

Stephen King - Home Delivery

Home Delivery
by Stephen King

Considering that it was probably the end of the world, Maddie Pace thought she was doing a good job. Hell of a good job. She thought, in fact, that she just might be coping with the End of Everything better than anyone else on earth. And she was positive she was coping better than any other pregnant woman on earth.

Coping.
Maddie Pace, of "all people.

Maddie Pace, who sometimes couldn't sleep if, after a visit from Reverend Johnson, she spied a single speck of dust under the dining-room table. Maddie Pace, who, as Maddie Sullivan, used to drive her fiance, Jack, crazy when she froze over a menu, debating entrees sometimes for as long as half an hour.

"Maddie, why don't you just flip a coin?" he'd asked her once after she had managed to narrow it down to a choice between the braised veal and the lamb chops, and then could get no further. "I've had five bottles of this goddam German beer already, and if you don't make up y'mind pretty damn quick, there's gonna be a drunk lobsterman under the table before we ever get any food on it!"

So she had smiled nervously, ordered the braised veal, and spent most of the ride home wondering if the chops might not have been tastier, and therefore a better bargain despite their slightly higher price.

She'd had no trouble coping with Jack's proposal of marriage, however; she'd accepted it -- and him -- quickly, and with tremendous relief. Following the death of her father, Maddie and her mother had lived an aimless, cloudy sort of life on Little Tall Island, off the coast of Maine. "If I wasn't around to tell them women where to squat and lean against the wheel," George Sullivan had been fond of saying while in his cups and among his friends at Fudgy's Tavern or in the back room of Prout's Barber Shop, "I don't know what'n hell they'd do."

When her father died of a massive coronary, Maddie was nineteen and minding the town library weekday evenings at a salary of \$41.50 a week. Her mother minded the house -- or did, that was, when George reminded her (sometimes with a good hard shot to the ear) that she had a house which needed minding.

When the news of his death came, the two women had looked at each other with silent, panicky dismay, two pairs of eyes asking the same question: what do we do now?

Neither of them knew, but they both felt -- felt strongly -- that he had been right in his assessment of them: they needed him. They were just women, and they needed him to tell them not just what to do, but how to do it, as well. They didn't speak of it because it embarrassed them, but there it was -- they hadn't the slightest clue as to what came next, and the idea that they were prisoners of George Sullivan's narrow ideas and expectations did not so much as cross their minds. They were not stupid women, either of them, but they were island women.

Money wasn't the problem; George had believed passionately in insurance, and when he dropped down dead during the tiebreaker frame of the League Bowl-Offs at Big Duke's Big Ten in Machias, his wife had come into better than a hundred thousand dollars. And island life was cheap, if you owned your place and kept your garden tended and knew how to put by your own vegetables come fall. The problem was having nothing to focus on. The problem was how the center seemed to have dropped out of their lives when George went facedown in his Island Amoco bowling shirt just over the foul line of lane nineteen (and goddam if he hadn't picked up the spare his team had needed to win, too). With George gone their lives had become an eerie sort of blur.

It's like being lost in a heavy fog, Maddie thought sometimes. Only instead of looking for the road, or a house, or the village, or just some landmark like that lightning-struck pine out on the point, I am looking for the wheel. If I can ever find it, maybe I can tell myself to squat and lean my shoulder to it.

At last she found her wheel: it turned out to be Jack Pace.

Women marry their fathers and men their mothers, some say, and while such a broad statement can hardly be true all of the time, it was close enough for government work in Maddie's case. Her father had been looked upon by his peers with fear and admiration -- "Don't fool with George Sullivan, dear," they'd say. "He'll knock the nose off your face if you so much as look at him wrong."

It was true at home, too. He'd been domineering and sometimes physically abusive, but he'd also known things to want and work for, like the Ford pick-up, the chainsaw, or those two acres that bounded their place to the south. Pop Cook's land.

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George Sullivan had been known to refer to Pop Cook as one armpit-stinky old bastid, but the old man's aroma didn't change the fact that there was quite a lot of good hardwood left on those two acres. Pop didn't know it because he had gone to living across the reach in 1987, when his arthritis really went to town on him, and George let it be known on Little Tall that what that bastid Pop Cook didn't know wouldn't hurt him none, and furthermore, he would disjoin the man or woman that let light into the darkness of Pop's ignorance. No one did, and eventually the Sullivans got the land, and the hardwood on it. Of course the good wood was all logged off inside of three years, but George said that didn't matter a tinker's damn; land always paid for itself in the end. That was what George said and they believed him, believed in him, and they worked, all three of them. He said: You got to put your shoulder to this wheel and push the bitch, you got to push ha'ad because she don't move easy. So that was what they did.

In those days Maddie's mother had kept a produce stand on the road from East Head, and there were always plenty of tourists who bought the vegetables she grew (which were the ones George told her to grow, of course), and even though they were never exactly what her mother called "the Gotrocks family," they made out. Even in years when lobstering was bad and they had to stretch their finances even further in order to keep paying off what they owed the bank on Pop Cook's two acres, they made out.. Jack Pace was a sweeter-tempered man than George Sullivan had ever thought of being, but his sweet temper only stretched so far, even so. Maddie suspected that he might get around to what was sometimes called home correction -- the twisted arm when supper was cold, the occasional slap or downright paddling -- in time; when the bloom was off the rose, so as to speak. There was even a part of her that seemed to expect and look forward to that.

The women's magazines said marriages where the man ruled the roost were a thing of the past, and that a man who put a hard hand on a woman should be arrested for assault, even if the man in question was the woman in question's lawful wedded husband. Maddie sometimes read articles of this sort down at the beauty shop, but doubted if the women who wrote them had the slightest idea that places like the outer islands even existed. Little Tall had produced one writer, as a matter of fact -- Selena St. George -- but she wrote mostly about politics and hadn't been back to the island, except for a single Thanksgiving dinner, in years.

"I'm not going to be a lobsterman all my life, Maddie," Jack told her the week before they were married, and she believed him. A year before, when he had asked her out for the first time (she'd said yes almost before all the words could get out of his mouth, and she had blushed to the roots of her hair at the sound of her own naked eagerness), he would have said, "I ain't going to be a lobsterman all my life." A small change... but all the difference in the world. He had been going to night school three evenings a week, taking the old Island Princess over and back. He would be dog-tired after a day of pulling pots, but off he'd go just the same, pausing only long enough to shower off the powerful smells of lobster and brine and to gulp two No Doz with hot coffee. After a while, when she saw he really meant to stick to it, Maddie began putting up hot soup for him to drink on the ferry-ride over. Otherwise he would have had nothing but one of those nasty red hot-dogs they sold in the Princess's snack-bar.

She remembered agonizing over the canned soups in the store -- there were so many! Would he want tomato? Some people didn't like tomato soup. In fact, some people hated tomato soup, even if you made it with milk instead of water. Vegetable soup? Turkey? Cream of chicken? Her helpless eyes roved the shelf display for nearly ten minutes before Charlene Nedeau asked if she could help her with something -- only Charlene said it in a sarcastic way, and Maddie guessed she would tell all her friends at high school tomorrow, and they would giggle about it in the girls' room, knowing exactly what was wrong with her -- poor mousy little Maddie Sullivan, unable to make up her mind over so simple a thing as a can of soup. How she had ever been able to decide to accept Jack Pace's proposal was a wonder and a marvel to all of them... but of course they didn't know about the wheel you had to find, and about how, once you found it, you had to have someone to tell you when to stoop and where exactly to push the damned thing.

Maddie had left the store with no soup and a throbbing headache.

When she worked up nerve enough to ask Jack what his favorite soup was, he had said: "Chicken noodle. Kind that comes in the can." were there any others he specially liked?

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The answer was no, just chicken noodle -- the kind that came in the can. That was all the soup Jack Pace needed in his life, and all the answer (on that particular subject, at least) that Maddie needed in hers. Light of step and cheerful of heart, Maddie climbed the warped wooden steps of the store the next day and bought the four cans of chicken noodle soup that were on the shelf. When she asked Bob Nedeau if he had any more, he said he had a whole damn case of the stuff out back. She bought the entire case and left him so flabbergasted that he actually carried the carton out to the truck for her and forgot all about asking why she wanted so much -- a lapse for which his long-nosed wife and daughter took him sharply to task that evening.

"You just better believe it and never forget," Jack had said that time not long before they tied the knot (she had believed it, and had never forgotten). "More than a lobsterman. My dad says I'm full of shit. He says if draggin pots was good enough for his old man, and his old man's old man and all the way back to the friggin Garden of Eden to hear him tell it, it ought to be good enough for me. But it ain't -- isn't, I mean -- and I'm going to do better." His eye fell on her, and it was a stern eye, full of resolve, but it was a loving eye, full of hope and confidence, too. "More than a lobsterman is what I mean to be, and more than a lobster-man's wife is what I intend for you to be. You're going to have a house on the mainland." "Yes, Jack."

"And I'm not going to have any friggin Chevrolet." He drew in a deep breath and took her hands in his. "I'm going to have an Oldsmobile."

He looked her dead in the eye, as if daring her to scoff at this wildly upscale ambition. She did no such thing, of course; she said yes, Jack, for the third or fourth time that evening. She had said it to him thousands of times over the year they had spent courting, and she confidently expected to say it a million times before death ended their marriage by taking one of them -- or, better, both of them together. Yes, Jack; had there ever in the history of the world been two words, which made such beautiful music when laid side by side?

"More than a friggin lobsterman, no matter what my old man thinks or how much he laughs." He pronounced this last word in the deeply downeast way: loffs. "I'm going to do it, and do you know who's going to help me?"

"Yes," Maddie had responded calmly. "I am."

He had laughed and swept her into his arms. "You're damned tooting, my little sweetheart," he'd told her.

And so they were wed, as the fairytales usually put it, and for Maddie those first few months -- months when they were greeted almost everywhere with jovial cries of "Here's the newly-weds!" -- were a fairytale. She had Jack to lean on, Jack to help her make decisions, and that was the best of it. The most difficult household choice thrust upon her that first year was which curtains would look best in the living room -- there were so many in the catalogue to choose from, and her mother was certainly no help. Maddie's mother had a hard time deciding between different brands of toilet paper.

Otherwise, that year consisted mostly of joy and security -- the joy of loving Jack in their deep bed while the winter wind scraped over the island like the blade of a knife across a breadboard, the security of having Jack to tell her what it was they wanted, and how they were going to get it. The loving was good -- so good that sometimes when she thought of him during the days her knees would feel weak and her stomach fluttery -- but his way of knowing things and her growing trust in his instincts were even better. So for a while it was a fairytale, yes.

Then Jack died and things started getting weird. Not just for Maddie, either. For everybody.

Just before the world slid into its incomprehensible nightmare, Maddie discovered she was what her mother had always called "preg," a curt word that was like the sound you made when you had to rasp up a throatful of snot (that, at least, was how it had always sounded to Maddie). By then she and Jack had moved next to the Pulsifers on Gennesault Island, which was known simply as Jenny by its residents and those of nearby Little Tall.

She'd had one of her agonizing interior debates when she missed her second period, and after four sleepless nights she made an appointment with Dr. McElwain on the mainland. Looking back, she was glad. If she'd waited to see if she was going to miss a third period, Jack would not have had even one month of joy and she would have missed the concerns and little kindnesses he had showered upon her.

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Looking back -- now that she was coping -- her indecision seemed ludicrous, but her deeper heart knew that going to have the test had taken tremendous courage. She had wanted to be more convincingly sick in the mornings so she could be surer; she had longed for nausea to drag her from her dreams. She made the appointment when Jack was out at work, and she went while he was out, but there was no such thing as sneaking over to the mainland on the ferry; too many people from both islands saw you. Someone would mention casually to Jack that he or she had seen his wife on the Princess t'other day, and then Jack would want to know what it was all about, and if she'd made a mistake, he would look at her like she was a goose.

But it hadn't been a mistake; she was with child (and never mind that word that sounded like someone with a bad cold trying to clear his throat), and Jack Pace had had exactly twenty-seven days to look forward to his first child before a bad swell had caught him and knocked him over the side of My Lady-Love, the lobster boat he had inherited from his Uncle Mike. Jack could swim, and he had popped to the surface like a cork, Dave Eamons had told her miserably, but just as he did, another heavy swell came, slewing the boat directly into him, and although Dave would say no more, Maddie had been born and brought up an island girl, and she knew: could, in fact, hear the hollow thud as the boat with its treacherous name smashed its way into her husband's head, letting out blood and hair and bone and perhaps the part of his brain that had made him say her name over and over again in the dark of night, when he came into her.

Dressed in a heavy hooded parka and down-filled pants and boots, Jack Pace had sunk like a stone. They had buried an empty casket in the little cemetery at the north end of Jenny Island, and the Reverend Johnson (on Jenny and Little Tall you had your choice when it came to religion: you could be a Methodist, or if that didn't suit you, you could be a lapsed Methodist) had presided over this empty coffin as he had so many others. The service ended, and at the age of twenty-two Maddie had found herself a widow with a bun in the oven and no one to tell her where the wheel was, let alone when to put her shoulder to it or how far to push it.

She thought at first she'd go back to Little Tall, back to her mother, to wait her time, but a year with Jack had given her a little perspective and she knew her mother was as lost -- maybe even more lost -- than she was herself, and that made her wonder if going back would be the right thing to do.

"Maddie," Jack told her again and again (he was dead in the world but not, it seemed, inside her head; inside her head he was as lively as any dead man could possibly get... or so she had thought then), "the only thing you can ever decide on is not to decide."

Nor was her mother any better. They talked on the phone and Maddie waited and hoped for her mother to just tell her to come back home, but Mrs. Sullivan could tell no one over the age of ten anything. "Maybe you ought to come on back over here," she had said once in a tentative way, and Maddie couldn't tell if that meant please come home or please don't take me up on an offer which was really just made for form's sake. She spent long, sleepless nights trying to decide which it had been and succeeded only in confusing herself more.

Then the weirdness started, and the greatest mercy was that there was only the one small graveyard on Jenny (and so many of the graves filled with those empty coffins -- a thing which had once seemed pitiful to her now seemed another blessing, a grace). There were two on Little Tall, both fairly large, and so it began to seem so much safer to stay on Jenny and wait.

She would wait and see if the world lived or died.

If it lived, she would wait for the baby.

And now she was, after a life of passive obedience and vague resolves that usually passed like dreams an hour or two after she got out of bed, finally coping. She knew that part of this was nothing more than the effect of being slammed with one massive shock after another, beginning with the death of her husband and ending with one of the last broadcasts the Pulsifers' high-tech satellite dish had picked up: a horrified young boy who had been pressed into service as a CNN reporter saying that it seemed certain that the President of the United States, the first lady, the Secretary of State, the honorable senior senator from Oregon, and the emir of Kuwait had been eaten alive in the White House East Room by zombies.

"I want to repeat this," the accidental reporter had said, the firespots of his acne standing out on his forehead and chin like stigmata. His mouth and cheeks had begun to twitch; his hands shook spastically. "I want to repeat that a bunch of corpses

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have just lunched up on the President and his wife and a whole lot of other political hotshots who were at the White House to eat poached salmon and cherries jubilee." Then the kid had begun to laugh maniacally and to scream Go, Yale! Boola-boola! at the top of his voice. At last he bolted out of the frame, leaving a CNN news-desk untenanted for the first time in Maddie's memory. She and the Pulsifers sat in dismayed silence as the news-desk disappeared and an ad for Boxcar Willie records -- not available in any store, you could get this amazing collection only by dialing the 800 number currently appearing on the bottom of your screen -- came on. One of little Cheyne Pulsifer's crayons was on the end table beside the chair Maddie was sitting in, and for some crazy reason she picked it up and wrote the number down on a sheet of scrap paper before Mr. Pulsifer got up and turned off the TV without a single word.

Maddie told them good night and thanked them for sharing their TV and their Jiffy Pop.

"Are you sure you're all right, Maddie dear?" Candi Pulsifer asked her for the fifth time that night, and Maddie said she was fine for the fifth time that night, that she was coping, and Candi said she knew she was, but she was welcome to the upstairs bedroom that used to be Brian's anytime she wanted. Maddie hugged Candi, kissed her cheek, declined with the most graceful thanks she could find, and was at last allowed to escape. She had walked the windy half mile back to her own house and was in her own kitchen before she realized that she still had the scrap of paper on which she had jotted the 800 number. She had dialed it, and there was nothing. No recorded voice telling her all circuits were currently busy or that the number was out of service; no wailing siren sound that indicated a line interruption; no boops or beeps or clicks or clacks. Just smooth silence. That was when Maddie knew for sure that the end had either come or was coming. When you could no longer call the 800 number and order the Boxcar Willie records that were not available in any store, when there were for the first time in her living memory no Operators Standing By, the end of the world was a foregone conclusion.

She felt her rounding stomach as she stood there by the phone on the wall in the kitchen and said it out loud for the first time, unaware that she had spoken: "It will have to be a home delivery. But that's all right, as long as you get ready and stay ready, kiddo. You have to remember that there just isn't any other way. It has to be a home delivery."

She waited for fear and none came.

"I can cope with this just fine," she said, and this time she heard herself and was comforted by the sureness of her own words.

A baby.

When the baby came, the end of the world would itself end.

"Eden," she said, and smiled. Her smile was sweet, the smile of a madonna. It didn't matter how many rotting dead people (maybe Boxcar Willie among them, for all she knew) were shambling around the face of the earth.

She would have a baby, she would accomplish her home delivery, and the possibility of Eden would remain.

The first reports came from an Australian hamlet on the edge of the outback, a place with the memorable name of Fiddle Dee. The name of the first American town where the walking dead were reported was perhaps even more memorable: Thumper, Florida. The first story appeared in America's favorite supermarket tabloid, Inside View.

DEAD COME TO LIFE IN SMALL FLORIDA TOWN! the headline screamed. The story began with a recap of a film called Night of the Living Dead, which Maddie had never seen, and went on to mention another -- Macumba Love -- which she had also never seen. The article was accompanied by three photos. One was a still from Night of the Living Dead, showing what appeared to be a bunch of escapees from a loonybin standing outside an isolated farmhouse at night. One was from Macumba Love, showing a blonde whose bikini top appeared to be holding breasts the size of prize-winning gourds. The blonde was holding up her hands and screaming in horror at what could have been a black man in a mask. The third purported to be a picture taken in Thumper, Florida. It was a blurred, grainy shot of a person of indeterminate sex standing in front of a video arcade. The article described the figure as being "wrapped in the cerements of the grave," but it could have been someone in a dirty sheet.

No big deal. BIGFOOT RAPES CHOIR BOY last week, dead people coming back to life this week, the dwarf mass murderer next week.

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No big deal, at least, until they started to come out in other places, as well. No big deal until the first news film ("You may want to ask your children to leave the room," Tom Brokaw introduced gravely) showed up on network TV, decayed monsters with naked bone showing through their dried skin, traffic accident victims, the morticians' concealing make-up sloughed away so that the ripped faces and bashed-in skulls showed, women with their hair teased into dirt-clogged beehives where worms and beetles still squirmed and crawled, their faces alternately vacuous and informed with a kind of calculating, idiotic intelligence. No big deal until the first horrible stills in an issue of People magazine that had been sealed in shrink-wrap and sold with an orange sticker that read NOT FOR SALE TO MINORS! Then it was a big deal.

When you saw a decaying man still dressed in the mud-streaked remnants of the Brooks Brothers suit in which he had been buried tearing at the throat of a screaming woman in a tee-shirt that read PROPERTY OF THE HOUSTON OILERS, you suddenly realized it might be a very big deal indeed.

That was when the accusations and saber rattling had started, and for three weeks the entire world had been diverted from the creatures escaping their graves like grotesque moths escaping diseased cocoons by the spectacle of the two great nuclear powers on what appeared to be an indivertible collision course.

There were no zombies in the United States, Communist Chinese television commentators declared; this was a self-serving lie to camouflage an unforgivable act of chemical warfare against the People's Republic of China, a more horrible (and deliberate) version of what had happened in Bhopal, India. Reprisals would follow if the dead comrades coming out of their graves did not fall down decently dead within ten days. All U.S. diplomatic people were expelled from the mother country and there were several incidents of American tourists being beaten to death.

The President (who would not long after become a Zombie Blue Plate Special himself) responded by becoming a pot (which he had come to resemble, having put on at least fifty pounds since his second-term election) calling a kettle black. The U.S. government, he told the American people, had incontrovertible evidence that the only walking-dead people in China had been set loose deliberately, and while the Head Panda might stand there with his slanty-eyed face hanging out, claiming there were over eight thousand lively corpses striding around in search of the ultimate collectivism, we had definite proof that there were less than forty. It was the Chinese who had committed an act -- a heinous act -- of chemical warfare, bringing loyal Americans back to life with no urge to consume anything but other loyal Americans, and if these Americans -- some of whom had been good Democrats -- did not lie down decently dead within the next five days, Red China was going to be one large slag pit.

NORAD was at DEFCON-2 when a British astronomer named Humphrey Dagbolt spotted the satellite. Or the spaceship. Or the creature. Or whatever in hell's name it was. Dagbolt was not even a professional astronomer but only an amateur star-gazer from the west of England -- no one in particular, you would have said -- and yet he almost certainly saved the world from some sort of thermonuclear exchange, if not flat-out atomic war. All in all not a bad week's work for a man with a deviated septum and a bad case of psoriasis.

At first it seemed that the two nose-to-nose political systems did not want to believe in what Dagbolt had found, even after the Royal Observatory in London had pronounced his photographs and data authentic. Finally, however, the missile silos closed and telescopes all over the world homed in, almost grudgingly, on Star Wormwood.

The joint American/Chinese space mission to investigate the unwelcome newcomer lifted off from the Lanzhou Heights less than three weeks after the first photographs had appeared in the Guardian, and everyone's favorite amateur astronomer was aboard, deviated septum and all. In truth, it would have been hard to have kept Dagbolt off the mission -- he had become a worldwide hero, the most renowned Briton since Winston Churchill. When asked by a reporter on the day before lift-off if he was frightened, Dagbolt had brayed his oddly endearing Robert Morley laugh, rubbed the side of his truly enormous nose, and exclaimed, "Petrified, dear boy! Utterly pet-trifled!"

As it turned out, he had every reason to be petrified. They all did.

The final sixty-one seconds of received transmission from the Xiaoping/Truman were

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considered too horrible for release by all three governments involved, and also no formal communique was ever issued. It didn't matter, of course; nearly twenty thousand ham operators had been monitoring the craft, and it seemed that at least nineteen thousand of them had been rolling tape when the craft had been -- well, was there really any other word for it? -- invaded.

Chinese voice: Worms! It appears to be a massive ball of --

American voice: Christ! Look out! It's coming for us!

Dagbolt: Some sort of extrusion is occurring. The portside window is --

Chinese voice: Breach! Breach! To your suits, my friends! (Indecipherable gabble.)

American voice: -- and appears to be eating its way in --

Female Chinese voice (Ching-Ling Soong): Oh stop it stop the eyes --

(Sound of an explosion.)

Dagbolt: Explosive decompression has occurred. I see three -- er, four -- dead, and there are worms... everywhere there are worms --

American voice: Faceplate! Faceplate! Faceplate!

(Screaming.)

Chinese voice: Where is my mamma? Oh dear, where is my mamma?

(Screams. Sounds like a toothless old man sucking up mashed potatoes.)

Dagbolt: The cabin is full of worms -- what appear to be worms, at any rate -- which is to say that they really are worms, one realizes -- that have apparently extruded themselves from the main satellite -- what we took to be -- which is to say one means -- the cabin is full of floating body parts. These space-worms apparently excrete some sort of acid --

(Booster rockets fired at this point; duration of the burn is 7.2 seconds. This may have been an attempt to escape or possibly to ram the central object. In either case, the maneuver did not work. It seems likely that the blast-chambers themselves were clogged with worms and Captain Lin Yang -- or whichever officer was then in charge -- believed an explosion of the fuel tanks themselves to be imminent as a result of the clog. Hence the shutdown.)

American voice: Oh my Christ they're in my head, they're eating my fuckin br --

(Static.)

Dagbolt: I believe that prudence dictates a strategic retreat to the aft storage compartment; the rest of the crew is dead. No question about that. Pity. Brave bunch. Even that fat American who kept rooting around in his nose. But in another sense I don't think --

(Static.)

Dagbolt: -- dead after all because Ching-Ling Soong -- or rather, Ching-Ling Soong's severed head, one means to say -- just floated past me, and her eyes were open and blinking. She appeared to recognize me, and to --

(Static.)

Dagbolt: -- keep you --

(Explosion. Static.)

Dagbolt: -- around me. I repeat, all around me. Squirming things. They -- I say, does anyone know if --

(Dagbolt, screaming and cursing, then just screaming. Sounds of toothless old man again.)

(Transmission ends.)

The XiaopingITruman exploded three seconds later. The extrusion from the rough ball nicknamed Star Wormwood had been observed from better than three hundred telescopes earthside during the short and rather pitiful conflict. As the final sixty-one seconds of transmission began, the craft began to be obscured by something that certainly looked like worms. By the end of the final transmission, the craft itself could not be seen at all -- only the squirming mass of things that had attached themselves to it. Moments after the final explosion, a weather satellite snapped a single picture of floating debris, some of which was almost certainly chunks of the worm-things. A severed human leg clad in a Chinese space suit floating among them was a good deal easier to identify.

And in a way, none of it even mattered. The scientists and political leaders of both countries knew exactly where Star Wormwood was located: above the expanding hole in earth's ozone layer. It was sending something down from there, and it was not Flowers by Wire.

Missiles came next. Star Wormwood jiggled easily out of their way and then returned to its place over the hole.

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On the Pulsifers' satellite-assisted TV, more dead people got up and walked, but now there was a crucial change. In the beginning the zombies had only bitten living people who got too close, but in the weeks before the Pulsifers' high-tech Sony started showing only broad bands of snow, the dead folks started trying to get close to the living folks.

They had, it seemed, decided they liked what they were biting.

The final effort to destroy the thing was made by the United States. The President approved an attempt to destroy Star Wormwood with a number of orbiting nukes, stalwartly ignoring his previous statements that America had never put atomic SDI weapons in orbit and never would. Everyone else ignored them, as well. Perhaps they were too busy praying for success.

It was a good idea, but not, unfortunately, a workable one. Not a single missile from a single SDI orbiter fired. This was a total of twenty-four flat-out failures. So much for modern technology.

And then, after all these shocks on earth and in heaven, there was the business of the one little graveyard right here on Jenny. But even that didn't seem to count much for Maddie because, after all, she had not been there. With the end of civilization now clearly at hand and the island cut off -- thankfully cut off, in the opinion of the residents -- from the rest of the world, old ways had reasserted themselves with unspoken but inarguable force. By then they all knew what was going to happen; it was only a question of when. That, and being ready when it did. Women were excluded.

It was Bob Daggett, of course, who drew up the watch roster. That was only right, since Bob had been head selectman on Jenny for about a thousand years. The day after the death of the President (the thought of him and the first lady wandering witlessly through the streets of Washington, D.C., gnawing on human arms and legs like people eating chicken legs at a picnic was not mentioned; it was a little much to bear, even if the bastid and his blonde wife were Democrats), Bob Daggett called the first men-only Town Meeting on Jenny since sometime before the Civil War. Maddie wasn't there, but she heard. Dave Eamons told her all she needed to know.

"You men all know the situation," Bob said. He looked as yellow as a man with jaundice, and people remembered his daughter, the one still living at home on the island, was only one of four. The other three were other places... which was to say, on the mainland.

But hell, if it came down to that, they all had folks on the mainland.

"We got one boneyard here on Jenny," Bob continued, "and nothin ain't happened there yet, but that don't mean nothin will. Nothin ain't happened yet lots of places... but it seems like once it starts, nothin turns to somethin pretty goddam quick."

There was a rumble of assent from the men gathered in the grammar-school gymnasium, which was the only place big enough to hold them. There were about seventy of them in all, ranging in age from Johnny Crane, who had just turned eighteen, to Bob's great-uncle Frank, who was eighty, had a glass eye, and chewed tobacco. There was no spittoon in the gym, of course, so Frank Daggett had brought an empty mayonnaise jar to spit his juice into. He did so now.

"Git down to where the cheese binds, Bobby," he said. "You ain't got no office to run for, and time's a-wastin."

There was another rumble of agreement, and Bob Daggett flushed. Somehow his great-uncle always managed to make him look like an ineffectual fool, and if there was anything in the world he hated worse than looking like an ineffectual fool, it was being called Bobby. He owned property, for Chrissake! And he supported the old fart -- bought him his goddam chew!

But these were not things he could say; old Frank's eyes were like pieces of flint.

"Okay," Bob said curtly. "Here it is. We want twelve men to a watch. I'm gonna set a roster in just a couple minutes. Four-hour shifts."

"I can stand watch a helluva lot longer'n four hours!" Matt Arsenault spoke up, and Davey told Maddie that Bob said after the meeting that no welfare-slacker like Matt Arsenault would have had the nerve to speak up like that in a meeting of his betters if that old man hadn't called him Bobby, like he was a kid instead of a man three months shy of his fiftieth birthday, in front of all the island men.

"Maybe you can n maybe you can't," Bob said, "but we got plenty of warm bodies, and nobody's gonna fall asleep on sentry duty."

"I ain't gonna -- "

"I didn't say you," Bob said, but the way his eyes rested on Matt Arsenault

suggested that he might have meant him. "This is no kid's game. Sit down and shut up."

Matt Arsenault opened his mouth to say something more, then looked around at the other men -- including old Frank Daggett -- and wisely held his peace.

"If you got a rifle, bring it when it's your trick," Bob continued. He felt a little better with Arsenault more or less back in his place. "Unless it's a twenty-two, that is. If you ain't got somethin bigger'n that, come n get one here."

"I didn't know the school kep a supply of em handy," Cal Partridge said, and there was a ripple of laughter.

"It don't now, but it will," Bob said, "because every man jack of you with more than one rifle bigger than a twenty-two is gonna bring it here." He looked at John Wirley, the school principal. "'Okay if we keep em in your office, John?'"

Wirley nodded. Beside him, Reverend Johnson was drywashing his hands in a distraught way.

"Shit on that," Orrin Campbell said. "I got a wife and two kids at home. Am I s'posed to leave em with nothin to defend themselves with if a bunch of cawpses come for an early Thanksgiving dinner while I'm on watch?"

"If we do our job at the boneyard, none will," Bob replied stonily. "Some of you got handguns. We don't want none of those. Figure out which women can shoot and which can't and give em the pistols. We'll put em together in bunches."

"They can play Beano," old Frank cackled, and Bob smiled, too. That was more like it, by the Christ.

"Nights, we're gonna want trucks posted around so we got plenty of light." He looked over at Sonny Dotson, who ran Island Amoco, the only gas station on Jenny. Sonny's main business wasn't gassing cars and trucks -- shit, there was no place much on the island to drive, and you could get your go ten cents cheaper on the mainland -- but filling up lobster boats and the motorboats he ran out of his jackleg marina in the summer. "You gonna supply the gas, Sonny?"

"Am I gonna get cash slips?"

"You're gonna get your ass saved," Bob said. "When things get back to normal -- if they ever do -- I guess you'll get what you got coming."

Sonny looked around, saw only hard eyes, and shrugged. He looked a bit sullen, but in truth he looked more confused than anything, Davey told Maddie the next day.

"Ain't got n'more'n four hunnert gallons of gas," he said. "Mostly diesel."

"There's five generators on the island," Burt Dorfman said (when Burt spoke everyone listened; as the only Jew on the island, he was regarded as a creature both quixotic and fearsome, like an oracle that works about half the time). "They all run on diesel. I can rig lights if I have to."

Low murmurs. If Burt said he could do it, he could. He was a Jewish electrician, and there was a feeling on the outer islands, unarticulated but powerful, that that was the best kind.

"We're gonna light that graveyard up like a friggin stage," Bob said.

Andy Kingsbury stood up. "I heard on the news that sometimes you can shoot one of them things in the head and it'll stay down, and sometimes it won't."

"We've got chainsaws," Bob said stonily, "and what won't stay dead... why, we can make sure it won't move too far alive."

And, except for making out the duty roster, that was pretty much that.

Six days and nights passed and the sentries posted around the little graveyard on Jenny were starting to feel a wee bit silly ("I dunno if I'm standin guard or pullin my pud," Orrin Campbell said one afternoon as a dozen men stood around the cemetery gate, playing Liars' Poker) when it happened... and when it happened, it happened fast.

Dave told Maddie that he heard a sound like the wind wailing in the chimney on a gusty night, and then the gravestone marking the final resting place of Mr. and Mrs. Fournier's boy Michael, who had died of leukemia at seventeen (bad go, that had been, him being their only child and them being such nice people and all), fell over. A moment later a shredded hand with a moss-caked Yarmouth Academy class ring on one finger rose out of the ground, shoving through the tough grass. The third finger had been torn off in the process.

The ground heaved like (like the belly of a pregnant woman getting ready to drop her load, Dave almost said, and hastily reconsidered) a big wave rolling into a close cove, and then the boy himself sat up, only he wasn't anything you could really recognize, not after almost two years in the ground. There were little splinters of

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wood sticking out of what was left of his face, Davey said, and pieces of shiny blue cloth in the draggles of his hair. "That was coffin-linin," Davey told her, looking down at his restlessly twining hands. "I know that as well's I know m'own name." He paused, then added: "Thank Christ Mike's dad dint have that trick." Maddie had nodded.

The men on guard, bullshit-scared as well as revolted, opened fire on the reanimated corpse of the former high-school chess champion and All-Star second baseman, tearing him to shreds. Other shots, fired in wild panic, blew chips off his marble gravestone, and it was just luck that the armed men had been loosely grouped together when the festivities commenced; if they had been divided up into two wings, as Bob Daggett had originally intended, they would very likely have slaughtered each other. As it was, not a single islander was hurt, although Bud Meechum found a rather suspicious-looking hole torn in the sleeve of his shirt the next day.

"Prob'ly wa'ant nothin but a blackberry thorn, just the same," he said. "There's an almighty lot of em out at that end of the island, you know." No one would dispute that, but the black smudges around the hole made his frightened wife think that his shirt had been torn by a thorn with a pretty large caliber.

The Fournier kid fell back, most of him lying still, other parts of him still twitching... but by then the whole graveyard seemed to be rippling, as if an earthquake were going on there -- but only there, noplacelse else.

Just about an hour before dusk, this had happened.

Burt Dorfman had rigged up a siren to a tractor battery, and Bob Daggett flipped the switch. Within twenty minutes, most of the men in town were at the island cemetery. Goddam good thing, too, Dave Eamons said, because a few of the deaders almost got away. Old Frank Daggett, still two hours from the heart attack that would carry him off just as the excitement was dying down, organized the new men so they wouldn't shoot each other, either, and for the final ten minutes the Jenny boneyard sounded like Bull Run. By the end of the festivities, the powder smoke was so thick that some men choked on it. The sour smell of vomit was almost heavier than the smell of gunsmoke... it was sharper, too, and lingered longer.

And still some of them wriggled and squirmed like snakes with broken backs -- the fresher ones, for the most part.

"Burt," Frank Daggett said. "You got them chainsaws?"

"I got em," Burt said, and then a long, buzzing sound came out of his mouth, a sound like a cicada burrowing its way into tree bark, as he dry-heaved. He could not take his eyes from the squirming corpses, the overturned gravestones, the yawning pits from which the dead had come. "In the truck."

"Gassed up?" Blue veins stood out on Frank's ancient, hairless skull.

"Yeah." Burl's hand was over his mouth. "I'm sorry."

"Work y'fuckin gut all you want," Frank said briskly, "but toddle off n get them saws while you do. And you... you... you... you..."

The last "you" was his grandnephew Bob.

"I can't, Uncle Frank," Bob said sickly. He looked around and saw five or six of his friends and neighbors lying crumpled in the tall grass. They had not died; they had swooned. Most of them had seen their own relatives rise out of the ground. Buck Harkness over there lying by an aspen tree had been part of the crossfire that had cut his late wife to ribbons; he had fainted after observing her decayed, worm-riddled brains exploding from the back of her head in a grisly gray splash. "I can't. I c -- "

Frank's hand, twisted with arthritis but as hard as stone, cracked across his face.

"You can and you will, chummy," he said.

Bob went with the rest of the men.

Frank Daggett watched them grimly and rubbed his chest, which had begun to send cramped throbs of pain all the way down his left arm to the elbow. He was old but he wasn't stupid, and he had a pretty good idea what those pains were, and what they meant.

"He told me he thought he was gonna have a blow-out, and he tapped his chest when he said it," Dave went on, and placed his hand on the swell of muscle over his own left nipple to demonstrate.

Maddie nodded to show she understood.

"He said, 'If anything happens to me before this mess is cleaned up, Davey, you and Burt and Orrin take over. Bobby's a good boy, but I think he may have lost his guts for at least a little while... and you know, sometimes when a man loses his guts,

they don't come back.' "

Maddie nodded again, thinking how grateful she was -- how very, very grateful -- that she was not a man.

"So then we did it," Dave said. "We cleaned up the mess."

Maddie nodded a third time, but this time she must have made some sound, because Dave told her he would stop if she couldn't bear it; he would gladly stop.

"I can bear it," she said quietly. "You might be surprised how much I can bear, Davey." He looked at her quickly, curiously, when she said that, but Maddie had averted her eyes before he could see the secret in them, motionless in her hands. A little pink bootie. She had already made a blue set. All of a sudden it seemed she could hear so much. The wind. The faint thunder of surf on Cricket Ledge. The house making little groaning sounds, like an elderly woman making herself comfortable in bed. The tick of the clock in the hallway.

"Jack?" she asked the silent night that was now no longer silent. "Is it you, dear?" Then the living-room window burst inward and what came through was not really Jack but a skeleton with a few mouldering strings of flesh hanging from it.

His compass was still around his neck. It had grown a beard of moss.

Dave didn't know the secret because no one on Jenny knew. That was the way Maddie wanted it, and the way she intended to keep it. There had been a time when she had, perhaps, in the blue darkness of her shock, pretended to be coping. And then something happened that made her cope. Four days before the island cemetery vomited up its corpses, Maddie Pace was faced with a simple choice: cope or die.

She had been sitting in the living room, drinking a glass of the blueberry wine she and Jack had put up during August of the previous year -- a time that now seemed impossibly distant -- and doing something so trite it was laughable. She was knitting Little Things. Booties, in fact. But what else was there to do? It seemed that no one would be going across the reach to the Wee Folks store at the Ellsworth Mall for quite some time.

Something had thumped against the window.

A bat, she thought, looking up. Her needles paused in her hands, though. It seemed that something bigger had moved jerkily out there in the windy dark. The oil lamp was turned up high and kicking too much reflection off the panes for her to be sure. She reached to turn it down and the thump came again. The panes shivered. She heard a little pattering of dried putty falling on the sash. Jack had been planning to reglaze all the windows this fall, she remembered, and then thought, Maybe that's what he came back for. That was crazy, he was on the bottom of the ocean, but...

She sat with her head cocked to one side, her knitting now

The wind flapped the curtains in a cloud above him as he sprawled, then got up on his hands and knees and looked at her from black sockets in which barnacles had grown.

He made grunting sounds. His fleshless mouth opened and the teeth chomped down. He was hungry... but this time chicken noodle soup would not serve. Not even the kind that came in the can.

Gray stuff hung and swung beyond those dark barnacle-encrusted holes, and she realized she was looking at whatever remained of Jack's brain. She sat where she was, frozen, as he got up and came toward her, leaving black kelpy tracks on the carpet, fingers reaching. He stank of salt and fathoms. His hands stretched. His teeth chomped mechanically up and down. Maddie saw he was wearing the remains of the black-and-red-checked shirt she had bought him at L. L. Bean's last Christmas. It had cost the earth, but he had said again and again how warm it was, and look how well it had lasted, how much of it was left even after being under water all this time.

The cold cobwebs of bone which were all that remained of his fingers touched her throat before the baby kicked in her stomach -- for the first time -- and her shocked horror, which she had believed to be calmness, fled, and she drove one of the knitting needles into the thing's eye.

Making horrid thick choking noises that sounded like the suck of a swill pump, he staggered backward, clawing at the needle, while the half-made pink bootie swung in front of the cavity where his nose had been. She watched as a sea slug squirmed from that nasal cavity and onto the bootie, leaving a trail of slime behind it.

Jack fell over the end table she'd gotten at a yard sale just after they had been married -- she hadn't been able to make her mind up about it, had been in agonies about it, until Jack finally said either she was going to buy it for their living

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room or he was going to give the biddy running the sale twice what she was asking for the goddam thing and then bust it up into firewood with --

-- with the --
He struck the floor and there was a brittle, cracking sound as his febrile, fragile form broke in two. The right hand tore the knitting needle, slimed with decaying brain tissue, from his eye-socket and tossed it aside. His top half crawled toward her. His teeth gnashed steadily together.

She thought he was trying to grin, and then the baby kicked again and she remembered how uncharacteristically tired and out of sorts he'd sounded at Mabel Hanratty's yard-sale that day: Buy it, Maddie, for Chrissake! I'm tired! want to go home and get m'dinner! If you don't get a move on, I'll give the old bat twice what she wants and bust it up for firewood with my --

Cold, dank hand clutching her ankle; polluted teeth poised to bite. To kill her and kill the baby. She tore loose, leaving him with only her slipper, which he chewed on and then spat out.

When she came back from the entry, he was crawling mindlessly into the kitchen -- at least the top half of him was -- with the compass dragging on the tiles. He looked up at the sound of her, and there seemed to be some idiot question in those black eye-sockets before she brought the ax whistling down, cleaving his skull as he had threatened to cleave the end table.

His head fell in two pieces, brains dribbling across the tile like spoiled oatmeal, brains that squirmed with slugs and gelatinous sea worms, brains that smelled like a woodchuck exploded with gassy decay in a high-summer meadow.

Still his hands clashed and clattered on the kitchen tiles, making a sound like beetles.

She chopped... chopped... chopped.

At last there was no more movement.

A sharp pain rippled across her midsection and for a moment she was gripped by terrible panic: Is it a miscarriage? Am I going to have a miscarriage? But the pain left and the baby kicked again, more strongly than before.

She went back into the living room, carrying an ax that now smelled like tripe.

His legs had somehow managed to stand.

"Jack, I loved you so much," she said, "but this isn't you." She brought the ax down in a whistling arc that split him at the pelvis, sliced the carpet, and drove deep into the solid oak floor beneath.

The legs separated, trembled wildly for almost five minutes, and then began to grow quiet. At last even the toes stopped twitching.

She carried him down to the cellar piece by piece, wearing her oven gloves and wrapping each piece with the insulating blankets Jack had kept in the shed and which she had never thrown away -- he and the crew threw them over the pots on cold days so the lobsters wouldn't freeze.

Once a severed hand closed upon her wrist. She stood still and waited, her heart drumming heavily in her chest, and at last it loosened again. And that was the end of it. The end of him.

There was an unused cistern, polluted, below the house -- Jack had been meaning to fill it in. Maddie slid the heavy concrete cover aside so that its shadow lay on the earthen floor like a partial eclipse and then threw the pieces of him down, listening to the splashes. When everything was gone, she worked the heavy cover back into place.

"Rest in peace," she whispered, and an interior voice whispered back that her husband was resting in pieces, and then she began to cry, and her cries turned to hysterical shrieks, and she pulled at her hair and tore at her breasts until they were bloody, and she thought, I am insane, this is what it's like to be insa -- But before the thought could be completed, she had fallen down in a faint, and the faint became a deep sleep, and the next morning she felt all right.

She would never tell, though.

Never.

"I can bear it," she told Dave Eamons again, thrusting aside the image of the knitting needle with the bootie swinging from the end of it jutting out of the kelp-slimed eyesocket of the thing, which had once been her husband, and co-creator of the child in her womb. "Really."

So he told her, perhaps because he had to tell someone or go mad, but he glossed over the worst parts. He told her that they had chainsawed the corpses that

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absolutely refused to return to the land of the dead, but he did not tell her that some parts had continued to squirm -- hands with no arms attached to them clutching mindlessly, feet divorced from their legs digging at the bullet-chewed earth of the graveyard as if trying to run away -- and that these parts had been doused with diesel fuel and set afire. Maddie did not have to be told this part. She had seen the pyre from the house.

Later, Gennesault Island's one firetruck had turned its hose on the dying blaze, although there wasn't much chance of the fire spreading, with a brisk easterly blowing the sparks off Jenny's seaward edge. When there was nothing left but a stinking, tallowy lump (and still there were occasional bulges in this mass, like twitches in a tired muscle), Matt Arsenault fired up his old D-9 Caterpillar -- above the nicked steel blade and under his faded pillowtick engineer's cap, Matt's face had been as white as cottage cheese -- and plowed the whole hellacious mess under.

The moon was coming up when Frank took Bob Daggett, Dave Eamons, and Cal Partridge aside. It was Dave he spoke to.

"I knew it was coming, and here it is," he said.

"What are you talking about, Unc?" Bob asked.

"My heart," Frank said. "Goddam thing has thrown a rod."

"Now, Uncle Frank -- "

"Never mind Uncle Frank this n Uncle Frank that," the old man said. "I ain't got time to listen to you play fiddlyfuck on the mouth-organ. Seen half my friends go the same way. It ain't no day at the races, but it could be worse; beats hell out of getting whacked with the cancer-stick."

"But now there's this other sorry business to mind, and all I got to say on that subject is, when I go down I intend to stay down. Cal, stick that rifle of yours in my left ear. Dave, when I raise my left arm, you sock yours into my armpit. And Bobby, you put yours right over my heart. I'm gonna say the Lord's Prayer, and when I hit amen, you three fellows are gonna pull your triggers at the same time."

"Uncle Frank -- " Bob managed. He was reeling on his heels.

"I told you not to start in on that," Frank said. "And don't you dare faint on me, you friggin pantywaist. Now get your country butt over here."

Bob did.
Frank looked around at the three men, their faces as white as Matt Arsenault's had been when he drove the 'dozer over men and women he had known since he was a kid in short pants and Buster Browns.

"Don't you boys frig this up," Frank said. He was speaking to all of them, but his eye might have been particularly trained on his grandnephew. "If you feel like maybe you're gonna backslide, just remember I'd'a done the same for any of you."

"Quit with the speech," Bob said hoarsely. "I love you, Uncle Frank."

"You ain't the man your father was, Bobby Daggett, but I love you, too," Frank said calmly, and then, with a cry of pain, he threw his left hand up over his head like a guy in New York who has to have a cab in a rip of a hurry, and started in with his last prayer. "Our Father who art in heaven -- Christ, that hurts! -- hallow'd be Thy name -- oh, son of a gun! -- Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it... as it..."

Frank's upraised left arm was wavering wildly now. Dave Eamons, with his rifle socked into the old geezer's armpit, watched it as carefully as a logger would watch a big tree that looked like it meant to do evil and fall the wrong way. Every man on the island was watching now. Big beads of sweat had formed on the old man's pallid face. His lips had pulled back from the even, yellowy-white of his Roebuckers, and Dave had been able to smell the Polident on his breath.

"... as it is in heaven!" the old man jerked out. "Lead us not into temptation butdeliverusfromevilohshitonitforeverand-everAMEN!"

All three of them fired, and both Cal Partridge and Bob Daggett fainted, but Frank never did try to get up and walk.

Frank Daggett had meant to stay dead, and that was just what he did.

Once Dave started that story he had to go on with it, and so he cursed himself for ever starting. He'd been right the first time; it was no story for a pregnant woman. But Maddie had kissed him and told him she thought he had done wonderfully, and that Frank Daggett had done wonderfully, too. Dave went out feeling a little dazed, as if he had just been kissed on the cheek by a woman he had never met before.

In a very real sense, that was true.

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She watched him go down the path to the dirt track that was one of Jenny's two roads and turn left. He was weaving a little in the moonlight, weaving with tiredness, she thought, but reeling with shock, as well. Her heart went out to him... to all of them. She had wanted to tell Dave she loved him and kiss him squarely on the mouth instead of just skimming his cheek with her lips, but he might have taken the wrong meaning from something like that, even though he was bone-weary and she was almost five months pregnant.

But she did love him, loved all of them, because they had gone through hell in order to make this little lick of land forty miles out in the Atlantic safe for her.

And safe for her baby.

"It will be a home delivery," she said softly as Dave went out of sight behind the dark hulk of the Pulsifers' satellite dish. Her eyes rose to the moon. "It will be a home delivery... and it will be fine."