

Stephen King - Nona

Nona
by Stephen King

Do you love?

I hear her voice saying this -- sometimes I still hear it. In my dreams. Do you love?

Yes, I answer. Yes -- and true love will never die. Then I wake up screaming. I don't know how to explain it, even now. I can't tell you why I did those things. I couldn't do it at the trial, either. And there are a lot of people here who ask me about it. There's a psychiatrist who does. But I am silent. My lips are sealed. Except here in my cell. Here I am not silent. I wake up screaming.

In the dream I see her walking toward me. She is wearing a white gown, almost transparent, and her expression is one of mingled desire and triumph. She comes to me across a dark room with a stone floor and I smell dry October roses. Her arms are held open and I go to her with mine out to enfold her.

I feel dread, revulsion, unutterable longing. Dread and revulsion because I know what this place is, longing because I love her. I will always love her. There are times when I wish there were still a death penalty in this state. A short walk down a dim corridor, a straight-backed chair fitted with a steel skullcap, clamps... then one quick jolt and I would be with her.

As we come together in the dream my fear grows, but it is impossible for me to draw back from her. My hands press against the smooth plane of her back, her skin near under silk. She smiles with those deep, black eyes. Her head tilts up to mine and her lips part, ready to be kissed.

That's when she changes, shrivels. Her hair grows coarse and matted, melting from black to an ugly brown that spills down over the creamy whiteness of her cheeks. The eyes shrink and go beady. The whites disappear and she is glaring at me with tiny eyes like two polished pieces of jet. The mouth becomes a maw through which crooked yellow teeth protrude.

I try to scream. I try to wake up.

I can't. I'm caught again. I'll always be caught.

I am in the grip of a huge, noisome graveyard rat. Lights sway in front of my eyes. October roses. Somewhere a dead bell is chanting.

"Do you love?" this thing whispers. "Do you love?" The smell of roses is its breath as it swoops toward me, dead flowers in a charnel house.

"Yes," I tell the rat-thing. "Yes -- and true love will never die." Then I do scream, and I am awake.

They think what we did together drove me crazy. But my mind is still working in some way or other, and I've never stopped looking for the answers. I still want to know how it was, and what it was.

They've let me have paper and a pen with a felt tip. I'm going to write everything down. Maybe I'll answer some of their questions and maybe while I'm doing that I can answer some of my own. And when I'm done, there's something else. Something they don't know I have. Something I took. It's here under my mattress. A knife from the prison dining hall.

I'll have to start by telling you about Augusta.

As I write this it is night, a fine August night poked through with blazing stars. I can see them through the mesh of my window, which overlooks the exercise yard and a slice of sky I can block out with two fingers. It's hot, and I'm naked except for my shorts. I can hear the soft summer sound of frogs and crickets. But I can bring back winter just by closing my eyes. The bitter cold of that night, the bleakness, the hard, unfriendly lights of a city that was not my city. It was the fourteenth of February.

See, I remember everything.

And look at my arms -- covered with sweat, they've pulled into goseflesh.

Augusta...

When I got to Augusta I was more dead than alive, it was that cold. I had picked a fine day to say good-bye to the college scene and hitchhike west; it looked like I might freeze to death before I got out of the state.

A cop had kicked me off the interstate ramp and threatened to bust me if he caught me thumbing there again. I was almost tempted to wise mouth him and let him do it. The flat, four-lane stretch of highway had been like an airport landing strip, the wind whooping and pushing membranes of powdery snow skirling along the concrete. And

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to the anonymous Them behind their Saf-T-Glas windshields, everyone standing in the breakdown lane on a dark night is either a rapist or a murderer, and if he's got long hair you can throw in child molester and faggot on top.

I tried it awhile on the access road, but it was no good. And along about a quarter of eight I realized that if I didn't get someplace warm quick, I was going to pass out.

I walked a mile and a half before I found a combination diner and diesel stop on 202 just inside the city limits. JOE'S GOOD EATS, the neon said. There were three big rigs parked in the crushed-stone parking lot, and one new sedan. There was a wilted Christmas wreath on the door that nobody had bothered to take down, and next to it a thermometer showing just five degrees of mercury above big zero. I had nothing to cover my ears but my hair, and my rawhide gloves were falling apart. The tips of my fingers felt like pieces of furniture.

I opened the door and went in.

The heat was the first thing that struck me, warm and good. Next a hillbilly song on the juke, the unmistakable voice of Merle Haggard: "We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy, like the hippies out in San Francisco do."

The third thing that struck me was The Eye. You know about The Eye once you let your hair get down below the lobes of your ears. Right then people know you don't belong to the Lions, Elks, or the VFW. You know about The Eye, but you never get used to it.

Right now the people giving me The Eye were four truckers in one booth, two more at the counter, a pair of old ladies wearing cheap fur coats and blue rinses, the short-order cook, and a gawky kid with soapsuds on his hands. There was a girl sitting at the far end of the counter, but all she was looking at was the bottom of her coffee cup.

She was the fourth thing that struck me.

I'm old enough to know there's no such thing as love at first sight. It's just something Rodgers and Hammerstein thought up one day to rhyme with moon and June.

It's for kids holding hands at the Prom, right?

But looking at her made me feel something. You can laugh, but you wouldn't have if you'd seen her. She was almost unbearably beautiful. I knew without a doubt that everybody else in Joe's knew that the same as me. Just like I knew she had been getting The Eye before I came in. She had coal-colored hair, so black that it seemed nearly blue under the fluorescents. It fell freely over the shoulders of her scuffed tan coat. Her skin was cream-white, with just the faintest blooded touch lingering beneath the skin -- the cold she had brought in with her. Dark, sooty lashes. Solemn eyes that slanted up the tiniest bit at the corners. A full and mobile mouth below a straight, patrician nose. I couldn't tell what her body looked like. I didn't care. You wouldn't, either. All she needed was that face, that hair, that look. She was exquisite. That's the only word we have for her in English.

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I sat two stools down from her, and the short-order cook came over and looked at me.

"What?"

"Black coffee, please."

He went to get it. From behind me someone said: "Well I guess Christ came back, just like my mamma always said He would."

The gawky dishwasher laughed, a quick yuk-yuk sound. The truckers at the counter joined in.

The short-order cook brought me my coffee back, jarred it down on the counter and spilled some on the thawing meat of my hand. I jerked it back.

"Sorry," he said indifferently.

"He's gonna heal it hisself," one of the truckers in the booth called over.

The blue-rinse twins paid their checks and hurried out. One of the knights of the road sauntered over to the juke and put another dime in. Johnny Cash began to sing "A Boy Named Sue." I blew on my coffee.

Someone tugged at my sleeve. I turned my head and there she was -- she'd moved over to the empty stool. Looking at that face close up was almost blinding. I spilled some more of my coffee.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was low, almost atonal.

"My fault. I can't feel what I'm doing yet."

"I -- "

She stopped, seemingly at a loss. I suddenly realized that she was scared. I felt my

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first reaction to her swim over me again -- to protect her and take care of her, make her not afraid. "I need a ride," she finished in a rush. "I didn't dare ask any of them." She made a barely perceptible gesture toward the truckers in the booth. How can I make you understand that I would have given anything -- anything -- to be able to tell her, sure, finish your coffee, I'm parked right outside. It sounds crazy to say I felt that way after half a dozen words out of her mouth, and the same number out of mine, but I did. Looking at her was like looking at the Mona Lisa or the Venus de Milo come to breathing life. And there was another feeling. It was as if a sudden, powerful light had been turned on in the confused darkness of my mind. It would make it easier if I could say she was a pickup and I was a fast man with the ladies, quick with a funny line and lots of patter, but she wasn't and I wasn't. All I knew was I didn't have what she needed and it tore me up.

"I'm thumbing," I told her. "A cop kicked me off the interstate and I only came here to get out of the cold. I'm sorry."

"Are you from the university?"

"I was. I quit before they could fire me."

"Are you going home?"

"No home to go to. I was a state ward. I got to school on a scholarship. I blew it. Now I don't know where I'm going." My life story in five sentences. I guess it made me feel depressed.

She laughed -- the sound made me run hot and cold. "We're cats out of the same bag, I guess."

I thought she said cats. I thought so. Then. But I've had time to think, in here, and more and more it seems to me that she might have said rats. Rats out of the same bag. Yes. And they are not the same, are they?

I was about to make my best conversational shot -- something witty like "Is that so?" -- when a hand came down on my shoulder.

I turned around. It was one of the truckers from the booth. He had blond stubble on his chin and there was a wooden kitchen match poking out of his mouth. He smelled of engine oil and looked like something out of a Steve Ditko drawing.

"I think you're done with that coffee," he said. His lips parted around the match in a grin. He had a lot of very white teeth.

"What?"

"You stinking the place up, fella. You are a fella, aren't you? Kind of hard to tell."

"You aren't any rose yourself," I said. "What's that after-shave, handsome? Eau de Crankcase?"

He gave me a hard shot across the side of the face with his open hand. I saw little black dots.

"Don't fight in here," the short-order cook said. "If you're going to scramble him, do it outside."

"Come on, you goddammed commie," the trucker said.

This is the spot where the girl is supposed to say something like "Unhand him" or "You brute." She wasn't saying anything. She was watching both of us with feverish intensity. It was scary. I think it was the first time I'd noticed how huge her eyes really were.

"Do I have to sock you again?"

"No. Come on, shitheels."

I don't know how that jumped out of me. I don't like to fight. I'm not a good fighter. I'm an even worse name-caller. But I was angry, just then. It came up on me all at once that I wanted to kill him.

Maybe he got a mental whiff of it. For just a second a shade of uncertainty flicked over his face, an unconscious wondering if maybe he hadn't picked the wrong hippie. Then it was gone. He wasn't going to back off from some long-haired elitist effeminate snob who used the flag to wipe his ass with -- at least not in front of his buddies. Not a big ole truck-driving son-of-a-gun like him.

The anger pounded over me again. Faggot? Faggot? I felt out of control, and it was good to feel that way. My tongue was thick in my mouth. My stomach was a slab.

We walked across to the door, and my buddy's buddies almost broke their backs getting up to watch the fun.

Nona? I thought of her, but only in an absent, back-of-my-mind way. I knew Nona would be there. Nona would take care of me. I knew it the same way I knew it would be cold outside. It was strange to know that about a girl I had only met five

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minutes before. Strange, but I didn't think about that until later. My mind was taken up -- no, almost blotted out -- by the heavy cloud of rage. I felt homicidal. The cold was so clear and so clean that it felt as if we were cutting it with our bodies like knives. The frosted gravel of the parking lot gritted harshly under his heavy boots and under my shoes. The moon, full and bloated, looked down on us with a vapid eye. It was faintly ringed, suggesting bad weather on the way. The sky was as black as a night in hell. We left tiny dwarfed shadows behind our feet in the monochrome glare of a single sodium light set high on a pole beyond the parked rigs. Our breath plumed the air in short bursts. The trucker turned to me, his gloved fists balled.

"Okay, you son-of-a-bitch," he said.

I seemed to be swelling -- my whole body seemed to be swelling. Somehow, numbly, I knew that my intellect was about to be eclipsed by an invisible something that I had never suspected might be in me. It was terrifying -- but at the same time I welcomed it, desired it, lusted for it. In that last instant of coherent thought it seemed that my body had become a stone pyramid or a cyclone that could sweep everything in front of it like colored pick-up sticks. The trucker seemed small, puny, insignificant. I laughed at him. I laughed, and the sound was as black and as bleak as that moonstruck sky overhead.

He came at me swinging his fists. I batted down his right, took his left on the side of my face without feeling it, and then kicked him in the guts. The air barfed out of him in a white cloud. He tried to back away, holding himself and coughing.

I ran around in back of him, still laughing like some farmer's dog barking at the moon, and I had pounded him three times before he could make even a quarter turn -- the neck, the shoulder, one red ear.

He made a yowling noise, and one of his flailing hands brushed my nose. The fury that had taken me over mushroomed and I kicked him again, bringing my foot up high and hard, like a punter. He screamed into the night and I heard a rib snap. He folded up and I jumped him.

At the trial one of the other truck drivers testified I was like a wild animal. And I was. I can't remember much of it, but I can remember that, snarling and growling at him like a wild dog.

I straddled him, grabbed double handfuls of his greasy hair, and began to rub his face into the gravel. In the flat glare of the sodium light his blood seemed black, like beetle's blood.

"Jesus, stop it!" somebody yelled.

Hands grabbed my shoulders and pulled me off. I saw whirling faces and I struck at them.

The trucker was trying to creep away. His face was a staring mask of blood from which his dazed eyes peered. I began to kick him, dodging away from the others, grunting with satisfaction each time I connected on him.

He was beyond fighting back. All he knew was to try to get away. Each time I kicked him his eyes would squeeze closed, like the eyes of a tortoise, and he would halt. Then he would start to crawl again. He looked stupid. I decided I was going to kill him. I was going to kick him to death. Then I would kill the rest of them -- all but Nona.

I kicked him again and he flopped over on his back and looked up at me dazedly.

"Uncle," he croaked. "I cry Uncle. Please. Please -- "

I knelt down beside him, feeling the gravel bite into my knees through my thin jeans.

"Here you are, handsome," I whispered. "Here's your uncle."

I hooked my hands onto his throat.

Three of them jumped me all at once and knocked me off him. I got up, still grinning, and started toward them. They backed away, three big men, all of them scared green.

And it clicked off.

Just like that it clicked off and it was just me, standing in the parking lot of Joe's Good Eats, breathing hard and feeling sick and horrified.

I turned and looked back toward the diner. The girl was there; her beautiful features were lit with triumph. She raised one fist to shoulder height in salute like the one those black guys gave at the Olympics that time.

I turned back to the man on the ground. He was still trying to crawl away, and when I approached him his eyeballs rolled fearfully.

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"Don't you touch him!" one of his friends cried.

I looked at them, confused. "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to... to hurt him so bad. Let me help - "

"You get out of here, that's what you do," the short-order cook said. He was standing in front of Nona at the foot of the steps, clutching a greasy spatula in one hand. "I'm calling the cops."

"Hey, man, he was the guy who started it! He -- "

"Don't give me any of your lip, you lousy queer," he said, backing up. "All I know is you just about killed that guy. I'm calling the cops!" He dashed back inside.

"Okay," I said to nobody in particular. "Okay, that's good, okay."

I had left my rawhide gloves inside, but it didn't seem like a good idea to go back in and get them. I put my hands in my pockets and started to walk back to the interstate access road. I figured my chances of hitching a ride before the cops picked me up were about one in ten. My ears were freezing and I felt sick to my stomach- Some purty night.

"wait! Hey, wait!"

I turned around. It was her, running to catch up with me, her hair flying out behind her.

"You were wonderful!" she said. "wonderful!"

"I hurt him bad," I said dully. "I never did anything like that before."

"I wish you'd killed him!"

I blinked at her in the frosty light.

"You should have heard the things they were saying about me before you came in.

Laughing in that big, brave, dirty way -- haw, haw, lookit the little girl out so long after dark. Where you going, honey? Need a lift? I'll give you a ride if you'll give me a ride. Damn!"

She glared back over her shoulder as if she could strike them dead with a sudden bolt from her dark eyes. Then she turned them on me, and again it seemed like that searchlight had been turned on in my mind. "My name's Nona. I'm coming with you."

"Where? To jail?" I tugged at my hair with both hands. "with this, the first guy who gives us a ride is apt to be a state cop. That cook meant what he said about calling them."

"I'll hitch. You stand behind me. They'll stop for me. They stop for a girl, if she's pretty."

I couldn't argue with her about that and didn't want to. Love at first sight? Maybe not. But it was something. Can you get that wave?

"Here," she said, "you forgot these." She held out my gloves.

She hadn't gone back inside, and that meant she'd had them all along. She'd known she was coming with me. It gave me an eerie feeling. I put on my gloves and we walked up the access road to the turnpike ramp.

She was right about the ride. We got one with the first car that swung onto the ramp.

We didn't say anything else while we waited, but it seemed as if we did. I won't give you a load of bull about ESP and that stuff; you know what I'm talking about. You've felt it yourself if you've ever been with someone you were really close to, or if you've taken one of those drugs with initials for a name. You don't have to talk. Communication seems to shift over to some high-frequency emotional band. A twist of the hand does it all. We were strangers. I only knew her first name and now that I think back I don't believe I ever told her mine at all. But we were doing it. It wasn't love. I hate to keep repeating that, but I feel I have to. I wouldn't dirty that word with whatever we had -- not after what we did, not after Castle Rock, not after the dreams.

A high, wailing shriek filled the cold silence of the night, rising and falling.

"That's an ambulance I think," I said.

"Yes."

Silence again. The moon's light was fading behind a thickening membrane of cloud. I thought the ring around the moon hadn't lied; we would have snow before the night was over.

Lights poked over the hill.

I stood behind her without having to be told she brushed her hair back and raised that beautiful face. As I watched the car signal for the entrance ramp I was swept with a feeling of unreality -- it was unreal that this beautiful girl had elected to come with me, it was unreal that I had beaten a man to the point where an ambulance

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had to be called for him, it was unreal to think I might be in jail by morning. Unreal. I felt caught in a spiderweb. But who was the spider?

Nona put out her thumb. The car, a Chevrolet sedan, went by us and I thought it was going to keep right on going. Then the taillights flashed and Nona grabbed my hand. "Come on, we got a ride!" She grinned at me with childish delight and I grinned back at her.

The guy was reaching enthusiastically across the seat to open the door for her. When the dome light flashed on I could see him -- a fairly big man in an expensive camel's hair coat, graying around the edges of his hat, prosperous features softened by years of good meals. A businessman or a salesman. Alone. When he saw me he did a double take, but it was a second or two too late to put the car back in gear and haul ass. And it was easier for him this way. Later he could fib himself into believing he had seen both of us, that he was a truly good-hearted soul giving a young couple a break.

"Cold night," he said as Nona slid in beside him and I got in beside her.

"It certainly is," Nona said sweetly. "Thank you!"

"Yeah," I said. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." And we were off, leaving sirens, busted-up truckers, and Joe's Good Eats behind us.

I had gotten kicked off the interstate at seven-thirty. It was only eight-thirty then. It's amazing how much you can do in a short time, or how much can be done to you.

We were approaching the yellow flashing lights that signal the Augusta toll station.

"How far are you going?" the driver asked.

That was a stumper. I had been hoping to make it as far as Kittery and crash with an acquaintance who was teaching school there. It still seemed as good an answer as any and I was opening my mouth to give it when Nona said:

"We're going to Castle Rock. It's a small town just south and west of Lewiston-Auburn."

Castle Rock. That made me feel strange. Once upon a time

I had been on pretty good terms with Castle Rock. But that was before Ace Merrill messed me up.

The guy brought his car to a stop, took a toll ticket, and then we were on our way again.

"I'm only going as far as Gardiner, myself," he said, lying smoothly. "One exit up. But that's a start for you."

"It sure is," Nona said, just as sweetly as before. "It was nice of you to stop on such a cold night." And while she was saying it I was getting her anger on that high emotional wavelength, naked and full of venom. It scared me, the way ticking from a wrapped package might scare me.

"My name's Blanchette," he said. "Norman Blanchette." He waved his hand in our direction to be shaken.

"Cheryl Craig," Nona said, taking it daintily.

I took her cue and gave him a false name. "Pleasure," I mumbled.

His hand was soft and flabby. It felt like a hot-water bottle in the shape of a hand. The thought sickened me. It sickened me that we had been forced to beg a ride with this patronizing man who thought he had seen a chance to pick up a pretty girl hitching all by herself, a girl who might or might not agree to an hour spent in a motel room in return for enough cash to buy a bus ticket. It sickened me to know that if I had been alone this man who had just offered me his flabby, hot hand would have zipped by without a second look. It sickened me to know he would drop us at the Gardiner exit, cross over, and then dart right back on the interstate, bypassing us on the southbound ramp without a look, congratulating himself on how smoothly he had solved an annoying situation. Everything about him sickened me. The porky droop of his jowls, the slicked-back wigs of his hair, the smell of his cologne.

And what right did he have? What right?

The sickness curdled, and the flowers of rage began to bloom again. The headlights of his prosperous Impala sedan cut the night with smooth ease, and my rage wanted to reach out and strangle everything that he was set in among -- the kind of music I knew he would listen to as he lay back in his La-Z-Boy recliner with the evening paper in his hot-water-bottle hands, the rinse his wife would use in her hair, the Underalls I knew she would wear, the kids always sent off to the movies or off to school or off to camp -- as long as they were off somewhere -- his snobbish friends

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and the drunken parties they would attend with them. But his cologne -- that was the worst. It filled the car with sweet, sickish scent. It smelled like the perfumed disinfectant they use in a slaughterhouse at the end of each shift.

The car ripped through the night with Norman Blanchette holding the wheel with his bloated hands. His manicured nails gleamed softly in the lights from the instrument panel. I wanted to crack a wing window and get away from that cloying smell. No, more -- I wanted to crank the whole window down and stick my head out into the cold air, wallow in chilled freshness -- but I was frozen, frozen in the dumb maw of my wordless, inexpressible hate.

That was when Nona put the nail file into my hand.

When I was three I got a bad case of the flu and had to go to the hospital. While I was there, my dad fell asleep smoking in bed and the house burned down with my folks and my older brother Drake in it. I have their pictures. They look like actors in an old 1958 American International horror movie, faces you don't know like those of the big stars, more like Elisha Cook, Jr., and Mara Corday and some child actor you can't quite remember -- Brandon de Wilde, maybe.

I had no relatives to go to and so I was sent to a home in Portland for five years. Then I became a state ward. That means a family takes you in and the state pays them thirty dollars a month for your keep. I don't think there was ever a state ward who acquired a taste for lobster. Usually a couple will take two or three wards -- not because the milk of human kindness flows in their veins but as a business investment. They feed you. They take the thirty the state gives them and they feed you. If a kid is fed up he can earn his keep doing chores around the place. That thirty turns into forty, fifty, maybe sixty-five bucks. Capitalism as it applies to the unhomed. Greatest country in the world, right?

My "folks" were named Hollis and they lived in Harlow, across the river from Castle Rock. They had a three-story farmhouse with fourteen rooms. There was coal heat in the kitchen that got upstairs any way it could. In January you went to bed with three quilts over you and still weren't sure if your feet were on when you woke in the morning. You had to put them on the floor where you could look at them to be sure. Mrs. Hollis was fat. Mr. Hollis was skimpy and rarely spoke. He wore a red-and-black hunting cap all year round. The house was a helter-skelter mess of white-elephant furniture, rummage-sale stuff, moldy mattresses, dogs, cats, and automotive parts laid on newspaper. I had three "brothers," all of them wards. We had a nodding acquaintance, like co-travelers on a three-day bus trip.

I made good grades in school and went out for spring baseball when I was a high-school freshman. Hollis was yapping after me to quit, but I stuck with it until the thing with Ace Merrill happened. Then I didn't want to go anymore, not with my face all puffed out and cut, not with the stories Betsy Malenfant was telling around. So I quit the team, and Hollis got me a job jerking sodas in the local drugstore.

In February of my junior year I took the College Boards, paying for them with the twelve bucks I had socked away in my mattress. I got accepted at the university with a small scholarship and a good work-study job in the library. The expression on the Hollises' faces when I showed them the financial-aid papers is the best memory of my life.

One of my "brothers," Curt, ran away. I couldn't have done that. I was too passive to take a step like that. I would have been back after two hours on the road. School was the only way out for me, and I took it.

The last thing Mrs. Hollis said when I left was, "You send us something when you can." I never saw either of them again. I made good grades my freshman year and got a job that summer working full-time in the library. I sent them a Christmas card that first year, but that was the only one.

In the first semester of my sophomore year I fell in love. It was the biggest thing that had ever happened to me. Pretty? She would have knocked you back two steps. To this day I have no idea what she saw in me. I don't even know if she loved me or not. I think she did at first. After that I was just a habit that's hard to break, like smoking or driving with your elbow poked out the window. She held me for a while, maybe not wanting to break the habit. Maybe she held me for wonder, or maybe it was just her vanity. Good boy, roll over, sit up, fetch the paper. Here's a kiss good night. It doesn't matter. For a while it was love, then it was like love, then it was over.

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I slept with her twice, both times after other things had taken over for love. That fed the habit for a little while. Then she came back from the Thanksgiving break and said she was in love with a Delta Tau Delta who came from her hometown. I tried to get her back and almost made it once, but she had something she hadn't had before -- perspective.

Whatever I had been building up all those years since the fire wiped out the B-movie actors who had once been my family, that broke it down. That guy's pin on her blouse.

After that, I was on-again-off-again with three or four girls who were willing to sleep with me. I could blame it on my childhood, say I never had good sexual models, but that wasn't it. I'd never had any trouble with the girl. Only now that the girl was gone.

I started being afraid of girls, a little. And it wasn't so much the ones I was impotent with as the ones I wasn't, the ones I could make it with. They made me uneasy. I kept asking myself where they were hiding whatever axes they liked to grind and when they were going to let me have it. I'm not so strange at that. You show me a married man or a man with a steady woman, and I'll show you someone who is asking himself (maybe only in the early hours of the morning or on Friday afternoon when she's off buying groceries), what is she doing when I'm not around? what does she really think of me? And maybe most of all, How much of me has she got? How much is left? Once I started thinking about those things, I thought about them all the time.

I started to drink and my grades took a nose dive. During semester break I got a letter saying that if they didn't improve in six weeks, my second-semester scholarship check would be withheld. I and some guys I hung around with got drunk and stayed drunk for the whole holiday. On the last day we went to a whorehouse and I operated just fine. It was too dark to see faces.

My grades stayed about the same. I called the girl once and cried over the telephone. She cried too, and in a way I think that pleased her. I didn't hate her then and I don't now. But she scared me. She scared me plenty.

On February 9 I got a letter from the dean of Arts and Sciences saying I was flunking two or three courses in my major field. On February 13 I got a hesitant sort of letter from the girl. She wanted everything to be all right between us. She was planning to marry the guy from Delta Tau Delta in July or August, and I could be invited if I wanted to be. That was almost funny. What could I give her for a wedding gift? My heart with a red ribbon tied around it? My head? My cock?

On the fourteenth, Valentine's Day, I decided it was time for a change of scene. Nona came next, but you know about that.

You have to understand how she was to me if this is to do any good at all. She was more beautiful than the girl, but that wasn't it. Good looks are cheap in a wealthy country. It was the her inside. She was sexy, but the sexiness that came from her was somehow plantlike -- blind sex, a kind of clinging, not-to-be-denied sex that is not so important because it is as instinctual as photosynthesis. Not like an animal but like a plant. You get that wave? I knew we would make love, that we would make it as men and women do, but that our joining would be as blunt and remote and meaningless as ivy clinging its way up a trellis in the August sun.

The sex was important only because it was unimportant.

I think -- no, I'm sure -- that violence was the real motive force. The violence was real and not just a dream. It was as big and as fast and as hard as Ace Merrill's '52 Ford. The violence of Joe's Good Eats, the violence of Norman Blanchette. And there was even something blind and vegetative about that. Maybe she was only a clinging vine after all, because the Venus flytrap is a species of vine, but that plant is carnivorous and will make animal motion when a fly or a bit of raw meat is placed in its jaws. And it was all real. The sporulating vine may only dream that it fornicates, but I am sure the Venus flytrap tastes that fly, relishes its diminishing struggle as its jaws close around it.

The last part was my own passivity. I could not fill up the hole in my life. Not the hole left by the girl when she said good-bye -- I don't want to lay this at her door -- but the hole that had always been there, the dark, confused swirling that never stopped down in the middle of me. Nona filled that hole. She made me move and act. She made me noble.

Now maybe you understand a little of it. Why I dream of her. Why the fascination remains in spite of the remorse and the revulsion. Why I hate her. Why I fear her.

Stephen King - Nona

And why even now I still love her.

It was eight miles from the Augusta ramp to Gardiner and we did it in a few short minutes. I grasped the nail file woodenly at my side and watched the green reflectorized sign -- KEEP RIGHT FOR EXIT I4 -- twinkle up out of the night. The moon was gone and it had begun to spit snow.

"Wish I were going farther," Blanchette said.

"That's all right," Nona said warmly, and I could feel her fury buzzing and burrowing into the meat under my skull like a drill bit. "Just drop us at the top of the ramp."

He drove up, observing the ramp speed of thirty miles an hour. I knew what I was going to do. It felt as if my legs had turned to warm lead.

The top of the ramp was lit by one overhead light. To the left I could see the lights of Gardiner against the thickening cloud cover. To the right, nothing but blackness. There was no traffic coming either way along the access road.

I got out. Nona slid across the seat, giving Norman Blanchette a final smile. I wasn't worried. She was quarterbacking the play.

Blanchette was smiling an infuriating porky smile, relieved at being rid of us.

"Well, good ni -- "

"Oh my purse! Don't drive off with my purse!"

"I'll get it," I told her. I leaned back into the car. Blanchette saw what I had in my hand, and the porky smile on his face froze solid.

Now lights showed on the hill, but it was too late to stop. Nothing could have stopped me. I picked up Nona's purse with my left hand. With my right I plunged the steel nailfile into Blanchette's throat. He bleated once.

I got out of the car. Nona was waving the oncoming vehicle down. I couldn't see what it was in the dark and snow; all I could make out were the two bright circles of its headlamps. I crouched behind Blanchette's car, peeking through the back windows.

The voices were almost lost in the filling throat of the wind.

"...trouble, lady?"

"...father... wind... had a heart attack! Will you..."

I scurried around the trunk of Norman Blanchette's Impala, bent over. I could see them now. Nona's slender silhouette and a taller form. They appeared to be standing by a pickup truck. They turned and approached the driver's-side window of the Chevy, where Norman Blanchette was slumped over the wheel with Nona's file in his throat. The driver of the pickup was a young kid in what looked like an Air Force parka. He leaned inside. I came up behind him.

"Jesus, lady!" he said. "There's blood on this guy! what -- "

I hooked my right elbow around his throat and grabbed my right wrist with my left hand. I pulled him up hard. His head connected with the top of the door and made a hollow thock! He went limp in my arms.

I could have stopped then. He hadn't gotten a good look at Nona, hadn't seen me at all. I could have stopped. But he was a busybody, a meddler, somebody else in our way, trying to hurt us. I was tired of being hurt. I strangled him.

When it was done I looked up and saw Nona spotlighted in the conflicting lights of the car and the truck, her face a grotesque rictus of hate, love, triumph, and joy. She held her arms out to me and I went into them. We kissed. Her mouth was cold but her tongue was warm. I plunged both hands into the secret hollows of her hair, and the wind screamed around us.

"Now fix it," she said. "Before someone else comes."

I fixed it. It was a slipshod job, but I knew that was all we needed. A little more time. After that it wouldn't matter. We would be safe.

The kid's body was light. I picked him up in both arms, carried him across the road, and threw him into the gully beyond the guardrails. His body tumbled loosely all the way to the bottom, head over heels, like the ragbag man Mr. Hollis had me put out in the cornfield every July. I went back to get Blanchette.

He was heavier, and bleeding like a stuck pig. I tried to pick him up, staggered three steps backward, and then he slipped out of my arms and fell onto the road. I turned him over. The new snow had stuck to his face, turning it into a skier's mask. I bent over, grabbed him under the arms, and dragged him to the gully. His feet left trailing grooves behind him. I threw him over and watched him slide down the embankment on his back, his arms up over his head. His eyes were wide open, staring raptly at the snowflakes falling into them. If the snow kept coming, they would both be just two vague humps by the time the plows came by.

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I went back across the road. Nona had already climbed into the pickup truck without having to be told which vehicle we would use. I could see the pallid smear of her face, the dark holes of her eyes, but that was all. I got into Blanchette's car, sitting in the streaks of his blood that had gathered on the nubby vinyl seat cover, and drove it onto the shoulder. I turned off the headlights, put on the four-way flashers, and got out. To anyone passing by, it would look like a motorist who had engine trouble and then walked into town to find a garage. I was very pleased with my improvisation. It was as if I had been murdering people all my life. I trotted back to the idling truck, got in behind the wheel, and pointed it toward the turnpike entrance ramp.

She sat next to me, not touching but close. When she moved I could sometimes feel a strand of her hair on my neck. It was like being touched with a tiny electrode. Once I had to put my hand out and feel her leg, to make sure she was real. She laughed quietly. It was all real. The wind howled around the windows, driving snow in great, flapping gusts.

We ran south.

Just across the bridge from Harlow as you go up I26 toward Castle Heights, you come up on a huge renovated farm that goes under the laughable title of the Castle Rock Youth League. They have twelve lanes of candlepin bowling with cranky automatic pinsetters that usually take the last three days of the week off, a few ancient pinball machines, a juke featuring the greatest hits of 1957, three Brunswick pool tables, and a Coke-and-chips counter where you also rent bowling shoes that look like they might have just come off the feet of dead winos. The name of the place is laughable because most of the Castle Rock youth head up to the drive-in at Jay Hill at night or go to the stock-car races at Oxford Plains. The people who do hang out there are mostly toughies from Gretna, Harlow, and the Rock itself. The average is one fight per evening in the parking lot.

I started hanging out there when I was a high-school sophomore. One of my acquaintances, Bill Kennedy, was working there three nights a week and if there was nobody waiting for a table he'd let me shoot some pool for free. It wasn't much, but it was better than going back to the Hollises' house.

That's where I met Ace Merrill. Nobody much doubted that he was the toughest guy in three towns. He drove a chopped and channeled '52 Ford, and it was rumored that he could push it all the way to I30 if he had to. He'd come in like a king, his hair greased back and glistening in a perfect duck's-ass pompadour, shoot a few games of double-bank for a dime a ball (Was he good? You guess.), buy Betsy a Coke when she came in, and then they'd leave. You could almost hear a reluctant sigh of relief from those present when the scarred front door wheezed shut. Nobody ever went out in the parking lot with Ace Merrill.

Nobody, that is, but me.

Betsy Malenfant was his girl, the prettiest girl in Castle Rock, I guess. I don't think she was terrifically bright, but that didn't matter when you got a look at her. She had the most flawless complexion I had ever seen, and it didn't come out of a cosmetic bottle, either. Hair as black as coal, dark eyes, generous mouth, a body that just wouldn't quit -- and she didn't mind showing it off. Who was going to drag her out back and try to stoke her locomotive while Ace was around? Nobody sane, that's who.

I fell hard for her. Not like the girl and not like Nona, even though Betsy did look like a younger version of her, but it was just as desperate and just as serious in its way. If you've ever had the worst case of puppy love going around, you know how I felt. She was seventeen, two years older than I.

I started going down there more and more often, even nights when Billy wasn't on, just to catch a glimpse of her. I felt like a birdwatcher, except it was a desperate kind of game for me. I'd go back home, lie to the Hollises about where I'd been, and climb up to my room. I'd write long, passionate letters to her, telling her everything I'd like to do to her, and then tear them up. Study halls at school I'd dream about asking her to marry me so we could run away to Mexico together. She must have tumbled to what was happening, and it must have flattered her a little, because she was nice to me when Ace wasn't around. She'd come over and talk to me, let me buy her a Coke, sit on a stool, and kind of rub her leg against mine. It drove me crazy.

One night in early November I was just mooning around, shooting a little pool with Bill, waiting for her to come in. The place was deserted because it wasn't even

eight o'clock yet, and a lonesome wind was snuffling around outside, threatening winter.

"You better lay off," Bill said, shooting the nine straight into the corner.

"Lay off what?"

"You know."

"No I don't." I scratched and Billy added a ball to the table. He ran six and while he was running them I went over to put a dime in the juke.

"Betsy Malenfant." He lined up the one carefully and sent it walking up the rail.

"Charlie Hogan was telling Ace about the way you been sniffing around her. Charlie thought it was really funny, her being older and all, but Ace wasn't laughing."

"She's nothing to me," I said through paper lips.

"She better not be," Bill said, and then a couple of guys came in and he went over to the counter and gave them a cue ball.

Ace came in around nine and he was alone. He'd never taken any notice of me before, and I'd just about forgotten what Billy said. When you're invisible you get to thinking you're invulnerable. I was playing pinball and I was pretty involved. I didn't even notice the place get quiet as people stopped bowling or shooting pool. The next thing I knew, somebody had thrown me right across the pinball machine. I landed on the floor in a heap. I got up feeling scared and sick. He had tilted the machine, wiping out my three replays. He was standing there and looking at me with not a strand of hair out of place, his garrison jacket half unzipped.

"You stop messing around," he said softly, "or I'm going to change your face."

He went out. Everybody was looking at me and I wanted to sink right down through the floor until I saw there was a kind of grudging admiration on most of their faces. So I brushed myself off, unconcerned, and put another dime in the pinball machine. The TILT light went out. A couple of guys came over and clapped me on the back before they went out, not saying anything.

At eleven, when the place closed, Billy offered me a ride home.

"You're going to take a fall if you don't watch out."

"Don't worry about me," I said.

He didn't answer.

Two or three nights later Betsy came in by herself around seven. There was one other kid there, this weird little four-eyes named Vern Tessio, who flunked out of school a couple of years before. I hardly noticed him. He was even more invisible than I was.

She came right over to where I was shooting, close enough so I could smell the clean-soap smell on her skin. It made me feel dizzy.

"I heard about what Ace did to you," she said. "I'm not supposed to talk to you anymore and I'm not going to, but I've got something to make it all better." She kissed me. Then she went out, before I could even get my tongue down from the roof of my mouth. I went back to my game in a daze. I didn't even see Tessio when he went out to spread the word. I couldn't see anything but her dark, dark eyes.

So later that night I ended up in the parking lot with Ace Merrill, and he beat the living Jesus out of me. It was cold, bitterly cold, and at the end I began to sob, not caring who was watching or listening, which by then was everybody. The single sodium arc lamp looked down on all of it mercilessly. I didn't even land a punch on him.

"Okay," he said, squatting down next to me. He wasn't even breathing hard. He took a switchblade out of his pocket and pressed the chrome button. Seven inches of moon-drenched silver sprang into the world. "This is what you get next time. I'll carve my name on your balls." Then he got up, gave me one last kick, and left. I just lay there for maybe ten minutes, shivering on the hard-packed dirt. No one came to help me up or pat me on the back, not even Bill. Betsy didn't show up to make it all better.

Finally I got up by myself and hitchhiked home. I told Mrs. Hollis I'd hitched a ride with a drunk and he drove off the road. I never went back to the bowling alley again.

I understand that Ace dropped Betsy not long after, and from then on she went downhill at a rapidly increasing rate of speed -- like a pulp truck with no brakes. She picked up a case of the clap on the way. Billy said he saw her one night in the Manor up in Lewiston, hustling guys for drinks. She had lost most of her teeth, and her nose had been broken somewhere along the line, he said. He said I would never recognize her. By then I didn't much care one way or the other.

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The pickup had no snow tires, and before we got to the Lewiston exit I had begun to skid around in the new powder. It took us over forty-five minutes to make the twenty-two miles.

The man at the Lewiston exit point took my toll card and my sixty cents. "Slippery traveling?"

Neither of us answered him. We were getting close to where we wanted to go now. If I hadn't had that odd kind of wordless contact with her, I would have been able to tell just by the way she sat on the dusty seat of the pickup, her hands folded tightly over her purse, those eyes fixed straight ahead on the road with fierce intensity. I felt a shudder work through me.

We took Route I36. There weren't many cars on the road; the wind was freshening and the snow was coming down harder than ever. On the other side of Harlow Village we passed a big Buick Riviera that had slewed around sideways and climbed the curb. Its four-way flashers were going and I had a ghostly double image of Norman Blanchette's Impala. It would be drifted in with snow now, nothing but a ghostly lump in the darkness.

The Buick's driver tried to flag me down but I went by him without slowing, spraying him with slush. My wipers were clogging with snow and I reached out and snapped at the one on my side. Some of the snow loosened and I could see a little better. Harlow was a ghost town, everything dark and closed. I signaled right to go over the bridge into Castle Rock. The rear wheels wanted to slide out from under me, but I handled the skid. Up ahead and across the river I could see the dark shadow that was the Castle Rock Youth League building. It looked shut up and lonely. I felt suddenly sorry, sorry that there had been so much pain. And death. That was when Nona spoke for the first time since the Gardiner exit. "There's a policeman behind you." "Is he -- ?" "No. His flasher is off."

But it made me nervous and maybe that's why it happened. Route I36 makes a ninety-degree turn on the Harlow side of the river and then it's straight across the bridge into Castle Rock. I made the first turn, but there was ice on the Rock side.

' 'Damn -- '

The rear end of the truck flirted around and before I could steer clear, it had smashed into one of the heavy steel bridge stanchions. We went sliding all the way around like kids on a Flexible Flyer, and the next thing I saw was the bright headlights of the police car behind us. He put on his brakes -- I could see the red reflections in the falling snow -- but the ice got him, too. He plowed right into us. There was a grinding, jarring shock as we went into the supporting girders again. I was jolted into Nona's lap, and even in that confused split second I had time to relish the smooth firmness of her thigh. Then everything stopped. Now the cop had his flasher on. It sent blue, revolving shadows chasing across the hood of the truck and the snowy steel crosswork of the Harlow-Castle Rock bridge. The dome light inside the cruiser came on as the cop got out.

If he hadn't been behind us it wouldn't have happened. That thought was playing over and over in my mind, like a phonograph needle stuck in a single flawed groove. I was grinning a strained, frozen grin into the dark as I groped on the floor of the truck's cab for something to hit him with.

There was an open toolbox. I came up with a socket wrench and laid it on the seat between Nona and me. The cop leaned in the window, his face changing like a devil's in the light from his flasher.

"Traveling a little fast for the conditions, weren't you, guy?"

"Following a little close, weren't you?" I asked. "For the conditions?"

He might have flushed. It was hard to tell in the flickering light.

"Are you lipping off to me, son?"

"I am if you're trying to pin the dents in your cruiser on me."

"Let's see your driver's license and your registration."

I got out my wallet and handed him my license.

"Registration?"

"It's my brother's truck. He carries the registration in his wallet."

"That right?" He looked at me hard, trying to stare me down. When he saw it would take a while, he looked past me at Nona. I could have ripped his eyes out for what I saw in them. "What's your name?"

"Cheryl Craig, sir."

"What are you doing riding around in his brother's pickup in the middle of a snowstorm, Cheryl?"

"We're going to see my uncle."

"In the Rock."

"That's right, yes."

"I don't know any Craigs in Castle Rock."

"His name is Emonds. On Bowen Hill."

"That right?" He walked around to the back of the truck to look at the plate. I opened the door and leaned out. He was writing it down. He came back while I was still leaning out, spotlighted from the waist up in the glare of his headlights.

"I'm going to... What's that all over you, boy?"

I didn't have to look down to know what was all over me. I used to think that leaning out like that was just absentmindedness, but writing all of this has changed my mind. I don't think it was absentminded at all. I think I wanted him to see it. I held on to the socket wrench.

"What do you mean?"

He came two steps closer. "You're hurt -- cut yourself, looks like. Better -- " I swung at him. His hat had been knocked off in the crash and his head was bare. I hit him dead on, just above the forehead. I've never forgotten the sound that made, like a pound of butter falling onto a hard floor.

"Hurry," Nona said. She put a calm hand on my neck. It was very cool, like air in a root cellar. My foster mother had a root cellar.

Funny I should remember that. She sent me down there for vegetables in the winter. She canned them herself. Not in real cans, of course, but in thick Mason jars with those rubber sealers that go under the lid.

I went down there one day to get a jar of waxed beans for our supper. The preserves were all in boxes, neatly marked in Mrs. Hollis's hand. I remember that she always misspelled raspberry, and that used to fill me with a secret superiority.

On this day I went past the boxes marked "razberry" and into the corner where she kept the beans. It was cool and dark. The walls were plain dark earth and in wet weather they exuded moisture in trickling, crooked streams. The smell was a secret, dark effluvium composed of living things and earth and stored vegetables, a smell remarkably like that of a woman's private parts. There was an old, shattered printing press in one corner that had been there ever since I came, and sometimes I used to play with it and pretend I could get it going again. I loved the root cellar. In those days -- I was nine or ten -- the root cellar was my favorite place. Mrs. Hollis refused to set foot in it, and it was against her husband's dignity to go down and fetch up vegetables. So I went there and smelled that peculiar secret earthy smell and enjoyed the privacy of its womblike confinement. It was lit by one cob-webby bulb that Mr. Hollis had strung, probably before the Boer War. Sometimes I wiggled my hands and made huge, elongated rabbits on the wall.

I got the beans and was about to go back when I heard a rustling movement under one of the old boxes. I went over and lifted it up.

There was a brown rat beneath it, lying on its side. It rolled its head up at me and stared. Its sides were heaving violently and it bared its teeth. It was the biggest rat I had ever seen, and I leaned closer. It was in the act of giving birth. Two of its young, hairless and blind, were already nursing at its belly. Another was halfway into the world.

The mother glared at me helplessly, ready to bite. I wanted to kill it, kill all of them, squash them, but I couldn't. It was the most horrible thing I'd ever seen. As I watched, a small brown spider -- a daddy longlegs, I think -- crawled rapidly across the floor. The mother snatched it up and ate it.

I fled. Halfway up the stairs I fell and broke the jar of beans. Mrs. Hollis thrashed me, and I never went into the root cellar again unless I had to.

I stood looking down at the cop, remembering.

"Hurry," Nona said again.

He was much lighter than Norman Blanchette had been, or perhaps my adrenaline was just flowing more freely. I gathered him up in both arms and carried him over to the edge of the bridge. I could barely make out the falls downstream, and upstream the GS&WM railroad trestle was only a gaunt shadow, like a scaffold. The night wind whooped and screamed, and the snow beat against my face. For a moment I held the cop against my chest like a sleeping newborn child, and then I remembered what he really was and threw him over the side and down into the darkness.

We went back to the truck and got in, but it wouldn't start. I cranked the engine until I could smell the sweetish aroma of gas from the flooded carb, and then

stopped.

"Come on," I said.

We went to the cruiser. The front seat was littered with violation tags, forms, two clipboards. The shortwave under the dash crackled and sputtered.

"Unit Four, come in, Four. Do you copy?"

I reached under and turned it off, banging my knuckles on something as I searched for the right toggle switch. It was a shotgun, pump action. Probably the cop's personal property. I undipped it and handed it to Nona. She put it on her lap. I backed the cruiser up. It was dented but otherwise not hurt. It had snow tires and they bit nicely once we got over the ice that had done the damage.

Then we were in Castle Rock. The houses, except for an occasional shanty trailer set back from the road, had disappeared. The road itself hadn't been plowed yet and there were no tracks except the ones we were leaving behind us. Monolithic fir trees, weighted with snow, towered all around us, and they made me feel tiny and insignificant, just some tiny morsel caught in the throat of this night. It was now after ten o'clock.

I didn't see much of college social life during my freshman year at the university. I studied hard and worked in the library shelving books and repairing bindings and learning how to catalogue. In the spring there was JV baseball.

Near the end of the academic year, just before finals, there was a dance at the gym. I was at loose ends, studied up for my first two tests, and I wandered down. I had the buck admission, so I went in.

It was dark and crowded and sweaty and frantic as only a college social before the ax of finals can be. There was sex in the air. You didn't have to smell it; you could almost reach out and grab it in both hands, like a wet piece of heavy cloth. You knew that love was going to be made later on, or what passes for love. People were going to make it under bleachers and in the steam plant parking lot and in apartments and dormitory rooms. It was going to be made by desperate man/boys with the draft one step behind them and by pretty coeds who were going to drop out this year and go home and start a family. It would be made with tears and laughter, drunk and sober, stiffly and with no inhibition. But mostly it would be made quickly. There were a few stags, but not many. It wasn't a night you needed to go anyplace stag. I drifted down by the raised bandstand. As I got closer to the sound, the beat, the music got to be a palpable thing. The group had a half circle of five-foot amplifiers behind them, and you could feel your eardrums flapping in and out with the bass signature.

I leaned up against the wall and watched. The dancers moved in prescribed patterns (as if they were trios instead of couples, the third invisible but between, being humped from the front and back), feet moving through the sawdust that had been sprinkled over the varnished floor. I didn't see anybody I knew and I began to feel lonely, but pleasantly so. I was at that stage of the evening where you fantasize that everyone is looking at you, the romantic stranger, out of the corners of their eyes.

About a half hour later I went out and got a Coke in the lobby. When I went back in somebody had started a circle dance and I was pulled in, my arms around the shoulders of two girls I had never seen before. We went around and around. There were maybe two hundred people in the circle and it covered half the gym floor. Then part of it collapsed and twenty or thirty people formed another circle in the middle of the first and started to go around the other way. It made me feel dizzy. I saw a girl who looked like Betsy Malenfant, but I knew that was a fantasy. When I looked for her again I couldn't see her or anyone who looked like her.

When the thing finally broke up I felt weak and not at all well. I made my way back over to the bleachers and sat down. The music was too loud, the air too greasy. My mind kept pitching and yawing. I could hear my heartbeat in my head, the way you do after you throw the biggest drunk of your life.

I used to think what happened next happened because I was tired and a little nauseated from going around and around, but as I said before, all this writing has brought everything into sharper focus. I can't believe that anymore.

I looked up at them again, all the beautiful, hurrying people in the semidarkness. It seemed to me that all the men looked terrified, their faces elongated into grotesque, slow-motion masks. It was understandable. The women -- coeds in their sweaters, short skirts, their bell-bottoms -- were all turning into rats. At first it didn't frighten me. I even chuckled. I knew what I was seeing was some kind of

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hallucination, and for a while I could watch it almost clinically. Then some girl stood on tiptoe to kiss her fellow, and that was too much. Hairy, twisted face with black buckshot eyes reaching up, mouth spreading to reveal teeth...

I left.

I stood in the lobby for a moment, half distracted. There was a bathroom down the hall, but I went past it and up the stairs.

The locker room was on the third floor and I had to run the last flight. I pulled the door open and ran for one of the bathroom stalls. I threw up amid the mixed smells of liniment, sweaty uniforms, oiled leather. The music was far away down there, the silence up here virginal. I felt comforted.

We had to come to a stop sign at Southwest Bend. The memory of the dance had left me excited for a reason I didn't understand. I began to shake.

She looked at me, smiling with her dark eyes. "Now?"

I couldn't answer her. I was shaking too badly for that. She nodded slowly, for me. I drove onto a spur of Route 7 that must have been a logging road in the summertime. I didn't drive in too deeply because I was afraid of getting stuck. I popped off the headlights and flecks of snow began to gather silently on the windshield.

"Do you love?" she asked, almost kindly.

Some kind of sound kept escaping me, being dragged out of me. I think it must have been a close oral counterpart to the thoughts of a rabbit caught in a snare.

"Here," she said. "Right here."

It was ecstasy.

We almost didn't get back onto the main road. The snowplow had gone by, orange lights winking and flashing in the night, throwing up a huge wall of snow in our way.

There was a shovel in the trunk of the police car. It took me half an hour to dig out, and by then it was almost midnight. She turned on the police radio while I was doing it, and it told us what we had to know. The bodies of Blanchette and the kid from the pickup truck had been found. They suspected that we had taken the cruiser. The cop's name had been Essegian, and that's a funny name. There used to be a major-league ballplayer named Essegian -- I think he played for the Dodgers. Maybe I had killed one of his relatives. It didn't bother me to know the cop's name. He had been following too close and he had gotten in our way.

We drove back onto the main road.

I could feel her excitement, high and hot and burning. I stopped long enough to clear the windshield with my arm and then we were going again.

We went through west Castle Rock and I knew without having to be told where to turn. A snow-cruised sign said it was Stackpole Road.

The plow had not been here, but one vehicle had been through before us. The tracks of its tires were still freshly cut in the blowing, restless snow.

A mile, then less than a mile. Her fierce eagerness, her need, came to me and I began to feel jumpy again. We came around a curve and there was the power truck, bright orange body and warning flashers pulsing the color of blood. It was blocking the road.

You can't imagine her rage -- our rage, really -- because now, after what happened, we were really one. You can't imagine the sweeping feeling of intense paranoia, the conviction that every hand was now turned against us.

There were two of them. One was a bending shadow in the darkness ahead. The other was holding a flashlight. He came toward us, his light bobbing like a lurid eye. And there was more than hate. There was fear -- fear that it was all going to be snatched away from us at the last moment.

He was yelling, and I cranked down my window.

"You can't get through here! Go on back by the Bowen Road! We got a live line down here! You can't -- "

I got out of the car, lifted the shotgun, and gave him both barrels. He was flung back against the orange truck and I staggered back against the cruiser. He slipped down an inch at a time, staring at me incredulously, and then he fell into the snow.

"Are there more shells?" I asked Nona.

"Yes." She gave them to me. I broke the shotgun, ejected the spent cartridges, and put in new ones.

The guy's buddy had straightened up and was watching incredulously. He shouted something at me that was lost in the wind. It sounded like a question but it didn't

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matter. I was going to kill him. I walked toward him and he just stood there, looking at me. He didn't move, even when I raised the shotgun. I don't think he had any conception of what was happening. I think he thought it was a dream.

I fired one barrel and was low. A great flurry of snow exploded up, coating him. Then he bellowed a great terrified scream and ran, taking one gigantic bound over the fallen power cable in the road. I fired the other barrel and missed again. Then he was gone into the dark and I could forget him. He wasn't in our way anymore. I went back to the cruiser.

"We'll have to walk," I said.

We walked past the fallen body, stepped over the spitting power line, and walked up the road, following the widely spaced tracks of the fleeing man. Some of the drifts were almost up to her knees, but she was always a little ahead of me. We were both panting.

We came over a hill and descended into a narrow dip. On one side was a leaning, deserted shed with glassless windows. She stopped and gripped my arm.

"There," she said, and pointed across to the other side. Her grip was strong and painful even through my coat. Her face was set in a glaring, triumphant rictus.

"There. There."

It was a graveyard.

We slipped and stumbled up the banking and clambered over a snow-covered stone wall. I had been here too, of course. My real mother had come from Castle Rock, and although she and my father had never lived there, this was where the family plot had been. It was a gift to my mother from her parents, who had lived and died in Castle Rock. During the thing with Betsy I had come here often to read the poems of John Keats and Percy Shelley. I suppose you think that was a silly, sophomoric thing to do, but I don't. Not even now. I felt close to them, comforted. After Ace Merrill beat me up I never went there again. Not until Nona led me there.

I slipped and fell in the loose powder, twisting my ankle. I got up and walked on it, using the shotgun as a crutch. The silence was infinite and unbelievable. The snow fell in soft, straight lines, mounding atop the leaning stones and crosses, burying all but the tips of the corroded flagholders that would only hold flags on Memorial Day and Veterans Day. The silence was unholy in its immensity, and for the first time I felt terror.

She led me toward a stone building set into the rise of the hill at the back of the cemetery. A vault. A snow-whited sepulcher. She had a key. I knew she would have a key, and she did.

She blew the snow away from the door's flange and found the keyhole. The sound of the turning tumblers seemed to scratch across the darkness. She leaned on the door and it swung inward.

The odor that came out at us was as cool as autumn, as cool as the air in the Hollis root cellar. I could see in only a little way. There were dead leaves on the stone floor. She entered, paused, looked back over her shoulder at me.

"No," I said.

"Do you love?" she asked, and laughed at me.

I stood in the darkness, feeling everything begin to run together -- past, present, future. I wanted to run, fun screaming, run fast enough to take back everything I had done.

Nona stood there looking at me, the most beautiful girl in the world, the only thing that had ever been mine. She made a gesture with her hands on her body. I'm not going to tell you what it was. You would know it if you saw it.

I went in. She closed the door.

It was dark but I could see perfectly well. The place was alight with a slowly running green fire. It ran over the walls and snaked across the leaf-littered floor in tongues. There was a bier in the center of the vault, but it was empty. Withered rose petals were scattered across it like an ancient bridal offering. She beckoned to me, then pointed to the small door at the rear. Small, unmarked door. I dreaded it. I think I knew then. She had used me and laughed at me. Now she would destroy me.

But I couldn't stop. I went to that door because I had to. The mental telegraph was still working at what I felt was glee -- a terrible, insane glee -- and triumph. My hand trembled toward the door. It was coated with green fire.

I opened the door and saw what was there.

It was the girl, my girl. Dead. Her eyes stared vacantly into that October vault,

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into my own eyes. She smelled of stolen kisses. She was naked and she had been ripped open from throat to crotch, her whole body turned into a womb. And something lived in there. The rats. I could not see them but I could hear them, rustling inside her. I knew that in a moment her dry mouth would open and she would ask me if I loved. I backed away, my whole body numb, my brain floating on a dark cloud. I turned to Nona. She was laughing, holding her arms out to me. And with a sudden blaze of understanding I knew, I knew, I knew. The last test. The last final. I had passed it and I was free!

I turned back to the doorway and of course it was nothing but an empty stone closet with dead leaves on the floor.

I went to Nona. I went to my life.

Her arms reached around my neck and I pulled her against me. That was when she began to change, to ripple and run like wax. The great dark eyes became small and beady. The hair coarsened, went brown. The nose shortened, the nostrils dilated. Her body lumped and hunched against me.

I was being embraced by a rat.

"Do you love?" it squealed. "Do you love, do you love?"

Her lipless mouth stretched upward for mine.

I didn't scream. There were no screams left. I doubt if I will ever scream again.

It's so hot in here.

I don't mind the heat, not really. I like to sweat if I can shower. I've always thought of sweat as a good thing, a masculine thing, but sometimes, in the heat, there are bugs that bite -- spiders, for instance. Did you know that the female spiders sting and eat their mates? They do, right after copulation.

Also, I've heard scurrings in the walls. I don't like that.

I've given myself writer's cramp, and the felt tip of the pen is all soft and mushy. But I'm done now. And things look different. It doesn't seem the same anymore at all.

Do you realize that for a while they almost had me believ-ing that I did all those horrible things myself? Those men from the truck stop, the guy from the power truck who got away. They said I was alone. I was alone when they found me, almost frozen to death in that graveyard by the stones that mark my father, my mother, my brother Drake. But that only means she left, you can see that. Any fool could. But I'm glad she got away. Truly I am. But you must realize she was with me all the time, every step of the way.

I'm going to kill myself now. It will be much better. I'm tired of all the guilt and agony and bad dreams, and also I don't like the noises in the walls. Anybody could be in there. Or anything.

I'm not crazy. I know that and trust that you do, too. If you say you aren't crazy that's supposed to mean you are, but I am beyond all those little games. She was with me, she was real. I love her. True love will never die. That's how I signed all my letters to Betsy, the ones I tore up.

But Nona was the only one I ever really loved.

It's so hot in here. And I don't like the sounds in the walls.

Do you love?

Yes, I love.

And true love will never die.