

Stephen King - It Grows on You

It Grows on You
by Stephen King

New England autumn and the thin soil now shows in patches through the ragweed and goldenrod, waiting for snow still four weeks distant. The culverts are clogged with leaves, the sky has gone a perpetual gray, and cornstalks stand in leaning rows like soldiers who have found some fantastic way to die on their feet. Pumpkins, sagging inward now with soft-rot, are piled against crepuscular sheds, smelling like the breath of old women. There is no heat and no cold at this time of year, only pallid air, which is never still, beating through the bare fields under white skies where birds fly south in chevron shapes. That wind blows dust up from the soft shoulders of back roads in dancing dervishes, parts the played-out fields as a comb parts hair, and sniffs its way into junked cars up on blocks in back yards.

The Newall house out on Town Road #3 overlooks that part of Castle Rock known as the Bend. It is somehow impossible to sense anything good about this house. It has a deathly look, which can be only partially explained by its lack of paint. The front lawn is a mass of dried hummocks, which the frost will soon heave, into even more grotesque postures. Thin smoke rises from Brownie's Store at the foot of the hill. Once the Bend was a fairly important part of Castle Rock, but that time passed around the time Korea got over. On the old bandstand across the road from Brownie's two small children roll a red firetruck between them. Their faces are tired and washed out, the faces of old men, almost. Their hands actually seem to cut the air as they roll the truck between them, pausing only to swipe at their endlessly running noses every now and again.

In the store Harley McKissick is presiding, corpulent and red-faced, while old John Clutterbuck and Lenny Partridge sit by the stove with their feet up. Paul Corliss is leaning against the counter. The store has a smell that is ancient -- a smell of salami and flypaper and coffee and tobacco; of sweat and dark brown Coca-Cola; of pepper and cloves and O'Dell Hair Tonic, which looks like semen and turns hair into sculpture. A flyspecked poster advertising a beanhole bean supper held in 1986 still leans in the window next to one advertising an appearance of "Country" Ken Corriveau at the 1984 Castle County Fair. The light and heat of almost ten summers has fallen on this latter poster, and now Ken Corriveau (who has been out of the country-music business for at least half of those ten years and now sells Fords over in Chamberlain) looks simultaneously faded and toasted. At the back of the store is a huge glass freezer that came out of New York in 1933, and everywhere hangs the vague but tremendous smell of coffee-beans.

The old men watch the children and speak in low, desultory tones. John Clutterbuck, whose grandson, Andy, is busy drinking himself to death this fall, has been talking about the town landfill. The landfill stinks like a bugger in the summertime, he says. No one disputes this -- it's true -- but no one is very interested in the subject, either, because it's not summer, it's autumn, and the huge range-oil stove is throwing off a stuporous glow of heat. The Winston thermometer behind the counter says 82. Clutterbuck's forehead has a huge dent above his left eyebrow where he struck his head in a car accident in 1963. Small children sometimes ask to touch it. Old Glut has won a great deal of money from summer people who don't believe the dent in his head will hold the contents of a medium-sized water tumbler.

"Paulson," Harley McKissick says quietly.

An old Chevrolet has pulled in behind Lenny Partridge's oil-burner. On the side is a cardboard sign held with heavy masking tape. GARY PAULSON CHAIR'S CANED ANTIQUE'S BOUGHT & SOLD, the sign reads, with the telephone number to call beneath the words. Gary Paulson gets out of his car slowly, an old man in faded green pants with a huge satchel seat. He drags a knurled cane out after him, holding to the doorframe tightly until he has the cane planted just the way he likes it. The cane has the white plastic handgrip from a child's bike affixed over its dark tip like a condom. It makes small circles in the lifeless dust as Paulson begins his careful trip from his car to the door of Brownie's.

The children on the bandstand look up at him then follow his glance (fearfully, it seems) to the leaning, crepitating bulk of the Newall house on the ridge above them. Then they go back to their firetruck.

Joe Newall bought in Castle Rock in 1904 and owned in Castle Rock until 1929, but his fortune was made in the nearby mill town of Gates Falls. He was a scrawny man with an angry, hectic face and eyes with yellow corneas. He bought a great parcel of

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open land out in the Bend -- this was when it was quite a thriving village, complete with a profitable little combined wood-milling operation and furniture factory -- from The First National Bank of Oxford. The bank got it from Phil Budreau in a foreclosure assisted by County Sheriff Nickerson Campbell. Phil Budreau, well-liked but considered something of a fool by his neighbors, slunk away to Kittery and spent the next twelve years or so tinkering with cars and motorcycles. Then he went off to France to fight the Heinies, fell out of an airplane while on a reconnaissance mission (or so the story has it), and was killed.

The Budreau patch lay silent and fallow for most of those years, while Joe Newall lived in a rented house in Gates Falls and saw to the making of his fortune. He was known more for his employee-severance policies than for the way he'd turned around a mill, which had been tottering on the brink of ruination when he'd bought it for a song, back in '02. The mill-workers called him Firing Joe, because if you missed a single shift you were sent down the road, no excuses accepted or even listened to. He married Cora Leonard, niece of Carl Stowe, in 1914. The marriage had great merit -- in Joe Newall's eyes, certainly -- because Cora was Carl's only living relative, and she would no doubt come into a nice little bundle when Carl passed on (as long as Joe remained on good terms with him, that was, and he had no intentions of being on anything less with the old fellow, who had been Damned Shrewd in his day but was considered to have become Rather Soft in his declining years). There were other mills in the area that could be bought for a song and then turned around... if, that was, a man had a little capital to use as a lever. Joe soon had his lever; his wife's rich uncle died within a year of the wedding.

So the marriage had merit -- oh yes, no doubt about it. Cora herself did not have merit, however. She was a grainbag of a woman, incredibly wide across the hips, incredibly full in the butt, yet almost as flat-chested as a boy and possessed of an absurd little pipestem neck upon which her oversized head nodded like a strange pale sunflower. Her cheeks hung like dough, her lips like strips of liver; her face was as silent as a full moon on a winter night. She sweated huge dark patches around the armholes of her dresses even in February, and she carried a dank smell of perspiration with her always.

Joe began a house for his wife on the Budreau patch in 1915, and a year later it seemed finished. It was painted white and enclosed twelve rooms that sprouted from many strange angles. Joe Newall was not popular in Castle Rock, partly because he made his money out of town, partly because Budreau, his predecessor, had been such an all-around nice fellow (though a fool, they always reminded each other, as if foolishness and niceness went together and it would be death to forget it), but mostly because his damned house was built with out-of-town labor. Shortly before the gutters and downspouts were hung, an obscene drawing accompanied by a one-syllable Anglo-Saxon word was scrawled on the fanlighted front door in soft yellow chalk. By 1920 Joe Newall was a rich man. His three Gates Falls mills were going like a house afire, stuffed with the profits of a world war and comfortable with the orders of the newly arisen or (arising) middle class. He began to build a new wing on his house. Most folks in the village pronounced it unnecessary -- after all, there were just the two of them up there -- and almost all opined it added nothing but ugly to a house most of them already considered ugly beyond almost all measure. This new wing towered one story above the main house and looked blindly down the ridge, which had in those days been covered with straggling pines.

The news that just the two of them were soon to become just the three of them trickled in from Gates Falls, the source most likely being Doris Gingercroft, who was Dr. Robertson's nurse in those days. So the added wing was in the nature of a celebration, it seemed. After six years of wedded bliss and four years of living in the Bend, during which she had been seen only at a distance as she crossed her dooryard, or occasionally picking flowers -- crocuses, wild roses, Queen Anne's lace, lady's slipper, paintbrush -- in the field beyond the buildings, after all that time, Cora Leonard Newall had kindled.

She never shopped at Brownie's. Cora did her marketing at the Kitty Korner Store over in Gates Center every Thursday afternoon.

In January of 1921, Cora gave birth to a monster with no arms and, it was said, a tiny clutch of perfect fingers sticking out of one eyesocket. It died less than six hours after mindless contractions had pushed its red and senseless face into the light. Joe Newall added a cupola to the wing seventeen months later, in the late spring of 1922 (in western Maine there is no early spring; only late spring and

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winter before it). He continued to buy out of town and would have nothing to do with Bill "Brownie" McKissick's store. He also never crossed the threshold of the Bend Methodist Church. The deformed infant which had slid from his wife's womb was buried in the Newall plot in Gates rather than in Homeland. The inscription on the tiny headstone read:

SARAH TAMSON

TABITHA FRANCINE NEWALL

JANUARY 14, 1921

GOD GRANT SHE LIE STILL.

In the store they talked about Joe Newall and Joe's wife and Joe's house as Brownie's kid Harley, still not old enough to shave (but with his senescence buried inside just the same, hibernating, waiting, perhaps dreaming) but old enough to stack vegetables and haul pecks of potatoes out to the roadside stand whenever called upon to do so, stood by and listened. Mostly it was the house of which they spoke; it was considered to be an affront to the sensibilities and an offense to the eye. "But it grows on you," Clayton Clutterbuck (father of John) sometimes remarked. There was never any answer to this. It was a statement with absolutely no meaning... yet at the same time it was a patent fact. If you were standing in the yard at Brownie's, maybe just looking at the berries for the best box when berry-season was on, you sooner or later found your eyes turning up to the house on the ridge the way a weathervane turns to the nor'east before a March blizzard. Sooner or later you had to look, and as time went by, it got to be sooner for most people. Because, as Clayt Clutterbuck said, the Newall place grew on you.

In 1924, Cora fell down the stairs between the cupola and the new wing, breaking her neck and her back. A rumor went through town (it probably originated at a Ladies Aid Bake Sale) that she had been stark naked at the time. She was interred next to her ill-formed, short-lived daughter.

Joe Newall -- who, most folks now agreed, undoubtedly contained a touch of the kike -- continued to make money hand over fist. He built two sheds and a barn up on the ridge, all of them connected to the main house by way of the new wing. The barn was completed in 1927, and its purpose became clear almost at once -- Joe had apparently decided to become a gentleman farmer. He bought sixteen cows from a fellow in Mechanic Falls. He bought a shiny new milking machine from the same fellow. It looked like a metal octopus to those who glanced into the back of the delivery truck and saw it when the driver stopped at Brownie's for a cold bottle of ale before going on up the hill.

With the cows and the milking machine installed, Joe hired a halfwit from Motion to take care of his investment. How this supposedly hard-fisled and tough-minded mill-owner could have done such a thing perplexed everyone who turned his mind to the question -- that Newall was slipping seemed to be the only answer -- but he did, and of course the cows all died.

The county health officer showed up to look at the cows, and Joe showed him a signed statement from a veterinarian (a Gates Falls veterinarian, folks said ever after, raising their brows significantly as they said it) certifying that the cows had died of bovine meningitis.

"That means bad luck in English," Joe said.

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"Take it the way you want to take it," said Joe. "That's all right."

"Make that idiot shut up, why don't you?" the county health officer said. He was looking down the driveway at the halfwit, who was leaning against the Newall R.F.D. box and howling. Tears ran down his pudgy, dirty cheeks. Every now and then he would draw back and slap himself a good one, like he knew the whole thing was his fault.

"He's all right, too."

"Nothing up here seems all right to me," said the county health man, "least of all sixteen cows layin' dead on their backs with their legs stickin' up like fence-posts. I can see 'em from here."

"Good," said Joe Newall, "because it's as close as you'll get."

The county health officer threw the Gates Falls vet's paper down and stamped one of his boots on it. He looked at Joe Newall, his face flushed so bright that the burst squiggles of veins on the sides of his nose stood out purple. "I want to see those cows. Haul one away, if it comes to that."

"No."

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"You don't own the world, Newall -- I'll get a court order."

"Let's see if you can."

The health officer drove away. Joe watched him. Down at the end of the driveway the halfwit, clad in dung-splattered bib overalls from the Sears and Roebuck mail-order catalogue, went on leaning against the Newall R.F.D. box and howling. He stayed there all that hot August day, howling at the top of his lungs with his flat mongoloid face turned up to the yellow sky. "Bellerin like a calf in the moonlight" was how young Gary Paulson put it.

The county health officer was Clem Upshaw, from Sirois Hill. He might have dropped the matter once his thermostat went down a little, but Brownie McKissick, who had supported him for the office he held (and who let him charge a fair amount of beer), urged him not to. Harley McKissick's dad was not the kind of man who usually resorted to cat's paws -- or had to -- but he'd wanted to make a point concerning private property with Joe Newall. He wanted Joe to understand that private property is a great thing, yes, an American thing, but private property is still stitched to the town, and in Castle Rock people still believed the community came first, even with rich folks that could build a little more house on their house whenever the whim took them. So Clem Upshaw went on down to Lackery, which was the county seat in those days, and got the order.

While he was getting it, a large van drove up past the howling moron and to the barn. When Clem Upshaw returned with his order, only one cow remained, gazing at him with black eyes which had grown dull and distant beneath their covering of hay chaff. Clem determined that this cow at least had died of bovine meningitis, and then he went away. When he was gone, the remover's van returned for the last cow.

In 1928 Joe began another wing. That was when the men who gathered at Brownie's decided the man was crazy. Smart, yes, but crazy. Benny Ellis claimed that Joe had gouged out his daughter's one eye and kept it in a jar of what Benny called "fubbledehyde" on the kitchen table, along with the amputated fingers which had been poking out of the other socket when the baby was born.

Benny was a great reader of the horror pulps, magazines that showed naked ladies being carried off by giant ants and similar bad dreams on their covers, and his story about Joe Newall's jar was clearly inspired by his reading matter. As a result, there were soon people all over Castle Rock -- not just the Bend -- who claimed every word of it was true. Some claimed Joe kept even less mentionable things in the jar.

The second wing was finished in August of 1929 and two nights later a fast-moving jalopy with great sodium circles for eyes screamed juddering into Joe Newall's driveway and the stinking, flyblown corpse of a large skunk was thrown at the new wing. The animal splattered above one of the windows, throwing a fan of blood across the panes in a pattern almost like a Chinese ideogram.

In September of that year a fire swept the carding room of Newall's flagship mill in Gates Falls, causing fifty thousand dollars' worth of damage. In October the stock market crashed. In November Joe Newall hanged himself from a rafter in one of the unfinished rooms -- probably a bedroom, it was meant to be -- of the newest wing. The smell of sap in the fresh wood was still strong. He was found by Cleveland Torbutt, the assistant manager of Gates Mills and Joe's partner (or so it was rumored) in a number of wall street ventures that were now not worth the puke of a tubercular cocker spaniel. The county coroner, who happened to be Clem Upshaw's brother Noble, cut down the body.

Joe was buried next to his wife and child on the last day of November. It was a hard, brilliant day and the only person from Castle Rock to attend the service was Alvin Coy, who drove the Hay & Peabody funeral hack. Alvin reported that one of the spectators was a young, shapely woman in a raccoon coat and a black cloche hat. Sitting in Brownie's and eating a pickle straight out of the barrel, Alvin would smile mordantly and tell his cronies that she was a jazz baby if he had ever seen one. She bore not one whit of resemblance to Cora Leonard Newall's side of the family, and she hadn't closed her eyes during the prayer.

Gary Paulson enters the store with exquisite slowness, closing the door carefully behind him.

"Afternoon," Harley McKissick says neutrally.

"Heard you won a turkey down to the Grange last night," says Old Glut as he prepares to light his pipe.

"Yuh," Gary says. He's eighty-four and, like the others, can remember when the Bend

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was a damned sight livelier than it is now. He lost two sons in two wars -- the two before that mess in Viet Nam -- and that was a hard thing. His third, a good boy, died in a collision with a pulpwood truck up around Presque Isle -- back in 1973, that was. Somehow that one was easier to take, God knows why. Gary sometimes drools from the corners of his lips these days, and makes frequent smacking sounds as he tries to suck the drool back into his mouth before it can get away and start running down his chin. He doesn't know a whole hell of a lot lately, but he knows getting old is a lousy way to spend the last years of your life.

"Coffee?" Harley asks.

"Guess not."

Lenny Partridge, who will probably never recover from the broken ribs he suffered in a strange road-accident two autumns ago, pulls his feet back so the older man can pass by him and lower himself carefully into the chair in the corner (Gary caned the seat of this chair himself, back in '82). Paulson smacks his lips, sucks back spit, and folds his lumpy hands over the head of his cane. He looks tired and haggard.

"It is going to rain a pretty bitch," he says finally. "I'm aching that bad."

"It's a bad fall," Paul Corliss says.

There is silence. The heat from the stove fills the store that will go out of business when Harley dies or maybe even before he dies if his youngest daughter has her way, it fills the store and coats the bones of the old men, tries to, anyway, and sniffs up against the dirty glass with its ancient posters looking out at the yard where there were gas-pumps until Mobil took them out in 1977. They are old men who have, for the most part, seen their children go away to more profitable places. The store does no business to speak of now, except for a few locals and the occasional through-going summer tourists who think old men like these, old men who sit by the stove in their thermal undershirts even in July, are quaint. Old Glut has always claimed that new people are going to come to this part of the Rock, but the last couple of years things have been worse than ever -- it seems the whole goddam town is dying.

"Who is building the new wing on that Christly Newall house?" Gary asks finally.

They look around at him. For a moment the kitchen match Old Glut has just scratched hangs mystically over his pipe, burning down the wood, turning it black. The sulfur node at the end turns gray and curls up. At last, Old Glut dips the match into the bowl and puffs.

"New wing?" Harley asks.

"Yuh."

A blue membrane of smoke from Old Glut's pipe drifts up over the stove and spreads there like a delicate fisherman's net. Lenny Partridge tilts his chin up to stretch the wattles of his neck taut and then runs his hand slowly down his throat, producing a dry rasp.

"No one that /know of," Harley says, somehow indicating by his tone of voice that this includes anyone of any consequence, at least in this part of the world.

"They ain't had a buyer on that place since nineteen n eighty-one," Old Glut says.

When Old Glut says they, he means both Southern Maine Weaving and The Bank of Southern Maine, but he means more: he means The Massachusetts Wops. Southern Maine Weaving came into ownership of Joe's three mills -- and Joe's house on the ridge -- about a year after Joe took his own life, but as far as the men gathered around the stove in Brownie's are concerned, that name's just a smoke-screen... or what they sometimes call The Legal, as in She swore out a perfection order on him n now he can't even see his own kids because of The Legal. These men hate The Legal as it impinges upon their lives and the lives of their friends, but it fascinates them endlessly when they consider how some people put it to work in order to further their own nefarious money-making schemes.

Southern Maine Weaving, aka The Bank of Southern Maine, aka The Massachusetts Wops, enjoyed a long and profitable run with the mills Joe Newall saved from extinction, but it's the way they have been unable to get rid of the house that fascinates the old men who spend their days in Brownie's. "It's like a booger you can't flick off the end of your finger," Lenny Partridge said once, and they all nodded. "Not even those spaghetti-suckers from Maiden n Revere can get rid of that millstone."

Old Glut and his grandson, Andy, are currently estranged, and it is the ownership of Joe Newall's ugly house, which has caused it... although there are other, more personal issues swirling around just below the surface, no doubt -- there almost always are. The subject came up one night after grandfather and grandson -- both

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widowers now -- had enjoyed a pretty decent dinner at Young Glut's house in town. Young Andy, who had not yet lost his job on the town's police-force, tried (rather self-indulgently) to explain to his grandfather that Southern Maine weaving had had nothing to do with any of the erstwhile Newall holdings for years, that the actual owner of the house in the Bend was The Bank of Southern Maine, and that the two companies had nothing whatever to do with each other. Old John told Andy he was a fool if he believed that; everyone knew, he said, that both the bank and the textile company were fronts for The Massachusetts Wops, and that the only difference between them was a couple of words. They just hid the more obvious connections with great bunches of paperwork, Old Glut explained -- The Legal, in other words. Young Glut had the bad taste to laugh at that. Old Glut turned red, threw his napkin onto his plate, and got to his feet. Laugh, he said. You just go on. Why not? The only thing a drunk does better'n laugh at what he don't understand is cry over he don't know what. That made Andy mad, and he said something about Melissa being the reason why he drank, and John asked his grandson how long he was going to blame a dead wife for his boozing. Andy turned white when the old man said that, and told him to get out of his house, and John did, and he hasn't been back since. Nor does he want to. Harsh words aside, he can't bear to see Andy going to hell on a handcart like he is.

Speculation or not, this much cannot be denied: the house on the ridge has been empty for eleven years now, no one has ever lived there for long, and The Bank of Southern Maine is usually the organization that ends up trying to sell it through one of the local real estate firms.

"The last people to buy it come from uppa state New York, didn't they?" Paul Corliss asks, and he speaks so rarely they all turn toward him. Even Gary does.

"Yessir," Lenny says. "They was a nice couple. The man was gonna paint the barn red and turn it into some sort of antique store, wasn't he?"

"Ayuh," Old Glut says. "Then their boy got the gun they kep -- "

"People are so goddam careless -- " Harley puts in.

"Did he die?" Lenny asks. "The boy?"

Silence greets the question. It seems no one knows. Then, at last -- almost reluctantly -- Gary speaks up. "No," he said. "But it blinded him. They moved up to Auburn. Or maybe it was Leeds."

"They was likely people," Lenny said. "I really thought they might make a go of it. But they was set on that house. Believed everybody was pullin their leg about how it was bad luck, on account of they was from Away." He pauses meditatively. "Maybe they think better now... wherever they are."

There's silence as the old men think of the people from uppa state New York, or maybe of their own failing organs and sensory equipment. In the dimness behind the stove, oil gurgles. Somewhere beyond it, a shutter claps heavily back and forth in the restless autumn air.

"There's a new wing going up on it, all right," Gary says. He speaks quietly but emphatically, as if one of the others has contradicted this statement. "I saw it comin down the River Road. Most of the framing's already done. Damn thing looks like it wants to be a hundred feet long and thirty feet wide. Never noticed it before. Nice maple, looks like. where does anybody get nice maple like that in this day n age?"

No one answers. No one knows.

At last, very tentatively, Paul Corliss says, "Sure you're not thinking of another house, Gary? Could be you -- "

"Could be shit," Gary says, just as quietly but even more forcefully. "It's the Newall place, a new wing on the Newall place, already framed up, and if you still got doubts, just step outside and have a look for yourself."

With that said, there is nothing left to say -- they believe him. Neither Paul nor anyone else rushes outside to crane up at the new wing being added to the Newall house, however. They consider it a matter of some importance, and thus nothing to hurry over. More time passes -- Harley McKissick has reflected more than once that if time was pulpwood, they'd all be rich. Paul goes to the old water-cooled soft-drink chest and gets an Orange Crush. He gives Harley sixty cents and Harley rings up the purchase. When he slams the cash-drawer shut again, he realizes the atmosphere in the store has changed somehow. There are other matters to discuss. Lenny Partridge coughs, winces, presses his hands lightly against his chest where the broken ribs have never really healed, and asks Gary when they are going to have

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services for Dana Roy.

"Tomorrow," Gary says, "down Gorham. That's where his wife is laid to rest." Lucy Roy died in 1968; Dana, who was until 1979 an electrician for U.S. Gypsum over in Gates Falls (these men routinely and with no prejudice refer to the company as U.S. Gyp Em), died of intestinal cancer two days before. He lived in Castle Rock all his life, and liked to tell people that he'd only been out of Maine three times in his eighty years, once to visit an aunt in Connecticut, once to see the Boston Red Sox play at Fenway Park ("And they lost, those bums," he always added at this point), and once to attend an electricians' convention in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. "Damn waste of time," he always said of the convention. "Nothin but drinkin and wimmin, and none of the wimmin even worth lookin at, let alone that other thing." He was a crony of these men, and in his passing they feel a queer mixture of sorrow and triumph.

"They took out four feet of his underpinnin," Gary tells the other men. "Didn't do no good. It was all through him."

"He knew Joe Newall," Lenny says suddenly. "He was up there with his dad when his dad was puttin in Joe's lectricity -- couldn't have been more'n six or eight, I'd judge. I remember he said Joe give him a sucker one time, but he pitched it out'n his daddy's truck on the ride home. Said it tasted sour and funny. Then, later, after they got all the mills runnin again -- the late thirties, that would've been -- he was in charge of the rewirin. You member that, Harley?" "Yup."

Now that the subject has come back to Joe Newall by way of Dana Roy, the men sit quietly, conning their brains for anecdotes concerning either man. But when Old Clut finally speaks, he says a startling thing. "It was Dana Roy's big brother, will, who throwed that skunk at the side of the house that time. I'm almost sure 'twas." "Will?" Lenny raises his eyebrows. "Will Roy was too steady to do a thing like that, I would have said."

Gary Paulson says, very quietly: "Ayuh, it was will."

They turn to look at him.

"And 'twas the wife that give Dana a sucker that day he came with his dad," Gary says. "Cora, not Joe. And Dana wa'ant no six or eight; the skunk was throwed around the time of the Crash, and Cora was dead by then. No, Dana maybe remembered some of it, but he couldn't have been no more than two. It was around 1916 that he got that sucker, because it was in '16 that Eddie Roy wired the house. He was never up there again. Frank -- the middle boy, he's been dead ten or twelve year now -- he would have been six or eight then, maybe. Frank seen what Cora done to the little one, that much I know, but not when he told will. It don't matter. Finally will decided to do somethin about it. By then the woman was dead, so he took it out on the house Joe built for her."

"Never mind that part," Harley says, fascinated. "What'd she do to Dana? That's what / want to know."

Gary speaks calmly, almost judiciously. "What Frank told me one night when he'd had a few was that the woman give him the sucker with one hand and reached into his didies with the other. Right in front of the older boy."

"She never!" Old Glut says, shocked in spite of himself.

Gary only looks at him with his yellowed, fading eyes and says nothing.

Silence again, except for the wind and the clapping shutter. The children on the bandstand have taken their firetruck and gone somewhere else with it and still the depthless afternoon continues on and on, the light that of an Andrew Wyeth painting, white and still and full of idiot meaning. The ground has given up its meager yield and waits uselessly for snow.

Gary would like to tell them of the sickroom at Cumberland Memorial Hospital where Dana Roy lay dying with black snot caked around his nostrils and smelling like a fish left out in the sun. He would like to tell them of the cool blue tiles and of nurses with their hair drawn back in nets, young things for the most part with pretty legs and firm young breasts and no idea that 1923 was a real year, as real as the pains which haunt the bones of old men. He feels he would like to sermonize on the evil of time and perhaps even the evil of certain places, and explain why Castle Rock is now like a dark tooth which is finally ready to fall out. Most of all he would like to inform them that Dana Roy sounded as if someone had stuffed his chest full of hay and he was trying to breathe through it, and that he looked as if he had already started to rot. Yet he can say none of these things because he doesn't know how, and so he only sucks back spit and says nothing.

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"No one liked old Joe much," Old Glut says... and then his face brightens suddenly. "But by God, he grew on you!" The others do not reply.

Nineteen days later, a week before the first snow comes to cover the useless earth, Gary Paulson has a surprisingly sexual dream... except it is mostly a memory. On August 14, 1923, while driving by the Newall house in his father's farm truck, thirteen-year-old Gary Martin Paulson happened to observe Cora Leonard Newall turning away from her mailbox at the end of the driveway. She had the newspaper in one hand. She saw Gary and reached down with her free hand to grasp the hem of her housedress. She did not smile. That tremendous moon of a face was pallid and empty as she raised the dress, revealing her sex to him -- it was the first time he had ever seen that mystery so avidly discussed by the boys he knew. And, still not smiling but only looking at him gravely, she pistoned her hips at his gaping, amazed face as he passed her by. And as he passed, his hand dropped into his lap and moments later he ejaculated into his flannel pants.

It was his first orgasm. In the years since, he has made love to a good many women, beginning with Sally Ouelette underneath the Tin Bridge back in '26, and every time he has neared the moment of orgasm -- every single one -- he has seen Cora Leonard Newall: has seen her standing beside her mailbox under a hot gunmetal sky, has seen her lifting her dress to reveal an almost non-existent thatch of gingery hair beneath the creamy ground-swell of her belly, has seen the exclamatory slit with its red lips tinting toward what he knows would be the most deliriously delicate coral (Cora)

pink. Yet it is not the sight of her vulva below that somehow promiscuous swell of gut that has haunted him through all the years, so that every woman became Cora at the moment of release; or it is not just that. What always drove him mad with lust when he remembered (and when he made love he was helpless not to) was the way she had pumped her hips at him... once, twice, three times. That, and the lack of expression on her face, a neutrality so deep it seemed more like idiocy, as if she were the sum of every very young man's limited sexual understanding and desire -- a tight and yearning darkness, no more than that, a limited Eden glowing Cora-pink. His sex-life has been both delineated and delimited by that experience -- a seminal experience if ever there was one -- but he has never mentioned it, although he has been tempted more than once when in his cups. He has hoarded it. And it is of this incident that he is dreaming, penis perfectly erect for the first time in almost nine years, when a small blood vessel in his cerebellum ruptures, forming a clot which kills him quietly, considerately sparing him four weeks or four months of paralysis, the flexible tubes in the arms, the catheter, the noiseless nurses with their hair in nets and their fine high breasts. He dies in his sleep, penis wilting, the dream fading like the afterimage of a television picture tube switched off in a dark room. His cronies would be puzzled, however, if any of them were there to hear the last two words he speaks -- gasped out but still clear enough:

"The moon!"

The day after he is laid to rest in Homeland, a new cupola starts to go up on the new wing on the Newall house.