The trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of

it, but June 9 is the day I remember. It was my twenty-sixth birthday. It

was also the day I met Rufus—the day he called me to him for the first

time.

Kevin and I had not planned to do anything to celebrate my birthday.

We were both too tired for that. On the day before, we had moved from

our apartment in Los Angeles to a house of our own a few miles away in

Altadena. The moving was celebration enough for me. We were still

unpacking—or rather, I was still unpacking. Kevin had stopped when he

got his office in order. Now he was closeted there either loafing or thinking

because I didn’t hear his typewriter. Finally, he came out to the

living room where I was sorting books into one of the big bookcases.

Fiction only. We had so many books, we had to try to keep them in some

kind of order.

“What’s the matter?” I asked him.

“Nothing.” He sat down on the floor near where I was working. “Just

struggling with my own perversity. You know, I had half-a- dozen ideas

for that Christmas story yesterday during the moving.”

“And none now when there’s time to write them down.”

“Not a one.” He picked up a book, opened it, and turned a few pages.

I picked up another book and tapped him on the shoulder with it. When

he looked up, surprised, I put a stack of nonfiction down in front of him.

He stared at it unhappily.

“Hell, why’d I come out here?”

“To get more ideas. After all, they come to you when you’re busy.”

He gave me a look that I knew wasn’t as malevolent as it seemed. He

had the kind of pale, almost colorless eyes that made him seem distant

and angry whether he was or not. He used them to intimidate people.

Strangers. I grinned at him and went back to work. After a moment, he

took the nonfiction to another bookcase and began shelving it.

I bent to push him another box full, then straightened quickly as I

began to feel dizzy, nauseated. The room seemed to blur and darken

around me. I stayed on my feet for a moment holding on to a bookcase

and wondering what was wrong, then finally, I collapsed to my knees. I

heard Kevin make a wordless sound of surprise, heard him ask, “What

happened?”

I raised my head and discovered that I could not focus on him. “Something

is wrong with me,” I gasped.

I heard him move toward me, saw a blur of gray pants and blue shirt.

Then, just before he would have touched me, he vanished.

The house, the books, everything vanished. Suddenly, I was outdoors

kneeling on the ground beneath trees. I was in a green place. I was at the

edge of a woods. Before me was a wide tranquil river, and near the middle

of that river was a child splashing, screaming …

Drowning!

I reacted to the child in trouble. Later I could ask questions, try to find

out where I was, what had happened. Now I went to help the child.

I ran down to the river, waded into the water fully clothed, and swam

quickly to the child. He was unconscious by the time I reached him—a

small red-haired boy floating, face down. I turned him over, got a good

hold on him so that his head was above water, and towed him in. There

was a red-haired woman waiting for us on the shore now. Or rather, she

was running back and forth crying on the shore. The moment she saw

that I was wading, she ran out, took the boy from me and carried him the

rest of the way, feeling and examining him as she did.

“He’s not breathing!” she screamed.

Artificial respiration. I had seen it done, been told about it, but I had

never done it. Now was the time to try. The woman was in no condition

to do anything useful, and there was no one else in sight. As we reached

shore, I snatched the child from her. He was no more than four or five

years old, and not very big.

I put him down on his back, tilted his head back, and began mouth-to

mouth resuscitation. I saw his chest move as I breathed into him. Then,

suddenly, the woman began beating me.

“You killed my baby!” she screamed. “You killed him!”

I turned and managed to catch her pounding fists. “Stop it!” I shouted,

putting all the authority I could into my voice. “He’s alive!” Was he? I

couldn’t tell. Please God, let him be alive. “The boy’s alive. Now let me

help him.” I pushed her away, glad she was a little smaller than I was,

and turned my attention back to her son. Between breaths, I saw her staring

at me blankly. Then she dropped to her knees beside me, crying.

Moments later, the boy began breathing on his own—breathing and

coughing and choking and throwing up and crying for his mother. If he

could do all that, he was all right. I sat back from him, feeling lightheaded,

relieved. I had done it!

“He’s alive!” cried the woman. She grabbed him and nearly smothered

him. “Oh, Rufus, baby …”

Rufus. Ugly name to inflict on a reasonably nice-looking little kid.

When Rufus saw that it was his mother who held him, he clung to her,

screaming as loudly as he could. There was nothing wrong with his

voice, anyway. Then, suddenly, there was another voice.

“What the devil’s going on here?” A man’s voice, angry and demanding.

I turned, startled, and found myself looking down the barrel of the

longest rifle I had ever seen. I heard a metallic click, and I froze, thinking

I was going to be shot for saving the boy’s life. I was going to die.

I tried to speak, but my voice was suddenly gone. I felt sick and dizzy.

My vision blurred so badly I could not distinguish the gun or the face of

the man behind it. I heard the woman speak sharply, but I was too far

gone into sickness and panic to understand what she said.

Then the man, the woman, the boy, the gun all vanished.

I was kneeling in the living room of my own house again several feet

from where I had fallen minutes before. I was back at home—wet and

muddy, but intact. Across the room, Kevin stood frozen, staring at the

spot where I had been. How long had he been there?

“Kevin?”

He spun around to face me. “What the hell … how did you get over

there?” he whispered.

“I don’t know.”