

Like the brief doomed flare of exploding suns that registers dimly on the blind men's eyes, the beginning of the horror passed almost unnoticed; in the shriek of what followed, in fact, was forgotten and perhaps not connected to the horror at all. It was difficult to judge.

The house was a rental. Brooding. Tight. A brick of colonial gripped by ivy in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. Across the street was a fringe of campus belonging to Georgetown University; to the rear, a sheer embankment plummeting steep to busy M Street and, just beyond it, the River Potomac. Early on the morning of April 1, the house was quiet. Chris MacNeil was propped in bed, going over her lines for the next day's filming; Regan, her daughter, was sleeping down the hall; and asleep downstairs in a room off the pantry were the middle-aged housekeepers, Willie and Karl. At approximately 12:25 A.M., Chris looked up from her script with a frown of puzzlement. She heard rapping sounds. They were odd. Muffled. Profound. Rhythmically clustered. Alien code tapped out by a dead man.

*Funny.*

For a moment she listened, then dismissed it; but as the rappings persisted she could not concentrate. She slapped down the script on the bed.

*Jesus, that bugs me!*

She got up to investigate.

She went to the hallway and looked around. The rappings seemed to be coming from Regan's bedroom.

*What is she doing?*

She padded down the hall and the rappings grew suddenly louder, much faster, and as she pushed on the door and stepped into the room, they abruptly ceased.

*What the freak's going on?*

Her pretty eleven-year-old was asleep, cuddled tight to a large stuffed round-eyed panda. Pookey. Faded from years of smotherings; years of smacking, warm, wet kisses.

Chris moved softly to her bedside, leaned over and whispered. "Rags? You awake?"

Regular breathing. Heavy. Deep.

Chris shifted her glance around the room. Dim light from the hall fell pale and splintery on Regan's paintings and sculptures; on more stuffed animals.

*Okay, Rags. Your old mother's ass is draggin'. Come on, say it! Say "April Fool!"*

And yet Chris knew well that such games weren't like her. The child had a shy and different nature. Then who was the trickster? A somnolent mind imposing order on the rattlings of heating or plumbing pipes? Once, in the mountains of Bhutan, she had stared for hours at a Buddhist monk who was squatting on the ground in meditation. Finally, she thought she had seen him levitate, though when recounting the story to someone, she invariably added "Maybe." And maybe now her mind, she thought, that untiring raconteur of illusion, had embellished the rappings.

*Bullshit! I heard it!*

Abruptly, she flicked a quick glance to the ceiling.