
T H E P L A N T

by Stephen King

part one of a novel in progress

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January 4, 1981

Zenith House, Publishers
490 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10017

Gentlemen:

I have written a book that you might want to publish. It is very good. It is all scary and all *true*. It is called *True Tales of Demon Infestations*. I know all the things in it from first hand. Contents include stories from "The World of Voodoo," "The World of the Aether," and "The World of the Living Dead." I include recipes for some potions as well, but these could be "censored" if you felt they were too dangerous although for most people they won't work at all and in a chapter called "The World of Spells" I explain why.

I am offering this book for publication *now*. I am willing to sell *all rights* (except for movie rights; I will direct the film myself). There are photos if you want them. If you are interested in this book (no other publisher has seen it, I am sending it to you because you are the publishers of *Bloody Houses*, which was quite good), please answer with the "SASE" I have enclosed. I will send the manuscript with return postage in case you don't like it (or don't understand it). Please respond as soon as possible. I think "multiple submissions" are unethical, but I want to sell *True Tales of Demon Infestations* as soon as possible. In this book there is some "scary s**t!" If you know what I mean.

Yours sincerely,

Carlos Detweiler
147 E. 14th St., Apt. E
Central Falls, R.I. 40222

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: Submissions / January 11-15th, 1981

A new year, and the slush in the slush pile grows ever deeper. I don't know how the rest of your toiling editorial minions are doing, but I continue to roll the existential rock of America's unpublished aspiring—at least my share of it. All of which is only to say that I read my share of crud this week (and no, I haven't been smoking what W. C. Fields called “the illicit spon-duix,” either—I'm just having a prolux day).

With your concurrence, I'm returning 15 book-length manuscripts which arrived unsolicited (see *Returns*, next page), 7 “outlines and sample chapters” and 4 unidentifiable blobs that look a bit like typescripts. One of them is a book of something called “gay event poetry” called *Suck My Big Black Cock*, and another, called *L'il Lolita*, is about a man in love with a first grader. I think. It's written in pencil and it's hard to tell for sure.

Also with your concurrence, I'm asking to see outline and sample chapters on 5 books, including the new bodice-ripper from that bad-tempered librarian in Minnesota (the authors never snoop in your files, do they, boss? Ordinarily it would be a flat submission, but the poor performance of *His Flaming Kisses* cannot be justified even by our horrible distribution set-up—any word on what's happening with United News Dealers, by the way?). Synopsis for your files (below).

Last, and probably least, I'm appending an odd little query letter from one Carlos Detweiller of Central Falls, Rhode Island. If I were back at Brown University, happily majoring in English, planning to write great novels, and laboring under the misapprehension that everyone who publishes must be brilliant or at least "real smart," I'd throw Mr. Detweiller's letter out at once. (Carlos Detweiller? I ask myself even now, as I rattle the keys of this ancient Royal—can that be a real name? Surely not!) Probably I'd use tongs to handle it, just in case the man's obvious dyslexia was catching.

But two years at Zenith House have changed me, Roger. The scales have fallen from my eyes. You don't really get heavyweights like Milton, Shakespeare, Lawrence, and Faulkner in perspective until you've lunched at Burger Heaven with the author of *Rats from Hell* or helped the creator of *Gash Me, My Darling* through her current writer's block. You come to realize that the great edifice of literature has one fuck of a lot more subbasements than you expected when you sneaked your first stroke-book up to your bedroom under your shirt (no I have *not* been smoking dope!).

So okay. This guy writes like a moderately bright third-grader (all declarative sentences—his letter has the panache of a heavysset guy walking downstairs in construction boots), but so does Olive Barker, and considering our creaky distribution system, her *Windhover* series has done quite well. The sentence in the first paragraph which says he knows all of these things "from first hand" suggests he's a ding-dong. You know that. His assertion that he's going to direct the movie suggests that he's a ding-dong with delusions of grandeur. I think we both know that. Further, I'd stake my last pair of skivvies (I'm wearing them, and mighty gray they are!) that, despite his disclaimer, every publisher in New York has seen *True Tales of Demon Infestations*. Loyalty to one's company can go only so far, chum; not even a moderately bright third-grader would *start* at Zenith House. I'd guess this letter has been patiently retyped and sent out by the indefatigable (and probably obsessed) Mr. Detweiller at least forty times, starting with Farrar, Straus & Giroux, or maybe even Alfred A. Knopf.

But I think there's a possibility—albeit an extremely thin one—that Mr.

Detweiller may have researched enough material to actually make a book. It would have to be rewritten, of course—his query letter makes that abundantly clear—and the title sucks, but we have several writers on our books who would be more than happy to do a little ghost-writing and pick up a quick \$600. (I saw you wince—make that \$400. Probably the indefatigable Olive Barker is the best of them. Also, I think Olive has a thing for Valium. Junkies work harder than normal people, boss, as I think you know. At least until they die, and Olive’s tough. She doesn’t look too good since her stroke—I hate the way the left side of her face just *hangs* there—but she *is* tough.)

As I say, the chances are thin, and it’s always a trifle risky to encourage an obvious crazy, because it is so difficult to get rid of them (remember General Hecksler and his book *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers*? For a while I thought the man might be genuinely dangerous, and of course he was a large part of the reason poor old Bill Hammer quit). But actually, *Bloody Houses* did do pretty well, and the whole thing—blurry photos and all—came out of the New York Public Library. So you tell me: do we add ole Carlos to *Returns* or do we invite him to submit an outline and sample of chapters? Speak quickly, O great leader, for the fate of the universe hangs in the balance.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton

DATE: 1/15/81

MESSAGE: Dear Christ, Johnny! Do you *ever* shut up? That memo was *three pages long!* If you *weren't* stoned, you have no excuse. Reject the damn query letter, tell this Carlos What's-His-Face to send his manuscript, buy him a pony, whatever you want. But save me the mother-fucking thesis. I don't get them from Herb, Sandra, or Bill, and I don't want them from you. "Shovel the shit and shut up," how does that strike you as a motto?

Roger

P.S. Harlow Enders called again today—we're going to keep on drawing paychecks for another year at least, it seems. After that, who knows? He says there's going to be an "assessment of position" in June, and "a total review of Zenith's overall position in the market" next January—I construe those two fulsome phrases to mean we could be for sale next January unless our market position improves, and given our current distribution system, I don't see how it can. My head aches. I think I may have a brain tumor. Please don't send me any more long memos.

r.

P.P.S. *L'il Lolita* is actually a pretty good title, don't you think? We could commission it. I'm thinking maybe Mort Yeager, he's got a touch for that sort of thing. Remember *Teenage Lingerie Show*? The girl in *L'il Lolita* could be eleven, I think—wasn't the original Lolita twelve?

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: Possible brain tumor

Sounds more like a tension headache to me. Take four Quaaludes and call me in the morning. By the way, Mort Yeager's in jail. Receiving stolen property, I think.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton
DATE: 1/16/81

MESSAGE: Don't you have any work to do?

Roger

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: Merciless huckstering by insensitive superior

Yes, I'll write a letter to Carlos Detweiler, next year's National Book Award winner.

John

p.s.—Don't bother to thank me.

January 16, 1981

Mr. Carlos Detweiller
147 E. 14th Street, Apt. E
Central Falls, Rhode Island 40222

Dear Mr. Detweiller,

Thank you for your interesting letter of January 4th, with its brief but intriguing description of your book, *True Tales of Demon Infestations*. I would welcome a fuller synopsis of the book, and invite you to submit sample chapters (I would prefer chapters 1–3) with your synopsis. Both the synopsis and the sample chapters should be typed and double-spaced, on good quality white bond paper (*not* the erasable type; on erasable bond, whole chapters have a way of simply disappearing in the mail).

As you may know, Zenith is a small paperback house, and our lists currently match our size. Because we publish only originals, we look at a great many proposals; because we are small, the proposals we look at are, in most cases, returned because they do not seem to fit our current needs. All of which is my way of cautioning you not to construe this letter as a covenant to publish your book, because that is most definitely not the case. I would suggest you mail off the synopsis and sample chapters with the idea that we will ultimately reject your book. Then you will be prepared for the worst...or pleasantly surprised if we should find it is right for Zenith Books.

Finally, here are the standard *caveats* upon which our legal department (and the legal departments, so far as I know, of all publishing houses) insist: you must enclose adequate postage to ensure the return of your manuscript (but please do *not* send cash to cover postage), you should realize that

Zenith House accepts no responsibility for the safe return of your manuscript, although we'll take all reasonable care, and that, as I said above, our agreement to look is in no way a covenant to publish.

I look forward to hearing from you, and hope this finds you well.

Sincerely yours,

John Kenton
Associate Editor
Zenith House, Publishers
490 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10017

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: upon further study...

...I agree. I *do* write too much. Appended to this is a copy of my letter to Detweiller. Looks like a synopsis of *The Naked and the Dead*, doesn't it?

John

January 21, 1981

Mr. John Kenton, Editor
Zenith House, Publishers
490 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Kenton,

Thank you for your letter of January 16th, in which I am of receipt of. I am sending off the entire manuscript of *True Tales of Demon Infestations* tomorrow. My money is low today, but my boss, Mrs. Barfield, owes me about five dollars from playing the lottery. Boy, she's a real sucker for those little cards you scratch off!

I would send you a "sinopsis proposal," as you say, but there is no sense of doing that when you can read it for yourself. As Mr. Keen in my building says, "Why describe a guest when you can see that guest." Mr. Keen does not really have any deep wisdom but he says something witty like that from time to time. I tried on one occasion to instruct him (Mr. Keen) in the "deeper mysteries" and he only said, "Each to his own, Carlos." I think you will probably agree that this is a silly comment which only *sounds* witty.

Because we don't have to worry about the "sinopsis proposal," I will spend my letter telling you something about me. I am twenty-three (although everyone says I look older). I work at the Central Falls House of Flowers for Mrs. Tina Barfield, who knew my mother when my mother was still alive. I was born on March 24th, which makes me an Aries. Aries people, as you know, are very psychic, but *wild*. Luckily for me, I am on the "cusp" of Pisces, which gives me the control I need to deal with the psychic universe. I have tried to explain all this to Mr. Keen, but he only says, "There's something *fishy* about you, Carlos," he is always joking like that and sometimes he can be very irritating.

But enough about me.

I have worked on *True Tales of Demon Infestations* for seven years (since age 16). Much of the information in it I got from the "OUIJA" board. I used to do the "OUIJA" with my mother, Mrs. Barfield, Don Barfield (he is now dead), and sometimes a friend of mine named Herb Hagstrom (also now dead, poor lad). Once in awhile others would join our little "circle" as well. Back in our Pawtucket days, my mother and I were quite "social!"

Some of the things we found out from “OUIJA” that are described in “blood-curdling detail” in *True Tales of Demon Infestations*: 1. The disappearance of Amelia Earhart was actually the work of *demons*! 2. Demonic forces at work on H.M.S. *Titanic*. 3. The “tulpa” that infested Richard Nixon. 4. There will be a President from ARKANSAS! 5. More.

Of course this is not “all.” “Don’t cool me off, I’m just gettin’ warmed up,” as Mr. Keen says. In many ways *True Tales of Demon Infestations* is like *The Necronomicon*, except that book was fictional (made up by H. P. Lovecraft, who also came from Rhode Island) and mine is *true*. I have amazing stories of black magic “covens” I have attended, by taking a potion and flying to these covens through the aether (I have recently been to covens in Omaha, Neb., Flagstaff, Ariz., and Fall River, Mass., without ever leaving “the comfort of my own home”). You are probably asking yourself, “Carlos, does this mean you are a student of the ‘black Arts’?” Yes, but don’t worry! After all, you are my “connection” to getting my book published, right?

As I told you in my last letter, there is also a chapter, “The World of Spells,” which most people will find very interesting. Working in a greenhouse and flower-shop has been especially good for working spells, as most require *fresh* herbs and plants. I am very good with plants, Mrs. Barfield would even tell you that, and I am now growing some very “strange” ones in the back of the greenhouse. It is probably too late to put them in this book, but as Mr. Keen sometimes tells me, “Carlos, the time to think about tomorrow is yesterday.” Maybe we could do a follow-up, *Strange Plants*. Let me have your thinking on this.

I will close now. Let me know when you get the manuscript (a postcard will do), and fill me in as soon as possible on royalty rates, etc. I can come to N.Y.C. any Wednesday on the train or Greyhound Bus if you want to have a “publishing luncheon” or come here and I will introduce you to Mrs. Barfield and Mr. Keen. I also have more photographs than the ones I am sending. I am happy to have you publish *True Tales of Demon Infestations*.

Your new author,

Carlos Detweiller
147 E. 14th St., Apt. E
Central Falls, R.I. 40222

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: *True Tales of Demon Infestations*, by Carlos Detweiller

I just received a letter from Detweiller in regard to his book. I think that, in inviting him to submit, I made the biggest mistake of my editorial career. Oooh, my *skin* is starting to hurt...

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton
DATE: 1/23/81

You made your bed. Now lie in it. After all, we can always get it ghost-written, right? Hee-hee.

Roger

January 25, 1981

Dear Ruth,

I feel almost as if I am in the middle of a goddam archetype—segments of the Sunday *New York Times* on the floor, an old Simon and Garfunkel album on the stereo, a Bloody Mary near at hand. Rain tapping on the glass, making it all the more cozy. Am I trying to make you homesick? Well... maybe a little. After all, the only thing the scene lacks is you, and you're probably paddling out beyond the line of breakers on a surfboard as I write these words (and wearing a bikini more non than existent).

Actually, I know you're working hard (probably not too hard) and I have every confidence that the PhD will be a world-beater. It's just that last week was a real horror show for me and I'm afraid there may be worse to come. Among other things, Roger accused me of prolixity (well, actually that was the week before, but you know what I mean), and I think I feel a real prolixity attack coming on. Try to bear with me, okay?

Basically, the problem is Carlos Detweiller (with a name like that he couldn't be anything *but* a problem, right?) He's going to be a short-term problem, is old Carlos, like poison ivy or a mouth sore, but as with those two things, *knowing* the problem is short-term doesn't ease the pain at all—it only keeps you from going insane.

Roger's right—I do tend toward prolixity, That's not the same as logorrhea, though. I'll try to avoid that.

The facts, then. As you know, every week we get thirty or forty “over the transom” submissions. An “over the transom” is anything addressed to “Gentlemen,” “Dear Sir,” or “To Whom It May Concern” —an unsolicited manuscript, in other words. Well...they're not *all* manuscripts; at least half of them are what us hip publishing guys call “query letters” (getting tired of

all these quotation marks yet? You should read Carlos's last letter—it would put you off them for life).

Anyway, they should *all* be query letters if this mudball lived up to its advance billing and really was the best of all possible worlds. Like 99% of the other publishers in New York, we no longer read unsolicited manuscripts—at least, that's our official policy. It says so in *Writer's Market*, *Writer's Yearbook*, *The Freelance*, and *The Pen Newsletter*. But apparently a lot of the aspiring Wolfes and Hemingways out there either don't read those things, don't believe them when they do read them, or simply ignore them—pick what sounds best to you.

In most cases we at least look at the slush, if it's typewritten (please don't breathe a word of this or we'll be inundated with manuscripts and Roger will probably shoot me—he's close now, I think). After all, *Ordinary People* came in over the transom and was first read by some editorial assistant who just happened to recognize that it was a hell of a story. But that, of course, was a million-to-one shot. I've never seen an unsolicited manuscript that looked like any more than the work of a bright fifth-grader. Of course Zenith House is hardly Alfred A. Knopf (our lead title for February is *Scorpions from Hell*, by Anthony L. K. LaScorbia, his follow-up to *Rats from Hell*), but still...you hope...

Detweiller, at least, followed protocol and sent a query letter. Herb Porter, Sandra Jackson, Bill Gelb, and I divvy those that came in the week before each Monday, and I had the misfortune to get this one. After reading it and mulling it over in my mind for all of twenty-five minutes (long enough to write Roger a long-winded memo on the subject that, under the circumstances, I'm probably never going to live down), I wrote Detweiller a letter asking him to submit a few sample chapters and an outline of the rest. And last Friday I got a letter that...well, short of sending it to you, I'm not sure how to describe it. He seems to be a twenty-three-year-old florist's assistant from Central Falls with a mother fixation and the conviction that he's attended witch's sabbats all over America while high on nutmeg, or something. I keep envisioning covens in Motel Six parking lots.

I thought ole Carlos's *True Tales of Demon Infestations* (I have gotten to the point where the title alone has the power to make me blanch and shudder in my shoes) might be some kid's adolescent research hobby—something that could be cut down and juiced up and sold to the *Amityville Horror* audience. His original letter was short, you see, and so full of these punchy little sentences—subject-predicate, subject-predicate, wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am—that one could believe that. And while I was never under any illusions that the man was a writer, I made an assumption of marginal literacy that turns out to be totally unfounded. In fact, just looking back at the original Detweiller letter makes me wonder how I ever could have scribbled the word *This has a certain half-baked charm* in the margin... and yet I see I did.

So what? You're saying. Big deal. Give the schmuck's manuscript a token look when it comes in and then send it back with a form letter—"Zenith House regrets," etc. That's right...but it's wrong, too. It's wrong because guys like Carlos Detweiller turn out all too often to be like a bad case of head-lice—easy to get, the very devil to get rid of. The worst of it is, I mentioned this very fact to Roger in my original overlong memo about the book, recalling General Hecksler and his *Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers*—you must remember me telling you how the General bombarded us with registered letters and phone calls after we rejected the book (you may not know, however, about the Mailgram Herb Porter got from him—in it Hecksler referred to Herb as "the designated Jew," a reference none of us has figured out to this day). It got steadily more abusive, and just before his sister had him committed to an asylum up-state, Sandra Jackson confessed to me that she was getting scared to go home alone—said she was afraid the General might jump out of a darkened doorway with a knife in one hand and a bouquet of psychic posies in the other. She said the hell of it was that none of us even knew what he *looked* like—we'd have needed a writing sample instead of a mug-shot to identify him.

And of course it all sounds funny now, but it *wasn't* funny when it happened—it was only after his sister wrote to us that we found out we were

actually one of his *lesser* obsessions, and of course he *did* turn out to be dangerous; just ask the Albany bus driver he stabbed.

I *knew* all that—even mentioned it to Roger—and still blithely went ahead and invited Detweiler to submit.

Of course, the other thing (and knowing me as you do, you’ve probably already guessed it) is simpler—it upsets me to have goofed in such grand style. If a gonzo illiterate like Carlos Detweiler could fool me this badly (I did think his book would have to be ghosted, true, but that is still no excuse), how much *good* stuff am I missing? Please don’t laugh; I’m serious. Roger is always ragging me about my “lit’ry aspirations,” and I suppose he has a right to (no progress on the novel this week if you’re interested—this Detweiler thing has depressed me too much), considering where the erstwhile head of the Brown University Milton Society ended up (he ended up encouraging Anthony LaScorbia to get right to work on his newest epic, *Wasps from Hell*, for one thing). But I think I would happily accept six months of hectoring letters from the obviously mad Carlos Detweiler, complete with veiled threats becoming a little less veiled with each missive, if I could only be assured that I hadn’t let something good slip by because of a totally deadened critical response.

I don’t know if this is more or less gloomy, but Roger mentioned in one of his Famous Memos that the Apex Corporation is going to give Zenith at least one more year to stop impersonating a dead dog and start showing some sales pizazz. He got the news from Harlow Enders, Apex’s chief New York comptroller, so presumably it’s accurate. I guess it’s good news when you consider that not everyone in publishing has got an office to go to these days, not even with a company whose biggest steady seller is the *Macho Man* series and whose biggest in-house problem isn’t spies making copies of manuscripts so that the movie studios can get an early look, but cockroaches in the water-cooler. It’s maybe not so good when you think of how little money we have to spend (maybe you *deserve* to get the Carlos Detweillers of the world when the most you can offer as an advance against royalties is \$1,800) and how shitty our distribution is. But no one at Apex understands

books or book marketing—I doubt if anyone there even knows why they picked up Zenith House last year in the first place, except that it happened to be for sale cheap. The chances that we can improve our position (2% of the paperback market, fifteenth in a field of fifteen) over the next year aren't very high. Maybe we'll end up getting married in California after all, huh, babe?

Well, enough doom and gloom—I'll mail this off and hopefully get back to work on my book tomorrow—and the next letter I write will be of the “chatty, newsy” variety. Shall I ask ole Carlos to send you flowers from Central Falls?

Forget I asked that.

My love,

John

p.s.—And tell your roommate that I don't believe manufacturing “the world's largest edible Frisbee” has any merit whatsoever, Guinness Book of Records or not. Why not ask her if she has any interest in trying for the world's record of sitting in a spaghetti-filled bathtub? First one to shatter it wins an all-expense-paid trip to Central Falls, Rhode Island...

J.

interoffice memo

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: *True Tales of Demon Infestations*, by Carlos Detweiller

Detweiller's manuscript came this morning, wrapped in shopping bags, secured with twine (much of it broken), and apparently typed by someone with terrible motor control problems. It is every bit as bad as I feared—abysmal, beyond hope.

That could and should be the end, but some of the photos he enclosed are *intensely* disturbing, Roger—and this is no joke, so please don't treat it as one. They are a weird conglomeration of black-and-white glossies (made with a Nikon, I would guess), color slides (ditto Nikon), and Polaroid SX-70 shots. *Most* of them are ridiculous—middle-aged men and women either got up in black bathrobes with cabalistic designs sewn on them or middle-aged men and women in nothing at all, displaying skinny shanks, dangling breasts, and pot bellies. They look exactly like what you'd guess the folks of Central Falls would imagine a Black Mass should look like (in some of them there is a much younger man who is probably Detweiller himself—this young man is always shot from the rear or with his face in deep shadow), and the locale appears, in most cases, to be a greenhouse—associated with the florist's where Detweiller told me he works, I imagine.

There's one packet of six photos labelled "The Sakred Seance" which show plasmic manifestations so obviously faked it's pitiful (what appears to be a balloon frosted with Day-Glo paint is floating from the medium's fingertips). A third packet of photos (all SX-70 shots) are textbook-style "exhibit" shots of various plants which purport to be deadly nightshade, belladonna, virgin's hair, etc. (impossible for me to tell if the labels are accurate—I can't tell a maple tree from a ponderosa pine without help; Ruth would probably know).

Okay, the disturbing part. Some of the photos (four, to be completely accurate) in the “Black Mass” scenes purport to show a human sacrifice—*and it looks to me as if maybe they really did kill someone*. The first photo shows an old man with an extremely realistic expression of terror on his face lying spread-eagled on a table in the greenhouse I mentioned. Several people in hokey robes are holding him down. The young man I presume to be Carlos Detweiller is standing on the left, naked, with what looks like a Bowie knife. The second shows the knife plunging into the old fellow’s chest; in the third, the man I presume to be Detweiller is reaching into the chest cavity; in the last he is holding up a dripping thing for the others to look at. The dripping thing looks very much like a human heart.

The pictures could be complete hokum, and I’d be the first to admit it—a half-decent special effects man could cobble up something like this, I suppose, especially in stills...but the efforts to mislead in the other photos are so painfully obvious that I wonder if that can be.

Just glancing at them is enough to make me want to whoops my cookies, Roger—what if we’ve stumbled onto a bunch of people who are really practicing human sacrifice? Mass murder, perhaps? I’m nauseated, but right now I’m more scared than anything else. I could have told you all of this in person, of course, but it seemed important to get this down in writing, just in case it does turn out to be a legal matter. Christ, I wish I’d never even heard of Carlos Fucking Detweiller.

Come down and take a look at these as soon as you possibly can, okay? I just don’t know if I should pick up the phone and call the police in Central Falls or not.

John

END OF THE PLANT, PART ONE
