicia died. But then the night sky got painted over black for me.'

Papers bent over the table. He started to work. Tommy couldn't see what he did but he felt it.

Tommy's legs jerked, and he heard his own voice scream—

From the Science Lab door, Tommy's muffled screams echoed down the long hall, past the hand-made signs.

Cheerleading Squad Tryouts

Hall Passes Required during all Class Periods

French Club meeting

Beat Luther Hills!

Out through the closed outer doors, out into the parking lot, Tommy's screams rang. Styles was smoking and polishing the Ford. He ground the cloth into the finish as if he wanted to grind away what he was hearing.

In the hallway Trickman sat on the floor surrounded by dozens of fast food wrappers. His shirt buttons were undone. It had been a feast. He unwrapped a burger for the Kid.

'You mean you never tasted a bacon burger? Oh, you're in for an experience, pal. . . '

A scream shot down the hall. The Kid flinched and turned around.

'Yeah kid, that was a good one.'

'Trickman . . . what's happening? What are they doing to it?'

'Believe me, pal, you don't even want to know.'

The light glared down over the dark shape on the lab table. Papers held a sponge up, dripping bilious blood.

'How intriguing,' he said. 'He certainly seems human, down to the bones and organs. And yet, there are these odd nodes on the bones . . . and these strange anatomical formations here, and here. I've never gotten one to dissect alive, before. But we never caught one before – not alive, anyway.'

The Professor remarked, 'You're not stuttering anymore.'

'I'm not? No, I suppose not.'

'We're running a risk doing this here. We should do it and get out. Before the police come.'

Papers selected a long curette and bent back to work. 'No,' he said. 'This operation must be performed carefully. Delicately. You aren't still attached to it, are you? This, this Thing?'

'I always knew it might have to come to this. We always raise them from the eggs. If they survive we use them for Tracers. They can sense one another – even if they think they're human themselves.'

'Of course. That makes sense.' Papers dropped the bloody curette into the pan.

The Professor said, 'He's quiet now.'

'He's watching me. . . ' Papers said.

Tommy's eyes stared with silent rage. The were the last part of him that even remotely resembled something that might once have been human. The rest was just a mess.

'I hoped the pills would keep him human,' the Professor said. 'I prayed we could avoid all this. You know, one can always hope for a miracle. But the Things always emerge at about this age. Even so – only twenty-three doses – we should have had at least half a year more from it—'

'Professor. He's growing angry—'

'He's about to Change! Sedate him – put him under – now!'

Papers wrestled with Tommy's right arm – the arm bulged with bumps and beetle plates. The Professor pumped another orange ampule into the hypodermic and stabbed at Tommy's arm but the needle skated off the beetle plates.

'It won't go in!' Papers said.

'Hold him steady! Now!'

The Professor plunged the needle under the edge of the plates. Tommy quieted and began to revert back.

'God, what strength! He's not even unconscious.'

The Professor wiped sweat from his brow but his sleeve was bloody and it left a red smear across his forehead. 'It's enough. Any more might reverse it.'

Papers opened one of Tommy's eyelids. He hovered over it with a curved probe.

'Now Tommy, try to take it easy. Soon begun, soon done.'

Papers brought his instrument to bear, and the shape on the table twitched and bucked against the bindings, and raised its voice in an almost human gurgle of pain.

A moth fluttered in a lamp over the parking lot. Beneath the lamp Trickman walked out to the Ford.

'How's Eddie doing now?'

Styles glanced in through the window. 'Sleeping in back. I wish they'd get it over with.'

Trickman belched, loud. 'I ate too much. . . '

The high school door opened. The Professor and Papers came out to the car.

'Finished?' Styles asked.

The Professor shook his head. Papers' lab coat was stained with blood. He stuffed it in a trash can.

'We still need to learn it's, uh, recovery time,' Papers said. He arched his shoulders and stretched. 'Just a question of how long before it regains cuh, consciousness . . . and its strength.'

The Professor checked his watch. 'It went under at 2:37.'

'Just nuh, note when it comes to.'

'We'll take Eddie back to the motel and start packing,' the Professor said. 'I'll be back.'

'And when he comes to?' Trickman said. 'What then?'

The Professor handed Trickman one of the gym bags.

'Exterminate it.'

They drove off. Trickman and Styles watched them go. They looked at the school. Styles looked at his watch.

‘Jesus,’ Trickman breathed.

‘What are you so jumpy about? It’s only a Crawler.’

‘But it used to be Tommy, man.’

The sound of a basketball bounced off the walls. Agnes appeared, holding the train of her skirts in one hand and dribbling the ball with the other.

‘Anybody up for a fast game of pickup?’

Styles and Trickman stared at her and behind them Miss Quinn appeared and flung them aside with brutal force. She beckoned. Agnes took Miss Quinn’s hand and they went inside the school.

Miss Quinn and Agnes approached the Science Lab.

‘Stay here, Agnes.’

‘I want to see him.’

‘No. Wait here. This is my homeroom, remember?’

Miss Quinn went in. Agnes bounced the ball off the wall, crossed to the water fountain and drank.

Out in the parking lot Trickman and Styles came to on the pavement. Trickman groaned.

Styles swore. ‘Would you mind being quiet and letting a guy sleep?’

‘What hit us?’

‘Something pretty fucking hard.’

The Science Lab door opened. Miss Quinn’s face appeared.

Agnes rushed up to her. ‘Miss Quinn – how is he?’

‘You’d better come in.’

Agnes squeezed in. The door closed behind her.

Styles groaned and stretched his arms. Behind him Trickman unzipped the gym bag. He handed one Burner to Styles and took another himself.

‘Well, like the man said. Let’s go.’

* * *

The Science Lab was dark except for the one light over the central table. Miss Quinn lead Agnes out of the darkness to the table. Something huddled on the table under a sheet. Agnes moved to it and hugged the sheet, getting blood all over her face and dress.

‘Oh, Tommy. Tommy.’

It moved and the sheet opened and the thing put one arm around her. It was Tommy. Bandaged, bloody, but human in shape and likeness.

He whispered, ‘Guess I don’t look so good anymore.’

‘Tommy. You didn’t kill Andrew or Angie, like they said – did you?’

‘No.’

‘Oh, Tommy – I’m glad.’

Miss Quinn watched at the door. ‘Tommy,’ she hissed. ‘How strong are you?’

‘Strong?’

‘Your friends are coming.’

1:17 a.m.
Briggsville High

The school hallway was dark; only the emergency exit lights and security lights were on, gleaming down the polished floor and metal lockers all lined up one after the other. At one end Styles appeared, head and shoulders around the corner, Burner ready. He signaled. At the other end Trickman returned the sign. In the middle of the hall stood the door to the Science Lab.

From the door they could hear the sound of breaking glass.

Smash! The cockroach terrarium burst into a hundred shards. Miss Quinn smashed the specimen jars. Mantises, wasps and cockroaches scattered about the room, flying, fluttering, scuttling free.

Tommy shook his head. He was almost human again. Agnes was trying to wrap him in bandages but there was too much blood to staunch. 'I don't know,' he said. 'I'm pretty tired.'

Miss Quinn strode up to Tommy and slapped his face – hard.

Agnes cried, 'Miss Quinn!'

'Quiet, Agnes. Don't interfere.'

Miss Quinn slapped Tommy harder. And again.

'Stop it!' Tommy shouted.

Miss Quinn grinned. 'That's right, Tommy. Get mad. Fight back. Did you like what your friends did to you? Did you like that? Did you?'

She struck him again. Tommy reared up and flung Miss Quinn half across the room.

* * *

The sound of the crash echoed in the darkened hall. Trickman and Styles halted. Trickman signaled – Huh? Styles signaled back – Who knows?

They cocked their Burners and converged on the door.

Agnes held Tommy back. 'Tommy! Stop it!'

Miss Quinn smiled and drew herself up from the broken glass. She seemed unharmed. 'It's all right, Agnes. Tommy's just waking up. And learning who he really is.'

Tommy turned and turned again. 'Papers tortured me – and the Professor – he just watched—'

'You never got mad before, did you, Tommy? You never felt much of anything before. Your Professor kept you on drugs all the time. He was afraid of you – of what you could do – if you ever came alive!'

Just then the door smashed open. Trickman and Styles burst in, guns blazing.

Out in the parking lot the Ford pulled in and parked. The Professor got out.

He stopped by the gym bag lying open on the pavement. He looked at the school. In one window bursts of red light were flickering.

In the science lab the red rays carved through beakers, benches, and stools. Windows burst under the heat. Tommy shielded Agnes behind the experiment table. He got madder.

'Damn them! Damn them! Damn them!'

Tommy twisted away and shot across the room straight for the two men. He bowled them over and smashed them back out the door.

Miss Quinn smiled and slithered out the window. Her skirts barely concealed her long legs but they were starting no longer to look like human legs.

Tommy sprang out into the hall. The two men were lying moaning, half conscious. He picked up Styles in one arm and hurled

him down the hall. Trickman lay balled up under the water fountain. He clawed at the levers of his Burner.

Agnes came out, dribbling the basketball. She passed to Tommy. ‘“And it’s Little Aggie with the shovel pass!”’

Tommy hurled the basketball like a missile at Trickman. It smashed his shoulder and flipped him a dozen feet down the hall. The Burner went skating.

Agnes cheered. ‘“And the Rookie takes it to them!”’

Tommy stood over Trickman. He laughed. He picked Trickman up and slammed him against the wall and Trickman’s head cracked and Trickman slumped to the floor dead.

Outside in the night, on the outer edges of the building, black shapes appeared in the starlight. Their eyes glittered black. Their antennas twitched.

Down below on the pavement, the Professor pulled a Burner from the Ford. When he slammed the door, Miss Quinn appeared behind him. She stripped the Burner out of his hands with a slap and pinned him against the Ford. It was an oddly erotic embrace.

Miss Quinn smiled and licked her lips. Her nether parts were beetle-plates, tentacles, jointed legs oozing Jelly. Only her head was still somewhat human. ‘Good evening, Professor. Going out?’

From the school came the sounds of the battle.

Miss Quinn twitched an antenna. ‘Hear that, Professor? That’s your pupil Tommy. I taught him a few extra-credit lessons. He’s a very apt pupil, wouldn’t you say so? Yes, very apt!’

At the end of the hallway Styles screamed and fired his Burner. Tommy darted forward, dodged, tackled Styles. They smashed through the glass doors onto the sidewalk outside.

Miss Quinn laughed. She licked the Professor’s ear and whispered into it. ‘Do you miss your wife, Professor? Do you dream sometimes of your child bride? I miss the man you murdered two weeks ago – the man in the warehouse down south. He was my lover. He was carrying those eggs for *me*. Those were *my*

eggs!’

She twisted him around. Faced him toward the school.

Across the parking they could see Styles stagger to his feet. Tommy was crouching watching him. Agnes was standing in her white dress in the smashed doorway.

Miss Quinn tightened her grip. ‘Did you think I’d let you get away with it, Professor, oh, Professor, no, Professor! But I won’t do it to you. I’ll let your protégé take care of that!’

Styles fired and Tommy leapt and lifted Styles up. He shook him and twisted his back until it cracked.

Miss Quinn released the Professor. He staggered away from the Ford. His Burner lay nearby.

Tommy dropped Styles’ body and started for the Professor. The Professor cocked the Burner. ‘Tommy – listen to me – it was for your own good, Tommy! We had to do it! It was necessary!’

Tommy didn’t answer. He came on. The Professor fired but Tommy sidestepped and the ray shot toward the school at Agnes. It hit her. She doubled over, crying out.

‘Agnes!’ Tommy cried.

He leapt on the Professor. He jammed the Burner’s muzzle into the Professor’s throat and his fingers found the trigger.

‘Do it, Tommy!’ Miss Quinn panted. ‘Do it!’

Tommy shook his head. ‘No.’

He let the Professor go. He took the Burner and twisted it into bits.

‘Go away,’ he said.

Miss Quinn was Changing again, becoming more human. She stood in the cold night wind, naked but for a few scraps of her dress. ‘Listen to him, Professor. Go now – while you can.’

The Professor staggered back. A look of utter fear and horror bloomed on his face. He limped off.

Miss Quinn leaned her head back and whistled.

Down the sides of the buildings the black shapes poured.

The Professor ran across the schoolyard. He paused by the basketball backboard, gasping for breath. The roach-like things, dozens of them, scurried toward him across the pavement. The Professor tried to climb the fence. He slipped and fell. He reached up once more – too late.

A dozen of the things swarmed over his legs and lower torso. The Professor choked and gurgled. He collapsed under the swarm.

His screams were cut short by the sound of awful, inhuman munching.

Miss Quinn smiled. She took the last Burner out of the Ford and blasted the car. The Ford exploded, lighting up the parking lot.

Near the high school doors, Tommy knelt over Agnes.

'Aggie – Little Aggie. How is it?'

Her eyes flickered open. 'Tommy. I feel okay. Only, something inside me – it's burning, Tommy. It's burning. . . '

The Spyder pulled up on the sidewalk. Miss Quinn threw open the door. She sat at the wheel, naked, gleaming with Jelly.

Miss Quinn beckoned. 'Come on.'

As naked as Miss Quinn and as bright with Jelly, Tommy lifted Agnes in his arms.

The lights and signs of the interstate streamed past. The lanes were almost empty at this hour. The sports car swallowed the miles.

Miss Quinn drove. Agnes huddled on Tommy's lap.

'Take me back to the motel,' Tommy said.

Miss Quinn glanced at him. 'Why? There's nothing for you there.'

'My clothes are there. And there's something I got to do.'

'It's your party, lover. After all. You're a grownup now.'

Miss Quinn slammed on the brakes and shifted.

The Spyder fishtailed and swung face-about and started back north on the open, empty lanes.

Crickets chirped in the late spring night. The Bright Dayz Motel was quiet. Only a few cars stood in the lot.

In Room No. 9 the Kid watched Papers stuff their things into suitcases.

Eddie was worked up. He sat on the edge of the bed. He was almost in tears. 'Papers – I had a dream! A bad dream!'

Then the door smashed open and Tommy stood in the Spyder's headlights, a figure shrouded in rage and strength.

‘Papers!’ Eddie shrieked. ‘Papers!’

Tommy grabbed Papers by the collar and dragged him outside.

At the edge of the vacant lot over the interstate, the gnarled tree twisted in the wind. Tommy dragged Papers up to it. He lifted him high over his head.

‘Tuh, Tommy! No, please, no!’

Tommy pressed Papers’ body back on the stub of a branch until he saw Papers’ mouth dribble with blood. Tommy stepped back. He looked at what he’d done.

Papers hung dying on the branch, his arms bent back.

Tommy turned. He walked back across the parking lot.

In the Spyder Agnes lay curled in a tight ball on the passenger seat. Her eyes were closed in pain. Miss Quinn stroked her hair.

Tommy walked into Room No. 9. He headed to the suitcases and pulled out his clothes. The Kid huddled behind the bed.

Tommy noticed him. ‘Go on! Beat it! Get out of here, you little creep!’

The Kid hesitated. Then he scrambled over the bed into the bathroom and slammed the door. Tommy turned back to his clothes.

Tomorrow

3:22 a.m.
The Interstate

Over the interstate the first streaks of dawn shone through bands of clouds.

Miss Quinn's Spyder shot down the lanes.

The wind cascaded through Miss Quinn's hair. She squirmed with pleasure on the leather seat. She threw her glasses out the window.

Tommy was dressed again in his usual clothes. He wore only a few bandages. For the rest he looked almost whole again.

'I'm almost healed,' he said, looking at his hands.

Miss Quinn laughed. 'You have a lot of fun ahead of you,' she said, 'finding out everything that makes you different.'

Tommy and Agnes were sharing the passenger seat again but it wasn't like the day they met. Now he cradled Agnes in his arms and she lay there curled up and half asleep. 'You okay?'

Agnes opened her eyes. She reached up and weakly drew his face down and kissed him. 'I'm better now. Yeah.'

'You sound drunk.'

'Drunk on you.'

'Try to sleep.'

'Sleep, mmm, sleep with you. . .'

She kissed and nibbled his cheek and neck.

Tommy drew back suddenly. He remembered. 'God – Papers – what did I do?'

'You found out who you are,' Miss Quinn said.

'It's horrible.'

'No, Tommy,' Agnes said. 'You had to do it. They hurt you, Tommy. They did awful things to you.'

'I don't know. . .'

Miss Quinn laughed. She licked Jelly off her inner wrist. 'Don't be a wimp. Enjoy it!'

She banged the Spyder up a gear.

In Tommy's arms Agnes nestled and closed her eyes. She fell asleep.

Tommy bent his head and kissed her hair. He let his face rest in the crook of her neck. He closed his eyes and dreamed.

Back at Briggsville the day was fair and bright. A few cars were standing in the parking lot of the Bright Dayz Motel.

There were no cars outside rooms eight through ten. But the door to Room No. 9 was hanging partly open.

Inside the room it was dark. Clothes, sheets, blankets and suitcases were strewn about. At the back the door to the bathroom was shut.

Inside the bathroom, the Kid was crouching in the bathtub. He was holding the sliding glass panel shut. He looked frightened and tired and worn-out. His eyes were full of tears and he snuffled snot.

He was sliding the glass panel open a crack and looking out.

The bathroom door was still shut.

The Kid crawled out of the bathtub and knelt by the door. He listened at the crack.

From the outer room came sounds. A car was pulling up outside. A knock sounded at the outer door. Voices came through.

The Kid unlocked the bathroom door and opened it a crack and looked out.

The outer door hung from its hinges. Dark figures stood in the doorway.

'Don't shoot!' he squeaked.

The lead man put up his Burner. 'Why, hello, Eddie. Is that you? Where's everybody else?'

The Kid's face relaxed in recognition. 'Commander?'

Suddenly it went dark. For a second he didn't know who he was or where. Was he the Kid in the motel room? Was he the man with the Burner?

Then something came to him – a word – a name: Tommy. That sounded right. Tommy. His name was Tommy.

And with that knowledge, Tommy lost the dream of the Kid and the Commander. It slipped off a cliff in the cold, wide dark, and tumbled like a bright window onto another place, smaller and down far away till it was gone.

It felt like he was sitting somewhere. The seat under him was firm. There was something warm and heavy in his lap. He knew the scent of it but nothing more than that.

It was cold here. He smelled the mucky rotten smells of a riverbank.

I'll open my eyes in a second, he thought. I'll wake up and look around and find out where I am.

7:19 p.m.
The Warehouse

He opened his eyes.

The Spyder had stopped. In the glare of its headlights Tommy could see a bank of tall rank weeds and up ahead a glint from the river. The abandoned warehouse waited just like in Tommy's first dream of it.

Miss Quinn switched off the headlights and stepped out. Tommy carried Agnes out. She was still asleep and in his arms she felt limp and relaxed and more precious than anything else he'd ever imagined.

'The Professor knows about this place,' Tommy said.

Miss Quinn shut the car door. 'The Professor's dead.'

'He sent in reports.'

Miss Quinn stretched her limbs. She started toward the warehouse. 'We won't be long. I need something here. And I want to call ahead.'

Inside the warehouse it was just the way Tommy saw it two weeks ago. They crossed the main floor and climbed the steps to the office.

In the office Miss Quinn snapped on the naked desk lamp and punched numbers on her phone. Tommy laid Agnes onto the leather couch.

'Ouf,' Agnes gasped.

'Hurt?'

'A little.'

'I'll get you to a doctor soon.'

Agnes shook her head. 'It doesn't feel that bad. Anyway, we're outlaws now, right? On the run?'

'I guess. Something like that.'

Agnes smiled and recited,

*'And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.'*

Miss Quinn spoke into her phone. 'That's right. We need a safe place.'

Outside along the riverbank the weeds swarmed with millions of insects hopping, scuttling, flying. Moths rose up and beat against the bright window to the office.

Tommy and Miss Quinn walked back to the Spyder. She wore a dress and carried a suitcase. Her hair was done in a new way and her makeup looked different, too. Tommy wondered how easy she remade herself. She sure didn't look like a science teacher anymore.

He could smell her now, too. All the Crawler stink she was spreading in the night air. God she smelled good. Tommy snuck in a good deep whiff of her as she put the suitcase in the back of the car. She turned to him and he stepped away, embarrassed. 'You're sure you won't come?'

'There was a guy in the Team, got burned once by one of the guns,' Tommy said. 'I remember. Papers said it was hopeless.'

'Come or stay. But they'll find you here.'

Tommy looked back toward the warehouse. 'She couldn't stand a long drive. It would tear her guts out.'

'Take this at least.'

Miss Quinn pressed a small white card into his hands.

'Go to that address if you get out. You'll be safe there.'

'Good-bye Miss Quinn.'

Miss Quinn leaned over and took his chin and kissed him on the mouth. Her tongue pried his lips open and roved inside him. Tommy strained against her.

Kissing Miss Quinn wasn't like kissing Agnes. It wasn't like kissing any human girl. Miss Quinn's tongue and lips did things no human tongue and lips could. And Tommy's own mouth answered in kind. It was like nothing he'd ever dreamed of, this insect-human kind of love. Then he felt Miss Quinn's tongue sliding back over his tongue deep down his throat. It felt like she

was pushing something there, and Tommy's throat spasmed and swallowed something like a small lozenge or pill.

She drew back and let him go. Tommy leaned against the car, panting. His head went round and round.

Miss Quinn got into the Spyder. She gave him a last flash of a smile and winked. 'Don't ever say it wasn't fun.'

She backed the car away toward the main road. Tommy turned back to the warehouse.

Tommy went inside the warehouse. He walked across the main floor. He snapped on his flashlight and looked at the burn spot on the concrete where the Man from the Motel had charred and Changed and died.

He shut off the light and climbed back to the office. But he didn't go in right away. Instead he paused at the door and looked in through the window.

Agnes lay on the couch, her eyes closed. She seemed asleep and at peace. Maybe she was dreaming happy dreams.

Tommy turned back away from the office.

'I ought to leave her,' he said. 'I ought to go somewhere and call a hospital. Maybe they can do something to help her. Maybe Papers was wrong.'

But he knew Papers had never been wrong. Not about something like that.

One Burn and you're done for.

Inside the office a moth beat its wings against the bare bulb of the desk lamp.

Tommy came in and sat in the big oak desk chair. He unbuttoned his shirt. Under his shirt his chest was pitted with a hundred bright red wounds.

Agnes said, 'Oh God, Tommy – what did they do to you?'

He looked over at her. She lay looking at him. He shrugged. 'These aren't from tonight. They're from a long time ago.'

Agnes got to her feet and knelt before him. She touched one wound, then another, with her fingertip.

'The Professor injected me with the Jelly. It helped me Trace them. A real gift I had, they said. Every one of these is a Crawler I led them to. That one was the first. Four years ago. We burned him with the Burners. I was twelve years old.'

Agnes kissed the wound. He leaned over her and breathed in her smell. She smelled nothing like Miss Quinn or any of the Things – any of his kind. She smelled good in another way.

What was he really, he wondered. Was he Thing or human. Could he choose which kind to belong to, or was the choice already made for him? He felt the white card in his pocket. So many questions to ask.

Something was stirring deep inside him. It was like a sort of hunger. No. It was like nothing he'd ever felt before.

It felt really bad and dangerous. And good.

'Tommy,' Agnes said, 'make love to me.'

Tommy stared at her. 'No.'

'Don't you want to?'

'You don't know what you're asking. If I got excited – if I Changed—'

She shook her head. 'I don't care.'

'You're not even okay to travel.'

'Tommy, I don't care what happens to us tomorrow. I don't care if they catch us and lock us away for a hundred years. You're my first boyfriend, Tommy. Make love to me tonight.'

'I can't! Agnes, you have to trust me. And do what I say.'

'What?'

'Tie me up, Little Aggie.'

She laughed. 'Why? Are you kinky, Tommy?'

'I'm not kidding. You have to, or else ... you just have to, okay?'

He held out his wrists. He looked at her just as serious as he could. She shook her head, then smiled to herself and nodded.

She started tying him.

'That's right,' he said. 'It's the only way, Aggie.'

'But, don't you know ... you're in my power now?'

He got a sudden sense of danger. Danger – and arousal. 'Little Aggie, don't mess around with this. I'm warning you.'

'Oh, yeah?'

She pulled up her long white dress and straddled him. She kissed him and reached for his zipper.

'You can do it,' she said, huskily into his ear. 'Please, Tommy. Please?'

He couldn't resist. He started to kiss her back.

'That's right. Kiss me, Tommy. Kiss me.'

His arms, tied behind the chair, started rippling. He could feel them ... bumps forming ... tentacles and jointed insect-limbs protruding.

He moaned, 'No, Aggie ... no ...'

She ground her crotch against him. His body rose in answer. He couldn't stop it. In a moment he knew he would enter her. But he would enter her in ways she couldn't even dream. The thought stabbed him with misery and deep joy.

'Tommy, whatever you fear, I'll face it with you - whatever it is we'll overcome it - I love you, Tommy.'

She was kissing his face and his face felt like it was darkening, growing scales - the things plunged into her thighs and sides. And she twisted back her head in shock, with fear - she opened her mouth - she started to scream—

Water was swirling down a white porcelain sink. Drops of red blood were spilling down the drain.

A moth was fluttering around a bare bulb on the wall, beating against it. Hands were washing blood off in the sink.

The hands were reaching for a white towel and drying themselves, leaving blood stains. The figure was moving out into the office—

Tommy looked across the office to the couch. On the couch lay the body of Agnes Renfield, naked, dead, mutilated. Half of her was missing and her torso was caved in on itself.

Tommy knelt by the couch and opened a book.

Tommy read the inscription. He shook his head. 'No, this one's yours. Here's mine.'

He placed her book open beside her dear dead face. He smoothed her hair and opened his copy of the book and read.

'Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees...'

Outside the night was cut by the stab of headlights approaching down the long broken drive. An old Chevy pulled up. A group of men climbed out. A Team.

There was a mature man in his 50's with an air of command. A nerdy man held a sheaf of papers. A nattily-attired man sat at the wheel. A fat man whose coat bristled with gadgets sat beside him. And in the back seat there was a Kid, too.

It was Eddie.

The fat man handed out the Burners. The Commander signed them all to make no sound. They crept up to the open warehouse doors. The Kid clung close to the Commander, sheltering in the man's long topcoat.

A sound floated down to them. It was a voice. It echoed from the open door to the warehouse office out over the main floor.

*'Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,'*

The men quietly cocked their Burners and moved inside.

The scuffling sounds of shoes from the main floor didn't stop Tommy reading. Neither did the smell that came to his acute olfactory nerves – the smell of human things.

'In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed—'

Tommy stopped. His voice choked and he couldn't go on. He looked around behind him.

Four men stood in the door. Burners ready. The Kid, Eddie, pointed at him.

'That's him,' Eddie said.

The Commander gave the order. 'Burn it,' he said. He used the same tones the Professor always had.

Tommy saw the Burners blaze as one. The red rays shot out dead for him – straight into his eyes—

Tommy's body jerked and twisted under the rays. He got mad in the end and smashed a hole in the office wall. And he started to Change. Bumps rippled under his skin. Tentacles burst out of his sides. His head melded with his trunk and his legs fused and his skin roughened like bark, oozing with Jelly. His body closed off into plates of beetle armor – his bulbous black insect eyes glaring as he burned.

The rays splashed everywhere about the office, igniting it – burning its walls black.

In the midst of the conflagration came the Commander's voice. 'Power off.'

The blaze died away.

The Thing's black eye socket charred black. Bits of the remains littered the steel floor of the office. The office was burning. The couch was burning around Agnes' corpse.

The Commander ordered, 'Get the knife.'

The man with glasses laid out his surgical gear and got busy. Out of the remains one tiny, pearlescent egg dropped. A little bigger than a grain of rice.

The man with glasses said, 'Only one. An unusually ti, tiny one.'

The Commander bent and examined it. 'Freshly planted. No more than a few hours ago.' He handed it back. 'Seal it and send it in.'

Police sirens were growing far away.

'Better get moving,' the Commander said. 'Leave the girl. Leave them together. Let the sun do its work.'

He turned to the Kid. 'You did good tonight, Eddie.'

The Kid stared at the remnants. He rubbed his chest. His top two shirt buttons were open and he scratched at a little red wound, fresh, no bigger than a needle prick.

'Still hurt?' asked the Commander. Eddie nodded. 'Don't worry. You'll get used to it.'

'How many more of them are there, Commander? More of these, these Things?'

The Commander sighed. 'More than you can ever imagine.'

'I met this one. I talked with it. They said its name was Tommy.'

The Commander followed the others out of the ruined office. The Kid lingered. He stared at the remnants.

At the door the Commander looked back. 'Come on, Eddie.'

They left. They crossed the main warehouse floor and went out into the sunlight. They stored the Burners in the gym bags, stowed the bags in the trunk, got in the Chevy and drove away.

Behind them the fire spread in the office over the charred remains of Tommy and Agnes.

Also Available

Lady Agatha was alone

Her lord had gone to take the measure of his lands, and his voice calling to his hounds came from far-off through her window, till it was hidden in the wind.

And she heard a great wave breaking on the stones of the Irish land, washing to the Western Sea; and a cry went with it, from a stricken old woman in a hut beyond the hill.

And Lady Agatha heard a third voice calling; and that was Aengus' voice.

She shut the window to stop the voice, but the room waxed so warm she had to open up again. His song went on and on. And the beat of the riders was everywhere; and Lady Agatha fell asleep at last.

And Master Aengus' song went right into her sleep.

She knew now why the riders came. They came for her.

— from **Blood by Moonlight**

‘What do you think of the stranger?’

‘He is nothing,’ said Gundoen. ‘Much wreckage washes to our shores. He’ll bring us no ill-luck, if that’s what you fear. And if he does, why then his death will end it.’

She shook her head. ‘Not that.’ She wondered how much of her dream she should tell him.

‘What then?’

‘He is . . . of death.’

Gundoen chuckled. ‘Do you believe with the Pious One?’

‘No. He is no more than mortal, certainly. But there is something else.’

‘What?’ His voice grew concerned. ‘Hertha-Toll, what have you seen?’

She looked about, leaned closer.

‘His eyes,’ she whispered. ‘They are the eyes of a Madpriest.’

— from **The Former King**

The witch went out

in the snow in the night in her bare feet, naked under her night-dress. She carried an apple and a paring knife in a stone bowl. She set the bowl in the snow before the Juniper Tree, took the apple and pared the red skin from the white flesh. . .

The knife slipped and bit into the mound at the bottom of her thumb. She licked blood from her thumb and squatted over the bowl.

She sat in the snow drifting down on her hair, staring at her red blood on the white snow.

‘Give me a child,’ she said. ‘Give me a child as hot as blood and as pure as snow.’

And the witch slipped from her nightdress and embraced the Juniper Tree. The branches scratched her pale bare skin, leaving little trails of blood. . .

— from **The Juniper Tree**



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